

SŪRAH 33

Al-Aḥzāb

(The Confederates)

Prologue

This sūrah describes a practical aspect of the first Muslim community's life over a period stretching from shortly after the Battle of Badr in year 2 to shortly before the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Peace Treaty four years later. In this respect it gives a true and direct description of the Muslim community in Madinah. It refers to many of the events that took place during that period and outlines certain regulations which it either initiates or endorses for the fledgling Muslim community.

The comments on events and regulations are relatively few, constituting only a small portion of the *sūrah*. Indeed, these comments serve only to link these events and regulations to the central concept of faith and submission to God. This is how we read the opening verses: *"Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verses 1-4) Early on, the *sūrah* comments on some social regulations: *"This is written down in God's decree. We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muḥammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers."* (Verses 6-8) A little further on we are shown the attitude of the weak-hearted when the confederate tribes laid siege to Madinah: *"Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support."* (Verses 16-17) A piece of

social legislation that went against the familiar practice in pre-Islamic days is followed by the comment: *“Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter.”* (Verse 36) Finally, we have a statement that sets the human mission against a universal background: *“We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish.”* (Verse 72)

The *sūrah* depicts a period of time when the Islamic character of both the community and the state had begun to take shape but had not yet developed sufficiently or acquired its full authority. That took place after Makkah fell to Islam and people began to embrace the new faith in large numbers allowing the Muslim state and its new system to establish their roots.

The *sūrah* undertakes an important part of social reorganization imparting the distinctive Islamic features of family and community life, outlining their basis in Islamic teachings. It also modifies or outlaws certain practices and traditions, bringing all these within the framework of the Islamic concept of life and society.

It is within the overall discussion of these situations and regulations that the confrontation with the confederate tribes and the Qurayzah expedition are discussed. We are informed of the attitudes of the unbelievers, the hypocrites and the Jews during these events, their schemes to weaken the Muslim community and how they always tried to undermine Islamic moral standards, even in Muslim homes. It was precisely this sort of derogatory behaviour that aimed at undermining the Muslim community either through direct military action and a corresponding defeatism or through efforts to erode the social and moral fabric of Muslim society. Moreover, these events left clear marks on the Muslim community to the extent that certain social aspects and particular concepts required modification. Thus the *sūrah* appears to be an integrated unit with a common thread running through its subject matter. Moreover, the time frame around which it works also constitutes a unifying factor.

The *sūrah* begins with a directive issued to the Prophet that he must fear God and pay no heed to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. On the contrary, he should obey God and rely on Him alone. This opening relates all that the *sūrah* includes to the central principle that forms the basis of all Islamic teachings, legislation, its social system and morality. It is the principle that formulates the Islamic concept of God and the requirements to submit to Him, implement the code He has outlined and place all our trust in Him.

A decisive word is then given on certain social traditions and practices. This starts with outlining a basic fact: *“Never has God put two hearts in one man’s body.”* (Verse 4) This alludes to the fact that man cannot live in two different universes or follow two

different systems. Should he do so he would stumble and become a hypocrite. Since he has only one heart, he must look up to One God and follow one system to the exclusion of all other things, familiar and well established as these may be.

The *sūrah* immediately moves on to abolish the practice of *ẓihār*, which involves a man swearing to his wife that she is to him like his mother's back, meaning that she is as unlawful to him to marry as his mother: "*Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers.*" (Verse 4) It makes clear that these are mere words that cannot establish a fact. They do not make a mother out of a wife; the wife remains the man's wife. It follows this with abolishing the practice of child adoption: "*Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons.*" (Verse 4) Thus inheritance within an adopting family is no longer valid. (We will discuss this in detail later on.) In contrast, the *sūrah* establishes the overall authority God assigns to His Messenger over all Muslims, placing his authority above what they may wish for themselves. It further establishes a sense of motherly relation between the Prophet's wives and all believers: "*The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers.*" (Verse 6) The practical effects of the bond of brotherhood established between Muslim individuals shortly after the migration of Makkan Muslims to Madinah are terminated, so as to restrict inheritance and the payment of blood money to real kinsfolk: "*Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated for God's sake.*" (Verse 6) Thus, earlier temporary measures are abrogated in favour of natural and permanent ones.

The following comment makes clear that the new system derives from the Islamic code and from God's ruling. It is written in God's book and established in the covenant made with all prophets, particularly those of them endowed with stronger resolve. In this way the Qur'an gives Islamic legislation and principles their appropriate place within people's thoughts and consciences.

This then outlines the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part shows God's great favour as He repelled the attacking forces of the confederates who besieged Madinah. It describes the confrontation with confederate forces and the Qurayzah Expedition vividly, painting successive images that show inner feelings, outward action and dialogue between groups and individuals. Within the overall picture of the battle and its events relevant directives are issued at the proper junctures. Furthermore, the reporting of events is followed by comments aimed at establishing sound values for the Muslim community. The Qur'ānic method is to paint the action exactly as it took place, stating both apparent and inner feelings, and bringing these into sharp relief. It then gives believers its verdict about their actions, criticizing any deviation and praising what is sound and correct. It also gives directives to avoid

error and confirm right practice and values. It relates all this to God's will, human nature and universal laws.

Thus, the discussion of the confrontation and the battle starts with the following verse: *"Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do."* (Verse 9) In the middle of the discussion, the following facts are highlighted: *"Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support."* (Verses 16-17) *"In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God."* (Verse 21) The discussion is finally concluded thus: *"God will surely reward the truthful for having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 24)

Alongside its discussion of events the *sūrah* shows how the true believers looked at the situation as it developed and portrays the contrasting feelings of the hypocrites. This enables us to distinguish sound values from false ones: *"The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions'."* (Verse 12) *"When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.' This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."* (Verse 22) The outcome is then given in decisive terms: *"God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty."* (Verse 25)

When this second part is concluded we are introduced to the decision that gave the Prophet's wives a choice. They had asked him for a more comfortable standard of living after the Muslim community became more prosperous, having gained much booty as a result of the siege of Qurayzah. They were asked to choose either the fine things of life or relinquish these in preference for pleasing God and His Messenger and earning a better position in the life to come. They all chose to be with God and His Messenger, preferring this to all worldly riches. They were also told that they would have double the reward if they maintained the path of goodness and remained God-fearing, and double the punishment should they commit any gross indecency. The *sūrah* explains that this doubling of reward and punishment was a result of their noble status, their relation with the Prophet and the revelation and recitation of the Qur'ān in their own homes, as well as the wisdom they received from the Prophet. This third part of the *sūrah* concludes with an outline of the reward given to all believers, men and women.

The fourth part makes an indirect reference to the case of Zaynab bint Jahsh, a cousin of the Prophet belonging to a noble Qurayshi family and her marriage to Zayd ibn H̱ārithah, a former slave given as a gift to Muḥammad long before his prophethood. The first thing it says about Zayd makes it clear that all believers, men and women, are subject to God's decision in any matter; they do not even have a say in their own personal business. It is God's will that determines everything, and they have to submit to it fully: *"Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error."* (Verse 36)

This marriage soon ends in divorce and the situation provides a practical example for the abolition of the effects of child adoption. God's Messenger himself is chosen to provide this example, because adoption was a deeply rooted tradition in the Arabian environment, and its practical effects were very difficult to break. Hence, God's Messenger was to bear this new burden as part of his mission to shape the new Muslim society: *"Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. God's will must be fulfilled."* (Verse 37) A clear statement of the nature of the relation between the Prophet and the believer then follows: *"Muḥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets."* (Verse 40)

This part concludes with clear directives to the Prophet and the believers: *"Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 48)

The fifth part begins by making a statement on the status of a woman who gets divorced before the consummation of her marriage. It moves on to organize the Prophet's marital life, stating which women are lawful for him to marry and which are not. This is followed by directives defining the relation between Muslims and the Prophet's homes and wives, both during his lifetime and after his death. It requires them not to mix with any men other than their fathers, sons, brothers, paternal and maternal nephews, other women and their slaves. It states that those who sought to disparage the Prophet and his wives would face severe punishment; they would be punished both in this life and the life to come. This gives us an impression that the hypocrites and others frequently resort to such disparagement.

Then follows a directive to the Prophet's wives, daughters and all Muslim women, to draw some of their outer garments over their bodies. *"This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted."* (Verse 59) It warns the hypocrites and others similar to them that they may be made to evacuate Madinah in a similar way as the two Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā` and al-Nadīr were made to do, or that they might be dealt with in the same way as the Qurayzah Jews. All this implies that these people

resorted to foul methods to harm the Muslim community in Madinah.

The final part of the *sūrah* mentions that people frequently ask about the Last Hour. Such questions are answered simply by saying that its knowledge belongs to God. They only need to know that it could be very close. This is followed by an image of the punishment meted out on the Day of Judgement. *“On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: ‘Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.’”* (Verse 66) It also describes how unbelievers then feel towards their leaders for having led them astray: *“And they shall say: ‘Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord! Give double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.’”* (Verses 67-68)

The *sūrah* ends on a highly powerful note that leaves a strong and lasting effect: *“We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verses 72-73)

This conclusion illustrates the heavy burden placed on humanity in general and the Muslim community in particular, since it is this community that shoulders this great trust of faith as well as its advocacy and implementation at individual and community levels. This is in perfect harmony with the particular atmosphere of the *sūrah*, and with the nature of the social system Islam lays down.

1

False Relations Abolished

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. (1)

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّبِيُّ اتَّقِ اللَّهَ وَلَا تُطِعِ الْكَافِرِينَ
وَالْمُنَافِقِينَ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا
حَكِيمًا ﴿١﴾

Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. (2)

وَاتَّبِعْ مَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ ۚ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (3)

وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ وَكِيلًا
﴿٣﴾

Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers. Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right

مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِرَجُلٍ مِّن قَلْبَيْنِ فِي
جَوْفِهِ ۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ أَزْوَاجَكُمُ اللَّائِي
تُظَاهِرُونَ مِنْهُنَّ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ ۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ
أَدْعِيَاءَكُمْ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ قَوْلُكُمْ
بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَقُولُ الْحَقَّ وَهُوَ يَهْدِي
السَّبِيلَ ﴿٤﴾

path. (4)

Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight. If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your protégés. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (5)

The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers. Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated [for God's sake]. None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree. (6)

We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muhammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. (7)

God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers. (8)

أَدْعُوهُمْ لِأَبَائِهِمْ هُوَ أَقْسَطُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ
فَإِنْ لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا آبَاءَهُمْ فَاِخْوَانُكُمْ فِي
الدِّينِ وَمَوَالِيكُمْ وَلَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ
فِيمَا أَخْطَأْتُمْ بِهِ وَلَكِنْ مَا تَعَمَّدَتْ
قُلُوبُكُمْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٤﴾

النَّبِيُّ أَوْلَىٰ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ
وَأَزْوَاجُهُ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ وَأُولُوا الْأَرْحَامِ
بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلَىٰ بِبَعْضٍ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ
مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ إِلَّا أَنْ
تَفْعَلُوا إِلَىٰ أَوْلِيَائِكُمْ مَعْرُوفًا كَانَ
ذَلِكَ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَسْطُورًا ﴿٥﴾

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ مِيثَاقَهُمْ وَمِنْكَ
وَمِنْ نُوحٍ وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَى ابْنِ
مَرْيَمَ وَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُمْ مِيثَاقًا غَلِيظًا ﴿٦﴾

لَيَسْئَلَنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَنْ صِدْقِهِمْ وَأَعَدَّ
لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

Setting the Scene

“Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust.” (Verses 1-3) Thus begins the *sūrah* which regulates certain aspects of the social and moral life of the newly born Muslim community. It is a beginning that tells us something about the nature of the Islamic system and its underlying principles. Islam is not merely a set of directives and admonitions, or manners and moral values, or a collection of laws and regulations, or traditions and practices. All these are included in Islam, but they do not make up Islam in its totality. Islam means submission to God’s will, a willingness to obey its orders, observe its prohibitions, looking up to no other system and adopting no other way. It is essentially an acceptance that mankind are subject to the overall divine code that governs their life and the earth they live on, as well as other planets and stars, and indeed governs the whole universe including the realms we know nothing about. It is also a certainty that as humans the only choice we should make is to do what God orders, refrain from what He forbids, take what He makes available and await the results He brings about. This is the basic rule on which are then established laws, regulations, traditions, manners and moral values. All these represent the practical manifestation of faith and submission to God. Islam is a faith that lays down a code which puts in place a specific social order. In their close interaction, these three make up Islam.

It is in this light that we should understand that the first directive in this *sūrah*, concerned as it is with the regulation of the Islamic social order, is addressed to the Prophet, requiring him to remain God-fearing. To stand in awe of God and remember that He watches over us, makes us alert, urging us to abide by every rule and implement every directive: *“Prophet! Have fear of God.”* (Verse 1)

The second directive prohibits yielding to the unbelievers and hypocrites, following their suggestions or adopting their views and methods: *“and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites.”* (Verse 1) This directive is given before the order to follow God’s revelation, which suggests that the pressures brought to bear by the hypocrites and the unbelievers in Madinah and its surrounding area were very strong. Nevertheless this directive remains applicable in all situations, warning the believers against following the hypocrites and the unbelievers, particularly in questions of faith, law and social order. This guarantees for the Muslim community that its system remains pure, unadulterated by directives other than God’s.

No one should be deceived by the wealth of knowledge and experience the unbelievers and hypocrites appear to possess, as were some Muslims in periods of weakness and deviation from the Islamic system. It is God who has perfect knowledge and infinite wisdom. The Islamic system is His own choice, established by His knowledge and wisdom: *“God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.”* (Verse 1)

However rich human knowledge and experience appear to be, they are only scanty.

The third direct order given at the outset is: *“Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord.”* (Verse 2) This defines the authority that issues directives that must be followed. The phrasing of this directive is particularly inspiring: the revelation is made *‘to you’* specifically, and its source is *‘your Lord’*, both of which add a specially personal element to the need to follow these orders even though they must be obeyed because they are issued by the One commanding obedience. This verse ends with the comment: *“for God is well aware of all that you do.”* (Verse 2) His revelation is based on full awareness of you, your deeds and motives.

The last order in these three opening verses states: *“Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust.”* (Verse 3) There is no need to worry about others or their scheming against you. You should place all your concerns in God’s hands and He will look after them in accordance with His knowledge and wisdom. Trusting to God alone is ultimately what gives us complete reassurance. It helps us to know our limitations and leave what lies beyond our ability to the One who controls and conducts everything.

Thus, along with the instruction to disobey the unbelievers and the hypocrites we have three directives: to always remain God-fearing, to follow His revelation and to place our trust in Him alone. It is these three elements that provide the advocates of Islam with all the resources they need. Furthermore, it clearly defines the system of Islamic advocacy: from God, for God’s sake, and relying on God: *“for God alone is worthy of all trust.”* (Verse 3)

These opening directives end on a strong note that refers to practical situations: *“Never has God put two hearts in one man’s body.”* (Verse 4) Since it is only one heart, it needs one system providing one complete and full concept of life. It requires one standard to give consistent values and judge events and actions. Otherwise, it will be pulled apart and will have different motives and considerations. It could easily fall into the trap of hypocrisy.

Man cannot have one source for his manners and morality, another for his laws and legislation, a third for his social and economic values, and a fourth for his art and philosophy. Such a mixture does not produce a man with a sound heart: it only produces a confused medley that lacks solid form or basis. A person with faith cannot truly hold to his faith and abandon its values and requirements in any situation in life, serious or not. He cannot say a word, take an action, formulate a concept, make a decision unless he remains within the limits established by his faith, which must always be a reality in his life. This is because God has not given him more than one heart, one law and one standard of values. A person of faith cannot say of anything he does: ‘I am doing this in my personal capacity and I am doing that

in my Islamic capacity', as we frequently hear politicians, businessmen, academics and others say. Since he is one person with one heart, he has one faith and one standard that govern all that he does and says in any and every situation. With this one heart he lives as an individual, a family man, a member of the community, a citizen of the state and the world; he lives in public and private, employer or employee, ruler or ruled, in situations of comfort or distress; having the same values and standards at all times: *"Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verse 4)

In short, we have a single system outlined by the same revelations and submitting to the One God. A single heart cannot worship two deities, serve two masters and move in two directions.

No False Relations

The *sūrah* now moves on to abolish certain practices in order to make the family the basis of the community: *"Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers. Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right path. Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight. If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 4-5)

In pre-Islamic days a man would say to his wife, 'you are to me like my mother's back', which meant that she was forbidden for him to marry. From that moment sex between them was regarded as incestuous. Yet she remained suspended: she was neither divorced such that she could marry another man, nor married having a lawful relationship with her husband. This was one aspect of the cruelty to which women were subjected in pre-Islamic days. As Islam started to reorganize social relations, making the family the basic social unit where each new generation grows in a sound environment, it attached great importance to removing such injustices against women and to giving family relations a basis of fairness and an easy, relaxed atmosphere. One of its new laws was *"Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers."* (Verse 4) The words a man utters do not change facts. Mothers and wives are totally different, and the nature of a relationship cannot be changed by the uttering of a word. Therefore, a pronouncement like this, or *ḡihār*, did not make a wife permanently forbidden to her husband as if she were his mother.

Some reports suggest that *ḡihār* was outlawed by other verses in *Sūrah* 58, The Pleading, when Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit pronounced *ḡihār* against his wife Khawlah bint Mālik ibn Tha`labah. She complained to the Prophet, saying: "Messenger of God! He

took my money and used me throughout my years of strength, and I have given him children. Now when I have grown old and can no longer bear children, he makes me like his mother!" The Prophet said to her: "I am afraid you are no longer lawful to him." [Related by Ibn Mājah, al-Ĥākim and al-Bayhaqī]. She repeated her complaint several times. God then revealed the following verses:

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. Even if any of you say to their wives, 'You are to me like my mother's bodies,' they are not their mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This you are enjoined to do, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (58: 1-4)

Thus, *zihār* is treated as a temporary prohibition of marital relations; it is neither permanent nor a divorce. It must be atoned for by the freeing of a slave, or fasting for two consecutive months, or feeding 60 needy people. When such atonement is made full marital relations can be resumed, retaining the practical facts as they are. The statement in the present *sūrah* is very clear: "Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers." (Verse 4) The family is thus safeguarded against this unfair practice, something that represented an aspect of the maltreatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabian society.

Adoption Abolished

Similarly, the practice of adopting a child reflected flaws in the foundation of the family and society. Although chastity was highly valued by the Arabs who, as is widely known, took pride in their ancestry, there were other phenomena that moved in the opposite direction. These were generally accepted, but not in the prominent families and clans. Indeed, some individuals could not tell who their fathers were. Furthermore, if a man liked one of these 'off-spring', he could adopt him, calling him his son, and the two would then inherit each other. The same applied to some people whose real fathers were even known. In this respect, they too could be adopted. This was particularly so with captives, when children or adolescents were taken captive in a raid on a clan or during a war. If a man then wished to adopt such a captive, he

would declare such adoption, and the captive would then be known as a son of his adopting father. He would then enjoy the privileges of being a son and was required to fulfil his duties as a son.

One of these was Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, of the Arab tribe of Kalb. He was taken captive when young in pre-Islamic days, then sold to Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām who gave him as a gift to his aunt Khadījah. When she was married to the Prophet, she gave him Zayd as a gift, but Zayd's father and uncle appealed to him for Zayd's release. The Prophet then decided to give him a choice, and he chose to remain with the Prophet. Therefore, the Prophet set him free and adopted him as his son. He was then called Zayd ibn Muḥammad. When Islam started several years later, he was the first man to accept Islam from among the lower classes in society.

Subsequently, when Islam began to set family relations on their natural basis and strengthen family bonds, purging these of any distortion, it abolished adoption, making the true blood relation the only cause for a son and father to be so called. Therefore, the Qur'ān states: *"Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths."* (Verse 4) Words can neither change reality nor can they establish a substitute relation to that of blood, which allows for hereditary qualities resulting from conception, pregnancy and birth, and which then allows for natural feelings to be engendered. The fact is that a child is seen as a living part of its natural parents.

"But God says the truth and He alone shows the right path." (Verse 4) God says the absolute truth which admits no falsehood whatsoever. It is only right that family relations should be established on facts of marriage and birth, not on mere words. God indeed shows the right path that is in harmony with sound, undistorted human nature and which cannot be substituted by any man-made system. Needless to say, the word of truth stated by God is far stronger and more solid.

"Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight." (Verse 5) It is only fair that a child should be called by its father's name: it is fair to the father from whom the child comes into existence, and fair to the child to take his father's name, inherit and be inherited by him, cooperate with him and provide a continuation of the lineage that relates him to his ancestors. It is also fair to put everything in its proper place and establish every relation on its natural basis, allowing no child or parent to be deprived of any special or distinctive quality. Moreover, it is only fair that no one other than the natural parent should shoulder the parental responsibility or enjoy its benefit, and no one other than a natural child should have the rights and duties of being a son or daughter.

Islam provides a system which ensures balance in family relations and gives the family a strong and real foundation. At the same time, it gives society a solid

foundation that combines reality with nature. Any system that ignores the natural family is bound to fail, because it is weak and based on forgery.

Since there was much confusion in family relations in pre-Islamic Arabian society, and because of the prevalent sexual permissiveness that led to some family relations being unknown, Islam made things easy, providing certain concessions. For example, should the true father of an adopted child be unknown, the child still had its place in the Muslim community; a relation based on brotherhood in faith and patronage: *“If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges.”* (Verse 5) This is, then, a moral relation that does not create practical commitments, such as inheritance and sharing in the payment of blood money. In pre-Islamic days, these family commitments were extended so as to apply to relations through adoption. The purpose of creating this moral relation is to give the formerly adopted child a bond in society after the abolition of adoption. The reference in the verse to those adopted children whose fathers were unknown gives us a clear picture of the prevalent confusion in family relations and the loose morality that held sway in pre-Islamic Arabia. Islam put an end to all this by establishing a society on the basis of the family unit which, in turn, is based on real marital and blood relations.

When Muslims have carefully endeavoured to call everyone by their fathers' names, they are not to be blamed for cases where they are unable to establish the true facts: *“You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend.”* (Verse 5) This benevolent attitude results from the fact that God forgives and bestows mercy on His servants, and He never charges them with more than they can reasonably do: *“God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verse 5)

The Prophet placed a strong emphasis on the need to establish real parenthood so that the new Islamic system could put an end to the social chaos that prevailed before Islam. Those who suppress true relations are warned that they could be considered as unbelievers. A report by al-Ṭabarī mentions that Abū Bakr once recited this verse and a man called `Abd al-Raḥmān declared: *“I am one of those whose fathers are not known. I am your brother in faith.”* The report quotes `Abd al-Raḥmān's son, `Uyaynah, as saying of his father: *“By God! I believe that had he known that his father was an ass, he would have declared himself the son of that ass.”* The Prophet says: *“Whoever knowingly claims to be the son of someone other than his father is not a believer.”*

Ending Brotherhood

Having abolished adoption, the *sūrah* moves on to put an end to the brotherhood institution, established by Islam following the migration of the Muslims from

Makkah to Madinah. This was a practical measure to address the situation of those immigrants who had abandoned their relations and property in Makkah, and the situation of Muslims in Madinah whose relations with their families were severed as a result of their embracing Islam. At the same time, the Prophet's personal authority over all believers is emphasized and given a higher position than all blood relations, while his wives are to be seen as the spiritual mothers of all believers: *"The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers. Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated [for God's sake]. Nonetheless, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree."* (Verse 6)

When the Muhājirīn, i.e. the Muslims from Makkah, left for Madinah, they had to leave everything behind, preferring their faith to their relatives, clans, property, livelihood, friends, and life memories. They abandoned all this for their faith. Their migration in this way, abandoning all that was dear, including their own families, provided an example of how faith grips one's whole being. They provided the practical example of the integrity of the Islamic personality, confirming the Qur'ānic statement: *"Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verse 4)

A different situation, however, arose in Madinah as Islam began to infiltrate homes. The result was that some members of a family became Muslims while others did not. Relations between people were often severed; family bonds became shaky; and there was an even greater disruption of social bonds. The Muslim society was still in its infancy and the Muslim state was still more of an idea than a solid regime with lasting roots.

This gave the new faith a strong moral impetus that superseded all emotions, traditions, social institutions and bonds, making faith the only bond that unites hearts. At the same time it united the small units that separated from their natural roots in the family and the clan, thus replacing the ties of blood, family, interest, friendship, race and language. It united these Muslim units into a well-knit and coherent block that showed a high degree of solidarity, cooperation and mutual care. This was not initiated by legislative texts or government orders; instead, it was based on an inner impetus that was stronger than anything that was familiar in ordinary human life. This provided the basis for the rise of the Muslim community, which could not be otherwise established.

The Muhājirīn [i.e. the migrants from Makkah] were welcomed in Madinah by its Muslim residents, the Anṣār. They were made so welcome that the Anṣār opened their hearts and homes for them and gave them shares in their property. In fact they were so keen to make the Makkan Muslims feel welcome in their new abode that the Anṣār drew lots to decide who would take each of the Muhājirīn: this because there

were only a few of the latter as compared with the great many Anṣār who were keen to host them. They, in fact, shared with the Muhājirīn everything they had, willingly and with warm hearts that betrayed no trace of avarice or showing off.

The Prophet established a bond of brotherhood between individuals of the Muhājirīn and individuals of the Anṣār, naming each two brothers, thereby giving rise to a unique bond in the history of mutual solidarity between believers in the same ideology. Indeed this brotherhood superseded the blood relationship, as it included rights of inheritance and other commitments between relatives. The resulting moral impetus was strong because the Prophet's Companions took to the new bond seriously, in the same way as their attitude towards everything Islam laid down. This impetus was essential to the rise of Islamic society and its protection, providing all, if not more than what could have been provided by a state that enjoyed stability and well established laws. Thus, the bond of Islamic brotherhood was necessary to safeguard and consolidate the new Muslim community in its exceptional and highly complicated circumstances. A similarly strong impetus is essential for the rise of any community facing equally unusual circumstances, until it begins to have a stable state with well defined laws that give it normality.

Although Islam welcomes such a strong impetus, it nonetheless wants Islamic society to have a foundation that relies on the normal resources its people can give in ordinary situations, not on what people are ready to sacrifice in exceptional circumstances. This is essential because once an emergency is over, people should return to their normal and ordinary standards. Therefore, once circumstances in Madinah began to settle after the Battle of Badr when the new Muslim state became more stable, social conditions and means of livelihood improved, and all were able to earn their living, the Qur'ān amended the system of brotherhood. It abrogated the commitments attached to it, which normally arise from family and blood relations, but retained it as a moral bond of brotherhood that can be reactivated in reality whenever needed. Thus, the Muslim community returned to a normal situation in which inheritance and other binding commitments are limited to blood relatives as they have always been in God's original decree and natural law: *"Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated (for God's sake). None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree."* (Verse 6)

The Prophet's Authority

At the same time, it re-emphasized the Prophet's authority over all Muslims, which gave him a higher claim than that of blood, indeed one that is higher than one's own wishes and desires: *"The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they*

have on their own selves." (Verse 6) Islam also makes the Prophet's wives spiritual mothers to all believers: "*and his wives are their mothers.*" (Verse 6)

The Prophet's authority over all Muslims is comprehensive. Inevitably, this includes charting a complete way of life for them. They cannot choose for themselves anything other than what he chooses for them in accordance with what God reveals to him. In an authentic *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "No one of you is a true believer until his preferences are subject to my message." This is so pervasive as to include their own feelings whereby the Prophet (peace be upon him) is dearer to them than their own lives. Thus, believers do not prefer their own safety to his, and they do not place anyone ahead of him in their hearts. Authentic *ahādīth* speaking of this are many, and here we give just two examples: "None of you attains to true faith until I am dearer to him than his own soul, his property, offspring and all mankind." "Umar said to the Prophet: 'By God! I love you more than I love anyone other than my own self.' The Prophet said: 'No, Umar! I should be dearer to you than your own self.' Then Umar rejoined: 'Messenger of God! I love you more than anyone else, including myself.' The Prophet said: 'You have got it now, Umar.'

This is not some mere utterance of a word. It is a standard, an extremely high one that people cannot attain to without possessing a special touch that opens a sublime horizon before their hearts, purging them of the self love that is deeply rooted in their very natures. Indeed, human beings love themselves far more than they can imagine. We may think that we have managed to bring our self love under control. Yet should anyone say a derogatory word to us, we will react as though we have been bitten by a snake. So much so that we may not be able to rein in our reactions, and even if we do restrain ourselves sufficiently so as not to react visibly, we will still feel the injury keenly. We may be willing to sacrifice our lives for what we believe in, and we may claim that we are free of self interest, but we still find it impossible to accept insults or derogatory criticism. Once more, this is a high standard which is difficult to attain without long training, constant alertness and the seeking of God's help. This is what the Prophet called the greater *Jihād*, or striving for God's cause. We need only to remember that even Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb needed instruction by the Prophet to open his pure heart to it.

The Prophet's authority over the believers also includes their commitments. An authentic *ḥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "I am the patron of every believer, both in this life and in the life to come. Read, if you will, [God's revelation]: *The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves.*" (Verse 6) Therefore, whoever leaves behind any property, his kinsfolk will inherit him, but if he leaves an outstanding debt or neglected children, let them come to me, for I am his guardian." What the *ḥadīth* implies is that the Prophet would repay the debts of any Muslim who died leaving outstanding debts and no repayment facility, and that

he would also look after any young children until they came of age.

Apart from this, life was to run normally, without the need for any special charge or exceptional moral impetus. Yet the close relationship between good friends remained intact after the abrogation of the brotherhood system. A Muslim may make a bequest in favour of a close friend, or give generous gifts during their lifetimes: *"None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends."* (Verse 6)

All these measures relate to the original bond, making it clear that this has always been God's will as recorded in His permanent decree: *"This is written down in Gods decree."* (Verse 6) Thus people are reassured as they rely on an original and natural status to which all laws and systems refer. Life then takes its natural line, moving easily and comfortably, with no need to overcharge oneself as happens during special times of emergency or to meet exceptional needs. After all, such periods are few and of limited duration in human life. Yet should the need arise, the overflow can always be tapped.

A Binding Covenant

Referring to God's decree that He willed it to be the permanent system, the *sūrah* refers to His covenant with prophets in general, and with the Prophet Muḥammad and other messengers of firm resolve in particular. This covenant commits them to deliver God's message containing His code for human life, and to implement and advocate it among the communities to which they were sent. When they have done so, people will then be responsible for their own attitudes towards divine guidance, and for their belief or disbelief. They are now accountable for themselves having no justification whatsoever for not following divine guidance after God's messengers delivered His message to them: *"We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muḥammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers."* (Verses 7-8)

If It is a single covenant or pledge that remained the same from Noah to Muḥammad, the seal of all prophets (peace be upon them all). It is one covenant, one system and one trust taken up by each and every one of them. The following two verses outline the covenant in general: *"We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets."* A specific reference to the Messenger who received the Qur'ān and whose message is addressed to all mankind then follows: *"from you, [Muḥammad],"* and then makes mention of other messengers endowed with strong and firm resolve. These were the ones entrusted with the major divine messages prior to Muḥammad, the last one: *"and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary."* Then the *sūrah* describes the covenant itself: *"From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge."* The

description of the covenant here gives it a tangible, solid form. It was indeed a pledge between God and the individuals He chose to receive His revelations, deliver His messages and establish His code, being all the time faithful to what He had entrusted them with.

“God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them].” The truthful are the believers. They are the ones who said the word of truth and believed in the message of truth. All others are liars because they believe in and say what is false. Describing the believers as truthful here is significant as it carries a clear meaning. They will be asked about the truth on the Day of Judgement in the same way as a teacher asks a top student to state the answer which earned him high marks. It is a question asked to honour those being asked. It informs all those present that the truthful deserve to be honoured on the great day when all mankind are assembled.

As for those who believed in what is false and made false claims concerning the most important issue of all, the issue of faith, a totally different result awaits them: *“He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers.”* (Verse 8)

Rallying All Hostile Forces

Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do. (9)

They came upon you from above and from below you. Your eyes rolled [with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats, and confused thoughts about God passed through your minds. (10)

That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken. (11)

The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.' (12)

Some of them said: 'People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.' And a group of them asked the Prophet's permission to leave, saying: 'Our houses are exposed,' while they were not exposed. They only

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا أَذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ
عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ جَاءَتْكُمْ جُنُودٌ فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ
رِيحًا وَجُنُودًا لَمْ تَرَوْهَا وَكَانَ اللَّهُ بِمَا
تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٩﴾

إِذْ جَاءُوكُم مِّن فَوْقِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنكُمْ
وَإِذْ زَاغَتِ الْأَبْصَارُ وَبَلَغَتِ الْقُلُوبُ
الْحَنَاجِرَ وَتَظُنُّونَ بِاللَّهِ الظُّنُونًا ﴿١٠﴾

هُنَالِكَ ابْتُلِيَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَزُلْزِلُوا
زِلْزَالًا شَدِيدًا ﴿١١﴾

وَإِذْ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ
مَّرَضٌ مَّا وَعَدَنَا اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَتْ طَائِفَةٌ مِّنْهُمْ يَا أَهْلَ يَثْرِبَ لَا
مُقَامَ لَكُمْ فَارْجِعُوا وَيَسْتَأْذِنُ فَرِيقٌ مِّنْهُمْ
النَّبِيَّ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّ بُيُوتَنَا عَوْرَةٌ وَمَا هِيَ
بِعَوْرَةٍ أِنْ يُرِيدُونَ إِلَّا فِرَارًا ﴿١٣﴾

wanted to run away. (13)

Had their city been stormed from all sides, and had they been asked to renounce their faith they would have done so without much delay. (14)

They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for. (15)

Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while.' (16)

Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support. (17)

God is indeed aware of those of you who hold others back; and those who say to their brethren: 'Come and join us,' while they themselves hardly ever take part in the fighting, (18)

begrudging you all help. But then, when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death. Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues, begrudging you all that is good. Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring

وَلَوْ دُخِلَتْ عَلَيْهِم مِّنْ أَقْطَارِهَا ثُمَّ سُئِلُوا
الْفِتْنَةَ لَأَتَوْهَا وَمَا تَلَبَّثُوا بِهَا إِلَّا يَسِيرًا

﴿١٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ كَانُوا عَاهَدُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ قَبْلُ لَا
يُوَلُّونَ الْأَدْبَرَ^{١٥} وَكَانَ عَهْدُ اللَّهِ
مَسْئُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

قُلْ لَنْ يَنْفَعَكُمُ الْفِرَارُ إِنْ فَرَرْتُمْ مِنَ
الْمَوْتِ أَوِ الْقَتْلِ وَإِذَا لَا تُمْتَعُونَ إِلَّا
قَلِيلًا ﴿١٦﴾

قُلْ مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَعْصِمُكُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ إِنْ
أَرَادَ بِكُمْ سُوءًا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ رَحْمَةً^{١٧} وَلَا
يَجِدُونَ لَهُمْ مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلِيًّا وَلَا
نَصِيرًا ﴿١٧﴾

﴿١٨﴾ قَدْ يَعْلَمُ اللَّهُ الْمَعْوِقِينَ^{١٨} مِّنْكُمْ
وَالْقَائِلِينَ لِإِخْوَانِهِمْ هَلُمَّ إِلَيْنَا وَلَا
يَأْتُونَ الْبَاسَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٨﴾

أَشِحَّةً عَلَيْكُمْ^{١٩} فَإِذَا جَاءَ الْخَوْفُ رَأَيْتَهُمْ
يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ تَدُورُ أَعْيُنُهُمْ كَالَّذِي
يُغْشَى عَلَيْهِ مِنَ الْمَوْتِ فَإِذَا ذَهَبَ
الْخَوْفُ سَلَقُوكُمْ بِالسِّنَةِ^{٢٠} حِدَادٍ أَشِحَّةً
عَلَى الْخَيْرِ^{٢١} أَوْلَيْتِكُمْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنُوا فَأَحْبَطَ اللَّهُ

their deeds to nothing. That is all too easy for God. (19)

They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn. Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you. Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting. (20)

In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God. (21)

When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.' This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God. (22)

Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God. Some have already fulfilled their pledges by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least. (23)

God will surely reward the truthful for having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (24)

God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared

أَعْمَلُهُمْ ۖ وَكَانَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ﴿١٩﴾
تَحْسَبُونَ الْأَحْزَابَ لَمْ يَذْهَبُوا ۗ وَإِنْ يَأْتِ
الْأَحْزَابُ يَوَدُّوا لَوْ أَنَّهُمْ بَادُونَ فِي
الْأَعْرَابِ يَسْأَلُونَ عَنْ أَنْبَائِكُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ
كَانُوا فِيكُمْ مَا قَتَلُوا إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٢٠﴾

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ
لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ
اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

وَلَمَّا رَأَى الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْأَحْزَابَ قَالُوا
هَذَا مَا وَعَدَنَا اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ ۖ وَصَدَقَ اللَّهُ
وَرَسُولُهُ ۗ وَمَا زَادَهُمْ إِلَّا إِيمَانًا وَتَسْلِيمًا ﴿٢٢﴾

مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ رِجَالٌ صَدَقُوا مَا عَاهَدُوا
اللَّهَ عَلَيْهِ ۖ فَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ قَضَىٰ نَحْبَهُ ۖ وَمِنْهُمْ
مَّن يَنْتَظِرُ ۖ وَمَا بَدَّلُوا تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

لِيَجْزِيَ اللَّهُ الصَّادِقِينَ بِصَدَقِهِمْ
وَيُعَذِّبَ الْمُنَافِقِينَ ۚ إِنِ شَاءَ أَوْ يَتُوبَ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿٢٤﴾

وَرَدَّ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِغَيْظِهِمْ لَمْ يَنَالُوا
خَيْرًا ۚ وَكَفَى اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الْقِتَالَ ۚ

the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty. (25)

He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. (26)

And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things. (27)

وَكَانَ اللَّهُ قَوِيًّا عَزِيزًا ﴿٢٥﴾

وَأَنْزَلَ الَّذِينَ ظَاهَرُوهُمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ
مِنْ صَيَاصِيهِمْ وَقَذَفَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الرُّعْبَ
فَرِيقًا تَقْتُلُونَ وَتَأْسِرُونَ فَرِيقًا ﴿٢٦﴾

وَأَوْرَثَكُمْ أَرْضَهُمْ وَدَيْرَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ
وَأَرْضًا لَمْ تَطْعُوهَا ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ
كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢٧﴾

Overview

In the early days of Islam, it was in the midst of events that the Muslim personality was moulded. With every new day and every new situation, this personality came closer to maturity, presenting its distinctive features. Furthermore this Muslim community, reflecting the total sum of its members' personalities, also had its own unique qualities and values that distinguished it from all other communities. At times, the predicaments the Muslim community faced presented its members with an acid test that separated the true from the false and which also proved everyone's true mettle.

Qur'anic revelations were given either before or after a particular test, describing events and throwing light on the difficulties involved. This brought into focus the attitudes taken as the event unfolded, and what intentions and motives were behind these attitudes and feelings. The Qur'an then addressed people's hearts as they lay open to the light, with no screen to cover them. It touched them at precisely the right spot so as to ensure the right response. This was a continuous educational exercise making use of events and experiences, one after the other, day after day.

The Muslims were not given the Qur'an in its totality in one go so that they could study it, understand its directives, observe its prohibitions and fulfil its commands. Instead, God put them to a variety of tests because He is fully aware that man does not attain full maturity except through practical experience and it is this that drives lessons home and moulds characters. The Qur'an then tells people the truth about

what has taken place and its significance. Thus, it issues its directives only when people have gone through the ordeal.

The experiences the Muslims went through during the Prophet's lifetime were truly remarkable. For it was a period of direct contact between heaven and earth, reflected in both events and words. When a Muslim went to bed he was aware that God watched and heard him, and that his every action, word, thought or intention could be exposed and commented upon by the Qur'ān. Similarly, all Muslims felt a direct contact with their Lord: if they faced a problem or a hardship, they hoped that the gates of heaven would open with a ruling that removed their difficulties. It was a period when God, in His majesty, said to one or the other: 'You have done, intended, declared or said this and that; or you must do this or should refrain from that.' It is infinitely awesome that God should address Himself to a particular person when that person and all who live on earth, and indeed the whole earth with all that it contains, do not represent more than a tiny particle in His glorious kingdom. Hard as we may find it to reflect on that period and its events we can hardly imagine how it was in practice. This is indeed beyond imagination.

Yet God did not leave the education of the Muslims and the moulding of their personalities to be accomplished through feelings only. He put them to practical tests necessitating their interaction. He is infinite in His wisdom, and He knows best the creation He has created. We need to reflect long on this wisdom so that we can better understand what we may encounter of tests during our own lives.

Difficulties in Abundance

The present passage analyses one of the great events in the history of the Muslim community, indeed, one of its hardest tests. The event was the attack launched by confederate forces on Madinah, which took place in the fourth or fifth year of the Prophet's migration.¹ A thorough reading of this passage and the way it portrays the events and comments on them, highlighting certain scenes and bringing out certain thoughts and feelings experienced by some Muslims, will enable us to understand how God shaped the personality of the Muslim community through both the events themselves and the Qur'ān. In order to understand this we will explain the Qur'ānic text after we have briefly related the events as given in books on the Prophet's life and history. This will demonstrate the great difference between how God relates historical events and the narrative man gives of them.

¹ Although biographers of the Prophet differ on whether this event was in year 4 or 5, it was most probably in year 5, as a careful reading of the events during the Prophet's lifetime indicates. – Editor's note.

An Encounter with Allied Forces

Muḥammad ibn Ishāq relates: “The beginning of events leading to the Encounter of the Moat started when a number of Jews, including Sallām ibn Abī Ḥuqayq ibn Akḥṭab and Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, all of the al-Naḍīr tribe, and Ḥūwathah ibn Qays and Abū `Ammār of Wā’il, as well as others of both Jewish tribes travelled to Makkah and spoke with the Quraysh. It was these Jews who worked hard to forge the alliance against God’s Messenger. When they met the Quraysh elders they called on them to join them in fighting the Prophet. They said to them: ‘We will join forces with you until we have exterminated him and his followers.’ The Quraysh put the following question to them: ‘You, the Jews, are the people who follow the first divine book, and you know the issues over which we differ with Muḥammad: which is better, our religion or his?’ Those Jewish elders answered: ‘Your religion is better than his, and you are closer to the truth than him.’ It is concerning these people that God revealed in the Qur’ān:

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. Have they, perchance, a share in (God’s) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone. Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him. Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell. (4: 51-55)

The Quraysh were very happy with this answer and expressed a readiness to join the Jews in battle against the Prophet.

“Then this Jewish delegation travelled to meet the leaders of the Ghaṭafān, another leading Arabian tribe, and they urged them to fight the Prophet, assuring them that they would be joining them as well as the Quraysh. The Ghaṭafān agreed and they all marshalled their forces. The Quraysh marched under the leadership of Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarb, while the Ghaṭafān were led by `Uyaynah ibn Ḥiṣn of the Fizārah clan, al-Ḥārith ibn `Awf of Murrah and Mis`ar ibn Rukhaylah of Ashja`.

“When the Prophet heard of what they had plotted, he ordered the digging of a moat to prevent their entrance into Madinah. The Prophet himself and his Companions worked hard to dig the moat. However, a number of hypocrite men put little effort into the work. They would put up a show of working, but then sneak off, going back home, without asking permission from the Prophet. By contrast, if any good believer needed to leave for some urgent matter, he would mention this to the

Prophet and ask his permission to absent himself for a while. The Prophet gave such people leave. Any of these would then go home, attend to the emergency and return, knowing that he would be rewarded by God for such work. Concerning the believers, God revealed in the Qur'ān: *"They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (24: 62) And He also said about the hypocrites who sneaked away: *"Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them."* (24: 63)

"When the Muslims had completed digging the moat, the Quraysh arrived and encamped at a place called Manna` al-Asyāl near Rawmah. They numbered 10,000 including their slaves and affiliates as well as those who followed them from the people of Kinānah and Tihāmah. The Ghaṭafān and their followers from Najd marched to their camping place near Uḥūd. The Prophet marshalled his troops, numbering 3,000, camping at a spot where their backs were to Mount Sala`, with the moat separating them from their attackers. He also ordered that the women and children should stay in sheltered homes.

"Ḥuyay ibn Akḥṭab, God's enemy, went up to Ka`b ibn Asad, the Rabbi of the Jewish tribe of Qurayzah, who had signed, on behalf of his tribe, a friendship treaty with the Prophet, pledging support to the Muslims. Ḥuyay wanted him to break his treaty and join the attacking forces. He used all his powers of persuasion and brought much pressure to bear on Ka`b, all of which culminated with a pledge of honour that should the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān withdraw without defeating Muḥammad, he would come and join Ka`b in his fort and share his fate with him. At this point Ka`b ibn Asad decided to join the attacking forces, thereby breaking his treaty with the Prophet.

"This was an extremely testing time for the believers. People were truly in fear of the outcome. The enemy was also preparing for a pincer attack from the front and the rear. Inevitably, the believers started to have all types of thoughts and doubts, while the hypocrites capitalized on the situation by speaking out against the Prophet. One of them, Mut`ib ibn Qushayr, said: 'Muḥammad used to promise us that we would eat of the treasures of the Persian and Byzantine Emperors, while today we feel unsafe to go to the toilet.' Another, Aws ibn Qayzī, said to the Prophet in front of a number of his clansmen: 'Messenger of God! Our homes are vulnerable. So permit us to leave and go home, as our homes are outside Madinah.'

“The Prophet remained steadfast with his Companions, while the idolaters laid siege for nearly a month, without war breaking out between them, except for exchanges of arrows across the moat.

“When things got worse and the Muslims were in real trouble, the Prophet sent a message to `Uyaynah ibn H̄iṣn and al-Ĥārith ibn `Awl, the Ghaṭafān leaders offering them one third of Madinah’s crops if they withdrew their forces. This was agreed and written down, but neither signed nor witnessed. It was essentially a proposed arrangement. When the Prophet wanted to conclude the agreement, he called in Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the Chief of the Aws tribe, and Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the Chief of the Khazraj tribe, consulting them on his proposal. They asked him: ‘God’s Messenger! Is this something you like and we would willingly do it, or something God has instructed you to do and we have no choice but to do it, or something you are doing for our sake?’ He said: ‘I am doing it for you, because I see that the Arabs are united against you, attacking you from all sides. I only want to break the unity of your enemy for the present,’ Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh said: ‘Messenger of God, when we were, like these people, idolaters, unaware of any religion other than the worship of idols, they did not hope to get a single fruit from Madinah except as a present from us or if we sold it to them. Now that God has honoured us with Islam and guided us to it and has given us the honour and strength of having you in our midst, would we willingly give them our goods? We have no need for this agreement. We will give them nothing but the sword until God makes His judgement between us.’ The Prophet replied: ‘The matter is entirely up to you.’ Then Sa`d took the sheet on which the agreement was written and erased the writing. He said: ‘Let them do their worst.’”

Thereafter, the Prophet and his Companions remained steadfast despite their fear of their enemies and the impending pincer attack they were sure would come.

Then a man from the Ghaṭafān called Nu`aym ibn Mas`ūd came over to the Muslim camp and said to the Prophet: “Messenger of God, I am now a Muslim and my people are not aware of the fact. You may give me whatever orders you wish.” Keenly aware of the situation the Muslims were in, the Prophet said to Nu`aym: “If you join us, you increase our number by one. But try, if you can, to dissuade the people from attacking us. War is but a successful trick.” [Nu`aym did a splendid job creating mistrust between the three groups forming the confederate forces, the Quraysh, Ghaṭafān and Qurayzah. This is related in detail in books documenting the history of the period. Hence, we confine ourselves to simply referring to the results of his efforts.]

It was through God’s grace that the hostile forces’ unity of purpose did not last long. Furthermore, God sent them a very strong wind on a severely cold and wet night. Nothing remained stable in their tents.

When the Prophet learnt of the doubts now casting shadows in the minds of his enemy, which meant that God had actually split them and that mutual mistrust had replaced their former unity, he sent one of his Companions, Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, to their camp at night to gather intelligence on what they intended to do.

Ibn Ishāq relates: “Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, a Companion of the Prophet who belonged to the Anṣār, was with a group of people in the city of Kūfah in Iraq many years later when he was asked by someone from that city: ‘Did you people really see God’s Messenger, and were you truly in his company?’ When Ḥudhayfah answered in the affirmative, the man asked: ‘How did you serve him?’ Ḥudhayfah said: ‘We used to try our best.’ The man said: ‘Had it been our fortune to be his Companions we would not have let him walk. We would have carried him on our shoulders.’ Ḥudhayfah said: ‘My nephew! We were one night with God’s Messenger during the Encounter of the Moat when he stood up praying for a part of the night. He then turned to his Companions and asked: “Who is willing to go and find out what our enemies are doing and return [to return was a condition the Prophet attached to that particular mission]. I shall pray to God to make any volunteer for this mission my Companion in Heaven.” No one volunteered because of our great fear and hunger on that very cold night. When no one answered, the Prophet called me forward. I then had no choice but to go. He said to me: ‘Ḥudhayfah, go inside their camp and find out what they are doing. Do not do anything on your own initiative until you return.’ I went into their quarters to see the wind and God’s other soldiers playing havoc in their camp. No pot or pan stood upright, no fire could be maintained and no structure stood up. Abū Sufyān then addressed his people: ‘People of the Quraysh, let everyone make sure of the person sitting next to him.’

“I took the man next to me by the hand and asked him who he was. He answered me, mentioning his name and his father’s name. Abū Sufyān then said: ‘People of the Quraysh, you realize that we cannot stay much longer. We have endured great hardship and the Jews of the Qurayzah have not fulfilled their promises to us. Indeed, we have received highly disturbing reports about their position. You see what these strong winds are doing to us. We cannot stay much longer in these conditions, and my advice to you is to go back home where I am now going.’ He then mounted his camel, which was tied to a peg. He hit the camel, which jumped on its feet, and released itself as it stood up. Had it not been for the Prophet’s clear instructions to me that I must not do anything serious before I returned, I could have killed Abū Sufyān with my arrow.”

Ḥudhayfah then returned to the Prophet to deliver his report. He found the Prophet praying, and sat very close to him. Continuing his prayers, the Prophet drew Ḥudhayfah closer to him until he was sitting between his legs and he covered him with his robe. When he finished his prayers, he listened to Ḥudhayfah’s report. The

Ghaṭafān decided to follow the Quraysh's decision when they learned that their allies were leaving.

The Qur'ānic Report

In its reporting of the events and its comments on them and the directives it gives to the Muslim community, the *sūrah* neither mentions people by name nor specifies positions; rather it describes types of people and patterns of character. It gives few details but highlights constant values and consequences. It focuses on the elements that remain after the events are over and their actors have departed. In this way, its focus serves to draw lessons for future generations and different communities. The Qur'ānic text also relates events to God's will that controls both the event and those who participate in it. It shows how God's will operates gently and smoothly to bring about the end He wants. The *sūrah* also pauses after each stage in the story to give a directive or to make comments reminding the listeners of the essential truth.

Although the *sūrah* relates the story to the people who took part in it in the first place, it does not only give them more information about it, but also lays before them certain aspects which they were unaware of. In this way, it brings to light people's inner thoughts, feelings, intentions and what was hidden within their hearts.

Added to all this is the fine style, vividness and freshness of the images drawn. Furthermore, the *sūrah* paints the hypocrites' cowardice with acid derision as also describes their twisted nature. This contrasts with the profoundly inspiring picture of faith that is drawn and the qualities it imparts to believers.

The Qur'ānic text is a manual for action, not only by those who witnessed the event but also in every environment and generation. It is a guide for Muslims whenever they face circumstances similar to those faced by the first Muslim community and at any time in the future. It aims to give them the same determination and motivation as the Prophet's Companions possessed.

No one will understand Qur'ānic texts fully unless they face circumstances similar to those faced by the first Muslim community. It is in such circumstances that texts reveal their meanings fully and hearts open up to understand them in depth. When this takes place, the text is no longer words and sentences, but rather a source of power and energy. The events described come alive: inspiring, motivating and urging action both in real life and in the depths of the human heart.

The Qur'ān is not merely a book to be read and understood: it is a motivating force. Its texts are ready for implementation at every point. It only needs a heart that warms to it in circumstances that enable its resources to be fully tapped. We may read a particular Qur'ānic text tens or hundreds of times, then we look at it again

when we are facing a particular situation only to discover that it gives us what it had not given before. It provides a straight answer to our complex problem, shows a way that we overlooked, clears our doubts and replaces these with firm and perfect reassurance. Nothing else, old or new, gives us what the Qur'ān gives.

A Test Too Hard

The *sūrah* begins its discussion of the encounter with the confederate forces by reminding the believers of God's favours when He repelled the armies that were intent on exterminating them. The first verse in the passage sums up the nature of the event, its beginning and end, before giving any details or explaining any attitudes. Thus, God's favour is brought into focus so that the Muslims will always remember it. It also makes it clear that as God commands the believers to follow His revelations, place their trust in Him and not yield to the unbelievers or the hypocrites, it is also He who protects those advocating His message and code for human life against aggression: *"Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do."* (Verse 9)

In this short opening verse we have a picture of the beginning and end of the battle, along with the decisive factors that combine to produce its result: the arrival of the enemy forces; God's sending strong winds and other troops unseen by the believers; and His support which is dependent on their attitude and action as God is fully aware of all that they do.

The *sūrah* then gives details of the situation:

They came upon you from above and from below you. Your eyes rolled [with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats, and confessed thoughts about God passed through your minds. That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken. The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.' Some of them said: 'People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.' And a group of them asked the Prophet's permission to leave, saying: 'Our houses are exposed,' while they were not exposed. They only wanted to run away. (Verses 10-13)

The verses paint an image of the whole of Madinah in the grip of great alarm and distress, with the idolaters of the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān allied with the Jews of Qurayzah moving in from all sides. These feelings of alarm and distress affected all of the people, but their reactions and responses differed. Needless to say, people's thoughts about God, their behaviour, and their evaluation of causes and results were much at variance. Therefore, the test was extremely difficult and the distinction

between believers and hypocrites was decisive.

We can see today the whole situation: its elements, feelings, actions and reactions as if it were happening before our eyes. We see it though from the outside: “*They came upon you from above and from below you.*” (Verse 10) We also see people’s reactions to what was unfolding: “*Your eyes rolled [with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats.*” (Verse 10) This is a picture of profound fear, anxiety and distress, imparted through people’s expressions and feelings. “*Confused thoughts about God passed through your minds.*” (Verse 10) The *sūrah* does not tell us about these thoughts in detail. In fact the adjective ‘confused’ is implied rather than stated in the Arabic text. This gives a more vivid picture of the confusion in people’s feelings and ideas, leaving minds bewildered and perplexed. Such a state of fear and confusion is then further heightened: “*That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken.*” (Verse 11)

A test that left the believers severely shaken must have been truly fearful. Muḥammad ibn Maslamah and others said: “During the Moat Encounter our nights were days. The unbelievers took it in turns to confront us, with Abū Sufyān showing up at the head of his troops one day, Khālīd ibn al-Walīd with his forces the next day, `Amr ibn al-`Aṣ the next, Hubayrah ibn Wahb the next, followed by `Ikrimah ibn Abī Jahl, and lastly by Ḍirār ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. This was very hard for us, and people were really in fear.”

A further description of the state in which the Muslims found themselves is given by al-Maqrīzī in *Imtā` al-Asmā`*: “The idolaters appeared at dawn, and the Prophet mobilized his Companions and the two sides engaged in fighting throughout the day and part of the night. Neither the Prophet nor any Muslim could move out of position. The Prophet could not offer any of the *Ẓuhr*, *`Aṣr*, *Maghrib* and *`Ishā`* prayers. His Companions said to him: ‘Messenger of God! We have not prayed.’ He said: ‘Nor have I.’ Then the idolaters withdrew and each side went back to their encampments. On another day, Usayd ibn Ḥudayr stood guard on the edge of the moat, at the head of 200 Muslims. Mounted forces of idolaters, commanded by Khālīd ibn al-Walīd tried to take them unawares, but the two sides were engaged in fighting for some time. Wahshī, who had killed Ḥamzah, the Prophet’s uncle, during the Battle of Uḥud, stabbed al-Ṭufayl ibn al-Nu`mān al-Anṣārī with a spear and killed him. On that day, the Prophet said: ‘The idolaters have kept us from our middle prayer of *`Aṣr*. May God fill their bellies and hearts with fire.’”²

Two Muslim reconnaissance units went out one night, and they met by accident, each thinking the other to belong to the enemy. They clashed, with some from both

² In a *ḥadīth* reported by Jābir, the Prophet was kept from offering *`Aṣr* prayer that day. It appears that this took place on more than one occasion, with the Muslims unable once to pray *`Aṣr*, while on another occasion, they could not pray any of the other prayers.

groups being injured or killed. When one of them shouted the Muslim battle slogan: *‘Ĥā Mīm. They will not triumph’*, they realized their mistake and stopped fighting. The Prophet advised the two parties: *‘Whoever of you is wounded should consider it an injury incurred for God’s sake, and whoever of your men has been killed is a martyr.’*

The worst distress the Muslims faced during the siege was the treachery of the Qurayzah Jews, who were to their rear. They feared that at any time a concerted attack by the idolaters and Jews could be mounted and that they would be heavily outnumbered by the herds intent on exterminating Islam and the Muslims.

On top of all this, the Muslims also faced the schemes concocted by the hypocrites, who, as usual, tried to raise doubts in their minds and so split their ranks: *“The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: ‘God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.”* (Verse 12) In this way, the hypocrites saw in the Muslims’ distress a chance to speak out without being blamed. They felt they could now undermine the believers’ morale, raising doubts about the promises given by God and His Messenger, without accusing fingers being raised against them. The overall situation, or so it seemed, confirmed the doubts they were raising. Moreover, they were consistent with what they felt deep inside. Such testing times, however, removed the thin cover by which the hypocrites tried to hide their reality. They were in such a state of fear themselves that this in itself shattered all their claims to be believers. In short, their truth was out.

In every community there will always be hypocrites and doubters who will, in times of difficulty, adopt the same attitude. Theirs is a state of mind encountered in all communities and across all generations.

“Some of them said: People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.” (Verse 13) Thus they tried to encourage the people of Madinah to desert and go home, arguing that standing guard behind the moat was meaningless when their homes were exposed to danger. This was a wicked attempt to exploit a natural weakness in people’s hearts: their concerns about their women and children at times of great danger. *“And a group of them asked the Prophet’s permission to leave, saying: ‘Our houses are exposed.’”* (Verse 13) Such people tried to give the appearance of being with the Muslims, whilst all they wanted was leave to go home under the pretext that their homes were vulnerable to attack. The Qur’ān, however, states their true motives, refutes their arguments and confronts them with their lies and tricks: *“while they were not exposed. They only wanted to run away.”* (Verse 13)

One report mentions that the Ĥārithah clan sent one of their people, Aws ibn Qayzī, to the Prophet with a message saying: *“Our homes are exposed. There is none among the Anṣār whose quarters are as vulnerable as ours. There is nothing to repel*

the Ghaṭafān from directing an attack against our quarters. Could you please give us permission to return home so that we can protect our women and children.” The Prophet gave them permission. However, Sa`d ibn Mu`adh said to him: “Messenger of God! Do not give them such permission. Whenever we faced a hardship in the past, they would do the same.” Thereafter the Prophet issued an order that they should return to Madinah. It was such people that the Qur`ān put face to face with their inner motives: *“They only wanted to run away.”* (Verse 13)

Where to Escape Death

The *sūrah* pauses a little here in order to draw a mental picture for those hypocrites as to how hollow their faith was and how they were always ready to break ranks, even for the slightest reason. They would not even try to cover their weaknesses: *“Had their city been stormed from all sides, and had they been asked to renounce their faith they would have done so without much delay.”* (Verse 14) The attitude described in the previous verses was the one they adopted when the enemy were still outside Madinah, unable to storm it. No matter how hard and stressful a situation is, a potential danger is far less than a real one. Should their worst fears come true and Madinah be stormed from all sides, and should they be asked to renounce Islam, they would do so with little hesitation, or a few would hesitate for a while before then reverting to disbelief. In essence, their claimed faith lacked firm roots while their cowardice made them unable to resist.

Thus the Qur`ān exposed their reality and put them naked before the mirror to see themselves as they truly were. It then accused them of breaking their clear pledges which they had earlier given to none other than God. Yet they were heedless of their promises and pledges: *“They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for.”* (Verse 15)

Ibn Hishām reports: “This is a reference to the Ḥārithah clan who, together with the Salamah clan, were about to desert the Muslim camp before the Battle of Uḥud. They subsequently vowed before God they would never do so again. Therefore, the *sūrah* reminds them of their earlier undertaking.

At Uḥud, God saved them and spared them from the consequences of desertion. This was one example of the practical lessons of the early days of *Jihād*. Now, with the lapse of time ensuring greater experience, they had to be put face to face against their reality.

At this point the Qur`ān restates an important value, one that corrects their notions about life and death, which had caused them to break their pledges and try to desert:

Say: Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain,

you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy? Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support. (Verses 16-17)

It is God's will that determines events and destinies, directing them along a certain way that leads to a definite result. Death, whether in battle or by natural causes, is inevitable and occurs at the appointed moment: it comes neither a second early nor a moment late. Flight from battle will not spare the deserter what God has willed. Should they flee from battle, they are certain to meet their inevitable death soon, at the appointed time. All times in this present life are soon, and all life extensions are short. No one can protect anyone else against God's will; no one can prevent it running its course. Should He will to harm someone or show them mercy, His will shall be done. Hence, the only proper attitude for anyone is to submit to God, obey His orders, and honour the vows given to Him in all situations of comfort and hardship. It is far better to place oneself in God's hand, placing one's trust completely in Him. He will, in any case do what He pleases.

Inner Feelings Laid Bare

The *sūrah* then clearly states that God knows the inner thoughts of those who not only stay behind at times of *Jihād*, but who also try to dissuade others from joining the battle. It draws a very truthful picture of their mentality, yet it provokes laughter and derision at such people who are encountered in all communities. It is a picture of cowardice composed of lines of fright and panic in times of hardship, arrogance and presumptuousness in times of ease, a begrudging nature of every good thing, a reluctance to participate in anything good, yet a state of utter terror and hysteria when danger looms from afar. The Qur'ān paints this picture with some fascinating touches that can neither be substituted nor replaced:

God is indeed aware of those of you who hold others back; and those who say to their brethren: 'Come and join us,' while they themselves hardly ever take part in the fighting, begrudging you all help. But then, when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death. Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues, begrudging you all that is good. Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring their deeds to nothing. That is all too easy for God. They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn. Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you. Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting. (Verses 18-20)

These verses begin with the statement that God is fully aware of those who try to

weaken the Muslim community by persuading others to stay behind. They themselves hardly, if ever, take part in any battle. Their attitude is well known to Him, and their scheming is exposed. The miraculous brush then begins to delineate the main lines that depict this type of people. They 'begrudge you all help.' They are very tight against the Muslims, unwilling to help them with effort or money, or even with sympathy and feeling. Yet *"when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death."* (Verse 19) This is a true-to-life, vibrant image of a cowardly people, yet it fills us with laughter when we look at their limbs shaking with fear. Worse still is the shadow they cast when the danger is over and security is assured: *"Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues."* (Verse 19) They come out of their holes, swelling with false pride, unashamedly making all sorts of claims about their bravery, determination, unwavering effort, etc. Not only so, but they *"begrudge you all that is good."* (Verse 19) Despite all their wild claims, they are unwilling to make any effort or donation in order to help with good works.

There will always be people belonging to this type in all generations and communities: boasting, cowardly, miserly and abusive: *"Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring their deeds to nothing."* (Verse 19) This is then the basic reason for their attitude. Their hearts have never experienced faith and they never saw its guiding light, or recognized its guidance. Hence, all their endeavours will end up in ruin. They cannot succeed because the basic element of success is absent from their lives. *"That is all too easy for God."* (Verse 19) Nothing is difficult for God, and His will is certain to be done.

The *sūrah* paints another derogatory picture of their condition on the day when the confederate forces acknowledged their failure and departed: *"They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn."* (Verse 20) They still tremble with fear, refusing to believe that those large forces have gone and all are now safe and secure. *"Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you."* (Verse 20) How pathetic and laughable! If those forces did return, these hypocrites would wish that they were Bedouins, and that they never lived in Madinah. They would rather not have anything to do with the people of Madinah, not even know anything about them. They only want to enquire of travellers about what happened to them, but this would only be a casual enquiry, as when one stranger asks about another.

They wish all this despite the fact that they have been left behind, away from the battle, unexposed to danger. It is all fear at a distance. Hence, *"Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting."* (Verse 20) Such was the condition of the hypocrites, the sick at heart, and those who spread lies to weaken the Muslim community.

The Opposite Image

Such severely testing times did not make all people look about in such an ugly way. Indeed, there was a totally different scenario going on, one casting light within all this darkness, one that remained stable despite the hardship, one that trusted to God, accepted His will, was reassured that His help would be forthcoming, and one that remained unshaken despite all the fear and confusion. The Qur'ān begins drawing this delightful image by citing the example given by the Prophet: *"In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God."* (Verse 21)

In the midst of all the worry, stress and fear, the Prophet provided shelter for the Muslims: he was the source of their hope, confidence and reassurance. Studying his attitude during the unfolding events of this period is necessary for leaders of Muslim communities and revivalist organizations today so that they can chart the way ahead. His attitude provides a good example for those who hope to earn God's pleasure on the Day of Judgement, and for those who always remember God. We should perhaps look at some aspects of his attitude, by way of example, though we cannot discuss this at any great length in this commentary.

The Prophet went out to work with the Muslims in digging the moat, using the axe and removing the earth and carrying the dust in a basket. As his Companions worked, they sang some rhymes, which they composed on the spot, deriving the same from whatever was taking place. The Prophet repeated their rhyming words at the end of the lines. For example, one of his Companions was called Ju`ayl, but the Prophet did not like his name as it meant 'a small dung beetle', so he renamed him `Amr. So the people around composed a rhyming couplet about this very thing of giving a man a better name. The Prophet repeated with them the two rhyming words. We can imagine the atmosphere the Prophet's participation gave them and how it could fill them with reassurance and enthusiasm.

Zayd ibn Thābit, a young Muslim, was carrying the dust away, and the Prophet said of him: 'He is certainly a good lad.' At one point Zayd was too tired and he fell asleep. It was very cold, but as he was sleeping another person, `Imārah ibn Ḥāzm, took Zayd's sword away. When he woke up, he was upset. The Prophet said to Zayd: 'Father of sleep! You slept and your weapon is gone!' Then the Prophet asked his Companions: 'Who of you knows where the sword belonging to this young man is?' `Imārah said: 'It is with me.' The Prophet told him to return it to Zayd and prohibited anyone from taking the weapon of a sleeping man even in jest.

This little episode shows how the Prophet was aware of all those who were with him, young and old, and that he cared for them all. We see him ready to joke with everyone in a pleasant way: 'Father of sleep! You slept and your weapon is gone!'

This also tells us much about the general atmosphere in which the Muslims lived as the Prophet took care of them, even during the hardest of circumstances.

The Prophet's pure soul looked forward to assured victory, distant as it might have been. He could see it as axes hit hard rocks to produce rays of light. He speaks about this to his Companions giving them reassurance. Ibn Ishāq reports: "Salmon mentioned that as he was digging in his area, a rock was too hard for him. The Prophet was nearby and when he saw Salmon's difficulty he took the axe from him and struck the rock three times, with each strike producing a flash of light. Salmān asked him: 'Messenger of God! What is this I have just seen: a flash of light from under the axe?' The Prophet said to him: 'Have you seen that? At the first strike, God opened to me the land of Yemen; at the second, He opened Syria and the west for me; and at the third, He opened the land to the east for me.'" In *Imtā` al-Asmā`*, al-Maqrīzī mentions that this happened to `Umar in front of Salmān. We can imagine what effect these words from the Prophet would have had on his Companions' hearts at the time when they felt danger approaching.

We should add to these delightful scenes the report we mentioned earlier when Ḥudhayfah returned from his dangerous night mission, gathering intelligence about the enemy and what they were doing. The night was exceedingly cold, and on his return the Prophet was in prayer. Yet on seeing Ḥudhayfah he realized how he felt, and he drew him to himself so that he was sitting by his side, near his feet, and then the Prophet covered him with his robe to let him warm himself a little while lie continued his prayer. After he had finished his prayer, he sat listening to Ḥudhayfah's report confirming the good news he had anticipated.

As for the Prophet's courage, perseverance and unshaken belief throughout this severely testing time, this is evident at every point in the story. We do not need to give details here, as they can be easily and clearly recognized: "*In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God.*" (Verse 21)

Strengthening Faith

The *sūrah* then depicts an image of firm faith and believers confronting real danger, one which is great enough to make even believers' hearts tremble. Yet the believers transform this trembling into something that gives them hope and reassurance: "*When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.'* This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God." (Verse 22)

The situation the Muslims faced on this occasion was so testing and stressful that it is described as such by none other than God: "*That was a situation when the believers*

were sorely tested and severely shaken." (Verse 11) They were ordinary people, and people have limited ability. God does not charge them with more than they can hear. Despite being assured of God's eventual support and the good news the Prophet gave them, going beyond their immediate problems to tell them of where Islam would soon expand to, spreading into Yemen and Syria and even further east and west, danger was staring them in the eye, giving them almost too much stress to cope with.

Ḥudhayfah's story is perhaps the most accurate in relaying how the Muslims felt. The Prophet sensed this fear and apprehension. Therefore, when he wanted an assignment to be taken up, he made its reward clear. He said: 'Who is willing to go and find out what our enemies are doing and return. I shall pray to God to make any volunteer for this mission my Companion in Heaven.' Yet despite this certain promise of returning safely and being assured of a high place in heaven, there were still no volunteers. When the Prophet called Ḥudhayfah by name, he said: 'I then had no choice but to go.' This could not have happened except in a situation of extreme stress and hardship.

However, side by side with the rolled eyes and shaken hearts there was an unseverable bond with God, a firm awareness of divine rules, and an unshakeable belief that these rules cannot be changed, and that their results are bound to come about once they have been set in motion. Hence, the Muslims felt that their being so severely tested heralded their victory, because they knew that they had been true to their trust: *"Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand."* (2: 214) They felt that they themselves had also been terribly shaken. Hence, God's help must be close at hand. This is what prompted them to say: *"This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger. This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."* (Verse 22)

"This is what God and His Messenger have promised us." Such trouble and distress is the preamble to the help we have been promised. Therefore, God's help is bound to come: *"Truly spoke God and His Messenger:"* They have spoken the truth in as far as both the indication and the result are concerned. Therefore, they were certain of the outcome: *"This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."*

Those Muslims were ordinary human beings subject to all the qualities and weaknesses that distinguish humans. Nor was it required of them that they surpass the limitations of the human race or shed its characteristics. God had created them such and they were meant to remain such. They were not expected to transform themselves into another race: angels, *jinn*, or animals. Therefore, as humans, it was

inevitable that they would be afflicted by hardship and shaken when facing extreme danger, but they remained nevertheless faithful to their bond with God. This was the bond that stopped them from falling, renewed their hope and prevented their despair. This is what made the generation of the Prophet's Companions unique, having no parallel in history. We need to understand this very clearly and recognize that they attained their summit while retaining all their human strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, they also held tight to their bond with God.

When we see ourselves weaken under stress, shaken by danger or worry at what lies ahead, we must not allow despair to overwhelm us, or feel that we are lost, unfit to achieve any high standard. What we must not do is hold on to our weak feelings thinking that this must be so because it happens to others who are better than ourselves. We must remember our bond with God and hold to this, because it is through this that we can shed our weakness, and regain our confidence and reassurance. We should look at our worry and fear as a signal that help is on its way. Then we will find renewed strength and self belief.

It was such balance that moulded that unique generation in the early days of Islam, which the *sūrah* praises in the following terms: *"Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God. Some have already fulfilled their pledges by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least."* (Verse 23) This is set against the other type of person who pledged to God that they would never run away, but who were untrue to their vows: *"They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for."* (Verse 15)

One of the young Companions of the Prophet reports: "I was named after my uncle Anas ibn al-Naḍr. He did not take part in the Battle of Badr, and he was sad. He thought: 'This was the first major battle the Prophet fights and I was absent. Should I live to fight in another battle with the Prophet, God will see what I will do.' He then felt that this was a serious pledge and he feared to say anything more. He was later in the Muslim army in the Battle of Uḥud. Before the battle, he saw Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh and said to him: 'Abū `Amr! I can smell heaven! I smell it coming from the side of Uḥud.' He fought hard until he was killed. He received 80 odd strikes variously from a sword, spear and arrow. Indeed, he was unrecognisable. His sister, my aunt, al-Rubayyī` bint al-Naḍr, said: 'I could only identify my brother by his finger.' When the verse saying, *Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God,*' was revealed, people felt that this referred to him and others who did as he did." [Related by Aḥmad, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī]

The *sūrah* then includes a comment stating the purpose of testing believers and the outcome of honouring a vow or breaking it: *"God will surely reward the truthful for*

having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.” (Verse 24) Comments like this, which are often found within the description of events, serve to outline the purpose behind what takes place, making it clear that everything is determined by God’s will. Nothing occurs by coincidence. Everything is according to plan and for a definite purpose. All events reflect God’s grace and confirm that His forgiveness and mercy are always close at hand, *“God is indeed Much-Forgiving Merciful.”* (Verse 24)

The *sūrah’s* discussion of the Encounter of the Moat concludes by stating its outcome which confirmed the believers’ expectations and showed how far in error the unbelievers and hypocrites had gone: *“God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty.”* (Verse 25)

From start to finish, God was in control of the battle, turning it the way He wished. The *sūrah* confirms this in its presentation, attributing to God every event and its outcome, so that we can understand this fact making it part of our overall Islamic concept.

The Other Enemy

It was not only the Quraysh and the Ghaṭafān that suffered a miserable defeat. Their allies, the Jews of Qurayzah also shared the same outcome: *“He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things.”* (Verses 26-27) However, before we discuss these verses we need to throw some light on the attitude the Jews in Madinah adopted towards Islam.

When Islam arrived in Madinah, the Jews there maintained peaceful relations with it for only a short period. Shortly after his arrival in Madinah, the Prophet signed a treaty with them with mutual obligations of support against outside enemies and clear conditions that they would never be in breach of their commitments, or aid any enemy, or take any hostile action against the Muslims.

The Jews, however, soon felt that Islam represented a threat to their traditional position as followers of the divine faith. Indeed they enjoyed much respect by the people of Madinah on account of this fact. Moreover, they felt that the new social system Islam established in Madinah under the leadership of the Prophet also constituted a threat to their position. Previously, they had very cleverly exploited the conflict between the two main Arab tribes in Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, to ensure that they themselves had the upper hand. The Prophet united the two tribes

in a new social system which deprived the Jews of the chance to sew discord between them.

Perhaps the last straw that broke the camel's back for them was that the rabbi they considered to be their master and leading scholar, `Abdullāh ibn Sallām, converted to Islam with all his family members. However, he feared that should he announce his conversion to Islam in public, the Jews might level false accusations against him. Therefore, he requested that the Prophet ask them about him and his standing among them before telling them that he had become a Muslim. When the Prophet asked the Jews as `Abdullāh had requested him, they said: 'He is our master as his father was; and he is our rabbi and leading scholar.' It was at this point that `Abdullāh came out to tell them that Islam was God's message to mankind and he asked them to follow his example and become Muslims. They immediately turned against him, speaking ill of him and warning all the other Jews against him. Clearly they felt that Islam represented an imminent threat to their religious and political standing. They were determined to scheme against God's Messenger allowing him no respite. This, then, was the beginning of the war between Islam and the Jews, which has never subsided.

At first, the war started as a cold war, as we say these days. That is to say, it began as propaganda against both Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and Islam. The tactics they employed varied from raising doubts about the message and the new faith, to sowing discord and creating division between the Muslims, as between the Aws and the Khazraj one day and between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār another day. They also spied on the Muslims for their idolater enemies, and befriended a group of hypocrites who pretended to be Muslim manipulating them to create trouble within the Muslim community. Ultimately, they openly urged other groups to unite against the Muslims, as happened in the encounter with the confederate tribes.

The major Jewish groups in Madinah were the tribes of the Qaynuqā`, al-Naḍīr and Qurayzah. Each had its own ongoing situation with the Prophet and the Muslim community. The Qaynuqā` tribe, who were the best fighters among the Jews, begrudged the Muslims their victory at Badr. Therefore, they started to exploit little events against the Muslims, so demonstrating that they had little respect for their treaty with the Prophet, fearing that he would soon gather strength and gain mastery over them. Ibn Hishām mentions in his biography of the Prophet: "One aspect of the case of the Qaynuqā` Jews was that the Prophet addressed them in their market place, saying: 'Take warning from what happened to the Quraysh and adopt Islam. You already know that I am a prophet sent by God with a message. You read this in your own scriptures and you are committed to believe in me by God's promise to you.' They replied: 'Muḥammad! Do not take it as something great that you met people who have no knowledge of war and fighting and that you got the upper hand

against them. Should we fight you, you will learn that we are the true fighters.’”

Ibn Hishām also reports on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn Jafar: “Behind the problem of the Qaynuqā` was an Arab woman who had brought some milk and sold it in the Qaynuqā Market. She then sat at a jeweller’s shop. People there wanted her to uncover her face, but she refused. The jeweller took the edge of her dress and tied it to her back, without her noticing. When she rose, her bottom was exposed and people laughed at her. She shouted for help. A Muslim attacked the Jewish jeweller, and killed him. The Jews then attacked the Muslim and killed him. His people shouted for other Muslims to come and help. The Muslims were very angry and trouble so erupted between them and the Qaynuqā` clan.”

Ibn Ishāq continues this report of the events: “The Prophet laid siege to them until they agreed to accept his judgement. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy [the chief of the hypocrites who was still accepted as a Muslim] went to the Prophet saying: ‘Be good to my allies.’ The Qaynuqā were formerly allied to the Khazraj. The Prophet made no reply. `Abdullāh repeated this but the Prophet turned away. `Abdullāh then put his hand inside the Prophet’s armour and the Prophet asked him to let him go. `Abdullāh did not listen. The Prophet became angry and said: let me go!’ `Abdullāh then said: ‘I will not let you go until you are good to my allies. They are 700 fighters who protected me against all my enemies and you come to finish them off in one day. I am a man who fears the turn of fortune.’ The Prophet then said to him: They are yours.’

`Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was clearly still held in high esteem by his clan. Furthermore, the Prophet accepted his intercession in favour of the Qaynuqā` Jews, provided they agreed to leave Madinah, taking their property with them, but not their weapons. Thus Madinah was rid of a powerful Jewish section.

As for the al-Nadīr tribe, the Prophet went to their quarters in the fourth year of his migration to Madinah, after the Battle of Uḥud, seeking their help in raising funds to pay the blood money for two people killed accidentally by one of his Companions. According to the provisions of the agreement between them and the Muslim state, they were bound to make such a contribution. When he explained his purpose, they said: ‘Yes, we will certainly make a contribution.’ He sat with his back to the wall of one of their houses. Then they consulted among themselves, and some suggested: ‘You will never again find this man in such a vulnerable state. Who can get to the roof of this house and throw a large rock to rid us of him?’

So they set about carrying out their wicked plot. The Prophet was informed of what they were planning; so he returned to Madinah. Once there, he ordered his community to prepare to fight the Jewish tribe of al-Nadīr. They retreated to their forts. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, the chief of the hypocrites, sent them word to remain

steadfast promising to give them his full support. He added: 'We will never let you down. If war is waged against you, we will fight alongside you; and if you are made to leave, we will go with you.' The hypocrites, however, did not fulfil their promise to the Jews. Instead, God struck fear into the hearts of the al-Naḍīr and they surrendered without a fight. They asked the Prophet to spare their lives in return for their departure. He agreed and allowed them a camel load each of their property, provided they surrendered any arms. They thus left Madinah, most settling in Khaybar, whilst others went further north to Syria. Among their leaders were Sallām ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Ḥuyay ibn Akḥṭab, the three who had played a leading role in forging the alliance between the Quraysh and Ghatafān and so forming the confederate tribes that sought to exterminate Islam and the Muslims.

Treachery of Great Magnitude

This left only the Qurayẓah, the third major Jewish tribe in Madinah. As we now know, they too had sided with the confederate tribes against the Muslims, this at the instigation of the al-Naḍīr chiefs, particularly Ḥuyay ibn Akḥṭab. This treachery by the Qurayẓah, in violation of their treaty with the Prophet, was a much harder test for the Muslims than the external attack they faced from the confederates.

To be absolutely sure of this new situation, the Prophet sent four of his Companions – Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, the chief of the Aws, Sa'd ibn 'Ubādah, the chief of the Khazraj, 'Abdullah ibn Rawāḥah and Khawāt ibn Jubayr – to the Qurayẓah to ascertain their position: "If you find out that the intelligence we have received is true, give me a hint which I will understand. Try to avoid affecting the Muslims' morale. If, on the other hand, you find that the Qurayẓah remain faithful to their treaty with us, make the news known to everyone." This shows how seriously he expected the news of treachery to affect the Muslim community as a whole.

The delegation went to the Qurayẓah and met the people there, calling on them to maintain their peaceful relations and to confirm their alliance with the Prophet. However, they found that the Qurayẓah had adopted a worse position than what they had heard about. Defiantly, they said: "You want us to confirm the alliance now, when we have been weakened by the departure of al-Naḍīr. Who is God's Messenger? We do not know him. We have no treaty or agreement with Muḥammad."

The Muslim delegation then left the Qurayẓah, returning to the Prophet with the bad news that the Jews no longer recognized their peace treaty with him. On arrival, they found the Prophet with a group of his Companions. Following his advice, they gave him a clear hint of the Qurayẓah's treachery rather than deliver the fact

publicly. The Prophet was not perturbed. On the contrary, he said: "God is Supreme. Rejoice, you Muslims, for the end will be a happy one."

In his report of these events, Ibn Ishāq says: "This test was too hard for the Muslims: fear mounted; the enemy came upon them from the front and the rear; the Muslims' thoughts went in all directions; hypocrisy was now in the open, etc."

When God gave the Prophet His support so as to make his enemies withdraw without gaining any advantage, sparing the believers the need to fight, the Prophet returned to Madinah victorious. People put down their arms. Back in his wife, Umm Salamah's home, the Prophet was washing himself after the long ordeal. Jibrīl, the angel, came to him saying: "The angels have not put down their arms yet. I have just come back from chasing the enemy." He then said to him: "God commands you to march to the Qurayzah." Their quarters were a few miles away from Madinah. This was after the noon *Zuhr* prayer. The Prophet issued an order to all his Companions: "He who obeys God must not pray *'Aṣr* except at the Qurayzah." People started marching. On the way, the *'Aṣr* prayer became due. Some of them stopped to offer it arguing that the Prophet had only wanted them to start marching immediately. Others said they would prefer to delay it until they had arrived, taking the Prophet's order at face value. Neither party blamed the other.

The Prophet marched behind them, having asked Ibn Umm Maktūm, his blind Companion, to deputize for him in Madinah. He also gave the banner to his cousin `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The Prophet laid siege to the Qurayzah quarter for 25 days. When they were in despair, they sent word to the Prophet saying that they would accept the judgement of Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the chief of the Aws tribe of the Anṣār, as he was their ally in pre-Islamic days. They felt that he was bound to be lenient towards them, just like `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had been lenient towards the Qaynuqā` Jews when he sought their release by the Prophet. They did not know, however, that Sa`d had received an injury to his arm during the earlier siege of Madinah and that the Prophet had the wound cauterized to stop it bleeding. He had also placed him in a tent close by where he was nursed. When he received his injury, Sa`d had prayed: "My Lord! If we are to fight the Quraysh again, spare me now for that fight. If you have willed that this encounter between us be the last, I pray to You, my Lord, to make this wound of mine my way to martyrdom, but spare me until I see our affair with the Qurayzah have a happy ending for Islam." God answered his prayer, making them choose him as their judge.

When the Qurayzah Jews intimated that they would accept Sa`d's judgement, the Prophet gave instructions for him to be brought in. He came riding a donkey that had been saddled for him. On his way, his tribesmen, the Aws, tried to persuade him to be lenient. They said: 'Be kind to your allies. The Prophet has chosen you to judge them in order that you be kind to them.' Sa`d first chose to be silent. When he was

tired of their insistence, he said: 'It is time for Sa`d to disregard all criticism when it comes to something through which he hopes to please God.' His tribesmen realized then that he would not be lenient.

As Sa`d approached the Prophet's tent, the Prophet said to those who were with him: 'Stand up to greet your master.' This was to give Sa`d extra respect in his position as judge and to make his judgement binding. When he sat down, the Prophet said to him that the Qurayzah had agreed to accept his judgement in their case. Sa`d said: "Will my judgement be binding on them?" He was answered in the affirmative. He asked again: "And on all who are present [meaning the Muslims]?" Again he received a positive answer. He then lowered his head in deference to the Prophet, pointing his hand in the direction where the Prophet was sitting, without looking at him, and said: "Does this also apply to those who are on this side?" The Prophet answered: "Yes." Sa`d said: "I hereby rule that all the men of the Qurayzah are to be killed, their properties to be divided and their women and children to be enslaved." The Prophet endorsed the ruling and said to him: "You have given God's own verdict."

At the Prophet's orders, moats were dug in the marketplace and the Qurayzah men were brought there with their hands tied. They were all executed. According to different reports they constituted somewhere between 700-800 people. Ḥuyay ibn Akḥṭab was among them, remaining faithful to his promise to stay with them and share their fate. Whoever of their young men was below the age of puberty was spared.

That day not only marked the humiliation of the Jews but also the weakness of hypocrisy. Thereafter, the hypocrites were reluctant to continue with their earlier trickery. Moreover, the idolaters no longer thought of attacking the Muslims in Madinah. In fact it was the Muslims who were now able to go on the offensive. Events thus moved in such a way as to lead to the fall of the two main cities in Arabia, Makkah and "Ṭā'if, to Islam. It may be said that the actions of the Jews, the hypocrites and the idolaters were interlinked, and that the expulsion of the Jews from Madinah put an end to such affiliations. The whole episode thus marked a totally new stage in the history of the Muslim state.

This was the practical development to which God refers in the Qur'ānic verses:

He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things." (Verses 26-27)

The phrase, 'a land on which you had never yet set foot,' can refer either to a land

that the Qurayzah owned outside their quarters, and which the Muslims took over along with the rest of their property, or it may refer to the fact that the Qurayzah surrendered their land without fighting. In this second sense, the Arabic phrase *taṭa`ū*, meaning, 'to set foot,' indicates fighting, which involves taking land by force.

"God has power over all things." This comment is taken from what takes place in reality. It refers all matters to God. The *sūrah's* presentation of the battle and its commentary on events are altogether consistent with this. It attributes all matters and actions to God, so that this essential truth is firmly rooted in the hearts of all Muslims. We see how God establishes it in people's hearts using first the actual events and then the Qur'ān as it makes a record of these events. Thus it takes its place at the centre of the overall Islamic concept.

In this way, the events become the subject matter of education, and the Qur'ān a manual and guide for life and all that relates to it. Values are well established and hearts reassured, using both the practical test and the Qur'ān as the means.

Unlike All Women

Prophet! Say to your wives: If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; (28)

but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.’ (29)

Wives of the Prophet! If any of you were to be guilty of manifestly immoral conduct, her punishment would be doubled. That is easy for God. (30)

But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward, and We have prepared for her most excellent provisions. (31)

Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women: if you truly fear God, do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire; but speak in an appropriate manner. (32)

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلًّا لِأَزْوَاجِكَ إِنْ كُنْتُنَّ
تُرَدْنَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا وَزِينَتَهَا
فَتَعَالَيْنَ أُمَتِّعُكُنَّ وَأُسْرِحُكُنَّ سَرَاحًا
جَمِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

وَإِنْ كُنْتُنَّ تُرَدْنَ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولَهُ وَالْأَخْرَةَ
فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَعَدَّ لِلْمُحْسِنَاتِ مِنْكُنَّ
أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٩﴾

يَنْبِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ مَنْ يَأْتِ مِنْكُنَّ بِفَاحِشَةٍ
مُبِينَةٍ يُضَعَفْ لَهَا الْعَذَابُ ضِعْفَيْنِ
وَكَانَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ﴿٣٠﴾

﴿٣١﴾ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ مِنْكُمْ لِحًا وَرَسُولِهِ وَتَعَمَلْ
صَلِحًا نُؤْتِهَا أَجْرَهَا مَرَّتَيْنِ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لَهَا
رِزْقًا كَرِيمًا ﴿٣١﴾

يَنْبِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ لَسُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ
إِنْ اتَّقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَخْضَعْنَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ
الَّذِي فِي قَلْبِهِ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَعْرُوفًا
﴿٣٢﴾

And stay quietly in your homes, and do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance. Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakaat, and pay heed to God and His Messenger. God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully.
(33)

Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware. (34)

For all men and women who have submitted themselves to God, all believing men and believing women, all truly devout men and truly devout women, all men and women who are true to their word, all men and women who are patient in adversity, all men and women who humble themselves before God, all men and women who give in charity, all men and women who fast, all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who always remember God — for them all God has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.
(35)

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ
الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ
وَأَتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ
إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ
أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

وَأذْكَرْنَ مَا يُتْلَىٰ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ
آيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ
لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ
وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ
وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَشِيعِينَ
وَالْخَشِيعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ
وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ
فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ
اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ
مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣٥﴾

Overview

This third passage in the *sūrah* speaks specifically of the Prophet's wives, except for the last verse which tells of the reward for all Muslims, men and women, for their good actions. At the beginning of the *sūrah*, they were called 'mothers of the believers', and this motherhood establishes certain duties. Their noble position, which earned them this status, also establishes certain duties. Further duties are also made

obligatory on them because of their relationship to the Prophet. The present passage outlines some of these duties and states the values God wants the Prophet's home, with all its purity, to represent and uphold so as to serve as a beacon of light guiding travellers.

A Choice is Offered

Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.' (Verses 28-29)

The Prophet chose for himself and his household a standard of living which was just about enough to meet their essential needs. The reason for so doing was not that he could not afford a better standard of living. Indeed, enormous tracts of land came under his control, yielding great wealth, and availing him of great riches if he so chose. Yet there were times when a month would pass without a fire being lit for cooking in any of his homes. At the same time, the Prophet was extremely generous when it came to giving gifts and charitable donations. Essentially, then, he made this choice so as to rise above material and worldly needs, and to sincerely seek what God keeps for believers. It was a question of preference. Neither his faith nor the law it lays down required that the Prophet lead such a life of austerity. Comfort and luxury are not disdained in Islam. Indeed, the Prophet did not turn his back on them when they were offered normally, without being sought after. Yet, he neither excessively indulged in them nor was he so preoccupied. We do not find any instruction from the Prophet requiring that any of his followers live the sort of life he chose for himself. He left it entirely to them, should they choose to emulate him in freeing themselves from the pressures of seeking life's comforts.

The Prophet's wives were ordinary women who shared all human feelings and desires. Noble, virtuous and close to the Prophet as they all were, their natural desire for life's comforts remained strong. When they felt that circumstances had changed and, by God's grace, prosperity had replaced poverty in the Muslim society, they spoke to the Prophet about their standard of living. He did not welcome this. In fact it was unpleasant to him, because his noble soul preferred to live without any such preoccupation. He appreciated the freedom and sublimity such a life provides. It was not a matter of whether life's comforts were lawful or not: there was no question of prohibition as Islam made it clear that such comforts were not prohibited for Muslims. It was rather a question of being free from material pressures.

The Prophet was so upset at this turn of events that he did not go out to meet his

Companions. That he stayed away was very hard for them. They, therefore, went to see him, but were not admitted. Imām Aḥmad relates on Jābir's authority: "Abū Bakr went to the Prophet when people were sitting near his door, but he was not admitted. `Umar also went, sought permission to enter but no such permission was given. Later on though, he admitted both Abū Bakr and `Umar. As they went in, they saw the Prophet surrounded by his wives but he was silent. `Umar thought that he should say something to make the Prophet laugh. He said: 'Messenger of God! I wish you had seen how last night my wife was asking me for more money and I thrust my fingers into her neck.' The Prophet laughed heartily and said: 'You see them surrounding me asking for more money.' Abū Bakr rose to hit his daughter, `Ā'ishah, while `Umar sought to do the same to Ḥafṣah, his daughter. Both said to them: Are you asking the Prophet to give you what he has not?' The Prophet told them not to hit their daughters, and both `Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah said: 'By God! We will never again ask the Prophet for anything he does not have.' God then revealed the verses offering them the choice. The Prophet started with `Ā'ishah saying to her: 'I am going to tell you something which I would like you to consider carefully and consult your parents before you decide.' He then read to her the two verses: "*Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.'*" She said to him: 'Would I consult my parents about staying with you? I certainly choose God and His Messenger. However, I would request you not to mention my choice to any of your other wives.' He said to her: 'God has not sent me to adopt a hard attitude, but He has made me a teacher and a facilitator. If any of them asks me about your choice, I will tell her.' [This *ḥadīth* is also related by Muslim on the authority of Zakariyyā ibn Ishāq, and related in a slightly different wording by al-Bukhārī.]

The Qur'ān defines the principal values in the Islamic concept of human life. These values must be practically reflected in the Prophet's home and in his own private life. His home remains a beacon of light for Muslims throughout human life. Hence it should provide the best and most accurate example of Islamic values.

The two verses gave the Prophet's wives a choice: either world luxuries and life comforts or God, His Messenger and the life to come. No single heart can accommodate two different value systems. The Prophet's wives had already said that they would never again ask the Prophet for what he did not have. The Qur'ānic verses were revealed to define the principle involved. It is not a question of whether the Prophet has such luxuries or not: it is a question of choosing between God, the Prophet and the life to come on the one hand and the luxuries and adornments of the present life on the other. The Prophet's wives were to choose whether they had worldly treasures at their disposal or their homes were without food. When this decisive choice was offered, they all made their preference clearly and absolutely,

choosing God, the Prophet and success in the life to come. They proved themselves fit for the sublime standard their high position as the Prophet's wives required. One report also mentions that the Prophet was delighted with their choice.

All Were Human

We need to pause a little to reflect on some aspects of this event which defines the Islamic concept of values. It leaves our hearts with no room for hesitation between worldly values and those of the life to come; between the world we live in and the world of heaven. It purges our hearts of any influence that hinders us from purely seeking God's pleasure, to the exclusion of everything else.

From another point of view, the event describes to us the nature of the Prophet's lifestyle, as well as those who lived with him and were closely related to him. The most beautiful thing about this lifestyle is the fact that it was chosen by ordinary people who never lost sight of their human feelings, desires and preferences, despite rising to sublime standards of devotion and dedication. Their human feelings and emotions did not die; they only rose to an exalted level and were purged of impurity while retaining their natural human beauty. Thus, they enabled them to attain the highest standard of perfection possible.

We often err when we give the Prophet and his Companions an untrue or incomplete image that does not consider all their human characteristics and emotions. We think that in this way we put them above what we consider to be a weakness. Our mistake renders the Prophet and his Companions opaque, devoid of their essential human features and characteristics. The human relation between us and them is severed, and we begin to see them as ghosts lacking a tangible reality. We begin to think of them as belonging to a different species: angels or a similar type of creature above human feelings and emotions. In this way they are removed from our lives and if we permit this they will no longer provide us with an example to follow or to be influenced by. When we read the history of the Prophet and his Companions we no longer find in this something for us to emulate, but instead we find ourselves looking at their lives with an awe and admiration that produces only vague feelings without practical effect. We also lose our ability to identify with such great personalities, because we no longer see them as ordinary humans who experienced the same emotions, feelings and reactions as we ourselves experience.

We can clearly understand God's wisdom in assigning His messages to ordinary men to deliver. This task was not assigned to angels or to creatures from any other species. This provides a real bond between the lives of the messengers and the lives of their followers. The latter continue to feel that the messengers' feelings and emotions, exalted as they were, were always those of humans. Thus, they love them

and try to emulate them in the same way as children try to emulate adults.

In the question of the choice offered to the Prophet's wives we note their natural desire for comforts and luxuries. We also see an image of the Prophet's home life, with his wives asking their husband for more money. He is upset, but he does not allow Abū Bakr and `Umar to beat `Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah, their daughters for their requests. The whole question is one of feelings and inclinations, which need to be refined, not suppressed. The question remains at this level until God orders the Prophet to give his wives the choice and they make their free choice without pressure or the suppression of any feelings. That his wives opted for the sublime standard he preferred greatly delighted the Prophet.

We also need to reflect for a moment on what we see of sweet emotion in the Prophet's heart. He shows that he loves `Ā'ishah and that he would love it if she rose to the standard of values God wants for him and his household. He therefore offers her the choice. He wants to help her rise to the sublime, so he asks that she does not make a decision until she has consulted her parents. He knows that her parents would never ask their daughter to leave him. `Ā'ishah does not overlook the Prophet's sweet emotion towards her. She is delighted with it, and she mentions this in her report. In this *ḥadīth* we see the Prophet as a man in love with his young wife, and as someone who would be delighted to see her rise to, and maintain the standard he has adopted for his life. We also see her delighted to recognize her place in her husband's heart, reporting his love and desire to keep her, which is manifested by his request that she consult her parents. We also see the woman in her as she requests him not to tell his other wives of her choice. She wants to be the one who makes that choice, ahead of at least some of them. But we also see the Prophet's greatness as he tells her: 'God has not sent me to adopt a hard attitude, but He made me a teacher and facilitator. If any of them asks me about your choice, I will tell her.' He does not want to deprive any of them of what could help them make the right choice. He is not testing them to see who might fail; rather he is helping those who request help, so that they can rise above worldly attractions.

All these are noble human elements which we must never ignore, suppress or undervalue as we read the Prophet's life story. To understand them as they truly are establishes a strong and active bond between us and the Prophet's person, as well as the personalities of his Companions. We can thus interact with them in a way that motivates us into emulation.

A Unique Position

The *sūrah* then outlines some special features for the Prophet's wives, giving them special privileges and responsibilities, which suit their noble status and their relation

to the Prophet:

Wives of the Prophet! If any of you were to be guilty of manifestly immoral conduct, her punishment would be doubled. That is easy for God. But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward, and We have prepared for her most excellent provisions. (Verses 30-31)

This is a responsibility commensurate with their status as wives of the Prophet and mothers of all believers. Both positions impose on them heavy duties and protect them against immorality. If, for argument's sake, any of them is guilty of some manifestly immoral conduct, she would deserve double punishment. This relates to the responsibility associated with their position and status. "That is easy for God." It is in no way more difficult as a result of their status as the Prophet's wives, as some people might think. "But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward," just as We double her punishment in the opposite situation. "And We have prepared for her most excellent provisions." (Verse 31) It is all ready, waiting for her, by God's grace.

The *sūrah* then explains what distinguishes the Prophet's wives from all other women, outlining their duties in dealing with other people, worshipping God, their conduct at home, and the special care God takes of the Prophet's noble household:

Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women: if you truly fear God, do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire; but speak in an appropriate manner. And stay quietly in your homes, and do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance. Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakāt, and pay heed to God and His Messenger. God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully. Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware. (Verses 32-34)

At the dawn of Islam, Arabian society looked upon women as a means of enjoyment and physical fulfilment. In this, it was like most other societies at the time. From a purely human angle, Arabian society simply looked upon women as inferior. Islam also found in Arabian society much confusion in sexual relations. The family system, moreover, was unsound, as already explained in this *sūrah*. Moreover, sex was looked at in a carnal way that disregarded beauty and purity and endorsed a wild, physical approach. This is clear in pre-Islamic poetry which focused on the woman's body, and expressed carnal thoughts.

Islam began to change the social attitude towards women, emphasizing the human aspect in relations between the two sexes. It is not merely a physical relation

that seeks to satisfy a carnal urge. It is rather the meeting of two people, created from one soul, connected with a tie based on affection and mercy, and bringing both of them comfort and reassurance. Their meeting has a goal related to God's will that brought man into being, gave the earth its population and assigned to man the charge of taking care of the earth.

Islam also paid attention to family ties, making the family the central unit of its social structure. The precursor for this was a caring home where future generations start life and find a healthy atmosphere free from negative influences that contaminate feelings and ideas. Family law constitutes a sizeable portion of Islamic legislation and takes up a considerable number of Qur'ānic verses. In addition to enacting legislation, Islam continually directs its followers to the need to strengthen this societal base, particularly ensuring its spiritual purity, keeping relations between the sexes clean, respectable and free from vulgarity, even in the gratification of sexual urges. In fact, the organization of society and family matters takes up a large part of the present *sūrah*. The passage we are currently discussing now includes an address to the Prophet's wives giving them instructions concerning their relations with other people, their own status and their relations with God. This address also includes a gentle directive expressed in fine style: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33)

What are the means to remove what is loathsome and ensure the purity of those women married to the Prophet, living in his home and who were in any case the purest women in the whole world? Needless to say, other women are in greater need of such means.

Initially, the *sūrah* makes them aware of their high positions and the advantages they have over all other women, making it clear that this is unique to them and cannot be shared by any other women in history. Hence, it is their duty to ensure that they can meet the obligations attendant with their status: *"Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women, if you truly fear God."* (Verse 32) They are told that their unique position is dependent on their being God-fearing. It is not their mere relation to the Prophet that gives them their status. Hence, they have to be up to the task, doing what this entails.

This is the plain truth that forms the basis of this religion of Islam. It is stated in absolute clarity by the Prophet as he addresses his own family, telling them that their close relation to him should not make them oblivious of their duties; he cannot benefit them anything unless they redeem themselves through their own actions: *"Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad! Ṣafīyyah bint `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! All you of the `Abd al-Muṭṭalib clan! I can in no way benefit you against God. You can ask me whatever you wish of my own money."* [Related by Muslim.] Another version quotes the Prophet as broadening his address so as to include first the entire Quraysh tribe, and

narrowing it gradually to his own small clan and finishing it by addressing his own daughter: "You the Quraysh people! Save yourselves from hell. You the Ka`b people! Save yourselves from hell. You the Hāshim clan! Save yourselves from the fire. You the `Abd al-Muṭṭalib clan! Save yourselves from the fire. Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad! Save yourself from the fire. By God! I can benefit you nothing against God. However, you are my relations and I will honour this relation and foster it." [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

Having outlined their status which they earn through being God-fearing, the *sūrah* outlines the means by which God removes what is loathsome from the members of the Prophet's household: "*do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire.*" (Verse 32) When they speak to strangers, they must not use the sort of softness in their speech which arouses men's desires and make those who are sick at heart feel their urge.

It is pertinent to ask who are those women whom God issues this warning? They are the Prophet's own wives and the mothers of all believers. Our minds cannot imagine that anyone would be tempted to think of them in terms of physical desire. When then is this warning issued? During the Prophet's own lifetime and in the best of human societies. However, God who created men and women knows that when a woman speaks too softly, with yielding tones, she touches upon man's desire and awakens his urge. He also knows that in all societies there are people who are sick at heart, and who think of every woman in carnal terms, even though she may be married to the Prophet and has the status of a mother of all believers. God is perfectly aware that loathsomeness can only be purged when the causes that awaken desire are removed.

How about our own society which deliberately awakens desire and plays on it? Everything around us aims to bring sexual desire into full play, and encourages promiscuity. In modern society, women are encouraged to use speech, appearance, attractions, in order to move men to desire and let loose their urge. How can purity find a place in this polluted atmosphere when people's movements, speech and appearance serve to encourage the very loathsome thing that God wants to remove from His chosen servants?

"But speak in an appropriate manner." (Verse 32) They were first ordered not to speak in a soft way; now they are ordered to confine their talk to what is appropriate. Indeed the subject matter of a conversation may encourage certain thoughts. Therefore, there must not be in the conversation between men and women anything that leads to what is improper. This applies to the tone of voice, jokes and ordinary chatting. We should remember that it is God, the Creator who knows His creation and what affects and influences them, who gives these instructions to the Prophet's wives who were already exemplary in their purity. They were required to observe

these instructions with the people of their own society, which was the best human society ever.

“*And stay quietly in your homes.*” (Verse 33) The Arabic word used here, *qarna*, connotes having weight that facilitates stability. This order does not mean staying permanently at home so as not to go out at all. It only indicates that to be at home is the normal situation, and whatever else is the exception that meets a need. In the home a woman finds herself as fits her nature: sound, undistorted and uncontaminated. She fulfils her role without being overburdened with duties God has not equipped her to fulfil.

In order to give the family home its proper atmosphere that is suited for the upbringing of young children, God made it a binding duty of the man to support the woman financially. Thus, the mother has the energy, time and freedom to look after her young ones and give the family its congenial and relaxed atmosphere. A mother who has to work in order to earn her living, giving her job her time and energy cannot bring freshness and a pleasant ambience into her family home. She cannot give her children what is due to them of care and attention. The homes of women who go out to work every day are akin to hotels in their atmosphere. They have but little of the pleasant atmosphere of a proper family home. In fact a home can only be established by a woman; its pleasant congeniality can only be ensured by a wife, and its tenderness and care can only be generated by a mother. A wife and mother who spends her time and energy, physical and spiritual, at work cannot bring anything into her home other than her tiredness and boredom.

When a woman goes out to work, that constitutes a disaster for her home, which may be allowed by necessity. That people should resort to it when they have no need for it is a setback affecting souls and minds at a time when many social ills are encountered.³

When a woman goes out frequently, for something other than work, such as visiting places of entertainment, clubs and the like, then this represents a setback for humanity. During the Prophet’s lifetime, women used to go to the mosque, as there was no directive to prohibit them from so doing. However, that was a time when moral standards were high and most people were God-fearing. Moreover, a woman went out for prayer, and no one could recognize her. She revealed nothing of her charms. Nevertheless, after the Prophet died `Ā’ishah preferred that they did not go to the mosque. An authentic *ḥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim quotes `Ā’ishah as saying: “Muslim women used to attend Fajr, or the dawn prayer with God’s

³ Sayyid Quṭb, *Al-Salām al-`Ālamī wa'l-Islām*, or ‘Islam and World Peace’, Cairo and Beirut, 6th edition, 1982, pp. 69-70.

Messenger and then go back home wrapped in their outer garments, unrecognizable in the darkness." Another report quotes her as saying: "Had God's Messenger seen what women have introduced into their behaviour, he would have disallowed them in mosques, just as Israelite women were disallowed." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

What could women have introduced into their lives during `Ā'ishah's lifetime to make her think that God's Messenger would have not allowed them in the mosques? How does this compare with what we see in our own time?

"And do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance." (Verse 33) This applies when a woman needs to go out, and it follows the order to stay quietly at home. In pre-Islamic days in Arabia, women used to display their charms, but all reports about such displays appear trifling, or even decent when compared with how women reveal their charms in our present climate. Mujāhid defines it as women walking alongside men and among them, while Qatādah says that they used to walk in a coquettish way. Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān, on the other hand, says that a display of charms meant that a woman would throw her head cover over her head without tightening it to cover her necklace, earrings or neck. Indeed, all this could be seen. Ibn Kathīr mentioned that a woman could walk among men, revealing her chest. She might also reveal her neck, plaits and earrings. Hence, God ordered female believers to cover themselves.

Such were the displays in ignorant Arabia and with which the Qur'ān dealt, purging the Muslim community from their effects and removing the elements that could lead to immoral behaviour. In so doing, the Qur'ān elevated thoughts, manners and feelings and it refined the senses of the Muslim community.

We say, 'senses' because the type of taste which admires the naked human body is vulgar, uncouth and lacks refinement. It is certainly less civilized than one which admires the beauty of modest appearance and what it indicates of beauty of soul, feeling and morality. This is a true measure of civilized human standards. Modesty has its own refined beauty which cannot be appreciated by people with coarse taste who only admire the naked flesh.

The Qur'ānic text speaks of such displays of women's charms as belonging to 'the old days of pagan ignorance,' using the Arabic term *jāhiliyyah* which, in Islamic usage, refers to pre-Islamic days. Thus, it implies that displaying physical charms belongs to the old days of ignorance. People who have left such ignorance behind and attained a higher standard of ideals and concepts will ignore such vulgarity.

We need to explain here that the term *jāhiliyyah* describes social conditions and a philosophy of life, not a particular period of time. Therefore, *jāhiliyyah* could exist at any time and in any society. Hence we can say that we live today in a period of blind

jāhiliyyah, which reflects vulgar tastes and unrefined concepts, pulling humanity to a humiliating and lowly level of civilization. When society accepts such standards, it cannot enjoy purity or blessings. Only a society that adopts the means of purification which the Prophet and the members of his household were the first to practise will attain such purity and blessings. The Qurʾān directs the Prophet's wives to these means, and then turns their eyes towards the sublime, giving them light and helping them to rise to the high standards their bond with God requires: *"Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakāt, and pay heed to God and His Messenger."* (Verse 33)

Worship is not divorced from social and moral behaviour. It is indeed the means by which to attain those high standards. The tie with God is indispensable, because it gives strength, purity of heart and immunity to social pressures. With such a tie, a believer feels that he follows better guidance than his community, and that he can lead others to the light he sees, rather than following their lead to the darkness they live in. In fact, mankind sinks into the ignorance of *jāhiliyyah* whenever they deviate from God's path.

Islam is a fully integrated whole that includes rituals, manners, morality, systems and laws, placing them all within the framework of faith. Each aspect has its role in putting this faith into practice. They work in full harmony. It is such integrated unity and harmony that provides the overall structure of Islam in practice. Hence, the order to attend to prayer, pay *zakāt* and obey God and His Messenger comes as the last of the moral and behavioural directives given to members of the Prophet's household. In fact, none of those directives can work fully in practice without worship and obedience. In fact, all this serves a definite purpose: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33)

The way this statement is phrased imparts gentle and tender feelings. They are described here as *'members of the household'*, without defining which household. In the text's translation we added in brackets the word 'Prophet' for explanation. By omitting it, the Qurʾān refers to it as if it is the only household in the world that deserves to be called as such. Once the word 'household', or *bayt* in Arabic, is used, then it has been defined. A similar usage applies to the Ka'bah, God's house. It is often called *al-bayt*, or 'The House'. Hence this reference to the Prophet's household adds an element of special honour.

The *sūrah* says: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33) We note the very kindly and gentle approach adopted here. It tells them that God in all His majesty is the One to ensure their purification and the removal of all that is loathsome from them. This is direct care from God shown to the members of this household. We appreciate this

care more fully when we remember that it is said by none other than God Almighty, who said to the universe, 'Be', and it came into existence, and who is in control of everything, the Lord of all majesty and glory. Furthermore, He says this in His book which is recited on high and recited in every place on earth, at all times, by millions in their devotion. Furthermore, these directives are given as a means of purification and removing what is loathsome. These are goals achieved by means which people adopt in their practical lives. This is the method Islam prefers, combining feelings of consciousness of God with action and behaviour. Together they reflect Islamic life and achieve its goals in human society.

These directives to the Prophet's wives are concluded, as they started, with a reminder of their high position and special privileges over other women. This they earn by their relation to God's Messenger and the grace with which God has favoured them when He made their homes the place where revelation is bestowed from on high, providing light, guidance and wisdom: "*Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware.*" (Verse 34) That is certainly a great privilege which is fully appreciated once it is mentioned. We should remember that this reminder is given at the conclusion of the address that started with offering the Prophet's wives a choice between the luxuries of this life on the one hand and God, His Messenger and the life to come on the other. This helps us to appreciate the great favour God has granted them and to recognize the triviality of the present life with all its attractions and luxuries.

Values in Islamic Life

When it comes to the purification of the Muslim community and establishing its life on the basis of Islamic values, men and women are equal and have the same role. Therefore, the *sūrah* gives these in detail:

For all men and women who have submitted themselves to God, all believing men and believing women, all truly devout men and truly devout women, all men and women who are true to their word, all men and women who are patient in adversity, all men and women who humble themselves before God, all men and women who give in charity, all men and women who fast, all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who always remember God – for them all God has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. (Verse 35)

These qualities grouped together in this one verse work together to form a Muslim's character. These are: self surrender to God, faith, devotion, being true to one's word, patience in adversity, humility before God, being charitable, fasting, being mindful of one's chastity, and remembering God at all times. Each quality has

its own role to play in a Muslim's life.

The first two qualities are expressed in the two Arabic words *islām* and *īmān*, which mean 'submission' and 'belief' respectively. There is a strong interrelation between the two, or we can say that both are two sides of the same coin. Submission is the outcome of belief and true belief gives rise to submission. 'Devotion' means obedience that results from submission and belief, though inner acceptance, not external pressure. 'Truthfulness' is the quality essential for every Muslim. Whoever does not possess this quality cannot be within the ranks of the Muslim community. God says in the Qur'ān: "*It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood.*" (16: 105) Thus, a liar is expelled from the ranks of the community which always remains true to its word, the Muslim community.

The next quality is 'patience in adversity'. In fact a Muslim cannot fulfil the requirements and duties of his faith without this quality. Islam needs patience in adversity at every step. Muslims have to be patient, resisting desire, bearing the harm inflicted by others, overcoming impediments, patiently addressing weaknesses and crookedness in other people, and going through the tests of either an easy life or hardship. Essentially, both are difficult predicaments.

'Humility before God' is an inner quality that reflects how we feel God's majesty deep in our hearts and how truly and willingly we obey and fear Him. 'Being charitable' indicates purification from greed and self indulgence. It also reflects care for others and kindness to them, as well as mutual security within the Muslim community. It is an act of gratitude to God for what He gives us and represents our discharging our duty on wealth.

'Fasting' is considered a quality because of its regular and consistent nature. It reflects an attitude that rises above the essential needs of life, enhancing man's willpower and giving supremacy within man's constitution to human qualities. 'Being mindful of one's chastity' involves not only the element of purity but also the proper control of the most profound and powerful desire in man. In fact, no one can achieve such proper control except one who is a God-fearing believer and who seeks God's help. This quality also regulates relations between people and aims to elevate the meeting between man and woman to a level that is higher than that of the urge of the flesh. It makes this meeting subject to God's law and serves the purpose of creating both sexes to populate the earth and build human life on it.

'Remembering God at all times' provides the link between all human activity and man's faith. It makes man mindful of God at every moment.

He thus constantly retains his strong bond with Him. Moreover, his mind and heart beam with happiness and the light of life. Those who reflect all these qualities, essential as they are for the building of Islamic character, are the ones for whom "*God*

has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.” (Verse 35)

In conclusion we should note how the *sūrah* gives an account of the qualities of all Muslims, men and women, after it paid special attention at the beginning of this part to the Prophet’s wives. Women are mentioned side by side with men, as part of the Islamic effort to give women their rightful position in society and establish society’s attitude to women on the right basis. In their bond with God and in the Islamic duties of purification, worship and practical conduct, men and women are seen to be in the same position.

Fearing Social Reaction

Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error. (36)

You did say to the one whom God had shown favour and you had shown favour, 'Hold on to your wife and have fear of God.' And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted to bring to light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe. Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. God's will must be fulfilled. (37)

No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him. Such was God's way with those who went before him. God's will is always destiny absolute. (38)

Those are the ones who convey God's messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe. Sufficient is God to reckon all things. (39)

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَى اللَّهُ
وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ
أَمْرِهِمْ ۗ وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ
ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُّبِينًا ﴿٣٦﴾

وَإِذْ تَقُولُ لِلَّذِي أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَأَنْعَمْتَ
عَلَيْهِ أَمْسِكْ عَلَيْكَ زَوْجَكَ وَاتَّقِ اللَّهَ
وَتُخْفِي فِي نَفْسِكَ مَا اللَّهُ مُبْدِيهِ وَتَخْشَى
النَّاسَ وَاللَّهُ أَحَقُّ أَنْ تَخْشَاهُ ۗ فَلَمَّا قَضَى
زَيْدٌ مِنْهَا وَطَرًا زَوَّجْنَاكَهَا لِكَيْ لَا يَكُونَ
عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ حَرَجٌ فِي أَزْوَاجِ أَدْعِيَائِهِمْ
إِذَا قَضَوْا مِنْهُنَّ وَطَرًا ۗ وَكَانَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ
مَفْعُولًا ﴿٣٧﴾

مَا كَانَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ مِنْ حَرَجٍ فِيمَا فَرَضَ
اللَّهُ لَهُ ۗ سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ فِي الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلُ
وَكَانَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ قَدَرًا مَقْدُورًا ﴿٣٨﴾

الَّذِينَ يُبَلِّغُونَ رِسَالَاتِ اللَّهِ وَتَخْشَوْنَهُ
وَلَا تَخْشَوْنَ أَحَدًا إِلَّا اللَّهَ ۗ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ
حَسِيبًا ﴿٣٩﴾

Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets. God has indeed full knowledge of everything. (40)

Believers! Remember God always, (41)

and glorify Him morning and evening. (42)

It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers. (43)

On the day when they meet Him, they will be greeted with 'Peace', and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward. (44)

Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner; (45)

one who calls people to God by His leave and a light-giving beacon. (46)

Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them. (47)

Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (48)

مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ
وَلَكِن رَّسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ ۗ وَكَانَ
اللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٤٠﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا أَذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ ذِكْرًا كَثِيرًا
﴿٤١﴾

وَسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَلِّي عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَلَائِكَتُهُ
لِيُخْرِجَكُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ ۗ
وَكَانَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحِيمًا ﴿٤٣﴾

تَحِيَّتُهُمْ يَوْمَ يَلْقَوْنَهُ سَلَامٌ ۗ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ
أَجْرًا كَرِيمًا ﴿٤٤﴾

يَأْتِيهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٤٥﴾

وَدَاعِيًا إِلَى اللَّهِ بِإِذْنِهِ ۖ وَسِرَاجًا مُّنِيرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِأَنَّ لَهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ فَضْلًا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٤٧﴾

وَلَا تُطِعِ الْكَافِرِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقِينَ وَدَعْ
أَذْنَهُمْ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ
وَكِيلًا ﴿٤٨﴾

Overview

This passage represents another stage in reorganizing the Muslim community on the basis of Islamic teachings, addressing in particular the adoption system to which reference was made at the beginning of the *sūrah* and annulling its effects. God has willed that His Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), be the one who undertakes in practice the annulment of this tradition. The Arabs used to treat the divorcee of an adopted son in the same way as if he was one's own son, i.e. she was permanently forbidden in marriage to the father. They could not accept that a woman who had previously been married to an adopted son was lawful for them to marry and this situation held until there was a precedent giving practical application to the new rule. Hence, the Prophet was chosen to undertake this new responsibility in addition to his burden of delivering God's message. When we examine this more closely, it is immediately apparent that no one other than the Prophet could have discharged this very heavy responsibility, facing as he did the community with an action that challenged its accepted norms. We also see that the Qur'ānic comment on this situation is long, stressing the believers' bond with God and His Messenger and clarifying the role of the Prophet in their community. All this is stated so as to make things easier for people to accept and make them more willing to implement God's orders outlining this new social system.

Before this specific case is discussed, a rule is put in place giving God and His Messenger all authority over the Muslims' lives. Once God and His Messenger decide a matter, a believer has no choice but to submit to that order and carry it out. This again demonstrates just how difficult it was to take an action that was contrary to tradition.

Background Cases

Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error. (Verse 36)

Reports suggest that this verse was revealed in respect of Zaynab bint Jaḥsh when the Prophet wanted to remove all social considerations dividing people into different social classes. These strata were inherited by the Muslim community from their pre-Islamic days. The Prophet now, however, wanted to emphasize the full equality of all people, making the only factor that distinguishes between them their fear of God and good action. Up until this point, former slaves that had been freed were placed in a class lower than that of their masters. One such former slave was Zayd ibn Ḥārithah

whom the Prophet had adopted.

The Prophet wanted to establish the full equality among people by giving Zayd a wife of noble birth, one from his own Hāshimite clan, and his own cousin, Zaynab bint Jaḥsh. In this way, the Prophet himself would remove class distinction within his own family. He had realized that class distinctions were so deeply entrenched in society that they could only be removed by his own practical example. His action would be the catalyst enabling humanity to follow in his footsteps.

In his discussion of this verse Ibn Kathīr quotes Ibn `Abbās's report: "The Prophet wanted to choose a wife for Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, and he went into Zaynab bint Jaḥsh's home and proposed to her that she married him. She said: I do not wish to marry him.' The Prophet said: 'Do not say that. Marry him.' She said: 'Messenger of God! I will consider it.' As they were engaged in conversation God revealed this verse to His Messenger: *'Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter.'* (Verse 36) She asked the Prophet: 'Messenger of God! Are you happy for me to marry him?' He replied: 'Yes.' She said: 'Then I will not disobey God's Messenger. I will marry him."

Another report by Ibn `Abbās mentions that Zaynab had a sharp element in her character and that when the Prophet proposed to her that she marry Zayd, she replied: 'I belong to a nobler family than his.' Then God revealed this verse in full. Other early scholars, for example, Mujāhid, Qatādah and Muqātil also confirm that this verse was revealed in connection with Zaynab's marriage to Zayd.

Ibn Kathīr includes in his commentary a different report attributed to `Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Zayd ibn Aslam: "This verse was revealed in connection with the case of Umm Kulthūm bint `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ who was the first woman to migrate to Madinah after the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Peace Treaty. She offered herself to the Prophet as a gift. He said, 'I accept,' then he married her to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah[most probably after he had divorced Zaynab], but she and her brothers were displeased. Her brother said: 'We wanted her to be married to God's Messenger, but he married her to his former slave.' This verse was then revealed: *Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter.'* (Verse 36) This is a specific order, but the *sūrah* includes one which is more general in its import: *'The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves.'* (Verse 6)

Imām Aḥmad mentions a third case reported by Anas: "The Prophet wanted to give Julaybīb, a former slave, a woman from the Anṣār as a wife and he proposed this to her father. The man said: 'I will consult her mother.' The Prophet said: 'That is fine.' The man went to his wife and told her what the Prophet proposed. She said: 'How come! The Prophet could not find us anyone better than Julaybīb when we

have refused better men.’ The girl was in her room and heard the conversation. As her father was about to go to tell the Prophet, the girl said to her parents: ‘Do you want to refuse what the Prophet has suggested to you? If the Prophet is happy with the man, then accept him.’ Her words came as a relief to her parents, and they agreed with her. Her father then went to the Prophet and said: ‘If you are happy with him, we accept him.’ The Prophet replied: ‘I am certainly happy with him.’ The Prophet then married the girl to Julaybīb. Some time later, Julaybīb joined a military expedition, but was killed in action, though around him were found several unbelievers whom he had killed during the fighting.” Anas also reports: “I saw this woman later: she belongs to one of the most charitable families in Madinah.”

These reports relate the revelation of the present verse to Zayd’s marriage to Zaynab or to Umm Kulthūm bint `Uqbah. We have added the third report about Julaybīb because it explains the sort of social environment Islam wanted to remove by assigning this task to the Prophet. This was part of his responsibility to reorganize the Muslim community on the basis of Islam, its constitution and value system.

Establishing a Principle

However, the import of the verse is much wider than just any one case. This because it also relates to the annulment of the effects of adoption, the permission to marry the divorcees of formerly adopted sons, and the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab after Zayd divorced her. This last situation attracted much talk at the time. In fact, some people who are hostile to Islam still use it to criticize the Prophet (peace be upon him) and to fabricate legends about him. Whether the verse was revealed in connection with the cases mentioned earlier or with the Prophet’s own marriage to Zaynab, it nonetheless states a rule which is far more general than any specific case and one which has a profound effect on Muslims’ lives.

This principle of the Islamic faith was, as a result, clearly established and deeply rooted in the hearts of the Muslim community, and it moulded their feelings. In essence, this rule is such that Muslims have no control over anything that belongs to them. They and all that they own belong to God, and He chooses for them whatever He pleases. Each and every individual is only a tiny part of the universe which follows the overall law God has set for it. The Creator of the universe who controls it determines their affairs and assigns to them their roles in the drama, stipulating all their actions on this universal stage. They cannot choose the role they play, because they do not know the full extent of the drama. Nor can they choose an action they prefer, because this may not fit in with the overall role assigned to them. They neither wrote the play nor do they own the stage. They are merely commissioned actors who earn their wages for their actions. The end result, however, is not their

concern.

When this element of the Islamic faith had been established in the hearts of the first Muslim community, they surrendered themselves truly and completely to God, leaving nothing for themselves. This gave them harmony with the nature of the universe, and brought their actions into line with its course. Thus, they moved in their own orbits, just like stars and planets in theirs, never trying to move out, accelerate or slow down. They willingly accepted everything God willed for them, realizing deep down that it is God's will that determines every event and every situation. This acceptance gave them comfort and reassurance. Gradually they stopped being surprised or shocked when something happened to them by God's will. They neither felt panic which needs reassurance, nor pain which needs patience. They simply received God's will as something they expected, causing them neither astonishment nor taking them aback.

They no longer wished to hasten the turn of events so as to accomplish something they desired, not even when their desires focused on achieving victory for their faith. They simply accepted that God's will would take them wherever He willed, while they remained content and satisfied. They laid down their lives, strove hard and sacrificed their wealth, willingly, patiently, pressing no favours and feeling no sorrow, firmly believing that they were only doing what God willed them to do and that ultimately what took place was only what God willed, and further that everything occurs at the right time. Thus they submitted themselves completely to God, letting His hand lead them along the way, feeling safe, secure and trusting that whatever the outcome it would be the right one.

In all this, they only did what they could, withholding nothing, wasting neither time nor effort, and not overburdening themselves or trying to go beyond their human abilities. They neither claimed what they did not have nor did they profess what they could not do.

This balance between absolute submission to God's will, exerting all efforts and energies, and not trying to exceed abilities was the distinctive mark of that first Muslim community which enabled it to successfully fulfil the responsibility their faith assigned to them. This was a trust that is too heavy even for mountains to bear. In fact, when this basic element of Islamic faith found its root in the hearts of the first Muslim community, it was able to achieve the miraculous within its own lifespan and in the life of mankind in general. In short, its efforts yielded plentiful and sweet fruit in a very short period of time.

The great transformation that took place within their own souls was indeed the great miracle that no man can ever produce. It only happened by God's direct will. Numerous verses in the Qur'ān refer to this truth. God says: *"Indeed, you cannot guide*

aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills.” (28: 56) “It is not for you to make people follow the right guidance. It is God who guides whom He wills.” (2: 272) “All true guidance is God’s guidance.” (3: 73) This is the meaning of guidance both in its essence and in its broadest sense. It represents man’s guidance about his place in this universe, one which gives his action harmony with what takes place elsewhere in the universe. Human efforts will not achieve their full results until people genuinely accept guidance in this sense, reassured that God’s will controls everything.

Let us read again the verse that led to this long discussion: *“Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error.” (Verse 36)* We see now that it has a far broader import than any particular event that might have led to its revelation. It establishes the most fundamental principle in the Islamic code.

Zaynab’s Marriage

The *sūrah* then refers to the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh and the rulings and directives that preceded or followed it:

You did say to the one to whom God had shown favour and you had shown favour, ‘Hold on to your wife and have fear of God.’ And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted to bring to light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe. Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. God’s will must be fulfilled. No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him. Such was God’s way with those who went before him. God’s will is always destiny absolute. Those are the ones who convey God’s messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe. Sufficient is God to reckon all things. Muḥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God’s Messenger and the seal of all prophets. God has indeed full knowledge of everything. (Verses 37-40)

Clear orders were given early in the *sūrah* prohibiting adoption and requiring that adopted children be called by their own fathers’ names, returning family relations to their normal structure: *“He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right path. Call them by their fathers’ names; that is more just in God’s sight. If do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.” (Verses 4-5)* However, adoption had its effects in the practical

life of the Arabian society, and the annulment of these practical effects was not going to be as easy as the prohibition of adoption. Social traditions have a strong hold on people. Hence why practical examples are needed to serve as precedents. Initially too such precedents meet with a hostile reception.

We have already stated that the Prophet married his formerly adopted son, Zayd ibn H̄ārithah, who used to be called Zayd ibn Muḥammad, to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, whose mother was the Prophet's own paternal aunt. The Prophet wanted to achieve through this marriage the removal of class distinctions as also implementation of the Qur'ānic principle: *"Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing."* (49: 13) He wanted to give this new Islamic value practical endorsement.

God's will then dictated that the Prophet should undertake the annulment of the effects of adoption himself, by marrying Zayd's divorcee. He was to confront society with this action, which no man could undertake despite the earlier prohibition against adoption. Therefore, God informed His Messenger that Zayd would be divorcing Zaynab and that he would marry her, and all to fulfil God's purpose. By this time, relations between Zayd and Zaynab were troubled, the parties themselves aware that their marriage would not last long.

Time after time, Zayd complained to the Prophet that his life with Zaynab was not a happy one, saying that he could not carry on with her. Brave as he was in clearly and unhesitatingly confronting his people in matters of faith, the Prophet felt that the burden of Zaynab's situation was too heavy for him to carry. He was uneasy about confronting people with the practical destruction of their old adoption tradition. Zayd was also very close to the Prophet.⁴ Therefore, he said to Zayd: *"Hold on to your wife and have fear of God."* (Verse 37) In so doing, he was delaying this serious challenge to social norms: *"And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted to bring to light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe."* (Verse 37) The Prophet knew that God would eventually bring it all to light, just as he knew through God's inspiration that it would take place. It was, thus, not a clear order from God. Had it been so, he would not have hesitated, not delayed for a moment. He would have declared it on the spot no matter what consequences he might have expected. Instead, it was simply an inspiration countered by the outcome he feared would take place. He thus waited until it was God's will for it to happen, for Zayd to divorce Zaynab with neither of them paying any thought of what would happen next. The prevailing tradition considered Zaynab as divorced by Muḥammad's son, and as such she was permanently unlawful for

⁴ The verse mentions that Zayd was granted favours by God and His Messenger. God gave him the blessings of being a Muslim, and close to the Prophet who loved him better than any other man. Furthermore, the Prophet did him the favour of setting him free, and of bringing him tip.

Muḥammad to marry. Up to this point, marriage between a man and the divorcee of his former adopted son was still unlawful. Changes to this rule had to wait until the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab, so that it could be practically established, despite people's reluctance.

These facts refute all contrary reports upheld by people hostile to Islam, in the past as well as in the present, and who have fabricated all sorts of legends around the situation.

The whole thing was exactly as God said: *"When Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them."* (Verse 37) This was, then, one of the heavy burdens the Prophet had to bear in connection with his message. Extremely uneasy, he had to face society with it. Indeed he was reluctant to so confront people, even though he had no hesitation whatsoever in confronting them with the essence of faith based on God's oneness, or with his denunciation of false deities and alleged partners with God, or with criticizing their forefathers.

"God's will must be fulfilled." (Verse 37) It cannot be overturned. It just comes about and nothing can stop it. Therefore, the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab took place after she had completed her waiting period. He then sent Zayd, her former husband and the person he loved most, to carry his proposal to her.

Anas reports: "When Zaynab finished her waiting period, the Prophet said to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah: 'Go and propose to her on my behalf.' He went to her home and saw her making her dough. He said: When I saw her I was in so much awe that I could not look at her, and say that God's Messenger wished to marry her. Therefore, I turned my back on her and, looking away, I said: Zaynab! I have happy news for you. God's Messenger has sent me to propose to you.' She said: 'I will do nothing until I have consulted my Lord.' She then went to pray. The Qur'ānic verse was revealed, and the Prophet came and entered her home without knocking." [Related by Muslim, Aḥmad and al-Nasā'ī.] Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālīk that "Zaynab used to take pride among the Prophet's other wives, saying to them: 'It was your families that gave you in marriage while it was God Himself who, from over the seventh heaven, gave me in marriage.'"

To be expected, the matter did not pass easily. Rather, it came as a big surprise to the whole Muslim community, while the hypocrites were quick to circulate their allegations that the Prophet had 'married his son's wife'. The question, however, was that of establishing a new principle. Therefore, the Qur'ān emphasized this and removed its strange aspects: *"No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him."* (Verse 38) It was God who ordained that the Prophet

should marry Zaynab and abolish the Arabian tradition that prohibited marriage to a former wife of an adopted son. Since God ordained this, no blame attaches to the Prophet. He was not the first prophet to find himself in such a position: *“Such was God’s way with those who went before him.”* (Verse 38) This, then, comes to pass in accordance with God’s consistent law which is not subject to people’s ideas which in any case lack sound basis. *“God’s will is always destiny absolute.”* It will always be done, unhindered by anything or anyone. It runs according to God’s wisdom to achieve the goal He sets out.

This rule also applied to earlier messengers: *“Those are the ones who convey God’s messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe.”* (Verse 39) When God commands them to do something, they are not swayed in some other direction by other people: indeed the latter are of no importance. They fear no one other than God who Charged them with the task of delivering His message and putting it into action: *“Sufficient is God to reckon all things.”* (Verse 39) It is He who holds them to account. They are accountable to no one else.

“Muḥammad is not the father of any one of your men.” (Verse 40) Zaynab was not his son’s wife, and Zayd was not his son; he was Ḥārithah’s son. Hence, when the matter is looked at from the angle of reality, it carries no blame whatsoever. Muḥammad was in the same relation o all Muslims, including Zayd ibn Ḥārithah: it is a relation between a prophet and his community. He is *“God’s Messenger and the seal of all prophets.”* (Verse 40) He thus puts in place God’s permanent law to be applied by all mankind for the rest of time. *“God has indeed full knowledge of everything.”* (Verse 40) He knows what suits humanity and sets its life on the best course. He has ordained that the Prophet act in accordance with His wisdom and knowledge. Furthermore, He has set in motion the laws and regulations that best serve people’s interests and bring them happiness.

From Darkness into Light

The *sūrah* goes on to establish this last meaning in the hearts of believers, keeping alive their relation with God who ordained whatever He willed for His Messenger and chose for the Muslim community what brought about their every good, replacing the darkness with light:

Believers! Remember God always, and glorify Him morning and evening. It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers. On the day when they meet Him, they will be greeted with ‘Peace; and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward. (Verses 41-44)

Remembering God means that one's heart is alive to God's remembrance, not the mere mention of His name. One should always be careful in whatever one does so as to remain within what God permits. To attend regularly to prayer is part of remembering God. In fact there are many *ahādīth* and reports that almost equate God's remembrance with attending to prayer. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If a man wakes his wife up at night and they offer two *rak'ahs* of night prayer, they will be considered that night as among those who remember God always." [Related by Abū Dāwūd, Al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.]

God's remembrance though is broader than prayer. It includes every way in which a person is fully conscious of his Lord, whether his tongue moves to mention Him or not. What we are referring to here is a consciousness that motivates to action. A human heart remains lost or perplexed until it establishes its link with God, remembering Him and feeling secure in His care. It then knows the way to follow, the method to implement, and how to go about all this. It is for this reason that the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* repeatedly urge people to remember God. The Qur'ān often links this to different times and situations in which man finds himself, so that these serve as reminders for him not to neglect this duty: "*Believers! Remember God always, and glorify Him morning and evening.*" (Verses 41-42)

The early morning and the end of the day have much that urges human hearts to maintain their ties with God, who changes times and situations, without ever changing Himself. Yet everything else changes and disappears.

At the same time, people are reminded of God's grace and the care He takes of His creation and the favours He bestows on them. Yet He is in no need of them while they need His care and blessings: "*It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers.*" (Verse 43)

All glory to God who bestows great favours and doubles them over and over again. Yet He also remembers His weak servants who have no real power of their own and whose life is only transitory. He remembers them, taking care of them and blessing them together with His angels. When He mentions them in good terms among those on high, the entire universe echoes their mention, as the Prophet states: "God says: Whoever of My servants mentions Me to himself, I mention him to Myself; and whoever mentions Me in the presence of a group, I mention him in the presence of a better group." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] This is indeed profound. One can hardly imagine it, when one knows that the whole earth with all the creatures living on and in it is no more than a tiny particle in relation to the great galaxies of the universe. Yet all these galaxies and what they contain of creatures are no more than a portion of the universe which God has willed to exist, saying to it, 'Be,' and it came into being.

“It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light.” (Verse 43) God’s light is one, comprehensive, continuous. What does not belong to it is darkness, which differs and has several depths. If people stray from God’s light, they have only darkness to live in. Nothing can save them or bring them out of this darkness except God’s light that enlightens hearts and minds, filling souls and guiding them to what suits their nature. The grace God bestows on them and the angels’ blessings and prayers for them are what takes them out of the darkness into the light. This is what happens to them when their hearts open up to faith: *“He is truly merciful to the believers.”* (Verse 43)

Such is their situation in this life, when they need to work. As for their situation in the life to come, when reward is administered, God’s grace continues to be with them. They are received there warmly, given honour and rich reward: *“On the day when they meet Him, they will be greeted with ‘Peace; and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward.”* (Verse 44) They have a peace that contrasts with fear, tiring effort and hard work. It is a greeting from God, brought to them by the angels who enter from every door to deliver the message given to them from on high. This comes in addition to the noble reward God has in store for them. Such is their Lord who legislates and chooses what is best for them. Who would not prefer His choice?

The Prophet’s Role

The Prophet who delivers to them what God has chosen, and shows them by practical example how to implement the laws God has enacted for them, is here given an outline of his own role. His position in relation to the believers is also explained.

Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner; one who calls people to God by His leave and a light-giving beacon. Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them. Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (Verses 45-48)

The Prophet’s position among them is that of a witness. They should, then, work to improve the testimony he gives, as it will state the facts, changing nothing and containing nothing that is false. He is also the *‘bearer of good news*, explaining what awaits those who work hard and well of God’s grace, forgiveness of sins, honour and reward. Moreover, he is *‘a warner’* to those who overlook their duties, telling them of what awaits the wrongdoers of punishment and suffering. Thus, they are not taken unawares. Furthermore, he is one who *Calls people to God*, not to worldly glory, national pride, personal gain or position. He only calls to God in a consistent way

that leads to Him *'by His leave'*. He does not invent anything, nor does he say anything of his own volition. He fulfils his task by God's leave, as He has commanded him. He is indeed *'light-giving beacon'*. He dispels darkness, removes doubts and enlightens the way. He is a beacon that gives light to guide people aright, like a lamp that dispels darkness on the road.

Such was Muḥammad, God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), and such was the light he gave. He gave to people a clear and lucid concept of existence, of their relation with God and their position in relation to the universe and its Creator. He gave us a clear value system, one which is essential for the right existence of the universe and man's life therein. He also gave us a clear and decisive explanation of the origin of life and its end, the goal it serves and the course by which it is served. No ambiguity is found in anything he has given. His is a style that addresses human nature directly, using its wider gates and the most effective of ways.

The *sūrah* repeats once more the Prophet's task of giving good news to the believers, expressing this in more detail: *"Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them."* (Verse 47) This gives flesh to something it mentioned in general a little earlier on: *"Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner."* (Verse 45) Thus, the details serve to further explain God's favours bestowed on the believers.

This address of the Prophet concludes with an order to him not to pay any heed to the unbelievers and hypocrites, not to care about their actions or whether these may hurt him or his followers, and to always place his trust in God: *"Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 48) It is the same address given at the outset of the *sūrah*, before it outlines any legislation for social reorganization. The Prophet is further instructed not to care for their hurting actions. He must not try to spare himself such hurt by relenting to them in anything, or relying on them in any way. God is sufficient for him to place his trust in Him alone.

We see how the situation of Zayd and Zaynab and the abrogation of the tradition that prohibited marriage with the divorcee of an adopted son was indeed difficult, requiring confirmation and explanation by God. This is why it was preceded by a long explanation and concluded with a long comment. All this emphasizes God's great care shown to the believers who must receive His orders with total acceptance and a willing submission.

Detailed Legal Provisions

Believers! If you marry believing women and then divorce them before the marriage is consummated, you have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them and release them in a becoming manner. (49)

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِذَا نَكَحْتُمُ
الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ثُمَّ طَلَقْتُمُوهُنَّ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ
تَمْسُوهُنَّ فَمَا لَكُمْ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ عِدَّةٍ
تَعْتَدُونَهَا فَمَتَّعُوهُنَّ وَسَرَّحُوهُنَّ سَرَاحًا
جَمِيلًا ﴿٤٩﴾

Prophet! We have made lawful to you the wives whom you have paid their dowries, as well as those whom God has placed in your right hand through war, as also the daughters of your paternal uncles and aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and aunts, who have migrated with you; and any believing woman who offers herself freely to the Prophet and whom the Prophet might be willing to wed: [this latter] applies to you alone and not to other believers. We well know what We have made obligatory to them in respect of their wives and other women their right hands possess; and thus no blame shall attach to you. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَحْلَلْنَا لَكَ أَزْوَاجَكَ الَّتِي
ءَاتَيْتَ أَجُورَهُنَّ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ يَمِينُكَ
مِمَّا أَفَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ وَبَنَاتِ عَمِّكَ وَبَنَاتِ
عَمَّتِكَ وَبَنَاتِ خَالِكَ وَبَنَاتِ خَالَتِكَ
الَّتِي هَاجَرْنَ مَعَكَ وَامْرَأَةً مُؤْمِنَةً إِنْ
وَهَبَتْ نَفْسَهَا لِلنَّبِيِّ إِنْ أَرَادَ النَّبِيُّ أَنْ
يَسْتَنْكِحَهَا خَالِصَةً لَكَ مِنْ دُونِ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ قَدْ عَلِمْنَا مَا فَرَضْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ فِي
أَزْوَاجِهِمْ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ لِكَيْلَا
يَكُونَ عَلَيْكَ حَرَجٌ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا

You may defer any of them you please, and take to yourself any of them you please. No blame will attach to you if you invite one whose turn you have previously set aside: this makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them. God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All-Knowing, Forbearing. (51)

You [Muhammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess. God keeps watch over all things. (52)

Believers! Do not enter the Prophet's homes, unless you are given leave, for a meal without waiting for its proper time. But when you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without lingering for the sake of mere talk. Such behaviour might give offence to the Prophet, and yet he might feel too shy to bid you go. God does not shy of stating what is right. When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from

﴿٥٠﴾ تَرْجِي مَنْ تَشَاءُ مِنْهُمْ وَتُؤَيِّ إِلَيْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَمَنْ أَبْتَغَيْتَ مِمَّنْ عَزَلْتَ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكَ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ تَقَرَّ أَعْيُنُهُنَّ وَلَا تَحْزَنَ وَيَرْضَيْنَ بِمَا آتَيْتَهُنَّ كُلُّهُنَّ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَلِيمًا ﴿٥١﴾

لَا تَحِلُّ لَكَ النِّسَاءُ مِنْ بَعْدُ وَلَا أَنْ تَبَدَّلَ بِهِنَّ مِنْ أَزْوَاجٍ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ حُسْنُهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتْ يَمِينُكَ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ رَقِيبًا ﴿٥٢﴾

يَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَىٰ طَعَامٍ غَيْرَ نَظْرِينَ إِنَّهُ وَلَكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ فَادْخُلُوا فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا مُسْتَعْسِفِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ ءِنْ ذَلِكَ كَانَ يُؤْذَى النَّبِيُّ فَيَسْتَحِيءُ مِنْكُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَسْتَحِيءُ مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا فَسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ ذَلِكُمْ أَطْهَرُ لِقُلُوبِكُمْ وَقُلُوبِهِنَّ وَمَا كَانَ لَكُمْ أَنْ تُؤْذُوا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَلَا

behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs. Moreover, it does not bebove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not bebove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away. That is certainly an enormity in God's sight. (53)

Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has full knowledge of everything. (54)

It is no sin for them [o appear freely] before their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, or such men slaves as their right hands possess. [Wives of the Prophet!] Always remain God-fearing; for God is witness to all things. (55)

God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace. (56)

Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering. (57)

And those who malign believing men and women for no wrong they might have done shall have burdened themselves with the guilt of calumny and with a blatant injustice. (58)

أَنْ تَنْكِحُوا أَرْوَاجَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ أَبَدًا إِنَّ
ذَلِكَ كَانَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمًا ﴿٥٣﴾

إِنْ تَبَدُّوا شَيْئًا أَوْ تَخْفَوْهُ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ
بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٥٤﴾

لَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي آبَائِهِمْ وَلَا أَبْنَائِهِمْ
وَلَا إِخْوَانِهِمْ وَلَا أبنَاءِ إِخْوَانِهِمْ وَلَا أبنَاءِ
أخواتِهِمْ وَلَا نِسَائِهِمْ وَلَا مَا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَانُهُمْ وَأَتَّقِينَ اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ
عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدًا ﴿٥٥﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَمَلَائِكَتَهُ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ
يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا صَلُّوا عَلَيْهِ
وَسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا ﴿٥٦﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُؤْذُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ لَعَنَهُمُ
اللَّهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا
مُهِينًا ﴿٥٧﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْذُونَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ بَغَيْرِ مَا اكْتَسَبُوا فَقَدْ
أَحْتَمَلُوا بُهْتَنًا وَإِثْمًا مُبِينًا ﴿٥٨﴾

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِأَرْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْنَّ مِنْ جَلْبِيبِهِنَّ

Prophet! Say to your wives, daughters and all believing women that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments. This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (59)

If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while: (60)

bereft of God's grace, they shall be seized wherever they may be found, and will be slain. (61)

Such has been God's way with those who went before. Never will you find any change in God's way. (62)

ذَلِكَ أَدَّتِي أَنْ يُعَرَّفَنَ فَلَا يُؤَدِّينَ^ج
وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٥٩﴾

لَئِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهِ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالَّذِينَ فِي
قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ وَالْمُرْجِفُونَ فِي
الْمَدِينَةِ لَنُغْرِبَنَّكَ بِهِمْ ثُمَّ لَا
يُجَاوِرُونَكَ فِيهَا إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٦٠﴾

مَلْعُونِينَ أَيْنَمَا ثُقِفُوا أُخِذُوا وَقُتِلُوا
تَقْتِيلًا ﴿٦١﴾

سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ فِي الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلُ^ط
وَلَنْ نَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٦٢﴾

Overview

This passage begins with a general rule concerning women who are divorced before their marriage has been consummated. This is followed by a number of rules relating to the Prophet's own family life, including the relationship between his wives and men generally, how Muslims should approach the Prophet's home, and the honour God bestows on His Messenger's home and how it is viewed by the angels and those on high. It concludes with a general order that applies to the Prophet's wives, daughters and all Muslim women. They are ordered to draw their outer garments over their bodies when they go out, so that they are recognized as chaste women. Thus, men with bad characters, such as the hypocrites and other wicked people who used to tease and irritate women would not approach them. It concludes with a warning to the hypocrites and circulators of rumours that they would be expelled from Madinah unless they stopped disturbing and irritating the

Muslim women.

These rules and directives form part of the reorganization of the Muslim community on the basis of the Islamic concept of life and society. As for matters that concern the Prophet's own private life, God has willed that life in the Prophet's home should remain a book open to all generations. Therefore, He incorporated these aspects into the Qur'ān, which will remain intact, and read in full, for the rest of time. At the same time, they are a sign of the honour God bestows on the Prophet's home, as He Himself undertakes to regulate its affairs and present it to mankind in His book, the Qur'ān.

Divorce Before Consummation

Believers! If you marry believing women and then divorce them before the marriage is consummated, you have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them and release them in a becoming manner. (Verse 49)

The situation of women divorced before their marriages have been consummated is dealt with in specific provisions outlined in *Sūrah 2, The Cow*: "You will incur no sin if you divorce women before having touched them or settled a dowry for them. Provide for them, the rich according to his means and the straitened according to his means. Such a provision, in an equitable manner, is an obligation binding on the righteous. If you divorce them before having touched them but after having settled a dowry for them, then give them half of that which you have settled, unless they forgo it or he in whose hand is the marriage tie forgoes it. To forgo what is due to you is closer to being righteous. Do not forget to act benevolently to one another. God sees all that you do." (2: 236-237)

This means that if a dowry has been agreed by the two parties in a marriage terminated before consummation, then the divorced woman is entitled to half the dowry. If the dowry has not been stated, then she is entitled to some provisions, in accordance with the means of the divorcing husband. Such a provision is binding on righteous people. The two verses in *Sūrah 2* do not mention any waiting period for such a divorced woman. We now have here a rule concerning this aspect, making it clear that such a woman has no waiting period to observe.

The waiting period is primarily to establish whether or not there is a pregnancy, so that no child is attributed to anyone other than its father, and no father is deprived of his child who might still be in the early days of conception. If the marriage has not been consummated, then no pregnancy has taken place, and there is no need for a waiting period. "You have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them." (Verse 49) This provision is according to what is mentioned in the other verses: half the agreed dowry or, if no dowry is agreed, a provision

commensurate with the man's financial status. The other obligation is to "release them in a becoming manner." (Verse 49) There must never be any imposition of hardship. Divorced women should be released so that they can begin a new life with someone else. This rule applies generally to all Muslims, given here in the context of organizing the Muslim community's social life.

The Prophet's Wives

The Prophet is then told which women are lawful for him to marry, and the special dispensation for him after the limit of four wives was imposed in an earlier *sūrah*: "You may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four." (4: 3) At the time the Prophet had nine wives, each of whom he married for a specific reason. `Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah were the daughters of his two closest Companions, Abū Bakr and `Umar. Umm Ḥabībah bint Abī Sufyān, Umm Salamah, Sawdah bint Zim`ah and Zaynab bint Khuzaymah⁵ were women from the Muhājirīn who had lost their husbands and the Prophet wanted to honour them. None of them was young or very pretty. Marrying them was merely an honour the Prophet gave them. As for Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, we have already discussed her marriage to the Prophet in detail. The other two were Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith and Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyay. Both were taken captive in war, but the Prophet freed them from bondage and married them to strengthen relations with their tribes and communities. Moreover, their marriage to the Prophet was an honour. Both accepted Islam after their people suffered the hardship of defeat.

They had all become 'mothers of the believers' and had the honour of being so close to God's Messenger, choosing God, His Messenger and the life to come over the luxuries and comforts of this world, when that choice was offered to them. It would have been very hard for them to be divorced when the maximum number of wives a Muslim may have was fixed at four. God looked at their situation and exempted His Messenger from that rule, permitting him to retain all his wives. Then, the Qur'ān stipulated that he must not add to them or replace any of them. Thus, the Prophet's exemption from the maximum of four wives was given specifically to those whom he had already married, so that they would not be deprived of this honour. The following verses clearly indicate this:

⁵ There is a little confusion here. Zaynab bint Khuzaymah lived only a very short period after her marriage to the Prophet. She was not one of the nine wives he had at the time when these rules were outlined. If we omit her name, eight remain. However, the ninth was Maymūnah, the last wife the Prophet married. Moreover, it is not exactly accurate to say that the four the author groups together were neither young nor pretty. While they were not young, they were not without beauty. There is no reason to try to justify the Prophet's marriages in this way. Some of the reasons the author mentions are certainly true, particularly in the cases of the last three he mentions, but the others need no justification. God gave His Messenger a dispensation and he made use of it. — Editor's note.

Prophet! We have made lawful to you the wives whom you have paid their dowries, as well as those whom God has placed in your right hand through war, as also the daughters of your paternal uncles and aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and aunts, who have migrated with you; and any believing woman who offers herself to the Prophet and whom the Prophet might be willing to wed: [this latter] applies to you alone and not to other believers. We well know what We have made obligatory to them in respect of their wives and other women their right hands possess; and thus no blame shall attach to you. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. You may defer any of them you please, and take to yourself any of them you please. No blame will attach to you if you invite one whose turn you have previously set aside: this makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them. God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All-Knowing, Forbearing. You [Muḥammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess. God keeps watch over all things. (Verses 50-52)

These provisions make it lawful for the Prophet to marry any woman from the types mentioned, even though this might take the number of such wives above the maximum of four which applied to all other Muslims. These types included the women whom he had already married and paid their dowries; any slave he came to own; his paternal and maternal cousins who had migrated with him, but not those who had not already migrated and any woman who presented herself as a gift to the Prophet without taking a dowry or having a guardian, if he wished to marry her.⁶ God made this a special privilege for the Prophet since he was the guardian of all believers, men and women. All other men are subject to the rules God has imposed concerning their wives and women slaves. Thus the Prophet had no restrictions placed on his actions with regard to retaining the ones he had already married or to responding to the circumstances of his special position.

The Prophet is then given the choice to marry any woman who offered herself to him as a gift, or to so delay the same. If he so delayed, he could go back to her at any time. Moreover he was free to have sex with any of his wives he wished and to delay any: *"This makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them."* (Verse 51) It is clear that all these provisions take into account the Prophet's special circumstances and the fact that many were keen to be honoured by being close to him. God knew all this and, as we know, He determines all situations in accordance with His knowledge and compassion: *"God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All-Knowing, Forbearing."* (Verse 51)

⁶ There are conflicting reports on whether the Prophet married any woman of this type or not. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he gave all women who made themselves gifts to him to other men to marry.

God then made it unlawful for the Prophet to marry anyone other than those to whom he was already married. This did not apply to numbers, but rather to those specific women married to the Prophet.

Nor could he replace any of them. He had, however, not increased the number of his wives before this prohibition was made.

“You [Muḥammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess.” (Verse 52) This was the only exception, whereby he was allowed to have any number of slave women. *“God keeps watch over all things.”* (Verse 52) This is the best guarantee of observing the rules.

ʿĀ'ishah reports that this restriction prohibiting the Prophet from having any more wives was subsequently abrogated, and the Prophet was given the freedom to marry others as he pleased. He, however, did not marry others, making only these the ones honoured with the title ‘mothers of the believers’.

Observing Good Manners

The *sūrah* moves on to delineate the position of Muslims *vis-à-vis* the Prophet's homes and his wives, both during his lifetime and after his death. It addresses the fact that some hypocrites and others with hearts full of sickness used to affront the Prophet by directing their annoying behaviour at his homes and wives. It issues a very strong warning to them, describing the enormity of their action in God's sight and reminding them that God is fully aware of their wickedness:

Believers! Do not enter the Prophet's homes, unless you are given leave, for a meal without waiting for its proper time. But when you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without lingering for the sake of mere talk. Such behaviour might give offence to the Prophet, and yet he might feel too shy to bid you go. God does not shy of stating what is right. When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs. Moreover, it does not behove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not behove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away. That is certainly an enormity in God's sight. Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has full knowledge of everything. (Verses 53-54)

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik: “When the Prophet espoused Zaynab bint Jahsh, he served a meal of meat and bread. I was sent to invite people to come over, and they came in groups. They would eat and leave, then another group came in, ate, and left. I invited everyone until I could find none to invite. I said this to the Prophet, and he said to his family: ‘Remove your food.’ Three

people remained in his home chatting. The Prophet went out to `Ā'ishah's room and said: 'Peace be on you, members of this household, together with God's mercy and blessings.' She replied to his greeting in the same way and asked him: 'How have you found your wife, Messenger of God? May God bless you and yours.' He then went to the rooms of every one of his wives, and each one of them said to him the same as `Ā'ishah. Then he went back, and found the three people still there chatting. The Prophet was very shy. He went out again, heading towards `Ā'ishah's room. I am not sure whether it was she or someone else who told him that those people had left. He came back, and when he had one foot inside and one out, the door was closed. Then the Qur'ānic verse mentioning the screen was revealed."

The verse outlines certain manners with regard to entering people's homes that were unknown in pre-Islamic Arabia. People just came into a home without asking permission, as we explained in commenting on the relevant verses in *Sūrah 24, The Light*.⁷ Perhaps this was more visible in the case of the Prophet's homes which were the source of knowledge and wisdom. Some people might come in, and if they saw food being prepared, they would wait to have a meal, without being invited. Some might stay on to chat after the meal was over, even though they had not been invited in the first place. They were totally oblivious to the inconvenience their behaviour caused the Prophet and his family. One report suggests that when those three people stayed on to chat on the night of the Prophet's wedding to Zaynab, she sat with her face to the wall. The Prophet was too shy to draw their attention to the inconvenience they caused. He could not say to his visitors something that might make them ashamed of themselves. Therefore, God stated this on his behalf, because: "*God does not shy of stating what is right.*" (Verse 53)

It is also reported that `Umar, who was endowed with refined sensitivity, suggested to the Prophet that he should put up a screen so that people would not enter his wives' rooms without leave. He hoped that God would order this and subsequently this verse was revealed endorsing his suggestion. Al-Bukhārī relates on Anas's authority: "`Umar said: 'Messenger of God! All sorts of people come into your home. You may wish to instruct the mothers of the believers to put up a screen.' God then revealed the verse requiring a screen to be put up."

This verse taught people that they must not enter the Prophet's homes without first seeking permission. Should they be invited to have a meal, they may go in. If they were not invited, they must not enter awaiting the food to be cooked. Then, when they had finished eating, they should leave. They should not stay on to chat. Muslims today badly need to stick to this standard of manners, which has been ignored by many. Guests often stay long after a meal, and in many cases they stay long at the table after they have finished eating. Their conversation may drag on,

⁷ Volume 12, pp. 234-238.

while the hosts, who hold on to some aspects of Islamic manners, find this terribly inconvenient. Islamic manners address all situations most appropriately. We would do well to revive these manners in our social dealings.

The verse then orders that the Prophet's wives be screened from men: *"When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from behind a screen."* In emphasizing that this is better for all, the *sūrah* states further: *"This makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs."* (Verse 53) It is not for anyone to say what is contrary to what God says. No one should say that easy mixing and chatting between the two sexes is more conducive to purity of hearts, and relief of suppressed instincts, giving both men and women a better approach to feelings and behaviour. We hear much talk in this vein, by unenlightened people. No one can say anything of this sort when God says: *"When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs."* (Verse 53) We should remember that He says this while referring to the Prophet's wives, the mothers of the believers, who were all pure women, and to the Prophet's Companions who were exemplary in their morality. When God says something and some people say something different, it is God's statement that is right. Whatever is contrary to God's statements is wrong and can only be stated by one who dares to say that human beings have greater knowledge of man's psychology than his Creator.

The facts of life confirm the truth of what God says and the falsehood of what others say to the contrary. People's experience everywhere in the world confirms this. Countries where mixing has reached extreme limits give ample evidence in support of this.

The Qur'ānic verse has already mentioned that peoples' entry awaiting a meal to be cooked, without being invited, and their staying on for a chat, gave offence to the Prophet, but that he was too shy to hint that they should leave. Now the verse makes it clear that it does not behove any Muslim to give offence to the Prophet; nor does it behove them to marry his wives when he dies, considering that his wives are like mothers to them. Their special position in relation to the Prophet makes their marriage to anyone other than him prohibited. This gave the Prophet's home its special sanctity and unique position. *"It does not behove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not behove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away."* (Verse 53)

Some reports mention that one of the hypocrites said that he was waiting to marry ʿĀ'ishah! *"That is certainly an enormity in God's sight."* (Verse 53) Terrible indeed is that which God describes as an enormity.

The *sūrah* does not, however, stop at this warning but goes on instead to deliver an even sterner one: *"Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has*

full knowledge of everything." (Verse 53)

It is God, then, who will take care of this. He knows what remains on the surface and what is kept secret, and He is fully aware of every thought and plan. He has described such matters as an enormity. Let anyone who wishes try to do anything of the sort. He will soon discover that he is exposing himself to God's mighty punishment.

Having made this warning, the *sūrah* makes the exception of some close relatives with whom the Prophet's wives did not have to be so guarded: *"It is no sin for them [to appear freely] before their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, or such men slaves as their right hands possess. [Wives of the Prophet!] Always remain God-fearing; for God is witness to all things."* (Verse 55)

These are the relatives a woman cannot marry, i.e. her *maḥram*. In fact it is lawful for all Muslim women to appear before these relatives in normal clothes, without covering their heads. I could not establish with any degree of certainty whether this verse addressing the Prophet's wives in particular or verse 31 of *Sūrah* 24, Light, addressing all Muslim women was revealed first. It is more likely, however, that the order was first issued to the Prophet's wives and then made applicable to others.

We should note here the instruction to always be conscious of God, and the reference to His awareness of everything. *"Always remain God-fearing; for God is witness to all things."* (Verse 55) This is indeed the best guarantee that people will pay heed.

Further Instructions and a Warning

The *sūrah* continues to warn those who give offence to the Prophet, either in person or with regard to his family, showing their action as an enormity. It does so in two ways: honouring the Prophet and describing his status with his Lord and on high, and stating that to give offence to the Prophet is to give offence to God Himself. Therefore, it earns the perpetrator expulsion from God's mercy both in the present life and in the life to come. Furthermore, the perpetrators stand to suffer a humiliating punishment:

God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace. Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering. (Verses 56-57)

The Arabic text uses the word *ṣalāt* and its derivatives for what is rendered in English as 'bless'. *Ṣalāt* means prayer, but prayer by God for the Prophet means that

God praises him to those on high, while when it refers to the angels it means that they pray to God for him. This gives the Prophet a sublime position: the whole universe echoes God's praise of His Prophet. No honour could be greater than this. How would a prayer and blessing by human beings compare with God's own blessing and honour bestowed on the Prophet, or with those of the angels among the community on high? There is certainly no comparison, but God wishes to bestow honour on the believers by putting their blessing of the Prophet together with His own, thus providing them with a tie with those on high.

When God so honours and praises the Prophet, it is exceedingly grotesque for humans to give offence to him: *"Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering."* (Verse 57) What makes this even more grotesque and ridiculous is that it is an affront to God by His creatures. They can never affront or offend God, but the expression here serves to show great sensitivity to any offence committed against the Prophet, in effect making it an offence against God Himself.

The *sūrah* then speaks of giving offence to believers generally, men and women, and falsely attributing to them what they do not have: *"And those who malign believing men and women for no wrong they might have done shall have burdened themselves with the guilt of calumny and with a blatant injustice."* (Verse 58) This strong condemnation suggests that there was in Madinah at the time a group of people who schemed in this way against believers: they defamed them, conspired against them and circulated false allegations about them. This takes place in all communities at all times with believers in particular being so maligned. God therefore undertakes to reply to their accusers, describing them as hypocrites guilty of calumny and injustice. He certainly says only what is absolutely true.

God Almighty then instructs His Messenger to issue an order to his wives, daughters and Muslim women generally requiring them, when they leave their homes, to cover their bodies and heads with an outer garment. In this way, they would be recognized and protected from the machinations of transgressors. Their modest appearance would distinguish them as chaste women, which embarrasses those who follow women to tease and malign them:

Prophet! Say to your wives, daughters and all believing women that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments. This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verse 59)

Commenting on this verse, al-Suddī says: "Some wicked people in Madinah used to go out at nightfall to make indecent remarks to women. Houses in Madinah were small. Therefore, women went out at night to relieve themselves. However, they

were maligned by such wicked remarks. When such people saw a woman wrapped in her outer cover, they refrained from maligning her as they recognized her as free and chaste. A woman who did not have such a cover was subjected to their affronts as they thought her to be a slave.”

Mujāhid says: “When they put on their outer cover, they were recognized as free and chaste women. No one maligned them. As for the verse ending, ‘*God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful,*’ it means that He forgave women what happened in the past, as they were not aware of what they should do.

We note the great care taken to purge all wicked behaviour from the Muslim society. These elements had to be pushed into a narrow corner, while new Islamic values and traditions took firm root in the Muslim community.

The passage concludes with a stern warning to the hypocrites and those who were sick at heart as well as those who circulated false rumours requiring that they stop all such wicked action, and refrain from affronting the believers and the Muslim community as a whole. Unless they stopped, God would empower His Messenger to drive them out of Madinah, so that they could be taken and killed wherever they were. This was the law applied, by God’s leave, in past generations, and it could easily be revived:

If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while: bereft of God’s grace, they shall be seized wherever they may be found, and will be slain. Such has been God’s way with those who went before. Never will you find any change in God’s way. (Verses 60-62)

This powerful warning gives us a clear impression of the Muslims’ strong position in Madinah after the Qurayzah affair. Indeed, the Muslim state was now in full power. The hypocrites could only scheme in secret, unable to demonstrate their reality. Indeed, they remained always in fear.

6

Too Heavy for Mountains

People ask you about the Last Hour. Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with God alone.' Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near. (63)

God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire, (64)

where they will permanently abide. They will find none to protect or support them. (65)

On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: 'Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.' (66)

And they shall say: 'Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. (67)

Our Lord! Give them double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.' (68)

Believers! Do not be like those who gave offence to Moses. God showed him to be innocent of whatever they alleged against him. Indeed, he was highly honoured in God's sight. (69)

يَسْأَلُكَ النَّاسُ عَنِ السَّاعَةِ قُلْ إِنَّمَا
عِلْمُهَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ
السَّاعَةَ تَكُونُ قَرِيبًا ﴿٦٣﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَعَنَ الْكٰفِرِينَ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ سَعِيرًا
﴿٦٤﴾

خٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا ۖ لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا
نَصِيرًا ﴿٦٥﴾

يَوْمَ تَقَلَّبُ وُجُوهُهُمْ فِي النَّارِ يَقُولُونَ
يَلَيْتَنَا أَطَعْنَا اللَّهَ وَأَطَعْنَا الرَّسُولَ ﴿٦٦﴾

وَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّا أَطَعْنَا سَادَتَنَا وَكُبَرَاءَنَا
فَأَضَلُّونَا السَّبِيلًا ﴿٦٧﴾

رَبَّنَا ءَاتِهِمْ ضِعْفَيْنِ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ
وَالْعَنَهُمْ لَعْنًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٦٨﴾

يٰٓأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ
ءَادَوْا مُوسَىٰ فَبَرَّأَهُ اللَّهُ مِمَّا قَالُوا وَكَانَ
عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَجِيهًا ﴿٦٩﴾

Believers! Have fear of God and say only what is just and true (70)

for then He will cause your deeds to be good and sound, and He will forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph. (71)

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. (72)

So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (73)

يَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَقُولُوا قَوْلًا

سَدِيدًا ﴿٧٠﴾

يُصْلِحَ لَكُمْ أَعْمَالَكُمْ وَيَغْفِرَ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ
وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ فَازَ فَوْزًا

عَظِيمًا ﴿٧١﴾

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ تَحْمِلَهَا
وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ

ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا ﴿٧٢﴾

لِيُعَذِّبَ اللَّهُ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ وَيَتُوبَ
اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ

غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٧٣﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* mentions people's questions about the Last Hour, when the Day of Judgement arrives. People have often asked for the Last Hour to be hastened, expressing doubt about it. The answer to this question always leaves its timing to God Almighty, warning people that it is close at hand, and that it could take them unawares at any time. The *sūrah* then portrays an image of the Last Hour that certainly does not please those who hasten it. It is an image of their own faces as they are turned over in the fire, expressing profound regret for not obeying God and His Messenger, and praying that their masters and chiefs be given double punishment. It is a scene of catastrophe that no one likes to consider. The *sūrah* then turns again to the present world, warning the believers against following in the footsteps of those who gave offence to Moses and levelled accusations against him, but God confirmed

his innocence. This appears to be in answer to something that actually took place. It might have been referring to the fact that some of them spoke about the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab, which was contrary to Arab tradition. The believers are invited to say only what is right, refrain from slander, so that God will accept their deeds and forgive them their sins. It makes obeying God and His Messenger more appealing to them, promising them great reward for this.

The final verses refer to the trust which the heavens, the earth and the mountains would not agree to shoulder, fearing that it was too heavy for them. Nevertheless, man undertook to bear it, so that God's purpose is accomplished: reward then is commensurate with action, and man will have to account for his choices.

The Timing of the Last Hour

People ask you about the Last Hour. Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with God alone.' Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near. (Verse 63)

Those people continued to ask the Prophet about the Last Hour, which he has long warned them against, while the Qur'ān gave vivid descriptions of some of its scenes, which they could almost see before their eyes. They ask the Prophet about its timing, and demand that it should be hastened. This implied doubt, rejection or ridicule of the whole question, according to the nature of the person asking and how close or far removed they were from faith.

The Last Hour is part of what lies beyond our perception. God is the only one who knows all about it. It is His will that no one among His creatures should know its timing, not even His messengers and favoured angels. A *ḥadīth* summing up Islamic faith is reported by `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who reports:

One day as we were sitting with God's Messenger (peace be upon him), there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no sign of travelling was to be seen on him but none of us knew him. He walked up to the Prophet and sat down by him. Resting his knees against the Prophet's knees and placing his hands on his thighs, he said: 'Muḥammad, tell me about Islam.' The Prophet said: 'Islam is to testify that there is no deity other than God and Muḥammad is God's Messenger, to attend regularly to prayer, to pay *zakāt*, to fast in Ramaḍān and to make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to do so.' The man said: 'You have spoken rightly.' We were amazed at him asking the question and then confirming that the answer was right.

He then said: 'Tell me about faith, or *īmān*.' The Prophet said: 'Faith is to

believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both its good and evil manifestations. He said: 'You have spoken rightly. Then tell me about attaining to perfection, or *iḥsān*.' The Prophet answered: 'It is to worship God as though you are seeing Him, knowing that while you cannot see Him, yet He sees you.' He said: 'Then tell me about the Last Hour.' The Prophet said: 'The one questioned about it knows no better than the questioner.' ... The Prophet then told us: 'The man was Gabriel who came here to teach you your religion.' [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

It is exactly as the Prophet said: the one questioned about the Last The Hour, i.e. the Prophet himself, and the questioner, i.e. the Angel Gabriel, have no knowledge of it. This is because '*Knowledge of it rests with God alone,*' and He imparts that knowledge to none of His creatures.

God has willed this for a purpose, of which we can see a part: people are warned that they should expect it at any time, ready to receive it as it comes all of a sudden. This is the attitude of the believers who remain God-fearing. By contrast, those who are oblivious of the Last Hour, and do not expect its arrival at any time, are the ones who deceive themselves and do not protect themselves against God's punishment. God has warned them, making the Last Hour a secret that could come upon them at any moment of the night or day: '*Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near.*' (Verse 63)

God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire, where they will permanently abide. They will find none to protect or support them. On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: 'Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.' And they shall say: 'Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord/ Give them double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.' (Verses 64-68)

As they are questioning the Prophet about the Last Hour, they are given a scene from it: "*God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire.*" (Verse 64) He has rejected them, expelling They abide there for an extended term, the length of which is known only to God. Its end is known only to Him and is dependent on His them from His grace. And He has prepared for them a raging fire which is kept ready for them: "*where they will permanently abide.*" (Verse 65)

They are deprived of all help and support. They cannot hope to escape: "*They will find none to protect or support them.*" (Verse 65)

In the midst of all this suffering, they appear very miserable: "*On the day when their*

faces shall be tossed about in the fire." The fire surrounds them from every corner. Yet the description here is intended to exaggerate the movement so as to feel that the fire touches every spot on their faces. *"They will say: Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger."* (Verse 66) It is a useless wish that can in no way be accepted. It is now too late for anything. They can only express regret and feel remorse.

At this point, they express unreserved anger with their masters and leaders who led them astray: *"And they shall say: 'Our- Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord! Give double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.'"* (Verses 67-68) Such is the Last Hour: what need is there to ask about its timing? The only way to ensure salvation on that day is to work hard in earning God's pleasure.

Baseless Accusations

It seems that the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, which was intended to replace the norms prevailing in pre-Islamic days, did not pass so easily. Many of the hypocrites and the sick at heart began to speak ill of it. So did some of those who had not yet ascertained the Islamic concept of social relations. All such people cast remarks and innuendoes, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes openly: they all expressed monstrous thoughts. The hypocrites and those who spread lies were not going to keep quiet. They sought every opportunity to inject their poison into the new Muslim society, just as we saw them do during the attack by the confederate forces, the story of falsehood, the division of booty, etc. They were always on the look out for something which they could use to cause the Prophet pain.

By this time, when the Qurayzah were expelled, preceded by other Jewish tribes, no one was left in Madinah who was openly an unbeliever. All its inhabitants were now Muslims, even though some of them only put up appearances while in actuality they were hypocrites. It was these hypocrites who circulated rumours and fabricated lies. Some believers unwittingly fell prey to them, repeating some of what they had heard. Now, the *sūrah* warns them against giving offence to the Prophet, in the same way as the Children of Israel gave offence to Moses. It directs them to say only what is right, correct and proper, telling them that only through obedience to God and His Messenger could they hope to achieve the great success:

Believers! Do not be like those who gave offence to Moses. God showed him to be innocent of whatever they alleged against him. Indeed, he was highly honoured in God's sight. Believers! Have fear of God and say only what is just and true for then He will cause your deeds to be good and sound, and He will forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph. (Verses 69-71)

The Qur'ān does not specify the sort of offence the Israelites directed at Moses, but some reports mention it specifically. However, we feel that there is no need to give details of something the Qur'ān alluded to in general terms. The aim here is to warn the believers against everything that could give offence to the Prophet. The Israelites are cited as an example of deviation from the right course on many occasions in the Qur'ān. Therefore, it is sufficient here to refer only to the fact that they gave offence to their prophet, warning the Muslims against following in their footsteps. This makes every believer refrain from doing what would place him among such deviant people.

God established Moses' innocence of whatever his people alleged against him. He was in a position of honour with God: *"He was highly honoured in God's sight."* (Verse 69) God makes it clear that His messengers are innocent of all that is fabricated and falsely alleged against them. Muḥammad, the most noble of God's messengers, has the first claim to be proven innocent by God Himself.

The *sūrah* directs the believers to say only what is just, true and accurate. They should make sure of what they say and its effects, before they accept what the hypocrites and spreaders of lies say, and before they pay attention to any wild accusation or evil fabrication against the Prophet, their leader and guide. It directs them to say right words leading to right action. God takes care of those who make sure of saying what is right, proper and accurate, guiding their footsteps and making their deeds sound, producing good results. God also forgives the sins of those who say what is right and do righteous deeds, for even they are not immune to slips and errors. They are all human, and by nature humans err and need God's forgiveness.

"Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph." (Verse 71) To obey God and His Messenger is, in itself, a great triumph, because it means consciously following the way God has marked out. It gives comfort and reassurance. To be sure that one is following the right way gives happiness, even if it does not earn any reward. A person who follows a direct, easy way that is full of light and who finds that all God's creatures respond to him and help him has totally different prospects from one who follows a blocked, rough way that is covered in darkness with all God's creatures emitting hostility towards him. Obedience to God and His Messenger brings its own immediate reward. Moreover, it achieves a great triumph now, before the Day of Judgement and entry into heaven. Enjoying bliss in the life to come is an act of grace which is over and above the reward for such obedience. It is a grace bestowed by God freely, without anything being asked in return.

Man's Weakness

In this act of grace, God considers man's weakness, the great burden he shoulders

and the trust he has been bearing alone when the heavens, the earth and the mountains refused, fearing that they could not cope with its requirements. Yet man is not only weak; he suffers from pressures created by his desires and inclinations, lack of knowledge, short life span as also barriers of time and place. All this makes him lacking in proper knowledge, unable to see what is beyond barriers or to look far ahead:

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. (Verse 72)

The heavens, the earth and the mountains, great and magnificent beings as they are, are chosen for discussion by the Qur'ān. Compared to these, man who lives in or beside them appears small and insignificant. These creatures, however, know their Lord without having to make an effort. They follow His law by their very nature and the system applicable to them, without need for an intermediary, reflection or choice. They run their respective courses without fail, fulfilling their tasks by virtue of their nature and constitution. The sun moves in its orbit in absolute accuracy, sending its rays and thus fulfilling the role God has assigned to it. It unconsciously holds its satellite planets and other celestial bodies in a set measure of gravity, thus fulfilling its role in the universe. The earth also runs its cycle, yielding its plants and feeding its population, burying the dead and sending up its water in springs, all in accordance with God's law, and without having to make a choice. The moon, stars, planets, the wind, the clouds, air and water, mountains and valleys – all fulfil their functions, by their Lord's leave. They know their Lord and are subject to His will without having to make an effort. What is this trust which they all dreaded to receive? It is the trust of responsibility, will power, personal knowledge and choice.

"Yet man took it up." (Verse 72) Man took it up because he is able to know God through his faculties and feelings. He can recognize God's law by reflection and consideration, and apply this law by his endeavour, obeying God willingly and by choice, resisting desires that lead to deviation and disobedience. In every step along this way man is acting by his own will, using his own knowledge, choosing his way fully aware of the end to which it leads.

It is a huge burden that this small creature, with little power and a short life, and with pressurizing desires and inclinations, has undertaken. In so doing, he runs great risks. Hence, man is *'prone to be wicked,'* putting himself in the wrong, and *'foolish,'* not knowing his ability. This is true in relation to the great responsibility he has shouldered. However, when he fulfils this trust, acquires the knowledge leading him to his Lord, knows His law and obeys Him fully, he becomes equipped with the knowledge, the guidance and the obedience which bring him to the level of ease and

perfection enjoyed by creatures like the heavens, earth and mountains, which obey God and follow His law naturally and directly. When man attains this level, while aware, conscious and exercising free choice, he attains a noble standard and is given a unique position among God's creation.

The acquisition of knowledge, the ability to choose and the willingness to be accountable constitute the quality that distinguishes man among God's creatures. This is the quality that earns man his position of honour, declared by God to those on high as He ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. In addition, He announced this honour in His revealed book, the Qur'ān: "*We have indeed honoured the children of Adam.*" (17: 70) It behoves man to know why he has been honoured and to live up to the trust he has accepted, while stronger creatures refused it dreading the responsibility.

All this has a definite purpose:

So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verse 73)

For man to take the trust upon himself means that he has to accept the consequences of his choice, and to make his reward dependent on action. This means that punishment is earned by the hypocrites and the unbelievers, while the believers are given help, which ensures that God forgives them their errors which they are bound to make, considering their weakness, the pressures on them and the barriers standing in their way. This help comes by an act of divine grace, for God is always Much-Forgiving, Merciful.

On this powerful note ends the *sūrah* that began with a directive to the Prophet to obey God, not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, follow God's revelations and place his trust in God alone. The *sūrah* also included numerous directives and pieces of legislation for the Muslim community. This powerful and final note describes man's huge responsibility and great trust, indicating what makes it so heavy. With this conclusion, the beginning and end of the *sūrah* are in full harmony with its subject matter. This, in itself, is evidence pointing to the Author of the Qur'ān.