

SŪRAH 23

Al-Mu'minūn

(The Believers)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, The Believers, or *al-Mu'minūn*, is defined by its name which makes its subject matter very clear. It begins with an outline of the believers' qualities, and presents an exposition on the indicators of faith in both the human soul and the universe at large. It then moves on to present the essence of faith as expostulated by God's messengers since the time of Noah up to Muhammad, the last of all prophets and messengers, (peace be upon them all). It also discusses the fallacies of those who deny faith, their objections and determined opposition that compel God's messengers to appeal to Him for help. At this point, God punishes the rejecters and saves the believers. The *sūrah* then refers to the fact that, after God's messengers have passed away, people fall into contention about this truth that admits no variation. This provides an opportunity to discuss and denounce the unjustified attitude the Arab idolaters took to God's last messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him). The *sūrah* closes with a scene of the Day of Judgement in which we see the fate suffered by those who reject the truth of faith. They are strongly reproached for their attitude. This scene concludes with a statement re-emphasizing the truth of God's absolute oneness and a prayer for His mercy and forgiveness.

As such, the *sūrah* is what its titles say, The Believers, or the *sūrah* of faith with all its issues, aspects and nature. Faith then provides its central theme.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with a statement that success is assured for the believers: "*Truly, successful shall be the believers.*" (Verse 1) It provides a detailed account, of the qualities of those believers who are certain to be successful. Referring to signs that encourage and endorse faith, which are found both

in human beings and in the universe at large, this part mentions the different stages of human life from its early beginnings to its final end. It elaborates much when it mentions the different stages an embryo goes through while providing only a brief outline of other stages. It then follows human life up to the Day of Resurrection before moving on to signs of faith in the wide universe, referring to the creation of the heavens, rain falling from the sky, bringing forth vegetation, plants and fruits. It also mentions animals that are placed at the disposal of human beings, ships traversing the *seas* and man's ability to use such ships and animals for transport.

The second part takes us from the indicators pointing out the reality of faith to a discussion of the truth of faith as advocated by all God's messengers, without exception: *"My people, worship God alone: for you have no deity other than Him."* (Verse 23) This is a statement made by Noah, and by every messenger that followed him, up to Muhammad, God's final Messenger. The unbelievers always made the same objections: *"This man is but a mortal like yourselves,"* and *"had God willed, He would have surely sent down angels."* (Verse 24) Another objection refers to the promise made by God's messengers: *"Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life?"* (Verse 35) The result was always that messengers appealed to God for support. He answered their appeals and destroyed the unbelievers. This part concludes with an address to all messengers: *"Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone."* (Verses 51-52)

The third part speaks about the fact that after God's messengers had gone, people were divided and fell into contention over this essential truth: *"People have divided themselves into factions, each delighting in what they have."* (Verse 53) It further speaks about people being oblivious of the fact that God tests them with the blessings He bestows on them. They are deluded by the riches they enjoy. The believers, on the other hand, remain God-fearing, worship Him alone and associate no partners with Him. At the same time they remain fully alert, with awe in their hearts: *"Their hearts lard filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return."* (Verse 60) At this point, an image is portrayed showing those who were oblivious of the truth of faith being overwhelmed by God's punishment. They cry out for help, but they are strongly reproached: *"Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night."* (Verses 66-67) The *sūrah* denounces their attitude towards God's Messenger whom they knew well to be honest and truthful. Now that he has come to them with the message of the truth, asking for no wages, how can they reject him and the truth he advocates? Although they acknowledge that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, which are all under His control as He is their only Lord, they reject the very concept of resurrection. They go further in their falsehood,

claiming that God has a son and associating partners with Him. *“Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as partner with Him.”* (Verse 92)

The final part turns away from them and their claims in order to address the Prophet, telling him to repel evil with what is better, and to seek refuge with God from the evil of satans. He must not be angered or grieved by what they say. In addition, we have here a scene of the Day of Judgement describing the punishment, suffering and humiliation that await them there. The *sūrah* concludes by stating that God always remains exalted above all that they say about Him: *“Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne.”* (Verse 116) It also asserts that the unbelievers will never be successful, whereas the believers' success is confirmed at the beginning of the *sūrah*: *“He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful.”* (Verse 117) Again, an instruction is given to seek God's mercy and forgiveness: *“Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy.”* (Verse 118)

The *sūrah* spreads an air of explanation and factual statement, mixed with calm argument, pure logic and inspiration. Its subject matter is faith, and faith gives it its special ambience. At the beginning we see the believers *“who humble themselves in their prayer,”* and in the middle they are described in the following terms: *“They give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return.”* (Verse 60) For an example of the inspiration of the *sūrah* we may take: *“It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds: how seldom are you grateful.”* (Verse 78). Indeed the entire *sūrah* reflects a gentle air of faith.

1

Man, Faith and the Universe

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Truly, successful shall be the believers, (1)

who humble themselves in their prayer, (2)

who turn away from all that is frivolous, (3)

who are active in deeds of charity, (4)

who refrain from sex (5)

except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, (6)

whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors, (7)

who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges, (8)

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي صَلَاتِهِمْ خَاشِعُونَ ﴿٢﴾

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنِ اللَّغْوِ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِلزَّكَاةِ فَاعِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأُفْجَاهِهِمْ حَافِظُونَ ﴿٥﴾

إِلَّا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ

فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مُلْؤِمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

فَمَنْ أَتَعَىٰ وَرَاءَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ

الْعَادُونَ ﴿٧﴾

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمْنَتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَاعُونَ

(8)

and who are diligent in their prayers. (9)

These shall be the heirs, (10)

who will inherit paradise; therein shall they abide.
(11)

Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay,
(12)

then We place him, a gamete,¹³ in a safe place of
rest. (13)

Then We create out of the gamete a clinging cell
mass, and out of the clinging cell mass We create
an embryo. Then We create within the embryo
bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We
then bring this into being as another creation.
Exalted be God, the best of creators. (14)

And then, after all this, you are destined to die ;
(15)

and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day
of Resurrection. (16)

We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits;
and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation.
(17)

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وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَوَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ۞

أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْوَارِثُونَ ۞

الَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْفِرْدَوْسَ هُمْ فِيهَا
خَالِدُونَ ۞

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّن طِينٍ

۞

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَّكِينٍ ۞

ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ
مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظْمًا فَكَسَوْنَا
الْعِظْمَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ ۞

فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ ۞

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ لَمَيِّتُونَ ۞

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ تُبْعَثُونَ ۞

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعَ طَرَائِقَ وَمَا كُنَّا

¹³ For an explanation of the translation of the Qur'anic terms denoting the stages of human development during pregnancy, please refer to the footnote on verse 5 of Sūrah 22, in this volume, p. 80. — Editor's note.

We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away. (18)

And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date-palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat, (19)

as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat. (20)

In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. (21)

By them, as by the ships you are carried. (22)

عَنِ الْخَلْقِ غَافِلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ فَأَسْكَنَّاهُ
فِي الْأَرْضِ وَإِنَّا عَلَى ذَهَابٍ بِهِ
لَقَادِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

فَأَنْشَأْنَا لَكُمْ بِهِ جَنَّاتٍ مِّنْ خَيْلٍ
وَأَعْنَبٍ لَّكُمْ فِيهَا فَوَاكِهُ كَثِيرَةٌ وَمِنْهَا
تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَشَجَرَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ طُورِ سَيْنَاءَ تَنْبُتُ
بِالدُّهْنِ وَصَبْغٍ لِلَّالِكِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَنْعَامِ لَعِبْرَةً نُّسْقِيكُم مِّمَّا
فِي بُطُونِهَا وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ كَثِيرَةٌ وَمِنْهَا
تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى الْفُلْكِ تُحْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Success Guaranteed by Faith

“Truly, successful shall be the believers.” (Verse 1) It is a true promise; nay, it is a firm decision ensuring success for the believers. If we take it as a promise, we know God never fails to honour His promises; and if we say that it is His decision, then no one can ever foil a decision by God. What is promised is success in the life of this world and in the life to come; success for the individual believer and for the community of believers. A believer will feel this success in his heart and will see it coming true in his day to day life. The success God promises includes all that human beings associate with success and what God keeps in store for His faithful servants.

So, who are those faithful servants, the believers who receive this document written by God, containing this promise and a clear declaration of success? Who are the believers promised all goodness, victory, happiness, success and goodly provisions in this life on earth; and further promised to be successful in the hereafter, when they receive God's reward and enjoy His pleasure? They will also have much more that is known only to God, and this will be given in their two lives. Who are these believers who will inherit paradise where they will abide?

Verses 2-9 give us a detailed list of their characteristics. They are the ones "*who humble themselves in their prayer, who turn away from all that is frivolous, who are active in deeds of charity, who refrain from sex except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors, who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges, and who are diligent in their prayers.*" (Verses 2-9) So, what do we make of these characteristics?

Together they draw for us the character of a Muslim at its highest level. That is the level of Muhammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the most perfect human being ever to walk on the face of the earth. He was educated and given a refined character by God, and God certified to his noble character and way of life: "*Truly, yours is a sublime nature.*" (68: 4) `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, was asked about his character. Her answer was: "His character was the Qur'ān in practice." She then recited verses 1-9 of the present *sūrah*, and commented, "Such was God's Messenger." [Related by al-Nasā'ī]

But we ask again: what value do these characteristics give to the life of the individual, the community and to human life in general?

"*Who humble themselves in their prayer.*" (Verse 2) They feel the reverence associated with prayer, as they stand up to address God, and their hearts are thus filled with awe, which is, in turn, reflected in their features and movements. Their spirits feel God's majesty as they realize that they stand in His presence. Thus, all their preoccupations and distractions disappear. Their thoughts and feelings are all concentrated on their discourse with Him. In His sublime presence, they are heedless of all their surroundings. They see and feel nothing but His majesty. Their minds and hearts are purged of even the slightest alien thought or feeling. In such a situation, a stray atom is reunited with its source, a wandering spirit finds its way, and a heart that has been long in isolation finds its company. Thus, all values, concerns and considerations diminish, except for the ones that are related to God in some way.

"*Who turn away from all that is frivolous.*" (Verse 3) This includes all frivolity, in words, actions, or concerns. A believer's heart has its own preoccupations which steer it away from frivolity. It is full with the remembrance of God and with

reflection on His majesty and His signs that we see everywhere in the universe and within ourselves. Indeed, every scene in the universe fills our minds with wonder and gives a clear message to our hearts. Moreover, the duties required by faith keep a believer preoccupied with maintaining the purity of his or her heart, soul and conscience. Believers' duties include those of behaviour which aim at maintaining the very high standards required by faith. Moreover, the task of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong aims at preventing any deviation in the life of the Muslim community. *Jihād* is also a duty that aims to repel aggression, protect the Muslim community and maintain its position and sovereignty. These duties are always there, and believers do not shirk their responsibilities. These are either individual or collective duties, sufficient to preoccupy people throughout their lives. Man's energy is limited, and it may either be spent in what serves and improves human life, or in frivolity and idle pursuit. By his faith, a believer is required to spend all his energy in what promotes life and sets it on the course of success and prosperity.

This does not preclude relaxation and seeking comfort when it is needed. But this is totally different from indulging in frivolous and idle pursuits.

Social and Moral Qualities

"Who are active in deeds of charity." (Verse 4) Having come forward to declare their submission to God and demonstrate this in their prayer, and having turned away from all that is frivolous, true believers complement this by being active in charity. The term used in Arabic for charity is *zakāt*, but this word is often used in a wider sense that goes far beyond the obligatory financial worship with which it is normally associated. Such charity purifies man's heart and money. It purges hearts of selfishness and greed, and overcomes Satan's whispers of discouragement as he raises before us the spectre of poverty, and demonstrates our trust in God. It also makes our money, or what is left of it, pure and good, free of all obligations and doubts concerning its being lawful. Furthermore, charity protects the Muslim community against the imbalance that results from the extremes of poverty on the one side and affluence on the other. It provides social security for all individuals in the Muslim community, particularly the weaker elements, and it protects the community against disintegration.

"Who refrain from sex..." (Verse 5) This is a pointer to the purity of the human soul, the home and the community, and to the way of protecting oneself, family and society. It is all the result of refraining from indulgence in sin and turning people's hearts only to what is permissible. Thus, the Muslim community is protected from the unrestrained promiscuity that undermines the family and allows dubious

parenthood to increase and become acceptable.

A community with no restraint on desire is wont to find its very social fabric corrupted, because it deprives itself of the sanctity for the family. The family home is the basic unit in the structure of the community. It is the cradle where children grow up. To serve as a healthy cradle, it needs purity and security, both of which give reassurance to the husband and wife so that each has full trust in the other. Thus, they cooperate to safeguard their home and ensure the healthy upbringing of their young ones.

A community where unrestrained desire becomes commonplace is a filthy community that occupies a very lowly position in humanity's esteem. Self control, willpower and the appropriate regulation of natural instincts to ensure their healthy and productive fulfilment are the best way to gauge human advancement. Thus, children feel no shame about the way they start their existence in this world, for they know who their fathers are. This is far removed from what animals are like.

The Qur'ān defines here the clean and healthy way which allows a man to place the seeds of life in the right place: *"Who refrain from sex except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame."* (Verses 5-6) As for married couples, no argument is raised here, because marriage is respected in all human communities. The other form, referring to 'rightfully possessed' women, needs some explanation.

We have spoken about the question of slavery and the Islamic approach to it elsewhere in this book.¹⁴ As we have stated, when Islam was revealed, slavery was a universal system. Captives of war were made slaves, and this was an international institution. It was not possible for Islam at the time, when it was engaged in military battles against its enemies who were trying hard to stop its spread with military force, to abolish slavery unilaterally. This would have meant that Muslim captives would remain enslaved by the enemies of Islam, while Islam would set enemy captives free. Hence, while putting an end to all other sources of slavery, Islam made a provisional exception in the case of captives of war. Abolition of this remaining source was delayed until a new international system to regulate the question of war captives could be put in place.

With this source of slavery remaining, captive women continued to come into Islamic society. To give them equal treatment, on the basis of the system then operating throughout the world, meant that they should be slaves. Their enslavement did not allow them to become wives through normal marriage. Hence, Islam allowed intercourse with them by their masters only, unless they were freed through the many ways Islam provided for the same.

¹⁴ Reference to slavery is made in Vol. I, pp. 279-81, Vol. III, pp. 31-2.

We see also in this permission a way to satisfy the natural needs of the women slaves themselves, so that they did not resort to immorality. We see this happening today, despite the international treaties prohibiting slavery, when women are taken captive in war. Islam, however, does not condone such promiscuity. But Islam did open up several ways for women slaves to gain their freedom: one of which automatically came into operation when the slave woman gave birth to her master's child. In this case, she became free on her master's death. Alternatively, her master may give her freedom, either voluntarily or in atonement for some offence he might have committed. Or, she may choose to buy her own freedom. A different situation applied if her master hit her across the face. He was, then, required to free her by way of compensation. There were further ways to freedom as well.

Anyway, allowing slavery through war was a temporary necessity in order to maintain equal treatment in a world where all war captives became slaves. It was, however, not a part of the Islamic social system *per se*.

"Whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors." (Verse 7) The limit is that of wives and women rightly possessed. There can be no other legitimate way. Whoever tries to go beyond this limit actually breaks the boundaries of permissibility and falls in sin. He becomes an assailant of human honour. There can be no lawful relationship except through marriage or the results of war undertaken for the sake of Islam. When transgression beyond these well defined limits takes place, the individual concerned becomes corrupt, like a sheep grazing out of bounds, and the family is undermined because of the lack of security felt by its members. Indeed the whole community feels endangered because its wolves have been set loose. Islam is keen to avoid all that.

Qualities Guaranteeing Admission to Heaven

"Who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges." (Verse 8) They, individuals and community alike, honour their pledges and discharge their trust. Both the individual and the community have many types of trust to maintain, the first of which is the trust encapsulated in their own nature, i.e. they are created by God in an upright fashion so as to be in harmony with the rest of the universe to which they belong. This testifies to God's oneness by the natural feeling of unity that governs the universe. Believers are faithful to this great trust, and they protect their nature from deviation so that it continues to testify to God's oneness. Other trusts are derived from this basic element.

The first pledge is that God has taken from, and made ingrained in human nature, committing it to believe in His existence and His oneness. All other pledges, covenants and treaties derive from this first one. When a believer commits himself to

something, he makes God his witness. Honouring his commitments is, to a believer, part of being God-fearing, of *taqwā*.

The Muslim community is also responsible for honouring its public trust, and for the fulfilment of its pledges to God and the duties that result from these pledges. The *sūrah* gives its statement in very general terms so as to include every type of trust and pledge. Believers are faithful to all these, at all times. Being faithful is part of their character. No community can hope to have a straightforward life unless pledges and trusts are fulfilled, so that every individual and group are certain of this basic rule of community life. It is the rule that gives everyone a sense of trust and security.

“And who are diligent in their prayers.” (Verse 9) They do not neglect their prayers or miss them through laziness. Nor do they fail to attend to them as prayer should be attended to. They offer them on time, attending to obligatory and recommended parts, making them complete, omitting nothing essential. Their prayer is alive, filling their hearts and interacting with their consciences. Prayer maintains a bond between God and human hearts. Therefore, a person who does not attend regularly to his prayer is unlikely to attend diligently and conscientiously to his bonds with other people. The qualities of believers outlined in this *sūrah* start with prayer and finish with prayer, so as to stress its unrivalled importance in the structure of faith. After all, prayer is the most perfect form of worship addressed to God.

These characteristics delineate the character of believers who are certain to be successful. While they are characteristics of individuals, they are decisive in giving the Muslim community its collective character and shaping the type of life it lives. It is an honourable life that befits man, the creature God has honoured and allowed to move up on the way to perfection. It is clear that God does not want man to live like animals, merely eating and indulging in pleasure.

Since life on earth does not achieve the perfection God wants for mankind, He has willed that believers who follow His way should attain their goal in paradise, where they live forever, in complete security, and where they have no fear: *“These shall be the heirs who will inherit paradise; therein shall they abide.”* (Verses 10-11) This is the ultimate success God has determined for believers. There is no goal beyond this.

The Origins of Man

Having given a detailed account of the qualities and characteristics of believers, the *sūrah* moves on to point out the indications available within man himself that lead to faith. It speaks of the various stages of development of a human being, starting with the very beginning of human origin, and ending with resurrection on the Day of Judgement, to establish a firm link between this life and the life to come:

Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, then We place him, a gamete, in a safe place of rest. Then We create out of the gamete a clinging cell mass, and out of the clinging cell mass We create an embryo. Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We then bring this into being as another creation. Exalted be God, the best of creators. And then, after all this, you are destined to die; and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection. (Verses 12-16)

The gradual formation of man, following the same sequence, confirms first the truth of the Originator, and also the deliberate planning in the course such formation follows. This cannot be the result of blind coincidence. Nor can it be a random beginning leading to a consistent line that never fails or deviates. The truth is that human beings come into existence in the way they do, rather than any other possible way, because our Creator wants it this way, and He does things according to His own plan and design.

Moreover, by giving this full picture with the different stages shown to follow each other without fail also indicates that belief in the Creator who plans everything and following the course of action believers follow, as indicated in the first eleven verses of the *sūrah*, is the only way to achieve the perfect standard human beings can achieve both in this life and in the hereafter. Thus, the two opening passages of the *sūrah* are interlinked.

“Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay.” (Verse 12) This statement implies that there are stages in the creation of human beings, without specifying them. The implication is much clearer in the Arabic’ original where the term *sulālah*, given in English as ‘essence’, also connotes a chain of development. Hence, it means that man goes through different stages, one leading to the other, from the very first beginning of clay to the eventual creation, man. This is a truth we get to know from the Qur’ān. We do not need any confirmation of it from scientific theories concerned with the origins of man or other living things.

The Qur’ān establishes this truth of God’s work and design. Thus, we can contemplate the great divide between the clay and man who came from that clay through a succession of stages. The details of this succession are not mentioned because it is unimportant to the wider aims of the Qur’ān. Scientific theories try to find a definite ladder for our origins and evolution. In their attempts, these theories may come up with some true conclusions and they may make mistakes. We cannot, however, confuse the truth established in the Qur’ān, which mentions the succession of stages, with the attempts made by scientists to establish these different stages of succession. These attempts are always open to error, proving today what they may disprove tomorrow in the light of advanced techniques and technologies.

This truth is sometimes expressed very briefly in the Qur’ān, when it says that

man's creation began with clay, giving no reference to the stages which the process of creation then went through. The ultimate reference then is the most detailed Qur'ānic text, which refers to a 'succession of stages'. We should remember that the Qur'ān uses a more general or shorter text, only because it is more suited to the context in which it occurs.

The Qur'ān does not explain how man evolved from the essence of clay, because such explanation is not part of its objectives. The stages of this succession may be exactly as scientific theories suggest, or they may be different. It may happen that man will be able to formulate an accurate idea of such succession. However, the parting point between the Qur'ānic view of man and the way scientific theories look at him is that the Qur'ān honours man, stating that a measure of God's spirit was breathed into him to make of him a man with the qualities and characteristics that distinguish man from animals. In this, the Islamic view is fundamentally different from that of all materialist theories. God certainly tells the truth.

Different Stages in the Creation of Man

This applies to the origin of the human race: it starts from an essence of clay. As for individual human beings, they go through well known stages: "*Then We place him, a gamete, in a safe place of rest.*" (Verse 13) The creation formula that brings about new individuals of the human race, and their method of reproduction, follows a line set by God. A drop of fluid is discharged from the man to settle in the woman's uterus. It is not the whole drop; rather, a single cell out of hundreds of thousands forming this drop. It settles in this safe enclosure in the uterus which is supported by the hip bones, protecting it from the shocks and knocks that occur to the body as one moves about.

The Qur'ānic text makes the gamete a stage in the succession of man's creation, coming immediately after man's existence. This is true, but it also deserves contemplation. A human being in his full stature, and with all his features, elements and characteristics, is enclosed within this gamete. It then develops into an embryo when it begins its new existence through a new series of stages.

The gamete stage leads to that of a cell mass after the male sperm fertilizes the female egg, and then the cell mass clings to the wall of the uterus. The cell mass grows and becomes an embryo. This little creation continues in this line that never changes or deviates from its course. It moves along its marked line, using its latent energy according to God's law which combines perfect design with elaborate planning.

The next stage is that of the emergence of bones: "*Then We create within the embryo bones,*" which is followed by another stage in which the bones are clothed with flesh.

We are overwhelmed with amazement here at this fact in the development of the embryo which is stated in the Qur'ān long before it was confirmed by embryology. This is the fact that bones are made of cells that are totally different from those of flesh. It has been confirmed beyond any shadow of doubt that bones are formed first in the embryo. In fact, not a single cell of flesh could be seen before the whole skeleton of the embryo is finally in place. This is what the Qur'ān states: *"Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh."* (Verse 14) Limitless is God in His glory. He is indeed All-Knowing, All-Aware.

"We then bring this into being as another creation." (Verse 14) This is now man with his distinctive features. It is true that the human embryo is similar to animal embryos, but only in its physical stages. For then the human embryo is given a different sort of creation to make up this distinguished creature that we know, with his potential to achieve excellence. The animal embryo, on the other hand, remains within the animal grade, possessing nothing of the distinctive features and qualities of man.

The human embryo is given special qualities that in time lead it along its human way. It is given 'another creation' as it completes its embryonic stages, while the animal embryo stops at that stage because it does not have the same qualities. Hence, no animal can go beyond its animal status, so as to automatically evolve into the same high status as man. The two are totally different, and the difference is caused by the breathing of divine spirit that brings the essence of clay into a human being, which is a different creation. This means that man and animals are similar in their biological make-up, but animals do not go beyond their status, while man is brought into being as a different creation, able to achieve a totally different level of perfection through the distinctive qualities God has willed to give him in order to complete His design of creation.¹⁵

"Exalted be God, the best of creators." (Verse 14) God is certainly the only One who creates. The superlative form is not used here in a comparative sense; rather, it indicates perfection in God's creation.

"Exalted be God, the best of creators." (Verse 14) It is He who has given human nature the ability to move from one stage to the next, in accordance with the law He has set, which will never change or be modified. It will not fail to continue until man achieves the degree of perfection assigned to him, on the basis of a perfect order.

¹⁵ The theory of evolution seeks to prove the opposite, making man another stage of animal evolution, and giving animals the capability to attain human status. The facts we see disprove the existence of any such relation between man and animal, showing that no animal has the necessary qualities to evolve into human status. It will always remain within animal boundaries. Its animal evolution may be proven according to Darwin's theory or in some other way, but mankind remains a higher type of creation distinguished by certain qualities that make man what he is, and this could never have come about as a result of mechanical development. It is a gift from a higher power.

People look with amazement at what they term as 'scientific miracles' *when* man invents a machine that works automatically, without human interference. But how does this compare with the development of an embryo in all its phases and stages, each of which is hugely different from the preceding one, ushering in total transformations. But people tend to overlook such miraculous events, closing their eyes and minds to them, because long familiarity tends to disguise their miraculous nature. The mere thought that man, very complex as he is, is summed up within a single cell that cannot be seen with the naked eye, yet carries all his qualities, distinctive features and special characteristics fills us with wonder. In fact, all these distinctive qualities, features and characteristics grow and take full shape during the different stages of the development of the embryo, and then appear in full when the embryo is brought back as a different and new creation. Then they are visibly seen in the child, or they make their presence in the newborn child felt. Indeed, every child carries its own genetic features in addition to general human features and qualities. Both types are latent in the original cell but emerge later. When we reflect on this fact, which occurs all the time, our hearts and minds are hound to acknowledge this remarkable design by our Creator.

Further Aspects of Creation

The *sūrah* continues to depict the different stages of life to complete the journey. Human life that began on earth does not however end there, because an element from outside the earth forms an essential part of it, influencing the path it travels. The breathing of God's spirit in it has given human life a goal different from that of the body, and a destination unlike that of the destination of flesh and blood. Hence it achieves its completeness somewhere other than this earth, in a totally different world: "*And then, after all this, you are destined to die; and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection.*" (Verses 15-16)

Thus, death is the end of human life on earth, forming a bridge between the life we know and the life to come. As such, it is a stage in human life, not its end.

Then comes resurrection which heralds the last stage, when the perfect life begins, free of all the failings of earthly life, physical needs, fear and worry, and leading to no other stage because it represents the level of perfection human beings can attain. This, however, applies only to those who follow the way leading to such perfection, outlined in the opening verses of this *sūrah*. It is the way followed by believers. By contrast, those who in this life sink to the level of animals go further down in the life to come so that they are right at the bottom. They are no longer human beings, because they become part of the fuel of hell, fed by stones and men.

The *sūrah* moves on to point out well known, yet often forgotten, aspects in the

universe which should lead people to faith:

We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits; and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation. We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away. And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat, as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat. In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried. (Verses 17-22)

All these indicators are cited here as aspects of God's power and perfect planning. In their constitutions, functions and roles they move in perfect harmony and in the same direction. They are subject to the same law. They function in unison and serve man, the creature God has honoured. Therefore, these aspects of the universe are shown to be interlinked with the stages of human life as outlined in the *sūrah*.

"We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits; and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation." (Verse 17) The Arabic word used here, *ṭarā'iq*, carries different meanings. It may mean seven layers, one above the other, or next to one another. It may also mean seven orbits, (as we chose in our translation), but it could also mean seven celestial systems like our solar system, or seven nebulae, or clusters of stars. Be that as it may, the term signifies seven celestial creatures above us, which means that they are higher than the level of the earth in the universe. God created them all according to His planning and to suit His purpose. He protects and preserves them according to a definite law He has set in operation: *"Never are We unmindful of Our creation."*

Blessings All Around Us

"We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away." (Verse 18) Here we have a direct link between those seven orbits or bodies and the earth. Water falls from the sky, and has a direct link with those bodies. In fact, it is the perfect order controlling the universe that allows water to so fall from the sky and settle into the earth.

It is only recently that geologists developed their theory that underground water comes from surface water and rain, which seeps through the earth. Before this theory was advanced, the general perception was that underground water was independent of surface water. Yet the Qur'ān stated this fact more than 1,400 years ago.

"We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure." It is all

according to an elaborate plan. It is neither too much so as to cause flooding and devastation, nor too little so as to cause drought and famine. Nor does it come at the wrong time when it would be of little use.

“And We cause it to lodge in the earth.” The picture here is akin to that of the fertilized egg that is implanted in the uterus, which is described in the Qur’ān as *‘a safe place of rest.’* Both the egg and the water have their settled and safe places of settlement in order to give rise to life. Here we see yet another example of the Qur’ānic method of artistic arrangement of scenes and images.

“We are most certainly able to take it all away.” It can sink into the depths of the earth, through a schism in the rocky layer under it, or by some other means. The One who kept it stored in its place is also able to allow it to go beyond man’s reach. Keeping it in its place is part of God’s grace.

It is from water that life derives: *“And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat.”* (Verse 19) Date trees and vines are only two types of plant life for the emergence of which water is essential. By the same token, the sperm, or fluid man discharges, is essential for the emergence of human life. Both examples are easily understood by those addressed by the Qur’ān. They also point to the numerous other examples that depend on water for life.

Of these other types the olive tree is chosen for particular mention: *“as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat.”* (Verse 20) It is one of the most useful trees for man, with its oil, fruit and wood. The closest area to Arabia where it was planted was Mount Sinai, close to the blessed valley mentioned in the Qur’ān. Hence, this particular area is mentioned here. In that area, it is fed by groundwater.

Then the *sūrah* leaves aside all plants to refer to the animal kingdom:

In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried. (Verses 21-22)

These creatures have been made subservient to man by God’s power and design, as also by His distribution of qualities and functions in the entire universe. Anyone who looks at them with open eyes and mind will not fail to recognize the wisdom behind this planning. He will realize that we drink the milk that comes from their bellies, which means that it comes from what these cattle feed on and digest. Their special glands turn it into this tasty and highly beneficial fluid.

“You gain many other benefits from them.” These benefits are given first in this

general statement, and then two are chosen for particular emphasis: “*You eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried.*” Permission is given to man to eat of these animals, which include camels, oxen, sheep and goats, but man is forbidden to inflict pain on these animals or to torture them. Eating them provides real benefit, while torture and pain are only indicative of a sadistic nature. Causing pain and inflicting torture bring no benefit to man.

The *sūrah* compares man’s riding of animals and his being carried on board boats and ships. Both are made possible through the system God has perfected for this universe which organizes the functions of all creatures and establishes coherence and coordination between them all. It is the way God has made water, ships and the atmosphere around them both that allows ships to float on water. If the composition of any of the three alters or changes, it would not be possible for ships to travel the seas. People realized this very early in human life, and they continue to benefit by it.

All these are signs that lead to faith when they are properly understood. They are relevant to both the preceding and the following parts of the *sūrah*, and fit with them in perfect harmony.

2

One Message for All Mankind

We sent forth Noah to his people, and he said: 'My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (23)

The unbelieving elders of his people said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you. Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels. We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers.' (24)

He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while.' (25)

He said: 'My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying.' (26)

We revealed to him to 'build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth, place on board this ark one pair of every species, as well as your family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed. Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned.' (27)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَقَالَ
يَقَوْمِ أَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ
أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَقَالَ الْمَلَأُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَوْمِهِ مَا
هَذَا إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِثْلُكُمْ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَتَفَضَّلَ
عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَأَنْزَلَ مَلَائِكَةً مَّا
سَمِعْنَا بِهَذَا فِي آبَائِنَا الْأُولِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا رَجُلٌ بِهِ جِنَّةٌ فترَضُّوا بِهِ
حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنْصُرْنِي بِمَا كَذَّبُونِ ﴿٢٦﴾

فَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِ أَنْ اصْنَعِ الْفُلَ كَبَأَعَيْنَا
وَوَحَيْنَا فإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُنَا وَفَارَ التَّنُّورُ
فَأَسْلُكْ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجَيْنِ اثْنَيْنِ
وَأَهْلَكَ إِلَّا مَنْ سَبَقَ عَلَيْهِ الْقَوْلُ مِنْهُمْ
وَلَا تُخَاطِبْنِي فِي الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا إِنَّهُمْ
مُغْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

When you and those who are with you are settled in the ark, say: 'All praise is due to God who has saved us from those wrongdoing folk.' (28)

And also say: 'My Lord! Let my landing be blessed. You are the best to bring us to safe landing.' (29)

Surely, in that there are signs. Indeed, We always put [people] to a test. (30)

Then after these people We raised a new generation. (31)

And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: 'My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (32)

The unbelieving elders of his people, who denied the life to come and to whom We granted ease and plenty in this worldly life, said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat and drinking of what you drink. (33)

Indeed, if you pay heed to a mortal like yourselves, you will certainly be the losers. (34)

Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life? (35)

فَإِذَا اسْتَوَيْتَ أَنْتَ وَمَنْ مَعَكَ عَلَى
الْفُلِّ فَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي نَجَّنا مِنْ
الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

وَقُلِ رَبِّ أَنْزِلْنِي مُنْزَلًا مُبَارَكًا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ
الْمُنْزِلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ وَإِنْ كُنَّا لَمُبْتَلِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ قَرْنًا ءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

فَأَرْسَلْنَا فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ
مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَقَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِهِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
وَكَذَّبُوا بِلِقَاءِ الْآخِرَةِ وَأَتْرَفْنَاهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ
الدُّنْيَا مَا هَذَا إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِثْلُكُمْ يَأْكُلُ مِمَّا
تَأْكُلُونَ مِنْهُ وَيَشْرَبُ مِمَّا تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَلَئِنْ أَطَعْتُمْ بَشَرًا مِثْلَكُمْ إِنَّكُمْ إِذَا
لَخَسِرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

أَيَعِدُّكُمْ أَنْكُمْ إِذَا مِتُّمْ وَكُنْتُمْ تُرَابًا
وَعِظْمًا أَنْكُمْ تُحْزَبُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Improbable, improbable indeed is what you are promised! (36)

There is no life beyond this, our present life; we die and we live, and we shall never be restored to life. (37)

He is nothing but a man who attributes his lies to God. Never will we believe in him.' (38)

He said: My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying.' (39)

Said [God]: Before long they shall certainly come to rue it.' (40)

Then the blast overtook them in all justice, and We caused them to be like dead leaves. And so – away with those wrongdoing folk! (41)

Then after them We raised new generations. (42)

No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it. (43)

And We sent forth Our messengers, one after another. Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying. So, We caused them to follow one another, and let them become mere tales. And so – away with the folk who would not believe. (44)

﴿٣٦﴾ هَيَّاتَ هَيَّاتَ لِمَا تُوْعَدُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

إِنَّ هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا
﴿٣٧﴾ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَبْعُوثِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا رَجُلٌ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا
﴿٣٨﴾ وَمَا نَحْنُ لَهُ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

﴿٣٩﴾ قَالَ رَبِّ انصُرْنِي بِمَا كَذَّبُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

﴿٤٠﴾ قَالَ عَمَّا قَلِيلٍ لَيُصْبِحُنَّ نَادِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

فَأَخَذْتَهُمُ الصَّيْحَةَ بِالْحَقِّ فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ
﴿٤١﴾ غُثَاءً ۖ فَبَعْدًا لِلْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

﴿٤٢﴾ ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ قُرُونًا ۖ آخَرِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

﴿٤٣﴾ مَا تَسْبِقُ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلَهَا وَمَا يَسْتَأْخِرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

﴿٤٤﴾ ثُمَّ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا تَتْرًا ۖ كُلَّ مَا جَاءَ أُمَّةً
رَسُولَهَا كَذَّبُونَهُ ۖ فَاتَّبَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ بَعْضًا
وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَحَادِيثَ ۖ فَبَعْدًا لِلْقَوْمِ لَآ
﴿٤٤﴾ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

And then We sent forth Moses and his brother Aaron, with Our signs and with clear authority, (45)

to Pharaoh and his nobles; but these behaved with arrogance, for they were haughty people. (46)

And so they said: 'Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves, even though their people are our slaves?' (47)

Thus, they gave the lie to them, and earned their place among the doomed. (48)

We had indeed given Moses the Book, so that they might be guided. (49)

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol, and provided them with an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and a fresh spring. (50)

Messengers! Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. (51)

This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone. (52)

ثُمَّ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ وَأَخَاهُ هَارُونَ
بِآيَاتِنَا وَسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَئِهِ ۚ فَاسْتَكْبَرُوا وَكَانُوا
قَوْمًا عَالِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

فَقَالُوا أَنُؤْمِنُ لِبَشَرَيْنِ مِثْلِنَا وَقَوْمُهُمَا لَنَا
عِبَادُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

فَكَذَّبُوهُمَا فَكَانُوا مِنَ الْمُهْلَكِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ الْكِتَابَ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَأُمَّهُ آيَةً ۖ وَأَوَيْنَهُمَا
إِلَىٰ رَبْوَةٍ ذَاتِ قَرَارٍ وَمَعِينٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

يَأْتِيهَا الرُّسُلُ كُلُّوَا مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَاعْمَلُوا
صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

وَإِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا
رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Overview

Having highlighted some of the indicators of the truth of God's oneness that are widely available in the universe and within man himself, the *sūrah* now speaks about the truth of faith preached by all God's messengers. It shows how people received

this same truth that admits no alteration or amendment at any time or with the successive messages given to God's messengers, starting with Noah (peace be upon him). We behold the procession of the community of messengers sent by God to deliver to mankind the same message expressed in one word, with a single import and a single direction. Although this message was given in the numerous languages God's messengers spoke to their communities, it is given in the same wording in Arabic. Thus, Noah's statement expressing this message is repeated in exactly the same wording by every messenger sent later, and mankind always give the same answer using the same words.

The First Messenger

We sent forth Noah to his people, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-flaring?' The unbelieving elders of his people said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you. Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels. We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers. He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while.' (Verses 23-25)

"My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him." (Verse 23) This is the unchanging word of truth. The whole universe is based on this truth and everything in it testifies to it. "Will you not be God-fearing?" (Verse 23) Do you not fear the consequences of denying the most fundamental truth that gives rise to all other truths? Do you not appreciate that by denying it you are distorting the bright image of the truth, and this will inevitably cause you to incur God's severe punishment?

However, the noblemen in his community who deny what he advocates are not prepared to discuss his statement or consider the evidence supporting it. They are unable to shed their narrow vision that concentrates on their own status and that of the messenger who calls them to accept the truth. They are not prepared to elevate themselves to the broader level from where they can better appreciate this great truth on its own. They cannot isolate it from personalities. Hence, they disregard this most fundamental truth in the universe, speaking instead about Noah as an individual: "This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you." (Verse 24)

From this very narrow angle the people of Noah looked at the great truth advocated by him. Hence, they could not appreciate its nature or see its truth. Their limited concerns and narrow interests thus blinded them to its essence, preventing their minds and hearts from appreciating it. Thus, to them the whole question was one of a single man from among themselves, who had nothing to distinguish him from the rest of them, wanting to have superiority over them, giving himself status

above their own.

In their haste to prevent Noah from attaining what they imagine he is after, they not only deny Noah's status, but also the status of mankind in general. They refuse to accept that God may honour this human race. They simply do not believe that God would send a human messenger, if He sends messengers at all. *"Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels."* (Verse 24)

This is because they do not find in their own souls the sublime quality that links mankind with the Supreme Society. It is the quality that enables those whom God selects to receive the grace embodied in His message and deliver it to their fellow human beings, guiding them to its noble source.

In their futile argument they refer to familiar precedents, rather than to wise logic: *"We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers."* (Verse 24) This always happens when blind imitation suppresses free thinking. Thus people do not look at what they have and try to relate it to reality in order to arrive at the right conclusion to questions in hand. They rather look to history for precedents. If they fail to find such a precedent, they are prepared to reject the question in its entirety.

Devoid of thought and imagination, such communities of unbelievers accept that what happened in the past may happen again. By contrast, what did not happen in the past cannot come into existence. What a narrow vision of human life this is, freezing it at a particular point of their forefathers' lives.

They are incapable of understanding that they are imprisoned within their narrow walls, unable to break into the wide universe! They accuse those who advocate freedom of thought of being mad, calling on them to think and reflect. When they are reminded of the pointers to the truth all around them, their reply is full of arrogance, reiterating accusations: *"He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while."* (Verse 25) Bear with him until he dies when we will be relieved of him, his message and his persistent advocacy of faith.

Drowned in a Great Flood

At this moment Noah could not find any way by which he could soften such stone-hearted people. He could only protect himself against their ridicule by putting his complaint to God and seeking His support: *"He said: My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying."* (Verse 26)

When the living decide to freeze in this way, while life wants to move forward towards the high standards it can achieve, such people constitute a clear impediment. Hence, they are either broken or life moves on, leaving them where they are. The former is what happened to Noah's people, for God willed that they

should be removed:

We revealed to him to build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth, place on board this ark one pair of every species, as well as your family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed. Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned. (Verse 27)

It was God's will that the road should be cleared of obstacles so that human life could continue its march along the road assigned to it.

Humanity had become prematurely old by Noah's time. It was like a young tree affected by a pest that stops it from growing. It soon dries up and dies whilst still young. At the time of Noah, humanity was in a similar position. Therefore, the remedy was the great flood that swept away everything, washing off the soil and leaving the land ready for a new crop with healthy seeds and a clean environment.

"We revealed to him to build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration." (Verse 27) The ark was the means of safety at the time of the flood. It also served to preserve the seeds of life so that they could grow again. God had willed that Noah should make the ark with his own hands, because man must take responsible action and utilize all means, doing his utmost so that he deserves God's help. Divine help is not given to those who sit on their laurels waiting for something to happen. Since Noah was chosen by God to be the second father of humanity, God instructed him to take the necessary measures, helping him and teaching him how to build the ark so that His purpose was accomplished and His will was done.

God gave Noah a sign which would announce this total process of purification of the entire planet: *"When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth..."* At this point Noah was to move quickly and place on board the ark the new seeds of life: *"Place on board this ark one pair of every species."* These included all types of animal, bird and plant that were known to Noah at the time, and which man could easily handle. He was also to place on board his *"family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed."* This is a reference to the unbelievers who denied the word of God and incurred His displeasure. They thus deserved to endure the working of God's law that engulfed with His punishment those who persistently denied His signs.

Noah was ordered not to argue about anyone or try to save anyone even though they may be very close to him: *"Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned."* (Verse 27) God's law does not try to appease anyone. It does not change its course for the sake of any friend or relative.

The *sūrah* does not give any details here of what happened to Noah's people after

that. The whole matter is settled with the statement: *"They shall be drowned."* Noah, however is taught how to show his gratitude to God and praise Him, seeking His guidance:

When you and those who are with you are settled in the ark, say: All praise is due to God who has saved us from those wrongdoing folk.' And also say: My Lord! Let my landing be blessed. You are the best to bring us to safe landing.' (Verses 28-29)

This is the right way to praise God and to turn to Him, giving Him His rightful attributes and acknowledging His signs. All people, including prophets who provide the lead for others to follow should show such humility before God.

The *sūrah* then comments on the whole story and the aspects of God's power and wisdom it demonstrates: *"Surely, in that there are signs. Indeed, We always put [people] to a test."* (Verse 30) Tests come in different types. Some are designed to demonstrate perseverance, some to show gratitude, some to earn reward, others to give guidance, purge unsound elements, or to rectify people's direction, etc. In the story of Noah there are several tests for him, his people and his future offspring.

Along the Same Way to Ruin

The *sūrah* moves on to portray another scene of unbelievers denying the message that continues to be the same across all generations and communities.

Then after these people We raised a new generation. And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (Verses 31-32)

The stories of earlier prophets referred to in this *sūrah* are not meant to give a full account or to provide details. They are meant to emphasize the unity of the message given to all of them, and to make clear that they received the same response from all their different communities. Hence these accounts commence with Noah to indicate the starting point, and finish with Moses and Jesus to define the last point before the final message. No names are mentioned in between the start and the finish of this long chain. This serves to indicate the similarity of all intervening episodes. However, in every new case the essence of the message and the way it was received are clearly mentioned to serve the purpose of the *sūrah*.

"Then after these people We raised a new generation." (Verse 31) The community in question is not specified, but it is most likely that the reference here is to the `Ād, the Prophet Hūd's people.

And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing? (Verse 32)

It is exactly the same message given by Noah to his people. It is expressed here in the very same words, although these communities spoke totally different languages. But what was the answer?

Their answer was almost identical to that given by Noah's people:

The unbelieving elders of his people, who denied the life to come and to whom We granted ease and plenty in this worldly life, said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat and drinking of what you drink. Indeed, if you pay heed to a mortal like yourselves, you will certainly be the losers.' (Verses 33-34)

This oft repeated objection concentrates on the fact that the messenger sent to them is a human being. Those who raise it are people who enjoy power and wealth and whose hearts no longer feel the spiritual bond between man and his Creator. Affluence corrupts human nature, blunts sensitivities, closes receptive faculties and weakens the heart's ability to feel and respond. Hence Islam combats the accumulation of wealth and establishes a social system that does not allow the very rich to emerge in the Muslim community simply because to do so encourages corruption.

The corrupt rich add in this case a denial of resurrection. They wonder at this messenger who alerts them to such life after death, considering it very strange:

Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life? Improbable, improbable indeed is what you are promised! There is no lift beyond this, our present life; we die and we live, and we shall never be restored to life. (Verses 35-37)

Such people cannot understand the ultimate purpose of life, the elaborate planning of its different stages until it reaches its eventual destination. This purpose will not be achieved in full in this present life on earth. Goodness is not fully rewarded in this life, nor does evil receive its just deserts. All rewards are given in the life to come. Good believers achieve the ultimate form of life that is free of fear, worry and hardship and continues as God wishes. On the other side, those who cling to evil in this life go to the lowest depths of life where their humanity comes to an end and they become as hard as stones.

Such people cannot understand such concepts. They fail to look at the early stages of life which were outlined at the beginning of the *sūrah* in order to realize the nature

of its final stages. They cannot imagine that the Mighty Power that controlled those stages will not cause life to end at the point of death when the body decays. Hence they are full of amazement at the messenger who promises them that they will be resurrected. In their ignorance, they consider this farfetched. They categorically state that there is only one life and one death. Generation succeeds generation, and those who have already died and are reduced to dust and bones cannot come back to life as the prophet promises them.

Yet unbelievers do not stop at this juncture betraying their own ignorance and their inability to reflect on the early stages of human life detailed at the opening of the *sūrah*. They go further than this and accuse God's messenger of lying and fabricating things that he attributes to God. They do not know God except in the context of making false accusations against His messenger: *"He is nothing but a man who attributes his lies to God. Never will we believe in him."* (Verse 38)

Facing the Same Rejection

At this point, the messenger finds no alternative but to seek God's help like Noah did before him. He uses the same wording as Noah: *"He said: My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying."* (Verse 39)

God responded to His messenger when the people refused to take the chance afforded to them. Nothing good could be expected from them after they had persisted in their denial of the truth. The messenger's appeal receives this answer: *"Said [God]: Before long they shall come to rue it."* (Verse 40) But then no regret will be of any avail. There is no turning back: *"Then the blast overtook them in all justice, and We caused them to be like dead leaves."* (Verse 41) The Arabic word, *ghuthā'*, describing their status contains even more connotations as it refers to what floods may carry of dead plants and other discarded, worthless items that serve no purpose. Having discarded the qualities with which God has honoured them, overlooked the purpose of their existence in this life and severed their relation with the Supreme Society, they no longer deserve honourable treatment. Hence, they are like the scum that the flood carries. No one pays any regard to it.

To this humiliation is added the fact that they are deprived of God's grace; thus no-one pays any attention to them: *"And so – away with those wrongdoing folk!"* (Verse 41) Far removed are they in real life and from people's memories and consciences.

The *sūrah* goes on to look at other generations and communities:

Then after them We raised new generations. No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it. And We sent forth Our messengers, one after another. Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying. So, We caused them

to follow one another, and let them become mere tales. And so – away with the folk who would not believe. (Verses 42-44)

This gives us a very brief summary of the advocacy of the truth, and establishes the normal trend that God operates in human life, right from the time of Noah and Had at the beginning to Moses and Jesus at the end. Every generation gets its term and departs: *“No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it.”* (Verse 43) Every community denies the truth given to them through God’s messenger: *“Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying.”* (Verse 44) And each time they do this, they are punished according to God’s law: *“So, We caused them to follow one another.”* (Verse 44) The lesson remains there for anyone who wishes to learn: *“We let them become mere tales,”* told by one generation to the next.

This brief summary concludes with an emphatic rejection of such communities. Thus, they are cast away: *“And so – away with the folk who would not believe.”* (Verse 44) Moses’ story and Pharaoh’s denial of his message is then told in a very brief account that fits with the general style of the *sūrah* and purpose.

And then We sent forth Moses and his brother Aaron, with Our signs and with clear authority, to Pharaoh and his nobles; but these behaved with arrogance, for they were haughty people. And so they said: Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves, even though their people are our slaves?’ Thus, they gave the lie to them, and earned their place among the doomed. (Verses 45-48)

Again in this account we note that the same objection is given to the fact that the messenger was merely a human being: *“They said: Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves?”* (Verse 47) A specific consideration connected with the Israelites’ situation in Egypt is also added: *“Even though their people are our slaves?”* (Verse 47) They are subservient to us and they do our bidding. In this situation, Moses and Aaron deserve, in Pharaoh’s and his people’s view, to be looked down upon. As for the revelations and the signs they have been given by God, and the clear authority granted to them, these count for nothing according to these people, focused as they are on earthly considerations and false values.

This is followed by a similarly brief reference to Jesus and his mother, highlighting the great miracle in his creation. Again, those who were bent on denying the truth of God and creation rejected this sign clearly pointing to God’s power:

We had indeed given Moses the Book, so that they might be guided. And We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol, and provided them with an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and a fresh spring. (Verses 49-50)

There are a number of different reports about the hill described here as a 'lofty place' and its exact location. Was it in Egypt, Damascus or Jerusalem? These were the places where Mary went with her son during his childhood and youth, as mentioned in Christian Scriptures. But knowing the exact location is not of vital importance. It is more important to know that God gave them both a goodly abode where fine plants grew and clear water was plentiful. Thus, they felt that God took care of them both.

At this point in its quick references to earlier messengers the *sūrah* makes its address to the followers of all messengers, as though they were all gathered together. Thus, the separating gulfs of time and place are shown to be meaningless when compared to the true bond of faith that unites them all:

Messengers! Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone. (Verses 51-52)

This address to His messengers requires them to live as human beings, which is the very thing that those who opposed them questioned: "Eat of that which is wholesome." Eating is a human need, but choosing only what is wholesome is the aspect that elevates human beings and makes them grow in purity. It enables them to establish a bond with the Supreme Society.

They are also required to "do good deeds." While taking action is common to all human beings, insisting on doing good is the characteristic of goodly people, providing a measure of control and a clear goal for their deeds. Again such people look up to the Supreme Society when they embark on anything.

No messenger of God was ever required to abandon his humanity. Rather, what they were asked to do was to elevate this humanity to the highest standard God has made possible for human beings to achieve. Thus, the Prophets provided the role model and the ideal which other people should try to emulate. It is left to God to judge their actions according to His own fine measure: "I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do." (Verse 51)

Emphasis is placed on the fact that neither time nor place is of any significance when compared with the single truth that all messengers preached. They all shared a very distinctive nature, were given their messages by the One Creator of all, and worked towards the same goal: "This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone." (Verse 52)

A Book Stating the Truth

*But people have divided themselves into factions,
each delighting in what they have. (53)*

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُم بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ
بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

*So, leave them alone, lost in ignorance, till a time
appointed. (54)*

فَذَرَّهُمْ فِي غَمَرَتِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

*Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring
We provide for them (55)*

أَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّمَا نُمِدُّهُم بِهِ مِنْ مَّالٍ
وَبَنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

*We hasten to them all that is good? By no means!
But they are devoid of perception. (56)*

نُسَارِعُ لَهُمْ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ ۗ بَلْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ
﴿٥٦﴾

*Truly, those who stand in reverent awe of their
Lord, (57)*

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ هُمْ مِنْ خَشْيَةِ رَبِّهِمْ مُشْفِقُونَ
﴿٥٧﴾

and who believe in their Lord's revelations, (58)

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

*and who do not associate any partners with their
Lord, (59)*

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِرَبِّهِمْ لَا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

*and who give away whatever they have to give
with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to
their Lord they shall certainly return: (60)*

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْتُونَ مَا آتَوْا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ وَجِلَةٌ أَنَّهُمْ
إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

أُولَٰئِكَ يُسْرِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَهُمْ هَاهُنَا
سَابِقُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

these vie with one another in doing good works,
and they are the ones who are foremost in them.
(61)

We do not charge a soul with more than it can
bear. We have a record that speaks the truth.
None shall be wronged. (62)

Nay, their hearts are blind to all this. But apart
from all that, they have deeds which they will
continue to commit. (63)

Then, when We shall have overwhelmed with
suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry
out in belated supplication. (64)

[But they will be told:] Do not cry out this day,
for from Us you shall receive no help. (65)

Time and again were My revelations recited to
you, but every time you would turn about on your
heels, (66)

revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly
far into the night. (67)

Have they, then, never tried to understand this
word [of God]? Or has there come to them
something that never came to their forefathers of
old? (68)

Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so
they deny him? (69)

Or do they say that there is in him a touch of
madness? Nay, he has brought them the truth;
and the truth do most of them detest. (70)

وَلَا تُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا ۗ وَلَدَيْنَا
كِتَابٌ يَنْطِقُ بِالْحَقِّ وَهُمْ لَا يُظَاهَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

بَلْ قُلُوبُهُمْ فِي غَمْرَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا وَهُمْ أَعْمَلُ
مِّنْ دُونِ ذَلِكَ هُمْ لَهَا عَمَلُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَخَذْنَا مُتْرَفِيهِم بِالْعَذَابِ إِذَا
هُمْ يَجْعُرُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

لَا تَجْعُرُوا الْيَوْمَ ۖ إِنَّكُمْ مِنَّا لَا تُنصَرُونَ
﴿٦٤﴾

قَدْ كَانَتْ آيَاتِي تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَكُنْتُمْ عَلَىٰ
أَعْقَابِكُمْ تَنْكُصُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

مُسْتَكْبِرِينَ بِهِ ۖ سَمِرًا تَهْجُرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَدَّبَّرُوا الْقَوْلَ أَمْ جَاءَهُمْ مَا لَمْ
يَأْتِ آبَاءَهُمُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

أَمْ لَمْ يَعْرِفُوا رَسُولَهُمْ فَهُمْ لَهُ
مُنْكَرُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ بِهِ ۖ جِنَّةٌ ۚ بَلْ جَاءَهُم بِالْحَقِّ

Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away. (71)

Or do you ask of them any recompense? But the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers. (72)

Most certainly, you call them to a straight path. (73)

But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path. (74)

Even were We to show them mercy and remove whatever distress might afflict them, they would still persist in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. (75)

Indeed, We took them to task, but they neither humbled themselves before their Lord, nor do they submissively entreat [Him]. (76)

Yet when We open before them a gate of truly severe suffering, they will plunge in despair. (77)

It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds. How seldom are you grateful. (78)

And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered. (79)

وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لِلْحَقِّ كَارِهِونَ ﴿٧١﴾

وَلَوْ اتَّبَعَ الْحَقُّ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ لَفَسَدَتِ
السَّمَوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ ۗ بَلْ
أَتَيْنَهُمْ بِذِكْرِهِمْ فَهُمْ عَنِ ذِكْرِهِمْ
مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

أَمْ تَسْأَلُهُمْ خَرْجًا فَخَرَجَ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ
وَهُوَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

وَإِنَّكَ لَتَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ
﴿٧٤﴾

وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ عَنِ
الصِّرَاطِ لَنُكَبُّونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

﴿٧٦﴾ وَلَوْ رَحِمْنَاهُمْ وَكَشَفْنَا مَا بِهِمْ مِنْ ضُرٍّ
لَلْجُؤُا فِي طُغْيَانِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذْنَاهُمْ بِالْعَذَابِ فَمَا اسْتَكَانُوا
لِرَبِّهِمْ وَمَا يَتَضَرَّعُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا فَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَابًا ذَا عَذَابٍ
شَدِيدٍ إِذَا هُمْ فِيهِ مُبْلِسُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَ لَكُمْ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَرَ
وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

And He it is who grants life and causes death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason? (80)

But they say like the people of old times used to say. (81)

They say: 'What! After we have died and become dust and bones, shall we be raised to life?' (82)

This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (83)

Say: 'To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know.' (84)

They will reply: 'To God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, reflect?' (85)

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?' (86)

They will reply: '[They all belong] to God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' (87)

Say: 'In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me] if you know.' (88)

They will reply: '[They all belong] to God.' Say: 'How, then, can you be so deluded?' (89)

Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying. (90)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي ذَرَأَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ وَلَهُ اخْتَلَفُ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

بَلْ قَالُوا مِثْلَ مَا قَالَ الْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

قَالُوا أَإِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظْمًا إِعْنَا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

لَقَدْ وَعَدْنَا نَحْنُ وَآبَاؤُنَا هَذَا مِنْ قَبْلُ إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا أَسَاطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾

قُلْ لِمَنْ الْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهَا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِ قُلْ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

قُلْ مَنْ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ السَّبْعِ وَرَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٨٥﴾

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِ قُلْ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

قُلْ مَنْ مِنْ بِيَدِهِ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ يُجِيرُ وَلَا يُجَارُ عَلَيْهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِ قُلْ فَأَنَّى تُسْحَرُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him. [Had there been any] each deity would surely have taken away his own creation, and they would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another. Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him. (91)

He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed. Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as a partner with Him. (92)

Say: My Lord! If it be Your will to show me that which they are warned against, (93)

then, my Lord, do not let me be one of those wrongdoing folk.' (94)

We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them. (95)

Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say. (96)

And say: My Lord! I seek refuge with You from the promptings of the evil ones; (97)

and I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me.' (98)

٨٩

بَلْ أَتَيْنَهُم بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

مَا أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ وَلَدٍ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِذًا لَذَهَبَ كُلُّ إِلَهٍ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَّا بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

عَلِمَ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ فَتَعَلَّى عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

قُلْ رَبِّ إِمَّا تُرِيدُنِي مَا يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

رَبِّ فَلَا تَجْعَلْنِي فِي الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾

وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ أَنْ نُزِيكَ مَا نَعِدُهُمْ لَقَدِيرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

أَدْفَعْ بِأَلَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ السَّيِّئَةِ نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

وَقُلْ رَبِّ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ هَمَزَاتِ الشَّيَاطِينِ ﴿٩٧﴾

Overview

This third passage begins by showing the state mankind reached after the generations which witnessed God's messengers. This is the state God's last Messenger found them in. They were in dispute over the single truth preached by all God's messengers.

The *sūrah* shows people oblivious of the truth the final Messenger put before their eyes. In their ignorance, they were totally unaware of the consequences they were bound to face. By contrast, believers worship God alone, do good deeds and remain apprehensive of what lies before them. They are in awe over the fact that they will inevitably be returned to God. The two situations are in perfect contrast: a believer is alert, cautious and heeding the warnings, while an unbeliever is deep in ignorance, unaware of what lies ahead.

The passage addresses them in different ways, at times denouncing their attitude, and at others discussing their doubts and providing clear answers to them. The passage also addresses their finer nature, pointing out what encourages people to believe, whether it be within themselves or in the universe at large. It also picks up some of what they take for granted, using these as argument against them.

As the passage concludes, it leaves them to their inevitable destiny. It tells the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that he should continue his efforts, explaining his message. He should not be distressed at their obstinate rejection. He should repel their evil deeds with good ones, and seek refuge with God against Satan who tries hard to lead mankind along the path of error.

Competing in Good Works

But people have divided themselves into factions, each delighting in what they have. So, leave them alone, lost in ignorance, till a time appointed. Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good? By no means! But they are devoid of perception. (Verses 53-56)

All messengers (peace be upon them all) belonged to a single nation, preaching the

same message, worship and pursuing the same direction. But when the messengers had gone, mankind splintered into different groups which could not agree on what line to follow.

The Qur'ān portrays such divergence as people in conflict, splitting into factions, quarrelling and pulling apart from each other. The picture drawn here is full of effort and movement. In the end each faction is left with only a portion of the whole, delighting at their ability to hold on to this. Hence, no faction thinks of anything other than what it supposedly possesses. Each goes its separate way, shutting up all inlets so that no ray of light or fresh breath of air comes through. All live in their isolated quarters, busy with what they have, ignorant of everything else.

Once this image has been drawn, the *sūrah* addresses God's Messenger: *"So, leave them alone, lost in their ignorance, till a time appointed."* (Verse 54) Let them take their time, preoccupied with their own affairs, until their appointed time inevitably comes, spelling out their destiny.

The *sūrah* adds a derisive question that highlights their lack of awareness. They think that the time they have been given, and the wealth and offspring they are allowed to enjoy means that they are favoured with blessings. *"Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good?"* (Verses 55-56) Little do they realize the truth that it is all but a test which they have to go through: *"By no means! But they are devoid of perception."* (Verse 56) They simply do not perceive the destiny to which they are heading after having enjoyed what has been given in this life.

By contrast, the believers are always on the alert, taking necessary precautions:

Truly, those who stand in reverent awe of their Lord, and who believe in their Lord's revelations, and who do not associate any partners with their Lord, and who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return: these vie with one another in doing good works, and they are the ones who are foremost in them. (Verses 57-61)

Here we see how faith affects hearts, imparting to them a special kind of refinement, sensitivity and aspiration to attain perfection. They are the ones who consider the consequences of their actions. They are always ready and willing to do their duties.

We see that believers are always in awe of their Lord, God-fearing, believing in His revelations and His signs, attributing no share of Godhead to anyone other than Him, fulfilling the duties He requires of them. Beyond all this, they *'give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return.'* This is a manifestation of their feeling that they actually fall

short of what they should do. It is true that they have done their utmost, but they consider it far from adequate.

ʿĀ'ishah reports that she asked the Prophet about this verse, saying: "Does the expression '*those who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe...*' refer to people who may steal, commit adultery and drink intoxicants but fear God?" He said: "No. It refers to a person who offers prayers, fasts, gives away to charity and at the same time fears God." [Related by al-Tirmidhi]

A believer senses God's care and feels His favours with his every and heartbeat. Hence, he thinks that whatever he offers of and good action is too little by comparison. At the same time, every grain in a believer feels God's greatness and power. With all his faculties he perceives how God regulates everything around him. Hence, he stands in awe of Him. He dreads meeting God, for fear of having fallen short of fulfilling his duties towards Him, or not having given Him what is due to Him of worship and gratitude.

It is these people who vie with one another in doing what is good. They are the ones who hasten to do good deeds, and are in the lead among those who do good. Their watchful eyes, alert hearts and minds prompt them to do what is required of them. Theirs is a totally different situation from the others who are lost in ignorance, thinking that God's blessings are given to them because they are favoured. They are no better than game animals rushing towards bait. Such people are everywhere: they are overwhelmed with what they are given of life's comforts, distracted from their duties, full of their own importance. But then they only wake up to their fate when it is too late.

Will They Not Reflect?

Islam ensures that its followers' hearts are always alert. This is an alertness generated by faith right from the moment it settles in a person's heart. It neither defies human power, nor is too hard for man to sustain. It is a question of sensitivity enhanced by a believer's bond with God and his watchfulness in all situations, guarding against sin. It is perfectly within people's power when the light of faith shines in their hearts: "*We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. We have a record that speaks the truth. None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 62)

God has established people's duties as He knows their inclinations and abilities. He will hold them to account on the basis of what they do within their ability. He neither charges them with what they cannot bear, nor dismisses any little thing they do. All their deeds are documented in a '*record that speaks the truth,*' highlighting it in its full value. Needless to say, God is precise in His reckoning.

People, however, tend to overlook the truth because their hearts are not touched by its invigorating light. Hence, they remain preoccupied with petty concerns, lost in a perpetual maze. They are only awakened when faced with inevitable doom, looking at the suffering that awaits them and enduring a humiliatingly and strong reproach:

Nay, their hearts are blind to all this. But apart from all that, they have deeds which they will continue to commit. Then, when We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication. [But they will be told:] Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help. Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night. (Verses 63-67)

Thus, the reason for their headlong pursuit of worldly affairs is nothing like being burdened with what they cannot bear. It is simply that their hearts are blinded, unable to see the truth as clearly stated in the Qur'ān. They are wont to follow a line different from the course charted by the Qur'ān: *"They have deeds which they will continue to commit."* (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then paints a picture of their being awakened by a sudden calamity: *"When We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication."* (Verse 64) People who live in luxury are indeed the ones who are most preoccupied with life's comforts, totally oblivious to what lies ahead. Now they find themselves suddenly overtaken by suffering, and they cry out for mercy, making a passionate appeal for it to be lifted. It is a picture that contrasts with the life of luxury and arrogance they lead in this world. Hence, they receive a strong reproach: *"Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help."* (Verse 65) The scene is described as though it is taking place now. They are strongly reproached, made certain of having no support, and reminded of what they used to do in life: *"Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night."* (Verses 66-67) It is as though what was being recited was a danger or a calamity you needed to avoid. You were too proud to submit to the truth. Indeed, you compounded your insolence, adding insult to injury, speaking ill of the Prophet and his message, but you, nevertheless, are willing to spend hours in idle chit-chat.

It was common practice for them to use obscene language when they gathered in circles around the Ka`bah, close to the idols they worshipped. Now the Qur'ān paints for them a scene of when they are called to account for their indulgence, showing them raising their voices with cries for help. It is at this point that they are reminded of what they do now in their circles, as though both take place at the same time. This is a familiar method of the Qur'ān, frequently depicting the Day of Judgement as

though it were actually occurring at that precise moment.

In their hostility towards the Prophet and with their disparaging remarks about him and the Qur'ān in their gatherings, the unbelievers represent an ignorant arrogance that is blinded to the truth. With such blind ignorance, the truth becomes the subject of derision and ridicule. Such people are encountered no matter what the time or place. Yet the state of ignorance that prevailed in Arabia at the time when the Islamic message was revealed serves as an example of similar past and future situations where ignorance prevails.

The Line the Truth Follows

Having shown the unbelievers this scene of reproach in the hereafter, the *sūrah* takes them back to this world, questioning them about their attitude: what stops them from accepting what they are told by God's Messenger, whom they know to be a man of trust? What doubts do they have to prevent them from following divine guidance? Why do they turn away from it, ridiculing it when it represents the absolute truth?

Have they, then, never tried to understand this word [of God] Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old? Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him? Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness? Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest. Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away. Or do you ask of them any recompense? But the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers. Most certainly, you call them to a straight path. But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path. (Verses 68-74)

The message Muhammad, God's Messenger, preached could not be rejected by anyone who looks at it carefully, using his reason. It is a model of beauty, perfection, consistency and attraction. It fits with human nature, addresses people's minds and hearts, outlines a course to elevate human life, and lays down a fine constitution to follow and a perfect code of justice. It also includes what answers the needs of human nature and what helps its development and advancement. "*Have they, then, never tried to understand this word (of God)?*" (Verse 68) This is, then, the secret behind their attitude.

"*Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old?*" (Verse 68) If so, it would have been strange for them and for their forefathers that a messenger came to call on them to believe in God's oneness. But the history of divine

messages proves that messengers followed one another, and all of them preached the same message advocated by Muhammad, God's last Messenger.

"Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him?" (Verse 69) Could this have been the reason for their insolent rejection? Yet they knew their Messenger well. They knew his birth and ancestry. They also knew his character, honesty and integrity. Long before he received his message, they nicknamed him *al-amīn*, which means 'the trustworthy'.

"Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness?" (Verse 70) Some of the lowest in their ranks used to say this about him, knowing full well that he was the wisest and most reasonable person among them. They never knew him slip once.

None of such possibilities had any foundation whatsoever. The fact is that most of them hated the truth because it deprived them of their false values and contradicted their desires and preferences: *"Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest."* (Verse 70)

The truth cannot be subservient to personal desires and preferences. For it is on the basis of truth that the universe is sustained, life flourishes and the laws of nature function: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption."* (Verse 71)

The truth is unique and consistent, while desires are numerous and changing. It is on the basis of the unique truth that the whole universe moves along the course that ensures its existence. Thus, its laws are not made to deviate or change in order to accommodate fleeting desires. Had the universe been subject to such changing or sudden desires it would have become corrupted. Indeed, human life, values, standards and systems would also have become corrupted. They would have staggered to and fro, in response to anger, pleasure, hatred, caprice, fear, laziness, activity, reaction and influence. But the physical universe and its progress towards its goal requires consistency and reliability as well as the following of a clearly charted course that is subject to no modification or deviation.

Bearing this in mind, Islam considers legislation for human life to be part of the universal law, formulated by the same hand that conducts the affairs of the universe and establishes coherence between all its parts. Human beings are part of the universe and subject to its law. Hence, it is only fitting that the One who legislates for the entire universe should also legislate for human life. When this is done, human life is no longer subjected to personal desires and preferences. Thus, it is immune to corruption: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption."* (Verse 71)

The community addressed by Islam should be keen to follow its truth, not only because it is the truth, but also because it represents its glory. Without Islam, it

would have had no place in history: *“Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away.”* (Verse 71) The Arabs were ignored throughout history until they were given the message of Islam. Since then, this community continued to be glorious as long as it adhered to Islam. Its position on the world stage, however, gradually shrank when it abandoned Islam, until it reached its present low depth. It will not recover its glory until it reverts to its true, guiding light.

The *sūrah* resumes its questioning of their attitude and the doubts that may be the cause for their refusal to believe in the Messenger: *“Or do you ask of them any recompense?”* (Verse 72) Had you demanded any wages from them, such a request might be their cause for refusal. The fact is that you seek nothing from them, because *“the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers.”* (Verse 72) What could a prophet seek from human beings, poor and needy as they are, when he has access to God’s inexhaustible favours? Indeed, what would a prophet’s followers hope to gain of this world’s comforts when they seek what may be provided by God who grants everything people have? The fact is that when a human heart is in touch with God, this whole universe, with all that it contains, dwindles into insignificance.

You only seek to guide them to the best method: *“Most certainly, you call them to a straight path”*; a path that brings them into line with the law that governs their nature. It bonds them with the rest of the universe, guiding them straight, without deviation, to God, the Creator of all.

Yet, like everyone else who does not believe in the life to come, these people deviate from the perfect way: *“But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path.”* (Verse 74) Had they been well guided, they would have reflected on the stages of their existence, because such reflection is bound to lead to belief in the hereafter, when perfection and absolute justice are attainable. The life to come is merely a stage in the line God has charted for all existence.

Inspiring Signs

These unbelievers are people who have lost their way and no longer benefit from the tests to which they are exposed, be they tests of plenty and affluence or those of hardship. Hence, when they are tested with favour *“they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good?”* (Verses 55-56) Even if they are tested with difficulty and hardship, their hearts are not softened, nor are their consciences awakened. They do not turn back to God, appealing to Him to remove their hardship. They remain in such a condition until, on the Day of Judgement, they are visited with an even greater suffering. Then they will be truly desperate and bewildered.

Even were We to show them mercy and remove whatever distress might afflict them, they would still persist in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. Indeed, We took them to task, but they neither humbled themselves before their Lord, nor do they submissively entreat [Him]. Yet when We open before them a gate of truly severe suffering, they will plunge in despair. (Verses 75-77)

These are common features among such people. They are hard hearted, oblivious of their duties to God, and they deny the hereafter. The idolaters who opposed the Prophet when he delivered his message were of the same type.

Showing humility at a time of hardship, and turning to God, entreating Him and recognizing Him as the only refuge and resort are indicative of a change of heart and a returning to faith. A heart which establishes such links with God is bound to soften. Reflection and remembrance then provide protection against further slips and errors. Thus, hardship brings about real benefit. But the person who persists in arrogance is a lost case, without hope. He is left to his destiny when he will be overwhelmed with suffering in the life to come. He will then plunge into despair, finding neither refuge nor support.

The *sūrah* then takes the unbelievers on a further round of reflection, in the hope that their hearts will awaken when they see the pointers to faith within themselves and in the universe at large:

It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds. How seldom are you grateful. And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered. And He it is who grants life and causes death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason? (Verses 78-80)

Indeed if man would only reflect on his own form and constitution, the multi-faceted potential he has been given, and the faculties of perception with which he has been blessed, he would certainly acknowledge God. His guidance would be all these great faculties within him that testify to God's oneness. No one other than God Almighty could produce such a creation with all these miraculous aspects, large and small. For example, how does our sense of hearing function? How are sounds picked up and distinguished? How does our eyesight function, sorting out shapes and shades of light? And then, what about our mind and how it works? How does it recognize forms and things? How does it understand meanings, concepts, values, feelings and physical forms?

The mere understanding of the nature of these senses and faculties and their ways of functioning is, in itself, a miraculous human discovery. How do we, then, look at their creation and placement in man's body in such a way that is best suited to the nature of man's world. The degree of harmony achieved here reflects an

overwhelming delicacy. Should only one of the many ratios that need to be met, in either man's nature or the nature of the universe, be disturbed, the whole relation no longer functions. Ears are not able to pick out sound, and eyes no longer see light. It is God's perfect design and limitless power that has achieved this perfect balance between human nature and the universe in which man lives. But man does not show gratitude to God for His favours: *"How seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 78) Gratitude begins with a clear acknowledgement of the One who has given us all these favours and blessings, glorifying Him and recognizing His attributes, then addressing all worship to Him alone. His oneness is testified by His creation. Gratitude is further enhanced when we use our faculties and senses to enjoy life in the manner of a firm believer who looks up to God before every action and in every situation.

"And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth." (Verse 79) He has placed you in charge of building human life on earth, after He gave you your hearing, eyesight and mind, as well as all the faculties and potentials that you need to fulfil the task assigned to you. *"And to Him you shall be gathered,"* when you will be accountable for all that you do in your lives on earth. You will be rewarded for all the good you do, and for following divine guidance. By contrast, you will reap the fruits of any evil or corruption of which you are guilty. Your lives on earth are not meant in vain, and you are not carelessly abandoned in your habitat. It is all for a definite purpose God has determined.

"And He it is who grants life and causes death." (Verse 80) Both life and death occur at every moment, but it is God alone who causes them both to occur. Man, the highest of all creatures on earth, cannot give life to a single cell. Similarly, man is totally incapable of depriving any living being of its life in the full sense of the word. People may be the means of ending life, but they are not the ones who truly deprive a living entity of its life. It is God alone who grants life and causes death.

"And to Him is due the alternation of night and day." (Verse 80) He is the One who has set this alternation in operation, just like He grants life and takes it away. Both sets of parallel situations are natural laws: one operates within the human being while the other operates in the world at large. When life is taken away from a particular body, it stops functioning and becomes motionless. Similarly, when light is taken away from the earth it darkens and becomes stagnant. But then life is brought back again and light is allowed to spread as the alternation takes place and the cycle continues uninterrupted, for as long as God wills. *"Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 80) Will you not draw the right conclusion and admit that it is all part of God's perfect design and elaborate planning. It is He alone who is in full control of life and the universe.

Questions with One Answer

The *sūrah* now stops its argument with the unbelievers, and reports their claims about resurrection and reckoning in the life to come. This discussion follows a long list of signs and pointers confirming God's oneness and His being the only Creator who causes life and death.

But they say like the people of old times used to say. They say: 'What! After we have died and become dust and bones, shall we be raised to life? This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (Verses 81-83)

Their claims sound exceptionally singular after the *sūrah* has enumerated many of the signs that testify to God's elaborate planning and His definite purpose of creation. It is He who has granted man his hearing, eyesight and mind, so that he is responsible for his deeds. He will thus earn a generous reward for his good actions or punishment for his bad ones. True reckoning and reward occur in full in the life to come. What we see in this life is that reward, whether good or bad, does not take place on earth. These are left until they fall due in the life to come.

God grants life and causes death. Hence, resurrection is by no means difficult. Life is breathed into beings at every moment, and it is only God who knows where it originates.

The point with these unbelievers is not that they fall short of appreciating God's wisdom and ability to resurrect life. They also ridicule the promises of resurrection and reward, saying that the same promise was given to their forefathers, but nothing of the sort has yet occurred. *"This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients."* (Verse 83) Resurrection will certainly occur at the time and place God has set for it in His elaborate plan. It will be neither brought forward nor put back at anyone's request, or in response to the ridicule of anyone who is unable to see the truth.

The Arab idolaters of old were muddled in their faith. They did not deny God. Nor did they deny that He is the Creator of the heavens and earth or that He is always in full control of everything in the universe. But they, nevertheless, assigned to Him partners and claimed that they worshipped those partners so that they could bring them closer to God. They also claimed that He had daughters. Exalted is God above all such claims. Hence the *sūrah* puts to them the facts that they acknowledge in order to set the record straight and bring them back to the true faith based on God's absolute oneness. This is the logical conclusion to the premises they acknowledge. Indeed, they would have arrived at this conclusion themselves had they not deviated from their uncorrupted nature:

Say: To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know.' They will reply: 'To God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, reflect?' Say: 'Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?' They will reply: ' [They all belong.' to God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' Say: 'In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me.' if you know.' They will reply: '[They all belong! to God.' Say: 'How, then, can you be so deluded?' (Verses 84-89)

This shows the extent of the confusion that lacks sound reasoning. It tells us to what extent the beliefs of the idolaters had degenerated by the time Islam was revealed. The first question asks about the ownership of this earthly world: *"Say: To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know."* (Verse 84) They acknowledge that they all belong to God, but they overlook this true fact when they address their worship to deities other than Him. Hence the question the Prophet is told to put to them: *"Say: Will you not, then, reflect?"* (Verse 85)

"Say: Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?" (Verse 86) This question is about absolute Lordship that controls the whole universe and God's Supreme Throne. The term 'seven heavens' may refer to seven celestial bodies, or solar systems, or seven clusters of stars, or seven galaxies, or any seven astronomical entities. When God's Throne is mentioned, it implies a reference to His might and control of the universe and all existence. Hence when they are asked about the Lordship over all these, they give the right answer, saying that they all belong to God. Yet they do not show any fear of the Lord of the Supreme Throne who controls all seven heavens and what lies beyond them. They associate with Him idols that cannot lift themselves when they are thrown on the ground. Hence, the question: *"Say: Will you not, then, fear Him?"* (Verse 87)

"Say: In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me] if you know." (Verse 88) This question is about power and dominion, asking them about the One who has power over all things, and who gives protection to all of His creatures so that no one can harm them in any way, other than according to His will. At the same time, no one can protect anyone or anything else against God. If God wants to inflict harm or punishment on any of His creatures, nothing can prevent it. Again they acknowledge that such power belongs to God alone. Hence the question asking them about the cause of their delusion, which leaves them like people bewitched: *"Say: How, then, can you be so deluded?"* (Verse 89)

The True Concept of God

Having refuted all the idolaters' claims about God, taking to Himself a son or

partners, the *sūrah* states in all clarity the true principle of God's oneness as explained by His Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying. Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him. Had there been any, each deity would surely have taken away his own creation, and they would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another. Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed. Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as partner with Him. (Verses 90-92)

Note how this statement employs different methods and styles. First, all argument with the idolaters is closed, and an emphatic assertion of their lying is given: "*Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying.*" (Verse 90) Then follow some of the details of their lies: "*Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him.*" (Verse 91) Irrefutable proof is then stated rendering all their claims false and showing the absurdity of pagan beliefs based on associating partners with God: "*Had there been any each deity would surely have taken away his own creation.*" (Verse 91) Each deity would stress his independence and conduct the affairs of his creation according to his own law. Thus, every part of the universe, and every group of creatures would have a different basis and laws. There would be no common code applying to them all. Hence, those deities "*would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another.*" (Verse 91) Such superiority could take the form of a more sophisticated law operating in a particular part of the universe. However, the universe as a whole cannot function properly unless it is subject to a single law that applies to all its parts and all creatures living in it.

None of this multiplicity is found in the universe, where consistency of structure proves the oneness of its Creator, and inner harmony testifies to its being run by a single will. Indeed, we clearly see that all parts of the universe function in perfect harmony: "*Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him.*" (Verse 91)

"*He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed.*" (Verse 92) None other than God has any authority over any part of His creation, knowing anything that is unknown to God. "*Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as a partner with Him.*" (Verse 92)

At this point, the *sūrah* stops addressing or speaking about them. It now turns its attention to God's Messenger, commanding him to appeal to God so that he is not placed with such people, if he ever witnesses the fulfilment of the warnings of suffering they have been given. He is further instructed to seek refuge with His Lord from the evil ones, satans, so as not to be irritated by or become fed up at what the

unbelievers claim:

Say: My Lord! If it be Your will to show me that which they are warned against, then, my Lord, do not let me be one of those wrongdoing folk.' We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them. Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say. And say: 'My Lord! I seek refuge with You from the promptings of the evil ones; and I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me.' (Verses 93-98)

The Prophet is certainly not going to be with the wrongdoers when God inflicts on them a severe punishment in fulfilment of His warnings. But this prayer which he is instructed to repeat serves as a further precaution. It is also meant as a lesson to all believers so that they do not slacken. They should also be on their guard, attending to their duties, seeking refuge with God and praying to Him to bestow His grace on them.

God is certainly able to fulfil what He has warned the wrongdoers of, and to make it all happen during the lifetime of His Messenger: *"We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them."* (Verse 95) He certainly showed him some of it in the Battle of Badr and then when Makkah surrendered to Islam.

However, at the time of the revelation of this *sūrah*, the Prophet was still in Makkah enduring with his followers much persecution from the idolaters. The policy followed by the Muslim community then, in implementation of God's instructions, was to repel a bad thing with something better. Muslims also had to demonstrate their patience in the face of adversity, leaving their destiny entirely to God: *"Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say."* (Verse 96)

The Prophet was certainly immune to any promptings or persuasion by evil ones. However, here he is instructed to pray for protection against all this in an urgent appeal for further immunity against their evil. Being the perfect role model for all Muslims in all generations, his appeal provides a lead for them to follow. They should also seek refuge with God against all temptation put in their way by the evil ones. Indeed the Prophet is instructed to appeal to God for protection against such evil people coming near him in any way. *"I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me."* (Verse 98)

This may also be interpreted as an appeal lest they come near him at the time of his death. This sense is strengthened by the verse that follows: *"When death approaches any of them, he says: My Lord! Let me return [to life]."* (Verse 99) This follows the Qur'ānic method that ensures an easy flow from one point to another.

4

Justice and Grace

*When death approaches any of them, he says:
My Lord! Let me return [to life], (99)*

*so that I may act righteously in whatever I have
failed to do.' By no means! It is but a word he
says. Behind them there stands a barrier till the
day when all will be raised from the dead. (100)*

*Then, when the trumpet is sounded, there will be
no ties of kinship between them on that day, nor
will they ask about one another. (101)*

*Those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the
scales will be successful; (102)*

*but those whose weight is light will have lost their
souls and will abide in hell. (103)*

*The fire will scorch their faces, and therein they
will look gloomy. (104)*

*'Were not My revelations read out to you, and
did you not consider them as lies?' (105)*

*They will reply: 'Our Lord! Our misfortune has
overwhelmed us, and so we went astray. (106)*

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ
أَرْجِعُونِ ﴿٩٩﴾

لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا ۗ
إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ
إِلَىٰ يَوْمٍ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَلَا أَنْسَابَ بَيْنَهُمْ
يَوْمَئِذٍ وَلَا يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

فَمَنْ ثَقُلَتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

وَمَنْ خَفَّتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ
خَسِرُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ فِي جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

تَلْفَحُ وُجُوهَهُمُ النَّارُ وَهُمْ فِيهَا
كَالِحُونَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

أَلَمْ تَكُنْ ءَايَتِي تَتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَكُنْتُمْ بِهَا
تُكذِّبُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

قَالُوا رَبَّنَا غَلَبَتْ عَلَيْنَا شِقْوَتُنَا وَكُنَّا
قَوْمًا ضَالِّينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

Our Lord! Bring us out of this [suffering]. If ever We relapse, then we shall be wrongdoers indeed.' (107)

He will say: Away with you into this ignominy! And do not plead with Me. (108)

Among My servants there were those who said: 'Our Lord! We believe in You. Forgive us and have mercy on us; for You are the best of those who show mercy.' (109)

But you made them the target of your derision to the point where it made you forget all remembrance of Me; and you went on laughing at them. (110)

Today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity. Indeed it is they who have achieved triumph.' (111)

And He will ask: 'How many years have you spent on earth?' (112)

They will answer: 'We have spent there a day, or part of a day; but ask those who keep count.' (113)

He will say: 'Brief indeed was your sojourn, if you but knew it. (114)

Did you think that We created you in mere idle play, and that to Us you would not have to

رَبَّنَا أَخْرِجْنَا مِنْهَا فَإِنْ عُدْنَا فَإِنَّا
ظَالِمُونَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

قَالَ أَحْسَعُوا فِيهَا وَلَا تَكَلِّمُونِ ﴿١٠٨﴾

إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَرِيقٌ مِّنْ عِبَادِي يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا ءَامَنَّا فَاعْفِرْ لَنَا وَارْحَمْنَا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ
الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

فَاتَّخَذْتُمُوهُمْ سِخْرِيًّا حَتَّى أَنْسَوَكُمُ ذِكْرِي
وَكُنْتُمْ مِّنْهُمْ تَضْحَكُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾

إِنِّي جَزَيْتُهُمُ الْيَوْمَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ هُمُ
الْفَائِزُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ
﴿١١٢﴾

قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ فَسْئَلُ
الْعَادِينَ ﴿١١٣﴾

قَالَ إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ۗ لَوْ أَنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ
تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ

return?’ (115)

Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne. (116)

He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful. (117)

Say: ‘My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy.’ (118)

إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١١٥﴾

فَتَعَلَى اللَّهِ الْمَلِكُ الْحَقُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ
رَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْكَرِيمِ ﴿١١٦﴾

وَمَنْ يَدْعُ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ لَا بُرْهَانَ
لَهُ بِهِ فَإِنَّمَا حِسَابُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ إِنَّهُ
لَا يُفْلِحُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿١١٧﴾

وَقُلْ رَبِّ اغْفِرْ وَارْحَمْ وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ
الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿١١٨﴾

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* continues to discuss the fate of the idolaters, showing it in a complete scene of the Day of Resurrection. It starts with an image of approaching death ending this life, and moves on to show what happens after the Trumpet is blown and the dead are brought back to life. This is followed by an emphatic statement of God’s oneness, coupled with a stern warning to those who associate partners with God, putting them on notice of what awaits them if they persist in their erring ways. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive given to the Prophet to seek God’s forgiveness, and to pray for His grace. God is certainly the best of all who show mercy.

As Death Approaches

“When death approaches any of them, he says: My Lord! Let me return [to life], so that I may act righteously in whatever I have failed to do.” (Verses 99-100) This is the scene of approaching death, when the person is certain that he is about to die. At this moment, he appeals for a return to life so as to have a second chance to do what he should have done in the first place. He wants to set things right with regard to the family and assets he is leaving behind. This is shown as if it is happening at the present moment, witnessed by all. But the appeal is made too late. Hence, the answer

is not given to the person concerned. It is declared for all to understand. *"By no means! It is but a word he says."* (Verse 100)

It is only a word that carries little or no significance. It does not deserve to be considered. Indeed the speaker does not merit any attention. It does not express any sincerity; rather, it is prompted by the dawning awareness of the great difficulty ahead. It expresses the great stress the speaker finds himself under, but it has no basis in conviction.

Thus ends the image of the speaker at the point of death. Suddenly, barriers are raised between him and the rest of the world. The matter is settled, contacts are severed, doors closed and the curtain dropped: *"Behind them there stands a barrier till the day when all will be raised from the dead."* (Verse 100) They neither belong to the people of this life, nor to those of the hereafter. They are in the stage in between, which will continue until all are resurrected.

The *sūrah* now speaks about that day, giving an image of what happens then and raising it for all to see. *"Then, when the Trumpet is sounded, there will be no ties of kinship between them on that day, nor will they ask about one another."* (Verse 101) All bonds come to an end, and all values people observe in this life are no longer of any consequence. *'There will be no ties of kinship'* then. The awesome atmosphere makes them all silent, with no one uttering as much as a word, let alone enquiring about others.

The process of reckoning and weighing up deeds and actions is shown to proceed with speed: *"Those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the scales will be successful; but those whose weight is light will have lost their souls and will abide in hell. The fire will scorch their faces, and therein they will look gloomy."* (Verses 102-104) This process is shown in a material image, with action and movement taking place, in the standard pattern the Qur'ān employs. Hence we dread the scene of those idolaters being scorched by the fire, their faces changing colour, darkening and looking full of gloom. It is a terrible image that almost transmits pain.

Those with light weight have lost everything, including themselves. When a man loses himself, what else can he own? What is left for him? He has lost the very thing that makes his existence meaningful, or that gives him personality.

At this point the *sūrah* changes style. So far, it has employed a reporting format. Now it makes a direct address, speaking to the people themselves. This makes the physical punishment, terrible as it certainly is, much less painful than the humiliation that is now poured on them. This address is stated as if it were taking place at that very moment, starting a long dialogue: *"Were not My revelations read out to you, and did you not consider them as lies?"* (Verse 105) When they hear this question they imagine that they are allowed to speak and make a plea. They think that perhaps if

they admit their guilt, their plea might be accepted: *"They will reply: Our Lord! Our misfortune has overwhelmed us, and so we went astray. Our Lord. Bring us out of this [suffering]. If ever We relapse, then we shall be wrongdoers indeed."* (Verses 106-107)

Their admission of guilt tells of the bitter feelings they experience. They are indeed miserable. But they have exceeded the limits they are allowed. To go beyond these is to be impolite when they are addressed by none other than God. They are only permitted to answer the question put to them. Indeed the question is perhaps made only by way of rebuke, and it requires no answer. Hence they are strongly censured: *"He will say: Away with you into this ignominy! And do not plead with Me."* (Verse 108) They are told to shut up and remain silent as only befits people held in ignominy.

Indeed they deserve all the punishment and the misery they are made to suffer.

Among My servants there were those who said: 'Our Lord. We believe in You. Forgive us and have mercy on us; for You are the best of those who show mercy' But you made them the target of your derision to the point where it made you forget all remembrance of Me; and you went on laughing at them. (Verses 109-110)

The crime they perpetrated was not merely that they disbelieved and made their rejection of the faith a personal matter, which is in itself a grave offence. They went much further by allowing their stupid impudence to go as far as ridiculing the believers who pray to God for mercy and forgiveness. They derided them so often that such derision became their main preoccupation, stopping them from remembering God and glorifying Him, and from reflecting on the numerous signs God has placed in the world pointing them in the direction of faith. They are now called upon to compare their own station with that of the people they ridiculed. *"Today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity. Indeed it is they who have achieved triumph."* (Verse 111)

A new phase of interrogation follows this stern, humiliating reply and the reasons that led to it: *"And He will ask: How many years have you spent on earth?"* (Verse 112) God certainly knows the answer, but the question is put to them to emphasize the triviality of life on earth and to stress the shortness of its duration. Yet they bartered the eternal life of the hereafter for their portion of life on earth. Now they feel that it was totally insignificant. In their despair they are impatient, and cannot bother about that life or its number of years: *"They will answer: We have spent there a day, or part of a day; but ask those who keep count."* (Verse 113) Stress, grief and despair ooze from their reply.

They are given an answer that tells them that their life on earth is very short compared to what awaits them. They only need to have the right measure. *"He will say: Brief indeed was your sojourn, if you but knew it."* (Verse 114) Again they are

strongly rebuked for denying the life to come. This is coupled with an outline of the purpose behind resurrection. This purpose has been clearly stated ever since the first creation: *“Did you think that We created you in mere idle play, and that to Us you would not have to return?”* (Verse 115)

Indeed the purpose, or rather the wisdom behind resurrection is part of the wisdom behind creation. It is all well measured and accurately designed. Resurrection is no more than a stage that brings the cycle of creation to its fullness. Only those who remain blind, unwilling to reflect on God’s purpose which is clearly evident everywhere in the universe around us, will not see it.

The Basic Issue of Faith

The final verses of the *sūrah* are dedicated to faith. They state its central tenet; namely, God’s oneness. We have an announcement of the great loss suffered by those who associate partners with Him. This contrasts with the success declared at the beginning of the *sūrah* which is guaranteed to the believers. Coupled with this declaration is an instruction to turn to God, requesting His forgiveness and appealing for His mercy. He is certainly the most merciful of all those who are compassionate:

Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne. He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful. Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy. (Verses 116-118)

Coming as it does after a scene painting events taking place on the Day of Resurrection, and after a host of arguments, proofs and pointers outlined throughout the *sūrah*, the comment included in these final verses provides a logical conclusion to everything contained in the *sūrah*. This statement refutes all that the unbelievers say about God, declaring that He is the true Sovereign who controls the entire universe, and that He is the only deity who is in full command of all. He is indeed ‘the Lord of the Glorious Throne’.

Any claim of partnership with God has absolutely no evidence to support it, neither from the universe and how it is run, nor from human logic or nature. Anyone who makes such a claim will have to face the reckoning in front of God, and the result is known in advance: *“Most certainly the unbelievers shall never be successful.”* (Verse 117) This is an unfailing rule that is bound to come true. Success, by contrast, is guaranteed for the believers.

All the favours and comforts that we see the unbelievers enjoying in this life, and all the power and resources they may sometimes have at their command does not mean success in reality. It is all given to them as a test, and it will end with their loss in this present life. However, if some of them escape punishment in this world, they will have to face the reckoning in the hereafter. There, in the life to come, is the final stage of this life cycle. It is not something separate or isolated. Indeed, it is an essential stage, clearly seen by those who have real vision.

The last verse in this *sūrah*, The Believers, gives the instruction to turn to God appealing for His mercy and forgiveness: *"Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy."* (Verse 118)

Thus the opening of the *sūrah* and its end jointly emphasize success for the believers and utter failure and loss for the unbelievers. Both elements stress the basic qualities of believers. Thus, the beginning states that the believers humble themselves in prayer, while the end instructs them to humbly appeal to God for forgiveness and mercy. Both make the *sūrah* a complete, well designed unit.