

SŪRAH 43

Al-Zukhruf

(Gold)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents a detailed picture of what the Islamic message faced of problems, arguments and objections. It also shows how the Qur'ān dealt with these and their effects on people, establishing at the same time its own truth in place of old, false, ignorant superstitions and values that had taken hold of people's minds at the time. In fact, some people, everywhere, continue to hold elements of these as valid.

Followers of pagan beliefs used to claim that the cattle God has created for the benefit of mankind are divided between God and their own alleged deities: "*Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]'. Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners.*"

(6: 136) In fact, they believed in many legends and superstitions concerning cattle, and these were all the result of deviant practices. In this way, they claimed that they were forbidden to ride some animals, while others were considered unlawful to eat: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him.*" (6: 138)

This *sūrah* discusses such deviant beliefs putting forward the original truth and demonstrating that cattle are God's creatures, representing an aspect of life that is closely related to the creation of the heavens and the earth. God has made cattle subservient to man so that people can express their gratitude and give thanks to Him for such a blessing. They must neither attribute false partners to Him nor enact for themselves legislation that is at variance with what pleases God, when they recognize Him as the Creator. How absurd that they discard the natural result of this truth, which they acknowledge, allowing superstition to get the better of them: *"Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.'*" (Verses 9–14)

Ignorant paganism used to claim that angels were God's daughters. Although they hated daughters being born to themselves, they nonetheless attributed daughters to God and worshipped these instead of Him. They alleged that they worshipped them by God's will. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have worshipped them. Again, this was nothing but a legend arising from deviant beliefs.

The *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic as well as the logic of sound human nature to refute this baseless legend: *"Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the*

Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (Verses 15–22)

When they were told that they were only worshipping statues, idols and trees, and that everyone who worships anything other than God will be thrown into hell together with the object of their worship, they twisted this clear statement making it a subject of dispute. They referred to Jesus, pointing out that his followers worshipped him. So would he be thrown into hell? They also argued that the idols represented angels who were God's daughters. Therefore, they postulated, "we are better worshipping them than the Christians who worship Jesus, a mere human being." The *sūrah* exposes such twisted logic, absolving Jesus of what the Christians perpetrated after his time, since he did not sanction anything of the sort: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57–59)

They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith and, as such, were best guided, yet all the while they were immersed in pagan ignorance. The *sūrah* outlines the true nature of Abraham's faith, based on God's absolute oneness. This principle continued and will continue among Abraham's descendants. Muḥammad, God's messenger, came to them with the same principle, but they received him with other than what Abraham's offspring should give: "*Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.'* He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. *I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verses 26–30)

They could not understand God's wisdom in choosing His messenger. Their earthly values, the basis of the status they assigned to people, contributed to their unwillingness to accept him. The *sūrah*

reports what they said in this respect, presenting the true values that should be upheld in comparison to their trivial ones: *"They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing."* (Verses 31–35)

The *sūrah* then recounts an episode from Moses' life history, one that reflects Pharaoh's similarly false values. This account demonstrates how both these values and Pharaoh himself were unworthy. It tells us of the fate that awaits him and all those with similar attitudes: *"We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations."* (Verses 46–56)

Ignorance Based on Superstition

Al-Zukhruf (Gold)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

By the Book that makes things
clear! (2)

We have made the Qur'ān a
discourse in Arabic so that you
may understand. (3)

It originates in the source of
revelation kept with Us; it is
indeed sublime, full of wisdom.
(4)

Should We ignore you and take
away this reminder from you
because you are people who
transgress beyond bounds? (5)



بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

حَمَّ ١

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ٢

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ
تَعْقِلُونَ ٣

وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُولَى الْكِتَابِ لَدِينَا
لَعَلٌّ حَكِيمٌ ٤

أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنْكُمْ الذِّكْرَ صَفْحًا
أَن كُنْتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّسْرِفِينَ ٥

Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; (6)

وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ نَبِيِّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. (7)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ نَبِيٍّ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٧﴾

We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history. (8)

فَأَهْلَكْنَا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ بَطْشًا وَمَضَى مَثَلُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' (9)

وَلَيْن سَأَلْتَهُمْ مَنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ خَلَقَهُنَّ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. (10)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمْ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. (11)

وَالَّذِي نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ فَأَنْشَرْنَا بِهِ بَلْدَةً مَيْتًا كَذَلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, (12)

وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. (13)

لَسْتَوُوا عَلَى ظُهُورِهِمْ تَدْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا اسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي سَخَّرْنَا هَذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لَهُ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

To our Lord we shall most certainly return.' (14)

وَإِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا لَمَقْتُلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. (15)

وَجَعَلُوا آلَهُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ جِزَاءً إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? (16)

أَرَأَيْتُمْ مَتَى يَخْلُقُ بَنَاتٍ وَأَصْفَنَكُمْ بِالْبَنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (17)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُمْ بِمَا ضَرَبَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ مَثَلًا ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? (18)

أَوْ مَنْ يُنشِئُوا فِي الْحَلِيِّةِ وَهُوَ فِي الْغِيَاثِ غَيْرُ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. (19)

وَجَعَلُوا الْمَلَائِكَةَ الَّذِينَ هُمْ
عِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ إِنثًا أَشْهَدُوا
خَلْقَهُمْ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَادَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْأَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. (20)

وَقَالُوا لَوْ شَاءَ الرَّحْمَنُ مَا عَبَدْنَاهُمْ
مَا لَهُمْ بِذَلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ
إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? (21)

أَمْ آتَيْنَاهُمْ كِتَابًا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ فَهُمْ
بِهِ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (22)

بَلْ قَالُوا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ
وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَرِهِمْ مُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' (23)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فِي
قَرْيَةٍ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُهَا
إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا
عَلَيْهَا آثَرِهِمْ مُقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' (24)

Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (25)

قَالَ أَلَمْ نَجْعَلْكُمْ بِآهْدَىٰ مِنَّا وَجَدْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ آيَاتِنَا كَرُّوا إِنَّا لَمَّا أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِ كَافِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

فَأَنزَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ طَبَقًا فَأَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابُ الْمُكذِبِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

An Address to the Mind

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters *Hā* and *Mīm* which are then followed by an oath by the book that makes things clear. Both the letters and the book are of the same nature: in its spoken form, the book is of the same type as the letters. Just like all letters in human language, the two letters, or sounds, are of God's signs: it is He who created people and gave them the sounds of their languages. When such letters are mentioned, they carry more than a single meaning with reference to the Qur'ān.

God states this oath by the two letters and the clear book so as to confirm the purpose of making this Qur'ān in the form it was made when revealed to the Arabs: "We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand." (Verse 3) The purpose, then, is that they should understand it as it is composed in their own tongue. The Qur'ān is God's revelation which He has made, in its spoken form, Arabic as He chose the Arabs to be the bearers of His message. We explained this purpose partly in commenting on the previous *sūrah*. Moreover, God made His choice on the basis of His knowledge that the Arabs were suitable message-bearers and that their language could best express it. God knows whom to entrust with His message.

He then defines what position He has assigned for the Qur'ān with Him and its value in His overall plan for the universe: "It originates in

the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom." (Verse 4) We will only in passing refer to the literal meaning of the phrase *Umm al-Kitāb*, translated here as 'the source of revelation'. Does it refer to the 'imperishable tablet'¹ mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, or to God's eternal knowledge? Both are the same in the sense that they do not have a specific meaning within our sphere of knowledge. Yet the verse transmits a definite impression that the Qur'ān has an especially high value in God's overall knowledge and planning. This is enough for us. The Qur'ān is 'sublime', and 'full of wisdom'. These two qualities give it a specific rationality, and indeed it is so! It is as if the Qur'ān has a soul of its own, with special features and qualities, that respond to the souls of those who interact with it. With its sublime position and wisdom, it provides guidance to humanity, leading it according to its own nature and qualities, imparting to its rational understanding and to its life values, concepts and facts that are also sublime and bear wisdom.

When this fact has been established it makes the people who speak the language in which the Qur'ān has been revealed appreciate the great gift and blessing God has given them. It shows them the extent of their transgression when they turn away from it in disdain. It is they who deserve to be treated with contempt. Therefore, they are told that they may well be ignored because of their transgression: "*Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds?*" (Verse 5)

It is indeed most remarkable that God, in His glory and sublimity, should care for such people, revealing to them a book in their own tongue, telling them about what they feel, explaining the inner aspects of their lives, showing them the path delineated by His guidance, relating to them accounts of earlier communities and reminding them of God's law that was in effect during ancient times. Yet they continue to ignore His guidance, turning away from it. For God to say that they will be deprived of His care and be ignored for their transgression sounds dreadful.

1. Verse 22 of *Sūrah* 85.

In addition to this threat, they are reminded of God's law that applied to earlier communities that denied the prophets sent to them: "*Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history.*" (Verses 6–8) What can they expect when God has already destroyed people that were much mightier than they because of their derision of the messengers sent to them?

The Almighty Creator

Amazingly, although the Arabs recognized that God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, they did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, declaring His oneness and address all worship to Him. On the contrary, they attributed partners to Him, assigning to these some of the cattle He has created. They also alleged that the angels were God's daughters whom they worshipped in the form of idols. The Qur'an reports their acknowledgement of God's creation, puts before them the logic of human nature which they discard, and outlines the behaviour they should adopt in response to His blessings, particularly ships and cattle. It then describes what they claim about the angels:

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return. (Verses 9–14)

The Arabs had a faith, which we can imagine as consisting of remnants of the original pure faith of Abraham, that had lost its original shining colours, intermingled with legends. What remained was something that human nature could not deny, namely that the universe has a Creator who is God: the universe could not have existed without a Creator and the Creator could only be God. Yet, the Arabs did not take this natural truth to its logical conclusion; they simply stopped at the bare fact: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.'*" (Verse 9)

It is obvious that they did not verbalize God's two attributes: the Almighty and the All-Knowing. They acknowledged that it was God who created the universe, but they did not know God according to His attributes detailed in the Islamic faith. These are positive attributes that produce a clear effect on people's lives and the life of the universe. They admitted that God created them and the universe, but they also alleged that He had partners because they did not know God's attributes that would have made the very concept of partnership with Him appear absurd. The Qur'ān tells them now that the Creator they acknowledge is the One who is Almighty and who knows all.

The *sūrah* takes them another step forward in outlining God's attributes and the favours He has given them: "*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Smoothing out the earth is a fact understood, in one way or another, by everyone. The people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān would have seen the earth smooth under their feet when they walked, ready for plants to grow. It is smoothed out generally for life to grow. However, we realize this today in a more profound way, taking into account what we have learnt about the nature of the earth and its history. Future generations will understand this fact in an even greater way; human knowledge will continue to expand and discover new facts that have so far remained unknown.

Today, we understand that smoothing out the earth so as to enable the human race to survive on it and find ways and paths to ensure life progresses is a complex multi-faceted process. In fact, this planet has gone through a number of different stages that have allowed its surface

to change from a hard rocky one to plant-supporting soil. Water has been formed from oxygen and hydrogen. Its rotation speed has slowed down to ensure that it has moderate temperatures throughout its day and so as to allow objects to remain stable on its surface. Moreover, a proper measure of gravity has been placed on it to ensure that its atmosphere remains sufficiently stable to support life. Without such an atmosphere life cannot be sustained, as is the case on other planets with a gravity too weak to ensure stability. Moreover, the earth's gravity has been made equal to movement and this equilibrium has protected objects and living things from being blown away, while at the same time allowing man and other living things to move on the surface of the earth. Had gravity increased above this sustainable level, all objects and living creatures would have been stuck to the earth and their movements would have become very hard or even impossible. Furthermore, air pressure would have increased so as to bind them firmly to the earth or crush them against it, just as we sometimes crush flies and mosquitoes with a strike that does not bring our hands into contact with them but rather increases the air pressure around them. By contrast, should air pressure decrease, our veins and breasts may burst.

The smoothing of the earth to make it life supporting also refers to the fact that the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator has brought about numerous balances which together facilitate human life on earth. Had any of these been disturbed, life would have become very difficult, even impossible. We have already mentioned some of these. We may, however, refer to the fact that the great amount of water that covers much of the earth's surface purges its atmosphere of much of the poisonous gases that result from the infinite number of interactions that take place all the time. Thus, its atmosphere remains life supporting. Plants also ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the oxygen living creatures breathe in and the oxygen breathed out during the process of assimilation plants perform. Unless this balance is maintained, all living things would have suffocated in a very short period of time.

Indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic statement, '*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you,*' grows

wider every day. Every new addition to its significance testifies to both God's might and knowledge. We see God's able hand wherever we look and however far our imagination roams. It tells man that his life is not the result of blind coincidence nor has he been abandoned. Indeed, God's hand defines man's every step before, during and after his life on earth.

"So that you can find your way." (Verse 10) Reflection on what the universe contains and its natural laws inevitably leads the human mind to recognition of its Creator who established such accurate and perfectly harmonious systems.

Blessings of Every Type

The *sūrah* then looks a step further at the process of life and the emergence of living creatures: "*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) Water comes down from the skies, as every person sees and knows, but most people are not moved by this remarkable phenomenon because of over familiarity. Muḥammad, God's messenger, (peace be upon him), however, held a different attitude. He looked at the drops of rain with love and welcoming delight, knowing that they came from God; in other words, his heart recognized God's handiwork in these drops. Every heart that is aware of its bond with God and the laws of nature He has set in operation should adopt this attitude. Every raindrop is the result of these laws of nature which operate under God's eye and control. That rain originates from the vapour that rises from the earth and cools down in the atmosphere in no way diminishes the implication of these facts. Who has brought the earth into being, placed water on it, subjected it to heat, made water naturally evaporate and vapour rise and condense? Who has given the universe its other characteristics which give the condensing vapour an electrical charge so that when clouds gather, their electric charges cause rain to fall? Besides, what is electricity? What are these other characteristics that produce the combined effect of rain falling down? As we learn more about nature, however, our knowledge casts a heavy weight over our understanding. We no longer

appreciate the messages given by universal phenomena; we no longer allow these messages to refine our feelings and responses.

“And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure.” (Verse 11) It is given in the right quantity, neither too much so as to flood large areas of land, nor too little to leave the land barren. Man has come to recognize the importance of maintaining this fine balance for the continuity of life. *“With it We raise dead land to life.”* Life on earth flourishes where water is plentiful. It is from water that every living thing originates. *“And thus you will be raised from the dead.”* (Verse 11) The One who originated life in the first place will bring it back again. It is He who started life in a land that was dead, and He will raise all back to life on the Day of Resurrection. Nothing is difficult for Him.

We learn from this *sūrah* that the Arab unbelievers used to assign a portion of their cattle to God and another portion to other beings. God, however, created cattle as one of the favours He bestows on man: people ride cattle as they ride on ships and they should appreciate His blessings and give thanks: *“And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord’s blessings and say: ‘Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.’”* (Verses 12–14)

Making things in pairs is a rule of life, as indicated in this verse. All living things are created in pairs; even the first living cell carries masculine and feminine characteristics. In fact, this rule perhaps applies to the universe in its entirety, if we consider its basic unit to be the atom which consists of a negative electron and a positive proton, as all research in physics has so far indicated. Be that as it may, this duality is apparent throughout life. It is God who has created all pairs, human and non-human.

Moreover, it is He who has *“provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride.”* (Verse 12) This is to remind man that God has placed him in charge of the earth, putting at his disposal its considerable and varied power and potential. It also invites man to show gratitude for God’s choice and blessings, reminds him of the One who grants

blessings every time such a blessing is enjoyed. Such expressions of gratitude for God's blessings is sure to keep our hearts alive to their bond with God at every turn in life: *"So that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves."* (Verse 13) We certainly cannot match His blessings. All that we can do is to be truly grateful and give due thanks for all that He has favoured us with. We should realize that we will eventually return to God after our term in charge of the earth comes to its end. He will then requite us for what we have done in life when we enjoyed His favours and what He placed at our service: *"To our Lord we shall most certainly return."* (Verse 14) Such are the refined manners people should adopt towards God who has granted us countless favours and blessings. Yet we tend to forget Him even when we are enjoying His favours. Hence, this gentle reminder.

These Islamic manners closely relate to the cultivation of the human conscience and people's education. This is not a mere ritual or empty phrase we say when mounting cattle or riding on ships and other means of transport. It is a deliberate action that aims to alert our feelings so that we are fully aware of the bond between God and His creatures. Furthermore, His blessings are granted to us freely; we cannot repay God in any way for any of His countless blessings. Hence, we should always remain in awe of Him, thinking of the day when we will meet Him and submit our account of what we did in life. Thus we should always remain conscious of God, aware that He is watching over us.

An Absurd Superstition

The *sūrah* then refers to the absurd legend that makes deities of angels, alleging that they are God's daughters when they are no more than a different type of creature:

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them i. given the good news of the birth of what he so readily

attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (Verses 15–25)

The *sūrah* addresses every aspect of this superstition, leaving no loophole unclosed. Throughout, the *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic and draws on their own life situations. It places before them the fate of earlier communities that adopted a similar stand to theirs, making almost identical allegations. It begins by highlighting the absurdity of this superstition and what it means of blatant rejection of the truth: "Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude." (Verse 15) The angels are God's servants. To allege that they are God's offspring means that they are not His servants, but instead have a special relationship with Him. Since they are God's servants, to give them any special relation to their Creator is meaningless. All God's creatures are His servants. Such a claim, thus, brands man as a clear unbeliever: "Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude." (Verse 15)

Using their own logic and standards, the *sūrah* ridicules their allegation that the angels are female and then their claim that they are

God's offspring: "*Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons?*" (Verse 16) If God were to take offspring for Himself, why would He choose females and give the males to them? This is nothing less than absurd and especially when they are so distressed when a daughter is born to them. "*If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 17)

What sort of manners are these that make them attribute to God what would fill them with gloom? Indeed, they would be so distressed about parenting a daughter that they could not even face speaking about it. In their environment, it was only brave men who could fight hard in battle that were looked upon with esteem. How come, then, that they assign to God offspring of the type which only cares about jewellery and fine things, unable to refute an argument or fight a case? "*[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument?*" (Verse 18) Here we see how the *sūrah* uses their own logic, making them ashamed of attributing to God what they themselves hate to father. Should they not, if at all, have attributed to Him what scores highly in their own estimation?

The *sūrah* then refutes another of their absurd superstitions. They alleged that the angels were female. On what basis do they make such a claim? "*They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19) Were they present when the angels were created so as to know that they were female? Had they seen their creation, they would have had reliable evidence. They certainly cannot claim to have been present at the time, yet still they make this ridiculous assertion. Therefore, they will be made responsible for claiming what they have no evidence to prove: "*Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19)

The unbelievers provide further argument to justify their absurdities, but once again the *sūrah* exposes how flawed their statements are: "*They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly*

lying." (Verse 20) When they are faced with irrefutable argument based on solid evidence, they justify their action by claiming that it is God's will. They allege that God accepts their worship of angels. Had He not been pleased with this, He would have prevented them from such worship! How devious! It is true that everything in the universe occurs by God's will. Yet it is also God's will that man has been given the ability to choose for himself which way to follow: true guidance or error. God has also required man to choose His guidance and follow it, telling man that this is the choice He will be pleased with. He is not pleased when man chooses error and disbelief, even though He has enabled him to do so.

When they attribute their own choice to God's will, this is nothing less than wild conjecture. They cannot be certain that God wants them to worship the angels. How can they achieve such certainty? "*Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying.*" (Verse 20) They simply indulge in guesswork and delusion. "*Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast?*" (Verse 21) Do they have such a book as a basis for their claims, giving them clear evidence in support of their worship?

Thus we see how the *sūrah* closes in on them, refuting every argument they make, and clearly indicating that faith cannot be based on guesswork or unsupported claims. Faith can only be based on a revealed book to which people should adhere.

At this point, the *sūrah* exposes the reality on which they rely when holding to their absurd superstition that makes them offer false worship: "*No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.'*" (Verse 22) This is a ludicrous and baseless argument. It shows them to be content to follow their ancestors without thinking about or looking into the basis of their actions. Thus, they are no more than a herd of cattle driven to where it does not know. They are totally unaware of their destination or whether they are following the road leading to it.

Being a message that seeks to free the human mind of all shackles, Islam rejects such abject following in the footsteps of ancestors. Every action should be determined on the basis of deliberate thinking and conscious choice.

At the end of this passage, the unbelievers are shown the fates of earlier communities that argued in the same vein and blindly followed their forefathers' footsteps, rejecting the truth clearly presented to them by God's messengers: *"And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end."* (Verses 23–25)

Thus we see that those who turn away from Divine guidance are of a similar nature and use the same arguments. They are blind to everything other than following in their forefathers' footsteps. They close their minds to any new evidence, rejecting any new way even though it may be better, rely on solid argument and bring better results. Such a persistently deviant nature, which will not open its eyes or mind to the truth, deserves nothing but destruction. Such is the fate put before the unbelievers so that, perchance, they will take heed.



Blindness Out of Choice

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, (26)

وَاذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِ
إِنِّي بَرَاءٌ مِمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' (27)

إِلَّا الَّذِي فَطَرَنِي فَإِنَّهُ سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. (28)

وَجَعَلَهَا كَلِمَةً بَاقِيَةً فِي عَقِبِهِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. (29)

بَلْ مَتَّعْتُ هَٰؤُلَاءِ وَآبَاءَهُمْ حَقًّا
جَاءَهُمُ الْحَقُّ وَرَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمُ الْحَقُّ قَالُوا هٰذَا سِحْرٌ
وَأَنبَاءٌ كَذِبَةٌ ﴿٣٠﴾

They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'an revealed to some great man of the two cities?' (31)

Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. (32)

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, (33)

gates, couches on which to recline, (34)

and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (35)

وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ
مِّنَ الْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

أَمْ هُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ نَحْنُ
قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُمْ مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ
الدُّنْيَا وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ
دَرَجَاتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُمْ بَعْضًا
سَخِرَاءً وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا
يَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَوْلَا أَن يَكُونَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً
لَجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ
سُقْفًا مِن فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا
يَظْهَرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَابًا وَسُرُرًا عَلَيْهَا
يَتَّكِفُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَرُحْرُفًا وَإِن كُنَّا لَمَنعُ
لِلْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ
لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. (36)

وَمَنْ يَعْصُ عَنْ ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. (37)

وَأَتَتْهُمْ لِيُضِلُّوهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! (38)

حَقًّا إِذَا جَاءَ فَقَالَ يَبَلَيْتَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ بَعْدَ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَيَلْسُ الْقَرْيُنُ ﴿٣٨﴾

Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (39)

وَلَنْ يَنْفَعَكُمْ يَوْمَ إِذْ ظَلَمْتُمْ أَتُكْرَفِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? (40)

أَفَأَنْتَ تُسْمِعُ الصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِي الْعُمْى وَمَنْ كَانَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; (41)

فَإِنَّا نَذْهَبُ بِكَ فَإِنَّا نَمْتَنِّمُهُمْ مُنْقَمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. (42)

أَوْ نُزَيِّنَاكَ الَّذِي وَعَدْتَهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِمْ مُقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path; (43)

فَأَسْتَمِعْ بِأَلْسِنَتِكَ أَوْحَىٰ إِلَيْكَ إِنَّا كُنَّا
عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. (44)

وَإِنَّهُ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ
وَسَوْفَ تُنْتَلَوْنَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (45)

وَسْتَلْ مَنْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ
رُسُلِنَا أَجَعَلْنَا مِنْ دُونِ الرَّحْمَنِ
إِلَهَةً يُعْبَدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' (46)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَئِهِ فَقَالَ إِنِّي
رَسُولُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, (47)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِآيَاتِنَا إِذَا هُمْ مِنْهَا
يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. (48)

وَمَا نُرِيهِمْ مِنْ آيَةٍ إِلَّا هِيَ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ أُخْتِهَا وَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ بِالْعَذَابِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' (49)

وَقَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا السَّاحِرُ ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا
عَمَدَ عِنْدَكَ إِنَّا لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (50)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمْ الْعَذَابَ إِذَا هُمْ
يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? (51)

وَنَادَى فِرْعَوْنُ فِي قَوْمِهِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ
أَلَيْسَ لِي مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَذِهِ الْأَنْهَارُ
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِي أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? (52)

أَمْ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَذَا الَّذِي هُوَ مَهِينٌ
وَلَا يَكَادُ يُبِينُ ﴿٥٢﴾

Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' (53)

فَلَوْلَا أَلْفِي عَلَيْهِ أَسْوِرَةٌ مِّنْ ذَهَبٍ
أَوْ جَاءَهُ مَعَهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ مُقَرَّرِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. (54)

فَأَسْتَحَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَأَطَاعُوهُ إِنَّهُمْ
كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; (55)

فَلَمَّا آسَفُونَا انْتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ
فَأَعْرَقْنَاهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations. (56)

فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ سَلَفًا وَمَثَلًا
لِّلْآخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Overview

The Quraysh, the major Arabian tribe living in Makkah at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, used to say that they were Abraham's descendants, which was true. They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith, which was untrue. Abraham espoused monotheism, clear and undistorted. It was for his belief in the One God that he abandoned his father and his people, after he was subjected to execution by burning. His religion is based on this basic belief. He urged his children and descendants to remain true to it. Thus, no trace of polytheism is ever found in his faith.

In this section of the *sūrah* the Arabs are made to see this historical fact so that they might check their claims against it. The *sūrah* also reports their objections to the Prophet Muḥammad's message: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (Verse 31) It shows the basic flaw in this argument: not only does it disregard the true values on which God wants human life to be based but it also espouses false values which turn them away from true guidance. Once the truth is outlined, the *sūrah* tells them of the fate of those who prefer to remain blind to God's remembrance. It also explains why such a choice was made which boils down to nothing less than following what Satan whispers. At the end of this section, the *sūrah* consoles God's messenger, who is grieved by their choice. He is told that he cannot make the blind see nor the deaf hear. They will have their due requital, whether he lives to see how God punishes them or God chooses to delay such punishment. He is directed, therefore, to hold fast to what is revealed to him as it represents the truth preached by all former messengers: "*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?*" (Verse 45)

In this section we are also given an episode from Moses' story, which reflects the Arabs' attitude to God's messenger. It seems that the same objections are repeated again: Pharaoh and his people adhered to the same false values upheld by the pagan Arabs.

The Principle Abraham Urged

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].
(Verses 26–28)

The precept of monotheism rejected by the Quraysh was nothing but the belief advocated by Abraham, from whom they descended. It was this great principle that Abraham declared to his own father and people, thus rejecting their false creed, disowning their traditional worship. He did not adopt falsehood simply because his father and people practised it. In fact, he did not pay them any courtesy when he declared his rejection of it in a clear and emphatic statement quoted in the Qur'ān: "*I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.*" (Verses 26–27)

It appears from Abraham's statement that although his people did not deny God's existence, they nonetheless assigned partners to Him and worshipped others beside Him. Therefore, Abraham disowned all those they worshipped other than God. He described God by His attribute that makes Him the One to be worshipped, which is the fact that He initiates and originates. It is He who deserves to be worshipped because He is the One who creates. He also stated his firm belief that God would give him guidance. He created him and He knew how to grant him guidance.

Abraham clearly stated this precept of God's oneness to which the whole universe testifies. He said it and made it "*an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].*" (Verse 28) It fell to Abraham to have the largest share in establishing this precept in life, delivering it to future generations through his seed. A number of his descendants were prophets and messengers, among whom three belong to the very select group of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. These three are Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). Today, scores of centuries after Abraham, more

than a billion people who follow the three Divine religions are indebted to Abraham for their belief in the fundamental principle of God's oneness. It was he who made it an abiding precept among his descendants. Many of them may abandon it, but it remains firm, clear and undistorted. Thus, people will always have a chance to return to God, their Creator, and worship Him. This represents a return to the truth, understanding it and holding firm to it.

Mankind knew the principle of God's oneness before Abraham, through many prophets such as Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and perhaps Idrīs, as also through other messengers who did not have a continuous line of descendants who could revive and advocate the principle. It was, therefore, with Abraham that this principle took firm root on earth. It continued to be advocated by his descendants, with a continuous line of prophethood, up to the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who descended from Abraham through his son, Ishmael, and who bore the greatest similarity to him.² Muḥammad stated the principle of God's oneness in its final and most comprehensive form, a form that influences every human activity and life concept.

How did those Arabs, descending from Abraham, receive this principle? They had after all been far removed from it for generations. Indeed, they had forgotten Abraham's faith to the extent that the principle of God's oneness was alien to them, viewed as exceedingly singular. They gave the Prophet preaching it a very bad reception, judging the Divine message by earthly standards. Hence, their criteria were flawed:

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities.' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to

2. Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "I have been shown earlier prophets. I found Moses (peace be upon him) to be a tall, slim type of man, as though he belonged to the men of Shanū'ah [One of the tribes of Yemen]. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) and the person I know who has the closest similarity to him is 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd. I saw Abraham (peace be upon him) and the one who bears closest similarity to him is your man, [meaning himself]." - al-Bukhārī

them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (Verses 29–35)

The *sūrah* turns to speak of those people present at the time of revelation: *"I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear."* (Verse 29) It is as though the *sūrah* is saying: 'Let us not talk about Abraham, for these people have no relation to him. We will discuss their situation specifically, which has no relevance to Abraham and what he advocated. God says that He allowed these people and their ancestors to enjoy life, providing them with much, and allowing them a long life, until the truth came to them in the shape of the Qur'ān, and there came to them a messenger who stated things clearly. Nevertheless, *"Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright."*' (Verse 30)

The truth, which is always clearly manifest, cannot be confused with sorcery. What they said was conjecture and they were the first to know that it was false. The elders of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the message of the Qur'ān, yet they aimed to deceive the masses: first by alleging that it was sorcery and secondly by reaffirming their rejection of it: *"This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright."* (Verse 30) In this way, they sought to impress the masses by showing themselves to be confident of what they said. Like all who are deluded, the masses would then follow them. What the Quraysh elders feared most was that they might lose their influence over people. Should the people see the truth of the principle of God's oneness, no leader would have any influence except within the framework of worshipping God alone.

Whom to Entrust with God's Message

The Qur'ān describes their confused values and standards as they objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as the one to bring them light and the message of the truth: "*They also say: Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) The two cities they referred to were Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Prophet belonged to the most distinguished family in the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe, which were the elite among Arabs. He was also known to be a man of high principles and fine manners, even before he was chosen as God's messenger. However, he was not a tribal chief, while his environment placed much store on such considerations. Hence their objection: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31)

God certainly knows best whom to entrust with His message. He chose the man whom He knew to be best suited to the task. Limitless is God in His glory! He chose a man whose paramount qualities were his morality and dedication, both of which are part of the nature and essence of the Islamic message. For the delivery of His message, He chose neither a tribal chief nor a man of wealth or social influence. This because He did not wish any earthly value to cast a shadow over the message bestowed from on high. It should neither be adorned with an earthly jewel nor be influenced by any alien effect. Thus, no one would embrace it to achieve ambition, and no one would seek it for unfair gain.

With their narrow view of worldly pleasures and lack of awareness of the nature of the Divine message, the Arabs objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as God's messenger, suggesting that a recognized leader of either of the two cities would have been preferable. The *sūrah* denounces their objections and reminds them of how God bestows His grace on whomever He chooses of His servants. It shows the flaw inherent in their concepts which confuse worldly values with Divine ones. It also makes clear to them how their values score in God's accurate measure: "*Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may*

take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass." (Verse 32)

How singular! What business do they have in apportioning God's grace when they cannot even determine their own provisions? Whatever comes their way of earthly provisions is determined by God, according to His wisdom and how He wants life on earth to progress: "*It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32)

People's livelihood and provisions in this present life are influenced by their individual talents, life circumstances and social relations. The way they are shared out among individuals and communities is subject to all these factors. Its sharing, however, differs from one generation and society to another, according to the systems, relations and general circumstances of each. The one essential feature which has never been absent, even under the most government-controlled system, is that people's shares are different. It has never happened that people receive equal shares, not even under artificial social orders claiming to enshrine absolute equality.

The result is that some people are raised in rank above others; a situation that occurs in all societies and generations. The purpose for such difference is that "*some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32) When the wheel of life turns, some people will inevitably be made to serve others. What is meant here is not that one class or one person should behave arrogantly towards another. This is a naïve understanding that is unsuited to the Divine pronouncement. The significance of the statement is longer lasting than any change or development in human society. All mankind serve one another as the wheel of life turns with them all. The one whose provisions are stinted serves the one who is affluent, but the reverse is true as well. Those who have plenty accumulate wealth, using it for their living and employ others who will then receive their provisions by virtue of their work. Each one thus serves another, and it is the difference in their livelihoods and their provisions that enable them to use one another in the course of life. Thus, a worker is in the service of the engineer and the employer,

while the engineer is in the service of the employer and the worker, and the employer, in turn, serves both engineer and worker in like manner. All contribute to man's assignment on earth through their differences in abilities, talents, livelihoods and incomes.

I know that many advocates of government-controlled systems cite this verse in their criticism of Islam and its social and economic systems. I also think that some Muslims feel uneasy about this statement. They feel that they need to defend Islam against the charge of establishing distinction between people in their provisions so that some of them can take others into service. It is time, however, that the advocates of Islam should stand firm, feeling absolutely proud of their faith. They need not defend it against a trivial accusation that will always remain unsubstantiated. Islam states permanent facts that remain part of the nature of the universe for as long as life continues.

It is part of the nature of human life that it relies on differences between individual human beings with respect to their abilities and talents, as well as to the type of work each one can do and the degree of excellence a man or a woman can achieve. These differences are necessary to ensure the fulfilment of a wide range of roles needed to discharge man's mission on earth. Had all human beings been copies of the same model, life on earth could not have survived. Numerous types of work would not have had corresponding abilities. They would have remained undone because there would not have been people who could do them. The One who created life and willed that it should steadily progress also created people with different talents and abilities to correspond to the different tasks that needed fulfilling. It is through such differences in roles that differences of livelihood and provisions occur. Such is the rule.

Greater than Life's Riches

So much for people's livelihood in this present life. Beyond it, however, is something far greater: "*Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass.*" (Verse 32) God bestows His grace on those whom He selects, knowing that they deserve it. There is, however, no

connection whatsoever between God's grace and what people have in this present life. Nor is there any connection between it and the values of this world. Such lots are worthless according to God's measure. Hence, they are given to good and bad people, while God's grace is preserved for those whom He chooses.

Earthly values are so petty and insignificant that had God so willed, He would have given them in plenty to those who disbelieve in Him. The only reason behind not doing so is that such plenty would then become a source of delusion, preventing many people from accepting the Divine faith:

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (Verses 33–35)

It is God who knows man's weaknesses best and what effect wealth and affluence have on him. Had it not been for the fact that people would be lured by such luxuries, God would have given to those who disbelieve in the Lord of Grace abundance in this world. He would have given them homes with roofs of silver and staircases made of gold. He would also have given them houses with many doors, indeed palaces with many couches to recline upon and gold ornaments as decor. Giving such luxuries in plenty to disbelievers clearly shows how worthless these items are on God's scales. "*Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world.*" (Verse 35) It is all no more than a fleeting enjoyment that lasts no more than this present life. Moreover, it is all no more than a trifling suited to this lower life.

"*It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 35) These are the ones who are honoured by God because they are God-fearing. He stores for them what is better, greater in value and more lasting. He grants them what is special. They are

thus distinguished over those who deny God, the Lord of Grace, for these are only given the trifling enjoyments of this worldly life, which animals also share.

Worldly luxuries, examples of which are given in these verses, dazzle large numbers of people, particularly when they see unbelievers enjoying such commodities while believers are deprived of them. They may see good believers suffering hardship while unbelievers enjoy power, wealth and high position. God knows the effects of such situations on the majority of people. Therefore, He explains to them how worthless these luxuries are in His unerring scales and how truly worthy what He has in store for believers is. A believing heart is reassured that God chooses only what is right and suitable for each group. The Makkan unbelievers who objected to God's choice of a man who had not been given much wealth rated people according to what they have of money and position. These verses make clear how trifling these are in God's sight, so much so that He gives them to the worst of His creatures, the people whom He dislikes most. Hence, affluence and its like does not indicate a person's position with God.

Thus the Qur'ān puts matters in their right perspective, showing the basis on which provisions are given in both this life and the life to come and stating those values that are true and consistent. In doing so, it lays down the basic principles that are unaffected by life's circumstances, developments, different creeds, social systems or environments. Life has its consistent, unchanging rules that govern its development. People who look only at changing appearances and do not reflect on the permanent rules tend to overlook this God-made law. They think that change applies to the essence of things as well as their form and appearance. Hence, they allege that the ever continuing march of life precludes the existence of permanent rules and values. The only law that they believe to be unchanging is that whereby everything undergoes continuous change. We, who believe in Islam, see in what is around us the truth of what God has stated: consistency and change are present, side by side, in every corner and aspect of the universe. The most obvious example before us is the difference in livelihood and provisions between people, and their varied causes and rates.

Which Type of Comrade

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the fate of those who are given plenty of the luxuries of this world but who remain unmindful of their duty of obedience to God and glorifying Him so as to deserve the great prize He grants on the Day of Judgement to those who fear Him:

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (Verses 36–39)

The Arabic text uses the term *'ashā* as the choice of unbelievers. This term signifies a tiredness of the eyes that prevents them from seeing things. It mostly occurs when facing a glaring light which the human eye cannot look into, or in the evening as darkness begins to descend when a weak eye cannot see things clearly. It may also be the result of illness. Its usage here, signifies blindness and a wilful turning away from God, the Lord of Grace.

"We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade." (Verse 36) It has been God's will that when man chooses to neglect His remembrance, Satan finds his way to him and becomes his comrade, whispering to him and making evil things seem goodly and attractive. In the Arabic text, this verse is stated in the conditional form to express a consistent rule that makes the result inevitable when the cause occurs. Thus the evil comrade will certainly turn his comrade away from the right path, even though such a person may continue to think that he is on the right track: *"These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided."* (Verse 37) This is the worst thing that one comrade can do for another: turning him away from the right path and not allowing him to wake up or reflect on what he is doing. Instead, he keeps him deluded, thinking that he is

doing well, until he comes face to face with his inevitable end. Note, too, that the verse uses the present tense, implying that this is going on now before the eyes of onlookers, though those who are blind do not see it.

The end comes all of a sudden while they are still deluded: "*When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.'*" (Verse 38) In an instant we move from this present world to the next. Those who chose to be blind unexpectedly arrive at their destination and wake up like a drunken person regains his consciousness. They open their weak eyes and each one of them looks at his evil comrade who led him to ruin while assuring him of safety. He is so enraged with him that he says to him: "*Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West. Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38) I wish I had never met you and that a great gulf had existed between us. The *sūrah* then makes this comment on the exchange between the two comrades: "*Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38)

As the curtain drops on them both, we hear a word that crushes all hope for them: "*Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.*" (Verse 39) The suffering of each is given in full measure. It is not something to share out among them so as to reduce its effect.

Making the Deaf Hear

The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet with a word of consolation so that he does not grieve about those who turned away from him, disbelieving in his message. It encourages him to hold on to the truth revealed to him from on high, as it is the same word of truth given to every messenger of God:

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a

straight path; and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (Verses 40–45)

This point is repeated several times in the Qur'an to comfort the Prophet and to explain the nature of guidance and error, attributing them both to God's will. They are part of the task assigned to God's messengers, (peace be upon them all). Here the *sūrah* puts clear lines between man's limited power, even at its strongest level given to prophets, and God's free and unrestricted power. It emphasizes God's oneness in one of the most inspiring images in the Qur'an.

"Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error?" (Verse 40) They are neither deaf nor blind, but akin to both in so far as they have chosen to turn away from Divine guidance and follow error. The task assigned to the Prophet is to put the facts before the ones who hear and to guide those who see. When people shut down their receptive faculties and refuse to listen to the discourse addressing their hearts and souls, the Prophet can do nothing for them. There is no way, then, that he can guide them to the truth. He should not grieve over their error, after having fulfilled his task to the best of his ability.

When the Prophet has done his duty, God will now determine matters: *"If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them."* (Verses 41–42) The case is resolved either way. Should the Prophet die first, God will determine the punishment of those who rejected his message. If, on the other hand, he remains alive until the fulfilment of what they were warned against, God is certainly able to mete out what His warnings contain. They cannot escape. What He determines will take place. In either case, the matter is subject to His will. The message is His, while the Prophet is only His messenger.

"Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path." (Verse 43) Hold on to what you have been given and go along your way, reassured, caring little for them and what

they do. For, *“you certainly are on a straight path.”* It will neither bend nor deviate. This faith is closely related to the essential truth of the universe. It is consistent with the basic law that governs the universe. It leads its follower to the Lord Creator, safe from all error and deviation. God reassures His messenger, re-emphasizing this truth. The advocates of Islam in subsequent generations should find in it reassurance and comfort, even though they may suffer a great deal at the hands of those who have gone astray.

“And it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account.” (Verse 44) This verse may be understood in two ways: this Qur'ān is a reminder to you and your people, and you will be questioned about it on the Day of Judgement. Now that you have been given this reminder, you are left with no argument if you fail to follow it. Alternatively, it means that the Qur'ān is an honour that raises the standing of the Prophet and his people. This is what has taken place in reality. As for the Prophet, hundreds of millions of people pray to God at all times of the day and night to bless him and grant him peace; this for more than fourteen centuries. Hundreds of millions of hearts will continue to love him and bless him until the end of time. As for his people, they were very much on the margin of life until the Qur'ān was revealed, giving them the leading role in human history. When they carried its message to the world, they had its leadership, but only for as long as they held on to the Qur'ān. When they abandoned it, they were reduced to the lowest level among humanity. They were left at the tail end after once having been distinguished leaders. Those people whom God has chosen to carry His message and to assume mankind's leadership will face a great responsibility should they abandon their trust: *“you will all be called to account.”* (Verse 44) Of the two interpretations, I prefer this second meaning as it is broader in scope.

“Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: ‘Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?’” (Verse 45) God's oneness is the central point of Divine religion ever since the first of His messengers. On what basis, then, do those who worship other beings rely? The Qur'ān states this truth here in a unique image that shows the Prophet asking the messengers before him whether God has

appointed deities to be worshipped other than Himself. The very question implies its definitive and categorical answer, given by each and every one of God's messengers. It is a very pleasing image, one that employs a strong, inspiring and effective style.

Needless to say, there are gulfs of time and place between the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the messengers who went before him. There is also the gulf between life and death, which is far greater than the gulfs of time and place. Yet all these gulfs totally disappear before the essential truth of the unity of the Divine message based on God's oneness. It is this truth that remains solidly present while considerations of time, place, life and death, as also of all changing phenomena, disappear. The dead and the living all testify to it at all times. Such are the connotations of this remarkable Qur'ānic statement.

However, in relation to the Prophet and his brothers, the messengers of God sent before him, and their bond with their Lord, nothing is considered far or near. At any Divine moment, all barriers are removed, and the essential, fundamental truth appears in full colour. It is the truth of all existence that transcends all barriers of time, place, shape and image. At this moment, the Prophet asks and receives the answer, as happened to him on his night journey when he led all earlier prophets in prayer.

When we look at such a statement, it is better for us not to think of limitations in our life. What is familiar to us in life is by no means the total law governing the entire universe. We should remember that we only know some of the phenomena operating in the universe and see some of their effects when we recognize an aspect of its laws. There are barriers in our constitutional make-up and in our senses that limit our perception to what is familiar to us. Beyond that, there is a realm that we cannot fathom.

The Same Old Argument

The *sūrah* continues to console the Prophet in the face of the objections raised about God's choice of him as the messenger by the chiefs of his people, people who upheld the false values of the present world. In this context, the *sūrah* relates an episode from Moses' history

depicting how Pharaoh and his people also upheld the same values. The Quraysh elders said: “*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*” (Verse 31) In former times, Pharaoh took pride in his power and kingdom, arrogantly asking: “*Is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see?*” (Verse 51) Proud and arrogant, he pointed to Moses, God's prophet and messenger, who had no great worldly wealth or position, and said: “*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*” (Verse 52) Pharaoh also made a suggestion similar to the unbelieving Quraysh: “*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?*” (Verse 53) It sounds like a musical recording, played over and over again.

The *sūrah* shows how the deluded masses responded, despite the miracles shown by Moses and the tests to which they were subjected. Every time a hardship befell them, they would cry out to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift their affliction. The *sūrah* also explains the fate they suffered after they failed to heed the warning: “*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*” (Verses 55–56) Yet these later unbelievers still do not take heed.

Throughout this episode, the uniry of the Divine message is clearly apparent. Similarly, the nature of the tyrannical elders and their reception of the message of the truth is the same. They all cling to the trivial values of this world. We also see the nature of the masses who are easily led astray by their leaders.

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them. (Verses 46–47)

The episode starts with a very brief reference to the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, as a prelude to the main point intended here, which is to portray the similarity of the objections made by Pharaoh and the pagan Arabs, as also their similar values. It sums up the nature of Moses' message in these words: “*I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds.*” (Verse 46) It is the same truth stated by every

messenger: that he is 'a messenger' sent by 'the Lord of all the worlds'. The *sūrah* then provides a very quick reference to the signs given to Moses, adding how the people received these: "*When he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.*" (Verse 47) The arrogant and the ignorant always behave this way.

This is followed by a reference to the testing hardships God inflicted on Pharaoh and his people, which are detailed in other *sūrahs*:

Yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (Verses 48–50)

The signs shown by Moses did not provide enough motivation for people to believe, yet each was greater than the one before it. This confirms what God says in several places that such signs do not provide guidance to a heart if it is not ready to listen, and that God's messengers cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. What is most singular in what God describes of Pharaoh's and his people's attitude is that when they spoke to Moses, they said: "*Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.*" (Verse 49) They appeal to him to do his best to lift their hardship, yet they address him as 'sorcerer'. They also say, 'Pray to your Lord' while he tells them that he is 'a messenger from the Lord of all the worlds,' not his own special Lord to whom only he and a few followers submit. Neither miracles nor God's messenger's words touched their hearts, despite their promise: "*We shall now follow the right way.*" Such promises are often forgotten: "*Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.*" (Verse 50)

The masses may be influenced by miracles, and the truth may find its way to their hearts that have long been deceived. To forestall this, Pharaoh appeared before them in his full regalia, adorned in splendour. He tried to deceive them with a superficial argument, one that unfortunately appeals to those who have long endured tyranny:

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?'
(Verses 51–53)

The kingdom of Egypt and the rivers flowing at Pharaoh's feet are there, before their very eyes. The masses are deluded by such apparent power and splendour. By contrast, the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and all that is between them, compared to which Egypt is no more than a little particle, requires believing hearts to perceive. Only such believers can draw the right comparison. Under the yoke of tyranny that has long subjugated them, the masses are dazzled by the glitter they see before them. They do not stretch their minds to reflect on the kingdom of the universe and to whom it belongs.

Pharaoh knew how to manipulate his people's hearts and delude them with his riches: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) What he meant by referring to '*this contemptible wretch*' was that Moses was not a king, a prince, or a man of power or wealth. Or perhaps he meant that Moses belonged to the Israelites, a wretched and enslaved community in Egypt. His other description of Moses as one '*who can hardly make his meaning clear*' refers to his speech impediment. By the time of this encounter with Pharaoh, however, Moses was cured of this by God in answer to his prayer: "*My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say.*" (20: 25–28) Nothing now prevented him from making his meaning clear. In the eyes of the masses, Pharaoh, with his terrestrial kingdom, was better than Moses, even though he had the word of truth, was a prophet, and advocated the faith that ensured safety from hell.

"*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him?*" (Verse 53) Is such a petty thing as a gold bracelet needed to confirm a Divine message? Is a mere trifling to be valued as greater than the miracles God gave to His messenger? Or, perhaps, Pharaoh meant that Moses should have

been crowned as king to give him power as well as the message. “*Why have no angels come to accompany him?*” (Verse 53) This is yet another deceptive objection, one that is often levelled at God’s messengers.

“*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*” (Verse 54) That tyrants make fools of their people is a familiar story. First of all, they isolate their people from all sources of knowledge, withholding the facts until they are forgotten and no longer sought after. They use all types of influences until their minds are fully convinced of them. Thereafter, it is easy to make fools of them and lead them wherever they want them to go. Yet no tyrant can do this to his people unless they are transgressors, turning away from God’s straight path after having abandoned the standards of His faith. Conversely, it is extremely difficult to try to delude believers or make fools of them. Hence, the Qur’ān gives the reason for the response Pharaoh received from his people: “*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*” (Verse 54)

The time of tests, warnings and education was over. God was fully aware that these people would not believe. The masses willingly obeyed Pharaoh, an arrogant tyrant, turning a blind eye to God’s light and His clear signs. Therefore, the warning had to be fulfilled and God’s word was issued: “*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*” (Verses 55–56)

Here, God is speaking about Himself in the context of retribution inflicted on people whom He destroyed. This is meant to highlight His limitless power. What the *sūrah* describes is a situation where these people were guilty of a great crime incurring God’s anger. Therefore, “*We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all*”, meaning Pharaoh, the notables among his people and his army. In this way did they meet their end when they tried to pursue Moses and his people. God made of them the ancestors of every erring generation. He also set them as “*an example for later generations*”. (Verse 56) Hence, later communities should learn their story and benefit from the lessons it delivers.

Thus, this episode of Moses' story reflects similar attitudes to those of the pagan Arabs as they confronted God's last messenger. It is mentioned here so as to comfort and support the Prophet and those who believed with him. It warns the unbelievers against a fate similar to that of earlier people. This is one example of how the Qur'ān uses a historical account as an edifying narrative. The *sūrah* then gives us an episode from Jesus' story against the backdrop of the Arabs' argument in defence of their worship of angels and the comparison they cite, as some Christians worship Jesus. This is given in the last passage of the *sūrah*.



When Friends Turn Enemies

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, (57)

وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْهُ يَصِدُّونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. (58)

وَقَالُوا آلَهِتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًا بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. (59)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ مَثَلًا لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. (60)

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ مَلَائِكَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ يَخْلُقُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. (61)

وَإِنَّهُ لَعَلَمٌ لِّلسَّاعَةِ فَلَا تَمْتَرُنَّ بِهَا وَاتَّبِعُونِ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦١﴾

Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. (62)

وَلَا يَصُدُّكُمْ الشَّيْطَانُ إِنَّهُ لَكُمُ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. (63)

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ عِيسَىٰ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالَ قَدْ
جِئْتُكُمْ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَلِأُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ
بَعْضَ الَّذِي تَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ فَاتَّقُوا
اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ١١٣

God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path.' (64)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُوهُ هَذَا
صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ ١١٤

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (65)

فَاخْتَلَفَ الْأَحْزَابُ مِنْ بَيْنِهِمْ فَوَيْلٌ
لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمٍ
أَلِيمٍ ١١٥

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? (66)

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا السَّاعَةَ أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ
بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ١١٦

On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing. (67)

الْأَخْيَارُ يَوْمَئِذٍ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ
عَدُوٌّ إِلَّا الْمُتَّقِينَ ١١٧

You, servants of Mine, no fear need you have today, nor shall you grieve. (68)

يَتُوبَادِ لِاخْوَفِ عَلَيْكُمْ الْيَوْمَ وَلَا تَأْتُمْ
تَحْزَنُونَ ١١٨

You, who have believed in Our revelations and surrendered yourselves to Us, (69)

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَكَانُوا
مُسْلِمِينَ ١١٩

enter paradise, you and your spouses, in pure happiness. (70)

أَدْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ أَنْتُمْ وَأَزْوَاجُكُمْ
تُحِبُّونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in. There you shall abide. (71)

يُطَافُ عَلَيْهِمْ بِصِحَافٍ مِنْ ذَهَبٍ
وَأَكْوَابٍ وَفِيهَا مَا نَشْتَهِيهِ
الْأَنْفُسُ وَتَلَذُّ الْأَعْيُنُ وَأَنْتُمْ
فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. (72)

وَتِلْكَ الْجَنَّةُ الَّتِي أُورِثْتُمُوهَا
بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat. (73)

لَكُمْ فِيهَا فَاكِهَةٌ كَثِيرَةٌ مِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell. (74)

إِنَّ الْمَجْرِمِينَ فِي عَذَابٍ جَهَنَّمَ
خَالِدُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair. (75)

لَا يُفَرِّجُهُمْ اللَّهُ مِنْهَا وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مَبَاسُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves. (76)

وَمَا ظَلَمْنَاهُمْ وَلَكِنْ كَانُوا هُمْ
الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!' He will answer: 'You are here to stay.' (77)

وَنَادَوْا يَا مَلِكُ لِيَقْضِ عَلَيْنَا رَبُّكَ قَالَ
إِنَّكُمْ مَعَكُمْ أَبَدًا ﴿٧٧﴾

We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. (78)

لَقَدْ جِئْتَكُمْ بِالْحَقِّ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَكُمْ
لِلْحَقِّ كَادِرُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. (79)

أَمْ أْتَرَمُوا أَمْراً فَإِنَّا مَبْرُمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (80)

أَمْ يَحْسِبُونَ أَنَّا لَنَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَاهُمْ
بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' (81)

قُلْ إِنْ كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ وَلَدٌ فَأَنَا أَوَّلُ
الْعَابِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. (82)

سُبْحَانَ رَبِّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبِّ
الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (83)

فَذَرِهِمْ يَخوضُوا ويلعبوا حتى يُلَاقُوا
يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. (84)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي فِي السَّمَاءِ إِلَهٌُ وَفِي الْأَرْضِ
إِلَهٌُ وَهُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٤﴾

Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. (85)

Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (86)

Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God.' How is it, then, that they are so misled? (87)

And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.' (88)

Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know. (89)

وَبَارِكِ الَّذِي لَمَّا مَلَكَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَعِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ وَإِلَيْهِ
تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ
الشفاعة إلا من شهد بالحق وهم
يعلمون ﴿٨٦﴾

وَلَمَّا سَأَلْتَهُمْ مَنْ خَلَقَهُمْ لَيَقُولُنَّ اللَّهُ
فَأَنَّى يُؤفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

وَقِيلِهِ يَرْبِّ إِن هَتُولَاءِ قَوْمٌ
لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

فَأَصْفَحْ عَنْهُمْ وَقُلْ سَلَامٌ فَسَوْفَ
يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Overview

In this final passage, the *sūrah* picks up the legends the pagan Arabs weaved around their worship of angels. It refers to one of the arguments they used to defend their absurd beliefs. It was a futile argument that reflected no attempt to arrive at the truth; it was more an exercise in polemics. They had been told that both they and what they worshipped were bound for hell. The reference here being to their idols that were

first intended as representations of angels, but which were later worshipped as deities. They were told that whoever worshipped anything other than God will be in hell together with the thing worshipped. In response, some of them cited the example of Jesus, who was worshipped by some of those who deviated from true Christianity. They asked whether Jesus would also be in hell? This was nothing but idle argument. They also claimed that they were better guided than the Christians who worshipped Jesus, a human being, while they worshipped the angels, God's daughters. All this was no more than compounded falsehood. In connection with this, the *sūrah* gives an account of Jesus, explaining the truth about him and his message, and the differences that gripped his people both before and after him.

Addressing all those who deviate from the true faith, the *sūrah* warns them against the sudden coming of the Last Hour. It moves on to portray a long scene of the Day of Judgement, giving an image of lasting happiness for the God-fearing and one of painful suffering for the guilty. Furthermore, the *sūrah* negates their legends concerning the angels, makes it clear that God is free of all that they allege concerning Him and outlines some of His attributes, including His complete ownership of both this life and the life to come. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to be forbearing and to turn away from the unbelievers. They will come to know what is there to be known. This is an implicit warning to those who continue to argue after things have been made very clear.

Arguing About Jesus

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom,

and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 57–65)

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Ishāq gives the following report:

The Prophet sat with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah in the Sacred Mosque, and they were joined by al-Naḍr ibn al-Hārith. There were a few other men from the Quraysh. The Prophet spoke to them, but al-Naḍr interrupted him. The Prophet argued with him until he silenced him. He then read to them a passage of the Qurʾān that included the verse that says: “*You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for.*” (21: 98) The Prophet then left.

Then came ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba ‘rī of the Tamīm tribe who sat with them. Al-Walīd said to him: ‘Al-Naḍr was no match for Muḥammad. Indeed Muḥammad said that both we and the deities we worship will be the fuel of hell.’ Ibn al-Ziba ‘rī said: ‘Had I been the one who argued with him I would have won. Ask Muḥammad whether everyone worshipped other than God will be in hell together with those worshipping him. Well, we worship the angels, and the Jews worship Ezra, while the Christians worship Jesus, son of Mary.’ Al-Walīd and those who were in the Mosque admired what Ibn al-Ziba ‘rī had said and felt that he put forward a winning argument. When this was mentioned to the Prophet, he said: ‘Anyone who likes to be worshipped in place of God will be joined to those who worship him. These people only worship Satan and whoever Satan orders them to worship.’ God then revealed the verse that says: “*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell.*” (21: 101) This means that Jesus, Ezra and other rabbis and priests who were sincere in their faith, but were then worshipped as deities by later people will be safe from hell.

Furthermore, concerning the argument about Jesus being worshipped and the admiration of the argument by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and others, God revealed the verse that says: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry.*" (Verse 57)

In *al-Kashshāf*, a commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī gives a broadly similar report, without mentioning its source. Both reports show clearly how argumentative the pagan Arabs were. They were exactly as the Qur'ān describes them: "*They are contentious people*". (Verse 58) They were certainly skilful in dispute. They realized what the Qur'ān and the Prophet meant, but they tried hard to twist its meaning, indulged in polemics, exploiting the fact that the Qur'ānic statement was general in its implication. This is characteristic of everyone who is devoid of sincerity, seeking to manipulate words and phrases in order to twist what was a clear meaning. Therefore, the Prophet strictly prohibited contentious arguments. Abū Umāmah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "The Prophet came out once only to find some people involved in argument concerning the Qur'ān. He was so angry that he looked as though vinegar had been poured over his face. He then said to them: 'Do not argue about God's book citing parts of it against other parts. No community strays into error unless they are given to contentious argument.' He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse that says: '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people.*' (Verse 58)

Another possible interpretation of the statement, "*Who is better: our deities or he?*" is supported by the general drift of the verses referring to their legend about the angels. What they meant is that their worship of the angels is better than the Christians' worship of Jesus, because the angels are closer to God in their nature and descent. Exalted is God above all that they allege. Thus, the statement, '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people*', serves as a reply to Ibn al-Zibā'rī as suggested earlier. Moreover, it means that their citing of what the Christians worship is invalid, because it deviates from the truth of God's oneness. It is not right to compare one deviation from the truth with another; they are all false. This interpretation is reasonable.

Hence, the *sūrah* makes the following comment: “*He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*” (Verse 59) He was no deity to be worshipped, even though some Christians deviated from the true path and did worship him. He was only a favoured servant of God, and no blame attaches to him for the fact that people worshipped him. God granted him favours so that he would be an example for the Children of Israel to follow. However, they forgot the lesson and went astray.

The *sūrah* discusses the Arabs’ legend about the angels, making it clear that they are part of God’s creation. Had God willed, He would have made the angels succeed them on earth, or He would have transformed some people into angels to succeed them: “*Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth.*” (Verse 60) All questions of creation are determined by God; whatever He wills to create will surely come into existence. None of His creation has any relation to Him other than that of a created being with its Creator, a servant with its Master.

Another statement about Jesus reminds them of the Last Hour which they denied: “*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*” (Verses 61–62) A number of the Prophet’s statements speak of Jesus’ second coming, a short time before the Last Hour. This is perhaps what is indicated in the statement: ‘*He is a portent of the Last Hour.*’ It means that he informs of its approach. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: “By Him who holds my soul in His hand, the son of Mary is about to come back among you, serving as a just arbiter. He will break the cross, kill the pig and abolish tribute money. Wealth will be so abundant that no one will accept money. Indeed one prostration before God will be better than this whole world and all that it contains.” [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd.] Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: “A group of my community will ever continue to fight, holding on to the truth, until the Day of Judgement. Jesus, son of Mary, will then come down and their commander will say to him: ‘Come and lead us in prayer.’ He will reply: ‘No. Some of you lead others.’ This is just an aspect of honour God has granted to this community.” [Related by Muslim.]

All this belongs to the realm beyond our perception. We are informed of it by the Prophet who tells the truth and references to it are given in the Qur'ān. No human being has any say in this other than what has been stated in these two sources.

“He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path.” (Verse 61) They had strong doubts about the coming of the Last Hour, but the Qur'ān calls on them to be certain of it. Likewise, they steered away from guidance and the Qur'ān urges them, through God's messenger, to follow him along the straight path which ensures that its travellers will not go astray. It makes it clear to them that their deviation is only the result of their following Satan when they would be better advised to follow God's messenger: *“Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.”* (Verse 62) The Qur'ān always reminds people of the on-going battle between them and Satan that has been raging since the time of Adam, their first father, and the first encounter in heaven. No one can be more heedless than one who knows that a watchful, sworn enemy is deliberately waiting for a chance to attack him and yet does not take care to protect himself. On the contrary, he moves closer to the determined enemy and even follows his lead.

Islam places man in the midst of this ever-raging battle with Satan. It assigns to him gains that are beyond anyone's imagination, should he be victorious. Likewise, his loss, should he be defeated, is beyond anyone's reckoning. Thus, Islam steers man's fighting ability to this on-going battle which asserts the humanity of man, giving him his special position among the rest of creatures. Thus, the highest aim for man on earth is to achieve victory against his enemy, Satan. Once he does, he overcomes evil and wickedness and establishes firm roots of goodness and purity.

The *sūrah* now speaks about Jesus, stating the truth about him and what he preached, and how his people differed about him, both before and after his time:

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord:

so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 63–65)

Thus, Jesus came to his people with clear signs, whether miracles God granted him or teachings that lead along the right way. He said to his people: *'I have come to you with wisdom'*. Whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted much of what is good, and he is safe and assured of his way. Jesus' mission also clarified for them some of the questions over which they differed. Indeed, they differed on many aspects of the law of Moses, allowing their variances to split them into hostile factions. Jesus also invited them to maintain their fear of God and to obey him in the Divine message he delivered to them. He declared the principle of God's oneness in full clarity, admitting no compromise in it: *"God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone."* (Verse 64) He never said that he was God, nor that he was God's son. He never made any reference to any relationship between him and God other than that of his being God's servant. Furthermore, he stated that his message demarcated a straight path without bend or error. Yet those who came after him disputed much, splitting into factions like those who preceded him. In this they were wrongdoers, relying on no sure information. Hence, the warning: *"Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day."* (Verse 65)

Jesus' message was addressed to the Children of Israel. They were awaiting his coming to save them from their humiliating bondage to the Romans. Yet when he came, they denied and opposed him. Indeed, they even plotted to get him crucified. Jesus found them divided into numerous sects, the most important of which were as follows:

1. The Sadducees, named after Zadok, whose family retained custody of the Temple since the time of David and Solomon. According to their law, he must have been a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. For, custody of the Temple belonged to Aaron's descendants. Holding such an office, they were very strict on detailed worship rituals, denouncing any deviation. Nevertheless,

in personal matters, they were lax, enjoying life's pleasures. They denied the Day of Resurrection.

2. The Pharisees. They were in dispute with the Sadducees, objecting to their strict observation of worship rituals while denying the Day of Resurrection. Their most common characteristic was their disregard of worldly pleasures, even though some of them took pride in their knowledge. Jesus denounced such an attitude.
3. The Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jews and Assyrians. They believed only in the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They denied the later books accepted by other Jews as part of their scripture.
4. The Essenes, or Essenians. These were influenced by some philosophical doctrines, living in isolation of other Jewish sects. Theirs was an ascetic, strictly organized sect.

In addition, there were numerous other sects that gave rise to much confusion in Jewish beliefs and traditions. The Jews at the time tolerated humiliation under the Romans, and awaited their deliverance at the hands of the Messiah. When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them declaring that '*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone*', and preaching a law of tolerance and spiritualism, he was opposed by the professional clerics who gave paramount importance to rituals. He is reported to have said about them: "They make loads that are hard to carry and lay them on the shoulders of the people. However, they are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They do everything to attract people's attention. They make their headbands large and the tassels on their shawls long. They love the place of honour at dinners and the front seats in synagogues. They love to be greetered in the marketplaces and to have people call them Rabbi." (Matthew 23: 4-7) He is also quoted as addressing them thus: "You, blind guides! You strain gnats out of your wine, but you swallow camels. How horrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outsides of cups and dishes. But inside they are full of greed and uncontrolled desires. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cups and dishes so that the outside may also be clean. How horrible it will be for you, scribes

and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed graves that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity."³ (Matthew 23: 24–27)

When we read today these words of Jesus (peace be upon him) and similar texts, we realize how applicable they are to professional clerics of all religions. They are all of the same type.

Jesus' term on earth came to its end and he went to his Lord. Later, his followers split into groups and factions: some made him a deity; some made him the son of God; others make God a trinity of three one of whom is Jesus. The pure concept of God's oneness preached by Jesus has, thus, been lost, as also his call on people to worship God alone, pure in their submission to Him.⁴

"Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day." (Verse 65) Then the pagan Arabs disputed with the Prophet concerning Jesus, basing their argument on what these different factions fabricated and weaved of legends about him.

Waiting for the Last Hour

When the *sūrah* refers to wrongdoers, it includes those factions that disputed about Jesus together with the pagan Arabs who argued with the Prophet on the basis of what those factions perpetrated. It draws a long, spectacular scene showing what happens to them on the Day of Judgement and adds an image of what happens to the God-fearing who receive His favours in heaven:

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing.

3. The information given here about Jewish sects and the subsequent quotations are based on Al-Aqqād, 'Abbās Mahmūd, *Abqariyyat al-Masīh*, Cairo, (n.d.).

4. A more detailed discussion of this is given in *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, pp. 178–180.

desire. However, what comes over and above desire satisfaction is that it is all pleasant to the eye, adding beauty to gratification: "*They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in.*" (Verse 71) Yet there is more to this blessed enjoyment: there is something greater and far more honourable. They are honoured by an address from on high: "*There you shall abide. This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat.*" (Verses 71–73)

What fate awaits the evildoers whom we left a little while ago in dispute, blaming one another? "*The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell.*" (Verse 74) It is a permanent, hard and severe suffering that allows no reduction or respite. No ray of hope will ever appear nor any chance of deliverance. They endure it, lost in despair: "*It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair.*" (Verse 75) This is all their own doing. No one has wronged them: "*We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves.*" (Verse 76)

An outcry is heard from afar. It is an outcry of utter distress, born in despair: "*They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" (Verse 77) It comes from down below, from behind the closed doors of hell. The evildoers are not appealing for help or salvation; they have already despaired of that. All they are asking for is that they should be allowed to perish, their misery end. That is all that they can hope for. When all that one can hope for is to perish, one must be in extreme distress. This cry certainly comes from long-suffering souls and bodies whose endurance has gone beyond all limits. Hence they cry out: "*Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!*" The answer they are given adds to their despair, caring little for what they feel: "*He will answer: 'You are here to stay.'*" (Verse 77) No deliverance, no hope, no death, no end; they are there to stay.

This distressing image is followed by an address to those who hate the truth and turn away from guidance. It portrays to all how singular their attitude is:

*We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth.
If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our*

own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (Verses 78–80)

It is their abhorrence of the truth that prevented them from following it. It is not that they did not realize that it is the truth. Nor did they doubt the honesty and sincerity of the Prophet; they had long known him, acknowledging that he never told a lie. How could he, then, lie to God saying about Him what was false? In most cases, those who oppose the truth are not unaware that it is the truth; they simply hate it because it conflicts with their desires. They are too weak to resist their desires, but they can always attempt to suppress the truth and persecute its advocates. It is from this, their weakness, that they derive the audacity to stand against the truth.

Therefore, the Almighty who knows all their secrets and scheming warns them: *“If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.”* (Verses 79–80) Their persistent support of falsehood against the truth is countered by God's clear will to establish and strengthen the truth; and their wicked scheming under the cover of darkness is countered by God's knowledge of all secret whispering. When weak creatures stand against the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In Heaven and on Earth

Now the Qur'ān directs the Prophet to say something to them and to leave them to face the destiny which has already been described to them:

Say: ‘If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.’ Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (Verses 81–83)

They alleged that the angels whom they worshipped were God's daughters. Had God had any offspring, the first one to know this and act on the basis of this knowledge was God's Prophet and messenger. He was close to Him and was quick to comply with His orders. He would have been the first to offer his respects to His offspring, had He had any as they alleged. He, however, worships none but God. This in itself is evidence confirming that their allegation has no basis. All glory belongs to God who is totally unlike what they allege. *"Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions."* (Verse 82)

When we contemplate the heavens and the earth, looking at their systems and harmony, we feel the greatness and sublimity of the One who controls all this, referred to as, *'the Lord of the Throne,'* and we realize the absurdity of any such claim. By our nature we know that the Maker of the universe can have no similarity to creatures who procreate. Therefore, attributing sons and daughters to Him appears to be no more than idle talk and play, which deserve no answer. It only merits a stern warning of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, an image of which has already been given: *"Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised."* (Verse 83)

The *sūrah* continues its glorification of God, the Creator, attributing to Him what is worthy of His Lordship of the heavens and the earth as well as the mighty throne:

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (Verses 84–86)

This statement confirms the unity of Godhead throughout the universe, making it clear that no one shares this with God Almighty who does everything according to His infinite wisdom and perfect

knowledge. The Arabic word *tabāarak*, translated here as 'blessed', carries connotations of greatness and exaltedness above all their perceptions. It is He who is 'the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all in between'. He alone knows the timing of the Last Hour and to Him all creation returns. On that day, when all return to Him, none of those whom they allege as His offspring or partners will have the power of intercession for anyone. None can intercede with Him other than one who knows the truth and bears witness to it. A person who testifies to the truth will not intercede on behalf of any who ever stood in opposition to it.

The *sūrah* then confronts them with something that is ingrained in their nature and concerning which they have no doubt. That is, their Creator is God. How, then, can they associate partners with Him in their worship, and how can they expect that anyone will intercede on behalf of anyone who associated partners with Him: "*Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God'. How is it, then, that they are so misled?*" (Verse 87) How can they ignore the truth testified to by their own nature? How can they allow their behaviour to be in conflict with its inevitable result?

As the *sūrah* comes to its close, it highlights the fact that the Prophet turns to his Lord complaining of their rejection of the truth and their disbelief: "*And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.'*" (Verse 88) This is given in a special form that implies how keenly the Prophet felt this and how well God received it. The answer from on high is a directive to the Prophet to bear with them and not to care for their rejection. On the contrary, he should forbear and feel his heart content. To this is added an implicit warning to those determined opponents of the truth: "*Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know.*" (Verse 89) The time will come when everything is exposed and they will then know the dreadful fate that awaits them.

SŪRAH 44

Al-Dukhān

(Smoke)

Prologue

Characterized by its short and rhyming verses, violent images and inspirational shades of meaning, this *sūrah* strikes like a hammer, its beat directed at making every human heart tremble. The entire *sūrah* appears to be a single whole, with one central theme to which all its elements are tied: the story the scene from the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, its depiction of the universe and the direct discussion of God's oneness, people's resurrection and God's message.

The *sūrah* begins with a reference to the Qur'ān and its revelation on a blessed night when every matter of wisdom is made clear. Its revelation is an act of mercy for mankind, as well as a warning to them. Moreover, it tells people about their Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all between them, confirming His oneness. He is the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of everyone who lived and everyone who will come to life.

The *sūrah* abandons this thread in order to speak about the people addressed by the Qur'ān: "*Yet they remain in doubt, playing about.*" (Verse 9) It issues a swift but stern warning against such doubt and play: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous*

is this suffering?" (Verses 10–11) On the day when this suffering befalls them, they will pray for it to be lifted, but once it comes it will not be removed. They are reminded that such suffering has not as yet been inflicted. They should, therefore, seize the opportunity now before they are returned to their Lord when this fearful suffering falls due: *"On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution."* (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* tells them about Pharaoh and the end he and his people met when a noble messenger from God came and appealed to them: *"Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God."* (Verses 18–19) However, they refused to take heed until God's messenger despaired of their ever responding. They were destroyed after having behaved with insolence: *"How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite."* (Verses 25–29)

Against this backdrop the *sūrah* reverts to their denial of the life to come. They said: *"We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true."* (Verses 35–36) They are reminded of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba' and are told that they are no better than they were. Therefore, they will not be spared a similar fate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that there is a link between resurrection and God's wisdom manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth: *"We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand."* (Verses 38–39) It then tells them about the Day of Decision, which is the time appointed for all of them. It adds here a violent scene depicting the suffering of the guilty who are made to eat of the Zaqqūm tree. It shows them how a sinful person is dragged into the midst of the blazing fire, where scalding water is poured over his head in recompense for his sins: *"Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted."* (Verses 49–50)

Side by side with this scene is an image of the blessings enjoyed in heaven by the God-fearing. This is a profound image, one that contrasts with the great suffering endured by the other group, and fits with the strong beat of the *sūrah*. This then ends with another reference to the Qur'ān, coupled with a strong and implicit warning: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

From start to finish the *sūrah* uses a continuous and fast bear, and puts before the human mind a succession of images and impressions that are characteristically powerful. It takes us on a long journey that includes the heavens and the earth, the present world and the next, heaven and hell, the past and the present, life and death, the laws of creation and those of the universe, of worlds that are perceptible as well as those that are imperceptible. Relatively short as it is, the *sūrah* provides a grand tour of the world around us and of that which lies beyond our perceptive faculties.



Smoke That Ushers Clarity

Al-Dukhān (Smoke)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

By the Book that makes things
clear! (2)

We have bestowed it from on
high on a blessed night; for,
indeed, We have always sent
warnings. (3)

On that night every matter of
wisdom is made clear (4)

by Our command; for, indeed,
We have always sent messages [of
guidance] (5)



بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

حَم ①

وَٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِیْنِ ②

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ فِی لَیْلَةٍ مُّبَرَكَةٍ
إِنَّا كُنَّا مُنذِرِیْنَ ③

فِیہَا یُفْرَقُ كُلُّ أَمْرٍ حَكِیْمٍ ④

أَمْرًا مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا مُرْسِلِیْنَ ⑤

as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; (6)

رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ
الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. (7)

رَبِّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
إِن كُنْتُمْ مُوقِنِينَ ﴿٧﴾

There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (8)

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ رَبُّكُمْ
وَرَبُّ آبَائِكُمُ الْأُولِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. (9)

بَلْ هُمْ فِي شَكٍّ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. (10)

فَارْتَفِبْ يَوْمَ تَأْتِي السَّمَاءُ بِدُخَانٍ
مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! (11)

يَغْشَى النَّاسَ هَذَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' (12)

رَبَّنَا اكْشِفْ عَنَّا الْعَذَابَ
إِنَّا مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; (13)

أَفَن لَّمْ يَذْكُرُوا أَنَّا قَدْ جَاءَهُمْ
رَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taugth by others, a madman!' (14)

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿١٤﴾

We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. (15)

إِنَّا كَاشَفُوْا الْعَذَابَ قَلِيْلًا إِنَّكُمْ عَآدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (16)

يَوْمَ تَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ إِنَّا مُنْتَقِمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, (17)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! (18)

أَنْ أَدْرَأَ إِلَىٰ عِبَادِ اللَّهِ إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. (19)

وَأَنْ لَا تَعْلُوا عَلَيَّ اللَّهُ إِنِّي مَعَكُمْ بِسُلْطَنِ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. (20)

وَإِنِّي عُدْتُ بِرَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمْ أَنْ تَرْجُمُونِ ﴿٢٠﴾

If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' (21)

وَلَنْ أَرْفُؤْكُمْ سُوْلًا فَاعْزُوا لَوْ كُنْتُمْ مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' (22)

And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; (23)

and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' (24)

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, (25)

and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, (26)

and good things in which they used to delight! (27)

Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. (28)

Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (29)

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, (30)

from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. (31)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِ مَثَلَهُمْ كَمِثْلٍ قَوْمِ عُجْرَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

فَأَسْرِ بِعِبَادِي لَيْلًا إِنَّكُمْ مُتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

وَاتْرِكْ أَلْبَحْرَ حَرًّا هُمْ جُنْدٌ مُفْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

كَمْ تَرَكُوا مِنْ جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَزُرُوعٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَنَعْمَ مَا كَانُوا فِيهَا فَكِهِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

كَذَلِكَ وَأَوْرَثْنَاهَا قَوْمًا آخَرِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

فَمَا بَكَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ السَّمَاءُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَا كَانُوا مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ جِئْنَا بِعَبْرِ إِسْرَائِيلَ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ الْمُهِينِ ﴿٣٠﴾

مِنْ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ عَلِيًّا مِّنَ الْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

We chose them knowingly above all other people. (32)

وَلَقَدْ آخَرْنَا نَحْمَهُمْ عَلَىٰ عَالَمٍ عَلَىٰ
الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (33)

وَمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ مِّنَ الْآيَاتِ مَا فِيهِ بَلَدٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Now these people assert: (34)

إِنَّ هَؤُلَاءِ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. (35)

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّا مَوْتَتُنَا الْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُنشَرِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (36)

فَأْتُوا بِآبَائِنَا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? (37)

أَهُمْ خَيْرٌ أَمْ قَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (38)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَلْعِبَثِ ﴿٣٨﴾

We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. (39)

مَا خَلَقْنَاهُمْ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. (40)

إِنَّ يَوْمَ الْفَصْلِ مِيقَاتُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support (41)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلَىٰ عَنْ مَوْلَىٰ شَيْئًا
وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (42)

إِلَّا مَنْ رَحِمَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree (43)

إِنَّ شَجَرَةَ الزَّقُّومِ ﴿٤٣﴾

will be the food of the sinful; (44)

طَعَامُ الْأَثِيمِ ﴿٤٤﴾

like molten lead will it boil in the belly, (45)

كَالْمُهْلِ يَغْلِي فِي الْبُطُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

like the boiling of scalding water. (46)

كَغَلِي الْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; (47)

خُذُوهُ فَاعْتِلُوهُ إِلَىٰ سَوَاءِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٤٧﴾

then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! (48)

ثُمَّ صَبُّوا فَوْقَ رَأْسِهِ مِنْ عَذَابِ
الْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٨﴾

Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! (49)

ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْكَرِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾

This is the very thing you surely doubted.' (50)

إِنَّ هَذَا مَا كُنْتُمْ بِهِ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

The God-fearing will certainly be
in a safe position, (51)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي مَقَامٍ أَمِينٍ ﴿٥١﴾

amid gardens and fountains, (52)

فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

wearing garments of silk and
brocade, facing one another.
(53)

يَلْبَسُونَ مِنْ سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ
مُتَقَابِلِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus shall it be. And We shall
pair them with pure companions
with most beautiful eyes. (54)

كَذَلِكَ وَزَوَّجْنَاهُمْ بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

There they can call for every kind
of fruit, enjoying peace and
security. (55)

يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِكُلِّ فَاكِهَةٍ آمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

They shall not taste death there,
having had their one death. He
will have preserved them from
suffering through the blazing
fire, (56)

لَا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا الْمَوْتَ
إِلَّا الْمَوْتَةَ الْأُولَىٰ وَوَقَّعَهُمْ
عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

an act of your Lord's favour. That
is the supreme triumph. (57)

فَضْلًا مِنْ رَبِّكَ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ
الْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٧﴾

We have made this Qur'an easy
to understand, in your own
language, so that they may take
heed. (58)

فَأَنمَآ يَسَّرْنَاهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Wait, then; they too are waiting.
(59)

فَأَرْقُبْ إِنَّهُمْ مُرْتَقِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

The Blessed Night

Hā. Mīm. By the book that makes things clear! We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (Verses 1–8)

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters, *Hā Mīm*, making an oath by them and by the book composed of letters like them, making things clear. We have spoken elsewhere about these separate letters occurring at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The point to add here is that making them the subject of an oath is just like taking an oath on the book. Every single letter, representing a sound, is a true miracle, or one of God's signs manifested in man's make-up, giving him the ability to speak. They also identify the order in which alphabetical sounds occur along the vocal tract, the symbol representing the letter and its sound, as also man's ability to gather information through them. All these are significant facts that grow in our minds when we seriously reflect on them.

What the oath asserts is the revelation of the book on a blessed night: "*We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 3–6) The reference to the night on which the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high most probably means – although God knows best – the night when its revelation first started. It was a night during the month of Ramaḍān, which is described in the following words: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed.*" (2: 185) The Qur'ān was not revealed in full on that night, nor was all the Qur'ān revealed during Ramaḍān. It had only

started to make contact with the earth, and that night was the first time such contact was made.

Blessed indeed is the night which brought such great goodness to mankind, allowing the Divine system to be implemented in human life, and providing people with a chance to be in touch with the major laws that govern the universe. These are given in easy translation in the Qur'ān, enabling human nature to respond to them and implement them with ease and comfort. It then enables a human community to be established, one based on the rules and responses of the nature God placed in man, living in harmony with the universe around it. It establishes a system that is naturally clean and honourable, free of unnecessary restrictions, under which man lives on earth but by which he maintains his contact with heaven.

Those who were the first to receive the Qur'ān lived during a remarkable period of history when they were in direct contact with God. He told them what they felt in different situations, making them feel, time after time, that He was looking after them. For their part, they took all this into account, in every move and action they performed, and every thought they entertained. They appealed to Him at every turn, trusting that He would always respond to them.

When that generation passed away, the Qur'ān remained an open book that directly addresses human hearts. When people open themselves to it, its effect surpasses magic. It transforms their feelings in a way that is heard of only in great legends. The Qur'ān has remained ever since a complete and clear system that can establish a model human community in any environment and at any time. What it creates is a type of human life that lives within its local environment and time and adopts the unique Islamic system with all its special qualities. This is the distinctive mark of the Divine system, and it applies to everything that God makes. Human beings make what suits them at a particular period of time and in a particular situation. God's work, on the other hand, is perfect, fulfilling all needs, suited to all times and situations, combining permanent truths with variable forms, all in perfect harmony.

God bestowed the Qur'ān from on high on that remarkable night to warn people in the first place: "*We have always sent warnings.*" (Verse 3)

The very fact that the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high on that blessed night makes this a deciding point: *"On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear."* (Verse 4) The Qur'ān certainly set things apart, distinguishing the permanent truth from powerless falsehood. Limits were established and the road along which man should travel through life was charted. This is the road man should follow for the rest of life. Thus, none of the fundamental issues of human life are left ambiguous. Everything is made clear in the Divine message. All this has been accomplished by God's command and by His will to send messengers to clarify matters for all mankind: *"By Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance]."* (Verse 5)

All this has been done as an act of mercy bestowed on mankind for all future generations up to the Day of Judgement: *"As a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all."* (Verse 6) Nothing manifests God's mercy like the revelation of the Qur'ān. With consummate ease, it appeals directly to people's hearts as easily as the blood flowing through their veins. In this way, it transforms man into a noble creature. With Qur'ānic guidance, human society becomes more like a dream world, yet it is there for eyes to see. The faith the Qur'ān outlines profoundly engages hearts and minds so as to be loved passionately. The question here is not one of meticulous perfection, goodness and suitability. It is much more than that. It is a scenario in which every one of these qualities is further enhanced until their perfection attains a beauty that permeates all details and combines and harmonizes them while at the same time maintaining their close links to the main body.

"As a mercy from your Lord." this is how the Qur'ān was revealed on that blessed night. *"He alone is the One who hears all and knows all."* (Verse 6) He hears and He knows. He reveals what He reveals to people on the basis of His knowledge of what they say and do, as well as what is suitable and beneficial for them of laws, regulations and directives. He is the One who is in control of the universe, taking care of all who live on it. He is *"the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers."* (Verse 7) The revelations He bestows from on high to mould people's lives is part of His Lordship of the universe and of His laws that operate in the universe.

The reference in this verse to firm belief implies an allusion to the unbelievers' confused beliefs. They recognized God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth but they, nevertheless, associated partners with Him. This means that the central principle of God's oneness was blurred in their minds, and this precluded them from having firm and reassured beliefs.

God is also the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of all generations of creation: "*There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.*" (Verse 8) Both the initiation of life and its deathly end are witnessed by all and are recognized as being beyond the power of any creature. This is clear at first sight and with simple consideration. The scene of death, like the scene of new life, touches the human heart and leaves a very strong influence on it, making it ready to respond. Hence, they are often mentioned in the Qur'ān to attract people's attention to them.

Clarifying Smoke

At this point, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' own situation, which was the opposite of the seriousness with which they should have dealt with God's revelations:

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! [They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (Verses 9–16)

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet that they are playing about when the situation requires seriousness, and that they continue to be in doubt about God's confirmed revelations. He is, therefore, instructed to

leave them until they face a day of great hardship: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering.*" (Verses 10–11)

Scholars during the early period of Islam differed in their views about what the smoke mentioned in this verse means. Some of them maintained that it will occur on the Day of Judgement, which makes the warning implied here similar to other warnings in the Qur'an about that day. They said that this will surely take place and that the Prophet awaited it. Others said that it actually did take place just as the Qur'an states. It was then lifted after the Prophet prayed God to so remove it.¹

We, though, are more in agreement with the view expressed by Ibn 'Abbās and explained by Ibn Kathīr making it clear that the smoke will appear on the Day of Judgement. Similar warnings also occur elsewhere in the Qur'an. What it means here is that these people doubt and play. Leave them, then, in anticipation of that terrible day when the skies shall bring smoke that makes things clear. As it envelops people, their suffering will be particularly painful. Their appeals for help is described thus: "*[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.'*" (Verse 12) They are told that a positive response to their appeal is impossible. It is now too late: "*How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!'*" (Verses 13–14) They claimed that a non-Arab person or people taught the Prophet the Qur'an, and they further alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a madman.

Having given them this image of a time when they appeal in vain, they are told that they still have a chance, which they should not lose. While they are still in this life, their punishment is delayed. If they believe now, as they will later promise they would if returned, they

1. The author adds here lengthy quotations from *Hadīth* anthologies and from commentaries on the Qur'an in support of both views. To include these in full would perhaps be tedious for an English reader. They are no more than endorsements of each of the two views, showing the evidence on which each relies. Therefore, these quotations have been omitted in this edition. – Editor's note.

will have acted whilst they have the time to prove their sincerity. Nothing is lost yet, so they better act now before they are returned to God. When they are returned to Him: “*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught,*” when the smoke envelops people. “*We will indeed exact retribution,*” for the play you indulge in and the falsehood you level at the Prophet describing him as ‘*taught by others, a madman*’, when he is God’s trusted messenger.

Drowning Pharaoh

A very brief account of the history of Moses and Pharaoh is then added. It concludes with a mighty strike in this present life, corresponding to the mighty onslaught that will strike them on the day when the skies will bring forth their smoke:

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh’s people: there came to them a noble messenger, who said to them: ‘Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.’ He then called out to his Lord, saying: ‘These people are lost in sin.’ And [God said]: ‘Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.’ How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 17–33)

This round starts with a strong note alerting people to the fact that when God sends a messenger to a certain community, this may represent

a special test for them. Likewise, allowing those who oppose the messenger and reject his message a period of time during which they may persist in their arrogance, persecuting the messenger and those who believe in him, may also be a special sort of test. When a community exhausts the patience of God's messenger, leaving him despairing of their ever being positive towards the Divine message, their action may incur a stern punishment: "*We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people.*" (Verse 17) We tested them with prosperity and power in the land, as well as all means of affluence and power. "*There came to them a noble messenger.*" (Verse 17) This was a part of their test, showing how they responded to God's messenger who asked nothing for himself in return. He only called on them to believe in God and demonstrate their readiness to give everything to God, leaving nothing for themselves when it comes to sacrifice for His sake. Thus, the messenger said to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.*" (Verses 18–21)

These are clear words, in short sentences, outlining what Moses asks of his people. He is advising them to make a complete response and submit totally to God. It does not behove God's servants to exalt themselves against Him. As Moses gives them God's message, together with clear and irrefutable proof that he is God's messenger, he seeks God's help and protection should they attack him. If they persist in their erring ways, unwilling to believe in God, he asks them to leave him alone, move away from him. This is extremely fair behaviour. Tyranny, however, is rarely willing to deal in fairness. It fears should the truth remain free, approaching people peacefully. It, therefore, resorts to strong, hard tactics in its efforts to impose its absolute authority. It cannot afford for the truth to make any in-roads and thus win minds and hearts over to its side. Hence, tyranny and falsehood strike hard. They stone any advocate of the truth, seeking to persecute them in every possible way.

The *sūrah* leaves out several episodes of this story to pick up its thread as it approaches its end. Moses realizes that people will not

respond to him positively. Nor will they adopt either of the two options he offered them: accepting his status or moving away from him. He is certain that they are genuinely guilty, with no hope of their ever changing their ways. Therefore, he makes his ultimate appeal to his Lord: "*He then called out to his Lord, saying: These people are lost in sin.*" (Verse 22) What means a messenger of God has other than to submit the outcome of his efforts to his Lord? Moses presents his account and leaves matters to God to deal with as He pleases.

Moses received an endorsement from God with regard to his evaluation of his peoples' status: they were truly guilty: "*Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verses 23–24) That their flight was to occur at night comes in for stronger emphasis in the Arabic text: the verb *asri*, translated as 'set forth', implies that the march must be under cover of darkness, then the verse adds the word *laylan*, meaning 'by night'. Thus they set forth stealthily, at night, unseen by Pharaoh and his watchmen. Furthermore, they were instructed not to make any disturbance in the parted sea as they crossed through it. Thus, Pharaoh and his host would be tempted to pursue them and God's will would then be as He had determined: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) Thus, God's will is done through apparent causes, but these causes are part and parcel of His will and how it is accomplished.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of this mass drowning in words that express God's will, which inevitably comes to pass: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) This is followed with a comment highlighting Pharaoh's humiliation as also of those who supported his arrogant tyranny. They are utterly humiliated in a world where they behaved with all arrogance. How fitting! Those very people bowed their heads before Pharaoh, bewitched by his power, yet he is of no significance in this world. When his power is withdrawn, there is nothing he can do to regain it. No one mourns his loss.

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit

it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Verses 25–29)

The scene begins with an image of the splendid comfort in which they dwelled: gardens, fountains, plants, high position, honour and blessings in which they revelled. Yet all this is taken away from them, or they are removed from it, so as to give it to others. In another *sūrah*, the Qur'an says: "*We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (26: 59) Whilst the Children of Israel did not inherit Pharaoh's kingdom *per se*, they were nonetheless given a similar kingdom in another land. What is meant, then, is that the same kind of kingdom and blessings that were taken away from Pharaoh and his people were given to the Children of Israel.

What happened next? Those same tyrants, who had gloried in their power and who were held in awe by people, were removed altogether. None grieved for them. Neither earth nor heaven felt their loss. Nor were they given any reprieve: "*Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verse 29) The statement carries connotations of humiliation and total disregard. No one on earth or in heaven was sorry about how these tyrants met their end. They were crushed like ants under foot. The whole universe hated them because they had split themselves away from it. This is a universe that believes in its Lord while they denied Him. Theirs were evil souls, untouchable by the universe in which they lived. Had these tyrants felt what these words imply, they would have foreseen their own humiliation and known that the universe looks upon them as creatures apart.

This is then contrasted with an image of those who are saved and blessed with honour:

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 30–33)

It was from '*humiliating suffering*' that the Children of Israel were saved. This contrasts with the humiliation that the Egyptian tyrants

and transgressors found themselves in. They were saved “*from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor.*” (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then mentions the fact that God chose the Children of Israel, knowing all about them, with both their positive and negative qualities. Yet He chose them in preference to all other people in their own time. God knew that they were, at the time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qur’ān about their deviation and slow response. Perhaps God made His choice on the basis that whilst they did not then attain the high standard of faith He required, they would nonetheless be the best under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight.

“*And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.*” (Verse 33) Thus, in turn, the Children of Israel were tested by means of these signs. When the test was over and their time in charge came to its end, God punished them for their deviation and evil. It was as a result of this test that God abandoned them; indeed, they were smashed by those who left them in their Diaspora. They were to suffer humiliation and were warned that God will re-punish them whenever they transgress and behave with arrogance. This warning remains true as long as human life continues.

Doubting Resurrection

Once more the *sūrah* takes up the unbelievers’ doubts and denial of resurrection and accountability. Here, too, resurrection is linked to the fact that the structure of the universe is raised on a foundation of truth and seriousness that requires accountability and requital after resurrection:

Now these people assert: ‘We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.’ Are they better than the people of Tubba’ and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day

when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (Verses 34–42)

The Arab idolaters used to say that people die once only and that is the end; no resurrection and no further life. They called this the first death, meaning that it precedes what they were promised of a second life after resurrection. To them, the proof of this assertion was contained in the fact that none of their forefathers who died had ever returned; none had been resurrected. They demanded that their forefathers should be brought back to life before their eyes if resurrection were indeed true. They thus betrayed their ignorance of the purpose of resurrection. They did not understand that it is a further stage of human life, with a definite purpose and a clear goal, which is the administration of requital for what was done in the first stage. Thus, God's obedient servants reach their noble destination, which they have earned through acting well in their first lives, while hardened sinners arrive at the miserable and filthy end they deserve. This means that resurrection will come about after the entire first stage of life has ended, i.e. man's time on earth has concluded. It precludes that resurrection should be the result of a human wish expressed by an individual or a community, so that they can believe in it. Indeed, faith is not complete unless one believes in resurrection, which God's messengers have confirmed, and which is apparent to anyone who reflects on the nature of life and God's wisdom in creating it in this way. Such reflection is sufficient on its own to believe in the Day of Judgement.

Before the *sūrah* invites them to reflect on the design of the universe, it shakes their hearts strongly, reminding them of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba',² in South Arabia. This story must have been well known to the Arabs, as the *sūrah* makes only a brief reference to it, warning them against a similarly terrible fate: "*Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because*

2. Tubba' was the title given to the kings of Ḥimyar, a major tribe that lived in southern Arabia. – Editor's note.

they were lost in sin?" (Verse 37) As this reminder makes them shudder, they are called upon to reflect on the perfect design of the heavens and earth, and how the universe is finely balanced and well planned, indicating that it is deliberately made in this way for a particular purpose: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 38–42) There is a fine and delicate relation between the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in between them on the one hand and the question of resurrection and accountability on the other. Human nature can easily understand this when attention is drawn to it in the way described here.

Such reflection should take into account the creation of the universe, what it points to of elaborate planning, wise purpose, perfect balance and harmony, the creation of everything in accurate measure and quantity placing it thus in harmony with everything around it. Such reflection undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that everything is created on purpose. No coincidence or carelessness is allowed in any aspect, major or trivial, of the design of the huge celestial bodies or the small, fine creatures living on them. Thus, we realize that the universe is created for a purpose, which means that nothing of it is the result of idle play; and that it is based on the truth, which means that no falsehood is allowed to infiltrate it. We further realize that it must have an end, which does not occur at the point of death after a short journey on earth. Logically speaking, a second life, when reward and punishment are administered, is inevitable, so that good and evil come to their natural ends. Man has been so created as to be susceptible to both tendencies of good and evil. It is through his will and effort that he chooses one or the other, making himself liable to ultimately receive its reward or punishment, as the case may be.

That man is so created, with both tendencies, and that God's action cannot be mere idle play, means that man will have a specific fate

which he meets after his journey on earth is over. This is the essence of the hereafter. Hence, it is mentioned after arrentions have been drawn to the wise purpose that lies beyond the creation of the universe: "*The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Vetses 40–42)

This statement comes naturally at this point, closely related as it is to what went before it. It is absolute wisdom that requires that creatures should have a day when judgement is made between those who follow true guidance and those who go astray; when goodness is rewarded and evil humiliated; when people have no support, bond or relation. They will return to their Creator as individuals, just like He created them, to be requited for what they did in life. No one will support them or offer a gesture of mercy, except for those on whom God bestows His grace. It is from God's hand that they came out to work in life, and to His hand they will return to receive what their actions deserve. In between, they have a chance to act, just as they are being tested.

Two Different Fates

The final scene in the *sūrah* depicts the two different ends of the believers and the unbelievers. Again, the scene and its images are violent, in keeping with the *sūrah*'s general ambiance:

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree will be the food of the sinful; like molten lead will it boil in the belly, like the boiling of scalding water. 'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.'

The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, amid gardens and fountains, wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. There they can call for every

kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (Verses 43–57)

The scene begins with an image of the Zaqqūm tree, which is stated to provide the food of sinners. It is a powerful image that strikes fear and panic in the audience's hearts. The closest thing we know to this food is the lees, the sediment that remains when oil has been long boiled. This lees continues to boil in their bellies like molten lead. The sinful person who behaved towards his Lord and His trusted messenger with arrogance will be standing there. An order is issued to the guards of hell to take him away in a brutal manner that suits his 'honourable' position: "*Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water.*" (Verses 47–48) Drag him away so as to make him feel his humiliation, for there is no honour for such sinners! When he gets there, pour scalding water over his head so as to burn his skin. Then, added to all this punishment is a strong rebuke: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man!*" (Verse 49) This is indeed the fate best suited to the one who boasted of his power and honour. Now he has none of this, because his boasting was an affront to God and His messengers. "*This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verse 50) When you were warned against this fate, you received the warning with mockery, doubting that it would ever happen.

Our eyes stretch to the other side to see the God-fearing who took the warning seriously and feared what may happen on this day of decision. We see them '*in a safe position*', where there is nothing to fear and no harsh treatment. They revel in their splendour '*amid gardens and fountains*'. Their garments are made of silk and brocade. They take their positions facing one another talking about whatever is of concern to them. In addition, they are given pure companions with beautiful eyes to make their bliss perfect. There, in heaven, they are the 'owners' of the place. They can ask for whatever they want and it will be given: "*There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security.*" (Verse 55) They expect no end to this happiness, as death

does not occur here. They have already died once and they will not be made to taste death again. This contrasts with what the unbelievers used to say in this present world: *"We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again."* (Verse 35) In the unbelievers' case, the one death is followed by suffering in hell. The believers, who are in heaven, *"shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire."* (Verse 56) This is yet another aspect of God's favour which He bestows on believers. No one is saved from suffering on the Day of Judgement unless the Lord grants this favour. It is all through *"an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 57)

The *sūrah* concludes with a reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending His message to warn us against the consequences of disbelief: *"We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting."* (Verses 58–59)

It is a fitting conclusion that sums up the message of the *sūrah*, reflects its ambiance, and fits with its beginning and line of discussion. It started with a reference to the book God revealed as a reminder for people so that they may take heed. It warned against what may happen on the Day of Judgement, with God saying: *"On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution."* (Verse 16) The two short verses at the end remind them of the favour God granted them by giving them the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, which they understand. They are finally given an implicit but nonetheless fearful warning: *"Wait, then; they too are waiting."* (Verse 59)



SŪRAH 45

Al-Jāthiyah

(Kneeling Down)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, describes some aspects of the reception Islam received from the idolaters. It reports their facile answers to its arguments and signs, states their stubborn rejection of the truth and shows how they unashamedly pursued desire. The Qur'ān also portrays their minds as sealed to Divine guidance, straying in whatever direction their fancies led them. Yet the Qur'ān continued to confront them with God's signs, reminded them of God's punishment and described His reward and His laws that operate in the universe.

As the *sūrah* describes those who opposed the message in Makkah, we see a group of people who insisted on going astray, who stubbornly rejected the truth and who were rude in their description of God and His revelations. Such people are described in the *sūrah* in the terms they deserve. They are also warned against God's grievous and humiliating punishment: *“Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever*

to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them." (Verses 7–10)

We also see a group of people, perhaps belonging to those who received earlier revelations but who were given to ill thoughts and misjudgement. They paid little attention to the truth of faith and saw little difference between those who did evil and those who did good works. The *sūrah* makes it abundantly clear to them that there is a huge difference between these two types on God's scales. It describes them as ill-judging and makes it clear that God judges all on the basis of absolute justice, which has been ingrained within the core of the universe since the beginning of creation: *"Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged."* (Verses 21–22)

We also see the person who has no criterion other than his own desire for judging anything. For this type, desire is the deity he worships and obeys. The *sūrah* wonders at such people and publicizes the fact that they are blind to the truth: *"Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?"* (Verse 23) Such people deny the life to come altogether, express grave doubts about the issue of resurrection and accountability and they stubbornly reject the truth asking for proofs that cannot be given in this life. The Qur'an directs such people to consider the signs and proofs already in place. They, however, remain oblivious to these: *"They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'"* (Verses 24–26)

It is possible to read all these descriptions as pointing to a single type of people. It is equally possible that they are different groups, all of which were opposed to the Islamic message during its period in Makkah. They would, thus, include some people to whom revelations were given in former times, but these would have been very small in number in Makkah at that time. Yet this reference to people of earlier revelations need not point to a particular group in Makkah; it may just be a pointer to a type of people that others should be made aware of.

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān confronts these people, highlighting as it does their qualities and behavioural patterns. It describes for them God's signs all over the universe and within themselves, warning them that they will have to face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. It also cites what happened to communities before them when they abandoned Divine faith.

In the first instance, God's signs are put before them in a profound, effective and simple way: *"Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?"* (Verses 3–6)

The *sūrah* then refers to other signs, showing them as blessings and favours granted by God, but the rejecters are oblivious to the message these impart: *"It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think."* (Verses 12–13)

The *sūrah* also shows the unbelievers what they will be like on the Day of Resurrection, which is something they deny altogether: *"When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be*

summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced." The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends.'" (Verses 27-35)

The *sūrah* leaves absolutely no doubt about the fairness of the requital or each person's individual responsibility. This fundamental principle is shown to be central in the way the universe came into existence and in the way it is maintained: "Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return." (Verse 15) This is further clarified as the *sūrah* responds to those who do evil yet consider that they will be on an equal footing with those who believe in God and do good deeds: "God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged." (Verse 22)

In the way it addresses its subject matter, the *sūrah* is one single whole, but we have divided it into two parts for easier study. It begins with the two separate letters, *Hā*, *Mīm*, adding a reference to the Qur'an: "This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise." (Verse 2) It concludes by addressing all praise to God, the absolute Lord of all the universe. This glorification of Him contrasts with the attitude of those who remain oblivious to His signs and

who ridicule His revelations: “*All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*” (Verses 36–37)

The *sūrah* is characterized by its easy flow and a soft beat that contrasts with the strong rhythm of the preceding *sūrah*, Smoke. God, the Creator of people’s hearts and the One who has bestowed this Qur’ān from on high, sometimes addresses people in a strong and hard way, at other times with gentle touches, and then again sometimes with a soft and quiet beat. He takes into account their different conditions, circumstances, attitudes and responses. His knowledge is absolute and His wisdom infinite.



A Clear Way of Religion

Al-Jāthiyah (Kneeling Down)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

This Book is bestowed from on
high by God, the Almighty, the
Wise. (2)

Surely, in the heavens and the
earth there are signs for those
who believe. (3)

And in your own creation, and
in the animals God scatters on
earth there are signs for people of
sure faith. (4)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

حَمِّ ①

تَنْزِيلِ الْكِتَابِ مِنْ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ②

إِنَّ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَآيَاتٍ
لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ③

وَفِي خَلْقِكُمْ وَمَا يَبُذُّ مِنْ دَابَّاءٍ آيَاتٍ
لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ④

And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. (5)

وَأَخْلَفَ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ رِزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيْحِ ؕ آيَاتٌ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations? (6)

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ اللَّهِ نَتْلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَبِأَيِّ حَدِيثٍ بَعْدَ اللَّهِ وَءَايَاتِهِ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Woe betide every lying, sinful person (7)

وَوَيْلٌ لِكُلِّ الْفَاسِقِ أَتَمِيرُ ﴿٧﴾

who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. (8)

يَسْمَعُ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ تُنزلُ عَلَيْهِ ثُمَّ يَصِرُ مُسْتَكْبِرًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٨﴾

When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. (9)

وَإِذَا عَلِمَ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا شَيْئًا اتَّخَذَهَا هُزُوًا ؕ أُولَٰئِكَ لَمْ عَذَابٌ مُهِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (10)

مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَلَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ
مَا كَسَبُوا شَيْئًا وَلَا مَا اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ
دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment. (11)

هَذَا هُدًى وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ
لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مِنْ رِجْزٍ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. (12)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الْبَحْرَ لِتَجْرِيَ الْفُلُكُ
فِيهِ بِأَمْرِهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think. (13)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مِمَّا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ
جَمِيعًا مِنَّةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to require people for whatever they may have earned. (14)

قُلْ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يَغْفِرُوا لِلَّذِينَ
لَا يَرْجُونَ أَيَّامَ اللَّهِ لِيَجْزِيَ قَوْمًا
بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return. (15)

مَنْ عَمِلْ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ
 أَسَاءَ فَعَلِيَهَا ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. (16)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ
 وَالْحِكْمَ وَالنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ
 مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى
 الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. (17)

وَمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ بَيِّنَاتٍ مِنَ
 الْأَمْرِ فَمَا اخْتَلَفُوا إِلَّا
 مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ
 الْعِلْمُ بِغَيَابِنَهُمْ إِنْ
 رَأَوْكَ يَقْضَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ
 يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا
 كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. (18)

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاكَ عَلَىٰ شَرِيحَةٍ
 مِنَ الْأَمْرِ فَاتَّبِعْهَا
 وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَ الَّذِينَ
 لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. (19)

إِنَّهُمْ لَنْ يَنْفَعُوا عَنكَ
 مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ۚ وَإِنَّ
 الظَّالِمِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ
 أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ ۗ وَاللَّهُ
 وَلِيُّ الْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith. (20)

Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. (21)

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged. (22)

Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed? (23)

هَذَا بَصِيرَةٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ
لِقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ اجْتَرَحُوا السَّيِّئَاتِ
أَنْ نَجْعَلَهُمْ كَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ سَوَاءً نَجْيَاهُمْ وَمَا نَحْنُ
بِإِنصَارِهِمْ سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

وَخَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ
وَلِيُجْزِيَ كُلَّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ
وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنِ اتَّخَذَ الْلَّهُمَّهُ هُونَهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ عِلْمِهِ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ
بَصَرِهِ عِثْرَةً فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ
أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Signs Everywhere

Hā. Mīm. This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* mentions the revelation of this book, the Qur'ān, by God, the Almighty, the Wise after having introduced the two separate Arabic letters *Hā, Mīm*, to point to this book's source. In speaking about the separate letters introduced at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs*, we have mentioned elsewhere that they highlight the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of the letters forming the Arab's own language, yet they cannot produce even a very small portion like it. This, then, constitutes permanent evidence that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty who can do whatever He wishes, the Wise who creates everything according to a certain measure and to serve a particular purpose. This is an apt comment that fits the ambience of the *sūrah* and its discussion of different types of people.

Before speaking about the unbelievers and their attitude towards the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* refers to signs pointing to the Creator that are available everywhere in the world around them. Alone, these signs should have been enough to direct them to believe in God. Now, the *sūrah* turns their minds to such signs so that they may open their hearts to them and realize that it is God who has bestowed this book from on high and that it is He who has created this great universe: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3) The signs scattered everywhere in the heavens and the earth are not limited to any area or situation. Wherever we look around us we find signs. Is there anything in this wonderful universe that is not a sign pointing to its great Maker?

Look at the skies and the great celestial bodies that are scattered like small particles in space; it is such an awesome expanse, yet so pleasant to the eye. Consider these celestial bodies as they move in their respective orbits with unfailing accuracy and harmony. We are never tired of contemplating this perfect harmony which is conspicuous everywhere around us. Then look at the earth: how big it is in comparison to the humans who dwell on it, yet it is no more than a tiny particle compared to the huge stars or to the expanse in which it floats. It would have been lost in that expanse, had it not been for the hand of God placing it in its appointed position within the overall universal system. Nothing is lost sight of. Consider also how God gave this earth the necessary conditions that allow the emergence of life on it. This has required that many fine elements have been brought together in absolute accuracy of measure and quality. Should any of these qualities be in the wrong measure or be inaccurate in their function, life on earth would not have been possible nor would it have lasted.¹

Everything on earth and every living thing, indeed every part of every living thing, large or small, is a sign. This applies to fine, little things in the same way as it applies to the large and huge: a small leaf in a great high tree or a frail plant is a sign when we contemplate its shape, size, colour and feel. A hair on the body of man or animal and a bird's feather are equally signs whether in terms of quality, length, material or function. Wherever man stretches his eyes to look at the skies or the earth, he will find a great multitude of signs that stand clear before him. Yet, who looks at these signs and understands their message? To whom are they addressed? In short, these are "*signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3)

It is faith that opens people's hearts to receive the messages that emanate from the numerous great signs disseminated throughout the heavens and the earth. When faith touches hearts, they soften and become far more receptive. The message everything around us gives is to indicate the distinctive nature of whatever God's hand has made of objects, whether these be animate or inanimate. Indeed, everything

1. For further discussion of this point, please refer to the commentary on Verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–383.

God has created is miraculous in nature. No one else can create anything similar to it.

The *sūrah* then points out that God's signs can also be seen within people themselves. They feel these close at hand: "*And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 4) Man's wonderful constitution, unique qualities, varied and fine functions are all miraculous indeed, but we tend to forget this because of long familiarity. Indeed the physical make-up of any human organ fills us with wonder. In its most simple and primitive form, in the amoeba and even smaller forms, life is a miracle. If this is apparent in man's highly complex constitution how much more complex then is his psychological and emotional constitution?

Around man, countless creatures walk on earth: different kinds with a great variety of shape, size and form. Only God knows them all. The smallest is the same as the largest: they are all miraculous in their creation and in the way they fit with the overall pattern of life. No species increases beyond certain limits to the extinction of other species. Only the mighty hand of God controls them all, increasing or decreasing them according to a perfect measure, giving them the qualities and functions that ensure proper balance.

Eagles are birds of prey that enjoy longevity, but who lay only a small number of eggs and so procreate on a small scale, as compared with swallows and other small birds. What would the world of birds be like had eagles procreated at the same rate as swallows and swifts? Needless to say, all other types of birds would have vanished. The same applies to lions who are ferocious hunters. What would animal life be like, had they procreated at the same rates as sheep and deer? No other animal species would have survived in any jungle or forest. Again, the hand of God controls the number of lions to ensure continuity, and increases the numbers of sheep and deer for an easily recognized purpose. A fly lays hundreds of thousands of eggs during its life cycle, yet flies live for only around two weeks. What would happen if flies were left to live for months or years?

Thus we see that in the very act of creation and its management, the qualities of different creatures of all kinds and types, there are endless

signs that deliver the same message, but only to those who make the effort to see and contemplate these signs. These are “*signs for people of sure faith.*” Certainty of faith is the condition that makes hearts receptive and interacting. It gives them reassurance so that they can look at the facts the universe presents with ease, confidence and calm. This enables our minds to draw great conclusions from simple facts.

The *sūrah* then highlights a number of natural phenomena and their effects on human life and on the lives of other creatures: “*And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.*” (Verse 5) The alternation of day and night is a phenomenon that has lost its significance in the minds of most people because of its regular frequency. Yet, what wonder would fill the heart of anyone who sees the approach of night or the creeping of the day for the first time? An alert mind and an open heart will always see this great wonder and marvel at it as they see in it God’s hand that controls the universe.

As human knowledge of some natural phenomena increased, man came to know that the night and day result from the earth revolving in its position opposite the sun once every 24 hours. Yet the wonder is in no way diminished. Indeed, similarly wonderful is the fact that the earth revolves with such regular speed while floating in space, with nothing to hold it in place other than God’s hand that has set the laws of nature in place, thus allowing life to emerge on this planet. Human knowledge broadens and people begin to recognize the great importance of the alternation of night and day for life on our planet. They understand that dividing time into night and day is essential for the emergence of life and its continuity. Without such alternation, everything on earth would be different, particularly human life. Thus the more we know, the better we feel the remarkable wonder that is this great phenomenon.

“*And in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless.*” (Verse 5) The ‘*means of subsistence*’ may refer to rain pouring down, as people understood in the past. Yet the term may refer to other things that

come from the skies and have similarly important roles to play in sustaining life on earth. The rays that come from the skies provide an example. These rays are actually essential for rain, because it is the heat of the sun that causes sea water to evaporate. It then gathers in clouds that produce the rain in a process of condensation. Rain water then forms reservoirs that allows rivers to flow and springs to gush forth. Thus, after being lifeless, the earth is revived through water, heat and light.

“And in the shifting of the winds.” The winds blow east or west, north or south, straight or at an angle, hot and cold, but always in accordance with the accurate, synchronized system that operates in the universe, where everything is meticulously calculated leaving nothing to coincidence. The blowing of the wind has a definite relation to the movement of the earth, the alternation of day and night as also to the means of subsistence sent down from the skies. They all cooperate to fulfil God's will and how it operates in the universe. All these are signs we see in the universe, but who understands their message? It is understood only by *“those who use their reason.”* (Verse 5) Man's mind, thus, has a role, one that it should fulfil.

Those Deaf to the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, revealed by God, highlights these universal signs in a way that inspires believers who have certainty of faith and who use their reason. In this way, it touches hearts and minds and addresses people's natures. The profound link between human nature and the universe means that it only requires some inspiring words, such as the verses of the Qur'ān, for senses to be alerted and made responsive. Anyone who does not believe as a result of contemplating these signs is totally unlikely to believe in some other way; and the one who is not fully alerted by the inspiring verses of the Qur'ān will not be alerted by loud outcries from any other source: *“Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?”* (Verse 6)

No words will be as effective as the Qur'ān, God's word. Nor will any creation be equal to God's creation in the universe. Likewise, no

truth will be as clear and confirmed as the truth of God: “*In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*” (Verse 6)

The only requital fit to be given to an unbeliever is severe punishment:

Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God’s revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (Verses 7–10)

These verses describe, in part, the unbelievers’ reception of the Islamic message in Makkah, their stubborn refusal to listen to the clear word of truth and their insistence on falsehood. They take a hostile attitude to the truth, as if it has never even been presented to them. These verses also mention the unbelievers’ rudeness and impudence as they speak of God and His word. The Qur’ān severely rebukes them for this, putting before them the grievous and humiliating suffering they are certain to endure.

“*Woe betide every lying, sinful person.*” (Verse 7) This verse threatens every habitual liar who frequently indulges in sin. The threat is issued by God Almighty who is able to bring about the total destruction of any community, and whose promises and warnings always come true. This makes the warning all the more serious and frightening.

The mark of such a lying, sinful person is that he persistently holds on to what is false, looks with disdain on the truth, feels too proud to respond to God’s revelations and behaves with insolence towards God. He thus: “*hears God’s revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them.*” (Verse 8) Although this hateful type of person could be found among the idolaters in Makkah, the same type is seen in every *jāhiliyyah* society, immersed in ignorance, whether in the past, present or future. Many

are those all over the world, including some who are described as Muslims, who behave with disdain when they hear God's revelations being recited and who persist in their erring ways as though they have never heard such revelations. They do so because what God has revealed is contrary to their desire and will not approve the evil and false practices in which they indulge.

“So, give him the news of painful suffering.” (Verse 8) This statement describes the punishment such a person will receive, but the Arabic text uses the word *bashshir* for ‘giving news’, even though the word is only used for giving good news. As used in this verse to bring news of painful suffering, it thus carries connotations of ridicule. If this person does not listen to the warning, let him receive the news of his suffering in a voice that signals good news. What mockery!

“When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it,” after learning their source. This is a far more serious and grave response. Yet it describes an oft found situation in every community that lives in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. How many are those, including some described as Muslims, who ridicule God's revelations, mocking them and those who believe in them. *“For such people there is humiliating suffering in store.”* (Verse 9) Humiliation is the fitting requital for everyone who ridicules God's revelations.

This suffering is ready and close at hand. It may not be time for it yet, but it is nevertheless present: *“Hell lurks behind them”*. (Verse 10) The phrase, *‘behind them,’* has connotations that are specifically intended. Since the suffering is ‘behind’ them, they do not see it and remain oblivious to it. Therefore, they do not try to avoid it. Yet it will surely engulf them. *“All that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God.”* (Verse 10) Nothing that they might have done or gained is of any use to them. Even if some of their deeds are good, they cannot benefit from them because they have been scattered by the wind like dust. Their deeds were not founded on a solid basis of faith. Likewise, their possessions will be of no use to them. Nor can their deities, friends, supporters or soldiers offer them help or protection. Nor can they intercede on their behalf. *“Grievous suffering awaits them.”* (Verse 10) Their punishment is not only humiliating, as

fits their offence for mocking God's revelations, it is also grievous to suit the magnitude of that offence.

This section concludes with a word that describes, in general terms, the true nature of God's revelations and the punishment to be meted out to those who disbelieve them: "*This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment.*" (Verse 11) It is a fact that this Qur'ān is true and pure guidance that admits no error whatsoever. Therefore, anyone who denies its truth deserves such grievous suffering. The nature of the pain is described here as abominable, which serves to emphasize its description in the previous verses.

Will They Reflect?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds them of the great favours and blessings God has given them in this world, so that their hearts may soften and reflect:

It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think. (Verses 12–13)

Man, an insignificant creature in this great universe, receives a large share of God's care, which allows him to make use of greater creatures in the universe, benefiting by them in a variety of ways when he understands a part of the secret, Divine law that controls all. Had man remained ignorant of this part of God's law, he could not, weak as he is, have benefited by such great forces. He would not even be able to live with them, considering his small stature and strength compared with theirs.

The sea is one such huge force which God has subjected to man by revealing to him a portion of its secret make-up and qualities. Thus, man has been able to make ships sail through the huge oceans without fear of its strong waves: "*so that ships sail through it by His command.*" (Verse 12) It is God who has given the sea and the material from which ships are made their qualities and made atmospheric pressure, the speed

of winds, earth's gravity and other universal features in the way they are. Thus, they combine to allow ships to sail through the sea. God further guided man to understand all this and make use of it for his own benefit, whether it be by fishing, trade, gaining knowledge, or sports and pleasure: "*And that you may seek of His bounty.*" It behoves man, then, to turn to God in gratitude for all these favours: "*and that you give thanks.*" (Verse 12) The Qur'an directs man to attend to this duty and to understand the close relationship between him and the universe. Everything has been originated by God and everything will ultimately return to Him.

Having specified the sea, the *sūrah* makes a general reference to God's favours. He has made all the forces, potentials and blessings in the universe that have a bearing on man's task on earth subservient to him: "*And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth.*" (Verse 13) Everything in the universe is created by God. He controls it and determines its operation. Man, a small creature in the universe, is given the ability to understand a part of the laws of nature that operate, by God's will, in this universe. This enables him to make use of powers and forces that are immeasurably greater than his own. Without God's grace, he would not have been able to do so. In all this, there are signs to reflect upon: "*In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verse 13)

Forgiveness of Offenders

Now the *sūrah* calls on believers to show magnanimity and forbearance to those who are weak because their hearts do not open to the great source of power. They are urged to show kindness to those who are blind to the great truths, and as a result, do not look forward to God's great days when some aspects of His majesty are clearly shown:

Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return. (Verses 14–15)

This directive is issued to the believers, requiring them to be forbearing towards those who do not look forward to God's days. Theirs should be an attitude of forgiveness that combines generosity with power and dignity. The truth is that such people deserve pity and sympathy because they are deprived of the benefit of believing in God, which is a rich treasure of grace, strength, wealth, reassurance and kindness. It provides true protection in moments of stress and weakness. They are also deprived of true knowledge that understands the nature of universal laws and what they can bring of power and riches for man's benefit. Those who enjoy the wealth of grace and benefits that come with faith are the ones who should be forbearing. They should forgive the slips and errors of the ones who are deprived of them.

On the other hand, the believers should leave the matter to God and He will requite all as they deserve. He will then credit them with their forbearing attitude and reward them for it as a deed of goodness. Such forgiveness naturally applies to what does not spread corruption on earth and does not constitute a transgression of the bounds set by God: *"It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned."* (Verse 14) This is followed by an assertion about every person's individual responsibility and about fair judgement for all. It further confirms that all will return to God: *"Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return."* (Verse 15) When this is made clear, a believer is able to be forbearing and to overlook personal offences, but this forbearance is not out of weakness. Instead, he is the one who is strong and magnanimous. He holds the torch of guidance to enable the ones deprived of light to see. He comes forward with the cure for those who are ill. He will be rewarded according to his deeds, unharmed by those who do evil. All matters are ultimately judged by God, to whom all shall return.

The Leaders of Humanity

The *sūrah* then speaks of the leadership of humanity and how it has ultimately been assigned to believers in the Islamic message. It refers to the divisions that split the Children of Israel after God had given

them scriptures, wisdom and prophethood. The mantle of leadership has now been given to the messenger advocating God's final message. This was clearly stated when the Prophet was still in Makkah, suffering with his followers from persecution by the unbelievers. Yet this tells us something about the nature of the Islamic message, right from its very beginning, and the mission it is expected to fulfil:

To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith. (Verses 16–20)

Before the advent of Islam, the leadership of mankind was assigned to the Children of Israel. They were the community entrusted with the Divine faith God laid down for a certain period of time. Mankind needs a leadership enlightened with Divine guidance. When human leadership is based on earthly considerations alone, with no reference to Divine guidance, it is pulled in different directions whether by desire, ignorance or commonplace failings. God alone, the Creator of mankind, is the One who gives people a law that is free from the pressures of desire, ignorance or failing. He is the One who knows best what suits His creation.

“To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood.” (Verse 16) They were given the Torah, containing God's law, and they had a state where they were required to implement this law. They were also given prophethood after Moses so as to ensure the

continued and right implementation of this Divine law. Prophets were sent to them in succession over a relatively long period of history. *"We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations."* (Verse 16) Their kingdom was in the holy land, which yielded rich harvests of all types, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

"We granted them clear indications in matters of faith." (Verse 17) What they were given of the Divine law was clear and decisive, free of ambiguity, confusion and contradiction. There was absolutely no reason for them to differ over this clear law. There was no obscurity over any question of their faith or its laws, and they were certainly aware of the right judgement on all matters of importance. Nevertheless, *"it was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves."* (Verse 17) Such disputes were motivated by mutual envy, malice and injustice, despite their knowing the truth. Therefore, their leadership of mankind was terminated, and their case is left to God, who will judge them on the Day of Resurrection: *"Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed."* (Verse 17)

God then assigned a new leadership, imparted a new message to a different messenger, put His Divine law back on its right course and gave back to Divine faith its absolute clarity. This new leadership is thus guided by God's law, not by any human desire: *"And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]."* (Verse 18) Thus matters are defined in absolute clarity: it is either God's law or people's changing desires that are devoid of knowledge. There can be no third alternative and no middle way. No one abandons Divine law unless they choose to pursue human desires. Everything that differs with God's law is the expression of desire that pleases those who lack knowledge. God warns His messenger against following the desires of those who have no knowledge of the truth, as they will be of no avail to him. They only try to protect one another. Thus, they cannot harm him in any way as God will support and protect him: *"They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing."* (Verse 19)

This verse and the one before it charts the way for the advocates of the Divine message, leaving no need for any comment or further detail: *“And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.”* (Verses 18–19) There is only one law that fits this description; everything else is the result of desire and ignorance. Every advocate of the Divine faith must follow only that. Those who espouse desire cannot help a believer: they only help one another and will not abandon their course. Yet they are too weak to be able to cause a believer any harm, since God is the One who protects the God-fearing. How can humans who, in their ignorance and weakness, have only one another for support be compared to one who advocates God's law and is protected by Him?

Commenting on this decisive clarification, the *sūrah* mentions the certainty of faith and what the Qur'an provides of insight, guidance and Divine grace: *“This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.”* (Verse 20) Describing the Qur'an as a means of insight emphasizes its role of providing enlightenment. The Qur'an provides insight, and insight makes matters clear. Moreover, the Qur'an itself is guidance and mercy, but all this is dependent on certainty of faith which admits no doubt or worry. With such certainty, we know the way as it appears before us clear, straight, leading to a well defined goal. We go along this way sure of step and without hesitation. The Qur'an is our source of light and guidance. It is indeed the embodiment of God's grace.

Totally Unequal

The *sūrah* clearly distinguishes between those who commit evil and those who do good as a result of being believers. There is no way that they can be judged in the same way. They are different in God's sight. Furthermore, God has established His universal law on the basis of truth and justice:

Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged. (Verses 21–22)

The first of these verses may be understood to refer to those among the people of earlier revelations who deviated from their scriptures and indulged in sin, but who nonetheless continued to think of themselves as believers. They might have thought themselves to be on the same level as Muslims who do good deeds. They might also have considered that the two groups are equal in God's sight, both in this life and in the life after death when people are given their reward or punishment. These verses may also be taken as a general discourse defining how people are judged on God's scales. It shows that believers who do good deeds are definitely in a higher position. It says that putting the evildoers and the righteous on the same level, either in this life or in the next, conflicts with the basic and permanent rule upon which the universe is founded, namely, the truth. Thus the truth is fundamental to both the universe and the Divine law. Consequently, both the universe and human life are set to progress by means of this truth. This manifests itself in the distinction between evildoers and those who do good in all respects, and in the individual judging of people on the basis of what each has earned through life. Justice is, thus, administered to all: "*None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22) This is the constant truth, the foundational stone of the entire universe.

The *sūrah* then refers to desire, which is by nature changing and fleeting. Yet some people make of desire a deity and thus they are unable to recognize true guidance:

Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed? (Verse 23)

The inimitable Qur'ānic style draws here an extraordinary image of the human soul when it abandons the basic and permanent rule of truth in order to follow fleeting desires, making of them a deity from which concepts, rules, feelings and actions are derived. In this way does man submit to desire and obey its dictates. This extraordinary situation is painted in a tone that invites strong censure.

“Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity!” Such an example should be carefully considered. A person of this ilk deserves to be abandoned by God so that he goes even further astray: no light of guidance will be given to him by Divine mercy. After all, he has left no room in his heart for such guidance when he worships his own desires: *“And whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth].”* The Arabic phrase, *‘alā ‘ilm*, may be translated as, ‘in full knowledge’, in which case it refers to God’s knowledge that such a person deserves to be left astray. Alternatively, it can be translated as we have rendered here as *‘despite his knowledge’*. In other words, his knowledge of the truth does not deter him from pursuing his desires. Such a person deserves to be left straying in blindness: *“sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes.”* His receptive faculties are sealed, allowing no light or guidance to seep through. His judgement is, thus, fundamentally impaired.

“Who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]?” (Verse 23) All guidance comes from God. No one can provide anyone with guidance or error, not even His chosen messengers. It is all determined by God alone. *“Will you not, then, take heed?”* (Verse 23) When a person takes heed, he will break the chains of desire and return to the straight path of truth. No one who treads this path will ever go astray.



To Whom Supremacy Belongs

They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. (24)

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا
وَمَا هِيَ إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَلِكَ مِنْ
عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (25)

وَإِذَا نزلَ عَلَيهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ مَا كَانَ
حُجَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا اتَّوَلَّوْنَا بِآبَائِنَا
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.' (26)

قُلِ اللَّهُ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يَجْمَعُكُمْ
لِلْيَوْمِ العَظِيمِ لَآ رَبَّ فِيهِ وَلَكِن أَكْثَرُ
النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. (27)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالأَرْضِ وَيَوْمَ نَقُومُ
السَّاعَةُ يُومِئذٍ يَحْمَرُّ المُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. (28)

وَتَرَىٰ كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَانِبَةً ۗ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا
الْيَوْمَ تُجْرَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' (29)

هَذَا كِتَابُنَا يَنْطِقُ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْحَقِّ إِنَّا كُنَّا
نَسْتَنْسِخُ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. (30)

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
فَيُدْخِلُهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۗ ذَلِكَ هُوَ
الْفَوْزُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٣٠﴾

And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? (31)

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَفَلَمْ تَكُنْ ءَايَتِي تُنزَّلُ
عَلَيْكُمْ فَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced." (32)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَالسَّاعَةُ لَا رَيْبَ
فِيهَا قُلْتُمْ مَا نَنْدِرِي مَا السَّاعَةُ ۗ إِنَّ نَسْفُ
الْأَطْنَانِ وَمَا عَنَّا بِمُسْتَقِيرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (33)

It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. (34)

Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends. (35)

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. (36)

His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (37)

وَبَدَأْتُمْ سَيِّئَاتٍ مَا عَمِلُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ
مَا كَانُوا يُوَدُّونَ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَقِيلَ الْيَوْمَ نَنْسَىكُمْ كَمَا نَسَيْتُمْ لِقَاءَ
يَوْمِكُمْ هَذَا وَمَا وَكُنَّا لِلنَّارِ وَمَا لَكُمْ
مَنْ نَنْصُرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

ذَلِكُمْ بِأَنَّكُمْ اتَّخَذْتُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ هُزُوًا
وَعَرَّيْتُمْ كُمُومَ الدُّنْيَا فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يُخْرَجُونَ
مِنْهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

فَلِلَّهِ الْحَمْدُ رَبِّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَرَبِّ الْأَرْضِ
رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَلَهُ الْكِبْرِيَاءُ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* presents what the idolaters used to say about the hereafter, resurrection and accountability on the Day of Judgement. It refutes their arguments, citing irrefutable evidence drawn from their own particular situation. It then portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement which they see as closing in upon them, even though it is not as yet due. This is because the Qur'ānic style presents it as if it is there before their very eyes.

The *sūrah* then concludes with praises of God, the only Lord of the heavens and the earth and all those who live within them. His glory is extolled and no one can aspire to His position of absolute power.

A Narrow View of Life

They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.' (Verses 24–26)

So short-sighted were they that they considered life to be nothing beyond what they saw before their very eyes: one generation dies and another replaces it in life. Apparently, no hand deals death; it is all a question of days that pass and time that elapses bringing death to all. It is time, then, that ends their lives, making them die. This is a superficial outlook that does not go beyond appearances to discover subtle reasons and causes. They do not ask what brings them life; or, when it is there, what takes it away? They see that death does not occur according to a defined system or after a certain number of days and years. Instead, they think that only the passage of time deprives them of life. Death comes to all: children and the elderly, the healthy and the ill, the strong and the weak. Therefore, when we carefully

consider the reason behind all this, time is an inadequate explanation. Therefore, God says of them: *“Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess.”* (Verse 24) Their guesses are wild, lack proper reflection, sound knowledge and an understanding of cause and effect. They do not look carefully at the two phenomena of life and death to realize that they are the result of a will other than that of man and a reason other than the passage of time.

“Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: ‘Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.’” (Verse 25) This is a similarly superficial outlook devoid of any understanding of the laws of creation, God’s wisdom or the secret that lies beyond life and death. People live on this planet so that they have a chance to work towards their ultimate destiny. Thus, God tests them by means of what He places at their disposal in this life. They then die and await the time of reckoning determined by Him. They will account for what they did in this life. Therefore, when they die, they do not return to this world. No purpose is served by such a return before the appointed time. They will not return merely because a group of human beings suggest they should. The major laws God has set in operation in the universe are not changed as a result of human suggestion. There is no question whatsoever of their naïvety in answer to God’s revelations being taken up: *“Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.”* (Verse 25)

Why should God bring back their forefathers before the time He, in His infinite wisdom, has determined? To convince them that God is able to bring the dead back to life? How amazing! Do they not see that God initiates life at every moment before their very eyes, in accordance with the law He has set for life? *“Say: It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt.”* (Verse 26) The very miracle they want to see done to their fathers occurs before their very eyes. It is God who grants life and causes death. There is nothing surprising, then, that He will bring the dead back to life, gathering them all on Resurrection Day. Why should they entertain any doubt about this, when they see it occurring before them: *“Though most people do not understand.”* (Verse 26)

The Qur'an's comment on this visible fact cites the origin of all: "To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth." (Verse 27) He is the One who makes and controls everything in the universe, and He is the One able to originate and reinstate everything and everyone.

The Record of All Deeds

They are now presented with a scene from the day that they doubt will ever come:

When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' (Verses 27–29)

In the first of these verses they are told of the fate of those who follow falsehood. They are the ones who end up in utter loss. Then we are given a panoramic view, with all the generations that have dwelled on the surface of this planet throughout the ages gathered together. They all sit on their knees, each community distinguished from the next, but all awaiting their dreaded accountability. The atmosphere is one of awe and fear. How can it be otherwise, when the assembly brings together everyone from all generations, and they are all on their knees? Greater fear is inspired by what lies ahead of people having to account for their deeds. What generates most fear, however, is that they have to face God Almighty, the Most Gracious, whose blessings were not met with gratitude, on earth, by most of those gathered before Him.

All those waiting on their knees look anxiously, breathless and with dry mouths. They are told: "Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do." (Verses 28–29) All of them, belonging to different communities, races and generations, are split into two groups – believers and unbelievers – for there is no other banner to raise on that occasion. One is God's party and the other is Satan's.

“Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph.” (Verse 30) They are the ones who are given comfort to dispel all worry and anxiety. The outcome of their situation is given straightaway, easily and without delay, so as to spread over them a pleasant air. But what do we find as we stretch our eyes through the words of the text to look at the other party? We hear a long and shameful rebuke one that reminds them of their worst sayings and deeds:

And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, ‘God’s promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour,’ you would answer, ‘We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced.’” (Verses 31–32)

How do you view your situation now? Are you convinced? Then the *sūrah* turns away for a moment to give us a glimpse of what happens to them: *“The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride.”* (Verse 33) Further reproach is heaped upon their heads, and they are told that their lot will be nothing other than total disregard, humiliation as well as painful doom:

It will be said to them: ‘Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God’s revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.’ (Verses 34–35)

As their ultimate fate is announced, the curtains are drawn leaving them in hell from which they cannot hope to leave and where they are not asked for excuses or justification: *“Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends.”* (Verse 35) As we listen, we almost hear the doors of

hell as they are finally closed. The scene is completed; nothing of it will change.

The *sūrah* concludes with voices praising and glorifying God:

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.
(Verses 36–37)

The praising voice declares God's Lordship over the universe: earth and heaven, mankind and *jinn*, birds and beasts, as well as everyone and everything. They are all under the care of one Lord who is totally in control. Praised is He for the care He takes of them all. The glorifying voice declares that all supremacy in the universe belongs to God alone. To Him bows every exalted tyrant, and to His power submits every rebellious nature. Furthermore, to Him belongs the supreme power and absolute wisdom. Praise and glory to God, the Lord of all the worlds.



SŪRAH 46

Al-Aḥqāf

(Sand Dunes)

Prologue

The present *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, addresses the question of faith: belief in God's oneness and His absolute Lordship of the universe. As in other Makkan *sūrahs*, faith here also includes belief in the revelation of the Divine message to Muḥammad, God's messenger, who was preceded by other messengers, and to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high, confirming earlier scriptures. It also includes belief in the resurrection and accountability for all that is done in this present life, whether good or evil.

These are the fundamental principles upon which Islam builds its whole structure. Hence, the Qur'ān elaborates on these principles in all the Makkan *sūrahs*. It also touches upon these aspects in the *sūrahs* revealed later in Madīnah, and specifically whenever it lays down legislation or addresses a directive to the Muslim community. Part of the nature of the Islamic faith is that it considers belief in God's oneness, Muḥammad's message and accountability in the life to come the pivot upon which all its principles, systems, laws and morality turn. All are closely related to this belief. Therefore, they remain proactive.

The *sūrah* treats this question of faith in every possible way, presenting it against different backdrops and adding universal, psychological and historical effects. It makes faith a question for all

existence, not merely the human race. It gives us a glimpse of how some of the *jinn* listened to the Qur'an, and refers to the attitude of some of the Children of Israel to it, presenting one testimony from uncorrupted human nature and another from some Israelites. It takes us on a journey so that we can look at the expanse of the heavens and the earth, and it also presents images from the Day of Judgement. It further shows us the fate of the people of Hūd, and touches on the fates of some of the townships around Makkah. According to the *sūrah*, both the universe itself and the Qur'an are books stating the same truth.

The *sūrah* consists of four inter-related parts that can be seen as a single whole. The first part begins with the two separate letters *Hā Mīm*, that also began the six *sūrahs* preceding this one. These two letters are immediately followed by a reference to the book of the Qur'an and its being a revelation from God: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) The *sūrah* follows this with a reference to the book of the universe, which is established on the basis of His truth and created according to elaborate planning. "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, the recited book of the Qur'an and the book of the universe we behold confirm the truth as well as the elaborate planning: "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3)

After this powerful and comprehensive opening, the *sūrah* begins to present the question of faith, starting with a denunciation of polytheism, upheld by the pagan Arabs, demonstrating that it lacks all basis in the universe, and that it further lacks true pronouncement and inherited knowledge: "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4) It shows the error of the one who worships instead of God someone or thing who cannot hear or respond to its worshipper and who disputes with him on the Day of Judgement dissociating itself from all such worship.

It then speaks of the appalling reception they gave to the truth as presented by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), describing it as plain sorcery. (Verse 7) They even had the temerity to go further than this and alleged that the Prophet had fabricated it all. The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to give them a reply that suits his position as a messenger of God, one that reflects his fear of God and accepts His judgement both in this world and the next: *“Say: ‘If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.’ Say: ‘I am not the first of God’s messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.”* (Verses 8–9) It also cites the attitude of some of the Children of Israel who accepted the Qur’ān as true guidance when they found in it what confirmed the scriptures given to Moses (peace be upon him). Such a person *“has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance.”* (Verse 10) They are, thus, denounced for their wrongdoing, for their disbelief, despite the testimony of those endowed with greater knowledge: *“God does not guide wrongdoers.”* (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* also mentions the unbelievers’ flimsy justification of their attitude as they said in reference to the believers: *“If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.”* (Verse 11) This explains their true stance: *“Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, ‘This is an ancient falsehood.’”* (Verse 11) The *sūrah* also refers to the book of Moses and the fact that the Qur’ān confirms it, highlighting its role: *“to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.”* (Verse 12) This part concludes with details of the good news given to those who believe in God and follow the right course: *“Those who say, ‘Our Lord is God,’ and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.”* (Verses 13–14)

The second part of the *sūrah* portrays two patterns of human nature, one upright and the other deviant, highlighting their different attitudes to the question of faith. It depicts both natures as they commence their lives, reared by their parents. It describes their respective attitudes

when they come of age and are able to make their own choices. The first recognizes God's blessings, is dutiful towards his parents, eager to give thanks, and seeking forgiveness for slips and mistakes: *"It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them."* (Verse 16) The other is disobedient of both his parents and God, denies the Day of Resurrection, and creates tremendous distress for his parents: *"Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of jinn and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost."* (Verse 18) This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a swift scene of the Day of Judgement portraying the fate of this second type of person: *"On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression."* (Verse 20)

In the third part, the *sūrah* speaks of the destruction of the 'Ād after they had rejected all warnings. It highlights the great wind which they had expected to give them rain and growth. Instead, it brought them ruin and the punishment they had hastened. *"When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do we requite guilty people."* (Verses 24–25) In this way, the *sūrah* aims to heighten the unbelievers' feelings by showing them the fate of the 'Ād, who they are reminded were stronger and wealthier than they. *"We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked."* (Verse 26) As this part comes to an end, the *sūrah* also reminds them of the fate suffered by the townships around them and how their alleged

deities could not provide any support. Thus, their fabrications were clear for everyone to see.

The fourth and final part gives us the story of a group of *jinn* who were directed by God to listen to a recitation of the Qurʾān. They were highly moved by it, immediately declaring that it speaks the truth and confirms “*what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*” (Verse 30) They went straight back to their people warning them and calling on them to believe: “*Our people! Respond to God’s call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God’s call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.*” (Verses 31–32) The *jinn* also refer to the open book of the universe which testifies to God’s power of initiation and resurrection: “*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*” (Verse 33) At this point the *sūrah* adds a touching scene, showing the unbelievers as they are brought before the fire. They will then admit what they used to deny, but it is all too late.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient and not to hasten the unbelievers’ punishment. They are only given respite for a short while, and God’s punishment will inevitably catch up with them: “*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*” (Verse 35)



One Universe, One Creator

Al-Aḥqāf (Sand Dunes)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

This book is bestowed from on
high by God, the Almighty, the
Wise. (2)

We have not created the heavens
and the earth and all that is
between them otherwise than in
accordance with the truth, and
for an appointed term. Yet the
unbelievers ignore the warnings
they have been given. (3)

Say: 'Have you thought of those
whom you invoke besides God?
Show me what part of the earth
they have created, or which share
of the heavens they own. Bring



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

حَم ①

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ②

مَلَخَقْنَا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
عَمَّا أُنذِرُوا مُّعْرِضُونَ ③

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ
أَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقُوا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ
شِرْكٌ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ أَتُنْفِئُونَ كِتَابَ

me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.' (4)

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? (5)

When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (6)

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' (7)

Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' (8)

مِن قَبْلِ هَذَا أَوْ أَثَرَهُ مِنَ عَلِيمٍ
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّن يَدْعُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَنْ
لَا يَسْتَجِيبُ لَهُمْ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ وَهُمْ عَنْ
دُعَائِهِمْ غَافِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

وَإِذَا حُشِرَ النَّاسُ كَانُوا لَهُمْ أَعْدَاءً وَكَانُوا
بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ كَافِرِينَ ﴿٦﴾

وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ قَالَ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الْحَقُّ لَمَجَاءٍ هُمْ هَذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧﴾

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ إِنْ افْتَرَيْتُهُ
فَلَا تَمْلِكُونَ لِي مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا
هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا نَفِيضُونَ فِيهِ كَفَى
بِهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَهُوَ
الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.' (9)

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'an is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' (10)

The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' (11)

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (12)

قُلْ مَا كُنْتُ بِدَعَاةٍ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي
مَا يُفْعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ إِنْ أَتَيْتُمْ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ
إِلَىٰ وَمَا أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ
وَكُفْرْتُمْ بِهِ، وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِنْ
بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ يَلْعَلُ عَلَىٰ مِثْلِهِ فَظَامِنَ
وَأَسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي
الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
لَوْ كُنَّا خَيْرًا مَا مَسَّبَقُونَا إِلَيْهِ وَإِذْ لَمْ
يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ، فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَذَا
إِنْ كُنَّا قَدِيمًا ﴿١١﴾

وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كَتَبُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ مُصَدِّقٌ
لِسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِنُذِرَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا
وَنُبَشِّرَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God', and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (13)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَمُوا
فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do. (14)

أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

In Line with the Truth

Hā. Mīm. This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given. (Verses 1-3)

As the *sūrah* opens it touches on the link between the letters of the Arabic language they speak and the Qur'an, a book composed of the same letters but unlike anything people say or write. This, in itself, is sufficient evidence to testify to the fact that the Qur'an is revealed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It also touches on the relationship between God's recited book and the book of the universe we behold and which He made. Both books are made with the truth and according to careful planning. The fact that the Qur'an is bestowed from on high by the Almighty testifies to His power and absolute wisdom. Likewise, the creation of the universe is an act of truth: "We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth." (Verse 3) It is subject to elaborate planning: "and for an appointed term." (Verse 3) Thus, God's purpose behind creation is fulfilled and all that He has willed through the process of creation is accomplished.

Both books are open, available to ears and eyes to contemplate. Each testifies to God's power and wisdom, indicating His planning. Indeed the book of the universe affirms the truth of the revealed book and its

promises and warnings. *“Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.”* (Verse 3) This is indeed most singular.

The revealed book states that the Godhead is One and that He is the Lord of everything, since He is the Creator who controls and determines all. The book of the universe also affirms this same truth: its system, balance and harmony confirm that the Maker is the One who makes everything on the basis of comprehensive and unerring knowledge. Indeed, everything bears the same mark of the One Maker. How can anyone then claim that there are deities other than Him? What have such alleged deities created? What share do they have in the universe? *“Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.”* (Verse 4)

Thus, God instructs His messenger to put before people the testimony of the book of the universe, as it admits no dispute and addresses human nature according to its own logic. *“Show me what part of the earth they have created.”* No one will ever say that such worshipped deities, be they statues made of stone, trees, *jinn*, angels or any other, ever created any part of the earth or anything that lives on earth. Human nature flies in the face of anyone making such a suggestion. *“Or which share of the heavens they own?”* (Verse 4) Nor will any human being claim that any worshipped deity has ever had any share in the creation of the heavens, or that they own any share in them. A glance at the sky is sufficient to fill our hearts with a clear sense of the Creator’s greatness and oneness, and to discard all deviant beliefs and absurdities. God, who bestowed the Qur’ān from on high, knows the effect of contemplating the universe on people’s minds and hearts. Therefore, He directs us to look at the book of the universe and listen to its message.

Some people, however, make assertions that rely on neither proof nor evidence. The Qur’ān does not allow them much leeway in this respect. Instead it requires that they provide evidence and proof in support of their claims and teaches them the method of proof putting before them a complete system of consideration, reflection and conclusion drawing: *“Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other*

vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true." (Verse 4) Thus, they have to rely either on a true book revealed by God, or a proved piece of evidence that has survived over time. All books revealed before the Qur'ān emphatically assert the oneness of God, the Creator. None of them assigns even a shred of validity to the legends that speak of multiple deities, or suggests that they have any share in the creation of the earth or the ownership of the heavens. Nor is there any vestige of knowledge to support such absurd claims.

Thus the Qur'ān puts before them the testimony of the universe, which is clear and decisive, discounts any claim that has no supporting evidence and teaches them the method of proof; all this in one verse using a small number of words, but with strong rhythm and sound argument.

The Qur'ān also invites them to take an objective look at those beings alleged to be deities. It points to the obvious error behind such claims when these entities can neither respond to them nor show any awareness of them in this present life. Furthermore, they will stand against the unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, denying all their claims:

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (Verses 5–6)

Some of the unbelievers considered their idols to be deities, either in themselves or as statues representing the angels. Others worshipped trees while still others worshipped the angels directly or even Satan. Yet none of these so-called deities respond to those invoking them, or at least make a useful response. Statues and trees give no response whatsoever, angels do not respond to anyone who associates partners with God, while the devils' response is only one of whispering and leading people astray. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, when all are gathered before their Lord, all alleged deities disown their errant worshippers. Even Satan disowns them, as clearly stated in another *sūrah*: "And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say:

'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store." (14: 22)

Thus, after having explained to them the universal truth that rejects their claims, the Qur'ān puts their own claims before their eyes, showing them what effect these claims have in this world and in the life to come. In both, the truth of God's oneness is clearly seen as the book of the universe proves it. The idolaters should espouse this if they care about what happens to them in this life and in the life to come.

This strong denunciation of idolatry referred, at the time of Qur'ānic revelation, to the deities worshipped by different communities during different periods of history. However, the Qur'ānic statements in this case have a broader significance and farther application than the historical situation then pertaining. What error is greater than one creature invoking another instead of God, at any time and place? Every creature thus invoked, regardless of its identity and status, will not and cannot make any response to those who invoke it. It is God alone who does what He wants. Polytheism is not limited to the naïve form practised by the idolaters of old. Many are those who associate with God partners from among people who have power, influence, wealth or position; they appeal to them for help. Yet these are also too weak to make any significant response to their appealers. None has any power to cause benefit or harm even to themselves. Appealing to them, placing hope in them and fearing them are all forms of subtle idolatry, which is unfortunately practised by many even though they do not recognize it as such.

A Wild Claim

The *sūrah* now discusses their attitude towards the Prophet and his true message, establishing the truth of revelation as it has already established the truth of God's oneness:

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' Do they say: 'He has invented it himself?' Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner. Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'an is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (Verses 7–12)

The *sūrah* first rebukes them for the reception they gave to God's revelations when it is given 'in all clarity', free of ambiguity, leaving no room for doubt. Besides, it presents the indisputable truth. Yet they describe this revelation as 'plain sorcery'. As we all know, truth is vastly different from sorcery; the two cannot be confused or viewed in the same way. Thus the *sūrah* begins its discussion by refuting their ridiculous claims.

It then picks up on their other claim alleging that the Prophet had 'invented' it. It states this in the form of a question, not a report, giving the impression that such a thing cannot be made or at least is unlikely to be made: "Do they say: 'He has invented it himself?'" (Verse 8) What a shameless claim! The Prophet is instructed to reply to them in all the politeness that fits his position as a prophet of God, reflecting his understanding of his Lord and his mission, as well as his knowledge of the true power and values in the universe: "Say: If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of

what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 8)

Essentially, the Prophet is instructed to ask them: how, for whose interest and for what objective would I invent it? Would I invent it so that you can believe in and follow me? If this is the case, you cannot help me in the least against God. He will surely hold me to account. What use would it be to me if you follow me, when you cannot give me the slightest support or protection when God punishes me for such invention?

This is a fit response from a Prophet who is instructed by God, and who recognizes no power in the universe other than His. Besides, it is a logical response which, when objectively considered, appears to the addressees to be truly valid. The Prophet makes this response and leaves them to God for judgement: "*He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it.*" (Verse 8) He is a witness to all that they say and do, and this is enough to ensure a fair judgement: "*Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you.*" Yet, "*He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 8) He may treat you with compassion, bestow His grace on you and guide you, forgiving you your earlier error. It is a response, then, that combines warning with persuasion. It gently touches hearts and makes people realize that the matter is far too serious to be left to their absurdities.

Yet another argument is provided, this time drawing on realities. Why do they reject the idea of a Divine message being given through revelation? Why are they so quick to denounce it as sorcery or as an invention, when there is nothing strange or unusual about it? "*Say: I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not a totally new phenomenon: he was one in a line of God's messengers. His situation was the same as all messengers who preceded him. He was an ordinary human being whom God knew to be suited to deliver His message. Therefore, He gave him His revelations and the Prophet carried out God's orders. This is what a Divine message is like. When a messenger of God feels this bond, he does not ask God for proof, nor does he

request anything special for himself; he simply moves on to deliver God's message as it is revealed to him. *"I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me."* He gets on with the task of delivering his message, not because of any knowledge he has of the realm that lies beyond human perception, nor because of any information given to him about what will happen to him, his people or his message. He simply follows instructions, trusting his Lord, submitting himself to Him. The future is unknown to him; its secrets are with his Lord and he does not seek to know them. He has all the reassurance he needs, and he realizes that the proper attitude for him is not to look beyond the limits of the mission he has been assigned: *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 9)

Those advocates of Islam endowed with profound insight into its message follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and find the same reassurance. They carry on with their advocacy of the Divine message seeking neither personal gain nor self interest. They do not know what the future holds for it or for them. They do not ask their Lord for evidence; they have all the evidence they need in their hearts. Nor do they pray for any special favour; it is sufficient favour for them that they follow this line. They discharge their duty, and this is enough for them. They do not overstep the fine line God has demarcated for them.

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers a witness who is close at hand and whose testimony is particularly relevant because he belongs to an earlier Divine religion whose followers are aware of the nature of revelation:

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.'
(Verse 10)

This verse may refer to one or more of the Jews who, knowing the nature of the Torah, recognized that the Qur'ān had the same nature as earlier revealed books and, therefore, declared themselves believers in Islam. There are reports that it refers specifically to 'Abdullāh ibn

Sallām. However, this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, and ‘Abdullāh ibn Sallām only adopted Islam when the Prophet later migrated to Madīnah. Other reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madīnah, thus confirming that it refers to this particular individual. Still other reports suggest that the verse was revealed in Makkah and hence would not refer to him. It may also be that the verse refers to a different situation that took place when the Prophet was still advocating his message in Makkah, when a small number of followers of earlier Divine religions adopted Islam. This would have been particularly significant for the idolater Arabs. Hence, the Qur’ān refers to it more than once, delivering a strong counter argument to those idolaters who rejected the Divine message without any basis.

The *sūrah* uses a special style in presenting its argument to them: “*Have you thought: what if this Qur’ān is really from God and you reject it?...*” (Verse 10) It aims to shake their stubborn rejection and raise a fear within them concerning the eventual result. Since there is a possibility that the Qur’ān may really be from God, as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says, should they not take precautions lest their rejection of it brings them to a terrible end? Could all the warnings it provides come true? Would they not be better advised to reflect on the whole matter lest they leave themselves open to all that it warns them against? Taking such precautions is all the wiser, considering that one or more of the people of Divine faiths confirmed that the Qur’ān is of the same nature as earlier revealed scriptures, and followed this by declaring their belief in it. By contrast, they, whose language the Qur’ān speaks, persist with their rejection. This is indeed blatant wrongdoing as it suppresses the truth. It deserves God’s punishment: “*God does not guide wrongdoers.*” (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* continues to report what the pagan Arabs said about the Qur’ān and Islam. It specifically mentions their arrogance as they try to show themselves as superior to the believers:

The unbelievers say of those who believe: ‘If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.’ Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, ‘This is an ancient falsehood.’ (Verse 11)

Among the earliest Muslims were those who were poor and weak in Makkkan society. To the arrogant elders of the Quraysh, this was a point of weakness. They boasted: 'had Islam been good, we would have been the first to recognize its goodness. Those others could not have preceded us in following it. Given our positions, knowledge and understanding, we are better equipped to determine what is good.'

Yet this was not so. What stopped them from accepting Islam was not any doubt that they had about it or that they did not recognize how good and sound it was, but rather the fact that they were too proud to follow Muḥammad's lead. They especially feared any loss of their social position or their economic privileges. Moreover they were proud of their ancestors and what they believed in. By contrast, those who were quick to respond to the call of Islam paid little attention to such considerations. Pride always prevents the arrogant from listening to the voice of sound nature; it precludes them from accepting the truth. Pride and arrogance always make people stubborn, urging them to seek hollow excuses and make false claims about the truth and its advocates. They will never acknowledge that they are wrong. Indeed, they put themselves at the centre of life, as if they were the pivot around which life itself turns: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) Since they have not acknowledged the truth, then there must be something wrong with it. They could not make a mistake. They try to impress on the masses what they feel of their own infallibility!

The case for revelation concludes with a reference to Moses' scriptures:

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (Verse 12)

The Qur'an repeatedly refers to its bond with earlier Divine books, particularly the one given to Moses, considering that the one given to Jesus was a complement to the Torah, which contains the basic faith and legislation. Hence, Moses' book is defined as 'a guide', or *imām* in Arabic, and described as 'grace'. Indeed, all Divine messages are signs of His grace bestowed on earth and its inhabitants, in every sense of

the word. It is grace and mercy extended throughout this life and in the life to come. This present book, the Qur'ān, "*confirms it in the Arabic tongue.*" It confirms the original source that forms the basis of all Divine religions and also the Divine code of life advocated by all religions. It confirms the true direction shown to humanity to ensure that it remains in contact with its Lord. The reference to its being in Arabic serves to remind the Arabs of God's favour in choosing them to be the bearers of His message to humanity and choosing their language for the Qur'ān. The verse also speaks of the nature and function of the message: "*To warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12)

What Reward for Believers?

At the end of this first part, the *sūrah* describes the reward of those who do good, explaining the good news the Qur'ān gives them, making clear its necessary condition, which is acknowledgement of God's Lordship and its implementation in human life:

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.
(Verses 13–14)

What is required of them is that they say: '*Our Lord is God.*' These are not idle words; indeed, they represent more than belief. They embody a complete system that applies to every step, action and feeling in life. They set up a criterion to judge every thought, event, action, relation, bond and person. Our Lord is God: to Him do we address our worship, it is Him that we seek and it is on Him alone that we rely. Our Lord is God: no one else matters; all our hopes look up to Him, and we fear none but He. Our Lord is God: in every thought, judgement and action we seek His pleasure. Our Lord is God: His is the law we implement, and from Him alone we receive guidance. Our Lord is God: all our bonds with anyone or thing in the whole world are subject to our relation with Him.

“And follow the straight path.” (Verse 13) This is the next step that defines a straight line that we should follow with reassurance and steady feelings, entertaining neither doubts nor fears. Thus, actions and behaviour will always be in line with God's code, avoiding pitfalls and resisting all temptations.

So, the statement, *‘Our Lord is God,’* outlines a system, and following this system after having consciously chosen it is a higher grade still. Those whom God guides to have both are indeed the best people. Hence, they *“shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.”* (Verse 13) Why would they fear anything or grieve over anything when they have a system that leads to God and following it is the best assurance to be with Him?

“They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.” (Verse 14) The phrase *‘for what they do’* explains the meaning of the statement, *‘our Lord is God’* and diligent following of the system it outlines. It tells us that there is a type of action that earns the reward of abiding in heaven. It is the type of action that results from this particular system and its conscientious implementation. Thus we realize that the words and phrases of faith in Islam are not mere statements to be made verbally. The basic statement, *‘I bear witness that there is no deity other than God’*, denotes a complete system. If it remains no more than a statement, it cannot be the cornerstone of Islam, as it always should be.

Millions of people repeat this declaration today, but it remains no more than words they utter. It produces no effect on their lives. They continue to lead a life based on a system that is akin to paganism while they repeat a declaration that for them remains hollow. To say, *‘I bear witness that there is no deity other than God’*, or *‘our Lord is God’*, is to denote a system of life. This must be clear in our minds so that we can identify this system and follow it.



Two Types of Offspring

We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months. And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (15)

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (16)

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ إِحْسَانًا
حَمْلَتُهُ أُمَّهُ كَرْهًا وَأَرْضَعْتُهُ كَرْهًا
وَحَمْلُهُ وَفِصْلُهُ ثَلَاثُونَ شَهْرًا
حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ
سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ
نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ وَعَلَىٰ
وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا تَرْضَاهُ
وَأَصْلِحْ لِي فِي ذُرِّيَّتِي ۗ إِنِّي تُبْتُ
إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّي مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ نَقَبَلُ عَنْهُمْ أَحْسَنَ
مَا عَمِلُوا وَنَجَّوْا عَنْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ فِي
أَصْحَابِ الْجَنَّةِ وَعَدَّ الصِّدْقِ الَّذِي
كَانُوا يُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' (17)

Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of *jinn* and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (18)

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged. (19)

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.' (20)

وَالَّذِي قَالَ لِبَوْلَدَيْهِ أُفٍ لَكُمَا
أَعِدَانِي أَنْ أُخْرَجَ وَقَدْ خَلَتِ
الْقُرُونُ مِنْ قَبْلِي وَهُمَا يَسْتَفِئَانِ
اللَّهَ وَيَتْلُوكَ مَا مِنْ إِيَّائِهِ وَعَدَّ اللَّهُ
حَقًّا فَيَقُولُ مَا هَذَا إِلَّا أَسْطُورٌ
الْأُولَئِكَ ﴿١٧﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي
أَمْرِ قَدْ خَلَتِ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنْسِ
إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَسِيرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

وَلِكُلِّ دَرَجَةٍ مِمَّا عَمِلُوا وَلِيُوفيَهُمْ
أَعْمَلُهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يظلمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَلَى النَّارِ أَلَذَّيْتُمْ
طِيبْتُمْ فِي حَيَاتِكُمُ الدُّنْيَا وَأَسْتَمْتُمْ
بِهَا فَا لْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ الْهُونِ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ
تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَمِمَّا كُنْتُمْ
نَفْسُفُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Overview

In this part the *sūrah* speaks of human nature when it sticks to the right track and when it deviates, and at what end it arrives in either case. It begins by urging man to remain dutiful to his parents. This instruction often comes in the Qur'ān after it speaks about faith or in conjunction with such discourses. The reason for this is that the bond between children and parents is the strongest and most important after the bond of faith. It is the one that deserves to be honoured. Furthermore, grouping the two bonds together in this way in the Qur'ān makes it clear that the bond of faith takes precedence in human life. It is followed though by the family bond in its closest form.

This part of the *sūrah* gives us a scene portraying two types of human nature. In the first, the two bonds of faith and the one between parent and offspring work together in the same direction, seeking God's acceptance. In the second, the two bonds separate and have no meeting point. In the first case, the children concerned are given the good news of being admitted into heaven, while in the second, they are destined to suffer in hell. An image of the punishment meted out in hell is given, describing the end suffered by the arrogant who are guilty of transgression.

Dutiful to Parents

"We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents." (Verse 15) This is an order given to all mankind, based on the very fact of their being human with no need for any further qualification. They are all enjoined to show kindness in its absolute, unrestricted sense. Mere parenthood requires such absolute kindness. This order comes from the Creator of man, and it appears to apply to the human race in particular. It is unknown among birds, animals or insects for the young to take care of the old. What is clearly observed among these creatures is that by nature the old take care of the young. Nevertheless, this applies only to some species. Hence, the Divine order seems to apply only to man.

This instruction to be kind to one's parents is repeated several times in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's pronouncements. By contrast,

kindness by parents to children occurs only rarely, addressing particular situations. Human nature itself ensures that parents take good care of their children, without the need for any other motivation. Parents often show a remarkable readiness to sacrifice whatever they have for their children, to the point of being willing to die for them. They show no hesitation in all this, seek no recompense, press no favour and expect no thanks. The new generation, however, rarely turns back to take care of the older one who had made such great sacrifices. Indeed, the younger generation moves forward to bring up another new generation and take care of it, making similar sacrifices in the process.

Islam considers the family the basic unit in its social structure. It is the nest where the young are reared, receiving their share of love, and learning the value of mutual cooperation and care. A child who does not have a family to look after it often suffers deprivation in some aspects of its life, even though all sorts of comfort remain available in its environment. The first thing such a child lacks as it grows up in an environment other than that of a family is love. It has been proven that by nature a child loves to have its mother's complete attention during its first two years of life. This cannot be provided in a non-family environment where one carer has to look after several children. In this situation, jealousy is bound to surface, and a grudging seed replaces that of love. Similarly, a child needs to be under one supervisory authority during a certain period of its life; this so that its character remains stable. Again, this cannot be provided anywhere other than the family environment. In a children's home, such an authority is lacking because supervisors work in shifts. Therefore, their charges can only but lack stability. Hence, we can see the wisdom behind making the family the basic unit of the Islamic social structure that meets all the needs of sound human nature.

The Qur'ān describes the mother's willing sacrifice, which cannot be compensated for by her children no matter how well they fulfil God's order to be kind to parents: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months.*" (Verse 15) Here the very words and their rhythm

gives us a clear sense of the difficulty and hard times the mother has to go through: “*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth.*” In Arabic this sounds akin to a great sigh, made by someone bearing a heavy burden and breathing with difficulty. It, thus reflects the latter stages of pregnancy, as also of labour and birth.

As embryology advances, it reveals to us more and more of the great sacrifice the mother makes during pregnancy. When the egg is fertilized, it clings to the uterus. As it needs to feed, it begins to tear the tissues around it and feed on it. Blood runs to it so that the egg begins now to swim in a pool of the mother’s blood, which is rich in nutrients. The egg needs more and more of this blood to grow and develop, and thus it continues to feed on the mother. This means that the mother eats food, digests it and as it enters her blood stream, this, with all its nutrients, feeds the developing embryo. When the embryo begins to develop its bones, it increasingly absorbs calcium from its mother who may suffer a shortage of the same. All this is merely a fraction of what the mother gives to the embryo.

Childbirth is another very difficult process, but its great pain dwindles before natural instinct. The mother is delighted with the fruit it yields, which means giving life to a new shoot of an old tree: a child that starts life as its mother moves on.

Now that the child is born, it needs to be breast-fed and taken much care of. By her milk, the mother gives of her own constitution, and as she takes care of her child, she gives much of her heart and feelings. Yet in giving all of this, she is nothing less than delighted. She is never fed up with all the trouble her child gives her. The best reward she aspires to is to see her child grow in good health. How can anyone compensate a mother for all her sacrifice? “One of the Prophet’s Companions was carrying his mother as they did the *tawāf*, walking around the Ka‘bah, [a ritual of pilgrimage]. He asked the Prophet: ‘Have I discharged my duty to her?’ The Prophet said: ‘No, not even for one sigh she made.’” [Related by al-Bazzār.]

Having given this example of what parents, particularly the mother, do for their children, the *sūrah* now paints an image of a child that has attained maturity, nurturing sound nature and following right guidance:

And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (Verse 15)

Here, the Arabic text uses the term *ashudd*, translated here as full manhood, which is between 30 and 40. Indeed at 40, man attains full maturity, when all talents and potentials are at their best and man tends to think and reflect in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, sound human nature begins to reflect on life and what comes after life, thinking of the eventual destiny.

The Qur'an describes the thoughts and feelings of a person with sound nature as he stands at the end of one half of life and the beginning of another half with an almost apparent end. He, therefore, turns to God with this prayer: "*My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents.*" (Verse 15) It is a prayer from a heart that appreciates the great grace God has bestowed on him, feeling that it is far more than he deserves. He recognizes that such grace was also bestowed in abundance on his parents. He feels that all his efforts are insufficient expression of gratitude for such grace. Therefore, he prays that God will enable him to perform his duty of thanksgiving and not allow his efforts to be wasted on distractions.

In this same prayer, the person who enjoys sound nature prays that God will enable him to "*do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance.*" What he wishes for is to be able to do some work that is so good as to meet with God's pleasure and acceptance. His utmost aim is to earn his Lord's acceptance, for it is in Him that he places all his hopes.

He goes on with his prayer: "*Grant me good descendants.*" This prayer issues from a believer's heart who hopes that his good work will continue with his children and their children and so on. He would love to be sure that his offspring will continue to worship God alone and seek His pleasure. Such goodly descendants are more precious to a believer than the greatest of material treasures. Such a prayer expresses a hope

that children take over from parents in obeying God across many generations.

What he presents in support of his sincere prayer is a request for repentance of any sins and errors and a statement of his full submission to God's will: "*To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.*"

Thus is the attitude of a good servant of God, one equipped with sound, uncorrupted nature. The Qur'an tells us of how God looks upon such people:

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (Verse 16)

The reward is granted on the basis of the best of one's deeds, while bad ones are overlooked. The destination to which such people go is heaven where they join its rightful dwellers. All this is in fulfilment of the true promise they were given in this present life. God's promise is always fulfilled.

To the Other Place

The converse of all this is error and transgression:

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of jinn and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (Verses 17–18)

The parents are believers, but the child is disobedient. His first characteristic is that of being undutiful to them, addressing them with arrogance and insolence, hurting their feelings: "*Fie on you both.*" He

then denies the resurrection, citing the hollow argument that no one from past generations has ever come back to life: "*Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?*" (Verse 17) The time of resurrection is determined by God, when all will be resurrected at the same time after this present world has completed its term. No one has ever said that resurrection will take place in instalments, with one generation resurrected during the lifetime of a later one. It is not a game; rather, it is a submitting of final accounts once the journey has come to its final destination.

The parents are shocked by their son's words that mark him out to be a clear disbeliever. They fear the outcome of what he says to God and to them. Therefore, they appeal to him and pray to God for help: "*they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true.'*" (Verse 17) These words give us a clear impression of their dread at the outcome of all this. The child, for his part, however, persists with disbelief and denial, saying: "*All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.*" (Verse 17) His inevitable end overwhelms him: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of jinn and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) The verdict passed on this person and others like him is the punishment incurred by unbelievers. There are large numbers of these across many generations of humans and *jinn*. God's promise which always comes true states that these '*will be utterly lost*'. What greater loss is there than the loss of faith in this life and the loss of God's pleasure in the life to come! Such a loss means inevitable suffering for such unbelievers.

Having given a general idea of the outcome that awaits the two groups, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the accurate accountability of every individual: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19) Every single one has their own grade, according to their deeds.

These two types of people are very common. Indeed, the description almost identifies two particular people to heighten the effect and make each mirror a life situation. There are reports suggesting that each example does refer to a particular case, but none of these carries any

degree of authenticity. It is better, therefore, to consider that they refer to two types rather than two individuals. This is endorsed by the way the *sūrah* comments on their situations. After describing the first type, the *sūrah* says: “*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*” (Verse 16) It refers to the second type with a similarly telling comment: “*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of jinn and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*” (Verse 18) It finally comments on both types together: “*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*” (Verse 19)

Submitting the Final Account

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers their own fate as they face the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection which they were wont to deny:

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: ‘You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.’
(Verse 20)

This is a fast moving scene, yet it has a profound, telling effect. The scene brings them before the fire, but just before they are driven into it, they are told the reasons which determined their fate in this way: “*You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure.*” They had their fair share of good things, but they used them all up in the life of this world, keeping nothing back for their future life. In fact, they did not reckon that there would even be a future life. Therefore, they enjoyed these good things to the full, showing no gratitude for them and expressing no thanks to God for

granting them. They did not refrain from committing what is forbidden in order to enjoy such pleasures. Therefore, they had their full share of good things in this world, leaving themselves nothing in the life to come. They exchanged the endless life of the hereafter for the short span of life on earth. Therefore, *"today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression."* (Verse 20) Everyone who behaves with arrogance on earth does so without any right. All pride belongs to God; none belongs to any creature, no matter what position he holds. To suffer humiliation is, therefore, a just reward for arrogance and deviation from the path God has charted.



When Prophets Are Challenged

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (21)

They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.' (22)

He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.' (23)

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering (24)

وَأَذْكُرَ أَخَا عَادٍ إِذَا نَذَرَ قَوْمَهُ بِالْأَحْقَافِ
وَقَدْ خَلَّتِ النُّذُرُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ
خَلْفِهِ ۚ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا اللَّهَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

قَالُوا اجْتَنِبْنَا إِنَّا نَبِئُكَ عَنْ إِلٰهِنَا فَأِنَّا
بِمَا تَعْبُدُنَا أَن كُنْتَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

قَالَ إِنَّمَا الْعِلْمُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَأُبَلِّغُكُمْ مَا أُرْسِلْتُ
بِهِ وَلَكِنِّي أَرَىٰكُمْ قَوْمًا تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ عَارِضًا مُّسْتَقْبِلَ أَوْدِيَّتِهِمْ قَالُوا
هَذَا عَارِضٌ مِّمَّنْ مَطْرًا نَّابِلٌ هُوَ مَا اسْتَعْجَلْتُمْ
بِهِ رِيحٌ فِيهَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (25)

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (26)

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. (27)

Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (28)

تَدْمِرُ كُلَّ مَقْعٍ بِأَمْرِ رَبِّهَا فَاصْبِرُوا
لَا يُرَى إِلَّا أَلَمُكُمْ كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي
الْقَوْمَ الْمَجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَلَقَدْ مَكَّنَّهُمْ فِيمَا إِنْ مَكَّنَّاكُمْ فِيهِ
وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ سَمْعًا وَأَبْصَارًا وَفَعَدَّةَ فَمَا
أَغْنَى عَنْهُمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَارُهُمْ وَلَا
أَفْعَادُهُمْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِذْ كَانُوا يَجْحَدُونَ
بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ
يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا مَا حَوْلَكُمْ مِنَ الْقُرَى
وَصَرَّفْنَا الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَلَوْلَا نَصْرُهُمُ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ
قُرْبَانًا آلِهَةً بَلْ ضَلُّوا عَنْهُمْ وَذَلِكَ
إِفْكُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Overview

This third part of the *sūrah* addresses its central question in a different way to that of its earlier parts. It speaks of the fate of the 'Ād and other townships around Makkah. Towards Hūd, their brother, whom God sent as His messenger, they adopted a similar attitude to that of the idolaters in Makkah towards Muḥammad, their brother and God's messenger. Both raised the same objections. Hūd answered them in the splendid manner of prophets, but within the limits of his human ability and the mission assigned to him. When they paid no heed to his warnings, they were smitten by God's punishment that left them utterly destroyed. Although they were more powerful, wealthy and intelligent than the Makkan unbelievers, none of this was of any avail to them. Nor did their alleged deities, which they claimed would bring them closer to God, avail them of anything.

The Makkan unbelievers are also reminded of the fate their own ancestors met, given they too had adopted the same attitude. They are told in no uncertain terms that they will suffer the same fate. The *sūrah* also shows them the line the Divine message follows: it is consistent and unchanging. Likewise, God's law applies to all and does not change. We see the tree of faith with firm roots, its branches stretched wide across the generations. It is the same faith for all times and communities.

At the Sand Dunes

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (Verse 21)

The brother of the 'Ād is the Prophet Hūd (peace be upon him) who is mentioned here by his position as a brother to his people. This highlights the relation of mutual love and care that existed between him and his people, which should have made them more responsive to his call and motivated them to think well of him and what he taught. The same bond existed between Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his people who similarly opposed him.

The 'Ād used to build their homes on the high sand dunes in a valley in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, said to be near Ḥadramawt.¹ God in His glory directs His messenger to remember Hūd and how he warned his people at the Valley of the Sand Dunes. This to give him encouragement as he realizes that Hūd was similarly rejected by his people. Such remembrance also serves to remind the Makkan unbelievers of the fate of those earlier communities that rejected God's messages.

Hūd warned his people, but he was not the first messenger to warn his community. Other messengers did the same before him: "*Other warners have come and gone both before and after him.*" Those messengers came close to him in time and place as also far from him. The chain of God's messages is a continuous one, and the warnings are given at all times. This whole issue is familiar to all. Hūd gave them the same warnings given by all messengers to their communities: "*Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.*" (Verse 21) Worshipping God means faith at heart and a code of living. To discard all this inevitably leads to terrible suffering in this present life, or in the life to come, or in both. When reference is made to a day, as it is made here, it means the Day of Judgement when the suffering is far greater and more terrible.

What response did Hūd's people give him for his caring instructions and warnings? "*They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 22) Their response betrays mistrust, lack of understanding, rejection of the warning, hastening the punishment he warned them against, arrogance and a persistent adherence to false beliefs.

For his part, Hūd receives all this with patience, showing the manners that befit a prophet. He makes no personal claims as he outlines his attitude and makes his limits clear to them: "*He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.'*" (Verse 23) I am giving you this

1. Recent reports based on satellite pictures suggest that a whole city is buried at a place close to Oman in the Empty Quarter, which means that it is to the west of Ḥadramout, a large province in Yemen. From the description given, this city might well be where the 'Ād lived. – Editor's note.

warning as I was commanded to do, but I do not know when such punishment falls, or what form it will take. All this is known to God alone. I am only delivering a message entrusted to me, making no further claim. “*But I see that you are insolent people.*” (Verse 23) What could be more foolish and insolent than to give such a hostile reception to a brother who is only offering sincere and honest advice?

The *sūrah* gives no further details of the long argument that took place between Hūd and his people, moving straight to report on the fate they suffered. This is intended here as a reply to their challenge and hastening of punishment:

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: ‘This cloud will bring us rain.’ ‘No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.’ When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (Verses 24–25)

Reports suggest that the ‘Ad suffered a period of intense heat, coupled with absence of rain. They endured this unbearable climate for some time. Then God sent them clouds, and they were delighted. They went into the surrounding valleys hoping that rain would quickly ensue. Yet the truth of what the clouds brought signified their ultimate demise: “*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*” Elsewhere in the Qur’ān, this stormwind is described as “*furiously raging.*” (69: 6) Another description of it states that it “*spared nothing of what it came upon, but caused it all to become like bones dead and decayed.*” (51: 42)

The Qur’ānic text depicts the wind as if it was alive, aware of what it was doing, fulfilling its orders to destroy everything in its wake: “*which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*” This is a universal fact which the Qur’ān is wont to impress on people. This universe is alive, and every force in it is aware of what God wants of it, proceeding to fulfil it. Man is one of these forces. When he is a true believer, his heart becomes open to greater knowledge and he becomes

able to understand more of the universal forces around him and respond to them. This opens the way to a mutual response that differs from what people generally know of life and understanding. Everything around us has life, but we do not appreciate this because shapes and forms limit our understanding. The universe around us is full of secrets which are appreciated by faculties of understanding, even though they cannot be seen by our eyes.

The stormwind fulfilled the task assigned to it, destroying everything. Thus, "*when the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings.*" (Verse 25) No trace of the 'Ād was left behind, not even their animals or belongings. Everything disappeared. All that was left were desolate dwellings, empty, lacking all signs of life: "*Thus do We requite guilty people.*" (Verse 25) This rule applies to all guilty people.

Useless Power

With this image of death and destruction, the *sūrah* addresses the present generation who follow in the 'Ād's footsteps, giving them a telling reminder:

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (Verse 26)

Those very people who were destroyed by the stormwind had once been established in the land in a way that had not been granted to the Arabs of Makkah. This is a general reference to what they had been given of power, wealth, knowledge and life's luxuries. They were also endowed with sharp faculties of hearing and sight, as well as hearts. The Qur'ān uses different ways of referring to the faculty of understanding, citing it alternatively as heart, mind or brain, when all refer to the same ability. Yet none of these faculties was of any use as the 'Ād rendered them useless when "*they persisted in denying God's*

revelations." (Verse 26) Denying God's revelations suppresses senses and faculties and screens them from His source of light and understanding, blunting them altogether. "*They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.*" (Verse 26) This refers to the punishment they were warned about and which they derided.

The lesson to be drawn here is that no one should ever be too proud of his power, wealth or knowledge, thinking that these can afford him absolute protection. We see in what happened to the 'Ād a natural power being used against people, destroying them and all that they enjoyed. Nothing was left of them except their empty and desolate dwellings.

Winds are a universal power operating all the time in accordance with the system God has placed in the universe. He may use them to destroy certain places as part of His overall scheme of things. There is no need, then, within this context, to upset or disrupt the universal system, as some people mistakenly suggest. The One who has put the system in place is the One who has determined the fates of individuals and communities. Every single thing, event, movement and person are taken into account within the overall system and the operation of His law. Like all other universal powers, winds are controlled by God, fulfilling the role He has assigned to them and to the universe. The same applies to humans at whose disposal God has placed certain universal powers. When people undertake something, they are in fact fulfilling the role assigned to them by God, for His purpose. Their freedom of action and choice is part of the overall law that ensures universal harmony. Indeed everything is set according to a fine measure, with nothing falling short or causing disruption.

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by drawing people's attention to the lessons learnt from the fates suffered by the communities in the areas not far from around Makkah:

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (Verses 27–28)

God destroyed the communities who rejected the messengers sent to them, such as the 'Ād in the Valley of the Sand Dunes in the south of Arabia, the Thamūd at Hījr in the north, the people of Sheba in Yemen, the Madyan whose former homes the Makkans passed on their way to Syria and the people of Lor whose dwellings were along the route the Arabs took on their summer journey to the north. God gave His message to these people in different ways so as to give such erring communities a chance to repent and change their ways. They, however, persisted with their errors and so incurred God's punishment, which was inflicted on them in various ways. What happened to them was so serious that it became part of the history one generation reports to the next. The idolaters in Makkah were aware of this, given they passed by these areas on their travels.

Their attentions are thus drawn to the real facts. God destroyed the unbelievers before them while their deities, whom they claimed drew them nearer to God, were utterly unable to save them: "*Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help?*" (Verse 28) They could not furnish them with any support. "*Indeed, they utterly failed them.*" They left them to their fate. Indeed, they did not know how to reach them, let alone spare them God's punishment. "*Such were their lies and such their false inventions.*" (Verse 28) All their claims about so-called deities are lies and fabrications. These too will inevitably be destroyed. What end, then, did those Arabs who took false deities for themselves expect?



Jinn Listening to the Qur'an

We sent to you a group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'an. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. (29)

'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. (30)

'Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. (31)

'He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.' (32)

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَا إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ الْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ
الْقُرْآنَ إِن فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوا أَنْصِتُوا فَلَمَّا
قُضِيَ وَلَوْ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِمْ مُنْذِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

قَالُوا يَا قَوْمَنَا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَابًا
أُنزِلَ مِن بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ
يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ وَإِلَى طَرِيقِ
مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

يَقَوْمَنَا أَجِيبُوا دَاعِيَ اللَّهِ وَآمِنُوا بِهِ
يَغْفِرَ لَكُمْ مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُخْرِجَكُم
مِّنْ عَذَابِ آلِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

وَمَن لَّا يَجِيبْ دَاعِيَ اللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ
فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي سَمَوَاتِهَا وَمِن دُونِهِ
أَوْلِيَاءُ أَزْوَاجٌ فِي صَلَائِلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (33)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْ يَخْلُقْهُنَّ يَمْدِرُ عَلَى
أَنْ يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ بَلَىٰ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ
قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (34)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَلَىٰ النَّارِ أَلَيْسَ
هَذَا بِأَلْحَقٍ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا قَالَ فَذُوقُوا
الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (35)

فَأَصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُولُو الْعَزْمِ مِنَ
الرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلْ لَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ
يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبَسُوا
إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّنْ نَّهَارٍ بَلَّغَ فَمَا لَهُمْ
بِهَا أَن يَأْكُلُوا لِقَاءَ الْيَوْمِ
إِلَّا الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* presents a different way of tackling the basic question of faith. It tells us the story of a group of *jinn* who heard the Qur'an being recited and who listened to it. They felt, at heart, that it was the word of truth and believed in it instantly. They then rushed to their own people calling on them to believe, giving

them the good news of earning forgiveness for their past sins and warning them against turning away and persisting in error. The effect of the Qur'ān on this group of *jinn* is clearly indicated in their advice to each other to hearken to its recitation, as well as the report they gave to their people about it, urging them to believe too. Reporting the story in this way should touch the hearts of human beings to whom the message of the Qur'ān is firstly addressed. It should have a telling and profound effect on them. At the same time, a reference to the link between the book given to Moses and the Qur'ān is mentioned by the *jinn*. This is a fact ignored by humans but highlighted by the *jinn*. Again this has a profound effect which is consistent with the message of the *sūrah*.

The *jinn*'s discourse also refers to the open book of the universe, testifying to God's great power manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and His ability to bring the dead back to life. Needless to say, people argue endlessly about this, often denying it altogether.

In the context of resurrection, the *sūrah* portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement speaking of the time when the unbelievers are brought before the fire of hell. Finally, the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity and not to hasten their punishment. Rather, he should leave them to live their lives until the appointed time, which is bound to come soon, in no more than an hour of a day, during which the message is given.

The *Jinn* Listening to the Qur'ān

We sent to you a group of jinn to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error. Are they not aware that

God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (Verses 29–33)

Those *jinn* who listened to the Qur'an in silence made a comment that embraced faith in its entirety: belief in God's revelation; the unity of the message given in the Torah and the Qur'an; acknowledging the truth to which the Qur'an guides; belief in the Day of Resurrection and which actions earn forgiveness and which incur punishment; acknowledging God's power of creation and His overall authority over all creatures, and recognizing the link between creation in the first place and bringing the dead back to life. These are the principles the *sūrah* discusses from start to finish. They are presented here by the *jinn*, in a voice that comes from beyond man's world.

The fact that the Qur'an mentions how a number of *jinn* were sent to listen to the Qur'an as the Prophet recited it, and reports what they did and said afterwards, is sufficient to confirm the existence of the *jinn* and the event related. It further confirms that they were able to listen to the Qur'an in its Arabic wording as pronounced by the Prophet. It also makes clear that the *jinn* are able to accept faith or deny it, that they have the choice to follow guidance or continue in error. There is no need for any further confirmation. No person can add anything to the reliability of a fact stated by God in the Qur'an. We, however, merely try to clarify it in our human perception.

The universe around us is full of secrets, as well as powers and creatures of which we know nothing: neither their nature, nor their shape, form or effect. We live in the midst of all these powers and secrets and every day discover some of these getting to know some of such creatures or their qualities and how they make their effect on the world around us. We are still, however, at the beginning of the road, leading to knowledge of the universe. We should bear in mind that all past generations of mankind, the present one and all future generations dwell on no more than a small particle in the vast universe, which is planet earth. When compared to human knowledge five centuries ago, what we now know when we are still just at the beginning of the road is considered stranger by far than the remarkable creatures known as

the *jinn*. Had someone told people five centuries ago anything about atomic energy, they would have considered him crazy, or at least considered his views far stranger than the *jinn*.

The secrets we discover and the knowledge we acquire remain within the limits of our human power, which is granted to us so that we can discharge our task of building life on earth, in accordance with the terms of reference set for us by God. Moreover, what we learn remains within what God has made available or subservient to us for use in fulfilment of our task. No matter how long human life on earth extends, human knowledge and discoveries will remain within this framework; i.e. the framework of what we need for the mission assigned to us when we were placed in charge of the earth, according to God's purpose and wisdom. We will discover and learn much more of the wonderful secrets and powers in the universe, compared to which the secrets of the atom may appear like child's play, but we will remain within the limited area of knowledge assigned to man. We will remain within the limits of the Qur'ānic statement: "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (17: 85) It remains little compared to what the universe contains of secrets and facts known only to its Creator who controls all. We need to contrast this against God's representation of His limitless knowledge: "*Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted.*" (31: 27)

Therefore, we cannot say that something belonging to the realm that lies beyond our perception, or some secret or power in the universe, certainly exists or not, or is possible or impossible, merely because it is beyond our familiar world or our human experience. We have not yet discovered all the secrets of our own physical constitution, its systems and potentials, let alone the secrets of our minds and spirits.

There may be secrets that are beyond what is meant to be revealed to us, and secrets that we are not meant to understand, even though we get to learn about their qualities or effects, or even only their existence. What is withheld from us will not, should we learn about it, benefit us in the fulfilment of our assignment on earth. Therefore, when God tells us in His words, not through our experience and acquired knowledge, about these secrets and powers, we should accept

His gift with gratitude and take it as He gives it to us, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Such knowledge comes to us directly from God, and He has chosen to give it to us in a particular measure. There is simply no other source to give us more.

On the basis of the account given in this *sūrah* and that given in *Sūrah* 72, *The Jinn*, (which most probably speaks of the same event), and from other references to the *jinn* in the Qur'ān as well as authentic *ahādīth* referring to this event, we can understand certain facts about the *jinn*. We will add nothing further.

To sum up these facts we say that there is a type of God's creation named the *jinn*, which is created out of fire. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic reports of *Iblīs*'s statement in reference to Adam: "*I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay.*" (7: 12) *Iblīs*, or Satan, belongs to the *jinn*, as God says: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) This type of creation has different qualities to those of humans. One of these is that it is created out of fire, and another is that the *jinn* can see humans while humans cannot see them. In reference to *Iblīs*, who belongs to the *jinn*, God says: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This last statement also tells us that the *jinn* have their own groupings and communities, which are similar to human communities.

The *jinn* can live on earth, although we do not know where. When He turned them out of heaven, God said to both Adam and *Iblīs*: "*Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.*" (2: 36) The *jinn* who were made subservient to Solomon performed for him certain works on land which, by necessity, meant that they had whatever was necessary for them to live on earth. Likewise, they can live and survive away from this planet. The Qur'ān reports a statement made by some of the *jinn* which says: "*We ascended to high heaven and found it filled with mighty guards and flames. We used to sit eavesdropping, but now eavesdroppers find flames lying in wait for them.*" (72: 8–9)

The *jinn* can also influence the understanding of humans, and they are given leave to lead such humans as go astray, but not those who are

God's true servants. In the Qur'ānic account of the exchange between God and *Iblīs*, the latter said: "*I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants.*" (38: 82–83) Other texts also confirm this, but we do not know how the *jinn* whisper to humans and influence them, nor what tools they use in the process. They can hear man and understand his language. This is clearly the case when this group of *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, understood it and were influenced by it. Like humans, the *jinn* can follow Divine guidance or go astray. As reported in *Sūrah 72*, this group of *jinn* said: "*Some of us surrender themselves to God and some are wrongdoers. Those that surrender themselves have attained to consciousness of what is right; whereas the wrongdoers are indeed the fuel of hell.*" (72: 14–15) Moreover, those of them who listened to the Qur'ān went straight to their people and called on them to accept the message of Islam, having themselves accepted it and learnt what their people had not yet learnt.

This is all that we can say with certainty about the *jinn*. We should not add to it anything that lacks supporting evidence. The event to which the present verses of the *sūrah* refer, as does, in all probability, *Sūrah 72*, *The Jinn*, is confirmed by several reports. Here, we will quote the most authentic of these.

"Ibn 'Abbās said: The Prophet neither recited anything to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. The Prophet went with a number of his Companions aiming for the 'Ukāz Market. By that time, the *jinn* were blocked from eavesdropping in the skies and flames were set against them. When they went to their people, they told them of the situation. Some of them said: 'You have been stopped from eavesdropping for something that must have taken place. Travel, therefore, throughout the earth and try to find out what has happened to cause this.' Groups of them travelled in every direction, searching for the cause that blocked them from eavesdropping. The company that went to Tihāmah drew close to the Prophet as he was at the Nakhlah Valley, aiming for 'Ukāz Market. He was leading the dawn prayer, with his Companions in the congregation. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. Then they said to one another: 'This is indeed what blocked you from eavesdropping in the skies.' They then went to their people and said to them: '*We have heard a*

wondrous discourse, guiding towards consciousness of what is right, and so we have come to believe in it.' (72: 1-2) God subsequently revealed this *sūrah* to the Prophet which included what the *jinn* said." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.]

Ibn Mas'ūd was asked whether any of the Prophet's Companions was with him on the night when the *jinn* listened to the Qur'an. He replied: "None of us accompanied him. We were with him one night when we missed him. We looked for him in the nearby valleys and paths. When we did not find him we thought that he might have been carried away or assassinated. Ours was an extremely terrible night then. In the morning we saw him coming towards us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said to him: 'messenger of God! We missed you and searched for you. When we could not find you we had a terrible night.' He said: 'Someone came to me with a call from the *jinn*, and I went with him and read the Qur'an to them.' He then took us to show us their traces and where they had their fires. They asked him for food and he said to them: 'You may have the bones of all animals at the slaughter of which God's name is invoked. When you hold a bone in your hand, it will be to you as though it has all the meat it can carry. Every dropping serves as fodder for your cattle.' The Prophet said to us: 'Do not, then, use these to clean yourself when you go to do stools.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Ishāq narrates the *jinn* story after the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if where he went to visit the Thaqīf tribe, seeking their support to deliver his message. By that time, Abū Ṭālib, his uncle who had provided him with protection against attack had died and the Prophet was now subjected to much harm and hostility. The Thaqīf, however, answered him very rudely and set their young lads and servants against him. In this way, the Prophet was stoned to the extent that both his feet bled. At this point, he prayed to God, making the following passionate appeal:

To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.

Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a

distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?

If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.²

After his account of the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if, Ibn Ishāq adds: "When the Prophet gave up hope of any positive response from the Thaḳīf, he returned to Makkah. When he was at the valley of Nakhlah, he rose up in the middle of the night to pray. It was then that the group of *jinn* God mentioned in the Qur'ān came to him. They were, as I was told, seven in number and came from among the *jinn* of Nuṣaybīn. They listened to his recitation. When he finished his prayer, they went straight to their people to warn them, having believed in Islam and the Qur'ān. God then related what happened to the Prophet in verses 29–32 of *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, and also in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*."

Ibn Kathīr comments on this last report by Ibn Ishāq, saying: "This is correct, but the time at which Ibn Ishāq says it occurred is questionable. The *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān in the early days of its revelation, as indicated by the *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn 'Abbās, while the Prophet went on his journey to Ṭā'if after his uncle's death, which means only one or two years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, as indicated by Ibn Ishāq himself and others. However, God knows best."

There are many other reports concerning this event. From all these, we rely on the first by Ibn 'Abbās, mentioned above, because it is the one that fits most perfectly with the Qur'ānic texts speaking about the event. Moreover, it clearly states that the Prophet learnt of what took place through what was revealed to him and that he neither saw nor

2. The story is given in detail in: Salāhī, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 178–182. – Editor's note.

felt the presence of the *jinn*. Moreover, this *ḥadīth* is the most authentic of all these reports, having the most reliable chain of transmission. As to the point that the Prophet learnt of the event through the Qur'ān, Ibn Ishāq's version agrees with this. It is further supported by what the Qur'ān mentions about the *jinn* being able to see us but not the reverse: "Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them." (7: 27)

A Telling Warning

We sent to you a group of jinn to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.
(Verse 29)

It was, then, a purposeful act of God's that He sent this group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān; in other words, it was not mere coincidence. God wanted the *jinn* to know about His final message, just as they had earlier learnt about Moses' message. According to His design, some of them will then believe and spare themselves punishment in hell, which is the abode of unbelievers whether *jinn* or humans.

The *sūrah* draws before our eyes an image of this group, between three and ten *jinn*, as they listened to the Qur'ān. It paints for us their feelings as it was being recited: an overwhelming awe leading to submission and action. "When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!'" This short sentence gives a clear impression of their attitude as they hearkened to the Qur'ānic recitation. Then, "When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them." (Verse 29) This sentence confirms the effect the Qur'ān had on them. They listened in complete silence, attentions focused throughout the recitation. When it was over, they returned at speed to their own people. They felt that what they had heard must be immediately told and passed on. Their people needed to know so that they could be warned. It is a situation where one is highly influenced by something which motivates him to immediate action that seeks to spread the benefit and to get others to adopt the same serious attitude: "Our people, they said, we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after

Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path." (Verse 30)

The first thing they said to their people was that the revelation they had heard had been bestowed from on high after the book of Moses and that it confirmed the scriptures before it. Thus, they knew about Moses' book and recognized, once they heard the Qur'ān, that it was closely related to the Torah. What they heard of the Qur'ān might not have mentioned Moses or his book, but its very nature suggested that it came from the same source. This acknowledgement by the *jinn*, who are relatively unaffected by factors that operate in human life, has a clear and profound import.

They give expression to their feelings as they listened to the Qur'ān: "*It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) The truth and the guidance provided by the Qur'ān have a profound effect on people. Only a sealed heart and an arrogant, stubborn soul, motivated by selfish interests, will resist it. Hence, it had an immediate and telling effect on the hearts of those *jinn*, prompting them to give this testimony of its truth. They proceeded with their warning to their people, full of enthusiasm and expressing their firm conviction of the truth they had learnt. In other words, this recitation of the Qur'ān placed a duty on them to inform and warn others: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) They considered the revelation of the Qur'ān a call on everyone who learned of it, whether human or *jinn*, to believe. They also considered Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), to be the one who called them to believe in God merely by reciting the Qur'ān. Hence their appeal to their people: "*Respond to God's call and have faith in Him.*" (Verse 31) They also believed in the Day of Judgement and learnt that belief and positive response to the Divine call ensured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from punishment. So they imparted this news to their people.

Ibn Ishāq considers that this concludes what the *jinn* said to their people, but the context suggests that the next two verses were also stated by them. We think that this is more likely, particularly the next verse: "*He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 32) This is a logical complement to the warning given by the *jinn* to their people whom they advised to believe in the new message. It is also likely that they explained that a negative response leads to dire consequences. No one who rejects the Divine call can escape God: He is always able to inflict punishment. The unbeliever will find none to support him against God or protect him from His punishment. He is, therefore, indeed in manifest error.

Likewise, the next verse most probably reports more of what the *jinn* said, as they wondered at those who reject God's call, thinking that they are immune from punishment or that there will be neither reckoning nor requital: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33)

This is a reference to the book of the universe mentioned at the *sūrah's* outset. The Qur'ān often provides such a close connection between a direct statement and a similar one occurring within a story or historical account, ensuring the confirmation of the same fact from two sources. The book of the universe testifies to His great might. It imparts to us the feeling that bringing the dead back to life is easy. This is what is intended here. That this point is made here in the form of a question and a reply makes it more emphatic. This is followed by the general comment that God has power over all things. Thus, bringing the dead back to life is included within His limitless power.

As Resurrection Takes Place

Having referred to bringing the dead back to life, the *sūrah* paints a picture of reckoning and accountability as though we see all this before our eyes:

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (Verse 34)

The scene here begins with a narrative, or an introduction to a narrative: “*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire...*” The audience are waiting for the narrative describing what will happen, but instead of a description, the scene is present before our eyes, with a dialogue taking place: “*Is this not the truth?*” What a question! It falls like a hammer on the heads of those who used to reject the truth, ridicule the message and hasten the punishment they were warned against. Now they are face to face with the truth they used to deny. They arrive at an answer, in fear and humility: “*Yes, by our Lord.*” Now they swear ‘*by our Lord*’, the very Lord whose messenger they rejected and whose Lordship they denied. Now they swear by Him affirming the truth they once denied.

At this point, the matter reaches maximum rebuke. The dialogue is over and the issue is settled: “*He will say: ‘Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.’*” (Verse 34) It is just an answer to a simple question: the crime is seen in full clarity and the criminal admits his guilt. The outcome is settled.

This scene is portrayed very speedily. This is deliberate because the confrontation is decisive. There is no room for argument. They used to deny the truth; now they acknowledge it and are made to suffer the consequences.

Following this scene that decisively spells out the fate of the unbelievers, and the one that touches the hearts of a group from a different world, the *sūrah* makes its final statement. It instructs the Prophet to remain patient with them and not to hasten their punishment. He has seen what awaits them, which is close at hand:

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (Verse 35)

Every word in this verse is charged with meaning; every phrase draws a whole world of images and impressions and refers to great issues and

values. “*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*” (Verse 35) This is a directive given to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who had shown more patience than anyone can tolerate while suffering persecution at the hands of his people. He grew up an orphan in their midst, then lost his guardian as well as every human support, one by one, losing his father, mother, grandfather, uncle as well as the wife who was the symbol of loving care. Thus he was free of all preoccupations, dedicating himself totally to his message. Yet he received at the hands of his unbelieving relatives more trouble than at the hands of others unrelated to him. He had to approach tribe after tribe, as well as individuals, seeking support in delivering his message but only meeting with rejection time after time. Some even set their henchmen against him and he was stoned and injured. His response was nothing more than a passionate appeal to his Lord, as quoted earlier.

Yet after all this, the Prophet is given this directive by his Lord: “*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*” (Verse 35) This shows just how hard and difficult the call to Islam is. A man like Muḥammad, the symbol of dedication, unshakeable belief and purity of heart, still needs this Divine directive to remain patient and not to hasten God’s punishment of the adversaries of his message. The hardships he met along this road required that he be comforted and counselled to remain patient. He also needed a sweet dose of Divine compassion, followed by reassurance: “*On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day.*” (Verse 35) It is all a short duration, an hour of a day. This whole life is so short and trivial that all the effects it has on hearts and souls is no more than the effect of an hour in a day. Then they will meet their inevitable fate and abide endlessly.

This hour of a life serves only to make things clear before the fate is sealed: “*This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*” (Verse 35) Certainly not. God wishes no injustice for anyone. Every advocate of the Divine message must remain patient in adversity. Last as much as it may, the adversity will be no longer than an hour of a day, and then everything is settled.

SŪRAH 47

Muḥammad

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Muḥammad, was revealed in Madīnah. It also goes by another name, *al-Qitāl*, meaning 'Fighting'. This secondary title is very apt because fighting is the *sūrah's* subject matter providing most of its images and giving it its distinctive beat. It begins with an explanation of the true nature of both the unbelievers and the believers which takes the form of a moral attack on the former and a monologue of praise of the latter. The clear implication is that God is the enemy of the unbelievers and the protector of those who have faith. Furthermore, this is a true fact in God's sight. Thus, the opening of the *sūrah* serves as a declaration of war by God against His enemies who are hostile to His faith: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verses 1–3)

Once this declaration of war against the unbelievers is made, an express, resounding order is given to the believers to join this war against

them. This order is followed by an outline of the rules that apply to captives of war once the bloody battle is over: *"Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden."* (Verse 4) Added to this order is an explanation about the purpose of fighting and encouragement to the believers to join with it and do well, and a promise of honour for those who fall as martyrs. A further promise of help is given to those who join the fighting in support of God's cause, with an added rejoinder making clear that the unbelievers will be destroyed and their deeds will come to nothing: *"Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste."* (Verses 4–9)

A strong warning is issued to the unbelievers, coupled with a declaration from God about His protection of the believers. The unbelievers will, thus, lose all; they will remain weak and lack support from any quarter: *"Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them."* (Verses 10–11) A further warning singles out the city which drove the Prophet out: *"How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them."* (Verse 13)

Having opened with such a strong attack on the unbelievers, the *sūrah* adds a varied discourse on faith and unbelief, describing the states of the believers and the unbelievers both in this world and in the life to come. It distinguishes between a believer's enjoyment of

goodly things and the way unbelievers enjoy the pleasures of this world in a way that does not differ from that of cattle: “*God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.*” (Verse 12) It describes what the believers will drink in heaven, variously pure water, milk with unaltered taste, delightful wine and pure, clarified honey. These drinks are so plentiful that they flow like rivers. Moreover, they have plenty of every type of fruit, together with God’s forgiveness and His being pleased with them. A rhetorical question is then added: “*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*” (Verse 15)

This first round in the ever-raging battle between the believers and the unbelievers over, the *sūrah* starts another round with the hypocrites who, together with the Jews in Madīnah, represented a danger to the Muslim community. The problem they posed was no less serious than that of the idolaters who were waging open war on Islam from Makkah and its surrounding areas. The events to which the *sūrah* refers suggest that it talks about the period that followed the Battle of Badr but prior to the Encounter of the Moat.¹ The latter heralded a crushing defeat for the Jews and a serious setback for the hypocrites, as explained in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV.

References to the hypocrites are made in the same confrontational and fighting manner as the rest of the *sūrah*. This is noticeable right from their first mention, which describes how they are absent minded when they sit with the Prophet and its comment that describes them as being far astray, following their desires: “*Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: ‘What is it that he said just now?’ Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*” (Verse 16) They are warned that the Last Hour will inevitably come,

1. The Battle of Badr took place during Ramaḍān, year 2 of the Islamic calendar, while the Encounter of the Moat occurred towards the end of year 5, (623 and 626 CE respectively) – Editor’s note.

and, then, they will not even be able to take heed: "*Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* then describes their panic when they are confronted with an express Qur'ānic order to fight. They have pretended to be believers, and here we see how the *sūrah* makes abundantly clear the difference between them and true believers: "*The believers say: 'Would that a sūrah had been revealed.' Yet when a sūrah of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) While they are urged to obey God and His messenger and to be truthful and firm, the *sūrah* condemns their behaviour and declares war against them. They are expelled from God's mercy: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, it is to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind.*" (Verses 20–23)

The hypocrites' schemes are exposed: they listen to Satan and befriend the Jews and conspire with them against the believers. Therefore, they are warned about torture that would be inflicted on them at the point of death. They are also warned about exposure within the Muslim community to which they pretend to belong when they are not really part of it. On the contrary, they scheme against it: "*Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put*

you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.” (Verses 25–31)

The *sūrah*'s third and final round again takes up the attack against the unbelievers from among the Quraysh and the Jews: “*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*” (Verse 32) It warns the believers against falling into the same traps as their enemies: “*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*” (Verses 33–34) They are encouraged to remain firm during the fight: “*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*” (Verse 35)

The life of this world is shown to be trivial. Believers are urged to spend some of their money to support God's cause. They are not meant to give away all they have; God knows their human nature and that they would find it too difficult to make such a sacrifice should it be asked of them: “*The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.*” (Verses 36–37) The *sūrah* concludes with a note of warning to the Muslims, should they be niggardly, unwilling to spend some of their money for God's cause: “*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*” (Verse 38)

The air of battle colours the *sūrah* from start to finish; it is characteristic of its every section. The ending of its verses sound like heavy bombardments. When such endings are given a softer tone, they seem like swords brandished in the air. The images the *sūrah* draws are as hard as the words expressing them. When referring to actual fighting,

the *sūrah* says: “when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.” (Verse 4) The actual killing and the taking of prisoners is described graphically: “Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.” (Verse 4) The condemnation of the unbelievers is expressed in equally powerful words: “As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.” (Verse 8) The fate of earlier communities is also documented in a highly resounding way, both in words and connotations: “God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.” (Verse 10) As they are made to suffer in hell the unbelievers are shown as being “given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels” (Verse 15) Likewise, the state of panic that overtakes the hypocrites is drawn intensely: “you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.” (Verse 20) Even the gentle warning to the believers against turning away is given in the form of a decisive threat: “If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.” (Verse 38)

Thus we see perfect harmony permeating the *sūrah*: its subject matter, images, connotations and rhythm.



Captives of War

Muhammad

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

Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, (1)

whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muhammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. (2)

This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct. (3)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
أضَلَّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ①

وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَءَامَنُوا
بِمَا نَزَّلَ عَلَيَّ مُحَمَّدٌ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَفَّرَ
عَنهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَأَصْلَحَ بَالَهُمْ ②

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْبَاطِلَ وَأَنَّ
الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْحَقَّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَذَلِكَ
يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ أَمْثَلَهُمْ ③

Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden. Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. (4)

He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, (5)

and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (6)

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; (7)

but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. (8)

This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (9)

فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَضَرْبَ الرِّقَابِ
حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَتَخْتَمُواهُمْ فَقَاشُوا أُلُوْقًا فَمَا
مُنَافِدُ وَإِمَا فِدَاءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ الْحَرْبُ
أُوزَارَهَا ذَٰلِكَ وَلَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ لَآنصَرَ
مِنْهُمْ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَ بَعْضَكُمْ بِبَعْضٍ
وَالَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَلَنْ يُضِلَّ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٤﴾

سَيُجِيبُهُمْ وَيُخْرِجُهُمْ بِإِذْنِهِ
﴿٥﴾

وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ الْجَنَّاتِ الَّتِي كَانُوا يَعْرِفُونَ
﴿٦﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنْ نَصَرُوا اللَّهَ
يَنْصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ ﴿٧﴾

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ
أَعْمَالُهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ
فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (10)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ دَمَّرَ اللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَالْكَافِرِينَ أَمْثَلَهُمْ ﴿١٠﴾

This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them. (11)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَأَنَّ
الْكَافِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَى لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (12)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَسْمَعُونَ
وَمَا كُونُوكُمْ أَتَأْكُلُ الْأَنْعَامُ وَالنَّارُ
مَشْوَى لَهُمْ ﴿١٢﴾

How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them. (13)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ هِيَ أَشَدُّ قُوَّةً مِّن
قَرْيَتِكَ الَّتِي أَخْرَجْنَاكَ أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ
فَلَا نَاصِرَ لَهُمْ ﴿١٣﴾

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (14)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِ كَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُ
سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِ ۖ وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ﴿١٤﴾

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (15)

مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وَعَدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ فِيهَا أَنْهَارٌ
 مِنْ مَّاءٍ غَيْرِ آسِنٍ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ لَبَنٍ لَمْ يَتَغَيَّرَ
 طَعْمُهُ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ خَمْرٍ لَذَّةٍ لِلشَّارِبِينَ
 وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ عَسَلٍ مُصَفًّى وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ
 الثَّمَرَاتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ كَمَنْ هُوَ
 خَالِدٌ فِي النَّارِ وَسُقُوا مَاءً حَمِيمًا فَقَطَّعَ
 أَمْعَاءَهُمْ ﴿١٥﴾

Belief in Muhammad's Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with a straightforward attack against the unbelievers, without any introduction or preparatory remarks. These unbelievers, who debar others from God's path, are faced with the prospect of their deeds going astray and ending up with nothing. This applies to all unbelievers whether they are those who debar others on their own initiative, or they themselves are debarred and then debar others from God's path. At the outset, the *sūrah* gives us a sense of deeds being animated, physically on the move, but their movements are erroneous, far astray, and without any defining goal. The result brings utter loss and destruction. Such animation is employed to provide an image of a battle in which the deeds separate themselves from the people who perform them: the result is that both go further astray from each other, and all ends in ruin.

These deeds that are brought to nothing may refer, in particular, to the ones that the unbelievers hoped would bring them good results; in other words, they appeared to them as good deeds. However, a good deed that is not based on faith loses its value; its goodness is superficial. What is important is the motive that gives rise to the deed, not the form

of the deed. Even if the motive is good, unless it relies on faith it may be only temporary or the result of sudden impulse. Faith, on the other hand, links all man's actions and feelings to a solid base. This gives deeds their meaning and aim, bringing them consistency and ensuring that their effects are in line with the Divine system that links all parts of the universe together. Thus, every action is seen to contribute to the overall progress of the universe, fulfilling a role and serving an end.

On the other side stand *“those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muhammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord.”* (Verse 2) These people are described as having faith, which certainly includes believing in Muhammad's revelations, but this aspect of belief is specifically highlighted in order to give it prominence since *“it is indeed the truth from their Lord.”* Faith that is established in one's heart and conscience must be accompanied by action that is clearly seen in life. Such action is the fruit of faith that indicates its presence. Such people have a special status: *“He will forgive them their bad deeds.”* (Verse 2) This contrasts with what happens to the deeds of the unbelievers: they go astray, even though they may initially seem to be good. Thus, while even good deeds done by unbelievers end up in nothing, the bad deeds of the believers are forgiven. The contrast here is perfect and absolute, emphasizing the value of faith in God's sight and in real life. Yet their reward goes further than this as God will *“bring them to a happy state.”* (Verse 2) This is a great blessing which is second to faith in importance and effect. The verse gives here connotations of perfect comfort, assurance, peace and happiness. When a person is in such a happy state, his thoughts are sound, his heart is reassured, his feelings are at ease, and his soul enjoys a sense of peace and security. What other blessing would anyone want?

Why do things go in these two opposite directions? There is no question of favouritism or coincidence in all this. Instead, it all relies on the fundamental law upon which the universe was established when God created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, making the truth its basic foundation: *“This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord.”* (Verse 3) Falsehood cannot put down deep roots in the universe. Therefore, it ends up in nothing, as does everything founded upon it.

Since the unbelievers follow falsehood, their deeds go astray and are brought to nothing. By contrast, the truth is the foundation on which the structure of the universe is built. Therefore, everything related to it stays on. Since the believers follow the truth from their Lord, He will forgive them their sins and bring them to a happy state. It is all clear, based on solid principles. "*Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verse 3) The believers are clear about these rules, they know the basis around which they should make their choices.

An Order to Fight

The principle stated in the first verse of the *sūrah* is made the basis of the directive to the believers to fight the unbelievers. The believers are the ones who follow the truth that must be established in human life on earth. It, truth, should be given the power to conduct life's affairs. Thus, human life becomes based on the truth and refers everything to it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, follow falsehood. This should be removed with all its effects on human life: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This verse refers specifically to meeting in battle, not any other meeting between believers and unbelievers. Up to the revelation of this *sūrah*, idolaters lived in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were at war with the believers and some bound by peace treaties. *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, had not as then been revealed giving notice that treaties specifying dates of expiry would not be renewed. On the other hand, treaties without a specific term were given a four-month notice of termination. Thereafter, idolaters were to be killed if they were found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The aim of these rules was to make the Peninsula the permanent base of Islam.²

The verse tells the believers specifically to smite the unbelievers' necks, but this only occurs after Islam is explained to them and they reject the call to accept it. The order is given in a way that describes the

2. This rule does not apply to idolaters outside the Arabian Peninsula; they could continue to live in the Muslim state but only in accordance with Islamic rules.

actual killing and the action it requires, so as to fit with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

“Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.” (Verse 4) The Arabic verb *‘athkhanā’*, translated here as ‘subdue’, also connotes strong fighting involving killing of opponents. The situation the verse envisages as a result of fighting is the total collapse of the enemy’s power so as to leave the enemy incapable of putting up any defence, let alone launching a counterattack. At this point only, captives are taken. While the enemy still has substantial force, the fight goes on to remove the danger it presents.

Thus, like most commentators on the Qur’ān, we see no conflict between this verse and the one in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, which remonstrates with the Prophet and the Muslims for taking many captives of war during the Battle of Badr. At the time, continuing the battle to kill more of the unbelievers was a better option. The relevant verses state: *“It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.”*³ (8: 67–68) This means that killing the enemy and breaking its power comes first. When this has been accomplished, captives may be taken. The wisdom in all this is clearly apparent. To remove aggression by forces hostile to Islam must be the first objective of fighting, particularly when the numerical strength of the Muslim community is well below that of the unbelievers. In such circumstances as prevailed at the time of the Battle of Badr, killing an enemy fighter was far more important in the balance of power between the two sides. However, this ruling remains valid in general, and it should be applied in any armed conflict with the aim of making the enemy powerless.

The Ruling on Captives of War

The verse then sets the ruling concerning those who are taken captive in war. This is the only Qur’ānic text stating a ruling on such captives:

3. These verses are explained in Vol. VII, pp. 198–202.

“Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.” (Verse 4) This means that captives of war are to be set free gratis, without any compensation. No specified ransom or exchange of prisoners is required. The Qur'ānic verse does not mention any third option, such as putting idolater captives to death or binding them into slavery. Nevertheless, what happened in practice was that the Prophet and the caliphs succeeding him put some war captives into slavery, and killed specifically named individuals. We will quote what Imām Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law, says about this verse in his book *Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, making some comments as necessary. We will then conclude by stating our view of the relevant rulings:

God says in this verse: *“Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.”* On the surface, the statement makes it clear that killing the unbelievers is the only option until they have been thoroughly subdued. This is consistent with what God says in the other verse: *“It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land.”* (8: 67) Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that this last statement applied to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were a small minority. When their numbers increased and they became more powerful, God established the ruling: *“Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.”* Thus, God allowed the Prophet and the believers all options: to kill their prisoners, enslave them or set them free. However, the transmitter of this *ḥadīth* doubts whether Ibn 'Abbās mentioned enslaving prisoners.

Since the reporter was uncertain that Ibn 'Abbās mentioned slavery in this context, we discard that option altogether. As for killing such prisoners of war, we see no basis for this in the verse under discussion. The verse mentions only freeing them either as an act of grace or against ransom.⁴

4. The author makes several comments on this lengthy quotation. We have included his comments in separate paragraphs so as to distinguish them from the quoted text. – Editor's note.

Al-Suddī is reported to have commented on the ruling, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" saying that it has been abrogated by the subsequent verse in *Sūrah* 9, stating: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) However, we say that the Qur'ānic statements: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks,*" and "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land,*" and "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them,*" are most probably outlining valid rulings, none of which has been abrogated. God commanded His messenger to kill the unbelievers and not to take captives from among them until they had been thoroughly subdued. This was the case when the Muslims were small in number, compared with their enemy. In that situation, only when the unbelievers were subdued after being killed in numbers and were made an example of to those who followed them, was it then permissible to take some of them captive, keeping them alive. This should be a permanent rule, applicable at any time when the Muslims are in a similar situation to that which prevailed in the early days of Islam.

In comment, we say that the order to kill the idolaters wherever they were found applied specifically to the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. The verse in the present *sūrah* is general in its import. When the enemy is thoroughly subdued and its power is smashed, it is permissible to take prisoners. This was the practice followed by the caliphs after the Prophet. Prisoners were killed only in particular cases which we will explain presently.

The statement, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" provides for one of two alternatives: freeing the prisoners either by an act of grace or against ransom, which suggests that killing them was prohibited. However, early scholars differ on this point. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have objected to killing prisoners of war, saying that they should be freed against ransom or indeed without it. 'Aṭā' is also reported to have held this view.

When asked what to do with prisoners, al-Ḥasan answered: 'Do with them what the Prophet did with the prisoners taken in the Battle of Badr: they were freed by an act of grace or against ransom.' Ibn 'Umar was given a prisoner, a man of high position from the city of Iṣṭakhr, so that he could kill him, but he refused to do so citing the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Likewise, Mujāhid and Ibn Sīrīn are reported to have spoken against killing prisoners of war. We have already mentioned al-Suddī's view that this ruling was abrogated by the other Qur'ānic instruction: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) Likewise, Ibn Jurayj is of this view. He cited the case of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayyīd whom the Prophet ordered to be killed after he was taken prisoner during the Battle of Badr.

Scholars from all provinces are unanimous that a prisoner of war may be killed, and we do not know of any taking a different view. Reports are numerous that the Prophet sanctioned such killing. He ordered the execution of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayyīd and al-Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith after the Battle of Badr, and Abū 'Azzah, the poet, after the Battle of Uḥud. He also put the Qurayzah prisoners to death when they accepted Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh's judgement to the effect that their men must be executed and their offspring be enslaved. From among them, he set al-Zubayr ibn Bāṭā free by an act of grace. When he conquered Khaybar, partly by war and partly by peaceful agreement, he stipulated a clear condition on Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but when his treachery was exposed, he ordered his execution. When he later entered Makkah, he ordered the killing of a number of people, stating that they should be killed, 'even if found clinging to the robes of the Ka'bah.' However, he freed the people of Makkah and took nothing of their property.

Abū Bakr is quoted to have said: "I wish I had not ordered al-Fujā'ah to be burnt when he was brought to me. I wish I had ordered his execution normally or set him free." Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī mentions that he executed the chief priest of al-Sūs, after he had given him a guarantee of safety for a number of people

whom the priest named. However, he forgot to include himself, and therefore, the guarantee of safety did not apply to him. So, Abū Mūsā ordered his execution.

All these reports and *ahādīth* confirm, without any doubt, that the Prophet and his Companions approved the execution of prisoners of war or setting them free. This is the consensus of scholars in all regions.

The permissibility of executing prisoners of war cannot, however, just be based on the Qur'ānic statement. It should instead be viewed against the actions of the Prophet and some of his Companions. When we carefully consider all the cases where prisoners were killed, we find that they were all special; in other words, there were additional militating factors other than merely fighting against Muslims and subsequent captivity. The men killed after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, namely, 'Uqbah, al-Naḍr and Abū 'Azzah, respectively, were all hostile opponents who were determined to harm the Prophet. The case of the Qurayzah Jews was also special, given they had agreed, in advance, for judgement to be passed on them by Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh. In all these cases we find special reasons placing them outside the general rule on prisoners of war stated in this verse: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4)

Scholars differed on setting prisoners free against ransom. Those of our school, the Ḥanafī, maintain that a prisoner cannot be set free against financial ransom, and cannot be sold to the enemy so as to join them again in fighting. Abū Ḥanīfah also states that a prisoner of war cannot be set free in exchange for Muslim prisoners. In no way should he ever be returned to join an enemy army. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan differ with Abū Ḥanīfah on this point, allowing the exchange of prisoners of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This last view is subscribed to by major scholars like al-Thawrī and al-Awzā'ī. Al-Awzā'ī adds that it is permissible to sell prisoners of war to the enemy, but the men among them may not be sold except in an exchange of prisoners. On the other hand, al-Muznī quotes al-Shāfi'ī as saying

that a Muslim ruler may set male prisoners of war free by an act of grace or against ransom after their defeat.

Those who approve of exchange of prisoners and setting enemy prisoners free against financial ransom cite in support of their view the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" This apparently permits setting them free against ransom and in exchange for Muslim prisoners. They also cite the fact that the Prophet set Quraysh prisoners from the Battle of Badr free against financial ransom. As for the permissibility of an exchange of prisoners, they cite in support a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn: "The Thaḳīf tribe took two Companions of the Prophet prisoner, and the Muslims took a man from the tribe of 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'ah prisoner. The Prophet passed by this prisoner when he was tied up, and the man called him. The Prophet went to him. He asked: 'Why am I taken prisoner?' The Prophet said: 'Because of your allies' offence.' The man said: 'But I am a Muslim.' The Prophet replied: 'Had you said this when you were free, you would have greatly prospered.' The Prophet moved away, but the man called him again. When the Prophet went to him, he said: 'Feed me, for I am hungry.' The Prophet said: 'This is what you need.' The Prophet then exchanged him for the two men taken captive by the Thaḳīf."

In our view, the evidence in support of those who say that prisoners of war may be set free against ransom is weightier and more valid than that stated in support of the view of al-Jaṣṣāṣ's school. This is true even though they differ concerning the form of ransom and whether it is financial or in exchange with Muslim prisoners of war. Imām al-Jaṣṣāṣ concludes his discussion by endorsing the view of his Ḥanafī school of Islamic law:

As for the mention in this verse of freeing prisoners as an act of grace or against ransom, along with what is reported of the action concerning the prisoners during the Battle of Badr, all this is

abrogated by the Qur'ānic verse that says: "*Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt, let them go their way.*" (9: 5) We have mentioned that this is the view of al-Suddī and Ibn Jurayj. Further confirmation of the abrogation is seen in the verse that says: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (9: 29) Both verses speak of the duty to fight against the unbelievers until they accept Islam or pay tribute, or *jizyah*. To free them against ransom runs contrary to this. All commentators on the Qur'ān and scholars of *ḥadīth* agree that *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed later than *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which means that the rulings it states abrogate the earlier ones including that of freeing them against ransom.

We have already stated that this ruling to kill idolaters unless they adopt Islam is specific to idolaters living in the Arabian Peninsula. Others living outside it can live in the Muslim state and pay a tribute, just like the payment of tribute is accepted from followers of earlier religions. That the tribute is accepted from them when they submit to the rule of the Muslim state does not preclude that some of them may fall prisoner before such submission. What ruling applies to such prisoners, then? We say that a Muslim ruler may free them by an act of grace if he determines that this serves the interests of the Muslim community. He may also free them against financial ransom or in exchange for Muslim prisoners, when their people continue to have a fighting force and remain hostile. When the enemy renounces hostility by agreeing to pay tribute to the Muslim state, a different situation applies with clearly specified rulings. This means that the ruling concerning prisoners of war continues to be valid in cases that are not settled by the payment of tribute.

What We Say

To sum up, this is the only Qur'ānic text providing a ruling on prisoners of war. All other texts relate to situations other than that of taking prisoners. Therefore, this represents the permanent basis for dealing with this question. In those cases where the practice differed, this was the result of specific and temporary situations. Putting some prisoners to death applied only in individual cases, which could be similar to future ones. Those individuals were executed for actions they committed before being taken prisoner. They were not killed merely for fighting the Muslims. A spy, for example, may be taken prisoner and tried. In this case, he is tried for spying, not for being an enemy soldier taken prisoner in open battle. His captivity merely brought him under the authority of the Muslim state.

A word needs to be said about placing prisoners of war in slavery. We have already stated on more than one occasion that this was in response to prevalent universal situations and common practices in war. These situations made it impossible for Islam to implement in all circumstances the general statement "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" when enemy camps used to put any Muslim taken prisoner into slavery. Therefore, this ruling was applied by the Prophet in certain situations: he set free some prisoners in acts of grace, while in other cases he exchanged prisoners and in still other cases, he accepted financial ransom. In some cases prisoners were made slaves in order to deal with situations that could not be otherwise dealt with.

Should all camps agree not to treat prisoners of war as slaves, Islam reverts to its single positive ruling in the matter: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Putting prisoners into slavery is not an Islamic rule; it is a procedure dealing with special circumstances. This is the view that we derive from this clear Qur'ānic statement and from carefully studying different cases, events and situations.

I should perhaps make it clear that I support this view because the Qur'ānic statements and the study of events and cases support it. It does not occur to me that I should defend Islam against the accusation that it puts prisoners into slavery. Such a thought I never entertain. Had Islam adopted this practice, it would have been the right and

better one. No human being with any degree of good manners would ever say that his view is better than God's ruling. I only look at the Qur'anic text, its wording and spirit. It is on this basis that I have formulated my view.

All this, i.e fighting, smiting the necks of unbelievers, binding them firmly and dealing with the captives according to this rule, continues "until war shall lay down its burden." (Verse 4) This means until war is over between Islam and its opponents. It remains the permanent Islamic rule. According to a *hadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd on Anas's authority, the Prophet says: "*Jihād* shall continue until the Day of Judgement." Its purpose is to ensure that God's word remains supreme.

The Purpose of *Jihād*

God does not require believers to fight and go on *jihād* because He needs their help against the unbelievers. Far be it from Him to need help. He is able, should He wish, to destroy those unbelievers utterly. It is all a test for mankind which determines everyone's position:

Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (Verses 4–6)

Those unbelievers who debar people from God's path, and their ilk throughout the earth, at all times, and those despots who exercise power unjustly and appear to command force and authority, behaving in all arrogance, are no more than a handful of creatures living on earth. The earth is nothing but a tiny little planet floating in the midst of countless other planets, stars, celestial systems and galaxies whose sizes and numbers are known only to God. In the universal expanse, worlds and galaxies appear merely as scattered points, and as though they float aimlessly. None other than God controls them all and ensures harmony between them.

Despots, their entourages and followers, indeed all people on earth, are no more than small ants when compared with God's power. No indeed, they are not even like tiny particles blown everywhere by a light breeze. They are just nothing. When God commands believers to smite the necks of unbelievers and to bind them firmly after they have been utterly subdued, He only makes of them a tool of His power. Had He so willed, He would have dealt with them directly, as He did with those whom he destroyed by floods, a stunning blast or wind. He can indeed punish them Himself, without using any of these forces. God, however, wants the best for the believers. Therefore, He tests them and cultivates what is good in them, making it easier for them to do the best of good works.

God wants to test the believers, bringing out the best potential in man. The highest level a human being attains is when the truth he believes in becomes so dear to him that he will fight for it, exposing himself to death, but also being willing to kill his opponents. He simply will not compromise on this truth he believes in, and cannot live or love life unless it be under such truth. God wants to cultivate the believers, so that every desire and aspiration pertaining to this transitory life on earth, dear as it may be normally to man, is progressively weakened. He wants to purge them of their weaknesses and compensate them for their shortcomings until all their desires respond to the call to *jihād* and the earning of His pleasure. God will thus know that those people have successfully passed the test and have been properly cultivated. They do not make their choices on impulse, but on the basis of careful consideration.

God also wants to elevate the believers. When they go through the hardships of *jihād*, exposing themselves to the danger of death at every turn, they learn to care little for this danger. For most people, however, this is so frightening that they shed much of their moral values and dignity to avoid it. Yet it is of little consequence to those who are used to exposing themselves to it, whether they eventually avoid it or not. To turn to God alone at every moment of danger produces an effect which is best compared to an electric shock. It is like remoulding people's hearts and souls in full clarity and purity.

Moreover, such a test provides the means to put the affairs of the whole community on the right basis, placing its leadership in the hands of those who strive so strenuously for God's cause ready to sacrifice themselves for it. Such people care little for worldly riches and luxuries. When they are the ones who have the leadership of human society, the whole world will be set on the right footing. Furthermore, it facilitates the way for people to earn God's pleasure and His reward without having to face the reckoning. By contrast, those in the opposite camp find it easy to do what incurs God's displeasure and exposes them to His punishment. Everyone will have his way made easy for him to follow, according to God's knowledge of the true nature of all.

Thus, God tells us about those who are killed, fighting for His cause: *"And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6) The first thing to note here is the contrast between what happens to the deeds of martyrs and what happens to those of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers, the *sūrah* started with the statement that *"their deeds [are] brought to nothing,"* by God. Here the verse says of martyrs: *"never will He let their deeds go to waste."* Theirs are good deeds, done in accordance with Divine guidance, linked to the solid truth by which they are motivated and in defence of which they are undertaken. They will remain because the truth is permanent and will never be lost.

We then face the great truth of the continuing life of martyrs killed in God's cause. This is a fact already stated in the Qur'ān: *"Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that."* (2: 154) This great truth is presented here in a new light. We see the life of the martyr extending and growing in the way it followed before it left this world, the way of obedience to God and sacrifice for His cause: *"He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state."* (Verse 5) It was for the cause of God that they were slain and so He will continue to guide them after their martyrdom, promising them that they will attain to a happy state, as their souls will be purged of any traces of earthly life's burdens. They will grow in purity so as to be suited to the absolute purity of the ones

on high to which they are raised. This means that theirs is a continuing, uninterrupted life except in an earthly sense. God takes care of their lives, increases them in guidance, purity and shining. Ultimately, He fulfils His promise to them, for He *“will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.”* (Verse 6)

A *ḥadīth* related by Aḥmad quotes the Prophet as saying: “A martyr is given six special privileges: with the first drop of his blood, he is forgiven every sin he has ever committed; he sees his position in heaven; and he is given his maiden companions, security from the greatest fear, torment in the grave and his adornment of true faith.” Another *ḥadīth* related by al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah specifically states that a martyr is made to see his position in heaven. This is how God makes heaven known to martyrs, and such is the end of continuing guidance and the happy state they are brought into after departing life on earth.

Purely for God's Sake

The *sūrah* then urges the believers to dedicate themselves to God and the implementation of His code in human life. It promises them His support in battle as well as defeat and hardship for His and their enemies:

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verses 7–9)

How do believers support God so as to fulfil the condition and receive what He has promised them of His support and steadying their step? What God requires of them is that they should be fully dedicated to Him, associating no partners with Him whatsoever, whether in a subtle or open way. They must love God more than they love themselves or their desires. They must refer to His rulings on everything they desire or wish for, as well as on their public and private actions, their thoughts and feelings. Such is the way to support God within ourselves.

Moreover, we know that God has laid down a complete code for life, based on certain rules and values; in short, a complete concept of life and the universe. In practical life, our supporting God is fulfilled when we make this code the arbiter of everything we do, when we implement His way of life in all aspects.

We need to reflect for a moment on the two phrases: "*those who are slain in God's cause*," and "*If you support God*." In both cases of being slain and giving support, the basic condition is that the action should be dedicated to God and serve His cause. Although this goes without saying, it is often blurred when faith suffers from deviation in one generation or another. In such cases we notice that words like martyrdom and *jihād* are twisted to serve cheap causes. It should be clear that there is no such thing as *jihād*, martyrdom or admission into heaven unless such *jihād* is for God's cause only, death for His sake alone, and the support we give within ourselves and in society is to Him alone. The objective must be that His word should be supreme; that His law and code of living should rule over people's consciences, morality, behaviour, laws and systems. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī reports: "The Prophet was asked about a person who fights to prove his bravery, support his people or to show off: which of these could be fighting in God's cause? He answered: 'Only the one who fights so that God's word remains supreme fights for God's cause.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.] There can be no other banner or goal under or for which people can fight and fall martyrs to be included in God's promise of admission to heaven other than His banner and His cause. This is true no matter what banner is raised and no matter what goals are defined under deviant systems and governments.

Advocates of Divine faith are best advised to understand this truth and keep it in their minds pure of any deviant concept. They must never allow thoughts that are alien to the Islamic faith to creep into their minds. If people strive for any purpose other than making God's word supreme, then their striving is not for Him, and when they are killed they do not earn martyr status. They cannot expect God's help and cannot hope to be in heaven. Advocates of Divine faith must make their vision clear. If they find this hard, the least they can do is to free

their thoughts and feelings from the concepts of their environment which are in conflict with the essence of God's conditional statement: "*Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" (Verse 7)

Such is the condition God requires to be fulfilled by believers. What He gives them in return is His support, ensuring victory and making their steps firm. This is God's promise which never fails. If it is delayed at some point, its delay serves another purpose which is accomplished when God's support, victory and firmness of step are fulfilled.⁵

We need to reflect a little on the way God's promise is stated: "*He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" The Arabic word, *yansurkum*, translated here as 'support you', also means 'gives you victory'. We tend to think first that firmness of step is necessary before victory can be achieved; in fact, it is an important element in gaining victory. This is so true. That it occurs second in this text indicates a different meaning. What is intended here is that believers remain firm when victory has been achieved so that they can shoulder the responsibilities that come with victory. Victory is not the end of the battle between faith and unfaith, the truth and falsehood. Victory imposes certain duties within the minds of the victorious and in life generally. Those who achieve victory must not allow conceit to creep into their minds, nor should they grow complacent. Many people may remain steadfast when the going is tough and the hardships are plenty, but few are those who do not weaken after victory or when life is easy and comfortable. To remain steadfast, upholding the truth after victory, is an even higher grade than gaining victory. Perhaps this is the meaning intended in this verse, but God knows best.

"*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) This is the opposite of granting help and firmness of step. This is an invocation of ill fortune which means that they will inevitably have ill fortune, humiliation and lack of support. Furthermore, their deeds will come to nothing, which means utter loss. The reason for all this is stated: "*This is because they hate what*

5. For further clarification of this point, see Vol. XII, pp. 134–142.

God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verse 9)

This describes what they entertain of hatred to what God has revealed: the Qur'ān containing His law and the code He lays down for human life. This is what prompts them to stubbornly reject the faith and entertain futile argument about it. Many are those with corrupt minds who hate the sound Divine code and find themselves, by nature, in conflict with it. We often meet such people and we sense their deep hatred of Islam and everything related to it. They are scared by the mere mention of it. In fact, such hatred is easily noticed these days.

Because of their hatred of God's revelations, He let their deeds go to waste. Again the Qur'ān uses its preferred method of drawing images. The Arabic word, *ahbāṣa*, translated here as 'cause to go to waste', normally describes cattle with swollen bellies as a result of feeding on poisoned grass. This ends in certain death. In the same way, those people who hate God's revelations find their deeds swollen and apparently growing, only to end in waste and utter loss. It is a vivid image that shows motion, and an end corresponding to that of the ones who hate God's revelations and admire their own works that appear to them great. Yet they are only swollen in the same way as the bellies of cattle grazing on poisonous grass.

Superficial Enjoyment

The unbelievers' attention is forcibly drawn to the fates of earlier ignorant communities:

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (Verse 10)

This is a strong and forceful statement accompanied by loud noises and an image of the earlier communities witnessing the destruction of everything around them. All their possessions are amassed in heaps while they themselves are buried under the debris; it is an image of

total destruction. They are told that such a fate awaits all unbelievers; they will reap nothing but devastation and ruin: "*A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) This fearful prospect contrasts with that of the believers who will receive support and victory: "*This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The constant rule being that when God is his protector, man need not worry about anything. Whatever happens to him should be seen as a test that heralds something good. It is never a sign of being abandoned by God, nor can it be seen as failure by God to fulfil His promise to support His servants. The one who is not so protected by God, however, will have no protection, even if all of mankind and the *jinn* are his patrons and supporters. Ultimately, he will be lost even though all means of protection and all sources of power known to mankind are at his disposal.

Having explained the lots of both believers and unbelievers when conflict and war erupt between them, the *sūrah* outlines their shares of enjoyment, making clear the distinction between the two:

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (Verse 12)

Believers who do good may sometimes be given luxuries and comforts of the best type to enjoy, but the comparison here is drawn between the believers' truly great share in heaven on the one hand and the total lot of the unbelievers on the other. The believers receive their share from God's hand in the heavens through which running waters flow. It is God who admits them there. Hence, it is a great, noble share given to them in reward for their faith and good deeds. By contrast, the share of the unbelievers is merely some enjoyment and the partaking of food '*as cattle eat*'. This is a miserable image unfit for man. It is an image of vulgar enjoyment and an animal-like approach to food, lacking both taste and manners. It is an enjoyment that is subject to no control; man has neither will, choice nor conscience in all this. Furthermore, it is unchecked by any sense of fear of God.

Regardless of their beliefs, people may have very fine culinary tastes and may be very selective in what they enjoy. This is certainly true of most people who grow up in wealthy families. This is not, however, what is referred to here. Rather, what the verse points to is that when man is in control of his will and has his values in place, he will choose only what is good in God's sight. He makes his choice using his will, free of the pressure of desire and cheap enjoyment. With such a will, he does not look at life as if it is a sumptuous feast of food and drink, or as though it is a chance for uncontrolled pleasure, paying little or no attention to what is lawful or unlawful.

The essential difference between man and animals is that man is equipped with free will and has a concept of life based on values stated by God, the Creator of all life. When man loses this, he sheds the most important qualities that distinguish him from other creatures and for which God has granted him special honour.

This series of comparisons between believers and unbelievers is interrupted by a reference to the city that drove the Prophet out, comparing it with other cities and communities that perished even though they were far more powerful: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13) This verse is reported to have been revealed when the Prophet was on his way from Makkah to Madīnah, having been driven out by the unbelievers. It was revealed by way of consolation to him, reminding him that those unbelievers who had opposed his message so determinedly, until he and his followers had to abandon their land and property and migrate for the sake of their faith, are truly powerless. In the end, they are subject to God's power.

The Reward: a Physical Image

The comparison between the two groups continues. This by virtue of an explanation outlining why the believers are admitted into gardens of bliss in the life to come after they have been given support and honour in this present life. It also explains why the unbelievers who lived a life of animal enjoyment in this world, are subjected to punishment in the next life:

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (Verse 14)

There is a fundamental difference between the conditions, codes of life and behaviour of the two groups. The believers are equipped with clear evidence from their Lord. They recognize the truth and are certain of its source. They receive their directives and instructions from God and are sure of what they receive. No deception or error exists in their way of life. The unbelievers, by contrast, are deceived, thinking their deeds to be good when they are essentially bad. They do not make certain of what they receive nor whether it is true or good. They only 'follow their own desires' with no standard of control to refer to and with no light to help them distinguish what is true and what is false. Are these two groups alike? The answer can only be in the negative for they are fundamentally different in their conditions and practices. Hence, they cannot be the same in their rewards and destinies.

Then follows an image of the differences between the two in the ends to which they are heading:

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (Verse 15)

Such physical descriptions of reward and punishment in the hereafter occur in several places in the Qur'ān. They may be accompanied with other mental images or given on their own. Likewise, mental images are often given on their own in the Qur'ān. It is God who has created mankind, and He knows best what affects and influences them and what is conducive to cultivating the better elements in their nature. He also knows what enjoyment or suffering is best in bringing out the best in them. People possess different qualities and characteristics that

are all combined within human nature but differ in their manifestation in each individual. Hence, God has given us detailed accounts of the types of comfort and suffering, pleasure and pain, according to His absolute knowledge of His creatures.

Some people are best motivated to good action and most contented with their reward when they are told that they shall have rivers of pure water, healthy milk, pure, clarified honey and delightful wine, as well as fruits of all kinds, together with forgiveness that ensures their admission to heaven. These people are given what is suitable to cultivate the best in them and ensure that they receive their fitting reward. There are others who worship God because they want to thank Him for the countless blessings He has given them, or because they love Him and try to draw closer to Him through their worship, just as lovers lean towards each other, or because they are too ashamed to be seen in any condition that does not please God. In their worship, they do not look up to heaven and hell, bliss or suffering. These are best motivated when they read God's words: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.*" (19: 96) They feel their greatest bliss when they learn that they will be "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55)

It is reported that the Prophet used to stand up in night worship until his feet swelled. 'Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him why he did so when God had assured him of total forgiveness for all his sins, past and future. He replied: "'Ā'ishah! Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.] Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyah wondered: "Would it be true that without heaven and hell, no one would have worshipped or feared God?" When Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the *Tābi'in* generation, asked her about the nature of her faith in God, she said to him: "I do not worship God for fear of hell or craving for heaven. I would then be no better than a miserable hired servant. I worship Him because I yearn to meet Him."

In between these two types there is a wide range of different natures and mentalities. They all find in what God describes of bliss and suffering, reward and punishment, what ensures the cultivation of what is best in them in this present life and what is fitting as a reward in the life to come. It should be noted that the images of happiness and

suffering grow in sophistication as the listeners become more refined by greater exposure to the Qur'an, and according to the types of situations being addressed. This is true of all generations and communities.

The requital is of two types: the first includes all these rivers together with plentiful and varied fruit as well as God's forgiveness. The other is thus outlined: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*" (Verse 15) Again, this is a physical image of fierce torture that fits the ambience of the *sūrah*. It also fits the crude nature of the unbelievers, for they are the ones who approach their enjoyments and their food like animals. It is a crude atmosphere. Hence, they are requited with boiling water that tears at their bowels and bellies. The two groups are totally different in their nature and code of life. Most certainly their requital will not be the same.



What Fate for Sealed Hearts

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (16)

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing. (17)

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (18)

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (19)

وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا خَرَجُوا
مِنْ عِنْدِكَ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مَاذَا
قَالَ مَا يَفْعَأُ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ طَمَعَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ
قُلُوبِهِمْ وَأَتَّبِعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا زَادَهُمْ هُدًىٰ وَوَسَّعَتْ
لَهُمْ سُبُلُهُمْ ﴿١٧﴾

فَهَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا السَّاعَةَ أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ بَغْتَةً
فَقَدْ جَاءَ أَسْرَاطُهَا فَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمْ إِذَا جَاءَتْهُمْ
ذِكْرُهُمْ ﴿١٨﴾

فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ
لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَاللَّهُ
يَعْلَمُ مَقَالِبَكُمْ وَمَنْ لَكُمْ ﴿١٩﴾

The believers say: 'Would that a *sūrah* had been revealed.' Yet when a *sūrah* of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be (20)

وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَتْ سُورَةٌ
فَإِذَا أَنْزَلَتْ سُورَةٌ مُحْكَمَةٌ وَذُكِرَ فِيهَا
الْقِتَالُ رَأَى الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ
يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ نَظَرَ الْمَغْشِيِّ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ
الْمَوْتِ فَأَوْلَى لَهُمْ ﴿٢٠﴾

obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. (21)

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَعْرُوفٌ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ الْأَمْرُ
فَلَزَّ صِدْقُوا اللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ﴿٢١﴾

If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? (22)

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِنْ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَنْ تُفْسِدُوا
فِي الْأَرْضِ وَتَقَطِّعُوا أَرْحَامَكُمْ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. (23)

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ اللَّهُ فَأَصَمَّهُمْ
وَأَعَمَّى أَبْصَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'an? Or are there locks on their hearts? (24)

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْفُرْقَانَ أَتَمَعَلَى
قُلُوبِ أَقْفَالِهَا ﴿٢٤﴾

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. (25)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْهُدَى وَالَّذِينَ
مَابَيْنَ لَهُمُ الْهُدَى الشَّيْطَانُ سَوَّلَ
لَهُمْ وَأَمَلَى لَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (26)

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ كَرَهُوا مَا
نَزَّلَ اللَّهُ سَنُطِيعُكُمْ فِي بَعْضِ
الْأَمْرِ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِسْرَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? (27)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ
وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٧﴾

That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (28)

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ اتَّبَعُوا مَا أَسْخَطَ
اللَّهُ وَكَرَهُوا رِضْوَانَهُ فَأَحْبَطَ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٢٨﴾

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? (29)

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ أَنْ
لَنْ يُخْرِجَ اللَّهُ أَصْفَهُمْ ﴿٢٩﴾

Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. (30)

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَأَرَيْنَاكُمْ أَصْفَهُمْ فَلَعَرَفْتَهُمْ
بِسِيمَتِهِمْ وَلَعَرَفْتَهُمْ فِي لَحْنِ
الْقَوْلِ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٠﴾

Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (31)

وَنَبِّؤُنَاكُمْ حَتَّى نَعْلَمَ الْمُجْتَهِدِينَ مِنْكُمْ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَنَبِّؤَا أَنْبَارَكُمْ ﴿٣١﴾

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites. In the first instance it depicts their attitude towards the Prophet and the Qur'ān, then their attitude to fighting which God requires Muslims to undertake in the service of His cause. Finally, it reveals their attitude towards the Jews and their conspiring with them against Islam and the Muslim community.

It should be remembered that hypocrisy first started in Madīnah. It did not exist in Makkah, as the situation there made it totally unnecessary. In Makkah, the Muslims suffered persecution and no one needed to appease them. When God facilitated support for Islam with its acceptance by the two tribes of Madīnah, the Aws and the Khazraj, the new faith spread into all clans and families. There were Muslims in every home in Madīnah. Some, however, hated to see the Prophet and Islam gaining power but dared not make their hostility public. Therefore, they pretended to be Muslim when in reality they were full of hatred for Islam. They were also keen for ill fortune to befall the Prophet and his Companions. Their chief was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl.

A Jewish community also lived in Madīnah. The Jews had a military and economic presence as well as organizational strength at the time the Prophet settled in Madīnah. They also hated the Prophet, his faith and his followers. The presence of such Jews offered encouragement to the hypocrites: essentially, the two groups were united in their hatred of Islam and the Muslims. As a result, they conspired and exploited every opportunity to undermine the Muslim community. When the Muslim community experienced difficult circumstances, their opponents made their hostility all the more apparent; and when the Muslims enjoyed good times, they resorted to covert action and wicked conspiracy. Up to the middle of the Prophet's stay in Madīnah, these two groups represented a real danger to Islam and the Muslim community.

Repeated mention of the hypocrites and their schemes occur in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, and in which they come in for clear denunciation. Their contacts with the Jews and cooperation with them

is also referred to in such revelations. In the present passage, we have such references to both the hypocrites and the Jews.

How Divine Guidance Works

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (Verse 16)

The phrase, 'some of them', may refer to the unbelievers who were the subject of discussion in the first passage of the *sūrah*. In this case, the hypocrites are considered as a group of unbelievers, although they conceal their reality. In this sense, the *sūrah* is referring to their true status. On the other hand, the phrase may refer to the Muslims, considering that the hypocrites were integrated with them, pretending to belong to their community. They were indeed treated as Muslims, as Islam requires us to deal with people on the basis of what they profess to be. In either case, however, they are hypocrites as their description in the *sūrah* and their deeds indicate.

The hypocrites' question, after they had listened to the Prophet, shows how they only pretended to pay attention to what he was saying when their minds were inattentive, preoccupied with other things, or rather were sealed altogether. It also suggests an implicit ridicule. Since they address their question to people endowed with knowledge asking about the meaning of what they heard, they imply that what Muḥammad said was incomprehensible. Despite having paid attention to it, they still could not understand its meaning. It further implies ridicule of those knowledgeable people who attended carefully to everything the Prophet said, making an effort to understand it fully and memorize it, as the Prophet's Companions used to do. In this way, using blatant or subtle mockery, these hypocrites asked them to repeat the Prophet's words. In all these possibilities we see wickedness, deep resentment and hatred: "*Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16)

Such is the condition of the hypocrites. Those who follow Divine guidance, however, are totally different:

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.
(Verse 17)

The order of reporting events in this verse calls for reflection. The believers start by accepting guidance, and God rewards them by increasing this guidance so that they do not err. He further gives them an even more profound reward, as He “causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.” This quality makes a person’s heart always apprehensive, feeling that God is watching him, fearing that he might incur God’s displeasure whilst hoping to earn His pleasure, and ashamed that God may see him in a situation of which He disapproves. Such a keen sensitivity is the essence of being God-fearing. It is a great prize which God grants to whomever He chooses of His servants when they accept His guidance and strive to earn His pleasure. Guidance, sensitivity and being God-fearing describe a condition that is the opposite of the hypocrisy described in the previous verse.

The *sūrah* picks up its description of the hypocrites who leave the Prophet’s presence having understood nothing of his teachings, which aim to enhance people’s fear of God, and remind them of what is certain to come of reckoning and requital:

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (Verse 18)

What do these people who sit with the Prophet and later leave, having understood or learnt nothing, wait for? Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them all of a sudden while they are preoccupied with worldly matters? Well, the portents of the Last Hour have already come, as have its signs. The revelation of the last Divine message is the clearest of all these portents. It announces that it is the last warning before the appointed time for the Last Hour. The Prophet

is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message, nothing separates me from the Last Hour more than what separates my two fingers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] If time appears to have extended long since the Prophet's time, we should remember that God's days are different from our days. According to God's reckoning, its first signs have already come. No reasonable person should allow it to come upon him all of a sudden, when he can no longer attend to a duty: "*Once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" This serves as a strong reminder to those who are oblivious.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet and the well-guided people who follow him telling them to follow a different course based on true knowledge, remembrance of God and seeking His forgiveness and feeling that He watches over them and knows everything about them. They will then be on their guard as they await the Last Hour:

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (Verse 19)

This directive points first of all to the need to always remember the first truth which the Prophet and those who follow him uphold: "*Know, then, that there is no deity other than God.*" Once this truth is firmly established in man's conscience, other directives are given: "*And pray to Him to forgive you your sins.*" This is said to the Prophet whom God has already forgiven his past and future sins, because it is the duty of every believer who is aware that his efforts fall short of fulfilling his duty, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, every believer feels that his prayer for forgiveness serves as an aspect of glorifying God and thanking Him for His forgiveness. Moreover, it is a lesson to the Prophet's Companions and followers who know his high position with his Lord, yet see that he is instructed to remember God and to pray to Him for forgiveness for himself and all believers, men and women. They know that God always answers the Prophet's prayers. They then feel that God has bestowed on them a great blessing by sending them this noble Prophet and instructing

him to pray to Him to forgive them. Thus, they are sure that He will forgive them their sins.

The final point in this directive is that “*God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.*” (Verse 19) Thus a believer feels both reassurance and fear at the same time. He is reassured that he is under God’s care wherever he is, and he is in fear because God knows every feeling and thought he may have, and is aware of his every secret. This is all part of education that keeps a believer always on the lookout, keen to remain always on the right track.

The Hypocrites and *Jihād*

The *sūrah* describes the attitude of the hypocrites to fighting for God’s cause and their utter cowardice when it is made obligatory upon Muslims. It exposes their true feelings about the whole idea of fighting, and explains what awaits them if they persist with hypocrisy. It warns them that they have to purge their hearts of hypocrisy, be true in their response to God and join the Muslim ranks with sincerity of purpose:

The believers say: ‘Would that a sūrah had been revealed.’ Yet when a sūrah of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur’ān? Or are there locks on their hearts? (Verses 20–24)

The believers express their wishes for a new *sūrah* to be revealed because they love the Qur’ān and find in every part of it something that appeals to them and warms their hearts. Alternatively, this expression may be indicative of their desire to have certain aspects of *jihād* and fighting outlined to them. Therefore they say: “*Would that a sūrah had been revealed.*” (Verse 20)

We are then told that a *sūrah* with clear import that admits no divergence of opinion has been bestowed from on high. "*Fighting is mentioned in it,*" which means that this *sūrah* gives an order to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, or outlines a ruling concerning those who disobey such an order. This is seen as a calamity by the hypocrites: they lose control of their feelings and their pretence is exposed. They appear weak, cowardly and spineless. Their pathetic condition is described in full colours: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) This is a unique way of describing extreme fear, one that shows them shaking with fear, too weak to stand up. This inimitable image applies to everyone deprived of faith, true courage and a sense of shame when they face the possibility of death in war. This is the true nature of the hypocrites who are sick at heart.

When all false appearances are shed and the reality of cowardice is exposed, the hand of faith is stretched out to offer them what strengthens their resolve and gives them power if they would only take it with sincerity: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God.*" (Verses 20–21) Undoubtedly, this is better for them than a scandal that exposes them as trembling, spineless cowards. It is better for them to be obedient to God's order, reassured that it is for their benefit and the benefit of their community, and to say a good, appropriate word expressing sincerity and purity of heart. When matters are resolved and fighting is decided upon, it is even better for them to be true to what they claim of commitment to His cause, manifesting this commitment with unwavering resolve and determined action. He will then give them added power and clear support that removes hardship, lightens the danger and ensures that they enjoy one of two noble prospects: either victory and safety on the one hand or martyrdom and admittance to heaven on the other. Such is the gift of faith that replaces fear with reassurance and weakness with courage and resolve.

The *sūrah* then addresses them directly, threatening them with dire consequences should their cowardice persist to the point where they abandon Islam altogether and revert to outright unbelief: "*If you turn*

away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship?" (Verse 22) The interrogative form, 'is it to be expected of you', suggests that this is likely and gives a warning that this will lead them back into the ignorance that prevailed in their community before it was reformed by Islam. This is a state that makes people spread corruption and sever their ties of kinship.

Having made this direct address, the *sūrah* then speaks about them, rather than to them, showing what happens should matters reach the point they have been warned against: "*It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'an? Or are there locks on their hearts?"* (Verses 23–24) 'It is such as these' who persist with hypocrisy until they finally discard all pretence of belief in Islam who are the ones whom God rejects. He leaves them deprived of guidance, 'deaf and blind.' They have not lost their hearing or their eyesight, but they have put these faculties to no use. Alternatively, they have deliberately stopped themselves from understanding what they hear and see. Thus, their faculties no longer function.

A rhetorical question is then asked: "*Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'an?"* (Verse 24) When people try to understand the Qur'an, they see things in full clarity. They see the light. Their hearts and feelings enjoy new vigour and their souls are full of life. "*Or are there locks on their hearts?"* (Verse 24) When hearts are thus locked they are deprived of the light the Qur'an spreads; they are in complete darkness.

Evil Conspiracy

The *sūrah* then shows the reason that made the hypocrites turn away from faith after having come close to it. We learn that this was because they conspired with the Jews of Madīnah and promised them help and support:

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because

they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes.
(Verses 25–26)

The first of these two verses gives a physical image of the hypocrites abandoning Divine guidance after they came to know it. It is an image which shows them turning their backs and going away. It tells of what lies behind all this: it is Satan whispering to them and delivering all manner of temptations. Thus we see their movement for what it is in reality and appearance. The *sūrah* then tells us why Satan has such power over them, making them turn their backs on the truth after they knew it: "*That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters'.*" (Verse 26)

The Jews of Madīnah were the first to hate what God revealed. They expected that God's final message would be given to them, with the last messenger chosen from among their own kind. They used to tell the pagan Arabs about this expected message and that its time was close to hand, saying that the new prophet would lead them and ensure that they would have power and that they would regain their kingdom. God, however, chose His last messenger from a different branch of Abraham's seed. This made them hate his message all the more. When the Prophet migrated to Madīnah, they hated his arrival there because they felt it threatened their own position. Therefore, they were hostile towards him from his very first day in Madīnah. When they realized that they were no match for the Muslims in open warfare, they resorted to wicked scheming and conspiracies. They were joined in this by all those bearing a grudge against Islam and every hypocrite. This war between them and the Prophet continued, going to and fro, until the Prophet removed them from Madīnah and then ensured that the Arabian Peninsula would remain totally for Islam.

Those hypocrites who turned their backs on Divine guidance said to the Jews: "*We will obey you in some matters.*" Most probably this refers to their wicked schemes and conspiracies against Islam and the Prophet. "*But God knows all their secret schemes.*" (Verse 26) This is a comment that implies a stern warning. What harm can their schemes produce when they are all known to God and exposed to His might?

This is followed by an open threat, one that puts them in the hands of God's own troops as they approach the ends of their lives: "*How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs?*" (Verse 27) Here, we have another image of the utter humiliation suffered by the hypocrites. They are at the point when they depart from this life. Weak and powerless, they are about to start their second life, but this commences with their faces and backs being smitten. This happens to them at the point of death, when they are in utter distress. They are indeed completely forsaken: "*That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They brought themselves to this end. It is they who have been hypocrites, disobeying God and conspiring with His enemies and the enemies of His messenger. It is they who hated what pleases God and adopted what incurs His displeasure. "*Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They used to admire their own deeds, thinking themselves clever as they schemed against the believers. Now they see how these deeds swell and grow only to be lost and to come to nothing.

The Threat of Exposure

At the end of this passage, they are warned that God may decide to expose them to the Prophet and the Muslims. They will then be known to all for what they really are: hypocrites living among Muslims, pretending to belong to them but conspiring against them:

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (Verses 29–31)

The hypocrites thought that they were adept in hiding their reality, making the Muslims think they were like them, true believers. The

sūrah shows how naïve their thinking is and threatens them with an exposure that makes all their grudges known to the Muslims. God says to His messenger: “*Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks.*” (Verse 30) This means that if God so wishes, He could point them out to the Prophet by name and position so he can recognize them from their features. This verse was revealed before God actually made some of them known to him by name. Nevertheless, the way they speak and their twisting of words and meanings, and the manner in which they address you tells you of their hypocrisy: “*but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech.*” (Verse 30) A comment is then added emphasizing God’s knowledge of every deed and its motives: “*God knows all that you people do.*” (Verse 30) Nothing escapes His perfect knowledge.

Then follows God’s promise to test the Muslim community as a whole so as to distinguish those who strive for His cause and remain steadfast through all difficulties. These people will then be known to all, with everything about them made clear. No confusion will persist, and the whole issue of hypocrisy and the hypocrites will be sorted out: “*Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.*” (Verse 31)

God is fully aware of everyone’s true nature, as well as of their thoughts and inner feelings. He knows all this just as He knows what happens and what will happen. What need is there, then, for such a test? Who needs to know what the test will prove?

In His infinite wisdom, God deals with human beings on the basis of their nature, ability and potential. They do not know what He knows of inner facts. These must come into the open before they can know and understand them, and then make use of them. Testing people with what is good or bad, affluence and poverty, comfort and hardship certainly proves everyone’s metal. Through such tests people may even come to know certain things about themselves of which they were otherwise unaware. As for God’s knowledge of what the test reveals of people’s nature, this refers only to His knowledge of their reality as it is exposed to people and they too are able to see it. It is when people

see this in a form they can comprehend that they are influenced by it. It shapes their feelings and charts the direction in which their lives move according to the means available to them. In this way God's purpose of testing people produces its results.

Nevertheless, believers always hope that they will not be put to God's tests and also hope that they will be spared such difficulties. Yet, should they be tested with hardship, they remain patient in adversity, aware that there is a good purpose behind this test. They submit to God's will, assured of His wisdom, and looking forward to His grace that follows the test. One devoted person, named al-Fuḍayl, was said to be in tears whenever he read this verse. He would appeal to God, saying: "My Lord, do not test us, because if You do, the truth about us will be known and the curtains we put up will be drawn apart. We will then be in trouble."



An Invitation to Sacrifice

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (32)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَنْ سَبِيلِ
اللَّهِ وَشَاقُّوا الرَّسُولَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ لَنْ يَضُرُّوا اللَّهَ شَيْئًا
وَسَيُحِطُّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. (33)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا
الرَّسُولَ وَلَا تَبْطُلُوا أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God. (34)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَنْ سَبِيلِ
اللَّهِ ثُمَّ مَاتُوا وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ
لَهُمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (35)

فَلَا تَهِنُوا وَتَدْعُوا إِلَى السَّلَامِ وَأَنْتُمْ الْأَعْلَوْنَ
وَاللَّهُ مَعَكُمْ وَلَنْ يَبْرِكُمْ أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٥﴾

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (36)

If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (37)

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (38)

إِنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لُحْيٌ وَلَهُمْ
وَلِإِنْ تَوَمَّنُوا وَتَتَّقُوا يُؤْتِكُمْ أَجْرَكُمْ
وَلَا يَسْأَلُكُمْ أَمْوَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٦﴾

إِنْ يَسْأَلْكُمْ هَا فَيَحْضِكُمْ
تَبَخَّلُوا وَنَخِرُوا أَضْعَفْنَاكُمْ ﴿٣٧﴾

هَذَا أَنْتُمْ هَؤُلَاءِ تُدْعَوْنَ لِتُنْفِقُوا فِي
سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يَبْخُلُ وَمَنْ
يَبْخُلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَحْضِلْ عَن نَّفْسِهِ وَاللَّهُ
الْفَرِيقُ وَأَنْتُمْ الْفُقَرَاءُ وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا
يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوا
أَمْثَلَكُمْ ﴿٣٨﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* speaks first about the unbelievers who debar others from God's way and are hostile to the Prophet despite being aware of the truth of his message. Most probably this refers to the idolaters the *sūrah* spoke about earlier. They are the ones who fit the description of bearing arrogant hostility towards the Islamic message. However, this new discourse may refer to all those who adopt such a hostile attitude including the Jews and the hypocrites in Madīnah. In this light, the present verses may be seen as a warning to them, should they adopt such an attitude, in public or private. The first possibility is perhaps more likely.

This part then devotes its final verses to an address to the believers, inviting them to carry on with their *jihād*, being ready to sacrifice their lives and their property, never slackening or giving in to calls for a truce in the fight against unbelieving aggressors. They must not be influenced by any consideration of their apparent weakness, or immediate interest. Nor can they be niggardly when they are asked for financial sacrifice. After all, God who knows man's natural instinct to hold tight to what he owns wants them to contribute only what they can easily afford. Should they fail to prove themselves worthy of advocating His message, God will deprive them of this honour and put in their place some other people who will shoulder the responsibility and fulfil the task. This is a strong warning that fits the general ambience of the *sūrah*. It also suggests that it was needed to deal with certain cases within the Muslim community, among true Muslims, not hypocrites. There could have been those who found it hard to make financial contributions side by side with those who gave great examples of courage, dedication and preparedness to sacrifice their all for the cause of Islam. Both types existed, and the Qur'an aimed to motivate the lower group to rise and try to join the other in its sublime standards.

They Cannot Harm God

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (Verse 32)

This verse states a true promise by God in relation to those who disbelieve and oppose the truth, trying to prevent it from being delivered to people, using their power, money and other means for the purpose. Such people are hostile to the Prophet, waging war against him and physically opposing him during his lifetime or suppressing his faith and code of life and persecuting the advocates of his message after his death. Yet such people have seen the light of guidance and recognized the truth embodied in the Islamic message, but they

stubbornly choose to remain blind to it and feel that their immediate interests are served by such an attitude.

God's true promise is that such people "*can in no way harm God.*" They are far too small and weak to be mentioned in the context of adversely affecting God. This is certainly not what is intended here. What the verse means is that they cannot harm God's faith, the code He laid down for human life, or those who advocate His message. Powerful as such people may become, they cannot affect or disturb the laws of nature He has set in operation. They may be able to harm some of the Muslims for a period of time, but this is merely a test that takes place for a purpose God wants to be fulfilled. It constitutes no real harm to God's laws or to His servants who advocate His faith and system. Moreover, the ultimate result of all the efforts of such hostile unbelievers is clearly set in advance: "*He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32)

At the same time, the believers are warned against doing anything that could lead them to a similar fate. They are urged to remain obedient to God and His messenger: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 33) This directive suggests that within the Muslim community there were some who might not have been fully obedient, or who might have found it hard to fulfil some of the duties and sacrifices that combating the different powerful groups opposing Islam required. Some might have been tied by bonds of kinship or common interests with others on the opposing side and found it hard to sever such ties.

This directive had a profound effect on true believers. They were shaken by the implied threat that they might do something that would do away with their good deeds and bring them to nothing. Several reports speak of the way this verse was received. One of them mentions that "the Prophet's Companions used to think that when a person truly believed in God's oneness, then no sin he committed would harm him, in the same way as no good deed is of any use when done by a person who associates partners with God. However, when this verse was revealed, they feared that sins might ruin their good deeds: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*"

‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar is quoted as saying: “We, the Prophet’s Companions, used to think that every good deed would inevitably be accepted by God until this verse was revealed. We wondered what thing could render our deeds worthless. We thought that it must be cardinal and grave sins. However, God revealed this verse: “*For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.*” (4: 116) We stopped speaking about this issue. We only feared for those who committed cardinal sins and hoped for good reward for those who avoided them.”

Such reports clearly show how true Muslims used to receive Qur’ānic verses. They were profoundly affected by them, fearing every warning, careful lest it applied to them and keen to do what the Qur’ān required of them. With such sensitivity, they achieved superb standards.

The next verse explains what fate awaits those who are hostile to the Prophet. These are they who are determined not to obey him and who continue in their rejection of the truth until death overtakes them: “*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*” (Verse 34) The chance to ensure forgiveness of sins is available only in this present life. The gates of repentance, which ensure forgiveness, are open for both unbelievers and sinners up to the moment of death. When the spirit is at the point of departing the body, then the chance to repent and earn forgiveness is lost and can never be regained.

Verses like this one address both believers and unbelievers. It warns the latter to take the right action before it is too late, to repent and turn back to God before the chance is lost and doors are closed. It tells the former to take care so as to avoid all causes that bring them nearer to such ill-fated ways. This is clearly understood from the fact that what the believers are cautioned against in the next verse are seen as reasons leading to the same fare of the unbelievers mentioned in the preceding verse:

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (Verse 35)

Such are the things believers are cautioned against. They are presented with the fate of the unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, so that they take care not to do anything that brings them nearer to such an outcome. This warning suggests that there might have been some individuals among the Muslims who felt the burden and strain of *jihād* to be too heavy. They might have weakened and advocated making some sort of a peace deal in order to avoid fighting. Some of them might have looked to their relatives in the ranks of the unbelievers, or had some financial interests with them. All such reasons may make a person prefer peaceful arrangements. Human beings are always the same and Islam deals with such weaknesses and natural tendencies in its own way, which has proven to be remarkably successful. This, however, does not preclude that there remained, particularly in that early period in Madīnah, some traces of such tendencies and weaknesses.

The present verse aims to deal with such elements. Let us look carefully at how the Qur'an progresses with its method of educating people and raising them to its standards: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35) You are the ones who are superior in faith and concept of life, because of your close link with the One who is the Most High. You have higher standards in your way of life, goals, objectives, feelings, morality, manners and behaviour. Therefore, you must not lose heart or sue for peace because you have the upper hand in strength, position and support. The Supreme Power grants you support: "*God is with you.*" You are not alone. God Almighty, with all His power, defends you and gives you help. How insignificant do your enemies appear when God is the One who helps you? Moreover, every effort you exert, everything you spend and every sacrifice you make is credited to you. Nothing is lost: "*He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" The reward for every iota of good work you do will certainly be yours. Why would anyone assured by God to have the upper hand, to be supported by Him and to have every effort rewarded lose heart? Why would he weaken when God tells him that he is honoured, victorious and rewarded?

The life of this world is of little importance. Believers may have to make some sacrifices during their lives on earth, but they will have

their reward in full in the life to come. Moreover, they are not asked to pay heavily in order to ensure such rewards:

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (Verse 36)

When life has no noble goal to achieve, and when people go through it heedless of the Divine code, it is no more than play and amusement. It is the code laid down by God that makes this life a prelude to a better and longer lasting life, makes of this life a period of action that yields its results in the life to come. Success in the life to come is, therefore, conditional upon good works in this present life. This is the message emphasized in the second sentence in the verse: “*If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward.*” (Verse 36) Belief in God during this life and action based on fearing Him are the qualities that gives this present life an air of seriousness elevating it from being a time of play, amusement and material enjoyment to a standard fulfilling the assignment God has given man and for which He has provided proper and complete guidance. When man attends to his assignment in this way, he is a God-fearing believer. What he spends of worldly possessions to serve this cause will not be lost to him. In fact, it produces a far greater reward in the everlasting second life.

Even then, God does not require people to sacrifice all their property. He knows that by nature, man is tight-fisted with what he owns. He does not require him to do what is too hard for him. In fact, He does not charge anyone with more than what that person can reasonably attend to. He is too kind to ask people to sacrifice all they possess. If He were to ask them this, they would be troubled and their ill feelings would become apparent.

He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (Verses 36–37)

We see here how kind God is to man and how, in His infinite wisdom, He only requires people to do what they can, taking human

nature, with all its facets, into consideration. Islam is a Divine faith which aims to establish a human system on a Divine basis. It is God who lays down its foundation and fundamental principles, but it is human abilities and needs that should be considered in determining its responsibilities. It is God who created man and He knows best what He has created. He is the One who knows all.

Niggardly Man

The final step in this approach deals with the believers' prevailing conditions when they are called upon to make financial sacrifices for God's cause. Their niggardly attitude is dealt with in the same way that the Qur'ān dealt with the reluctance to make personal sacrifices when people are called upon to fight for His cause:

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (Verse 38)

This verse provides an accurate description of the Muslim community at the time and how people in all communities react when they are called upon to make sacrifices. It says that some people will be niggardly. This means that others are not niggardly at all; they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have. This was certainly true as is authentically reported by several of the Prophet's Companions. In fact, the Qur'ān describes several such instances in different *sūrah*s. In this respect, Islam produced miraculous examples of people coming forward, with apparent joy, and making really exemplary sacrifices. However, this does not mean that there were not individuals who found it hard to make sacrifices. Indeed, some people may find it easier to put their lives at risk than to make financial sacrifices.

The present verse deals with this natural tendency: "*Whoever is niggardly is niggardly towards himself.*" Whatever contribution people

make is credited to them, and they need it on the Day when they are resurrected. Then, they will have nothing of whatever they owned in this life. All that is left for them is what is credited to their account. Therefore, when they are niggardly, they keep their balance low, depriving themselves of the great reward that financial sacrifice for God's cause surely earns. Thus, they are niggardly towards themselves.

This is absolutely true. God does not require them to make financial contributions for any reason other than the fact that He wants what is best for them. He benefits nothing by anything they spend on His cause. He is not in need of anything: "*God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need.*" (Verse 38) It is He who gave you your money and possessions. He is also the One who saves for you whatever contributions you make. He does not need what He has given you in this life or the reward credited to you in the life to come. You are the ones who are in need of Him in both situations. You have nothing unless He grants it to you. Indeed, you will need all the reward He grants you in the hereafter. You cannot pay back to Him anything of what He has bestowed on you in this life, let alone have anything left in the hereafter. It is all given to you out of His grace. How can you be so niggardly?

The last word is decisive. That God has chosen you to be the advocates of His message is an honour and a great favour He bestows on you. You have to prove yourselves worthy of this honour. Unless you so prove yourselves by fulfilling the trust assigned to you, appreciating its value by discarding anything that is contrary to it, God will take back what He has favoured you with, granting this honour to some other people: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Anyone who has experienced the great favour of faith, feeling the honour it represents and appreciating the great position he has in the universe as a result of being entrusted with this Divine mission recognizes this last statement in the *sūrah* as a very serious warning. As he walks on earth, such a person feels God's power and experiences His light filling his soul. He bears the emblem of faith. Should such a believer be deprived of true faith, be expelled from Divine care, and find God's door slammed in his face, he will not bear to live. Indeed, life would

become like hell for anyone who has experienced contact with his Lord and then been cut off.

Faith is a great favour and honour, unequalled by anything in the universe. Life becomes so cheap and money so trivial when faith is put on the scales against anything else. Therefore, the warning this last statement in the *sūrah* embodies is the most serious one a believer can receive from God Almighty.

