

SŪRAH 28

Al-Qaṣaṣ

(The Story)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, at a time when the Muslims were a small minority without power, while the idolaters were in full control of power, wealth, position and authority. In this context, the *sūrah* establishes the true standard of values and power: it clearly states that there is only one true power in the universe, God's, and only one true value, faith. Whoever enjoys God's support need have no fear, even though he may be bereft of material power, and whomever God opposes can enjoy neither peace nor security even though he may be in possession of all types of material power. A person who enshrines the value of faith enjoys every good thing, whilst the one who lacks it will not reap any benefit whatsoever.

The corpus of the *sūrah* deals with aspects pertaining to Moses and Pharaoh, and concludes with details about Qārūn [or Korah] and his treatment of Moses' people. The first of these two stories tackles power and authority, showing Pharaoh, a ruthless tyrant, alert to any source of danger. Then, there is Moses, a suckling baby with neither power nor shelter. Pharaoh had exalted himself, ruling over and dividing people into sections and classes, persecuting the Children of Israel, slaying their men and sparing their women, watching carefully lest they should do anything that might constitute a usurpation of his control. Yet all his might and precautions were of little avail against a little child who was cared for by the only real power that protects from all evil. Indeed this power challenges Pharaoh openly, throwing the child into his own lap, placing him in Pharaoh's own palace so as to be doted upon by his own wife, while he stands by, unable to do anything against Moses. On the contrary, he does with his own hands what brings about his downfall.

The second story demonstrates the value of wealth, as also the value of knowledge. Wealth occupied everyone's attention as they watched Qārūn strutting about in his various adornments. He possessed such enormous treasures that just to carry the keys of these treasures required a whole group of strong men, who would find the task very tiring. What is more, Qārūn also had knowledge which he thought to have brought him all this wealth. Yet those endowed with true knowledge among his people were not bewitched by such wealth. They looked to God's reward, knowing that this is infinitely better and more lasting. Then God's power intervened sinking him and his household into the earth, showing beholders that neither wealth nor knowledge were of any avail to Qārūn. The intervention here is direct just as it is with Pharaoh when he and his troops were drowned in the sea.

Both Pharaoh and Qārūn exalted themselves, tyrannizing the Children of Israel: one with the brute force of authority, the other with financial might. The end was the same in both instances: one was swallowed by the earth, the other was drowned in the sea. In neither case do we see any opposing force capable of resisting God's direct power that intervened to put an end to tyranny and injustice. The two stories clearly show that when evil and corruption are manifest, while those who are good and righteous appear powerless, God Almighty intervenes directly and openly to put an end to it all.⁹

In between the two stories, the *sūrah* takes the idolaters on a couple of rounds opening their eyes to the significance of these narrations and directs their attention to some of God's signs that are present in the universe, as also the fate of past communities or scenes from the Day of Judgement. All these endorse the moral of the stories and confirm God's unalterable law.

The unbelievers used to say to the Prophet: "*If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.*" (Verse 57) In this way, they justified their rejection of the Prophet's message on the basis that people would tear them away from their land if they changed their old beliefs. In other words, they wanted to

⁹ In commenting on *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Ḥā, I said: "We also learn from this account that when the Children of Israel accepted the humiliation Pharaoh imposed on them, by virtue of his persecution campaign, killing their men and sparing their women, God did not interfere on their side. They simply accepted their subjugation, fearing Pharaoh and his power. But when faith was paramount in the hearts of those who believed in Moses and his message, and when they were ready to withstand the torture with their heads held high, declaring their rejection of Pharaoh and their belief in God, then God intervened and conducted the battle. Thus, victory was achieved on the battlefield as it was earlier achieved within their hearts and souls." (Vol. XI, p. 343.)

However, what I have just said in this *sūrah* is more accurate and accords with the import of this *sūrah*.. Yet what I said in that comment is acceptable with some change in phraseology. Here, the *sūrah* demonstrates how God's power intervened right from the outset, but the ultimate victory was only achieved when faith was clearly uppermost in the hearts of those who believed, and when they openly declared the word of truth in the face of ruthless tyranny.

ensure that people still held them in awe and reverence as they were the custodians of the Sacred Mosque. God relates here the stories of Moses and Pharaoh showing which people enjoy security and which experience overwhelming fear. It tells them that it is only under God's protection that people can truly feel secure even though their situation may appear otherwise. Fear, however, lacks such protection even though it may seem that security is fully present. Qārūn's story is related to confirm this basic truth in a different way.

The unbelievers' stance is answered as follows: *"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) This is a reminder that it is God who has provided them with security, appointing the Sacred House in their own vicinity. It is He who has extended security to them and it is He who can easily deprive them of it. This is followed by a warning against arrogance and ungratefulness: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

The *sūrah* then makes it clear to them that they have already been warned when a messenger of God has been sent to them. God's law has always been that people are destroyed if they persist in their erring ways once they have been so warned: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59)

This is followed by a scene from the Day of Judgement when they stand alone, having been publicly disowned by those beings whom they alleged to be God's partners. Thus they are made to realize what punishment they will incur on the Day of Judgement, after they have also been punished in this life. It tells them again where security lies and what brings fear.

The *sūrah* concludes with God's promise to His Messenger as he is driven out of Makkah by the idolaters. This promise makes it clear that God, who has assigned to him this Qur'ānic message and defined the duties involved in his assignment, will surely facilitate his return to his home town, giving him support against idolatry and idolaters. God had favoured him with the message to which he had never aspired. He will certainly give him support and return him to the city from which he was driven out. The stories related in this *sūrah* endorse this promise. Moses returned to the very land from which he fled in fear for his life. When he returned it was but for a relatively short time. He once again left, only this time with the Children of Israel. In this way, the Israelites were saved whilst Pharaoh met his humiliating fate.

The final note in the *sūrah* also seals God's promise: *"Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return."* (Verse 88)

Such is, in a nutshell, the *sūrah*'s theme and import. This is outlined in four phases: Moses' story, the comments that follow it, Qārūn's story and this final promise.

1

Security at the Height of Danger

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Tā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe. (3)

Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. (4)

But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], (5)

طسّم

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

نَتْلُو عَلَيْكَ مِنْ نَبَأِ مُوسَىٰ وَفِرْعَوْنَ
بِالْحَقِّ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾

إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ
أَهْلَهَا شِيْعًا يَسْتَضِعُّ طَائِفَةً مِنْهُمْ
يُدَبِّحُ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيِ نِسَاءَهُمْ إِنَّهُ
كَانَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُّوا
فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ
الْوَارِثِينَ ﴿٥﴾

and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions. (6)

We revealed to the mother of Moses: "Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve. We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers." (7)

Pharaoh's household picked him up; and so [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief. Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed. (8)

Pharaoh's wife said: A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' They had no inkling [of what was to happen]. (9)

By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses' mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith. (10)

She said to his sister: 'Follow him.' So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. (11)

وَنُمَكِّنْ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنُرِيَ فِرْعَوْنَ
وَهَمَمَنَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا
تَحذَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَرْضِعِيهِ ۖ فَإِذَا
خِفْتَ عَلَيْهِ فَاَلْقِيهِ فِي الْيَمِّ وَلَا تَخَافِي
وَلَا تَحْزَنِي ۗ إِنَّا رَادُّوهُ إِلَيْكَ وَجَاعِلُوهُ
مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٧﴾

فَالْتَقَطَهُ آلُ فِرْعَوْنَ لِيَكُونَ لَهُمْ
عَدُوًّا وَحَزَنًا ۗ إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَمَمَنَ
وَجُنُودَهُمَا كَانُوا خَاطِئِينَ ﴿٨﴾

وَقَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ فِرْعَوْنَ قُرْتُ عَيْنٍ لِي
وَلَكَ ۗ لَا تَقْتُلُوهُ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَنْفَعَنَا أَوْ
نَتَّخِذَهُ وَلَدًا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

وَأَصْبَحَ فُؤَادُ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ فَارِغًا ۗ إِن
كَادَتْ لَتُبْدِي بِهِ لَوْلَا أَنْ رَبَّنَا
عَلَىٰ قَلْبِهَا لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

وَقَالَتْ لِأُخْتِهِ قُصِّيهِ ۖ فَبَصُرَتْ بِهِ عَنْ
جُنُبٍ وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: 'Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?' (12)

Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this. (13)

When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (14)

One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: "This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray." (15)

He then prayed: 'My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself, so forgive me.' So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (16)

He said: "My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I

وَحَرَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ الْمَرَاضِعَ مِنْ قَبْلُ
فَقَالَتْ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ أَهْلِ بَيْتٍ
يَكْفُلُونَهُ لَكُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُ نَصِیحُونَ

﴿١٢﴾

فَرَدَدْنَاهُ إِلَىٰ أُمِّهِ كَىٰ تَقَرَّ عَيْنُهَا وَلَا
تَحْزَنَ وَلِتَعْلَمَ أَنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ
وَلٰكِنَّا أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

﴿١٣﴾

وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ وَاسْتَوَىٰ ءَاتَيْنَاهُ حُكْمًا
وَعِلْمًا وَكَذٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ

﴿١٤﴾

وَدَخَلَ الْمَدِينَةَ عَلَىٰ حِينٍ غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ
أَهْلِهَا فَوَجَدَ فِيهَا رَجُلَيْنِ يَقْتَتِلَانِ هٰذَا
مِن شِيعَتِهِ وَهٰذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ
فَاسْتَعْثَمَهُ الَّذِي مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ عَلَى الَّذِي
مِن عَدُوِّهِ فَوَكَرَهُ مُوسَىٰ فَقَضَىٰ عَلَيْهِ
قَالَ هٰذَا مِنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطٰنِ إِنَّهُ عَدُوٌّ
مُّضِلٌّ مُّبِينٌ

﴿١٥﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي فَاغْفِرْ لِي
فَغَفَرَ لَهُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

﴿١٦﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَا أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ فَلَن أَكُونَ
ظَهِيرًا لِلْمُجْرِمِينَ

﴿١٧﴾

give help to wrongdoers.’ (17)

Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: “Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.’ (18)

But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: “Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.’ (19)

Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: “Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice.’ (20)

So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: “My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk.’ (21)

And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: “I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path.’ (22)

When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds and flocks], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: ‘What is the matter with you two?’ They said:

فَأَصْبَحَ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ خَائِفًا يَتَرَقَّبُ فَإِذَا
الَّذِي أَسْتَنْصَرَهُ بِالْأَمْسِ يَسْتَصْرِحُهُ
قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَى إِنَّكَ لَغَوِيٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

فَلَمَّا أَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يَبْطِشَ بِالَّذِي هُوَ عَدُوٌّ
لَهُمَا قَالَ يَمْوسَى أَتُرِيدُ أَنْ تَقْتُلَنِي كَمَا
قَتَلْتَ نَفْسًا بِالْأَمْسِ إِنْ تُرِيدُ إِلَّا أَنْ
تَكُونَ جَبَّارًا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا تُرِيدُ أَنْ
تَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُصْلِحِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَجَاءَ رَجُلٌ مِّنْ أَقْصَا الْمَدِينَةِ يَسْعَى
قَالَ يَمْوسَى إِنَّ الْمَلَأَ يَأْتَمِرُونَ بِكَ
لِيَقْتُلُوكَ فَاخْرُجْ إِنِّي لَكَ مِنَ
النَّاصِحِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

فَخَرَجَ مِنْهَا خَائِفًا يَتَرَقَّبُ قَالَ رَبِّ نَجِّنِي
مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

وَلَمَّا تَوَجَّهَ تَلْقَاءَ مَدْيَنَ قَالَ عَسَى
رَبِّي أَنْ يَهْدِيَنِي سَوَاءَ السَّبِيلِ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَاءَ مَدْيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ أُمَّةً
مِّنَ النَّاسِ يَسْقُونَ وَوَجَدَ مِنْ
دُونِهِمُ امْرَأَتَيْنِ تَذُودَانِ قَالَ مَا
خَطْبُكُمَا قَالَتَا لَا نَسْقِي حَتَّى يُصْدِرَ
الرِّعَاءُ وَأَبُونَا شَيْخٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

“We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man.’ (23)

So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: ‘My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me.’ (24)

One of the two women then came back to him, walking shyly, and said: “My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us.’ And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: ‘Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk.’ (25)

Said one of the two women: “My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust.’ (26)

[The father] said: “I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.’ (27)

Answered [Moses]: “This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say.’ (28)

When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: ‘Wait

فَسَقَى لَهُمَا ثُمَّ تَوَلَّى إِلَى الظِّلِّ فَقَالَ رَبِّ
إِنِّي لِمَا أَنْزَلْتَ إِلَيَّ مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَقِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَجَاءَتْهُ إِحْدَاهُمَا تَمْشِي عَلَى اسْتِحْيَاءٍ
قَالَتْ إِنَّ أَبِي يَدْعُوكَ لِيَجْزِيَكَ أَجْرَ
مَا سَقَيْتَ لَنَا فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ وَقَصَّ عَلَيْهِ
الْقَصَصَ قَالَ لَا تَخَفْ نَجَوْتَ مِنَ
الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

قَالَتْ إِحْدَاهُمَا يَأْبَتِ اسْتَجْرَهُ إِنَّ
خَيْرَ مَنْ اسْتَجَرْتَ الْقَوِيُّ الْأَمِينُ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ أُنكِحَكَ إِحْدَى ابْنَتَيَّ
هَاتَيْنِ عَلَى أَنْ تَأْجُرَنِي ثَمَنِي حَجَجٍ
فَإِنْ أَتَمَمْتَ عَشْرًا فَمِنْ عِنْدِكَ وَمَا
أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَشُقَّ عَلَيْكَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِنْ شَاءَ
اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

قَالَ ذَلِكَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ أَيَّمَا الْأَجَلَيْنِ
قَضَيْتُ فَلَا عُدْوَانَ عَلَيَّ وَاللَّهُ عَلَيَّ مَا
نُقُولُ وَكَئِيلٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

﴿٢٨﴾ فَلَمَّا قَضَى مُوسَى الْأَجَلَ وَسَارَ
بِأَهْلِهِ آنَسَ مِنْ جَانِبِ الطُّورِ نَارًا
قَالَ لِأَهْلِهِ امْكُثُوا إِنِّي آنَسْتُ نَارًا لَعَلِّي
آتِيكُمْ مِنْهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوْ جَذْوَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.’ (29)

But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: ‘Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds.’ (30)

“Throw down your staff!” But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: “Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. (31)

“Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people.’ (32)

He said: ‘My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. (33)

And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he will confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.’ (34)

Said He: “We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both

فَلَمَّا أَتَتْهَا نُودِيَ مِنَ شَاطِئِ الْأَوَادِ
الْأَيْمَنِ فِي الْبُقْعَةِ الْمُبْرَكَةِ مِنَ
الشَّجَرَةِ أَنْ يَمْوِسَىٰ إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ رَبُّ
الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

وَأَنْ أَلْقِ عَصَاكَ ۗ فَلَمَّا رَآهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا
جَانٌّ وَلَّىٰ مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ ۗ يَمْوِسَىٰ
أَقْبَلَ وَلَا تَخَفْ ۗ إِنَّكَ مِنَ الْآمِنِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

أَسْأَلُكَ يَدَكَ فِي جَيْبِكَ تَخْرُجَ بَيْضَاءَ مِنْ
غَيْرِ سُوءٍ وَأَضْمُمُ إِلَيْكَ جَنَاحَكَ مِنْ
الرَّهْبِ ۗ فَذَانِكَ بُرْهَنَانِ مِنْ رَبِّكَ إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَئِهِ ۗ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا
فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي قَتَلْتُ مِنْهُمْ نَفْسًا فَأَخَافُ
أَنْ يُقْتُلُونِ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَأَخِي هَارُونُ هُوَ أَفْصَحُ مِنِّي لِسَانًا
فَأَرْسَلْهُ مَعِيَ رِدْءًا يُصَدِّقُنِي ۗ إِنِّي أَخَافُ
أَنْ يُكَذِّبُونِ ﴿٣٣﴾

قَالَ سَنَشُدُّ عَضُدَكَ بِأَخِيكَ وَنَجْعَلُ
لَكَمَّا سُلْطَنًا فَلَا يَصِلُونَ إِلَيْكُمَا ۗ
بِعَايَتِنَا أَنْتُمْ وَمَنْ اتَّبَعَكُمْ أَلْغَبُونَ

of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.’ (35)

When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: ‘This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old.’ (36)

Moses replied: ‘My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.’ (37)

‘Nobles!’ said Pharaoh. ‘I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.’ (38)

Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. (39)

And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (40)

٣٥

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا بَيَّنَّتْ قَالُوا
مَا هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّفْتَرَىٰ وَمَا سَمِعْنَا
بِهَذَا فِي ءَابَائِنَا الْأُولَىٰ ۗ

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِمَن جَاءَ
بِالْهُدَىٰ مِن عِنْدِهِ ۚ وَمَن تَكُونُ لَهُ
عَقِبَةُ الدَّارِ إِنَّهُ لَا يُفْلِحُ الظَّالِمُونَ

٣٦

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَتَأْتِيهَا الْمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمْتُ
لَكُمْ مِّنْ إِلَهِ غَيْرِي فَأَوْقَدْ لِي
يَنْهَمُنُّ عَلَى الطِّينِ فَأَجْعَلْ لِي صَرْحًا
لَّعَلِّي أَطَّلِعُ إِلَىٰ إِلَهِ مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّهُ
مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ

وَأَسْتَكْبَرُ هُوَ وَجُنُودُهُ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ
الْحَقِّ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا يُرْجَعُونَ

٣٩

فَأَخَذْنَاهُ وَجُنُودَهُ فَنَبَذْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ
فَأَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
الظَّالِمِينَ

And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. (41)

We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned. (42)

And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect. (43)

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ
وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

وَأَتَّبَعْنَاهُمْ فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا لَعْنَةً وَيَوْمَ
الْقِيَامَةِ هُمْ مِنَ الْمَقْبُوحِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا
أَهْلَكْنَا الْقُرُونَ الْأُولَى بَصَائِرَ لِلنَّاسِ
وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Setting the Scene

“Tā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear.” (Verses 1-2) The *sūrah* begins with these three separate letters to make clear that it is from letters like these that the Qur’ān is composed. Its verses are of a greatly superior quality and of much finer import than what is normally composed by people: “These are verses of the Book that makes things clear.” (Verse 2) Thus, this book is not the work of ordinary people; for no one can produce its like. It is revelation that God relates to His servants, reflecting His incomparable ability, and the truth that is at the heart of everything God makes, large or small: “We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe.” (Verse 3) It is then to the believers that this book is addressed. It is meant to remould and cultivate them, pointing out their way for them and showing them the code to implement. The stories related in this *sūrah* are meant for those believers, because they are the ones who will benefit from them.

This direct relation from God imparts an air of the special care taken of believers, making them feel worthy and important. How could they fail to realize this, when it is God Almighty that relates His book to His Messenger for their own sake. Being believers, they have the necessary qualities to receive such sublime care: “for people who will believe.” (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* then relates the story of Moses and Pharaoh, right from its very first moment, when Moses was born. Although Moses’ story is related in many other

sūrahs, it is never recounted from the very beginning anywhere else. It is this very beginning, describing the difficult circumstances in which Moses was born, powerless among a people who had long been persecuted and humiliated by Pharaoh, that serves as the main theme of the *sūrah*. It shows the hand of the divine will working openly, without any apparent human medium, striking directly at the root of tyranny and injustice. It thus gives support and empowerment to the oppressed. This is a concept that the small and weak Muslim minority in Makkah needed to fully understand. It was equally important that the powerful majority be made well aware of it too.

In the majority of cases, Moses' story, frequently related in other *sūrahs*, begins with him receiving his message, giving an account of how strong faith stands up to tyrannical power, and eventually leading to the triumph of faith and the defeat of tyranny. But this is not the message this *sūrah* intends to give. Its message is that when evil is at its zenith, it carries the cause of its own destruction, and when aggression is let loose, it does not need people to fight and repel it. God will intervene to support the powerless who are made to suffer at its hands. He will then save the good elements among them, educating them and making them leaders of mankind and the inheritors of the earth.

Such is the purpose of relating this story in this *sūrah*. Hence, it begins with the episode that highlights this aspect. Every story related in the Qur'ān is told in the way that best serves the purpose of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. It is a means to educate people and to emphasize concepts, values and meanings. Hence, it is made to fit smoothly with the context in which it occurs.

The episodes of Moses' story that are told here are those of his birth in exceptionally difficult circumstances and how God took care of him; his youth and the wisdom and knowledge God imparted to him. It also covers the events that occurred; how he killed an Egyptian, fled from Egypt after learning about a plot to kill him, his marriage in the land of Madyan and the time he spent there. It then moves on to his being called by God and given his message; the confrontation with Pharaoh and his people and how they rejected both Moses and Aaron, and finally a quick reference to Pharaoh's ultimate end.

The first two episodes, which are mentioned only in this *sūrah*, are treated at length because they bring to the fore the open challenge to aggressive tyranny. We clearly see how Pharaoh is totally unable to evade God's will despite all his precautions and manoeuvres: *"But it was Our will... to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their [i.e. the oppressed] hands the very things against which they were taking precautions."* (Verse 6)

Following the Qur'ānic method, the story is actually shown in a series of scenes

with some gaps in between that are left to our imagination. In fact the reader does not miss anything of the events and images that are left out between scenes. On the contrary, we actually enjoy the active participation of our imagination. The first episode is recounted in five scenes, while the second takes up nine scenes, followed by four scenes in the third episode. In between each two episodes there is a wide or narrow gap, as is between scenes, allowing the curtains to drop and be lifted again. Before relating the events of the story, however, the *sūrah* sets the scene against which it all unfolds, thus telling us the story's overall purpose:

Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions. (Verses 4-6)

Thus the stage is set, and the hand that controls events is shown, together with the goal to be achieved. Declaring to whom this hand belongs right at the outset is intentional and fits the drift of the story from beginning to end.

We do not know for certain the identity of the Pharaoh in whose reign these events took place. Defining specific historical periods is not important in Qur'ānic stories, as these do not contribute anything to their morals. It is sufficient that we know that it all took place long after the Prophet Joseph's time. It was Joseph who brought his father, Jacob or Israel, and his brothers to Egypt where they lived for several generations and, thus, becoming a large community.

When the Pharaoh of this story took power, he attributed to himself too much personal power and divided the people of Egypt into castes.

The Children of Israel were the most oppressed group during his reign, because they followed a religion different from the one he and his own people followed. They believed in the faith preached by their first grandfather, Abraham, and his grandson, Jacob. Despite all the distortions that had crept into their faith, they still retained their basic belief in the One God and denied Pharaoh's claims to be a deity. Indeed, they rejected Pharaohnic polytheism altogether.

The tyrant felt that the presence of this community represented a threat to his throne, not least because they could side with hostile neighbours. He could not, however, expel them because of their large numbers, amounting to hundreds of thousands. He, therefore, hit on a devilish plan to forestall the danger he anticipated from such a community that did not recognize him as their deity. His plan involved

putting them to do the hardest and most dangerous of jobs, thereby ensuring their suffering. On top of all this, he slew their male children at birth, but spared their female offspring. This ensured that their women would be much larger in number than their men, and so weaken them. Historical reports also suggest that he appointed birth attendants to inform him of what children were born to the Israelites, in this way enabling the slaying of all the males, showing no compassion for their tender age. It was in such circumstances that Moses was born: *“Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption.”* (Verse 4)

God, however, wanted and willed something totally different from what this tyrant wanted. Despotic rulers are often deceived by their own power and the means available to them. They forget God, His power and His planning, thinking that they choose what they wish both for themselves and for their enemies. They believe that nothing can stop them from fulfilling their own agenda.

God declares here what He wishes and challenges Pharaoh, Hāmān¹⁰ and their hosts, telling them that whatever precautions they might take will be of no avail: *“But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions.”* (Verses 5-6) Thus God wants to grant the oppressed some of His gifts, which He does not specify, and to change their situation making them leaders after they have been subjected to other people’s leadership. He also wanted to give them the Holy Land once they had attained a degree of faith and righteousness which made them worthy of it. God’s intent, then was to give the Children of Israel power and security, and at the same time foil Pharaoh’s plans.

Thus the *sūrah* paints a clear picture of both the existing situation and the future one. It does this prior to its recounting of events so as to place Pharaoh’s boasting power, which to human sensibilities appears enormous, face to face with God’s infinite power, against which nothing can stand.

The stage is thus set and the audience’s interest so focused that they are now eager to know how this objective can be achieved. This adds life to the story; it is as though it is being acted out now, rather than centuries ago. Such is the general Qur’ānic method of storytelling.

Saving Moses

¹⁰ Hāmān was Pharaoh's assistant. From the Qur’ānic references to him we can assume that he occupied a position which is equivalent to that of a Prime Minister. — Editor's note.

The story begins and we are told how God's hand works directly, and not through anyone else. Moses was born under the sort of difficult circumstances the *sūrah* has described: a newborn baby in great danger. We almost see the knife being taken out to cut his throat. His mother is so worried, fearing that the news of his birth might reach the despotic authorities. She is well aware that if it did she would not be able to protect or hide him. How could she prevent him from crying and so betraying his presence? She knew herself to be helpless and powerless.

At this point God's hand intervenes, making direct contact with the worried mother, and inspiring her with what to do: *"We revealed to the mother of Moses: 'Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve.'"* (Verse 7) What sort of inspiration is this? A caring mother suckling her child is told to cast him into the river should she fear for his life. She is told, however, not to fear or grieve for him: *"have no fear and do not grieve."* He will be under the care of the One who provides all security and dispels all fear. He will be looked after by the hand which makes the fire a cool and relaxing place, and makes the sea a place of shelter and repose. No Pharaoh dare come near anyone this hand protects.

"We shall restore him to you." (Verse 7) You need not fear for his life or worry about his being taken away from you. *"And shall make him one of Our messengers."* (Verse 7) This is a promise for the future, and God's promise is certain to come true.

This is the first scene showing a worried mother as she received a clear, reassuring revelation that promises a bright future. The revelation removes all fear and worry from her heart, giving her peace and reassurance. The *sūrah* does not mention how she reacted or how she carried out the instructions. Instead, the curtains fall only to rise again bringing us the next scene.

"Pharaoh's household picked him up." (Verse 8) Is this the security promised her? Does it augur the fulfilment of the happy news she has been given? How, when she feared for her son none other than Pharaoh and his household? It is they that now have him. Nothing could have worried her more than her child falling into their hands. Here, we see the challenge thrown down openly, in full view of all. It is a challenge to Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. They were chasing down every newborn male in Moses' community because of fear for their own positions. Their spies were everywhere, so that no newly born boy could escape their watchful eyes. Now God's hand effortlessly puts into their very own midst such a child. It is indeed the child who will bring about their downfall. He is now in their hands and he is helpless, unable to fend for himself. Indeed, he cannot cry for help, should he be in danger.

The purpose behind delivering the child to Pharaoh is also clearly stated: *“So [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief”* (Verse 8) He will certainly be an open foe, challenging them, and bringing grief and sorrow. *“Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed.”* (Verse 8)

Yet how will all this come about when the child is so helpless? The *sūrah* tells us straightaway: *“Pharaoh’s wife said. - A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son. ‘They had no inkling [of what was to happen].’”* (Verse 9) God’s hand not only delivers the child into Pharaoh’s fortified palace by way of an open challenge, it also takes him right into his wife’s heart, thus providing him with loving protection. It thus gives him a thin, transparent cover of love overflowing from a woman’s heart. Thus, he needs neither weapons, authority nor money for his protection. Such love defies Pharaoh, his despotism and his fear for his kingdom. Pharaoh is too small and humble in God’s measure: the child needs no more than this thin covering of love to enjoy complete protection from him.

“A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you.” (Verse 9) This is how she describes the child brought to them, the one who will become their enemy and bring them all, except for the woman herself, much grief. *“Do not kill him,”* yet it is he who will bring about Pharaoh’s end. *“He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son,”* when it will be through him that their fate will be sealed. *“They had no inkling [of what was to happen].”* (Verse 9) What irony! Thus ends the second scene and the curtains fall here temporarily.

What about his mother though, who must have been justifiably apprehensive? *“By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses’ mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith.”* (Verse 10) She did as she was told and threw her child into the river. Where is he now though? Where has the river carried him? She might well have asked herself how she could have done such a thing. How could she even hope that he would find security in the midst of such danger?

The *sūrah* portrays a telling picture of a poor mother’s anxious heart. It is *“a void’*, one whereby she is unable to think or act. *“She would indeed have disclosed his identity,”* betraying her own secret. We can imagine her being driven in a moment of despair to give the whole thing away: *“Had We not strengthened her heart,”* giving her added strength to deal with this very difficult situation. *“So that she could continue to have faith.”* (Verse 10) She needed to have faith in God’s promise, to be patient in the adversity she was faced with and to continue to follow His guidance.

She nevertheless exerted her own efforts so as to know what had happened to the child: *“She said to his sister: ‘Follow him.’”* (Verse 11) She asked her daughter to follow

the child in his box floating along the river, so as to know whether he survived or not. The girl did as instructed, seeking to establish what happened to her baby brother. She went into different quarters and markets, and she soon saw him from a distance, carried by some of Pharaoh's servants who were looking for someone to suckle him. At this point things regain an air of calm:

So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: "Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?" (Verses 11-12)

Here we see the working of God's will completing its scheme to thwart Pharaoh. It brings the child to them, they pick him up, and furthermore they are made to love him from the very first moment. Thus, they look for a suckling mother for him, but God made him refuse all breasts to increase their confusion and helplessness. Every time a new breast was offered to him he refused it. Thus they feared for the child's life. They continued in this situation until his sister saw him at a distance and recognized him. She soon realized how eager they were to find someone who could take care of him. She carefully approached them: *"Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?"* (Verse 12) They were delighted with what she said, hoping that it could be true and that the child would be saved.

This fourth scene is over, and the next one starts immediately, showing the child back with his mother, thriving, well protected by Pharaoh and cared for by his wife. While fear was everywhere around him, he enjoyed complete security: *"Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this."* (Verse 13)

In Full Vigour

The *sūrah* does not tell us anything about the many years that separate its first two episodes: namely Moses' birth and rescue and the second showing him as a mature adult in his prime. We do not know what happened after he was restored to his mother for suckling, how he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, what sort of relation he had with his real mother after he was weaned, what position he had in the palace or outside it when he grew up. Nor are we told anything about Moses' faith during these years, when God took care of him, preparing him, in the midst of Pharaoh's worshippers and priest, for the mission which would, in time, be assigned to him.

The *sūrah* is silent on all these points. As it starts its narration of the second episode, we see a fully mature Moses, a man endowed with wisdom and knowledge, and one granted the reward of righteous people: *“When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good.”* (Verse 14)

This verse identifies a man of full physical growth and mental maturity, a stage of life normally attained when a person is around 30 years of age. Did Moses stay in Pharaoh’s palace as his adopted son until he reached such an age? Did he move elsewhere given how uncomfortable he must have felt with the prevailing state of affairs? How could Moses, with his pure and untainted nature, feel otherwise? His mother must have informed him of his true identity, the community to which he belonged, and its faith. He certainly witnessed the injustice and persecution meted out to his people, as also the extensive corruption prevalent in Egyptian society.

We have no evidence pointing to any of this, but the development of events imparts a feeling of how things moved. The granting of wisdom and knowledge to Moses is followed by this comment: *“Thus do We reward those who do good.”* This suggests that he did well, and God rewarded him with superior knowledge and wisdom:

One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: ‘This is of Satan’s doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray.’ He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me. ‘So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. He said: My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers.’ (Verses 15-17)

We are told that he *‘entered the city’*, which we understand as the Egyptian capital. Where had he come from so as to enter the city? Was he in the palace at Ein Shams? Or had he deserted the palace and the capital but came in this time when the people were unaware of his presence? He might have come around noon when people were resting? Anyway, however he arrived, he nonetheless witnessed something not to his liking: *“He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies.”* (Verse 15)

One of the two was an Egyptian, said to belong to Pharaoh’s staff, with some reports suggesting that he was his cook. The other was an Israelite. The two were

fighting as Moses came into the city, and the Israelite appealed to him for help against their Egyptian enemy. How could this happen? How could an Israelite appeal to Moses, Pharaoh's adopted son against another from Pharaoh's court? This would not have happened if Moses was still residing in the palace, or if he was one of Pharaoh's courtiers. It could only have happened if the Israelite was certain that Moses no longer had any contact with the palace, and that he was in reality an Israelite opposed to Pharaoh and sympathetic to his own people's cause. This last possibility is more in line with Moses' character. For it is unlikely that he would have tolerated life in the corrupt environment of the palace.

"Whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him." (Verse 15) The Arabic word *wakaza*, used for "struck", indicates a punch delivered with the full weight of one's arm. We understand that Moses punched the man only once, and that this caused his death. We thus have an idea of Moses' physical strength, his anger and the strength of his opposition to Pharaoh and those of his court.

However, it appears from the drift of the narrative that Moses did not intend to kill the Egyptian. Indeed, when he saw him lifeless, he regretted what he had done, attributing it to Satan's temptation. His action was the result of anger, and anger is a devil or part of what Satan manipulates: *"He said: This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray."* (Verse 15)

He goes on to show genuine regret for what his anger caused, acknowledging that by so doing, he had wronged himself, had burdened himself with such results. He appealed to God for forgiveness. *"He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me."* (Verse 16) God responded to his prayer, knowing that his repentance was genuine: *"So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."*

It appears that his refined sense indicated to him that God had responded to his appeal and forgiven him. A believer's heart, which has reached such a superior level of sensitivity, feels that his prayer has been answered once it is made. As he felt such acceptance, Moses trembled and made a firm pledge, considering this as part of his gratitude for God's favours: *"He said: My Lord.' For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers."* (Verse 17) This is an absolute pledge and commitment to neither side with nor help wrongdoing people. It is a disavowal of wrongdoing in all shapes and forms, even though the person might feel strongly motivated to give such help by the need to rebel against injustice.

Thus Moses shows both his appreciation of God's favours and his profound sorrow at the injustice he had committed. In all this, we see Moses as a passionate, spontaneous person, capable of reacting strongly to events and situations. Indeed, we will see such aspects of his character in several instances, not least in the very next scene:

Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: 'Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.' But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: 'Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.' (Verses 18-19)

Only a day had passed since the first fight ended with the death of an Egyptian, followed by God's acceptance of Moses' repentance and Moses subsequent pledge never to support wrongdoing. Inevitably, he feared his offence be discovered. We see him on his guard, expecting a reaction at any moment. This again reflects his spontaneous character. We are given the impression that as he walked *in the city*, which is normally a place of security, he experienced real fear.

That Moses should feel such fear suggests that at this stage he did not have any association with Pharaoh's palace. Under tyranny, it is a trifling matter when anyone close to the palace kills a person. Indeed, such a person would not have entertained any fear, let alone expect any harm to befall him. Yet as he walked vigilantly, Moses looked up and there *"he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help."* (Verse 18) The same man is again appealing to Moses for more support, and probably wanting him to do with this one what he did to the other the day before.

The Secret is Exposed

The image of the man falling dead only the day before was still vivid in Moses' mind, as was his regret, repentance, and pledge to God. His fear that he may come to harm as a result was also genuinely felt, which explains Moses' outburst accusing the Israelite of being quarrelsome: *"Moses said to him: 'Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.'* (Verse 18) The man appeared to be involved in endless quarrels which inevitably enhanced angry feelings against the Children of Israel at a time when they could not protect themselves or mount a full- scale revolution. Nothing good could come from such animosity.

Yet Moses was nonetheless full of anger against the Egyptian and moved to strike him as he had the other. This again gives us a glimpse of his passionate and spontaneous personality, of how strongly he was affected by the injustice suffered by the Israelites and how keen he was to do whatever he could to repel aggression.

But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You

want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.' (Verse 19)

When injustice is widespread and values are undermined, good people will be greatly distressed to see wrongdoing practically shaping society's laws and traditions, and corrupting people's nature so as to make them accept injustice without a thought of taking action to repel it. Indeed people's nature may suffer such degeneration that they may reproach the victim for resisting injustice. They may even describe as "tyrant in the land" a person who tries to prevent injustice being done to him or to others, as this second Egyptian called Moses. The fact is that the situation where tyranny smites at will, with no one to resist it, has become so familiar that people tend to accept it as the norm that reflects good manners, propriety and sound social structure. Should anyone rise to destroy such foul structure, their outcry would be loud, calling such rebel a killer or a tyrant. He would be the recipient of much of their blame, while the wrongdoer will get away with little criticism, if at all. The victim will be denied any justification, even though people realize that he could not tolerate injustice any longer.

Moses was so upset at the injustices suffered for so long by the Israelites that we see him first taking spontaneous action and then regretting it, then we see him moved to almost repeat the action he had earlier regretted. Therefore, God did not abandon him. On the contrary, He took care of him and responded to his prayer. God knows human nature and that people have a limit for their tolerance. Therefore, when injustice is acute and the way to restore justice is blocked, the oppressed may well go on the attack, risking all. Hence we do not see Moses' action painted in stark colours, as often happens when human nature becomes distorted in communities where injustice persists.

This is what we understand from the way the Qur'ān describes the two events and what follows. It neither provides justification for Moses' action, nor does it exaggerate its significance. Perhaps its description of Moses as wronging himself stems from the fact that his action was motivated by ethnic affiliation when as God's choice as His messenger he should have remained above all this. Or it may be that his action precipitated a fight with individuals who served tyranny, which is of little avail in achieving the ultimate goal of freedom. In this way, then, the whole situation was akin to that in Makkah when God restrained the Muslims from fighting until the appropriate time.

It nonetheless appears that accusing fingers were pointing in a certain way as regards the Egyptian's death the day before. Perhaps Moses was suspected in the light of his outspoken criticism of Pharaoh's tyranny. Or it may be that the Israelite had whispered to some of his own people, such that the secret was out, spreading

beyond the Israelite community. We think this highly probable. For Moses to kill one of Pharaoh's men would have brought joy to the Israelite community. Such a piece of news will easily and speedily circulate, giving comfort and satisfaction. This is easily enhanced if Moses was widely known to hate injustice and to support its victims.

Thus, when Moses seemed about to strike the second Egyptian, the latter confronted him with a clear accusation: *"Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday?"* (Verse 19) He then continued his outburst, *"You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right."* (Verse 19) Moses might well have been seen as a pious and virtuous man who would love to set things on the right course. Thus, the Egyptian reminds him of this, in effect accusing Moses of violating his own principles, being a tyrant rather than a reformer, killing people instead of setting their relations on the right course. The way this is phrased suggests that Moses was not at the time a member of Pharaoh's court. Had he been thus considered, the Egyptian would not have dared to talk to him in such a way. He might have thought it better to take up a totally different line of address.

Some commentators suggest that these sentences were spoken by the Israelite rather than the Egyptian, in response to Moses saying to him, *"Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow."* These commentators say that the Israelite thought Moses was angry with him and wanted to strike him. Hence, he raised his voice revealing the secret he alone knew. They base their argument on the fact that the secret was unknown to the Egyptians. It is more likely, however, that the Egyptian was the one who said it. We have explained how the secret might have been aired, and also suggested that the Egyptians might in any case have divined the circumstances of the situation.

Warning by a Well-Wisher

It appears that when the man reminded him of events the day before Moses did not proceed. The Egyptian was spared, left to run off and tell Pharaoh and his men that Moses was the killer. Here again there is a gap in the story. The next thing we are told of concerns a man hurrying from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses of a plot to do away with him. He further advised Moses that he should flee the city to save his life:

Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice. (Verse 20)

This is clearly the work of God's hand. At the right moment, something intervenes

to carry out His will. The leading personalities of Pharaoh's government were now aware that Moses was responsible for their compatriot's death. They would have seen this as spelling danger, smacking of rebellion by the Children of Israel. Hence, Moses needed to be removed. Had it been an ordinary case of murder, it would have not deserved that Pharaoh and his chiefs be preoccupied with it. Therefore, God's hand selected one of those very people to precipitate events. Most probably he was the one believer in Pharaoh's household who had kept his faith secret and who is mentioned in detail in *Sūrah* 40, The Believer. He was chosen to go at speed from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses before Pharaoh's men could reach him. It was a simple warning: *"Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice."* (Verse 20)

"So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk." (Verse 21) Once more we see Moses' spontaneous and passionate personality, as he reacts to different situations. He is in fear, on guard, directly appealing to God for help and protection. He seeks his security with God, prays for His care: *"My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* follows him as he stealthily leaves the city, keeping on the alert, alone with no support other than what he hopes to receive from God Almighty. *"And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Again we note certain prominent traits in Moses' personality as he moves quickly along a desert road, trying to evade his chasers. He aims for Madyan, which is to the north of Ḥijāz in the Arabian Peninsula and to the south of Syria and Palestine. It is a very long journey, one which he undertakes with little preparedness. At the same time, we note how he is full of faith, surrendering himself to God, seeking His guidance: *"I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Once more we find Moses at the centre of a harrowing situation after having enjoyed not only a life of security but also one characterized by ease and affluence. He is now alone lacking all apparent means of security, chased everywhere by Pharaoh and his troops. The Egyptians want to do to him now what they failed to do when he was a baby. But the hand that provided for him then will now protect him here. Thus, Moses is able to cover the long distance to Madyan where he is safe.

When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: "What is the matter with you two?" They said: "We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man." So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send

me.' (Verses 23-24)

His long trek had taken him to Madyan, tired and exhausted. Yet the scene before him is one that a person with sound moral sense cannot condone. Moses sees many herdsmen and shepherds bringing their cattle and sheep to drink at the water, but two women stand aside, prevented from watering their flock. Those with a good sense of integrity and morality would have allowed the two women to water their sheep first and then leave before the men took care of their cattle. Despite his exhaustion, Moses, the stranger, could not accept what he saw. He stepped forward to ask the two ladies: *"What is the matter with you two?"* (Verse 23)

They appraised him of their situation: *"They said: We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen and shepherds drive home. Our father is a very old man."* (Verse 23) As women, they could not fend for themselves in the midst of so many men. Furthermore, their father was an old man who could not compete with younger and stronger men. Moses' sense of fairness could not abide this. He stepped forward to put things right. He watered their flock for them before the rest, as honourable people should have done in the first place. He does not stop to consider his own position first, as a runaway in a place where he knows no one and where he has no support. Yet nothing stops him from acting as the honourable man he is.

"So he watered their flock for them." (Verse 24) This testifies to his noble soul, one reared under God's watchful eye. It also speaks of his physical strength, something that makes him feared even when exhausted by his long trek. It might be his mental rather than physical power that made the other shepherds hold him in awe. People are normally more affected by spiritual strength.

"Then he withdrew into the shade." (Verse 24) This suggests that it was the hot season when Moses undertook his long journey. And then he sends a prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) He seeks the physical shade to rest his tired limbs. He seeks the great shade spread by God, whose generosity is unlimited, to comfort his heart and soul. This is the essence of his prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) In my weakness in this lonely, hot place where I am a stranger, I am, my Lord, in dire need of Your kind help and endless favours. This whispered, passionate prayer reflects the warmth of Moses' heart and his confident pursuit of God's kindness. It tells us of the strong bond Moses feels with his Lord.

Security in a New Home

We have barely had time to absorb Moses' passionate prayer when the *sūrah* quickly moves on to the next scene that ushers in an end to his troubles. This begins

with the conjunction *fā*, indicating a quick sequence. It is as if the heavens rush to respond to Moses' prayer:

One of the two women then came back to him, walking shyly, and said: My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us." (Verse 25)

It is a quick rescue granted by God. It comes in the form of an invitation sent by the old man, who wants to extend his hospitality to Moses for his noble action. The invitation is delivered by "one of the two" who came *walking shyly*,¹¹ as a virtuous young woman should walk, displaying neither adornment nor temptation. She delivers the invitation in a brief and clear manner which the Qur'ān expresses as: "My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us." (Verse 25) Shy as she was, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, and delivers her message in full. This is, again, a reflection of a pure and virtuous nature. Her shyness does not overcome her, because she is assured by her purity and virtue.

The *sūrah* ends this brief scene, limiting it to the delivery of the invitation and Moses' acceptance. The next scene shows Moses with the old man whose name is withheld. Some reports say he was called Yathrūn and that he was the Prophet Shu`ayb's nephew.¹¹ "And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk." (Verse 25)

Moses was in need of security, as also of something to eat and drink, but his need for the former was stronger. Hence, the account given in the *sūrah* emphasizes this, making the first words the old man says in comment to Moses' story: "Have no fear." He wanted him to feel at ease by dispelling his fear. He then explains: "You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk." (Verse 25) They have no authority over Madyan.

We then hear a feminine voice that reflects honesty and propriety: "Said one of the two women: My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust." (Verse 26) Both she and her sister have endured the hard task of tending sheep, fending for themselves in the midst of men. Neither of them is happy

¹¹ I have already said once in this book that the man was Shu`ayb himself, and I said on another occasion that he might have been Shu`ayb but equally might have been someone else. Now I am more inclined to say that he was not the Prophet Shu`ayb, but rather an old man from Madyan. What makes me say so is that this man is said to have been old, while Shu`ayb witnessed the end of his disbelieving people, and only those who believed in him were saved. Had the man been the Prophet Shu`ayb, living with a small number of believers who had been spared, such people would not have behaved in the way described here. They would not have watered their animals before those belonging to their prophet. Believers do not treat their prophet and his daughters in this way. Moreover, the Qur'ān does not mention anything about the old man teaching Moses, his son-in-law, anything. Had he been the Prophet Shu`ayb, we would have heard the clear voice of prophethood over the ten years he spent with him.

with this. They would prefer to be at home, doing the work of women, and not having to compete with strangers at grazing and watering places. They are, after all, virtuous women. Here, the one who speaks sees a young man, a stranger in their town, but at the same time someone who is strong and trustworthy. She has seen how the other shepherds held him in awe, making way for him when he watered her sheep. But he is in a weak position because he is a stranger. She also recognized him as worthy of trust when she noticed his sense of propriety as she delivered her father's invitation to him. Hence, she advises her father to hire him so that he would spare her and her sister the trouble of doing a shepherd's work. She commends him for his ability to do the work as also his honesty and integrity. As she gives this advice, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, fearing no misunderstanding or unworthy suggestion.

We need not bother ourselves with what commentators exaggerate about Moses' physical strength, saying for example, that he, single-handed, lifted the stone covering the well. Normally, it would have taken 20 or 40 men to lift it. In fact, the well was not covered, but the herdsman were watering their cattle and flocks, and Moses either moved them away while he watered the two women's sheep, or joined them as they watered their own cattle.

Nor do we need to bother with those reports that speak about his integrity suggesting that he said to the woman that she should walk behind him and direct him as to which way to go. Thus, he would not see her walking in front of him. Other reports suggest that he said this after the wind lifted her skirts and exposed her legs. All this is unnecessary, trying to remove suspicion that does not exist. Both Moses and the girl were naturally prudish, and this reflects in their normal behaviour, without any affectation.

A Marriage Proposal

The old man acted on his daughter's advice. He probably sensed a mutual liking between his daughter and Moses, one which could be the basis for a happy family. It is only natural that a young woman with a healthy, uncorrupted nature be inclined towards a man in whom she discerns strength and honesty. Hence, the old man combined the two purposes, suggesting to Moses that he marries one of his daughters in return for eight years work. Should Moses increase the period to ten years, this would be an added favour, not a commitment to which he would be held:

[The father] said: 'I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship

on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.' (Verse 27)

Frankly and simply the old man offered one of his daughters, without naming her, as a wife for Moses, but he might have felt that the intended girl was known to him as they seemed inclined towards each other. He stated this without any embarrassment, for the offer was one of marriage. There is after all nothing to be embarrassed about when the aim is to build a home and establish a family. It is only when people move away from sound, natural values, to observe unhealthy traditions, that they are unnecessarily restricted. Thus, in our social environment today, we see that no parent or guardian can approach a man of sound faith and integrity to propose that he should marry his daughter, sister or other relative. Such traditions make it imperative that the man or his parents should make the proposal, as it is improper that a proposal should be made by the woman's side. The irony is that under such deviant traditions and in such social environment young men and women meet, talk and play together without any intention to get engaged to be married. Once the idea of marriage is entertained, affected shyness is observed and other barriers are erected to prevent any simple, frank and honest discussion.

During the Prophet's lifetime, fathers used to offer their daughters to men in marriage. Indeed, women offered themselves to the Prophet or to whoever he wished them to marry. This was done in all honesty and propriety, without any embarrassment for anyone. `Umar offered his daughter in marriage to Abū Bakr first, but he did not answer, so he then offered her to `Uthmān but he regretfully declined. Then `Umar told the Prophet who comforted him saying that God may give her a better husband than both. It was the Prophet who then married her. A woman also offered herself to the Prophet but he expressed his regret. She then placed herself under his care so as to marry her to whomever he thought suitable. He married her to a man who had nothing to offer as dowry except his having learnt two *sūrahs*, which he undertook to teach her. This, then, was the dowry she received.

With such an open and simple approach Islamic society used to build its homes. Nothing needed to be done under cover, or with affected or devious means. This is exactly what the old man did with regard to Moses, promising not to impose any hardship on him or to ask of him what was beyond his means. He hoped that, with God's grace, Moses would find him to be an upright man. This is the most appropriate way of talking about oneself. One neither boasts of one's virtues nor emphatically states that one is a good person. One only hopes to be so, leaving the matter to God.

Moses accepted the offer, and the contract was made, clear and precise, with God as a witness: *"Answered [Moses]: This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say."* (Verse 28)

Contractual agreements must be made in all clarity, leaving no room for ambiguity. Neither party should allow shyness or embarrassment to interfere with such purpose. Thus, Moses approves the offer and accepts the conditions outlined by the old man. He then repeats the main condition to ensure that there is no misunderstanding: *“Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged.”* (Verse 28) Whether I stay eight or ten years I shall not be wronged with regard to the working conditions, or with being forced to stay ten years. Any stay beyond eight years is a matter of my own choice. *“God is the witness to all we say.”* (Verse 28) God is the witness who ensures justice between the two parties to any contract.

Moses put this so clearly because he was a straight and frank person who wanted the agreement to be absolutely clear and precise. Yet he also intended to stay the longer term, and did actually do so. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) mentioned that Moses “spent the longer and better of the two terms.” [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

Thus Moses found a place of security in his father-in-law’s home, having no fear of Pharaoh and his designs. This was certainly for a definite purpose God wanted to accomplish. We will now let this episode pass, as the *sūrah* does not state anything further about it.

On the Way Back

The ten years agreed between the two men have passed, bringing us to the story’s third episode. We see Moses on the road again, backtracking along the route he had taken alone ten years previously. This time though he is travelling with his family. The atmosphere on this second journey is totally different. He is about to receive, on the way, something that he could never have imagined. His Lord will call him and speak to him. He will assign to him the mission for which He has prepared him. Moses is, thus, to deliver God’s message to Pharaoh and his nobles, asking them to release the Children of Israel so that they can worship God alone, associating no partners with Him, and taking possession of the land God has promised them. In this way, Moses would be an enemy and source of grief for Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. In essence, he would bring about their downfall.

When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: “Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.” But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds. Throw down your staff’ But when

he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proof from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people. 'He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.' Said He: "We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail." (Verses 29-35)

Before we discuss this episode, we need to reflect a little on what God intended for Moses in those ten years, and the purpose behind his journeys away from and back to Egypt. We note that it was God's hand that planned the way Moses' life should unfold, step by step, right from the time he was a suckling newborn. It ensured that he was cast in the river so that Pharaoh's household should pick him up. It endeared him to Pharaoh's wife so that he was brought up in his enemy's home. It then made him enter the city at a time when its people were unaware of him, only to kill one of its people. It then sent him a believer from among Pharaoh's own household to warn him to leave the city. It then took care of him along the desert road to Madyan, when he travelled suddenly, alone and ill prepared. It took him to the old man where he stayed for ten years before returning to Egypt to receive his mission. We, thus, witness a long line of care, instruction and the gaining of experience before Moses is called and assigned his mission. His experience included being loved and pampered, spontaneous retaliation as a result of prolonged pressure, regret and repentance, being in fear for his life and chased, finding himself a lonely and hungry stranger, serving others as a shepherd after having lived in a palace, along with a multitude of small experiences, varied feelings, thoughts and understanding in addition to what God bestowed on him of knowledge and wisdom on reaching his prime.

Preparation for a Difficult Mission

To be entrusted with a divine message is a hard and multi-faceted task. The one so assigned needs a wealth of experience, understanding, knowledge and refinement in practical matters. They also need God's special favours, His revelations and directives.

Apart from the message of Islam given to Muhammad (peace be upon him), Moses' message is perhaps the hardest assigned to any prophet. He was sent to Pharaoh, the most tyrannical ruler on earth at the time. Pharaoh was also head of the

longest established monarchy, and the most advanced civilization. Furthermore, he was a ruler that demanded to be worshipped by all his subjects.

Moses was sent to rescue a community that had long been humiliated, and who had long accepted humiliation as their lot. Humiliation corrupts human nature, obliterating its good, beautiful aspects and making what is rotten, filthy and decadent appear acceptable. To rescue such a community was a tough assignment.

Moreover, the people to be addressed by his message had deviated from their old faith. Their hearts were neither free to readily accept the new faith, nor could they conform to their original faith. Addressing such people would be difficult, made all the more so by the numerous deviations and innovations they had introduced over several generations.

In short, Moses was given the mission of rebuilding a nation, or, indeed, to build it from scratch. With his message, the Children of Israel became, for the first time, a separate community, with a special way of life, implementing a message.

Perhaps this is why the Qur'ān attaches such importance to this story. For it provides a complete example of building a nation on the basis of faith. We see all the internal and external difficulties, deviations and other impediments that stand in its way.

The ten years Moses spent in Madyan served as a learning period, separating the palace life Moses was used to during his childhood, and the hard life awaiting him as he advocated his message. Palace life has its own atmosphere and traditions. It imbibes influence on the people enjoying its comforts, even though they may be exemplary in their understanding, awareness and knowledge. Delivering a message from God requires that the messenger deal with all people, rich and poor, affluent and deprived, clean and dirty, refined and rough, good-natured and evil, strong and weak, patient in adversity and impulsive, etc. Poor people have their own habits in the food they eat, in their clothing, walking, concept of life, understanding of events, vision of life, talking and in the expression of their emotions. Such habits cannot easily be accepted by those who are accustomed to palatial splendour. The poor may be full of goodness, ready to accept faith and implement it, but the rich and privileged may find it very difficult to deal with the poor because they cannot accept the latter's physical appearance and habits.

A divine message imposes certain standards of dedication coupled with a hard life. The rich may be prepared to sacrifice a life of ease, comfort and plenty, but they are rarely able to withstand hardship and deprivation for long. Therefore, God willed to reduce the standard of plenty Moses was used to, placing him instead in a community of shepherds so as to feel God's grace. In this way, he would know what it was to experience fear and hunger, and what it means to have to work for a living.

Furthermore, he would no longer feel any revulsion towards the poor, with their habits, manners and naivety. Just as he was thrown onto the water's ripples when he was a baby, now he is thrown into the sea of life in order to equip him for his task.

When Moses had completed his training in a foreign land, God's hand directed him anew, returning him to the land of his birth, where his own community lived. It is there that he would start delivering his message. Beforehand, though, he must travel the same route he used during his flight from Egypt. Why should it be the same? His training had included knowledge of desert routes, this because he would be leading his people along the same route in obedience of God's orders.

Thus, he would not need to depend on others, not even a guide. His people needed such a leader to show them which way to go at every turn, after they had lost their ability to think for themselves. Long had been their humiliation and subjugation.

Thus we realize how Moses was reared under God's watchful eye, and how he received his life's education so as to be ready to shoulder the burden of his message.

A Call from on High

When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves. (Verse 29)

What could have happened to Moses to make him return to Egypt when the terms of his contract with the old man were fulfilled? He had left it in fear, expecting death for his part in the unwitting murder of an Egyptian. What could have caused him to forget such danger when it was Pharaoh and his chiefs that wanted rid of him? It is the hand that guided his footsteps throughout his life. It might this time have guided him through natural feelings of nostalgia for one's home and people. It might have reduced his sense of danger to a minimum, so that he could now take up the mission for which he was created and prepared.

Anyway, we see Moses on his return journey to Egypt, with his family, in the dark of the night, having lost his way. It was a cold night, which made him pleased at the sight of fire in the distance. He headed in that direction to get some information or a firebrand. This, then, is the first scene in this episode.

The second scene tells us of the great surprise prepared for Moses: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site."* (Verse 30) We see him aiming towards the fire, and on the right bank of

the valley. From here on this site is blessed. The whole universe now echoes the sublime address Moses receives “*out of the tree*’, which might have been the only tree there.

Moses received the direct call: “*Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds.*” (Verse 30) He received it alone in a solitary valley, in the depths of night, but the whole universe responded, with the heavens and the earth reverberating it. We do not know how, or with which faculty or sense he received it, but he certainly received it with his whole being, as did the entire universe around him. He was able to receive it because he was reared under God’s watchful eye until he was ready for this moment. The universe recorded this sublime address, and the site where it took place became blessed as God, in all His majesty, revealed His presence there. The valley became distinguished by this great event, and Moses stood there in the noblest position a human being ever stood.

God then continued to give His instructions: “*Throw down your staff?*” (Verse 31) Moses complied with the order, throwing down his staff. Only now it was no longer his staff but instead a writhing serpent, which was large in size but moving very fast: “*But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back.*” (Verse 31) Moses was totally unprepared for this. Taken aback, he turned and set to flight. He did not even think of going back to find out what had happened to his staff, or to better see this preternatural happening. Such is the natural reaction of spontaneous people.

He then listened to his Lord’s address: “*Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure.*” (Verse 31) Again, we witness Moses experiencing fear and security in quick succession. Such contrasting emotions were indeed the essence of his life. In fact, this continuous interaction was deliberately instilled in him so as to counterbalance the Israelite’s inactivity and habitual acceptance of their humble position. His spontaneity was part of what God granted him so that he could fulfil his role.

He is told to come near and to have no fear. Needless to say, a person whose every step is watched over by God will always be safe and secure.

“*Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish.*” (Verse 32) Again Moses did as he was instructed, putting his hand inside his garment’s top opening. Drawing it out, he received yet another shock. His hand was now a shining white, though clearly healthy. Its original colour would have been rather dark, weathered by the sun and elements. This change of colour thus symbolized the clear truth: one supported by undeniable, irrefutable evidence.

Again Moses’ spontaneous personality caught up with him as he trembled, struck with awe. But God’s care was soon forthcoming, giving him another instruction so as to calm him down: “*Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear.*” (Verse 32)

In the Arabic text, the word *janāh* is used to denote “side”, giving the impression that he draws it over himself like a bird, to reassure himself.

So Moses has now been given clear signs, causing him fear at first before he was reassured. Now it is time he learned of what lay ahead of him: *“These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people.”* (Verse 32) He is given a message to deliver to Pharaoh and his lieutenants, in fulfilment of the promise his mother was given when he was still a newborn baby: *“We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers.”* (Verse 7) Despite the passage of many years, the promise has remained true, given by God who always speaks the truth.

Moses now remembers that he had killed one of Pharaoh’s entourage and that he had to flee Egypt in order to save himself. As he was in the presence of his Lord who had honoured him beyond his wildest expectations, even to the point of meeting Him and being given clear signs, he felt the need to take precautions so that his message should not be brought to an abrupt end if he himself was killed: *“He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me.”* (Verse 33)

He does not say this by way of apology, or to find a way out of his commission. He only wanted to ensure that the message of truth would be advocated should his fears be well-founded. This reflects his keen desire to fulfil his task; a desire that is in line with Moses’ character as a man of strength, someone worthy of trust. He elaborates on his fears further: *“And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.”* (Verse 34) Aaron is more eloquent and better able to defend the message. He can provide much needed support, and can succeed Moses should he be killed.

Moses is reassured and his request is granted: *“Said He: ‘We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.’”* (Verse 35) It is not merely that God granted Moses’ request, but that He also gave him a greatly reassuring promise, endowing both brothers with power. Thus, they would not face the tyrant Pharaoh relying only on their own devices. They would go equipped with a source of power that cannot be resisted by any earthly force. No tyrant possessed the means to harm them: *“They will not be able to touch you.”* How could they when you enjoy God’s protection that creates a fence around you? But the good news Moses is given goes further than this, assuring him and his brother of the eventual outcome; namely, that the truth will be triumphant. They have been given signs from God, and these signs are the means of victory: *“By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.”* (Verse 35)

God's power is thus seen to intervene directly, shaping events, working through no earthly force as a cover. The victory will come about through none of the causes that are familiar to people. Thus a new code of values will be established in people's hearts based on faith and complete trust in God.

The Arrogant are Punished

This awesome scene is closed; time passes and the location changes; Moses and Aaron are now facing Pharaoh, producing God's clear signs, refuting the arguments of falsehood and explaining God's guidance. The end is shown: drowning in this present life, and a curse in the life to come. All is expressed in a series of short, concise verses:

When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: 'This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old. 'Moses replied: My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.' 'Nobles!' said Pharaoh. 'I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.' Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned. (Verses 36-42)

The *sūrah* delivers its final strike very quickly, making no mention of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh's sorcerers: such details can be found in brief or in detail in other *sūrahs*. Here the *sūrah* moves from the denial of the truth by Pharaoh and his people directly to their destruction. It also includes what will happen to them in the hereafter. This quick movement is deliberate, so as to fit with the general drift of the *sūrah* emphasizing God's direct intervention, through no human agent. Once Pharaoh is seen to be adamant in his rejection of God's message, his end is directly shown. No further details are needed.

"When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old." (Verse 36) Pharaoh's words are exactly the same as those employed by the Quraysh idolaters in Makkah when the Prophet Muhammad called on them to believe in God: *"This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old."*

(Verse 36) It is nothing more than futile argument when faced with the overpowering truth. It is the same argument whenever falsehood confronts the truth: an accusation of sorcery, and a rejection based on nothing other than that the whole thing was new, unknown to their forefathers. Indeed, they have no argument, and no basis for their stand. Hence, their vague statement that proves nothing.

Moses (peace be upon him) refers the matter to God, because in such a situation where no proof is being requested, it is better to be brief and let God judge between the two parties: *“Moses replied.. My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.”* (Verse 37)

This is a very polite answer, which makes an implicit, yet very clear statement about the outcome of all confrontations between truth and falsehood. His Lord knows well that he is truthful, following divine guidance. The future certainly belongs to the one who comes with guidance, while the evildoers will never gain the ultimate success. This is God’s law that will never change, even though things may appear at times to move in some other way. Moses, like every prophet, puts this very clearly to people.

Pharaoh’s response is evasive, boastful and sarcastic: *“Nobles! I know of no deity that you could have other than myself Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.”* (Verse 38) What a blatant lie Pharaoh utters: *“I know of no deity that you could have other than myself”* And his nobles receive such falsehood with humble acceptance. Pharaoh relies on the legends that circulated in Egypt at the time claiming that kings descended from deities. He also relied on brute force that did not allow anyone to think or speak out against him. Whilst others saw him as mortal like themselves, they nevertheless accepted his arrogance without question.

He then affects seriousness about wanting to find out the truth and making sure of Moses’ God. Yet, in truth, he is only making fun of the whole issue: *“Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses.”* Moses says his god is in heaven, so I will go up into the sky to look at him. In the same tone of sarcasm he pretends that he has doubts about Moses and his statements, but nevertheless he wants to look and find out for himself: *“even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.”* (Verse 38)

It is at this point in the exchange that the match with the sorcerers takes place, though it is not mentioned here. The *sūrah* instead proceeds straight to how Pharaoh met his end: *“Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us.”* (Verse 39) Given they thought they would never return, they behaved arrogantly, against all right, denying God’s signs and

warnings. Hence, God's punishment was quick: *"And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea."* (Verse 40) Pharaoh was seized with force and cast into the sea as though he was a little stone. We note the contrast between Moses being cast into the river when he was a newborn baby and he finds in it a safe shelter, and Pharaoh, the tyrant king, being cast into the sea, only to be destroyed. Safety and security are ensured when one is on God's side, while fear and destruction are attendant with the other side. We note that in the Arabic text, the same word, *yamm*, is used for both river and sea as this signifies a great body of water.

"Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers." (Verse 40) It is an end that is met in full view, so as to serve as a lesson and a warning for all who deny God's messages. It shows how God's power overwhelms tyrants and despots in no time at all, so as to make their end easy to describe in just half a line or even less.

Another glance and this whole world is passed by so as to present a picture of Pharaoh and his hosts on the Day of Judgement calling on people and leading them into hell: *"And We made them leaders who called others to the fire."* (Verse 41) Evil is the leadership, and evil is the call. *"No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection."* (Verse 41) It is a defeat in this life and a defeat in the life to come, in fair requital for their aggression and transgression. But they will not only be defeated; they are cursed in this world and spurned in the next: *"We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned."* (Verse 42)

The Other End

The *sūrah* leaves out the entire history of the Children of Israel's departure from Egypt, and the events that followed, in order to mention Moses' lot after having shown us Pharaoh's:

And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect.
(Verse 43)

This is certainly a great favour given to Moses. His is an honourable bequest: a book revealed to him by God in order to give mankind new insight and guidance into what is right. Believers must, however, remember how God's power intervened to save the weak and overcome the powerful. They must reflect on how oppressors are destroyed and the oppressed avenged and given power.

Thus ends the story of Moses and Pharaoh as related in this *sūrah*. It makes clear that safety and security can only be achieved by being on God's side, while fear is always associated with moving away from Him. It also shows how God's hand

intervenes to challenge tyranny and overcome it, when its power seems irresistible. The fledgling Muslim community in Makkah needed to understand this concept and be sure of it, while the arrogant idolaters also needed to reflect on it. Moreover, this concept is needed whenever and wherever believers advocate the truth and tyranny stands in its way.

This is yet another example, then, of how the Qur'ān uses historical accounts as educative material, and also to establish certain facts and principles which need to be reflected upon.

2

The Truth Clear for All

You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. (44)

But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life. Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers. (45)

Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out [to Moses]. Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect. (46)

[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, "Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among

وَمَا كُنْتَ بِجَانِبِ الْعَرَبِيِّ إِذْ قَضَيْنَا إِلَى
مُوسَى الْأَمْرَ وَمَا كُنْتَ مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ



وَلَكِنَّا أَنْشَأْنَا قُرُونًا فَتَطَاوَلَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْعُمُرُ
وَمَا كُنْتَ ثَاوِيًا فِي أَهْلِ مَدْيَنَ
تَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتِنَا وَلَكِنَّا كُنَّا

مُرْسَلِينَ

وَمَا كُنْتَ بِجَانِبِ الطُّورِ إِذْ نَادَيْنَا وَلَكِن
رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أَتَتْهُمْ
مِّن نَّذِيرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ



وَلَوْلَا أَن تُصِيبَهُمْ مُّصِيبَةٌ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ
أَيْدِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُوا رَبَّنَا لَوْلَا أَرْسَلْتَ إِلَيْنَا
رَسُولًا فَنُتَّبِعَ ءَايَاتِكَ وَنَكُونَ مِنَ

الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

the believers.' (47)

Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given? But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: "These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other.' And they add: "We reject both of them.' (48)

Say: "Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true! (49)

But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing. (50)

We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect. (51)

Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it. (52)

And when it is recited to them, they say: "We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ عِنْدِنَا قَالُوا لَوْلَا أُوتِيَ مِثْلَ مَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفُرُوا بِمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَالُوا سِحْرَانِ تَظَاهَرَا وَقَالُوا إِنَّا بِكُلِّ كَافِرُونَ



قُلْ فَاتُوا بِكِتَابٍ مِّنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ مِنْهُمَا أَتَّبِعُهُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

فَإِنْ لَّمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَكَ فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّمَا يَتَّبِعُونَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ۗ وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنِ اتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ بِغَيْرِ هُدًى مِّنَ اللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ

وَلَقَدْ وَصَّلْنَا لَهُمُ الْقَوْلَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ هُمْ بِهِ يُؤْمِنُونَ

وَإِذَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا بِهِ ۗ إِنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّنَا ۗ إِنَّا كُنَّا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مُسْلِمِينَ



submitted ourselves to Him.’ (53)

These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. (54)

And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: “To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.’ (55)

Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright. (56)

They say: “If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.’ Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. (57)

How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. (58)

Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a

أُولَئِكَ يُؤْتَوْنَ أَجْرَهُمْ مَرَّتَيْنِ بِمَا صَبَرُوا
وَيَذَرُونَ بِالْحَسَنَةِ السَّيِّئَةَ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا اللَّغْوَ أَعْرَضُوا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا
لَنَا أَعْمَلْنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَلْنَا سَلَمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَا
نَبْتَغِي الْجَاهِلِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ
يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

وَقَالُوا إِنْ تَتَّبِعِ الْهُدَى مَعَكَ نُتَخَطَفُ
مِنْ أَرْضِنَا أَوْلَمْ نُمْكِنْ لَهُمْ حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا
تُجْبَىٰ إِلَيْهِ ثَمَرَاتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ رِزْقًا مِّنْ لَّدُنَّا
وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ بَطَرَتْ مَعِيشَتَهَا
فَتِلْكَ مَسْكِنُهُمْ لَمْ تَسْكَنْ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ
إِلَّا قَلِيلًا وَكُنَّا نَحْنُ الْوَارِثِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ مُهْلِكَ الْقُرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ يَبْعَثَ
فِي أُمَّهَا رَسُولًا يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتِنَا وَمَا
كُنَّا مُهْلِكِي الْقُرَىٰ إِلَّا وَأَهْلُهَا
ظَلِمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. (59)

'Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? (60)

Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us? (61)

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?"(62)

Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.'"(63)

They will be told: "Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! (64)

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "What answer did you give to My messengers?" (65)

But to them all information will be

وَمَا أُوْتِيتُمْ مِّنْ شَيْءٍ فَمَتَّعُ الْحَيٰوةِ
الدُّنْيَا وَزَيَّنَّتْهَا وَمَا عِنْدَ اللّٰهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ
أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

أَفَمَن وَعَدَّنٰهُ وَعَدَدًا حَسَنًا فَهُوَ لَاقِيهِ
كَمَن مَّتَّعْنَاهُ مَتَّعَ الْحَيٰوةِ الدُّنْيَا ثُمَّ هُوَ
يَوْمَ الْقِيٰمَةِ مِنَ الْمُحْضَرِينَ ﴿٦١﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ شُرَكَآءِىَ الَّذِينَ
كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

قَالَ الَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ رَبَّنَا هَٰؤُلَاءِ
الَّذِينَ أَغْوَيْنَا أَغْوَيْنَهُمْ كَمَا غَوَيْنَا
تَبَرَّأْنَا إِلَيْكَ مَا كَانُوا إِيَّانَا يَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

وَقِيلَ أَدْعُوا شُرَكَآءَكُمْ فَدَعَوْهُمْ فَلَمْ
يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَهُمْ وَرَأَوُا الْعَذَابَ لَوْ أَنَّهُمْ
كَانُوا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَا أَجَبْتُمُ
الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

فَعَمِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْأَنْبَاءُ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَهُمْ لَا
يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

فَأَمَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صٰلِحًا

blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. (66)

However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful. (67)

Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. (68)

And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. (69)

He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return. (70)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?" (71)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?" (72)

فَعَسَىٰ أَنْ يَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُفْلِحِينَ

٦٧

وَرَبُّكَ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيَخْتَارُ ۗ مَا كَانَ لَهُمُ الْحَيْرَةُ ۗ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَتَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

٦٨

وَرَبُّكَ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمْ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ

٦٩

وَهُوَ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۗ لَهُ الْحَمْدُ فِي الْأُولَىٰ وَالْآخِرَةِ ۗ وَلَهُ الْحُكْمُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

٧٠

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ اللَّيْلَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِضِيَاءٍ أَمْ أَفَلَا تَسْمَعُونَ

٧١

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ النَّهَارَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِلَيْلٍ تَسْكُنُونَ فِيهِ أَمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ

٧٢

وَمِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ

It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful. (73)

On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' (74)

We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: "Produce your evidence!" They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them. (75)

لِتَسْكُنُوا فِيهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَلِعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ شُرَكَاءِي
الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَتَزَعْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا فَقُلْنَا
هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ فَعَلِمُوا أَنَّ الْحَقَّ لِلَّهِ
وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

Overview

The first passage related Moses' story with telling effects. The current passage begins with some additional comments concerning Moses before it picks up the main theme of the *sūrah* explaining where security lies and who should be in fear. It also portrays a number of scenes from the universe, as also from the Day of Judgement, which it addresses to the unbelievers who denied God's message and made false allegations against the Prophet. It tells them about their own situation after presenting certain aspects that confirm the truth of what God's Messenger tells them. It refers to some of the people of earlier divine religions who received this final message positively, recognizing its truth and believing in it. By contrast, the idolaters continue to deny it when it is meant to bring them God's mercy. They only need a little clear reflection to recognize this and be certain of it.

Confirmation of the Message

The first comment on Moses' story confirms the revelations being given to the Prophet. The Prophet was telling his people about past events in details that could not have been gathered except by an eyewitness. Yet, he was not there at the time. He learnt of these events through revelations bestowed on him from on high. This is only an act of grace meant to spare his people God's punishment for their idolatry.

Should such punishment befall them, they will surely cry out that they would have believed if only a messenger from God had been sent to them.

You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life. (Verses 44-45)

The mountain referred to is Mount Sinai, known as al-Tar, where Moses had his appointment with God after a certain period, given first as 30 nights, but then completed with 10 more, making the total 40 as mentioned in *Sūrah* 7. It was on this occasion that Moses received the full extent of his message as detailed in the tablets: these contain the divine law as delineated for the Children of Israel. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not present at this meeting so as to know all its details as outlined in the Qur'ān. Indeed, several centuries and many human generations separated him from it: *"But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life."* (Verse 45) This clearly indicates that his knowledge of it was received from God who revealed the Qur'ān to him from on high. He is the One who knows all.

The Qur'ān also speaks of Madyan and Moses' sojourn there. Yet the Prophet was never at Madyan and it is only the Qur'ān that provides him with such detailed information: *"Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers."* (Verse 45) It is God who chooses His messengers. It is also He who gives them information about past nations and communities.

The Qur'ān also describes in full detail God's address to Moses by the side of Mount Sinai and how he responded to his Lord: *"Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out (to Moses)."* (Verse 46) Again, The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not hear this call and nor could he have recorded the details of this appointment as it took place. The fact that God related all this to him, which testifies to his honesty and the truth of his message, is an aspect of God's mercy extended to his people. He is, thus, able to warn them while earlier messengers were sent to the Children of Israel who lived in an area adjacent to Arabia. The Arabs had not been sent a messenger since the time of their first father, Prophet Ishmael: *"Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect."* (Verse 46)

It is certainly by virtue of an act of grace that God sends a messenger to warn and advise people. At the same time, it seals the argument against them. When they have received God's message, they cannot then argue that they were taken by surprise, or say that they had not received ample warning before receiving their punishment.

Indeed, the way they lived, associating partners with God and committing all manner of sin, deserves punishment. Hence, God wanted to leave them with no room for argument. He wanted to make them stand face to face with the truth, such that nothing could hinder them from accepting it and from becoming good believers:

[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, 'Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among the believers.'
(Verse 47)

This is what they would have said had not a messenger been sent to them with sufficient proofs and signs to make them see the truth for what it is. Yet even when the Messenger came to them with the irrefutable truth, they still would not follow him:

Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given?" But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other' And they add: 'We reject both of them.' (Verse 48)

They would not admit the truth. On the contrary, they continued to give false excuses so as to justify their rejection. They also asked why this Messenger was not given the like of what Moses was given, referring to both the physical miracles and the tablets.

Clearly, their objections were dishonest. Hence, the Qur'ān puts the following question to them: *"But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given?"* (Verse 48) There were Jews in Arabia who had the Torah, but the Arabs neither accepted this nor believed in it. They were also aware that the Torah gives a clear description of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They also sought the advice of some followers of earlier religions asking them about Muhammad's message. In turn, those learned ones answered them that it was true, fully consistent with their own revelations. Yet still the idolaters would not accept such assertions. They claimed that both the Torah and the Qur'ān were magic; hence, each confirmed the other: *"Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other:' And they add: 'We reject both of them.'"* (Verse 48) It is all, then, argument for argument's sake. It has nothing to do with the proper pursuit of the truth, nor with proper evidence to confirm it.

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān takes a further step to put the truth before them. It says: If you like neither the Qur'ān nor the Torah, then show me a divine writ which

provides better guidance than these two books and I will follow it: *“Say: ‘Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true!’”* (Verse 49) Nothing, then, could be fairer. Whoever rejects the truth after this is merely being obstinate, following his own desire with little concern about evidence to support his position:

But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing. (Verse 50)

The truth is clear in this Qur’ān, and the argument Islam presents is clear and powerful. Anyone who knows Islam well but who still rejects it is only doing so because he prefers to pursue his own desires. There are only two ways: either commitment to the truth which breaks the grip of desire, and leads to submission and acceptance of the faith, or evading the truth and pursuing desire, which means rejecting the truth and denying faith. The unbelievers cannot present any argument on the basis of ambiguity, confusion or lack of proof. *“But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims.”* (Verse 50) This is a fact that allows no argument as it is clearly stated by God. Those who do not respond positively to this faith pursue their own desire and self-interest. They have no excuse. They offer no sound argument as they turn away from the truth.

“Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God.” (Verse 50) In this they are also transgressors and wrongdoers: *“Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing.”* (Verse 50)

The Qur’ān leaves no excuse for those who claim that they have not understood its message, or who claim that they do not comprehend Islam. Once this faith is presented and explained to them, all argument ceases and excuses are futile. The Qur’ān is indeed the epitome of clarity. No one denies it except those who are deliberate wrongdoers: they wrong themselves and are unjust to the truth. As such they do not deserve divine guidance: *“God does not guide those who are wrongdoing.”* (Verse 50) As the message is given to them, the issues are set out clearly and no excuse can be made for turning away: *“We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect.”* (Verse 51)

Sound Approach to Truth

The *sūrah* now begins a new round, presenting the case of those who sincerely look for the truth and abide by it. They have clear minds, sound approach and

sincere intentions. These are a group from the people of earlier revelations who came to know of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān thus tells of how they approached it once they had heard it.

Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it, and when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him. These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.' (Verses 52-55)

Sa`id ibn Jubayr mentions that these verses speak about 70 priests sent by Negus. When they met the Prophet he recited to them *Sūrah* 36, *Yā Sīn*, from start to finish. They were in tears as they listened to it and then immediately declared their belief in Islam. These verses confirm what they did.

Muhammad ibn Ishāq reports in his biography of the Prophet:

When the Prophet was still in Makkah, some 20 Christians came to him after they had heard about him in Abyssinia. They found him in the Mosque, and they sat with him asking him about his faith. A number of unbelievers from the Quraysh were sitting in their normal gathering places around the Ka`bah. When the Christians finished their questions, the Prophet called on them to believe in Islam and read some of the Qur'ān to them. When they listened to the Qur'ān, they were in tears. They immediately responded to the Prophet's call, declared their belief in God and that Muhammad was truly God's Messenger. They confirmed that he met the description they had of him in their Scriptures. When they rose to leave him, Abū Jahl and a number of the Quraysh unbelievers intercepted them, and reproached them, saying: "How ill advised you are! Your people sent you here to get information about this man; yet you hardly sat with him before you abandoned your faith and accepted his claims. We have never seen a more stupid delegation than yours." Members of the delegation replied: "We wish you peace, and we will not engage in futile argument with you. We follow what we choose and you follow what you choose. We have not been slow to take advantage of the good that has been offered us."

It is reported that this Christian delegation was from the people of Najran. God knows best which report is more accurate. It is also stated that it is they that are referred to in the Qur'ānic verses starting with: "*Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it...*" (Verse 52) However, I asked al-Zuhri

about these verses and of whom they speak. He said to me: "I have often heard from our scholars that they speak of Negus [may God be pleased with him] and his men, as also the verses in *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, which read: "*You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, "We are Christians." This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: "Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?" And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good; while those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the blazing fire.*" (5: 82-86)

Whichever group of people these verses speak about, the Qur'ān is referring the unbelievers to a particular event which they knew about. It, thus, presents to them an example of how people with clear vision receive the Qur'ān. How they respond to it, recognize its truth and how it accords with their own Scriptures. They do not allow any impediment, whether desire or pride, to stand between them and its truth. Furthermore, they are prepared to put up with any difficulty the ignorant put in their way.

"*Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it.*" (Verse 52) This is one of the signs confirming its truth. All divine revelations are consistent. People who have been familiar with earlier revelations recognize the truth of the latest ones and are ready to believe in them, knowing that they all stem from God.

"*And when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him.'*" (Verse 53) The Qur'ān is so clear that it needs only to be read out and these people who have had some experience of the truth know for certain that it comes from the same source. Thus, they are reassured, knowing that it comes from none other than God: "*It is the truth from our Lord. Indeed, even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him.*" Such submission to God is the central issue of every faith.

Those who have already submitted themselves to God, and who believe in the Qur'ān when it is recited to them "*are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity.*" (Verse 54) It is their perseverance with self-surrender to God in its fullest sense, which is the meaning of Islam. It requires rising above desire and carnal pleasure, in order to follow the true path. They gain a double reward because of their perseverance in the face of real adversity. The most difficult

adversity is that of contending with desire, lust and deviation. They have shown their patience in all such circumstances, as well as perseverance in the face of the unbelievers' ridicule and hardship.

Good believers, however, do more than that for they also "repel evil with good". This is indeed harder than perseverance in the face of physical and mental hardship. It means rising above personal pride and the desire to reply to ridicule and avenge physical injury. It also entails rising a step higher and adopting a benevolent attitude so as to answer what is foul with that which is decent. This is a height of greatness only achieved by good believers who feel that they are dealing with God, and who look for His acceptance. Hence, they forbear and persevere without losing their feeling of contentment.

"And having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them." (Verse 54) Here the *sūrah* mentions their being charitable with money after having emphasized their kindness to others. These two types of generosity, the personal and the financial, spring from the same origin, one which makes a believer rise over personal desire so as to treasure what is higher than earthly values. Both are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān.

People who are content with their faith also display another quality: namely, bearing patiently whatever hardship comes their way as a result of their self-surrender to God: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.'"* (Verse 55) Frivolous, idle talk kills time without benefit or knowledge to heart or mind. It is the sort of vulgar language that leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. It is the same whether it is addressed to someone who is present or spoken about when that person is absent.

Believing hearts do not engage in such idle talk, nor do they listen to it. They are preoccupied with the requirements of their faith, revelling in its light and purity: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it."* They are not provoked to reply in kind. They neither join those who are given to frivolous, idle talk nor enter into a slanging match with them. Instead, they leave malcontents alone, maintaining an attitude of decency and peace: *"To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you."* (Verse 55) Thus, they observe the highest standard of propriety, saying a kindly prayer, but making clear that they do not wish to share in such behaviour: *"We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk."* (Verse 55) We do not wish to waste our precious time, match them in their idle talk, or even listen to it.

This is a shining picture of the sort of reassurance faith gives. It shows the believer rising above frivolity, yet still retaining a kind and charitable posture. It draws a clear line to follow for whoever wishes to adopt Islamic manners. There is certainly no

participation with the ignorant. There is only an attitude that overlooks their faults, and wishes them well even though they are out to offend.

Who Receives Guidance

The Prophet did not need to do more than recite a portion of the Qur'ān in his effort to present his faith to followers of earlier revelations and they accepted it. Yet with regard to his own people, the Prophet made every endeavour to help them see the light of faith, yet God did not open their hearts to it because of what He knew of them. The Prophet could not give guidance to everyone he wished. It is certainly God who guides those whom He knows to have the right attitude and mentality making them ready to accept the faith: *“Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright.”* (Verse 56)

It is reported in the two most authentic anthologies of *Ĥadīth* that this verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle who looked after him and gave him much support, extending his protection to him against the Quraysh so that he could deliver his message in peace. Indeed, he put up with much pressure and hardship that involved the Quraysh's boycott of his own clan, the Hashimites, for three years when they were practically besieged in their own quarters. He did all this out of love for his nephew, Muhammad, and upholding the value of supporting one's kindred in the face of adversity. When his death was approaching, the Prophet urged him to believe in God and accept Islam, but God did not facilitate this for Abū Ṭālib because of something God, in His wisdom, knew.

Al-Zuhrī reports on the authority of Al-Musayyib ibn Ḥāzn al-Makhzūmī: “When it was clear that Abū Ṭālib was about to die, the Prophet went to see him and found Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh ibn Umayyah ibn al-Mughīrah with him. The Prophet said to him: “Uncle! Say: “There is no deity other than God,” and I will be able to give you good support in front of God.’ Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh said to him: Abū Ṭālib! Would you abandon the religion of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, your father?’ The Prophet continued to press him while the two unbelievers urged him to stick to his father's faith. The last thing he said was: “I follow `Abd al-Muṭṭalib's faith.’ He refused to say: “There is no deity other than God.’ The Prophet said: ‘I will certainly pray for your forgiveness unless I am ordered not to do so.’ God later revealed the verse that says: *“It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives.”* (9: 113) In reference to Abū Ṭālib, He also revealed the verse that says: *“Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright.”* (Verse 56) [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Muslim also gives another version on the authority of Abū Hurayrah: ‘When

death was approaching Abū Ṭālib the Prophet said to him: "Uncle! Say, "There is no deity other than God,' and I will be your witness to it on the Day of Judgement." He said: "If it was not for my fear that the Quraysh will shame me saying that it is only for the fear of death that I said it, I would certainly have pleased you by saying it. I would not do so except to give you that pleasure.' Then the verse was revealed saying: "*Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright.*" (Verse 56) Further reports by Ibn `Abbās, Ibn `Umar, Mujāhid, al-Sha`bī and Qatādah confirm that the verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ṭālib and that the last he said was: "I follow `Abd al-Muṭṭalib's faith.'

It is amazing just how serious and strict this religion of Islam is. Abū Ṭālib was the Prophet's uncle. He had supported and protected him against all who tried to harm him. Yet he was not to be one of the believers. This despite his great love of the Prophet and the Prophet's reciprocation of that love. Nor did the Prophet's desire that his uncle accept Islam make any difference. The point is that Abū Ṭālib gave all that he did to the Prophet out of paternal love and a sense of commitment to his kindred. Faith and its ties did not come into it. God was certainly aware of his motives; so he did not facilitate for him what the Prophet dearly wished. Thus, this aspect of guidance was not part of what the Prophet could have. It belongs to God's will and His evaluation of the situation. The Prophet's task is to deliver his message. Advocates of Islam in subsequent generations can only advise people. As for people's hearts, these belong to God. Whether a person chooses guidance or error depends on what God knows of their feelings and what is in their hearts.

Absurd Fears

The *sūrah* then mentions what they said to the Prophet by way of justifying their negativity to his message. Basically, they would lose their power *vis-a-vis* neighbouring Arab tribes which revered the Ka`bah, honoured its custodians and venerated its idols. Those tribes would collaborate against them, or perhaps other enemies from outside Arabia would drive them away from their land as they could no longer rely on support from neighbouring tribes. The Qur`ān clearly shows them where security lies and what they should fear, citing both their history and their current state of affairs. This follows what was stated earlier in the *sūrah* about Moses and Pharaoh. It takes the unbelievers on a further round showing them the true causes of ruin, not least ingratitude for God's blessings, denying His messengers, and turning a blind eye to His signs. This is followed by further verses that clearly outline true values. Thus, this present life, with all its pleasures, appear infinitesimal when compared to what God has in store for those who truly believe:

They say. 'If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.' Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us? (Verses 57-61)

Theirs is a superficial outlook, evaluating matters by earthly standards. That is why the Quraysh imagined, as many other people do, that following the guidance God has given exposes them to danger and tempts their enemies to attack them. They think it will deprive them of support and bring about their ruin: *"They say: If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) They do not deny that what the Prophet advocated is proper guidance, but they fear their enemies will tear them away from their land. They forget God, the only One who provides support and protection. They overlook the fact that no force on earth can overcome them when they enjoy God's support, and none can give them victory should God withdraw His support from them. Faith has just simply not touched their hearts. Had it done so, they would have had a different measure with which to appraise hostile forces and powers. Indeed, they would have had a completely different outlook, realizing that true security is found in enjoying God's support, and that fear results from lack of His guidance. For certain, following God's guidance is directly linked with real power and dignity. This is neither myth nor something said to comfort and reassure people. It is a profound truth which ensues from following God's guidance. For this brings people into harmony with the laws that govern the universe and all powers operating in it. It enables them to make use of such powers for the benefit of mankind. It is God who has created the universe and set in operation all its laws. Those who follow God's guidance can only derive strength from all this.

Where Real Security Lies

The guidance provided by God lays down a perfect and practical way of life. When it is implemented, it achieves victory on earth, in addition to leading to

happiness in the life to come. Its great distinctive feature is that it allows for no separation between what promotes happiness in this life and what achieves it in the life to come. It does not negate man's interest in this world for the sake of the world beyond. It joins them together to achieve goodness in the heart, society and life as a whole. Thus, this present life is seen as the time for planting while the next life is the time for harvesting. This can only be achieved through following divine guidance and addressing all actions to God, aiming to earn His pleasure.

Every time a community followed God's guidance, He ultimately gave it power, security and sovereignty. This after it completed its preparations to shoulder the trust of being in charge. This is a law that has never failed.

Many are those who fear the consequences of implementing divine law and following God's guidance. They fear the hostility and the scheming of those who are hostile to divine faith, the collaboration of enemy powers and their economic and general sanctions. But all these fears are based on myth, just like those of the Quraysh when they said to the Prophet: *"If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) When those very people eventually embraced God's guidance and implemented its rules, they were able to extend their authority over vast areas to the east and the west in less than a quarter of a century.

At the time, God gave them an answer that demonstrated the fallacy of their excuses. Who had given them security, and placed the Sacred Mosque in their land? Who was it who had made people from all over the world yearn to visit their land? Such visitors brought with them all manner of fruit and goods, presenting them in this sacred land while they were produced in unfamiliar areas and in different seasons.

"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us." (Verse 57) How could they fear being overpowered when they follow divine guidance. Is it not God who established the Sacred Mosque for them by the efforts of their first father, the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him)? Is it logical that the One who gave them security when they disobeyed Him would then leave them to be torn apart when they do what pleases Him? *"But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) They do not know where security lies and where fear comes from. They do not know that everything is determined by God Almighty.

If they really want to be spared aggression and loss of their lands, then they should avoid the causes of ruin: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58) To be ungrateful and show no thanks for God's blessings is the reason that causes people's ruin. The Quraysh had been given this sanctuary where they lived. They should beware of remaining ungrateful. If they

continue so doing, they will leave themselves open to God's punishment. They, thus, run the risk of being destroyed like the dwellers of those cities which they knew, the dwellings of destroyed communities which remain uninhabited: *"The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited."* (Verse 58) Their houses are still standing, telling of what happened to the people who took God's blessings for granted, never giving due thanks for them. They perished, leaving no offspring to inherit them. Thus, *"it is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

Yet God did not destroy those ungrateful communities without first sending a messenger to recite to them His revelations. This is the law to which He has committed Himself as an act of mercy: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59) The purpose behind sending a messenger into the main population centre is that it becomes a focal point from which the divine message is delivered to neighbouring areas and then further a field. Thus, no one will have the excuse of not knowing the divine message. The Prophet was sent to Makkah, the main centre in Arabia, warning its people of the fate that befell earlier communities which denied their messengers after receiving God's warnings. *"Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* Such people continue to deny God's revelations and messages, even though they know them to be true.

Yet all the enjoyments, pleasures, possessions and wealth that is available in this life, as well as the land where God has granted them power, the produce He has given them and all that mankind has ever enjoyed throughout life on earth is all but scanty when measured against what God has in store: *"Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason?"* (Verse 60)

This is the ultimate valuation. It applies not only to what they fear to lose of possessions, land or security, or to what God grants them of power, riches and enjoyment, or to what He gives to different people to enjoy. It is the ultimate valuation of all that this life brings, even when it is in its perfect state and made to last without interruption or consequences. It is all part of *"the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment."* It counts for little when compared with that which God has. For that is by nature *"much better and more enduring."* Hence the question is asked: *"Will you not use your reason?"* Comparing the two necessitates sound reasoning that knows the nature of both types. Hence the verse ends with this question. It alerts its addressees to the need to use their reason.

The round thus concludes with setting the two lives side by side, giving everyone the ability to choose: *"Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this*

world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us?" (Verse 61) On the one side we see those given a good promise by God and they find it on the Day of Judgement to be true. On the other, are those who took all the enjoyment life in this world could give, little and short as it is. They are forcibly brought forth on the Day of Resurrection for their deeds to be accounted for. The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are forced to come forward, afraid, dreading the outcome of the reckoning.

This is indeed the final word in reply to their earlier excuses expressing their fear that they will lose their land if they follow divine guidance.

Even if this were to come about, it would still be better than being forcibly brought before God for reckoning and reward. For, following divine guidance brings security and power on earth and rich reward in the hereafter. It is only those who are totally oblivious of the true nature of power in the universe, who are unaware of where security lies and what causes fear that abandon divine guidance. They are the losers who make a poor choice. They cannot avoid their inevitable ruin.

Disclaimers Availing Nothing

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round in which it portrays certain images of the Day of Judgement. It shows us the inevitable end to which associating partners with God leads:

On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped." They will be told: 'Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'What answer did you give to My messengers?' But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful. (Verses 62-67)

The first question is one of rebuke: *"Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?"* (Verse 62) God certainly knows that such alleged partners are not to be found on that day, and that those who made the claims about their alleged status know nothing about them, they cannot even reach them. The question is asked so as to disgrace them. Therefore, those who are asked will give no answer, because no

answer is needed or expected. They only try to exonerate themselves for having led others astray, preventing them from following divine guidance, as the elders of the Quraysh used to do with their subordinates. They will say: *“Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.”* (Verse 63)

We did not force them into error, nor had we any power over their hearts. They went astray knowingly and by choice, just like we did. *“We now disown them before you,”* having had nothing to do with the crime of leading them astray. *“It is not us that they worshipped.”* They worshipped idols, statues and other creatures. As for us, we did not present ourselves to them as deities, nor did they address their worship rituals to us.

This attempt at diverting the questions will not, however, benefit them. They are forced back to the central point, which is the farce of associating partners with God: *“They will be told: Call on those you alleged to be [God’s] partners.”* (Verse 64) If those alleged partners can do any good, now is the time to call on them. Hence, they are urged to appeal to them to come to their help. In their misery, they know all too well that calling on them is futile. But they have no choice but to do as they are told: *“They will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them.”* (Verse 64) Nothing else was expected and so the unbelievers are humiliated: *“They will then see the suffering [that awaits them].”* (Verse 64) They see it in this dialogue, just as they see it before them. Their inevitable end is one of great suffering.

When the image we see is at its climax, they are shown the guidance they continued to reject. This is the dear wish of anyone in that position on that great day. Guidance is available to them in this life if they will only take it up: *“If only they had been open to guidance!”* (Verse 64)

They are immediately returned to that dreaded scene: *“On that day, He will call to them and ask: What answer did you give to My messengers?”* (Verse 65) God certainly knows how they answered His messengers, but the question is put to them as a form of rebuke. In their state of total loss, they have no answer to give: *“But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions.”* (Verse 66) For *“blotted out”* the Arabic text uses the word *`amiyat*, which denotes blindness. Indeed, it imparts an air of non-seeing to the whole scene. It is as if all information has been blinded and cannot reach them, leaving them with nothing. They can neither ask nor answer any questions. They remain silent, totally lost.

“However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful.” (Verse 67) This is the opposite image. At the moment the unbelievers are at the height of their distress, the *sūrah* depicts the person who repents of his sins, believes in God and does righteous deeds. This is the person who

hopes to be successful. The choice is open to all and the time is there to make such a choice.

Where Praise Belongs

The *sūrah* makes it clear that everything is subject to God's will and His choice. It is He who creates and knows everything. To Him all matters of this life and the life to come are referred. All praise belongs to Him and His is the judgement on anything in this life. For to Him is the eventual return. They cannot choose for themselves or for anyone else. It is God who creates and chooses what He pleases:

Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return. (Verses 68-70)

These verses are stated by way of comment on those that precede them. Verses wherein the unbelievers state their fear about losing their land should they accept the guidance the Prophet presents, and concluding with their position on the Day of Judgement when they face the reckoning and have to answer for their idolatry and erring ways. These comments clearly state that they do not have a choice between security and fear. They also re-emphasize God's oneness and that all matters are returned to Him.

"Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases." (Verse 68) This is a fact people often forget or overlook. Indeed, God creates what He is pleased to create. No one can suggest anything to Him, whether increase or decrease in His creation. No one can introduce any amendment or modification on what He creates. He is the One who chooses whatever and whomever He pleases for the fulfilment of the functions, actions and duties He determines. No one can suggest to Him any candidate, or course of action to follow. None can propose to Him any statement or move. *"Never can they have such choice,"* whether in what relates to themselves or to anyone else. Everything large or small belongs to God alone.

If only this fact was established in people's minds and hearts, they would never feel frustrated. They would neither be elated with anything they receive nor be distressed by anything they miss out on. The choice is not theirs to make; it is God who chooses.

However, this does not mean that they should stop thinking or acting as they

wish. It simply means that they should accept what happens after they have done their best to consider, reflect, plan and act. They should accept it willingly. All they have to do is their utmost, leaving the results to God.

The unbelievers used to allege that God had partners when God alone is the Creator who chooses everything. He has no partner who has any share in His creation or in what He chooses: *“Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners.”* (Verse 68)

“And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open.” (Verse 69) He requites them according to what He knows of their situation, choosing for them what they deserve, be it truth or error.

“He is God, other than whom there is no deity.” (Verse 70) No partner does He have either in His creation or His choice. *“To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last.”* (Verse 70) Praise is due to Him for His choices, blessings, wisdom, planning, justice, grace and mercy. He alone deserves all praise. *“With Him rests all judgement.”* (Verse 70) His judgement is passed on all His servants, with none able to change any part of what He judges. *“And to Him you shall all return.”* (Verse 70) He then makes His final judgement on all.

Thus the *sūrah* gives us a feeling that God’s overpowering will is supreme throughout the universe. He is fully aware of everyone’s situation, whether hidden or open. Nothing is hidden from Him. To Him all shall return. How can they, then, associate partners with Him when they are under His control?

A Different Universe

The *sūrah* then takes the unbelievers on yet another round presenting them with scenes of the universe. In these, they are shown to remain oblivious to what God chooses for them and their life. It alerts them to two great universal signs, the night and the day, and the secrets they involve of what God chooses for His servants:

Say: “Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?” Say: “Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?” It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful. (Verses 71-73)

Because of their long familiarity with the succession of night and day, which are

sometimes called in Arabic, “the two new ones’, people forget their ever-renewing status. Rarely do they admire the sunrise or sunset, and only rarely do they reflect thoughtfully on the spreading of the day or the darkening that ushers in the night. They do not reflect on the act of grace that brings their succession with all that it involves of mercy and life renewal. The Qur’ān alerts them from the long familiarity that blunts their senses and invites them to reflect on these great universal scenes. It presents them with the possibility of either the night or the day lasting forever, and the terrible consequences of either eventuality. It is a fact that people seldom appreciate things until they lose them or fear that possibility.

“Say: Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?” (Verse 71) People miss the light of day when the winter nights become a little longer, and cannot wait for the bright sun when it disappears for a few hours behind clouds. What will they do then if they lose its light completely, with the night stretching perpetually over their world? This question supposes that they will remain alive in such an eventuality, when all life is in peril unless daylight is forthcoming.

*“Say: Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?”*¹² (Verse 72) People look for the shade when the hours of day stretch and become very hot, and they look forward to the coming of the night when the days stretch longer in the summer. They enjoy their repose and rest in the night. All creatures need the night when they can renew the energy they spend during the day. What would happen to them then, should they remain alive, if the day were endlessly perpetuated until the Day of Judgement? Indeed, all life could perish in a day that never ends.

Everything in this universe is determined according to a careful measure, and every little detail is planned. *“It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful.”* (Verse 73)

The night is for rest and repose, and the day for work and activity. It is all part of God’s grace. Indeed everything people have is by the grace of God, so that *“you may have cause to be grateful,”* for the blessings and kindness He has granted you. One of these blessings is the succession of night and day. So also are all laws of nature which

¹² We should note that the verse speaking of the night being perpetuated forever ended with *‘Will you not listen?’*, while the verse speaking of the other possibility of an endless day, concluded with *‘Will you not see?’* Both are suitable qualities, because hearing is the important faculty at night, while during the day the primary faculty is sight. This is just an example of how the Qur’ānic style makes extensive use of harmony.

God has chosen to set in operation, reflecting His knowledge and wisdom.

Then follows a quick image of the Day of Judgement presented in a rhetorical question about those beings the unbelievers alleged to be partners with God. The *sūrah*, thus, confronts them with their false claims, showing them to be absolutely without substance:

On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: 'Produce your evidence!' They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them. (Verses 74-75)

This image of the day when they are called and the question about God's alleged partners was drawn earlier. It is now repeated to confirm it once more in connection with the scene that draws a witness from each community. This witness is the prophet sent to each community, and he will state what reception he and his message were given. The Arabic word *naza`nā*, which is rendered as 'We shall draw' signifies a particularly strong movement. Yet the meaning intended here is that he is called out from among them, standing where he could see and be seen by them all. As they face this witness, they are required to produce their evidence for what they believed in. They have no evidence and cannot on that day persist in their denials. "They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone." (Verse 75) Indeed, all truth in its complete purity belongs to God alone. "And all the falsehood they invented will forsake them." (Verse 75) Whatever falsehood they invented is useless. It cannot find them, nor can they find it at the time when they need it most.

Thus the comments on the story of Moses and Pharaoh are concluded. These comments took us on a long trip looking at hearts, souls, worlds, events and great scenes, moving repeatedly between the life of this world and the world beyond. It went far and wide in the universe, and deep into the soul, and far back in history, looking at the laws that govern life and the universe. Yet it always remained in full harmony with the central theme of the *sūrah*, and with the two main stories it relates: the one about Moses and Pharaoh and the other about Qārūn, or Korah. We have already looked at the first story and we will now look at the second.

Ungrateful for God's Blessings

Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: 'Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. (76)

Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' (77)

Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.' Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins. (78)

﴿٧٦﴾ إِنَّ قَرُونَ كَانَ مِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَى فَبَغَى عَلَيْهِمْ وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْكُنُوزِ مَا إِنَّ مَفَاتِحَهُ لَتَنُوءُ بِالْعُصْبَةِ أُولَى الْقُوَّةِ إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ قَوْمُهُ لَا تَفْرَحْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْفَرِحِينَ

﴿٧٧﴾ وَابْتَغِ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا وَأَحْسِنْ كَمَا أَحْسَنَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ وَلَا تَبْغِ الْفَسَادَ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

﴿٧٨﴾ قَالَ إِنَّمَا أُوتِيْتُهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عِنْدِي أَوَلَمْ يَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَهْلَكَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنَ الْقُرُونِ مَنْ هُوَ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُ قُوَّةً وَأَكْثَرُ جَمْعًا وَلَا يُسْأَلُ عَنْ ذُنُوبِهِمُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ

And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune!' (79)

But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.' (80)

Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself. (81)

By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: 'Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success.' (82)

We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (83)

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done. (84)

فَخَرَجَ عَلَى قَوْمِهِ فِي زِينَتِهِ قَالَ
الَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا
يَلَيْتَ لَنَا مِثْلَ مَا أُوتِيَ قَارُونُ إِنَّهُ لَذُو
حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٧٩﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَيَلَكُمْ
ثَوَابُ اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ لِمَن ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ
صَالِحًا وَلَا يُلْقَاهَا إِلَّا الصَّابِرُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

لَخَسَفْنَا بِهِ وَبِدَارِهِ الْأَرْضَ فَمَا كَانَ
لَهُ مِنْ فِئَةٍ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَا
كَانَ مِنَ الْمُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

وَأَصْبَحَ الَّذِينَ تَمَنَّوْا مَكَانَهُ بِالْأَمْسِ
يَقُولُونَ وَيَكْفُرُونَ اللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ
لِمَن يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ وَيَقْدِرُ لَوْلَا أَن
مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا لَخَسَفَ بِنَا وَيَكْفُرُونَ لَا
يُفْلِحُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

تِلْكَ الدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ نَجْعَلُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا
يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوًّا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فَسَادًا
وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

مَنْ جَاءَ بِالْحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُ خَيْرٌ مِنْهَا وَمَنْ
جَاءَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ فَلَا تُجْزَى الَّذِينَ عَمِلُوا
السَّيِّئَاتِ إِلَّا مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* opened with the story of Moses and Pharaoh showing the power of government and authority and how, when coupled with injustice, tyranny, disbelief and abandonment of God's guidance, it ended in failure and ruin. Now the *sūrah* tells us about Qārūn, or Korah, portraying the power of wealth and knowledge and how, when coupled with arrogance and ingratitude, this leads to the same end. In essence, the *sūrah* depicts those values that make wealth and luxury practically insignificant when compared with faith and righteousness, as also with moderation in enjoying life's pleasures without arrogance or corruption.

The Qur'ān does not specify the time and place where these events took place. It only tells us that Qārūn belonged to Moses' people and that he was unjust to them. Did this happen in Egypt before the Israelites left? Or was it after their departure but during Moses' lifetime? Or did it take place after Moses' death? There are some reports which suggest that Qārūn was Moses' cousin and that the events related in the *sūrah* took place during Moses' lifetime. Other reports add that he even wronged Moses and was party to a plot that sought to accuse Moses of adultery. Qārūn was to receive a bribe in return. God showed that Moses was innocent and allowed him to punish Qārūn, who was swallowed into the earth.

We do not need any of these reports, nor do we need to know the exact time and place of these events. The story, as told in the Qur'ān, is sufficient to serve its purpose and to establish its own values. If its time, place and circumstances could have benefited its purpose, the Qur'ān would have provided these details. Therefore, we will discuss here only what the *sūrah* imparts, without reference to other reports.

Sound Advice Met with Arrogance

Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.' (Verses 76-78)

This is how the story begins, naming its main character, Qārūn, and his community, "the people of Moses", as well as the way he treated his people, which was

unjust. It also tells us right at the very start the reason for such injustice, namely wealth: *"We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men."* (Verse 76) It goes on to explain the events, statements and reactions involved.

Qārūn belonged to Moses' people. God had given him abundant wealth, described in the *sūrah* as *"treasures"*, a term that signifies a hoarded surplus of money which is taken out of circulation. Indeed the mere carrying of the keys to these treasures represented a heavy burden even for a band of strong men. It was because of his wealth that Qārūn treated his people unjustly. The *sūrah* does not specify the form of injustice dealt out by Qārūn, leaving it indefinite so as to include all types of injustice. He might have taken their land and property unfairly, as is often done by those who use power and wealth to deprive others of their rights. He might also have deprived them of their fair share in his property. God has given the poor their rightful share in the property of the rich, so that wealth does not circulate exclusively among the rich while all around them the poor are in desperate need. When this happens, corruption becomes manifest. Qārūn might equally have been guilty of other forms of injustice.

However, some in his community tried to stop such injustice, counselling him to maintain the path that earns God's pleasure. Thus, he would be able to enjoy his wealth and partake of the pleasures it provides, but in moderation and within reason. More importantly, this path requires wealthy people to watch God in all their actions, for it is He who granted them all they have. They too will have to account for their deeds on the Day of Judgement: *"His people said to him: Do not exult (in your riches); for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption."* (Verses 76-77) This outlines the values and features that sum up the divine way of life and distinguish it from all other ways.

"Do not exult" in your riches nor be so proud of them as to forget the One who has granted you this blessing. Do not neglect to give due thanks. Do not treat your money as an object of extreme delight so that you become insolent and arrogant in your treatment of other people. *"For God does not love those who are exultant."* (Verse 76) His compatriots remind him of God and the fact that He does not love those who are infatuated with wealth, showing arrogance and using its power to humiliate others.

"Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world." (Verse 77) Here we see the right balance that is characteristic of the divine way of life. It makes the wealthy look forward to

the life to come hoping to be among the successful on the Day of Judgement, without depriving him of his share of enjoyment in the present life. In fact, the divine system urges him to do so as a duty, so that he does not discard life's pleasures and look down upon the life of this world.

God has created the pleasures and luxuries of this life so that people may enjoy their share of these, and work towards obtaining them. Thus human life is set on the way to progress and man fulfils the task God has assigned him on earth. The only proviso is that in such enjoyment of pleasures they should seek the reward of the hereafter. Thus, the wealthy neither deviate from the road leading to heaven, nor neglect their duties as a result of their riches. When they seek the hereafter, their enjoyment of pleasure becomes a form of gratitude to God and proper acceptance of His blessings. Thus it is, in turn, a way to earn more reward. The divine way of life achieves harmony and balance in human life. It enables man to progress spiritually without suffering deprivation or wasting natural resources.

"Do good just as God has done good to you." (Verse 77) The money you have is a gift God has granted you out of his kindness. Hence, it should be received with gratitude and used for good purposes, and doing kindness to other people.

"Do not seek to spread corruption on earth." (Verse 77) Corruption takes many forms including injustice, indulgence in pleasure, paying no heed to God's guidance or to the hereafter, doing what causes envy and hatred, spending money wastefully and blocking its proper use. *"For God does not love the ones who spread corruption,"* in the same way as He does not love those who are exultant.

Such was the honest advice given to Qārūn by his people. Yet in one sentence his reply carried every meaning of corruption: *"Answered he: I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have."* (Verse 78) I have got this wealth and amassed it through the knowledge I have; all by my own endeavour. So, why are you trying to tell me how to use what is my private property?

This is the attitude of one who chooses to be oblivious to the source of the blessings he has been given. He has been blinded by his wealth. Such people are common, seen in all societies. Many a rich person believes that his knowledge and effort are the only means by which he has amassed his wealth. Hence, he is not to be questioned about the way he uses his wealth, what he spends or for what purpose, whether it be for good or foul. No thought does he entertain of God or earning His pleasure.

Islam accepts private ownership and appreciates people's efforts in this regard, provided that they remain within the realm of what is permissible. While it does not belittle the importance of private effort, it stipulates a certain method of spending money just like it stipulates rules and methods that must be observed in acquiring it.

Its system combines balance and moderation. It does not deprive anyone of the fruits of their enterprise, but at the same time it does not approve either unrestricted indulgence or miserly hoarding. It gives the community its dues in such wealth, as well as the right to watch and monitor the methods of obtaining, investing, spending and enjoying wealth.

Qārūn, however, did not listen to his people, nor did he appreciate the blessings granted by his Lord. He did not abide by the divine method, but instead turned away arrogantly. Therefore, a warning was issued to him for his insolence and arrogance: *"Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78) If he believed himself to be powerful and rich, God had in the past destroyed communities that were far more powerful and wealthy. He should have known this, because it is such knowledge that saves man from destruction. Let him know, then, that he and all guilty people like him are worth nothing in God's sight. They are not even worth questioning about their sins. They are neither the arbiters nor the witnesses: *"The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78)

Dazzling Appearances

In just this first scene we see arrogance at its height. We also see sound advice ignored in favour of corruption and ingratitude.

The second scene shows Qārūn appearing before his people, decked out in all the splendour his wealth could afford him. Some of them are so dazzled by this that they express their keenest wish to have something similar. Envious, they believe that he has been given a great fortune. Others, however, listen to the voice of faith, rising above the lure of wealth and Qārūn's pomp. Speaking in full confidence, they remind the first group of the facts:

And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune! But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you!' God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.' (Verses 79-80)

Here, we see some people infatuated with the luxuries that the present life can offer, ready to do what they can in order to have their share of it. Others feel that faith is a greater blessing, and hope for God's reward. Thus the value of wealth is set

side by side with the value of faith: *"Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune.'"* (Verse 79)

The luxuries and splendour that life can give have always captivated people so that they neither look beyond these nor seek any higher or nobler value. They do not ask what price the owner has paid for such luxuries, nor by what means he has obtained them. They covet it whether it is wealth, position or honour. They swarm like flies to it. It does not matter to them whether the price is too high, the method too wicked or the means too lowly.

By contrast, those who maintain their bond with God have a different standard of values by which they look at life. Their souls are too noble to let worldly considerations get the better of them. The dignity they feel as a result of their faith prevents them from yielding to the pressures exerted by others. Such people are the ones endowed with real knowledge and the right sense of proportion: *"But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.'"* (Verse 80) God's reward is far better than all this pomp, and what God gives is better by far than all that Qārūn has. To have such insight into things puts people into a nobler category: they are the ones who persevere in adversity and resist temptation. They are the ones who remain patient despite being deprived of what they might wish for. When they prove their patience in the face of adversity and their perseverance in following the way God has laid down, He elevates them to a level that enables them to rise above all that life on earth can offer. Thus do they seek only God's reward, and with confidence and reassurance.

A Fitting End

When the attraction of material splendour and pomp is at its greatest, God intervenes in order to end the test and save the weaker elements of the community from such temptation. Thus arrogance is utterly destroyed in the third, decisive scene of this story:

Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself. (Verse 81)

In such a short sentence a huge event is described: *"We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling."* Thus Qārūn went into the earth over which his pride had swelled. He is shown to be weak and powerless, incapable of using his wealth or position to any advantage.

With him the severe test that had claimed other people was also brought to an end. The blow he received made them turn back to God, lifting the cover of error that had earlier blinded them. The final scene of the story is thus portrayed:

By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success. (Verse 82)

These very people are shown expressing their gratitude to God for not granting them what they had wished for only the day before. They are full of pleasure that God had not given them what He did Qārūn. They recognized that wealth is not an indication of God's pleasure. He gives in plenty or in small measure to any of His servants for reasons other than being pleased or displeased with them. Had wealth been evidence of God's pleasure, He would not have punished Qārūn so severely. Wealth is merely a test which can bring about a terrible end. They also realized that unbelievers will never be successful. Although Qārūn did not say anything to suggest that he was an unbeliever, nonetheless his arrogance and claims that his knowledge brought him all his wealth made them classify him as one. They saw that his end was one normally met by unbelievers.

The curtains are drawn with a victory for believing hearts achieved through God's direct will. Faith is seen to be far weightier than any worldly consideration. The comments that now follow are, therefore, most apt:

We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (Verse 83)

It was to the hereafter that the people endowed with true knowledge referred. They have the right sort of knowledge which gives things their proper value. The hereafter, then, with its high rank in the universal order, and its happy life is granted to "those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption." (Verse 83) No thought of arrogance is ever entertained by them. Nor do they seek to stress their own importance. Indeed such self-consciousness takes a secondary position, well below their consciousness of God and the supreme value they attach to the way of life He has laid down. They look at this earthly life, its concerns, values and standards with little interest. Corruption is far from their minds. Hence, they are given high rank in the hereafter: "The future belongs to the God-fearing," who fear God and seek His pleasure, dreading to incur His wrath.

In the life to come reward for all actions is given in accordance with the rule to which God has committed Himself: a good action will be multiplied manifold and rewarded with that which is much better. Conversely, a bad action is given only its like. This is a gesture of God's grace to mankind: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done."* (Verse 84)

4

The Ultimate Return

He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return. Say: 'My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error.' (85)

You could never hope that this book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace. Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. (86)

Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. (87)

Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return. (88)

إِنَّ الَّذِي فَرَضَ عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ
لَرَأْدُكَ إِلَىٰ مَعَادِ قُلِّ رَبِّيَ أَعْلَمُ مَن جَاءَ
بِالْهُدَىٰ وَمَن هُوَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَمَا كُنتَ تَرْجُو أَن يُلْقَىٰ إِلَيْكَ
الْكِتَابُ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ فَلَا
تَكُونَنَّ ظَهِيرًا لِّلْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَلَا يَصُدُّكَ عَن آيَاتِ اللَّهِ بَعْدَ إِذْ
أُنزِلَتْ إِلَيْكَ وَادْعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ وَلَا
تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

وَلَا تَدْعُ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا
هُوَ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ لَهُ الْحُكْمُ
وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

The Prophet and the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* has told its stories and given its direct comments on them both. Now it addresses the Prophet and the small band of believers who followed him when he was still in Makkah. This address is made when the Prophet had been driven out of his home town, was being chased by his people who wanted to kill him, and had not yet reached his new base, Madinah. He was at al-Juhfah, close to Makkah where the

danger was very close. His eyes frequently turned to his home town which he so dearly loved. He only left it for the sake of his message. Otherwise, Makkah was the place where he had spent all his life, the place of his memories, and where his relatives lived.

In this desperate situation he is told: *"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return."* (Verse 85) God, who has given you the Qur'ān and the task of delivering His message will not abandon you, or allow the unbelievers to chase you out of your place and home town. He will not allow them to impose their will on you or to oppress the believers with you. He has made the Qur'ān binding on you so as to give you support through it at the time He judges to be right. If you are driven out today and being chased in all directions, you will certainly return with larger support.

God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to give Muhammad, His servant, this true promise at such a stressful time, so that he could go along his way comforted, confident and reassured by God's promise. He does not entertain the slightest doubt that God's promise will come true.

Indeed, God's promise applies to all those who follow the same way. Anyone who suffers hardship and adversity for God's sake and bears this with patience and perseverance will ultimately be given support against the oppressors. God will take over the battle on their behalf when they have given all that they can in fulfilment of their duty.

"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return." (Verse 85) He had formerly returned Moses to the land from where he fled, and with his return he saved the oppressed community and destroyed Pharaoh and his noblemen. It was the God-fearing who ultimately triumphed. Hence, you also, Muhammad, should go along your way, leaving the question of judgement between you and your people to God Almighty: *"Say: My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error."* (Verse 85) Leave the matter to God and He will requite both those who follow right guidance and those who remain in error.

That He had assigned the Qur'ān to you and made it binding on you was an act of mercy and grace. It could not have occurred to you at any time that you would be the person chosen to receive this trust. It is, indeed, a noble position to which you could not have aspired before it was granted to you: *"You could never hope that this Book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace."* (Verse 86)

This confirms that the Prophet had no aspirations to be entrusted with God's message. He was chosen by God who creates and chooses as He pleases. To be a messenger of God is too high a position for any one to hanker after, unless God chooses that person and gives him the necessary preparations. It is an aspect of grace

given to the Prophet and made available to all humanity which is addressed by this message. It is grace that is granted to the chosen few, not to any aspirant. Many of the Arabs and Jews living nearby were longing for the last promised message to be given before the end of time. But God, who knows best to whom to assign His message, chose for it someone who never aspired to it. He knew that he was well prepared to receive its unfailing goodness.

His Lord bids him then not to lend support to the unbelievers. He warns him of allowing the unbelievers or anyone else to turn him away from God's revelations. He sets the pure faith based on God's absolute oneness against idolatry and idolaters.

Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return. (Verses 86-88)

This is the last word in the *sūrah* separating the way God's Messenger follows from that of the unbelievers. It clearly marks out the way for the Prophet's followers, which remains the true way until the Day of Judgement. It is the final word given at the time the Prophet was immigrating for God's sake, his journey separating two clearly distinct periods of history.

"Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers." (Verse 86) There can never be any mutual support or cooperation between believers and unbelievers when their two ways and codes are so widely different. One group is God's party and the other Satan's party. On what could they cooperate?

"Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high." (Verse 87) Unbelievers always try to turn the advocates of faith away from their task, using all means and methods. The believers, however, always stick to their way, paying no heed to those who oppose them or try to divert them. They have God's revelations with which they have been entrusted.

"But continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord." (Verse 87) It should always be a direct, clear call that allows for no ambiguity or equivocation. It is a call to God, not to any bond based on national or narrow interests. It does not seek the fulfilment of any desire. Whoever wishes to adopt this message pure and simple should do so. Those who want something else should know that the way to that end is different.

"And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God." (Verse 87-88) This rule is stated twice in succession. The first warns

against associating partners with God. The second warns against adopting any deity alongside God. It is this rule that separates clarity from confusion with regard to faith. It is on this rule that the whole structure of faith is based: its morality, values, duties and legislations. It is the pivot around which every directive and legislative order turns. Hence, it is always stated first.

Such emphasis is then repeated in a rather different way: *“There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return.”* (Verse 88)

“There is no deity other than Him.” No submission is made to anyone else. His is the only power and the only refuge. *“Everything is bound to perish except Himself”* Indeed everything else will die and perish: wealth, position, authority, power, life and its comforts, the whole earth, the heavens and all creatures in them, as well as the entire universe we know or do not know about. All will perish and only God, the Everlasting, will remain. *“With Him rests all judgement.”* He judges as He pleases. No one is party to His judgement, and none can impede or abrogate His verdict. Whatever He wills shall be. *“And to Him you all shall return.”* There can be no escape from Him or His judgement.

Thus concludes the *sūrah* that shows God’s will taking direct action, protecting the divine message and destroying tyranny. It concludes with restating the basic concept of faith: God’s oneness and His transcendent authority. Therefore, the advocates of the divine message should go along their way confident and reassured.