

SŪRAH 27

Al-Naml

(The Ants)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah shortly after *Sūrah* 26, The Poets, and it follows the same pattern: an introduction and conclusion which together spell out the subject matter. In between there are several historical accounts that emphasize the main theme, providing further elucidation of it. These histories help to draw parallels between the attitudes of the unbelievers in Makkah on the one hand and their predecessors among other communities on the other. Thus, the *sūrah* reveals a pattern which advocates of Islam in any generation need to contemplate.

As in all Makkan *sūrahs*, the main theme is faith: to believe in God and worship Him alone, without partners, and to believe in the resurrection as well as reward and punishment in the hereafter. This also requires believing in God's revelations, and that all matters that are beyond our perception, or *ghayb*, belong to God: they are known only to Him. A further prerequisite of such faith is belief in God's attributes: He alone is the Creator and Provider, and all blessings come from Him alone. Hence, gratitude is due to Him for all that He gives us. Moreover, He is the Almighty who grants us all our faculties, abilities and powers.

The *sūrah's* historical accounts confirm these issues and portray the fate of those who deny them and the happy end of those who believe in them. Immediately after the opening, we have a short account of Moses which describes his sighting of a fire as he travelled at night in the desert, his approach towards it and how he was addressed from on high. This account also documents the message Moses was required to deliver to Pharaoh. The *sūrah* then immediately proceeds to state that

Pharaoh and his people denied the truth of the signs God sent them, even though they knew in their hearts that these were true. In this context we are also told of the fate of those who knowingly deny the truth: *“Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers.”* (Verse 14) The Makkan unbelievers’ attitude towards the Qur’ān, which they knew to be truly God’s revelation was, in essence, no different than these earlier evildoers.

We then have a reference to the blessings God bestowed on David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). This precedes Solomon’s story with the ant, the hoopoe and the Queen of Sheba. The story highlights that David and Solomon were truly thankful for the favours God granted them, which included knowledge, a kingdom and prophethood. In addition, He made the *jinn* and the birds subservient to Solomon, willing to do his bidding. Again the story here highlights the basics of faith preached by all God’s messengers. The account gives special treatment to how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon’s message, contrasting this with the reception the Quraysh gave God’s message as preached by the Prophet Muhammad. Basically, the Quraysh denied the message, describing it as false, while the others accepted it. Yet it was God who gave Solomon all the knowledge, wealth and power he possessed. It is God who knows and owns everything. When compared with those of God, Solomon’s kingdom and knowledge were no more than a drop in the ocean.

Then follows an account of the Prophet Ṣāliḥ and the Thamūd. Of particular importance here is the conspiracy some of the evildoers among his people concocted against Ṣāliḥ and his household, plotting to kill him. It shows how God foiled their plot, saved Ṣāliḥ and the believers, and destroyed the Thamūd together with the conspirators: *“Their dwellings are now empty.”* (Verse 52) The Quraysh also plotted against the Prophet Muhammad, similarly conspiring to kill him at night.

The last historical account in this *sūrah* concerns Lot. It tells how his people planned to drive him and those who believed in him out of their town under the pretext that they *kept themselves pure*. It tells us of their end after Lot and his group left them to their fate: *“We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned.”* (Verse 58) The Quraysh also considered driving the Prophet out of their city, shortly before he migrated to Madinah.

Once these historical aspects are dealt with, the *sūrah* begins its comments with the verse: *“Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?”* (Verse 59) It then takes us on a descriptive round of some great universal scenes, as also some of the deeper aspects of the human soul. In this way, the *sūrah* shows us the work of the great Maker, Planner, Creator and Sustainer who alone knows what lies beyond the reach

of any created being's perception, and to whom we shall all return. It then tells us about one of the aspects that signal the coming of the Last Hour, adding some images of the Day of Judgement and the fate that awaits those who deny it.

The *sūrah* concludes on a note that fits well with its subject matter and ambience: *"I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God], and to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner. And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."* (Verses 91-93)

Throughout the *sūrah*, special emphasis is laid on knowledge, highlighting God's perfect knowledge of what is concealed and what is left public, particularly His knowledge of everything that lies beyond the reach of our perceptions. It also speaks about some of the universal signs which He reveals to us. It refers to the knowledge God granted David and Solomon, and how Solomon was taught the language of the birds, and how he humbly acknowledged such learning. Hence, at the beginning of the *sūrah* the Prophet is told: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) In the comments on the historical accounts the Prophet is instructed to say: *"None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead. Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verses 65-66) *"Indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verses 74-75) In conclusion we are told: *"He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) The story of Solomon begins as follows: *"For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants."* (Verse 15) Knowledge is given special emphasis in such verses, not least where Solomon says: *"We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) And also as the Hoopoe says: *"That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) When Solomon wanted the queen's throne to be brought to him, it was not the skilful *jinn* who brought it in the wink of an eye; the one who did was a person *"who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

Thus knowledge is the main feature that permeates the entire *sūrah*, from beginning to end, so as to highlight its special importance.

1

Revelations Bringing Happy News

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Tā Sīn. These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book; (1)

a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers (2)

who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come. (3)

As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction. (4)

These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers. (5)

Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing. (6)

طَسَّ ۚ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْقُرْآنِ وَكِتَابٍ
مُّبِينٍ ﴿١﴾

هُدًى وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢﴾

الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ
وَهُمْ بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ زَيَّنَّا لَهُمْ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ فَهُمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿٤﴾

أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَهُمْ سُوءُ الْعَذَابِ وَهُمْ فِي
الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ الْآخْسَرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

وَإِنَّكَ لَتَلْقَى الْقُرْآنَ مِن لَّدُنِّ حَكِيمٍ
عَلِيمٍ ﴿٦﴾

All by the Grace of God

The *sūrah* begins with two separate letters, *Ṭā Sīn*, as reference to the basic material of which the *sūrah* and the entire Qur'ān are composed. These letters are available to all Arabic-speaking people, yet they are all unable to compose anything like the Qur'ān: they have been challenged to do so, yet none has ever produced anything that approximates the excellence of the Qur'ān. These two letters are followed by a reference to the Qur'ān itself: "*These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book.*" (Verse 1) It should be noted that in the Arabic text the conjunction *wa*, which means 'and', occurs after the word 'Qur'ān', but in this usage it only means 'which is'. Describing the Qur'ān here as 'a book' provides a subtle element of comparison with how the unbelievers in Makkah received the book bestowed on them from on high and how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon's letter, which in this *sūrah* is also called a *kitāb*, meaning 'book'. Yet Solomon is no more than God's servant.

The Qur'ān, or the book, is then described as "*a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers.*" (Verse 2) This is more expressive than saying that it contains or provides guidance and joyful tidings. Indeed the way the description is phrased makes the very entity of the Qur'ān the guidance and the happy tiding. For certain, the Qur'ān provides guidance to believers in every way and every sense. It also gives them what brings happiness both in this life and in the life to come.

That the guidance and the happy news are given to the believers only is especially significant. The Qur'ān is not a book of theoretical or applicable science that yields all its benefits to whoever reads and understands it. The Qur'ān addresses hearts in the first instance and gives all its light and fragrance to an open mind which receives it with certainty and contentment. When a person's mind is refreshed with firm belief, it can better appreciate the Qur'ān and understand far more of its meanings than we can imagine. It brings about miraculous changes in this life as one adopts a new way of life and discards his old one. All the systems, legislation and values the Qur'ān promotes are based first and foremost on faith. Hence, a person who does not, deep at heart, believe in God or accept that this Qur'ān is revealed by God or that its contents represent the system God wants implemented in human life, cannot find the desired guidance in the Qur'ān and will not share in the joyful news it brings.

This book, the Qur'ān, contains inexhaustible treasures of guidance, knowledge and sound directives, but faith is the key to opening it all. Without this key, the Qur'ān does not yield its treasures to anyone. Hence those who truly believed in it were able to accomplish miracles. But when the Qur'ān was reduced to no more than chants set to charming tunes that people enjoyed hearing without touching their hearts, it remained an unopened treasure, incapable of achieving anything.

The *sūrah* outlines the qualities of those believers who find guidance and happy news in the Qur'ān. They are ones: *“who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come.”* (Verse 3) The first quality is to attend regularly to prayer, offering it as it should be offered, with their hearts and souls conscious of the fact that they are standing in front of God, in all His majesty. Thus they feel themselves in contact with His sublime presence, and their thoughts fully attentive to addressing and glorifying Him. Secondly, they pay their *zakāt*, which is the obligatory charity. When they pay it they purge their hearts of stinginess rising above the lure of wealth. They give their brethren some of what God has granted them, thus fulfilling their social duty towards their community. Finally, they firmly believe in the life to come, which means that their fate in the hereafter remains topmost in their thoughts. It prevents them from giving free rein to their desires and keeps the fear of God alive in their hearts. They dread lest they might be considered disobedient when they come before Him for judgement.

It is only such obedient believers who can hope for God's reward yet still dread His punishment. Only they, with their hearts open to the Qur'ān, can find its guidance and receive its happy news. For them, it is a light illuminating their lives, providing them with strong motivation for action. It is their only reliable guide and one to which they always refer.

Strong emphasis is placed on believing in the hereafter; this in the form of a stern warning to those who refuse to believe, and persist with their erring ways: *“As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction.”* (Verse 4)

Believing in the life to come is the motive that keeps whims and desires in check, urging us to lead a life of moderation. When such belief is lacking, a person cannot restrain himself from pursuing wanton desires, thinking that his only chance for indulging in pleasure is that offered in this life. Yet life on earth is scarcely long enough to fulfil a small portion of what people desire or hope for. Besides, when someone has the means to lead a life of indulgence, what can stop him from pursuing his wildest pleasures unless he has to reckon with standing before God, awaiting His judgement, reward or punishment? Indeed, a person lacking belief in the hereafter will inevitably pursue every pleasure within his ability. No sense of shame or check will restrain him. It is in the nature of human beings that they love pleasure unless they are guided by a divine message that tells them of a future, permanent life that follows this short one, and that the latter is but preparation for that future life. If they heed this guidance then they will find much greater pleasure in different types of pursuits.

It is God who has moulded human nature in this fashion, giving it the propensity to follow His guidance when it opens its receptive faculties to this, and the opposite

propensity to remain blind when it shuts such faculties down. His will is always done, in both situations. Hence, the Qur'ān says in reference to those who will not believe in the hereafter: *"We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction."* (Verse 4) They choose not to believe, and thus God's law comes into operation making their deeds seem fair and attractive to them. They cannot see any foul element in what they do and so remain unable to find a clear way leading them aright.

When evil is made to seem fair, the end result is well known: *"These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers."* (Verse 5) Whether suffering is meted out to them in this present life or in the life to come, they will have to face utter ruin in the hereafter. It will be their just recompense for pursuing what is evil.

The *sūrah's* opening is completed with a verse that re-emphasizes the divine source of the Qur'ān: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) The Arabic verb *tulaqqā*, which is rendered here as 'you receive', gives a sense of the Qur'ān being a sublime gift presented by the One who does everything wisely and plans everything on the basis of perfect knowledge. Indeed, His wisdom and knowledge are clearly seen in the Qur'ān; its mode, the duties it assigns and directives it gives, in the system it follows, in its revelation at the most appropriate time, in the flow of its component parts and in the harmony of its subject matter.

The *sūrah* then begins its historical accounts which provide a panoramic exhibition of aspects of God's wisdom, knowledge, planning and care.

2

Nine Miracles for Most

Moses said to his family: 'I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves.' (7)

But when he came close to it, he was addressed: 'Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (8)

'Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise! (9)

Now throw down your staff' But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. 'Moses, have no fear!' [Said God]: 'Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence. (10)

If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (11)

Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. [This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people.' (12)

إِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَهْلِهِ إِنِّي آنَسْتُ نَارًا
سَاءَتِ كُفْرًا مِنْهَا نَجْرٌ أَوْ آتِيكُمْ بِشِهَابٍ
قَبَسٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهَا نُودِيَ أَنْ بُورِكَ مَنْ فِي النَّارِ
وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٨﴾

يَمُوسَىٰ إِنَّهُ أَنَا اللَّهُ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

وَأَلْقِ عَصَاكَ فَلَمَّا رَآهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا جَانٌّ
وَلَّى مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ يَمُوسَىٰ لَا تَخَفْ
إِنِّي لَا تَخَافُ لَدَيَّ الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

إِلَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ ثُمَّ بَدَّلَ حُسْنًا بَعْدَ سُوءٍ
فَإِنِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

وَأَدْخِلْ يَدَكَ فِي جَيْبِكَ تَخْرُجَ بَيْضَاءَ مِنْ
غَيْرِ سُوءٍ فِي تِسْعِ آيَاتٍ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ
وَقَوْمِهِ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.'
(13)

Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers. (14)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ آيَاتُنَا مُبْصِرَةً قَالُوا هَذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

وَجَحَدُوا بِهَا وَاسْتَيْقَنَتْهَا أَنفُسُهُمْ ظُلْمًا
وَعُلُوًّا ۚ فَانظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Overview

This short and quick episode about Moses occurs immediately after God has assured the Prophet of his divine revelations: "Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing." (Verse 6) It is as though the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was being told that receiving such revelations was not a new phenomenon without precedent in history. Here, we see Moses being assigned his mission. He was called from on high to deliver the message to Pharaoh and his people. Similarly, the Prophet was told that the opposition he met with and the accusations levelled at him by his people were nothing new. Moses' people were certain at heart that the signs they were shown were the work of none other than God but, in their wicked arrogance, they nevertheless denied them. The end those evildoers of old met should be reflected upon, for his own people who were also stubborn in their rejection of the truth of the divine message could face a similar end.

Moses: A Favoured Messenger

"Moses said to his family: I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves." (Verse 7) This event, which is mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, took place when Moses was on his way back from Madyan to Egypt, accompanied by his wife, the daughter of Shu'ayb (peace be upon him).⁵ He apparently lost his way on a dark cold night. This is suggested by him saying to his wife that he would bring information or a torch to give them some warmth. This occurred close to Mount Sinai, called al-Ṭūr in Arabic.

⁵ We do not have any authentic statement confirming that the old man who employed Moses and had two daughters one of whom was married to Moses was in fact Shu'ayb. This is, however, a high probability, one given greater weight by the fact that whenever the Qur'ān mentions the two prophets, Moses' story follows that of Shu'ayb's which suggests that they occurred at the same time, or in quick succession.

Desert dwellers used to light fires on high ground so as to provide guidance to night travellers. When such travellers arrived at the fire, they would be given hospitality and warmth, or at least be guided on their way.

"I perceive a fire." This is what Moses first said on sighting the fire. The Arabic text uses the verb *ānast* for 'perceive' which carries connotations of friendliness. Thus, his words sound like: I can see a welcoming fire which should give us some comfort. We can ask directions which should tell us which way to go, and we could get a brand to warm ourselves. As Moses walked towards the fire, he received the call from on high: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed: Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!"* (Verses 8-9)

This is an address echoed by the whole universe, bringing together different worlds and cosmoses. All existence humbly submits to this call which shakes consciences and spirits. The heavens and earth perceive the strong bond linking them together, one which makes an insignificant particle of creation respond to the great Creator's call. Thus, a weak mortal is elevated, by God's grace, to a position from where he speaks directly to Him.

"When he came close to it, he was addressed..." (Verse 8) We note here the use of the passive voice, although the address is from a known source. Yet the passive formula is preferable because it implies reverence and glory for the Supreme Being making the address. *"Blessed are those in the fire and those around it!"* (Verse 8) Who were in the fire and who were around it? Most probably, it was unlike any fire we light. It was a fire coming from on high, lit up by angels who are pure, so as to give perfect guidance. It simply looked, at a distance, like a fire. Hence blessing is bestowed on the angels that were in and around it, including Moses who was moving closer towards it. The whole universe records this sublime gift, while the location remains a blessed one because God Almighty revealed His glory and bestowed His blessings there.

The universe also recorded the rest of the address: *"Limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!"* (Verses 8-9) Thus God gives Himself the sublime position of glory due to Him and declares His Lordship over all the worlds. He informs His servant that the One addressing him is God, the Almighty, the Wise. All humanity, represented by Moses, is thus elevated to an extraordinarily high position. Moses found the information he sought at the fire, but it was a great piece of information, and something he never expected. He also received the warming brand, but this was a gift guiding him to the right path. The address was one meant to confirm that Moses was chosen by God, but such choice entails a duty to carry a message to the most wicked of tyrants. Hence, his Lord began to prepare and equip him for his mission.

“Now throw down your staff” (Verse 10) In this case the whole thing is given in a nutshell. We have little of the long discourse mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, *Ṭā Hā*, because the emphasis here is laid on the call to Moses and his assignment. *“But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back.”* (Verse 10) When he did as he was told and threw down his staff, he saw it come alive, writhing at speed like a small but fast-moving snake. His spontaneous nature caught up with him as he was totally taken by surprise. He could never have thought the staff would be so transformed on simply being thrown down. Hence, he ran away, with no thought of going back to take a further look at this serpent. His whole reaction suggests complete and utter surprise.

Yet he was soon reassured when the call from on high resumed. This now told him of the nature of his assignment: *“Moses, have no fear! [Said God]: Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence.”* (Verse 10) He is told that he is entrusted with a message from God, and God’s messengers entertain no fear in the presence of their Lord, as He informs them of their duties.

“If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful.” (Verse 11) Only those who do wrong should be afraid. However, those of them who replace wrong with good, abandoning injustice, evil and unbelief, making sure to replace them with justice and faith, and doing righteous deeds will receive God’s grace and forgiveness.

Moses is now reassured and calm. Therefore, his Lord gives him his second miracle before even telling him about his mission or its nature: *“Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish.”* (Verse 12) Again, Moses did as he was told, putting his hand through the top opening of his robe, and then bringing it out brilliant white. He had no skin disease. What happened was another miracle. God promised to support him with nine miraculous signs of the type of which he had just seen two. At this point Moses is also told of his assignment, for which he has been given such preparation. *“[This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people.”* (Verse 12)

Here, the *sūrah* does not provide any details of these nine signs, though they are mentioned in *Sūrah* 7, *The Heights*. These were the years of drought, crop shortages, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. The lack of detail in this instance indicates that the emphasis here is on the miraculous nature of these signs, and the stubborn refusal of Pharaoh’s people to acknowledge them and take heed: *“But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: ‘This is plain sorcery.’ Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers.”* (Verses 13-14)

Thus they were given numerous signs to bring the truth clearly before their eyes.

Indeed these signs are described here as '*light-giving*' which is rather an inadequate rendering of the Arabic adjective, *mubṣirah*, which means 'endowed with insight', as if the signs themselves can see the people and lead them to divine guidance. Yet they described these signs as '*plain sorcery*'. Although deep inside they were convinced that these were true signs confirming the truth of the message, they nevertheless repeated such claims out of '*their wickedness and arrogance*.' Yet '*within their souls they knew them to be true*.' Their attitude was one of stubborn rejection because they did not seek proof. They just did not want to believe, thus doing the truth they recognized profound injustice.

The same was true of the Quraysh elders. They were certain of the truth of the Qur'ān, but they persisted in denying it and rejecting the Prophet's call to believe in God alone. They wanted to continue with their false beliefs because of the privileges and gains they felt would be threatened if they were to abandon their religion. They realized that such gains and privileges depended totally on their false beliefs and that Islam was sure to do away with them. They felt their position to be very shaky, compared with the clear truth of Islam.

Such is the truth. Its rejecters do not deny it out of ignorance. They deny it because they know it to be the truth and realize that it threatens their interests and privileges. Hence, they deliberately reject it.

"Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers." (Verse 14) The end Pharaoh met is well known, and the Qur'ān tells us about it in other *sūrah*s. Here we have only this brief reference to it, as it may cause avowed opponents of the truth to reflect on the lessons of the past. It may, perchance, alert them to take heed before they too suffer a similar fate.

3

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: 'All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants.' (15)

Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].' (16)

Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks. (17)

At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' (18)

He smiled joyously at her words, and said: 'My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.' (19)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا دَاوُدَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ عِلْمًا وَقَالَا
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي فَضَّلَنَا عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّنْ
عِبَادِهِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمَانُ دَاوُدَ ۖ وَقَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا
النَّاسُ عَلَّمْنَا مَنطِقَ الطَّيْرِ وَأُوتِينَا مِنْ
كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ۖ إِنَّ هَذَا هُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿١٦﴾

وَحُشِرَ لِسُلَيْمَانَ جُنُودُهُ مِنَ الْجِنِّ
وَالْإِنْسِ وَالطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَتَوْا عَلَىٰ وَادِ النَّمْلِ قَالَتْ نَمْلَةٌ
يَأْتِيهَا النَّمْلُ آدْخُلُوا مَسْكِنَكُمْ لَا
تَحْطِمَنَّكُمْ سُلَيْمَانُ وَجُنُودُهُ وَهُمْ لَا
يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

فَتَبَسَّمَ ضَاحِكًا مِّن قَوْلِهَا وَقَالَ رَبِّ
أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتَ
عَلَيَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا
تَرْضَاهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِي بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِي عِبَادِكَ

He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? (20)

I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless he brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence]. (21)

But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. (22)

I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. (23)

I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. (24)

That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal; (25)

God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.' (26)

Said [Solomon]: 'We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. (27)

الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَتَفَقَّدَ الطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِيَ لَا أَرَى

الْهُدَاهُ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

لَأُعَذِّبَنَّهُ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا أَوْ لَأَذْنَحُجَّهُ

أَوْ لِيَأْتِنِي بِسُلْطَنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾

فَمَكَثَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطْتُ بِمَا لَمْ

حُطِّ بِهٖ وَجِئْتُكَ مِنْ سَبَإٍ بِنَبَأٍ يَقِينٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

﴿٢٣﴾

إِنِّي وَجَدْتُ امْرَأَةً تَمْلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيَتْ مِنْ

كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهِيَ عَلَى عَرْشٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَجَدْتُهُمْ وَاقِفَةً يُسْجُدُونَ لِلشَّمْسِ مِنْ

دُونِ اللَّهِ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَعْمَلَهُمْ

فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ فَهُمْ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

﴿٢٦﴾

أَلَّا يَسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ الَّذِي خَرَجَ الْحَبَّ فِي

السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُخْفُونَ وَمَا

تُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢٨﴾

﴿٢٩﴾

قَالَ سَنَنْظُرُ أَصَدَقْتَ أَمْ كُنْتَ مِنَ

Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return.' (28)

[The Queen of Sheba] said: 'Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. (29)

It is from Solomon, and it reads, "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: (30)

Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God]." (31)

Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present.' (32)

They said: 'We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command.' (33)

Said she: 'When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. (34)

Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back.' (35)

الْكَذِبِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

أَذْهَبَ بِكِتَابِي هَذَا فَأَلْقَاهُ إِلَيْهِمْ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّى
عَنْهُمْ فَأَنْظُرْ مَاذَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

قَالَتْ يَتَأْتِيهَا الْمَلَأُوْا إِنِّي أُلْقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَابٌ
كَرِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

إِنَّهُ مِنْ سُلَيْمَانَ وَإِنَّهُ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ
الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿٣٠﴾

أَلَّا تَعْلَمُوا عَلَيَّ وَأَتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالَتْ يَتَأْتِيهَا الْمَلَأُوْا أَفْتُونِي فِي أَمْرِي مَا
كُنْتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمْرًا حَتَّى تَشْهَدُونِ ﴿٣٢﴾

قَالُوا لَحْنُ أَوْلُوا قُوَّةٍ وَأَوْلُوا بِأَسِ شَدِيدٍ
وَأَلْأَمْرُ إِلَيْكَ فَانظُرِي مَاذَا تَأْمُرِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

قَالَتْ إِنَّ الْمُلُوكَ إِذَا دَخَلُوا قَرْيَةً
أَفْسَدُوهَا وَجَعَلُوا أَعِزَّةَ أَهْلِهَا أَذِلَّةً
وَكَذَلِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَإِنِّي مُرْسِلَةٌ إِلَيْهِمْ بِهَدِيَّةٍ فَنَاظِرَةٌ بِمِ

When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: 'Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. (36)

Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.' (37)

Solomon said: 'Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' (38)

Said an efreet of the jinn: 'I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' (39)

But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: 'I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.' When he saw it standing before him, he said: 'This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self-sufficient, most generous.' (40)

He [then] said: 'Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided.' (41)

يَرْجِعُ الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَ سُلَيْمَانَ قَالَ أَتُمِدُّونَنِ بِمَالٍ
فَمَا آتَيْنَاكَ اللَّهُ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا آتَيْنَاكَ بَلْ
أَنْتُمْ بِهَدْيِكُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

أَرْجِعْ إِلَيْهِمْ فَلَنَأْتِيَنَّهُمْ بِنُجُودٍ لَا قِبَلَ لَهُمْ
بِهَا وَلَنُخْرِجَنَّهُمْ مِنْهَا أَذِلَّةً وَهُمْ صَاغِرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

قَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَيُّكُمْ يَأْتِينِي بِعَرْشِهَا
قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

قَالَ عِفْرِيتٌ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ
قَبْلَ أَنْ تَقُومَ مِنْ مَقَامِكَ وَإِنِّي عَلَيْهِ
لَقَوِيٌّ أَمِينٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

قَالَ الَّذِي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ مِّنَ الْكِتَابِ أَنَا
آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَرْتَدَّ إِلَيْكَ طَرْفُكَ
فَلَمَّا رَأَاهُ مُسْتَقَرًّا عِنْدَهُ قَالَ هَذَا مِنْ
فَضْلِ رَبِّي لِيَبْلُوَنِي أَأَشْكُرُ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ وَمَنْ
شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ
رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤١﴾

قَالَ نَكِّرُوا لَهَا عَرْشَهَا نَنْظُرْ أَتَهْتَدِي أَمْ

So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: 'It looks as though it were the same.' [Said Solomon]: 'We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves to God. (42)

Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation.' (43)

She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: 'It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!' She said: 'O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself, with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (44)

تَكُونُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْ قِيلَ أَهَكَذَا عَرْشُكَ ۗ قَالَتْ
كَأَنَّهُ هُوَ ۗ وَأُوتِينَا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهَا وَكُنَّا
مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَصَدَّهَا مَا كَانَتْ تَعْبُدُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّهَا
كَانَتْ مِنْ قَوْمٍ كَافِرِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

قِيلَ لَهَا ادْخُلِي الصَّرْحَ ۗ فَلَمَّا رَأَتْهُ
حَسِبَتْهُ لُجَّةً وَكَشَفَتْ عَنْ سَاقَيْهَا ۗ قَالَ
إِنَّهُ صَرْحٌ مُّمَرَّدٌ مِّن قَوَارِيرَ ۗ قَالَتْ رَبِّ
إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ
لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Overview

In this passage we have a short reference to David and a more complete account of Solomon, following immediately after the short episode of Moses. All three were prophets sent to the Children of Israel. Yet these stories occur in a *sūrah* that opens with a description of the Qur'ān. Later it says: "This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree." (Verse 76)

As related here, Solomon's story provides far more details than anywhere else in the Qur'ān, but it concentrates only on one episode which relates what he did with the hoopoe and with the Queen of Sheba. A preamble to the story quotes Solomon as he declares to all people that God has granted him the ability to talk to birds and understand their speech, and He has further given him of all things. He expresses his thanks to God for such clear favours He has bestowed on him. We then see him inspecting a procession that included humans, *jinn* and birds, before we note a warning given by one ant to its community lest they be stamped upon. Solomon understands the ant's discourse and again he expresses his gratitude to God. He

realizes that such favours constitute a test, and he prays to God that he will be successful in this test.

These stories of Moses, David and Solomon are perhaps the most important in the history of the Children of Israel. They fit well with what the *sūrah* says in its opening about the Qur'ān which, in turn, explains to the Children of Israel most of their disputes. Furthermore, the details given here about Solomon are especially suited to the subject matter of this *sūrah*. This is clearly apparent in several instances. Firstly, the whole *sūrah* lays great emphasis on knowledge. The first words regarding David and Solomon are: *"We granted knowledge to David and Solomon."* (Verse 15) Solomon's address begins with a reference to his knowledge of the language of the birds: *"We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) As the story progresses, the hoopoe excuses itself for its absence: *"I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information."* (Verse 22) Besides, the one who brings the queen's throne to Solomon in no time is *"the one who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* opens with a reference to the Qur'ān, God's clear and elucidating book sent to the unbelievers, yet they refuse to believe and adopt an incredulous attitude. In Solomon's story, reference is made to the epistle he sent the Queen of Sheba. It does not take long before she and her people declare their belief in and submission to God. She did so when she saw the superior powers given to Solomon, making the *jinn*, humans and birds subservient to him. But it was God who placed these and other powers under Solomon's command. God has sway over all His creation, and He is the Lord of the truly magnificent throne.

The *sūrah* also looks at a variety of God's favours granted to people, and a variety of signs He has placed in the universe. It refers to the fact that He has placed man in charge of the earth but most men deny His signs, refusing to believe in Him or show their gratitude. Solomon, however, is an example of a truly grateful servant, who appeals to his Lord to guide him to be truly thankful. Enjoyment of his favours does not corrupt his upright nature, nor does the power at his command lead him to tyranny or transgression.

The passage about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is a very good example of the Qur'ānic art of story telling. The story is full of movement and action, rich in feeling and scenery. Highlighting certain images and separating them with suitable gaps are two more aspects of the unique method of the Qur'ān.

A Brief Reference and a Detailed Account

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All

praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants.
(Verse 15)

This is the starting signal that opens the story. It reports on the most important favour God granted to David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). As for David, the details of what knowledge God imparted to him are given in other *sūrah*s. These include his fine and enchanting recitation of Psalms which was echoed by the universe around him. The mountains and the birds sang God's praises with him because of the sweetness of his voice, his profound sincerity and deep feeling as he addressed his Lord. All barriers and impediments between him and the universe were removed. He was skilled in making protective garments which were particularly useful in war. Iron and sharp, tough objects were softened for him so that he was able to use them the way he liked. He was also taught how to judge between people, which was a favour also shared by Solomon.

The *sūrah* also gives us an account of some of the favours God granted Solomon, particularly his knowledge of the speech of birds and other creatures. This is in addition to what is mentioned in other *sūrah*s, such as his ability to judge in intricate disputes, and the fact that the winds were made subject to his command, by God's grace.

The story begins with the reference to knowledge: "*For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon.*" (Verse 15) Before the verse concludes we are told of their thanksgiving to God for this favour. They stress the great value and benefit of knowledge, and declare their praise of God for it. Thus, the value of knowledge is enhanced, and it becomes clear that people with knowledge are favoured highly.

We are not told here of the type or speciality of the knowledge given to these two prophets because the emphasis is on knowledge in its entirety. This gives us the further connotation that all knowledge is a gift from God, and that it behoves every person of knowledge to know the source of such knowledge. This makes all those endowed with knowledge turn to God, praising Him, and motivates them to use their knowledge in ways that please the great Giver. Thus, knowledge, which is an aspect of God's favour, does not turn people away from God. Any knowledge that does so is deviant, moving away from its source and missing its goal. Nor does it bring happiness to the one who possesses it. Instead, it brings only misery, fear, worry and destruction.

Today humanity has achieved a good standard in a particular branch of science, being able to induce nuclear fusion and use nuclear energy. But what has humanity benefited by such knowledge whose possessors neither remember, fear or praise God, nor use their knowledge in His service? What result has humanity reaped other than the horrific tragedy of nuclear bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and

Nagasaki, and the worry and fear of destruction that people in the West and the East experience?⁶

The story then progresses concentrating on Solomon only: *“Solomon inherited David. He said: ‘O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].’”* (Verse 16) David was given kingship alongside prophethood and knowledge, but it is knowledge, rather than kingship, that is mentioned in this context because being a king is too trivial by comparison.

It is clear that the inheritance intended here is that of knowledge, because it is the main blessing which deserves mention. This is confirmed by Solomon’s declaration to his people: *“O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things.”* (Verse 16) He highlights the fact that he has been taught the language of birds, and mentions other favours in a general way, but he attributes both to the same source, which is not David, his father. Indeed, none of this did he inherit from his father.

Removing the Barriers of Nature

“O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things.” (Verse 16) Thus Solomon announces to all people that these are aspects of God’s favours granted to him. He seeks no special position as a result. Indeed, he describes such favours as they truly are: *“This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].”* (Verse 16) It is a favour that makes its source known to all. No one can teach the language of birds to man other than God, and no one can give anyone a measure of all good things except God.

Birds, animals and insects have their own means of communication, which are in fact their languages. God, the Creator of all these says: *“There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own.”* (6: 38)

⁶ After two bombs were dropped on Japan, a member of the industrial authority working on production of the British bomb, and who was a professor at the University of Birmingham, wrote: “I am certain that it will not be long before the production of bombs, with greater explosive power, perhaps by 10,000 tons or more, and then there will be bombs with explosive power reaching one million tons. Nothing will ensure protection against such bombs, six of which will be sufficient to wipe England off the face of the earth.” His prediction has been fulfilled, and the great powers have produced bombs so powerful that they make the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem no more than children’s toys. Perhaps we should mention here that the Hiroshima bomb immediately killed between 210,000 and 240,000 other than causing burns and disfigurement to scores of thousands of people. * It should be remembered that this was written in 1954, when the arms race was in full swing. The author does not give the source of his quotation, and the name of the professor is written in Arabic letters only, making it very difficult to identify him with any degree of accuracy. — Editor’s note.

They cannot form communities unless they have ties and bonds which they maintain, and some means of communication with which to understand each other. This is clearly observed in many species of bird, animal and insect. Biologists who are interested in certain species try hard to understand a little of their languages, but they can only rely on guesswork which does not approach any degree of certainty. What God granted to Solomon was something special, a miracle that goes beyond the laws of nature familiar to man. The knowledge he acquired was not through any attempt he had made to understand these species; it was a gift from God.

It is important to emphasize this point so as to make it clearly understood. Some contemporary commentators on the Qur'ān are too impressed by modern scientific achievements. Hence they try to explain what the Qur'ān says about Solomon as similar to the attempts by biologists to understand the methods of communication used by birds and animals. Thus, they force the miracle God granted to Solomon out of its nature. They also give scientific discoveries a degree of importance far greater than what they deserve. It is perfectly easy for God to teach one of His servants the languages of birds, animals and insects, as a special favour, and without any effort on that person's part. This does not require more than the lifting of some barriers God has placed between different species when He created them all.

Yet this is only one part of the miracle God granted to Solomon, His servant. The other part was that a number of the *jinn* and birds were placed under his command, serving him like human servants would. Moreover, the birds thus placed under him were given special faculties far greater than ordinary birds of the same species. This is clearly apparent in the story of the hoopoe who was able to understand the situation at the Queen of Sheba's court as clearly as a most intelligent and religious person. This is again a miraculous aspect.

It is a fact that the law God has set for His creation allows birds a measure of understanding that may vary, but this measure remains well below what man understands. That birds have their own form is merely part of the overall balance maintained in the universe. It is subject to the general law of creation.

Another fact is that a hoopoe living today is exactly the same as other hoopoes that have lived on earth for a very long time. Its genes are such that they make it, practically, a clone of the first hoopoe. Whatever adaptations the hoopoe has gone through does not enable it to move on to a higher species. This is clearly part of the system and balance God has set for His creation.

The two facts mentioned above cannot preclude the working of a miracle whenever God, the Creator of all species and laws governing them wants it. The miracle itself may be a part of the overall law of creation, which we do not know in full. If it is, then this part occurs at the time appointed for it, which is known only to

God. As it occurs, it transcends the natural laws familiar to man, but it thus complements the divine laws of creation and balance. This explains how Solomon's hoopoe came into existence, and perhaps all the birds that were placed under Solomon's command at that time.

A Majestic Procession for Solomon

"Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks." (Verse 17) This is a big procession in which are marshalled all troops, *jinn*, human and bird. Naturally, men are well known to us, but the *jinn* are creatures about whom we know nothing more than what God has said in the Qur'ān. They were created from flames, and can see us while we cannot see them: *"Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them."* (7: 27) [The reference in this verse is to *Iblīs*, or Satan, who belongs to the *jinn*.] They are able to prompt people and tempt them to take evil and sinful actions. We do not know how this takes place. We also know that a group of them believed in God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He did not meet or see them, but God informed him of what happened: *"Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a group of the jinn listened [to the Qur'ān]', and said: 'We have listened to a wonderful discourse that guides to what is right, and so we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate any partners with our Lord.'"* (72: 1-2) We also know that God made some of them serve Solomon, making for him whatever he wished of sanctuaries, statues, and large cauldrons for cooking. They also dived into the sea for him, and did his bidding. Some were in his procession side by side with humans and birds.

We say that God placed under Solomon's command only a section of the *jinn*, birds, and humans. Thus it is clear that not all people on earth were his subjects, because his kingdom stretched over an area that includes today's Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, up to the Euphrates. Similarly, not all *the jinn* or birds were under his command; rather it was a section of each type.

In support of this view about the *jinn* we cite the fact that *Iblīs*, or Satan, and his offspring belong to the *jinn* as the Qur'ān states:

When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command." (18: 50) God also says about Iblīs: "who whispers in the hearts of mankind, from among jinn and mankind. (114: 5-6)

Thus *Iblīs* and his offspring who all belonged to the *jinn* continued to whisper in people's hearts tempting them to sin during Solomon's reign. Had they been placed

under his command, they would not have been able to do so since he was a prophet advocating what is right. Hence, it is clear that only a section of them were loyal to Solomon.

In support of our view concerning the birds, we say that Solomon learnt of the hoopoe's absence when he inspected the birds. Had all birds, including all hoopoes, been placed under him, they would have been marshalled in his procession, and he would never have been able to discover the absence of one hoopoe among millions of hoopoes, and many millions of birds. He would not have wondered: "*Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe?*" (Verse 20) Indeed, this question suggests that it was a particular hoopoe which he identified. It might be that it was the only hoopoe under Solomon's command, or that it was the one in a group of hoopoes whose duty was to take part in that particular procession. What supports this view is that we soon realize that the hoopoe in question was gifted with an understanding that transcends what hoopoes and all birds normally possess. Such gifts must have been granted to those placed under Solomon's command, and not to hoopoes and birds in general. Indeed, the hoopoe in the story appears to have a gift of understanding matched only by intelligent and God-fearing humans.

So, this great procession was ready before Solomon, "*and they were all lined in orderly ranks,*" so that there would be no chance of disorder. They are described as 'troops' in the verse to indicate the orderly nature of the procession.

At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' He smiled joyously at her words, and said: My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.' (Verses 18-19)

So the procession moved forward in an orderly manner, until they reached a valley where ants were in plenty. In fact the *sūrah* describes the place as a valley of ants. At this point, an ant supervisor made an announcement to all other ants in the vicinity. It should be remembered that, like bees, ants live in complex social colonies in which different ants have different functions and duties that are organized according to an elaborate system that we might find too difficult to emulate, despite our superior intelligence. So, the supervisor ant announced in the manner of communication used by ants that they should hasten back to their dwellings, so that Solomon and his troops would not crush them unawares.

Solomon understood what she said and was pleased. His pleasure was two-fold: he smiled at her words like an adult smiles to a child who tries to evade him, fearing

that the adult wants to punish him when he has no such intention. Plus he was gratified that God has given him this gift which opened up for him worlds that are normally closed to mankind. He was also joyful at the fact that ants should have such understanding, with the ability to give orders and carry them out.

When Solomon gathered what the ant said, *he smiled joyously at her words.*' Yet he soon realized what had just happened. He realized that it was all a great gift God had granted him, lifting the barriers that separate different types of creation. He therefore turned to God in acknowledgement of His favours: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents."* (Verse 19) It is a direct address to his Lord, one that expresses the feeling that He is so close to him. He wants his whole being: organs, feelings and thoughts; heart, mind and tongue; words, actions and directions; talents, abilities and energies to be brought together to offer thanks for all the favours bestowed on him and his parents. Solomon's prayer indicates how profound his appreciation of God's grace was. He felt that God's blessings overwhelmed his whole being as also his parents'. Hence, he wanted to give due thanks with his whole being: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents."* (Verse 19)

"And that I may do righteous deeds which will please You." (Verse 19) To do good deeds is also a blessing from God to which He directs those who are genuinely grateful for His gifts. Solomon, a truly grateful servant of God who prays for His help so that he would wholeheartedly express his gratitude, also prays to Him to guide him to do what will earn His pleasure.

"And include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants." (Verse 19) Solomon knows that to be included among God's righteous servants is an aspect of God's mercy. When it is bestowed on a servant of God, it guides him to do righteous deeds, and thus he is included in this best group of God's servants. We note that Solomon, a prophet at whose disposal God placed large sections of *jinn*, birds and people, does not take anything for granted. He fears lest his deeds or thanksgiving might not be up to the standard expected of him. This is a case of refined sensitivity that enhances Solomon's aspiration to gain God's pleasure and receive His mercy. It is expressed at the moment God's grace is brought into view, as when the ant's warning to other ants focuses attention on God's grace that made Solomon understand her speech.

We see here two miracles, not one. The first is Solomon listening to the ant and understanding her warning to her community. The second is the ant's awareness that the approaching people were Solomon and his troops. We know that the first pertains to what God taught Solomon, a man and a prophet. Comparatively speaking, this is more probable than the second miracle which is clear in the ant's words. An ant may recognize that the approaching procession consists of gigantic

creatures who could easily crush tiny ones like ants if they step on them. Prompted by the survival instinct God has given them, ants may flee such a danger. But for an ant to recognize Solomon and his troops is miraculous indeed.

The Story Unfolds

All this was a prelude to Solomon's story with the Queen of Sheba in which the hoopoe plays an important role. The story is told in six scenes with certain aspects deliberately left out, but which do not impair our understanding. Indeed, these gaps serve to enhance the artistic beauty of the story. Furthermore, some scenes carry a commentary, alerting us to their spiritual significance and enhancing the moral portrayed. These stylistic features combine in such a way as to ensure the perfect harmony of the verses.

Since the reference to Solomon began by mentioning the *jinn*, humans and birds, as well as highlighting the importance of knowledge, the story gives roles to all three aspects of creation, thus showing the value of knowledge. It is as if the opening verses deliberately identify the key actors in the story. This, then, is one of the Qur'an's finer artistic features in storytelling.

As told in the *sūrah*, the story paints the personal and distinctive features of the main characters: Solomon, the queen, the hoopoe and the queen's courtiers. It portrays the different reactions from these characters in the various situations presented.

The first scene begins with the military parade, after the procession has passed the valley of the ants:

He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless He brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence]. (Verses 20-21)

We see Solomon, a prophet and a king, marshalling his troops, and inspecting the birds only to discover the hoopoe's absence. We understand that this is a special hoopoe, with a specific position assigned to it in the procession. It was not just one of thousands or millions of hoopoes on the face of the earth. We note that Solomon was alert enough to miss a mere soldier in the great multitude composed of *jinn*, men and birds. His enquiry is of the type that befits a commander: it is flexible, looking at the different possibilities: "*Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees?*" (Verse 20)

It soon becomes clear to all that the hoopoe is absent without permission. The

matter needed to be dealt with firmly so as to keep matters under control, particularly because its absence was no longer a secret. Hence, Solomon threatens the absent hoopoe: *"I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him."* (Verse 21) But Solomon is not a tyrant; he is a prophet. He does not issue a final judgement on the hoopoe before listening to what it has to say in its defence. Therefore, we immediately see Solomon as a just ruler: *"Unless he brings me a clear warrant,"* to justify his absence.

The curtains are drawn here, or maybe the scene continues as the hoopoe arrives. He carries an important and surprising piece of news for Solomon, as also for us who are observing events as they unfold:

But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.' (Verses 22-26)

The hoopoe is fully aware of the king's firm and serious demeanour. Therefore, he begins his report with a surprise that overshadows the fault of his absence and ensures that the king will listen to him: *'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you.'* What king would not listen when one of his subjects tells him that he has learnt something that he could not know? Now that the hoopoe has the king's attention, it proceeds to give the news he brought from Sheba, in Yemen. He mentions first that *"I found there a woman ruling over them,"* and he further adds that *"she has been given of all good things,"* which tells that her kingdom was affluent, powerful and civilized. Furthermore, the queen's *"is a magnificent throne."* (Verse 23) She sits on a magnificent couch which indicates the presence of skilled workers. The hoopoe adds that he found both the queen and her people *"prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God."* (Verse 24) He explains that these people had erred because Satan had deceived them, making their deeds seem fair to them. Thus, they are bereft of guidance, and as such they do not worship God Almighty *"who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 25) *What is hidden'* refers to everything that is concealed, including the rain from the sky and the plants of the earth. It also includes the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He also *"knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) This mirrors what is hidden in the heavens and earth as it

refers to what is hidden within one's own soul.

Until this point the hoopoe remains in the position of someone who has broken the rules and is still awaiting the king's judgement. Hence, it concludes the news it brought with a reference to God Almighty, the Lord of all, and the Lord of the magnificent throne, to which no human throne can be compared: "*God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.*" (Verse 26) This reference is meant as a reminder to the king so as to moderate his attitude as he remembers God's great power. It is, in short, a subtle appeal for compassion.

What we see here is a remarkable, intelligent hoopoe who has faith. He presents what he saw very skilfully, aware of its position, and relying on subtle expression. It understands that the woman is a queen and the people around her are her subjects, and it is fully aware that they prostrate themselves before the sun, instead of God. It also knows that such worship should be offered only to God who is the Lord of all the universe. This is not how hoopoes generally look at matters and understand them. Such understanding by a hoopoe is indeed miraculous.

Exchange with a Powerful Queen

Solomon does not judge the matter hastily. He is not too thrilled with the news brought by the hoopoe. He wants to be sure before taking any action. This is the appropriate course to follow by a fair prophet and a wise king:

Said [Solomon]: We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return. (Verses 27-28)

At this point the contents of the letter are not revealed. They are left until it is delivered when interest is at its highest.

The curtains are drawn here. When they are lifted again, we are in the presence of the Queen of Sheba, after the letter has been delivered to her. She is in consultation with her advisers:

[The Queen of Sheba] said: Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God].'(Verses 29-31)

As she tells them of the letter we gather that most probably she did not know how the letter was delivered or by whom. She uses the passive voice in her report of its

delivery. Had she known that it was a hoopoe who delivered it, as some commentaries on the Qur'an suggest, she would surely have reported this as a remarkable and extraordinary event. Nevertheless, she describes the letter as "worthy", either because of its shape, appearance, the seal it bears or because of its contents which she reports to her advisers: "It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God].'" (Verses 30-31) She did not worship God, but the whole region knew about Solomon and his status. Besides, the language of the letter was clear, decisive and to the point.

What the letter stated was very clear, simple and powerful. It began with the name of God, the Most Merciful, and made a single demand: that the queen and her people must not take a hostile or belligerent attitude towards its sender; rather, they should go to him declaring their submission to God, in whose name he addressed them.

Having reported on the letter and its contents, the queen requested advice, declaring that she would not make a decision without their consultation and consent: "Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present." (Verse 32) Thus she appears to be a very wise queen. It is clear at the outset that she was greatly impressed by the letter, yet she also appears serious and decisive. She imparted this to her advisers by describing the letter as 'worthy'. It is clear that she wants neither opposition nor belligerency. She does not say this openly; instead, she prepares the way for it by the line she takes. She then requests their advice.

As is customary with courtiers, they declared their readiness to do whatever was demanded of them, but they left the final decision to the queen: "They said: We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command." (Verse 33)

Now we see the woman, rather than the queen, expressing her feelings. A woman instinctively hates war and the destruction it brings in its wake. Therefore, she decides to seek peace and conciliation rather than resistance and conflict:

Said she: When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back. (Verses 34-35)

The queen is fully aware that when kings occupy a city or a country, they wreak havoc, destroying everything, so as to break all resistance. In particular, they target its chiefs, seeking to humiliate them as they are the ones who put up resistance. This is clearly the habit of all domineering kings. She is also aware that a gift wins hearts and emphasizes friendship. It may also remove the threat of war. Hence, her

approach was certainly worth a try. If Solomon accepted the gift, then he was after something that belonged to this world. She would then know that normal worldly means would be effective. If he refused the gift, then it was all a question of faith which he would pursue with diligence, accepting no compromise.

This scene is concluded at this point. When the curtains are lifted again we see the queen's emissaries delivering her gift to Solomon who takes them to task for thinking that they could buy his peace with money, seeking to divert him from calling on them to believe in God. He announced his final ultimatum, in clear and powerful terms:

When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.' (Verses 36-37)

His answer derides money, scorning its use in a situation that involves advocacy of the faith, where it can be of no use: *"Is it gold that you would give me?"* Are you making me such a trivial offer? *"What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you."* (Verse 36) He has given me things that are far superior to wealth; namely, knowledge, prophethood and the service of the *jinn* and birds. No material thing, rich as it may be, holds any attraction for me: *"Yet you rejoice with your own gift."* (Verse 36) Such worldly luxuries may please the likes of you who have no bond with God and who do not receive His gifts.

He follows this with a new ultimatum, saying to the queen's envoy: *"Go back to them,"* and take your gift with you. Tell them to await their inevitable defeat: *"We shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match."* (Verse 37) Such forces have never been placed under any person's command. The queen and her powerful army are no match for them. *"And we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled."* (Verse 37)

The curtains are drawn, and the envoys are dismissed. The *sūrah* does not add a further word about them. It is as if the whole matter is settled and needs no further comment.

Waiting for the Queen

We now see Solomon fully aware that his answer will settle the matter with the queen, whom he realized had no wish for conflict. Indeed, he felt that she was likely to respond to his call. The *sūrah*, however, does not mention how her envoys

returned, what they said to her, and how she made up her mind. There is a gap here, but we learn from what comes afterwards that she planned to go to Solomon, and that he was aware of her intention. Hence, he discusses with his commanders how to bring him her throne which she had left well guarded in her palace:

Solomon said: "Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?" Said an afreet of the jinn: I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.' (Verses 38-40)

What was Solomon's objective behind bringing her throne before she arrived and declared her submission to God? Most probably he wanted to show her some aspect of the superior power placed at his command. This was likely to win her heart and influence her to believe in God.

An afreet from among the *jinn* offered to bring the throne to him before he had finished the session he was attending. It is reported that he sat from morning till noon to judge in disputes that were put to him. Apparently, Solomon felt that this was too long a time to wait. Therefore, a person 'who was deeply versed in the Book' offered to bring it in the twinkling of an eye. The *sūrah* does not mention the name of that person, nor does it say which was the book known to him. We understand, however, that he was a believer who had a strong bond with God, and had some divine secret that allowed him to use something of the great power that transcends barriers and distances. This is something that at times occurs to some people with very strong faith. No explanation is offered for it, because it goes beyond what is familiar to people. This, then, is all that we can say without delving into the realm of legend and superstition.

Some commentators on the Qur'ān add certain details. Some say that the book mentioned in the verse is the Torah; others say that the person knew God's greatest name; and others still have offered yet more suggestions. None of these, however, gives us any explanation that carries any degree of certainty. Yet the matter is much simpler than all such explanations. Countless are the secrets we know nothing about in the universe around us, and numerous also are the powers that we do not use ourselves. Indeed, within the human soul there are many secrets and powers that we cannot fathom. When God wants to inform any of His servants of one of these secrets or powers that person will accomplish something of a miraculous nature that goes beyond what is familiar. It is all accomplished by God's will and design. No one other than a true servant of God will be able to accomplish such feats.

The person in Solomon's story who is described as *deeply versed in the Book* was

able, by the knowledge imparted to him, to use some secret or power that enabled him to accomplish the miraculous bringing over of the queen's throne to Solomon. His knowledge of the Book established a bond between him and his Lord that made him able to do what was required.

Some commentators suggest that this was Solomon himself, but we think it was more likely that it was a different person. Had it been Solomon, the *sūrah* would have mentioned this given that the whole story is about him. There would have been no need to withhold his name at this remarkable juncture. Some say that his name was Assaf ben Berachia, but we have no evidence to support this.

When he saw it standing before him, he said: This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self sufficient, most generous. (Verse 40)

Solomon was clearly in awe of God's majesty as He fulfilled his requests in such a supernatural way. He also felt that such grace constituted a serious test for him personally. To pass such a test successfully he would need to be very alert, as also need help from God. He also needed to recognize God's favours and to be genuinely grateful for them. Needless to say, God needed no thanks from anyone, but the one who thanks God for His favours does so for his own good, because his thanks ensure that more favours will come his way. In this way, then Solomon would be better able to pass the test. As for those who are ungrateful, they should know that God has no need of them or their gratitude; He is most generous, granting favours and expecting neither return nor gratitude.

A Confrontation of Sorts

Now Solomon continues preparing some surprises for the Queen of Sheba whom he expected would arrive shortly: *"He [then] said: Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided."* (Verse 41) He wanted the distinctive features of her throne to be changed, so as to gauge her intelligence and alertness. Would she be able to recognize it, or would the change confuse her such that she could not see it?

Perhaps Solomon wanted to test her presence of mind and her reaction at the point of surprise as she saw the throne. Therefore, we are presented with a picture of the queen with Solomon: *"So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: 'It looks as though it were the same.'"* (Verse 42) This was a shock for the queen. She could have never thought it possible that the throne she was looking at

was her own. She had left it in her own country, where it was well guarded. What could bring it to Jerusalem, Solomon's capital? Who could bring it and how? Yet she could see that it was hers, despite the alterations. Should she deny this on the basis of the realities of the situation, or should she say that it was hers, considering all the similarities? Her answer was thoughtful and clever: *"It looks as though it were the same."* (Verse 42) She neither denied nor confirmed it. In fact her answer is indicative of a sharp intelligence and quick presence of mind.

We have here another gap which suggests that she was informed of the surprise and its secret. In reply she said that she was already prepared to surrender herself to God from the moment she had decided to come to Solomon after he had turned down her gift: *"We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves."* (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* then explains what prevented her from believing in God up to that point and what had turned her away from surrendering herself to God when Solomon's letter was first delivered to her. She had grown up in the midst of an unbelieving people. Her worship of creatures that were far from equal to God, such as the sun, actually prevented her from worshipping Him alone: *"Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation."* (Verse 43)

Solomon had already prepared another surprise for the queen, which thus far remains hidden from us. With the first one, we were told of it before it actually occurred, but here the method is different:

She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: "It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!" She said: 'O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (Verse 44)

This surprise consisted of a palace made of glass, and its floor placed above water so as to appear like a lake. When she was asked to enter the palace, she thought that she was meant to walk through the lake and so lifted her skirts to bare her legs. The surprise was then complete. Now Solomon tells her its secret: *"It is but a court smoothly paved with glass."* (Verse 44) The queen stood agape, perfectly amazed at such wondrous accomplishments that defy human capabilities. She recognized that Solomon had been given superior powers. Therefore, she turned to God acknowledging her past error, declaring that she had wronged herself when she worshipped others, and announcing her submission, not to Solomon, but with him, *"to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 44)

Thus her heart had interacted with divine guidance and benefitted by its light. She

realized that surrendering to God did not mean her submission to anyone of His creatures, not even to Solomon, the prophet and the king who had been given all these miracles. True surrender is to God, the Lord of all the worlds, being in companionship with those who believe in Him and who advocate His message, on the basis of equality.

The *sūrah* highlights this point in order to clarify the nature of belief in God and surrender to Him. It imparts the sort of dignity that raises the vanquished to the ranks of the victors, such that they become brothers in faith. In fact, there are no vanquished or victors. How can there be when they are truly brothers, tied by the bond of faith, feeling their equality in God's sight?

The elders of the Quraysh who opposed the Prophet in Makkah felt it far beneath them that they should be under Muhammad's leadership. Here we see a woman of the past teaching them that Islam places the advocate of the divine message and those who are addressed by that advocate on the same basis. Leader and subordinates are equals, treated in the same way. People simply respond to God's Messenger and submit with him to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Plotting to Kill a Prophet

To the Thamūd We sent their brother, Ṣāliḥ, and he said: "Worship God alone', but they split into two contending factions. (45)

Said [Ṣāliḥ]: "My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?" (46)

They answered: "We augur evil from you and those that follow you.' Said he: "The evil you augur can come only from God. You are indeed people undergoing a test.' (47)

There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. (48)

They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth."' (49)

They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ ثَمُودَ أَخَاهُمْ صَالِحًا أَنِ
اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ فَإِذَا هُمْ فَرِيقَانِ
تَخْتَصِمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

قَالَ يَاقَوْمِ لِمَ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ قَبْلَ
الْحَسَنَةِ لَوْلَا تَسْتَغْفِرُونَ اللَّهَ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

قَالُوا أَطَّيَّرْنَا بِكَ وَبِمَن مَّعَكَ قَالَ
طَبَّرُكُمُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ تُفْتَنُونَ
﴿٤٧﴾

وَكَانَ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ تِسْعَةُ رَهْطٍ
يُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا يُصْلِحُونَ
﴿٤٨﴾

قَالُوا تَقَاسَمُوا بِاللَّهِ لَنُبَيِّتَنَّهُ وَأَهْلَهُ ثُمَّ
لَنَقُولَنَّ لِوَلِيِّهِ مَا شَهِدْنَا مَهْلِكَ أَهْلِهِ
وَإِنَّا لَصَادِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

وَمَكْرُوا مَكْرًا وَمَكْرْنَا مَكْرًا وَهُمْ لَا

perceive it. (50)

Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, (51)

and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing. In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge. (52)

And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing. (53)

يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

فَأَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ مُكْرِهِمْ أَنَّا
دَمَّرْنَاهُمْ وَقَوْمَهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

فَتِلْكَ بُيُوتُهُمْ خَاوِيَةٌ بِمَا ظَلَمُوا إِنَّا
فِي ذَلِكَ لَأَيَّةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

وَأَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَكَانُوا
يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Overview

In the majority of cases when an account of the history of the Prophet Ṣāliḥ and the Thamūd is given, it constitutes part of a series of histories involving the Prophets Noah, Had, Lot and Shu`ayb. Sometimes we also have an account of Abraham. In this *sūrah*, particular emphasis is given to prophets sent to the Children of Israel: Moses, David and Solomon. We have no account of Hūd, Shu`ayb or Abraham.

In the present account of Ṣāliḥ we have no mention of the she-camel which was the miracle given to him. Instead, we are given the episode involving nine wicked people who plotted to assassinate him and his household. They conspired against him when he was totally unaware, but God foiled their scheming, destroyed them and their community, leaving the homes of the wrongdoers empty to serve as a lesson to following generations. He saved those who believed and led God-fearing lives. The idolaters in Makkah often passed by the destroyed dwellings of the Thamūd, yet still they did not take heed.

Precipitating Evil

“To the Thamūd We sent their brother, Ṣāliḥ, and he said: “Worship God alone’, but they split into two contending factions.” (Verse 45) In this verse the whole message Ṣāliḥ conveyed to his people is summed up in one point, “worship God alone,’ which is the basis of the divine message to mankind throughout all generations, and with all prophets and messengers. Although everything around man in the universe and

within man himself urges belief in this fundamental truth, humanity lived for countless generations denying or deriding this basic and simple fact. It continues to deliberately evade it today, taking divergent routes that lead it away from the right and straight path.

The *sūrah* mentions the attitude of Ṣāliḥ's people after he had endeavoured to persuade them to believe, but they split into two factions: one that responded to him and the other who opposed him. The latter formed the majority, as we are told elsewhere in the Qur'ān.

We then have a gap in the story, which is common in Qur'ānic narration, and we sense that those who denied Ṣāliḥ's message tried to hasten God's punishment against which he had warned them, rather than praying for God's guidance and mercy. In this they were the same as the Quraysh who also precipitated God's punishment. Ṣāliḥ criticized their attitude and tried to direct them to seek God's forgiveness, so that they might receive His mercy: *"Said [Ṣāliḥ]: My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?"* (Verse 46)

The hearts of unbelievers can reach such a level of corruption that they appeal to God, saying: *"God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us."* (8: 32) They say this rather than praying to God to guide them to believe in the truth He has revealed. While this verse refers to what the Quraysh said, Ṣāliḥ's people said something similar, rejecting their prophet's appeals that they should repent, seek God's forgiveness and pray for His mercy. They even justified their irritation with him and his followers by saying that they constituted a bad omen and that they expected evil to befall them as a result of their presence: *"They answered: We augur evil from you and those that follow you."* (Verse 47)

The Arabic text uses the verb *iṭṭyrynā*, rendered here as *'we augur evil'*. It refers to the different superstitious habits of ignorant people who refuse to accept the clarity of faith. In Arabia a person who was about to take a serious decision would scare a bird. If the bird flew towards the right rather than the left, the man felt optimistic about his decision and went ahead with it. If the bird flew to the left, the man would be gloomy, expecting evil. Needless to say, birds know nothing of the world that lies beyond our perception. Their spontaneous flight cannot tell us anything about the unknown. But it is ingrained within human nature that it cannot live without something unknown to which it attributes what lies beyond its knowledge and ability. When it does not attribute this, through faith, to God who knows all that lies beyond the reach of any creature's perception, it attributes it to legend and superstition that know no limit and follow no logic.

Many are those who deny God, and refuse to attribute to Him what lies beyond human perception, describing it as religious fallacy, while claiming for themselves a superior standard of knowledge. At the same time they attach much importance to the number 13, or to a black cat crossing their path, or to lighting two cigarettes with one match, or other such superstitious notions. This is indicative of the way people resist human nature and its need for faith. Indeed human nature cannot dispense with faith in its attempt to explain many universal phenomena which human knowledge has not yet fathomed. Indeed some of these will always remain beyond the reach of human knowledge, because they exceed human ability which is given to man in accordance with what he needs for the fulfilment of his task of building life on earth.

When Ṣāliḥ's people stated their stupid excuse, one which betrayed their superstitious confusion, Ṣāliḥ put the truth clearly before their eyes: *"Said he: The evil you augur can come only from God."* (Verse 47) Everything that relates to your fortunes, future and destiny lies with God. He has set certain rules, commanded people to comply with His laws, and set clear before them the way to ensure their happiness. Whoever follows divine guidance will have its good results, without any need to scare a bird in order to decide what path to follow. Those who deviate from His guidance will reap evil results, even though their scared birds may reassure them by the direction of their flight.

"You are indeed people undergoing a test." (Verse 47) You are certainly being tested with whatever happens to you, good or bad, and with God's bounty that is given to you. Therefore, to stay alert, study events and recognize that they are part of the trial that will ensure good results which can never be achieved through pursuing omens.

True faith makes people evaluate things properly, motivates them to reflect on what takes place all around them. It makes them realize that it all happens by God's will, while nothing is the result of blind coincidence. Thus, life increases in value and people attain a higher spiritual standard. Man makes his journey through life on this planet without any isolation from the universe around him, or its Creator who conducts its affairs, or the laws of nature operated by God to ensure the continuity of the universe.

This sound approach is, however, accepted only by sound hearts which have not been twisted by irrevocable deviation from the truth.

Among Ṣāliḥ's people there were nine leaders who were irreconcilable in their opposition to his call. Hence, they plotted against him and his family:

There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him

and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth."
(Verses 48-49)

These nine people had left no room in their hearts for the truth and its message. They were determined to bring matters to a head after they found Ṣāliḥ's argument overpowering. Hence they devised a plot. Most singularly, they agreed under oath by God to kill Ṣāliḥ and his family under the cover of darkness. All this when he asked nothing other than that they believe in God and worship Him alone. It is also singular that they should not only swear to kill him and his family, but that they were also intent on denying any knowledge of the crime. *"We are indeed telling the truth."* They would kill them in darkness, and as such they would not see the killing and hence would not be witnesses to it.

What a stupid, shallow trick! Yet they used it to reassure themselves and justify their lies. It is certainly singular that such people were so keen to sound truthful given the circumstances. When it is blinded to God's guidance which shows the straight path, human nature betrays countless such twists and deviations.

So they schemed and plotted, but God was watching them, aware of their scheming: *"They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not perceive it."* (Verse 50) The gap between the two schemes, and the two powers behind them is too far to bridge. Yet often are those who have power deceived by their resources, oblivious to the watching eye that never sleeps. They do not reckon with God's power as it takes them suddenly and from where they do not expect: *"Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing."* (Verses 51-52)

It is only a brief moment yet destruction engulfs them, leaving their homes empty with no soul surviving. A moment earlier they had been scheming their evil plot. The *sūrah* deliberately portrays the two scenes in quick succession, in order to highlight the devastating element that takes unawares those plotters who are deceived by their power, thinking their scheme perfectly worked out.

"In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge." (Verse 52) The *sūrah* as a whole and its comments on the stories it relates repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge.

Following this image of surprise punishment, the *sūrah* then mentions that those believers who were conscious of God and feared Him were saved: *"And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing."* (Verse 53) A person who fears God is spared other fears.

It is clearly stated in a sacred *ḥadīth* that “God will not allow two types of fear to afflict a believer.’ Thus, a believer who truly fears God will fear no one else.

Perversion Leading to Ruin

And Lot said to his people: 'Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? (54)

وَلُوطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ أَتَأْتُونَ
الْفَاحِشَةَ وَأَنْتُمْ تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people.' (55)

أَإِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّنْ دُونِ
النِّسَاءِ ۚ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

His people's only answer was: "Expel Lot's people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure.' (56)

﴿٥٦﴾ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِ إِلَّا أَنْ
قَالُوا أَخْرِجُوا آلَ لُوطٍ مِّنْ قَرْيَتِكُمْ
إِنَّهُمْ أَنَاسٌ يَّتَطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. (57)

فَأَنْجَيْنَاهُ وَأَهْلَهُ إِلَّا امْرَأَتَهُ قَدَّرْنَا مِنْهَا مِنَ
الْغَابِرِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned. (58)

وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ مَطَرًا ۖ فَسَاءَ مَطَرُ
الْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Persecuting Purity

What we have here is a summarized version of Lot's history and the decision taken by his people to drive him out of their town because he denounced their perverted sexual practices. By so indulging unashamedly in homosexuality, they perverted human nature which God had installed in all human beings, and indeed in living species generally.

This was a strange phenomenon in the history of human communities. Perversion can occur with individuals, as a result of psychological disorders or temporary circumstances, leading men to have sex with other men. This happens mostly in army barracks where women are not allowed, or in prisons where inmates are held for long periods of time, having to cope with sexual desires without contact with women. But for such practices to be widespread, becoming the norm in a whole town, and despite the presence of women and marriage possibilities, it is most peculiar indeed.

God has made human nature such that the two sexes are attracted to each other, because life in general is based on marriage. He says in the Qur'ān: *"Limitless in His glory is He who has created all the pairs out of whatever the earth produces, and out of people's own selves, and out of that which they have no knowledge."* (36: 36) Thus all living species, plant, animal, human and other creatures unknown to man, are created in pairs. Such duality seems fundamental in the make up of the entire universe, let alone living species. The atom itself, which until now seems to be the basic unit of all creatures, has protons and electrons, which are positive and negative charges.

The reality is that the survival of all living things is based on the mating between two opposites. Even species that do not have males and females combine their male and female cells in the same unit, reproducing by a function that brings both together.

Since mating is basic for reproduction, God has made mutual attraction between the opposite sexes part of the essence of nature, which needs no acquisition or development through education or thought: it is pure instinct. This ensures that life continues naturally, because those who are alive find their pleasure in the fulfilment of their nature. Thus the divine will accomplishes its design through the natural satisfaction of creatures' instinctive desires. God made male and female genitals, and instilled mutual attraction between the two sexes, so that they find their natural pleasure in being together. He made no such possibility in two males coming together. Hence it is most odd that the natural inclinations of a whole community should become so perverted and without any compelling need pushing people to do what is contrary to their natural inclinations, as was the case with Lot's people.

Lot publicly denounced his people's practices stating that these were depraved: *"And Lot said to his people: Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people."* (Verses 54-55)

His first sentence wonders at their abominable practice when they actually saw that life, in all shapes, forms and species, follows its natural course, while they were the ones behaving oddly. In his second sentence he makes clear what type of

abomination they practised. It is enough to state what they did so as to highlight its perversion and conflict with nature. Lot then describes them as grossly ignorant, using the word in both its senses: lacking knowledge and being foolish. A person who does not know what human nature is like is devoid of all knowledge, and one who deliberately departs from human nature is a stupid fool who transgresses against all that is right.

What was Lot's people's reply to his denunciation of their wrongdoing and his urging them to revert to natural practices? In a nutshell, they planned to drive him, and those who followed him, away, for no reason other than that they maintained their purity: *"His people's only answer was: 'Expel Lot's people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure.'" (Verse 56)*

Their statement ridiculed anyone who sought to keep himself pure of such abominable practice. It also objected to his disapproval of their practice. They were so deep in their deviation that they could not realize how filthy their practice was. Their reply also indicated their opposition to the very idea of keeping themselves pure, because that would make them refrain from such perversion. Whatever they meant, they had nonetheless made up their minds to remove Lot from the picture. God, however, wanted something different to happen:

So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned. (Verses 57-58)

The *sūrah* does not provide any detail of this destructive rain, as occurs in other *sūrahs*. Hence, we do not need to discuss it here. We will only mention that they were destroyed with a rain, when rain normally brings life. This fits with the fact that they used semen in a way that is contrary to what it is meant for, which is to ensure the continuity of life and growth. God certainly knows better what He means by His words, and what to accomplish by His natural laws.

Of God's Own Making

Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him? (59)

Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice. (60)

Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge. (61)

Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect! (62)

قُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَسَلَامٌ عَلَىٰ عِبَادِهِ الَّذِينَ
أَصْطَفَىٰ ۗ ءَآلَهُ خَيْرٌ مَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

أَمَّنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَأَنْزَلَ
لَكُمْ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَنْبَتْنَا بِهِ
حَدَائِقَ ذَاتِ بَهْجَةٍ مَّا كَانَ لَكُمْ
أَنْ تُنْبِتُوا شَجَرَهَا ۗ ءَآلَهُ مَعَ اللَّهِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ
قَوْمٌ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

أَمَّنْ جَعَلَ الْأَرْضَ قَرَارًا وَجَعَلَ خِلَالَهَا
أَنْهَارًا وَجَعَلَ لَهَا رَوَاسِيَ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَ
الْبَحْرَيْنِ حَاجِزًا ۗ ءَآلَهُ مَعَ اللَّهِ ۚ بَلْ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

أَمَّنْ يُجِيبُ الْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكْشِفُ
السُّوءَ وَيَجْعَلُكُمْ خُلَفَاءَ الْأَرْضِ ۗ ءَآلَهُ
مَعَ اللَّهِ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him. (63)

Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God?' Say: "Produce your proof, if you are truthful." (64)

Say: "None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead." (65)

Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. (66)

The unbelievers say: "What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]? (67)

We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (68)

Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty." (69)

Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. (70)

أَمَّن يَهْدِيكُمْ فِي ظُلْمَتِ الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ
وَمَنْ يُرْسِلُ الرِّيحَ بُشْرًا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ
رَحْمَتِهِ ۗ أَعَلَيْهِ مَعَ اللَّهِ تَعَلَى اللَّهُ عَمَّا
يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

أَمَّن يَبْدُوهُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَرْزُقُكُمْ
مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ أَعَلَيْهِ مَعَ اللَّهِ قُلْ
هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

قُلْ لَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
الْغَيْبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ
يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

بَلِ أَدْرَاكَ عِلْمُهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ ۗ بَلْ هُمْ فِي
شَكٍّ مِّنْهَا ۗ بَلْ هُمْ مِّنْهَا عَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ۖ أَءِذَا كُنَّا تُرَابًا وَّءَابَاؤُنَا
أِنَّا لَمُخْرَجُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

لَقَدْ وَعَدْنَا هَذَا نَحْنُ وَّءَابَاؤُنَا مِن قَبْلُ
إِن هَذَا إِلَّا أَسْطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا تَكُن فِي ضَيْقٍ مِّمَّا

They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?" (71)

Say: "It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you." (72)

Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. (73)

And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. (74)

There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book. (75)

This Qur'an explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. (76)

And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. (77)

Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. (78)

So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. (79)

يَمْكُرُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هَذَا الْوَعْدُ إِن كُنْتُمْ

صَادِقِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾

قُلْ عَسَى أَنْ يَكُونَ رَدِفَ لَكُمْ بَعْضُ

الَّذِي تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ

أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمْ وَمَا

يُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَمَا مِنْ غَائِبَةٍ فِي السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا فِي

كِتَابٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَاقُصُّ عَلَىٰ بَنِي

إِسْرَائِيلَ أَكْثَرَ الَّذِي هُمْ فِيهِ

يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

وَإِنَّهُ هُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِي بَيْنَهُمْ بِحُكْمِهِ ۗ وَهُوَ

الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٧٩﴾

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (80)

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (81)

When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. (82)

On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. (83)

And when they come forth [God] will say: 'Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' (84)

And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. (85)

Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. (86)

فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّكَ عَلَى الْحَقِّ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّكَ لَا تَسْمَعُ الْمَوْتَى وَلَا تَسْمَعُ الصُّمَّ الدُّعَاءَ إِذَا وَلَّوْا مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

وَمَا أَنْتَ بِهَادِي الْعُمَىٰ عَنِ ضَلَالَتِهِمْ إِنْ تَسْمَعُ إِلَّا مَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِآيَاتِنَا فَهُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

وَإِذَا وَقَعَ الْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ أَخْرَجْنَا لَهُمْ دَابَّةً مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ تُكَلِّمُهُمْ أَنَّ النَّاسَ كَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا لَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشُرُ مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ فَوْجًا مِّمَّنْ يُكَذِّبُ بِآيَاتِنَا فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءُوا قَالَ أَكَذَّبْتُمْ بِآيَاتِي وَلَمْ تُحِطُوا بِهَا عَلِمًا أَمْ أَذًا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَوَقَعَ الْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ بِمَا ظَلَمُوا فَهُمْ لَا يَنْطِقُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

الْمَ يَرَوْنَ أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ لَيْسَكُنُوهُ فِيهِ

On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. (87)

And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. (88)

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. (89)

And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: "Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?" (90)

[Say]: 'I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. (91)

And to recite the Qur'ān.' So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner." (92)

And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is

وَالنَّهَارَ مُبْصِرًا ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ
لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُنْفَخُ فِي الصُّورِ فَفَزِعَ مَنْ فِي
السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِلَّا مَنْ شَاءَ
اللَّهُ ۚ وَكُلُّ أَتَوْهُ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

وَتَرَى الْجِبَالَ تَحْسَبُهَا جَامِدَةً وَهِيَ تَمُرُّ
مَرَّ السَّحَابِ ۚ صُنِعَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَتَقَنَ كُلَّ
شَيْءٍ ۚ إِنَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

مَنْ جَاءَ بِالْحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُ خَيْرٌ مِمَّا وَهُمْ مِّنْ
فَزَعٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ ۚ آمِنُونَ ﴿٩٠﴾

وَمَنْ جَاءَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ فَكُبَّتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ فِي
النَّارِ هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

إِنَّمَا أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ رَبَّ هَذِهِ الْبَلَدَةِ
الَّذِي حَرَّمَهَا وَلَهُ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ ۚ وَأُمِرْتُ
أَنْ أَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾

وَأَنْ أَتْلُوا الْقُرْآنَ ۚ فَمَنْ أَهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا
يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ ۚ وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَقُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا

never heedless of what you do.' (93)

مِنَ الْمُنذِرِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ سَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَتَعْرِفُونَهَا
وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَفِيلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

Overview

Following closely after those episodes of the histories of Moses, David, Solomon, Ṣāliḥ and Lot (peace be upon them all), this final passage is closely related to its opening verses. As clearly seen, the stories that occur in between the opening and concluding passages are also closely related to both. Every story serves an aspect of the overall issue that the *sūrah* tackles. This final passage begins with praising God and offers the greeting of peace to His chosen prophets and messengers who include in their ranks many that have not been mentioned in this *sūrah*. Thus, the passage begins a new discussion of faith. This round portrays scenes of the universe and shows aspects of the inner self, and things that are beyond our world. It also refers to the signs that announce the approach of the Last Hour, and shows scenes of the hereafter and the hardship people experience on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, apart from those excepted by God, all creatures in the heavens and the earth dread the arrival of the Last Hour.

In this passage people are made to contemplate what they see in the universe around them, and also what is within themselves. They cannot deny these and cannot explain their existence unless they acknowledge God as the sole Creator who has planned it all and who is able to accomplish His purpose in full. These scenes are shown in succession, with a perfect rhythm, rendering all counter argument futile. Successive questions are put to them: who has created the heavens and the earth? Who brought rain from the skies to bring forth pleasant gardens? Who has stabilized the earth, caused rivers to run through it, placed mountains on it and a barrier between seas? Who responds to a supplicant praying in desperation and removes harm? Who causes human succession on earth? Who guides you in the darkness on land and at sea? Who sends the wind heralding His grace? Who originates and repeats creation? Who provides sustenance for you from the heavens and the earth? Time after time they are hammered with the question: can there be another deity alongside God? They cannot utter such a claim, yet they worship objects claiming for them a share of God's divinity!

The passage then looks at their denial of and confusion about the hereafter. It comments by directing them to reflect on the end met by earlier communities which,

like them, denied the truth. This is followed by a scene of the resurrection and what it involves of fear and hardship. It returns them for a moment to life on earth before resuming its account of the Day of Judgement, as if to shake their hearts and souls.

As the passage approaches its end it acquires an awesome rhythm. Having directed the unbelievers' attentions to scenes of the universe and the horror of the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet abandons them to their fate which they have chosen, defining his own code and method: *"I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this City who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit, and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner."* (Verses 91-92)

The passage and the round conclude in the same way they started: with praising God, the only One who is worthy of praise. The unbelievers are left to their Lord who is sure to show them His signs, and who is certainly aware of all they do in public and in private: *"And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."* (Verse 93)

Who Else?

Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him? (Verse 59)

In this verse God orders His Messenger (peace be upon him) to say the most suitable word with which to open and conclude his discourse preaching God's message. All praise be to God who deserves praise for all the blessings He has bestowed on His servants, not least guiding them to believe in Him and follow the system and code of living He has chosen for them. Thereafter, a greeting of peace is offered to His servants whom He has chosen to deliver His message and outline the system He wants implemented.

Following this opening, the *sūrah* highlights its effects on hearts that deny God's signs. It begins with a question that admits only one answer: *"Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?"* (Verse 59) These false deities may be statues and figures, angels or *jinn*, or some other created being. None of them, however, aspires to a position of being similar to God Almighty, let alone to being more worthy than He. No one endowed with a mind to think could ever draw such a comparison. Hence the question appears to ridicule their position, or rebuke them for what they say. It is not a question to be asked in earnest, nor does it require an answer.

Therefore, a different question is put to them, derived from the nature of the universe around them and what they see of it:

Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice. (Verse 60)

The heavens and the earth are undeniable facts, yet no one can claim that other deities have created them, when such deities are nothing but statues, angels, devils, stars or planets. Simple facts are enough to show the fallacy of such a claim. None of the idolaters in Arabia made the absurd claim that the universe came into existence by itself, without a creator, like latter day unbelievers do. Hence, it was sufficient to remind people of the existence of the heavens and earth, and to direct them to reflect on who had created them. This was sufficient to prove the case of faith and show unbelief as something truly absurd. This question, however, does remain valid. The creation of the heavens and earth in the way they are, with deliberate planning clearly evident, could never have come about by blind coincidence. Indeed, the perfect harmony apparent in the heavens and the earth forces any thinking person to acknowledge that it is all the work of the One and only God. Indeed, God's oneness is evident through His work: there is one harmonious design running throughout the universe, with a single nature and direction. Hence, it must have been made by the One originator whose aim is clear in everything He creates and designs.

"Or, who is it that... sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow." (Verse 60) Rain is also a clear undeniable fact. One cannot be explained in any way other than acknowledging the Creator of the heavens and earth. He enables all in accordance with a system that permits the sending down of rain, in set quantities that allow for the emergence of life as it is. None of this could have come about by coincidence or accident. It is because of meeting such special needs that the Qur'an uses the phrase *"sends down for you..."* The Qur'an directs people's attentions to the fine effects of sending rain in suitable measure to meet their needs: *"With which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty." (Verse 60)*

Gardens warm hearts with endearing vigour and activity. To look at natural beauty is enough to bring hearts alive. To contemplate all the aspects of creation in gardens is sufficient to make a person glorify the Maker of such inimitable beauty. Indeed, even the best artists fall short of matching the colours of just a single flower. The use of shades of the same colours, the intricate lines and the arrangement of little petals within the same flower appears to be a miracle that defies the ingenuity of all

art. Add all this to the miracle of growth reflected in trees, and you have a secret the human mind cannot fathom: *"You could have never caused such trees to grow."* (Verse 60) For certain, the secret of life remains unknown to all humanity. Up to this moment in time, no one has been able to say how life started and how it was attached to plants, animals and people. To have a proper answer, we need to refer to some source beyond our visible world.

When the *sūrah* dwells on life growing in delightful gardens, and by means of this heightening interest and causing reflection, it surprises its listeners with the question: *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 60) No one can claim that there is. All have to admit the fact. Hence, their attitude of equating their alleged deities with God and worshipping them on an equal footing appears to be most unjust: *"Nay, they are people who swerve from justice."* (Verse 60)

The Arabic word *ya`dilūn* used in this verse to describe these people carries two meanings. The first means 'to equate', which renders the sentence as "Nay, they are people who equate,' meaning equating others in their worship with God. The other meaning is the one chosen in our translation, which is *"to swerve from justice."* Thus, by associating others with God in their worship they actually swerve from justice. This because God is the only One worthy of worship: He is the only Creator. Whichever meaning we choose, however, makes their action derisive.

The *sūrah* then highlights another universal truth, placing it to the forefront of their vision:

Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge. (Verse 61)

The preceding verse spoke about the fact of the heavens and earth's creation. This verse refers to how the earth was made. God has made it stable, steady and solid so that it can support growing life. If the earth's position in relation to the sun and moon, or its shape, size, atmosphere, speed of rotation or orbital movement, or the speed of the moon as it circles it in orbit, or any other aspect which could not have come about by coincidence, were different to what it actually is, the earth would not sustain life.

Those unbelievers who were first addressed by the Qur'ān could not understand the meaning of *"who is it that made the earth a stable abode"*. But they realized that it was, overall, a very suitable abode for the emergence and continuity of life. They could not claim that any of their alleged deities had a part in the earth's creation. This is sufficient for them. Thereafter, the question remains open for future generations

who, with increased knowledge, would be better able to appreciate its great significance. This is an aspect of the Qur'ānic miracle as it addresses all standards of intellect, generation after generation.

“Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst.” (Verse 61) In relation to the earth, rivers are the veins that carry the fluid of life. They are everywhere, running north and south, east and west, bringing fertility and growth. Rivers are the result of rain water gathering and running according to local geography. The Creator of the universe is the One who has determined the formation of clouds, rain and rivers. No one can say that anyone other than this single Creator has taken part in forming the universe. Running rivers are a phenomenon seen by the unbelievers themselves. So who has made them? *“Could there be any deity alongside God?”*

“And has set upon it firm mountains.” (Verse 61) The mountains are placed firmly in their positions. They are often the starting points of rivers, as rain water runs from them at high speed to the valleys below so as to form the riverbeds in which water flows. Thus the firm mountains provide contrast with the running water in this panoramic scene. Contrasting images are often employed in the Qur'ān.

“And has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water?” (Verse 61) These two bodies of water are the salty seas and the rivers carrying sweet water. Both have water as their main material. The barrier between them is a natural one which prevents the sea from overpowering the river and spoiling its water. The level of water in rivers is higher than sea level, and this causes the barrier between them despite the fact that many rivers wind their way to the sea. Nevertheless, the riverbed remains unaffected by the sea. Even when a river's water level drops below sea level, the barrier remains effective, due to the different degrees of viscosity of the two waters. River water is lighter than sea water, which helps to keep them separate. This is one aspect of God's elaborate design in creating the universe.⁷

Who has done all this? *“Could there be any deity alongside God?”* When we look at the unity of design we cannot but acknowledge the unity of the Creator. *“Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge.”* (Verse 61) Knowledge is mentioned here because this universal fact needs knowledge to be properly contemplated and for its meticulous aspects to be made clearly apparent to all. Moreover, knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah*, as we have already explained.

⁷ Scientific discovery confirms that when straits connect two contiguous seas their waters are separated by an invisible barrier, each containing different marine life. The Qur'ānic statement also applies to such situations. In the Arabic text, the word used for 'body of water' is *baḥr*, which means sea, but it is used in the dual form to mean a sea and a river, or two seas. — Editor's note.

Who Takes Care of Man?

Next, the *sūrah* tells them about themselves:

Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect! (Verse 62)

As it tells them about their inner thoughts and real position, this verse speaks to peoples' consciences. When a person finds himself in real distress, expecting little help from anywhere, he resorts to none other than God to remove his distress. This is especially so when the distress is too much to cope with; when the help one had been expecting from friends and relatives fails to materialize; when one looks around only to find oneself in a hopeless situation with no means of escape; when no power, not even one's own, is able to do much to relieve one's distress; when whatever one has prepared for hard times proves useless. In such a situation human nature wakes up and appeals to the only power that can provide help and support. Man then appeals to God, even though he had forgotten Him in times of ease and plenty.

It is only God, and none other, who responds to a person in distress and removes ill and hardship. It is God who restores security to such a person and removes all that has been afflicting him.

In times of ease and plenty people are oblivious of this fact. They try to find support and protection with some worldly power, flimsy as such may be. Yet when distress and hardship are too strong, their nature regains insight and they turn back to their Lord, seeking His forgiveness and support.

The Qur'ān directs stubborn opponents of faith to this fact that lies in their nature. It incorporates this with the indisputable facts of the universe, such as the creation of the heavens and earth, rain, plant growth, man's firm abode on earth, the mountains, rivers and the barrier between river and sea water. That a person in distress appeals to God for help is also a fact of life which is no less true than any of these.

The *sūrah* continues to direct their feelings to realities in their life: "*And makes you inherit the earth?*" Who is it that allows people to take charge of the earth? It is God who initially placed mankind in charge of the earth, and then made them succeed one another, generation after generation. It is He who created them in accordance with laws of nature that allow their existence on earth, and granted them talents and abilities that prepare them for their great task of building life on earth. These laws make the earth what it is, providing them with a suitable abode, and produce harmony and complementarity in the whole universe so as to provide and maintain the balance that promotes life and ensures its continuity. Should any of the many

existing conditions be disturbed, life on earth becomes impossible.⁸

Besides, it is God who has determined life and death, to allow one generation to succeed another. Had earlier generations continued to live, the earth would be too small for them and their descendants. Life, civilization and thought would have become stale and slow, as the succession of generations promotes new thinking and experimenting. Had too many generations been allowed to live together, conflict and dispute would have increased exponentially.

All these are facts we find within the human soul, in the same way as the facts mentioned earlier exist in the universe. Who brought about their existence? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 62) They certainly forget or choose to be oblivious. *"Little do they reflect."* (Verse 62) Had man reflected on such facts, he would maintain his bond with God as it was originally. He would not have been oblivious of it, and he would never have associated partners with God.

The *sūrah* then refers to other indisputable facts that represent human life and activity on this planet:

Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him.
(Verse 63)

People, including the first community to be addressed by the Qur'ān, move along beaten tracks when they travel on land or by sea, and they try to discover the secrets of land and sea through experimentation. They are guided to their goals, but who guides them? Who has placed in them the powers of understanding and recognition? Who has enabled them to be guided by stars, other devices and landmarks? Who has established a link between their own nature and that of the universe, and between their powers and its secrets? Who has given their ears the ability to catch and recognize sound; and their eyes to receive light; their senses to perceive sensations? Who has given them the intelligent faculty we call "mind" in order to benefit by what it receives, and to gather and build upon experience? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 63)

"And who sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace?" (Verse 63) Whatever may be said about the formation and causes of wind from scientific, atmospheric or geographical points of view, they remain part of the overall design of the universe. It is this design that allows the wind to travel, driving clouds from one place to another, promising rain which symbolizes God's grace as it supports life.

⁸ For further explanation, please refer to the commentary on verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25 in Vol. XII.

Who has made the world such that the winds bring tidings of forthcoming grace?
“*Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him.*” (Verse 63)

Origination and Resurrection

These verses containing such powerful questioning conclude with a question about their own creation, resurrection and the provisions they receive from heaven. This is all coupled with a challenge that cannot be met:

Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: Produce your proof, if you are truthful.’ (Verse 64)

To initiate creation is an indisputable fact, and no one can explain it in any way other than saying that it is the work of the One Creator. His existence must be acknowledged because of the existence of the universe. Every attempt to explain the existence of the universe in such an evidently planned and deliberate state without acknowledging God's existence and oneness has proven logically unsustainable. Indeed, His own creation proves His oneness. It tells of one system of creation, planning, absolute balance and harmony, which means that it is all subject to a single will that established a single sophisticated rule of existence.

It is the bringing back of creation that unbelievers have always disputed. Yet the acknowledgement of initial creation in such a planned and elaborate way inevitably leads to belief in a second creation so as to give people what they deserve for their actions which they do in this temporary stage of life. Although some reward for action is given in this life, it is by no means complete. The point is that we have clear balance and harmony in the elaborate creation of the universe. This necessitates its perfection through the achievement of balance and harmony between action and reward, which does not happen in life on earth. Therefore, it must take place in a second life. As to why such balance and reward are not accomplished in this life, we can only say that it is the prerogative of the Creator and His wisdom. We must not put such a question to Him, because He knows His creation best. He has chosen not to reveal the reason to us, keeping it as part of His own knowledge which He reveals to no one.

With the acknowledgement of God as the originator of creation and the One who brings the dead back to life, the *sūrah* asks the same question again: “*Could there be any deity alongside God?*” (Verse 64)

Providing sustenance is closely related to our first and second creation. Sustenance

comes from the earth in a variety of ways, the most evident of which are plants, animals, water and air, all of which enable us to eat, drink and breathe. It also includes minerals that we take from the earth, sea treasures that provide food and adornment, different types of energy such as electricity and magnetism, as well as other powers known only to God. We are able to discover some of these and tap them every now and then.

Sustenance that comes from the heavens is also plentiful. In this life we get light, heat and rain as well as whatever powers and benefits God grants us. In the life to come, we receive the reward God will be pleased to give us. This is implied in the figurative sense of "heaven" connoting elevation, which is often used in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

The provision of sustenance out of heaven and earth is mentioned after the initiation and resurrection of creation because both types of sustenance are closely related to the two cycles of creation. In the first stage of creation people live on the food and sustenance they get out of the earth. The way they deal with such sustenance in this life is an important factor in determining their reward in the hereafter. The same applies to sustenance provided from heaven: it is to sustain life initially and to provide reward ultimately. Here again we see an example of the accuracy and harmony in the Qur'ānic style.

Creation and resurrection are facts, as is sustenance provided out of the heavens and earth, but unbelievers are often oblivious to these facts. Hence the *sūrah* throws out a forceful challenge to them: "Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: 'Produce your proof, if are truthful.'" (Verse 64)

They will have no proof, and no one who tries to find proof will ever be successful. Such is the Qur'ānic method of argument about faith: it uses scenes from the universe around us and facts that we know within our own constitution, making them a framework for its powerful logic. It thus revives human nature so that it looks at facts in a simple and correct way. It addresses the human conscience through the facts it knows but has overlooked for long. In this simple and logical way, the Qur'ān establishes the profound indisputable truths we know in the universe and within ourselves. It leaves no room for dialectic reasoning that we have inherited from Greek sophistry, and which found its way into what is known in Islamic scholarship as the *Kalām* discipline, or theology.

Blind to the Truth

Having taken us on this round of universal imagery and facts about our lives to establish the truth of God's oneness and the falsehood of polytheism, the *sūrah* begins a new passage citing aspects of what lies beyond the reach of human

perception, known only to God. These verses discuss the life to come, which human nature and logic accept as essential, but the timing of which our knowledge cannot determine:

Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. The unbelievers say: 'What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]? We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients. 'Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty. 'Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you.' Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book. (Verses 65-75)

Belief in resurrection, reckoning and reward is an integral and indispensable element of faith. There must be a future world when reward is completed so as to make it fit the action performed. It is necessary that man's heart and mind are focused on such future life, so as to make his actions in this world look to what awaits him there.

Over countless generations and despite successive divine messages humanity has taken a singularly bizarre attitude towards the question of resurrection and the life to come, despite its being both simple and necessary. It always stood incredulous when a messenger of God said that there would be life after death. The great miracle of initiating life in the first place was not enough to make humanity realize that a second life is easier to accomplish. Hence, people often turned away from every signal warning them of what awaits them in the life to come. They were bent on following their erring ways, disbelieving in God's messages and rejecting His messengers.

The life to come is part of the realm that lies beyond our faculties of perception and which is known only to God. Yet unbelievers always demanded to know the exact timing of this future life, or else they would continue to deny it. They treated it as superstition and legend that has no place in reality. Therefore the *sūrah* makes clear that it is God alone who knows the world beyond, and that human knowledge of the hereafter is very limited: *"Say: 'None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the*

total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it." (Verses 65-66)

Ever since the beginning of human life, man has been unable to see anything of the world beyond his perceptive faculties except what God, who knows all, has chosen to reveal to him. This has always worked for man's benefit. Had God known that revealing such knowledge would be good for man, He would have satisfied his curiosity and revealed it to him.

God has given man a host of abilities, talents, powers and potentials that enable him to fulfil the task assigned to him on earth, but no more. To lift the thick curtains that hide what lies beyond the reach of human perception would not help man in his task. Indeed keeping it unknown increases man's search for knowledge, which then opens up new vistas for him providing him with hidden treasures. Man's quest for knowledge enables him to discover more of the world's secrets and powers which he can then use to improve the quality of life on earth. He can use its materials and products, modify his practices and elevate his life, and by so doing fulfil his role of building human life on earth.

It is not only man who has been denied access to God's knowledge. All creatures that live anywhere in the universe, including the angels and the *jinn*, are assigned missions and tasks that do not require knowledge of what God has kept secret. Therefore: *"Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God."* (Verse 65) This is a definitive statement which leaves no room for anyone to make false claims. Yet this statement speaks about *"hat is hidden"* in general. Therefore, it is followed by a more specific statement concerning the life to come because, next to God's oneness, it represents the second most important issue of contention with the idolaters: *"Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead."* (Verse 65)

This is a negation of any knowledge of the timing of resurrection, even in the most undefined form of knowledge, which is perception. It is not only that they lack any definite knowledge of when resurrection will take place; they cannot perceive it as it approaches. Such knowledge is part of what is hidden, which none in the heavens or earth knows anything about.

This point is then left aside, so as to speak about their attitude to the hereafter and knowledge of it: *"Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verse 66) On this issue they have achieved all that they can aspire to, but remain unable to fathom it. *"Nay, they are in doubt of it."* (Verse 66) They are uncertain whether it will ever come. How can they know its timing and expect its arrival? *"Nay, they are blind to it."* (Verse 66) In as far as the hereafter is concerned, they are totally blind, unable to see or comprehend anything. This last statement depicts them in a worse situation with regard to the hereafter than the two earlier ones.

After Being Reduced to Ashes

"The unbelievers say: What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]?" (Verse 67) This has always been the most difficult point for unbelievers to accept. Could it be true that after life has departed from us, and our bodies have decomposed and been reduced to dust and ashes, which happens to all people within a certain period of their burial apart from some exceptional cases, we will be brought back to life? Is it true that we and our forefathers, who died long before us, will be raised up from the earth when we have become part of its dust?

This physical image acts as a barrier preventing them from accepting the possibility of future life. They forget that they have been brought into this life from nothing. No one knows where the atoms and cells that make up their bodies were initially. They were scattered on the earth, deep in the sea and high in the air. Some came from the soil, some from space and water, and some from the sun. Indeed, some were breathed in by man, plant or animal, and some came from a carcass that had decomposed allowing some of its elements to evaporate. These atoms and cells were then part of some food or drink, or part of the air people breathe, or the rays to which they are exposed. Then this countless multitude, from an unknown number of sources, was assembled in a fertilized egg that clings to the wall of a woman's uterus, and which then grows and acquires human form. After a long journey through life, it becomes no more than a dead body wrapped in sheets, ready for burial. Thus was their first creation. What is so strange about bringing them back in the same form, or in a different one, for their second life? But this was what those unbelievers of old used to say. It continues to be said today by some unbelievers, albeit somewhat differently.

The unbelievers followed this absurdity with ridicule: *"We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients."* (Verse 68) They were fully aware that earlier messengers had warned their forefathers in the past, which indicates that those Arabs were not totally unaware of faith. Rather, they thought that such promises had not been fulfilled. Therefore, they discarded the new promise, describing it as fables circulated among ancient people which Muhammad then revived. They forget that the Day of Judgement arrives at the time appointed for it, and it will neither be put forward because people hasten it, nor delayed to fulfil their hopes.

Its time has been set by God and remains known only to Him. When Gabriel asked the Prophet about its timing, he said: *"The one being asked about it knows no more about it than the one putting the question."* [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.]

At this point, the *sūrah* directs the unbelievers to turn their minds to the end met

by earlier communities which, like them, denied the warnings given by God's messengers. These are described here as the guilty ones: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty."* (Verse 69) This directive is meant to broaden their view. No human generation stands in isolation. Every generation is subject to the same laws and rules that apply to the rest. What happened to those who were guilty in the past may happen to the guilty in later generations, because divine laws admit no favouritism. Travelling about the land was certain to inform them of past experiences, and these would contain a lesson for them. It would open their minds and hearts to light. The Qur'ān directs people to learn of the operation of divine laws so as to broaden their vision and give wider dimension to their lives.

Having given this directive to unbelievers, the *sūrah* spells out God's order to the Prophet to leave them to their destinies. He was not to feel distressed at what they might be scheming. They would not be able to cause him any harm. Nor was he to grieve for them, because he had already done his duty, delivering God's message and warning them against what fate awaits them: *"Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme."* (Verse 70) This verse tells us of the Prophet's compassion. He grieved over what could happen to his people, because he knew what had happened to earlier communities that rejected God's messages. The verse also tells us how wicked their scheming was against the Prophet, his message and followers.

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers said about resurrection and their refusal to take the warnings of God's impending punishment seriously: *"They ask: When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true."* (Verse 71) They said this whenever they were reminded of what happened to earlier communities, even though they used to pass by where they lived, such as Lot's townships, the Thamūd's dwellings at al-Ĥijr, the `Ād's home at al-Aĥqāf, and the dwelling place of Sheba after it was destroyed by the floods. In ridicule they asked the Prophet when those warnings would come true? If you speak the truth, then let us have it now, or at least give us an exact timing for it.

In a short verse, the *sūrah* gives the impression of the forthcoming horror, imparting a touch of ridicule to their attitude: *"Say: It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you."* (Verse 72) Thus the *sūrah* strikes fear in their hearts and makes them worry about the impending punishment. It could easily be very close, coming from behind, like a rider seeking another in fast pursuit. Yet they cannot perceive it. Thus, they are hastening it when it is already close to overtaking them. What a frightening surprise to fit their ridicule.

But who can tell? What God has kept for Himself will remain hidden behind a curtain that reveals nothing whatsoever. Something very serious, extremely terrible could be moments away. It is wise, then, to be warned and to be ready at all times to

what may lie behind those thick curtains.

"Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful." (Verse 73) Perhaps one of the most important aspects of God's bounty is that He allows people respite when they do wrong or fail to do what is required of them. He does not hasten His punishment, giving them chance after chance to reflect on their positions, repent of their mistakes, and turn back to the right path. Nevertheless, most of them are ungrateful for the grace God bestows on them. Rather, they ridicule the whole idea and hasten their own punishment, or continue in their erring ways, refusing to reflect and take heed. *"And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open."* (Verse 74) He gives them this respite although He is fully aware of the feelings they harbour in their hearts as also what they declare by word and deed. This means that respite is given them in the full knowledge of their actions and feelings. Yet they will inevitably have to face the reckoning of all this.

This round concludes with a statement emphasizing God's perfect knowledge that overlooks nothing anywhere in the universe: *"There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verse 75) Let imagination travel anywhere in the universe, thinking of any hidden thing: a secret, an object, a piece of news or information, force or power: it is all recorded and included in God's knowledge. Nothing is lost or overlooked. God's knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah*, and the reference to it here is just one of many.

A Final Word on Israelite Differences

Having emphasized the point of God's perfect knowledge, the *sūrah* moves on to speak about the Children of Israel's differences on fundamental issues. What the Qur'ān states about these is part of God's knowledge, and it provides the final, indisputable word on them. It is an example of how God judges between people in dispute. This is stated so as to provide some comfort to the Prophet for he is instructed to leave them to God, who will judge between them as He pleases:

This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (Verses 76-81)

The Christians have long been in dispute concerning Jesus Christ and Mary, his mother. Some say that the Christ was purely human, while others maintain that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three different forms in which God reveals Himself to mankind. They allege that God is made of these three elements, making Jesus the Son. Thus, God the Father came down in the form of the Holy Spirit and took human form inside Mary and was born in the form of Jesus. Others still say that the Son is not eternal like the Father, but created in this world. As such, he is of a lower status than the Father and subject to Him. A different group deny that the Holy Spirit was one of the three elements. The Council of Nicaea held in 325 AD and the Council of Constantinople held in 381 decided that the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to the Father in divinity. It further decided that the Son was born from the Father in eternity and that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father. Likewise, the Council of Toledo, held in 589, also made the same decision concerning the Holy Spirit. The Eastern and Western Churches split over this point, and continue to differ. The Qur'ān gives the final word to end all such disputes. It describes the Christ as God's *"Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him."* (4: 171) He is certainly a human being, no more: *"He was nothing but a servant of Ours whom We had graced and whom We had made an example for the Children of Israel."* (43: 59)

Christians have held similar differences about the crucifixion. Some say that Jesus was crucified until death, was buried and then rose from the tomb after three days and was taken to heaven. Others say that Judas who betrayed him and pointed him out to his enemies was made to look like Jesus and that it was he who was crucified in his place. Some say that his likeness was thrown over his disciple Simon, and Simon was taken in his place. The Qur'ān gives the final word on all this as it says: *"They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so."* (4: 157) *"God said: Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve."* (3: 55)

In the past the Jews distorted the Torah and altered its divine laws. The Qur'ān confirms the original text God revealed: *"We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds."* (5: 45)

The Qur'ān tells them the truth about their history and their prophets, purging it of countless legends which they report in different ways. It cleanses this history from all the filth they tried to attribute to their prophets. In fact, we can hardly find an Israelite prophet left unstained by such filth. They alleged that Abraham introduced his wife to the King of Palestine and to the Pharaoh of Egypt as his sister, hoping for some favour from them. Jacob, or Israel, played tricks and lied to his father Isaac in order to take his grandfather's blessings, which were due to his brother Esau. They further alleged that the Prophet Lot's two daughters made him drunk on two nights

so that he slept with each one of them in order to beget a child. They did so, it is alleged, because he had no male heir and they feared that his wealth would go to others. It is further claimed that they achieved their purpose. They also alleged that David saw a pretty woman from the roof of his palace. When he knew that she was married to one of his soldiers, he sent this soldier on a mission from which he was sure not to return so that he could have his wife. Solomon is alleged to have worshipped a mule in order to please one of his women with whom he was so infatuated that he could not refuse her any request.

The Qur'ān absolves all these noble and pure prophets of all the filth such Israelite superstitions, which the Jews added to the Torah, tried to attach to them. Likewise it refuted all false claims against Jesus, son of Mary.

Guidance and Mercy

This Qur'ān which supersedes all books revealed before it provides the final word on all disputes between their followers. Still the idolaters in Arabia argued about it. It is as God describes it: *"It is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe."* (Verse 77)

It is *"guidance"* preventing dispute and error. It outlines the way of life to implement, and determines the course to follow. It also provides a bond between the believers and the great laws of nature which never fail. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is *"mercy"* saving them from doubt, worry and confusion between systems and theories that cannot provide a solid basis to build their lives upon. Moreover, it establishes a bond with God that gives them reassurance and peace with themselves and with mankind generally. In this way, it leads them to earn God's pleasure and His magnificent reward.

The Qur'ānic method of remoulding hearts and souls in accordance with pure, undistorted nature is indeed unique. It establishes harmony between human life, the universe and the major laws of nature operating in it. This enables man to live in peace and reassurance because he realizes that he lives in a world whose laws and forces are at peace with him. He knows that the overall law that runs the universe is the same as that which controls his life. With such harmony and peace between man's soul and the great existence around him, peace is generated within the community and among humanity at large. Reassurance and stability become a reality in human life. This is *"mercy"* in its most comprehensive form. This quick reference to God's grace represented in the revelation of the Qur'ān is followed by an assurance to the Prophet that God will judge between him and his community on the basis of His perfect knowledge: *"Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing."* (Verse 78)

God has made the triumph of the truth a natural law similar to that of the creation

of the heavens and the earth and the succession of night and day. It never fails. It may be slow in coming, but this will only be because of a particular purpose known to God which will ensure the fulfilment of certain goals known to Him. Yet still the law remains in operation, and God's promise is certain to be fulfilled. Indeed, no one's faith is complete unless one believes in its certainty. What we need to know is that God's promise will come to pass at the moment appointed for it, and it will neither be hastened nor delayed: *"So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth."* (Verse 79)

The *sūrah* continues to comfort the Prophet so that he bears with patience the stubborn rejection by the unbelievers, despite his strenuous efforts giving them sound advice and addressing them with the Qur'ān. He is told that he has not slackened in his duty, but he can make only those with beating hearts hear. These are the ones who listen attentively, and their hearts are moved so as to respond to the Prophet who gives them honest and sound counsel. By contrast, those whose hearts are dead and who are blind to all the pointers to the truth of faith are a lost case. There is simply no access to their hearts. Therefore, the Prophet should not worry about their persistent error: *"Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verses 80-81)

The Qur'ānic style paints here a lively image of a mental condition that renders hearts, souls and feelings frozen, unresponsive. We see them first as dead, with the Prophet calling on them but they do not hear him. The second image shows them deaf, moving away from the person who is calling them. Thirdly they are shown as blind who cannot see the guide trying to set them on the right course. These three images interact to give us a profound description of their situation.

In contrast to the dead, blind and deaf we see the believers who are alive, with their hearing and seeing faculties finely tuned: *"You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verse 81) These are the ones whose hearts are ready to receive God's revelations. They have life and they warm to it, feeling its presence. They benefit by what they hear and see. Such are the believers and the Prophet's duty is to make them hear, pointing to the signs God has placed all around us. They will then accept what he tells them and submit themselves to God.

Islam is simple, clear and very close to pure human nature. Once the heart gets to know it, it will submit to it. Thus the Qur'ān describes those hearts which are prepared to listen and be guided to the truth. They do not indulge in futile argument. Once God's Messenger calls on them, pointing to God's signs and reciting His revelations, they respond and submit.

Presages of the Last Hour

The *sūrah* then takes us on another round previewing some of the forerunners of the Day of Resurrection. It mentions the appearance of a beast that will speak to those who do not believe in God's signs that are placed in the universe. It paints a scene of the resurrection and the rebuke levelled at those who deny God's signs, while they stand speechless. It then quickly refers to the two signs that are always there to see, namely the night and the day, before taking us back to a horrendous image when the trumpet is blown and the mountains are made to move like clouds. It shows us the good believers safe from all this horror while those who have been errant are thrown on their faces in hell:

When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?' (Verses 82-90)

The first of these verses mentions a beast. The same is mentioned in many *aḥādīth*, some of which are authentic, but these do not give any description of it. There are descriptions of it in other *aḥādīth* which do not aspire to any reasonable degree of authenticity. Hence, they should be discarded. Of the many descriptions of this beast that should be so discarded are that it is 60 yards in length, that it has fluff, feathers, a beard and hoofs, that it has a bull's head, pig's eyes, elephant's ears, a deer's horns, an ostrich's neck, a lion's chest, a tiger's colour, a cat's waist, a ram's tail and a camel's limbs. Nothing of such descriptions is of any significance whatsoever.

It is better by far to limit ourselves to the text of the Qur'ān and the authentic *aḥādīth* which tell us that the appearance of the beast is a presage of the Day of

Resurrection. It is when the time for repentance has expired and judgement is due on those who rejected the faith that God will bring forth this beast to speak to them. Beasts normally do not speak, or rather their languages are not understood by humans. However, at this point people will understand what this beast says, and they will know that it is a miracle that heralds the Last Hour. But they were keen to deny God's signs and the Day of Resurrection.

It is noticeable in this *sūrah* that several scenes depict a dialogue between insects, birds, *jinn* and the Prophet Solomon. Mention of a beast that speaks to people thus fits well with those scenes, as it complements the *sūrah's* overall imagery.

The *sūrah* proceeds from this forerunner of the Day of Judgement to the scene of resurrection and gathering: *"On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks."* (Verse 83) All mankind will be gathered on that day, but the *sūrah* highlights here the position of those denying revelations. It shows them as they are driven in ranks, altogether, having no say or choice in the direction they have to go.

"And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?" (Verse 84) The first question is one of reproach, because it is already known that they denied God's revelations, while the second is sarcastic. This combination is used in spoken language making the second question imply that they took no particularly noticeable action in their lives, apart from their denial of God's revelations. Such a question receives no answer; those to whom it is put stand speechless: *"And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak."* (Verse 85) They deserve such a fate because of the wrongdoing in their lives on earth. They are unable to speak, while the beast has already spoken. What a contrast drawn in the Qur'ānic expression and also in the great signs being described in the Qur'ān.

The presentation in this round follows a special pattern, setting scenes from this life against those from the life to come, moving from one to the other at the moment when it is particularly effective. Here the *sūrah* leaves those who denied God's revelations as they stand speechless on the Day of Resurrection to draw a scene of this world which should have awakened their consciences and invited them to reflect on the universe and its creation. They should have thought of this and realized that God takes care of them, providing them with what enables them to have comfortable lives, making the universe around them suitable for life, not hostile to it: *"Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 86)

The scene of the still night and the alert day should give man a religious conscience that directs him to maintain his bond with God who alternates the night

and day. Both day and night are two universal signs that bear a clear message to anyone who accepts the faith, but unbelievers do not do so. Had there been only night or only day, life would not have been possible on earth. Indeed, had either the day or the night been ten times longer than what they are now, the sun would have burnt out every plant on earth, while at night every surviving plant would have been frozen. Life then would have been impossible. We see that the present state of the night and day is suitable to life, and this carries signs for people who respond to faith.

From this situation in our present life the *sūrah* moves immediately to the day when the trumpet is blown. This heralds great horror for all, except those protected by God's will. In addition the mountains that have been symbols of firmness and stability are made to move. The day ends with giving the good believers their reward in the form of security and goodness, while the others are punished by fear, thrown on their faces into the fire. *"On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?"* (Verses 87-90)

The trumpet is blown for the first time to strike terror in the hearts of all creatures except those whom God wishes to spare. It is said that those who are exempt are the martyrs. With this extraordinary sound emanating from the trumpet all living creatures are struck and become senseless. Then the trumpet is blown a second time bringing them all back to life. It is then blown again to gather them all together: *"All shall come to Him in utter humility."* (Verse 87)

With this great terror, a universal upheaval takes place with everything losing its normal systemic functioning. Thus firm mountains that have been symbols of stability move lightly like clouds. This is an image that shows the terror at its clearest. It is as if the mountains are in fear, moving with those who are struck with terror, confused, unable to determine their direction.

"Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection." (Verse 88) All glory is due to Him. Perfection is clear in everything He does or makes. Nothing happens by chance or coincidence; nothing is flawed; nothing is overlooked or forgotten. When we reflect on God's creation we cannot find even a little detail left out. Indeed everything, large or small, important or not, is taken into consideration. Everything is made according to an elaborate plan that leaves the one who contemplates in utter amazement.

"He is indeed fully aware of all that you do." (Verse 88) This is now the day of reckoning when all that you have done is reckoned. It is the day set by God who has ordered all things to perfection: it has come at the time set for it, with no hastening or delay. It fulfils its role in God's method of creation and planning. It brings harmony between action and reward in the two closely linked lives. Hence, it is part of *"the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do."* (Verse 88)

On this fearsome day, security and reassurance are granted only to those who did well in their first life on earth. This is in addition to their reward which exceeds by far everything they did: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day."* (Verse 89) To be in security when all are in terror is in itself a great reward. What comes after that is granted by God's grace. These believers feared God in their first life, so He willed that they would have no fear on the Day of Judgement.

"And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire." (Verse 90) This is a terrible scene as such people are thrown on their faces into hell. They also suffer further rebuke: *"Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?"* (Verse 90) They had turned their back on God's guidance, which was presented to them as clearly as night and day; so now their faces are the first to face the fire.

Summing Up Instructions

At the end the Prophet is instructed to sum up his call and his method in calling on people to believe. He leaves them to their destiny, which they have chosen for themselves after the issues have been clearly put in front of them. The *sūrah* concludes, as it started, with praising God, leaving it to Him to show them His signs and to hold them to account for their deeds:

I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner." And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do.' (Verses 91-93)

The Arab idolaters used to believe in the sanctity of Makkah and the Sacred House, i.e. the Ka`bah. Indeed they based their supremacy in Arabia on belief in the sanctity of this House. Yet they did not believe in the oneness of God who made it

sacred and also made it the focus of their lives. Therefore, God's Messenger gives faith its proper value, declaring that he is commanded to worship the Lord of this sacred city, who has no partners. He states the Islamic concept of God's oneness: the Lord of this city is the Lord of everything: *"To Him all things belong."* (Verse 91) He also declares that he is bidden to be one of those who surrender themselves totally to God. No one else has any claim on them. They are a group of their own stretching over countless generations, sharing their belief in God and surrendering themselves to Him.

Such is the essence of his message, while its essential means is the recitation of the Qur'ān: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."* (Verse 92) The Qur'ān is the book of this message, and also its constitution and method. The Prophet has been ordered to strive against the unbelievers by means of the Qur'ān, because it is sufficient as a means to address hearts, minds and souls. It contains what overpowers souls, influences feelings, and violently shakes hearts. Fighting was permitted at a later stage to defend believers, ensure the freedom for God's message to address people with the Qur'ān, and to implement the divine law. As for calling people to faith, the Qur'ān itself is sufficient: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."*

"So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner." (Verse 92) This statement represents personal responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or error. In turn, it reflects the dignity that Islam guarantees man such that none are driven to faith against their will. It is only that we recite the Qur'ān and let it work on people in accordance with its profound and meticulous method. Needless to say, when human nature is left unshackled, it responds to the Qur'ān because its very constitution is in unison with the Qur'ānic method.

"And say: All praise is due to God." (Verse 93) This is by way of introducing what is to come concerning God's own making. *"He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) God certainly says the truth. Every day He shows His servants some of His signs within themselves and in the great expanse of the universe. He reveals to them some of the secrets at work in the universe.

"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do." (Verse 93) This is the final note in the *sūrah*, expressed gently yet imparting an awesome sense. They are then left to do what they want, prompted by the profound note: *"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."*