

SŪRAH 15

Al-Ĥijr

Prologue

Proper Understanding Required

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, after the revelation of *Sūrah* 12, Joseph. The time was a very critical one, falling as it did between the ‘year of sorrow’ when the Prophet lost his wife Khadijah and his uncle Abū Ṭālib and the year when the Prophet migrated to Madinah. The *sūrah* thus reflects the needs and requirements of this difficult period. For specifics about this crucial time please refer to the Prologues of *Sūrahs* Jonah and Hūd, in Volume IX, and *Sūrah* Joseph in this volume.

In particular, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet and the Muslim community in how best to deal with their practical problems, and how to stand firm in the face of the unbelievers’ stubborn opposition. This then is the role and nature of the Qur’ān.

At this critical juncture, the message of Islam was making little progress because of the unwavering resistance of the Quraysh, the Arabian tribe residing in Makkah, and whose leadership was recognized by the rest of Arabia. Their persecution of the Prophet and his followers was now at its zenith. Hence, the Qur’ān warns and threatens these pagan Arabs, portraying as it does the fate of earlier communities which denied God’s messages and opposed His messengers. It reveals to the Prophet the real reasons behind their determined opposition. Essentially it had nothing to do with the truth of his message and much to do with their stubbornness which could not be moderated even as a result of seeing God’s clear signs. Hence, the *sūrah* consoles the Prophet. It directs him to hold fast to the truth he has and to confront with it all those who reject it. He is also instructed to remain patient in adversity, conveying his message to mankind with determination.

Thus the *sūrah* shares with other *sūrahs* revealed during the same period the same subject matter and general features. Likewise, it addresses the needs and requirements of that period when the Islamic message faced the ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, that prevailed in Arabia. The same applies to any similar period in history. Indeed it even applies now.

We have always emphasized the practical nature of the Qur'ān because it is central to an understanding of this book, its goals and objectives. This means that we need to be aware of the circumstances that prevailed when a particular *sūrah* or text was revealed so that we can better recognize the drift of the text and understand its directives. We are thus able to appreciate how it deals with real life situations, and with living human beings who either actively support or oppose it. In this way, we can better understand its rulings and benefit by its directives whenever similar circumstances prevail. We particularly need to take such an attitude in our own times.

But we say this knowing full well that only those who are actively facing this present state of ignorance in their work to bring about an Islamic revival will look at the Qur'ānic texts in this light. Such people are dealing with circumstances and events similar to those faced by the first advocate of this faith, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and his early Companions. They face the same type of rejection of the great truth of this faith, which requires complete submission to God in all aspects of life: religious, moral, political, economic and social. Likewise, they face the same type of persecution which was endured by the first group of Muslims. Only such people are able to deduce the Islamic method of active advocacy which cannot be deduced in a theoretical approach.

It should be stated here that what is required in our own time is an understanding of the method to be followed by a young Islamic movement facing a totally un-Islamic state of affairs. Such a movement aims to bring mankind out of darkness into light, and out of ignorance and submission to different beings into a state where people submit themselves to God alone. These were the objectives of the first Muslim generation, even before the Islamic state in Madinah was born, and before Islam enjoyed any authority anywhere on earth.

Today we are in a position which, though not identical to that early period, has some similarities to it. Needless to say, circumstances and external factors are different. Yet we are aiming to establish an active advocacy of Islam in the face of total opposition. The fact that circumstances are different means that the needs and requirements of such advocacy are different. Hence why we need today fresh insight into the method of action that Islam approves. Such insight will fit the precedents set by the first Islamic movement, established by the Prophet, to the circumstances and requirements of the present period.

It is such insight that the newly-born Islamic movement requires. It is too early now for the development of a system of government, and the drafting of a legal code. Today, there is not a single state or community where the basic rule of human transactions is God's law and the Islamic code. The type of insight which gives birth to a system of government and a legal code comes at the appropriate time. Its details should fit the Muslim community that needs it, whenever it comes into existence, and begins to face the practical problems that apply to it. Prior to this, producing such a system and a code is no different from trying to plant seeds in the air and hoping they will sprout.

The Nature of Opposition to Islam

The first major topic the *sūrah* tackles highlights the nature of those who reject this faith of Islam, based on submission to God alone, and outlines their true motives for so doing. It also describes the terrible fate that awaits such unbelievers. The *sūrah* tackles this in several rounds, employing different subjects and techniques, such as narrative, an exhibition of scenes of the universe and scenes of the Day of Judgement, and directives and comments that either precede or follow the stories it relates.

While the general atmosphere of *Sūrah* 13, Thunder, reminds us of *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, the general atmosphere of this *sūrah* reminds us of *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. Both begin with a serious warning, and the whole *sūrah* confirms it. The two *sūrahs*, however, differ greatly in their method.

The warning at the beginning of *Sūrah* 7 is stated very clearly: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers. Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord, and follow no masters other than Him. How seldom do you keep this in mind. How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting. And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: 'We have indeed been wrongdoers.'"* (7: 2-5) The *sūrah* then relates the story of Adam and *Iblīs*, following it to its conclusion when human life on earth comes to an end and people return to their Lord where the warnings given to them will be fulfilled. This is then followed by some scenes of the universe, including images of the heavens and earth, night and day, the sun, moon and stars, the wind, clouds, water and fruit. Thereafter, we are given the stories of the Prophets Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, Shu`ayb and Moses, all of which confirm the warning.

Here in this *sūrah*, the warning is given at the beginning, but it is given a continuous air of mystery to enhance its effect in anticipation of the fearful destiny: *"These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. Little do those who disbelieve wish that*

they were Muslims. Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth]. Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.” (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* then refers to some scenes from the universe: the heavens and the constellations, the expanded earth and the mountains set firm on it, the plants that demonstrate a balanced method of creation, the winds full of moisture, water and drinking, and the life, death and resurrection of all mankind. This is followed by the story of Adam and *Iblīs* leading up to the destinies of all believers and unbelievers. Then we have brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Shu`ayb and Ṣāliḥ, with the emphasis being placed on the destiny of unbelievers in each case. We note here that the Arabs were aware of the ruins left by these communities, as they passed by them on their traditional journeys to Syria.

The main line in both *sūrahs* is the same, but each has its own special features. Their rhythm is similar, but not identical. This is the system followed by the Qur`ān, tackling its topics in a variety of ways that may be similar in some aspects but totally different in others, and where they are never repeated or allowed to be identical.

The *sūrah* can be divided into five sections, each of which includes a specific topic. The first explains the law that God has set in operation concerning His message and people’s attitudes to it, either accepting and believing in it or rejecting it. This starts with an implicit warning which is covered with mystery: *“These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims. Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth].”* (Verses 2-3) This section ends with a statement that the unbelievers reject the message out of stubbornness, not because they do not have sufficient evidence to lead them to faith: *“If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: ‘It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.’”* (Verses 14-15)

They are all of the same type: *“Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him. Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them.”* (Verses 10-13)

The second section portrays some of the signs God has placed in the universe, both in the heavens and the earth and in between. All of these have been set in accordance with God’s precise wisdom, and according to a definite measure: *“We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, so that anyone who tries to*

eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see. We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure. We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up.” (Verses 16-22)

It is to God that everyone and everything returns at the time appointed and known to God: *“It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All-Knowing.”* (Verses 23-25)

The third section delivers the story of mankind and the origins of following right guidance or abandoning it in order to follow erring ways. It also shows the fates of those who follow God’s guidance and those who reject it. This is shown in the way Adam was created out of clay before God breathed of his soul into him, and the arrogance of Iblis who leads people astray.

The fourth section relates the fates suffered by the peoples of Lot, Shu`ayb and Şāliḥ. It starts with the verses: *“Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering.”* (Verses 49-50) The stories are given in succession, showing God’s mercy to Abraham and Lot, and His punishment of the peoples of Lot, Shu`ayb and Şāliḥ. Thus the Quraysh are told of the fate of those whose lands they pass by on their trips to Syria. Their ruins are there for them to see. *“Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still.”* (Verses 75-76)

The fifth and final section reveals the truth that is at the heart of the creation of the heavens and the earth and how this relates to the Hour of Judgement and the reward or punishment that comes after that, and also to the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). That is the great truth in the whole universe. It relates to origin and destiny: *“It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator. We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur’ān.”* (Verses 85-87)

1

Preserving the Qur'ān

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. (1)

Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims. (2)

Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth]. (3)

Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. (4)

No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it. (5)

They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. (6)

Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?' (7)

الرَّ ۙ تِلْكَ ءَايَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَقُرْءَانٍ مُّبِينٍ

﴿١﴾

رُبَّمَا يَوَدُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْ كَانُوا

مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٢﴾

ذَرَهُمْ يَأْكُلُوا وَيَتَمَتَّعُوا وَيُلْهِمُ الْأَمَلُ

فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣﴾

وَمَا أَهْلَكْنَا مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا وَهِيَ كِتَابٌ

مَعْلُومٌ ﴿٤﴾

مَا تَسْبِقُ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ أَجْلَهَا وَمَا يَسْتَعْجِرُونَ

﴿٥﴾

وَقَالُوا يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِي نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ الذِّكْرُ إِنَّكَ

لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٦﴾

لَوْ مَا تَأْتِينَا بِالْمَلَكَةِ إِن كُنْتَ مِنَ

الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٧﴾

We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite. (8)

It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact. (9)

Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, (10)

but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him. (11)

Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, (12)

who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them. (13)

If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, (14)

still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.' (15)

مَا نُنَزِّلُ الْمَلَائِكَةَ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَمَا كَانُوا إِذًا
مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٨﴾

إِنَّا لَحُنَّ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ
﴿٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فِي شِيَعِ الْأَوَّلِينَ
﴿١٠﴾

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١١﴾

كَذَلِكَ نَسْلُكُهُ فِي قُلُوبِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٢﴾
لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ ۗ وَقَدْ خَلَتْ سُنَّةُ الْأَوَّلِينَ
﴿١٣﴾

وَلَوْ فَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَابًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَظَلُّوا
فِيهِ يَعْرُجُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

لَقَالُوا إِنَّمَا سُكِّرَتْ أَبْصَارُنَا بَلْ لَحْنُ قَوْمٍ
مَسْحُورُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Unbelievers Indulge in Wishful Thinking

This opening passage speaks about the nature of the book which the unbelievers reject as fabrication, adding a threat that they will soon witness a day when they wish they had submitted themselves to God and become Muslims. It tells them that

that day has a fixed time, and that is the reason for its delay. It mentions the challenges they make and how they demand that angels be brought to them. It threatens them by stating that when God sends down angels to unbelievers, He destroys them altogether. Finally the *sūrah* speaks of the real reason for their unbelieving attitude. It is certainly not for lack of evidence, but rather due to their entrenched stubbornness.

“Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse.” (Verse 1) The three separate letters with which this *sūrah* starts and similar ones that occur at the beginning of some Qur'ānic *sūrahs* make up the book, i.e. the Qur'ān. They are available to all. They make the sublime verses, which are inimitable in composition and argument. These letters do not have an intrinsic meaning in themselves, but they make up the Qur'ān, which is very clear in its meaning.

People who do not believe in the revelation of this inimitable book, and describe the Qur'ān as fabricated when it is very clear in its import, will come to see a day when they will dearly wish that they had adopted a totally different attitude. They will wish that they had been believers and that their behaviour was in line with the teachings of religion. *“Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims.”* (Verse 2)

They may wish so but that will be when no wish is of use. But in fact, *‘little do those who disbelieve wish’*. The way this is expressed implies a threat and a touch of derision. It also implies encouragement to make use of the available opportunity and submit to God before it is too late. For if the chance is lost and the day comes when they wish they had submitted themselves to God and accepted Islam, their wishes will be of no avail.

This is followed by another implicit threat: *“Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth].”* (Verse 3)

Leave them to their carnal desires, eating and enjoying, without reflection, contemplation or thought to what is around them. Leave them with their deluding hopes and deceiving temptations, while life passes away and the opportunity is lost. Leave them so that you do not waste your own time with those who have condemned themselves when they lost their way in idle hopes and desires. The temptation shows them that they have a long life to come and that they will achieve what they covet. They think that nothing can stop them from obtaining what they hope for, and that they have to face no reckoning and will be held to no account. They delude themselves by thinking that what they get in this life is enough to ensure their safety in the hereafter.

This image of beguiling hopes is drawn from real human life. Hope always tempts and beguiles man. So much so that he overlooks the facts of God's existence, fate and

the certainty of death. Man forgets that there is a duty to be fulfilled and a prohibition to be observed. He goes even further so as to forget God altogether and forget that he himself is going to die and then be resurrected in order to account for his deeds.

This beguiling hope is a fatal one, and it is to this hope that the Prophet is commanded to leave them. *“For they will surely come to know the truth,”* but then it will be too late for such knowledge to be of any benefit to them. The command given to the Prophet implies a threat to them, as well as a strong call aiming to wake them up so that they could see their hope for what it is: a beguiling hope that causes them to overlook their inevitable fate.

But the laws God has set in operation for the world and for human life will continue along their respective courses. The end of each nation will come at the time appointed by God. Then it is the practices of each community that determine how these laws and how God’s order will operate: *“Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.”* (Verses 4-5) Therefore, they must not be deluded by the fact that God’s punishment has not taken them. God’s law will take its well-marked course and operate as God wants it to operate. As for them, they will certainly come to know.

That clear book and appointed term are given by God to every nation and community so that they will do their work. What they do in this life determines their fate in the hereafter. When a community believes in God, does good works, allows human life to proceed and prosper, and implements justice then God will extend its life until it deviates from these rules and becomes devoid of all goodness. That determines the end of its life, either with total loss and ruin, or with a temporary general weakness.

It may be said that there are communities which do not believe or do any good works or implement justice, but they continue to thrive and prosper. But this is nothing but delusion. Such communities must have a fair residue of goodness, even if it is limited to building a good life on earth, dealing justly among its own citizens and taking measures to ensure material prosperity within their own territories. They owe their continued existence to this residue of goodness. When it is exhausted, they face their inevitable destiny. God’s law will always operate, and every community has its time: *“No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.”* (Verse 5)

A Promise That Will Never Fail

The *sūrah* then describes their bad manners in the way they addressed the Prophet, when he had only presented to them the Qur’ān which is a clear reminder

of the truth. It helps to reawaken them to face the facts instead of running after beguiling hopes. He also reminded them of God's law and its operation. But they ridiculed him and spoke to him with extreme impudence. *"They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?'"* (Verses 6-7) Ridicule is apparent in their way of addressing the Prophet, *"You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high!"* (Verse 6) They actually deny the fact of revelation and the Prophet's message altogether, but they make this mocking address.

Their rudeness is carried still further as they insult the Prophet personally: *"You are truly mad!"* (Verse 6) This they do in response to his call on them to believe in God, using the Qur'ān in all its clarity to address them. They go on to make unreasonable demands, asking for angels to come down to endorse his message: *"Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?"* (Verse 7) The demand for angels is often repeated in this and other *sūrah*s, and it is put to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as it was put to prophets and messengers before him. This reflects man's clear ignorance, for it is he whom God has honoured when He assigned prophethood to a few chosen people.

The reply to such ridicule, impudence and ignorance takes the form of reasserting the rule which is confirmed by the fates suffered by past communities. Angels are sent down to a messenger of God only to destroy the unbelievers of his community when their term is up. At this point there can be no more respite and no further delay: *"We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite."* (Verse 8) Is this what they want and demand?

Preservation of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* then calls on them to look carefully on God's guidance and reflect on it. God only sends down the angels with the truth. He commands them to establish and implement it. In the case of persistent unbelievers, the truth is to destroy them. Not only do they deserve this, but it is also inevitable. Such destruction, then, is a truth in itself and the angels carry it out without delay. God chooses for them what is better than the choice they make for themselves. He gives them the Reminder so that they may reflect on it and follow its guidance. This is much better than sending down the angels with the final truth, if only they would reflect: *"It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact."* (Verse 9) It is much better for them, then, to approach it positively, because it will remain intact, suffering no loss or change. It will remain pure, unaffected by falsehood, free of distortion. It guides them to the truth with God's care, if they really want the truth. If

they were asking for angels to make sure of it, they should know that God does not wish to send down angels for them, because He wants what is better for them. Hence, He sent down the Reminder which is preserved intact. That is better than sending angels to destroy them.

When we look today, after the passage of many centuries, at the fulfilment of God's promise to preserve the Qur'ān, we see a great miracle testifying to the fact that it is God's book. We see that the circumstances and situations that it has endured over the centuries could not have left it intact, suffering no change of even a single sentence or a single word, without the interference of a superior power. That power, which is greater than all situations, factors and circumstances, has preserved this book keeping it pure from change or distortion.

There was a time when many sects and groups sought to find support for their ideas in the Qur'ān and the *Ĥadīth*. The resulting conflict was fuelled by the Jews, the diehard enemies of this faith, and by those who advocated nationalism. These were known in Islamic history as *Shu`ūbiyyīn*. These groups sought to introduce foreign elements into the *Sunnah*. Only the colossal efforts of scores of bright, pious and meticulous scholars, over several decades, purged the *Ĥadīth* from that which did not belong to it.

In times of conflict and strife, such sects deliberately misinterpreted Qur'ānic verses, twisting Qur'ānic texts so that they could cite them in support of their views and rulings. But they were all, even in the darkest and hardest circumstances, totally unable to introduce a single change into the text of the Qur'ān, the book God has guaranteed to preserve. Its text has remained exactly as it was revealed by God, providing a challenge to every would-be perpetrator of distortion. This is irrefutable testimony to the fact that this Qur'ān is God's own book and He is the One who guarantees its preservation.

A Guarantee for All Time

Muslims generally have gone through a time, which we continue to endure these days, when they have been too weak to defend themselves, or their faith, way of life, land, honour, property, moral values or even their reasoning and intellectual faculties. Their enemies have managed to replace every moral value, sound belief, virtuous practice, and legal standard they have had with something foul and alien. They have tempted Muslims to accept loose morality and shameless behaviour. What is more, such behaviour has been given attractive titles such as progress, advancement, secularism, freedom, breaking one's shackles, revolution and innovation, etc. Muslims have thus become Muslims only by name. They have retained practically nothing of their profound faith. Hence, their power has been

sapped, and they have become little more than the scum that floats on the surface of a river.

Yet in spite of all their attempts, the enemies of this religion have not been able to change the text of the Qur'ān, or to distort it. This is not due to any lack of motive. They would indeed have loved dearly to alter its text if that were at all possible. But try as hard as they might, they have been unable to achieve their goal.

The enemies of this faith, particularly its Jewish elements, have utilized their great expertise, stretching over four thousand years, in scheming against the divine faith. Indeed, they have even been successful in many ways. For example, they succeeded in introducing some foreign elements into the *Sunnah* and the history of the Muslim nation. They have been able to falsify events and even implant their own people within the Muslim community so that they could play roles they could not otherwise do. They managed to destroy states, communities, systems and laws, and to dress some of their traitors in a heroic guise so that they continued their destructive work against the Muslim community. Although they have done this throughout history, they have been more successful in modern times.

One thing, however, they have not been able to achieve, although circumstances appear to make it seem easy, is tamper with this preserved book, which receives no protection from people who allege to believe in it. This is yet further evidence, if any were needed, that this is God's book. The fact that it has remained free of all distortion in spite of these conditions testifies to the fact that it was revealed by God Almighty. At the time of the Prophet, this promise to preserve the Qur'ān intact sounded a mere promise. Today, however, after all these great events and long centuries, it is indeed a great miracle confirming the indisputable fact that it is God's revealed book. No one disputes this fact except a stubborn, ignorant fool. *"It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact."* (Verse 9) God certainly tells the truth.

Same Old Denials

God consoles the Prophet (peace be upon him), and tells him that he is not unique in his position among God's messengers who, like him, were the target of much ridicule and rejection. The unbelievers are always wont to show their stubbornness in denying the true faith.

"Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him." (Verses 10-11) It is the same story. Just like the unbelievers in the communities of old received what God's messengers told them, the same is the case with the unbelievers in your community. They all show the same attitude. Their hearts, having turned away from God's messages and

been hostile to God's chosen messengers, are no longer able to reflect or receive a message as it should be received: *"Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them."* (Verses 12-13) We let it sink into their hearts as its truth is denied, subject to ridicule, because their hearts cannot receive it except in this way. This applies to all generations and communities, past, present and future. Those who deny the truth of God's message are of the same nature: *"The ways of ancient communities have gone before them."* (Verse 13)

It is not proper evidence of the truth of God's message that they lack. They are stubborn, unwilling to change, no matter what signs and proofs are given to them. At this point, the *sūrah* gives a particularly rich image of repugnant obstinacy and mean strong-headedness: *"If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.'"* (Verses 14-15) We can imagine them ascending higher and higher into the sky, going through a special door that opens for them, and they climb physically and see with their eyes the open door. Yet their stubborn attitude remains, whereby they deny the truth of what they see and feel, claiming that someone must have cast a spell over them so that they cannot see clearly. They claim that what they see is mere fantasy: *"It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched."* (Verse 15) All we see and feel is mere illusion.

There is no use arguing with such people. They have all the evidence they need to believe. What prevents them is not that the angels have not been sent down to them, because their own ascension is greater evidence and closer to them than the angels descending. Instead it is their shameless obstinacy which causes them to disregard and reject the clearly manifest truth.

This then is an example of human stubbornness which the *sūrah* paints. It is met only with a feeling of disgust and contempt. This example is neither temporary nor local, nor is it the product of a particular environment at a particular period of time. It is an example of human beings when their nature has been distorted and their faculties of reception impaired. They are cut off from the living universe around them and all the signals it gives. In our own generation, this example applies to atheists who follow materialistic creeds which they claim to be 'scientific', when they are far removed from science and knowledge, as well as from insight and inspiration.

Advocates of materialistic doctrines disbelieve in God and deny His existence. They claim that the universe exists without a Creator who controls whatever takes place in it. They then formulate on the basis of their claims and denials social, political, economic and 'moral' creeds, even stating that such are 'scientific'. Indeed, they say that their creeds are the only scientific ones.

This lack of feeling of God's existence despite all the evidence that testifies to His control of the universe clearly indicates that their receptive faculties are impaired. Their persistence in denying God is no less rude and impudent than that painted in the Qur'ānic text: *"If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.'"* (Verses 14-15) The evidence that is available in the universe is so varied and manifest that it is stronger than their ascension to heaven. That evidence addresses every sound nature in an open and private manner, saying what is so powerful that human nature must accept without question.

When we look at the universe we find that it has countless laws working in perfect harmony to maintain its phenomena and existence. Moreover, it has so many complementary aspects which allow life to come into existence in certain parts of it. So to claim that this universe exists without a creator, is something that the human mind cannot accept. It is wholeheartedly rejected by human nature. Not only so, but the better science understands nature and the more deeply it penetrates into the universe and the more of its secrets it uncovers, the notion of self existence and uncontrolled operation seems even more far-fetched. In fact, the greater human knowledge becomes, the more clearly science admits that it is the Creator who controls the universe. Undistorted human nature accepts this truth once it receives the clear signals the universe makes. It has accepted it long before recent scientific evidence supporting it has come to light.

Testimony by a Western Scientist

The universe cannot create itself, then create the laws that control its existence. Nor can we attribute the emergence of life to a lifeless universe. Hence neither human nature nor human intelligence accepts the emergence of the universe or life without a Creator who continues to control it. Indeed material science is now rejecting it as well.

Russell Charles Artist, Professor of Biology at David Lipscomb College, Nashville, Tennessee, says:

Many theories have been brought forward in the attempt to derive living cells from inanimate matter. Certain investigators are claiming that life has originated through the protogene, or through viruses, or through an aggregation of large protein molecules, which may leave the impression that at last the gap between the lifeless and the living has been spanned. Actually it must be admitted that all attempts to produce living matter experimentally from inanimate matter have failed utterly.

Furthermore, it is not by direct evidence that the one who denies the existence of God proves to a waiting world that a fortuitous aggregation of atoms and molecules is life, capable of maintaining and directing itself as do the cells described here. Not at all. He accepts this as a *belief*. It is his private interpretation of the facts visible to us all, that an accidental concourse brought the first cell into being. But this is to accept an even greater miracle than to believe that Intelligence called it into being!

I maintain that each of these single cells (each a system so intricate and delicate that its complete functioning has so far escaped our study), and all the trillions of them on this earth, definitely present a justifiable inference – one of Mind, or Intelligence, or Thought, which we call God. Science both admits and accepts this inference.

I believe firmly that there is a God.⁵

The author did not start his investigations from a religious standpoint, but instead commented with an objective outlook, reflecting on the laws of nature. Yet he reached a conclusion that supports the truth as outlined by both natural inspiration and innate religious sense. When a truth exists, everyone who seeks it will inevitably come across it, regardless of what route he takes. It is only those whose receptive faculties have stopped functioning that cannot attain to the truth.

Those who deny God's existence are people whose argument is in conflict with the logic of nature, reason and universal existence. They seem to suffer from the malfunctioning of all their receptive faculties. They are blind, as God Himself describes them: "*Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind.*" (13: 19)

As this is their true description, it follows that any social, political or economic theory they come up with, as well as any theory they formulate, on the universe, human life and history must be viewed by a Muslim as no more than the groping in the dark of a blind person who has lost all his senses, at least with regard to understanding human life and how it is organized. No Muslim can adopt anything such a person formulates, let alone make it the basis of his view of life or code of living.

This is a matter of faith, not an intellectual argument. A person who argues that the material world has created itself and initiated human life, and makes this concept the basis of his ideology and code of living errs in the starting point of thought and

⁵ Russell Charles Artist, 'Trillions of Living Cells Speak Their Message', a paper included in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe*, ed. John Clover Monsma, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1958, p. 124.

doctrine alike. All structures and rules that have such a basis cannot bring any good. They have no meeting point even with any detail in the life of a Muslim whose basic concepts and code of living start with the belief in God's oneness and His creation of the universe which remains subject to God's will at all times.

Hence, to suggest that so-called 'scientific socialism' is independent of materialism betrays ignorance. Adopting 'scientific socialism', when it has such a basis and line of thinking, constitutes a total turning away from Islam as a faith, concept and code of living. It is not possible to combine scientific socialism and belief in God. To try to do so is to try to combine Islam with unbelief.

People must choose either to believe in Islam or in materialism. If they believe in Islam, they cannot adopt scientific socialism. Islam is much more than a faith and a conviction. It is a system based on an ideology. On the other hand, scientific socialism is based on materialistic philosophy, which believes that life is matter, and denies the existence of God altogether. We simply cannot separate the two. Hence, a choice between the two must be made. Everyone is free to make his or her choice, but everyone must be responsible for their choice.⁶

⁶ The author wrote his commentary at a time when so-called, "scientific socialism" was in vogue. Hence, he concentrates on this particular doctrine. However, what he says applies to all materialistic philosophy and any system based on it, including capitalism. — Editor's note.

2

Great Universal Expanse

We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, (16)

وَلَقَدْ جَعَلْنَا فِي السَّمَاءِ بُرُوجًا وَزَيَّنَّاهَا
لِلنَّظِيرِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, (17)

وَحَفِظْنَاهَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْطَانٍ رَجِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

so that anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see. (18)

إِلَّا مَنْ أَسْتَرَقَ السَّمْعَ فَاتَّبَعَهُ شِهَابٌ
مُتَّبِعٌ ﴿١٨﴾

We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. (19)

وَالْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَاهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَاسِيَ
وَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَّوْزُونٍ ﴿١٩﴾

We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. (20)

وَجَعَلْنَا لَكُمْ فِيهَا مَعِيشَ وَمَنْ لَسْتُمْ لَهُ
بِرَازِقِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure. (21)

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا عِنْدَنَا خَزَائِنُهُ وَمَا
نُنزِّلُهُ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَعْلُومٍ ﴿٢١﴾

We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up. (22)

وَأَرْسَلْنَا الرِّيحَ لَوَاقِحَ فَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنْ
السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَسْقَيْنَاكُمُوهُ وَمَا أَنْتُمْ لَهُ
بِخَازِنِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. (23)

وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ نُحْيِي ۚ وَنُمِيتُ وَنَحْنُ الْوَارِثُونَ



Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. (24)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْنَا الْمُسْتَقْدِمِينَ مِنْكُمْ وَلَقَدْ

عَلِمْنَا الْمُسْتَخْرِينَ

Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All-Knowing. (25)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ تَحْشُرُهُمْ إِنَّهُ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ



Endless Wonders

The *sūrah* now moves on to an exhibition of universal signs. It starts with a scene in heaven followed by one on earth, then an image of winds fully loaded with water, before we have pictures of life and death, resurrection and gathering. All these scenes are denied by those who, when a gateway to heaven is opened for them and they ascend through it higher and higher, surely say: “It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.” (Verse 15)

“We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, so that anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see.” (Verses 16-18) This is the first line in the great universal scene which tells of God’s creative power. It delivers a more telling testimony to the inimitability of God’s creation than any coming down of angels. It reflects God’s elaborate planning and His limitless power that puts into place this great piece of creation, the universe. The ‘constellations’ may refer to the stars and planets themselves with their huge entities, or it may refer to their positions which define their orbits. In both cases, they testify to the great power behind their creation and to the accuracy and beauty that they reflect. “We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold.” (Verse 16)

The reference here to the beauty of the universe, particularly the type seen in the sky, suggests that beauty is an intended purpose behind such creation. It is not merely size or accuracy that are intended, but beauty which is clearly seen in all its aspects. A quick glance at the sky in a dark moonless night, with so many stars and planets sending their faint light our way, gives us a sense of that unique beauty. The same feeling will be aroused by a similar look at the sky in a night with a full moon,

moving along in a romantic air, with the rest of the universe holding its breath so that it does not disturb a happy dreamer. One glance like that is sufficient to indicate the depth of the beauty in the creation of the universe. It will tell us more about the Qur'anic expression here: *"We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold."* (Verse 16)

With the beauty comes preservation, pure and intact: *"We have guarded them from every cursed devil."* (Verse 17) None, then, can spoil this purity by trying to spread evil in it. Satan is allowed to do his evil work only on earth, to tempt human beings to follow his wicked designs. The sky, which is a symbol for what is exalted and sublime, is beyond his reach. He may attempt to do so, but every attempt he makes is foiled: *"Anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see."* (Verse 18)

Who is the devil, and what is his nature; and how does he eavesdrop, and on whom; and what does he try to hear? All these are matters that belong to a world beyond our reach. We have only the texts available to us. It is useless to try to go further into this, because it adds nothing to anyone's faith. Investigating it does not produce anything other than preoccupying man's mind with something that is not among its concerns.

Let us then be satisfied with knowing that there is no room in the heavens for the devil and his work. Its breathtaking beauty is preserved. The sublimity it symbolizes is kept free from anything impure. And if the devil so much as attempts to climb up, a fast moving flame pursues him.

The second line in this great and awesome scene draws the earth stretched as far as our sight can reach, and made easy to traverse. It shows the mountains giving it firmness and stability, and its plants and vegetation that are necessary sustenance for man and animal: *"We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for."* (Verses 19-20)

The sense of an immense creation is clear here. The reference first to the massive constellations whose large size is implied by their very name, and in the shooting flame which is described as being clear for all to behold, and then the mountains whose weight is alluded to by the adjective, 'firm,' all add a sense of grandeur to the scene described. Even plants are described here as 'balanced' which, in its Arabic original, *mawzūn*, suggests considerable weight. The precise meaning of this phrase, however, is that every plant on earth is created with fine measure and precision. The grand impression of the scene is further enhanced by the term, *ma`āyish*, or 'means of livelihood', used here in the plural and left indefinite. Still more is added by the phrase, 'those whom you do not have to provide for.' This refers to every living thing on

earth. Hence, the scene appears massive, grand, majestic.

But the verse then refers to human beings. Your livelihood is placed on earth '*for you*', and also for '*those whom you do not have to provide for*'. They all survive on the provisions God gives them. Humans constitute only one of the countless communities that live on earth. This community does not provide sustenance to any other. It is God that provides for it and for other types of creation. But God grants it more of His bounty as He places for its service other communities and types of creation which live on the provisions given to them by God, without placing any responsibility or burden on man.

A Clear Plan for All Creation

In fact, the provisions given to every community are determined by God, according to His will. He grants them as He pleases, at the time He chooses, and in accordance with the laws He has set in operation: "*There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure.*" (Verse 21) No creature owns, or has power over, anything. The resources of everything are with God in His supreme realm. He grants it to His creation, in their respective worlds, according to a defined measure. Nothing is given or provided arbitrarily.

We have here a precise statement, "*There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure.*" (Verse 21) Its import becomes apparent as man's knowledge increases and becomes more advanced. The more he knows about the universe and how it is made and operates, the better he understands the Qur'ānic statement. The meaning of the term, 'storehouses', becomes clearer after man has discovered the nature of the elements which form the material world, and their composition. Man knows that the basic 'storehouses' of water, for example, are the oxygen and hydrogen atoms. The storehouses of provisions we have in the form of green plants and vegetation include the nitrogen which is present in the air, carbon and the oxygen that form carbon dioxide, and the rays of the sun. Examples like these are numerous, giving a clear picture of the import of the expression, "*God's storehouses*", of which man has come to know much, but this much remains only a little of what there is.

Of the things that God sends in accordance with defined measure are winds and water: "*We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up.*" (Verse 22) The Arabic term, *lawāqih*, which signifies *heavily loaded* has been interpreted by some according to the scientific meaning of 'fertilizing', referring to the fact that the winds carry the pollen from some plants or trees to fertilize the female ones. But this does not seem to fit with the text here. We have to remember that the Qur'ān is very meticulous in drawing its

own connotations. What is referred to here is rather the fact that winds carry moisture, just like a she-camel becomes heavy with milk. God then sends down water from that moisture carried by the winds, and He allows man to drink it for his own survival. Yet man cannot retain it all: *"You are not the ones who store it up."* (Verse 22) It has not come from the storehouses of human beings, but from God's treasures. It has been poured according to a well-defined measure.

The winds move, carry the moisture and pour the water in accordance with the laws of nature. But who has determined all this in the first place? It is all determined by the Creator who has set the original law of the universe which gives rise to all aspects and operates all phenomena: *"There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure."* (Verse 21)

We note here how every move is referred to God, even the drinking of water: *"Then We send down water from the skies for you to drink."* (Verse 22) The expression, *asqaynākumūh*, given in translation as, *"for you to drink"*, is given in the Arabic original as, *"We send down water from the skies and We make you drink it"*. What is meant here is that we have fashioned you in a way which makes you in need of water, and we made the water suitable for your needs. All this is made according to a measure. It is all set in operation by God's will. This mode of expression is chosen in order to provide an element of complete harmony in the whole scene, so that everything is referred to God, even the movement of one's hand to take water to drink. The whole atmosphere is one that attributes everything in the universe to God's will that directly determines every event and movement. His law that controls the movement of stars and planets is the same as His law that controls people's actions. The first passage of the *sūrah* referred to God's law concerning those who reject God's message, and this second passage refers to His law that governs the heavens and the earth, the wind, water and drinking. All this is subject to God's will which is linked to the great truth that is behind the creation of the heavens, the earth, human beings and all other creatures.

The *sūrah* then perfects the attribution of all matters to God alone, stating that life and death, the living and the dead, the resurrection and judgement belong to Him: *"It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verses 23-25)

Thus the second passage complements the first. In the first passage we have the statement: *"Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it."* (Verses 4-5) Here, in this passage, it is emphasized that life and death are determined by God, the heir to all life, and He knows whom He has determined to die early and who will have their death delayed. It is He who gathers them all together at the end,

for “*He is indeed Wise, All Knowing.*” (Verse 25) He determines the term of every community according to His wisdom. He knows when it dies, and when it is resurrected and all that happens in between.

We note the harmony of movement in this passage and the preceding one. This is seen in the sending down of revelation, angels, the flames hitting eavesdropping devils, and water from the sky. Harmony is also evident in the general surroundings in which events take place in the whole universe: the skies, the constellations, flames, the earth, the mountains and the vegetation, the winds and the rain. When the *sūrah* provides an example of arrogance, it sets it in a scene of climbing up into the heavens through an open door. All this speaks volumes for the fine style of the Qur’ān.

3

Man and His Sworn Enemy

Indeed We have created man out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape, (26)

whereas the jinn We had created before him out of the fire of scorching winds. (27)

Your Lord said to the angels: 'I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. (28)

When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him.' (29)

Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves. (30)

Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves. (31)

God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' (32)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَلٍ مِّنْ
حَمَإٍ مَّسْنُونٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَالْجَانَّ خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ مِنْ نَّارِ السَّمُومِ
﴿٢٧﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَلَقْتُ بَشَرًا
مِّنْ صَلْصَلٍ مِّنْ حَمَإٍ مَّسْنُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُّوحِي
فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

فَسَجَدَ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَى أَنْ يَكُونَ مَعَ
السَّاجِدِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالَ يَتَابِئِسُ مَا لَكَ إِلَّا تَكُونَ مَعَ
السَّاجِدِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

[Iblis] replied: 'I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape.' (33)

God said: 'Then get out of here, for you are accursed, (34)

and the curse shall be on you till the Day of Judgement.' (35)

Said [Iblis]: 'My Lord, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be resurrected.' (36)

[God] said: 'You are among those who are granted respite (37)

till the Day of the appointed time.' (38)

[Iblis] said: 'My Lord, since You have let me fall in error, I shall make [evil] seem fair to them on earth, and I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, (39)

except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.' (40)

Said He: 'This is, with Me, a straight way. (41)

You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you. (42)

For all such, hell is the promised destiny. (43)

It has seven gates, with each gate having its allotted share of them.' (44)

قَالَ لَمْ أَكُنْ لِأَسْجُدَ لِبَشَرٍ خَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ صَلْصَلٍ مِنْ حَمَإٍ مَسْنُونٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

قَالَ فَأَخْرِجْ مِنْهَا فَإِنَّكَ رَجِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَإِنَّ عَلَيْكَ اللَّعْنَةَ إِلَى يَوْمِ الدِّينِ ﴿٣٥﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنْظِرْنِي إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنْظَرِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

إِلَى يَوْمِ الْوَقْتِ الْمَعْلُومِ ﴿٣٨﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَا أَغْوَيْتَنِي لَأُزَيِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا أُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

قَالَ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ عَلَيَّ مُسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٤١﴾

إِنَّ عِبَادِي لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانٌ إِلَّا مَنْ اتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ الْغَاوِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ لَمَوْعِدُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

هَٰذَا سَبْعَةُ أَبْوَابٍ لِكُلِّ بَابٍ مِنْهُمْ جُزْءٌ مَقْسُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. (45)

*[They are received with the greeting]:
'Enter here in peace and security.'* (46)

We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest] as brothers, facing one another, on couches. (47)

No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart. (48)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

أَدْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَامٍ ءَأَمِينٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَنَزَعْنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِمْ مِّنْ غِلٍّ إِخْوَانًا
عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مُّتَقَابِلِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

لَا يَمَسُّهُمْ فِيهَا نَصَبٌ وَمَا هُمْ مِنْهَا
بِمُخْرَجِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Overview

With these verses the *sūrah* begins to relate the story of man's creation. It is the story of basic human nature, truth and error and their basic factors, the story of Adam and the substance from which he was created, and what took place at the time of his creation and afterwards. The Qur'ān has already referred to this story twice in previous *sūrahs*, namely *Sūrahs* 2 and 7, The Cow and The Heights. Each time it occurs it serves a special purpose, and is recounted in its own special style with a distinct atmosphere. Hence, the episodes highlighted each time are different, as are the approach and the rhythm employed.

In all three *sūrahs*, the story is introduced with reference to the establishment of mankind on earth as God's vicegerent. We note that in *Sūrah* 2, it is preceded by the verse: "It is He who created for you all that is on earth. He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things." (2: 29) And in *Sūrah* 7, the preceding verse says: "We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful." (7: 10) Here in this *sūrah*, the story of creation is preceded by the statement: "We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure." (Verses 20-21)

Yet in each of these *sūrahs* the story of creation is told in a different context, with a definite purpose for each usage. In *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, the point of emphasis is the appointment of Adam as a vicegerent on earth, which has been placed, with all its contents, at man's service: "Your Lord said to the angels, I am appointing a vicegerent on

earth.” (2: 30) As the angels wondered at this appointment, the reason for which was not readily apparent to them, they were told some of its aspects: *“He taught Adam the names of all things and then turned to the angels and said, ‘Tell Me the names of these things, if what you say is true.’ They said, ‘Limitless are You in Your glory! We only know what You have taught us. Indeed, You alone are All-Knowing, Wise.’ He said, Adam! Tell them their names.’ When he had told them all their names, He said, ‘Have I not said to you that I know the secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth, and I know all that you reveal and conceal?’”* (2: 31-33) The *sūrah* then relates how the angels prostrated themselves before Adam while *Iblīs*, or Satan, arrogantly refused. It tells how Adam and his wife resided in heaven before they were seduced by Satan and then their expulsion from heaven and fall to earth so that they could assume their vicegerency, having gone through such a painful experience and repented and asked God to forgive them. Comments on the story as told in *Sūrah* 2 are given in the form of an admonition to the Children of Israel to remember God’s grace and honour their pledges to Him. This closely relates to the appointment of Adam, the father of mankind, as vicegerent on earth and the covenant he made with God.

In *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, emphasis is placed on the long journey from heaven and back again, highlighting Satan’s unabating hostility to man from the very start. One group will go back to heaven from where Satan drove out their first parents, and these go to heaven by virtue of their disobedience of Satan. Another group, however, will go to hell because they follow the footsteps of Satan, their eternal enemy. Hence, as related in *Sūrah* 7, the story tells of the angels’ prostration before Adam while Satan arrogantly refused to do so. Satan then requested God to give him respite till the Day of Judgement so that he could seduce Adam’s offspring, the cause of his original expulsion. The *sūrah* then speaks of Adam and his wife situated in heaven where they could eat of all its fruits except for one tree. This prohibited fruit is made the means to test man’s will and obedience. It tells us the details of how Satan tried hard to persuade Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit until they responded to him, when their nakedness was exposed. It speaks of God’s admonition of them and their fall to earth where the great battle takes place. *“Said He: ‘Get you down hence, [and be henceforth] enemies to one another, having on earth your abode and livelihood for a while.’ ‘There shall you live,’ He added, and there shall you die, and from there shall you be brought forth [on the Day of Resurrection].”* (7: 24-25) The *sūrah* then follows all the stages of the journey until all have returned and stood before God on the great wide stage, before going their separate ways to heaven and hell: *“And the inmates of the fire will cry out to the dwellers of paradise: Pour some water on us, or give us some of the sustenance God has provided for you. They will reply: ‘God has forbidden both to the unbelievers.’”* (7: 50) At this point the curtains fall.

Here, in this *sūrah*, as we shall see, emphasis is placed on the secret of Adam’s creation and the essential factors in man’s constitution, leading him to follow either

divine guidance or Satan's erring ways. Hence it begins by stating that Adam is created out of sounding clay and black mud moulded into shape, before God breathed of His noble spirit into him. It also states that Satan was created before him, out of the fire of scorching winds. It tells of the angels' prostration before Adam, while Satan refused to so prostrate before a human being created of such low material, and how, as a result, God expelled him from heaven with a curse. God then accepted Satan's request to give him respite until the Day of Judgement. It adds Satan's own admission that he has no power over God's faithful servants. His power is only over those who submit to him in preference to submitting to God. It then states, without detail, the destiny of each of the two parties. The lack of detail here fits with the point of emphasis whereby the two essential factors are the human constitution, and the domain where Satan can influence man.

The Origins of Man's Creation

"Indeed We have created man out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape, whereas the jinn We had created before him out of the fire of scorching winds." (Verses 26-27) At the outset the difference in the two natures is clearly stated. The dry clay which gives off a sound when knocked and which is originally black mud given a specific shape is totally different from the fire described here as scorching, blowing fiercely. We learn later that another element is added to man's nature, namely, the breathing of God's spirit into it. Satan's nature, however, remained that of the fire of scorching winds.

Your Lord said to the angels: I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him.' Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves. God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' [Iblīs] replied: I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape.' God said: 'Then get out of here, for you are accursed, and the curse shall be on you till the Day of Judgement.' (Verses 28-35)

These verses start with God's address to the angels. When, where and how He said all this are details that we have no way of knowing. We simply have no clear statement in the Qur'ān or the *Ĥadīth* which answers these points. Since these details belong to the realm of what lies beyond human perception, we have no way of knowing them. Hence any attempt to provide answers is futile. The same applies to man's creation out of a dry clay, moulded into shape, and infused with God's spirit.

We may refer to other statements in the Qur'ān concerning this point, particularly verse 23: 12, "*We create man out of the essence of clay,*" and verse 32: 8, "*He causes him i.e. man] to be begotten out of a line of a humble fluid.*" We may say on the basis of these statements that man and life itself originally come out of the earth's clay. The basic constituents of this clay are found in the physical constitution of man and all living organisms. There are several stages between the original clay and man's creation, and to these the term, *line'*, refers. That is all that may be said on the basis of the texts we have. Any addition is no more than an overload added to the text, which the Qur'ān does not need. Scientific research may proceed with whatever means available to it. It may advance theories which are then either confirmed by hard evidence or amended if they cannot be proven. It cannot, however, make conclusions that are in conflict with the facts stated in the Qur'ān, which tell us that the line of creation started with the elements of clay, and to which water was later added.

How has this clay been elevated from its original constituent nature to the horizon of organic life and then to the more sublime horizon of human life? That is a secret no human being can explain. Indeed the secret of life even in the basic organism or the initial cell remains unknown. No one claims to have fathomed it. Then there remains the secret of a human's higher life with all its special features of perception, feeling and inspiration that distinguish man from all other animals. Different theories may try to explain this secret, but they have been forced to acknowledge that man has his own distinctive features and characteristics that single him out right from the very inception of human life. They cannot prove any direct relationship with any creature that lived before man, even though some theories claim that man evolved from other creatures. Nor can any of these theories disprove the other premise that different species have emerged separately, even though some are higher than others. Man thus emerged as a separate, new species.

The Qur'ān explains man's distinction in a clear and simple statement: "*When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him.*" (Verse 29) Thus it is this breath of God's spirit that takes man from the state of a humble organic entity to the noble human stage, right from his inception. It makes of him a distinguished creature worthy of being vicegerent on earth. How does this happen? In answer we ask: when was this human creature able to perceive how the Creator works?

Now we can stand on solid ground. Satan was created out of the fire of scorching wind, long before man's creation. This is as far as our knowledge goes. What Satan's nature is and how he was created are matters which we cannot delve into. However, we do understand that he shares some characteristics with the fire of scorching wind. We realize that he can affect the elements constituting mud and clay, since he is made out of fire. He also causes harm and is not slow to inflict it, since the fire he is made of is that of scorching wind. Then the story reveals to us his conceit and

arrogance, which is not far removed in our perception from the nature of fire.

Then man's creation took place, starting with the sticky mud that had dried, then the adding of sublime spirit which brought about his distinction from all living creatures. This gave him his unique human characteristics. Right from the beginning of human life, man has followed his own separate line, while animals remained in their own domain.

Man's Dual Nature

It is this breath of God's spirit that provides man's link with the Supreme Society, making him worthy of contact with God, receiving His messages, and going beyond the material world of his physical constitution to the mental world of hearts and minds. It is this breath of God's spirit which allows man to go beyond time and space, and beyond the reach of his senses and physical ability to formulate perceptions and experience feelings that, at times, seem unlimited.

All this despite the heavy nature of clay which puts him in need of all that his clay constitution requires, such as food, drink, clothing and the satisfaction of desires. He also has his weaknesses, giving rise to faulty concepts and whims. Yet right from the beginning, man is a compound of these two inseparable elements. He has the nature of a compound, not that of a mixture. We need to keep this fact clear in our minds whenever we speak about man's constitution from clay and sublime spirit. The two constituents are inseparable in his nature. In no situation does either element achieve total domination, completely excluding the other. Man is not pure clay or pure spirit even for a single moment. Every single action and every single deed involves his whole make-up which is indivisible.

Achieving a proper balance between the clay and the sublime elements is the highest level man is called on to achieve. That is the stage of human perfection. He is not required to shed either element of his constitution so as to become either angel or animal. To attempt a rise that disturbs the balance is a shortcoming that does not suit man's essential characteristics, or the purpose of his creation in this unique fashion. A person who tries to suppress his basic physical instincts is the same as one who tries to suppress his free spiritual powers. Both go beyond straight human nature, imposing on themselves something that God does not sanction. Both destroy themselves by distorting the basic compound of their very nature. They will have to account to God for such destruction.

Hence the Prophet (peace be upon him) reproached one of his Companions for deciding to remain celibate, vowing not to marry, and another for having decided to fast every day of his life and a third who decided to spend all night every night in worship. His reproach is clear in a *ḥadīth* reported by his wife `Ā'ishah, and he said at

the end: "Whoever turns away from my path does not belong to me."

Islam has formulated its own laws for human life taking into account man's constitution. It established a human system which does not suppress a single aspect of human potential. The whole purpose of this system is to establish a perfect balance between these powers, so that they all work in concert, without allowing anyone of them to encroach on another. Any such encroachment leads to the negation of the other, and every dominance leads to destruction. Man is responsible for the maintenance of the essential characteristics of his nature and his accountability to God. The system Islam establishes for human life is geared to promote these characteristics which God has given to man for a clear purpose.

Anyone who wishes to kill the animal instincts in man destroys his unique constitution, just like one who wishes to kill the essentially human instincts such as faith and believing in what lies beyond the reach of our perception. Anyone who deprives people of their faith destroys their human entity, just like one who deprives them of their food, drink and other physical needs. Both are enemies of man, and both deserve to be driven away just like we must drive Satan away.

Man is an animal with something extra. He has the same needs as an animal, but he has other needs on account of that extra element. These latter needs are not inferior to the 'essential needs' as claimed by advocates of materialistic creeds who are, in truth, enemies of mankind.

These are simply thoughts derived from the truth of our human constitution, as stated in the Qur'ān. We have referred to them only briefly so that we do not delay any further the discussion of the Qur'ānic text relating the most important story of man's creation. We shall however return to these thoughts at the end of our discussion.

The Encounter and the Fall

God said to the angels: *"I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him."* (Verses 28-29) And what God said immediately took effect, for His word expresses His will, and His will is always done. We cannot question how the breath of God's eternal spirit mixed with the clay that has limited life. Such arguments are no more than idle play. It is indeed a child's play with man's intellect itself. It forces the human mind out of its own realm in which it may exercise its powers of perception, reflection and comprehension. All the controversy that has been raised over this issue, past and present, betrays ignorance of the nature of the human mind, its characteristics and limitations. It simply forces the human mind to try to measure God's work by human standards. It is an altogether wrong premise.

God simply says that this has happened without saying how. Hence, the event itself is a fact that the human mind cannot deny. Yet it cannot prove it by any interpretation it invents, other than accepting what God has said. Man is a creature with a beginning, and as such, he cannot judge what is eternal, or how the eternal creates. When the human mind accepts this point, it stops expending its power in futile argument.

What happened after God issued His order to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam? *"Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves."* (Verse 30) That is in the nature of this aspect of God's creation, the angels. They obey God's orders whatever they are, without argument or delay. However, something else also took place at the same time: *"Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves."* (Verse 31)

Iblīs belongs to a different type of creation, separate from the angels. He is created out of fire while they are created out of light. They do not disobey God, whatever His command may be. He, on the other hand, disobeyed God, rejecting His command. For certain, then, he is not, and never was, one of the angels. That we have here a form of exception, more strongly pronounced in the Arabic text, refers to what is called in Arabic linguistics 'inconsequential exception'. It is acceptable to say in Arabic: "The Joneses have come except for Ahmad", when you know that Ahmad does not belong to the Jones family, but is always with them. Now since the order stated here has been issued to the angels, how could it apply to *Iblīs*? That the same order was issued to *Iblīs* is clearly stated in *Sūrah 7, The Heights*. There the order to *Iblīs* is mentioned in a later verse, when God questions him: *"What has prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you?"* (7: 12) This is clear proof that *Iblīs* was given the same order. He might have been included in the order given to the angels, if he was with them at the time, or perhaps a separate order was issued to him. However, this is not mentioned here and this shows that he is of a far lesser position than the angels. Furthermore, the texts we have, and Satan's own behaviour, all demonstrate that he was not one of the angels.

It should be also mentioned that we are dealing here with matters that belong to a different realm, and that we cannot fathom their nature or how they took place, except within the meaning of the texts we have. Neither human reason nor imagination has any role to play here.

"God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' [Iblīs] replied: I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape." (Verses 32-33) Thus the nature of this creature, who was created out of the fire of scorching winds, has surfaced. We see that arrogance, conceit and disobedience are part of his nature. *Iblīs* mentions the clay and mud, but does not mention the sublime spirit that mixes

irrevocably with that mud. In his insolence he declares that a great creature like him could not prostrate himself to a human being whom God has created out of mud moulded into shape.

Such an attitude leads to its natural consequence: *“God said: ‘Then get out of here, for you are accursed, and the curse shall be on you till the Day of judgement.’”* (Verses 34-35) This is a just reward for disobedience and rebellion.

At this point, his evil characteristics come out in full force. We see how he nurses his grudges and how he plans to spread evil: *“He said: My Lord, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be resurrected.”* [God] said: *‘You are among those who are granted respite till the Day of the appointed time.’”* (Verses 36-38) He requests respite to the Day of Judgement, but not to have the opportunity to repent of his sin which he has committed in the presence of God Almighty. It is not to atone for his sin that he wants to be spared death until the Day of Judgement, but rather to exact revenge on Adam and his offspring. He is avenging himself against mankind for his expulsion and the curse that he has incurred. He thus blames Adam for his expulsion, instead of acknowledging that it was the result of his own sinful insolence.

“[Iblīs] said: ‘My Lord, since You have let me fall in error, I shall make [evil] seem fair to them on earth, and I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.’” (Verses 39-40) It is Iblīs himself who has chosen the battleground, which is the earth. *“I shall make evil seem fair to them on earth.”* (Verse 39) He also states what he will use for a weapon. He will simply tempt mankind by making what is foul appear to be fair, so that they are tempted to do it. In fact, no human being resorts to foul things unless these seem fair to him by some trick perpetrated by Satan. Thus he sees such foul things in a guise which is different from what they truly are. Hence people should always remember the weapon which Satan uses. If they find something attractive and are tempted, they should make sure lest it has been made to appear so by Satan. Proper refuge is to ensure that their link with their Lord is kept in fine tuning by worshipping Him as He should be worshipped. Even according to his own statement, Satan has no power over God’s faithful servants: *“I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.”* (Verses 39-40) God chooses from among His servants those who purge themselves of all evil and worship Him alone, as though they see Him. It is over such people that Satan holds no sway.

Satan knows that this condition which he himself has stated is one which he cannot change because it is part of the laws governing human nature. Hence, the reply to Satan’s words: *“Said He: This is, with Me, a straight way. You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you.”* (Verses 41-42) This is the way established by the will of God as a final arbiter with regard to guidance and going astray. *“You shall have no power over My servants.”*

(Verse 42) They are immune to your devices and schemes, as they close all entry points to their minds and hearts. They always look to God for guidance, and they know what pleases Him by their nature which they purge of all sin. Satan has power only over 'those who choose to follow' him, as they have been in error, going far astray. Those who dedicate themselves to God will not be left without guidance.

The outcome is also clear. It is stated right at the beginning: *"For all such, hell is the promised destiny. It has seven gates, with each gate having its allotted share of them."* (Verses 43-44) For those who go astray are of different categories. Each gate to hell will have its portion from among them, according to the nature of their deeds.

This ends the scene of the beginning of human life, putting great emphasis on the lesson to be learnt. It tells how Satan finds his way into the human soul, trying to overpower the sublimity of the spirit breathed into man with the characteristics of his clay origin. Those who maintain their links with God, emphasizing their spirit characteristics will have nothing to fear from Satan.

The destiny of the believers who follow the truth is also outlined here: *"The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. [They are received with the greeting]: 'Enter here in peace and security.' We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest] as brothers, facing one another, on couches. No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart."* (Verses 45-48) The God-fearing are those who are on the alert, trying always to avoid what displeases God or incurs His anger. It may be said that the 'fountains' mentioned here correspond to the gates of hell. These people enter heaven 'in peace and security' which contrast with the fear and panic felt by those who go to hell. 'Malice' and ill feelings are removed from their hearts, which contrasts with the grudge that Satan always feels against human beings. Their good labours in this life are rewarded by their being secure, free from all feelings of tiredness and weariness.

A Fine Destiny for the Righteous

The story of man's creation and placement on earth deserves detailed comments, but we will only touch briefly on certain aspects of it, as befits the way it is told in this *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* delivers a clear message concerning the special creation known as man. He has a unique make-up which gives him more than the physical constitution which he has in common with other living creatures. No matter how life emerged and how living creatures came into being, man is distinguished by another quality mentioned in the Qur'ān, which derives from the breathing of the divine spirit into him. This quality is not the result of the continuous evolution of man, stage after stage, as claimed by Darwinism. It came right at the inception of human life, when

man was first created. There was no time when man was only a living organic entity, then the spirit entered into his constitution to make of him the man we see today.

Neo-Darwinism, and its main advocate, Julian Huxley, have been forced to admit a part of this great fact. In this respect, it admits the uniqueness of man, and his ability to establish human civilization. Nevertheless, neo-Darwinism continues to claim that this unique human being has evolved from the animal kingdom.

It is very hard to reconcile this view of neo-Darwinism which admits the uniqueness of man with the essential concept of evolution advanced by Darwin. Yet all evolutionists adamantly persist with this attitude, giving it false scientific guise. This is only because they try to break away from the Church and whatever view it advances. The Jews have always encouraged and promoted this concept, endorsing it as scientific, because it serves their ultimate goal.

We have already discussed this point when commenting on a similar text in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. It is useful to quote here from those comments:

The total import of Qur'ānic statements that speak of the creation of Adam (peace be upon him) and the start of human life indicates very strongly that this particular creation was given its human characteristic and special tasks at the time of its coming into existence. Evolution in human history took the form of developing these characteristics and gaining further experience in utilizing them. It is not an evolution of existence which suggests, as Darwinism would like us to believe, that a process of evolution of species has reached its climax with the advent of man.

There might have been stages of advanced animals, with one coming after the other, as evidenced by the theory of natural selection. But this is no more than a theory that does not aspire to any degree of certainty, because the estimation of the ages of rocks in geological strata is again a theoretical process. It is the same as estimating the ages of different stars and planets on the basis of the characteristics of their rays. Future discoveries may amend or change these theories.

But even if we were to learn the ages of rocks with absolute certainty, there is nothing to prevent the existence of different species of animals, some of which are higher than others, in different time periods, and that their advancement makes them particularly suited for the prevailing circumstances. Some of them may disappear when circumstances change drastically to make it difficult for the earth to sustain their existence. That does not make it inevitable that these species have evolved one from the other. All the studies and observations of Charles Darwin and those who followed him cannot prove more than that. They cannot say with any certainty that one species evolved from a preceding one, on the basis of fossils and where they have been found. It simply proves that a subsequent species was higher than a preceding one. This can easily be explained as we have already said: the prevailing

circumstances at one particular time allowed the existence of one species. The circumstances subsequently prevailing allowed the existence of another species and the disappearance of the first one.

All this means that the appearance of human beings was independent of other species. It took place at a time when the prevailing circumstances on earth facilitated the existence, development and advancement of this particular type of creation. This is the total sum of the Qur'ānic statements on the creation of man.

The fact that biologically, physiologically, mentally and spiritually, man has unique characteristics is so clear that it has been acknowledged by neo-Darwinists who include a number of atheists. This uniqueness also supports the view that human existence was totally independent of the existence of all other species. It simply has no biological inter-relationship with them.⁷

An Eternal Hostility

The unique method of creation which led to the emergence of man, a creature with its own separate existence, is the fact that God breathed in him of His own spirit. This gives us a totally different picture of man and his 'essential needs' from those of all materialistic philosophies, with all the economic, social and political doctrines they produce and all the concepts and values they advance for human life.

The claim that man is nothing but an advanced animal species that has evolved from lower animals lies at the heart of the concept promoted in the Marxist Declaration that the essential needs of man are: food, drink, shelter and sex. These are certainly the basic needs of animals. Man cannot be given a more degrading position than what this outlook assigns to him. All his rights that are derived from the fact that he is unlike animals, since he has his unique human qualities, are thus denied to him. He is denied his freedom of belief, thought and expression, and his right to choose his profession and where to live, as well as his right to criticize the system of government and its intellectual basis. Indeed he is denied even the right to criticize the party in power, or those who are even less than the party, such as despotic rulers in hateful dictatorial regimes that treat human beings as though they are no more than a flock of sheep. After all, human beings, in materialistic philosophies, are no different from animals from whom they had at one time evolved. All this misery is then ennobled as 'scientific socialism'.

The Islamic concept of man, based on man's special, distinctive qualities, considers that the basic needs of man are different from those of animals. Food, drink, shelter and sex do not constitute the total sum of his basic needs. His intellectual and

⁷ Sayyid Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. VI, pp. 36

spiritual needs are by no means of secondary importance. Faith, freedom of thought, will and choice are also basic needs that must be placed in the same category as food, drink, shelter and sex. Indeed, these other needs are of a higher position, because these are the ones that man needs while animals do not. In other words, these are the ones that emphasize his humanity. When he is denied these, his humanity itself is denied.

Thus, in the Islamic system, freedom of faith, thought and expression, choice and will cannot be denied for the sake of increased production so that food, drink, shelter and sex are provided for humans! Nor is it permissible that moral values, as established by God, not by tradition, environment or economy, be denied in order to meet the animal needs of man.

The two outlooks are essentially different in their evaluation of man and his basic needs. Hence, they can never be reconciled in a single system. It is either Islam or materialistic doctrines with all their oppressive products, including what they call 'scientific socialism'. Indeed 'scientific socialism' is just another sordid product of materialism which degrades man whom God Himself has honoured.

The eternal battle between Satan and man on this earth is one in which Satan tries his best to lead man away from what submission to God alone entails in accepting His faith, concepts, worship, systems and laws. Human beings who submit to God alone, which means they worship Him only, are the ones over whom Satan has no power whatsoever. It is God who says to Satan, as related in this story of creation: *"This is, with Me, a straight way. You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you."* (Verses 41-42)

The point which separates those who follow the road to heaven, promised to the righteous, and those who follow the path leading to hell, which is the abode of evildoers, is that of submission to God. This is always referred to in the Qur'an as worship. The alternative is to follow what Satan paints as fair and thus not submit to God. It should be pointed out here that Satan himself did not deny God's existence or His attributes. So, he did not disbelieve in Him, so to speak. What he did was to refuse to submit to Him. That is the point at issue which sends Satan and his followers to hell.

Submission to God is the central point of Islam. If those who claim to follow Islam submit to anyone other than God in a single rule, whether it relates to faith, concepts, worship, law or moral standards and values, then their claim is worthless. Islam means submission to God alone in all these. Submission to anyone else means sinking back into *jāhiliyyah*. It is not possible to separate this submission so as to make it applicable only to faith and worship, but not to systems and laws. Submission to God must be acknowledged in its totality. Such submission means

worshipping God, in both its linguistic and Islamic senses. It is over such submission that the eternal battle between man and Satan is fought.

Finally we come to what God touchingly says about the righteous: *"The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. [They are received with the greeting]: 'Enter here in peace and security.' We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest) as brothers, facing one another, on couches. No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart."* (Verses 45-48)

This religion does not try to change human nature or to make mankind a different sort of creation. It acknowledges that in this life people experience malice and grudges. This is part of their human nature which faith does not totally eradicate. It simply works on it to reduce its intensity, and then elevates its domain so that believers love and hate for God's sake only. But in heaven, where their humanity attains its most sublime standard, the very sense of malice and grudge is removed. Here, people experience only pure love and brotherhood.

This is the supreme standard of the people of heaven. If someone finds that it dominates his feelings in this life, then he should look forward to being in heaven in the hereafter, as long as he is a believer. This is the essential condition which gives every action its true value.

4

Lessons of History

Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; (49)

﴿ نَبِيَّ عِبَادِي أَنِّي أَنَا الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴾

﴿ ٤٩ ﴾

and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering. (50)

﴿ وَأَنَّ عَذَابِي هُوَ الْعَذَابُ الْأَلِيمُ ﴾

Tell them about Abraham's guests, (51)

﴿ وَنَبِّئُهُمْ عَنِ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴾

when they went in to him and said: 'Peace.' But he replied: 'We feel afraid of you.' (52)

﴿ إِذْ دَخَلُوا عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُوا سَلَامًا قَالَ إِنَّا مِنْكُمْ وَجِلُونَ ﴾

They said: 'Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge.' (53)

﴿ قَالُوا لَا تَوْجَلْ إِنَّا نُبَشِّرُكَ بِغُلْمٍ عَلَيْمِ ﴾

﴿ ٥٣ ﴾

Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?' (54)

﴿ قَالَ أَبَشَّرْتُمُونِي عَلَىٰ أَن مَسَّنِيَ الْكِبَرُ فَبِمَ تَبَشِّرُونَ ﴾

They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.' (55)

﴿ قَالُوا بَشَّرْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ فَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ الْقَانِطِينَ ﴾

He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's

﴿ قَالَ وَمَنْ يَقْنَطُ مِن رَّحْمَةِ رَبِّهِ إِلَّا الضَّالُّونَ ﴾

grace?’ (56)

[Abraham] said: ‘What is your business, you [heavenly] messengers?’ (57)

They replied: ‘We are sent to a guilty nation, (58)

except for Lot’s household, all of whom we shall save, (59)

except for his wife. We have decreed that she should remain with those who stay behind.’ (60)

And when the messengers [of God] came to the house of Lot, (61)

he said: ‘You are unknown here.’ (62)

They answered: ‘No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. (63)

We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed. (64)

Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded.’ (65)

And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

قَالُوا إِنَّا أُرْسِلْنَا إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

إِلَّا ءَالَ لُوطٍ إِنَّا لَمُنَجُّوهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

﴿٥٩﴾

إِلَّا امْرَأَتَهُ قَدَرْنَا ۖ إِنَّا لَمِنَ الْغَابِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

﴿٦٠﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَ ءَالَ لُوطٍ الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

قَالَ إِنَّكُمْ قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

قَالُوا بَلْ جِئْنَاكَ بِمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ

يَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

وَأَتَيْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّا لَصَادِقُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

فَأَسْرِ بِأَهْلِكَ بِقِطْعٍ مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ وَاتَّبِعْ

أَدْبُرَهُمْ وَلَا يَلْتَفِتْ مِنكُمْ أَحَدٌ وَأَمْضُوهَا

حَيْثُ تُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَيْهِ ذَٰلِكَ الْأَمْرَ أَنَّ دَابِرَ

هَٰؤُلَاءِ مَقْطُوعٌ مُّصْبِحِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

be wiped out by the morning. (66)

The people of the city came [to Lot] rejoicing [at the news of the young people]. (67)

Said he: 'These are my guests: so do not put me to shame. (68)

Fear God and do not bring disgrace on me.' (69)

They replied: 'Have we not forbidden you to entertain any people?' (70)

He said: 'Here are these daughters of mine [to marry], if you must do [what you intend to do.]' (71)

By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness, (72)

when the blast [of punishment] overtook them at sunrise, (73)

and We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay. (74)

Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. (75)

Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still. (76)

In all this there is a sign for true believers. (77)

The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan] were also wrongdoers, (78)

and so We punished them. Both these [communities] lived by an open highway,

وَجَاءَ أَهْلَ الْمَدِينَةِ يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

قَالَ إِنَّ هَؤُلَاءِ ضَيْفِي فَلَا تَفْضَحُونِ ﴿٦٧﴾

﴿٦٨﴾

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُخْزُونِ ﴿٦٩﴾

قَالُوا أَوْلَمَ نَنْهَكَ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧٠﴾

قَالَ هَؤُلَاءِ بَنَاتِي إِنْ كُنْتُمْ فَعِلِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

لَعَمْرُكَ إِنَّهُمْ لَفِي سَكْرَتِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

فَأَخَذْتَهُمُ الصَّيْحَةَ مُشْرِقِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

فَجَعَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا سَافِلَهَا وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ

حِجَارَةً مِّن سِجِّيلٍ ﴿٧٤﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّمَتَوَسِّمِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَإِنَّهَا لِبَسِيبٍ مُّقِيمٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

وَإِنْ كَانَ أَصْحَابُ الْأَيْكَةِ لظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

فَأَنْتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمَا لَبِإِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٧٩﴾

plain to see. (79)

Likewise, the people of al-Ĥijr also denied [God's] messengers. (80)

We have given them Our signs, but they turned their backs on them. (81)

Out of the mountains did they hew their dwellings, leading a life of security. (82)

But the blast [of punishment] overtook them at early morning. (83)

Of no avail to them was all that they had acquired. (84)

وَلَقَدْ كَذَّبَ أَصْحَابُ الْحِجْرِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ



وَأَتَيْنَهُمْ آيَاتِنَا فَكَانُوا عَنْهَا مُعْرِضِينَ



وَكَانُوا يَنْحِتُونَ مِنَ الْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا



فَأَخَذْتَهُمُ الصَّيْحَةُ مُصْبِحِينَ



فَمَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ



Overview

This rather long passage refers to some examples of God's mercy and the punishment He inflicts. These include how Abraham was given in his old age the happy news of a son to be born to him, and how Lot and his household, except his wife, were saved from the fate that befell the wrongdoers. They also include a reference to the fateful punishments that befell the people of the Madyan and those of al-Ĥijr.

All these stories occur after an introduction that says: "Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering." (Verses 49-50) Some of them thus confirm what has been said about God's mercy, and some confirm that His punishment is grievous indeed. These stories also refer to what is mentioned at the opening of the *sūrah*, confirming the warning it contains: "Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth]. Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it." (Verses 3-5) These were examples of cities destroyed by God after they ignored all the warnings they had received. Their punishment only befell them after the time they were given had lapsed. The stories we have in this passage also confirm

what is mentioned earlier in the *sūrah* concerning the angels and their mission when they are sent with God's orders: *"They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?' We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite."* (Verses 6-8)

All this goes to show that the whole *sūrah* is a single unit, with every part confirming the rest. This observation we make in spite of the fact that most *sūrahs* were revealed in parts, with the possibility that later verses were often revealed before earlier ones. Yet the final ordering of the verses of each *sūrah* is made in accordance with divine instructions. Hence, there must be a clear purpose in such order. We have learnt some aspects of the wisdom behind the ordering of verses in the *sūrahs* we have discussed. Each of them appears clearly as a complete and perfect structure. Yet what we say is only a personal point of view, while true knowledge belongs to God alone. We pray to Him to guide us to what is right.

Abraham's Visitors

"Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering." (Verses 49-50) This order to the Prophet (peace be upon him) comes after the reward of God-fearing believers and the punishment of wrongdoers are mentioned. The link is self-evident. But God's mercy and forgiveness are mentioned before the punishment, because they fit in with the grace God has committed Himself to bestow. Sometimes, only the punishment and suffering are mentioned, or they are given precedence in the text, but that is only because there is special need for such treatment.

We are then given an account of the encounter between the Prophet Abraham and the angels sent to Lot. This episode is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, each time in a different way which fits the context in which it occurs. The story of Lot alone is also mentioned in other places.

For example, Lot's story is covered in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, and a different account of Abraham and Lot's story is given in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd. In the first we have a denunciation by Lot of the indecent practices of his community, and their reply to him: *"Drive them [i.e. Lot and his household] out of your land, for they are indeed people who would keep chaste."* (7: 82) It also refers to saving him and his household, except his wife who was destined to stay behind with those who were to be destroyed. There is no mention of the angels coming to him or the scheme of his people against them. In the second instance, a totally different layout is given to the story of the angels with Abraham and Lot. There we have more details concerning Abraham and the happy news he was given in the presence of his wife. There is also a mention of his

argument with the angels concerning Lot and his community, which is not mentioned here. Different lines are adopted in the two *sūrah*s in relating the events concerning the angels and Lot. In *Sūrah* Hūd the angels do not reveal their identity to him until his people arrived, and he had pleaded with them to spare his guests, but all his pleas fell on deaf ears. When he despaired of them, he cried out in distress: *"Would that with you I had real strength, or that I could lean on some mighty support."* (11: 80) Here in this *sūrah*, the identity of the angels is revealed right at the outset, while the design of his people against his guests is mentioned later. The point here is not to mention the story as it took place, but the confirmation of the warnings, emphasizing that when angels are sent down, their task is to inflict the punishment, giving people no further respite.

Tell them about Abraham's guests, when they went in to him and said: Peace.' But he replied: 'We feel afraid of you.' They said: Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge.' Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?' They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.' He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's grace? (Verses 51-56)

In this account some of the details mentioned in other *sūrah*s are left out. The angels greet Abraham with a message of peace as they enter, but he tells them he is apprehensive about them. The *sūrah* does not mention the reason for his fear, nor does it mention that he placed a roasted calf before them, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd. There we are told: *"When he saw that their hands did not reach out to it, he felt their conduct strange and became apprehensive of them."* (11: 70) The point of emphasis here is that God's grace is always bestowed on God's servants, as made clear by His messengers. Hence the details of Abraham's story are of little importance. *"They said: 'Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge.'" (Verse 53)* The *sūrah* outlines this happy news without much detail of what else took place.

Here also we have Abraham's reply, without mentioning his wife and her intervention in the discussion that ensued: *"Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?'" (Verse 54)* First Abraham feels it unlikely that he would be given a son at his old age, particularly with his wife also being old and barren as mentioned in other *sūrah*s. Therefore, the angels remind him of the truth: *"They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.'" (Verse 55)* Abraham immediately returns to his normal hopeful self, stating that he never lost hope of God's grace: *"He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's grace?'" (Verse 56)*

Here we note a reference to God's grace in Abraham's reply, which fits with the beginning. An emphasis is also placed here on the fact that only those who go far astray despair of God's grace. They go far away from the road God has laid down for people to traverse, so they do not feel His mercy, compassion and care which He bestows on all His servants. On the other hand, a person whose heart is full of faith will never despair of God's grace, no matter what hardship and difficulties he is called on to endure. Even in the thickness of darkness and the gloom of adversity, they feel that God's grace is close at hand. It will never fail to be bestowed. God has the power to initiate the causes and bring about the results, changing the present and the future.

As Abraham feels reassured he becomes eager to know the purpose they have been sent to accomplish: "[Abraham] said: 'What is your business, you [heavenly] messengers?' They replied: 'We are sent to a guilty nation, except for Lot's household, all of whom we shall save, except for his wife. We have decreed that she should remain with those who stay behind.'" (Verses 57-60) The account we have here does not refer to Abraham's argument on behalf of Lot and his people, as mentioned in *Sūrah Hūd*. Instead, it moves on quickly from the angels' information to the realization of their mission. Abraham believes that God will bestow His grace on Lot and his household, with the exception of Lot's wife. Thus the business the angels have with Abraham is accomplished, and they proceed towards completion of their mission.

When All Values Are of Little Value

And when the messengers [of God] came to the house of Lot, he said: 'You are unknown here.' They answered: 'No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed. Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded.' And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will be wiped out by the morning. (Verses 61-66)

As indicated earlier, the *sūrah* states that the angels immediately reveal their true identity to Lot and that they have come to accomplish what his people disputed about their punishment for their misdeeds. That punishment comes in fulfilment of God's warnings, confirming the fact that when angels are sent to a community, their punishment is immediate.

"He said: 'You are unknown here.'" (Verse 62) He said this in irritation, as he was fully aware of the habits of his people and expected what they would try to do with his guests. He was a stranger among his people, and they were arrogant in their

immorality. Hence he tells his guests that it is unwise of them to come to a city when the reputation of its people is well known. *"They answered: 'No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed.'"* (Verses 63-64) All these assertions serve to tell us the extent of Lot's alarm and distress, as he wants to be hospitable yet also protect his guests against the designs of his people. Hence, they reassure him time after time, before giving him his instructions: *"Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded."* (Verse 65) Thus Lot was to leave the town by night, before the break of dawn. He was to walk behind those who would be saved with him to make sure that no one was left behind, and no one looked behind, like displaced people unwilling to leave their homeland.

"And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will be wiped out by the morning." (Verse 66) It is God, then, who has revealed to Lot this very serious piece of news, which is expressed in the Qur'an as the last one of those people would be destroyed by the morning. Well, if the last of them is destroyed, it follows that the whole lot are destroyed, with none spared. Hence, caution must be exercised, so that no one is left behind to suffer the fate which was sure to engulf the whole city.

The *sūrah* relates this part of the story first because it is more suited to its overall theme. It now fills in the details of what happened earlier when Lot's people heard that a number of handsome young men were visiting him. To them, that was a chance not to be missed: *"The people of the city came [to Lot] rejoicing."* (Verse 67)

The way this is expressed portrays to what low and abhorrent level those people had sunk in their eagerness to fulfil their perverse, uncontrolled desires. This is shown in the fact that the townsfolk came in a group, rejoicing at the presence of young men, openly declaring their intent to rape them in broad daylight. This shameful publicity of their wicked intentions, in addition to the filthy action itself, is so abhorrent and repulsive that we cannot imagine it, but it was certainly true. An individual may harbour some perverted desire, but he conceals the fact and tries to satisfy his perversion in secret. He is ashamed if others know of it. In fact, sound human nature prefers to keep such desire private even when it is with one's legitimate wife. Some animal species do not mate in public. But those wicked and evil people declare their lust shamelessly, come seeking it in groups, and rejoice as they expect to fulfil it. This is unparalleled perversion.

On the other side we see the Prophet Lot in distress, standing up to defend his guests and his honour. He tries to awaken in his people a sense of honour and fear of God. But he knew full well that they had no fear of God, and that such perverted natures would not respond to any compassionate, humanitarian appeal. Yet in his

distress he tries every avenue: *“Said he: ‘These are my guests: so do not put me to shame. Fear God and do not bring disgrace on me.’”* (Verses 68-69) But his appeal awakens no feeling of honour or integrity. They had lost all such feelings. Instead, they rebuke Lot for entertaining any man as a guest, as if he is the offender by offering them the temptation: *“They replied: ‘Have we not forbidden you to entertain any people?’”* (Verse 70)

Lot continues with his attempts, pointing out the proper line of desire, i.e. the other sex. It is women who hold natural attraction for men to satisfy their sexual urge, so that procreation continues and human life is preserved. *“He said: ‘Here are these daughters of mine [to marry], if you must do [what you intend to do].’”* (Verse 71)

Lot, a prophet, does not offer his daughters in any adulterous relationship. He simply reminds the menfolk of the natural way to satisfy their urge. He knew that if they responded to his appeal they would not want to be adulterous. Hence, his offer sought recourse to their human nature, if only it would respond. But that was unlikely.

The *sūrah* portrays the scene with all the action taking place. At this moment, the mode of expression changes into an address to the Prophet who is observing it all. This takes the form of an oath, following the traditional method of Arabic emphasis: *“By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness.”* (Verse 72) This describes a state that had become part of their nature. In that state they were unlikely ever to wake up or listen to appeals based on personal integrity, fear of God or uncorrupted human nature. Hence they were doomed and God’s punishment was to engulf them without delay: *“We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite.”* (Verse 8)

Now we face a scene of total destruction, two towns in complete ruin with particular features that are suited to the perverted natures of their dwellers: *“By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness, when the blast [of punishment] overtook them at sunrise, and We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay.”* (Verses 72-74)

The Fate of Erring Communities

The towns were ruined by a natural phenomenon which seems similar to that of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which are sometimes accompanied by earth subsidence and a showering of stones. Sometimes complete villages and towns are so immersed. It is said that the Dead Sea was formed after this event, which witnessed the sinking of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the surface of the earth collapsed forming a lake that was later filled with water. We will not try to explain their particular punishment as an earthquake or a volcano, for our approach is based

instead on complete faith that does not admit such explanations.

We know for certain that all natural phenomena operate in accordance with a law that God has laid down for the universe. But no phenomenon or event occurs on the basis of inevitability. It occurs in fulfilment of God's will, which applies particularly to that situation. There is no conflict between the operation of God's law and the need for an act of God's will for every event. We also know for certain that in some cases God, in His wisdom, accomplishes a particular will of His through a certain event, in order to serve a certain purpose. What destroyed Lot's townships need not be an ordinary earthquake or volcano. God might have willed to inflict on them whatever scourge He might have chosen, at the time of His choice and by the method He determined. That is the approach to explain, on the basis of faith, all miraculous events that took place at the times of all prophets.

Those towns were on a road regularly traversed between Arabia and Syria. They contain good lessons for those who wish to learn from the end that befell earlier communities which defied and rejected God's messengers. But such lessons are of benefit only to those who are prepared to learn from them: *"Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still. In all this there is a sign for true believers."* (Verses 75-77) Thus the warning came true. The sending of the angels was a signal for God's punishment which no one can prevent or avoid.

The same applied to the communities of the Prophets Shu`ayb and Ṣāliḥ: *"The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan] were also wrongdoers, and so We punished them. Both these [communities] lived by an open highway, plain to see."* (Verses 78-79) The Qur`ān gives detailed accounts of the history of the Prophet Shu`ayb and his people in other *sūrahs*. Here we have only a reference to the injustice they were keen to perpetrate, and to their punishment. This comes as confirmation of God's punishment. As indicated at the beginning of the *sūrah*, when the time appointed for any community lapses, their punishment is inevitable if they persist in their rejection of God's messages. The city of Madyan and the wooded dales inhabited by Shu`ayb's people were not far from Lot's townships. The reference in the dual form, 'both', here may mean Madyan and the wooded lands, which were on a clearly marked road. Or it may mean the townships of Lot already mentioned and Shu`ayb's city of Madyan. They may be grouped together as they lie on the same road between Hijaz in today's Saudi Arabia and Syria. The doom that befalls cities and townships flourishing along a well traversed road provides a great reminder as it becomes a lesson to all that pass by. Life continues all around these towns which once flourished, but now lie in ruin.

The people of al-Ĥijr are the community to whom the Prophet Ṣāliḥ was sent. Their land lies in between Hijaz and Syria. Its ruins are still seen today, because they used to build their dwellings in the mountains, cutting space for themselves there.

This indicates a high level of progress and civilization, as well as recognized power: *“Likewise, the people of al-Ĥijr also denied [God’s] messengers.”* The fact is that those people only rejected the message of the Prophet Ṣāliḥ, but he was certainly a representative of all God’s messengers. When they denied him, they belied all messengers.

“We have given them Our signs, but they turned their backs on them.” (Verse 81)

Ṣāliḥ’s special miraculous sign was the she-camel who had an equal share of water to drink as the whole town with all its cattle. But the signs available in the universe are numerous, and so are God’s signs within ourselves. All of these are there for people to look upon and contemplate. God did not only give them the preternatural sign which Ṣāliḥ brought them, but instead they turned away from all God’s signs. No reasonable person was ready to contemplate them and reflect on the message they carried.

“Out of the mountains did they hew their dwellings, leading a life of security. But the blast [of punishment] overtook them at early morning. Of no avail to them was all that they had acquired.” (Verses 82-84) What we have here is a very quick move from the secure dwellings carved out in the mountains, to a blast that overwhelms them all, leaving nothing of what they earned, acquired or built. They are destroyed suddenly. This scene touches our hearts violently. No people feel more secure than those who hew their dwellings out of mountainous rocks. No community feels more at ease than early in the morning as the sun rises and sends its warming rays. But the people of Ṣāliḥ are overwhelmed by a blast at that very tranquil moment in their very secure dwellings. They lost everything. Nothing could protect them, for no fortress is immune from God’s punishment. The blast, which was the sound of storms, or a thunderbolt, destroys them all.

Thus the scenes of punishment portrayed in very quick flashes come to an end. They show us how God’s law is fulfilled, and how the people who reject God’s messages are destroyed when their time is over. The end of this passage is seen to be in perfect harmony with the ending of the previous three passages. They all emphasize that God’s law always operates, and His promises and warnings always come true.

5

Keeping to the Path of Truth

It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. (85)

Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator. (86)

We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur'an. (87)

Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things We have granted to some among them, and do not grieve on their account, but spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers, (88)

and say: 'I am indeed the plain warner.' (89)

Just as We have bestowed from on high on those who later broke it into parts, (90)

and declare the Qur'an to be a confused medley. (91)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا
بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَأَتِيَةٌ
فَأَصْفَحْ الصَّفْحَ الْجَمِيلَ ﴿٨٥﴾

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْخَلْقُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَاكَ سَبْعًا مِّنَ الْمَثَانِي
وَالْقُرْءَانَ الْعَظِيمَ ﴿٨٧﴾

لَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ
أَزْوَاجًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَاخْفِضْ
جَنَاحَكَ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

وَقُلْ إِنِّي - أَنَا النَّذِيرُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٨٩﴾

كَمَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَى الْمُقْتَسِمِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

الَّذِينَ جَعَلُوا الْقُرْءَانَ عِضِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

But, by your Lord, We will call them all to account (92)

for whatever they have done. (93)

Therefore, proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God. (94)

We shall suffice you against all who deride [this message] — all (95)

who claim that there are other deities beside God. They shall certainly come to know. (96)

We know that you are distressed by what they say. (97)

But extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, (98)

and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you. (99)

فَوَرَبِّكَ لَنَسْأَلَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾

عَمَّا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

فَأَصْدَعْ بِمَا تُؤْمَرُ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ
الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾

إِنَّا كَفَيْنَاكَ الْمُسْتَهْزِئِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾

الَّذِينَ تَجْعَلُونَ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ
فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ يَضِيقُ صَدْرُكَ بِمَا
يَقُولُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَكُن مِّنَ السَّاجِدِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾

وَأَعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ ﴿٩٩﴾

Overview

The general laws which govern life and the universe, communities and messages, right guidance and error, destiny, reckoning and reward are laws that never fail. Every passage in the *sūrah* ended with the confirmation of one of these laws or describing some aspects of it as it pertained to different situations. These laws testify to the inherent wisdom in every type of God's creation, and to the essential truth on which all creation is based.

Now in this final passage of the *sūrah* we have a statement outlining the great truth which is manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is

in between them, and the nature of the Hour which is certain to come. It is also manifested in the nature of the message preached by God's messengers and brought to its complete fulfilment in the message given to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). These are all grouped together within the framework of the great truth which manifests itself in them all. This great truth, which is essential to all creation, originates with God, the Creator of the universe: *"Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator."* (Verse 86)

Hence the truth will establish itself, and the message that is derived from the great truth will continue along its way, and the advocate of the truth should continue his efforts, ignoring the idolaters who ridicule his message: *"Proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God."* (Verse 94) God's laws will continue to operate without fail, relying on the great truth which originates with the All-Knowing Creator. This provides the grand finale of the *sūrah*.

Seven Verses of Special Standing

"It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator." (Verses 8 5-86) The comment stating the truth which sustains the heavens and the earth, and which was the basis of their creation has great significance. It is given in a remarkable expression. Let us look at what this verse implies: *"It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them."* (Verse 85) It implies that the truth is central to the design, structure and management of the universe, central to its destiny and the destiny of all that it contains.

This means that the universe has not been created as an act of idle play, nor has there been in its design and origin any element of deception, fraud or falsehood. Whatever evil there is in it, is incidental, and not an essential ingredient. Moreover, the truth is genuine in its constitution. That it is made of the constituent elements making it up is true. There is no trickery or deception. The laws that govern these elements and bring them together are also part of the truth which is firm, constant, unchanging. It is immune to any vain desire, defect or conflict. The truth is also deep in the management of the universe. It is on the basis of the truth that its affairs are conducted, according to those laws that follow the truth and justice. Besides, the truth determines its destiny. Every result occurs in accordance with its just and constant laws. Any change in the heavens and the earth is accomplished in accordance with the truth and for the truth. Every reward is based on absolute truth, without favouritism.

This provides a link between the truth which is the basis of the creation of the

heavens and the earth and the Last Hour which is most certain to come at its appointed time. This Last Hour is a part of the truth which sustains the universe. This means that the Hour itself is true and it will come to establish the truth.

"Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance." (Verse 85) Do not allow grudges and ill-feelings to remain in your heart. The truth will certainly triumph. *"Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator."* (Verse 86) He knows who and what He has created. In fact all creation is originated by Him, which, by necessity means that the truth is of its essence, and that everything in it will return to the truth from which it originated. That truth is essential in all creation. Whatever differs with it is false and incidental. Hence it will disappear, leaving the great solid truth well established in the conscience of the whole universe.

Closely linked to this great truth is the message preached by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and the Qur'ān revealed to him: *"We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur'ān."* (Verse 87) The Arabic term, *mathānī*, translated here as 'the oft-repeated verses' refers to the opening *sūrah*, al-Fātiḥah, composed of seven short verses. This is the more probable meaning of the term, although some commentators maintain that it refers to the seven longest *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. These seven verses are often repeated as they are required to be read in every prayer, and they extol God's praises, which is a term derived from the same root as *mathānī*. The term, 'this sublime Qur'ān', refers to the rest of the Qur'ānic revelations.

What is important to note here is that this statement comes immediately after mentioning the creation of the heavens and the earth on the basis of the truth and the certainty of the Last Hour. This suggests a very close link between the Qur'ān and the truth that forms the basis of the existence of the universe and the coming of the Last Hour. Indeed the Qur'ān is part of that truth, as it refers to the laws of creation, draws people's attention to them, points out the signs God has placed in their own creation and in the expanse of the universe, and urges people to recognize and respond to these. Furthermore, it points out the reasons which make people follow right guidance or go astray, the destiny of the truth and falsehood, good and evil. It then belongs to the truth and helps to illuminate it. It is as well established as the truth that forms the basis for the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is also as constant as the laws of existence and is linked to them. The Qur'ān is by no means a fleeting incidence or something that is certain to disappear. It remains influential in the direction and conduct of human life, whatever liars may say, and long as the followers of falsehood may deride it. Indeed falsehood is the incidental element that is certain to disappear.

The man who has been given these oft-repeated verses and the sublime Qur'ān which is derived from, and linked to, the great truth will not allow his eyes to hanker

after some pleasures of this life that are certain to come to an end. Nor will he worry about the destiny of stray people or care about what happens to them. He continues to follow the way of truth: *“Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things We have granted to some among them, and do not grieve on their account, but spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers, and say: “I am indeed the plain warner.”* (Verses 88-89)

“Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things...” Literally, the instruction given to the Prophet is that he must not stretch his eyes towards such enjoyments. Yet it is not the eye that is stretched, but rather the eyesight. However, the picturesque style of the Qur’ān depicts the eye itself as being stretched. It is a funny picture when we imagine it. What it means is that the Prophet should not care about the pleasures that God has allowed some people, men and women, to enjoy as part of the test they have to go through. He should not even give them much importance, or care what they do, or wish for something similar to what they enjoy. All this is of little consequence. He has the everlasting truth in those seven oft-repeated verses and the sublime Qur’ān.

When the Prophet is in Distress

This remark is sufficient to contrast the great truth and favours God’s Messenger has with the little enjoyment that glitters despite its being of little consequence. This is followed by a directive to the Prophet to ignore those lost in their worldly enjoyments and to care only for the believers. For these are the ones who follow the truth which he preaches, the truth which sustains the heavens and the earth and all that is in between. The other group follow falsehood which is incidental in the universe, not part of its design.

“And do not grieve on their account.” (Verse 88) You must not trouble yourself over their miserable fate which is dictated by God’s justice and by the great truth. You should leave them to face the truth. On the other hand, the Prophet is told to show kindness to the believers. The Qur’ān expresses this sentence in a figurative way, telling the Prophet to *“spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers.”* (Verse 88) This is an image denoting gentle treatment and good care of the believers. The Prophet is also instructed to say: *“I am indeed the plain warner.”* This is the essential method of advocating the divine message. The warning is mentioned here on its own without adding the rejoinder of giving good and happy news. The warning is more suited here as the context mentions those who deride the truth, indulge in their worldly enjoyments and never contemplate the truth which is the basis of both the divine message and the existence of the universe.

“And say: ‘I am indeed the plain warner.’” (Verse 89) This is the word every messenger has said to his people, including those who remain from old communities

to whom messengers were sent with a reminder similar to the one Muḥammad (peace be upon him) brought. Among such people in Arabia were some Christians and Jews who were not ready to accept the Qur'ān with complete submission. They accepted parts of it and rejected others, as their prejudice dictated. These are the ones whom God describes here as the ones who break [God's revelation] into parts.

"Just as We have bestowed from on high on those who later broke it into parts, and declare the Qur'ān to be a confused medley. But, by your Lord, We will call them all to account for whatever they have done." (Verses 90-93) This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation, but the Qur'ān addresses mankind generally. These were human beings who divided the Qur'ān into parts, and they are responsible for their actions. The Qur'ān has served a clear warning on them, as did their own scriptures. The Qur'ān and the Prophet were not unfamiliar to them. God had formerly revealed scriptures to them. Therefore, they should have received the new revelations with acceptance and submission.

At this point the address turns directly to the Prophet, instructing him to continue along the way defined for him, proclaiming what God has commanded him to convey to people. Making the proclamation is described in Arabic as, *iṣḍā`*, a term which also means 'break', to denote a strong and solid stand. He must not be deterred from making such a proclamation or be deflected from his way by the unbelief of an idolater or the ridicule of those who deride his message. God will protect him against these: *"Proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God. We shall suffice you against all who deride [this message] – all who claim that there are other deities beside God. They shall certainly come to know."* (Verses 94-96)

The Prophet is a human being who cannot help but be distressed when he hears people ascribing divinity to beings other than God, or deriding his message. He is eager to defend the truth and his message, and is upset at all the falsehood and idolatry around him. He is, therefore, instructed to glorify his Lord and praise Him. Such glorification and worship will shield him against the evil he hears. Hence he should not stop praising his Lord and extolling His glory until that which is absolutely certain, i.e. death, arrives and he is gathered to His Lord: *"We know that you are distressed by what they say. But extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you."* (Verses 97-99)

Thus the finale of this *sūrah* is an instruction to turn away from the unbelievers, and seek God's protection. As for the unbelievers themselves, there will come to them a day when they will wish they had submitted themselves to God.

Proclaiming the truth of this faith of Islam and making clear all of its components and requirements are a necessary part of its advocacy. A strong proclamation will shake an inactive human nature and awaken placid feelings. It will also put the

argument clear for people to consider, “so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth.” (8: 42) A soft approach which requires an advocate of Islam to declare one part of it and conceal another, so as not to offend tyrants or alienate the masses, is contrary to the correct line of advocacy of this powerful message.

A strong proclamation of this truth means neither rigidity nor rudeness, nor the adoption of an insensitive or impolite manner. Nor does a gentle approach mean too subtle a method or the concealment of any aspect of faith, cutting the Qur’ān into parts. Good proclamation means stating all the facts about the Islamic faith clearly and plainly, but with wisdom and friendly address that shows a preference for ease over hardship.

It is not the role of Islam to achieve a *modus vivendi* with the un-Islamic states and situations that prevail on earth. This was not its role when it was first revealed, and it will never be its role at any time. An un-Islamic situation is one that turns away from submission to God alone and ignores the code of living God has chosen for mankind. It seeks to derive its laws, regulations, traditions, standards and values from a source other than the divine source. Islam, on the other hand, is a message which aims to turn people from a state of *jāhiliyyah* and ignorance into submission to God alone. This is the great truth which must be proclaimed clearly by the advocates of Islam, even in the face of persecution by tyrants and rejection by the masses: “We know that you are distressed by what they say. But extol your Lord’s limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you.” (Verses 97-99)