

SŪRAH 25

Al-Furqān

(The Criterion)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, a Makkan revelation, appears to aim at comforting the Prophet and giving him solace, reassurance and support as he faced the stubborn rejection, maltreatment, haughty argument and open hostility of the Quraysh idolaters. In one aspect, it shows the divine kindness bestowed by God on His Messenger, dispelling his pain, comforting his heart so that it overflowed with reassurance and showing him an abundance of care and compassion. In another aspect, it portrays the fierce battle against arrogant mortals who stubbornly oppose God's Messenger, combining falsehood with arrogance, and hostility with a wilful rebuffal of divine guidance.

It is ordinary people who insult this glorious Qur'ān, with such boasting as: *"This [Qur'ān] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people."* (Verse 4) Or they describe it as: *"Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening."* (Verse 5) Furthermore people are ready with their abuse of the Prophet, saying: *"The man you follow is certainly bewitched."* (Verse 8) Or they may say in ridicule: *"Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?"* (Verse 41) As if all this rejection is not enough, such people are often ready to direct their arrogant remarks at God Himself: *"Yet when they are told, Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious."* (Verse 60) Or they may say: *"Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21)

Ever since Noah's time unbelievers held the same attitude as the Quraysh idolaters towards Muhammad, God's final Messenger. They all objected to the fact

that God's Messenger was mortal, an ordinary man like them, saying: *"What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him?"* (Verse 7) They also objected to his limited wealth, saying: *"Why has not a treasure been granted to him?"* (Verse 8) They further objected to the method of revelation: *"The unbelievers ask: Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?"* (Verse 32) Such voiced objections came on top of their blatant rejection of faith, as also their ridicule and aggression.

The Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him), confronted all this alone, having neither physical power nor wealth. He stood within his appropriate limits, suggesting nothing to his Lord, doing nothing other than turning to his Lord seeking His pleasure, caring for nothing else. He prayed: *"My Lord! If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face... To You I submit until I earn Your pleasure."*

Here, in this *sūrah*, we see the Prophet enjoying his Lord's compassion, who gives him comfort and solace, and provides him with support against all the difficulties placed in his way, including the ridicule of others. After all, they are often impolite with their Lord who creates them and gives them all that they have. The Prophet then should not be much troubled if he receives a little of such ridicule and ill treatment. *"Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord."* (Verse 55) *"Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection."* (Verse 3) *"Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful?'"* (Verse 60)

God redresses the ridicule the Prophet suffers by portraying the very low level into which the unbelievers have sunk: *"Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you, then, be held responsible for him? Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray."* (Verses 43-44) God promises him support in any dispute or argument he may have with them: *"Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation."* (Verse 33)

When the battle is over, God shows His Messenger scenes of the destruction of earlier communities which rejected His messages, such as the people of Noah, the `Ād, Thamūd and the people of al-Rass, as well as others. The way they met their dismal end is shown in a series of images from the Day of Resurrection: *"Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path."* (Verse 34) *"Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fug and its raging sigh. And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. [But they will be told]: 'Do*

not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!” (Verses 11-13) “On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: ‘Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend!’ (Verses 27-28)

God further comforts him by the fact that he faces the same difficulties earlier messengers faced: *“Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market places.” (Verse 20) “Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support.” (Verse 31)*

God also makes clear to him that his task is to remain patient against all adversity, standing up to the unbelievers and striving hard against them using the Qur’ān to make his argument clear, well founded and overpowering. *“Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur’ān.” (Verse 52)* The Prophet is clearly told that his best support in his striving for God’s cause is to place his trust in God alone: *“Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants’ sins.” (Verse 58)*

The *sūrah* continues along the same lines: one aspect of it overflows with solace and reassurance given by God to His Messenger, and the other portrays the intransigence of the unbelievers and the difficulties they put up against him. It threatens them with punishment and destruction that will be visited upon them by God Almighty. It thus moves on until it approaches its end when it spreads an air of ease, comfort, peace and reassurance. It portrays a detailed image of ‘the servants of God the Most Merciful’. These are the people *“who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: Peace.” (Verse 63)* They are seen here as if they are the final product of the *long Jihād*, or tough striving against people who stubbornly refuse to abandon their erroneous ways and follow divine guidance, or the sweet fruit of the human tree, despite its thorny branches. The *sūrah* ends with a picture of how little value humanity has in God’s sight, except for those believers who turn to Him and address their prayers to Him alone: *“Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you.” (Verse 77)*

Such is the general atmosphere of the *sūrah* and such is its subject matter. It is a single unit that is hard to divide into sections, but we can distinguish four parts in its treatment of themes.

The first part begins with extolling God’s limitless glory and praising Him for the revelation of the Qur’ān which serves as a warner to mankind. It emphasizes in clear, unequivocal terms God’s oneness and sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. It affirms that He alone controls the universe and conducts its affairs in His absolute

wisdom, making it clear that He has neither offspring nor partner. It then mentions that the unbelievers nevertheless ascribe divinity to alleged deities that can create nothing, but are themselves created. All this is stated before referring to their hurtful statements about God's Messenger, denying his message and alleging that it is fabrication of his own making, or the fables of ancient communities. It also comes before any reference to their objection to Muhammad, God's Messenger, being a human being who eats food and walks in the streets and market places. Also later come their other statements suggesting that he should be supported by an angel, or that he should have a treasure or a garden providing him with all his food. Furthermore, the *sūrah* reports their insults claiming that he is bewitched. It appears that the *sūrah* begins by quoting their denials of their Lord so as to comfort the Prophet as he hears their abusive remarks about him and his message.

The *sūrah* then declares that they have gone far astray as they deny the Last Hour. It warns them against the punishment God has prepared for them in hell, where they are to be thrown in a narrow space, chained one to the other. It contrasts this with an image of the believers in heaven where they abide forever, enjoying whatever they wish. It further shows their fate on the Day of Judgement when they are made to face their alleged deities which will confront them with the falsity of their beliefs. This first line in the *sūrah* ends with further consolation to the Prophet, making it clear to him that all earlier messengers God sent were mortals like him who ate food and walked about the streets and market places.

The second part begins with the arrogant statements of those who deny their inevitable meeting with God. They impudently say: *"Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21) They are then quickly brought face to face with a scene of the day when they will see the angels: *"it will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger.'"*

(Verses 26-27) This is meant to give reassurance to the Prophet as he complains to his Lord about his people's disregard of the Qur'ān. It quotes their objections to the way the Qur'ān is revealed as they ask: *"Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?"* (Verse 32) The answer to this objection is a scene showing them being gathered to hell on their faces on the Day of Judgement, the day they now deny. Further comment is given in an outline of the fate of past communities that similarly rejected the faith, such as the peoples of Noah, Moses, and the `Ād, Thamūd, al-Rass and many other generations in between. It wonders at their attitude as they pass by the destroyed towns of the people of Lot taking no heed. All this is meant to comfort the Prophet as he hears their ridicule when they refer to him saying: *"Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?"* (Verse 41) The *sūrah* comments on their ridicule, putting them in their rightful place: *"They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse*

astray." (Verse 44)

The third part of the *sūrah* is made up of a number of scenes from the universe, starting with a description of the shadow and moving to the scene of the succession of day and night, before showing the wind as a herald of revitalizing rain and the creation of man from water. Despite all this, the unbelievers continue to worship deities that have no power to bring them benefit or cause them harm. They even go further, by aiding one another against their Lord who has created them. When they are called upon to address their worship to the only true Lord of the universe, they revert to arrogance: *"Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful, they ask: What is the Most Merciful?"* (Verse 60) The *sūrah* explains that God is *"He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light-giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude."* (Verses 61-62)

The fourth and final part of the *sūrah* paints a detailed picture of the 'servants of the Most Merciful', showing them as they prostrate themselves before Him in total devotion, recording their statements that earn them their noble positions as His servants. It opens the door of repentance to anyone who wishes to join this group, describing their reward for their perseverance and patience in the face of adversity, and their fulfilment of the requirements of faith: *"These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life] with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace."* (Verse 75)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement to the effect that all mankind would have been discarded by God, had it not been for those of His servants who obey Him and do His bidding, recognizing His authority and His right to be obeyed. By putting erring humanity in its place, the Qur'ān also shows that the harassment the Prophet is subjected to should be seen as trivial, for that is what it really is.

1 To Distinguish Right from False

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Blessed is He who from on high bestowed upon His servant the do standard to discern the true from the false, so that it might be a warning to all the worlds: (1)

He to whom belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion. It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions. (2)

Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection. (3)

The unbelievers say: 'This [Qur'an] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people.' In truth, it is they who have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood. (4)

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ ۗ
لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا ﴿١﴾

الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَمْ
يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي
الْمَلِكِ وَخَلَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَقَدَرَهُ
تَقْدِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

وَاتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ ءَالِهَةً لَا تَخْلُقُونَ
شَيْئًا وَهُمْ تَخْلُقُونَ وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ
لِأَنْفُسِهِمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ
مَوْتًا وَلَا حَيَاةً وَلَا نُشُورًا ﴿٣﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنَّ هَذَا إِلَّا آفَاكُ
أَفْتَرْتَهُ وَأَعَانَهُ عَلَيْهِ قَوْمٌ ءَاخِرُونَ
فَقَدْ جَاءُوا ظُلْمًا وَزُورًا ﴿٤﴾

And they say: 'Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.' (5)

Say: 'This [Qur'ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (6)

They also say: 'What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market-places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him?' (7)

Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance.' The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' (8)

See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]. (9)

Blessed is He who, if it be His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too. (10)

Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. (11)

When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh. (12)

وَقَالُوا أَسْطِيزُ الْأَوَّلِينَ أَكْتَتَبَهَا
فَهِيَ تُمْلَى عَلَيْهِ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

قُلْ أَنْزَلَهُ الَّذِي يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٦﴾

وَقَالُوا مَا لِهَذَا الرَّسُولِ يَأْكُلُ
الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشِي فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ لَوْلَا
أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْهِ مَلَكٌ فَيَكُونُ مَعَهُ نَذِيرًا
﴿٧﴾

أَوْ يُلْقَى إِلَيْهِ كَنْزٌ أَوْ تَكُونُ لَهُ جَنَّةٌ
يَأْكُلُ مِنْهَا وَقَالَ الظَّالِمُونَ إِنْ
تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا رَجُلًا مَسْحُورًا ﴿٨﴾

أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ ضَرَبُوا لَكَ الْأَمْثَلَ
فَضَلُّوا فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَبِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي إِنْ شَاءَ جَعَلَ لَكَ خَيْرًا مِّنْ
ذَلِكَ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ
وَيَجْعَلُ لَكَ قُصُورًا ﴿١٠﴾

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِالسَّاعَةِ ۖ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لِمَنْ
كَذَّبَ بِالسَّاعَةِ سَعِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

إِذَا رَأَتْهُمْ مِّن مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ سَمِعُوا لَهَا
تَغِيظًا وَزَفِيرًا ﴿١٢﴾

And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. (13)

وَإِذَا أُلْقُوا مِنْهَا مَكَانًا ضَيِّقًا مُقَرَّبِينَ
دَعَوْا هُنَالِكَ ثُبُورًا ﴿١٣﴾

[But they will be told]: 'Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!' (14)

لَا تَدْعُوا الْيَوْمَ ثُبُورًا وَاحِدًا وَادْعُوا
ثُبُورًا كَثِيرًا ﴿١٤﴾

Say: 'Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God-fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode?' (15)

قُلْ أَدَايِكَ خَيْرٌ أَمْ جَنَّةُ الْخُلْدِ الَّتِي وُعدَ
الْمُتَّقُونَ ۚ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَزَاءً وَمَصِيرًا
﴿١٥﴾

There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for. (16)

لَهُمْ فِيهَا مَا يَشَاءُونَ خَالِدِينَ ۚ كَانَ
عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ وَعْدًا مَّسْئُولًا ﴿١٦﴾

On the day He gathers them with all those they worship instead of God, He will ask: 'Was it you who led these My servants astray, or did they by themselves stray from the right path?' (17)

وَيَوْمَ يَحْشُرُهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ
اللَّهِ فَيَقُولُ ۖ أَأَنْتُمْ أَضَلَلْتُمْ عِبَادِي هَٰؤُلَاءِ
أَمْ هُمْ ضَلُّوا السَّبِيلَ ﴿١٧﴾

They will say: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself. But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good.' (18)

قَالُوا سُبْحٰنَكَ مَا كَانَ يُنْبَغِي لَنَا أَنْ
نَتَّخِذَ مِنْ دُونِكَ مِنْ أَوْلِيَاءَ وَلٰكِنْ
مَتَّعْتَهُمْ وَعٰآبَاءَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَسُوا الذِّكْرَ
وَكَانُوا قَوْمًا بُورًا ﴿١٨﴾

[Then God will say]: 'Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help. Whoever of you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering.' (19)

فَقَدْ كَذَّبْتُمْ بِمَا تَقُولُونَ فَمَا
تَسْتَطِيعُونَ صَرْفًا وَلَا نَصْرًا ۚ وَمَنْ
يَظْلِم مِّنكُمْ نُدِقْهُ عَذَابًا كَبِيرًا ﴿١٩﴾

Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market-places. We have made some of you a means of testing others. Are you able to endure with patience? Surely your Lord sees all. (20)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا
 إِنَّهُمْ لَيَأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشُونَ فِي
 الْأَسْوَاقِ ۗ وَجَعَلْنَا بَعْضَكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ
 فِتْنَةً أَتَصْبِرُونَ ۗ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ بَصِيرًا



The Purpose of Qur'anic Revelations

This opening gives a clear indication of the main themes of the *sūrah*, namely the revelation of the Qur'ān by God, the addressing of its message to all mankind, God's absolute oneness that admits no partner or offspring, and His sovereignty over the whole universe which He, in His wisdom, controls. Yet despite all this, the unbelievers continue to associate partners with Him and the fabricators persevere in their falsehood. Moreover, baseless arguments and arrogant statements are made.

"Blessed is He who from on high bestowed upon His servant the standard to discern the true from the false, so that it might be a warning to all the worlds." (Verse 1) The Arabic word, *tabārak*, translated here as 'blessed' is a derivative of the root word, *barakah*, denoting blessing but adds a further dimension of increase and growth so as to signify the continuous increase of praise and God's blessings. God is not mentioned in the verse by name. Rather, a relative noun is used, *"He who from on high bestowed... the standard."* This is useful in highlighting His action of sending a message to mankind, because the essential argument of the *sūrah* is the truth of the revelation of the Qur'ān and its message.

The Qur'ān is named here as '*al-Furqān*', which is also the title of the *sūrah*. The name indicates distinction and separation between the truth and falsehood, divine guidance and erroneous beliefs. Furthermore, the Qur'ān makes a clear distinction between two different ways of life and two epochs in human life. It outlines a clear way of life as it is conceived in human conscience and in practice. This way of life is distinct from anything humanity has ever known. It ushers in a new era for humanity, unlike anything it ever witnessed. Thus it is a criterion in this broad sense, separating the stage of human childhood that has just ended from the stage of maturity about to begin. The age of physical miracles is thus ended to start that of rational miracles. Moreover, local and provisional messages come to an end with the revelation of the Qur'ān, God's final and universal message to all mankind: *"so that it might be a warning to all the worlds."* (Verse 1)

Special honour for God's Messenger is shown at this point, describing him as 'God's servant'. The same description is given to him when the Prophet's night journey is highlighted. *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem]."* (17: 1) Also in the context of prayer and supplication, the Prophet is given the same description: *"When His servant stood up praying to Him..."* (72: 19) Another instance of using this description is the opening of *Sūrah* 18 which also speaks of the revelation of the Qur'ān: *"All praise is due to God who has bestowed this Book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion."* (18: 1) Describing man as God's servant in these contexts indicates the highest and most honourable status to which any human being can aspire. It also serves as an implicit reminder that when man achieves his highest status, he is no more than God's servant, while the position of majesty belongs to Him alone, with absolutely no hint or suggestion of there being anyone who bears any resemblance to Him or is His partner. It was situations like the Prophet's night journey to Jerusalem and from there to heaven, or direct supplication to God and speaking to Him, or receiving His directives and revelations that tempted some of the followers of earlier messengers to weave legends speaking about a son of God or a relationship other than that of Godhead and servitude to Him. Hence, the Qur'ān emphasizes the status of man's servitude to God as the highest position to which a chosen human being can aspire.

The *sūrah* defines God's purpose of the revelation of the Qur'ān to His servant, *"so that it might be a warning to all the worlds."* (Verse 1) As a Makkan revelation, this Qur'ānic statement is important as it proves the universal character of the Islamic message right from its early days. This is contrary to the claims made by some non-Muslim 'historians' suggesting that the Islamic message initially had only local aspirations, but became more ambitious and outward looking as it secured a number of military victories. The truth is that this message was addressed from the start to all mankind. By its very nature, and the means it employed, it was clearly a universal message aiming to take all mankind into a new era, where a new code and style of life are implemented. It defined its universal nature when the Prophet was still in Makkah, facing determined and unrelenting opposition. It sought to achieve all this through the Qur'ān, the criterion God revealed to His Messenger to serve as a warning to all the worlds.

The One who revealed to His Messenger this standard is *"He to whom belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion. It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (Verse 2)

Once more God is not mentioned here by name, but a relative pronoun is used instead to emphasize certain suitable attributes of His: *"He to whom belongs the*

dominion over the heavens and the earth." He has absolute dominion over the heavens and the earth: a dominion that signifies ownership, control and ability to change and transform.

"Who begets no offspring." Procreation is one of the natural laws God has set in operation to ensure the continuity of life, but God is Eternal and able to accomplish His purpose, whatever that may be.

He *"has no partner in His dominion."* Everything in the heavens and the earth testifies to the unity of design, nature, law and control.

"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions." He determines the size, shape, function, time and place of everything as well as all their interactions and harmonization.

The nature of the universe, its make up and constitution fill us with wonder. It makes nonsense of any suggestion that the universe came into being by chance. It demonstrates the meticulous and detailed proportioning of creation, which human knowledge can hardly manage to fathom even in one area of the vast universe. With every scientific progress made, more aspects of the harmony and balance in the universe and its natural laws are discovered. Consequently, we can better appreciate the meaning of this wonderful statement: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."*

It is useful to mention here some scientific facts that emphasize the fine proportions observed in the creation of our world. A.C. Morrison writes:

It is at least extraordinary that in this adjustment of nature there should have been such exquisite nicety. For, had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist... If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage. The atmosphere is just thick enough to let in the actinic rays needed for vegetation and to kill bacteria, produce vitamins, and not harm man unless he exposes himself too long. In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence.

The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea, from which have come life, food, rain, temperate climate, plants, animals, and ultimately man himself.²⁰

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.²¹

How strange is the system of checks and balances which has prevented any animal, no matter how ferocious, how large, or subtle, from dominating the earth since the age of trilobites and probably not then. Man only has upset this balance of nature by moving plants and animals from place to place, and he has immediately paid a severe penalty in the development of animal, insect, and plant pests.

A striking illustration which will point out specifically the importance of recognizing these checks in connection with the existence of man is the following fact. Many years ago a species of cactus was planted in Australia as a protective fence. The cactus had no insect enemies in Australia and soon began a prodigious growth. The march of the cactus persisted until it had covered an area approximately as great as England, crowded the inhabitants out of towns and villages, and destroyed their farms, making cultivation impossible. No device which the people discovered could stop its spread. Australia was in danger of being overwhelmed by a silent, uncontrollable, advancing army of vegetation. The entomologists scoured the world and finally found an insect which lived exclusively on cactus, would eat nothing else, would breed freely, and which had no enemies in Australia. Here the animal conquered the vegetation and today the cactus pest has retreated, and with it all but a small protective residue of the insects, enough to hold the cactus in check forever.

The checks and balances have been provided, and have been persistently effective. Why has not the malarial mosquito so dominated the earth that our ancestors through the ages have not either died or become immune? The same may be said of the yellow fever mosquito, which lived one season as far north as New York. Mosquitoes are plentiful in the Arctic. Why has not the

²⁰ A.C. Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Morrison and Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 27-28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

tsetse fly evolved so that he would live in other than his tropical surroundings and wipe out the human race? One has but to mention the plagues and the deadly germs against which man has had no protection until yesterday, and his total lack of knowledge of sanitation as an animal, to understand how wonderful has been his preservation...

The insects have no lungs such as man possesses, but breathe through tubes. When insects grow large the tubes cannot grow in relation to the increasing size of the body of the insect. Hence there never has been an insect more than inches long and a little longer wing spread. Because of the mechanism of their structure and their method of breathing, there never could be an insect of great size. This limit in their growth held all insects in check and prevented them from dominating the world. If this physical check had not been provided, man could not exist. Imagine a primitive man meeting a hornet as big as a lion or a spider equally large.

Little has been said regarding the many other marvellous adjustments in the physiology of animals, without which no animal, or indeed vegetable, could continue to exist.²²

Thus, day by day, human knowledge uncovers more and more of the elaborate system that gives every creature their measure, proportion and balance. With such increased knowledge we appreciate even better the significance of the Qur'ānic statement: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (Verse 2)

The unbelievers at the time of the Prophet did not understand any of this. Hence they persisted with their unbelief. *"Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection."* (Verse 3)

Their false deities are deprived of the most essential characteristics of Godhead. Thus, they *"cannot create anything,"* while God has created everything, and false deities *"are themselves created."* Their servants create them in the sense that they make them, if they are statues or idols, while if they are angels, devils, humans or some other object of God's making, then God creates them, in the sense of bringing them into existence. Furthermore, they *"have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves,"* let alone doing so to others. Someone who might not be able to bring himself benefit may still be able to cause harm, but even this is out of the hands of such false deities. Hence, this is mentioned first as the easiest thing to do, then it is followed by other qualities that only God can have: they *"have no power over death, life*

²² Ibid., pp. 92-94.

or resurrection.” If these deities cannot cause a living thing to die, or bring to life anything dead, or bring someone to life after death, what characteristic of Godhead could they have? How could these idolaters ascribe divinity to such beings?

It is a case of straying so far from the truth that it is not surprising that they make singular claims against the Prophet. Their claims against God are even more singular and more impudent. Could there be anything worse than that a human being should claim that God has partners when it is God who has created him as well as everything else in the universe? The Prophet was asked: “Which is the most cardinal sin?” His reply was: “That you should claim that God has equals, when it is He who has created you.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Accusations without Basis

Having shown how they fabricate such allegations against God, who is limitless in His glory, the *sūrah* refers to their impudent claims against God’s Messenger, replying to them in a way that shows how false and absurd it all is.

The unbelievers say: ‘This [Qur’ān] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people.’ In truth, it is they who have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood. And they say: Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.’ Say: ‘This [Qur’ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.’ (Verses 4-6)

It was a most blatant lie that the unbelievers of the Quraysh said when they knew deep at heart that it had absolutely no basis. Their elders who instructed them to circulate these lies were fully aware that the Qur’ān which Muhammad recited could not have been authored by a human being. They actually knew this given their appreciation of fine poetry. Furthermore, they could not stop themselves from being influenced by the Qur’ān. Moreover, they knew Muhammad long before his prophethood, and they were aware that he was exemplary in his honesty: he never told a lie, broke a promise, or breached a trust. How could he, then, invent a lie against God, attributing to Him words which He did not say?

But they were stubborn, motivated by fear for their social status that relied on religious position. Hence, they resorted to such tactics, making false allegations that could be accepted by ordinary people who might not have similar literary talent. They claimed that the Qur’ān was “*nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people.*” (Verse 4) It is said that those other people were three foreign slaves, or even more. This is such an absurd allegation. If a man could, with the help of others, devise this Qur’ān, or invent it, what would stop them from producing, with the help

of others, a similar Qur'ān to refute Muhammad's argument? He repeatedly challenged them to do so and they failed to take up the challenge.

Hence why the *sūrah* does not employ any argument to refute their absurd allegations. Instead, it gives its clear judgement on their statements: "*They have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood.*" (Verse 4) It is an act of injustice against the truth, Muhammad and themselves. Moreover, it is a blatant falsehood.

The *sūrah* gives other examples of their false accusations against the Prophet and the Qur'ān: "*And they say: Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.*" (Verse 5) The Qur'ān gives accounts of the history of past communities for the dual purpose of serving as lessons and admonition for people, and providing guidance for them. The unbelievers, however, label such true accounts of history as '*fables of ancient times*', alleging that the Prophet sought such fables to be written down so that they could be read out to him, because he was unlettered, unable to read. When they were read to him every morning and evening, he would then recite them to people claiming that they were revealed to him by God. Such unfounded allegations do not stand up to any examination. We need only look at the logical sequence of the historical accounts given in the Qur'ān, the relevance of each story to the context in which it is placed, and the perfect balance and harmony between the objectives of each story and the *sūrah* in which it occurs. All this confirms the deliberate choice and meticulous presentation of Qur'ānic historical accounts. Nothing of this is found in legends and fables that are related for entertainment. They hardly ever serve a basic theme or support a particular idea.

Their allegation that these accounts were fables of ancient communities indicates that they were accounts of events that took place much earlier. This means that Muhammad (peace be upon him) could not have known them without being taught by some of those who circulated such fables, generation after generation. Hence, the *sūrah* replies that the One who revealed them to Muhammad was the One whose knowledge is absolute. It is He who knows all secrets everywhere in the universe. Indeed, no situation, past present or future, is unknown to Him: "*Say: This [Qur'ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 6) How could the knowledge of legend reciters be compared with God's perfect knowledge? How could legends and fables be compared to the secrets of the heavens and the earth, which are perfectly known to God? This is no more than comparing a drop of water to an endless ocean.

When they make such absurd allegations against the Prophet they commit a gross error, which is added to their persistent associating of partners with God, their Creator. Nevertheless, the door to repentance remains open, if they wish to desist from their sinful ways. God, who is fully aware of their fabrications and schemes,

will extend mercy and forgiveness to them: *“He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* then examines their false accusations against the Prophet, their absurd objections to his being human, and their unreasonable suggestions about his message:

They also say: ‘What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him? Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance. ‘The wrongdoers say: ‘The man you follow is certainly bewitched.’ See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back. Blessed is He who, if it be His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too. (Verses 7-10)

The first point they make concerns Muhammad’s status: they wonder why he eats food and goes about the streets and market places. Why is he an ordinary human being, doing what other humans do? This is an objection all communities made against every messenger God sent. How could such a person, raised by such a family, living with them and behaving like them in all respects,, be a messenger from God, receiving revelations from on high? How could he have contact with another world, receiving knowledge that is unavailable to them when he is just one of them, while they receive no such revelations and know nothing about this other world?

Honouring Mankind

From this angle, the whole idea seems unlikely. However, taken from another angle, it seems perfectly natural. God has breathed of His own spirit in man, and with this breath man has become distinguished among all God’s creation, and placed in charge of the earth. Yet human knowledge, experience, and abilities remain limited and inadequate. God would not leave man without support and guidance to show him the way to fulfil his trust. Hence, He gave him the potential to be in contact with Him through the breath of the divine spirit that distinguishes him. It is no wonder that God should choose a human being who has the spiritual potential to receive His message and so impart to him what guides him and humanity along the right way.

This is an aspect of the grace God bestows on man, which appears amazing in one way and perfectly natural in another. But those who do not know the value of this creature and the true nature of the honour God has bestowed on him deny that a human being should be in contact with God through divine revelation. They refuse

to acknowledge that such a person should be chosen by God as His Messenger. They think that angels are better placed to carry out such a role: *“Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him?”* (Verse 7) But God had ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before man as He granted him superior qualities associated with the breathing of His spirit in him.

It is divine wisdom that determines the sending of a human messenger to a human community. Such a messenger shares their feelings, experiences, hopes and sorrows. He knows their aspirations, needs and limitations. Thus, he understands their weaknesses, taps their strengths, and leads them along the way, step by step, knowing their motivations and reactions. After all, he is one of them, guiding them towards God’s pleasure, supported by His revelation and guidance.

For their part they find in God’s human Messenger an easy example to follow. He is one of them who takes them gradually along the road to a sublime standard. He lives among them implementing the moral standards, the actions and the duties God requires them to observe and fulfil. Thus, he personally serves as the practical implementation of the faith he preaches. Everything in his life and behaviour are presented to them so that they can look at every detail and aspire to follow his example, knowing that it is within man’s capability. Had God’s Messenger been an angel, they would not think about his actions and behaviour, and would not even attempt to follow his suit. They would feel that since he has a different nature, they could not aspire to his standard or follow his example.

We see how God’s infinite wisdom, which ordains all things in due proportion, has determined that His Messenger should be a human being so that he fulfils the role of leading mankind along the way He has laid down for them. To object to this choice is to betray ignorance of such wisdom and the honour God has granted mankind.

Another absurd objection focused on God’s Messenger walking about the market-place earning his living. His position as Messenger would have been recognized had he been granted great wealth to save him the trouble of so working for his living: *“Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance.”* (Verse 8)

But God willed that His Messenger should not have treasure or garden, because He wanted him to be a perfect example to be followed by his community. He was to fulfil the great task of delivering his message while he worked, earning a living at the same time. Thus, none of his followers could argue that the Prophet was freed from the responsibility of work, and thus was able to devote all his time to his message. None would take this as an excuse for not fulfilling his duty towards the divine message. We see clearly that the Prophet worked for his living while he also worked

for his message. It is right, then, that everyone of his followers should do the same, so as to fulfil his own task towards the divine faith.

Wealth was later given in abundance to the Prophet so as the first experience should be completed and the example he provided be perfected. He did not allow such wealth to become his preoccupation, preventing him from the fulfilment of his task. Indeed, his generosity was so superior that it was likened by his Companions to unrestrained wind. He provided a perfect example in resisting the lure of wealth so as to enable his followers to look at affluence in the proper perspective. Thus, no one could say that Muhammad was able to fulfil the duties of his message because he was poor, having no preoccupations of wealth, free from the task of looking after it. Instead, he fulfilled his duties in both situations of poverty and affluence.

Besides, what value is wealth, treasures and gardens when compared with contact between man, a weak mortal, and God the Eternal? What significance has this earth and all that it contains, or indeed this whole universe, when compared to contact with God the Creator who grants everyone all that they have? But unbelievers appreciate nothing of this.

The *sūrah* then refers to another false accusation the unbelievers repeated time after time against the Prophet. The Qur'ān mentions this blatant lie here as well as in *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey. In both *sūrahs* the Qur'ān gives the exact same reply to this accusation quoting it in exactly the same words in both *sūrahs*. "*The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.'* See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]." (Verses 8-9)

Both *sūrahs* deal with more or less the same subject, tackling it in similar fashion. Needless to say, the unbelievers employ such a personal attack against the Prophet aiming to detract from his social standing. They liken him to a man who is bewitched, saying things that normal people do not say. Yet at the same time their accusation implies recognition that what he says is unusual or unfamiliar in the sense that it is above human standards. The reply the *sūrah* gives wonders at their attitude: "*See to what they liken you.*" They liken him to bewitched people at one time, accuse him of false fabrication at another, and even compare him at times to those who relate legends. All this is far beyond the truth. They have missed every road that leads to the truth and are left in error: "*They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth].*" (Verse 9)

This argument ends on a note that shows the stupidity of their suggestions. They propose that the Prophet should be given some luxuries, thinking that a true messenger of God should have plenty of such worldly comforts as a treasure store or a garden providing him with his food requirements. Had God so willed, he would have given him much more than everything they suggest: "*Blessed is He who, if it be*

His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too." (Verse 10) But God has willed to give His Messenger what is much better and more valuable than gardens and palaces. He has given him a direct relation with the One who gives all such luxuries, bestowing on him His care and guidance. He enjoys this relationship which is far superior to any worldly comfort or luxury, great as it may be.

Denying Resurrection

At this point in its discussion of their wrongful statements about God and His Messenger, the *sūrah* reveals another dimension of their disbelief. They deny the Last Hour. Hence, they have no qualms about making baseless accusations or fabrications. They do not fear that they will face God who will hold them to account for their lies' and fabrications. We see them here as they stand on the Day of Judgement when hardened hearts are shaken to their core. They are made to see what awaits them there in comparison with the happiness that is prepared for the believers:

Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh. And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. [But they will be told]: Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!' Say: 'Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God-fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode?' There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for. (Verses 1 1-16)

They have indeed denied the Last Hour going to great extents in their disbelief. The Qur'ānic expression implies this as it puts aside all that was said earlier in order to magnify the extent: "*Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny.*" It then paints the destiny that awaits those who are guilty of such a terrible thing. It is a blazing fire made ready to receive them: "*For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire.*" (Verse 11)

Personification, or the representation of inanimate objects or states as having life of their own, is a special artistic feature the Qur'ān employs to such perfection that it defies imitation. It makes such objects so alive that we take them as such.

Here we are in front of the blazing fire which is now granted life. It looks and sees at a distance those who have denied the Last Hour. It is angry, furious with them, raging to engulf them. As they proceed towards it, it wants to take them all at once. It

is a fearful scene that leaves even the most courageous badly shaken.

Then we see them having arrived there. They are not just left to face such a raging fire, but are thrown in it, their hands and feet chained together. The tightness of the area increases their misery and makes it impossible for them to free themselves from their chains. Then we see them, having despaired of breaking loose, realizing that their stress is endless. Therefore, they pray for their own destruction as a way out of this endless misery: *“When, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then.”* (Verse 13) Their own destruction seems to them the best that they can hope for as a way of escaping this unbearable torment. But they soon hear the answer to their prayers. It is a sarcastic response that fills them with bitterness: *“Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!”* (Verse 14) To be destroyed and made extinct once is not sufficient to redeem them. Hence, the sarcastic suggestion.

In contrast to such fearful prospects, the *sūrah* portrays what is prepared in the hereafter for the God-fearing who are eager to meet their Lord and who believe in the Last Hour. Again, sarcasm is fully employed to leave its telling effect on the unbelievers:

Say: Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God-fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode? There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for.
(Verses 15-16)

Which is better: the end of the unbelievers already described in the *sūrah* or the paradise God has promised to the believers. He has indeed given them leave to ask Him about it, requesting the fulfilment of His promise, which is always honoured. They are free to request there whatever they wish for. Can the two be compared? The question is put sarcastically by way of reply to their own sarcasm levelled at the Prophet (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* goes on to portray another scene of the Day of Judgement which is denied by the unbelievers. Now we see them gathered together with their alleged deities, and they all stand before God for interrogation:

On the day He gathers them with all those they worship instead of God, He will ask: ‘Was it you who led these My servants astray, or did they by themselves stray from the right path?’ They will say, ‘Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good. [Then God will say]: ‘Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help. Whoever of

you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering.' (Verses 17-19)

The ones who were worshipped may be idols, angels or *jinn*, and indeed everyone and everything that has ever been worshipped instead of God or alongside Him. God certainly knows all the answers, but the interrogation carried out when all creatures are gathered together, standing there in the open, means reproach and publicity. As such the very interrogation is a means of fearful suffering. The answer comes from those who were worshipped. They declare their own submission to God Almighty, and that He is free of all that the unbelievers allege. They disclaim not merely any aspiration to Godhead, but also any thought on their part of taking for themselves any masters other than Him. They also ridicule the ignorant who associated partners with God and denied the Last Hour: *"They will say: Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself. But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good."* (Verse 18)

The enjoyment that people are allowed for a long time, inheriting it generation after generation, without acknowledgement of the One who gives such blessings or expression of thanks and gratitude to Him, has been their main preoccupation. They forgot to turn to the One who gives us everything we have, and thus their hearts became devoid of all goodness, barren, like a land without fruit, vegetation or life.

At this point, the address is directed to those who worshipped such beings, emphasizing their humiliation: *"Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help."* (Verse 19) You cannot do anything for yourselves, neither avoiding your well deserved punishment, nor gaining support from anyone or any quarter.

All this is shown as a scene of the Day of Judgement which is held before our eyes. Suddenly, the address is made to those unbelievers in their present condition here on earth: *"Whoever of you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering."* (Verse 19) Such is the Qur'ānic method of addressing people's hearts at the moment when they are ready to respond, influenced as they may be by the fearful scene already portrayed.

Entrusting God's Message to Man

Thus they are shown to have witnessed the end of all false fabrication concerning faith and ridicule of God's Messenger. Now the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet consoling and reassuring him, telling him that his was not a special case among God's messengers. They all shared the same essential attributes:

Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market places. We have made some of you a means of testing others. Are you able to endure with patience? Surely your Lord sees all. (Verse 20)

If the unbelievers voice objections, these are not made against the Prophet in person; rather, they are objections to a law God has put in place for a definite purpose: *"We have made some of you a means of testing others."* Thus, those who do not appreciate God's wisdom and plans will object, while those who have full trust in His wisdom and support will persevere and remain reassured. The divine message will continue the struggle using human means and methods, so that those who have faith will demonstrate their patience in adversity: *"Are you able to endure with patience?"*

"Surely your Lord sees all." He sees human nature, and what is in people's inner thoughts. He sees to what end each one is driving. We note here the use of the possessive pronoun, 'your Lord', to give the Prophet a feeling of comfort and reassurance. God knows what best affects people's hearts and feelings.

2

Below Animal Level

Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: 'Why have no angels been sent down to us?' – or, 'Why do we not see our Lord?' Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing. (21)

On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: 'a forbidding ban!' (22)

We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust. (23)

On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose. (24)

On the day when the skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. (25)

On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]. It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. (26)

On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. (27)

﴿ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا لَوْلَا
أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَوْ نَرَى رَبَّنَا لَقَدِ
اسْتَكْبَرُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَعَتَوْا عُتُوًا كَبِيرًا

﴿ ٢١ ﴾

يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ الْمَلَائِكَةَ لَا بُشْرَى يَوْمَئِذٍ
لِّلْمُجْرِمِينَ وَيَقُولُونَ حَجْرًا مَّحْجُورًا ﴿ ٢٢ ﴾

وَقَدِمْنَا إِلَىٰ مَا عَمِلُوا مِنَّ عَمَلٍ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ
هَبَاءً مَّنشُورًا ﴿ ٢٣ ﴾

أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ يَوْمَئِذٍ خَيْرٌ مُّسْتَقَرًّا
وَأَحْسَنُ مَقِيلًا ﴿ ٢٤ ﴾

وَيَوْمَ تَشْقُقُ السَّمَاءُ بِالْغَمِّمِ وَنُزِلَ
الْمَلَائِكَةُ تَنْزِيلًا ﴿ ٢٥ ﴾

الْمَلِكُ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْحَقُّ لِلرَّحْمَنِ ۗ وَكَانَ
يَوْمًا عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ عَسِيرًا ﴿ ٢٦ ﴾

وَيَوْمَ يَعَضُّ الظَّالِمُ عَلَى يَدَيْهِ يَقُولُ
يَلِّيتُنِي أَخَذْتُ مَعَ الرَّسُولِ سَبِيلًا ﴿ ٢٧ ﴾

Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend! (28)

He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!.' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (29)

And the Messenger will say: 'My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'an as something to be discarded!' (30)

Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support. (31)

The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'an been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. (32)

Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation. (33)

Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces — they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path. (34)

Indeed, We gave the book to Moses, and appointed his brother Aaron to help him to bear his burden. (35)

يَوَيْلَيْتُ لَيْتَنِي لَمْ أَتَّخِذْ فُلَانًا خَلِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

لَقَدْ أَضَلَّنِي عَنِ الذِّكْرِ بَعْدَ إِذْ جَاءَنِي ۗ
وَكَانَ الشَّيْطَانُ لِلْإِنْسَانِ خَذُولًا ﴿٢٩﴾

وَقَالَ الرَّسُولُ يَا رَبِّ إِنَّ قَوْمِي اتَّخَذُوا
هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ مَهْجُورًا ﴿٣٠﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَا لِكُلِّ نَبِيٍّ عَدُوًّا مِّنَ
الْمُجْرِمِينَ ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِرَبِّكَ هَادِيًا وَنَصِيرًا ﴿٣١﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ
الْقُرْآنُ جُمْلَةً وَاحِدَةً ۚ كَذَلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ
بِهِ ءُفُؤَادَكَ ۗ وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ
وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

الَّذِينَ تَحْشُرُونَ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ إِلَىٰ
جَهَنَّمَ أُولَٰئِكَ شَرُّ مَكَانًا وَأَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٣٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلْنَا
مَعَهُ رَٰحَاهُ هَارُونَ وَزِيرًا ﴿٣٥﴾

And We said: 'Go you both to the people who denied Our signs,' and then We utterly destroyed those people. (36)

When the people of Noah rejected their messengers, We caused them to drown, and made of them an example for mankind. For the wrongdoers We have prepared grievous suffering. (37)

And also the `Ad and Thamūd, and the people of al-Rass, and many generations in between. (38)

To each of them did We proffer lessons, and each of them did We utterly annihilate. (39)

They must have surely passed by the town which was rained upon with a shower of evil. Have they, then, never seen it? But nay, they would not believe in resurrection. (40)

When they see you, they make you a target of their mockery, [saying]: 'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?' (41)

He could almost have led us astray from our deities, had we not been steadfastly attached to them.' But in time, when they see the suffering, they will come to know who it was that went farthest astray. (42)

Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you, then, be held

فَقُلْنَا أَذْهَبَا إِلَى الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا
بِعَايَتِنَا فَدَمَّرْنَاهُمْ تَدْمِيرًا ﴿٣٦﴾

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ لَمَّا كَذَبُوا الرُّسُلَ
أَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ آيَةً
وَأَعْتَدْنَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٣٧﴾

وَعَادًا وَثَمُودًا وَأَصْحَابَ الرَّسِّ وَقُرُونًا بَيْنَ
ذَٰلِكَ كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٨﴾

وَكُلًّا ضَرَبْنَا لَهُ الْأَمْثَالَ وَكُلًّا تَبَّرْنَا
تَتْبِيرًا ﴿٣٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَتَوْا عَلَى الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِي أَمْطَرْنَا مَطَرًا
السَّوْءَ ۚ أَفَلَمْ يَكُونُوا يَرَوْنَهَا ۚ بَلْ
كَانُوا لَا يَرْجُونَ نُشُورًا ﴿٤٠﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَوْكَ إِذْ يَتَّخِذُونَكَ إِلَّا هُزُوعًا أَهْدَا
الَّذِي بَعَثَ اللَّهُ رَسُولًا ﴿٤١﴾

إِنْ كَادَ لِيُضِلَّنَا عَنْ ءِالِهَتِنَا لَوْلَا أَنَّ
صَبَرْنَا عَلَيْهَا ۚ وَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ حِينَ
يَرَوْنَ الْعَذَابَ مَنْ أَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

أَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ أَفَأَنْتَ
تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٤٣﴾

responsible for him? (43)

Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray. (44)

أَمْ تَحْسَبُ أَنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ أَوْ
يَعْقِلُونَ إِنَّ هُمْ إِلَّا كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ
أَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٤﴾

Overview

This second passage of the *sūrah*, like the first, starts with the allegations, suggestions and objections made by the unbelievers as a prelude to their statements about the Prophet himself. All this is given here with the aim of comforting the Prophet. In this passage, however, we have an early account of the punishment in store for their arrogance, one which is posited in a series of images of the hereafter. All this is given in reply to their question: “Why have no angels been sent down to us?” – or, ‘Why do we not see our Lord?’” (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* then quotes their objection to the revelation of the Qur’ān over a long period, and explains the purpose behind this, reassuring the Prophet that God’s help is ready at hand whenever the unbelievers challenge him: “Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation.” (Verse 33)

The *sūrah* describes to the Prophet and the unbelievers the fate suffered by earlier communities which denied God’s messages, reminding them in particular of the destruction suffered by Lot’s people. This has a greater effect, because they pass by that township, with its remains telling its terrible story. Yet they are hardened to it, and its sight does not inspire them to take steps in order to avoid a similar fate.

All this is given by way of introduction to the unbelievers’ ridicule of the Prophet and their offensive remarks about him. The *sūrah* immediately delivers a strong comment on this portraying them in a very contemptible light: “They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray.” (Verse 44)

Ominous Prospects for the Unbelievers

Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: ‘Why have no angels been sent down to us?’ – or, ‘Why do we not see our Lord?’ Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing. On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: ‘a forbidding ban!’ We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust. On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose. On the day when the

skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]. It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so- and-so for a friend! He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (Verses 21-29)

The unbelievers do not hope to meet God. This means that they do not expect such a meeting and do not take it into account so as to determine their prior behaviour. In their hearts they do not feel any awe of God. Hence, they are ready to make utterances that no one who expects to meet God would entertain. *"Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21)

They considered it unreasonable that God's Messenger should be a man. They demanded that angels be sent to them testifying to the truth of the message in order for them to believe in it. An alternative demand they made was that they should see God, so as to believe in Him. Such an overbearing attitude betrays the sort of ignorance associated with denying God and His attributes, having no proper esteem for Him. Who are they to make such overbearing demands? What are they in comparison with God Almighty? In God's dominion, they are no more than a particle floating aimlessly in the air, unless they establish a bond between them and God through believing in Him, deriving their strength from Him. Hence, the reply given them in the same verse shows the source of their overbearing attitude: *"Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing."* (Verse 21)

They have given themselves airs and graces, become conceited, proud and haughty. All of which has led them to great transgression. Their pride is their main preoccupation, which means that they no longer give proper estimation to other things and values. They think themselves too great, or masters of the universe who deserve that God should appear before them in person so that they can believe in Him.

A truly sarcastic reply is given to them as they are informed of the terrible eventuality awaiting them when they see the angels, which is the less overbearing of their demands. For they will only see the angels on a very hard and difficult day on which they will be destined to receive unbearable and inescapable suffering. That is the Day of Reckoning when evil deeds are punished. *"On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: 'a forbidding ban!'"* (Verse 22)

This is the day when their suggestion is granted, *"On the day when they shall see the angels"*. No good news is given to the sinners on that day, for their punishment

awaits them. How terrible is the fulfilment of their request! This is when they say, *a forbidding ban!* This phrase used to be said by the Arabs to avert evil and enemies. It is a sort of appeal which hopes to drive enemies away and avoid any harm that might ensue. They utter it on that day by force of habit, because the whole thing comes as a surprise. But what will their words avail them of on that day?

"We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust." (Verse 23) It all happens in a brief moment. Our imagination follows the motion described in detail, with actions being raised and thrown up in the air. In no time, all good works they did in this present life are left like scattered dust, because they were not based on faith. Faith establishes a bond between people's hearts and God, and makes good works a way of life, chosen on purpose with due reflection, not in response to a fleeting whim or sudden impulse. With believers, good works are never reduced to the sort of single action that does not reflect a well defined method and clear objective.

According to Islam, man's life and action are closely related to the universe and the law that governs its existence and binds it all to God, including man and all his activities in life. When man's life is separated from its central access that relates it to the universe, he finds himself lost, without influence and with no value attached to his work. Indeed his actions become non-existent. It is faith that binds man to his Lord, adding value to his actions and giving them credit in the overall system of the universe.

Hence, the works of the unbelievers are thus made to die, and their death is shown in a highly tangible image: *"We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust."* (Verse 23)

On the other side we find the believers, who dwell in heaven, in a perfectly contrasting image: *"On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose."* (Verse 24) They are well settled, enjoying their comfort. This feeling of settlement contrasts with the scattered dust in the opposite image, and the reassurance felt by the believers contrasts with the fear of the unbelievers that obliges them to make a worried prayer.

The unbelievers also used to suggest that God and the angels should appear before them on the tops of clouds. Such suggestions perhaps show the influence of Jewish legends speaking of God revealing Himself over a cloud or a column of fire. Therefore, the Qur'ān shows another image of the day when their request to see angels is granted: *"On the day when the skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]."* (Verses 25-26)

This verse, and many others in the Qur'ān, make it clear that that day will witness

far-reaching celestial events indicating a complete collapse of the system that controls all parts of the universe, including all celestial bodies. Such an upheaval indicates the end of this world. This upheaval is not limited to the earth, but includes planets, stars, solar systems and galaxies. It is useful to look at some aspects of this upheaval as described in different *sūrah*s: *"When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away... when the seas are set alight."* (81: 1-3 and 6) *"When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode, when the graves are hurled about."* (82: 1-4) *"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!"* (84: 1-5) *"When the sky is rent asunder and becomes red like burning oil."* (55: 37) *"When the earth is severely shaken, and when the mountains crumble away, so as to become like scattered dust."* (56: 4-6) *"When the trumpet is blown with a single blast, and the earth and the mountains are lifted up and crushed with a single stroke! Then that which must come to pass will on that day have come to pass; and the sky will be rent asunder – for, frail will it have become on that day."* (69: 13-16) *"On a day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains will be like tufts of wool."* (70: 8-9) *"When the earth is rocked by her [final] earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens."* (99: 1-2) *"The day when people will be like scattered moths, and the mountains like tufts of carded wool."* (101: 4-5) *"Wait, then, for the day when the skies shall bring forth a pall of smoke which will make obvious [the approach of the Last Hour], enveloping all mankind. 'Grievous is this suffering!'"* (44: 10-11) *"On the day when the earth and the mountains will be convulsed, and the mountains will become like a sand-dune on the move."* (73: 14) *"On that day, the skies shall be rent asunder."* (73: 18) *"When the earth is systematically levelled down."* (89: 21) *"When every eye is dazzled, and the moon darkens, and the sun and the moon are brought together."* (75: 7-9) *"When the stars are effaced, and when the sky is rent asunder, and when the mountains are scattered like dust."* (77: 8-10) *"They ask you about the mountains. Say: My Lord will scatter them far and wide, and leave the earth level and bare, with no curves or ruggedness to be seen."* (20: 105-107) *"You will see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away."* (27: 88) *"One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare."* (18: 47) *"On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens."* (14: 48) *"On that Day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment."* (21: 104)

All these verses indicate that our world will come to a fearful end characterized by a violent shake-up of the earth, while the mountains will be scattered like dust. The seas will be set alight, or made to explode, either by being overfull as a result of the upheaval taking place or its molecules will explode and turn into fire. The stars will be darkened, the sky rent asunder and the planets scattered. Distances will be confused as the sun and the moon will be brought together.

The sky will look like smoke at one time and alight and red at another. It is a fearful event that leaves nothing in place.

What Use is Regret?

In this *sūrah* God threatens the unbelievers with the sky being rent asunder by clouds. This may be a reference to clouds formed out of the vapours produced by the great explosions. On that day, the angels will go to the unbelievers, as the latter suggested, but their task will not be to confirm the Prophet's message, but rather to administer punishment to the unbelievers as God will have ordered: *"It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers."* (Verse 26) So why do they want the angels to go to them when their arrival signals so much distress?

The *sūrah* then portrays an image showing the regret and remorse felt by the unbelievers. It is portrayed at length, in detail, giving the impression that it is unending, where every wrongdoer bites his own hand in a gesture of regret:

On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (Verses 27-29)

Everything around the wrongdoing unbeliever is still, while he sends out expressions of regret, with sorrow marking his voice. The rhythm here is deliberately long to add to the sound effects. As we read or hear these verses, we also seem to participate in the expression of regret. *"On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands."* (Verse 27) One hand is not enough. He bites both, alternating from one to the other, because his sorrow and regret are so keen. The movement itself is very common, expressing what the person making it feels. Hence, it is shown in full clarity.

The wrongdoer will also say: *"Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger!"* (Verse 27) Would that I followed his way and had not moved a single step away from it! He says this about God's Messenger despite the fact that he had denied the very possibility that God might have entrusted him with a message.

"Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend!" (Verse 28) No name is mentioned here, but the friend is described as 'so and so' to include every bad friend who encouraged him to turn away from the path of God's Messenger and follow the wrong way. *"He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!"* (Verse 29) He was indeed Satan's aide, or was himself just another Satan. *"Satan is ever treacherous to man,"* leading him into situations of error and letting him down when he most needs help.

We see how the Qur'ān shakes their hearts, painting these fearful scenes of their fate as though this is already happening before their eyes. Yet still they deny God and speak of Him in a way that shows no respect. Indeed they make careless

suggestions when what awaits them is certain to fill them with regret.

Perhaps we should add that some reports mention that these verses were revealed to the Prophet by way of comment on an incident involving `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayt, who frequently visited and sat with the Prophet. One day he invited the Prophet for a meal. The Prophet said that he would not eat `Uqbah's food unless `Uqbah uttered the declaration, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God, and that Muhammad is God's Messenger.' `Uqbah did so. His friend, Ubayy ibn Khalaf, however later remonstrated with him, saying: 'You have abandoned your religion.' `Uqbah said: 'No, by God! It was only that he refused to eat my food when he was in my home, and I felt embarrassed, so I granted his wish.' Ubayy said: 'I will not be satisfied unless you go and step over him and spit in his face.' `Uqbah looked for the Prophet until he found him in prostration near Dar al-Nadwah, and he did just that. The Prophet said to him: 'Should I ever meet you outside Makkah, I will hit your head with my sword.' `Uqbah was taken prisoner in the Battle of Badr, and the Prophet ordered `Alī to execute him.

A Complaint by God's Messenger

After these scenes of the Day of Judgement the *sūrah* brings us back to this world with a discussion of the unbelievers' attitude towards the Prophet and their objections to the method of revealing the Qur'ān from on high. This part of the *sūrah* again ends with a scene of what happens to the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement.

And the Messenger will say: My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'ān as something to be discarded!' Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support. The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation. Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path. (Verses 30-34)

They have abandoned the Qur'ān, which God revealed to His Messenger to warn and explain to them what lies ahead for mankind. They refused to listen to it because they feared they would be attracted to its message. Stubbornly, they refused to consider its message which would have guided them to the truth and given them light. Although God revealed it as a constitution for human life, guiding it to all that is best, they shut their minds to it. "And the Messenger will say: My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'ān as something to be discarded!" (Verse 30) His Lord certainly

knew this, but God's Messenger made his complaint, humbly stating that he had exerted his best efforts, but still his people adamantly refused to listen to the Qur'an and consider its message.

God comforts His Messenger, telling him that the same was the case with all earlier messengers. Every prophet has had enemies who discard divine guidance and deliberately turn people away from faith. But God is certain to guide His messengers to the way that ensures their victory over foul and wicked enemies. *"Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support."* (Verse 31)

Divine wisdom is perfect indeed. The fact that wicked people wage war against prophets and their messages is certain to strengthen these messages, giving them the sort of seriousness that fits their nature. The struggle of advocates of divine faith against those who fight it may be hard, involving much sacrifice, but it is such struggle that eventually distinguishes true and sincere advocates from false ones, strengthening the former and expelling the latter. Thus, only those who are true to their faith, dedicated to its cause, aspiring to no personal or easy gain remain, dedicating their efforts to God alone.

Had advocacy of the divine faith been comfortable and easy, moving along a smooth way adorned with flowers, and without opposition, everyone would have become an advocate. Indeed true causes would have been muddled with false ones, and much confusion would have resulted. When a message or a cause faces determined opposition, the struggle for it becomes inevitable and sacrifice necessary. Only serious believers are ready to endure pain and make sacrifices for their causes, because such believers consider their faith to be more important than this whole world and the comforts it offers. Indeed, to them, faith is more important than life itself. Only the strongest in faith and most enduring among them can carry this fight to its end, because these are the ones who aspire most to what God has in store for them.

It is those who render sacrifices and remain steadfast that are eventually entrusted with the implementation of the divine message, because they are the ones who, having paid the heavy price of victory, are able to shoulder its continued burden. Their experience teaches them how to overcome the many hazards that lie along their way. The hardship they endure sharpens their abilities and talents, increases their strength and knowledge. All these will stand them in good stead as they continue to advocate the divine faith in all situations.

What happens in most cases is that the majority of people stand aside while the struggle between the wicked and advocates of the divine faith rages on. The sacrifices of these advocates will inevitably mount, but their steadfastness, despite

the great pain they have to endure, remains strong and they are not shaken in any way. As a result, the multitude standing by begin to feel that the message these believers advocate is more precious than all their sacrifices. They start to examine it in order to see what makes such a message dearer to its advocates than life. What happens then is that these people, who have long stood by, begin to embrace the faith in large numbers.

For this reason God has willed that every prophet has to face enemies. Such wicked people stand in the face of the divine message, which is the message of truth. Its advocates then resist its enemies and bear whatever sacrifices they are called on to give. The end is predetermined, and those who place their trust in God are certain of it. It is the provision of divine guidance that leads to the ultimate victory: *"Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support."* (Verse 31)

That the wicked should stand against prophets is only natural. The prophets advocate the message of the truth which is given at the appropriate time to rectify corruption that creeps into community life or into human life in general. This is a corruption that affects hearts, systems and life itself. Such corruption is initiated, promoted and exploited by the wicked. They are the ones whose interests and values are served through the promotion of such corruption. Their opposition to the prophets aims to defend themselves and their interests. They want to retain the corrupt atmosphere in which they thrive. Some insects are stifled by the fine smell of flowers because they can only survive on dump heaps. Some worms survive only in dirty stagnating water, and perish in clean, running water. Such are the wicked. Hence their hostility to the message of truth. They fight it tooth and nail. But it is only natural that it will emerge triumphant, because it promotes life and looks up to the sublime horizon which binds it to God. *"Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support."* (Verse 31)

The Time Span of Qur'ānic Revelations

The *sūrah* goes on examining the arguments of the wicked who stand in opposition to the Qur'ān:

The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. (Verse 32)

The purpose of revealing the Qur'ān is to re-educate a community and establish a new social order. Such a task requires time. In a process of proper education it is not enough to understand the words being said, rather one must interact with them as also with the ideas expressed. This interaction should then be brought into the

practical world. Human nature does not go through a total transformation overnight, as a result of reading a book which provides a complete new way of life. It is more likely to be influenced day by day, and by one aspect after another. This gives human nature the chance to gradually, but thoroughly understand it, and to get used to it bit by bit, bearing the responsibilities it requires. Thus, people are not scared off as they might be were it presented in full, surrounded by difficulties. This gradual approach is like serving a fresh nourishing meal every day, from which the recipient becomes stronger and better able to benefit by the next meal, enjoying it even more.

The Qur'ān provides a comprehensive way of life, as well as a system of education that suits human nature. For it is revealed by God, the Creator of human nature who knows it thoroughly. For this reason, it was revealed in parts, to suit the real needs of the Muslim community as it came into existence and began to grow. It is not meant to be a theoretical book which is read for enjoyment or increasing one's knowledge. It is meant to be implemented in full, with every task accomplished and every detailed order carried out. Indeed its verses are 'orders of the day' which Muslims receive and start to implement immediately, just like military personnel receive their daily orders on the battlefield. They must understand these orders properly, interact with, and implement them.

For all this, the Qur'ān was revealed in small parts, explaining things first to the Prophet and strengthening his resolve to fulfil his task. Its revelation progressed, one passage or *sūrah* after another, as suited the different stages along the road the Muslim community travelled. *"Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation."* (Verse 32) The Arabic term *tartīl*, translated here as 'gradual revelation', indicates successive steps according to God's knowledge of what suited the Muslims at the time and their readiness to receive more.

This method accomplished miracles in transforming the community which so received it, interacting with it day after day and absorbing its message part after part. When the Muslims ignored this method, viewing the Qur'ān as a book for theoretical knowledge and recitation in worship only, they no longer benefited by it. They simply abandoned its method which aimed to reshape their way of thinking and their everyday lives.

The *sūrah* continues to reassure the Prophet that he will be given the ultimate argument and the final evidence whenever the unbelievers come up with a new suggestion or objection. *"Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation."* (Verse 33)

Their argument is false, and God refutes it with the truth. Indeed the Qur'ān aims to establish the truth in full clarity. It does not aim to win an argument or to be

applauded in a debate. It has no time for such pursuits.

God, limitless is He in His glory, promises to help His Messenger in any argument he may have with his people. He follows the truth, and God empowers him with the truth that overcomes all falsehood. How can the unbelievers' argument stand up to God's ultimate proof? How can the falsehood they advocate resist the overpowering truth revealed by God?

This passage ends with an image showing the unbelievers' resurrection and how they are gathered in hell, as a punishment for their rejection of the truth and for their upholding twisted logic and values: *"Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path."* (Verse 34) This picture of them gathering on their faces in hell is a very humiliating one. It contrasts with their arrogance and turning away from the truth. This image is placed before the Prophet to strengthen him against the opposition he faced from them. It is also placed before them as a warning against what awaits them. The portrait as a whole is meant to undermine their arrogance and show how weak their position is. Yet despite such strong warnings, they stubbornly held on to their rejection of the truth.

The Fate of Earlier Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then makes some quick and brief references to earlier communities who rejected God's message, as given to them through His messengers. First we are told about Moses who was granted the support of his brother Aaron. Aaron was to share the task assigned to Moses. They were ordered to confront the people who *'denied Our signs'*, for Pharaoh and his people denied God's signs even before Moses and Aaron were sent to them with God's message. Such signs are available all the time, giving clear evidence. God's messengers simply remind people of their negligence of such signs. Before the second verse speaking about them is completed, a quick picture of their fate is shown: *"We utterly destroyed these people."* (Verse 36)

This is followed by a reference to Noah's people who *'rejected their messengers'* and in consequence, God *'caused them to drown'*. It should be explained here that Noah's people denied only Noah's message and their rejection applied only to him, but we have to remember that Noah only preached the faith advocated by all God's messengers. Hence, when they rejected what he told them, it was as though they rejected all messengers, most of whom lived after their own time. God states that He *'made of them an example for mankind.'* (Verse 37) The great floods could not be forgotten despite the passage of time. Anyone who looks carefully at the result of that flood will understand its lesson, provided he approaches it with an open mind. *"For the wrongdoers We have prepared grievous suffering."* (Verse 37) It is now ready, requiring no further waiting. We note that the wrongdoers are mentioned by their

attribute, rather than by the use of a pronoun, which would have been perfectly correct from the point of view of style, but mentioning this quality explains the reason behind their punishment.

The next verse groups together the `Ād, Thamūd and the people of al-Rass, as well as many generations in between. Al-Rass refers to a ground well which was not properly built. Its people, who lived in a village in Yamāmah, killed the Prophet sent to them. Al-Ṭabarī, however, says that they are the ones mentioned in *Sūrah* 85, The Constellations, as having lit a fire in a great pit to burn all the believers. Whatever the truth of this, the fact remains that all these communities faced the same fate after they were given a clear message, proffering clear lessons. None heeded what they were told and none averted the terrible fate against which they were warned.

All these peoples, as well as Lot's township which suffered a shower of evil rained upon it, followed the same line and shared the same fate: *"To each of them did We proffer lessons"* so that they may take heed. But this was not to be. Hence, the outcome of their stubborn rejection of God's message was that *"each of them did We utterly annihilate."* (Verse 39)

The *sūrah* makes this very quick reference to all these communities, ending by mentioning the fate of Lot's people, whose township, Sodom, the Arabs passed by on their summer trade journey to Syria. Sodom was destroyed with a volcanic rain that brought on them gases and stones, destroying the town completely. The *sūrah* states that they did not take heed because they did not believe in resurrection and did not hope to meet God. Hence, their hearts remained hardened. This gave rise to their objections to, and ridicule of their messengers.

Ridiculing God's Messenger

After this quick reference to earlier communities, the *sūrah* mentions the ridicule faced by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from his people. This follows upon the earlier mention of their arrogance and objection to the method of revelation of the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* also earlier described what will happen to them on the Day of Resurrection, and also the fate suffered by earlier unbelievers. All this is given by way of solace to the Prophet before mentioning the ridicule they direct at him. They are warned that they will be placed in a position lower than that of animals: *"When they see you, they make you a target of their mockery, [saying]: 'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?'"* (Verse 41)

Prior to his choice as God's Messenger, Muhammad was highly respected among his people, being the descendant of a leading family and tribe. His honesty and morality enhanced his position, as he was nicknamed *al-amīn*, which meant 'the trustworthy'. When the community faced a serious dispute over which tribe should

replace the Black Stone, they accepted him as arbiter. When he gathered them to give them the first news of his mission, he asked them whether they would believe him if he were to tell them that armed people were moving behind the hills, preparing to attack them, they said: "Yes, because you enjoy our full trust."

Yet when he told them of his mission and recited to them this great book of divine revelations, they ridiculed him, saying: *'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?'* This is cruel ridicule. Yet, were they so convinced that he deserved such ridicule, or that the message he preached also deserved it? Not at all! For it was all a scheme devised by the Quraysh elders to detract from his great personality and to counter the irresistible influence of the Qur'ān. They felt that the new message constituted a threat to their social and economic positions. Hence, they resorted to every conceivable means to counter it.

They convened meetings and conferences to devise plots and strategies, and to agree on what accusations they should level at Muhammad, knowing full well that they were only fabricating blatant lies.

Ibn Ishāq reports that one year as the pilgrimage season approached, a group of the Quraysh attended al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was a high-ranking elderly figure. He said to them: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend (meaning the Prophet). So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. Someone suggested that they should describe Muhammad as a fortune-teller. Al-Walīd said: "It is clearly recognized that he is not. We have seen fortune-tellers and what he says is nothing like the incomprehensible rhyming phrases they use." Another suggestion was to say that he was a madman, but al-Walīd rejected this too, saying: "We have seen madness and its effect on people. His is nothing like a madman's seizure, convulsion or hallucination." A third suggestion was to say that he was nothing more than a poet, but al-Walīd again told them that it would not do. "We have learnt poetry in all its forms and metres, and what Muhammad says is nothing like poetry." Someone suggested that they should say that Muhammad was a magician. Al-Walīd said: "He is not a magician. We have seen such people and their gestures as they blow and contract. He is totally unlike them."

Giving up, they said: "What shall we say, then?" Al-Walīd said: "What Muhammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as

false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan.” They all approved of al-Walīd’s suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign. They made sure to meet pilgrims as they arrived in Makkah so as to warn them about the Prophet.

This is but one example of the plots they devised. It also shows how they were at a loss concerning the accusations they could level at the Prophet. Yet it also shows that they were well aware of how truthful he was. Indeed their mockery as they said: *Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?*’ was merely one of the forms they used in their propaganda against Islam and its advocates. In arriving at such claims, the elders of the Quraysh did not express their true feelings about the truth of Islam. It was simply a device aiming to lower the Prophet’s esteem in the public eye. For they were keen that the masses should continue to look up to them in matters of religion, as this would ensure that they continued to enjoy their social and economic privileges. In all this, the Quraysh were no different from other forces that are hostile to the truth and its advocates in all places and generations.

Although they were keen to project an attitude of ridicule towards the Prophet, their words reflected the great anxiety they felt, their knowledge of his strong argument and the powerful message the Qur’ān embodied. They said: *“He could almost have led us astray from our deities, had we not been steadfastly attached to them!”* (Verse 42)

They admitted that they were greatly shaken to the extent that, keen as they were to stick to their religion which gave them numerous privileges, they were about to abandon their deities and idol worship altogether. They maintained this only through a great deal of resistance.

Steadfastness, which they speak about, is only required to resist what is powerfully appealing. They also described the right guidance the Prophet gave as *‘leading astray’*, which shows how wrong they were in their evaluation of the situation. Despite the appearances they put on of mocking the Prophet, they could not conceal the tremor they felt in their hearts as Muhammad advocated his message, reciting the Qur’ān. Hence, a quick and general warning is given which struck fear in their hearts: *“But in time, when they see the suffering, they will come to know who it was that went farthest astray.”* (Verse 42) They will know then whether Muhammad brought them a message of truth or one of error. But their newly acquired knowledge would then be of little use to them, because suffering would be staring them in the face. This is true whether the suffering is of the type that is inflicted in this present life, like the Quraysh suffered at the Battle of Badr, or in the hereafter.

When Desire is Worshipped

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet consoling and comforting him. He did not fail to deliver his message or to employ strong arguments in advocating it. He certainly deserved nothing of the mockery and ridicule they levelled at him. It is they that are wicked. They make their own desires an idol which they worship. They have no argument for the stand they adopted. How could such a person formulate even the semblance of an argument?

“Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you then, be held responsible for him?” (Verse 43) This verse is carefully phrased to paint a picture showing the psychological condition of a person who pays no heed to accepted standards or values. Instead, they only submit to their own desires and worship none but their own pleasure. They apply no standard, recognize no value, acknowledge no logic. Once their desire moves clearly in a particular direction, they follow like slaves submitting to a powerful master.

God, who is limitless in His glory, addresses His servant and Messenger in a kindly and compassionate manner, referring to this type of person. He asks him: *“Have you considered...”* He follows this by drawing a picture of a man who pays no regard to truth, logic or sound argument. He comforts the Prophet so that he does not feel too disappointed at having failed to guide someone who has no propensity to follow guidance. Hence, the Prophet need not concern himself with such people: *“Could you, then, be held responsible for him?”* (Verse 43)

The *sūrah* hurls further ridicule on those who submit to their lust and worship their desire, turning a blind eye to the truth. It puts them on the same level as animals which are devoid of hearing or logic. This is followed by yet more ridicule which shows such people as even inferior to animals: *“Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray.”* (Verse 44)

This very clear statement that maintains accuracy applies, as the *sūrah* says, to ‘most of them’, because only a minority of unbelievers showed any inclination to accept guidance, or reflect on what they heard. The majority, who took their desires as their gods which they blindly obeyed, ignored all the signs they heard and saw, and were indeed like cattle. Indeed man is distinguished from animals by his propensity to reflect and understand, as well as by his ability to mould his life in accordance with the truth he accepts upon consideration and reflection. His great human quality is that he is able to change course on being convinced by sound argument. When man deliberately abandons such qualities, he puts himself in a position worse than that of animals. An animal is guided to what suits it by the abilities and susceptibilities God has placed within it. Thus, it fulfils its role without

deviation. Man, on the other hand, often disregards the qualities God has given him, making little use of them. In this he is worse than an animal who does not neglect any inclination given to it.

“They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray.” (Verse 44) This comment expels those who ridicule the Prophet from the ranks of mankind. They are to be looked down upon, never to command respect.

Raising Support Against God

Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen when, had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still? But then We have made the sun its guide. (45)

And then, little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves. (46)

He it is who makes the night a garment for you, and sleep a repose. He makes every day a resurrection. (47)

And He it is who sends forth the winds as heralds of His coming grace. And We cause pure water to descend from the skies, (48)

so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human. (49)

Many times have We explained this [in the] Qur'an to them, so that they may take it to heart, but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers. (50)

Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city. (51)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَيْفَ مَدَّ الظِّلَّ وَلَوْ شَاءَ لَجَعَلَهُ سَاكِنًا ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا الشَّمْسَ عَلَيْهِ دَلِيلًا ﴿٤٥﴾

ثُمَّ قَبَضْنَاهُ إِلَيْنَا قَبْضًا يَسِيرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ لِبَاسًا وَالنَّوْمَ سُبَاتًا وَجَعَلَ النَّهَارَ نُشُورًا ﴿٤٧﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ الرِّيحَ بُشْرًا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ رَحْمَتِهِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً طَهُورًا ﴿٤٨﴾

لِنُحْيِيَ بِهِ بَلَدَةً مَيِّتًا وَنُسْقِيَهُ مِمَّا خَلَقْنَا أَنْعَمًا وَأُنَاسِيًّا كَثِيرًا ﴿٤٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَاهُ بَيْنَهُمْ لِيَذَّكَّرُوا فَأَبَىٰ أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا ﴿٥٠﴾

وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَبَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ قَرْيَةٍ نَذِيرًا ﴿٥١﴾

Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur'an. (52)

He it is who has brought the two bodies of water to meet; the one sweet and thirst-quenching, and the other salty and bitter. Yet between them He has made a barrier and a forbidding ban. (53)

And He it is who has created man from water and established for him bonds of lineage and marriage. All-Powerful is your Lord. (54)

Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord. (55)

We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. (56)

Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. All I ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.' (57)

Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins. (58)

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and is established on the throne of His Almighty, the Most Merciful. Ask, then,

فَلَا تُطِيعِ الْكَافِرِينَ وَجَاهِدْهُمْ بِهِ
جِهَادًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٥٢﴾

﴿٥٣﴾ وَهُوَ الَّذِي مَرَجَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ هَذَا عَذْبٌ
فُرَاتٌ وَهَذَا مِلْحٌ أُجَاجٌ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَهُمَا
بَرْزَخًا وَحِجْرًا مَحْجُورًا ﴿٥٤﴾

﴿٥٥﴾ وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ مِنَ الْمَاءِ بَشَرًا فَجَعَلَهُ
نَسَبًا وَصِهْرًا ۗ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ قَدِيرًا ﴿٥٦﴾

﴿٥٧﴾ وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ
وَلَا يَضُرُّهُمْ ۗ وَكَانَ الْكَافِرُ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِ
ظَهِيرًا ﴿٥٨﴾

﴿٥٩﴾ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٥٦﴾

﴿٥٧﴾ قُلْ مَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ إِلَّا مَنْ
شَاءَ أَن يَتَّخِذَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِ سَبِيلًا ﴿٥٨﴾

﴿٥٩﴾ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْحَيِّ الَّذِي لَا يَمُوتُ
وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِهِ ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِهِ بِذُنُوبِ
عِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا ﴿٦٠﴾

﴿٦١﴾ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا
بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى
الْعَرْشِ ۗ الرَّحْمَنُ فَسْئَلُ بِهِ خَبِيرًا ﴿٦٢﴾

about Him, the One who knows everything. (59)

Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious. (60)

Blessed is He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light-giving moon. (61)

And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude. (62)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ اسْجُدُوا لِلرَّحْمَنِ قَالُوا وَمَا
الرَّحْمَنُ أَنْسَجِدُ لِمَا تَأْمُرُنَا وَزَادَهُمْ
نُفُورًا ﴿٦٠﴾

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ فِي السَّمَاءِ بُرُوجًا
وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا سِرَاجًا وَقَمَرًا مُنِيرًا ﴿٦١﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ خِلْفَةً
لِمَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يَذَّكَّرَ أَوْ أَرَادَ شُكُورًا ﴿٦٢﴾

Overview

This passage concentrates on some of the great wonders in the universe that testify to God's existence and the unique system He has put in place to control and conduct everything that happens. It directs the Prophet to look carefully at these signs and interact with them. Such interaction, particularly when it is done with an open heart and mind, is sufficient to redress any lingering effects of the hardship caused by the unbelievers. He will be looking at the great horizons against which the unbelievers' schemes and hostilities are reduced to insignificance.

The Qur'an always directs people's hearts and minds to reflect on, and interact with, what they see in the universe. They will then recognize the work of God's hand in all that they see, hear and feel. They will have much to reflect upon which will strengthen their bond with God through His work.

When man lives in the universe with an open heart and mind, and an alert soul, his life rises above the petty concerns of this world. His sense of life is heightened as he feels, at every moment, that the universe around him is much larger and greater than his own world, while all that he sees and feels comes into being through one and the same will, are subject to the same law, and submit to One Creator. He will realize that he is but one of countless creatures that submit to God, and that God's hand is visible in all that he sees, hears and feels.

To fear only God will be mixed in anyone's consciousness with parallel feelings of friendliness and trust. These feelings will fill his soul and his whole world, imparting a mixture of love and reassurance that will accompany him on his life journey and remain with him until he meets God. He cannot fail to experience such feelings when everything around him is made by God, according to His fine and elaborate system of creation.

We see in this passage how the *sūrah* paints a scene of shadows extending then gently contracting, before we move to a picture of a quiet night of deep slumber and a bustling day of tireless activity. We then see the winds as heralds of God's mercy, followed by water pouring down from the skies to quicken barren land. We see the salty sea and the sweet river water, and the barrier between them preventing them from mixing. Then we look at a different type of fluid, the semen that gives rise to human life. We contemplate how the heavens and the earth were created in six days, and look at the star constellations in the sky, with the sun as a lamp lightening the world for us, and the moon doing the same at night. We also contemplate the unending succession of night and day.

As it paints these images, the *sūrah* directs our hearts and minds to reflect that they are all of God's creation, reminding us of His power and fine planning. It shows how singular the unbelievers' attitude is when they associate partners with God and worship alongside Him entities that can cause them neither benefit nor harm. The unbelievers are so ignorant that they speak impudently about God and support one another in denying Him. This is very strange, particularly when seen against the multitude of universal signs demonstrating God's creation. It is all a great display that the Creator raises before our eyes for us to contemplate.

Moving Shadows, Still Night

Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen when, had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still? But then We have made the sun its guide. And then, little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves. (Verses 45-46)

This image of shadow and shade imparts to a troubled and tired soul a feeling of comfort, relaxation and security, as if it is a gentle, compassionate hand that wipes away pain and worry, giving comfort and energy. Is this God's purpose as He directs the Prophet, who has suffered the unbelievers' ridicule and opposition, to contemplate the shadow? In the tough battle the Prophet went through in Makkah, facing determined opposition and wicked scheming, his soul must have felt the burden too heavy, with only a small number of believers supporting him against the overwhelming majority of unbelievers. Not only so, but he was not then even

allowed to retaliate against physical aggression or repel hostile ridicule. In this troubled atmosphere passages of the Qur'ān were revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) to serve as a healing balsam, a relaxing shade and kind blessing. It provided him with support in the midst of determined denial and opposition. Shade, particularly when considered against a hot desert background, gives an image that is in complete harmony with the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* that is full of compassion and blessings.

The *sūrah* shows the shadow as being gently stretched by God's hand before it then contracts: *"Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen?"* (Verse 45) Some time later, *"little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves."* (Verse 46) The shadow is a faint darkness made by the sun's rebounding rays. It moves along with the movement of the earth in relation to the sun, changing its position, length and shape. The sun points it with its light and heat, determining its area and length. When we follow how the shadow changes shape and extent, we experience a feeling of comfort and are gently alerted to the fact that it is an aspect of God's work.

When the sun starts its decline, we see the shadows lengthen and further lengthen. Suddenly all shadows disappear as the sun sets. Where have all the shadows gone? God's unseen hand has collected them all as the deep darkness of the night gathers and spreads over our world. This is all the work of God's able hand which humans fail to see, but which continues without fail.

"Had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still?" (Verse 45) The way the visible universe and solar system are made makes the shadow move in the gentle way it does. Had the system been even slightly different, this would have had a different effect on the shadow. Had the earth been motionless, the shadow cast over it would have stood still, neither extending nor shrinking. On the other hand, if the earth's movement had been faster or slower, the extension and shrinking of the shadow would have been proportionately slower or faster. It is the way the universe is made, with its operative laws, that gives the shadow its specific features.

The highlighting of this phenomenon, which we see every day without paying much attention to it, is part of the Qur'ānic method of making our consciousness interact with the universe so as to respond to aspects that we tend to ignore because of their familiarity. We only need to contemplate the countless marvels around us for our thoughts to move in the right direction.

Moving on, the *sūrah* highlights an image of the night, its stillness and peaceful slumber, contrasted with the day and its bustling movement. *"He it is who makes the night a garment for you, and sleep a repose. He makes every day a resurrection."* (Verse 47)

The night spreads its cover over animate and inanimate objects so as to make the world appear as though it wears the blackness of the night. Hence, the night is

described as a garment. At night, movement stops and footsteps cease to allow people and most animals, birds and insects to sleep. Sleep is a cessation of sensation, consciousness and feeling, which is why it is described as 'repose'. Then the dawn starts to breathe and movement begins. Life is thus resumed. Hence, the day is a new 'resurrection' after a short mini-death. The two alternate with every daily cycle of the earth. Again this phenomenon is ignored by human beings, but it is indicative of the great design of the universe made by God, who never sleeps or overlooks anything.

The *sūrah* highlights another universal phenomenon that is closely related to life:

And He it is who sends forth the winds as heralds of His coming grace. And We cause pure water to descend from the skies, so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human. (Verses 48-49)

All life on earth depends on rain water, either directly, or through the rivers and other water courses, springs, wells and underground reservoirs it supplies. Only those who directly depend on rain for their living properly appreciate God's grace as He sends rain. They look forward to rain, full of hope, realizing that it brings them life. They look for wind, which they know to drive the clouds. Hence, they realize that the wind is an early indicator, announcing the forthcoming act of God's grace, provided that they believe in God.

It is important to look at the last two verses very carefully: "We cause pure water to descend from the skies." (Verse 48) We note how the concept of purity and purification points to the life brought about by rain: "so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human." (Verse 49) Thus, life is given an added aspect of purity, because God wants human life, and indeed all life on earth, to be pure of evil. Thus, He washes the face of the earth with pure water that brings life to an otherwise dead land, and which also serves as a pure drink for all creatures.

Jihad by Means of the Qur'ān

At this point the *sūrah* refers to the Qur'ān which, like pure rain water, descends from on high to purify people's hearts and souls. It wonders how man warms to rain, which is essential for physical life, but does not warm to the Qur'ān which gives life to hearts and souls.

Many times have We explained this (in the] Qur'ān to them, so that they may take it to heart, but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers. Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city. Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most

vigorously against them with this Qur'ān. (Verses 50-52)

We have put it to them in a great variety of forms, styles and presentations, addressing it to their minds, hearts, souls and feelings. We sought to awaken their consciences to its import in numerous ways, employing different means to ensure that they interact with it. All it needs from them is that they should *'take it to heart.'* The point is that the Qur'ān aims to remind people of a truth that is well established in their nature, even though they often forget it. What makes them heedless of it is the fact that they submit to their desires: *"but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers."* (Verse 50)

This means that the mission entrusted to God's Messenger is a very tough one. He faces the whole of mankind when the great majority of them choose to follow their desires, insisting on unbelief, being ingrate, despite the presence of numerous signs pointing to the truth of faith.

"Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city." (Verse 51) Such a course would have divided the task and made it easier to carry out. God, however, chose one of His servants, the last of His messengers, and required him to address all mankind, so as to give them the same message which remains free from local variations. God also gave His Messenger the Qur'ān, so as to make it the address he drove home to them: *"Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur'ān."* (Verse 52)

This Qur'ān has great power and influence. It is irresistible. When God's Messenger addressed the Arabs with it, it shook their hearts and consciences. They tried hard to counter its effects, employing every means at their disposal, but all their efforts were useless. The Quraysh elders used to say to their people: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but rather talk frivolously about it, so that you might gain the upper hand."* (41: 26) This betrayed their profound fear that the Qur'ān would touch their own hearts and the hearts of their followers and that they would embrace Islam. They were aware that it took only the reading of a couple of verses, or perhaps a *sūrah* or two, by Muhammad, and listeners were so affected they accepted his message. To them, it seemed like the Qur'ān had a magic effect on people.

The elders of the Quraysh were themselves touched by the power of the Qur'ān. It was only because they were keenly aware of this profound effect that they resorted to such tactics, warning their people against listening to it and encouraging them to take it frivolously. Indeed, their statement is indicative of how worried they were about the effect of the Qur'ān.

Ibn Ishāq reports that three of the Quraysh elders, Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went out one night to listen to the Qur'ān being recited by the

Prophet as he prayed in his home during the night. Each of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about what he did. As the day began to break, they went back. However, the three of them inevitably met. There was no need for them to ask each other what they were doing. Therefore, they remonstrated with one another and concluded that their action was inadvisable: "Should some of your followers see you," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against such 'irresponsible' action. Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they were ashamed of themselves. One of them suggested that they should give each other their word of honour not to listen to the Qur'ān again. They did so before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān at his home. He asked him what he thought about what he heard Muhammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him.

Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocutor: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf (the Prophet's clan) for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."

This is just an example of how strongly attracted they were to the Qur'ān. They felt that it was too powerful for them. Hence, they needed to pledge their word of honour that they would not listen to it again. What they feared most was that some of their subordinates might see them so taken by the Qur'ān that they too would be unable to resist it.

Indeed, the Qur'ān embodies simple and natural facts which link hearts directly to the truth that issues forth with irresistible power. It includes scenes and images of the Day of Judgement, and others derived from the universe around us, historical accounts, scenes of the fate of past communities, and powerful arguments, all of which strike basic cords in our hearts. Indeed, we often find that a single *sūrah* affects us so powerfully as to take hold of our whole being. Indeed, the Qur'ān is often described as more powerful than great armies. It is no wonder, therefore, that God ordered His Messenger not to obey the unbelievers, and not to budge from fulfilling

his task. The divine order also required the Prophet to vigorously strive against unbelievers by means of the Qur'ān. Having been given the Qur'ān, the Prophet was equipped with something much more forceful and compelling than any human logic.

Separating Types of Water

The *sūrah* again portrays images from the world around us. Having spoken about winds heralding rain and its pure water, now it speaks of the great bodies of water, some of which are sweet and some salty, and how they do not mix.

He it is who has brought the two bodies of water to meet; the one sweet and thirst-quenching, and the other salty and bitter. Yet between them He has made a barrier and a forbidding ban. (Verse 53)

It is God who created both types and left them to run their courses, meeting at certain points. Nevertheless, their waters do not mix because they have a natural barrier keeping them apart. In most cases, rivers run at a level higher than the sea, which means that at the meeting point, it is the river with its sweet water that runs into the salty sea. It is very rare that a river runs below sea level. Hence, the sea with its much greater body of water does not overpower the river whose water gives life to plants, animals and man. The fact that this is the natural order in practically all cases where a river meets the sea means that it is certainly not coincidental. It happens by the will of the Creator who made the universe in such a way as to fulfil His purpose and remain subject to His laws of nature.

Indeed the natural laws God has set in operation ensure that the salty waters of sea and ocean do not overrun dry land or overpower rivers. This remains so even during high tides caused by the moon's gravity as it affects the earth's surface water.

It is useful to cite here some scientific observations that stress the facts mentioned in the Qur'ān:

The moon is 240,000 miles away, and the tides twice a day are usually a gentle reminder of its presence. Tides of the ocean run as high as sixty feet in some places, and even the crust of the earth is twice a day bent outward several inches by the moon's attraction. All seems so regular that we do not grasp to any degree the vast power that lifts the whole area of the sea several feet and bends the crust of the earth, seemingly so solid. Mars has a moon – a little one – only six thousand miles away from it. If our moon was, say, fifty thousand miles away instead of its present respectable distance, our tides would be so enormous that twice a day all the lowland of all the continents would be submerged by a rush of water so enormous that even the

mountains would soon be eroded away, and probably no continent could have risen from the depths fast enough to exist today. The earth would crack with the turmoil and tides in the air would create daily hurricanes. If the continents were washed away, the average depth of water over the whole earth would be about a mile and a half and life could not exist except perhaps in the abysmal depth of the ocean, where it would feed upon itself till extinct.¹

But the hand that manages this universe has let the two bodies of water free, placing between them a barrier that prevents either from encroaching on the other. This barrier is erected between them through their very nature and the nature of the universe which demonstrates such balances that testify to the wisdom of its Maker.

As the *sūrah* proceeds, it refers to a fluid that is totally different from the water pouring down from the skies, or moving along in seas and rivers. It mentions the sperm that gives rise to human life: “*And He it is who has created man from water and established for him bonds of lineage and marriage. All-Powerful is your Lord.*” (Verse 54) It is from this particular fluid that a fetus takes form and becomes a male child related to its ancestors by lineage, or a female one that enables the marriage relationship to take place.

The human life that comes into existence through this fluid is far greater and more wonderful than life caused by rain. Just one cell, out of a countless number comprised in one drop of man’s semen, fertilizes the woman’s egg to initiate the formation of the greatly sophisticated creature, man, the most remarkable of all living creatures.

It is from practically identical sperms and female eggs that boys and girls come into existence, in a remarkable process that human knowledge has not yet fathomed. None of the many thousands of sperms shows any clear signs that makes it able to produce a male or a female. Similarly, no female egg shows such signs. Nevertheless, one eventually produces a man, while another produces a woman. “*All powerful is your Lord.*” This amazing phenomenon shows just one aspect of His power.

The Great Miracle of Life

If we were to look minutely into this fluid, we would be overawed as we look for a complete set of human characteristics in exceedingly minute components that carry the hereditary aspects of the human race, as also the parents and their immediate families, which are then transferred to the fetus, male or female, in accordance with God’s will. Here we quote from the chapter on genes in A.C. Morrison’s *Man Does*

¹ A.C. Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Morrison and Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 22-23.

Not Stand Alone:

In every cell, male and female, are chromosomes and genes. Chromosomes form the darkened nucleus which contains the genes. The genes are the main deciding factor as to what every living thing or a human being shall be. The cytoplasm is the extraordinary chemical combinations which surround them both. The genes are so infinitesimal that if all of them which are responsible for all the human beings on earth today, with their individuality, psychology, colour, and race, could be collected and put in one place, there would be less than a thimbleful. These ultra-microscopic genes are the absolute keys to all human, animal, and vegetable characteristics. A thimble is a small place in which to put all the individual characteristics of two billions of human beings. However, the facts are beyond question... The embryo recapitulating in its progressive development from protoplasm to racial identity indicates recorded history retained and expressed by atomic arrangement in the genes and cytoplasm...¹

We have found that genes are recognized to be sub microscopic arrangements of the atoms in the sex cells of all things that have life. They hold the design, ancestral record and characteristics of each living thing. They control in detail root, trunk, leaf, flower and fruit of every plant as exactly as they determine the shape, scales, hair, wings of every animal, including man.²

Such a glimpse into the marvels of life is sufficient as a pointer to the wise Creator's great hand: "*All powerful is your Lord.*" (Verse 54)

In League Against God

In this atmosphere of careful planning of creation, and in the light of life that is produced by rain water and human sperm, the very thought of worshipping anyone other than God is incompatible with nature, as also singular and absurd. Hence, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' worship and puts it in perspective: "*Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord.*" (Verse 55)

Every single unbeliever, including the idolaters who opposed Islam in Makkah, joins the fight against their Lord who has created them and given them shape and form. How can this be when the unbeliever is so insignificant as to stand in opposition to God? In fact unbelievers oppose God's faith and the code of living He has laid down for human life. In order to show the enormity of their offence, the

¹ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

² Ibid., p. 86.

sūrah describes them as opponents of God, their Lord and Master.

When someone stands in opposition to God's Messenger and his message, he is actually fighting against God. The Prophet need not worry about this person, because his opponent is God, who will certainly ensure that he cannot do the Prophet any harm.

God then reassures His Messenger, lightening his burden. He assures him that once he has discharged his duty, delivering his message, with what it brings to people of good news and warnings, striving hard against the unbelievers through the Qur'ān, then there is no reason for him to be troubled at the unbelievers' stubborn rejection of his message. God will take over the fight against those who oppose him. All he needs to do is to place his trust in God and leave matters to Him.

We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. All ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord. Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins. (Verses 56-58)

Thus the task of God's Messenger is defined: it is to give happy news and issue a warning. At the time this *sūrah* was revealed, the Prophet was still in Makkah and had not yet received orders to take up arms against the idolaters to ensure the freedom of expression and advocacy of his message. That order was given to him later, after his immigration to Madīnah. There was certainly a definite purpose behind withholding such an order at the time, and this is best known to God Himself. However, we think that at the time the Prophet was still inculcating the new faith in the minds and hearts of his followers. He wanted it to sink deep so as to impart its distinctive character to them and for it to become manifest in their lives and actions. Thus, they would become the nucleus of the Muslim society which moulds itself on the basis of its Islamic faith. Moreover, the order to refrain from fighting during the Makkan period avoided bloody hostilities and vengeance killing which could have shut the door firmly between the Quraysh and Islam. God certainly knew that eventually they would all embrace Islam, with some of them doing so before the Prophet's immigration to Madīnah and the rest after the Muslims' re-entry into Makkah. They would form the solid base of the new faith.

Nevertheless, the core of the Islamic message remained the same in Madīnah: giving happy news and issuing serious warnings. Fighting was permitted only to remove physical barriers erected by the unbelievers to deprive God's message of free expression, and to protect the believers against religious oppression. This means that the Qur'ānic statement was applicable both in Makkah and Madīnah: *"We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner."* (Verse 56)

In Whom to Trust

“Say: ‘No reward do I ask of you for this. All I ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.’” (Verse 57) God’s Messenger does not entertain any thought of making any worldly gain or profit as a result of people’s acceptance of Islam. None will have to pay any fee or make any offering as he embraces the Islamic faith. All that he needs to do is to say certain words verbally, provided that he believes in them with his heart. This is the distinctive feature of Islam which has no room for any priesthood of any kind, which would charge fees for services rendered. There is no ‘joining fee’, and no price has to be paid to reveal a mystery or bestow a blessing or organize entry. Islam is free of all that may deter anyone from faith. It allows no room for anyone to stand as an intermediary between people and their Lord. God’s Messenger receives only one reward for all his troubles in advocating God’s faith, and this reward is nothing other than the fact that someone answers the divine call and receives God’s guidance: *“that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.”* (Verse 57) Such are his only wages. When the Prophet sees someone accepting divine guidance and seeking to earn God’s pleasure, then his compassionate heart finds comfort, and his noble conscience is set at ease.

“Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise.” (Verse 58) Everyone other than God is dead, because life comes to an end with death. The only one that remains is God, the Living One who does not die. If we rely on someone whose life comes to an end after a short or long time, then we are only putting our weight against a wall that will eventually collapse, or seeking shade that will inevitably fade away. To be truly assured one must rely only on the One who never dies, and place one’s trust solely in Him. *“Extol His limitless glory and praise.”* (Verse 58) The only one worthy of praise is God who grants all favours and blessings. Hence the Prophet is instructed to leave alone those unbelievers who heed no warning and care for no happy news. He should give them up to Him since He knows their sins. Nothing is hidden from Him: *“Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants’ sins.”* (Verse 58)

Within the same context of God’s limitless knowledge and His power to grant reward and inflict punishment, the *sūrah* mentions the facts that He is the One who has created the heavens and the earth, and established Himself on the Throne:

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and is established on the throne of His Almighty, the Most Merciful. Ask, then, about Him, the One who knows everything. (Verse 59)

The days in which God created the heavens and the earth are certainly different from our earth days. For our days are only a product of the solar system, measuring

a celestial cycle that came into existence after the creation of the heavens and the earth. Our days are equivalent to the time the earth rotates in its position relevant to the sun. Besides, creation does not require more than God should will something to exist. This is given the verbal symbol 'Be', and whatever is intended comes into existence. Perhaps these six days, whose measure is known only to God, refer to long stages that brought the heavens and the earth to their present status.

That God is '*established on the throne*' refers to His being the Almighty who controls everything in the universe. The Arabic text uses the conjunctive word, *thumma*, which means 'then', after it mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth and before it refers to God being on the throne. However, this does not signify a chronological order. It only indicates the superiority of this lofty status.[§]

Together with God's greatness, control and might comes His all- encompassing mercy, and with it is joined His absolute knowledge: "*The Most Merciful. Ask, then, about Him, the One who knows everything.*" (Verse 59) Thus, when you put your request to God, you are putting it to the One whose knowledge includes everything anywhere in the universe.

Setting the Universe to Order

Yet those impudent, shameless people behave discourteously when they are called upon to believe in God, the Most Merciful, and worship Him:

Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious. (Verse 60)

This is a particularly distasteful picture of impudence, mentioned here to comfort the Prophet who was at the receiving end of their insolence and disrespect. These people have no respect for their Lord. They speak in such an impudent way about God Almighty. Is it surprising, then, that they should say whatever they do about His Messenger? They even dislike God's name, and say that they do not know His attribute, the Most Merciful. Hence, they ask the Prophet about Him, using the interrogative word 'what', thus adding insult to injury. Their rudeness was at its worst when they said that the only Raḥmān, which is the Arabic word for the Most Merciful, they knew was the one in Yamāmah, referring to Musaylamah, the liar who claimed that he was a prophet.

Their shameless impertinence is answered by stressing that all glory belongs to

[§] For further discussion on the *Istiḥā* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān*.

God, highlighting His greatness and the great signs He has placed in the universe:

Blessed is He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude. (Verses 61-62)

Most probably the term ‘constellations’, as mentioned here, refers to the positions of the planets and their great orbits. Their mention contrasts with the mockery sensed in the unbelievers’ question: ‘What is the Most Merciful?’ These constellations, in their real and perceived greatness, are only one aspect of His creation. In these the sun takes its position, and the sun is called here ‘a lamp’ as it sends light to our planet as well as to other planets. And among them there is a light-giving moon, which spreads a gentle air of calm.

The *sūrah* also refers to the succession of day and night, which are two of God’s great signs that people always overlook, although reflection on them is enough for anyone ‘*who would take heed or would show gratitude.*’ Had it not been for the fact that God made the day and night to succeed each other in this fashion, no vegetal, animal or human life could have emerged on this planet. Indeed, life would not be possible if the length of the day and night cycle were changed. Scientists tell us:

The earth rotates on its axis in twenty-four hours or at the rate of one thousand miles an hour. Suppose it turned at the rate of a hundred miles an hour. Why not? Our days and nights would then be ten times as long as now. The hot sun of summer would then burn up our vegetation each long day and every sprout would freeze in such a night.¹

Blessed, then, is the One who created the heavens and the earth, and created everything according to a definite measure. Blessed is the One who “*Set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude.*” (Verses 61-62)

¹ Ibid., p. 20.

4

God's True Servants

The true servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: 'Peace'; (63)

وَعِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ الَّذِينَ يَمْشُونَ عَلَى
الْأَرْضِ هَوْنًا وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ الْجَاهِلُونَ
قَالُوا سَلَامًا ﴿٦٣﴾

who stay up far into the night in adoration of their Lord, prostrating themselves and standing; (64)

وَالَّذِينَ يَبِيتُونَ لِرَبِّهِمْ سُجَّدًا وَقِيَمًا
﴿٦٤﴾

who pray: 'Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment; (65)

وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا أَصْرِفْ عَنَّا
عَذَابَ جَهَنَّمَ إِنَّ عَذَابَهَا كَانَ غَرَامًا
﴿٦٥﴾

it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station; (66)

إِنَّهَا سَاءَتْ مُسْتَقَرًّا وَمُقَامًا ﴿٦٦﴾

and who, whenever they put their money to use, are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two; (67)

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنْفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَلَمْ يَقْتُرُوا
وَكَانَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ قَوَامًا ﴿٦٧﴾

and who never invoke any deity side by side with God, and do not take any human being's life – [the life] which God has willed to be sacred – except for a just cause, and do not commit adultery. Whoever does any of this will face

وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَدْعُونَ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ
وَلَا يَقْتُلُونَ النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا
بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا يَزْنُونَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ
يَلْقَ أَثَامًا ﴿٦٨﴾

punishment, (68)

and on the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy. (69)

Excepted, however, shall be they who repent, attain to faith and do righteous deeds, for God will transform their bad deeds into good ones. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (70)

Whoever repents and does what is right has truly turned to God by [his act of] repentance. (71)

[And the true servants of God are] those who never bear witness to what is false, and whenever they pass by [people engaged in] frivolity, pass on with dignity; (72)

and who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, do not fall deaf and blind to them; (73)

and who pray: 'Our Lord! Grant us spouses and offspring who will be a joy to our eyes, and cause us to be foremost among the God-fearing.' (74)

These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life] with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace, (75)

and there they shall abide; how goodly an abode

يُضَعَفُ لَهُ الْعَذَابُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وَتَحْدَثُ فِيهِءَ مُهَانًا ﴿٦٨﴾

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٦٩﴾

وَمَنْ تَابَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَإِنَّهُ يَتُوبُ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَتَابًا ﴿٧٠﴾

وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَشْهَدُونَ الزُّورَ وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِاللَّغْوِ مَرُّوا كِرَامًا ﴿٧١﴾

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِّرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ لَمْ تَحْجُرُوا عَلَيْهَا صُمًّا وَعُمْيَانًا ﴿٧٢﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّاتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعْيُنٍ وَاجْعَلْنَا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا ﴿٧٣﴾

أُولَئِكَ تُجْزَوْنَ الْغُرْفَةَ بِمَا صَبَرْتُمْ وَيُلَقَّوْنَ فِيهَا تَحِيَّةً وَسَلَامًا ﴿٧٤﴾

خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۗ حَسُنَتْ مُسْتَقَرًّا وَمُقَامًا ﴿٧٥﴾

and how high a station; (76)

Say: 'No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you.' (77)

قُلْ مَا يَعْبُؤُا بِكُمْ رَبِّي لَوْلَا دُعَاؤُكُمْ
فَقَدْ كَذَّبْتُمْ فَسَوْفَ يَكُونُ لِزَامًا

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* portrays the distinctive features of the true servants of God, the Most Merciful. They appear to be the highest model of humanity that remains after the end of the long battle between true guidance and error, between those who impertinently deny the truth and God's messengers who bring His guidance for humanity. They seem to be the fruit ripening after such a long struggle. They are the ones who bring comfort to the bearers of divine guidance, after they had been met with denial and rejection.

The previous passage recounted the unbelievers' impertinent remark when they said that they did not know the name *Raḥmān*, or the Most Merciful, as belonging to God. In this passage we have a full description of 'the true servants of the Most Merciful' who know Him well and deserve to be described as belonging to Him. The *sūrah* shows their distinctive features as reflected in their behaviour and the way they conduct their lives. They provide a living example of the Muslim community which Islam aims to build, and the type of person it moulds through the implementation of its perfect system. These are the ones who deserve God's care. Mankind generally are too unimportant for God to care about, except for the presence of God's true servants who always turn to Him, praying for His support.

The Distinctive Features of Faith

The true servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: 'Peace.' (Verse 63)

The true servants' first feature is that they walk gently, with no affectation, pretension, or display of arrogance. Like every movement man makes, walking delivers an expression of one's personality and feelings. A serious, reassured and sound personality demonstrates itself through its gait. A person of this type walks with an air of seriousness and reassurance, reflecting clarity of purpose and strength. To *walk gently on earth*' does not mean that believers hang their heads down, affecting

weakness and lack of support, as understood by some of those who think that by so doing they show themselves to be God-fearing! God's Messenger used to bend forward when he walked. He was the fastest and best walker, with an air of serenity. Abū Hurayrah reports: "I have never seen anyone more handsome than God's Messenger: he looked as if the sun was reflected in his face. And I have never seen anyone who walked faster than God's Messenger. It was as though the earth would shrink for him. [As we walked with him] we would put in our best effort, but he was most relaxed." `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib describes: "When the Prophet walked he bent forward, as though he was walking quickly downhill."

In their serious and dignified approach, and in their attention to serious concerns, God's true servants do not bother themselves with other people's absurdities and stupidities. They do not waste their time or energy in futile arguments with such people. They recognize that engaging in an argument with people who argue for argument's sake is fruitless. Hence, *"whenever the ignorant address them, [they] say: Peace."* (Verse 63) But this is by no means a sign of weakness or lack of ability. It is simply a dignified approach which does not permit them to waste time and energy over what is unbecoming of the honourable.

Such is their conduct in daytime when they are with other people. At night they reflect their God-fearing nature, as they stand in awe of God and fear His punishment.

Who stay up far into the night in adoration of their Lord, prostrating themselves and standing; who pray: 'Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment; it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station. (Verses 64-66)

The *sūrah* highlights here the two main movements Muslims perform in prayer, namely prostration and standing up. Thus it reflects their action in the depth of the night, when others are fast asleep. Such true servants of God stay up prostrating themselves and standing before their Lord, addressing themselves completely to Him. They are not concerned about not being in bed, because they have something that they enjoy, giving them far more comfort, energy and happiness than sleep can ever give. They are preoccupied with being close to their Lord, addressing Him with all their being. Hence, people go to sleep while they pray standing and prostrating themselves. Other people are concerned with their position on earth while these true servants of God look up to the throne of the Most Merciful.

In their prayers, with all its movements, and all their inner feelings, they are fully conscious of their Lord, fearing to incur His displeasure and so His punishment. Thus they appeal to Him: *"Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it*

causes is indeed a dire torment; it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station." (Verses 65-66) They have not seen hell or its suffering, but they believe in it. They also visualize it according to its descriptions in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's statements. Thus their genuine fear of it is the fruit of true faith.

Humbly and most seriously they pray to their Lord to avert their suffering in hell. They do not feel safe simply because they spend part of the night in worship, prostrating themselves and standing in prayer. Their God-fearing sense makes them think little of what they do, feeling always that they fall short of what is needed. Hence, they pray for God's grace and forgiveness so that He spares them the punishment of hell.

This description implies that hell tries to engulf every human being, with its gates open and hands outstretched trying to grab them. God's true servants who stay up far into the night in their devotion fear it and appeal most sincerely to their Lord to spare them from such punishment. As they address their prayer, they shiver with fear: *"for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment."* (Verse 65) It engulfs its victim, not allowing them any room for escape. This is what makes it dire indeed. Moreover, *"it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station."* (Verse 66) Could there be a worse station than hell as a place of abode and settlement? How can anyone settle within the fire? How can there be an abode in a place of continuous burning?

Steering Away from Sin

God's true servants lead a balanced life that is exemplary in its seriousness and moderation: *"Whenever they put their money to use, they are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two."* (Verse 67) Balance is the distinctive feature that Islam establishes in the life of the individual and the community. Its achievement is what Islam aims for through educating its followers and through its legal system. Its whole structure is based on balance and moderation.

Although Islam approves private ownership, a Muslim is not free to spend his money without restriction, as is the case in the capitalist system and in communities which do not conduct their lives in accordance with divine law. A Muslim is required to strike a balance between extravagance and miserliness. Both attitudes are bad for the individual, society and for money itself. Indeed, a miser not only deprives himself of the benefits of his money, but also deprives the community of the benefits of keeping money in circulation. Indeed money is meant to provide services for the community. Both extremes of overspending and withholding money produce social and economic imbalance, leading to crises, in addition to their unhealthy effect on people's hearts and ethics.

As Islam regulates this aspect of human life, it begins with the individual, making

the adoption of a balanced approach in life a feature of faith. Thus, whenever true servants of God, the Most Merciful, put their money to use, they *"are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two."* (Verse 67)

The next important quality of God's true servants is that they *"never invoke any deity side by side with God, and do not take any human being's life – (the life] which God has willed to be sacred – except for a just cause, and do not commit adultery. Whoever does any of this will face punishment, and on the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy."* (Verses 68-69)

To believe in God's oneness is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith. It is the point where clarity, straightforwardness and simplicity of beliefs is separated from ambiguity, confusion and complexity. Needless to say, no proper system of life can be based on the latter.

Similarly, prevention of killing anyone, except for a legitimate reason, is central to the achievement of security in society so that human life is given its rightful value and due respect. Otherwise, life would become like a jungle where no one was safe or able to do constructive work.

Likewise, preventing adultery is basic to the establishment of a clean social life where man rises above naked physical desires, and where he feels that the union of the two sexes has a nobler purpose than the mere satisfaction of desire. Otherwise, life sinks low and men and women become preoccupied with the satisfaction of unrestrained physical desire.

These three qualities distinguish the sound and clean life that is worthy of man from the life of cheap pleasures that reduces man to the rank of an animal. Hence, God mentions these qualities as belonging to His true servants who are the most honourable in His sight. Their outline is followed with a stern warning: *"Whoever does any of this will face punishment."* (Verse 68) This punishment is outlined in the next verse: *"On the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy."* (Verse 69) Thus, it is not merely a double measure of punishment, but ignominy too, which is even worse.

Erasing Sin Through Repentance

But the door remains open for anyone who wishes to save himself from such a fate. This requires repentance, firm belief and good action: *"Excepted, however, shall be they who repent, attain to faith and do righteous deeds."* (Verse 70) Those who fulfil these three conditions are promised that whatever sin they did prior to their repentance will be changed into good deeds which will be added to their newly earned good actions: *"for God will transform their bad deeds into good ones."* (Verse 70) This is an

aspect of God's bounty that is granted without the person concerned having to do anything to deserve it other than turn away from error and seek refuge with Him: "*God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 70)

The door of repentance is always open to admit anyone whose conscience is reawakened and wants to return to the fold. No one is ever turned away from it, no matter who he might be or what sins he might have committed in the past. A *ḥadīth* related by al-Ṭabarānī mentions that Abū Farwah asked the Prophet: "If a man has done all kinds of sin, leaving out nothing, will his repentance be accepted?" The Prophet asked him: "Are you a Muslim?" When he answered in the affirmative, the Prophet said: "Then do what is good and abandon what is evil, and God will change all your past misdeeds into good ones." The man asked: "And even my worst, treacherous ones?" The Prophet said: "Yes." The man glorified God and continued to do so as he went away.

There is a rule for repentance and a condition for its acceptance, which are clearly spelled out: "*Whoever repents and does what is right has truly turned to God by [his act of] repentance.*" (Verse 71) Repentance begins with genuine regret and desisting from bad deeds and is made complete through doing good deeds that prove that it is a serious and genuine repentance. At the same time, good deeds produce a positive sense that favourably compensates for abandoning sin. Sin is an action which, when withdrawn, leaves a vacuum that must be filled with an action in the opposite direction. Otherwise, the feeling of emptiness makes one miss one's old sinful ways. Hence we see here a remarkable feature of the Qur'ānic method of cultivating goodness within the community of believers. It is based on profound knowledge of human nature. Who can know this better than the Creator?

Further Qualities of True Believers

Having completed this interposition of the conditions of repentance, the *sūrah* resumes its outline of the qualities of the true servants of the Most Merciful: "*Those who never bear witness to what is false, and whenever they pass by [people engaged in] frivolity, pass on with dignity.*" (Verse 72) This may be taken literally which means that they never give false testimony, since such an action leads to usurping people's rights and helps injustice. It may also be taken to mean that they do not attend any place or stay with any group where falsehood is said or done. They steer away from such places or company so as not to be party to anything that happens there. This is a more powerful meaning. They also steer away from all frivolity and idle talk: "*Whenever they pass by people engaged in frivolity, pass on with dignity.*" (Verse 72) They remove themselves from participation in any such practice. A believer has more serious preoccupations that leave no time for frivolous and idle pursuits. His mind is

full with what his faith requires of him so as to ensure that God's message is delivered to mankind. This is sufficient preoccupation for anyone.

Another of their qualities is that they are quick to remember when a reminder is given to them. Their hearts are open to the understanding of God's signs and revelations: *"And who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, do not fall deaf and blind to them."* (Verse 73) The picture drawn here is critical of the idolaters who approach their deities and false beliefs like the deaf and blind, deprived of guidance and light. It shows them in a state of blind fanaticism, while God's true servants are fully aware of the truth in their faith, and in God's signs and revelations. Hence, they accept the faith with open eyes, hearts and minds. They are free of fanaticism. When they show enthusiasm for their faith, it is an enthusiasm based on true knowledge and profound insight.

Finally, these true servants of God are not content with staying up far into the night offering their voluntary worship, prostrating themselves to God, and allowing their other fine qualities to shine. They want something more. What they hope for is that they should have spouses of their type and children who follow in their footsteps, thus bringing them great joy. Not only so, but in this way, those who are classified as God's servants will multiply. They also pray that God will make of them a good example for those who are God-fearing: *"And who pray: "Our Lord! Grant us spouses and offspring who will be a joy to our eyes, and cause us to be foremost among the God-fearing."* (Verse 74)

This is a natural feeling based on a profound sense of faith. It expresses a strong desire to increase the numbers of people who follow divine guidance, and that the first in such increased numbers should be their own offspring and spouses who are the closest to them. Indeed, these are a man's first responsibility. Added to this natural feeling is the believers' hope that they will provide examples of goodness to be followed by those who are keen to earn God's pleasure. There is no element of selfishness or arrogance in such a wish, because all the God-fearing are on the way that God defines.

Destined for the Finest Abode

What reward do God's true servants receive? This outline of their qualities concludes with what they earn:

These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life] with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace, and there they shall abide; how goodly an abode and how high a station. (Verses 75-76)

The Arabic text uses the term *al-ghurfah*, which is translated here as 'a high station in heaven'. The term may be taken to mean in this context either heaven, or a special place in heaven. Linguistically speaking it means, 'the room', which is a more honourable place than the reception room where Arabs normally received their guests. True servants are received in this high position with a warm welcome, on account of their patient endurance of whatever they had to put up with in order to maintain their sound qualities. What is implied here is recognition of the strong will-power needed to restrain desire and resist temptation. This is not easy to do without a good degree of endurance that can only be shown by someone who is deservedly mentioned by God in His book, the Qur'ān.

In contrast to hell from which they pray to God to save them, God rewards them with heaven where *"they shall abide; how goodly an abode and how high a station."* (Verse 76) There they are in the best state, enjoying God's favours and blessings.

With the picture of God's true servants fully drawn, showing them as the cream of humanity, the *sūrah* concludes by stating that mankind are worth very little in God's sight, except for the fact that some of them turn to Him in prayer. As for those who deny Him and His messages, they will be punished. *"Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you."* (Verse 77)

It is a fitting final statement which is intended to give comfort and reassurance to the Prophet, consoling him for the stiff resistance and impudent remarks he received from his people who persisted with their opposition in order to maintain their false beliefs. What value would they and humanity have, if it had not been for the small group of believers who prayed and appealed to God, as do His true servants? What significance do they have when the earth on which all mankind live is no more than a tiny particle in the great universal expanse? Moreover, man is no more than one of the numerous species that live on earth. Any nation is but one of many that live on earth, and a single generation of one nation is no more than a single page of a great book the number of whose pages is known only to God Almighty.

Despite all this man continues to give himself airs, thinking himself to be of real value. He is so lost in his arrogance that he speaks impertinently about his Creator. In truth, man is weak, powerless and insignificant, except when he establishes his links with God and derives from Him strength and guidance. Only then does he acquire weight on God's scales, to the extent that this becomes greater than that of angels. This is indeed a blessing God bestows on man whom He has honoured and before whom He ordered His angels to bow. The purpose of all this was that man should know his Lord and worship Him alone, for only then does he maintain his qualities for which the angels bow. Otherwise, he is insignificant and valueless.

“Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him].” (Verse 77) The phraseology here is meant to give support and honour to the Prophet who speaks of his Lord who grants him His protection. What are the unbelievers if they continue to refuse to join God’s true servants? They are no more than fuel for hell: *“You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you.”* (Verse 77)