

SŪRAH 13

Al-Ra 'd

(Thunder)

Prologue

I often feel reluctant to comment on Qur'ānic texts, knowing that my style and resources are inadequate. As with *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, I find myself ill-equipped to explain the present *sūrah*. But what am I to do, realizing as I do that our generation needs to receive the Qur'ān with a detailed explanation of its nature, method, subject matter and aims? Unfortunately people have moved too far from the environment in which the Qur'ān was revealed, and from its purpose and goals. They are little aware of its import and dimensions. Even its terminology does not carry to them its true meanings. People today live in a state similar to that the Qur'ān faced at the time of its revelation, but they do not use the Qur'ān to confront this *jāhiliyyah* as the early Muslims did. Without such action, people cannot begin to formulate a proper understanding of the Qur'ān and its secrets, because such secrets remain a closed book for anyone who sits idle, unwilling to act according to Qur'ānic guidance.

Nevertheless, I am overwhelmed whenever I attempt to comment on the Qur'ān. It is impossible for me to put in words and sentences what I feel when I listen to the Qur'ān or reflect on its text. Hence, I know how wide the gulf is between the feelings the Qur'ān generates within me and what I present to my readers.

I am also profoundly aware of the great gulf that separates our generation from that which directly received the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān addressed them directly, and they felt its rhythm, viewed its images, appreciated its inspiration and recognized its hints, interacting with it and making their response clear. They aimed to fulfil its message in their approach to life and their confrontation with its opponents. Hence,

they were able to accomplish what was, by all standards, miraculous in a short time-span. They achieved a total about-turn in their feelings, concepts and life generally, and produced a similar and complete change in the life of their community, in human life generally and in the line human history would take to the end of time.

They drank at the Qur'ānic spring, allowing no intermediary between them and the Qur'ān. Their ears felt its music as it was first spoken, and they appreciated its warmth and inspiration. Hence, they took immediate action to mould their lives and thoughts in accordance with its principles, values and the facts it presented. By contrast, our present generation shapes its life pattern in accordance with this or that philosophical approach, little realizing that the opponents of such approaches are only mortals too, liable to all manner of error.

Furthermore, when we consider what those early Muslims achieved within themselves and in the life around them, which was miraculous by any standard, we try to explain such achievements by reference to our own logic based on standards and values that are fundamentally different from theirs. Hence, we err in identifying their motives and goals and in appreciating the results they achieved. We forget that they were made a different creation by the Qur'ān.

I appeal to my readers not to make the understanding of my book their aim. They should read it to draw nearer to the Qur'ān, then put the book aside and approach the Qur'ān as it is. They cannot do so unless they dedicate themselves to the implementation and fulfilment of its values and principles in their lives, fighting opposition forces under its banner.

This was my first thought as I began to look at this *sūrah*, as if I was reading it for the first time, although I had read and heard it countless times. The Qur'ān, however, gives you as much as you give to it. Each time, it opens up to you with new light, inspiration and rhythm, giving as much as you are prepared to receive. It sounds fresh every time, as though you had never read, heard or dealt with it before.

The present *sūrah* is a remarkable one, maintaining the same rhythm and giving the same ambience from start to finish.² Nevertheless, it presents us with a multitude of images, feelings and thoughts that fill our imagination and address our hearts and souls in every possible way. With its brilliant light and endless meanings, it travels

² The Qur'ānic musical rhythm uses a variety of elements, including harmony between the place and manner of articulation of individual sounds within a single word, sound harmony in each sentence or clause, the type of long vowels chosen, and the long vowels and the consonants used in the final words of each verse. [I have discussed this at length in my book *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*.] All the elements of rhythm used in this *sūrah* are consistent throughout, except for the long vowels and consonants in the final words of its verses. We note that the first five verses use words with an *'non (fin)'* ending. The rest of the *sūrah* uses a long *'a (ā)'* followed by a plosive, or semi-plosive consonant, such as *aab (āb)*, *aad (ād)*, *aal (āl)*, *aar (ār)*.¹

with our hearts to wider worlds, times and horizons, keeping us fully aware, understanding everything we see and hear.

What we have here is not words and sentences; rather, a strong, hammering rhythm pervades the entire *sūrah*, permeating its images, meanings, and finer touches.

The main theme of the *sūrah*, like all Makkan revelations,³ is faith and the main issues which surround it: God's oneness and Lordship, submission to Him in this world and in the life to come, revelation, resurrection and its correlatives. Yet this single issue with its multiple strands is never presented in the same way in any two *sūrahs*, whether revealed in Makkah or Madinah. Every time we find it presented in a new way and new light, generating a different impact and inspiration.

These issues are not presented in the form of an academic argument, based on cold logic. Instead they are presented within a framework, which is the universe and its remarkable phenomena which serve as proofs to be appreciated by open minds. These marvellous phenomena are unending. Indeed, they look new every day, as they continue to reveal their secrets time after time. Even what was revealed earlier seems to acquire a new perspective in the light of new discovery. Hence, the issues the *sūrah* tackles remain alive.

The *sūrah* takes the human heart on a grand tour, showing it the universe in a variety of spectacular images: the heavens raised without support; the sun and the moon pursuing their courses for a definite time; the night covered by day; the spread of the earth with its firm mountains and running rivers; gardens, plants and date trees with different shapes, tastes and colours yet growing in adjacent land irrigated with the same water; the lightning generating fear and hope; the thunder glorifying and praising God; the angels standing in awe; the thunderbolt God hurls against whomever He wishes; the clouds heavy with rain that pours over riverbeds; and the foam that disappears into nothing to allow what is of benefit to stay.

The *sūrah* pursues the human heart wherever it tries to go. This pursuit is based on God's absolute knowledge which encompasses every little detail, including what is concealed or moving openly in broad daylight. It is the knowledge that records every fleeting thought occurring to any living thing. At the same time, whatever happens to be beyond the reach of human perception is encompassed by God's knowledge, including what every female conceives and whatever falls short or increases in gestation.

³ Despite the statement in some copies of the Qur'ān, based on reports indicating that the *sūrah* is a Madinan revelation, we maintain that it was revealed in Makkah. This is clearly indicated by its subject matter, method of approach, general atmosphere and ambience which is clearly noted by anyone who is well familiar with the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* gives an impression of the nature of God's power that encompasses the entire universe: the hidden and the apparent, large and small, present and removed. The part of the universe that human faculties can imagine is great and awesome indeed.

In addition, the *sūrah* includes some parables that are presented in vivid, moving scenes and images. It also adds a scene of the Day of Judgement, with its happiness for some and suffering for others, and people's reactions to both. There are also brief references to the fate of earlier generations and how they conducted themselves, and were subjected to God's law and its operation.

These are, in brief, the main themes and issues tackled in the *sūrah*. The *sūrah* is also remarkable for its artistry in presenting these issues. The general framework within which these issues are presented is the universe, with its remarkable phenomena and spectacular imagery. But the framework here has a special ambience provided by contrasting natural scenes and phenomena: heaven and earth; sun and moon; night and day; entities and shadows; firm mountains and running rivers; useless scum and penetrating water; adjacent but different pieces of land; clustered and non-clustered date trees, etc.

This element of contrast is carried further so as to include all meanings, actions and fates. Thus, the abstract contrast echoes the physical one to perfect its general atmosphere. Thus we see the clear contrast within God's supreme power as He establishes Himself on the throne making both the sun and the moon subservient; embryos in the womb fall short in gestation with others increasing; the one who speaks in whispers and the one who speaks aloud; the one who moves stealthily in the night and the one who walks in broad daylight; fear and hope regenerated by lightning; the glorification of God in praise by the thunder and in fear by the angels. The true prayer addressed to God is contrasted with the false one addressed to false deities. Similarly we see the contrast between those who know and those who are blind; the people of earlier revelations who are delighted by the Qur'an and those who deny some parts of it; the annulment and the confirmation in God's records. Everything in the *sūrah*: its meanings, directions and movements utilize the element of contrast to the full.

Another aspect of the remarkable harmony of style is seen in the fact that because the *sūrah* raises a background of natural scenes, referring to heaven and earth, sun and moon, thunder and lightning, thunderbolts and rain, it also mentions what is carried in animal wombs, coupled with a reference to "*by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase.*" These two aspects are in harmony with the water running in riverbeds and the growth of vegetation. Harmony is a consistent aspect of the Qur'anic style.

All this provides some explanation as to why I feel inadequate and reluctant to tackle Qur'ānic *sūrahs* with my inadequate style. But once more the need is compelling, because people in our generation do not live with the Qur'ān. I therefore seek God's help and support in this task.

1

A Glance at Wide Horizons

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth, yet most people will not believe. (1)

It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord. (2)

It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. (3)

الْمَرْءَ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَالَّذِي أُنزِلَ
إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ الْحَقُّ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي رَفَعَ السَّمَوَاتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا
ثُمَّ أَسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَسَخَّرَ
الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِي لِأَجَلٍ
مُّسَمًّى يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ يُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ بَلِقَاءِ رَبِّكُمْ تُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي مَدَّ الْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا
رَوَاسِيَ وَأَنْهَارًا وَمِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ جَعَلَ
فِيهَا زَوْجَيْنِ اثْنَيْنِ يُغْشَى اللَّيْلَ النَّهَارَ إِنَّ
فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date-palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (4)

But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide. (5)

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing. Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution. (6)

Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner.

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ قِطْعٌ مُتَجَبِّرَاتٌ وَجَنَّاتٌ مِّنْ^٤
 أَعْنَابٍ وَزُرْعٌ وَنَخِيلٌ صِنَوَانٌ وَغَيْرُهُ
 صِنَوَانٍ يُسْقَى بِمَاءٍ وَاحِدٍ وَنُفِضِلُ
 بَعْضَهَا عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ فِي الْأَكْلِ ۚ إِنَّ فِي
 ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

﴿٥﴾ وَإِن تَعَجَبَ فَعَجَبٌ قَوْلُهُمْ أَإِذَا كُنَّا
 تُرَابًا أَءِنَّا لَفِي خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ
 الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ الْأَغْلَلُ
 فِي أَعْنَاقِهِمْ ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ۗ هُمْ
 فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿٥﴾

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ قَبْلَ الْحَسَنَةِ وَقَدْ
 خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمُ الْمَثَلَتُ ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو
 مَغْفِرَةٍ لِّلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ ظُلْمِهِمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ
 لَشَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٦﴾ وَيَقُولُ

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ آيَةٌ مِّنْ
 رَبِّهِ ۗ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُنذِرٌ ۗ وَلِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ



Every community have [their] guide. (7)

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. (8)

He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. (9)

It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. (10)

Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (11)

It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope,

اللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَحْمِلُ كُلُّ أُنْثَىٰ وَمَا تَغِيضُ الْأَرْحَامُ وَمَا تَزْدَادُ ۗ وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ عِنْدَهُ بِمِقْدَارٍ ﴿٨﴾

عَلِمَ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْكَبِيرِ الْمُتَعَالِ ﴿٩﴾

سَوَاءٌ مِنْكُمْ مَن أَسَرَ الْقَوْلَ وَمَن جَهَرَ بِهِ ۚ وَمَن هُوَ مُسْتَخَفٌّ بِاللَّيْلِ وَسَارِبٌ بِالنَّهَارِ ﴿١٠﴾

لَهُ مَعْقَبَاتٌ مِّن بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِن خَلْفِهِ يَحْفَظُونَهُ مِمَّنْ أَمَرَ اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ ۗ وَإِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ سُوءًا فَلَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ ۗ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِّن دُونِهِ ۚ مِن وَالٍ ﴿١١﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي يُرِيكُمُ الْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا وَيُنشِئُ السَّحَابَ الثِّقَالَ ﴿١٢﴾

and originates the heavy clouds. (12)

And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. (13)

To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. (14)

To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. (15)

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of

وَيُسَبِّحُ الرَّعْدُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ مِنْ
خِيفَتِهِ وَيُرْسِلُ الصَّوَاعِقَ فَيُصِيبُ بِهَا
مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُمْ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي اللَّهِ وَهُوَ
شَدِيدُ الْحَالِ ﴿١٣﴾

لَهُ دَعْوَةُ الْحَقِّ وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ
دُونِهِ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُونَ لَهُمْ بِشَيْءٍ إِلَّا
كَبْسِطٍ كَفَيْهِ إِلَى الْمَاءِ لِيَبْلُغَ فَاهُ وَمَا هُوَ
بِيَبْلُغُهُ وَمَا دُعَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ
﴿١٤﴾

وَلِلَّهِ يَسْجُدُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا وَظِلَّلُهُمْ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ
﴿١٥﴾

قُلْ مَنْ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلِ اللَّهُ
قُلْ أَفَاتَّخَذْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ لَا
يَمْلِكُونَ لِأَنْفُسِهِمْ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا قُلْ
هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَى وَالْبَصِيرُ أَمْ هَلْ

darkness equal to light?’

Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: ‘God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.’ (16)

He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables. (17)

For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting-place! (18)

تَسْتَوِي الظُّلُمَاتُ وَالنُّورُ

أَمْ جَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ خَلَقُوا كَخَلْقِهِ
فَتَشَبَهَ الْخَلْقُ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ قُلِ اللَّهُ خَلِقُ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ ﴿١٦﴾

أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَسَالَتْ أَوْدِيَةٌ
بِقَدَرِهَا فَاحْتَمَلَ السَّيْلُ زَبَدًا رَابِيًا ۚ
وَمِمَّا يُوقِدُونَ عَلَيْهِ فِي النَّارِ ابْتِغَاءَ حَلِيبَةٍ
أَوْ مَتَعٍ زَبَدٌ مِثْلَهُ ۚ كَذَلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ
الْحَقَّ وَالْبَاطِلَ ۚ فَأَمَّا الزَّبَدُ فَيَذْهَبُ
جُفَاءً ۖ وَأَمَّا مَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ فَيَمْكُثُ فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۚ كَذَلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ ﴿١٧﴾

لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ الْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ
وَالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَهُ لَوْ أَنَّ
لَهُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا وَمِثْلَهُ مَعَهُ
لَافْتَدَوْا بِهِ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ سُوءُ الْحِسَابِ
وَمَا أُولَٰئِكَ بِمُعَذِّبِينَ ۚ وَمَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَنِيسَ الْمِهَادِ ﴿١٨﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* opens with a basic issue of faith, namely the revelation of God's book, the Qur'ān, and the truth it contains. This formulates the foundation over which all the other issues of faith are built, including those of the oneness of God, belief in the hereafter, and the need to do good in this life. All these branch out from the central point of believing that the One who gives all orders is God, and that the Qur'ān is His revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him).

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. *These are verses of the Book.*" (Verse 1) This is one way of reading the first statement, but it may also be interpreted as, 'These are signs that prove the truth of this Book.' They are clear evidence that it is a revelation from God. The very fact that it is composed of the same material as these separate letters, *alif lām, mīm, rā*, is sufficient proof that it comes from God, and is not the work of any creature, human or non-human.

"*That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth.*" (Verse 1) That is the real and pure truth which is never coloured with any falsehood. It admits no doubt. These letters are signs that it is revealed by God, and what comes from God must be undoubtedly true. "*Yet most people will not believe.*" (Verse 1) They neither believe that it is divine revelation, nor do they accept the major issues that result from believing in revelation, such as belief in God's oneness, submission to Him alone, resurrection on the Day of Judgement, and the need to do good in this life.

Scenes of Magnificent Splendour

The *sūrah's* opening sums up its theme, and points out all the issues that it discusses. It moves on to show some aspects of God's unlimited power and some of the spectacular aspects in the universe which indicate God's wisdom and elaborate planning. They clearly indicate that such wisdom requires that there should be revelation to put the issues clearly to human beings, and resurrection so that people are made to account for their deeds. God's infinite power means that He can resurrect people so that they return to Him, the Creator who has originated them and originated the universe before them.

The superb, divine paintbrush begins to draw some of the great universal images, touching on the heavens and on the earth, and a few aspects of the world we live in and life itself. It then wonders at those who deny resurrection, having looked at these great signs. Such people even hasten the infliction of God's punishment on

themselves, demanding, at the same time, that other signs are given to them: *"It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord."* (Verse 2)

The heavens, or the skies, whatever they indicate to people in different ages, are there to be seen by all. They provide an infinite expanse which strikes us with awe should we contemplate them for even a short while. They are elevated, 'raised without support', exposed so that we can see them. This is the first spectacle of the universe to raise human consciousness. For man immediately realizes that no one can raise the heavens without support, or even with support, except God. The most that people themselves can raise, with or without support, are simply the buildings that we erect for our purposes. We then speak of the skill, mastery, artistic touches and the perfection that go into raising such buildings, heedless of the heavens above us, raised without support, and the great power and perfection that lies behind their creation. It is impossible for human beings even to imagine such power and perfection.

The *sūrah* then moves from this awesome scene to the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception: *"And established Himself on the Throne."* (Verse 2) If the heavens are high and great, then the Throne is higher and infinitely greater. This is indeed the ultimate height, drawn in the usual manner of the Qur'ān to demonstrate relative dimensions to enable human beings to understand. This is another stroke from the same remarkable paintbrush. It adds a dimension of absolute height next to the heights we see.[§]

The *sūrah* then moves to the concept of making the sun and the moon subservient. The great height that people see, with all its exhilarating beauty and breathtaking greatness, is all subservient to the will of God, the Great, the Almighty.

We would like to pause a little here to reflect on the parallels drawn in this scene. We see a great height in our visible world contrasted to a height in the world beyond. We also find an exaltation that is associated with height, contrasted with the notion of subservience to God's will. We also see the sun and the moon providing contrast in kind and time: one is a star shining during the day and the other a planet showing its beauty at night.

We move on to find that exaltation and subservience are coupled with God's elaborate planning and wisdom: *"He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term."* (Verse 2) There are definite limits

[§] For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān*.

and well-defined laws that apply to the sun and the moon as they move in their annual and daily courses, and as they follow their respective orbits, not moving an inch beyond them. Indeed the sun and the moon continue to pursue their courses to a time limit that has been appointed by God.

"He ordains all things." (Verse 2) All matters are ordained according to elaborate planning which includes the subservience of the sun and the moon. This planning applies to the entire universe with all its celestial bodies that pursue their courses for a definite time. There can be no denial of the greatness of this planning and the great wisdom that lies behind it.

Elaborate and Coherent Scenes

It is part of His planning that *"He makes plain His revelations."* (Verse 2) The term used in the Qur'ān for 'revelations', *āyāt*, also means 'signs'. Thus He bestows His revelations and places His signs in their perfect order, showing each at the right time and for a definite purpose, *"so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord"* (Verse 2) When you see these signs clearly pointing to the truth of creation, indicating also what lies beyond them of great signs in the universe, all created by God, and described plainly and clearly in the Qur'ān, in a way which speaks volumes of God's ability and elaborate planning, you will begin to think that your return to the Creator after this first life is inevitable. It is then that the deeds of human beings will be assessed and their reward determined. That is part of the planning that is absolutely perfect and wise.

This inimitable imagery then moves from the heavens to the earth to depict its wider view: *"It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think."* (Verse 3)

The main lines here are the spreading out of the earth so that its expanse comes into view. Whatever its total shape, it is spread out to give the appearance of broadness. This is the first aspect. Then the line of firm mountains is drawn, followed by that of flowing rivers to complete the broad lines of the main view. These are made both parallel and contrasting, for they are complemented with a total picture of what the earth contains and what life in it holds. The first refers to the plants that come out of the earth: *'It is He who... has created on it two sexes of every type of fruit,'* while the other is represented in the phenomena of night and day: *'and caused the night to cover the day.'* (Verse 3)

The first of these scenes includes a fact that has only recently been fathomed by scientific research. That is that all living creatures, and plants among them, have a male and female. It used to be thought that plants have no male sex, but it was

recently discovered that one- sex plants carry the male and female organs within the same flower, or the same stem. This fact increases the effect of the scene as it urges us to contemplate the secrets of the universe after considering only its apparent aspects.

The other scene speaks of the succession of night and day, with one overwhelming the other in a never-failing system. This invites us to think more carefully about the laws of nature. The arrival of the night after the departure of the day, and the break of dawn when the night begins to move away are phenomena that we are familiar with. Familiarity may make them less striking, but only a little contemplation is needed for them to appear before us as infinitely marvellous. We only need to feel them as if it were all happening for the first time. Moreover, the very elaborate system that helps all celestial bodies move in their respective orbits, without fail, invites us to think of the power that governs all this and ensures that it continues to function with perfect accuracy. *"In all these there are signs for people who think."* (Verse 3)

We should pause again here to reflect on the contrasting features in the scene before moving to the next one. There is a contrast for example between the firm mountains that appear well established in their positions, and the flowing rivers; between the male and female in all fruits and trees; between the night and the day; and then between the earth and the sky. These last two scenes complement each other in the overall panoramic view of the universe.

As we move along with the *sūrah*, we see this highly creative paintbrush delivering further detail of the scene of the face of the earth: *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Many of us pass by these scenes not looking carefully at what we see, until our souls go back to their nature and re-establish contact with the universe of which they constitute a part. We stand aside to contemplate it before reuniting with it. *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land,"* with different characteristics. Had they been the same, they would have constituted a single piece or tract. But they are 'tracts', some of which are fertile and some which are not; some are rocky and some barren. In each type there are grades and colours. Some are built up, while others have subsided; some are cultivated while others abandoned; some are well-watered and others arid, etc. Yet they are all next to each other.

Then we are given yet further detail: vineyards, fields of grains and palm trees. They represent three different types of plant: the creeping grape tree, and the high, upright date-palm and the ordinary grain plants, shrubs of beans, roses, etc. The

picture is one of immense variety and colour.

The date-palms may grow in clusters or stand alone. Some date trees have one stem and others have two or more shooting from a single tree. All these are *"irrigated by the same water,"* and have the same soil, but the fruits they give taste differently: *"Yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food they provide."* (Verse 4) Who other than the Creator, the wise planner, can do all this? Who of us has not found different tastes in fruits from the same piece of land? Yet how many have looked at this aspect to which the Qur'ān draws our attention? It is with touches like these that the Qur'ān remains ever new, because it enhances our feelings and the way these are influenced by what we see around us. These are too numerous to be fully contemplated within the lifetime of any one person. In fact they are too many for all mankind to fathom. Hence the Qur'ānic comment: *"In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Once more the *sūrah* draws a contrast between the adjoining tracts of land that differ from one another. The date trees can be single or clustered. Moreover, tastes, plants and fruit are all of a rich variety.

The *sūrah* starts with such panoramic scenes from the vast universe, but then speaks of people who remain uninspired by all these signs around them, visible in every aspect of creation. Their hearts and minds remain oblivious to the fact that behind all these marvels lies the great power of the Creator. This is because their minds are in chains and their hearts bound. They cannot contemplate the vast universal scenes around them: *"But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide."* (Verse 5)

It is quite amazing that after all these signs people should wonder: *'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised to life in a new act of creation?'* (Verse 5) The One who has created the great universe and manages its affairs in meticulous fashion is certainly able to resurrect human beings in a new act of creation. But such people refuse to believe this, lacking faith in their Lord who created them. What holds them back are the chains and shackles that restrain their hearts and minds. Just as they are shackled in this life, so will they be in the life to come. Their punishment will only be completed when they are thrown in the fire of hell where they will abide for a very long time. They have switched off all the faculties God has given to people and honoured them on their account. They have also accepted a low position in this life. This earns them an even lower life in the hereafter, simply because they have lived their first life making no use of their faculties, feelings and emotions.

Wrongdoers, Yet Forgiven

These people wonder that God will bring them back to life after their death, yet it is their being amazed that is indeed amazing. They even ask that their punishment be hastened instead of asking that they be given God's guidance and praying for His grace: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good."* (Verse 6)

Just as they do not look at the universe around them and do not contemplate its multitude of signs, they do not look at the fate of those communities before them. Those communities adopted the same attitude, precipitating God's punishment, and it came fast upon them, making of them a lesson to any future community: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time."* (Verse 6) They are unaware even of the fate of their own past generations which carry an effective lesson for those who wish to learn. *"Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing."* (Verse 6) He bestows His mercy on them even if they commit injustice and wrongdoing, allowing them time to reconsider their position. He allows them a chance to repent so that He will forgive them. But those who persist with their evil and wrongdoing, and remain unwilling to enter the gate of forgiveness, will find that God's punishment is severe indeed. *"Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution."* (Verse 6)

At this instance, the *sūrah* puts God's forgiveness ahead of His punishment to contrast it with those who pray for punishment rather than God's guidance. This demonstrates the great gulf between the goodness that God wants for them and the evil they seek for themselves.

It speaks volumes of how misguided, blind and abject they are. They certainly deserve the fire.

The *sūrah* then moves on to wonder at these people who are unable to see all the signs in the universe, each of which is a miracle on its own. They ask the Prophet for a miraculous sign. But what will they do with such a sign when the universe around them is full of signs pointing to the Creator. *"Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) They demand a miracle when miracles are neither of the Prophet's own making nor part of his business. It is God who decides, in His wisdom, whether it is necessary. *'But you are only a warner,'* who invites people to consider and reflect, warning them of the consequence of stubborn refusal to see the facts. This is the same task given to every messenger sent before him. God has sent these messengers to their peoples so that they might guide them to the right path: *"Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) As for miraculous signs, these are God's own affair.

God's Limitless Knowledge

Now the *sūrah* enters a totally different realm, that of human souls and feelings and other creatures.

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verses 8-11)

We are overwhelmed with the effect of these fine touches in the scene drawn before our eyes and the music that is characteristic of the mode of expression. We are infinitely surprised as we imagine how penetrating God's knowledge is, and to what depth it goes. How He is fully aware of every pregnancy in every womb, the secrets in people's hearts, the stealthy who move under the cover of darkness, those who walk in open daylight, and whatever any creature says in public or private. All of these are known to Him as if each one is followed by a ray of His knowledge, and by protectors who count their thoughts and intentions. The whole scene fills us with awe. So much so that we seek refuge with God, appealing for His protection. A believer knows that God's knowledge encompasses everything, but that total concept does not afford the same breadth of feeling as the details given here in such a beautiful image.

No abstract concept or unqualified true statement comes near to the Qur'ānic description of God's absolute knowledge: "*God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure.*" (Verse 8) Our imagination starts to follow every female in this whole universe: every female in rural and urban areas, amongst nomadic tribes and city dwellers, in houses, caves, shanty towns and forests. We then consider that God follows every pregnancy carried in every womb, and knows every drop of blood that moves in or out of all these wombs.

No abstraction or generalization compares to the statement that follows: "*It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command.*" (Verses 10-11) Here our

imagination follows every whisperer and open speaker, as well as everyone who moves about under the cover of darkness or who walks in open daylight anywhere in this great universe. We imagine God's knowledge following every individual from the front and from behind, recording every little detail at any time of the night or day.

The *sūrah's* opening description of the miraculous features to be found in the open universe are no greater and no more profound than the present verses which examine the deeper secrets of the human soul, or the far reaches of the world beyond the reach of human perception. Both sets of signs are of equal magnificence. Let us now reflect on some of the finer aspects of these verses: *"God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure."* (Verse 8)

When God's knowledge is described as total with regard to increase and decrease in gestation, this is followed by a statement saying that with God everything comes according to a clear and definite measure. So harmony is evident between the term, 'measure', and the notion of increase and decrease or falling short. Furthermore, the two situations of wombs falling short and increasing provide contrast, which is characteristic of the whole of this *sūrah*.

"He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High." (Verse 9) The two attributes mentioned here, 'the Great One' and 'the Most High', have definite impressions that they impart, but which are so difficult to describe in words. There is nothing created that does not have some shortcoming that keeps it within finite limits. Anything of God's creation, whether action or matter, which people describe as great indeed, begins to shrink once God is mentioned. The same applies to the other attribute, 'the Most High'. Have I said anything at all? No. Nor has any other commentator on the Qur'an who has reflected on these two attributes, 'the Great One, the Most High'.

"It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day." (Verse 10) The contrast is very clear in this verse. But the arresting point is the use of the Arabic word, *sārib*, which is translated as 'walking openly'. Its implication suggesting almost the opposite impression of its meaning. The shade it casts is akin to stealth or something hiding, while it means 'going or moving in the open'. Motion here is the intended feature as contrasted with using the dark night for cover. This shows that both the fine sound of the word and its shades are the cause of its use, so that the general atmosphere remains undisturbed.

"Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command." (Verse 11) The guardians that follow every human being, recording every

little detail, including thoughts, feelings and whims are not described or defined in any way here, except in so far as they fulfil this task *'by God's command'*. Hence, further description is pointless. We cannot say who they are, or what they are like, or how they watch, or where they are placed. We do not want to take away any of the awesome effect that the verse generates. The description is meant to give a cryptic impression. Anyone who appreciates fine style would hesitate long before trying to spoil this ambiguity by trying to explain what is better left unexplained.

"Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts." (Verse 11) He sends His angels to watch them all the time, monitoring any changes they may introduce within themselves or in their way of living, and determines what He does with them on that basis. He does not change any grace, luxury or position of respect, or indeed any hardship or position of humiliation or weakness, until people have changed their actions, feelings and conditions. The change then fits what they themselves have changed. But God knows what they do or change even before they do it themselves, but the consequences of their action take place after they have done it.

This lays a great responsibility on human beings. It is God's will that makes what He does with them dependent on what they themselves do. His laws operate on the basis of how they tackle these laws through their actions. The statement here is very clear, allowing no other interpretation. But it also signifies the position of honour God grants human beings as He has made them and their actions the means to implement God's will with regard to their own position, status and welfare.

Having established this principle, the *sūrah* highlights God's changing the situation of any particular community for the worse. The gist of the first statement indicates that they have changed for the worse, and as a result God has willed them to suffer misfortune: *"When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them."* (Verse 11) The *sūrah* stresses this aspect rather than the opposite because it fits here with those who hasten evil rather than good. When that was mentioned forgiveness was stated first so that people's lack of awareness of the truth was highlighted. Here, only the evil alternative is mentioned so as to serve as a warning. If, by their actions, they deserve God's punishment, then it is inevitable; it will not be averted. No support will rescue them from it.

How Thunder Glorifies God

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round to a different but related stage. Here we see natural scenes and human feelings mixed in a perfect harmony of picture and effect. The whole image casts an atmosphere of awe, apprehension, expectation and appeal. We are on our guard as we watch, and the verses here produce a profound

effect on us: *"It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and originates the heavy clouds. And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verses 12-16)

Lightning, thunder and clouds are well-known phenomena, and so are thunderbolts which occasionally accompany them. They have their clear effect on people, whether they know much about their nature or not. The *sūrah* includes here the scenes of all these phenomena, adding to them others that speak of the angels, shadows, glorification of God, prostration to Him, fear and hope, as well as a true prayer and one that remains unanswered. It also adds another picture of a thirsty person who seeks water, stretches his hands to it, and opens his mouth to receive even a drop. These images are gathered here neither haphazardly nor by coincidence. Each one imparts its effect on the whole scene, adding an air of awe and expectation, fear and hope, a prayer full of expectation and anxiety. These feelings are all brought in to depict God's power, for He alone has power over all forces, and causes benefit and harm to all. They serve to emphasize the fact that He has no partner and to warn against associating any such partners with Him.

"It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope." (Verse 12) This phenomenon which you see with your eyes is initiated by the nature that He has given the universe. It is He who has moulded this nature and given it its characteristics. One aspect of it is lightning which you see in accordance with the natural laws He has set in place. You are filled with fear as a result, because, by nature, it shakes people and has a strong effect on them. The real worry is that it becomes a thunderbolt. It may herald devastating floods. At the same time people hope that it brings benefit, as it may be followed by rain that quickens barren land, and it may cause dry rivers and streams to flow again.

Again it is He who *"originates the heavy clouds."* (Verse 12) These clouds are heavy with the water they bear. It is God who has devised the laws of nature and set them

in operation. In accordance with these laws, clouds form and rain falls. Had He created the universe in a different fashion, there would have been no clouds and no rain. The fact that we know how clouds form and gather, and how rain falls, does not detract from the importance or magnificence of this phenomenon. It works in a universal setting that has been put into place by none other than God, and according to certain laws that control that setting. None other than God has had a part in devising or operating these laws. The universe has not created itself, nor has it devised its own laws.

Thunder is the third aspect of the rainy atmosphere. This loud, explosive and resounding noise is a result of the laws of the universe set into operation by God. Whatever we may say about the nature or causes of thunder, it is a consequence of what God has set in the universe. It is a hymn of praise and glorification of the Power that has devised this whole system. Every fine and perfected product praises its Maker through what it reflects of His fine and perfect creation. However, the immediate and direct meaning of the term, 'glorify', may be the one intended here. This means that the thunder actually '*extols His limitless glory and praises Him.*' (Verse 13) If so, it is part of what God has chosen not to reveal to mankind. People have to accept this and believe in it as it is stated by God. After all, people only know very little about the world around them and even about themselves.

The fact that glorification and praise of God by thunder is mentioned here follows the established pattern which we frequently encounter in the Qur'ān. This imparts qualities and aspects of life to silent cosmic scenes, so that they participate in the action, and their action fits perfectly with the overall scene. The scene drawn here shows living things in a natural setting, and includes angels glorifying God, being in awe of Him, an earnest prayer to God, and also invocation of partners, as well as the person stretching out his hands to the water bidding it to reach his mouth, but it will not. Amidst this picture of prayer and worship, thunder is depicted as a living entity, using its distinctive sound to glorify God and pray to Him.

This image of fear, prayer, heavy clouds, lightning and thunder is completed with the mention of thunderbolts hurled by God to hit whomever He wills. Thunderbolts are also a natural phenomenon. These God hurls at those who have changed their situation for the worse, and when He decides not to give them any more chances, knowing that such chances will not produce any change in them.

A Call Without Response

What is most amazing is that in the midst of this terrifying atmosphere of lightning, thunder and thunderbolts, and in the midst of glorification of God by thunder and by the angels, and the uproar of furious tempests, some human noises

are raised to argue about the One who controls all these forces, giving them their natural characteristics which can easily drown all argument: *"Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise."* (Verse 13) Their ineffective voices are thus lost in this great and awesome scene whereby prayer and supplication resound like thunder and thunderbolts. Furthermore, these phenomena confirm the presence of God, about whose existence they argue. They also confirm His oneness, and that to Him alone all praises and glorification should be addressed by even the greatest creature in the universe, and the angels who stand in awe of Him. What effect then could the faint voices of such human beings have in their argument about God, the Almighty, the Wise?

As they argue about God, they attribute partners to Him and appeal to those alleged partners, when the prayer of truth belongs only to Him. Every other prayer is of no use, bringing only hardship to those who utter it: *"To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14)

The scene here is very much alive, vivid, expressing an eager appeal. It shows that only one prayer is a true prayer, and it is answered. It is the prayer which is addressed to God, expressing trust in Him and dependence on Him, seeking His help, mercy and guidance. All other prayers are false and futile. Do you not see what happens to those who address their prayers to false deities whom they claim to be God's partners? Here is one of them, very thirsty, seeking water and stretching his hands towards it, with an open mouth which sends an earnest prayer, asking for the water to reach his mouth, but it never does in spite of his efforts. The same applies to the prayer of those who disbelieve in God's oneness, and pray to alleged partners: *"The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14) But in what situation is this thirsty, earnestly appealing person deprived of even a drop of water? It is in an atmosphere charged with lightning, thunder and clouds heavy with rain. No wonder! These, like all other natural phenomena, operate according to God's orders.

At a time when such people associate partners with God, appealing to them for help, we see that everything in the universe submits to God's will, operating in accordance with the laws He has set. Whoever of them believes in God willingly submits to Him in total obedience, and whoever disbelieves submits by force. No one is able to challenge God's will, or to live outside the domain of the laws He has set in operation: *"To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening."* (Verse 15)

Because the general atmosphere here is one of prayer and supplication, the *sūrah*

expresses the notion of submission to God's will by the act of prostration, which is the clearest symbol of submission. It says that all creatures in the heavens and the earth prostrate themselves before God, but it adds that their shadows also do the same. They submit in the morning and also at the setting of the day when rays are broken and shadows are at their tallest. Thus the person and the shadow share in the prostration, submission and obedience. That is a fact, because shadows do what the persons themselves do. This fact adds its own connotations to the image painted. In effect, we see a double prostration, of both people and shadows. In fact the whole universe with all creatures and their shadows kneel down in submission before God, either willingly through faith or unwillingly. Yet those who are dumb still ascribe partners to God. How strange!

Unequal Contrasts

At this point the *sūrah* reverts to sarcastic questioning. In the general atmosphere the *sūrah* generates, showing the whole universe and all creatures in it submitting to God's will, voluntarily or by force, the only fitting response to anyone who persists in disbelief is that of ridicule and derision.

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.' (Verse 16)

An instruction is given to the Prophet to put this question to them: "*Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?*" (Verse 16) But the question does not invite an answer, because the *sūrah* has already answered it. It is asked here simply so that they may listen to the answer as it is being said, just as they have already seen it with their eyes. "*Say: [It is] God.*" (Verse 16) Then the Prophet is further instructed to put another question to them: "*Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?'*" Now the question is put to them by way of a denunciation of their actions, because they have already chosen different protectors.

Yet they are still to be questioned in spite of the fact that the whole matter is as clear as the difference between truth and falsehood, or the blind and the seeing, or light and darkness. This reference to the blind and the seeing is a reference to themselves and to believers, because it is only their blindness that prevents them

from seeing the clear truth felt by all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Similarly, the reference to light and darkness is a reference to their situation and that of believers. What prevents them from seeing the manifest truth is the darkness that totally covers them. *"Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verse 16)

Is it possible that these partners whom they associate with God have created something similar to God's creation, and as a result they cannot distinguish between God's creation and that of the alleged partners? If this were the case, they would have some justification in acknowledging such partners who have the power to create. After all, creation is an attribute which earns the creator the right to be worshipped. Without such ability to create, there is no justification for worshipping any alleged partner of God. In fact, they deserve all this bitter ridicule. They see that all things have been created by God, and they realize that their alleged partners have created nothing, and cannot create anything, because they themselves are creatures. Nevertheless the unbelievers worship them and submit to them without justification. This is the lowest depth to which human intellect can sink.

The comment at the end of all this ridicule to which no objection is made is: *"Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verse 16) This emphasizes the fact that God is the only Creator as He is the One who controls everything, which is the ultimate degree of authority. Thus the issue of attributing partners to God is preceded at the beginning by the prostration of all who are in the heavens and the earth, as well as their shadows, to God, willingly and unwillingly. It concludes by emphasizing that God has power over everything in the heavens and on earth. Recalling also what is mentioned of lightning, thunder, thunderbolts, glorification and praising of God in fear and in hope, we ask: what heart can stand up to all this unless it is blind, living in the depths of darkness until death overtakes it?

Again there are contrasts in the scene here between fear and hope, sudden lightning and heavy clouds, for the heaviness of the clouds not only refers to the rain they carry but also contrasts with the speed of lightning. The contrasts here are also between the fact that thunder glorifies and praises God while the angels do the same, as also between a true prayer and one that goes in vain. Similarly there is a contrast between the heavens and earth, the prostration of all living things willingly and unwillingly, persons and shadows, morning and evening, the seeing and the blind, darkness and light, the overpowering Creator and alleged partners who create nothing and who can cause themselves neither benefit nor harm. The text of the *sūrah* follows the same pattern with clear accuracy and remarkable harmony.

Truth and Falsehood: an Illustration

The *sūrah* moves on to give an example of truth and falsehood, the prayer that is fulfilled and the one that goes with the wind, of quiet goodness and boasting evil. The example provided depicts an aspect of God's power and His elaborate planning of creation: *"He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables."* (Verse 17)

The pouring down of water from the sky to make riverbeds flow and swell fits with the general atmosphere drawn in the previous picture of heavy clouds, lightning and thunder. It forms a part of the overall scene of the universe which is set as a background for the issues the *sūrah* tackles. It also testifies to the great power of God, the Almighty. The fact that each river flows according to a measure that fits its capacity and needs also testifies to God's elaborate planning that includes everything God creates. That is one of the main themes of the *sūrah*. However, both are only a framework for the parable God sets for people, drawn from their practical environment which they see at all times, but rarely contemplate.

When water pours from the sky causing the riverbeds to flow, it gathers along the way a swelling foam that floats on the surface as scum which at times is so thick that it forms a screen covering the water. This foam continues to rise and swell, but it is no more than scum. The water flows underneath, tranquil and peaceful, but it is the water that brings life and benefit. The same is seen with metals that are melted in order to make jewellery, as with gold and silver, or to make useful tools or utensils, as with iron or lead. The scum may float on top covering the metal itself, but it is merely scum that brings no benefit to anyone. It soon disappears to leave the pure and useful metal in place.

This is what truth and falsehood are like in this life. Falsehood may rise and swell so as to look in full control, but it is no more than foam or scum. It is soon ignored or cast away as it has no substance. The truth remains quiet and tranquil, to the extent that some people may think that it has disappeared, or died or has been lost, but it is the one which stays firm, like the water bringing life, or the pure metal that is full of benefit. *"Thus does God set forth His parables."* (Verse 17) And thus He determines the eventual outcome of beliefs, advocacy efforts, actions and verbal statements. He is the One who has power over all things, and who determines what happens in the universe and the destiny of all life. He knows what is apparent and what is hidden, truth and falsehood, what remains firm and what vanishes without trace.

Whoever responds to Him will have a fine reward, and whoever turns away will

face great suffering. So much so that the latter will want to offer the earth's riches twice over, in order to release himself. But there is no chance of release. There is only an awful reckoning and a fitting abode in hell: *"For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting-place!"* (Verse 18)

Here again the contrast is clear between those who respond to their Lord and those who do not. Between the rich reward and the awful reckoning, hell and its painful abode. This follows the same pattern of the *sūrah* in providing one contrasting image after another.

2

The Nature of Faith and Prophethood

Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: (19)

﴿ أَمْ مَنْ يَعْلَمُ أَنَّمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ
الْحَقُّ كَمَنْ هُوَ أَعْمَى ﴾ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو

الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿١٩﴾

those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; (20)

الَّذِينَ يُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَنْقُضُونَ

الْمِيثَاقَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; (21)

وَالَّذِينَ يَصِلُونَ مَا أَمَرَ اللَّهُ بِهِ أَنْ يُوصَلَ
وَيَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ وَيَخَافُونَ سُوءَ الْحِسَابِ

﴿٢١﴾

who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode: (22)

وَالَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا ابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا
الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْفَقُوا مِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ سِرًّا
وَعَلَانِيَةً وَيَدْرءُونَ بِالْحَسَنَةِ السَّيِّئَةَ

أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْعُقَبَى الدَّارِ ﴿٢٢﴾

gardens of perpetual bliss, which they will enter together with the righteous from among their parents, their spouses and their offspring. The angels will come in to them from every gate, (23)

[saying]: 'Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode. (24)

As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode. (25)

God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure. (26)

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; (27)

those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. (28)

جَنَّتُ عَدْنٍ يَدْخُلُونَهَا وَمَنْ صَلَحَ مِنْ
ءَابَائِهِمْ وَأَزْوَاجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّاتِهِمْ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ
يَدْخُلُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ كُلِّ بَابٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِمَا صَبَرْتُمْ ۖ فَنِعْمَ عُقْبَى
الدَّارِ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَنْقُضُونَ عَهْدَ اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ
مِيثَاقِهِ وَيَقْطَعُونَ مَا أَمَرَ اللَّهُ بِهِ ۗ أَنْ
يُوصَلَ وَيُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ
لَهُمُ اللَّعْنَةُ وَهُمْ سُوءُ الدَّارِ ﴿٢٥﴾

اللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۗ
وَفَرِحُوا بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ
الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا مَتَعٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ آيَةٌ
مِّن رَّبِّهِ ۗ قُلْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُضِلُّ مَنْ يَشَاءُ
وَيَهْدِي إِلَىٰهِ مَن يُنَاصِبُ ﴿٢٧﴾

الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۗ
أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ ﴿٢٨﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal.’ (29)

Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: ‘He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.’ (30)

Even if there should be a Qur’an by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God’s alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God’s promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. (31)

Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution. (32)

الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ

طُوبَىٰ لَهُمْ وَحُسْنُ مَآبٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ أَرْسَلْنَاكَ فِي أُمَّةٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن

قَبْلِهَا أُمَمٌ لِّتَتْلُوَ عَلَيْهِمُ الَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا

إِلَيْكَ وَهُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ بِالرَّحْمَنِ ۚ قُلْ هُوَ

رَبِّي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ

مَتَابٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَلَوْ أَنَّ قُرْءَانًا سُيِّرَتْ بِهِ الْجِبَالُ أَوْ

قُطِعَتْ بِهِ الْأَرْضُ أَوْ كَلِمٌ بِهِ الْمَوْتَىٰ بَلَّ

لِلَّهِ الْأَمْرُ جَمِيعًا ۗ أَفَلَمْ يَأْيِسِ الَّذِينَ

ءَامَنُوا أَنْ لَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ لَهْدَى النَّاسَ

جَمِيعًا ۗ وَلَا يَزَالُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا تُصِيبُهُم بِمَا

صَنَعُوا قَارِعَةً أَوْ تَحُلُّ قَرِيبًا مِّن دَارِهِمْ

حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَ وَعْدُ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ

الْمِيعَادَ ﴿٣١﴾

وَلَقَدْ اسْتَهْزَىٰ بِرُسُلٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَاَمَلَيْتُ

لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُهُمْ ۗ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ

عِقَابِ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]? Yet they ascribe partners to God. Say: 'Name them. Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know; or are these merely empty words?' Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide. (33)

They shall endure suffering in the life of this world, but, truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God. (34)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire. (35)

Those to whom We have given revelations rejoice at what has been bestowed on you from on high, but among different factions there are some who deny part of it. Say: 'I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.'

أَفَمَنْ هُوَ قَائِمٌ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ۗ وَجَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ قُلُوبًا سَمُوهُمْ ۚ
 أَمْ تُتَّبِعُونَهُرِ بِمَا لَا يَعْلَمُ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَمْ بِيظْهِرٍ مِّنَ الْقَوْلِ ۗ بَلْ زُيِّنَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مَكْرَهُمْ وَصُدُّوا عَنِ السَّبِيلِ ۗ وَمَنْ يُضِلِلِ
 اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ هَادٍ ۖ

لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَلِعَذَابُ
 الْآخِرَةِ أَشَقُّ ۗ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِّنَ اللَّهِ مِن وَّاقٍ ۖ

﴿ مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وَعِدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ ۗ تَجْرَىٰ
 مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ۗ أُكُلُهَا دَائِمٌ وَظِلُّهَا ۗ
 تِلْكَ عُقْبَى الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا ۗ وَعُقْبَى
 الْكَافِرِينَ النَّارُ ۗ ﴾

وَالَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَفْرَحُونَ
 بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمِنَ الْأَحْزَابِ مَنْ يُنْكِرُ
 بَعْضَهُ ۗ قُلْ إِنَّمَا أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ
 وَلَا أُشْرِكَ بِهِ ۗ إِلَيْهِ أَدْعُوا وَإِلَيْهِ مَأْتٍ

(36)

Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue. If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God. (37)

We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation. (38)

God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation. (39)

Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (40)

Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning. (41)

Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode. (42)

The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are

وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ حُكْمًا عَرَبِيًّا ۗ وَلَئِنْ
اتَّبَعْتَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ مَا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ

مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا وَاقٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ
أَزْوَاجًا وَذُرِّيَّةً ۗ وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ
بِأَيَّةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۗ لِكُلِّ أَجَلٍ كِتَابٌ

﴿٣٨﴾

يَمْحُوا اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيُثَبِّتُ ۗ وَعِنْدَهُ رُحْمٌ

الْكِتَابِ ﴿٣٩﴾

وَإِن مَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعْضَ الَّذِي نَعِدُهُمْ أَوْ
نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلْغُ وَعَلَيْنَا

الْحِسَابُ ﴿٤٠﴾

أَوْلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا نَأْتِي الْأَرْضَ نَنْقُصُهَا مِنْ
أَطْرَافِهَا ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ لَا مُعَقِّبَ لِحُكْمِهِ ۗ

وَهُوَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٤١﴾

وَقَدْ مَكَرَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۗ فَلِلَّهِ الْمَكْرُ
جَمِيعًا ۗ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ۗ

وَسَيَعْلَمُ الْكٰفِرُ لِمَن عُقِبِيَ الدَّارِ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَسْتَ مُرْسَلًا ۗ قُلْ
كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَمَنْ

عِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ الْكِتَابِ ﴿٤٣﴾

*those who have true knowledge of the
Book.'* (43)

Overview

Great scenes drawn from the vast universe and the world beyond, as well as the depths of the human soul were presented in the first half of the *sūrah*. Now, this second half adds a fine rationality that deals with the great issues of revelation and the divine message, God's oneness, the unbelievers' attributing partners to Him, as well as their demand for miracles and their hastening of God's punishment.

This new phase opens with a demonstration of the natures of belief and denial of the truth. The former is evidence of true knowledge, while the latter is blindness. Another touch delineates the nature of believers and unbelievers, and the distinctive qualities of both. This is followed by a scene of the Day of Judgement and the bliss it brings to the former and suffering to the latter. We then have a description of plentiful and stinted provisions as determined by God. Then follows an image of believing hearts gaining reassurance through remembrance of God. Then we move to a description of the Qur'ān which almost makes mountains move, or the earth split apart, or the dead speak. A further image touches on the calamities that befall unbelievers or which strike a short distance from their quarters. This is followed by a sarcastic remark directed at the unbelievers' false gods. Mention is then made of the doom of past communities so as to rid the earth of them time after time. The closing part contains a stern warning to those who deny the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to leave them to their inevitable doom. All this shows that the strong beat we encountered in the first half of the *sūrah* now prepares us for a close look at the issues raised. Our minds are open to receive these issues and accept the message of the *sūrah*. The two parts are mutually complementary, although each has its special effects, all of which serve one issue and promote the same goal.

Qualities of the Righteous

The first question addressed in this part of the *sūrah* was already raised in the first half. Here, however, it is presented rather differently: *"Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind."* (Verse 19)

This verse states clearly that the opposite of a person who knows that the revelation received by the Prophet from his Lord is the truth is not one who does not have that knowledge, but one who is blind. This is a unique way of expressing that which touches hearts and magnifies differences. At the same time it states the truth without any exaggeration, addition or distortion. This is a great, clear and readily apparent fact that remains unnoticed only by he who is blind. People, then, belong to

one of two groups: those who keep their eyes open, so they know it, and those who are blind, so they do not. Real blindness is that which shuts minds, intelligence and learning faculties. It is a blindness which switches off the source of spiritual knowledge. *"Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind."* (Verse 19) Those are the ones who have open minds and active faculties of understanding. When those are reminded of the truth, they keep it in mind, and when they are alerted to its indications, they appreciate them.

The *sūrah* outlines a few qualities of those who are endowed with understanding: *"Those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant."* (Verse 20) God's bond and covenant are referred to here as being absolute. This includes every bond and covenant made with all people. The greatest bond which provides a basis for all others is faith. The most important covenant which embraces all others is that which binds people to fulfil the requirements of faith.

The bond of faith is both old and new. It is as old as human nature which conforms to the law that governs all existence. Human nature is endowed with a direct understanding that there is a single power which has brought the universe into existence, and that this power belongs to the Creator who is the One to be worshipped. It also includes the covenant made with all human generations before they are born, as we interpret the relevant Qur'ānic verse: *"Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves. [He said]: Am I not your Lord?' They replied: 'Yes, indeed, we bear witness to that."* (7: 172) At the same time, it is a new bond, renewed with the messengers whom God has sent to re-establish the faith, remind people of it and provide its details.

They do not initiate the bond of faith, but they outline its requirements of submission to God alone to the exclusion of all others. This bond also requires good action, proper behaviour, and turning always to God alone who is the other party to the old covenant.

On the basis of the bond and covenant with God, all bonds and covenants with human beings are established, whether with God's Messenger or with people, relatives or strangers, individuals or communities. A person who remains true to the first bond will remain true to all bonds because this is a duty. When one fulfils the duties required by the original covenant, one will fulfil all that is required towards other people, because this is a stipulation of the original covenant. Thus, in these few words the *sūrah* outlines the basic rule upon which the whole structure of human life is built.

"And who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning." (Verse 21) The first of these qualities is expressed in

general terms, referring to everything that should remain united or joined together. Hence it means total obedience, following the established rules and the code God has laid down, without deviation. If the details were provided here about everything that should remain joined, it would be a very long list. There is no need to provide such details here. For it is enough to impress on us the need to remain constant, ready to obey, and maintain our bond with God. The last part of the verse implicitly describes the feelings that accompany such complete obedience: *"who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning."* Conscious of God, they dread the reckoning. But as they are endowed with understanding, they prepare for that reckoning before it is due, so that they will have an easy one.

"Who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord." (Verse 22) Patience takes different forms. One aspect is to persevere, fulfilling the requirements of the covenant, such as by dedicated action, diligent striving or *jihād*, and advocacy of God's message, etc. Another is to be patient in situations of affluence and poverty. However, those who are patient when they have abundance of everything are few and far between. Most people become arrogant in such situations and this may lead them to disbelief in God. A different aspect is to be patient in the face of other people's stupidities that result from ignorance. These are all adverse situations that require patience. True believers show such patience out of love for their Lord, which is implied in the expression that they 'seek His countenance'. Their motive is not to spare themselves the embarrassment of people saying that they are afraid, or to solicit the compliment that they have shown patience, or to gain any advantage or avert any harm. Their only motive is that they love God and seek His reward. Hence they endure any trial to which He subjects them, and accept what God's will dictates and are content that He brings them only what is good for them.

"And attend to their prayers." (Verse 22) This is a requirement of remaining true to God's bond and fulfilling the covenant made with Him, but it is given prominence here because it is the cornerstone of such fulfilment. It is also the practical manifestation of turning to God alone, and the relationship between Him and His servants which allows no room for any intervention by anyone else.

"And spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them." (Verse 22) This is also part of keeping together what should be united, and part of the fulfilment of the covenant made with God. It is given special mention because it is a bond between God's servants which unites them in this life on the basis of faith. It purges the giver of stinginess, and purifies the recipient of grudge. It makes life in the Muslim community worthy of human beings who co-operate with, and look after, one another and who are honoured by God. The spending is meant to be in secret and in the open. When it is secret it preserves integrity, and spares people embarrassment. When it is open, it gives a motive to others to do the same, and it

demonstrates the implementation of God's law. Both ways carry importance and value in life.

"And who repel evil with good." (Verse 22) What is meant here is that in their daily dealings with others, they reply to the evil done by others by doing what is good. The verse, however, stresses the result, rather than the action leading to it. When an evil action is returned with something good, this has a dampening effect on the evil tendency in others, encouraging them to do good instead, and helping them to resist Satan's promptings. Eventually, it repels the evil action and prevents it. Hence, the verse emphasizes this result and gives it prominence by way of encouraging people to reply to an evil action with a good one.

Moreover, there is a subtle reference here to returning evil with good only when this helps to prevent, rather than encourage evil. When evil is uncompromising, it must be overpowered. To return it with good action only emboldens it, making it more intransigent.

Besides, the prevention of evil by means of good action is feasible mostly in relations between equals. When the dispute is over faith, it is normally the case that arrogant aggressors and spreaders of corruption can only be dealt with by strong, decisive action. Qur'anic directives then should be considered and implemented on the basis of a rational and objective study of every situation to determine the best course under the circumstances.

"Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode: gardens of perpetual bliss, which they will enter together with the righteous from among their parents, their spouses and their offspring. The angels will come in to them from every gate, [saying]: 'Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode." (Verses 22-24) Such people possessing such qualities have a high position in heaven where they have their permanent abode. There they will be reunited with their righteous relatives, including their good parents, spouses, children and grandchildren. Everyone of these is admitted into heaven on the basis of their own good actions, because they deserve this goodly reward from God. But they are also blessed with reunion with the people they loved in the life of this world, which is another aspect of their happiness that enhances what they have in heaven.

In this great atmosphere of happy reunion, the angels take part in their reception and hospitality, constantly moving everywhere: *"The angels will come in to them from every gate."* (Verse 23) The image given here is very real. It is as if we see the angels and hear them welcoming the believers, saying: *"Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode."* (Verse 24) It is a great sight with people and angels meeting, greeting and honouring one another.

On the other side are the ones who are devoid of mind and insight, which means

that they neither reflect on, nor see the truth. They are the opposite of the first group in every respect: *"As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode."* (Verse 25)

They break the covenant God has made with human nature in the first place and, in consequence, break every subsequent covenant. When the first bond is broken, all later ones established on its basis are also broken. A person who does not honour his commitment to God will never be true to any bond or covenant. Therefore, these people cut asunder whatever should be joined and remain united. This is expressed here in absolute terms so as to cover everything that comes under the same heading. They also spread corruption on earth, which contrasts with the perseverance of the first group, their attending to prayers, charitable spending and repelling evil with good. Indeed spreading corruption on earth is the opposite of all these qualities, because abandoning any of them represents or encourages corruption.

Such people are cast away, with a curse laid upon them, which means that they are rejected and turned away. This contrasts with the honour given to the other group. Moreover, they will have *an evil abode'*, which is not specified because we know it as contrasting with the abode of the good who are in heaven.

This group are delighted with whatever comfort or pleasure they have in the life of this world, and as such, they do not aspire to the far superior happiness in the life to come. Yet it is God who determines what people have in this life. He gives either abundant or stinted provision, which means that He has the final say in both this present life and in the future life alike. Had such people sought the reward of the hereafter, God would not have deprived them of happiness in this life, when it is He who gives it to them in the first place: *"God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure."* (Verse 26)

True Heart Comfort

We have already referred to the great difference between a person who knows that what has been bestowed from on high to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is the truth and one who is blind.

Now the *sūrah* speaks about the blind who do not see all the signs God has placed in the universe and who are not satisfied with the Qur'ān as a great sign. Hence they demand another miraculous sign. The *sūrah* mentions something of this earlier and comments by saying that the Prophet is only a warner, for miraculous signs rest with God. Now it mentions their demand anew, outlining the reasons that help one

person to follow divine guidance and cause another to remain in error. It also paints a picture of hearts content with alertness of God's presence. Such hearts do not worry or demand miracles in order to believe when they have the Qur'ān available to them. For the Qur'ān can make mountains move and the earth split apart. With the Qur'ān, the dead can be addressed. This is sufficient to tell us about the power and authority of the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* concludes its discussion of those who ask for miracles by explaining to the believers that they hope for nothing. It draws their attention to the examples they see before them and to what, from time to time, befalls those who deny the truth.

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal. Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' Even if there should be a Qur'ān by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God's alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution.' (Verses 27-32)

The answer to their demand is that miracles are not what lead people to believe. Faith has its solid foundation within the human soul. There are causes that lead to it, but these have to originate within the soul: *"Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him.'"* (Verse 27) It is their turning to Him which makes them worthy of His guidance. It is clearly understood that those who do not turn to God are those who deserve to be left to go astray. This is indeed what happens to them. What matters, then, is one's own heart and its being ready to receive God's guidance. If so, it seeks it and appeals to God for it. Hearts which do not make any positive move to seek God's guidance remain far removed from it.

This is followed by an image of believing hearts which enjoy a congenial atmosphere of reassurance, happiness and peace: *"those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God."* (Verse 28) They find comfort in their feeling

that their bond with God is a real one, and that they are close to Him, secure with His support.

They are without worry, and worry is normally only generated when one is left alone or when one is unsure of one's way. Such people understand God's wisdom behind man's creation, origin and destiny. They also find comfort in feeling secure against aggression, harm or evil, except as God wills for them. This is coupled with a resigned acceptance of whatever trial God wishes to test them with. They are reassured that God will always bestow on them His grace, giving them guidance, abundance and security in this life and in the life to come.

"It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort." (Verse 28) Such comfort is a profound reality in the hearts of believers who deeply and truly feel the meaning of faith. They have a bond with God which they recognize. They cannot express the meaning of such a bond in words.

It touches their hearts, generating a feeling of happiness and reassurance that they do not stand alone in this universe. Whatever surrounds them is a friend, because it is all made by God under whose protection they live.

No one on earth is more miserable than those who are deprived of the blessing of a close relationship with God. Those who, having severed the most essential bond with their Creator, feel that they have no relationship with all around them are bound to suffer great misery. Who can be more wretched than one who does not realize why he has been created, or where he is heading, or why he suffers. Forlorn indeed is the one who goes about his life feeling isolated in an endless desert, having to strive without support, guidance or help.

In life we often experience moments which none can withstand unless we are certain of God's support and protection, regardless of whatever resources of fortitude, perseverance and power may be at our command. There are moments in life that render all that useless. But such moments can be faced easily by those who find their comfort in God: *"It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort."* (Verse 28)

Those who turn to God are reassured when they remember Him, and find fine welcome when they return to Him. This is the same as the outcome of their turning to Him in this life presenting their good deeds: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal."* (Verse 29) The Arabic term, *tūbā*, which is used here for 'happiness' is chosen for its added connotations of greatness. Hence, their happiness is great, unending.

Conversely, those who demand a sign are those who have deprived themselves of the contentment, comfort and happiness of faith. They live in worry, and it is this anxiety that makes them demand miracles and signs. The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet

that he is not the first messenger to preach the divine message to his people. This means that they should not find the matter too strange. Before them there were numerous communities and many messengers. If they persist with their rejection of the divine faith, you, the Prophet, should continue to follow your own way, putting your trust in God alone: *"Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.'"* (Verse 30)

What is extremely odd is that they refuse to believe in God, the Most Gracious, in the remembrance of whose mercy people find inner comfort and contentedness. God's Messenger is being told that all his task requires is that he read to them what God has revealed to him. This is the purpose for which God has given him this message. If they persist in rejecting it, he has to make it clear to them that he places his trust in God alone, and that he turns to Him, seeking help from no one else.

The task the Prophet is sent to accomplish is to recite this remarkable Qur'ān to them. Had there been a divine writ with which mountains move, or the earth split asunder, or the dead made to speak, this Qur'ān would have had the necessary characteristics to achieve such supernatural phenomena. But this Qur'ān is meant to address the living who are accountable for their deeds. If they will not respond, then the believers may despair of their ever turning to God and submitting to Him. They should leave them alone until God's threat to the unbelievers has come true: *"Even if there should be a Qur'ān by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God's alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise."* (Verse 31)

The Qur'ān has done with those who received it and moulded themselves according to its teachings much more than moving mountains, cleaving the earth asunder or making the dead speak. In fact the miracles it achieved in and with these souls are much greater and more far-reaching in their effects on human life and indeed on the earth itself. Islam and Muslims have not only changed the course of history so often, but they have also changed all that is on the face of the earth.

The very nature of the Qur'ān, its address and expression, its treatment of its subject matter, the truth it outlines and its effect have overwhelming and penetrating power. This power is felt by everyone who appreciates and understands what is being said. Those who moulded themselves in accordance with its teachings moved what is more deeply entrenched than mountains, which is the history of nations and communities. They cut asunder what is far more solid than the earth, which is

inflexible thought and rigid tradition. They were able to send life into what was more lifeless than the dead, which is communities that had been suffering under a long history of despotism. If we look at the change that was brought about in the life of the Arabs, and their complete and far-reaching transformation, with no apparent cause other than the effect of the Qur'ān and its method of remoulding hearts and souls, we realize that it is far greater than moving mountains, splitting the earth apart and sending life into what is dead.

"God's alone is the command in all things." (Verse 31) It is He who chooses what to do and the tools for the situation. If after the revelation of the Qur'ān there remain people who are not touched by it, the believers should give up trying to inspire life into such hearts. They should leave the whole matter to God. Had He so wished, He would have created all people with a single tendency to believe in Him, just as He did with the angels. Alternatively, He would have brought about something that would force them to believe. But He has not willed either scenario, because He has created man to fulfil a particular task, and He – limitless is He in His glory – knows that its fulfilment requires that man is created with both tendencies: *"Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind?"* (Verse 31) The believers, then, should leave them to God.

However, some disaster may befall them, causing them great harm and killing whoever is doomed to destruction: *"As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes."* (Verse 31) When it does, they are left in fear that a similar one may follow, destroying them altogether. It may touch certain hearts and give them life.

This may continue *"until God's promise is fulfilled."* (Verse 31) This is a reference to the promise God has given. He has delayed their judgement until that time. *"God never fails to fulfil His promise."* (Verse 31) It will certainly be fulfilled and they will receive whatever they have been promised.

Examples are many, and the fate of earlier communities should provide a lesson to be acted upon before it is too late. *"Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution."* (Verse 32) This last sentence may be read as a question, but it is rhetorical requiring no answer. For such punishment was the subject of discussion for many generations.

Foul Devices with Fair Appearance

The second point discussed here is that of the partners people associate with God. The issue was also discussed in the first part of the *sūrah*. It is raised here in the form of a sarcastic question which compares such alleged partners with God who deals

with every soul and rewards it for what it earns in this life. The scene is concluded with a description of the suffering those who invent this fallacy are certain to endure in this life and the greater suffering they will meet in the hereafter. This contrasts with the security and blessings awaiting the righteous: *"Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]? Yet they ascribe partners to God. Say: Name them. Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know; or are these merely empty words?"* Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide. They shall endure suffering in the life of this world, but, truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God. Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire." (Verses 33-35)

God, limitless is He in His glory, watches all souls, has power over them all in every situation and knows what every one of them does in public or private. The Qur'ān, in its inimitable style, describes this in a very vivid way so that we see all this for ourselves, overwhelmed with awe: *"Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]?"* (Verse 33) Now who is this watcher? It is God Himself? What soul will not feel fear to the bottom of its heart? Yet the description is real. The *sūrah* uses a rather physical image because human beings are more influenced by material than abstract matters.

If the situation is such, how come they associate partners with God? Their attitude appears here peculiarly odd. *"Yet they ascribe partners to God."* (Verse 33) Yes, indeed! They ascribe partners to God Almighty who deals with every soul according to what it has earned. None and nothing escapes His watchful eye.

"Say: 'Name them.'" (Verse 33) They are unrecognizable entities. They may have names, but the *sūrah* treats them like entities with no name.

"Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know!" (Verse 33) This is particularly sarcastic. Are you, human beings, aware of something which God does not know? Do you know of earth deities unknown to God? They dare not make such a claim, yet they practically say as much when they claim that such deities exist while God asserts that there are none.

"Or are these merely empty words?" which have no real significance? Is the question of God's existence so trivial that people approach it in jest, using words that are uttered without meaning or significance?

All this ridicule comes to an end with a decisive statement that puts the issues involved very clearly: *"Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any*

guide." (Verse 33) The real issue, then, is that these people denied God, ignoring all evidence in support of faith, and choosing not to see God's guidance. Thus God's law operates against them, whilst their own souls persuade them that they are right and that their schemes against the advocates of faith is right and fair.

All this turns them away from the path that leads to the truth. A person who, by the operation of God's law, goes astray because he has chosen error over divine guidance will have none to guide him. God's law operates when the causes for its operation come together.

The natural goal for such blind hearts means their suffering: *"They shall endure suffering in the life of this world."* (Verse 34) A calamity may befall them during their lifetime, or it may strike close to them causing a great deal of apprehension, anxiety and fear. In fact, hearts that are devoid of the comfort and reassurance generated by faith, and do not recognize the presence of divine wisdom behind every event they face are indeed suffering. However, *"truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still."* (Verse 34) The suffering here is left undefined so that there is no limit to how we imagine it to be. *"They will have none to shield them from God."* (Verse 34) No one will extend them any protection against whatever punishment God inflicts on them.

On the other side stand those who are God-fearing. The word chosen here to describe them, *al-muttaqūn*, is derived from the same root as *wāq*, i.e. 'protector', and is used here to express the fact that the unbelievers stand without protection against God's punishment. The God-fearing actually protect themselves with their faith and righteousness against all suffering and punishment. In addition the promise given to them to be in heaven is fulfilled: *"Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God."* (Verse 35) That is an abode of perfect and complete comfort, where both shade and fruit are everlasting. It is an image that gives hearts comfort and reassurance, and which contrasts with the hardship and suffering of the unbelievers.

But the suffering on one side and the happiness of heaven on the other are the right and proper destiny of both groups: *"Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire."* (Verse 35)

A Command to Worship

The main themes of this *sūrah* are those of revelation and God's oneness. Speaking of the two together, the *sūrah* mentions the attitude of the people of earlier revelations towards the Qur'ān and the Prophet, making it clear to the Prophet that the revelations he has received from on high constitute the final judgement on what

earlier revelations included. It is indeed the final word which includes whatever God wants to remain applicable of the divine faith preached by all His messengers. It omits what God wants to be omitted, because its purpose, which is known to God, has been served. The Prophet, then, must stick to what God has revealed to Him. He must not follow the desires of those who follow earlier revelations, or those who are generally known as the 'People of the Book', in any matter, whether serious or otherwise. As for those who require him to produce a sign, they should be told that signs are given only when God wills them to be given. The Prophet's task is only to convey his message.

Those to whom We have given revelations rejoice at what has been bestowed on you from on high, but among different factions there are some who deny part of it. Say: I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.' Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue. If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God. We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation. God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation. Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (Verses 36-40)

Those among the people of earlier revelations who are sincere in following their faith will find in the Qur'an an endorsement of the basic rules of the faith built on God's oneness, an acknowledgement of the truth of the earlier religions and their books, a serious consideration of these faiths coupled with deep respect, and also a sincere perception of the bond which unites all those who believe in God. Hence, they rejoice and believe. This rejoicing is experienced by sincere hearts, for it is the uniting of truth, providing a strengthened belief that all God's revelations are true and are endorsed by the new divine message.

"But among different factions there are some who deny part of it." (Verse 36) The factions referred to here could be found among the people of earlier revelations and also the idolaters. The *sūrah* does not mention which part they deny, because the purpose here is just to state the fact that they challenge the truth of this new revelation by denying parts of it: *"Say: 'I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.'"* (Verse 36) He alone is the One to be worshipped, and in whom we call on people to believe, and to whom we all return.

The Prophet is ordered to declare this approach when he confronts anyone who

denies a part of his book, the Qur'ān. He should declare his firm belief in the whole book revealed to him by his Lord, whether the people of earlier revelations rejoice at it or deny parts of it. The reason is that what has been revealed to him is the final arbiter, expressed in Arabic, his language which he knows well. Since the Qur'ān is God's final word on faith, all reference should be made to it only: *"Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue."* (Verse 37)

"If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God." (Verse 37) What has been given to you is the true knowledge. Whatever the different factions say is no more than the expression of their desires which have no basis in true knowledge or established fact. This warning addressed to God's Messenger is the clearest expression of this fact. It is one whereby deviation is not tolerated, not even by the Prophet. Far be it from the Prophet to deviate from it in any way.

Anyone who objects to the fact that God's Messenger is a human being should remember that all past messengers were human beings as well: *"We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring."* (Verse 38) If the objection has something to do with him not producing a physical miracle, then that is something over which he has no control. It is determined by God: *"Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission."* (Verse 38) He determines this when He wills and according to His wisdom. If there are differences in the details of what is revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad and the revelations given earlier, these differences are due to the fact that every period of time has a suitable book. The Qur'ān is the final one to be revealed by God: *"Every age has had its revelation. God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation."* (Verses 38-39) He annuls what has served its purpose and confirms what is of benefit. He has His original decree which contains all that is confirmed or annulled. He is the One who has sent down His revelations and He does with it what He pleases, in accordance with His wisdom. His will is always done.

Whether God inflicts any of His threats upon them during the Prophet's lifetime or causes him to die before that, the fact of the matter remains the same. The nature of the message and the nature of Godhead remain the same: *"Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning."* (Verse 40) This clear and decisive directive illustrates the nature of the message and the role of its advocates. Such advocates are required to fulfil their role, as it may be at every stage. They are not responsible for reaching any goal other than that determined by God. It is not for them to precipitate the attainment of any goal. They should never entertain any thought of failure when they see that their efforts have not attained power in the land. They are merely advocates of a message, and they should never go beyond this

advocacy role.

God's might is clearly seen in everything around us. When strong and affluent communities deny God, allow corruption to spread and claim that they make their own affluence, God's hand begins to reduce their power, wealth and general standing. They are confined to a limited stretch of land after having had an extended area of rule and influence. When God determines that such communities shrink in their power and area, His rule is carried out, with no power able to stand in its way: *"Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning."* (Verse 41)

Those unbelievers in Arabia are not stronger or more powerful in their scheming than the communities which lived before them. Yet those were smitten by God who is more powerful and more elaborate in His planning: *"Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode."* (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* concludes by mentioning the fact that the unbelievers deny God's message given to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Its opening confirms the truth of his message. Thus the beginning and the end address the same point. God's testimony is called for, and it is certainly sufficient. After all, He has absolute knowledge of this book, or divine writ, and of all other revealed books: *"The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are those who have true knowledge of the Book.'" (Verse 43)*

Thus ends the *sūrah* which has taken us along a trip to discover the great horizons of the universe and to show us some of the inner aspects of the human soul. It makes profound and lasting impressions on our hearts and minds, leaving the final testimony to God, which is made at both the beginning and the end. It is a testimony to put an end to all arguments.

An Irrefutable Testimony

The *sūrah* draws clear outlines of the Islamic faith, following the Qur'ānic method of explaining its principles. It could be said that we should have dwelt on these aspects of the Islamic faith as they are mentioned in the *sūrah*. However, we have chosen instead not to interrupt the flow of the Qur'ānic theme in this *sūrah*, leaving such discussion to the end.

The opening of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses, as well as a number of directives it contains point clearly to the fact that it is a Makkan revelation. It certainly was not revealed in Madinah as some reports indicate. In fact it was

revealed at a time when the unbelievers' attitude was hardened, manifesting itself in outright rejection of the Islamic message, throwing challenges at the Prophet, demanding that he produce miracles and other signs, and precipitating God's punishment against which he warned them. This required a clear statement which aimed at strengthening the Prophet and his Companions so that they held on to what God had revealed, disregarding all opposition. They were to care little for all the false accusations levelled at them and the challenges put to them. They were to feel themselves as having the upper hand since they were following the truth, able to turn to God alone for support, and declare His oneness as the only Lord of the universe. They were to believe their faith as truth, no matter how vehemently it was denied or rejected by the unbelievers and the idolaters. The *sūrah* also puts some irrefutable evidence supporting this truth to the idolaters, which they could witness in the universe around them, within themselves, as also in the events of human history. All these aspects are grouped together and utilized in such a way as to make a profound address to the human mind.

Here are some of the verses stressing the fact that this revealed book, i.e. the Qur'ān, represents the truth, and that rejecting it altogether, denying its truth, or giving a slow response to its appeal does not change this great fact:

These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the truth, yet most people will not believe. (Verse 1)

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing. Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution. Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide. (Verses 6-7)

To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping) that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. (Verse 14)

Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables. (Verse 17)

Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in

mind. (Verse 19)

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord? Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort.' (Verses 27-28)

Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' (Verse 30)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire. (Verse 35)

Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (Verse 40)

The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are those who have true knowledge of the Book.' (Verse 43)

In all these verses we can clearly discern the nature of the confrontation that the idolaters used to challenge the Prophet and the Qur'ān. We also see in this challenge and the divine directives on how to respond to it the nature of the times when this *sūrah* was revealed.

Declaring the Essentials of Faith

A main feature of the divine instructions to God's Messenger is that he should face all the opposition, challenges, denunciations and difficulties thrown in his face by declaring the truth of his message in full. This means that he must declare in all clarity that there is no deity other than God, the only Lord in the universe, the Almighty who must be worshipped alone without associating any partners with Him. All people will inevitably return to Him for judgement, when they will either be admitted into heaven or thrown in hell. These are the basic truths which the

unbelievers denied and challenged the Prophet over. He is further instructed not to follow their desires, or seek compromises with them that require that any part of these truths be concealed, suppressed or delayed. In fact the Prophet is warned that God's punishment will apply to him also if he follows their desires in this respect, after all the clear knowledge that has been given to him.

This main feature clearly shows that the advocates of the Islamic message cannot deviate from the nature of the message and its method of advocacy. They must also declare the basic truths of the Islamic faith without hesitation, suppressing nothing and delaying nothing. The first of these essential truths is that all Godhead and Lordship in the universe belong to God alone. Hence, all submission must be to Him. He is the One to be obeyed in all matters. This truth must be declared, no matter what sort of opposition it meets nor how stiff the unbelievers' resistance is. Even in the face of hardship and persecution, its advocates must declare it complete. It is not for them to decide that part of this truth should be put aside, or temporarily suppressed, because tyrants dislike it or persecute those who advocate it, or turn away from the faith on its account. None of these considerations permit advocates of the Islamic message to change its strategy, starting, for example, with matters of worship or moral values, good manners or spiritual considerations. It may appear that such a course is preferable in order to avoid the wrath of tyrants but that would be a grave mistake. For advocates of the Islamic message must at all times declare God's oneness and Lordship over the whole universe, and that all submission and obedience belong to God alone.

This is the proper way to advocate the Islamic faith, as God wants it to be done. It is the strategy followed by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), as he was instructed by God. No advocate of Islam can abandon this strategy, or change its method of action. After all, the Islamic faith is God's message and He looks after it. He provides sufficient support for its advocates, and He is always able to protect them against tyrants.

The Qur'ānic method of calling people to Islam brings together the Qur'ān, God's book which we recite, and the open book of the universe. The whole universe, with all the evidence it provides of God's power and elaborate planning, is a source of inspiration for mankind. Combined with these two books is the record of human history which also contains countless proofs of God's power and planning. Human beings are shown all these, as the address is made to their minds, hearts and feelings all at the same time.

This *sūrah* contains numerous examples from the pages of the book of the universe as it addresses the whole human entity. Here are just some of them:

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by

your Lord is the truth, yet most people will not believe. It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord. It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (Verses 1-4)

The *sūrah* includes all these scenes so that the whole universe becomes a witness giving proof of God's power of creation, origination, and design, according to an elaborate plan. It then wonders at people who see all this evidence but who nonetheless find it difficult to believe in resurrection and a new creation. They deny God's revelations because what He reveals states very clearly this truth which should be felt to be so close at hand, considering God's limitless power which produced these marvellous scenes of creation.

But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide. (Verse 5)

It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and originates the heavy clouds. And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. (Verses 12-13)

This scene of universal phenomena enhances the feeling of amazement at people who continue to argue about God, associating partners with Him when they can see the results of His power and Lordship, as well as the submission of the universe to Him. All this proves that He controls all matters in the universe. No one else has similar power to create, plan or control:

Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards

water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.' (Verses 13-16)

An Appeal to Human Feelings

The whole universe is thus turned into a great exhibition proving God's power and pointing out what should motivate people to accept the faith. It addresses human nature with profound logic, and addresses the whole human being with all its faculties of perception and understanding. This is all done in perfect harmony.

To the great book of the universe is added a few pages of human history, together with the visible effects of God's power, control of the universe and His elaborate planning of human life:

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. (Verse 6)

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verses 8-11)

God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure. (Verse 26)

As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or

will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution. (Verses 31-32)

Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning. Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode. (Verses 41-42)

The Qur'ān must always be the book to which advocates of Islam turn for guidance, before turning to any other source. It is from the Qur'ān that they must learn how to call on people to believe, and how to awaken their hearts and bring inactive souls back to life. The Qur'ān is a revelation sent down by God, the Creator of man who knows his nature, how he is influenced and in what way he reacts. We have already said that advocates of the Islamic faith should follow the strategy laid down by God, starting with making the truth plain concerning God, His oneness, Lordship over all the worlds, sovereignty and power. Similarly, they must seek to open people's hearts to the message of truth by following the method of the Qur'ān in making people truly aware of their Lord. This is the best way to make people recognize that all submission must be to God alone, the true Lord who controls the whole universe.

The Nature of Prophethood

The Qur'ān takes great care to show in the clearest of terms the nature of the message and the nature of God's Messenger. It does so in order to establish for people who their true Lord is, and to remove any trace of polytheism from their minds. There were in the past many instances of deviation from this proper concept, among the people of earlier revelations, which led to confusion between the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. The clearest example was among the Christians who added to Jesus (peace be upon him) divine qualities and qualities of Lordship that belong to God alone. As a result, the followers of different churches became involved in a maze of conflict that was contrary to the truth.

But the Christians were not the only ones whose beliefs were so confused. All pagan communities were similarly involved in such endless confusion, producing concepts that assign mysterious qualities to prophethood, or link it with magic, or clairvoyance, or with contacts with spirits and the *jinn*.

Many of these concepts found their way into the beliefs of the pagan Arabs. Hence some of them used to demand that the Prophet tell them about things beyond the reach of human knowledge. Some demanded that he should produce some physical miracles. They also accused him of being a sorcerer, or a madman who had contacts with the *jinn*, while some suggested that he should have an angel supporting what he said. The fact is that all such suggestions, demands, accusations and challenges thrown at him had their roots in the pagan concepts of the nature of prophethood and prophets in general.

The Qur`ān puts the truth of this concept in a most lucid way, outlining the nature of the message and the messenger who received it from God and conveyed it to mankind. It also outlines the unique nature of Godhead in which no other being has the slightest share, and the nature of servitude that applies to all creatures, including God's messengers and prophets. They too were human beings who had no divine qualities whatsoever, and had no contact with the *jinn* or with the world of magic. They only received revelations from God. Beyond that, they had no power to produce any supernatural miracle, except by God's will. They were chosen for a certain task while they retained their human nature and their status as God's servants.

The *sūrah* includes several examples clarifying the nature of prophethood and the message given to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). These examples serve to purge people's minds of all traces of paganism and the legends that distorted the beliefs of people who had earlier received divine revelations, leading them to a new form of paganism and a new set of legends and superstitions.

This clarification does not come in the form of an intellectual argument or a philosophical or metaphysical thesis. Instead, it provides support to believers implementing a practical method of action that stood up to the challenges of the unbelievers:

Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide. (Verse 7)

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him.' (Verse 27)

Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' (Verse 30)

We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation. (Verse 38)

Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (Verse 40)

These verses lucidly sum up the nature of the message and the role of God's Messenger. He is only sent to warn mankind. His task is to convey his message, and all that he has to do is to recite to people the revelations he receives. It is not for him to produce any miracle, except by God's will. Beyond that he is only God's servant, to whom he will definitely return. As a human being, he gets married and begets children, and lives as a human being in all respects. He practises his servitude to God in all aspects and all situations.

With such clarity all confused beliefs, superstitions and erroneous concepts concerning the nature of prophethood are completely removed. The faith remains pure, admitting nothing of the muddled concepts advanced by different churches and pagan beliefs. In fact such confused concepts reduced Christianity after its first century to pagan status, while it was preached by Jesus Christ as a divine faith, assigning to him no more than the status of a good human servant of God who could not produce a miracle except by God's permission.

The Prophet's Task

Before we conclude our remarks on this question we should reflect a little on a point clearly stated in the verse that says: "*Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning.*" (Verse 40) This is said to the Prophet (peace be upon him), God's Messenger who received His revelations and was commanded to address people and call on them to believe in the Islamic faith. In a nutshell, this statement means that what becomes of this faith and message has nothing to do with him. Nothing of it is his concern. His task is to deliver his message complete. Guiding people to accept it is not his task. Guidance is provided by God alone. Whether God fulfils part of what He has promised him with regard to the fate of those people or his term in this life comes to an end before that, the nature of his task remains the same: he has only to deliver his message. The reckoning and the determination of their fate are left to God. Nothing sums up more clearly the role of the advocates of Islam and the task they are called on to perform. The outcome concerning this faith, and indeed everything else, is determined by God alone.

This should teach the advocates of Islam to recognize their limits and remain within them. They cannot precipitate results and fates. They must not try to hasten people's acceptance of the faith, or urge the immediate fulfilment of God's promise to those who follow His guidance or His warning to those who reject His message. They cannot say, 'we have been calling on people, explaining the true faith, for a long time, but only a few people have responded positively,' or that 'we have been patient for so long, but God has not punished the oppressors during our lives'. Their task is advocacy. How God deals with people in this life or in the life to come is not of any concern to His servants; it is His own affair. Hence, knowing our limits as God's servants and acknowledging our servitude to Him mean that we leave it all entirely to Him to determine as He pleases.

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah. Hence, the Prophet's task is confined to the delivery of the message. Striving for God's cause, or *jihād*, had not yet been made a duty. The Prophet was later commanded to follow the delivery of the message with *jihād*. This is something we have to understand with regard to the practical nature of this religion. Its statements have their progressive nature, moving forward to match the progress of the message and to suit and direct its development. This is often overlooked by writers on Islam in our time. Such writers concentrate on their research without looking at the progress. Hence they do not relate texts to their time of revelation and the practical situation in which they were revealed.

Many are the people who read a statement like this one, "*your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning,*" and deduce from it that the task of Islamic advocates is merely to convey the message. Once they have delivered it and put it before people, they then consider their task complete. As for striving for God's cause, or *jihād*, I really do not know whether it has a place in their perspective.

Many others read the same statement and restrict the domain of *jihād*, without abrogating it altogether. They hardly remember that this is a text revealed in Makkah. Nor do they relate Qur'ānic texts to the progress of the Islamic message and the stage of its advocacy. This shows their lack of understanding of the practical nature of this religion. They simply read it in books and texts. This religion is never fully understood by those who sit idly without taking practical steps to advocate it. It is not a religion for the idle.

Nevertheless, delivering the message remains the basis of the task of God's Messenger, and also the task of those who follow his example in advocating his message. Indeed to deliver God's message is the first stage of *jihād*. It must, however, be approached in the right way, so that it is directed at explaining the basic truths of the faith before its details. This means that it should aim, first of all, to establish that Godhead, Lordship and Sovereignty belong to God alone, and that people must submit themselves to God and abandon all submission to anyone else. When this is

done, the un-Islamic society in which they live will take a stand against advocates of the Islamic faith. It first turns a deaf ear, and then challenges them. It then starts to subject them to oppression and iron-fist tactics. Therefore, the next stage of striving, or *jihād*, follows as a natural progression from the proper delivery of God's message: *"Thus have We set up against every prophet enemies from among hardened sinners. Yet none can give guidance and effective support as your Lord does."* (25: 31)

Such is the way, and it is the only true way.

Man's Actions and Future Life

An important feature of this *sūrah* is that it states the final word concerning the relation between a human being's attitude and action on the one hand and his fate and destiny on the other. It makes it clear that people's conditions are determined by what they do for and by themselves. At the same time, it states that every event takes place by God's will. The *sūrah* includes several statements which are relevant to this point. They are sufficient to make the Islamic concept of this very serious issue abundantly clear. Here are just a few such examples:

Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verse 11)

For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting place! (Verse 18)

God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. (Verses 27-28)

Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? (Verse 31)

Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide. (Verse 33)

The first of these verses clearly states that God's will to change the lot of any community depends on, and is fulfilled through, what this community does for itself and how it changes its behaviour and actions both in attitude and practice. When a community changes their direction and actions, God changes their lot on that basis. Should their new situation require that misfortune befall them, God's will is done and nothing can stop it. There is no one to protect them from it. They will never find anyone to give them support against God.

On the other hand, if they respond to their Lord, and change their situation, God will give them what is best, ensuring that they receive it in the life of this world, or in the life to come, or in both. On the other hand, when their response is negative, God will cause misfortune to befall them, and will put them to severe reckoning on the Day of Judgement. No ransom will buy their release from God's punishment, should they return to Him without having responded to His message in this life. It is clear from the second text quoted above that the nature of people's response depends on the direction they choose for themselves and the actions they perform. God's will is fulfilled through both their attitude and action.

The third text begins with a statement asserting God's free-will to let anyone go astray, but this is followed by saying that God "*guides to Himself those who turn to Him.*" This is a definite statement that God gives His guidance to anyone who turns to Him. This shows that God lets go astray only those who do not respond to Him. He never denies His guidance to anyone who turns or responds to Him. This is in line with His promise in another *sūrah*: "*Those who strive hard in Our cause We shall certainly guide to paths that lead to Us.*" (29: 69) Thus both guidance and straying away from it are the outcome of God's will as it affects His servants. His will is done through people's own actions and what they choose for themselves, responding to their Lord or turning away from Him.

The fourth text states that God could have guided all people, had He so willed. In light of all the texts, it is clear that what this means is that God could have created all people with the same propensity to accept His guidance, or He could have forced them to follow it. But He has willed to create them in their present nature, with their dual susceptibility to either follow His guidance or go astray. It is not His will to force them either to follow guidance or to go astray — far be it for Him to force anyone to stray. He has made His will dependent on their response to the pointers to His guidance and the evidence supporting faith.

The last of these texts states that the unbelievers have turned away from the right path and that their foul devices are made to appear fair to them. Taking such a statement on its own has led to the well-known argument in Islamic history about man's free-will and predestination. But when this text is taken together with all relevant texts, the complete concept becomes clear. We then realize that such foul

devices and turning away from guidance are the result of people's negative response to God's call and their denial of the faith. Indeed the unbelievers reject the faith, and this leads to the operation of God's will so that their foul devices are made to acquire a fair appearance, and so they are turned away from the right path.

A final word is needed to clarify this point concerning which there is much controversy in all religions. The direction people choose to follow does not, by itself, bring about their fate. Fate is an event which is brought about by an act of God's will. Indeed every event that takes place in the universe is caused by a separate act which puts God's will into effect: *"We have created everything in due measure and proportion."* (54: 49) There is no mechanism in the system of the whole universe, nor is there any set of causes that lead inevitably to certain results. Both cause and effect are of God's creation, and they are created in due measure. What direction people choose for themselves allows God's will to operate in a manner that fits this direction. As for the actual working of God's will and the practical effects that depend on it, these are fulfilled by a special act for every event: *"With Him everything has its definite measure."* (Verse 8)

This concept, as we said earlier, increases the responsibility of human beings in as much as it shows the honourable position God has assigned to man in the system of the universe. Man is the only creature whose action and direction lead to the fulfilment of His will in a certain way. This is a heavy responsibility and a great honour.

Blind Rejection of the Truth

This *sūrah* provides the final word on the fact that rejecting God's religion and giving a negative response to the truth embodied in this faith is evidence of human nature going awry and the malfunctioning of its receptive system. No sound human nature, without any corrupting or distorting influences, would hesitate to respond positively to the truth, choosing submission to God, when it is presented so clearly, as it is in the Qur'ān. Deep inside, human nature knows this truth and accepts it. It is only turned away from it when a person has something that makes him choose for himself an option other than faith and its true guidance. He thus makes himself deserving of error and thereby incurs God's punishment. This is what God says in another *sūrah*: *"I will turn away from My revelations those who, without any right, behave arrogantly on earth: for, though they may see every sign, they do not believe in it. If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path; because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them."* (7:146)

In the present *sūrah* we have a number of similar verses which indicate the nature

of unbelief, making it clear that it is nothing other than blindness of the heart. Indeed, the mere acceptance of the truth and the following of God's guidance indicate that human nature is no longer blind. Indeed there are enough pointers and indicators everywhere in the universe which show the truth clearly to those who think and use their reason.

Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode. (Verses 19-22)

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal.' (Verses 27-29)

It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (Verses 3-4)

Here we have a clear statement indicating that those who do not respond to the truth are, as God Himself testifies, blind, and that they neither think nor use their reason. Those who respond to the truth are the ones endowed with understanding. These find a heartfelt comfort in remembering God. They relate to what they, deep at heart, know to be the truth, finding in it comfort and reassurance.

In fact we find confirmation of this fact in everyone who turns away from the truth, embodied in the divine faith, which is contained in its full and complete form in the message of Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Such people have defective and distorted natures. They suffer from the malfunctioning of their best receptors. Hence they do not react to the message presented by the whole universe as it praises God

and testifies to His oneness, ability and inimitably elaborate planning.

Since those who do not believe in this truth are blind, as confirmed by God, then no Muslim who claims to believe in God's Messenger and accepts that the Qur'an is God's revelation can follow the lead of a blind person in any matter of importance in life. This particularly applies to matters that relate to the system which governs human life, to the values and standards that must be implemented in human life, and to behaviour, traditions and morals that are acceptable in human society.

This is our attitude to everything that non-Islamic philosophy produces, apart from physical and material sciences and their practical applications. These come under the Prophet's statement when he said to his Companions: "You know the affairs of your own world better." It is not right that a Muslim who knows God's guidance and who is fully aware of the truth preached by His Messenger to become a student learning from someone who has not responded to God's guidance and who does not know it to be the truth. Such a person is, as God says, blind. No Muslim can reject God's testimony and continue to claim to be a Muslim.

We must take this religion very seriously, and accept its clear statements as correct and valid. If we approach this matter in a hesitant, uncertain way, then this means approaching faith itself with uncertainty. On the other hand, it could mean rejecting the testimony of God (limitless is He in His glory). Such rejection means a complete rejection of faith.

This religion is very serious indeed. It admits no frivolity. Every single statement and every word contained in this religion is true. Anyone who entertains doubts about this seriousness, or who finds himself reluctant to accept this truth with full and complete trust should realize that Islam is in no need of him. In fact God is in no need of anyone whomsoever.

It is not right that the pressures of un-Islamic society should weigh heavily on any Muslim so as to make him adopt the standards of such a society in his approach to life. How can he when he knows that the message conveyed by Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the truth, and that anyone who does not know it to be the truth is blind. How can he follow such a blind person, learning from him, after having heard God's testimony?

Blindness and Life Corruption

A final aspect of faith that the *sūrah* highlights is the close relationship between the corruption that creeps into people's life on earth and their blindness to the message of the truth God has bestowed on people guiding them to what is right, useful and beneficial. Those who do not respond either to the covenant God has made with

human nature or to the truth which has come from Him, knowing it to be the truth, are indeed the ones who spread corruption on earth. By contrast, those who know it to be the truth and respond to it are the ones who work to set matters on the right course and whose work helps life prosper.

Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode. (Verses 19-22)

As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode. (Verse 25)

Human life will not be set on the right course unless its leadership is firmly in the hands of those endowed with understanding, who know that what was revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is the truth. Such people fulfil their commitment which is part of the covenant God has made with human nature on the one hand and with Adam and his offspring on the other. These covenants specify that people must worship God alone, submitting to none other than Him, receiving only His guidance and obeying only His orders. Hence, they keep together what God has ordered to be united. They fear their Lord, which means that they are always consciously trying to avoid anything that may incur God's displeasure. They also fear that they may have an awful reckoning. Hence they are constantly aware of the hereafter, watching their every action. They remain constant to their covenant, bearing the burden of such consistency. They attend regularly to their prayers, give to charity out of their provisions, which God has granted to them, and make their donations in private or openly. They repel evil and corruption with goodness and kindness.

Human life is not set aright unless it has such a wise leadership which follows God's guidance, and which moulds life in accordance with His guidance and the code of living He has laid down. It does not follow the right course when it has blind leadership which does not know that the truth is what was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. Such leadership follows systems that differ from that laid down by God for His good servants. Human life does not follow the right course under a feudal, capitalist or communist system, or indeed under what is termed 'scientific socialism'. Nor does it take a healthy form and style under theocracy, dictatorship or

democracy. All of these are systems devised by the blind who appoint themselves lords beside God. Such lords devise systems and enact legislation that are not sanctioned by God. They also impose their authority on people, forcing them to submit to such legislation, instead of submitting to God.

Based on the Qur'ānic text, the evidence for what we say is seen in the corruption, the *jāhiliyyah* that has spread throughout the world in the twentieth century. It is seen in the misery under which mankind writhe, both in the East and in the West, under capitalist, communist or socialist systems, and under both dictatorship and democracy. Under all such systems people suffer corruption, loss of moral values, misery and anxiety. That is because all these systems are devised by people who are blind, not knowing that what God has revealed to His Messenger, Muḥammad, is the only truth. Hence, they do not fulfil their covenant with God. Nor do they implement the code of living that is based on His guidance.

By virtue of his faith, and his knowledge that the truth is embodied in what was revealed to Muḥammad, a Muslim rejects every code of living other than that devised by God. He also rejects any social, economic or political doctrine other than what has been legislated by God, who devised it for His good servants.

The mere acceptance of the legitimacy of any code or system devised by any authority other than God's means a break from submission to God, as such submission means in practice complete surrender to Him alone. Accepting such legitimacy is not only in conflict with the central concept of Islam; it also hands over on earth to the blind who break their covenant with God after it has been confirmed. These are the ones who cut asunder what God has bidden to be united and who thus spread corruption on earth.

Throughout history mankind has suffered untold misery, as it tried, without proper guidance, a great variety of systems, laws and regimes under the leadership of blind people assuming the guise of philosophers, theoreticians, legislators and politicians. Never did mankind experience real happiness, elevate human standards, or reach the standard worthy of their role as God's vicegerents on earth except under the Islamic system.

These are some of the prominent features of this *sūrah*. Our discussion merely points to them although it can explain them but inadequately. Praise be to God who has guided us to this. It is only through His guidance that we can make the right choice.