

SŪRAH 16

Al-Naĥl

(The Bees)

Prologue

Although this *sūrah* enjoys a calm rhythm with a quiet, soft beat, it nonetheless tackles several main topics within its broad framework. It makes use of several sound effects and emphatic connotations to heighten its impact. Like all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, it discusses the main topics of faith, such as God's oneness, revelation and resurrection. But it also refers to a number of secondary topics, such as the essential unity between Abraham's faith and the faith preached by Muĥammad (peace be upon them both). It outlines the true nature of God's will, and mentions the human will with regard to accepting or denying the true faith, following divine guidance or going astray. It explains the mission of God's messengers and His law that applies to those who deny them and their messages. It discusses the question of who may forbid things or leave them lawful, and the false concepts of pagan ideologies in this regard. It speaks of leaving one's community to migrate for God's sake, the persecution Muslims may suffer at the hands of unbelievers, the rejection of faith after having accepted it and what punishment any of these situations may incur. It then adds some discussion on human dealings, such as maintaining justice, ensuring kindly treatment, giving money for good purposes and the fulfilment of promises and pledges, as well as other practices that observe the principles of faith. Thus we see how the *sūrah* weaves together its interrelated subject matter.

These topics are presented within an expansive framework in which all the events take place. It includes the heavens and the earth, with the rain pouring down, the trees springing up, the day and night, the sun, the moon and the stars, the seas, the

mountains and the rivers. It is indeed this whole world with all that takes place in it as well as the life to come with all its scenery and the fates of different categories of God's creatures. It also includes the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception, and the feelings it inspires within us.

Against such a broad backdrop the *sūrah* sounds like a massive campaign aimed at profoundly influencing people's hearts and minds. It is a campaign that uses a moderate rhythm with several coherent sounds. It has nothing of the very strong beats we hear in *Sūrahs* 6 and 13, Cattle and Thunder respectively. Yet in its quiet rhythm it addresses every sense and feeling in the human soul, as well as both reason and conscience. It alerts our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our hands to touch and feel, our consciences to be alert and our minds to reflect. It portrays every aspect of the whole universe, looks at the present life and the life to come, as well as secrets of the universe and what is beyond the reach of our faculties of perception. All these are used to heighten the effect on our senses, hearts and minds. The result is a massive panorama which only a closed mind and a dead heart can ignore.

We are directed to look at the signs and messages that God has placed throughout the universe, and the great bounties and blessings He has given to mankind, and to reflect on the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the images of death, and the fate suffered by former communities. Coupled with this is a series of emotional touches that penetrate the depths of our hearts, and which refer to the different stages of human life from unborn embryos, to people in the full vigour of youth, in mid-life and in old age, as also in situations of strength and weakness, enjoying God's blessings or enduring hardship. It uses different styles and modes of expression, giving examples, drawing images, relating dialogue and presenting stories in order to make its message clear and enhance its effect.

The splendid colours that impart their shades to the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* also highlight a number of great natural phenomena, reflecting the greatness of creation, God's bounty, His knowledge and elaborate planning. These are all intermingled. The great universe created by God is subject to God's perfect knowledge and His meticulous design and planning. Yet it is meant to be a blessing for mankind, meeting not only their needs but also their wishes and expectations. Thus all needs and necessities are satisfied; adornments provided; relaxation of body and soul ensured. It is then right that people should give thanks and express their gratitude to God.

Thus throughout the *sūrah* we see God's blessings and believers expressing gratitude. There are several directives on the need to show such gratitude, coupled with various comments. Parables are given, as well as examples. The most vivid of these is that of the Prophet Abraham who is described as showing "*his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path.*"

(Verse 121)

All this is given in a perfect harmony of image, connotation, expression, rhythm, issue and subject matter. We now hope to outline some of these as we discuss the *sūrah* in detail.

1

God the Creator of All

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

God's judgement is bound to come; so do not seek to hurry it on. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him. (1)

He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.' (2)

He has created the heavens and the earth in truth; sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him. (3)

He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious. (4)

He creates cattle which give you warmth and other benefits; and from them you obtain food. (5)

And you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evening and when you take

أَتَى أَمْرُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُوهُ ۗ سُبْحٰنَهُ
وَتَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١﴾

يُنزِلُ الْمَلٰٓئِكَةَ بِالرُّوحِ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ عَلَىٰ مَنْ
يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ۗ أَنْ أَنْذِرُوا أَنَّهُ لَا إِلٰهَ
إِلَّا أَنَا فَاتَّقُونِ ﴿٢﴾

خَلَقَ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ ۗ
تَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣﴾

خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ فَإِذَا هُوَ
خَصِيمٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٤﴾

وَاللَّائِمَةَ خَلَقَهَا ۗ لَكُمْ فِيهَا دِفْءٌ
وَمَنْفَعٌ وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا جَمَالٌ حِينَ تُرْتَحُونَ وَحِينَ
تَسْرَحُونَ ﴿٦﴾

them out to pasture in the morning. (6)

And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. (7)

And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge. (8)

It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright. (9)

It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. (10)

And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (11)

And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason. (12)

On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of

وَتَحْمِلُ أَثْقَالَكُمْ إِلَىٰ بَلَدٍ لَّمْ تَكُونُوا
بَلِغِيهِ إِلَّا بِشِقِّ الْأَنْفُسِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكُمْ
لَرءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

وَالْخَيْلَ وَالْبِغَالَ وَالْحَمِيرَ لِتَرْكَبُوهَا
وَزِينَةً ۚ وَخَلَقَ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨﴾

وَعَلَىٰ اللَّهِ قَصْدُ السَّبِيلِ وَمِنْهَا جَائِرٌ وَلَوْ
شَاءَ لَهَدَنكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً لَكُمْ
مِنْهُ شَرَابٌ وَمِنْهُ شَجَرٌ فِيهِ تُسِيمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

يُنْبِتُ لَكُمْ بِهِ الزَّرْعَ وَالزَّيْتُونَ
وَالنَّخِيلَ وَالْأَعْنَابَ وَمِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ وَالشَّمْسَ
وَالْقَمَرَ ۗ وَالنُّجُومَ مُسَخَّرَاتٌ بِأَمْرِهِ ۗ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَمَا ذَرَأَّا لَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُخْتَلِفًا
أَلْوَانُهُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed. (13)

It is He who has made the sea subservient to [His laws], so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful. (14)

He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way (15)

as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided. (16)

Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? (17)

Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. (18)

God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. (19)

Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. (20)

They are dead, not living, and they do not know

وَهُوَ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ الْبَحْرَ لِتَأْكُلُوا مِنْهُ
لَحْمًا طَرِيًّا وَتَسْتَخْرِجُوا مِنْهُ حِلْيَةً
تَلْبَسُونَهَا وَتَرَى الْفُلْكَ مَوَاجِرَ فِيهِ
وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلِعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَأَلْقَى فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيَ أَنْ تَمِيدَ
بِكُمْ وَأَنْهَارًا وَسُبُلًا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ
﴿١٤﴾ وَعَلَّمَتِ بِالنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

أَفَمَنْ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ لَآ تَخْلُقُ أَفَلَا
تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ لَا تُحْصُوهَا إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُسْرُونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ
﴿١٨﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَا
يَخْلُقُونَ شَيْئًا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

أَمْوَاتٌ غَيْرُ أَحْيَاءٍ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ
يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

when they will be raised back to life. (21)

Overview

This first passage speaks about God's oneness. It makes use of all the tools we outlined in the Prologue: the numerous signs and indicators the great variety of God's creation exhibit, the countless favours He has bestowed on man in every stage of his life, His perfect knowledge of what is kept secret and what is left public, the life of this world and the life to come.

An Imminent Grave Event

God's judgement is bound to come; so do not seek to hurry it on. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him. He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.' (Verses 1-2)

The unbelievers in Makkah used to ask the Prophet to hasten their punishment in this life, or to hasten the punishment God has in store for them in the life to come. As time passed with no punishment being inflicted, they urged the Prophet more and more to hasten it, demonstrating that they could not care less. They thought that Muḥammad was warning them against something that would never happen. His only aim, as they imagined, was to get them to believe what he said and accept his faith. They could not understand God's wisdom in giving them time. Nor could they appreciate His grace. They would not reflect on the signs He has placed everywhere in the universe around them. Nor would they reflect on His revelations in the Qur'ān which address people's minds and hearts. That is after all a much more effective address than punishment and suffering. It is more worthy of man whom God has honoured when He gave him a mind, feelings and an independent will to study, reflect and make free choices.

The opening of the *sūrah* is very decisive: "*God's judgement is bound to come.*" It implies that the command has been given, and that God's will has been made. This is sufficient for the judgement to come to pass at the time appointed for it by God Himself. "*So do not seek to hurry it on.*" God's laws operate in accordance with His will. They cannot be hurried, nor can they be postponed to satisfy people's wishes. The statement here tells us that God's judgement, to resurrect people or to inflict His

punishment on those who deserve it, has been made. It will come to pass at the time God has determined. There will be no hurrying and no delay.

The decisive nature of this statement is especially effective, even on those who try to wear a careless face. Moreover, it expresses the truth. Whatever God wills is bound to take place. The fact that He has made a judgement means that it is carried out, and that it becomes part of reality. Hence, there is neither an overstatement of facts nor a deviation from them.

Their beliefs, associating partners with God, and all the false concepts that they formulate on that basis, are far removed from God's true nature: "*Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him.*" (Verse 1) Beliefs that ascribe divinity to anyone other than God all lack foundation. They are the result of degenerate and disgraceful thinking.

God, who does not abandon mankind to their erring beliefs and baseless concepts, sends down from on high what gives them life and saves them: "*He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases.*" (Verse 2) This is God's greatest favour and blessing. He not only sends down water from the sky to make the earth quicken and to give physical life, but He also sends down the angels with His divine inspiration. The Arabic expression uses the word *rah*, which also means 'spirit', for inspiration. This adds connotations of life within people's souls, consciences and feelings, and within society so as to preserve them all from corruption. This is the first thing that God sends down to people from on high, and it is His most important blessing and bounty. God's purest creation, the angels, are sent down to His chosen servants, the prophets, giving them a message that is summed up in these words: "*Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.*" (Verse 2)

The emphasis here is on God's oneness, which is the central point of the Islamic faith. It breathes life into people's souls. It is also the parting point between the way which gives life and the way which destroys it. A soul that does not believe in God's oneness is lost, confused, pulled in all directions by diverse and contradictory concepts and beliefs. It cannot move with its whole being towards a definite goal. Use of the term *rib* in reference to God's message implies all these. Indeed it provides a fitting reference to them at the beginning of this *sūrah* which speaks of the great variety of God's favours. It is the top of all these blessings, without which all others lose their value. Indeed man does not make a proper use or derive proper benefit from anything on earth unless his soul comes alive with the great blessing of faith.

The warning is given a special mention so as to appear to be the central point of the message, because the larger part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers who deny God's blessing, prohibit what God has made lawful, violate their covenant with

God and reject faith altogether. This makes the warning more appropriate at the outset, coupled with a call to fear God and avoid incurring His displeasure.

Creation and Compassion

The *sūrah* then begins to outline the aspects of creation that emphasize the oneness of the Creator, and the aspects of blessing that confirm that it is God alone who bestows them all. These are revealed in groups that follow one another sequentially, starting with the creation of the heavens and the earth, and moving to the creation of man: *“He has created the heavens and the earth in truth; sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him. He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.”* (Verses 3-4)

“He has created the heavens and the earth in truth.” (Verse 3) The truth is at the core of their creation and their existence. Indeed the truth is an essential element in managing their affairs and the affairs of all creation. Nothing is created in vain or idle play. Everything derives its existence on the basis of the truth, and leads eventually to the truth. *“Sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him.”* (Verse 3) He is exalted above their pagan beliefs and above any creatures they associate with Him. He is indeed the One who has created the heavens and the earth and all beings that live in them. No creature is worthy of being His partner. Indeed He has no partners.

“He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.” (Verse 4) The gulf is so huge between the origin and the end, between the worthless sperm and the man in open contention. He disputes with his Lord and denies Him. He argues about His existence or His oneness. Yet the way the verse runs leaves no gap between the point of origin, the drop of sperm, and the grown up man engaged in dispute and contention. This shows the contrast to be complete and the gulf too wide. Such brevity is intended for enhanced effect.

Against the expanse of the heavens and the earth man stands out. Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions some of the creation God has made subservient to man, beginning with cattle: *“He creates cattle which give you warmth and other benefits; and from them you obtain food. And you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evening and when you take them out to pasture in the morning. And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge.”* (Verses 5-8)

In numerous situations that are similar to the environment where the Qur’ān was revealed, and in any agricultural set-up, which remains the principal one in the

whole world, the value of cattle is fully appreciated. Indeed mankind cannot survive without cattle. The better known cattle in Arabia at the time were camels, cows, sheep and goats. On the other hand, horses, mules and asses were for riding and show. They were not meant to be eaten. Indeed there is disagreement among scholars on the permissibility of eating the meat of these animals. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah relies on this verse which defines the uses of these animals to say that horses may not be eaten. The majority of scholars, however, maintain that they are permissible to eat. In this they rely on authentic *aḥādīth* and on practical *sunnah*.

As the Qur’ān refers to this aspect of God’s blessings, it refers to the practical needs it fulfils in human life. Cattle give warmth as we use their hide, wool and hair. These have even further benefits. We also obtain milk and meat from cattle. We are reminded that cattle provide food for people and carry their loads when they travel. Without cattle, people would until recently have found great difficulty in reaching their destination. At the same time we enjoy their beauty, particularly when we drive them home in the evening and when we take them to pasture in the morning. Just looking at them moving along, strong and full of vigour, gives us pleasure. Rural people are better able than town dwellers to appreciate the meanings to which these verses refer.

Horses, mules and asses also meet other human needs. They are used as mounts to ride or, they are put on show for their beauty: “*And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show.*” (Verse 8) Here we encounter a particularly interesting point in the Islamic outlook of life, whereby beauty constitutes an important aspect. God’s blessing does not merely satisfy essential needs, such as food, drink and mounts. It also satisfies healthy desires beyond basic needs. Here we find satisfaction of the sense that enjoys beauty and seeks pleasure, and also satisfies human feelings that are more sublime than animal desires and needs.

“*Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful.*” (Verse 7) This comment refers in particular to the carrying of heavy loads to distant lands which people could not reach otherwise without enduring much hardship. Thus the comment directs our attention to the great blessings that God has given us by creating cattle, and to the great mercy accompanying this blessing.

“*And He creates things of which you have no knowledge.*” (Verse 8) This sentence comments on the creation of cattle, horses, mules and asses and the different uses to which they are put and the benefits they provide. Thus it invites people’s imagination to look beyond their immediate environment and the time in which they live. Beyond what exists at a particular location and in a particular time there are other forms and types of life. God wants people to expect this so as to broaden their vision. He also wants them to accept such other forms of life when they are available. They must not refuse to benefit by such new types, saying that they will only use the

cattle, horses, mules and asses their fathers used. Similarly, no one should be so rigid as to say that since the Qur'ān only mentioned these, no other form of transport can be used.

Islam is open minded and flexible. It equips its followers with the ability to use all potentials and resources that are available at any time. The Qur'ān thus prepares people's minds and hearts to receive whatever God creates and science discovers or produces in the future. A proper Islamic conscience is always ready to accept any new remarkable addition to God's creation or to scientific discovery. Over the years many new means of riding and carrying loads have been added, as well as many objects of beauty. None of these were known to people when the Qur'ān was revealed. There will be many more which are unknown to us. The Qur'ān prepares us to accept these without difficulty by stating that God "*creates things of which you have no knowledge.*" (Verse 8)

Within the context of carriage, riding and travelling to reach certain destinations on earth, the *sūrah* adds other objectives which we can reach by travelling along mental ways. Such is the road to faith, which is a straight way that has no turnings. It does not go beyond the defined goal. There are other ways that do not lead to the same destination. Now God has undertaken to make the way leading to Him clear and well defined. He points it out through the signs He has placed in the universe and through His messengers: "*It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright.*" (Verse 9)

The right path is the straight one which does not bend here or there. It goes directly to its destination, allowing for no deviation. A swerving path may lead away from the destination, or may go beyond it, without stopping at it.

"*Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright.*" (Verse 9) But it has been His will that He creates man with the dual propensity to follow His guidance or to go astray, and to let him choose to follow either way. Hence, some people follow the right path and some follow swerving ways. Neither type goes beyond God's will which has determined to allow man free choice.

Blessings Galore

The second group of great signs in God's creation and His unlimited blessings then follow:

It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (Verses 10-11)

Water pours down from the sky in accordance with laws that God has placed in nature and set into operation. It is these laws that control the running of such water and bring about its outcome in accordance with God's will. Indeed He initiates every movement and determines every result by a special act of will. The water is mentioned here as an aspect of God's grace. *"From it you drink."* So it has the quality of being suitable for drinking. Its other quality follows: *"And with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle."* (Verse 10) This reference fits in well with the earlier mention of cattle. It provides harmony between the pasture and cattle. A reference is also made to plants which serve as food for man, including olives, dates and grapes, and many other types of fruit.

"Surely in this there is a sign for people who think." (Verse 11) There is certainly a sign in the way God has designed the universe and set its laws so that they fit human life. Man would not have been able to survive on this planet had the laws of nature been unsuitable for his nature and life needs. That man is placed on the surface of the earth has not come about by blind coincidence. Nor is it a matter of coincidence that proportions and relativity between our planet and other planets and stars are as they are, or that climatic conditions are so suitable to support human life and satisfy man's needs and desires.

The people who think are the ones who understand that there is elaborate and wise planning in the universe. They relate a natural phenomenon such as rain and its effects of initiating life and helping plants and trees to grow and yield their fruit to the higher laws of existence and the evidence pointing to the Creator who has no partners. They appreciate that everything is part of His planning and under His management. The careless see such phenomena every morning and every evening, winter and summer, but it stirs nothing in their minds. They do not feel any urge to try to identify the One who has designed this unique and remarkable system.

A third group of signs are then added: *"And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 12)

Another aspect of the perfect design of creation and the blessings bestowed on mankind at the same time is the creation of the night, day, sun, moon and stars. All these help to meet our needs on earth. We do not say that they have been created for man, but they are made to serve his existence and to benefit him. The phenomenon of the succession of day and night has a profound effect on human life. If anyone is in doubt, let him imagine a day that is not followed by a night, or a night not followed by a day, and reflect what that would mean to the life of human beings, animals and plants on earth.

The same applies to the sun and moon. They have a direct bearing on life on earth,

its origin, maintenance and growth. Moreover, *“all the stars are subservient to His command.”* (Verse 12) They serve the interests of man and other beings known only to God. All this is, again, part of the wise and elaborate planning that includes everything in the universe. The harmony and balance between all universal laws are appreciated by people who use their reason and contemplate what lies beyond these laws: *“In this there are signs for people who use their reason.”* (Verse 12)

Yet another group of blessings that God bestows on mankind is also mentioned: *“On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed.”* (Verse 13)

What God has created and placed on the earth is fantastic in its nature and diversity. We need only to mention the metals that are available in the soil. These support the life of whole communities during different periods. It is sufficient to cast a glance at these hidden resources to appreciate the great blessing to which the *sūrah* refers. These are kept for mankind until they have achieved sufficient progress to make use of these resources when they are needed. Whenever it is said that a great treasure has been exhausted, another is discovered. All this is part of the provision God has placed at man’s service. *“Surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed.”* (Verse 13) Such people do not forget that it is God’s able hand that has kept these treasures and resources hidden for them until they are able to make use of them.

We are then alerted to another group of God’s creation which is the sea and its animal life. Its water is salty and cannot be used for drinking or irrigation. Yet it includes a fantastic range of blessings that God bestows on man: *“It is He who has made the sea subservient to (His laws), so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful.”* (Verse 14)

The sea and its life forms also meet many human needs and satisfy various human desires. From it we obtain fresh fish and other species to eat. In it we find pearls and corals which we use as ornaments. Some communities continue to use shells as personal ornaments or to make artefacts from them. The reference to ships also hints at the element of beauty and its satisfaction, not merely the use of shipping for transport. *“You see the ships ploughing through the waves.”* (Verse 14) The expression here draws our attention to the beauty we see everywhere in the universe. Such beauty stands out just as the object we are contemplating is seen to serve a definite purpose and meet a felt need. We only need to appreciate such beauty and not confine ourselves to needs that must be satisfied.

The verses here draw our attention to the fact that we should seek what God has given us of provision and bounty, and to our duty of giving thanks to Him for having placed food, ornament and beauty for us in the salty sea: *“so that you may be*

able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful.” (Verse 14)

The last group of God’s numerous blessings mentioned in this passage refers to different aspects of God’s creation: *“He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way, as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided.” (Verses 15-16)*

Modern science gives us several theories which explain the formation of mountains, but it does not mention their function to which the Qur’ān refers. The most important of these contradictory theories is that the surface of the earth shrank as it cooled down after its initial burning stage. This then led to the formation of valleys, hills and mountains on its surface. Yet the Qur’ān mentions that the mountains ensure that the earth remains well balanced. This function is not given due attention by scientists.

In contrast with the firm mountains, our attentions are drawn to the running rivers and the roads we follow. There is a direct link between the rivers and the mountains in this scene. Many a river starts at a mountain, where rain-water gathers. The roads also have a direct link with both mountains and rivers. They provide another link to the general atmosphere of movement, cattle, mounts and transport. Juxtaposed with the roads are the landmarks which people use to ensure that they are following the right way. These include hills, mountains and open spaces, as well as the stars which guide travellers on sea and dry land alike.

False Deities That Create Nothing

Now that the aspects of creation, blessings and great design have been completed in this first passage of the *sūrah*, a comment follows to emphasize the point at issue, namely the oneness of God who is sublimely exalted above all those beings people associate as partners with Him:

Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? Should you try to count God’s blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. They are dead, not living, and they do not know when they will be raised back to life. (Verses 17-21)

This comment comes at the most opportune time. We are all ready to accept the point it makes: *“Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create?” (Verse 17)* Could there be more than one answer? No! Of course not! They are not alike. Is it possible that a human being can equate God who has created all these with false deities that create nothing? *“Will you not, then, think? (Verse 17)* The point needs no more than a

little reflection and the whole case is set to rest.

The *sūrah* mentions a great variety of God's blessings. Now it comments on this, saying: *"Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them."* (Verse 18) If people are unable even to compute God's blessings, they are much less likely to be able to thank God enough for them. Indeed most blessings remain unnoticed by man, because they are too familiar to him. He is thus oblivious to their importance. He only notices the importance of a blessing that he has taken for granted when it is withdrawn. We need only remember how oblivious we are of the importance of different organs and systems in our bodies. We only remember this when we are ill, because our organs are not functioning properly. Nevertheless, God's forgiveness ensures that man's shortcomings and lack of gratitude are overlooked: *"God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 18)

The Creator knows full well what He has created, what is apparent of it and what is concealed: *"God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open."* (Verse 19) How can they equate Him with their alleged deities who neither create nor have any knowledge. They are indeed dead, having no life whatsoever. Indeed they have no feelings: *"Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. They are dead, not living, and they do not know when they will be raised back to life."* (Verses 20-21)

The reference here to the resurrection implies that the Creator must, for certain, know its time, because resurrection is complementary to creation. It is then that the living receive their reward for what they have done in life. The deities that do not know when their worshippers are raised to life are only a mockery. A true Creator determines when to resurrect His creation.

2

Divergent Outlooks and Attitudes

Your God is the One God. Those who deny the life to come have hearts that persist in denying the truth. They are full of arrogance. (22)

إِلَهُكُمْ إِلَهُ وَاحِدٌ فَالَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِالْآخِرَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ مُنْكَرَةٌ وَهُمْ مُسْتَكْبِرُونَ



God surely knows what they keep secret and all that they bring into the open. He does not love those who are arrogant. (23)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يُسْرُونَ
وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ
الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ



Whenever they are asked, 'What has your Lord bestowed from on high?' they say: 'Fables of the ancients!' (24)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ مَآذَا أَنْزَلَ رَبُّكُمْ قَالُوا
أَسْطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ



On the Day of Resurrection they shall bear the full weight of their burdens, as well as some of the burdens of those ignorant ones whom they have led astray. Evil is the burden they shall bear. (25)

لِيَحْمِلُوا أَوْزَارَهُمْ كَامِلَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ
وَمِنْ أَوْزَارِ الَّذِينَ يُضِلُّونَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ

Those who lived before them also schemed. But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive. (26)

Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: 'Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?' Those who are endowed with knowledge will say: 'Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, (27)

those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves.' These will then offer their submission, saying: 'We have done no wrong!' [They will be answered]: 'Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing! (28)

Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide.' Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant! (29)

But when the God-fearing are asked: 'What has your Lord revealed?' they say: 'All that is good.' For those who do good in this world, good reward [is assured]; but far better is their abode in the hereafter. Blessed is the dwelling place of the God-fearing. (30)

أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَزُرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَدْ مَكَرَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ فَأَتَى
اللَّهُ بُنْيَانَهُمْ مِنَ الْقَوَاعِدِ فَخَرَّ عَلَيْهِمُ
السَّقْفُ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ وَأَتَنَّهُمُ الْعَذَابُ مِنْ
حَيْثُ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

ثُمَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يُخْزِيهِمْ وَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ
شُرَكَاءِى الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تُشْتَقُونَ
فِيهِمْ ۚ قَالَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ إِنَّ
الْخِزْيَ الْيَوْمَ وَالسُّوءَ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ
﴿٢٧﴾

الَّذِينَ تَتَوَفَّيهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ ظَالِمِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ
ط فَأَلْقَوْا السَّلَمَ مَا كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ مِنْ سُوءٍ
بَلَىٰ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

ط فَادْخُلُوا أَبْوَابَ جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
فَلْبِئْسَ مَثْوَى الْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

﴿٣٠﴾ وَقِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا مَاذَا أَنْزَلَ رَبُّكُمْ
قَالُوا خَيْرًا ۗ لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا فِي هَذِهِ

The Gardens of Eden they will enter; through which running waters flow. There they shall have everything they desire. Thus shall God reward the God-fearing: (31)

those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity, saying: Peace be upon you! Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life]. (32)

Are they [who disbelieve] awaiting anything but for the angels to appear before them, or for your Lord's command to come? Those before them did the same. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves. (33)

The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (34)

Those who associate partners with God say, 'Had God so willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped any other than Him, nor would we have declared anything forbidden without a commandment from Him.' Those before them said the same. Are the messengers bound to do anything other than to clearly deliver the message? (35)

الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً ۖ وَالْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ ۗ وَلَنِعْمَ
دَارُ الْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

جَنَّتُ عَدْنٍ يَدْخُلُونَهَا يُجْرَى مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ ۖ لَهُمْ فِيهَا مَا يَشَاءُونَ ۚ كَذَلِكَ
يَجْزِي اللَّهُ الْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

الَّذِينَ تَتَوَفَّوهُمْ الْمَلٰٓئِكَةُ طَيِّبِينَ ۖ
يَقُولُونَ سَلٰمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ادْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ
بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ اِلَّا اَنْ تَاْتِيَهُمُ الْمَلٰٓئِكَةُ
اَوْ يَأْتِيَ اَمْرٌ رَبِّكَ ۗ كَذٰلِكَ فَعَلَ الَّذِيْنَ
مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۗ وَمَا ظَلَمَهُمُ اللّٰهُ وَلٰكِنْ
كَانُوْا اَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُوْنَ ﴿٣٤﴾

فَاَصَابَهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا عَمِلُوْا وَحَاقَ بِهٖمْ
مَا كَانُوْا بِهٖ يَسْتَهْزِءُوْنَ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِيْنَ اٰشْرَكُوْا لَوْ شَاءَ اللّٰهُ مَا
عَبَدْنَا مِنْ دُوْنِهٖ مِنْ شَيْءٍ نَّحْنُ وَلَا
اٰبَاؤُنَا وَلَا حَرَمْنَا مِنْ دُوْنِهٖ مِنْ شَيْءٍ ۗ

Indeed, We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.' Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance, while others were inevitably doomed by their error. Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth. (36)

However eager you may be to show them the right way, [know that] God does not bestow His guidance upon any whom He judges to have gone astray. They shall have none to support them. (37)

They most solemnly swear by God that God never raises the dead to life. Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself, even though most people do not know it. (38)

[Thus] He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars. (39)

Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, 'Be' — and it is. (40)

As for those who forsake their homes for the sake of God after having suffered injustice, We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life; yet better still is their reward in the life to come, if they but knew it. (41)

كَذَلِكَ فَعَلَ الَّذِينَ مِنَ قَبْلِهِمْ ۗ فَهَلْ
عَلَى الرُّسُلِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولًا أَنْ
اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ ۗ فَمِنْهُمْ
مَنْ هَدَى اللَّهُ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ حَقَّتْ عَلَيْهِ
الضَّلَالَةُ ۗ فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

إِنْ تَحَرَّصَ عَلَىٰ هُدَاهُمْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي
مَنْ يُضِلُّ ۗ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَاصِرِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾
وَأَقْسَمُوا بِاللَّهِ جَهْدَ أَيْمَانِهِمْ لَا يَبْعَثُ
اللَّهُ مَنْ يَمُوتُ ۗ بَلَىٰ وَعَدًّا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا
وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ الَّذِي اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا كَاذِبِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾
إِنَّمَا قَوْلُنَا لِشَيْءٍ إِذَا أَرَدْنَاهُ أَنْ نَقُولَ لَهُ
كُنْ فَيَكُونُ ﴿٤١﴾

وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا فِي اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا ظَلَمُوا

[Such reward is granted to] those who, having been patient in adversity, place their trust in their Lord. (42)

The messengers We sent before you were but men whom We inspired. So, if you have not realized this, ask those who are endowed with knowledge. (43)

[We sent such messengers] with clear proofs and divine books, and We have now bestowed on you the reminder so that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them, and that they may take thought. (44)

Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive? (45)

Or that He will not suddenly take them to task in the midst of their comings and goings; for they can never frustrate His design? (46)

Or that He will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive? Surely your Lord is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. (47)

Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? (48)

لَنْبُوْتَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةٌ ۗ وَلَا جَزَاءُ
الْآخِرَةَ اَكْبَرُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾
وَمَا اَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ اِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِيْ
اِلَيْهِمْ ۚ فَسْئَلُوْا اَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ اِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا
تَعْلَمُوْنَ ﴿٤٤﴾

بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ ۗ وَاَنْزَلْنَا اِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ
لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ اِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَفَكَّرُوْنَ ﴿٤٥﴾

اَفَاَمِنَ الَّذِينَ مَكْرُوا السَّيِّئَاتِ اَنْ يَّخْسِفَ
اللّٰهُ بِهِمُ الْاَرْضَ اَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ مِنْ
حَيْثُ لَا يَشْعُرُوْنَ ﴿٤٦﴾

اَوْ يَأْخُذَهُمْ فِي تَقْلِيْبِهِمْ فَمَا هُمْ
بِمُعْجِزِيْنَ ﴿٤٧﴾

اَوْ يَأْخُذَهُمْ عَلٰى تَحُوْفٍ فَاِنَّ رَبَّكُمْ
لَرَّءُوْفٌ رَّحِيْمٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

اَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا اِلٰى مَا خَلَقَ اللّٰهُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ

*For, before God prostrates itself every living thing
in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels.
They do not behave in arrogant defiance. (49)*

*They fear their Lord, who is high above them,
and do as they are bidden. (50)*

يَتَفَقَّهُوا ظِلَّةً عَنِ الْيَمِينِ وَالشَّمَالِ

سُجَّدًا لِلَّهِ وَهُمْ دَاخِرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَلِلَّهِ يَسْجُدُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي

الْأَرْضِ مِنْ دَابَّةٍ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَهُمْ لَا

يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

يُخَافُونَ رَبَّهُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا

يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Overview

The first passage of this *sūrah* outlined a great many aspects of God's marvellous creation and His blessings which He bestows on His servants, and His knowledge of what is open and what is secret. The other beings which the unbelievers allege to have a share of divinity do not create anything; indeed they themselves are created. They are devoid of knowledge, dead and unlikely ever to come to life. They do not know when their servants are resurrected in order to face the reckoning. This clearly shows that they cannot be deities worthy of worship. Indeed it shows that all beliefs based on a multiplicity of deities are false. This was the first issue raised by the *sūrah* in connection with the question of God's oneness, with an added reference to the question of resurrection.

The present passage picks up where the last one left off, starting a new round which begins with a clear statement of God's oneness. It makes clear that those who do not believe in the Day of Judgement have hearts that are hardened in their denial of the truth. Blindness has become an essential characteristic that prevents them from admitting the truth to which signs clearly testify. Their arrogance stops them from acknowledging what they feel to be the truth and accepting its message. The passage concludes with a touching scene in which we see all shadows prostrating themselves, together with every living thing in the heavens and earth, as well as the angels, to God. These are free of arrogance. They fear God and obey His command without dissent. This scene of complete obedience contrasts with that of the hardened

unbelievers arrogantly denying the truth at the beginning of the passage.

In between these two scenes, the *sūrah* reports what the arrogant unbelievers say about revelations and about the Qur'ān. They allege that all this is merely fables of the ancients. It also reports their claims about the reasons for their associating partners with God, their prohibition of what God has made lawful, alleging that God wants them to do what is evil and that He accepts it from them. It quotes their assertions about resurrection and judgement, as they emphatically swear that God does not bring back to life anyone who has died. It answers all their claims, portraying them as they face their death, and as they are brought back to life disclaiming their false assertions.

The *sūrah* also paints scenes of the fate of earlier communities which denied the truth like the unbelievers do. It warns them against being seized by God at any moment of the day or night, when they are totally unaware, either moving around on earth, or feeling apprehensive, expecting God's punishment to overwhelm them. In this passage the *sūrah* also reports what the believers say, and what they expect when they are gathered to God, and what awaits them of goodly reward on the Day of Judgement. The passage concludes with a scene of total serenity and complete obedience demonstrated by all, including shadows, living creatures and angels, in heaven and on earth.

Unbelief Compounded by Arrogance

Your God is the One God. Those who deny the life to come have hearts that persist in denying the truth. They are full of arrogance. God surely knows what they keep secret and all that they bring into the open. He does not love those who are arrogant. (Verses 22-23)

The *sūrah* provides a clear link between believing in God's oneness and believing in the Day of Judgement. Indeed it makes the one evidence for the other, as worshipping God alone is closely associated with belief in resurrection and reward. It is in the hereafter that God's wisdom and justice are clearly and fully manifested.

"Your God is the One God." All that the *sūrah* has outlined of great signs of creation and blessing, and also of the signs of His perfect knowledge, lead to this clear truth. A truth with manifest effects seen in the harmony and complementarity of the laws of nature governing the universe.

Those who reject this great truth, and do not believe in the hereafter, are not short of proof and evidence. The fault lies rather with them and their own hardened natures. Their hearts persistently deny the very signs they see. They are arrogant, unwilling to accept clear evidence, submit to God, and believe in His Messenger.

God who has created them knows this. Indeed He knows what they keep secret and what they do and say in the open, and He does not like what He knows of them. They are full of arrogance. *“He does not love those who are arrogant.”* (Verse 23) An arrogant nature is unlikely to be convinced or to submit to the truth. It is their arrogance that makes them unloved by God.

Whenever they are asked, ‘What has your Lord bestowed from on high?’ they say: Fables of the ancients!’ On the Day of Resurrection they shall bear the full weight of their burdens, as well as some of the burdens of those ignorant ones whom they have led astray. Evil is the burden they shall bear. (Verses 24-25)

Those arrogant people with hardened, unresponsive hearts are asked, *‘What has your Lord bestowed from on high?’* (Verse 24) But they do not give the direct and normal answer, quoting some verses from the Qur’ān or stating their import without distortion to prove their honest reporting even though they may not believe in it. They give instead a dishonest answer, saying, *‘Fables of the ancients!’* (Verse 24) A fable is defined as ‘a story not founded on fact, a legend or myth.’ Thus do they describe the Qur’ān which addresses minds and souls, deals with life situations, human behaviour, social interactions as well as people’s conditions, past, present and future. They only describe it as such because it relates some parts of the history of earlier communities. Their denial of the truth thus leads them to bear the burden of their own sins, as well as a portion of the burdens of those whom they lead astray, preventing them from believing in God and the Qur’ān, keeping them unaware of its truth and nature. The Qur’ān describes these sins as heavy burdens. Indeed, they are foul burdens. They weigh heavily on people’s souls like loads weigh heavily on their backs. They trouble hearts like burdens trouble the body. Indeed they are worse and even more troublesome than physical burdens, heavy as these may be.

A Wicked Campaign

Ibn Abī Hātim reports: “The elders of the Quraysh met for consultation. Some of them said: ‘Muhammad is a man of fine argument. If he speaks to a man, he soon gets hold of him. Therefore, select some of your most honourable people, whose lines of ancestry are well known. Let them take their positions at every route into Makkah, at one or two day’s distance, so that they turn away anyone who comes to meet Muhammad.’ People did just that. If any of them met a man sent by his people to find out about Muhammad, he would introduce himself to him, telling him his position among his people. He would then offer to tell him about the Prophet, saying, ‘He is a liar who has been followed only by slaves and ignorant people, and those who are good for nothing. All wise men among his people have taken a clear

stand against him.’ This would be enough to turn many people away. It is to this that God refers in the verse stating: *“Whenever they are asked, ‘What has your Lord bestowed from on high?’ they say: Fables of the ancients!”* (Verse 24)

“On the other hand, if the man sent to find out about the Prophet is one to whom God has given insight, he would say: ‘I am certainly a bad intelligence gatherer if, having reached so close, I am to return now without meeting this man and listening to what he says in order to give my people a true picture of him.’ He would insist on going into Makkah, where he would meet the believers and where they would tell him that all that Muhammad says is good and fine.”

This was a well orchestrated propaganda campaign mounted by the Quraysh against Islam. A similar campaign is organized in every generation by arrogant people who do not wish to submit to the truth despite all the evidence supporting it. Indeed the arrogant among the Quraysh were not the first to deny the truth or to scheme against it. The *sūrah* draws for them a picture of the fate suffered by schemers before them, and their destiny in the hereafter. It shows them what they endure from the moment their souls part with their bodies until they receive their punishment in the life to come. All this is depicted in vivid images, following the inimitable style of the Qur’ān:

Those who lived before them also schemed. But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive. Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: ‘Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?’ Those who are endowed with knowledge will say: ‘Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves.’ These will then offer their submission, saying: ‘We have done no wrong!’ [They will be answered]: ‘Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing! Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide.’ Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant! (Verses 26-29)

“*Those who lived before them also schemed.*” (Verse 26) The *sūrah* paints their scheming as though it was a building with foundations, corners, ceiling and roof, which implies that it was a massive and well designed plot. But nothing can stand up to God’s might: *“But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above.”* (Verse 26) This paints a picture of total destruction, overtaking them from beneath their feet and above their heads. The foundations supporting the building collapse, and the roof falls down burying them. *“And suffering befell them from where they did not perceive.”* (Verse 26) Thus the building they very carefully constructed to provide them with shelter becomes their burial ground as they are overwhelmed from every direction. Little did they think that what they built for

shelter would become the instrument of their own destruction.

The image we have here is one of complete destruction. This is the perfect irony directed at those who scheme and plot against God's message, believing that their scheming is too strong and elaborate to ever be foiled. But God's own scheming is far too weighty for them to oppose. This scene is often repeated. The Quraysh were not the first to take this stand, nor would they be the last. On the other hand, God's message goes on along its clear way, no matter what the plotters devise. People turn around from time to time, and they see that highly effective scene portrayed by the Qur'an: *"But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive."* (Verse 26)

All this takes place in the present life on earth. But there is something else beyond: *"Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: 'Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?'"* (Verse 27) This is now a scene of the hereafter, where we see the plotters stand up in shame, and when their arrogance and scheming is no longer of any use to them. They stand in front of the One to whom all creation and all authority belong. He will rebuke them, asking: *"Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?"* You were keen to dispute with My Messenger and his followers who acknowledged My oneness, claiming that your false deities were My partners. Where are they now?

In their shame and humiliation, they will remain silent. On the other hand, those endowed with knowledge, angels, messengers and true believers, whom God permits to speak, will say plainly and forcefully: *"Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers."* (Verse 27)

Now they are taken a step backwards, and described at the moment they face death. *"Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves."* (Verses 27-28) The angels are gathering their souls which they themselves have wronged by depriving themselves of the light and reassurance of faith. By their own actions they have brought about their own ruin, and now they have to suffer punishment in hell.

The *sūrah* paints their position at the moment of their death, when they are still close to earth and to all the falsehood they asserted here, and all their evil scheming: *"These will then offer their submission, saying: 'We have done no wrong!'"* (Verse 28) Those who used to revel in their arrogance are now submissive, unable to contend. They offer complete submission! But at the same time they lie. This may be an aspect of their plotting in this life as they submissively say: *"We have done no wrong!"*

Yet the answer comes to them straightaway from God who knows their true reality: *"Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing!"* (Verse 28) There

is no room now for lies or deception. They have to suffer the fate of all arrogant peoples who deny the truth: *“Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant!”* (Verse 29)

A Perfect Contrast

On the other side stand the God-fearing. Their picture contrasts fully with that of the arrogant unbelievers, in origin and destiny:

But when the God fearing are asked: ‘What has your Lord revealed?’ they say: All that is good.’ For those who do good in this world, good reward [is assured]; but far better is their abode in the hereafter. Blessed is the dwelling place of the God fearing. The Gardens of Eden they will enter; through which running waters flow. There they shall have everything they desire. Thus shall God reward the God fearing; those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity, saying: ‘Peace be upon you! Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life.]’ (Verses 30-32)

The God-fearing realize that the very essence of the divine message and all that God has revealed of directives, commandments and laws is good and perfect. Hence when they are questioned about what God has revealed from on high, they sum it up in a word: *“All that is good.”* They go on to outline this good that God has revealed, according to what they have learnt from God’s revelations: *“For those who do good in this world, good reward is assured.”* (Verse 30) They enjoy a good life and have a good position. However, *“Far better is their abode in the hereafter.”* It is certainly better than all there is in this present life. *“Blessed is the dwelling place of the God-fearing.”* (Verse 30) More details are now given about this abode of the hereafter, which is shown to be a goodly one indeed: *“The Gardens of Eden they will enter, through which running waters flow.”* (Verse 31) In such a place and with such resources they have comforts and luxuries in abundance. *“There they shall have everything they desire.”* (Verse 31) They will want for nothing. Every good thing is provided without any limit on what God grants them. *“Thus shall God reward the God-fearing.”* (Verse 31)

Again the *sūrah* takes a step backwards to show the God-fearing believers as they are about to die. It is an easy scene, as they are comforted by the angels: *“Those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity.”* (Verse 32) They are in a comfortable, pure condition, looking forward to meeting God, having nothing to fear. The angels greet them: *“Peace be upon you!”* (Verse 32) This is a greeting of welcome and reassurance. They follow this by delivering the happiest news of all: *“Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life].”* (Verse 32)

At the end of this scene with its two aspects of death and resurrection, the *sūrah* queries what the idolaters of the Quraysh are waiting for? Are they waiting for the

angels to gather their souls, or for God's command to resurrect them? For this is what happens to them on death and then on the day when resurrection takes place by God's command. Yet they have a clear lesson in what happened to earlier communities. They have been shown two images delineating what happens to both parties:

Are they [who disbelieve] awaiting anything but for the angels to appear before them, or for your Lord's command to come? Those before them did the same. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves. The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (Verses 33-34)

The attitude of human beings is amazing. They see what happened to people of earlier generations who followed the same course they follow. But they do not take heed. They do not believe that what happened to earlier communities can happen to them. They do not realize that the laws of nature operate in accordance with a well defined pattern, and that premises lead to their natural conclusions, actions receive their just reward, and God's law will not be suspended to appease anyone.

"It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves." (Verse 33) God has given them the freedom of thought and choice. He has shown them all His signs placed in the universe around them and within their own souls, warning them against the consequences of their actions. He then left them to choose, and to bear the consequences of their own doings in accordance with His laws. Thus He has not wronged them in any way. Their fate is a case of action rebounding on the perpetrator.

Indeed God does not inflict too severe a punishment on them. Instead, their own misdeeds were severe, and it is these they have to endure the natural consequences of: *"The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride."* (Verse 34) This verse and similar ones are very significant. People are not punished with anything other than the natural consequences of their own actions. These are the very things which sink them to a degree lower than that of human beings. Hence they are punished with something lower than what is fitting for humans. They endure a humiliating abode and painful suffering.

Two Ways for Mankind

Now the *sūrah* reports yet another argument advanced by the unbelievers, to explain the reasons for their disbelief.

Those who associate partners with God say, Had God so willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped any other than Him, nor would we have declared anything forbidden without a commandment from Him.' Those before them said the same. Are the messengers bound to do anything other than to clearly deliver the message? Indeed, We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.' Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance, while others were inevitably doomed by their error. Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth. (Verses 35-36)

They lay on God's will the blame for all their own and their forefathers' deviant beliefs, their worship of false deities, as also for their misguided concepts leading them to prohibit what God had made lawful without any clear authority from Him. They allege that none of them would have done anything of the sort, had God willed to prevent it. This is a grossly mistaken view of God's will and how it operates. Furthermore, it deprives man of the most important quality which God has given him in this life.

God's will is never directed so as to make His servants associate partners with Him. Nor is He ever pleased when they prohibit what He has made lawful. This is clearly stated in His law contained in His messages to mankind. The messengers were only assigned the task of delivering His message, and they were up to the task, exerting their best efforts to fulfil it: *"We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.'"* (Verse 36) This is the command He issued, outlining what He wishes His servants to do. God Almighty does not order His servants to do something which He knows them to be, by nature, unable to do, or to do what He has compelled them to avoid. The clear evidence proving His displeasure with those who disobey His orders is the punishment which He inflicted in former times on those who denied His messages and messengers. Hence He draws attention here to the fate of those disobedient communities: *"Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth."* (Verse 36)

God, the Creator, the Wise, has willed that human beings should have an equal propensity either to follow His guidance or to go astray, and that their choice of which way to follow should be completely free. He has also given them reason and intellect in order to be able to determine which way to choose. He has placed in the universe numerous pointers to guidance, and these signs are there for them to see, hear, sense and feel wherever they turn at any moment of the night or day, leading their minds to the right conclusion.

Out of His grace, which He gives in abundance, God has not left His servants to make their choice only on the basis of their reasoning. He has given in His laws, which were outlined by His messengers, a clear and constant standard for people to

follow when they need guidance. By using this standard, which is not subject to people's wishes and desires, they are able to determine right and wrong on any matter. He did not make His messengers overbearing tyrants who used brute force to compel people to believe in Him. These messengers were only carriers of His messages, assigned only the task of delivering them. They called on people to worship God alone, to steer away from every type of belief that associates partners with Him, and to shun submission to any power other than God's: *"We have raised a messenger in every community, (who said to them): 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.'"* (Verse 36)

Some people respond positively to God's message: *"Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance."* (Verse 36) Another group chose error: *"Others were inevitably doomed by their error."* (Verse 36) Neither party has broken away from God's will for He did not compel them to follow one way or the other. Each chose the way for himself after having been given sufficient guidance to distinguish between truth and error. Such guidance is placed within man himself and is also made available everywhere in the universe around him.

This statement also refutes the false argument advanced by the idolaters and repeated by many of those who commit every kind of disobedience of God. Islam is very clear on this point. God orders His servants to do only what is right and good, and He forbids them only what is evil. He may sometimes choose to inflict clear punishments which plainly reflect His displeasure. But this does not mean that He intervenes to compel them to go astray and then punishes them for something over which they claim to have no choice. This is absolutely false. They are completely free to follow the way they choose, and that freedom is given them by God's will. Whatever good or evil they do, then, takes place by God's will in this sense only.

This explains the comment given in the form of an address to the Prophet outlining the law determining what people may follow of guidance or error: *"However eager you may be to show them the right way, [know that] God does not bestow His guidance upon any whom He judges to have gone astray. They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 37) People's acceptance of divine guidance is not the result of the Prophet's deliberations and efforts. This is not his task. His mission is only to deliver the message God gave him. Guidance and error are subject to God's law which never fails, bringing the same results every time. Whoever deserves to remain in error according to God's law shall not receive His guidance. That is because of the operation of the laws God has set in nature. This is His will which is always done. Hence, *"they shall have none to support them."* Besides, who can support them against God?

The Truth of Resurrection

The unbelievers make yet another argument to justify their rejection of the divine message. *"They most solemnly swear by God that God never raises the dead to life. Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself, even though most people do not know it. [Thus] He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars. Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, 'Be' – and it is."* (Verses 38-40)

The question of resurrection has been the main point of contention among many communities ever since God sent His messengers to mankind, commanding them to do what is good and forbidding them what is evil, warning them always that they are accountable for their deeds before God on the Day of Judgement.

Yet these people from the Quraysh were ready to solemnly swear that God will not raise anyone to life after death. In other words, they acknowledge God's existence but deny that the dead will be brought back to life by Him. They consider such resurrection to be impossible after bodies have decomposed, organs separated and molecules are scattered everywhere. They overlook the miraculous nature of life in the first place. They are oblivious to the nature of God's power and the fact that it cannot be compared with that of human beings or their abilities. They do not realize that to bring anything into existence does not trouble God in any way, and does not place any burden whatsoever on His power. It is sufficient for Him to decide to bring something into existence for that thing to exist.

Human beings are also oblivious of God's purpose behind resurrection. The fact is that nothing reaches its fullness in this life. People differ on truth and falsehood, right and error, good and evil, etc. Their differences and disputes cannot be settled or reach the right conclusion in this life on earth. It is a matter of God's will that some of them live long, and that they are not held to account for their deeds during this life. Thus, reward and punishment are administered in the hereafter when everything reaches its fullness.

The *sūrah* replies to the unbelievers' assertion that the dead will not be resurrected. It dispels people's doubts with an emphatic assertion: *"Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself"* (Verse 38) When God makes a promise, then that promise is fulfilled without fail. *"Even though most people do not know it."* (Verse 38) People are rarely aware of the true nature of a promise made by God.

The whole thing has a definite purpose: *"He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars."* (Verse 39) They lie when they allege that their methods are based on true guidance, when they accuse God's messengers of lying, and when they deny the life to come and entertain concepts and beliefs that are false and lack basis. Besides, resurrection is so easy: *"Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, 'Be' – and it is."* (Verse 40)

Resurrection is one such easy thing. It will take place once God wills it to.

In contrast to those who persist in denying the truth, the *sūrah* provides a glimpse of the true believers who are prepared to abandon their homes and migrate in order to lend support to God's cause. Their only motivation is their faith in God and in the hereafter.

As for those who forsake their homes for the sake of God after having suffered injustice, We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life; yet better still is their reward in the life to come, if they but knew it. [Such reward is granted to] those who, having been patient in adversity, place their trust in their Lord. (Verses 41-42)

These are the people who migrate, leaving their homes, abandoning all property and belongings, sacrificing an easy life with their own peoples and communities. They seek only God's reward. When they experience tyranny and injustice, they leave their homeland in order to live a life of obedience to God. Hence, God promises them in return for the loss of their homes something that they will like: "*We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life.*" (Verse 41) They will be well compensated for their loss: "*yet better still is their reward in the life to come,*" but people are rarely aware of the fact. Such people have important qualities which deserve God's reward. Hence when they persevere in the face of hardship, and they are '*patient in adversity,*' their reward is assured. This is because they "*place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 42) They associate no partner with Him in belief, reliance and trust.

The *sūrah* reiterates the task of God's messengers. This comes in the context of highlighting the mission of the last Messenger and the revelations bestowed on him from on high. This forms a prelude to warnings threatening the unbelievers with severe punishment.

The messengers We sent before you were but men whom We inspired. So, if you have not realized this, ask those who are endowed with knowledge. [We sent such messengers] with clear proofs and divine books, and We have now bestowed on you the reminder so that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them, and that they may take thought. (Verses 43-44)

Those messengers We sent in former times were men too. We did not send angels or any other type of creation. They were men chosen for a task: "*whom We inspired,*" just like We inspire you. Their task, like yours, was simply to deliver their message. "*So... ask those who are endowed with knowledge*", i.e. the people and nations to whom messengers were sent in earlier times. Ask them, "*if you have not realized this [fact]*", to make sure whether those messengers were men or angels or belonged to some other type of creation. We certainly sent human messengers "*with clear proofs*", and We

gave divine books, and, “We have now bestowed on you the reminder that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them.” (Verse 44) This applies to those who received earlier revelations but who then differed among themselves concerning the messages contained in their divine books. The Qur’ān provides a clear judgement in their disputes. This also applies to the Prophet’s contemporaries, the first community to be addressed by the Qur’ān. The Prophet was there to explain it to them and to provide practical guidance on how it should be implemented in their lives. “And that they may take thought,” on the signs God has placed in the universe confirming the message of truth, and reflect on the Qur’ānic revelations. Indeed the Qur’ān always calls on people to reflect and use their reason.

Universal Submission to God’s Power

The present passage started with a reference to those who plot and scheme. It now concludes with two highly charged emotional touches. The first warns that against God’s scheme no one is safe at any time of the night or day. The other invites people to join the whole universe in extolling God’s praises and worshipping Him. Only man can refuse to submit to God, while everything around him glorifies and praises God:

Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive? – Or that He will not suddenly take them to task in the midst of their comings and goings; for they can never frustrate His design? – Or that He will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive? Surely your Lord is Most Compassionate, Most merciful. Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? For, before God prostrates itself every living thing in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels. They do not behave in arrogant defiance. They fear their Lord, who is high above them, and do as they are bidden. (Verses 45-50)

It is indeed most amazing that human beings see how God’s hand is working yet they take no heed. Those of them who scheme continue their plotting, and those who thus far have been safe continue to feel secure against a strike that will overwhelm them just as happened to other people before them. They entertain no fear that God may inflict punishment on them at any moment, whether they are asleep or awake, mindful or oblivious of what is going on around them. The *sūrah* warns them of the impending danger which they may ignore at their peril: “Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive?” (Verse 45) Or do they feel secure that God will not smite them at any time while they travel about on business or pleasure.

"They can never frustrate His design." (Verse 46) They are not immune from His punishment wherever they happen to be. Or do they feel safe against a strike which "will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive?" (Verse 47) Their expectation of danger and alertness to it will not frustrate God's will. He is just as able to seize them when they fully expect danger as He is able to take them unawares. The fact remains that God "is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful." (Verse 47)

The question has to be asked again: Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure against God's punishment? They are certainly totally oblivious to what is going on around them whereby the whole universe, with all its laws and phenomena, delivers a message of submission to God and acceptance of His will: *"Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? For, before God prostrates itself every living thing in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels. They do not behave in arrogant defiance. They fear their Lord, who is high above them, and do as they are bidden."* (Verses 48-50)

The image drawn here is one of shadows extending and retreating, moving and standing still. It is highly inspiring, provided that we open our hearts, alert our senses and respond to what goes on in the universe around us. The Qur'an expresses the notion of submission to God's laws by prostration. This is indeed the most expressive aspect of submission. The *sūrah* thus alerts us to the gentle movement of shades, for it profoundly influences our feelings. It depicts all creatures, 'in complete submission'. It also adds the angels to this universal grouping. This gives us a wonderful image of living creatures, shadows, inanimate objects and angels in a position of full submission to God. It depicts their complete devotion and sincere worship. None is too proud to refuse to worship Him or to disobey His command. Only a group of arrogant human beings jarr the tune in this remarkable orchestration.

Thus this passage, having started with a reference to arrogant unbelievers, concludes with isolating such arrogant humans in a scene that comprises the whole universe.

The One and Only God

God has said: 'Do not take [for worship] two deities, for He is but one God. Hence, of Me alone stand in awe.' (51)

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth, and to Him alone submission is always due. Will you then fear anyone but God? (52)

Whatever blessing you have comes from God; and whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. (53)

Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord, (54)

[as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (55)

They assign a share of the sustenance We provide for them to what they know nothing of. By God, you shall certainly be called to account for your

﴿ وَقَالَ اللَّهُ لَا تَتَّخِذُوا إِلَهَيْنِ اثْنَيْنِ
إِنَّمَا هُوَ إِلَهُهُ وَاحِدٌ فَإِيتِي فَآرْهَبُونَ ﴾

﴿ وَ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَهُ الدِّينُ
وَاصِبًا أَفَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ تَتَّقُونَ ﴾

﴿ وَمَا بِكُمْ مِّنْ نِّعْمَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ إِذَا
مَسَّكُمُ الضُّرُّ فَإِلَيْهِ تَجْتَرُونَ ﴾

﴿ ثُمَّ إِذَا كُشِفَ الضُّرُّ عَنْكُمْ إِذَا فَرِيقٌ مِّنْكُمْ
بِرَبِّهِمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴾

﴿ لِيَكْفُرُوا بِمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ فَتَمَتَّعُوا فَسَوْفَ
تَعْلَمُونَ ﴾

﴿ وَتَجْعَلُونَ لِمَا لَا يَعْلَمُونَ نَصِيبًا مِّمَّا
رَزَقْنَاهُمْ تَاللَّهِ لَتُسْأَلُنَّ عَمَّا كُنتُمْ تَفْتَرُونَ ﴾

false inventions. (56)

And they assign daughters to God, who is limitless in His glory, whereas for themselves they choose what they desire. (57)

And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (58)

He tries to avoid all people on account of the [allegedly] bad news he has received, [debating within himself] shall he keep the child despite the shame he feels, or shall he bury it in the dust? Evil indeed is their judgement. (59)

To those who do not believe in the life to come applies the attribute of evil, whereas to God applies the attribute of all that is most sublime, for He is Almighty, Wise. (60)

If God were to take people to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single living creature on the face [of the earth]. But He gives them respite for a set term. When their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can

وَيَجْعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ الْبَنَاتِ سُبْحَانَهُ وَلَهُمْ مَا

يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ

مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِنْ سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ ۚ

أَيْمَسِّكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ ۖ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي

الْطُّرَابِ ۗ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ مَثَلُ السَّوِّءِ ۗ

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ ۗ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

﴿٦٠﴾

وَلَوْ يُؤَاخِذُ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ بِظُلْمِهِمْ مَا تَرَكَ

عَلَيْهَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ وَلَٰكِنْ يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ

مُتَسَيِّئٍ ۗ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجْلُهُمْ لَا

يَسْتَفْخِرُونَ سَاعَةً ۗ وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ

﴿٦١﴾

they hasten it. (61)

They attribute to God what they hate [for themselves]. And their tongues assert the lie that theirs is the supreme reward. Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them, and they will be hastened on into it. (62)

By God, We have sent messengers to various communities before your time, but Satan made their foul deeds seem fair to them. He is also their patron today. A grievous suffering awaits them. (63)

We have bestowed upon you from on high this book for no other reason than that you may make clear to them those issues on which they differ, and [to serve] as guidance and grace to people who believe. (64)

And God sends down water from the skies, giving life to the earth after it has been lifeless. In this there is surely a sign for people who listen. (65)

In cattle too you have a worthy lesson: We give

وَيَجْعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ مَا يَكْرَهُونَ وَتَصِفُ
أَلْسِنَتُهُمُ الْكَذِبَ أَنَّ لَهُمُ الْحُسْنَىٰ لَا
جَرَمَ أَنَّ لَهُمُ النَّارَ وَأَنَّهُمْ مُّفْرَطُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

تَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمَمٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَزَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَعْمَالَهُمْ فَهُوَ وَلِيُّهُمُ الْيَوْمَ
وَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٣﴾

وَمَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا لِتُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ
الَّذِي اٰخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ ۚ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

وَاللَّهُ أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ
الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً
لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَنْعَامِ لَعِبْرَةً ۚ نُسْقِيكُمْ مِمَّا فِي
بُطُونِهِمْ ۖ مِنْ بَيْنِ فَرْثٍ وَدَمٍ لَّبَنًا خَالِصًا
سَائِغًا لِلشَّارِبِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

you to drink of that [fluid] which is in their bellies, produced alongside excretions and blood: pure milk, pleasant to those who drink it. (66)

And from the fruit of the date- palms and vines you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason. (67)

Your Lord has inspired the bee: 'Take up homes in the mountains, in the trees and in structures people may put up. (68)

Then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths your Lord has made smooth for you.' There issues from its inside a drink of different colours, a cure for people. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (69)

It is God who has created you; and in time will cause you to die. Some of you are left to the most feeble stage of life, so that they no longer know what they had previously known. God is indeed All-Knowing, infinite in His power. (70)

To some of you God has given more than He has given to others. Those who are so favoured are

وَمِنْ ثَمَرَاتِ النَّخِيلِ وَالْأَعْنَابِ

تَتَّخِذُونَ مِنْهُ سَكَرًا وَرِزْقًا حَسَنًا إِنَّ

فِي ذَلِكَ لَأَيَّةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

وَأَوْحَىٰ رَبُّكَ إِلَى النَّحْلِ أَنْ اتَّخِذِي مِنَ

الْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا وَمِنَ الشَّجَرِ وَمِمَّا يَعْرِشُونَ

﴿٦٧﴾

ثُمَّ كُلِي مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ فَاسْلُكِي سُبُلَ

رَبِّكَ ذُلًّا ۚ تَخْرُجُ مِنْ بُطُونِهَا شَرَابٌ

مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهُ فِيهِ شِفَاءٌ لِلنَّاسِ إِنَّ فِي

ذَلِكَ لَأَيَّةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ يَتَوَفَّاكُمْ ۚ وَمِنْكُمْ مَن

يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ أَرْدَلِ الْعُمَرِ لِكَيْ لَا يَعْلَمَ بَعْدَ

عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦٩﴾

وَاللَّهُ فَضَّلَ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ فِي الرِّزْقِ ۚ

فَمَا الَّذِينَ فَضَّلُوا بِرَادِي رِزْقِهِمْ عَلَىٰ

مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَهُمْ فِيهِ سَوَاءٌ ۚ

أَفَبِنِعْمَةِ اللَّهِ تَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

unwilling to share their provisions with those whom their right hands possess, so that they are all equal in this respect. Will they, then, deny God's favours? (71)

And God has given you spouses of your own kind and has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren, and provided you with wholesome sustenance. Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings? (72)

Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power. (73)

Do not, then, compare anything with God. Indeed, God knows all, whereas you have no knowledge. (74)

God makes this comparison' between a man enslaved, unable to do anything of his own accord, and a [free] man on whom We have bestowed goodly favours, and he gives of it both in private and in public. Can these two be equal? All praise is to God alone, but most people have no

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا
وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ
وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ
أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَتِ اللَّهِ هُمْ
يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ
رِزْقًا مِنَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ شَيْئًا وَلَا
يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

فَلَا تَضْرِبُوا لِلَّهِ الْأَمْثَالَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ
وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

❖ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا عَبْدًا مَمْلُوكًا لَا يَقْدِرُ
عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَمَنْ رَزَقْنَاهُ مِنَّْا رِزْقًا حَسَنًا
فَهُوَ يُنْفِقُ مِنْهُ سِرًّا وَجَهْرًا هَلْ
يَسْتَوُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا

knowledge. (75)

And God makes another comparison between two men, one of whom is dumb and can do nothing of his own accord. He is a sheer burden to his master: wherever he sends him, he accomplishes no good. Can he be considered equal to one who enjoins justice and follows a straight path? (76)

يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا رَجُلَيْنِ أَحَدُهُمَا
أَبْكَمُ لَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ كَلٌّ
عَلَى مَوْلَاهُ أَيْنَمَا يُوجِّهُهُ لَا يَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ
هَلْ يَسْتَوِي هُوَ وَمَنْ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَهُوَ

عَلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

Overview

This third passage of the *sūrah* is again devoted to the major issue of God's oneness. The first three verses make it clear that God is one without partners, and that to Him alone the entire universe and all that it contains belong, and that He is the One who bestows all bounty and grace. The passage concludes with two comparisons between a master who owns and provides, and a slave who is able to do nothing of his own accord. Can these two be equal? How is it, then, that God, the Master of all and the Provider for all, is assigned equals who have no power and provide nothing? How can it be said that He is God and they are gods like Him?

In this passage a picture is painted of people suffering affliction and turning to God alone for help. When their affliction is removed, they associate partners with Him.

The passage also portrays some aspects of the superstitious nature of pagan beliefs, in that their followers attribute some of what God has provided for them to their false deities, while they themselves do not share with their slaves anything they own. They attribute females to God as His daughters while they hate to have daughters born to themselves: "When any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom." (Verse 58) Yet at the same time they boast that they will have all the good things, and that they will be rewarded handsomely for their deeds. All these misconceptions they have inherited from earlier communities that held idolatrous beliefs.

In this passage the *sūrah* portrays a few examples of God's creation, showing how only God is able to produce such things and sustain them. In itself, this constitutes a great evidence of God's control of the whole universe. It is God who sends down water from the skies to bring life to the earth after it has been lifeless. It is He who produces pure milk from the bellies of cattle, so that people may have a wholesome drink. He it is who brings out the fruits of the date-palms and the vines, from which people make their intoxicating drinks and derive good sustenance. Through His inspiration, the bees take up their homes in hills, trees and in wooden trellises people put up, and then produce honey which provides a cure for many ailments. It is God also who creates people and then gathers them in death. Some of them He leaves to old age, when they forget what they had learnt in life and become naïve. He it is who provides for some in abundance while He gives less to others. And it is God who gives them spouses and enables them to have children and grandchildren. Yet despite all these favours, people take to worshipping beside God things that can give them no sustenance, and which are themselves powerless, claiming that such things are equal to Him. All such fabrications are indeed false.

All these aspects are within people's own environment and even within themselves. They are directed to them so that they will appreciate God's power and its work in the world around them. The conclusion depicts the two clear examples we have already referred to. Thus, the whole passage addresses the human mind and conscience, striking powerful notes that are certain to influence any human being.

All Grace Comes from God

God has said: Do not take [for worship] two deities, for He is but one God. Hence, of Me alone stand in awe. His is all that is in the heavens and the earth, and to Him alone submission is always due. Will you then fear anyone but God? Whatever blessing you have comes from God; and whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord, [as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (Verses 51-55)

God has commanded that people do not worship two deities, for there is only one God, without partner or equal. The style here relies on the repetition of numbers for emphasis. This is not easily reflected in translation. Arabic, the language of the original text of the Qur'ān, admits a repetition of the number two to the dual form of deity in the first sentence. If we were to give a literal translation, the sentence would read: "Do not take for worship two deities in doubles." Again repetition is employed in the next sentence to emphasize God's oneness. This is re-emphasized in the use of

'alone' in the last part of the verse: "*Of Me alone stand in awe.*" There is a sense of reiterated warning in this verse. This added emphasis reminds us that the issue in question is that of faith. God's oneness must be a concept of complete and perfect clarity in the mind of every believer.

God, the only deity, is also the One to whom everything belongs: *“His is all that is in the heavens and the earth.”* (Verse 52) All true faith also belongs to Him: *“To Him alone submission is always due.”* (Verse 52) It is a continuous process, ever since there was a faith and people to believe in it. Such belief means submission, and no faith is true unless it is based on submission to Him. He alone gives blessings and bestows grace: *“Whatever blessing you have comes from God.”* (Verse 53) It is also ingrained in human nature that whenever people experience hardship and difficulty, they turn to God, seeking His help. At such times, there is no room for the superstitions of idolatry or pagan beliefs. To Him alone people turn with their appeals to remove their hardship: *“Whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help.”* (Verse 53)

Thus we see that Godhead and dominion in the universe belong to God alone. All submission is addressed to Him, and all grace is bestowed by Him, and to Him alone everyone should turn in all situations. Human nature is a witness to this. When it experiences affliction, harm or hardship, it returns to its purity and turns to God alone. Yet despite all this, no sooner does God save people from some type of harm that could destroy them than some of them associate partners with Him. This leads them to disbelief in God’s guidance and to denying His grace. Such people should think clearly about what will happen to them after their brief enjoyment: *“Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth].”* (Verse 55)

The *sūrah* portrays here a picture of a certain type of human being which is found across every generation. When harm and affliction strikes, people’s hearts turn to God for help. By nature, they know that He is the only One to protect them when no one else can. In times of comfort and pleasure, they are preoccupied with enjoyment, weakening their relationship with God: *“whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord.”* (Verses 53-54) They deviate from His path, following diverse ways which may lead to outright idolatry, or may take the form of ascribing divinity to values and situations, even though they may not describe these as deities.

Indeed deviation may be even more extreme so as to prevent people from turning to God in times of hardship. Instead they may turn to some other creature, appealing to them to save their skins. They may do so under the pretext that such creatures enjoy a special position with God, or they may have some other excuse. For example, when people appeal to ‘saints’ to cure their illnesses or remove their afflictions. Such people are thus even more deviant than the pagan Arabs.

Common Forms of Paganism

“They assign a share of the sustenance We provide for them to what they know nothing of” (Verse 56) They thus prohibit themselves some types of cattle, not allowing themselves to ride these or to eat their meat, or they allow these animals’ use to men, forbidding them to women, as we saw in *Sūrah 6, Cattle*. They do this in the name of their alleged deities of which they know nothing. They are simply false inventions which they inherited from earlier ignorant generations. It is God who gave them this bounty, the cattle which they ride and use. Yet they give a portion of these to things which are in reality unknown to them. Their false deities did not give them the cattle. The cattle were created by God who has made them available to them. He calls on people to believe in His oneness, but they stubbornly associate partners with Him. The whole situation is full of irony which no human being of sound mind can accept.

Despite the fact that the faith based on God’s oneness is well established, some people continue to assign a portion of the sustenance God provides for them to beings or things similar to the idols of ignorant days. Some, for example, set loose a calf, which they call, ‘Sayyid Al-Badawī’s calf.’ The calf is thus sanctified. It is allowed to roam freely, eat whatever it will, with no one benefiting from it in any way, until it is slaughtered in honour of Sayyid Al-Badawī, a mystic buried in Ṭanṭa, an Egyptian city. Others pledge sacrificial animals to dead ‘saints’ in the same way as the ignorant Arabs used to do when they assigned portions of God’s provisions to their idols. Such sacrificial animals are forbidden to be pledged in this way, forbidden to be eaten when they are slaughtered, even though God’s name is mentioned at their slaughter, because they have been sanctified to things other than God.

“By God, you shall certainly be called to account for your false inventions.” (Verse 56) This is stated emphatically, with an oath. It is an invention that destroys the very foundation of faith, because it flies in the face of the concept of God’s oneness.

And they assign daughters to God, who is limitless in His glory, whereas for themselves they choose what they desire. And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. He tries to avoid all people on account of the [allegedly] bad news he has received, [debating within himself] shall he keep the child despite the shame he feels, or shall he bury it in the dust? Evil indeed is their judgement. (Verses 57-59)

Deviation from the right faith is not limited to beliefs. Indeed when people deviate from the essence of faith, their deviation spreads into their social life and its traditions. Whether faith is given prominence or kept in the background in any society, it continues to be the prime influence on living conditions. The Arabs of the days of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, used to claim that God had daughters, i.e. the angels, yet they themselves hated that daughters should be born to them. Thus daughters

can be assigned to God, while they give themselves the sons they love.

Such deviation from the right faith led them to bury their daughters alive, or to ill-treat or humiliate them. They feared that girls would bring them shame, if they did not guard their honour and chastity, or bring them poverty. For girls neither fought in war nor earned a living. On the contrary, they could be taken captive in the never ending tribal skirmishes, and this brought shame to the whole tribe. Alternatively, girls needed to be fed, placing a burden on family resources. The true faith is free of all such misconceptions. All sustenance is provided by God for everyone. None will take anything more than what is assigned to him or her. Moreover, human beings, male and female, are given by God a position of honour. In Islam, a woman is a human being, equal to man in status. She is the other half of the human entity, as Islam states.

The *sūrah* paints a grim picture of the practices of ignorance: *“And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.”* (Verse 58) He is sad and angry, trying to suppress his fury, as though the birth of a girl is a disaster when she is a gift from God, just like any boy. Man cannot fashion the foetus in the womb so as to determine the sex of his child. He cannot breathe life into it, or make the fertilized egg a human being. It is sufficient to reflect how life grows, by God’s will, from a sperm into a human being, to make the birth of a child, of either sex, a joyous occasion. It is a miracle of creation despite the fact that it takes place all the time. Why should a man who is given a daughter feel sad and gloomy when he himself has no say in any stage of the process of creation. It is all done by God, while he himself is only the means to accomplish God’s will.

It is divine wisdom that has determined that life is started with a couple: a male and a female. This means that the woman is as essential to the continuation of life as the man, indeed more so, because it is inside the woman that the first stage of life is completed. How can a man thus feel sad when given the news of the birth of a daughter? Why does he hide away, feeling ashamed, when life cannot continue and prosper without both spouses? This is obviously then a case of deviant social concepts and traditions. Hence the *sūrah* comments: *“Evil indeed is their judgement.”* (Verse 59)

Here we have a fair example of the role of the Islamic faith in establishing social norms and conditions on the right basis. We also appreciate the honourable view of women, and indeed of all mankind, that Islam propagates. For it was not only women but the whole of humanity who was treated unjustly in Arab pagan society. A woman is a human being, and humiliating or insulting her is an insult to mankind whom God has honoured. To bury a girl alive, like the Arabs did, is to kill half of mankind. It is contrary to the whole purpose of creation which necessitates that every living thing, not only human beings, comes from a male and a female.

Whenever human society deviates from the true faith, ignorant concepts begin to raise their ugly faces. In fact we see the same concepts that prevailed then creeping up again today. Many social classes do not welcome the birth of a girl. It is often the case that a woman is not treated on an equal footing with a man. She is not offered the same care or respect. This is an aspect of paganism the seeds of which were planted with the deviation from the true Islamic faith that has affected many communities.

It is amazing that some people criticize, even condemn, Islam and its laws, particularly with regard to women, on the basis of what they see in societies that have deviated from Islam. They do not trouble themselves to look at the relevant Islamic concepts and the fundamental changes they have produced in social conditions as well as in people's minds and feelings. What they should realize when they look at the true Islamic viewpoint with regard to women is that this viewpoint has not been the product of any practical necessity, human theory or social or economic need. It is a viewpoint that is inherent in the Islamic faith which was revealed by God who has given mankind a position of honour. This honour applies both to man and woman. Both have equal status and both are honoured by God.

If God Were to Inflict Punishment Now

By nature, Islam differs with all other creeds and societies in concepts and outlook. The difference between the two is as wide as the difference between the unbelievers' characteristics and God's own attributes. For He is far above all comparison: *"To those who do not believe in the life to come applies the attribute of evil, whereas to God applies the attribute of all that is most sublime, for He is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 60)

At this point the question of associating partners with God is closely related to that of denying the life to come. Both stem from the same sort of deviation. They are interlinked in people's minds, leading to clear influences on the individual, human society and life altogether. Whilst the unbelievers are evil, in thought, behaviour, beliefs, concepts, and practices, God has the most supreme attributes. He cannot be compared with anyone, least of all those unbelievers. He is mighty, setting everything in its right place, wise, acting always on the basis of infinite wisdom.

He certainly can punish people for their wrongdoing. Had He chosen to do so, He would have brought everything down over their heads. But in His wisdom, He has decided to give them respite, for a definite term:

If God were to take people to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single living creature on the face [of the earth]. But He gives them respite for a set term. When their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can they hasten it.

(Verse 61)

God has created man and bestowed on him grace and blessings of all types. Man is the only creature on earth that spreads corruption, commits injustice, denies his Creator, allows tyranny within his own social set up and inflicts harm on other species. Yet despite all this, God is merciful to him, gives him one chance after another, and never abandons him altogether. His wisdom goes hand in hand with His might; His grace with His justice. But human beings are short-sighted, deluded by the respite given them. They do not feel how graceful God is to them until His justice brings them to account at the end of the term He has appointed for them. But *“when their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can they hasten it.”* (Verse 61)

What is even more amazing is that those who associate partners with God assign to Him what they dislike for themselves, whether daughters or other things. They then falsely claim that they will only have what is good in return for what they do and allege. The Qur’ān states what they shall have, and this differs widely from what they claim: *“They attribute to God what they hate [for themselves]. And their tongues assert the lie that theirs is the supreme reward. Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them, and they will be hastened on into it.”* (Verse 62)

The translation of this verse here is the nearest one possible. But the original Arabic expression, *taṣīfu alsinatuhum al-kadhib*, describes their tongues as though they are the lie itself, or a reflection of it giving its exact likeness, as we say of a woman walking gracefully, ‘she is grace itself.’ Literally, the verse states, ‘their lie of a tongue asserts.’ They have been lying for such a very long time that they themselves represent a symbol indicating falsehood.

Their claim that they shall have the supreme reward when they assign to God what they hate for themselves is the lie their tongues reflect. Before the verse is completed however, the Qur’ān places them face to face with the truth, namely, that their reward is undoubtedly the Fire. They deserve this because of what they have done in their lives: *“Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them.”* (Verse 62) They will be sent directly to it: *“And they will be hastened on into it.”* (Verse 62)

Those Arabs were not the first community to deviate from the path of the truth, nor were they the first to attribute to God what they did not accept for themselves. Other communities before them traversed the same deviation and false claims against God. Satan made their concepts and actions seem fair to them and they accepted his bidding. Thus he became their master. God, then, sent His Messenger to save them, show them the truth and judge between them in their disputes over their faith. He provided guidance to the believers and delivered a message that is an act of grace bestowed on them:

By God, We have sent messengers to various communities before your time, but Satan made their foul deeds seem fair to them. He is also their patron today. A grievous suffering awaits them. We have bestowed upon you from on high this book for no other reason than that you may make clear to them those issues on which they differ, and [to serve] as guidance and grace to people who believe. (Verses 63-64)

This means that the purpose of the last message is to judge in the disputes that arise between the different peoples who claim to believe in previous messages. The original message is based on God's oneness. Yet doubts and confusion have crept into this central concept. All types of distortion of its clarity in any way or form are absolutely false. The Qur'an clarifies all this and serves as guidance and grace to those whose hearts are willing to receive it.

Clear Signs to Reflect Upon

At this point, the *sūrah* reviews some of the aspects pointing to God's oneness in what God has created in the universe, and in the qualities and characteristics He has given man, as well as in the aspects of grace He has bestowed on him which none but God could have provided. In the verse we have just discussed He mentions His book, the Qur'an, which is the best aspect of grace God has bestowed on man as it imparts life to souls. Now, this is followed by mentioning the water God sends down from the sky to give physical life to man and other creatures. *"And God sends down water from the skies, giving life to the earth after it has been lifeless. In this there is surely a sign for people who listen."* (Verse 65) Water is indeed the source of life for every living thing. This verse makes it the source of life for the whole earth, implying that this includes all that exists on earth. The One who transforms death into life is indeed the One who deserves to be God and to whom worship is addressed: *"In this there is surely a sign for people who listen."* They should indeed reflect on what they hear and listen to its message. In fact the Qur'an repeatedly mentions the signs pointing to God and His authority, and how He brings life into what is dead. It draws people's attentions to this, because it provides irrefutable proof for anyone who reflects on what he sees and hears.

Another sign is derived from the creation of cattle and their lives: *"In cattle too you have a worthy lesson: We give you to drink of that [fluid] which is in their bellies, produced alongside excretions and blood: pure milk, pleasant to those who drink it."* (Verse 66) How is milk produced through the udders of cattle? It is made of what remains in the bellies of cattle after they have digested their food and the absorption of the excretions in the intestines to transform it into blood. The blood is then circulated to every cell in the body, but when it reaches the milk glands or the udder, it becomes milk through a fine process set by God. This is indeed an aspect of His fine and inimitable creation.

Indeed the whole process that transforms the food intake into blood, and gives every cell what it needs of the blood's ingredients is a highly remarkable process. Yet this goes on all the time inside the body, just like the metabolism process. At every moment complicated processes of maintenance and destruction take place in this unique organism, which continue until the spirit departs from the body. No fair minded human being could contemplate such remarkable processes without feeling that every atom in his being glorifies the Creator. Even the most complex man-made apparatus fades into insignificance when compared to the human constitution or to any one of its systems or even its countless cells.

Indeed beyond the general description of the metabolism processes we find details that fill us with wonder. Within this process, the function of a single cell in the human body is remarkably wonderful.

All this has remained a secret until recently. This scientific fact mentioned in this *sūrah* about how milk is produced alongside excretions and blood was unknown to mankind. Indeed no contemporary of the Prophet could have ever imagined it, let alone described it so accurately. No self respecting human being could ever argue about this. The mention of one such fact is sufficient to prove that the Qur'ān is God's revelation. All mankind was at the time totally ignorant of such facts.

Such pure scientific facts apart, the Qur'ān carries within its own unique characteristics irrefutable proofs of its being revealed by God, provided we appreciate such characteristics as they truly are. However, one scientific fact like this, expressed with such accuracy, refutes all arguments advanced by those who are hardened in their rejection of the truth.

"And from the fruit of the date palms and vines you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason." (Verse 67) Such fruits come out of the life which is produced through the rain pouring down from the sky. From them people make wine and other intoxicating drinks, which were not forbidden at the time this *sūrah* was revealed. People also derive from such fruits wholesome food. The way this verse is phrased implies that intoxicants are unwholesome, which serves as a preliminary indication of their forthcoming prohibition. The verse describes the situation as it was in practice. It does not imply that wines and intoxicants were permissible. On the contrary it hints that they will soon be forbidden. *"Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason."* (Verse 67) People with reason are sure to realize that the provider of all these fruits and other provisions is God, the One who deserves to be worshipped.

The Bee and Its Honey

Your Lord has inspired the bee: 'Take up homes in the mountains, in the trees and in structures people may put up. Then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths your Lord has made smooth for you. 'There issues from its inside a drink of different colours, a cure for people. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (Verses 68-69)

The bees work on the prompting of their nature which God has given them. It is an inspiration that they follow. The work the bees do is so detailed, accurate and well planned that the rational mind finds it difficult to contemplate. This applies to the building of the hives, the division of the work between the bees, and to their production of pure honey.

The bees take up home, according to their nature, in hills and mountains, in trees and in structures people put up for their vines or other plants. God has smoothed things for the bees through what He has planted in their nature and through the nature of the world around them. The verse states that honey provides a cure for people. Although this has already been fully explained by some medical experts, it is also true for the simple reason that the Qur'an states it. This is what every Muslim should believe, based on the complete truth embodied in the Qur'an. This is what the Prophet expressed very clearly.

Al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī that "a man came to the Prophet telling him that his brother was suffering from diarrhoea. The Prophet told him: 'Give him a drink of honey.' The man did, then he came again and said: 'Messenger of God, I have given him honey, but his complaint has worsened.' The Prophet said to him: 'Go and give him a drink of honey.' The man went away again before returning the third time to say: 'Messenger of God, that has only aggravated his condition.' The Prophet said emphatically: 'God tells the truth and your brother's belly tells lies. Go and give him a drink of honey.' The man did just that and his brother took the drink and was cured." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

This report is so significant because it demonstrates the Prophet's complete trust in the face of the patient's seeming deterioration when given honey to drink. But the situation ended with a clear confirmation of the truth stated in the Qur'an. A Muslim should always have such complete trust in the truth of what the Qur'an says, even though reality may appear to contradict it at times. In other words, what is stated in the Qur'an is more truthful than apparent reality, which could easily change, giving way to a new reality that will confirm the Qur'anic statement.

We need to reflect a little on the fine harmony in portraying these blessings: the sending down of water from the sky, the production of milk alongside excretions and blood, the derivation of intoxicants and wholesome food from the fruits of date and

vine trees, and the production of honey by bees. All are drinks produced from materials that possess totally different shapes and forms. Since the context is that of drinks, the only aspect of blessings related to cattle mentioned here is their milk. This adds to the harmony of the vocabulary employed in this panoramic scene. In the next passage we will see how the *sūrah* mentions the hide, wool and hair of cattle, because the context then is one of dwellings, homes and places of refuge. Hence the aspects of cattle mentioned there are those that fit that scene. This is an essential element of the artistic harmony evident in the Qur'ān.

The Life Cycle

The *sūrah* moves on to touch on something much closer to human beings, because it relates to their very being, their life on earth, provisions, spouses, children and grandchildren. They are more likely to feel an affinity with this and to respond positively to the message it provides:

It is God who has created you; and in time will cause you to die. Some of you are left to the most feeble stage of life, so that they no longer know what they had previously known. God is indeed All-Knowing, infinite in His power. To some of you God has given more than He has given to others. Those who are so favoured are unwilling to share their provisions with those whom their right hands possess, so that they are all equal in this respect. Will they, then, deny God's favours? And God has given you spouses of your own kind and has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren, and provided you with wholesome sustenance. Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings? Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power. (Verses 70-73)

The first aspect points to life and death which affect every human being. It is a simple fact that people love life, and when they reflect on this it may well bring about an appreciation of God's power and grace. Similarly, fear for one's life may engender a sense of caution and reliance on God who gives life. Furthermore, the image of the elderly, being feeble, forgetting what they have learned and languishing in a naïve state similar to that of a helpless child may make people reflect on the various stages of life and adopt a more humble attitude. They will begin to look at man's strength, knowledge and ability in a different light. The final comment of the verse is, "God is indeed All-Knowing, infinite in His power." (Verse 70) This portrays the fact that true, absolute and eternal knowledge belongs to God alone, as does the irresistible power which is never weakened by time. All knowledge and power people possess are imperfect, partial and Limited by time.

The second aspect demonstrates what God has provided for people. In this respect

people clearly differ with some having more than others. Such differences have their reason in accordance with God's law. Nothing takes place haphazardly. A man may have intelligence, knowledge and common sense, but his talent in earning a living remains limited. This does not detract from the fact that he may be talented in other areas. Another person may appear dull, lacking in knowledge or naïve, but he has an eye for what brings profit and how to make the best of any financial investment. At a casual glance, it seems that affluence has nothing to do with ability, but the fact is that it is the fruit of a special type of ability. Moreover, it may be that God gives someone in abundance to test that person, and He may test another by giving him limited provisions. Whichever test a person has to go through is determined by God's wisdom.

That people have different means is a well-known phenomenon. This is more pronounced in communities where there is much inequity. The *sūrah* refers to this phenomenon which was clearly apparent in Arabian society, and makes use of it in order to dispel those myths that had their roots in the pagan beliefs of the Arabs. These have been referred to in an earlier *sūrah*. One such myth was their practice of allocating to false gods a share of the provisions of agricultural produce God gave them. Here the *sūrah* identifies that they do not give such provisions to their slaves to establish equity. How come, then, they give a portion of what God has granted them to false gods? *"Will they, then, deny God's favours?"* (Verse 71) Instead of expressing their thanks and gratitude to God who has given them these provisions, they associate partners with Him.

The third aspect looks at people, their spouses, children and grandchildren. It begins with a statement of the relationship between the two sexes: *"God has given you spouses of your own kind."* (Verse 72) All belong to the same human race, and the female is not an inferior species to be ashamed of when a daughter is born. He also *"has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren."* (Verse 72) Humans are mortal, and so they feel that their lives continue through their children and grandchildren. Touching upon this aspect is very significant. To this blessing is added the provision of sustenance, because of the similarity between the two types of blessing: *"And [He] provided you with wholesome sustenance."* (Verse 72) The comment at the end of the verse takes the form of a rhetorical question: *"Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings?"* (Verse 72) Do they associate false partners with Him, in flagrant disobedience of His orders, when He has given them all these blessings? He is the Lord of all the world and His Lordship has practical manifestations in their lives at all times.

"Will they, then, believe in falsehood?" (Verse 72) Everything other than God in respect -Co beliefs is false. Thus, all their deities and myths are false, having no truth in them. They *"deny God's grace and blessings,"* when these are true, having practical

effects in their own lives.

Incomparable Situations

Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power. (Verse 73)

It is indeed amazing that human nature can become so twisted as to allow the worship of things that can provide people with nothing. They prefer such things to God, the Creator who provides them with all they have and all the blessings they enjoy. Yet they go even further, attributing to them similarities with God. Hence the commandment: “Do not, then, compare anything with God. Indeed, God knows all, whereas you have no knowledge.” (Verse 74) God has no peers, so people must never claim that there is anyone equal or similar to Him.

The *sūrah* then gives two examples of a master who can give and provide and a disabled slave who earns nothing. These examples are given to bring the eternal truth they had overlooked closer to their understanding. That truth is that God has no peers and that they must never equate God with anyone in their worship. Everyone and everything other than God is created by Him, and all are His servants.

God makes this comparison between a man enslaved, unable to do anything of his own accord, and a [free] man on whom We have bestowed goodly favours, and he gives of it both in private and in public. Can these two be equal? All praise is to God alone, but most people have no knowledge. And God makes another comparison between two men, one of whom is dumb and can do nothing of his own accord. He is a sheer burden to his master: wherever he sends him, he accomplishes no good. Can he be considered equal to one who enjoins justice and follows a straight path? (Verses 75-76)

The first example is taken from their own lives. They had slaves who owned nothing and who had no power over anything. They would never put the slave who has no independent will on the same level as his master who enjoys considerable power. How then can they justify their equation of the Master and Owner of all with any of His creation, when they all serve Him?

The second example depicts a dumb, dull and weak person who understands nothing and can do no good, and another who is eloquent, able, encouraging fairness, hard working for every good cause. No reasonable person would equate the two. How is it, then, that dumb idols of stone are equated with God Almighty, who enjoins only what is reasonable and guides to the path of truth?

With these two examples we come to the end of this passage which started with

God's order that people must not worship two deities. It ends with amazement at the attitude of those who attribute Godhead to other deities. God has replaced Joseph's trials with his new position of power, and also with the promise of better things to come in the life to come. All this reward is for faith, righteousness and perseverance in the face of difficulty.

Denying the Undeniable

To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth. The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still. God has power over all things. (77)

وَلِلَّهِ غَيْبُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا أَمْرُ
السَّاعَةِ إِلَّا كَلَمَحِ الْبَصَرِ أَوْ هُوَ أَقْرَبُ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٧٧﴾

God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful. (78)

وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُم مِّن بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا
تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ
وَالْأَبْصَرَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

﴿٧٨﴾

Do they not see the birds and how they are enabled to fly in mid-air? None but God holds them aloft. In this there are signs for people who will believe. (79)

أَلَمْ يَرَوْا إِلَى الطَّيْرِ مُسَخَّرَاتٍ فِي جَوِّ
السَّمَاءِ مَا يُمَسِّكُهُنَّ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي
ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

And God has made your homes as places of rest, and has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use. (80)

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّن بُيُوتِكُمْ سَكَنًا
وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّن جُلُودِ الْأَنْعَامِ بُيُوتًا
تَسْتَخِفُّونَهَا يَوْمَ ظَعْنِكُمْ وَيَوْمَ
إِقَامَتِكُمْ ۚ وَمِنْ أَصْوَابِهَا وَأَوْبَارِهَا
وَأَشْعَارِهَا أَثْنَا وَمَتَعًا إِلَىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٨٠﴾

And God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains, and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence. Thus does He perfect His favours to you, so that you may submit to Him. (81)

But if they turn away [from you, remember that] your only duty is to deliver [your message] clearly. (82)

They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers. (83)

One day We will raise up a witness from every community, but then the unbelievers will not be allowed to make pleas, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (84)

And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite. (85)

And when those who associate partners with God will see their [alleged] partners, they will say: 'Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You.' But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars.' (86)

On that day, they shall proffer submission to God; and all their inventions will have forsaken

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِمَّا خَلَقَ ظِلَالًا
وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الْجِبَالِ أَكْنَانًا وَجَعَلَ
لَكُمْ سَرَابِيلَ تَقِيكُمْ الْحَرَّ وَسَرَابِيلَ
تَقِيكُمْ بَأْسَكُمْ كَذَلِكَ يُتِمُّ نِعْمَتَهُ
عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُسَلِّمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلْغُ الْمُبِينُ
﴿٨٢﴾

يَعْرِفُونَ نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنْكِرُونَهَا
وَأَكْثَرُهُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا ثُمَّ لَا
يُؤَدِّنُ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَلَا هُمْ
يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا الْعَذَابَ فَلَا
يُخَفِّفُ عَنْهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَى الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا شُرَكَاءَهُمْ
قَالُوا رَبَّنَا هَؤُلَاءِ شُرَكَائُنَا الَّذِينَ كُنَّا
نَدْعُوا مِنْ دُونِكَ فَأَلْقَوْا إِلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلَ
إِنَّكُمْ لَكَذِبُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَأَلْقَوْا إِلَى اللَّهِ يَوْمَئِذٍ السَّلْمَ وَضَلَّ
عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

them. (87)

Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought. (88)

One day We will raise up within every nation a witness from among themselves to testify against them. And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]. We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God. (89)

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
زِدْنَاهُمْ عَذَابًا فَوْقَ الْعَذَابِ بِمَا كَانُوا
يُفْسِدُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ
أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَىٰ هَٰؤُلَاءِ
وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تَبَيِّنًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ
وَهَدَىٰ وَرَحْمَةً وَنُذِرِي لِّلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* continues its discussion of the aspects confirming the truth of God's oneness, such as the great variety of creation, the perfection of God's blessings and His absolute knowledge of all things. However, in this passage, prominence is given to the question of resurrection. The Last Hours which is a Qur'ānic expression denoting the gathering and reckoning on the Day of Judgement, is one of the secrets which God keeps to Himself. The passage refers to the different hidden secrets of God's creation in the heavens and the earth, in human beings and across the wide universe. One of these relates to the Last Hour, whose timing is known to God alone. He controls it with ease: "The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still." (Verse 77) Another secret relates to what is created in the wombs of females. It is God alone who lets the foetus come out of the womb, with no knowledge whatsoever of the world it comes into. It is He also who gives human beings the blessings of hearing, seeing and thinking. These are favours which deserve gratitude. The *sūrah* also refers to the birds and how they are given the ability to fly. Needless to say, they are held aloft in mid-air by none other than God.

This is followed by a reference to some material blessings given to mankind. These are relevant to the aforementioned secrets. They include the blessings of abode, rest, shade and shelter in built up homes and temporary dwellings made of animal skin. The latter have the advantage of being easy to carry and re-erect when people are on

the move. Reference is also made to furniture and other articles made of animal wool, fur and hair, and to places of shelter and garments that protect people from the heat of the sun and the might of the enemy. God reminds people of His blessings and how He has perfected them, so that they may fulfil their duty: *"Thus does He perfect His favours to you so that you may submit to Him."* (Verse 81)

This is followed by details relating to resurrection, juxtaposed against pagans and the idols they worship. God's messengers bear witness against such unbelievers, while the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is witness against his own people.

In the Twinkling of an Eye

To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth. The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still. God has power over all things. (Verse 77)

Resurrection is an essential question of faith that has attracted much controversy in all periods and communities. Every one of God's messengers had to deal with it. Yet it is part of the realm of what is known to God alone: *"To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth."* People stand before the thick curtains of *ghayb*, or God's hidden knowledge, aware of their inability and inadequacy. They may have great knowledge of their world, and may be able to discover much of the treasures of the earth and its resources and potentials, but even the greatest human scientists stand helpless when it comes to the knowledge of the immediate and distant future. He simply does not know what will happen the next moment, and whether, when he has taken the next breath in, he will be able to breathe out. A human being may entertain high hopes, stretching in different directions, yet his destiny remains behind the curtain of God's own knowledge. He himself has no means of knowing when his time will come. Yet it may come the next moment and he will be among the dead. It is in fact an aspect of God's grace bestowed on human beings that they do not know anything of what will take place beyond the present moment. Their lack of knowledge gives them hope and urges them to continue to work and produce. Whatever they manage will be taken over and completed by those who succeed them, until every individual of the next generation faces, in his or her turn, their destiny.

The Last Hour is part of the knowledge kept hidden from man. If people knew in advance when their time was to come, life would cease to function, or, at least, would be seriously disrupted. It would certainly not follow the line set out for it. The irony is that people count hours, days, months and years moving all the time

towards their pre-destined appointment when they will depart from this life.

"The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still." (Verse 77) It is close at hand, but according to a calculation different from that of human beings. To bring it on, in full preparation, does not take much time. It is merely the twinkling of an eye and it is there, ready for all mankind: *"God has power over all things."* (Verse 77) To resurrect such countless numbers of God's creation, gather them all together, reckon their deeds, assign the reward for each of them, is all easy for God whose will is accomplished in no time. Whenever He wills something, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is instantly accomplished. If this seems difficult, it only looks so to the eyes of those who see, measure and count by human standards and criteria. Hence they are grossly mistaken.

To make things easier for people to understand, the Qur'ān gives a simple example from human life. People can in no way accomplish it themselves, and they cannot formulate a clear idea of how it happens. Yet it takes place at every moment of the day and night: *"God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful."* (Verse 78)

This is something close to us, yet it is so far away. We may see the different stages a foetus goes through, but we do not know how these are accomplished, because it is part of the secret of life which is known to God alone. The knowledge man claims and boasts of, and which he wants to use in order to test the reality of the Last Hour and the secrets of God's hidden knowledge, is something acquired: *"God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge."* (Verse 78) Even the most advanced scientist is born devoid of knowledge. Whatever he subsequently learns is given to him as a blessing from God, within the limits He has set for mankind, and contingent upon what is needed for life on this planet: *"He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds."* (Verse 78) It should be mentioned here that the Arabic word, *af'idah*, rendered in the translation as 'minds', originally denotes, 'hearts'. The Qur'ān, however, uses it in reference to all human faculties of perception, which are generally referred to as constituting the human mind and intellect. The Arabic term also includes the power of inspiration, the nature and working of which are unknown to us. The Qur'ān reminds us here that God has given people all these faculties, *"so that you may be grateful."* (Verse 78) When we appreciate the value of these blessings God has given us and His other blessings, we will certainly be grateful to Him. The first step in showing our gratitude is to believe in God, the Sovereign, the Supreme, who alone deserves to be worshipped.

God's Hidden Secrets

Among the wonders that testify to God's limitless power and His control of everything in the universe is one that we see every day without giving it much thought. This is the ability of birds to fly: *"Do they not see the birds and how they are enabled to fly in mid-air? None but God holds them aloft. In this there are signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 79) Because it is so familiar to us to see birds flying in mid-air, we do not pay attention to the fascinating wonder their flying involves. Our minds do not give it much thought unless we are fully alerted to it, contemplating it with the eye of a talented poet seeking to capture every detail and nuance. The verse makes it clear that as the birds fly, *"none but God holds them aloft."* He does so through His laws of nature, which make the birds able to fly and make the atmosphere around us amenable for their flight. It is His laws that keep the birds in mid-air, floating safely, without fear that they may fall: *"In this there are signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 79)

A believer's heart is one which appreciates the wonders of creation, looks at them with awe and expresses his feelings with worship and glorification of God, the Creator of all things. Believers who are talented in expressing their thoughts and feelings write masterpieces of every type in describing the wonders of God's creation. They also describe their own feelings and how they are touched when they look at different creatures. No poet can rival their work if his heart is not kindled by the light of faith.

The *sūrah* takes us another step in reviewing some manifestations of God's power and His blessings which He bestows on man. It takes us now into the dwellings of the Arabs at the time, looking at their home comforts and furnishings:

And God has made your homes as places of rest, and has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use. And God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence. Thus does He perfect His favours to you, so that you may submit to Him. (Verses 80-81)

The ease, comfort and reassurance one has at home are certainly a blessing from God but it is something best appreciated only by those who are homeless. They are mentioned here shortly after speaking about what the Qur'ān describes as *ghayb*, or what lies beyond the reach of human perception. In fact, the connotations of home comforts are not far removed from those of *ghayb*, because in both we sense that there is a reality that is kept hidden. Hence, a reminder of the comforts we find in our own homes should alert us to the value of this great blessing.

We may add a word here about the Islamic view of the home in the light of its description in the Qur'ān as a 'place of rest'. This is an expression that is inferior in its connotations to the Arabic term used in the Qur'ān, namely *sakan*. Yet it gives us an idea that Islam wants one's habitat to be a place of rest, comfort and reassurance. In the home one should feel at ease, safe and secure in one's environment and with those who share it. It is certainly not a place for contention, quarrel and conflict.

Islam guarantees the safety and sanctity of the home in order to ensure the security and peace of those who live in it. None is allowed to enter a home unless he first seeks, and obtains, permission to do so. No one forces his way in, without justification, armed with the force of authority. No one watches those living inside, or spies on them, for any reason, to disturb their peace and undermine their security. To do so constitutes a breach of the sanctity which Islam assigns to the home.

As the atmosphere in this passage is one of homes, shelter and garments, the *sūrah* refers to some fitting aspects of the creation of animals, thereby providing harmony between the two constituents of the scene. It tells people that God *"has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use."* (Verse 80) We see how the verse highlights what is taken from animals to satisfy human needs. With furnishings, the *sūrah* mentions, 'articles of convenience,' which in Arabic usage denotes cushions, mattresses and blankets. All these are meant to add to people's comfort and enjoyment.

In this atmosphere of peace and security the language used in the following verse flows easily to speak about shade, places of shelter in the mountains, and the garments people use to protect themselves against climatic conditions as also against opponents in war. *"God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains, and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence."* (Verse 81) When we have proper shelter, we feel safe, and when we seek security in the mountains, we are also able to relax. Again the garments mentioned in the *sūrah*, providing two types of protection, give us a feeling of comfort and protection. All these feelings are akin to that of the comfort of one's own home. Hence, the comment that follows at the end of the verse reminds people of their need to submit to God, their Lord: *"Thus does He perfect His favours to you, so that you may submit to Him."* (Verse 81) Such submission gives us a greater feeling of safety and security.

God reminds people of all this making it clear to them that they should submit to their Lord who has created all these. However, people turn away and take no heed. They should know that God's Messenger is responsible only for delivering God's message to them and he certainly fulfilled his mission. It is up to them whether they

deny the truth which stares them in the face: *"But if they turn away [from you, remember that] your only duty is to deliver [your message] clearly. They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers."* (Verses 82-83) They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers.

A Witness against Every Community

As the Last Hour when the Day of Judgement arrives is mentioned at the beginning of this passage, we are given here an idea of what awaits the unbelievers when it comes.

One day We will raise up a witness from every community, but then the unbelievers will not be allowed to make pleas, nor will they be allowed to make amends. And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite. And when those who associate partners with God will see their [alleged] partners, they will say: 'Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You.' But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars. 'On that day, they shall proffer submission to God; and all their inventions will have forsaken them. Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought. (Verses 84-88)

The scene begins with the prophets being called as witnesses, giving their accounts of the treatment they received from their peoples when they conveyed God's messages to them. The unbelievers will be standing there, not permitted to speak or make any plea or argument. They will not be allowed to make amends in order to satisfy their Lord, for it is too late to do so. It is a time for reckoning and the determination of fates. *"And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite."* (Verse 85)

Their silence however is broken when they see gathered with them those so-called 'partners' which they used to allege to have a share in God's divinity, and to worship them instead of God or alongside Him. They point to them, crying out: *"Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You."* (Verse 86) Their statement begins with an acknowledgement of God's position. They address Him as "Our Lord!" What is more is that they no longer describe the false deities they used to worship as God's partners. They refer to them as 'our partners'. Those very partners are frightened by such a description for it constitutes a serious accusation. Hence, they refute it, asserting most emphatically that those who worshipped them are liars. *"But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars.'"* (Verse 86) They turn to God in full submission. *"On that day, they shall proffer submission to God."*

(Verse 87) Thus the unbelievers will discover that none of their inventions will be of any avail to them in their very difficult situation: *"All their inventions will have forsaken them."* (Verse 87)

The scene concludes with an emphatic statement asserting that those who tried their best to turn others from the path of faith will have their punishment increased: *"Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought."* (Verse 88) Disbelief in God is corruption, and turning others from God's path is also corruption. These people are guilty of both offences. Hence it is only right that their punishment should be increased.

This applies to all people and communities. The *sūrah* then singles out a special situation involving the Prophet with his own people: *"One day We will raise up within every nation a witness from among themselves to testify against them. And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]. We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God."* (Verse 89) What a gloomy and fraught scene is chosen as the background: that of a pagan people looking on when the false deities they used to worship declare that they are liars, and those very deities declare their own submission to God, totally disowning their former worshippers.

Against this background, the Prophet's position is clearly stated. He will be the witness against his own people. This timely piece of detail adds power to the whole scene: *"And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]."* (Verse 89) The verse mentions then that the revelations given to the Prophet *"makes everything clear,"* leaving no excuse for anyone to justify turning away from them. The revelation of the Qur'ān also provides *"guidance and grace and gives good news to those who submit themselves to God."* (Verse 89) This shows clearly that whoever wishes to follow right guidance and receive God's mercy should declare his submission to God before the arrival of that awesome and fearful day. For when it comes, no one will be given leave to justify his position or to make amends for past deeds. Thus we see that the scenes of the Day of Judgement given in the Qur'ān serve a definite purpose endorsing the message given in the section where they occur.

Absolute Justice

God enjoins justice, kindness [to all], and generosity to one's kindred; and He forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed. (90)

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ
وَإِيتَائِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَيَنْهَىٰ عَنِ
الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ ۗ يَعِظُكُم
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴾

Fulfill your covenant with God whenever you make a pledge. Do not break your oaths after you have confirmed them, and have made God your surety. God certainly knows all that you do. (91)

﴿ وَأَوْفُوا بِعَهْدِ اللَّهِ إِذَا عَاهَدْتُمْ وَلَا
تَنْقُضُوا الْأَيْمَانَ بَعْدَ تَوْكِيدِهَا وَقَدْ
جَعَلْتُمُ اللَّهَ عَلَيْكُمْ كَفِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُعَلِّمُ
مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴾

Be not like her who untwists the yarn which she has firmly spun, using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular community may be more powerful than another. By this, God puts you to the test. On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that

﴿ وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّتِي نَقَضَتْ غَزْلَهَا مِنْ بَعْدِ
قُوَّةٍ أَنْكَا تَتَّخِذُونَ أَيْمَانَكُمْ
دَخْلًا بَيْنَكُمْ أَنْ تَكُونَ أُمَّةٌ هِيَ أَرْبَىٰ
مِنْ أُمَّةٍ ۗ إِنَّمَا يَبْلُوكُمُ اللَّهُ بِهِ ۗ وَلِيُبَيِّنَ
لَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ مَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴾

on which you now differ. (92)

Had God so willed, He would have surely made you all one single community. But He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray] and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]. You shall certainly be called to account for all that you do. (93)

Do not use your oaths as a means to deceive one another, lest your foot should slip after it has been firm, and lest you should be made to suffer the evil [consequences] of your having debarred others from the path of God, with tremendous suffering awaiting you. (94)

Do not barter away your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if you but knew it. (95)

Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting. We will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did. (96)

Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man

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وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً
وَلَكِنْ يُضِلُّ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ
وَلَتَسْأَلَنَّ عَمَّا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوا أَيْمَانَكُمْ دَخَلًا بَيْنَكُمْ
فَتَرِلَّ قَدَمٌ بَعْدَ ثُبُوتِهَا وَتَذُوقُوا السُّوَاءَ بِمَا
صَدَدْتُمْ عَنِ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَكُمْ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ

وَلَا تَشْتَرُوا بِعَهْدِ اللَّهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا إِنَّمَا
عِنْدَ اللَّهِ هُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ
تَعْلَمُونَ

مَا عِنْدَكُمْ يَنْفَدُ وَمَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ بَاقٍ
وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُ الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا أَجْرَهُمْ
بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثِيَ وَهُوَ
مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهُ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً
وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا

or woman, and is a believer, We shall most certainly give a good life. And We shall indeed reward these according to the best that they ever did. (97)

Whenever you read the Qur'an, seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed. (98)

He certainly has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord. (99)

He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity. (100)

When We replace one verse by another — and God knows best what He reveals — they say: 'You are but a fabricator.' Indeed most of them have no knowledge. (101)

Say: 'The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth, so as to strengthen the believers, and to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.' (102)

We know full well that they say: 'It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.' But the man to whom

يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ

الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ ﴿٩٨﴾

إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ لَهُ سُلْطَانٌ عَلَى الَّذِينَ

ءَامَنُوا وَعَلَى رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

إِنَّمَا سُلْطَانُهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ يَتَوَلَّوْنَهُ

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِهِ مُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

وَإِذَا بَدَّلْنَا آيَةً مَكَانَ آيَةٍ وَاللَّهُ

أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُنَزِّلُ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُفْتَرٍ بَلْ

أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

قُلْ نَزَّلَهُ رُوحُ الْقُدُسِ مِنْ رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ

لِيُثَبِّتَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَهُدًى وَبُشْرَى

لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُمْ يُقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلِّمُهُ

بَشَرٌ لِّسَانُ الَّذِي يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ

أَعْجَمِيٌّ وَهَذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِيٌّ مُبِينٌ

they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear. (103)

Those who do not believe in God's revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (104)

It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars. (105)

As for anyone who denies God after having accepted the faith — and this certainly does not apply to one who does it under duress; while his heart remains true to his faith, but applies to him who willingly opens his heart to unbelief — upon all such falls God's wrath, and theirs will be a tremendous suffering. (106)

This is because they love the life of this world better than the life to come. God does not bestow His guidance on those who reject the truth. (107)

Such are those whose hearts and ears and eyes are

١٠٣

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَا يَهْدِيهِمُ اللَّهُ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٠٤﴾

إِنَّمَا يَفْتَرِي الْكَذِبَ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَاذِبُونَ

١٠٥

مَنْ كَفَرَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِيمَانِهِ إِلَّا مَنْ أَكْرَهَ وَقَلْبُهُ مُطْمَئِنٌّ بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَكِنْ مَنْ شَرَحَ بِالْكُفْرِ صَدْرًا فَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٠٦﴾

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ اسْتَحَبُّوا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا عَلَى الْآخِرَةِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ طَبَعَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَسَمِعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَرِهِمْ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ

الْغَافِلُونَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ

sealed by God; such are the heedless (108)

Without doubt, in the life to come they will be the losers. (109)

But then, your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who forsake their homes after enduring trials and persecution, and strive hard [in God's cause] and remain patient in adversity. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (110)

One day every soul will come pleading for itself. Every soul will be repaid in full for all its actions, and none shall be wronged. (111)

الْخٰسِرُوْنَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

ثُمَّ اِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِيْنَ هَاجَرُوْا مِنْۢ
بَعْدِ مَا فُتِنُوْا ثُمَّ جَهِدُوْا وَصَبَرُوْا اِنَّ

رَبَّكَ مِنْۢ بَعْدِهَا لَغَفُوْرٌ رَّحِيْمٌ ﴿١٠٩﴾

﴿١١٠﴾ يَوْمَ تَأْتِيْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ جُنْدِلُۙ عَنِ
نَفْسِهَا وَتُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا عَمِلَتْ

وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُوْنَ ﴿١١١﴾

Overview

The previous passage ended with a verse that included the following statement: "We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God." (Verse 89) This new passage begins with a clarification giving some glimpses of what the Qur'an contains of clear guidance, grace and the good news it brings. The passage also includes orders to maintain justice and to act with kindness, particularly to relatives, and to steer away from indecency, evil and transgression, and to remain true to one's pledges and promises. It forbids going back on oaths once they have been made. All these are essential practices that we must maintain, as the Qur'an impresses upon us.

The passage also states that those who violate pledges or swear solemn oaths to deceive others will endure tremendous suffering. It also brings good news for those who persevere in the face of adversity. These will certainly be rewarded in accordance with their best actions.

It outlines some of the good manners which must be maintained when reading the

Qur'ān, such as seeking refuge with God against Satan, so that he does not come near the place where the Qur'ān is being read. It mentions some of the fabrications the pagans used to repeat about the Qur'ān. Some plainly accused the Prophet of inventing it, while others claimed that a foreigner taught it to the Prophet. The passage concludes by stating the punishment for those who disbelieve after having accepted the faith, and the position of those who are compelled to declare their rejection of the faith while their hearts are full of the certainty of its truth. It tells us about the reward of those who are subjected to oppression on account of their faith, and who strive and fight hard, always remaining patient in adversity. All this serves as clarification, guidance, mercy and good news, as the last verse of the previous passage mentions.

An Order Combining All Goodness

God enjoins justice, kindness [to all], and generosity to one's kindred; and He forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed. (Verse 90)

This book, the Qur'ān, has been revealed in order to bring a nation into existence, and to regulate a community; to establish a different world and initiate a new social order. It represents a world message for the whole of mankind, which does not allow any special allegiance to tribe, nation or race. Faith is the only bond that unites a community and a nation. It puts forward the principles that ensure unity within the community, security and reassurance for individuals, groups, nations and states, as well as complete trust that governs all transactions, pledges and promises.

It requires that justice should be established and maintained, because justice ensures a solid and constant basis for all transactions and deals between individuals and communities; a basis subject to no prejudice, preference or favouritism; a basis influenced by no family relationship, wealth or strength; a basis that ensures equal treatment for all and subjects all to the same standards and laws.

Along with justice, the Qur'ān urges kindness, which relaxes the strictness of absolute justice. It lays the door open for anyone who wishes to win the heart of an opponent to forgo part of what is rightfully his. This means that the chance is available to all to go beyond strict justice, which is both a right and a duty, to show kindness in order to allow wounds to heal or to win favour.

Kindness has an even broader sense. Every good action is a kindness. The command enjoining kindness includes every type of action and transaction. It thus covers every aspect of life, including a person's relationship with his Lord, family, community and with the rest of mankind.

Perhaps we should add here that some commentators on the Qur'ān say that 'justice' is the obligatory part, while 'kindness' is voluntary, but highly encouraged, particularly in so far as matters of worship are concerned. They say that this verse is part of the revelations received by the Prophet in Makkah, when the legal provisions had not as yet been outlined. But the way the verse is phrased uses both justice and kindness in their broadest sense. Moreover, from a purely ethical point of view, both are generally applicable principles, not mere legal provisions.

One aspect of kindness is 'generosity to one's kindred', but it is specially highlighted here in order to emphasize its importance. From the Islamic point of view, this is not based on narrow family loyalty, but on the Islamic principle of common solidarity which moves from the smaller, local circle to the larger, social context. The principle is central to the implementation of the Islamic social system.

The verse proceeds to outline three prohibitions in contrast to the three orders with which it begins, stating that God "*forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression.*" (Verse 90) Under shameful conduct everything that goes beyond the limits of propriety is included, but the term is often used to denote dishonourable assault and indecency. Thus it combines both aggression and transgression. Hence it has become synonymous with shamefulness.

'Reprehensible conduct' refers to any action of which pure, undistorted human nature disapproves. Islam also disapproves of any such conduct because it is the religion of pure human nature. Human nature can however become distorted, but Islamic law remains constant, pointing to what human nature is like before distortion creeps in.

'Aggression' in this context denotes injustice as well as any excess that goes beyond what is right and fair. No community can survive when it is based on the spread of shameful, reprehensible conduct and aggression. No community can hope to flourish if it does not stamp out shameful conduct, reprehensible actions and aggression. Hence human nature is bound to rebel against these whenever they are allowed to spread in society.

Human nature will not allow such destructive forces to remain in full play without staging a rebellion. This is inevitable even though such forces may be exceedingly powerful, functioning under the protection of tyrant rulers. In fact the history of humanity is full of such rebellions aiming to purge humanity of such parasites, in the same way that the human body mobilizes its defences to expel any alien organism. The very fact that human nature rebels against them proves that they are alien to proper human life. While God enjoins justice and kindness, He forbids shameful, reprehensible conduct and aggression. This is in perfect accord with what pure human nature desires. It strengthens human nature and supports its resistance

to such alien forces. Hence the final comment in the verse tells us that God “admonishes you so that you may take heed.” (Verse 90) The admonition serves to awaken human conscience and support an undistorted human nature.

Using Oaths for Deceit

Fulfil your covenant with God whenever you make a pledge. Do not break your oaths after you have confirmed them, and have made God your surety. God certainly knows all that you do. (Verse 91)

Fulfilment of God’s covenant includes the pledge Muslims give to the Prophet (peace be upon him) when they accept the Islamic faith, as well as every pledge or promise that involves something permissible or encouraged. The fulfilment of promises and pledges ensures that trust is maintained in human transactions. Without such trust human society, and humanity generally, cannot have a solid foundation. The verse makes sure that those who make a pledge or a covenant are ashamed to break their oaths after having confirmed them, making God the surety for their fulfilment, and appealing to Him as their witness. This is followed by an implicit warning: “God certainly knows all that you do.” (Verse 91)

Islam takes a very strict view on the question of fulfilling covenants, allowing no breach or violation under any circumstances. This is important because it constitutes the basis of trust in any community. Without strict fulfilment of covenants, the whole structure of the community collapses. The treatment of this point in the *sūrah* does not stop at merely stating an order to fulfil all covenants and pledges and a prohibition of their violation. It goes further than that, showing the violation of covenants in a very bad light. It also dismisses every excuse people make to justify their going back on covenants: “Be not like her who untwists the yarn which she has firmly spun, using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular group may be more powerful than another. By this, God puts you to the test. On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that on which you now differ.” (Verse 92)

A person who goes back on his pledges is shown like a stupid, imbecile woman who has no resolve. She spins her yarn and then breaks it leaving it in loose thread. Every little detail given in the example suggests shame and ignominy. The whole picture is meant to give a completely repulsive impression. No honourable person would compromise himself to look so idiotic as the woman who spends her life doing what is of no use and no value whatsoever.

Some people tried to justify going back on the covenants they had made with the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) by saying that he and his companions were but a weak group, while the Quraysh enjoyed strength of numbers and

position. The *sūrah* makes it clear that this is no justification for making their oaths a means of deception, showing themselves ready to go back on them whenever it suited them: *“using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular community may be more powerful than another.”* This is a clear order not to contemplate breaking pledges in order to gain favour with a community that may appear to be more powerful.

The Qur’ānic statement includes cases when a breach of a covenant is justified on the basis of what we call today, ‘national interests’. A certain country may abrogate a treaty it has signed with another, or with a group of countries, only because a stronger nation or group of nations happen to be on the other side. ‘National interest’ is used to justify such violation of binding covenants and treaties. Islam does not approve of such justification. It makes its firm stand that covenants must be honoured; and oaths must never be made in deception. At the same time Islam does not approve of any pledge, treaty or covenant that is not based on righteousness and God-consciousness. Islam is very clear on this. No pledge or cooperation in injustice, transgression, disobedience to God, usurpation of other people’s rights or exploitation of other communities and countries is admissible in Islam. Such is the foundation on which the Muslim community and the Islamic state were built. Hence, security, trust as also sound and healthy relationships on individual and international levels were enjoyed by the whole world at the time when Islam assumed the leadership.

This Qur’ānic statement warns against seeking such an excuse. It warns that when a situation like the one described in the verse prevails, and one community appears to be far more powerful than another, it serves as a trial to Muslims. God wishes to test their resolve to honour their covenants so that they may prove their unwillingness to break a covenant when they have made God their witness to it. *“By this, God puts you to the test.”* (Verse 92) As for differences that may exist between nations and communities, these are left to God to resolve on the appointed day: *“On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that on which you now differ.”* (Verse 92) This statement serves to reassure the Muslim community as it resolves to honour its pledges to, and treaties with, communities that do not share its faith.

Had God so willed, He would have surely made you all one single community. But He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray] and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]. You shall certainly be called to account for all that you do. (Verse 93)

It is God’s will that people should be created with different aptitudes and susceptibilities. He could have created them with the same aptitude, but He has so willed that each individual is so unlike any other. He has set into operation rules and laws which ensure that people can follow His guidance or choose to go astray. These

fulfil His will in relation to mankind. Within these laws, everyone is responsible for the actions he or she takes. Bearing this in mind, it follows that differences of faith and beliefs cannot be used as an excuse to violate treaties and covenants. These differences have their reasons which are subject to God's will. Covenants are to be honoured regardless of differences in faith.

Do we need to comment on such clean and straightforward dealings, or such religious tolerance? The fact is that throughout history, such cleanliness and honest dealing were only experienced under Islam, when the Muslim community was truly guided by the Qur'an.

Ideals Made Practical

The *sūrah* places even greater emphasis on the fulfilment of pledges and the prohibition of resorting to oaths in order to deceive others, lulling them into a false sense of security in order to make transitory gain. It warns that the only result of such deception is to weaken the basis of social life and undermine bonds, commitments and beliefs. It warns against God's severe punishment in the hereafter. At the same time, it holds the promise of a much better reward which more than compensates for any trivial gain they may have had to sacrifice in honouring their pledges. It reminds them that what they have in this life is transitory, certain to come to an end, while that which God holds is inexhaustible, everlasting.

Do not use your oaths as a means to deceive one another, lest your foot should slip after it has been firm, and lest you should be made to suffer the evil [consequences] of your having debarred others from the path of God, with tremendous suffering awaiting you. Do not barter away your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if you but knew it. Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting. We will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did. (Verses 94-96)

When oaths are sworn only to deceive other people, the result is the weakening of faith in one's own conscience and giving to others a distorted image of it. Someone who swears in order to deceive others cannot have firm belief, and cannot walk firmly along its path. At the same time, he presents a bad image of his professed faith to those who trust him only to find themselves deceived. In this way, he sets a very bad example of believers, in effect turning others away from God's faith.

In fact whole communities accepted the faith of Islam when they realized how faithful to their trust the Muslims were. The unhesitating fulfilment by the Muslims of their promises, their true oaths and clean, straightforward dealings motivated

other communities to learn more about Islam and believe in it. Thus the resulting gain was far greater than the temporary loss that appeared to be incurred by fulfilment of pledges.

The Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet have left a very strong impression on Muslims in relation to their promises and treaties. This has remained the distinctive characteristic of their dealings with others both at individual and international levels. It is reported that a truce was made between Mu`āwiyah, the fifth Caliph, and the Byzantine Emperor. When the truce was approaching its end, Mu`āwiyah marched towards Byzantium. He was very close to the border when the truce expired, and he began military activity. `Umar ibn `Utbah, a Companion of the Prophet in his army said to him: "Mu`āwiyah! God be glorified. Honour your pledges and never violate them. I have heard God's Messenger [peace be upon him] saying: 'Whoever has a treaty with other people must not break his commitment until the term has lapsed.' Mu`āwiyah ordered his army to retreat and marched home." Examples in history of Muslims honouring treaties, even though their immediate interests would have been better served by abrogating them, are numerous.

The Qur'ān was able to make such a distinctly strong impression on Muslims through repeated warnings against violation of covenants, promises of reward for honouring them, and by making the covenant a bond with God. It shows the benefit that may result from such violation of commitment to be paltry, while God rewards generously those who are true to their word: "*Do not barter away your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if but knew it.*" (Verse 95) The verse reminds us that what human beings may have is transitory, even though it may be all the property of one person. On the other hand, what is with God remains for ever: "*Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting.*" (Verse 96) Thus their determination to fulfil their commitments, even though they may be burdensome, is immensely strengthened. Those who persevere in the face of difficulty are promised generous reward: "*We will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did*" (Verse 96) The promise implies that their failings are overlooked, so that their reward takes into account only the best of their actions.

Equal Reward for Equal Sexes

The next verse lays down a general rule about action and reward: "*Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man or woman, and is a believer, We shall most certainly give a good life. And We shall indeed reward these according to the best that they ever did.*" (Verse 97) The first item in this rule is that the two sexes, male and female, are equal with regard to their actions and the reward they receive for them. They enjoy the same

relationship with God and the same standing in His regard. Hence, He rewards them equally, applying one measure to both of them. Although the term, 'whoever', with which the verse opens, includes both men and women, the Qur'ānic statement emphasizes this by stating it very clearly: "*Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man or woman.*" This equality is stressed emphatically in the same *sūrah* that gives us an image of how Arab *jāhiliyyah* society looked upon women.

It tells us how society looked down upon women, and the extent of the depression a father felt when he was given the news of the birth of a girl, leading him to hide away from his friends and acquaintances, because of the shame he felt.

Another aspect of this general rule is that good action must have a strong foundation, which must be faith. Without it, good action cannot be cemented into a well built structure. It remains haphazard, and it soon becomes like ashes blown in every direction by a strong wind. Faith provides the axis around which all bonds turn. It gives good action a motive and an aim. Thus it gives goodness a strong foundation so that it is not swayed by fleeting desires.

The rule also establishes that when good action is coupled with faith, it is rewarded by a goodly life in this world. It need not be a life of affluence and riches. It may be a goodly life with or without plenty of money. There are many things in life, other than money, which provide a goodly feeling and happiness. A strong bond with God and a feeling of trust in Him and His abounding grace make life happy indeed. Life may also be blessed with good health, a peaceful and blessed living, love and compassion. It may have the rejoice generated by good action and its effects on oneself and society. Money is only one aspect, and little of it is sufficient when one looks up to what is more blessed and longer lasting.

This general rule also makes clear that a goodly life in this world will not reduce in any way one's good reward in the life to come. Indeed the reward is based on the best actions believers do in this world. This implies, as we have stated earlier, that God will forgive them their sins. This is indeed the best reward to which human beings may aspire.

Attitude to Qur'ānic Recitation

The *sūrah* then speaks about the Qur'ān and the values to be observed when reciting it. It also mentions some of the false assertions the unbelievers used to make about it. "*Whenever you read the Qur'ān, seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed. He certainly has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord. He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity.*" (Verses 98-100) Seeking God's refuge against Satan prepares the atmosphere such that it is more congenial for the recitation of God's book. It gives a

sense of purity that strengthens the reader's bond with God, so that he is free from any other preoccupation, that is with any aspect of the world of evil that Satan represents.

This is all generated by seeking refuge with God from Satan and his schemes. Yet it is made clear that Satan *"has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord."* (Verse 99) Those who appeal to God alone and purge their hearts of any loyalty to any other bond are free of Satan's power. Much as he may whisper to them, their bond with God protects them from toeing his line. They may slip and commit errors, but they do not submit to Satan. They will always purge their hearts of Satan's influence and turn to God in repentance. *"He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity."* (Verse 100) It is such people who make Satan their patron, who allow their desires to dictate their actions under Satan's influence that are subject to his power. Indeed some of them make Satan their Lord. Indeed some have even worshipped Satan, or a similar deity of evil. However, following Satan's footsteps is a kind of associating him as a partner with God.

The Nature of False Fabrication

The *sūrah* also mentions some of the falsehoods the unbelievers circulated about the Qur'ān:

When We replace one verse by another – and God knows best what He reveals – they say: 'You are but a fabricator.' Indeed most of them have no knowledge. Say: 'The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth, so as to strengthen the believers, and to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.' We know full well that they say: It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.' But the man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear. Those who do not believe in God's revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them. It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars. (Verses 101-105)

The unbelievers do not understand the role of God's book and the fact that it has been revealed to establish a global human society and create a community to lead it along its way. They do not realize that it is the final message to come from on high to mankind. They are oblivious of the essential truth that God, who has created man, knows best which concepts, principles and legislation are best suited for humanity. When He abrogates a verse that has completed its purpose, He puts another in its place which is more suitable for the stage the new community has reached, and better suited for the long future, the duration of which is known only to Him. This is

certainly His prerogative. The verses of this book may be likened to a medicine which is given in small doses to a patient until he is cured. Then he is advised to resume a normal diet which helps to protect his health.

But the unbelievers understand nothing of all this. Hence it is not surprising that they did not appreciate the purpose behind the abrogation of one verse by another and accused the Prophet of being a fabricator when he was indeed the most honest and truthful person they had ever known. Hence the verse comments: *“Indeed most of them have no knowledge.”* (Verse 101)

The *sūrah* then states the truth of the revelation of the Qur’ān: *“Say: The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth.”* (Verse 102) It could not be a fabrication when it was brought down by the Holy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel (peace be upon him). He has brought it *‘from your Lord’*, not from you, and this is done *in truth’*, which means that no falsehood can ever be attached to it. The purpose of its revelation is *‘to strengthen the believers,’* who maintain the bond between God and their hearts. These realize that it has come from God to spell out the truth and make it clear for all mankind. It has another purpose as well, which is *‘to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.’* (Verse 102) They are strengthened by the fact that they are guided along the right path, as also given the happy news of achieving victory and establishing their power.

We know full well that they say: ‘It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.’ But the man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear. (Verse 103)

This was yet another falsehood the unbelievers tried to assert. They claimed that the Qur’ān was taught to the Prophet by a man whom they named. We have different reports about the particular person they mentioned. One report points to a foreign servant attached to one clan or another of the Quraysh who used to sell goods near al-Şafā. The Prophet might have sat with him and spoke to him at times. But the man spoke a foreign language. His knowledge of Arabic was sufficient only to conduct necessary business transactions.

Another report by Ibn Ishāq in his biography of the Prophet suggests that the Prophet used to sit at al-Marwah with a Christian servant named Sabī`ah, although some people called him Jabr. He was a slave owned by a man from al-Ĥaḍramī clan. Ibn Kathīr, the historian, and other scholars like `Ikrimah and Qatādah mention that the man’s name was Ya’īsh.

Another scholar and historian, al-Ṭabarī, reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet’s cousin, that the Prophet used to teach a slave called Bal`ām who spoke a foreign language. The unbelievers used to see the Prophet leaving his place. So they

came up with their ridiculous fabrication, saying that Bal`ām taught the Prophet.

God answers all these fabrications with a simple, clear statement that ends all argument: *“The man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear.”* (Verse 103) It is difficult to imagine that they were serious when they made such ludicrous claims. It was all most likely a part of their evil scheming which they knew to be absolutely false. They were fully aware of the merits of the Qur`ān and its literary excellence. How could they claim that a man speaking a foreign tongue could have taught it to Muḥammad. If such a man could have produced such a masterpiece, why would he not claim it for himself, without teaching it to another?

Today, with humanity having made such huge advancements, and human talent having produced such great books and masterpieces, social orders and legislation, anyone who appreciates literature, social systems and legal codes is bound to acknowledge that the Qur`ān could not have been authored by a human being.

Even the atheists of Communist Russia who wished to criticize Islam in the Conference of Orientalists held in 1954 managed no better than to claim that the Qur`ān could not have been the work of one man. It must have been the collective work of a large community. Moreover, they claimed, it could not have been written totally in Arabia. Some parts of it must have been written in other parts of the world! They felt that no individual had the talent to produce this book, and nor had one nation the knowledge embodied in it. They could not admit to the force of sound logic and attribute the Qur`ān to its true Author, God, the Lord of all the worlds. They denied God’s existence. How could they acknowledge revelation and prophethood?

This is the view of some specialist scholars in the twentieth century. Compared with it, the Makkan unbelievers’ claim that a foreign slave who spoke little Arabic taught it to Muḥammad appears at its most ludicrous.

The Qur`ān states the reason behind such false assertions: *“Those who do not believe in God’s revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them.”* (Verse 104) Those who refuse to believe in the signs given by God will not be guided to the truth concerning this divine revelation. Indeed God does not guide them to the truth concerning anything. This is the natural consequence of their unbelief and deliberate rejection of the message God’s signs impart to them. Hence, *“grievous suffering awaits them,”* after they have been in continuous error.

The *sūrah* then makes it clear that false claims against God could not be made by Muḥammad, whose honesty was exemplary. Such falsehood could only be asserted by people like them refusing to believe in God: *“It is only those who do not believe in God’s revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars.”* (Verse 105) Lying is

a cardinal sin which no believer perpetrates. The Prophet himself made it clear that a true believer could at times commit some sinful action, but a true believer would never deliberately tell a lie.

Rejecting the Faith after Accepting it

The *sūrah* outlines here the rulings concerning anyone who disavows faith after having accepted it:

As for anyone who denies God after having accepted the faith – and this certainly does not apply to one who does it under duress, while his heart remains true to his faith, but applies to him who willingly opens his heart to unbelief– upon all such falls God’s wrath, and theirs will be a tremendous suffering. This is because they love the life of this world better than the life to come. God does not bestow His guidance on those who reject the truth. Such are those whose hearts and ears and eyes are sealed by God; such are the heedless. Without doubt, in the life to come they will be the losers. (Verses 106-109)

The early Muslims in Makkah were subjected to such brutal oppression as could only be endured by those who had made up their minds to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of a higher destiny in the life to come. Such people endure all the atrocities the unbelievers perpetrate against them, rather than revert to pagan faith.

The *sūrah* paints in ghastly colours the crime of the person who reverts to unbelief after having known the true faith, declared his acceptance of it and experienced its blessings. Such a person only reverts to unbelief because he prefers the comforts and pleasures of this world to the happiness of the life to come. Hence such people are threatened with God’s wrath and tremendous suffering, in addition to being deprived of God’s guidance. They are described as heedless, as having sealed their hearts, ears and eyes, and as being certain losers in the life to come. The important point here is that faith must never be subject to bargaining or to a balance of profit and loss. When a person’s heart and mind submit to faith, they do not admit any worldly influence. This world has its values and considerations, while faith has its own. The two sets cannot overlap or have anything in common. Faith must not be treated in a trifling way. It is not a bargain that you make one day and reverse the next. It is far more precious. Hence the crime is painted in such ghastly colours and the punishment is seen to be extremely stern.

The only exception from such condemnation is the one who professes, under utter duress, to have rejected the faith only to save himself from certain death, while his heart remains full of faith, certain that it is the truth. It is reported that this ruling was revealed in connection with `Ammār ibn Yāsir. Al-Ṭabarī reports on the authority of

Muḥammad, `Ammār's son, that "the unbelievers in Makkah tortured his father, `Ammār ibn Yāsir, continuously until he gave in to some of their demands. He then reported this to the Prophet who asked him: 'How do you feel deep at heart?' He said: 'My heart is full of faith, entertaining no doubt whatsoever.' The Prophet said to him: 'If they try again, do likewise.' This was a concession, and it applies to anyone in similar circumstances.'¹

Yet many believers refused to satisfy their torturers, preferring to die rather than give in, even only verbally, to their demands. This was the stance taken by `Ammār's own parents. His mother, Sumayyah, was so resolute in her resistance that she was stabbed with a spear in her vagina and died a martyr. His father also was tortured to death without giving in. Similarly did Bilāl, who was singled out for a special treatment. The unbelievers laid him down on the burning sands in the summer heat of Arabia and put on his chest a large rock and dragged him along, ordering him to reject his faith, but he refused and declared: "He is only One God." He then said to them: "Had I known anything that would give you more displeasure, I would have said it."

Another example is that of Ḥabīb ibn Zayd al-Anṣārī, when Musaylamah, the liar who claimed to be a messenger of God asked him: "Do you believe that Muḥammad is God's Messenger?" Ḥabīb said: "Yes, indeed." Musaylamah asked him: "Do you believe that I, too, am God's messenger?" Ḥabīb said: "I hear nothing." Musaylamah then ordered that Ḥabīb be dismembered. He kept asking him and he kept giving the same replies until he died under such torture.

`Abdullāh ibn Ḥudhāfah of the Sahm clan of the Quraysh was a companion of the Prophet who was once taken captive by the Byzantines. He was taken to their ruler who offered him a share in his kingdom and that he would give him his own daughter as a wife if he would embrace Christianity. `Abdullāh said: "If you were to give me all your kingdom and all the wealth and property of all Arabs in return for disowning the faith of Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), I would not accept for even a blink of an eye." The Byzantine ruler said: "If you refuse, then I will kill you." `Abdullāh said: "Do what you like." The ruler then ordered that he should be crucified. Soldiers then shot at him with arrows piercing his legs and arms, but he refused to convert to Christianity despite all this.

The ruler then ordered that he should be brought down from the cross. A large pan made of copper was put over a great fire until it was boiling fiercely. Another Muslim captive was then thrown into the pan and soon his bones were visible. `Abdullāh was then told to convert to Christianity, threatened that he would suffer

¹ Abū Ja`far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān `An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 8, Part 14, p. 182.

the same fate if he did not. He refused, and the ruler ordered that he should be thrown into the pan. As he was being lifted, the ruler noticed that his eyes were tearful. He ordered that he should be brought down. He then spoke to him only to be astonished by `Abdullāh's explanation of his crying. `Abdullāh said: "I only cried because I have one soul, and I am subjected to this torture for my faith. I wish I had as many souls as the number of hairs on my body and each one of them was subjected to the same fate."

Another report suggests that the Byzantine ruler then imprisoned `Abdullāh ibn Ḥudhāfah for several days without food or water. He then sent him wine and pork. `Abdullāh touched nothing of this. He was then taken to the ruler who asked him why he did not eat or drink. `Abdullāh said: "In my condition, [i.e. a case of starvation approaching death] it is lawful for me to eat and drink the otherwise forbidden things you sent me. But I will not give you the pleasure of feeling that you have broken my resolve." The ruler secretly admired `Abdullāh for his great resistance under pressure. He said to him: "Kiss my head and I will set you free." `Abdullāh said: "I will do so if you will also set free all the other Muslim captives you hold." The ruler agreed and `Abdullāh kissed his head. The ruler was true to his promise and set them all free. `Abdullāh took them all to Madinah and reported what happened to the Caliph, `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who said: "It is the duty of every Muslim to kiss `Abdullāh ibn Ḥudhāfah's head. I will be the first to do so." He then stood up and kissed `Abdullāh's head.

This shows that faith is a matter of grave importance. There can be no compromise about it. To uphold it may require paying a heavy price. But, to a Muslim, faith is far more valuable than any price. It is so also in God's view. It is a trust honoured only by one who is prepared to sacrifice his life for it.² Indeed the life of this world and all the comforts it may provide is of little consequence compared with faith.

But then, your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who forsake their homes after enduring trials and persecution, and strive hard [in God's cause] and remain patient in adversity. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful. One day every soul will come pleading for itself. Every soul will be repaid in full for all its actions, and none shall be wronged. (Verses 110-111)

The reference here is to some believers who were among the weaker elements of Arabian society. They were subjected to great pressure and had to renounce their faith. However, they subsequently migrated and joined the believers when they had a chance to do so. They strove hard for the cause of Islam, enduring much hardship

² The author himself honoured this trust when he refused to succumb to all the pressure and torture he was subjected to. He sacrificed his life when he was executed for no crime other than holding his views. This was in the summer of 1966, in the reign of Nasser, the Egyptian dictator. — Editor's note.

along the way. The verse gives them the good news of God's forgiveness and an abundance of His grace: *"After all this, your Lord is Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful."* (Verse 110)

This will take place on a day when every soul will be preoccupied with its own affairs. It has no time for anyone else. The statement, *"every soul will come pleading for itself,"* gives us a sense of the seriousness of the whole matter. Everyone will be trying hard to save themselves from the suffering that awaits the wrongdoers. But pleading will be of no avail, for it is the time of reckoning and reward. Hence: *"Every soul will be repaid in full for all its actions, and none shall be wronged."* (Verse 111)

Advocacy by Example

God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God's favours. Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do. (112)

There had come to them a messenger from among themselves, but they denied him. Therefore suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers. (113)

So eat of all the lawful and good things God has provided for you, and be grateful to God for His favours, if it is truly Him that you worship. (114)

He has forbidden you only carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and anything over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if anyone is driven to it by necessity, neither desiring it nor exceeding his immediate need, then God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (115)

Do not say — for any false thing you may utter with your tongues — that 'This is lawful and this is forbidden', so as to attribute your lying inventions to God. Indeed those who attribute their lying inventions to God will never be

وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا قَرْيَةً كَانَتْ ءَامِنَةً
مُطْمَئِنَّةً يَأْتِيهَا رِزْقُهَا رَغَدًا مِّن كُلِّ
مَكَانٍ فَكَفَرَتْ بِأَنْعَمِ اللَّهِ فَأَذَاقَهَا اللَّهُ
لِبَاسَ الْجُوعِ وَالْخَوْفِ بِمَا كَانُوا
يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَكَذَّبُوهُ
فَأَخَذَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾
فَكُلُوا مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ اللَّهُ حَلَلًا طَيِّبًا
وَأَشْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ
تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةَ وَالدَّمَ وَلَحْمَ
الْخِزْيِيرِ وَمَا أُهْلَ لِغَيْرِ اللَّهِ بِهِ فَمَنِ
أَضْطُرَّ غَيْرَ بَاغٍ وَلَا عَادٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَا تَصِفُ أَلْسِنَتُكُمُ
الْكَذِبَ هَذَا حَلَلٌ وَهَذَا حَرَامٌ لِتَفْتَرُوا
عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى
اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ لَا يُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١١٦﴾

successful. (116)

Brief is their enjoyment [of this life], and grievous suffering awaits them [in the life to come]. (117)

To the Jews We have made unlawful such things as We have mentioned to you earlier. We did them no wrong, but they were the ones who persistently wronged themselves. (118)

But indeed your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent and mend their ways. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (119)

In truth Abraham was a model, devoutly obedient to God, and true in faith. He was not one of those who associated partners with God. (120)

He showed his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path. (121)

We bestowed on him good in this world; and truly, in the life to come he will be among the righteous. (122)

And now We have inspired you with [this message]: Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.' (123)

[The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of

مَتَّعٌ قَلِيلٌ وَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١٦﴾

وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ هَادُوا حَرَّمْنَا مَا قَصَصْنَا
عَلَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمَا ظَلَمْنَاهُمْ وَلَكِنْ
كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّنَا لِلَّذِينَ لَئِذَا
بُجِهَلَةً ثُمَّ تابوا من بعد ذلك وأصلحوا
إِنَّ رَبَّنَا مِنْ بَعْدِهَا لَعَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١١٩﴾

إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ كَانَ أُمَّةً قَانِتًا لِلَّهِ حَنِيفًا
وَلَمْ يَكُ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

شَاكِرًا لِأَنْعَمِهِ ۚ اجْتَبَاهُ وَهَدَاهُ إِلَى
صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٢١﴾

وَأَتَيْنَاهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً ۗ وَإِنَّهُ فِي
الْآخِرَةِ لَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

ثُمَّ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ أَنْ اتَّبِعْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

إِنَّمَا جُعِلَ السَّبْتُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ
اختلفوا فيه ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّنَا لَيَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ
يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

﴿١٢٤﴾

Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute. (124)

Call people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path and who are rightly guided. (125)

If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you. But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. (126)

Endure, then, with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient; and do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues. (127)

God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good. (128)

أَدْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ
الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَدِلْ لَهُم بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ
رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ
وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

وَإِنْ عَاقَبْتُمْ فَعَاقِبُوا بِمِثْلِ مَا عُوقِبْتُمْ
بِهِ وَلَئِنْ صَبَرْتُمْ لَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لِلصَّابِرِينَ
﴿١٢٦﴾

وَأَصْبِرْ وَمَا صَبْرُكَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ وَلَا تَحْزَنْ
عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا تَكُ فِي ضَيْقٍ مِمَّا
يَمْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ
مُحْسِنُونَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

Overview

Earlier in the *sūrah* God gave two examples to drive home to people an important principle of faith. Now He gives another to portray the situation of Makkah and its pagan people who denied the blessings God had bestowed on them. The example serves to make clear what destiny awaits them if they persist in their attitude. The example highlights the blessings of abundant provisions, peace and security given to the city before mentioning the good and wholesome things they prohibit themselves on the basis of their pagan myths. In fact God has made these lawful to mankind. He has clearly outlined what He has forbidden, and it does not include the matters they

prohibit themselves. This is an act of ingratitude to God, giving no thanks to Him for His blessings. By adopting this attitude they lay themselves open to God's severe punishment.

As it outlines the foul things God has forbidden to Muslims, the *sūrah* mentions the wholesome things God had forbidden to the Jews because of their wrongdoing. These were not forbidden to their forefathers at the time of Abraham who was a devout servant of God. These were indeed permissible to him and his offspring. Some were later forbidden to the Jews as a sort of punishment for their subsequent disobedience. Those who then mended their ways could receive God's forgiveness and mercy.

Then God revealed a new message to Muḥammad as the final version of His faith. Thus all wholesome things were made lawful again. The same applies to the restrictions of the Sabbath, the day on which the Jews are forbidden fishing and hunting. The Sabbath applies to its own people who disagreed over it. Some of them obeyed the orders and refrained from doing what God had forbidden, while others transgressed and incurred God's punishment. They were sent to a depth far below that of human beings.

At this point the *sūrah* comes to its close with an order given to God's Messenger to call on people to follow God's guidance. He should make his call with wisdom and goodly admonition, and with argument that is kindly. He is also told to maintain the laws of justice, replying to any aggression with similar measure, knowing that patience and forbearance are even better. The final outcome is indeed in favour of the God-fearing because God is with them, showing them the way to success, supporting and taking good care of them.

An Example to Avoid

God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God's favours. Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do. There had come to them a messenger from among themselves, but they denied him. Therefore suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers. (Verses 112-113)

This case is very similar to that of Makkah where God's sacred house was built. It was made a consecrated city where everyone could feel secure. No one was threatened, even though he might be guilty of murder. All enjoyed the security of being in the neighbourhood of God's Inviolable House. People all around were threatened by all manner of dangers, while the people of Makkah enjoyed peace and security. Their provisions came to them easily from all over the world, carried by

pilgrims or trade caravans which travelled in peace. Yet they lived in a barren valley with no cultivation or vegetation. Nevertheless, ever since the days of Abraham, they enjoyed a life of prosperity in addition to their security.

Then a Messenger came to them: a man from among them whom they knew to always tell the truth and to be exemplary in his honesty. They could find nothing wrong with his character. It was God who sent him as His Messenger, bringing mercy to them and to all mankind, preaching the same faith as that of Abraham, who built the Inviolable House of worship which ensured their security and prosperity. But they were quick to reject his message, levelling at him all sorts of false accusations, and subjecting him and his followers to persecution.

The example cited here by God is practically identical with their own situation: *“God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God’s favours.”* (Verse 112) The result of these people’s attitude is placed before their very eyes. They denied the messenger God sent them, *“Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do.”* (Verse 112) The inevitable result was that *“suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers.”* (Verse 113)

The Arabic text brings this image to life by enhancing the effects of the hunger and fear, making them a garment to be worn, but then they are also made to ‘taste’ or ‘experience’ these to generate a more profound effect than that of the image of contact between skin and garment. The text highlights the response of different senses to enhance the effect of experiencing hunger and fear and how this affects the unbelievers. The *sūrah* does this so that they may take heed and endeavour to spare themselves the same destiny which is inevitable if they persist in their wrongdoing.

In virtue of this example which highlights the blessings and the provisions given to them, and by contrast, the risks of restriction and deprivation, they are ordered to eat of the good things God has made lawful to them and to show their gratitude to Him. This is how to maintain the path of true faith, submitting totally to God alone and associating no partners with Him. It is when partners are associated with God that wholesome things are made forbidden in the name of such false deities: *“So eat of all the lawful and good things God has provided for you, and be grateful to God for His favours, if it is truly Him that you worship.”* (Verse 114)

The Lawful and the Forbidden

Now the *sūrah* defines what is forbidden, listing the prohibitions in detail. The list does not include what the Arabs forbade themselves, giving these special names such as *baḥīrah*, *sā’ibah*, *waṣīlah* and *hām*.

We note the exclusivity in the way the prohibitions are listed: *“He has forbidden you only carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and anything over which any name other than God’s has been invoked.”* (Verse 115) These are forbidden either because they are physically harmful, as in the case of dead animals, blood and pig meat, or because they are outrageous to faith or to mental well-being as when invoking a creature’s name at the time of slaughter. *“But if anyone is driven to it by necessity, neither desiring it nor exceeding his immediate need, then God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verse 115) This faith of Islam is made easy, involving no affliction. If someone fears to die or becomes ill as a result of hunger and thirst, he may eat something of these forbidden items. We mentioned earlier the differences among scholars as to how much one may eat in such cases. The important thing is that one must neither transgress the principle of prohibition, nor exceed the limits of necessity that override the prohibition in order to permit what is normally restricted.

These are the limits of what God has prohibited or left lawful in relation to food. These limits must not be trespassed on the basis of pagan myths. No one can make a false claim describing as prohibited what God has permitted. Permissibility and prohibition are made by order from God, because they are part of legislation, which is the prerogative of God alone. Anyone who claims legislative authority for himself, on any basis other than God’s orders, is an inventor of untruth. Those who invent anything without God’s authority will never prosper:

Do not say – for any false thing you may utter with your tongues – that ‘This is lawful and this is forbidden’, so as to attribute your lying inventions to God. Indeed those who attribute their lying inventions to God will never be successful. Brief is their enjoyment [of this life], and grievous suffering awaits them [in the life to come].
(Verses 116-117)

This is an express order that they must not describe anything as lawful or unlawful without appropriate warrant. When they say that something is lawful and another prohibited, without a reliable statement in support, they are stating a naked lie, which they falsely attribute to God. The *sūrah* makes it clear that those who invent falsehood and attribute it to God will have nothing but brief enjoyment in this life. Beyond this, they will be made to experience grievous suffering.

Yet some people have the audacity to enact legislation of their own, relying on no valid text to serve as the basis of what they legislate. What is most amazing is that they still expect to prosper in this life and in the life to come as well.

Beyond this, God has made certain prohibitions applicable to the Jews. These were stated earlier in *Sūrah 6, Cattle*: *“To those who followed the Jewish faith did Wye forbid all animals that have claws; and Wye forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones.”* (6: 146) But this

was a punishment to the Jews in particular. It does not apply to Muslims. Now this *sūrah* states: *“To the Jews We have made unlawful such things as We have mentioned to you earlier. We did them no wrong, but they were the ones who persistently wronged themselves. But indeed your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent and mend their ways. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verses 118-119)

The Jews deserved that these wholesome things be made forbidden because of their transgression and disobedience of God. It was they who thus wronged themselves, while God did them no wrong. However, a person who does wrong in ignorance, without persistently disobeying God until his death, and who follows his repentance with doing good will surely enjoy God’s forgiveness. God will bestow His mercy on him. The statement here is general, so as to include the Jews who repented and anyone else who, in future, repents after committing a wrong. This applies right to the Day of Judgement.

The *sūrah* then mentions Abraham and states the truth about his faith. His mention is relevant to the prohibitions made specially applicable to the Jews. It is also relevant to the claims of the pagan Arabs of the Quraysh that they followed Abraham’s faith, particularly in what they prohibited for themselves, consecrating it to their false deities. The *sūrah* makes it clear that the message of the Prophet Muḥammad is directly related to Abraham’s faith:

In truth Abraham was a model, devoutly obedient to God, and true in faith. He was not one of those who associated partners with God. He showed his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path. We bestowed on him good in this world; and truly, in the life to come he will be among the righteous. And now We have inspired you with [this message]: ‘Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.’ [The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute. (Verses 120-124)

The Qur’ān describes Abraham as the perfect follower of God’s guidance, obedient to his Lord, grateful to Him. The Arabic term describing him here, *ummah*, means a ‘nation’ or a ‘leader’. Thus the verse may be taken to mean that Abraham was equal to a whole nation in his faith and true obedience. Or it may be understood to mean that he was a leader to be followed in all goodly matters. In commentaries on the Qur’ān, both meanings are mentioned. In fact they are not that far apart. A leader who encourages his followers to do what is good leads a whole nation and receives his own reward and a reward similar to that given to all those whom he guides. This means that he is, in his goodness and reward, like a whole nation.

Abraham is also described as being *'devoutly obedient to God'*, always seeking to be pure in his devotion, *'and true in faith'* which means that he always sought the truth and abided by it. Since he never associated partners with God, those who do so must not claim any relationship with him, because there is no such affinity.

Abraham also showed his gratitude, by word and deed, *for the blessings bestowed by Him'*. He was totally unlike those pagans who denied God's blessings verbally and showed their ingratitude by deed. They even claimed that what they enjoyed of God's sustenance was given to them by the false deities they associated with Him. Hence God chose Abraham and *'guided him to a straight path.'* This is the path of faith based on God's absolute oneness.

This is the truth about Abraham whom both the Jews and the Arab unbelievers claimed to follow. *"And now We have inspired you with [this message]: 'Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.'"* (Verse 123) This means a re-establishment of the faith based on God's oneness, followed by Abraham and reiterated in the new message revealed to Muḥammad.

The restrictions of the Sabbath apply to the Jews only, who differ on its details. It was neither a part of the faith of Abraham nor sanctioned in the faith of Muḥammad who followed Abraham's footsteps. *"[The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him."* (Verse 124) Their case is left to God who knows the truth about all matters: *"Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute."*(Verse 124)

The Best Method of Advocacy

The *sūrah* has thus clarified what similarities may appear between the faith based on believing in God's oneness as outlined by Abraham and perfected by Islam, God's final message to mankind, and the deviant beliefs to which the Jews or the pagan Arabs adhered. All this is part of what the Qur'ān has been revealed to set right. The Prophet is told to continue his efforts, calling on people to follow the divine faith, but utilizing wisdom and good exhortation, and delivering his argument in a kindly manner. If his opponents go on the offensive and act aggressively, the penalty should be of the same type as the aggression, or the Prophet may choose the better way of forgiveness and patience in adversity, despite being able to exact punishment. This is sure to bring him a better outcome. He need not grieve however over those who reject God's guidance, nor should he be afflicted by their scheming against him and his followers.

Call people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner. Your Lord knows best who strays from His

path and who are rightly guided. If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you. But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. Endure, then, with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient; and do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues. God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good. (Verses 125-128)

Such are the basic rules of Islamic advocacy and such are its appropriate methods. The proper approach is being shown here to the Prophet and to all who succeed him in advocating the Islamic faith. The advocate must make it clear that he simply calls on people to follow the path outlined by God. He is not calling for any personal or national cause. He is simply discharging his duty towards his Lord. He claims no credit for himself, nor does he have a favour to curry with the message itself or with those who respond to his call and follow divine guidance. He receives his reward from God alone.

Advocacy must be undertaken with wisdom. The advocate of the divine message must take into consideration the situation and circumstances of the people whom he addresses in order to determine what he tells them on each occasion. He must not make things appear difficult to them, nor should he burden them with a long list of duties before they are so prepared. He must also consider how he should address them, and how to diversify his method of address in accordance with different circumstances. He must not let his enthusiasm carry the day so as to overlook the prerequisites of wisdom.

Together with wisdom goes goodly exhortation which addresses hearts gently, seeking to kindle good feeling and response. No unnecessary reproach or remonstrance should be thrown at them. An advocate of Islam does not publicize genuine mistakes which people commit with good intention. Kindly exhortation often attracts people to follow God's guidance, achieving good results that cannot be achieved through reproach or rebuke.

The third element in this proper approach to Islamic advocacy is to argue '*in the most kindly manner*'. This means that there should be no personal criticism or humiliation of an opponent. It is important in such an argument to make the other party realize that, as advocates of the cause of faith, we have no vain desire to win an argument or to boast about having an irrefutable case. Our aim must always be clear, namely, to arrive at the truth. Human beings have their pride, and they will not concede any point unless the argument is carried on in a kindly manner. No one likes to be defeated in argument. People often confuse their own prestige with the value of their opinion, considering that they are humiliated when they have to admit that their view is mistaken. It is only when argument is carried out kindly that people's sensitivity can be tempered, as they realize that their own dignity is preserved. They

then recognize that an advocate of Islam seeks only the truth and has no desire to press home personal advantage.

In order to help advocates of Islam restrain themselves and not allow themselves to be carried away by enthusiasm, the *sūrah* mentions that it is God who truly knows those who follow His guidance and those who are in error. Hence there is no need to press an argument beyond what is reasonable. Issues should be stated clearly and matters should then be left to God: *“Your Lord knows best who strays from His path and who are rightly guided.”* (Verse 125)

This is the proper method of advocacy as long as it remains within the realm of verbal address and stating a point. Should the advocates of Islam suffer aggression, then the whole situation changes. Aggression is an action that must be repelled with similar force in order to preserve the dignity of the truth and to ensure that falsehood does not triumph. Response to aggression, however, must not exceed the limits of repelling it. Islam is the faith of justice and moderation, peace and reconciliation. It repels any aggression launched against it or its followers, without committing any aggression against others: *“If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you.”* (Verse 126)

This is indeed part of the method of advocacy. To repel aggression within the limits of justice preserves the dignity of the Islamic message so that it suffers no humiliation. A humiliated message has no appeal for anyone. Indeed no one will accept that humiliation be suffered by a divine message. God does not permit His message to suffer humiliation without repelling it. Those who believe in God do not sit idle in the face of persecution and humiliation. They are entrusted with the task of establishing the truth in human life, maintaining justice between people, and leading mankind to the right path. How are they to fulfil their tasks when they do not reply to aggression or respond to unjust punishment?

Yet at the same time that the rule of equal punishment is established, the Qur’ān calls on believers to endure with fortitude and to forgive. This applies in situations when the believers are able to repel aggression and to eradicate evil. In such cases, forgiveness and patience are more effective and of greater value to the Islamic message. Their own personal position or prestige is of secondary importance when the interests of the message are better served by forgiveness and endurance. However, should such forgiveness compromise the position of the message and lead to its humiliation, then the first rule of equal retaliation is preferable.

Since endurance requires resisting one’s feelings and impulses, restraining one’s emotions and maintaining control over natural reactions, the Qur’ān relates it to faith and earning God’s pleasure. It also assures the believers that it brings them good: *“But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. Endure, then,*

with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient.” (Verses 126-127) It is God who gives a believer the strength to be patient in adversity and to control his instinctive reactions. Seeking God’s pleasure is the one thing that restrains the impulse to retaliate and punish.

The Qur’an encourages the Prophet, and every advocate of Islam as well, not to grieve when they see people turning their backs on God’s guidance. They have their duty to fulfil. Guiding people aright or leaving them to go astray are matters determined by God, in accordance with His laws of nature which control people’s souls and their striving to follow guidance or to turn away from it. *“Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues.”* (Verse 127) The Prophet should not be distressed when he sees such people scheme against him. God will protect him against their scheming and intrigue. He will never let them have the upper hand when he conveys his message, seeking no personal gain for himself. He may have to endure harm, but that is only to test his patience. He may feel that victory is slow in coming, but that is only to test his trust in God’s support. The ultimate outcome is known in advance: *“God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good.”* (Verse 128) He who has God on his side need not worry about anyone’s scheming or intrigue.

Such is the constitution that any advocacy of God’s message should follow. It is the only way to ensure victory as promised by God. This is what God tells us, and God always tells the truth.