

SŪRAH 18

Al-Kahf

(The Cave)

Prologue

The most important thing to be noted about this *sūrah* is its preponderant narration of events that took place in the past. First we have the story of the sleepers in the cave, followed by that of the man with two gardens, then a reference to Adam and Satan. In the middle of the *sūrah* we see what happened between Moses and the pious man, and at the end there is an account of Dhu'l-Qarnayn. These stories form the major part of the *sūrah*, taking 71 out of its 110 verses. Most of the remaining verses comment on the stories and outline the lessons to be learnt from them. In addition, the *sūrah* also contains some scenes of the Day of Judgement, and others drawn from human life to explain an idea or emphasize a concept. In all these, we see examples of the Qur'ānic method of emphasizing its ideas through vivid imagery.

The central theme in the *sūrah*, to which all its accounts and ideas relate, is to purge faith of all alien concepts. It seeks to establish correct and accurate thought and reasoning, as also establish values that are sound according to the criterion of the Islamic faith.

Purging faith of alien concepts is determined both at the outset and conclusion. The *sūrah* opens with these verses: *“All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward which continues to be theirs forever. Furthermore, it warns those who assert, ‘God has taken to Himself a son.’*

No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter." (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* concludes with: *"Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as partner."* (Verse 110) Thus the *sūrah* begins and ends with declaring God's oneness, rejecting any concept that associates partners with God, accepting revelation as true, and making a clear and absolute distinction between God and other beings.

The *sūrah* touches on this theme several times, in various ways. As it relates the history of the sleepers in the cave, those young believers are quoted as saying: *"Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity!"* (Verse 14) In its commentary on their story, the *sūrah* says: *"No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule."* (Verse 26)

As it relates the story of the man with two gardens, the *sūrah* quotes the argument of the believer as he says to his friend: *"Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall associate with my Lord."* (Verses 37-38) In the final commentary on this story, the *sūrah* includes: *"He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome."* (Verses 43-44)

As it draws one of the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* says: *"One day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them."* (Verse 52) And in comment on another scene the *sūrah* says: *"Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers."* (Verse 102)

The establishment of clear and accurate thought and reasoning is made manifest in the rejection of the claims of all those who associate partners with God, because they assert what they do not know. They have no evidence to prove what they claim. The *sūrah* also directs human beings to make their judgement only on what they know for certain. What they do not know, they should leave to God to determine. Thus at the beginning of the *sūrah* we have the verse stating: *"It warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself son.' No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers."* (Verses 4-5)

The sleepers in the cave are quoted as saying: *"These people of ours have taken for*

worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their belief." (Verse 15) When they wonder how long they have been in that state of sleep, they leave the issue to God who has perfect knowledge of everything: "They said: Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus." (Verse 19) The story also includes clear disapproval of those who speak about the number of the sleepers, relying only on guesswork: "Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.'" (Verse 22)

In the story of Moses and the pious man, the latter reveals to him at the end the secret behind each of his apparently wild and unreasonable actions to which Moses had objected. He says to Moses that it was all done "by your Lord's grace. I did not do any of this of my own accord." (Verse 82) Thus all issues and situations are attributed to God alone.

The main purpose of the *sūrah* is to make faith the basis for the evaluation of concepts, ideas, practices and values. This is shown in various places. All proper and good values are attributed to faith and good action. Any other value which does not have its basis in faith is unworthy, even though it may seem highly attractive. All that appears fascinating and beautiful in this life is meant as a test. It will all come to an end: "We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust." (Verses 7-8) To be under God's protection is to be in a wide and comfortable environment, even though one may have to seek refuge in a narrow and barren cave. Those young believers who abandoned their community and went to the cave are clear about their purpose: "Now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs." (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, requiring him to persevere and be patient, associating with those who believe, paying no regard to the adornments of this world or to those who overlook their duty towards God: "Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.'" (Verses 28-29)

The story of the two gardens and their owner portrays how a believer is proud of

his faith, valuing it as much higher than wealth, position or luxury. A believer states the truth clearly to his arrogant friend and reproaches him for forgetting God: *“Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. If only you said as you entered your garden, “Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power except with God!” Although, as you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you, yet it may well be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that you will never be able to find it.”* (Verses 37-41)

Once this story has been told, the *sūrah* then depicts this present life and how it is prone to rapid change. Wealth and prosperity are soon replaced by something totally different: *“Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things.”* (Verse 45) This is followed by a clear statement showing the difference between transitory values and everlasting ones: *“Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord’s sight, and a far better source of hope.”* (Verse 46)

Dhu’l-Qarnayn is not mentioned in the *sūrah* for his being an angel, but rather because of his good deeds. When the people he found in between the two mountain passes offered him money to build a barrier to protect them against Gog and Magog, he declined because: *“That with which my Lord has established me is better”* than anything you could give me. And when the barrier has been erected, he acknowledges that it was all done by God’s help, not by his own power: *“This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord’s promise always comes true.”* (Verse 98)

At the end of the *sūrah*, the fact is stated that the worst losers among all creatures are those who refuse to believe in God’s revelations or in the fact of meeting Him on the Day of Judgement. Such people will have no weight and no position or status, despite the fact that they believe themselves to be doing well: *“Say: Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord’s revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day.”* (Verses 103-105)

Thus we see that the pivot round which the whole *sūrah* turns is that of purging faith of all false concepts, providing sound reasoning and establishing correct values on the basis of faith.

The whole *sūrah* concentrates on these three purposes, round after round. It begins by praising God who has revealed to His servant this book which serves to give happy news to the believers and stern warnings to those who allege that God has betaken to Himself a son. It states clearly that whatever we find on earth is made a sort of adornment only to make it a test for human beings. It will all vanish into nothing. This is followed by the story of the sleepers in the cave, which serves as a good example of making the right choice, giving preference to faith over worldly pleasures and comforts. For the sleepers seek refuge in the cave to keep their faith intact.

The second stage directs the Prophet to content himself with the company of those who appeal to their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. He should abandon those who neglect to remember God. The story of the two gardens and their owner shows clearly how a believer feels his strength in his faith while the values of this world mean nothing to him.

The third stage includes several interlinked scenes of the Day of Judgement, as well as a reference to Adam and Satan. It concludes with an explanation of the rule which results in the destruction of oppressors, while treating sinners with mercy and allowing them respite until their appointed term.

The story of Moses and the pious man forms the fourth stage, while the fifth gives an account of Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Then the *sūrah* finishes as it began: giving happy news to the believers and more warnings to the unbelievers. It reaffirms the fact of revelation and emphasizes anew the truth of God's oneness without any partner.

1

A Distinctive System of Values

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, (1)

unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself, and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward (2)

which continues to be theirs forever. (3)

Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' (4)

No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter. (5)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ
وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا ۝١

قِيمًا لِيُنذِرَ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِمَّنْ لَدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرَ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ
أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ۝٢

مَكْتَبِينَ فِيهِ أَبَدًا ۝٣

وَيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ وَلَدًا ۝٤

مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا لِآبَائِهِمْ كَبُرَتْ
كَلِمَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ أَفْوَاهِهِمْ ۝٥
يَقُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا ۝٦

Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message? (6)

We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; (7)

and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust. (8)

Do you think that the People of the Cave and the inscription were a wonder among Our signs? (9)

When those youths took refuge in the cave, they said: 'Our Lord! Bestow on us Your grace, and provide for us right guidance in our affair.' (10)

So We drew a veil over their ears in the cave, for a number of years, (11)

and then We awakened them so that We might mark out which of the two parties managed to calculate the time they had remained in that state. (12)

We shall relate to you their story in all truth. They were young men who believed in their Lord, so We increased them in guidance. (13)

فَلَعَلَّكَ بَخِيعُ نَفْسِكَ عَلَىٰ ءَاثَرِهِمْ إِن لَّمَّ
يُؤْمِنُوا بِهِذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا ﴿٦﴾

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لِّهَا
لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ﴿٧﴾

وَإِنَّا لَجَاعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيْهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا ﴿٨﴾

أَمْ حَسِبْتَ أَنَّ أَصْحَابَ الْكَهْفِ وَالرَّقِيمِ
كَانُوا مِن ءَايَاتِنَا عَجَبًا ﴿٩﴾

إِذْ أَوْى الْفِتْيَةُ إِلَى الْكَهْفِ فَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا
ءَاتِنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا
رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَىٰ ءَاذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ
سِنِينَ عَدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحَزِينِ أَحْصَىٰ
لِمَا لَبِثُوا أَمَدًا ﴿١٢﴾

حُنُّ نَقْصُ عَلَيْكَ نَبَأَهُم بِالْحَقِّ ؕ إِنَّهُمْ
فِتْيَةٌ ؕ ءَامَنُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ وَزِدْنَاهُمْ هُدًى ﴿١٣﴾

We put courage in their hearts, so that they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity!' (14)

These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs. Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God? (15)

Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.' (16)

You might have seen the sun, on its rising, incline away from their cave on the right, and, on its setting, turn away from them on the left, while they lay in a space within. That was one of God's signs. He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out

وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا
رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَنْ نَدْعُوَ مِنْ
دُونِهِ إِلَهًا لَقَدْ قُلْنَا إِذَا شَطَطًا ﴿١٤﴾

هَتُّؤُلَاءِ قَوْمَنَا أَنَّ نَحْنُ مِنْ دُونِهِ ءِ إِلَهَةٌ
لَوْلَا يَأْتُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِسُلْطٰنٍ بَيِّنٍ فَمَنْ
أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِذِ اعْتَرَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ
فَأْوَدَّا إِلَى الْكَهْفِ يَنْشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ
رَحْمَتِهِ وَيُهَيِّئْ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَمْرِكُمْ مِرفَقًا



﴿١٦﴾ وَتَرَى الشَّمْسَ إِذَا طَلَعَتْ تَزَّوُّرُ عَنْ
كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَتْ
تَقَرَّبُ إِلَيْهِمْ ذَاتَ الشِّمَالِ وَهُمْ فِي فَجْوَةٍ
مِّنْهُ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ ءَايَاتِ اللَّهِ لَعَلَّ مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ
فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِ وَمَنْ يُضِلِّ فَلَنْ تَجِدَ لَهُ

the right way. (17)

You would have thought that they were awake, when they were certainly asleep. And We turned them over repeatedly, now to the right, now to the left; and their dog lay at the cave's entrance, with its forepaws outstretched. Had you come upon them, you would have certainly turned away from them in flight, and would surely have been filled with terror of them. (18)

Such being their state, We awakened them; and they began to question one another. One of them asked: 'How long have you remained thus?' They answered: 'We have remained thus a day, or part of a day.' They said: 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it. But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. (19)

For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in which case you would never attain to any good! (20)

وَلِيًّا مُرْشِدًا ﴿١٧﴾

وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ أَيْقَاظًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ ۚ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمْ
ذَاتَ الَّتِيْمِيْنِ وَذَاتَ الشِّمَالِ ۗ وَكَلْبُهُمْ
بَسِطٌ ذِرَاعِيْهِ بِالْوَصِيْدِ ۗ لَوْ اَطَّلَعَتْ
عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلَّيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَلَمَلِئْتَ مِنْهُمْ
رُعبًا ﴿١٨﴾

وَكَذٰلِكَ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِيَتَسَاءَلُوْا بَيْنَهُمْ
قَالَ قَابِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ ۗ قَالُوْا لَبِثْنَا
يَوْمًا اَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ۗ قَالُوْا رَبُّكُمْ اَعْلَمُ بِمَا
لَبِثْتُمْ ۗ فَابْعَثُوْا اَحَدَكُمْ بِوَرِقِكُمْ هٰذِهٖ
اِلَى الْمَدِيْنَةِ فَلْيَنْظُرْ اَيُّهَا اَزْكٰى طَعَامًا
فَلْيَاْتِكُمْ بِرِزْقٍ مِّنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا
يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ اَحَدًا ﴿١٩﴾

اِنَّهُمْ اِنْ يَّظْهَرُوْا عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْجُمُوْكُمْ اَوْ
يُعِيْدُوْكُمْ فِيْ مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَنْ تُفْلِحُوْا اِذَا
اَبَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

وَكَذٰلِكَ اَعْرَضْنَا عَنْهُمْ لِيَعْلَمُوْا اَنَّ

In this way have We drawn people's attention to their case, so that they might know that God's promise is true and that there can be no doubt as to the Last Hour. The people disputed among themselves as to what happened to them.

Some of them said: 'Erect a building in their memory. God knows their case best.' Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: 'Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.' (21)

Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: 'My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.' (22)

Never say about anything, 'I shall do this tomorrow,' (23)

without adding, 'if God so wills.' Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind and say, 'I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ حَقُّ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا
إِذْ يَنْتَزِعُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَمْرَهُمْ^ط

فَقَالُوا أَأَبْنَاؤُا عَلَيْهِمُ بَنِينَآ^ط رَبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ
بِهِمْ^ع قَالَ الَّذِينَ غَلَبُوا عَلَىٰ أَمْرِهِمْ
لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيْهِم مَّسْجِدًا ﴿٢١﴾

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةٌ رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ
وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا
بِالْغَيْبِ^ط وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ
كَلْبُهُمْ^ع قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِم مَّا
يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ^ط فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً
ظَهْرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا
﴿٢٢﴾

وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَيْءٍ إِنِّي فَاعِلٌ ذَٰلِكَ
غَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾

إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ^ع وَادِّكُرْ رَبَّكَ إِذَا نَسِيتَ
وَقُلْ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَهْدِيَنِي رَبِّي لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ

this to what is right.' (24)

So they stayed in their cave three hundred years, and [some] add nine years more. (25)

Say: 'God knows best how long they remained there. His alone is the knowledge of the secrets of the heavens and earth. How well does He see and hear! No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule.' (26)

Recite whatever has been revealed to you of your Lord's book. There is nothing that could alter His words. You can find no refuge other than with Him. (27)

هَذَا رَشْدًا ﴿٢٤﴾

وَلَبِثُوا فِي كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِينَ

وَأَزْدَادُوا تِسْعًا ﴿٢٥﴾

قُلِ اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثُوا ۗ لَهُ غَيْبُ
السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَبْصِرَ بِهِ ۖ وَأَسْمِعُ
مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ ۖ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا يُشْرِكُ

فِي حُكْمِهِ ۗ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

وَاتْلُ مَا أُوحِيَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ كِتَابِ رَبِّكَ ۗ
لَا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَاتِهِ ۖ وَلَنْ تَجِدَ مِنْ دُونِهِ

مُلْتَحَدًا ﴿٢٧﴾

A Stern Warning for Outright Liars

The *sūrah* states its case very clearly from the outset:

All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself, and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward which continues to be theirs forever. Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter. Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message? We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust. (Verses 1-8)

This opening speaks of a very straightforward and decisive position. It combines this with praising God and expressing gratitude to Him for revealing the book, i.e. the Qur'ān, to 'His servant', Muḥammad, and for making it clear, free of distortion and absolutely straight. There is nothing in it that may be described as evasive or dodgy. Its purpose is '*to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself*' (Verse 2)

The picture is clear right at the outset. There is no ambiguity or equivocation about the Islamic faith. It is God who has bestowed the book from on high, and He is to be praised for so bestowing it. Muḥammad is God's servant, which means that everyone else is also His servant. God has no son or partner. The book itself is free of distortion and '*unerringly straight*'. The concept of the Qur'ān being straight is given first in the form of negating any possibility of distortion, and then reiterated in describing it as '*unerringly straight*'. This makes for very strong emphasis.

Such clarity is maintained as the purpose of revealing the Qur'ān is outlined. Indeed it has a dual purpose: "*To warn people of a severe punishment from Himself and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward.*" (Verse 2) However, the stern warning is more strongly emphasized throughout. It begins in a general way, speaking of a severe punishment that God Himself may inflict. Then the warning is reiterated for a particular group of people: "*It warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself son.'*" (Verse 4) In between the two warnings we have the happy news given to *believers who do good works.*' This serves as a condition that ensures that faith should have practical evidence in real life. It is not confined to theoretical principles that may be endlessly discussed without effect in practice.

The *sūrah* then moves to expose their false approach by which they judge the most important issue of all, i.e. faith: "*No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers.*" (Verse 5) Theirs is a despicable attitude when they utter such an enormity without proper consideration or real knowledge: "*Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter.*" (Verse 5)

The description here makes use of the sound of the words to add to the impression of horror given to the listeners. It begins with the adjective, 'dreadful', to enhance the anticipation of something totally unacceptable. This is further increased by the inversion used in the sentence. The sound and rhythm of the Arabic original is particularly significant in giving a true sense of the enormity those unbelievers utter. This is brought to its climax in the last sentence which utilizes the form of negation and limitation: "*Nothing but falsehood do they utter.*" (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet in a way that is akin to disapproval of his being saddened by his people's attitude which denies the truth of the Qur'ān. He was pained by their rejection of God's guidance and their insistence on following the way which he knew would lead them to ruin. In a hint of disapproval, the Prophet is

asked: “Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message?” (Verse 6) Would your grief at their rejection of the truth cause you to kill yourself? These people do not deserve that you should feel any sorrow on their account. It is better that you should abandon them.

The Prophet is also reminded that God has made all the comforts and pleasures available on earth, and all riches and offspring, a sort of a test for mankind. The test will prove who of them does good in this life so as to earn its benefit as well as a happy destiny in the life to come: “We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct.” (Verse 7)

God certainly knows the position of every one of His creatures, but he rewards everyone only on the basis of the actions a person takes. It is actual deeds that are rewarded according to their merit. The *sūrah* does not mention here those who do not do good works because the statement is clear with all that it entails.

The eventual outcome of all such adornment that is available on earth is inevitable. The earth will shed it all, and all living things on earth will die. Thus before the Day of Resurrection, the earth will be nothing more than a coarse and lifeless surface: “In time We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust.” (Verse 8) There is a clear element of toughness in the expression and in the scene it portrays. We are faced with an earth that has a desert-like surface with no trace of life over it.

Young Men with Clear Insight

After its brief opening, the *sūrah* speaks about the people of the cave, depicting the effect faith has on believers: giving them reassurance and inner peace. Hence, they prefer it to all material riches and pleasures. When they find it hard to live as believers within their community, they seek refuge in a cave where they receive God’s care and protection and enjoy His grace.

There are countless reports that speak about the sleepers in the cave, and just as many versions of their story. However, we have no use for any of these; we will confine ourselves to what the Qur’ān tells us about them as it is the only source that provides true information. There may be other reports that have found their way into books of commentary on the Qur’ān, but we will disregard all these as they lack proof of authenticity. In this we rely on good counsel, because the *sūrah* contains an order prohibiting all argument concerning the people of the cave and reference to any source other than the Qur’ān in trying to establish the truth about them.

It is reported that the reason for the revelation of this story and that of Dhu’l-Qarnayn, related later in the *sūrah*, is that the Jews persuaded the people of Makkah to put to the Prophet questions concerning them, and also concerning the spirit. It is

also said that the people of Makkah themselves asked the Jews to prepare some questions for them to test whether Muḥammad was a true Prophet. This may be partially or totally true, especially since the account giving the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn begins with, "*They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: I will give you an account of him.*" (Verse 83) But no reference is made to any question about the people of the cave. We leave this point aside and proceed to discuss the story as it is related, since it is clearly relevant to the main theme of the *sūrah*.

The structure of the story begins with a short summary before its narration in detail. It is shown in a series of scenes with some gaps left in between. Nevertheless, all omissions are clearly understood.

The story begins as follows:

Do you think that the people of the cave and the inscription were a wonder among Our signs? When those youths took refuge in the cave, they said: 'Our Lord! Bestow on us Your grace, and provide for us right guidance in our affair.' So We drew a veil over their ears in the cave, for a number of years, and then We awakened them so that We might mark out which of the two parties managed to calculate the time they had remained in that state. (Verses 9-12)

This sums up the whole story showing its main lines and features. We learn from it that the people of the cave were youths, whose number is not mentioned, and that they went to the cave to isolate themselves from their community because they believed in God. We also learn that they were made to sleep in the cave for a number of years, which is not stated here, before they were aroused from their long slumber. We are told of two groups arguing about them, so they were awakened to make clear which of the two groups calculated their stay in the cave better. We are clearly told that, strange as their history is, it is not particularly marvellous among the miracles and signs given by God. Indeed there are numerous things that are much more marvellous and miraculous in the universe than the story of the cave people. Those youths are referred to in the *sūrah* as '*the people of the cave and the inscription*'. A cave is a natural chamber in a mountain or under rocky ground, while the inscription refers, most probably, to the record of their names which was, perhaps, the one hung at the entrance of the cave, where they were eventually found.

After this summary which heightens our interest in the story, the *sūrah* begins by stating that the account about to be given is the whole truth concerning their affair:

We shall relate to you their story in all truth. They were young men who believed in their Lord, so We increased them in guidance. We put courage in their hearts, so that they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an

enormity! These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs. Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God? Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.' (Verses 13-16)

This is the first scene. Those believing youths were increased in guidance in order to be able to manage their affairs with their community. Along with this increased guidance, *"We put courage in their hearts,"* to make them solid in their attitude, firm in their belief in the truth, proud of the faith they had chosen.

Then we are informed that *"they stood up,"* which signifies a movement indicating resolve and firmness. *"They stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth.'" (Verse 14)* He is indeed the Creator, Lord and Sustainer of the whole universe. *"Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him."* (Verse 14) For He is the One without partners of any sort. We make this pledge, because if we were to call upon anyone else, *"we should indeed have uttered an enormity!" (Verse 14)* We would have gone beyond all proper limits and be in total error.

They now turn to the prevailing situation among their people and express their rejection of it. They are clear that what their people do has no foundation whatsoever: *"These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs."* (Verse 15) Indeed any faith should be founded on solid evidence of the truth. Only with such evidence can it have its say to turn people's hearts and minds to its argument. Without such proof, it is utter fabrication. What is worse is that such falsehood is asserted in relation to God Himself: *"Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God?" (Verse 15)*

Up to this point the attitude of the youths appears to be clear, open and straightforward. They are resolute in their adoption of the faith, betraying no hesitation whatsoever. Indeed they are shown to be very strong physically and mentally, and strong in their faith and in their rejection of the way followed by their community.

Here they are talking about two vastly different ways of life. There can be no meeting point between the two, and there can be no participation by these young believers in the life of their community. They had no choice but to flee in order to protect their faith. They are not prophets able to present to their community the true faith, calling on them to accept it. They are simply a group of young people who have been able to discern the right path out of a bleak, unbelieving environment. Should they have stood up in public to declare their faith, they might well not have been able to withstand the pressure on them to abandon it. Nor could they resort to pretence and avoidance, appearing to concur with their people while worshipping

God in secret. Furthermore, it appears that, most probably, their secret was found out. Hence they had no option but to flee, seeking God's protection and support. They preferred life in the cave to all the attractions that their society offered.

Spreading Grace

That is the conclusion of their consultations and they immediately put it into effect: *"Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs."* (Verse 16)

The surprise here is great indeed. These young believers who have abandoned their people and families, forsaking all the pleasures of this life and preferring instead to sleep rough in a small dark cave, begin to sense God's grace. They feel it coming, easy, comforting, abundant, limitless. It is spread over them to change the quality of their life in the cave: *"God may well spread His grace over you."* (Verse 16) Thus, the cave becomes like a wide expanse, where God's grace is bestowed in abundance to change their whole outlook on life and bring about comfort and contentment. The solid, rocky walls of the cave are made to overlook a wide horizon, and loneliness in the cave is totally dispelled, for God has spread His grace over their young hearts and He takes care of them, arranging something for their comfort.

This is an aspect of what faith can do to a person. All appearances undergo a fundamental change. All that people may value and all their concepts with regard to life and happiness do not matter. When a human heart is full of faith, it sees a totally different world, where God's grace imparts reassurance and genuine happiness. Hence whatever turn events may take will be accepted, because the total result is comforting and fitting for one's life in this world and in the life to come: *"God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs."* (Verse 16)

With these young people proceeding to the cave, the story moves on to the next scene. Now we see them settled in the cave, overtaken by sleep:

You might have seen the sun, on its rising, incline away from their cave on the right, and, on its setting, turn away from them on the left, while they lay in a space within. That was one of God's signs. He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out the right way. You would have thought that they were awake, when they were certainly asleep. And We turned them over repeatedly, now to the right, now to the left; and their dog lay at the cave's entrance, with its forepaws outstretched. Had you come upon them, you would have certainly turned away from them in flight, and would surely have been filled with terror of them. (Verses 17-18)

This is a remarkable scene. Not only do we see how the young men looked and what they were doing, we have a picture full of life, with the sun rising, but deliberately moving away from their cave. The word used here, *'inclining away'*, imparts a sense of deliberate action taken for a particular purpose. Again when it is time for the sun to move in the other direction before it sets, it turns away to the left so that their cave remains unseen. All the while, they lay in a space within.

Before completing its description of the scene, the *sūrah* makes a familiar Qur'ānic comment which draws people's attentions to a particular aspect of faith that is relevant at that particular point: *"That was one of God's signs."* (Verse 17) It was indeed a great sign, something highly remarkable. They were put in a cave where they could not see the sun, nor its rays. It gave them neither light nor warmth. They remained in their position, alive but motionless.

"He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out the right way." (Verse 17) There is a certain divine law that determines which people may receive God's guidance and which are left in error. When a person looks at God's signs and accepts what they indicate, that person finds God's guidance in accordance with His law. Hence, he is *'indeed rightly guided.'* (Verse 17) But whoever turns his back on these signs and refuses to understand the message they impart is bound, according to God's law, to go astray. Hence he is left in error and will have none to guide him.

The *sūrah* goes on to show the young people asleep in their cave. They are turned from one side to another in their very long slumber. Anyone looking at them would think them awake when they were fast asleep. Their dog remains at the entrance to the cave, stretching his forepaws like dogs normally do when they rest. He takes the position normally taken by a guard dog. The whole scene would fill any onlooker with terror so as to put them to flight. He would find people looking as though they were awake but in reality were asleep, unable to wake or move. This was all God's arrangement, protecting them, until the time He chose for their awakening.

The Sleepers Awake

Suddenly things change totally:

Such being their state, We awakened them; and they began to question one another. One of them asked: 'How long have you remained thus?' They answered: 'We have remained thus a day, or part of a day.' They said 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it. But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in

which case you would never attain to any good!' (Verses 19-20)

The element of surprise is always used in Qur'ānic stories in order to enhance the effect. Here the scene portrays the youths as they woke after their long slumber. They do not realize how long they have been asleep. They rub their eyes and begin to ask one another about what had happened. One turns to the others asking how long they were asleep for, just like anyone rising after having slept for many hours. He must have felt that this time his sleep was unduly long. The answer he received from his friends is indefinite: *"We have remained thus a day, or part of a day."* (Verse 19)

But then they realize that to determine the length of their sleep is of no consequence. They leave that point aside, just like a believer should do in any matter of no specific importance. They turn to something more practical. They are hungry and have some money which they carried on them when they left home. Their discussion takes a different turn: *"They said: 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it.'"* (Verse 19) The most natural reaction in the circumstances! One is to go to the city to bring back the best food available for them.

They are however in an unusual position, and they have to be extra careful. They must not allow their people to find them out or discover their hiding place. For that would bring certain disaster. The people in authority in the city would stone them to death for their apostasy.

These young men worshipped God alone, associating no partners with Him, while their people were pagans. Hence they were sure to kill them or at least to torture them until they renounced their belief in God and turned back to the faith of their community. These are the only options their people would consider. Hence the young believers re-emphasize their advice to their friend who was going to the city to bring the food: *"But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in which case you would never attain to any good!"* (Verses 19-20) Indeed no one who turns back to unbelief in God and associates partners with Him could ever attain any good result. How could it be possible when he has incurred the greatest loss through disbelieving in God's oneness?

We are given here a panoramic view of the whole scene. The youths are apprehensive, unaware of how much time had lapsed or how many years they had remained in their cave. Indeed generations had passed by, and the city from which they departed had gone through great changes. The tyrants they feared had been removed from power. Yet the story of the young people who had fled in order to maintain their faith had been reported from one generation to another, with people

differing as to their faith and what they believed in, as well as the exact timing of their escape. The awaking sleepers were totally unaware of all these events.

The *sūrah* however allows the curtain to fall over this scene only to raise it again showing a totally different picture, with a time lapse between the two. We understand that the present population of the city believe in God. They are so thrilled to discover the young believers through the one who was sent to fetch food. The people in the city somehow ascertain that he is one of the young men who had fled from the tyranny of the unbelievers a long time ago.

We need to stretch our imaginations somewhat to realize the magnitude of the young men's surprise as they heard from their friend what had happened during their sleep. He assures them that the city has experienced a great change since their departure. There was now nothing in the new society that they could not accept. Indeed all that they had once known in that city was now totally different. They themselves belonged to a generation that had long since gone. To the present people in the city, they were a marvel. Hence they would not be treated like ordinary human beings. They were totally unrelated to the present generation. Their relatives, friends, ties, concerns, feelings, habits and traditions had either been severed or undergone radical change. They were no more than a living memory, not real people. Therefore, God had spared them all that could result from their joining this new generation and thus caused them to die.

All this is left to our imagination. The *sūrah* portrays the final scene, when they are allowed to die. The people are standing outside the cave, disputing among themselves about their faith, and how to preserve their memory for future generations. It moves directly to outline the moral of this remarkable story: *"In this way have We drawn people's attention to their case, so that they might know that God's promise is true and that there can be no doubt as to the Last Hour. The people disputed among themselves as to what happened to them. Some of them said: 'Erect a building in their memory. God knows their case best.' Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: 'Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.'"* (Verse 21)

The lesson here is clear. The end those young people met shows a real, tangible example of how resurrection takes place. The people in the city felt the full impact of resurrection and realized, as they could never have done otherwise, that God's promise in respect of resurrection after death will come true and that the Last Hour is certain to come. This was all seen in the awakening of those sleepers from their long sojourn in the cave.

Some people suggested that they should commemorate them: *"Erect a building in their memory."* (Verse 21) The building thus erected would not determine their faith, as the people who discovered them did not know what faith exactly the sleepers

followed: “*God knows their case best.*” (Verse 21) It is He alone who knows their faith. But the people who enjoyed authority in the city decided differently. “*Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: ‘Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.’*” (Verse 21) That was the way followed by Jews and Christians who erected temples over the graves of their saints and divines. Some Muslims today imitate their action in clear defiance of the Prophet’s teachings. In condemning this practice, the Prophet once said: “*God curses the Jews and the Christians who erect temples at the graves of their prophets and saints.*” [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur’ān]

How Many Were in the Cave?

Again the scene is brought to a close and another is shown with people in debate about the sleepers in the cave. This is only natural as people normally relate reports and news, adding something here and omitting something there. They may invent some details here or there, one generation after another. Thus a simple story is told in different ways as time passes. Hence, dispute about the number of youth in the cave continued for a long time:

Some will say, ‘They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,’ while others will say, ‘Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,’ idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, ‘They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.’ Say: My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.’ (Verse 22)

All such disputes about their number is useless. It is all the same whether they were three, five, seven or even more. Their case is left to God who knows all their details. They were also known to the few who established the facts about the whole event as it took place, or who heard its true report. There is no need, then, to go into any argument about their number, as the moral of their story may be drawn regardless. The Qur’ān directs the Prophet not to engage in any dispute over the issue and not to question any party over their case. This is consistent with the Islamic approach which spares the human mind of all useless debate. A Muslim should not pursue anything that he cannot establish through true knowledge. This event which took place a very long time ago belongs to God’s knowledge which is perfect. Hence, let us leave it there.

On God We Rely

In connection with the prohibition of dispute about unknown events of the past,

an order is given not to pre-judge the future or its events.

It is impossible for man to know what may happen in the future. Hence, he should not give any definite judgement of it:

Never say about anything, 'I shall do this tomorrow,' without adding, 'if God so wills.' Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind and say, 'I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than this to what is right.' (Verses 23-24)

Every action a human being does or omits to do, indeed every breath a human being takes, is subject to God's will. The curtains hiding the future are stretched in full so as to hide everything beyond the present moment. Our eyes cannot discern what is behind that curtain, and our minds are finite, no matter how advanced our knowledge may be. Hence a human being must never say that he is definitely doing something tomorrow unless he attaches his intention to God's will. This is because tomorrow belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. As such, it is known only to God. Hence, we do not make any assertion about it.

This does not mean that man should be fatalistic, giving no thought to the future and making no plans for it. He should not live for the present moment, cutting himself off from his past and future. No, this is not what the directive implies. Rather, what is implied is that every human being must make an allowance for what God may will in his case. He may intend to do whatever he wants, always seeking God's help, feeling that His will is in full control of everything. It may well be however that God may decide something different to what he intends. Should God help him to put into effect what he intends, then all well and good. But if God's will moves in a different direction, he should not despair or be sad. All matters belong to God at the beginning and at the end.

What this means in practice is that every person should think and plan as they wish, but they must always remember to rely on God's help and guidance. They should realize that they only have the faculties of thinking and deliberation God has given them. This should not lead to laziness or disinterestedness. On the contrary, it should give us more strength, confidence, reassurance and resolve. Should events reveal that God's will has moved in a direction different to what we planned, we should accept this with contentedness and reassurance. We submit to God's will, because it is beyond our knowledge until God makes it known.

This is the method Islam instils into the minds of its followers. Hence a Muslim does not feel alone when he plans or thinks of the future. Neither does he show any conceit or arrogance when he succeeds, nor is he overtaken by depression and despair when he fails. In all situations, he remembers God, feeling stronger for relying on Him, expressing gratitude to Him for his success, resigned for whatever

God's will may determine.

"Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind." (Verse 24) This is what a Muslim should do when he forgets to relate his intentions to God's will. He should remember God and renew his reliance on Him. He should also hope to remain always conscious of God, turning to Him in all situations and all future actions, always saying: *"I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than this to what is right."* (Verse 24) This short prayer indicates that it is not so easy to always turn to God in all affairs. Hence the prayer to try always to maintain it and improve on one's situation.

Long Was Their Sleep

With all that has been said and told, we have still not been informed of the duration of the sleepers' stay in their cave. Now we are told for certain:

So they stayed in their cave three hundred years, and [some] add nine years more. Say: 'God knows best how long they remained there. His alone is the knowledge of the secrets of the heavens and earth. How well does He see and hear!' (Verses 25-26)

This is the truth of the length of their stay in the cave, given to us by the One who knows all secrets in the heavens and the earth. Well indeed He sees and hears. Perfect is His knowledge. His statement puts an end to the matter, leaving no room for dispute.

A final comment is added about the whole story in which we see faith in God's oneness clearly apparent in all its details: *"No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule."* (Verse 26) A further comment is added in the form of a directive to the Prophet to recite what God has revealed to him, as it represents the final word, and the truth that admits no falsehood whatsoever. He should seek refuge with Him, for no one can provide any shelter other than He. When the young men of the cave sought His protection, He spread His grace over them and provided them with His guidance:

Recite whatever has been revealed to you of your Lord's book. There is nothing that could alter His words. You shall find no refuge other than with Him. (Verse 27)

Thus ends the story of the people of the cave. It was preceded and intermingled with directives. Indeed stories are given in the Qur'an to add emphasis to such directives. The Qur'an maintains perfect harmony between its directives and the way they are presented in the context of the story.

Faith Based on Free Choice

And contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. (28)

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ
بِالْغَدْوَةِ وَالْعَشيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ ۗ وَلَا
تَعْدُ عَيْنَاكَ عَنْهُمْ تُرِيدُ زِينَةَ الْحَيَاةِ
الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَلَا تُطِعْ مَنْ أَغْفَلْنَا قَلْبَهُ عَن
ذِكْرِنَا وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرْطًا



Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.' For the wrongdoers We have prepared a fire whose billowing folds will encompass them from all sides. If they beg for water, they will be given water [hot] like molten lead, which will scald their faces. Dreadful is the drink, and evil is the place to seek rest. (29)

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۗ فَمَن شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ
وَمَن شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ ۗ إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا
لِلظَّالِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهِمْ سُرَادِقُهَا ۗ وَإِن
يَسْتَعِينُوا يُعَاثُوا بِمَاءٍ كَالْمُهْلِ يَشْوِي
الْوُجُوهَ ۗ بِئْسَ الشَّرَابُ وَسَاءَتْ



As for those who believe and do righteous deeds — We, for certain, do not fail to reward any who perseveres in doing good. (30)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا ۗ



Theirs shall be gardens of perpetual bliss, with rivers rolling at their feet. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of silk and brocade, and they will recline on couches. Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest. (31)

Set forth to them the case of two men, to one of whom We gave two vineyards and surrounded them with date-palms, and placed a field of grain in between. (32)

Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way. In the midst of them We caused a stream to flow. (33)

And so [the man] had fruit in abundance. This man said once to his friend, in the course of a discussion between them, 'More wealth have I than you, and more power and followers.' (34)

And having thus wronged his soul, he went into his garden, saying: 'I do not think that this will ever perish!' (35)

Nor do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if [it does and] I am brought before my Lord, I should surely find there something better than this in exchange.' (36)

أُولَئِكَ هُمْ جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ
تَحْتِهِمُ الْأَنْهَارُ يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ مِنْ
ذَهَبٍ وَيَلْبَسُونَ ثِيَابًا خُضْرًا مِنْ سُندُسٍ
وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ مُتَّكِنِينَ فِيهَا عَلَى الْأَرَائِكِ نِعْمَ
الْثَوَابُ وَحَسُنَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا ﴿٣١﴾

﴿٣٢﴾ وَأَضْرِبْ لَهُمْ مَثَلًا رَجُلَيْنِ جَعَلْنَا
لِأَحَدِهِمَا جَنَّتَيْنِ مِنْ أَعْنَابٍ وَحَفَفْنَاهُمَا
بِنَخْلٍ وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمَا زُرْعًا ﴿٣٣﴾

كِلْتَا الْجَنَّتَيْنِ آتَتْ أُكْلَهَا وَلَمْ تَظْلِمْ مِنْهُ
شَيْئًا وَفَجَّرْنَا خِلْفَهُمَا نَهْرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

وَكَانَ لَهُ ثَمَرٌ فَقَالَ لِصَاحِبِهِ وَهُوَ
يُحَاوِرُهُ أَنَا أَكْثَرُ مِنْكَ مَالًا وَأَعَزُّ نَفَرًا
﴿٣٥﴾

وَدَخَلَ جَنَّتَهُ وَهُوَ ظَالِمٌ لِنَفْسِهِ قَالَ
مَا أَظُنُّ أَنْ تَبِيدَ هَذِهِ أَبَدًا ﴿٣٦﴾

وَمَا أَظُنُّ السَّاعَةَ قَائِمَةً وَلَئِنْ رُدِدْتُ إِلَى

His friend replied in the course of their discussion:
Do you deny Him who has created you out of
dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the
end fashioned you into a man? (37)

But for my part, I believe that He is God, my
Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord.
(38)

If only you said as you entered your garden,
“Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for]
there is no power except with God!” Although, as
you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you,
(39)

yet it may well be that my Lord will give me
something better than your garden, just as He
may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this
[your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren
dust (40)

or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that
you will never be able to find it.’ (41)

So his fruitful gardens were encompassed with
ruin, and there he was, wringing his hands over
all that he had spent on that which now lay
waste, with its trellises caved in; and he could only
say: ‘Would that I had not associated partners
with my Lord!’ (42)

رَبِّي لَأَجِدَنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهَا مُنْقَلَبًا ﴿٣٧﴾

قَالَ لَهُ صَاحِبُهُ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُ أَكَفَرْتَ
بِالَّذِي خَلَقَكَ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ
سَوَّكَ رَجُلًا ﴿٣٨﴾

لَيْكِنَّا هُوَ اللَّهُ رَبِّي وَلَا أُشْرِكُ بِرَبِّي أَحَدًا

﴿٣٩﴾

وَلَوْلَا إِذْ دَخَلْتَ جَنَّتِكَ قُلْتَ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ
لَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ ۚ إِن تَرَنِ أَنَا أَقَلُّ مِنْكَ
مَالًا وَّوَلَدًا ﴿٤٠﴾

فَعَسَى رَبِّي أَنْ يُؤْتِيَنِي خَيْرًا مِّنْ جَنَّتِكَ
وَيُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهَا حُسْبَانًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ
فَتُصْبِحَ صَعِيدًا زَلَقًا ﴿٤١﴾

أَوْ يُصْبِحَ مَأْوَاهَا غَوْرًا فَلَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ لَهُ
طَلَبًا ﴿٤٢﴾

وَأُحِيطَ بِثَمَرِهِ فَأَصْبَحَ يُقَلِّبُ كَفَّيْهِ عَلَى
مَا أَنْفَقَ فِيهَا وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا

He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. (43)

For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome. (44)

Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things. (45)

Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope. (46)

وَيَقُولُ يَلِيَّتَنِي لِمَ أُشْرِكُ بِرَبِّي أَحَدًا ﴿٤٣﴾

وَلَمْ تَكُن لَّهُ فِئَةٌ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ

وَمَا كَانَ مُنْتَصِرًا ﴿٤٤﴾

هُنَالِكَ الْوَلِيَّةُ لِلَّهِ الْحَقِّ ۚ هُوَ خَيْرٌ ثَوَابًا

وَخَيْرٌ عُقْبًا ﴿٤٥﴾

وَأَضْرَبَ لَهُمْ مَثَلًا الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَا ۖ

أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ

الْأَرْضِ فَأَصْبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذْرُوهُ الرِّيْحُ ۗ

وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّقْتَدِرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۗ

وَالْبَاقِيَتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ

ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا ﴿٤٧﴾

Overview

This second passage of the *sūrah* establishes a proper value system from a faith perspective. No real value is attached to wealth, position, influence or power, nor to indulgences and comforts. All these are transitory. Islam does not prohibit enjoyment of luxuries or comforts that are obtained in a lawful and legitimate way. But these are not the goals of human life. Whoever wants to enjoy these may do so, but he should remember that it is God who provides them. A human being must, therefore, express his gratitude to God through good work, because this is what remains in the end.

The passage starts with a directive to the Prophet to remain steadfast with those who turn to God for guidance and grace. He should abandon those who are oblivious of their Lord. An example is given of the two parties. This is given in a story involving two men, one boasts about his wealth and position, while the other maintains pure faith in God, hoping to receive from Him what is better than all material riches.

This is followed with an analogy showing the whole of life on earth. It appears to us short, fleeting, and having no real substance. It is just like ashes blown by the winds in all directions. The ultimate truth is that *"Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope."* (Verse 46)

The Truth from Your Lord

And contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.' (Verses 28-29)

Some reports suggest that these verses were revealed when some of the noblemen of the Quraysh demanded that the Prophet should expel his poor Companions if he were to hope that the chiefs of the Quraysh tribe would ever come to believe in his message. Thus people like Bilāl, `Ammār, Şuhayb, Khabbāb and `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd would have to be expelled from his companionship. Or at least the Prophet should make special arrangements, whereby he could meet the masters of the Quraysh on their own, in a place where none of the poor and the deprived were admitted. The rich, they argued, would be irritated if they had to sit in the same place with them, because their clothing smelled of perspiration.

It is also reported that the Prophet hoped dearly that these elders of the Quraysh would embrace Islam. He even contemplated making the arrangements they suggested, but before taking any steps in that direction God revealed to him the verse which starts with His command: *"Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance."* (Verse 28) Thus He sets the true values clearly and permanently. These establish a standard that never fails. When this has been accomplished and the true criterion has been put in place, then *"let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it."* (Verse 29) Islam will never seek to bend its values in order to please anyone and gratify his wishes. It does not borrow any value from any society implementing standards of *jāhiliyyah*. It has

its own values and it will continue to implement these only.

The Prophet is thus to remain patient, and not to precipitate matters. He is to content himself with those who “*call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance.*” Their aim is to win His pleasure. Hence to Him only should they appeal at all times, and in all situations. They should never change their purpose. Indeed they determinedly seek their goal which is more honourable and far superior in every way to any goal sought by people who are content with this life and seek nothing beyond its confines.

Being content and patient means that the Prophet should have for his true companions those very people the chiefs of the Quraysh wanted expelled. He is to sit with them and instruct them in their faith and its requirements. They are indeed the better set of people. It is their type that supports new messages best. A new faith or message does not rely on those who accept it only when it appears victorious, or when it gives them a position of leadership or other type of material gain. A new message is truly supported and firmly consolidated when it has adherents of sincere heart who turn to God seeking nothing other than to win His pleasure. No position of honour, pursuit of pleasure or achievement of any material gain discolours their sincerity.

“*Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world.*” (Verse 28) Do not let your attention pass them by in order to contemplate the superficial comforts of this world, in which people compete. All this is no more than an outward beauty which remains much inferior to the high horizon to which those who *call on their Lord morning and evening*’ aspire to, because they seek only to please Him and win His acceptance.

The Prophet is further instructed: “*Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds.*” (Verse 28) He must not pay any attention to them when they demand that they must be separated from the poor. Had they remembered God, they would have banished from their minds any thoughts of conceit and arrogance. They would have recognized their position in front of God, who looks at all mankind in the same way and places them in the same rank. They would have felt that in faith all people are brothers. But they continue to implement standards of *jāhiliyyah*, allowing fleeting desires to dictate their attitudes. Hence, both they and their views are worth no attention, because they themselves have not paid attention to God and His commandments.

Islam places all human beings on the same level, in front of God. They do not claim a position on the basis of their wealth, lineage or social standing. All these are transient. The real criterion to distinguish people is their standing with their Lord,

which is determined by their sincerity in seeking His pleasure and their dedication to His cause.

“Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us.” (Verse 28) We have left his heart alone because he directed all his attention and all his efforts to his selfish pursuits, wealth, family, pleasures and desires. Such preoccupations leave no time and no room for remembrance of God. Indeed when anyone places them at the top of his list, he does not have time for God, and in consequence, God lets him pursue these goals further and become even more removed from His remembrance. His days pass rapidly and he comes to his end in order to face what God has in store for those who wrong themselves.

“Say: ‘The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.’” (Verse 29) This is what the Prophet should proclaim in all clarity and firmness. The truth does not bend for the sake of anyone. It follows its own straight way. It is clear, solid, strong, free of all crookedness and manipulation. It is, then, each individual’s own decision whether to take it up or leave it: *“Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.”* Whoever does not like the truth may banish himself from it. Anyone who does not wish to make his desires fall in line with the truth should know that no privileges are given at the expense of faith. A person who does not lower his head to God and His majesty has no place in the service of God’s message.

Faith does not belong to anyone who makes concessions in it. It belongs to God who needs no one. Faith does not obtain strength if it is supported by people who do not seek it for its own sake, or who do not accept it as it is. A person who does not wish to sit with people dedicated to God’s cause because he feels himself above them will have nothing to contribute to the Muslim community. Such a person is better left out.

No Rescue Available

The *sūrah* then portrays a scene of the hereafter, describing what is prepared for the unbelievers on the one hand and for the believers on the other. The unbelievers will have a fire that has been made ready to receive them: *“For the wrongdoers We have prepared a fire.”* (Verse 29) It is all made, set and brought forward. It does not require any new effort to receive them. No one is needed to kindle that fire, and it does not take any time to light or burn fiercely. God does not need anything to create whatever He wishes other than to actually will it, and it exists. The expression here uses the term, ‘prepare’, to indicate speed of action. Everything is put in place to take the wrongdoers and the unbelievers straight to the fire that is already prepared to receive them.

It is a fire that has huge folds that surge to encompass its inhabitants. They are securely captured there, with no hope of escape or rescue. Nor is there any chance of having a breath of cooling air, or the chance of a reduction in the suffering. Should they cry for help or to be spared the burning fire, help is given to them in the form of filthy water which is described in words which some commentators believe to mean 'molten lead', while others define it as 'boiling oil'. Should anyone's face get near it, it would certainly scald them. What will it do, then, to throats and stomachs, should the wrongdoers attempt to drink it? *"If they beg for water, they will be given water [hot] like molten lead, which will scald their faces."* (Verse 29) It is a terrible situation that they find themselves in when they so urgently need a drink, but they only have what the Qur'ān truthfully describes as: *"Dreadful is the drink."* (Verse 29) Moreover, the fire and its billowing folds are not the place where to seek rest: *"Evil is the place to seek rest."* (Verse 29) In this description there is an element of bitter irony. They are not in the fire to take rest, but to be burnt in punishment for their wrongdoing. But this description also serves as a contrast with the fate of the believers in heaven. The two ends are opposite extremes.

The opposite picture shows the believers who have done righteous deeds in heaven where they will permanently stay:

Theirs shall be gardens of perpetual bliss, with rivers rolling at their feet. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of silk and brocade, and they will recline on couches. Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest. (Verse 31)

These running waters provide all the elements of a cool atmosphere, pleasant scenery, gardens and a fresh breeze. The believers are in these gardens where they actually recline and rest, in full luxurious attire made of different types of fine silk, some of which is light, while the other is thick like velvet. They also wear bracelets of gold and enjoy other luxuries. The comment here is accurate: *"Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest."* (Verse 31)

These are the two widely different ends. Let everyone choose which one to have. The truth has been made absolutely clear by none other than God Himself, and the choice is open to everyone: *"The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it."* (Verse 29) We see here a subtle reference to the attitude of the Quraysh unbelievers who demanded that the Prophet should either expel the poor from among his followers, or at least set up a different meeting place for the elders of the Quraysh, because it was beneath them to sit with the poor. They are again given the choice, either to sit with the believers, even though they are poor and smelly or they can have their resting place in the billowing folds of the fire and enjoy molten lead for refreshment. For those smelly clothes contain within them

hearts that are full of faith, and minds that always remember God.

A Gulf Too Wide

This passage is followed by a story of two men and two gardens, given as an example of what is permanently valuable and what is no more than transitory. It paints two examples of human beings: the first seeks pride in the luxuries of this world, while the other is fully content with his relationship with God. Each is seen in practical life. The first who, in the Qur'anic example, has two gardens delineates a man dazzled with riches. He feels himself powerful with what he has been given, so he forgets the Supreme Power who controls everything in people's lives, and thinks that his wealth is permanent. This gives him a feeling that his power is everlasting.

The other is a believer who derives his position and status through faith. He always remembers his Lord, realizing that the blessings he enjoys are in themselves evidence of the One who grants all such blessings. Hence, he knows that he should always praise his Lord and express his gratitude to Him for what he has been granted:

Set forth to them the case of two men, to one of whom We gave two vineyards and surrounded them with date palms, and placed a field of grain in between. Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way. In the midst of them We caused a stream to flow. And so [the man] had fruit in abundance. (Verses 32-34)

The two gardens are full of fruit, having vineyards which are made even more splendid with a siege of date palms. In between the two gardens is a large field which the man uses to cultivate grains and other plants. A river running in between the two gardens adds much that is pleasant to the whole scene, because the running water reassures the owner of inexhaustible produce that, in turn, bring much wealth.

"Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way." (Verse 33) This is again a picture of continuing prosperity. What is worth noting here is that in the original Arabic text, negating any failure by the two gardens to yield their produce is described as 'doing no wrong or injustice' in that respect. This gives an element of contrast with their owner who does himself great wrong, by being arrogant and ungrateful to God for all the blessings he enjoys. He does not praise his Lord for what He has given him. This is an action full of conceit which means, in effect, that he is unfair to himself.

We actually see the man going into one of his gardens, gratified as he looks at it. He is full of pride, strutting like a peacock, calling for admiration. He speaks

arrogantly to his friend whom he knows to be of limited means: *"This man said once to his friend, in the course of a discussion between them, More wealth have I than you, and more power and followers."* (Verse 34)

He then walks into one of the two gardens with his friend. His attitude is that of someone conceited and ungrateful. He has completely forgotten God, thinking that the two gardens will never fail to yield their produce. In the height of this conceit, he denies the Last Hour, when all are resurrected and gathered together before their Lord. Besides, should this Last Hour be true, he is certain to have a position of favour there. He has been favoured here in this life when he has been given his two gardens. So he is sure to have more favours granted to him in the hereafter.

And having thus wronged his soul, he went into his garden, saying: 'I do not think that this will ever perish! Nor do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if [it does and] I am brought before my Lord, I should surely find there something better than this in exchange.' (Verses 35-36)

This is plain arrogance. It makes people who have wealth, position, power and influence think that the values that dictate the way they are treated here in this life will apply in their favour in the life to come. They think they will be treated in the same way in God's Supreme Society. Their line of thinking is that since they enjoy such privileges in this life, they must then have a position of favour with the Lord of heavens.

His poor friend, who does not possess wealth, position, gardens or crops, is more confident as to the results of his nobler and better established values. He feels strong as a result of his faith, and he is certain of the support he receives from God Almighty, to whom all creatures submit. Hence, he confronts his arrogant friend with the truth showing him how conceited he is. He reminds him of how he is created from clay and from a sperm. He also directs him to the sort of attitude he should maintain towards God. He warns him against the result to which his conceit could lead him. He declares that he hopes to receive what is better than, and superior to, his friend's gardens and their fruit:

His friend replied in the course of their discussion: Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. If only you said as you entered your garden, "Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power except with God." Although, as you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you, yet it may well be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that you will never be able to find it.' (Verses 37-41)

This is an example of how faith makes a believer very powerful. He does not care for wealth, might, or arrogance. He states the truth clearly, without hesitation or cowardice. There is no room for bending the truth in order to please anyone, be that a friend or someone mighty. A believer feels that he is far higher than all power and wealth. What God has for him is far superior to any riches or pleasures this life may bring. God's grace is all that he seeks, and His grace is plentiful and always available. On the other hand, God's punishment is severe and could befall the arrogant at any time.

The story then takes us suddenly from the scene of growth and prosperity to one of destruction and barrenness, from arrogance and conceit to repentance and seeking forgiveness. What the man of faith warned against has come true:

So his fruitful gardens were encompassed with ruin, and there he was, wringing his hands over all that he had spent on that which now lay waste, with its trellises caved in; and he could only say: 'Would that I had not associated partners with my Lord!' (Verse 42)

The whole scene is raised before our eyes, and we see all the fruit of the gardens destroyed, as though the calamity befell it from all sides, leaving nothing untouched. The two gardens are totally destroyed with their trellises caved in. The owner realizes that he can do nothing to save any portion of his gardens or the plantation in between. He wrings his hands in sorrow, bewailing his misfortune which has left all his wealth destroyed and all his labour wasted. He is now repentant for having associated partners with God, acknowledging that He alone is the Lord of the universe. Although the man never previously mentioned the ascribing of divinity to anyone other than God, the fact that he placed a worldly value higher than the values of faith represents such association of partners with God. He now regrets his past attitude and dissociates himself from it. Alas! It is too late.

At this point the *sūrah* declares in all clarity that all protection comes from God: all power belongs to Him; all support comes from Him; His reward is the best reward; and what He stores for us is best and everlasting: *"He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome."* (Verses 43-44)

Thus the curtains fall with the gardens in total destruction, and the owner wringing his hands in regret and sorrow. Beyond that, we realize that God's power and majesty overwhelm all.

Transient Pleasures

Now the *sūrah* draws another scene showing life on earth in its totality, and we realize that it is similar to those destroyed gardens. It is of a fleeting nature, lasting only a very short while and lacking solid substance: *“Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things.”* (Verse 45)

This scene, with all its movement, is depicted rapidly so as to enhance within us the feelings of a transitory life, one which is short and ends in death. Here we see water pouring down from the skies, but it does not run or form watercourses. It is immediately absorbed by plants, but these plants do not grow, nor do they yield ripe fruit. It is all destroyed, becoming nothing more than dry stubble, blown away by the winds. The whole duration of life is thus ended within three short sentences. The original Arabic text uses all forms that indicate rapid transition from one stage to the next: the fall of water, then its absorption by plants, and then its blowing away by the wind. How short is life, and how worthless!

Having shown this scene of the present, transitory life to full effect, the *sūrah* makes a contrast between the values to which people attach great importance in this life and those which have the upper position at all times. All this is stated from the point of view of the divine faith: *“Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord’s sight, and a far better source of hope.”* (Verse 46)

Wealth and children are the most important things people covet in this life. Islam does not forbid enjoying these, provided that they are derived through legitimate means. Moreover, it gives them their appropriate value in relation to the everlasting life to come. They are adornments, but not criteria to evaluate people with. It is not right that people’s status should be measured according to what they have of these. True value should be given to what endures, and that means all good works, including words, actions and worship.

People’s hopes are normally very closely linked to wealth and children. However, the deeds that endure, i.e. good works, bring better reward and fulfil greater hopes. Hence believers should look to these for a more wholesome fulfilment of their hopes. They are bound to receive their result and reward on the Day of Reckoning.

In all this we see a consistent line, starting with the directive to the Prophet to remain patient and content *“with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance.”* (Verse 28) We also see the same message imparted in the story of the two gardens and the two friends, as well as in the scene showing the value of the present life. This is all perfected with this last statement explaining the values of this life and those of the life to come. All this serves to put human values

into the proper perspective.

3

Heedless of Divine Warnings

One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare. We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them. (47)

They will be lined up before your Lord, [and He will say]: 'Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!' (48)

The record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains. They will say: 'Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account.' They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them. Your Lord does not wrong anyone. (49)

When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed

وَيَوْمَ نُسَيِّرُ الْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً
وَحَشَرْنَاهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٤٧﴾

وَعَرِّضُوا عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ صَفًّا لَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا
كَمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ ۚ بَلْ زَعَمْتُمْ أَلَّن
نَجْعَلَ لَكُمْ مَوْعِدًا ﴿٤٨﴾

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ
مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لَ
هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا
كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا ۚ وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا
حَاضِرًا ۗ وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا ﴿٤٩﴾

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ
فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ

his Lord's command.

Will you, then, take him and his progeny for your masters instead of Me, when they are enemies to you? Vile is the substitute for the wrongdoers! (50)

I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation; nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray. (51)

Once day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them. (52)

And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it. (53)

We have indeed given in this Qur'an many facets to every kind of lesson for mankind. But man is, above all else, always given to contention. (54)

What is there to keep people from accepting the faith now that guidance has come to them, and from seeking forgiveness from their Lord, unless it be that they are waiting for the fate of the [sinful] people of ancient times to befall them as well, or

فَفَسَقَ عَنِ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ ۗ

أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِي
وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ بِئْسَ لِلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا



۞ مَا أَشْهَدْتُهُمْ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَلَا خَلْقَ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَمَا كُنْتُ مُتَّخِذَ
الْمُضِلِّينَ عَضُدًا ﴿٥١﴾

وَيَوْمَ يَقُولُ نَادُوا شُرَكَاءِيَ الَّذِينَ
رَزَعْتُمْ فَدَعَوْهُمْ فَلَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَهُمْ
وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمْ مَوْبِقًا ﴿٥٢﴾

وَرَاءَ الْمَجْرُمُونَ النَّارَ فَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ
مُؤَاقِعُهَا وَلَمْ يَجِدُوا عَنْهَا مَصْرِفًا ﴿٥٣﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لِلنَّاسِ مِنْ
كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ أَكْثَرَ شَيْءٍ
جَدَلًا ﴿٥٤﴾

وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمْ

for the suffering to be brought before their eyes?
(55)

We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. But with false arguments the unbelievers seek to confute the truth. They make My revelations and warnings a target for their mockery. (56)

Who could be more wicked than one who, when reminded of his Lord's revelations, turns away from them and forgets what his own hands have done? Over their hearts We have cast veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears, deafness. Even if you call them to the right path, they shall never be guided. (57)

Your Lord is Most Forgiving, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them now to task for whatever they do, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment. But they have an appointed time which they cannot evade. (58)

The same applied to other communities which We destroyed when they persisted in wrongdoing. For We had set a time for their destruction. (59)

الْهُدَىٰ وَدَسْتَعْفِرُوا رَبَّهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ

سُنَّةُ الْأَوَّلِينَ أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ قُبُلًا ﴿٥٥﴾

وَمَا نُرْسِلُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرِينَ

وَمُنذِرِينَ ۚ وَجُحِدِلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا

بِالْبَطْلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا بِهِ الْحَقَّ ۖ وَاتَّخَذُوا

ءَايَاتِي وَمَا أُنذِرُوا هُزُوًا ﴿٥٦﴾

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ ذُكِّرَ بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِ

فَأَعْرَضَ عَنْهَا وَنَسِيَ مَا قَدَّمَتْ يَدَاهُ ۚ إِنَّا

جَعَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَنْ يَفْقَهُوهُ

وَفِي ءَاذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا ۖ وَإِنْ تَدْعُهُمْ إِلَىٰ

الْهُدَىٰ فَلَنْ يَهْتَدُوا إِذًا أَبَدًا ﴿٥٧﴾

وَرَبُّكَ الْغَفُورُ ذُو الرَّحْمَةِ ۖ لَوْ يُؤَاخِذُهُمْ

بِمَا كَسَبُوا لَعَجَلْ لَهُمُ الْعَذَابَ ۚ بَلْ

لَهُمْ مَوْعِدٌ لَّنْ يَجِدُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ مَوْئِلًا

﴿٥٨﴾

وَتِلْكَ الْقُرَىٰ ۖ أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ لَمَّا ظَلَمُوا

Overview

The second passage of the *sūrah* ended on a note concerning the ‘things that endure: good works.’ This third passage takes up the thread and talks about the day when such enduring things will have their full weight and significance. This is given against the backdrop of a whole scene from the Day of Judgement. It is followed by mention of Satan’s behaviour, when he was commanded to prostrate himself before Adam, but he disobeyed his Lord. This is given by way of wondering at human beings who take Satan or *Iblīs* and his offspring for friends and protectors, when they know that these are indeed their enemies. Their behaviour is bound to end with punishment on the Day of Reckoning. The passage also refers to the partners people associate with God, showing them as totally helpless on that day.

In the Qur’ān God gives numerous examples and parables so that people will take heed and realize what they expose themselves to when they reject the faith. They had better take the necessary steps to spare themselves punishment on that day. These examples focus on the unbelievers of the past who persisted in denying the truth and rejecting the faith. Nevertheless unbelievers continue to demand that punishment should befall them or that they should be destroyed in the same way as past communities. They make false arguments to try to overcome the truth, taking God’s revelations and His messengers as a source of mockery. Had it not been for God’s grace, He would have hastened their punishment.

This part of the *sūrah* with its scenes of the Day of Judgement, and its reference to the destruction of past communities for their rejection of the truth is closely linked to the main theme of the *sūrah* which aims to establish the true faith, free from all distortion.

A Record to Include All Affairs

One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare. We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them. They will be lined up before your Lord, [and He will say]: ‘Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!’ The record [of everyone’s deeds] will be laid

open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains. They will say: 'Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account.' They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them. Your Lord does not wrong anyone. (Verses 47-49)

These verses portray an image in which nature forms an essential part. Horror is seen in its every detail as well as in people's hearts. Here we see firm mountains disappearing. What then will happen to hearts? The whole earth will appear void and barren, without hills, mountains, slopes or valleys to block anyone's view. The same applies to hearts and consciences: they will be unable to hide anything away. With all this open, level land which hides nothing, all people are brought forward: *"We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them."* (Verse 47)

Indeed not a single soul will be left out. They are all waiting for a great moment: *"They will be lined up before your Lord."* (Verse 48) Every single one, those countless beings who walked on earth ever since the day when human life began and right to the end of this world are all gathered together. They are lined up in an open space where none can hide.

The mode employed thus far is one of description. Now however the *sūrah* takes up the address mode, which adds the feeling that what we see is taking place now before our eyes. We see events unfolding, and we hear what is said. We see those who deny that day experiencing their own humiliation. Shame covers their faces: *"Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!"* (Verse 48)

This change of expression gives the scene much vividness, bringing it forward to the present so that we see it enacted. To us, the Day of Judgement is no longer something in the distant future. We almost see the shame on people's faces. We hear the majestic voice of the Almighty rebuking those people and reminding them of their position: *"Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance."* (Verse 48) They shamelessly persisted in their denial of such a day and their meeting with God once their life on earth had ended: *"You claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]."* (Verse 48)

Having brought the scene forward to give it an added sense of reality, the *sūrah* resumes its description of what takes place there: *"The record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains."* (Verse 49) It is the record of all their deeds placed before their eyes to read and review. They realize that it is a comprehensive and accurate record, and they fear the consequences. They are embarrassed by the fact that the record includes every single thing, no matter how small or trivial. In their frustration, they exclaim: *"Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account."* (Verse 49) This is

the cry of one who is worried, fearing the worst after he has been caught red-handed, unable to evade the results or find any justification. This is because he recognizes the accuracy of the record which puts before his eyes all that he has done: *"They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them."* (Verse 49) They also realize that whatever befalls them will only be fair, because *"Your Lord does not wrong anyone."* (Verse 49)

Much Too Argumentative

The guilty facing such a difficult situation are certainly aware, in this life, that Satan is their enemy. Nevertheless, they befriended him and he led them to their predicament. How strange that they should take Satan and his progeny for friends and protectors when they know them to be hostile since the first encounter between Adam and Iblīs: *"When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command. Will you, then, take him and his progeny for your masters instead of Me, when they are enemies to you? Vile is the substitute for the wrongdoers!"* (Verse 50)

This story highlights the singularity of some people's attitude as they take Satan and his progeny for protectors and patrons in preference to God. It represents an outright disobedience of God's commands and the neglect of obligations and duties He has assigned to them.

Why do they befriend these, their enemies, when they possess neither real knowledge nor reliable strength? God has not brought them to witness His creation of the heavens and the earth, or even their own creation. Nor does He seek help or support from them: *"I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation; nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray."* (Verse 51) They are no more than creatures whom God has created. They do not know what God has chosen to keep hidden from them, nor does He need their help.

It is important to reflect a little on the way the last verse ends: *"nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray."* Is it appropriate to ask whether God seeks help from people who do not lead others astray? Sublime and great is God. He is in no need of anyone in the universe. He is the Almighty who has the power to accomplish whatever He wills. The phraseology here is intentional. It brings to the fore the myths of the unbelievers only to shoot them down. Those who seek protection from Satan and make him a partner to God only do so because they imagine that Satan has a great wealth of knowledge and overpowering might, when in fact Satan is a seducer who leads people astray. God does not like deviation or those who lead other people astray. Had He, for argument's sake, sought helpers, He would not have taken them from among the seducers who lead people into error and deviation. This is the meaning the verse and its ending aim to emphasize.

Another scene of the Day of Judgement follows, portraying the end that awaits the guilty and those to whom they ascribe a share of divinity:

One day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them. And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it. (Verses 52-53)

They are in a position where no claim has any value unless it is supported by irrefutable proof. The Lord who sits for judgement on that day commands them to bring their partners whom they alleged to enjoy favour with God. He tells them to call them up. Yet such people are lost. They forget that they are already witnessing the Day of Reckoning. So they call on their former partners who do not make any kind of response. They are no more than creatures of God who cannot avail themselves or anyone else of anything. They also have to face the great events that take place on the Day of Judgement. God places between such worshipped deities and those who worshipped them a gulf of doom too wide for either group to cross over. That gulf is the fire of hell: *"For We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them."* (Verse 52)

Those who are guilty will look around and fear will overwhelm them. They expect that at any moment they will fall into the fire. It is extremely hard to expect to be punished, particularly when the punishment is ready and there is no chance of escape: *"And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it."* (Verse 53)

Why Reject God's Guidance?

They could certainly have escaped the fire and all punishment, had they only opened their hearts to the Qur'ān and not opposed the truth it lays down. God certainly gave them all sorts of examples, covering all situations and circumstances: *"We have indeed given in this Qur'ān many facets to every kind of lesson for mankind. But man is, above all else, always given to contention."* (Verse 54) The *sūrah* describes man here as 'a thing'. The literal translation of the above sentence reads: "But of all things, man is the most contentious." It chooses such expression in order to encourage man to be less arrogant and to feel that he is one of God's countless creatures, although he is the worst in argument and contention, after God has given solid, irrefutable argument, clearly expounded in the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* then documents the false arguments which the unbelievers, who represent the majority of mankind, have sought to provide:

What is there to keep people from accepting the faith now that guidance has come to them, and from seeking forgiveness from their Lord, unless it be that they are waiting for the fate of the [sinful] people of ancient times to befall them as well, or for the suffering to be brought before their eyes? (Verse 55)

They have received guidance in plenty, which should have been sufficient for them to believe and follow God's orders. But they demanded for themselves the sort of suffering that befell nations of old. They made such a demand thinking that God's punishment would never overtake them, or they did so in mockery. Sometimes they modified their demands, asking for the punishment to be shown directly to them. That, they argued, would prove what the Prophets preached and then they would believe in them.

Answering such demands is not a matter for God's messengers to decide. God's rule that applied to past communities meant that when miracles were given and people continued to disbelieve, they were destroyed. To do this or to cause a scourge to overwhelm people are matters which only God determines. His messengers have a different duty, which is to bring happy news and to warn: *"We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. But with false arguments the unbelievers seek to confute the truth. They make My revelations and warnings a target for their mockery."* (Verse 56)

The truth is clear, but the unbelievers resorted to false arguments, trying to disprove the truth. Their attitude was perverted, because even when they demanded miracles or hastened God's punishment, they still did not wish to be convinced. Essentially they were only ridiculing God's revelations and mocking His messengers.

Who could be more wicked than one who, when reminded of his Lord's revelations, turns away from them and forgets what his own hands have done? Over their hearts We have cast veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears, deafness. Even if you call them to the right path, they shall never be guided. (Verse 57)

These people who treat what God has bestowed from on high with mockery and who ridicule His warnings cannot understand the Qur'an or comprehend its message. Hence, God places over their hearts screens which prevent them from understanding it. In their ears He causes a sort of deafness so that they cannot hear it. He has also willed that, because of their deliberate refusal and wilful turning away from His guidance, they will never be guided. For guidance to penetrate people's hearts, such hearts must be open to receive it in the first place.

"Your Lord is Most Forgiving, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them now to task for whatever they do, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment." (Verse 58)

Rather, He gives them respite and allows them time, because He is Kind and Merciful. He wishes to allow them every chance so that they can see the issues clearly. He does not hasten their punishment as they demand. However, He will not abandon them completely and leave them unpunished: *“But they have an appointed time which they cannot evade.”* (Verse 58) They have a term in this life which they will fulfil. During this time a portion of their punishment will be inflicted on them. And they have a time appointed in the hereafter when whatever they have deserved will be given in full.

They have done wrong and they have been unjust. Hence they deserve punishment, or even destruction in the same way as communities of old. However, God in His mercy has determined to give them a chance for the full duration of their term on earth. That is to fulfil a purpose which He, in His wisdom, wishes to be accomplished. Therefore, He treats them differently and allows them respite until the time appointed for them, which they cannot evade:

The same applied to other communities which We destroyed when they persisted in wrongdoing. For We had set a time for their destruction. (Verse 59)

They must not be deluded by the respite they are given. Their time will inevitably come. The rules God has made applicable will never fail, and He does not leave any promise unfulfilled.

4

A Special Lesson for Moses

Moses said to his servant: 'I shall journey on until I reach the point where the two seas meet, though I may march for ages.' (60)

But when they reached the junction between the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight. (61)

And after they had marched on for some distance, Moses said to his servant: 'Bring us our midday meal; we are indeed worn out by this our journey.' (62)

Said [the servant]: 'Do you recall when we betook ourselves to that rock for rest. There I forgot the fish — and none but Satan made me thus forget it! — and it took its way into the sea. How strange!' (63)

[Moses] said: 'That is [the place] we are seeking! So they turned back, retracing their footsteps,

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَى لِفَتْنِهِ لَآ أَبْرُحُ حَتَّىٰ
أَبْلُغَ مَجْمَعَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ أَوْ أَمْضِيَ حُقْبًا



فَلَمَّا بَلَغَا مَجْمَعَ بَيْنَهُمَا نَسِيَا حُوتَهُمَا
فَاتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ سَرَبًا

فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَا قَالَ لِفَتْنِهِ ءَاتِنَا غَدَاءَنَا لَقَدْ
لَقِينَا مِنْ سَفَرِنَا هَذَا نَصَبًا

قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَ إِذْ أَوَيْنَا إِلَى الصَّخْرَةِ فَإِنِّي
نَسِيتُ الْحُوتَ وَمَا أَنسَنِيهِ إِلَّا الشَّيْطَانُ
أَنْ أَذْكُرَهُ وَاتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ عَجَبًا



قَالَ ذَلِكَ مَا كُنَّا نَبْغُ فَارْتَدَّآ عَلَىٰ

(64)

and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Our mercy and whom We had endowed with knowledge of Our own. (65)

Moses said to him: 'May I follow you, on the understanding that you will teach me something of the wisdom you have been taught?' (66)

The other answered: 'You will not be able to have patience with me, (67)

for how can you be patient with something which you cannot fully comprehend?' (68)

Moses replied: 'You will find me patient, if God so wills; and I shall not disobey you in anything.' (69)

The other said: 'Well, then, if you are to follow me, do not question me about anything until I mention it to you myself.' (70)

And so the two went on their way, and when they embarked, [the sage] made a hole in the boat. Moses exclaimed: 'Have you made a hole in it in order to drown the people in it? Strange indeed is that which you have done!' (71)

ءَاثَارِهِمَا قَصَصْنَا ﴿٤٤﴾

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا ءَاتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً
مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِمَّا لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا ﴿٤٥﴾

قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَىٰ هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ
تُعَلِّمَنِي مِمَّا عَلَّمْتَ رُشْدًا ﴿٤٦﴾

قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا ﴿٤٧﴾

وَكَيْفَ تَصْبِرُ عَلَىٰ مَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ خُبْرًا ﴿٤٨﴾

﴿٤٨﴾

قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ صَابِرًا وَلَا
أَعْصِي لَكَ أَمْرًا ﴿٤٩﴾

قَالَ فَإِنِ اتَّبَعْتَنِي فَلَا تَسْأَلْنِي عَنْ شَيْءٍ
حَتَّىٰ أُحَدِّثَ لَكَ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا ﴿٥٠﴾

فَانْطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا رَكِبَا فِي السَّفِينَةِ
خَرَقَهَا قَالَ أَخْرَقْتَهَا لِتُغْرِقَ أَهْلَهَا لَقَدْ
جِئْتَ شَيْئًا إِمْرًا ﴿٥١﴾

He replied: 'Did I not say that you would not be able to have patience with me?' (72)

Moses said: 'Do not take me to task for my having forgotten, and be not hard on me on account of what I have done.' (73)

And so the two went on until they met a certain young man. [The sage] slew him, whereupon Moses exclaimed: 'Have you killed an innocent man with no cause of just retribution for murder? Foul indeed is that which you have perpetrated!' (74)

He replied: 'Did I not make it clear to you that you would not be able to have patience with me?' (75)

Moses said: 'If ever I question you again, do not keep me in your company; for then you would have had enough excuses from me.' (76)

And so the two went on until they came to a town, where they asked its people for food, but they refused them all hospitality. There they found a wall on the point of falling down, and [the sage] rebuilt it. Moses said: 'Had you wished, you could have taken payment for what you did.' (77)

[The sage] replied: 'This is the parting of ways between me and you. Now I shall explain to you the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience. (78)

As for the boat, it belonged to some needy people who toiled upon the sea — and I desired to

قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ

صَبْرًا ﴿٧٢﴾

قَالَ لَا تُؤَاخِذْنِي بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرْهِقْنِي

مِنْ أَمْرِي عُسْرًا ﴿٧٣﴾

فَأَنْطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَامًا فَقَتَلَهُ قَالَ

أَقْتَلْتَ نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ لَقَدْ جِئْتَ

شَيْئًا نُّكْرًا ﴿٧٤﴾

قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكَ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ

مَعِيَ صَبْرًا ﴿٧٥﴾

قَالَ إِنْ سَأَلْتُكَ عَنْ شَيْءٍ بَعْدَهَا فَلَا

تُصَحِّبْنِي قَدْ بَلَغْتَ مِنْ لَدُنِّي عُذْرًا ﴿٧٦﴾

فَأَنْطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَتِيَا أَهْلَ قَرْيَةٍ

أَسْتَطْعَمَ أَهْلَهَا فَأَبَوْا أَنْ يُضَيِّفُوهُمَا

فَوَجَدَا فِيهَا جِدَارًا يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَنْقَضَ

فَأَقَامَهُ قَالَ لَوْ شِئْتَ لَتَّخَذْتَ عَلَيْهِ

أَجْرًا ﴿٧٧﴾

قَالَ هَذَا فِرَاقُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنِكَ سَأُنَبِّئُكَ

بِتَأْوِيلِ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٧٨﴾

slightly damage it because behind them there was a king who was taking every boat by force. (79)

And as for the young man, his parents are true believers, and we feared lest he should cause them much grief by his overweening wickedness and unbelief. (80)

And so we desired that their Lord grant them in his stead [a son] of greater purity than him, and closer in loving tenderness. (81)

And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys living in the town, and beneath it was buried a treasure belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man. So your Lord has willed it that when they come of age they should dig up their treasure by your Lord's grace. I did not do any of this of my own accord. This is the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience.' (82)

أَمَّا السَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسْكِينٍ يَعْمَلُونَ
فِي الْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَاءَهُمْ

مَلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا ﴿٧٩﴾

وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنَيْنِ فَخَشِينَا

أَنْ يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا ﴿٨٠﴾

فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبَدِّلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِنْهُ زَكَاةً

وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا ﴿٨١﴾

وَأَمَّا الْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَامَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِي

الْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُ كَنْزٌ لَهُمَا وَكَانَ

أَبُوهُمَا صَالِحًا فَآرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يَبْلُغَا

أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنْزَهُمَا رَحْمَةً مِّن

رَبِّكَ وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُ عَنَّ أَمْرِي ذَلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ

مَا لَمْ تَسْطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٨٢﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* begins by relating an episode in the life of the Prophet Moses which is not told or hinted at anywhere else in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* does not give details of where this episode took place other than saying, 'the place where the two seas meet.' Nor does it define the period in Moses lifetime when the events took place. Thus, we do not know whether the events related took place when Moses was still in Egypt, before he led the Israelites on their way to Palestine, or after they had left it. If the latter, was it before he led them into the Holy Land, or when they stopped, refusing to enter because they did not wish to confront its powerful inhabitants? Was it after they had begun their forty years of wandering in the land, going to and fro, in total loss?

The event involves a goodly servant of God's whom Moses meets and

accompanies for a period of time. But the *sūrah* does not give us any details of the identity of this person. It does not mention his name or status. Was he a prophet, a messenger, a scholar, or a person favoured by God for his strong faith and complete dedication to the service of His cause?

There are many reports attributed to Ibn `Abbās and others concerning the details of this story. One of them is related by al-Bukhārī who quotes Sa`id ibn Jubayr, a scholar from the generation that followed the Prophet's Companions as saying: "I said to `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās that Nawf al-Bakkālī claims that the person who accompanied al-Khaḍīr [that is the name often given to the learned man in this story] was not Moses, God's Messenger to the Children of Israel. He claims that he was a different person also named Moses. Ibn `Abbās replied: 'That is a lie told by this enemy of God. Ubayy ibn Ka`b said to us that he heard God's Messenger saying: Moses was making a speech to the Children of Israel when he was asked which person had been endowed with most knowledge. He replied that he himself was that person. God took issue with him for not having attributed knowledge to Him, so He sent him a message saying that there was at the point where the two seas meet a person who had been given greater knowledge than he had. Moses asked his Lord to tell him how he could meet this man. God told him to take a whole fish with him, keeping it in a container. Wherever he lost his fish, he would find that person.'

There are several reports that add details about this story. However, apart from a note on the probable location of the story, we prefer to limit ourselves to the Qur'ānic text without going into any further detail. This helps us to live 'in the shade of the Qur'ān'. We believe that the way the story is told in the Qur'ān, without defining the time or place and without mentioning names, has a definite purpose. Therefore we will look at the Qur'ānic text and study it without additions.

Where the Two Seas Meet

Moses said to his servant: I shall journey on until I reach the point where the two seas meet, though I may march for ages. (Verse 60)

Most probably, and God knows best, the place described here as the '*point where the two seas meet*' refers to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and their meeting place is the area where the Bitter lakes and the Timsāh lake are found along the Suez Canal. It may also be a reference to the meeting point of the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of `Aqabah at the northern end of the Red Sea. This whole area witnessed the history of the Children of Israel after they left Egypt. Anyway, the Qur'ān only refers to it in passing without defining it further. There are several other reports suggesting where the area was that '*the two seas meet*', but we feel these are all unacceptable.

We understand from the general drift of the story that Moses had a definite purpose behind his journey. He declares that he will travel as far as the meeting point of the two seas, no matter how troublesome the journey may prove, or how long it takes. He expresses his determination by the words quoted in the Qur'ān: *"though I may march for ages."* There are differences as to the exact meaning of the Arabic word, *ḥuqub*, which is given in the translation as 'ages'. Some scholars state that each such *ḥuqbah*, or age, denotes one year, while others say it denotes eighty years. Whichever meaning it may have, the expression denotes a resolve rather than duration of time.

But when they reached the junction between the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight. And after they had marched on for some distance, Moses said to his servant: 'Bring us our mid-clay meal; we are indeed worn out by this our journey' [the servant]: Do you recall when we betook ourselves to that rock for rest. There I forgot the fish – and none but Satan made me thus forget it! – and it took its way into the sea. How strange! (Verses 61-63)

Most probably, the fish was cooked. Its raising back to life and its moving straight into the sea was a sign given by God to Moses, so that he would know the place where he was to meet the man. This is indicated by the amazement expressed by the servant when he saw the fish swimming in the sea. Had the fish only dropped into the sea and settled at the bottom, there would be nothing strange in the matter. What makes this interpretation more plausible is that the whole trip was full of surprises that go beyond imagination, and this was only one of them.

Moses realized that he had gone beyond the place where he was to meet the man, which was by the rock where he and his servant had stayed for a little rest. Hence he traced his way back to it and there they met the man they sought: *"[Moses] said: 'That is [the place] we are seeking!' So they turned back, retracing their footsteps, and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Our mercy and whom We had endowed with knowledge of Our own."* (Verses 64-65)

It also seems that this meeting was to remain Moses' secret, given to him by his Lord. His servant did not know anything about it until they met the man. Hence the following scenes in the story speak only about Moses and the pious man endowed with knowledge.

First Jolting Shock

Moses addresses the pious sage in a most polite manner. It is the sort of politeness that is worthy of a prophet. He puts his request, without making any assumptions, and he makes it clear that he seeks proper knowledge from a good servant of God:

Moses said to him: May I follow you, on the understanding that you will teach me something of the wisdom you have been taught? (Verse 66)

The man's knowledge however is nothing like human knowledge with its immediate causes and inevitable results. It is a part of divine knowledge that God has granted him, according to a measure He determined and for a purpose He wanted to accomplish. Moses could not be expected to be patient with the man and his actions, even though Moses was a prophet and a messenger from God. Looked at superficially, these actions may appear to have no logical justification whatsoever. They could not be understood without having access to the wisdom dictating them, and that is part of divine wisdom which people cannot begin to comprehend.

The sage understandably fears that Moses may not have the patience required to make of him a comfortable companion. He makes this clear to Moses. *"The other answered: You will not be able to have patience with me, for how can you be patient with something which you cannot fully comprehend?"* (Verses 67-68) But Moses is so eager to learn. Hence he resolves to be very patient and obedient, seeks God's help and places God's will ahead of his own resolve: *"Moses replied: You will find me patient, if God so wills; and I shall not disobey you in anything."* (Verse 69)

The man reiterates the difficulties ahead, stating to Moses a condition for his companionship: that he remain patient and not question the sage about any action he takes until he himself reveals its purpose: *"The other said: Well, then, if you are to follow me, do not question me about anything until I mention it to you myself"* (Verse 70) Moses accepts the condition and the two set out together.

Soon afterwards comes the first scene from the trip: *"And so the two went on their way, and when they embarked, [the sage] made a hole in the boat."* (Verse 71) This is certainly a strange thing to do. The boat carried both men as well as other passengers. They are all in the middle of the sea, and the sage makes a hole in the boat. On the surface, this is an action that exposes the boat and all its passengers to the risk of being drowned. Why would anyone, let alone a learned and devout person, do such an evil thing?

Confronted with such an apparently outrageous action, Moses simply forgets the conversation that he had had with the sage. A human being may accept something when it is discussed in abstract terms, but when he faces it in practice and looks at its consequences, his reaction may be totally different. Practical matters have a totally different effect. Here we see Moses, having already been warned against apparently outrageous actions and having resolved to remain patient, loses all patience when faced with a tough situation.

Moses apparently had an impulsive nature, which we detect throughout his life. Early on we see him giving an Egyptian man quarrelling with an Israelite a punch

and killing him. He then repents and seeks God's forgiveness. Yet the following day he sees the same Israelite quarrelling with another Egyptian and tries to stop the latter. The details of these events are given in *Sūrah* 28.

With such an impulsive nature, Moses could not be patient when he saw his companion making a hole in the boat. He forgot all about his promise. Human nature is shown not to comprehend matters fully except through practical experience. Hence Moses says in objection: *"Have you made a hole in it in order to drown the people in it? Strange indeed is that which you have done!"* (Verse 71)

But the sage tolerates this with patience, and he gently reminds Moses of what he said earlier: *"Did I not say that you would not be able to have patience with me?"* (Verse 72) Moses now regrets his overreaction, saying that he completely forgot. He requests the man to accept his apologies and not to rebuke him. *"Do not take me to task for my having forgotten, and be not hard on me on account of what I have done."* (Verse 73) The man accepts his apologies and the two proceed further.

Patience Stretched to the Edge

There are, however, other strange events awaiting Moses which would exhaust his patience: *"And so the two went on until they met a certain young man. [The sage] slew him."* (Verse 74)

The first action exposed the boat and its passengers to certain risks. Now there is the blatant murder of a young man without provocation or justification. This was too much for Moses to tolerate patiently, despite all the promises he had given not to question anything he saw. Hence, *"Moses exclaimed: 'Have you killed an innocent man with no cause of just retribution for murder? Foul indeed is that which you have perpetrated.'"* (Verse 74)

This suggests that Moses was not unmindful of his promise. He probably remembered it, but felt unable to keep quiet when he witnessed a murder. To him, the young man was innocent. He had not perpetrated anything to justify his killing. He was perhaps even under age, so that he could not be held accountable for any misdeeds.

Once again the sage reminds Moses of the condition he has made and the promises Moses has given, referring also to what he said in the first place: *"Did I not make it clear to you that you would not be able to have patience with me?"* (Verse 75) This time, however, the sage goes further and reminds Moses that he said all this to him personally: *"Did I not make it clear to you..."* So the early warning was addressed to Moses personally, but he was not convinced. He had sought to be the man's companion accepting his conditions.

Again Moses reflects, knowing that he has broken his promises twice, forgetting it despite reminders. His regret makes him too apologetic, depriving himself of any possibility of a lengthy companionship with the sage. He gives himself only one last chance: *“Moses said: If ever I question you again, do not keep me in your company; for then you would have had enough excuses from me.”* (Verse 76)

This brings us to the third and last scene: *“And so the two went on until they came to a town, where they asked its people for food, but they refused them all hospitality. There they found a wall on the point of falling down, and [the sage] rebuilt it.”* (Verse 77) The two are hungry but find themselves in a town whose population are extremely inhospitable. They receive no guests and give nothing to the poor and hungry. Yet the man finds a wall there about to fall down. The Arabic text, *yurīdu an yanqadda*, is more vivid, making the wall almost like a living creature with a will that makes it want to fall. Yet this stranger occupies himself with rebuilding the wall for nothing.

Moses finds the situation full of irony. Why should such a stranger exert so much effort in rebuilding a wall in a town where they were denied even a little food and all hospitality? He should have at least demanded some money for his labours and then they could have bought some food to eat. He says: *“Had you wished, you could have taken payment for what you did.”* (Verse 77)

This signalled the end of this unlikely companionship. Moses no longer had any excuse to offer: *“[The sage] replied: This is the parting of ways between me and you. Now I shall explain to you the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience.”* (Verse 78)

Up to this point Moses, as well as everyone following the story, have been subjected to a series of surprises with no indication as to their meaning or purpose. Our response is the same as that of Moses. We do not even know who the person was who did such singular acts. The Qur’ān does not tell us his name, in order to add to the general air of bafflement surrounding us. But what would his name add? The sage simply represents higher divine wisdom which does not attach results to their immediate causes. It aims to explain that there are objectives of which we may know nothing about. Hence, keeping his name from us fits in well with the abstract concept he represents.

Furthermore, higher forces dictate the development of the story right from the beginning. Moses is so keen to meet this man, he travels until he is totally worn out. But his servant leaves their food at the rock where they stopped to rest. But his forgetfulness is the cause of their return only to find the man at that very spot. Had they travelled on, they would have missed him. The whole atmosphere is shrouded in secrecy, just like the man’s name.

All Made Clear and Simple

The secret is then revealed: *“As for the boat, it belonged to some needy people who toiled upon the sea – and I desired to slightly damage it because behind them there was a king who was taking every boat by force.”* (Verse 79) This explains that the small damage the boat suffered was enough to save it for its people. Had it been seaworthy, it would certainly have been confiscated by the tyrannical king. Perpetrating some small damage to the boat saved it from the greater harm and ruinous injustice which was certain to take place without it. Hence, causing such damage was a good and kindly action.

And as for the young man, his parents are true believers, and we feared lest he should cause them much grief by his overweening wickedness and unbelief. And so we desired that their Lord grant them in his stead [a son] of greater purity than him, and closer in loving tenderness. (Verses 80-81)

This young man appeared at the time to be deserving of no punishment, but God revealed his true nature to the sage. We realize now that he harboured all the seeds of wickedness and unbelief which were bound to increase as he grew up. Had he lived, he would have caused his parents, believers as they were, too much trouble. He might have led them, out of love for him, to follow him in his wickedness. Hence, God directed His goodly servant to kill the boy in order to replace him with one who would be better and more dutiful.

Had the matter been left to human knowledge, the sage could not have treated the boy except on the basis of what appeared to him. He would have had no justification in killing him, particularly since the boy appeared to be still under age, having done nothing to deserve capital punishment. It is not up to anyone, other than God Himself or one to whom God imparts knowledge from Him personally, to judge anyone on the basis of his nature. Nor is it permissible to make such knowledge the basis of any action other than that which appearances allow. But God may command what He wills, as He does in this case.

And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys living in the town, and beneath it was buried a treasure belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man. So your Lord has willed it that when they come of age they should dig up their treasure by your Lord’s grace. (Verse 82)

This wall which the sage laboured to rebuild, asking no wages for his labours despite the refusal of hospitality from the townspeople, had a treasure underneath. This treasure belonged to two young orphans in the town. Had the wall been left to fall down, the treasure would have become visible and the two boys would not have

been able to claim it, considering their weakness. Since their father was a pious and righteous man, God allowed his children to benefit by his piety while they were weak. He willed to give them the time necessary to grow up and dig up their treasure when they were in a position to keep it.

The sage then disowns any share in this whole matter. It is God's grace that dictated all his actions. It was all by God's command who had imparted to him the necessary knowledge in such cases and others, showing him what to do in each case: "*I did not do any of this of my own accord.*" (Verse 82)

Thus the secret is made clear, and all the actions of the sage which seemed preposterous in the first instance appear to be simple and wise. Now that the curtain has been removed and the secret revealed, the man disappears totally from the scene and no further mention is made of him in this *sūrah* nor indeed throughout the rest of the Qur'ān. The story itself represents God's great wisdom, which reveals itself only when and as needed.

Within the context of the whole *sūrah*, this story about Moses and the sage is closely linked to the story of the young sleepers in the cave. Both agree that what lies beyond our human perception should be left totally to God, who will conduct it on the basis of His perfect and absolute knowledge. As for us, we know only what is told to us.

Accurate Historical Accounts

They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: 'I will give you an account of him.' (83)

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْقَرْنَيْنِ قُلْ سَأَتْلُوا
عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا ﴿٨٣﴾

We established his power on earth, and gave him means to achieve anything. (84)

إِنَّا مَكَّنَّا لَهُ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَءَاتَيْنَاهُ مِنْ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٤﴾

So he followed a certain way (85)

فَاتَّبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٥﴾

and [marched westwards] till, when he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in dark, turbid waters; and nearby he found a certain people. 'Dhu'l-Qarnayn,' We said, 'you may either punish them or treat them with kindness.' (86)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَغْرِبَ الشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا
تَغْرُبُ فِي عَيْنٍ حَمِئَةٍ وَوَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا
قَوْمًا قُلْنَا يَبْنَؤُا الْقَرْنَيْنِ إِمَّا أَنْ تُعَذَّبَ
وَإِمَّا أَنْ نَتَّخِذَ فِيهِمْ حُسْنًا ﴿٨٦﴾

He replied: 'The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him.' (87)

قَالَ أَمَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نُعَذِّبُهُ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّ
إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِ فَيُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا نَكْرًا ﴿٨٧﴾

But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.’ (88)

Then he followed another way (89)

and [marched eastwards] till, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it. (90)

So he did; and We had full knowledge of all the means available to him. (91)

Then he followed yet another way (92)

and [marched on] till, when he reached a place between the two mountain-barriers he found beneath them a people who could scarcely understand a word. (93)

‘Dhu’l-Qarnayn,’ they said, ‘Gog and Magog are ravaging this land. May we pay you a tribute so that you erect a barrier between us and them?’ (94)

وَأَمَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُ جَزَاءٌ
الْحُسْنَىٰ ۗ وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا ﴿٨٨﴾

ثُمَّ اتَّبَعَ سَبِيلًا ﴿٨٩﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَطْلِعَ الشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا
تَظْلُعُ عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ لَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهَا
سِتْرًا ﴿٩٠﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ وَقَدْ أَحَطْنَا بِمَا لَدَيْهِ خُبْرًا ﴿٩١﴾

ثُمَّ اتَّبَعَ سَبِيلًا ﴿٩٢﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ بَيْنَ السَّدَّيْنِ وَجَدَ مِنْ
دُونِهِمَا قَوْمًا لَّا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ قَوْلًا ﴿٩٣﴾

قَالُوا يٰذَا الْقَرْنَيْنِ اِنَّ يٰاَجُوْجَ وَمَآجُوْجَ
مُفْسِدُوْنَ فِى الْاَرْضِ فَهَلْ نَجْعَلُ لَكَ
خَرْجًا عَلٰى اَنْ تَجْعَلَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَهُمْ سَدًّا ﴿٩٤﴾

﴿٩٤﴾

He answered: 'That with which my Lord has established me is better [than any tribute]. Hence, do but help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them!' (95)

Bring me blocks of iron!' At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountainsides, he said: 'Ply your bellows!' Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.' (96)

And thus their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart], nor could they dig their way through it. (97)

He said: 'This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true.' (98)

On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves dashing against one another. The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together. (99)

And We shall, on that day, present hell, all spread out, for the unbelievers, (100)

who have turned a blind eye to My admonition and a deaf ear to My warning. (101)

قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ
أَجْعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا ﴿٩٥﴾

ءَاتُونِي زُبَرَ الْحَدِيدِ ۖ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ
الصَّدَفَيْنِ قَالَ أَنْفُخُوا ۖ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَعَلَهُ
نَارًا قَالَ ءَاتُونِي أُفْرِغَ عَلَيْهِ قِطْرًا ﴿٩٦﴾

فَمَا اسْتَطَعُوا أَن يَظْهَرُوهُ وَمَا اسْتَطَعُوا
لَهُ نَقَبًا ﴿٩٧﴾

قَالَ هَذَا رَحْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّي ۖ فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ
رَبِّي جَعَلَهُ دَكَّاءَ ۖ وَكَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي حَقًّا
﴿٩٨﴾

﴿٩٩﴾ وَتَرَكْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَمُوجُ فِي بَعْضٍ
وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فُجِّمَعْنَهُمْ جَمْعًا ﴿١٠٠﴾

وَعَرَضْنَا جَهَنَّمَ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْكَافِرِينَ عَرْضًا
﴿١٠١﴾

الَّذِينَ كَانَتْ أَعْيُنُهُمْ فِي غِطَاءٍ عَن ذِكْرِي
وَكَانُوا لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَمْعًا ﴿١٠١﴾

Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers. (102)

Say: 'Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? (103)

It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. (104)

It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day. (105)

That will be their reward, hell, for having rejected the faith, and made My revelations and My messengers a target of their mockery.' (106)

But those who have faith and do righteous deeds shall have the gardens of paradise as their dwelling place. (107)

Therein they will abide, and never will they desire any change to befall them. (108)

Say: 'If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it.' (109)

أَفَحَسِبَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنْ يَتَّخِذُوا
عِبَادِي مِنْ دُونِي أَوْلِيَاءَ ۗ إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا
جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ نُزُلًا ﴿١٠٢﴾

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِالْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَالًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

الَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ
يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ
وَلِقَائِهِ ۖ فَخَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ فَلَا نُقِيمُ لَهُمْ
يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وِزْنًَا ﴿١٠٥﴾

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَاؤُهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ بِمَا كَفَرُوا وَاتَّخَذُوا
آيَاتِي وَرُسُلِي هُزُوًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ الْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يَبْغُونَ عَنْهَا حِوَلًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي
لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي
وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as a partner.' (110)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا
إِلَهُكُمْ إِلَهٌُ وَاحِدٌ فَمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ
رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ
بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا ﴿١١٠﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* is mainly concerned with Dhu'l-Qarnayn and his three journeys, to the east, west and the central areas, as well as his erection of a strong barrier to prevent Gog and Magog from getting through. The *sūrah* tells us that after he had erected the barrier, Dhu'l-Qarnayn said: "This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true." (Verse 98)

The reference to the 'true promise' is followed with the blowing of the trumpet and a scene of the resurrection before the *sūrah* concludes with three short sections, each of which starts with the command, 'Say'. These three sections sum up all the main topics of the *sūrah* and follow its drift. They serve as the final strong beats of an evenly flowing tune.

The Mysterious Traveller

The story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn begins as follows: "They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: I will give you an account of him." (Verse 83) Speaking about the reasons that led to the revelation of this *sūrah*, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq mentions a report attributed to Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and Companion. The report mentions that the Quraysh sent al-Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith and `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ to ask the Jewish rabbis in Madinah about Muḥammad, outlining for them their terms of reference. The Quraysh elders told the two men to describe Muḥammad in detail to the Jewish rabbis and to report to them truthfully what he advocated. "The Jews," said the Quraysh elders, "are the people of early Scriptures and they have a wealth of knowledge about prophets which is not available to us."

In Madinah, the two men from the Quraysh put their questions to the rabbis and solicited their honest opinion about Muḥammad. The rabbis told them to ask Muḥammad three questions. "If he gives you satisfactory answers, then he is a prophet and messenger of God. If he has no answer to give, then he is fabricating whatever he says. You may do what you like with him. Ask him about a group of

young people about whom there was a strange story in ancient times, and let him tell you what happened to them. Ask him also about a man who travelled all over the place and went to the far east and far west. The third question you should ask him is to tell you about the spirit.”

Al-Naḍr and `Uqbah travelled back to Makkah and told their tribesmen that they had brought the answer to their problem with Muḥammad. When they told them of the advice of the Jewish rabbis, they went to the Prophet and put the three questions to him. The Prophet told them that he would answer them the following day. Apparently he did not qualify the promise by saying, ‘God willing’, as he should have done and as Muslims should always do. As a result nothing was revealed to him for fifteen days, nor did the angel Gabriel meet him during this period. The people of Makkah began to spread a fresh propaganda campaign, saying: ‘Muḥammad has promised to give us an answer on the morrow, and now it has been fifteen days since we asked him, without him giving us any reply to our questions.’

The Prophet was very sad at this delay in revelation and he was much distressed by what the people of Makkah said about him. Then the angel Gabriel came down revealing this *sūrah*, The Cave, which tells him in its early verses not to grieve too much for his people if they refuse to listen to him. It then proceeds to answer the questions put to him, relating the stories of the young men and the traveller of old times. He also gave the Prophet the answer to the third question about the spirit, which occurs in *Sūrah 17*, The Night Journey.

Another report by Ibn `Abbās tells of the reason for the revelation of the verse giving the reply to the question about the spirit. This mentions that the Jews themselves put the question to the Prophet: “Tell us about the spirit, and how the spirit inside the body can be tortured, when the spirit belongs to God?” As nothing about the spirit had been revealed to him, he could not answer them. Gabriel then came down to him with the verse stating: “Say: The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You [mankind] have been granted but little knowledge.” (17: 85)

Since there are several reports about the immediate reason behind the revelation of this *sūrah*, we prefer not to go into these, limiting our discussion to the Qur’ānic text, which provides us with true and accurate information. On the basis of this text we realize that a question was asked about Dhu’l-Qarnayn, but we do not know for certain who put the question. Knowing the questioner will not add anything about the import of the story. We will now discuss the text.

The Qur’ānic text does not mention anything about the personality of Dhu’l-Qarnayn or where and when he lived. This is typical of Qur’ānic stories. The intention is not to provide historical accounts, but to learn the lessons that may be

derived from the stories mentioned. In most cases, these lessons can be drawn without the need to define time and place.

Documented history refers to a king called Iskandar, or Alexander Dhu'l-Qarnayn. It is also certain that the person to whom the Qur'an refers by the name Dhu'l-Qarnayn is not the Greek king, Alexander, for he was a pagan worshipping idols, while the Qur'an speaks about someone who believed in God's oneness and in resurrection and the life to come.⁶ In his book, *Al-Āthār Al-Bāqiyah `an al-Qurūn Al-Khāliyah*, al-Bīrūnī mentions that Dhu'l-Qarnayn, about whom the Qur'an gives us this account, was a king of Ḥimyar in Yemen. This is based on the fact that his name begins with 'Dhu', which is typical of Ḥimyarī kings. His actual name was Abū Baler ibn Afrīqish. He travelled at the head of his army along the southern Mediterranean coast, passing through Tunisia and Morocco and building the town of Afrīqiya. Thus the whole continent was named after him. He was nicknamed Dhu'l-Qarnayn because he reached as far as the two furthest points in relation to the sun.

This view may be correct, but we have no means of verifying it. It is not possible to undertake research based on documented history with the aim of establishing the real personality of Dhu'l-Qarnayn of whose history the Qur'an gives us a glimpse. The same applies to most historical accounts given in the Qur'an, such as those concerning the people of the prophets Noah and Hūd, or the Thamūd, etc. History itself is only a recent addition, compared to the length of human life on earth. Great events took place in the periods preceding what history reports, and these remain unknown to historians. Hence, we cannot refer to them for answers.

Had the Torah remained intact, without distortion or addition, it would have been a reliable source of information concerning some of these events. But the Torah has been mixed with legends that have, without doubt, no foundation. It has been infused with reports that have, most certainly, been added to the original text revealed by God. Hence, the Torah cannot be treated as a reliable source for the historical accounts it contains. Thus, the only source left for us is the Qur'an, since God has guaranteed its preservation in its original form and its protection against any distortion. It is indeed the only source for its historical accounts.

Needless to say, it is wrong to try to evaluate the Qur'an with reference to history. There are two obvious reasons for this. The first is the fact that history is a recent creation which has missed countless events in mankind's progress. The Qur'an tells us some of these events which remain totally unknown to history and historians.

⁶ It may appear that Sayyid Quṭb is doing what he says he will not do, discussing the identity of the central figure of the story and the locations mentioned, but in fact he is only illustrating why history could not be referred to in search for more details of the Qur'anic accounts. His discussion of the probable locations remains very close to the Qur'anic statements. The footnote speaking about the wall near Tirmidh simply mentions a probability without any attempt to evaluate it. — Editor's note.

Secondly, even though history may record some of these events, it remains the product of human beings. Thus, it suffers from the shortcomings of human action, such as imperfection, error, distortion, etc. In our own time, when means of communication and facilities of verification have become available in plenty, we find the same piece of news or the same incident reported in a variety of ways, each looking at it from a particular angle, and giving it a different interpretation. It is out of such heaps of confusion that historical accounts are made, regardless of what may be said about research and verification.

Hence, whatever is said about referring to history in order to evaluate the accounts given in the Qur'ān cannot be admitted on the basis of the scientific rules adopted by people, let alone by Islam which states clearly that the Qur'ān is the final arbiter. Such reference to history cannot be advocated by a believer in the Qur'ān or in scientific research. It is no more than useless polemic.

A Policy of Justice for All

Some people, then, asked God's Messenger about Dhu'l-Qarnayn, and God revealed to him what this *sūrah* contains about his history and actions. We have no source other than the Qur'ān to give us further information. Hence, we will not try to expand or elaborate, because that would not be based on any accurate information. Commentaries on the Qur'ān provide many accounts and plenty of information, but none of these has any reliable basis. Hence, they should be approached very cautiously, particularly because they include Israelite reports and other legends.

Of the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn the Qur'ān mentions three journeys, one to the west, one to the east and the third to a place described as an area 'between two mountains'. Let us now consider this Qur'ānic account.

The story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, as given in this *sūrah*, begins with a brief introduction of the man himself: "*We established his power on earth, and gave him means to achieve anything.*" (Verse 84) God then has established his power on earth, giving him uncontested authority. He has also given him the means of government and victory, the facilities to build civilization, enjoy the blessings God has made available to mankind, and all that make human life on earth steady and prosperous.

So he followed a certain way." (Verse 85) Thus, he went along one way which was made easy for him, aiming westwards: "*When he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in dark, turbid waters; and nearby he found a certain people. Dhu'l-Qarnayn, We said, you may either punish them or treat them with kindness. He replied: The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him. But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.*" (Verses 86-88)

Reaching the setting of the sun means the place where a person feels that the sun sets beyond the horizon. This varies according to geographic location. In some places we may feel that the sun sets beyond a mountain, while in others we feel that it goes down into the water, as is the case when we look at the sea or ocean. In other places still, the sun seems to set in the sand, as when we are in a desert with no hills or mountains around.

It appears from the text that Dhu'l-Qarnayn went westwards until he reached a point on the Atlantic coast which people believed to be at the end of dry land. He saw the sun setting in the sea. It is even more likely that this was at a river mouth, where there would be plenty of weeds and the area muddy. Little lakes form in such situations and may look like water springs. He saw the sun setting there, going down in a spring of murky water. But it is impossible for us to define the area, because the *sūrah* does not give us any clue. We have no other reliable source. Hence, every view other than this cannot be considered accurate because it has no reliable basis.

At this lake of turbid and murky waters, Dhu'l-Qarnayn found a community and God gave him a choice: *"Dhu'l-Qarnayn, We said, you may either punish them or treat them with kindness."* (Verse 86) Now, how did God say this to Dhu'l-Qarnayn? Was it revelation, or a mere statement of the situation, resulting from the fact that God had given him power over those people, so that he could determine whatever he wished to do with them. In this case, it would be just as if it was said to him: Here they are at your command: you may choose to punish them or to follow a lenient course of action. Both are possible. There is nothing to stop us understanding the text in either way. What is important to realize is that Dhu'l-Qarnayn declared his policy in the areas that came under his rule and their population became subject to his authority.

He replied: 'The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him. But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.'(Verses 87-88)

This is a declaration that those who transgress the bounds of justice will be subject to their own punishment in this life. Then they will return to their Lord who is certain to inflict on them severe punishment that has no parallel in what is known in human life. On the other hand, pious and true believers will receive kindly treatment, generous reward, honour and help in all their affairs.

These are the outlines of just and good government. A true believer should receive from rulers every sort of kindly treatment and generous reward, while transgressors who are unjust to their fellow human beings should be punished severely. When those who do well in the community, pursuing a fair line of action in all their

pursuits, receive a good reward for their actions, and when the unjust and oppressors receive a fair punishment and humiliation, then the whole community is motivated to follow the line of goodness. But when matters go wrong, and the unjust, oppressor and corrupt people are the ones who enjoy favour with the ruler, while those who are good and fair are persecuted, then the ruler's power becomes no more than a tool of corruption and misery for the whole community. Nothing remains fair. The whole society sinks into chaos.

After Dhu'l-Qarnayn's return from his westward journey he took his way eastward. Again we realize that his authority was well established, and that all means were made available to him:

Then he followed another way and [marched eastwards] till, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it. So he did; and We had All knowledge of all the means available to him. (Verses 89-91)

What we said about the setting of the sun is also true of its rising place. What is meant here is the point where it rises in the east as we look up beyond the horizon. Again the Qur'ān does not define the place. It simply describes it and the situation of the people Dhu'l-Qarnayn found there: *"When he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it."* (Verse 90) This suggests that the land was open, unscreened from the sun by any hills or trees. Thus when the sun rose, the people were directly exposed to it. This description applies to deserts and vast plateaus. It does not specify a particular location. All that we say is that it is likely that this place was in the far east, where the sun rose over its open, flat land. It might have also been on the east coast of Africa.

Another probability is that the description, *'for whom We had provided no covering against it,'* means that those people were always in the nude and did not employ clothing. Hence, they were not screened from the sun.

Since Dhu'l-Qarnayn had announced his policy of government, the *sūrah* does not repeat it here. Nor is any further action mentioned because God is fully aware of his intention and behaviour.

It is important, however, to reflect very briefly here on an artistic touch in the image provided. The scene portrayed for us is open and clear: a blazing sun which is in no way screened from the people.

Similarly, Dhu'l-Qarnayn's conscience and intentions are open, known ' fully to God Almighty. This provides harmony between the natural scene and man's conscience in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

A Barrier against Evil Forces

Then he followed yet another way and [marched on] till, when he reached a place between the two mountain-barriers he found beneath them a people who could scarcely understand a word. Dhu'l-Qarnayn,' they said, 'Gog and Magog are ravaging this land. May we pay you a tribute so that you erect a barrier between us and them?' He answered: 'That with which my Lord has established me is better [than any tribute]. Hence, do but help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them! Bring me blocks of iron!' At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountain-sides, he said: 'Ply your bellows!' Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.' And thus their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart], nor could they dig their way through it. He said: 'This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true.' (Verses 92-98)

Now we come to the third of Dhu'l-Qarnayn's journeys which took him to a place *between the two mountain-barriers.*' We cannot make any definite suggestion as to the exact location of this place, nor do we have any information about the nature of these barriers. All that we can understand from the text is that he reached a place lying in between two natural or man-made barriers, separated by a gap or low passage. Down there he found some backward people, whom the Qur'an describes as *could scarcely understand a word.*'

These people realized that Dhu'l-Qarnayn was both powerful and able. They also discovered that he was pious and God-fearing. Hence, they offered him payment in return for erecting a barrier to stop Gog and Magog, who frequently attacked them from beyond the mountain barriers and used the passage in between, from wreaking havoc in their land. These people had exhausted all the means available to them, yet still they could not repel those evil forces. Hence they were prepared to pay for a solution to their problem utilizing Dhu'l-Qarnayn's power.

Following the policy declared by that pious ruler, which was based on resisting all evil and corruption on earth, he declined to take their money, and offered instead to erect the barrier without charge. He judged that the easiest way to do so was to close the passage between the two mountain-barriers. However, he asked the backward people to help him by employing their physical strength: *"Help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them! Bring me blocks of iron!"* (Verses 95-96) They began to gather whatever blocks of iron were available. He put all these blocks in a heap to close the gap between the two barriers, so that the two mountain-sides became like two crusts covering a heap of iron articles in between.

"At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountainsides," (Verse 96) and the heap of iron was as high as the top of the two barriers, *"he said: Ply your*

bellows!" (Verse 96) They were to generate air to increase the fire which heated the iron. *"Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.'*" (Verse 96) The molten copper thus filled the gaps between the iron blocks, making the new barrier impregnable.

This method has recently been used in strengthening iron by adding a percentage of copper to it, thereby reinforcing it. It is to this fact that God guided Dhu'l-Qarnayn, recording the fact in His book many centuries before it was discovered by human science.

Thus the two natural barriers joined together with the man-made one, and the gap through which Gog and Magog launched their attacks was completely sealed. Hence, *"Their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart]"* by climbing it. *"Nor could they dig their way through it,"* to resume their attacks. For the first time, those vulnerable, backward people felt secure in their land.⁷

Dhu'l-Qarnayn looked at the great work which he accomplished, yet experienced neither pride nor conceit. Nor was he elated by this edifice which testified to both his power and knowledge. Rather, he remembered God and thanked Him, acknowledging that it was He who guided him to what work should be done, and that his own power was granted to him by God, and that future events would take place according to His will. He also declared his belief that all mountains, walls and barriers are certain to be levelled before the Day of Judgement so that the whole earth will be flat. He said: *"This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true."* (Verse 98)

Thus ends this passage which relates part of the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, a good example of a pious ruler who is given power and secure position as well as other means and facilities. He goes with his armies east and west, but he does not tyrannize or show conceit. Nor does he consider his conquering of other people's lands a means to exploit individuals, communities and countries in order to ensure a luxurious life for himself or his people. He does not treat the vanquished people as slaves, making them the means for his self-aggrandisement. On the contrary, he spreads justice, assists the weak and backward, ensures that no aggression is launched against them, and charges nothing for his services. He utilizes the power God granted him in building proper and secure communities where everyone gets what rightfully belongs to him. He then attributes every good work he does to the grace of God, claiming no part of it for himself. Even at the height of his power, he

⁷ A wall was discovered close to the city of Tirmidh in central Asia, and was mentioned by a German and a Spanish historian who passed by it early in the fifteenth century. They referred to Bāb Al-Ĥadīd, meaning 'the iron door', and which can be found between Samarqand and India. This may be the wall built by Dhu'l-Qarnayn.

does not forget God's power and that to Him he certainly shall return.

The Truth about Gog and Magog

Now who were Gog and Magog? Where are they now? What did they do and what will happen to them? Such questions are very difficult to answer with any degree of accuracy. Our knowledge of them is limited to what is mentioned specifically in the Qur'ān and in authentic *ahādīth*. The Qur'ān includes here a quotation of what Dhu'l-Qarnayn says: "*Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true.*" (Verse 98) This statement does not specify a time. God's promise to destroy the rampart may already have occurred when the Tatars swept across huge areas, destroying whole kingdoms.

Another mention of them is found in *Sūrah 21, The Prophets*, where it is stated: "*When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm down from every corner, when the true promise draws close [to its fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers.*" (21: 96-97) Again this statement does not specify a time for the promised appearance of Gog and Magog. That God's promise has come near to fulfilment, in the sense that the Last Hour or the Day of Judgement is soon to come, is an accomplished fact ever since the time of the Prophet. In the Qur'ān we read: "*The Hour has drawn near, and the moon was cleft asunder.*" (54: 1) In God's reckoning, time has a totally different perspective from that of human reckoning. The time gap between the moment when the Hour becomes near and its actual occurrence may stretch to millions of years or centuries. Thus human beings may see this as a very long period of time, while, by God's standards, it may signify nothing more than a blink of an eye.

This means that the rampart built by Dhu'l-Qarnayn might have been penetrated in the period that has lapsed between the revelation of the verse stating, '*the Hour has drawn near,*' and our present day. This suggests that the conquests of the Tatars in the eastern provinces might have represented a sort of fulfilment of the warning which tells of Gog and Magog forging ahead and sweeping across the earth. An authentic *hadīth* related by Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal on the authority of Zainab bint Jaḥsh, the Prophet's wife, mentions that the Prophet woke up once, red in the face, saying: "Woe to the Arabs! A calamitous event is drawing near. The rampart of Gog and Magog has been breached today by as much as this, [rounding his thumb with his first finger]." I said, "Messenger of God! Would we be destroyed when righteous people are living among us?" He said: "Yes, if evil becomes widespread."

The Prophet's dream occurred more than thirteen and a half centuries ago. The conquests of the Tatars took place subsequently, destroying the `Abbāsīd Caliphate. It was Hülegü who destroyed it, ending the reign of al-Musta`ṣim, the last `Abbāsīd

Caliph. This might have been the realization of the Prophet's dream. But true knowledge belongs to God. All that we say in this respect is by way of probability, not certainty.

Deaf and Blind

The *sūrah* follows the reference by Dhu'l-Qarnayn to God's true promise with a scene from the Day of Judgement:

On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves dashing against one another. The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together. And We shall, on that day, present hell, all spread out, for the unbelievers, who have turned a blind eye to My admonition and a deaf ear to My warning. (Verses 99-101)

This is a scene showing the movement of huge masses of people of all colours, races and geographical areas, belonging to all generations and times, after they have been resurrected and brought back to life. They move across in a chaotic way, unaware of what is around them. They push each other like waves in the sea and mix like the surf raised by the waves. Then suddenly a trumpet is blown and they are gathered according to a specific order: "*The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together.*" (Verse 99)

We see also the unbelievers who turned away from remembrance of God as though their eyes were covered and their ears deaf. Now we see them with hell brought before them and they cannot turn away from it as they used to turn away from God's guidance. On that day, the option of turning away is not within their power. The cover over their eyes has been drawn, and they now see clearly the consequence of their deliberate turning away. This is a fair recompense.

The *sūrah* provides symmetry between their turning away and their vision of hell as it is brought before them. The two actions are shown in contrast both in scene and movement.

This contrast is followed by a comment full of derision: "*Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 102) Do these unbelievers think that they can choose from among God's creatures which fully submit to Him some who could support them against God? Can these give them help or grant them protection against God's might? If such thoughts are entertained by them, then let them experience the results of such self-delusion: "*We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 102) This is an evil abode already prepared to receive them. There is no need for waiting. It is all ready to receive its unbelieving dwellers.

Deceptive Thoughts of Bad Action

The *sūrah* concludes with a few verses that bring together its many different lines of discussion in harmonious tone and rhythm. We have here three different aspects which, together, sum up the whole theme of the *sūrah*. The first of these revolves around values and standards as they are reflected in deviant societies and as they truly are. These relate to both actions and people.

Say: 'Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day.' (Verses 103-105)

"Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do?" (Verse 103) These are the ones whose loss cannot be exceeded by any human being in history. The answer to this question comes very quickly. *"It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided."* (Verse 104) It did not lead them to follow any proper guidance. It did not yield any real fruit, nor did it achieve any objective. But these people *"nonetheless think that what they do is right."* (Verse 104) This tells how misguided these people are. They have no inclination that whatever they do in this world takes them further into error and is thus completely wasted. Hence, they continue spending their whole lives in such vain pursuits.

Now the listeners are asked whether they want to know who these people are. The question heightens their curiosity, holding the attentions of everyone within hearing range. Then when everyone eagerly anticipates the information, the identity of these unrivalled losers is revealed: *"It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works."* (Verse 105) The linguistic sense imparted by the Arabic term, *habitat*, describing their actions as 'vain' is derived from a very special case. It is that of an animal feeding on poisonous grass. Its belly is swollen before it dies. The same is the case with the actions of those who are misguided. They grow and seem fair and rewarding, but the fact is that they come to nothing whatsoever.

"No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day." (Verse 105) Thus they are shown to be worthless, having no value in the scale of true standards and principles. This is their condition 'on Resurrection Day'. But they only have the requital they deserve. *"That will be their reward, hell, for having rejected the faith, and made My revelations and My messengers a target of their mockery."* (Verse 106)

Contrast in the scene is given by showing how the believers fare and what their value score is on the true scales used on the Day of Judgement. *"But those who have*

faith and do righteous deeds shall have the gardens of paradise as their dwelling place. Therein they will abide, and never will they desire any change to befall them." (Verses 107-108) This abode in the gardens of paradise is contrasted here with the other abode in hell. The gulf between the two is colossal.

There is also here a fine reference to human nature and its appreciation of pleasure and enjoyment. This is expressed in the sentence, *never will they desire any change to befall them.*' (Verse 108) We need to reflect a little on this statement which assures us that the believers are to dwell in paradise permanently. By nature however human beings are bored with any state that continues *ad infinitum*. When they are satisfied that the blessings they enjoy are permanent, they are no longer keen to preserve them, seeking changes instead.

This is how human nature is made, and for a definite purpose. Moreover, this is more suited to the role assigned to man in this life, placing him in charge of the earth. This role requires developing human life so as to achieve the level of perfection God in His wisdom has determined for it. Hence, He has made man a creature who loves change, discovery and movement from one stage, place or scene to another. This aspiration enables man to move on, to change things in his life, to discover new things as also reinvent his social system. In this way, man's whole life changes and develops. It continues to progress gradually until it achieves its best level of perfection.

At the same time, human nature loves what is familiar and tries to preserve customs and traditions. However, this is kept at a degree that does not obstruct progress or prevent the development of thought or new ideas. The two trends achieve a balance which ensures progress. Every time the balance is disturbed so as to impose stagnation, it is followed by a revolt which gives new momentum in the opposite direction. This may even exceed the limits of moderation. The best periods in human life are those which achieve an equilibrium between the driving force and social controls, and between motivation and restraint. Should stagnation persist, it heralds a retreat in social conditions and a slow death in the life of both individuals and the community.

Such is the nature that is more suitable for human life on earth. In heaven, which is the world of absolute perfection, there is no duty and responsibility commensurate with human nature. Should people retain their nature that fits their life on earth while living in the permanent and self-renewing bliss of heaven, they will, in time, feel exceedingly bored with it. Heaven will become like a prison and its dwellers will seek to leave it for a while, just to have a change, even though this may mean paying a visit to a place of misery. They will need such a departure from heaven to satisfy their innate and strong desire for change.

But the Creator, who knows well the nature of His creation, will change human desire so that when they are in heaven, they will not want to change or to leave. Instead, they will be keen to continue their lives there for as long as time stretches.

Preparing for a Meeting with the Lord

The second concluding element shows the limits of human knowledge when compared with God's infinite knowledge. As our imagination cannot reach the absolute, the Qur'ān gives us a simple analogy which we can easily comprehend, using its method of image drawing: *"Say: If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it."* (Verse 109) The sea is the largest and richest thing known to mankind. People use ink to write down whatever they want to record. This is how they document their knowledge which they imagine to be great. Hence the Qur'ān puts forward the image of the sea with all its vast expanse, but which is now made of ink with which to write down God's words that indicate His knowledge. Even though the whole sea is used, God's words are not finished. At this point another sea of similar magnitude is brought forward, but it too is used in full while God's words are far from finished.

It is with such a clear image and movement that the concept of the infinite is placed before the finite human intellect. A universal and abstract concept remains beyond human conception until it is described in specific terms. No matter how powerful a human being's ability to understand the abstract is, he needs to relate an abstract concept to images and shapes, types and characteristics. This applies to abstract concepts of what is limited or tangible. How then can it fathom what is unlimited and intangible?

Hence, the Qur'ān gives analogies and draws on similarities in order to give people images and scenes that describe the great concepts it wants them to understand. It often uses what is tangible, and what has shape and definite characteristics and recognizable features in the same way as is employed here. In this example, the sea represents human knowledge which people imagine to be great. But huge and rich as the seas and the oceans may be, they remain limited. God's words, on the other hand, represent His infinite knowledge for which people cannot set any limit. Indeed they cannot receive or record it all, let alone comprehend it.

Conceit may creep into the human soul as people are able to make new discoveries about themselves or about the universe. They are elated with these scientific discoveries feeling that they have achieved what there is to achieve, or at least are on the way to it. But when they look at the areas which remain unknown, they realize that they have only taken a few steps into the sea which remains so vast, stretching

beyond the horizon. The fact remains that man's ability to receive and record God's knowledge is very limited indeed, because it represents a relationship of what is finite and what is infinite.

Man may gain as much knowledge as he can, and he may discover much of the secrets of the universe, but he must never arrogantly boast about his knowledge. For the utmost that he can achieve is to transform the seas and oceans into ink, yet all that ink is insufficient to record God's words.

With such a comparison that shows man's knowledge to be extremely limited in relation to God's, the final touch in the *sūrah* paints the highest and noblest degree for man, which is that of recipient of God's final message. This again is something close and finite in relation to the limitless horizon our sight cannot reach:

Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord (on Judgement Day), let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as partner. (Verse 110)

That is the ultimate horizon of Godhead. How does the horizon of prophethood compare with it, when it is, after all, a human horizon?

"Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me..." I am a human being who receives something from that highest level. I get my knowledge from that inexhaustible source. Yet I am a human being who does not go beyond the guidance which I receive from my Lord. I am a human being who is taught something, learns it and then teaches it to others. Whoever aspires to a position close to this height must first of all benefit by whatever he or she learns from God's Messenger. They must also utilize the only means that leads there: *"Whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as a partner."* (Verse 110) This is the passport to that splendid meeting.

Thus ends the *sūrah* which began by mentioning revelation and the oneness of God, utilizing themes and tones that gradually grow more and more profound until they reach this final climax. It is a distinguished beat which generates all the tunes in the splendid music of faith.