

SŪRAH 37

Al-Şāffāt

(Ranged in Ranks)

Prologue

This Makkan *sūrah*, like the one before it, is composed of short verses and is characterized by fast beats, successive scenes and a myriad of images. Indeed, the effect it produces is at times very intense. Like all Makkan revelations, its aim is to establish the Islamic faith firmly in people's hearts, purging it of any traces of idolatry and polytheism. In this respect, however, it addresses a particular form of polytheism which prevailed in Arabian society at the time, pausing long to expose its falsehood. All this is summed up in the allegation that God married the *jinn*, who subsequently gave Him the angels as His daughters.

The *sūrah* attacks this superstition heavily, exposing its stupidity and lack of substance. Furthermore, because this topic is given prominence, the *sūrah* begins by mentioning some types of angels: *"By the [angels] ranged in ranks, who rebuke reproachfully, and recite God's word."* (Verses 1-3) This is followed by mention of the devils and how they are targeted by piercing flames to prevent them from eavesdropping on those on high. Had they been in the position given them in ignorant superstitions, they would not have been chased in this way. The fruit of the tree growing in the midst of hell is likened to devils' heads. At the end, this superstition is strongly and decisively refuted: *"Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? Do you not reflect? Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! They claim that He has kinship with the jinn; yet the jinn themselves know that they will be*

brought [before God] for judgement. Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him." (Verses 149-159)

In addition to dealing with this particular form of idolatry, the *sūrah* tackles the same issues of faith discussed in other Makkan *sūrahs*. It confirms God's oneness, citing evidence from the universe: "Most certainly your God is One, Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise." (Verses 4-5) As it draws a scene of the Day of Judgement, it specifies that idolatry is the reason why those punished in the hereafter receive their punishment: "On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. Whenever they were told, 'there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, and would say: Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?' For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. You will indeed taste grievous suffering, being requited only for what you used to do." (Verses 33-39)

The *sūrah* also speaks about resurrection, reckoning and reward. Referring to the idolaters' reaction when they are told that they will be brought back to life, it states that they say: "This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?" (Verses 151-17) It follows this with a detailed scene of the Day of Judgement, full of images, movements, reactions and surprises.

Reference is also made to the question of revelation and the message, quoting the unbelievers as saying: "Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?" (Verse 36) It states the true nature of prophethood: "For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers." (Verse 37)

As the *sūrah* describes the attitude of the idolaters, how far astray they go, as well as their rejection of the truth, it mentions a series of earlier messengers: Noah, Abraham and his sons, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah. These accounts show clearly how God grants His grace to His messengers, how He supports them against their enemies and how He inflicts punishment on those who deny the truth: "Most of the people of old went astray before them; although We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants." (Verses 71-74) The story of Abraham and his son Ishmael, the sacrifice and the ransom, is given special prominence as it paints obedience and submission to God in their most profound form. Indeed, such submission equates with attaining the summit that can only be reached through pure faith, one which elevates people to a splendid horizon.

A wide range of effects accompany the presentation of different issues in the *sūrah*. To mention but a few, we see the skies, stars, planets and piercing flames: "We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily

snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame.” (Verses 6-10)

Special effects are also provided in the scenes that portray the Day of Judgement, its surprises and the strong reactions that ensue. These scenes are rather unique and this aspect will be highlighted later when we discuss those verses in detail.

Further effects are provided by the stories the *sūrah* relates, most particularly that of Abraham and his son Ishmael as they proceed to give the sacrifice. Here, the effects are at their highest, strongly shaking our hearts.

The *sūrah* is also characterized by its distinctive rhythm which is most suited to the images and scenes it portrays as also to the style it adopts and the meanings it wants to emphasize.

The *sūrah* can be divided into three parts. The first includes the opening describing the three types of angels who glorify God, the Lord of all points of sunrise, who adorned the skies with stars. It then mentions the *jinn* and how they try to eavesdrop on those on high and who are then targeted by piercing flames. A question is then put to them: are they more difficult to create than the other beings God created, including angels, the skies, the *jinn*, planets and flames? This leads to a refutation of what they used to say about resurrection, showing its absurdity, and confirming what they used to find difficult to believe. This is followed by a long and unique image of resurrection, reckoning, reward and punishment.

The second part mentions how those who were erroneous only followed in the footsteps of the unbelievers of old who received warnings, but paid no heed. It gives accounts of the people’s of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah, showing the ends met by the two parties in each respect.

In the last part, the superstition concerning the *jinn* and the angels is brought into focus. It states clearly God’s promise of victory to His messengers: *“Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious.”* (Verses 171-173) The *sūrah* closes on a special note glorifying God, denying all false claims about Him, greeting His messengers and praising Him as the Supreme Lord: *“Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of almightiness, above all what people attribute to Him. And peace be upon all His messengers. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.”* (Verses 180-182)

1

Will You Have a Look?

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

By the [angels] ranged in ranks, (1)

وَالصَّافَّاتِ صَفًّا ﴿١﴾

who rebuke reproachfully (2)

فَالزَّاجِرَاتِ زَجْرًا ﴿٢﴾

and recite God's word (3)

فَالتَّلِيَّاتِ ذِكْرًا ﴿٣﴾

most certainly your God is One, (4)

إِنَّ إِلَهَكُمْ لَوَاحِدٌ ﴿٤﴾

*Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything
between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise.
(5)*

رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
وَرَبُّ الْمَشْرِقِ ﴿٥﴾

*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth
with stars, (6)*

إِنَّا زَيْنَّا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةِ الْكَوَاكِبِ
﴿٦﴾

*and have made them secure against every
rebellious devil. (7)*

وَحِفْظًا مِّنْ كُلِّ شَيْطَانٍ مَّارِدٍ ﴿٧﴾

*Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high,
but shall be repelled from all sides, (8)*

لَّا يَسْمَعُونَ إِلَى الْمَلَأِ الْأَعْلَىٰ وَيُقَذَّفُونَ
مِنْ كُلِّ جَانِبٍ ﴿٨﴾

driven away, with lasting suffering in store for

دُحُورًا ۗ وَهُمْ عَذَابٌ وَّاصِبٌ ﴿٩﴾

them. (9)

If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame. (10)

Now ask those [unbelievers]: Are they more difficult to create, or the other beings We have created? Them have We created out of a sticky clay. (11)

Whereas you marvel, they scoff; (12)

and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; (13)

and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule; (14)

and say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery. (15)

What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? (16)

And perhaps our forefathers?' (17)

Say: 'Yes, indeed! And you shall be utterly humbled.' (18)

There will be just one single cry, and they will all begin to see, (19)

and will say: 'Woe betide us! This is the Day of Judgement!' (20)

إِلَّا مَنْ خَطِفَ الْخَطْفَةَ فَأَتْبَعَهُ شِهَابٌ
ثَاقِبٌ ﴿٩﴾

فَأَسْتَفْتِهِمْ أَهَمْ أَشَدُّ خَلْقًا أَمْ مَنِ خَلَقْنَا
إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُمْ مِّن طِينٍ لَّازِبٍ ﴿١٠﴾

بَلْ عَجِبْتَ وَيَسْخَرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَإِذَا ذُكِّرُوا لَا يَذْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَوْا آيَةً يَسْتَسْخِرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَقَالُوا إِن هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٤﴾

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظْمًا أَعِنَّا
لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

أَوْءَابَاؤُنَا الْأَوْلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

قُلْ نَعَمْ وَأَنْتُمْ دَاخِرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

فَإِنَّمَا هِيَ زَجْرَةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ فَإِذَا هُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ
﴿١٨﴾

وَقَالُوا يَنْوِيلُنَا هَذَا يَوْمَ الدِّينِ ﴿١٩﴾

هَذَا يَوْمَ الْفَصْلِ الَّذِي كُنْتُمْ بِهِ
تُكذِّبُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

This is indeed the Day of Decision which you used to call a lie! (21)

Gather together all those who were bent on wrongdoing, their ilk, and all that they used to worship (22)

instead of God, and guide them all to the path of hell, (23)

but halt them a while, for they shall be asked: (24)

'How is it that you do not help one another?' (25)

Indeed, on that day they will be in complete submission. (26)

They will turn upon one another accusingly. (27)

Some [of them] will say: 'You used to [whisper to us] approaching us from the right!' (28)

The others will reply: 'No! It was you who would not believe. (29)

We had no power over you; but you were willing to exceed all limits. (30)

Now our Lord's word has come true against us, and we are bound to taste [the punishment]; (31)

If we led you astray, we ourselves were astray.'

﴿٢١﴾ أَحْشُرُوا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا وَأَزْوَاجَهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا يَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

﴿٢٣﴾ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَاهْدُوهُمْ إِلَى صِرَاطِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٢٤﴾

﴿٢٥﴾ وَقِفُوهُمْ إِنَّهُمْ مَسْئُولُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

﴿٢٧﴾ مَا لَكُمْ لَا تَنصُرُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

﴿٢٩﴾ بَلْ هُمْ الْيَوْمَ مُسْتَسْلِمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

﴿٣١﴾ وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

﴿٣٣﴾ قَالُوا إِنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَأْتُونَنَا عَنِ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٤﴾

﴿٣٥﴾ قَالُوا بَلْ لَمْ تَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

﴿٣٧﴾ وَمَا كَانَ لَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ بَلْ كُنْتُمْ قَوْمًا طَٰغِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

﴿٣٩﴾ فَحَقَّ عَلَيْنَا قَوْلُ رَبِّنَا إِنَّا لَذٰٓئِقُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

﴿٤١﴾ فَأَغْوَيْنَاكُمْ إِنَّا كُنَّا غٰوِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

(32)

On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. (33)

Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. (34)

Whenever they were told, 'there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, (35)

and would say: 'Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?' (36)

For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. (37)

You will indeed taste grievous suffering, (38)

being requited only for what you used to do. (39)

Not so God's true servants. (40)

Theirs shall be a predetermined sustenance: (41)

fruits; and they will be honoured (42)

in gardens of bliss, (43)

seated on soft couches, facing one another. (44)

فَإِنَّهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَفْعَلُ بِالْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ أَبِنَا لَتَنَارِكُوا ءَالِهَتِنَا لِشَاعِرٍ مَّجْنُونٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

بَلْ جَاءَ بِالْحَقِّ وَصَدَقَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

إِنَّكُمْ لَذَائِقُوا الْعَذَابِ الْأَلِيمِ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَمَا تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ رِزْقٌ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

فَوَاكِهُ وَهُمْ مُكْرَمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

عَلَى سُرُرٍ مُتَقَابِلِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

يُطَافُ عَلَيْهِمْ بِكَأْسٍ مِّنْ مَّعِينٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: (45)

clear, delicious to those who drink it, (46)

causing no headiness or intoxication. (47)

With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye, (48)

as if they were hidden eggs. (49)

And they will turn to one another with questions. (50)

One of them will say: I had a close companion on earth (51)

who used to ask me: 'Do you really believe (52)

that after we have died and become mere dust and bones we shall be brought for judgement?' (53)

He adds: 'Would you like to look down?' (54)

Then he looks and sees him in the midst of the fire. (55)

He will then say: 'By God! You almost brought me to ruin! (56)

But for the grace of God I should have also been

بَيضَاءَ لَذَّةٍ لِلشَّارِبِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

لَا فِيهَا غَوْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ عَنْهَا يُنْزَفُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

وَعِنْدَهُمْ قَنْصَرَاتُ الطَّرْفِ عِينٌ ﴿٤٨﴾ كَأَنَّهُنَّ

بَيْضٌ مَكْنُونٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

فَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ إِنِّي كَانَ لِي قَرِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

يَقُولُ أَأَنْتَ لِمَنْ الْمُصَدِّقِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظْمًا أَأَنْتَا

لَمَدِينُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

قَالَ هَلْ أَنْتُمْ مُطَّلِعُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

فَاطَّلَعَ فَرَآهُ فِي سَوَاءِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

قَالَ تَاللَّهِ إِنْ كِدْتَ لَتُرْدِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

وَلَوْلَا نِعْمَةُ رَبِّي لَكُنْتُ مِنَ الْمُحْضَرِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

﴿٥٧﴾

أَفَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَيِّتِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

brought there.' (57)

'But then is it truly so, that we are not to die (58)

except for our first death, and that we are not to suffer? (59)

This is indeed the supreme triumph.' (60)

Everyone should strive to attain this goal. (61)

Is this the better welcome, or the Zaqqūm tree? (62)

We have made it a test for the wrongdoers. (63)

It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. (64)

Its fruit is like devils' heads. (65)

They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies. (66)

Then on top of it, they will be given polluted, scalding water to drink. (67)

Then again, their ultimate goal is hell. (68)

إِلَّا مَوْتَنَا الْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُعَدِّينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٨﴾

لِمِثْلِ هَذَا فَلْيَعْمَلِ الْعَامِلُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

أَذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ نُزُلًا أَمْ شَجَرَةُ الزَّقُّومِ ﴿٦٠﴾

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهَا فِتْنَةً لِلظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٦١﴾

إِنَّهَا شَجَرَةٌ تَخْرُجُ فِي أَصْلِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٦٢﴾

طَلْعُهَا كَأَنَّهُ رِئُوسُ الشَّيَاطِينِ ﴿٦٣﴾

فَأِنَّهُمْ لَا يَكُلُونَ مِنْهَا فَمَا يَكُونُ مِنْهَا الْبُطُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

﴿٦٥﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّ لَهُمْ عَلَيْهَا لَشَوْبًا مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٦٦﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّ مَرَجِعَهُمْ لِلْإِلَى الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٦٧﴾

A Sky Adorned with Stars

By the [angels] ranged in ranks, who rebuke reproachfully and recite God's word most certainly your God is One, Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise. (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* begins by mentioning three groups of people, identifying what they do. The first description may mean that they range themselves in rows as they pray, or range their wings, awaiting God's commands. The second group rebukes whoever deserves rebuke, perhaps at the time when the angels gather their souls when they die, or at the time of resurrection, or when they are driven into hell, or in any position or situation. The third group recite God's word, which may be the Qur'ān or other scriptures or they may recite glorifications of God. They are mentioned in the form of an oath made by God confirming His oneness: "*Your God is One.*" (Verse 4) As we have already stated, the occasion here is the mention of the superstition circulated in ignorant Arabia alleging that the angels were God's daughters, and as such, they too were deities.

God then mentions to His servants something about Himself that is suited to the truth of His oneness: He is the "*Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise.*" (Verse 5) The heavens and the earth stand before us, speaking to us about the Creator who controls everything in this universe. No one else claims the ability to create and control the universe, and no one can deny that the One who created the universe is the true Lord who has absolute power. He also created and controls "*everything between them,*" including the air, clouds, light, as well as tiny little creatures which man comes to know from time to time, but much more remains unknown to man. It is impossible to look with an alert mind at the heavens and the earth and what is between them without being profoundly affected by the greatness, accuracy, variety, beauty, harmony and coherence between all these creatures. Only a dead heart can look at them without genuine interaction.

"*Lord of all points of sunrise.*" (Verse 5) The translation of this verse is far from adequate, as the verse not only refers to the rising of the sun, but of every star and planet. Each has its time and point of rising. Therefore, the number of such points in all the corners of the universe is beyond imagination. At the same time, the phrase refers to the fact that as the earth turns round the sun, every point of it has its own sunrise, and its point of sunset. Whenever a point of earth is facing the sun, it has its sunrise, and the opposite point on the surface of the earth has its sunset. People did not know this at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, but God told them about it. This precise system that makes such successive sunrises over the earth, and the splendid beauty that so permeates our planet beckons us to reflect on the superb beauty of God's creation and to believe in His oneness. How could such beauty, accuracy and consistency have been achieved unless the Maker is One?

This is the reason why this particular attribute of God's is mentioned on this occasion. We will see that there will be another occasion in the *sūrah* which recalls the mention of the heavens and sunrises, as it refers to planets, flames, devils and their destruction.

We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame. (Verses 6-10)

At the outset, the *sūrah* touches on the part of the superstition that relates to angels. Now it touches on the part that relates to the *jinn*. In pre-Islamic days, some Arabs alleged that the *jinn* were related to God. Indeed, some of them worshipped *the jinn* for this reason, and because they attributed to them knowledge of the world beyond human perception.

"We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars." (Verse 6) One look at the sky is sufficient to realize that the element of beauty is purposely incorporated into the making of the universe: its very make up is beautiful, well proportioned and harmonious. In fact, beauty is an essential part of its nature. Its design gives equal importance to beautiful appearance and perfect functioning. Therefore, everything in it is made according to an accurate measure, performing its role to perfection and adding to its overall beauty.

The sky and its stars is the most beautiful scene around us. We never tire of it. Every star and planet sends its flickering light, like a damsel's eye looking shyly at you. When you look straight at her, she turns her eye away; but when you take your glance away, her eyes brighten. To look at these stars and planets as they change position night after night gives endless pleasure.

Another function of the stars and their satellites is also mentioned in the *sūrah*, demonstrating how some of them are shooting stars and piercing flames that target *the jinn*, preventing them from getting close to those on high: We *"have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame."* (Verses 7-10) This means that some of the shooting stars we see guard the skies against rebellious devils to prevent them from eavesdropping on those on high. Such devils on the Day of Judgement will be punished further. However, a rebellious devil might stealthily snatch something of what goes on among the angels on high, but as this devil descends, a piercing flame pursues and burns him.

We have no idea how the rebellious devil tries to eavesdrop, how he snatches a fragment, or how he is pursued by the piercing flame. All these are beyond the limits of our human nature and its power of imagination. The only way open to us is to believe what we are told by God and accept it as it is stated. We should remember that our knowledge of the universe is only superficial. What is important to

understand here is that those devils who are prevented from eavesdropping on what takes place on high are the ones whom the idolaters alleged to be related to God. Had anything of the sort been true, the whole story would have been totally different. Such alleged relatives would not have suffered the burning fate that pursues them.

Receiving the Message with Ridicule

The Prophet is then instructed to question them about whether they considered their own creation to be more difficult or the creation of the heavens, earth and all creation in the universe? If they agree that man's creation is less difficult, why should they then disbelieve in resurrection, meeting it with derision and considering it impossible, when it is nothing compared to creating the universe?

Now ask those [unbelievers]: Are they more difficult to create, or the other beings We have created? Them have We created out of a sticky clay. Whereas you marvel, they scoff and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule; and say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?' (Verses 11-17)

The other created beings in this respect include the angels, heavens, the earth and all between them, *the jinn*, stars, planets and piercing flames. They acknowledge that these are created by God. No answer, however, is expected to the question. This is simply a rhetorical device inviting amazement at their lack of understanding of what is around them. It derides the way they look at things. Leaving the question unanswered, the *sūrah* shows them the substance from which they were created in the first place: it is soft, sticky clay made of material from this earth, which is itself one of God's creatures: "*Them have We created out of a sticky clay.*" (Verse 11) It is abundantly clear then that they are not the more difficult to create. Hence, their making fun of God's signs and His promise to bring them back to life is nothing less than absurd.

Their attitude makes the Prophet wonder: "*Whereas you marvel, they scoff and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule.*" (Verses 12-14) It is only right that the Prophet should wonder at them. A believer who recognizes God with all his faculties as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) did, and who sees in full clarity the numerous signs in the universe pointing to Him, is bound to wonder and marvel at how people can remain oblivious to them. In short, how can they adopt such an attitude?

As the Prophet looked at them with amazement, they continued ridiculing the

truth he presented to them, speaking of God's oneness and their own resurrection. They preferred to remain blind, with their hearts sealed. Hence they scoffed at God's revelations and signs, wondered at the Prophet who presented these to them and made that the material for further ridicule. Part of this was how they described the Qur'ān: *"This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?"* (Verses 15-17) They are oblivious to everything around them that reminds them of God's power and ability, claiming that He would not return them to life after they and their forefathers had died and perished. Yet such return is nothing to marvel at, if we would only look at the universe around us and see what God has created.

Since they would not reflect quietly and calmly on what they saw, they are strongly jolted such that they see their own agitated state in the life to come: *"Say: Yes, indeed! And you shall be utterly humbled."* (Verse 18) Yes, indeed, you and your forefathers will be resurrected and utterly humiliated, unable to put up any opposition. It is not merely that God emphatically confirms their resurrection, but He shows them how it is done. This is depicted in a long scene describing resurrection in different ways, presenting lively images and successive movements. The whole account employs the narrative style first, then changes to dialogue, and in between they see events and actions and hear comments on these. Thus, the whole scene comes alive.

"There will be just one single cry, and they will all begin to see." (Verse 19) It is all just a glimpse, taking no more than a single cry, which is described in Arabic as *zajrah*, to indicate that it is exceedingly strong and coming from a superior source. This single cry is made *"and they will all begin to see,"* suddenly, without any preparation. Surprised so violently, they cry out: *"Woe betide us! This is the Day of Judgement!"* (Verse 20) In the midst of their shock, a voice will unexpectedly make it clear that whatever happens to them is through their own making: *"This is indeed the Day of Decision which you used to call a lie"* (Verse 21) Here we see how the *sūrah* changes its style from the narrative to directly address those who used to deny that there would ever be such a day when all mankind would be resurrected and their fate determined.

It takes only one decisive sentence of blame before the orders are issued to those whose task it is to carry them out: *"Gather together all those who were bent on wrongdoing, their ilk, and all that they used to worship instead of God, and guide them all to the path of hell, but halt them a while, for they shall be asked."* (Verses 22-24) So the wrongdoers and their like are to be gathered together. Although the order is clear and decisive, it also carries much sarcasm in the expression, *'guide them all to the path of hell.'* This is certainly a strange type of guidance, worse than going astray. Yet it is the perfect retort to their straying from the path of divine guidance. Since they did

not benefit in this present world from guidance to the straight path, guidance will be given to them in the life to come, but this time to the path of hell.

Having been given such guidance, we then see them halted for questioning. Again the address turns to them with blame, even though it is delivered through a simple and innocent question: *"How is it that you do not help one another?"* (Verse 25) Why do you not support one another when you are all here and in need of any help you can get? You also have here with you the deities you used to worship. Needless to say, none of them ventures an answer.' What follows this rhetorical questioning is a comment describing their condition: *"Indeed, on that day they will be in complete submission."* (Verse 26) Both the worshippers and the worshipped are in a state of complete submission to God.

Once more, the *sūrah* picks up the narrative style, portraying them as they argue with one another: *"They will turn upon one another accusingly. Some [of them] will say: You used to [whisper to us] approaching us from the right!"* (Verses 27-28) This describes the normal condition of whispering, coming from the right. Thus, they blame the whisperers, saying they are responsible for their present ordeal. Those accused will immediately deny responsibility, putting it squarely on their accusers: *"The others will reply: No! It was you who would not believe."* (Verse 29) It was not our whisper that took you from faith into disbelief.

You were not following guidance and we led you astray by whispering. Indeed, *"We had no power over you."* (Verse 30) We could not impose our views on you, forcing you to follow us against your will: *"but you were willing to exceed all limits."* (Verse 30) You would not abide by any limit. *"Now our Lord's word has come true against us, and we are bound to taste [the punishment]."* (Verse 31) Both you and us are in the same position, deserving of God's punishment for not heeding the warnings. You joined us because of your propensity to follow error. We did nothing to you, instead you followed us in our error: *"If we led you astray, we ourselves were astray."* (Verse 32)

At this point, another comment is made, but this time it sounds like a sentence announced before all, making its grounds clear and revealing what they did in this world to bring about their condemnation in the next: *"On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. Whenever they were told, there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, and would say: Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?"* (Verses 33-36) A further comment carries clear censure of those who say such monstrous words: *"For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. You will indeed taste grievous suffering, being requited only for what you used to do. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 37-40)

Since God's true servants are mentioned here, making it clear that they will not

suffer, their condition on the Day of Judgement is also shown. Once more this comes in narrative style, describing the happiness and bliss they will enjoy to the full and contrasting it with the suffering the other party endures:

Theirs shall be a predetermined sustenance: fruits; and they will be honoured in gardens of bliss, seated on soft couches, facing one another. A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: clear, delicious to those who drink it, causing no headiness or intoxication. With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye, as if they were hidden eggs. (Verses 41-49)

This is happiness pure and perfect, combining all that is enjoyable, physically and spiritually. Everyone finds in it whatever they want of happiness. To start with, the people enjoying this happiness are God's true servants, a description that signifies they are held in high regard. They are also 'honoured' among those on high, and this is the highest honour. They have 'fruit' and they sit 'on soft couches facing one another.' They will be served so that they need not exert any effort for anything. What they drink is also described in detail: "A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: clear, delicious to those who drink it, causing no headiness or intoxication." (Verses 45-47) These are the best qualities in any drink, giving the pleasure without negative consequences. Thus they do not fear that it will be used up, and it gives them no unpleasant side effects. They have companions who are described as follows: "With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye." (Verse 48) Their modesty means that they do not look up to anyone other than their mates, despite being very pretty. They are chaste and gentle, "as if they were hidden eggs," untouched by anyone.

As the story unfolds we see these true servants of God engaged in pleasant conversation, recalling things from their past lives and looking at what they now enjoy. This image contrasts with the contentious arguments the others have in their place of suffering. One of the believers then relates to his brethren something that he recalls from his first life: "One of them will say: I had a close companion on earth who used to ask me: Do you really believe that after we have died and become mere dust and bones we shall be brought for judgement?" (Verses 51-53) His friend did not believe in the Day of Judgement, and he asked him in amazement whether he truly believed in resurrection after death. As he is speaking about his friend, this believer wishes to know what happened to him. He looks for him and calls on his brothers to look as well: "He adds: 'Would you like to look down?' Then he looks and sees him in the midst of the fire," (Verses 54-55)

When he sees him in his suffering, he turns to him and says: You could have led me astray and ruined me by what you whispered in my ear. It was only through God's favour that I did not listen to you: "He will then say: By God! You almost brought

me to ruin! But for the grace of God I should have also been brought there.” (Verses 56-57) I could have ended up in the same position and been driven with the herd to the same position you now are in.

His awareness of what happened to his friend makes him feel more acutely the great blessing he and his fellow believers are experiencing. Therefore, he wants to assert it and be reassured that it will last: *“But then is it truly so, that we are not to die except for our first death, and that we are not to suffer? This is indeed the supreme triumph.”* (Verses 58-60)

A short comment is made here, alerting hearts to the need to work hard in order to achieve such a goal. *“Everyone should strive to attain this goal.”* (Verse 61) The goal is a pure and everlasting happiness that cannot be ended by death or prevented by torture. It is the type of goal that deserves hard effort. Compared to this, other goals people strive for seem worthless.

In order to highlight the great gulf between this everlasting, pure happiness and the other destiny awaiting the unbelievers, the *sūrah* explains what awaits the latter after they have been held to account:

Is this the better welcome, or the Zaqqūm tree? We have made it a test for the wrongdoers. It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. Its fruit is like devils’ heads. They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies. Then on top of it, they will be given polluted scalding water to drink. Then again, their ultimate goal is hell. (Verses 62-68)

Rhetorically they are asked whether the pure endless bliss is a better position and place or the Zaqqūm tree. What is this tree, then? The answer is simple: *“It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. Its fruit is like devils’ heads.”* (Verses 64-65) Needless to say, people do not know how devils’ heads look. Nevertheless, it is a frightening image. It is sufficient only to think of these heads to be scared. How, then, would they countenance the prospect of these very heads becoming the food with which they fill their bellies?

God made this tree a test for the wrongdoers. When they heard its name, they made fun of it, saying: ‘How could a tree grow in hell without being burnt?’ One of them, Abū Jahl, said in sarcasm: “People of the Quraysh! Do you know what the Zaqqūm tree is that Muḥammad holds up to scare you with? It is the dates of Madinah cooked with butter. Should we get it, we will swallow it without hesitation.”

The fact is, however, that the Zaqqūm tree was something different from the food they knew: *“They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies.”* (Verse 66) When it stings their throats and burns their bellies — as it grows in the fire it is of the same substance —

they will look for a cool drink to stop the burning. However, they will only drink contaminated, boiling water: *“Then on top of it, they will be given polluted, scalding water to drink.”* (Verse 67)

After this meal, they leave the table to return to their permanent abode, which is far from welcoming: *“Then again, their ultimate goal is hell.”* (Verse 68)

2

Abraham's Sacrifice

They found their forefathers astray, (69)

and rushed to follow in their footsteps. (70)

*Most of the people of old went astray before them;
(71)*

although We had sent them warners. (72)

*Behold what happened in the end to those that
had been warned. (73)*

Not so God's true servants. (74)

*Noah cried to Us, and We are the best to answer
prayer: (75)*

*We saved him and his household from great
distress; (76)*

and caused his offspring to be the survivors. (77)

*We caused him to be praised by later generations:
(78)*

Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds! (79)

إِنَّهُمْ أَلَفُوا ءَابَاءَهُمْ ضَالِّينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

فَهُمْ عَلَىٰ ءَاثَرِهِمْ يُهْرَعُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

وَلَقَدْ ضَلَّ قَبْلَهُمْ أَكْثَرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا فِيهِمْ مُنذِرِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾

فَانظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُنذِرِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ نَادَيْنَا نُوْحًا فَلَنِعْمَ الْمُجِيبُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَأَهْلَهُ مِنَ الْكَرْبِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٦﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا ذُرِّيَّتَهُ هُمُ الْبَاقِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِي الْآخِرِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

سَلَامٌ عَلَىٰ نُوحٍ فِي الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾

Thus do We reward those who do good. (80)

He was truly one of Our believing servants. (81)

Then We caused the others to drown. (82)

Among those who followed his way was Abraham. (83)

He turned to his Lord with a sound heart. (84)

He said to his father and his people: 'What is this that you worship? (85)

Do you choose false deities instead of God? (86)

'What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?' (87)

Then he cast a glance at the stars, (88)

and said: 'Indeed I am sick.' (89)

So his people turned away from him and left. (90)

He then approached their deities stealthily and said: 'Will you not eat [your offerings]?' (91)

'What is the matter with you that you do not speak?' (92)

And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand. (93)

إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا الْآخَرِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾

وَإِنَّ مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ لَإِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴿٨٣﴾

إِذْ جَاءَ رَبَّهُ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ ﴿٨٤﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِ مَاذَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

أَفِيفًا ءِالِهَةً دُونَ اللَّهِ تُرِيدُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

فَمَا ظَنُّكُمْ بِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

فَنظَرَ نَظْرَةً فِي النُّجُومِ ﴿٨٨﴾

فَقَالَ إِنِّي سَقِيمٌ ﴿٨٩﴾

فَتَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

فَرَاغَ إِلَى ءِالِهَتِهِمْ فَقَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

مَا لَكُمْ لَا تَنْطِقُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

فَرَاغَ عَلَيْهِمْ ضَرْبًا بِالْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٣﴾

فَأَقْبَلُوا إِلَيْهِ يَزْفُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

His people came to him hurriedly, (94)

but he said: 'Do you worship something that you yourselves have carved, (95)

while it is God who has created you and all your handiwork?' (96)

They said: 'Build him a pyre and throw him into the blazing fire.' (97)

They schemed to harm him, but We caused them to be humiliated. (98)

And Abraham said: 'I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me. (99)

Lord! Grant me a righteous son.' (100)

We gave him the happy news that he will have a forbearing son. (101)

When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said: 'My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.' [Ishmael] said: 'My father! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.' (102)

When the two of them had surrendered themselves to the will of God, and Abraham laid him prostrate on his forehead, (103)

We called to him: 'Abraham! (104)

قَالَ أَتَعْبُدُونَ مَا تَنْحِتُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ وَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

قَالُوا ابْنُوا لَهُ بُنْيَانًا فَأَلْقُوهُ فِي الْجَحِيمِ

﴿٩٧﴾

فَارَادُوا بِهِ كَيْدًا فَجَعَلْنَاهُمُ الْأَسْفَلِينَ

﴿٩٨﴾

وَقَالَ إِنِّي ذَاهِبٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّي سَيِّدِينَ ﴿٩٩﴾

رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

فَبَشَّرْنَاهُ بِغُلَامٍ حَلِيمٍ ﴿١٠١﴾

فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ السَّعْيَ قَالَ يَبْنَئِي إِنِّي أَرَىٰ

فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ ۚ

قَالَ يَتَّابِتِ أَفْعَالٌ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن

شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

فَلَمَّا أَسْلَمَا وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ ﴿١٠٣﴾

وَنَدَيْنَاهُ أَنْ يَتَّابِرْ هَيْمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

قَدْ صَدَّقَتِ الرُّؤْيَا ۚ إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي

الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

*You have already fulfilled the dream.' Thus do
We reward those who do good. (105)*

All this was indeed a momentous trial. (106)

*We ransomed [Ishmael] with a noble sacrifice,
(107)*

*We caused him to be praised by later generations:
(108)*

Peace be upon Abraham! (109)

Thus do we reward those who do good. (110)

He was truly one of our believing servants. (111)

*We gave Abraham the happy news of Isaac, a
prophet and a righteous man; (112)*

*and We blessed him and Isaac; but among their
offspring there were those who do good and others
who would glaringly sin against their souls. (113)*

*We also bestowed Our favour on Moses and
Aaron; (114)*

*We saved them and their people from great
distress; (115)*

We gave them support, so that it was they who

إِنَّ هَذَا هُوَ الْبَلَاءُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿١٠٦﴾

وَفَدَيْنَاهُ بِذَبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٠٧﴾

وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِي الْآخِرِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

سَلَامٌ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١١٠﴾

إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١١١﴾

وَدَشَرْنَاهُ بِإِسْحَاقَ نَبِيًّا مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١١٢﴾

﴿١١٣﴾

وَبَدَّ بَدِيدًا عَلَيْهِ وَعَلَىٰ إِسْحَاقَ وَمِن
ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا مُحْسِنٌ وَظَالِمٌ لِّنَفْسِهِ مُبِينٌ ﴿١١٣﴾

﴿١١٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ مَنَّا عَلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

وَنَجَّيْنَهُمَا وَقَوْمَهُمَا مِنَ الْكُرْبِ
الْعَظِيمِ ﴿١١٥﴾

وَنَصَرْنَاهُمْ فَاكُنُوا هُمُ الْغَالِبِينَ ﴿١١٦﴾

achieved victory. (116)

We gave them the Scripture which made things clear; (117)

We guided them to the right path; (118)

We caused them to be praised by later generations: (119)

Peace be upon Moses and Aaron! (120)

Thus do We reward those who do good. (121)

Both were among Our believing servants. (122)

Elijah too was one of Our messengers. (123)

He said to his people: 'Have you no fear of God?' (124)

How can you invoke Baal and forsake the best of creators, (125)

God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers?' (126)

But they accused him of lying. Therefore, they will certainly be brought [for punishment]. (127)

Not so God's true servants. (128)

We caused him to be praised by later generations:

وَأَتَيْنَهُمَا الْكِتَابَ الْمُسْتَبِينَ ﴿١١٧﴾

وَهَدَيْنَهُمَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ﴿١١٨﴾

وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِمَا فِي الْأَخْرَبِ ﴿١١٩﴾

سَلَامٌ عَلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾

إِنَّهُمْ مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

وَإِنَّ إِيَّاسَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

أَتَدْعُونَ بَعْلًا وَتَذَرُونَ أَحْسَنَ

الْخَالِقِينَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

اللَّهِ رَبِّكُمْ وَرَبِّ آبَائِكُمُ الْأُولِينَ ﴿١٢٦﴾

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَإِنَّهُمْ لَمُحْضَرُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلِصِينَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِي الْأَخْرَبِ ﴿١٢٩﴾

(129)

Peace be upon Elijah! (130)

Thus do We reward those who do good. (131)

He was truly one of Our believing servants.
(132)

Lot was also one of Our messengers. (133)

We saved him and all his household, (134)

except for an old woman who stayed behind.
(135)

Then We utterly destroyed the others. (136)

Surely you pass by their ruins at morning-time,
(137)

*as also by night. Will you not, then, use your
reason?* (138)

Jonah too was one of Our messengers. (139)

He deserted, going on the laden ship. (140)

They cast lots, and he was the one who lost.
(141)

The whale swallowed him, for he was to blame.
(142)

Had he not been of those who truly glorified God,
(143)

سَلَّمَ عَلَىٰ إِيَّا سِينَ ﴿١٢٩﴾

إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣١﴾

وَإِنَّ لُوطًا لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

إِذْ نَجَّيْنَاهُ وَأَهْلَهُ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

إِلَّا عَجُوزًا فِي الْغَدِيرِينَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

ثُمَّ دَمَّرْنَا الْآخَرِينَ ﴿١٣٥﴾

وَإِنكُمْ لَتَمُرُّونَ عَلَيْهِمْ مُصْبِحِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

وَبِاللَّيْلِ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

وَإِنَّ يُونُسَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

إِذْ أَبَقَ إِلَى الْفُلِكِ الْمَشْحُونِ ﴿١٣٩﴾

فَسَاهَمَ فَكَانَ مِنَ الْمُدْحَضِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾

فَالْتَقَمَهُ الْحُوتُ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ ﴿١٤١﴾

فَلَوْلَا أَنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُسَبِّحِينَ ﴿١٤٢﴾

he would have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day. (144)

We caused him to be cast out, sick, on a barren shore, (145)

and caused a gourd tree to grow over him. (146)

Then We sent him to [a community of] one hundred thousand or more. (147)

They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while. (148)

لَلْبَيْتِ فِي بَطْنِهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿١٤٤﴾

﴿١٤٥﴾ فَتَبَدَّنْهُ بِالْعَرَاءِ وَهُوَ سَقِيمٌ ﴿١٤٥﴾

﴿١٤٦﴾ وَأَنْبَتْنَا عَلَيْهِ شَجَرَةً مِّنْ يَقْطِينٍ ﴿١٤٦﴾

وَأَرْسَلْنَاهُ إِلَى مِائَةِ أَلْفٍ أَوْ يَزِيدُونَ ﴿١٤٧﴾

﴿١٤٧﴾

﴿١٤٨﴾ فَآمَنُوا فَمَتَّعْنَاهُمْ إِلَى حِينٍ ﴿١٤٨﴾

Overview

In this second part, the *sūrah* picks up the lessons of history as it mentions communities going back to the early days of humanity and their attitudes towards divine guidance. We find the story frequently repeating itself. Indeed, the people who persisted in disbelief in Makkah, taking a hostile attitude to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), appear to be an offshoot of those earlier communities that went astray. The fates of those earlier communities are mentioned, putting before the Arab unbelievers certain historical events for them to reflect upon as also to reassure the believers that divine care, which never deserted the believers of old, would also not fail them.

The *sūrah* gives brief accounts of Noah, Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah. It dwells more on Abraham's and Ishmael's story as it puts before us an example of supreme faith and sacrifice showing us the nature of true surrender to God's will. This particular episode is not mentioned anywhere else in the *Qur'ān*. Together, these stories make up the entire passage.

The Fate of Noah's People

They found their forefathers astray, and rushed to follow in their footsteps. Most of the people of old went astray before them; although We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants. (Verses 69-74)

These people are hardened in following error, but at the same time they are simply following the footsteps of others, without thinking or reflection. They rush to follow their fathers' lead taking no opportunity to question or examine: *"They found their forefathers astray, and rushed to follow in their footsteps."* (Verses 69-70) Both they and their fathers are examples of going astray, which was also the case of the majority of earlier communities: *"Most of the people of old went astray before them."* (Verse 71) Yet they did receive warnings, but paid no heed: *"although We had sent them warners."* (Verse 72) What did this lead to in the end? What was the outcome of the unbelievers' attitude, as compared with the outcome of heeding the warnings and accepting the faith? This is shown in the stories that follow. The verses that ensue serve as a mere announcement of what is to come: *"Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 73-74)

The first story is Noah's, but the account here dwells only briefly on the outcome, highlighting the care God took of His true servants:

Noah cried to Us, and We are the best to answer prayer: We saved him and his household from great distress; and caused his offspring to be the survivors. We caused him to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds! Thus do we reward those who do good. He was truly one of Our believing servants. Then We caused the others to drown. (Verses 75-82)

This reference to Noah includes his appeal to God and the full answer to his prayer by the best to give such an answer. It also tells of the fact that he and his household were saved from the great floods that drowned all except those whom God willed to be saved. It speaks of God's will to make of his offspring communities which build the earth and establish its heritage, while he himself, would he be remembered by future generations until the end of time. *"We caused him to be praised by later generations."* (Verse 78) It declares to all the worlds God's greeting to Noah, as he was one who fulfilled well the assignment given him: *"Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds! Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verses 79-80) What reward could anyone wish for when he has received God's own greetings and is to be remembered for the rest of time? The mark of Noah's doing well that so ensured his great reward was his unshakeable faith: *"He was truly one of Our believing servants."* (Verse 81) This outcome is brought about by faith. The unbelievers among Noah's people met their own ruin: *"Then We caused the others to drown."* (Verse 82) This has set the rule ever since the dawn of history. It is the pattern given in general terms immediately before these stories: *"We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 72-74)

Abraham and the Idols

The *sūrah* then depicts two of the main episodes from Abraham's story. The first shows him advocating faith among his people and destroying their idols, followed by their attempt to kill him and God saving him. This episode is also described in other *sūrahs*. The second episode however, is only mentioned here. It speaks of Abraham's dream, his sacrifice and how God released his son. This story is given in detail, speaking of stages and attitudes in a remarkably fine and effective style. It shows the most sublime example of obedience to God, sacrifice and self surrender:

Among those who followed his way was Abraham. He turned to his Lord with a sound heart. He said to his father and his people: What is this that you worship? Do you choose false deities instead of God? What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds? (Verses 83-87)

Thus the story opens, moving from Noah to Abraham and making it clear that they were related in faith and its advocacy. Thus Abraham is said to belong to Noah's community despite the long time gap between them. Nonetheless they shared the same divine constitution and message.

Abraham's quality highlighted here is his sound heart, which makes him a man of true faith and clear conscience: *"He turned to his Lord with a sound heart."* (Verse 84) This is an image of complete submission as represented in Abraham's turning to his Lord. Use of the adjective 'sound' gives clear impressions, and at the same time it is easy and clear, giving strong connotations of purity, sincerity and straightforward behaviour.

Because he had a sound heart, Abraham took exception to the practices of his people. This was motivated by his sound sense which recoiled from any idea or behaviour that conflicted with essential human nature: *"He said to his father and his people: What is this that you worship? Do you choose false deities instead of God? What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?"* (Verses 85-87) As he saw them worshipping statues and idols, he disapprovingly asked: *'What is this that you worship?'* This thing that you worship is not worthy of what you do. In fact, there is no trace of truth in such worship: it is sheer falsehood: *"Do you choose false deities instead of God?"* (Verse 86) What concept do you have of God? Is it so low that human nature looks with abhorrence at its first sight? *"What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?"* (Verse 87)

The *sūrah* does not report their answer or their argument with him. Instead, it moves straight to the second scene, showing what he determined to do to confront this flagrant falsehood:

Then he cast a glance at the stars, and said: 'Indeed I am sick.' So his people turned

away from him and left. He then approached their deities stealthily and said: 'Will you not eat [your offerings]? What is the matter with you that you do not speak?' And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand. (Verses 88-93)

It is said that Abraham's people were in the midst of a special festive occasion, which might have been their new year's day, when they went out to spend the day in gardens and parks. They started, however, by placing fruit in front of their deities for blessing. When they returned, having had their fun, they took their blessed food. Abraham, who had despaired of ever receiving a reasonable response from them, realized that they had gone too far astray, and had made up his mind with regard to his next move. Indeed, he waited until the day when they were sure to be away from their temples. He was so fed up with their error that it pained his heart. Therefore, when he was invited to join them, he looked at the sky and said: 'I am sick, I cannot join in your festivity. If I come with you, I may spoil your occasion.'

He was simply expressing his distress at their practices, so that they would leave him alone. What he said was true; it was no lie. Distress can leave real feelings of illness. Since the people were busy preparing for their celebration, they did not stop to examine his claims. Rather, they left him alone and went away. This was the chance Abraham had waited for.

He went straight to their false deities and saw splendid varieties of food and fruit placed in front of them. He said sarcastically: "*Will you not eat?*" (Verse 91) Needless to say, the statues and idols made no reply. He continued with his sarcasm, while also expressing irritation: "*What is the matter with you that you do not speak?*" (Verse 92) This is a common psychological situation: a man addressing his words to something he knows will not hear or answer him. It was, however, merely an expression of what Abraham felt towards his people as they engaged in absurd falsehood. Once more, the idols gave him no answer. At this point he moved swiftly to pour out all his frustration in action, not just in mere words: "*And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand.*" (Verse 93) Thus he cleared his illness and distress by solid action.

With this scene over, the *sūrah* paints a new one. The people return from their festivities and see their deities destroyed. Here we do not have the details given in *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, about their asking as to what had happened and determining who was the perpetrator. Instead, the *sūrah* moves straight to their confrontation with Abraham.

"*His people came to him hurriedly.*" (Verse 94) The news circulated quickly among them, and they unflinchingly sought to confront him. They were angry, agitated and numerous, while he was alone. Yet he had his faith: he knew its simple details, recognizing its soundness within himself and seeing its evidence in the universe

around him. This made him stronger than this agitated, angry multitude with its confused beliefs and stupid concepts. Therefore, he put his argument straight, caring little for their number and anger: *"He said: Do you worship something that you yourselves have carved, while it is God who has created you and all your handiwork?"* (Verses 95-96)

It is the logic of a simple and sound nature putting the case starkly and clearly to others: how come you worship what you carve with your own hands, when worship should be addressed to the Maker, not to what is made: *"It is God who has created you and all your handiwork."* (Verse 96) He is the Maker of all, and He is the One to be worshipped.

Although Abraham's argument was clear and logical, in their blind anger, the people did not listen. When did falsehood ever listen to simple truth? Therefore, their leaders retaliated by exercising a crude tyranny: *"They said: Build him a pyre and throw him into the blazing fire."* (Verse 97) This is the only logic tyranny knows. It cares little for argument and proof. Tyrants know that they cannot face the word of truth, with its overpowering appeal.

The *sūrah* gives no details of what happened after they issued their orders. It simply shows the outcome with the fulfilment of God's promise to His true servants and His warnings to the unbelievers: *"They schemed to harm him, but We caused them to be humiliated."* (Verse 98) What chance has such scheming when God wants it to be foiled? What can frail and powerless tyrants who cling to power do when God takes care of His true servants?

The Great Sacrifice

The *sūrah* moves on to the second episode it relates of Abraham's history. After he was saved from the fire, he closed that chapter of his life to begin a new phase: *"And Abraham said I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me."* (Verse 99) His words indicate that he was migrating, this in both a mental and physical sense. He was abandoning everything: his father, family, home, people and land, leaving them all behind and going to his Lord, free of all concerns. He thus surrendered himself to his Lord, assured that He would give him guidance and care, setting him on the right path. It is a migration from one state to another, abandoning all ties and bonds in favour of one bond that remains pure and strong. His words express complete faith and unqualified surrender.

Until that moment, Abraham was without children. He had left behind his relations, friends and all that was familiar to him. Needless to say, his relations with those who threw him in the fire suffered a final breakdown. Therefore, he went to his Lord, praying to Him to grant him believing offspring: *"Lord! Grant me a righteous son."* (Verse 100) And God answered his true servant's prayer: *"We gave him the happy*

*news that he will have a forbearing son.” (Verse 101) The son was most probably Ishmael, as clearly inferred from his life story and from the *sūrah* itself. Indeed, we can see the mark of his forbearance in his youth. We can also imagine the delight experienced by Abraham in his new abode, where he was a stranger, at the birth of this son described by God as a ‘forbearing son.’*

It is time for us now to look at the glorious attitude that Abraham’s life story represents, drawing from it an inspiring lesson as presented by God Almighty to the Muslim community.

When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said: My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.’ [Ishmael] said My father.! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.’ (Verse 102)

What effect will faith not produce? We see here Abraham in his old age, cut off in a foreign land, having deserted his homeland and his people, being given a child. The child turns out to be a model son, with his forbearance confirmed by God Himself. Hardly had Abraham enjoyed his son’s company and seen his youth blooming so as to become his companion and assistant, when he sees in his dream that he should slaughter him. He understands that it is a sign from God requiring sacrifice. What is his attitude now? He does not hesitate for a moment. The thought of disobedience does not even occur to him. He thinks only of submission. It is true that the dream was only a signal, not a clear and direct order issued through revelation. It was a signal by his Lord though, and that was enough for Abraham to comply, not to delay, and not even to ask why.

Moreover, his compliance did not betray any feeling of distress, horror or panic; it was marked by calm acceptance and reassurance, reflected in his words as he put this most grave matter to his son: *“My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.”* (Verse 102) These are the words of a man in full control of himself and his feelings, knowing that he is only doing his duty and trusting that it behoves him to comply. We do not see any element of panic driving a person to do even what he feels to be repugnant, in order to get it done and finished with.

That it was hard for Abraham is beyond doubt. He was not required to send his only son to war, nor to put him to a task that would end in his death. Nothing of the sort. Instead he was required to undertake the task himself, by his own hand. And what task was that? It was to slaughter his own son by way of sacrifice. This was the order he received calmly, the one that he put to his son and asked him to consider carefully. He did not take his son by surprise and do what was bidden. Rather, he

puts the question to him as if it were both normal and familiar. To Abraham, the question was one of obedience. Since his Lord wanted something, so be it, without hesitation. His son should also know and accept it willingly, with submission so that he too would earn the reward of obeying God and experience the pleasure of submission to Him. He himself had known that pleasure and now wants his son to feel it as the pure goodness that surpasses all else that life can offer.

What does the son say as his father proposes to slaughter him in fulfilment of what he saw in a dream? The son also rises to the sublime standard his father had earlier attained: *"He said: My father! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity."* (Verse 102) This is not a response of mere obedience and resignation. It is a response marked with acceptance and certainty. His reply begins with, *'My father!'* The prospect of his death does not cause him to panic or to forget his manners and love of his father. *"Do as you are bidden."* He also feels the same as his father, taking the dream as a signal, which means an order. This is sufficient to make him willing to carry it out without hesitation.

Furthermore, we see in Ishmael's response proper manners with his Lord, and recognition of the limits of his ability in the face of hardship. Therefore, he seeks his Lord's help to overcome his weakness. He attributes to God the grace of helping him to obey and make the sacrifice: *"God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity."* (Verse 102) He does not press the matter as a heroic act on his part. Nor does he describe it as facing the danger and caring little for the consequences. He does not give himself any credit in the matter; he simply attributes it all to God who has helped him in carrying out His orders with patience in adversity. This is an example of perfect humility before God, trust in Him, combined with complete obedience and submission to His will.

The scene moves further to show us the order being carried out: *"When the two of them had surrendered themselves to the will of God, and Abraham laid him prostrate on his forehead."* (Verse 103) Once more, obedience, faith and acceptance of God's will rise to a far nobler standard than anything known to humanity. The father puts his son prostrate before him and the son submits and shows no resistance. All this takes place in reality. Such is self surrender, which is the essence of Islam: complete trust, obedience, certainty, acceptance, submission and action. Both father and son experience nothing other than pure faith.

The point here is not one of bravery, courage, enthusiasm or heroic action which a warrior might feel in battle. A committed fighter may undertake a task knowing that his chance of survival is negligible. However, this is totally different from what Abraham and Ishmael were doing: for them, there is no boiling situation, no rush of enthusiasm prompting hasty action before weakness or hesitation can creep in. Theirs is a rational self surrender, with full knowledge of what they want, and

complete reassurance about what will take place. More than that, they coolly appreciate the pleasure of obeying God's orders.

At this stage, Abraham and Ishmael have done all that is required of them. They have submitted themselves and carried out the order. All that remained was the actual shedding of Ishmael's blood and his death, which, in God's scales, counted for little, compared with the energy, feelings and determination both father and son put into what was bidden of them. By this time, the test had reached its climax, its results were known and its objectives fulfilled. What remained was physical pain and a dead body, but God does not want His servants to endure suffering. He does not require them to torment or kill themselves. Once they have submitted themselves and shown their true willingness to do what He bids, then they have fulfilled what is required and passed the test successfully.

Deliverance

God witnessed the sincerity shown by both Abraham and Ishmael, and He considered them to have fulfilled all that was required of them:

We called to him: Abraham! You have already fulfilled the dream.' Thus do We reward those who do good. All this was indeed a momentous trial. We ransomed [Ishmael] with a noble sacrifice. (Verses 104-107)

You have indeed fulfilled all you needed to fulfil. God wants nothing from His servants other than that they submit themselves to Him totally, so that they have nothing which they consider too dear or too precious to give up, not even an only son, or their own lives. You, Abraham, have done this, offering everything dear, with certainty and acceptance. What was left was flesh and blood, which could be substituted by any type of flesh and blood. Thus, God ransomed this young man who had submitted himself to His will by a great and noble sacrifice. It is reported that the sacrifice was a ram which Abraham found ready by God's will and that he sacrificed this ram in place of Ishmael.

Abraham was then told: *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 105) We reward them by choosing them for such a test, directing their minds and hearts to rise to the necessary level, helping them in such fulfilment and then giving them the reward they deserve.

It is to commemorate this great event which serves as a symbol of true faith and submission to God that Muslims celebrate the *Īd* of Sacrifice, or *al-Adhā*. This event serves as a reference point for the Muslim community to know their first father, Abraham, whose faith it follows and to whom it traces its ancestry. It thus

understands the nature of its faith, based on submission to God's will with perfect acceptance and reassurance. It will never need to ask God why. It will never hesitate to do His bidding, once it realizes what He wants of it. It gives its all, withholding nothing, and choosing no particular way or form of offering. It simply does what He bids it to do. The Muslim community also knows that God does not wish to overburden it with the test, nor put it to hardship. All He needs is that Muslims should be ready to give whatever they are required to give, in full obedience and commitment, without hesitation. Once they prove such complete dedication, He will remove the need for their sacrifice and pain. He will consider that they have fulfilled their duty and reward them for that, replacing their sacrifice and honouring them as He honoured their father, Abraham.

"We caused him to be praised by later generations." (Verse 108) He is remembered by one generation after another. He is the father of all prophets, and the founding father of the Muslim community which inherits his faith. God has assigned to the Muslim community the task of leading humanity on the basis of Abraham's faith. In so doing, God has made the Muslim community Abraham's descendants for the rest of human life.

"Peace be upon Abraham." (Verse 109) It is a greeting of peace by his Lord, recorded in His book and engraved in the book of the universe. *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 110) We reward them after testing them, and We fulfil Our promise to them and honour them. *"He was truly one of our believing servants."* (Verse 111) Such is the reward of faith, and such is its nature as revealed by the momentous test.

God's grace is bestowed once more on Abraham, as He gave him Isaac in his old age. He further blesses him and his son, making Isaac a prophet: *"We gave Abraham the happy news of Isaac, a prophet and a righteous man; and We blessed him and Isaac."* (Verses 112-113) Their offspring goes on through generations, but its main criterion is not the relation of blood, but the relation of faith and a code of living: whoever follows in their footsteps does-good, and whoever deviates wrongs himself and cannot benefit from this blood relation: *"Among their offspring there were those who do good and others who would glaringly sin against their souls."* (Verse 113)

Abraham's Descendants

The descendants of Abraham and Isaac included Moses and Aaron:

We also bestowed Our favour on Moses and Aaron; We saved them and their people from great distress; We gave them support, so that it was they who achieved victory. We gave them the Scripture which made things clear; We guided them to the right path; We caused them to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Moses and

Aaron! Thus do We reward those who do good. Both were among Our believing servants. (Verses 114-122)

Here we only have a glimpse of the story of Moses and Aaron, highlighting God's favours bestowed on them first in being chosen to deliver His message, then in saving them and their people from great distress, which is recounted in detail in other *sūrah*s. God's favours on them also included their victory over their enemies, Pharaoh and his people, as also giving them the Scriptures and guiding them to the right path. It should be clear that God guides to this right path only those who believe in Him. He further ensured that they would be praised by future generations. This glimpse concludes with a greeting and blessing of peace from God to Moses and Aaron. Again the type of reward given to those who do good and the great value of faith, for which believers are held in honour, is repeated here.

A similar glimpse of the story of Elijah, a prophet mentioned in the Old Testament, is given here. Elijah was a messenger to people in Syria who worshipped a statue called Baal. The ruins of the city of Baalbek in Lebanon retain traces of such worship:

Elijah too was one of Our messengers. He said to his people: 'Have you no fear of God? How can you invoke Baal and forsake the best of creators, God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers?' But they accused him of lying. Therefore, they will certainly be brought [for punishment]. Not so God's true servants. We caused him to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Elijah! Thus do We reward those who do good. He was truly one of Our believing servants. (Verses 123-132)

Elijah called on his people to believe in God's oneness, denouncing their practice of worshipping Baal in preference to God, the best of creators. Thus, he followed the same line as Abraham when he denounced his people's idolatrous worship. The same stance was taken by every messenger when they encountered idol worship. The wrongdoers' response was to accuse Elijah of lying and to reject his message. God confirms here that they too will be brought before Him for punishment, except for those of them who believed in the message of the truth. This snippet ends in the same way as other historical accounts in this *sūrah* by emphasizing the honour God grants to His messengers: this by giving them the greeting and blessing of peace, outlining the reward of people who do good and the great value of faith. This is the only occasion that an account of Elijah is given in the *Qur'ān*.

Then we take a brief look at Lot, whose story occurs after Abraham's story in other *sūrah*s:

Lot was also one of Our messengers. We saved him and all his household, except for an

old woman who stayed behind. Then We utterly destroyed the others. Surely you pass by their ruins at morning-time, as also by night. Will you not, then, use your reason? (Verses 133-138)

The depiction here is similar to that given of Noah. It refers to the fact that Lot was God's messenger, and that he was saved with his family, except his wife, while the hardened unbelievers were destroyed. This is followed by a reminder to the Arabs who used to pass by the area where Lot's people lived without heeding the lesson their ruins told, and without fearing that they would be destroyed in similar fashion.

Jonah and the Whale

The last of these glimpses from the history of earlier messengers concerns Jonah:

Jonah too was one of Our messengers. He deserted, going on the laden ship. They cast lots, and he was the one who lost. The whale swallowed him, for he was to blame. Had he not been of those who truly glorified God, he would have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day. We caused him to be cast out, sick, on a barren shore, and caused a gourd tree to grow over him. Then We sent him to la community of] one hundred thousand or more. They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while. (Verses 139-148)

The *Qur'ān* does not mention where Jonah's people lived, but it is understood that they were not far from the sea. Reports tell us that Jonah was frustrated by his people's continued denial of his message and the truth it made clear. He warned them against God's impending punishment, and then abandoned them in anger. His anger led him to the sea-shore, where he boarded a laden ship. When the ship was in the middle of the sea, it was hit by a raging storm. It was widely believed at that time that such a disaster signalled that among the passengers there must be someone who had incurred God's anger. For the ship to withstand the storm that person had to be thrown overboard. They, thus, drew lots and Jonah was the one who lost. Although they knew him to be a virtuous and God-fearing man, the drawing of his lot was confirmed. Therefore, they threw him into the sea, or he might have jumped himself. Nonetheless, he was swallowed by the whale, deserving of blame, because he had abandoned the assignment God had given him, leaving his people in anger before seeking God's permission. When he felt acute distress inside the whale's belly, he glorified God and prayed for His forgiveness, stating that he had wronged himself. He said in his prayer: *"There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!"* (21: 87) God answered his prayer, and the whale cast him out.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that *"had he not been of those who truly glorified God, he would*

have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day." (Verses 143-144) When he was cast out, he was both sick and naked. Therefore God *"caused a gourd tree to grow over him,"* its broad leaves covering him. It also protected him against flies, which are said not to come near this plant. This was part of the favour God bestowed on him. When he had recovered, God returned him to the people whom he had left in anger. In turn, they feared that his warnings would come true, and they believed, praying for God's forgiveness. God thus accepted them, sparing them the punishment He inflicts on people who deny His message: *"They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while."* (Verse 148) They numbered a hundred thousand or more, and all of them became believers.¹¹

This brief account of Jonah's story explains the fate of those who believe, so contrasting the fate of the unbelievers in the other stories. Let the Arabs, who received Muḥammad's message, choose which fate they prefer.

¹¹ Other references to Jonah's story are discussed in Vol. 9, pp. 117-118, and Vol. 12, pp. 52-54. – Editor's note.

3

To Whom Victory is Guaranteed

Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? (149)

Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? (150)

Out of their falsehood they say: (151)

God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. (152)

Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? (153)

What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? (154)

Do you not reflect? (155)

Or do you perhaps, have a clear authority? (156)

Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! (157)

They claim that He has kinship with the jinn; yet the jinn themselves know that they will be brought [before God] for judgement. (158)

فَاسْتَفْتِهِمُ أَلرِّبَّكَ الْبَنَاتُ وَلَهُمُ
الْبُنُونَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

أَمْ خَلَقْنَا الْمَلَائِكَةَ إِنثًا وَهُمْ
شَاهِدُونَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ مِّنْ إِفْكِهِمْ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿١٥١﴾

وَلَدَ اللَّهُ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

أَصْطَفَى الْبَنَاتِ عَلَى الْبَنِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

أَمْ لَكُمْ سُلْطَانٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥٦﴾

فَاتُوا بِكِتَابِكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

وَجَعَلُوا بَيْنَهُ وَبَيْنَ الْجَنَّةِ نَسَبًا ۗ وَلَقَدْ

عَلِمَتِ الْجِنَّةُ إِنَّهُمْ لَمُحْضَرُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him. (159)

سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Not so God's true servants. (160)

إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلِصِينَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

Neither you nor what you worship (161)

فَإِنَّكُمْ وَمَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١٦١﴾

can lure away from God any (162)

مَا أَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ بِفِتْنِينَ ﴿١٦٢﴾

except one who is destined for hell. (163)

إِلَّا مَنْ هُوَ صَالِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٦٣﴾

Every single one of us has his appointed place: (164)

وَمَا مِنَّا إِلَّا لَهُ مَقَامٌ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿١٦٤﴾

we are ranged in ranks, (165)

وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ الصَّافُونَ ﴿١٦٥﴾

and we too extol His limitless glory. (166)

وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ الْمُسَبِّحُونَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

They have long been saying: (167)

وَإِنْ كَانُوا لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿١٦٧﴾

If only we had before us a tradition from those of old, (168)

لَوْ أَنَّ عِنْدَنَا ذِكْرًا مِّنَ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

we would certainly be true servants of God.' (169)

لَكُنَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلِصِينَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

Yet they reject it. In time, they will come to know. (170)

فَكَفَرُوا بِهِ ۗ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: (171)

وَلَقَدْ سَبَقَتْ كَلِمَتُنَا لِعِبَادِنَا الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٧١﴾

إِنَّهُمْ لَهُمُ الْمَنْصُورُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

it is they who will be helped, (172)

*and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious.
(173)*

So, turn away from them for a while, (174)

*and watch them; in time, they too will come to see.
(175)*

*Do they really wish to hasten Our punishment?
(176)*

*When it strikes in their midst, terrible will be the
morning of those who were already warned. (177)*

*And again, turn away from them for a while,
(178)*

*and watch them; in time, they too will come to see.
(179)*

*Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of
almightiness, above all what people attribute to
Him. (180)*

And peace be upon all His messengers. (181)

*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the
worlds. (182)*

وَإِنَّ جُنْدَنَا لَهُمُ الْغَالِبُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿١٧٤﴾

وَأَبْصِرْهُمْ فَسَوْفَ يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٧٥﴾

أَفِعْدَابِنَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

فَإِذَا نَزَلَ بِسَاحَتِهِمْ فَسَاءَ صَبَاحُ
الْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

وَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿١٧٨﴾

وَأَبْصِرْ فَسَوْفَ يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

سُبْحَانَ رَبِّكَ رَبِّ الْعِزَّةِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

وَسَلَّمَ عَلَى الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٨١﴾

وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٨٢﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* builds on the main themes already discussed, particularly the historical accounts given in the second part which explain the true nature of the relation between God and His servants to refute the superstitions

circulated among the Arabs. In one such superstition the Arabs claimed that the angels were God's daughters, and in another they alleged that a marriage relation existed between God and the *jinn*. The *sūrah* now puts before them what they said before God's message was delivered to them. This was when they expressed dear hopes that God would send them a messenger and when they emphasized that they would follow the guidance such a messenger provided. Yet when God sent them the Messenger they asked for they resorted to disbelief. The *sūrah* concludes by stating God's promise to His messengers that they will end victorious, disassociating God from all the unbelievers' claims, and praising God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Superstitious Beliefs

Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? Do you not reflect? Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! (Verses 149-157)

The *sūrah* uses every means to refute the unbelievers' claims; it shows their false superstition for what it is, draws its argument on the basis of their own logic and how it works in their own environment. They used to prefer boys to girls, considering the birth of a girl something of a tragedy. Yet they allege at the same time that the angels were female and that they were God's daughters. Therefore, the *sūrah* takes up the argument, using their own standards to show how stupid their claims were: "Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons?" If females are of a lesser rank, how could they assign daughters to their Lord and keep sons for themselves? Or was it that He chose for Himself daughters and gave them sons? Neither possibility stands to reason. The Prophet is instructed to question them about this worthless claim. He is also to ask them about the source of the superstition and how it came about. In other words, where did they get the idea that the angels were females? Did they witness their creation in order to know their sex? "Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence?" (Verse 150)

The *sūrah* gives the exact wording of their fabricated lies about God: "Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed." (Verses 151-152) They are liars even according to their own tradition which prefers sons to daughters. How could it be, then, that God would choose daughters for Himself? "Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons?" (Verse 153) It wonders at their judgement which ignores their own logic: "What is the matter with you? How do you make your

judgement? Do you not reflect?" (Verses 154-155) Where do you get the evidence on which you base your judgement? "Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth!" (Verses 156-157)

The *sūrah* moves on to refute the other superstition which alleged that some relationship existed between God and the *jinn*: "They claim that He has kinship with the *jinn*; yet the *jinn* themselves know that they will be brought [before God] for judgement." (Verse 158) The allegation being that the angels were God's daughters born to Him by the *jinn*! The unbelievers claimed that this is how the relation started. The *jinn*, however, know for certain that they are created by God, like all other creation, and they also know that they will be brought before Him for judgement. Had they been related to Him, they would be due different treatment.

God places Himself far above this worthless fabrication: "Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him." (Verse 159) He also makes clear that the believers among the *jinn* would not be driven to suffer their punishment. "Not so God's true servants." (Verse 160)

The *sūrah* then quotes an address made to the idolaters, their alleged deities and their deviant beliefs. Apparently, the address is made by the angels:

Neither you nor what you worship can lure away from God any except one who is destined for hell. Every single one of us has his appointed place: we are ranged in ranks, and we too extol His limitless glory. (Verses 161-166)

What this address means is that neither the unbelievers, nor the deities they worship could turn anyone away from God's path except one who is considered to belong to the people of hell and destined for it. They cannot lead astray a believer who is God's obedient servant. Hell has its own people who are of a known type. These respond to temptations and listen to those who try to lead them astray.

The angels also refute this superstition, making it clear that each one of them has his own position which he does not exceed. They are a type of God's creation who worship Him alone. They are assigned certain tasks and they fulfil them, ranging themselves in rows for prayer and extolling God's glory.

An Unfailing Promise

The *sūrah* then speaks about the idolaters who circulate such superstitions, mentioning the promises they made when they envied the people of earlier revelations for receiving such messages. They used to say that had they had some sort of traditional beliefs inherited from Abraham or later prophets, they would have had a degree of faith that would have enhanced their position with God: "They have

long been saying: *If only we had before us a tradition from those of old, we would certainly be true servants of God.*" (Verses 167-169) Yet when they received the best revelations ever bestowed from on high, they turned away and forgot their promises: *"Yet they reject it. In time, they will come to know."* (Verse 170) The verse carries an implicit threat, which is suitable for those who persist in disbelief, going back on expressed wishes and promises: *"They will come to know."*

At this point the *sūrah* states God's promise to His messengers of His assured help. In this way victory is assured them: *"Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious."* (Verses 171-173)

The promise is a true promise, and God's word is fulfilled. The roots of true faith have been firmly established on earth and its structure is raised despite the unbelievers' rejection, the persecution to which believers are subjected as well as many other obstacles and barriers. The beliefs of idolaters and unbelievers have disappeared, their power has dwindled while the faith preached by God's messengers appeals to people's minds and hearts. In fact, its appeal remains strong in spite of all the opposing factors. All the attempts to suppress divine faith in favour of any other philosophy or ideology have failed, even in those areas where these started. God's promise to His messengers has come true. This is a universal phenomenon that has remained true throughout the world and in all generations.

It is also true for every movement that aims to revive the divine message, provided that its advocates are sincere and dedicated. It will be triumphant no matter what obstacles are put in its way. Falsehood may mobilize all its powers of persecution, torture, open warfare as well as propaganda that relies on fabricated lies, but all to no avail. The removal of such calumny may entail fighting a few battles, perhaps with different results, but eventually God's promise to His messengers will be fulfilled. This is a promise of ultimate victory that will see them established on earth and having power. This promise will be fulfilled even though all the powers on earth are ranged to stop it.

This promise is one of God's universal laws which operates just like the stars and planets follow their cycles, the night and day alternate, and like a dead land coming to life when rain falls on it. However, this law follows God's will and works according to His planning. It may appear slow in relation to people's limited life spans, but it will never fail. In fact it may be fulfilled in a way that people do not appreciate, because they always look for the form of victory they know. Indeed, they may not readily appreciate that victory comes in a new form and they may need time to appreciate this.

People may want to see a particular form of victory for the advocates of the divine

faith who follow His messengers, but God wishes to accomplish a different form which is greater and longer lasting. What takes place, then, is what God wants, even if this means that these advocates will have to endure greater troubles, exert more effort and strive for much longer than they expected. Before the Battle of Badr, the Prophet's Companions hoped to take the Quraysh's trade caravan, but God wanted that they miss it and instead engage their enemy, with its superior forces, in battle. What God wanted ensured a much better outcome for them and for Islam. That was the victory God wanted to give His Messenger, a victory for His message with lasting effects.

The advocates of God's faith may lose a battle, and may even suffer very hard times, but this is because God is preparing them to achieve victory in a greater battle. He thus brings about circumstances that make their victory yield fruit on a wider scale and for a longer period.

God's word has gone forth, and His promise has been given by His will. His law will take effect without fail: *"Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious."* (Verses 171-173)

When this true promise has been declared, God orders His Messenger to turn away from unbelievers, leaving them to God's word and *promise* to take effect. He should, however, watch them as the word proves true, for they will see with their own eyes how this comes about:

So, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. Do they really wish to hasten Our punishment? When it strikes in their midst, terrible will be the morning of those who were already warned. And again, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. (Verses 174-179)

The Prophet is told to leave them alone and not care for them. He is further told to wait for the day when he and they will see what God's promise means for him and them. If they hasten His punishment, they will suffer greatly when it falls upon them. Should this strike a community, they will have got what is certain to grieve them. Again, the Prophet is told to abandon them to their fate. This order implies further warning to them, and again the *sūrah* advises that the outcome will be terrible: *"And again, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see."* (Verses 178-179) What will happen is left unspecified, implying great terror.

The *sūrah* concludes with extolling God's glory, stating that all might belongs to Him alone. It adds the blessing and greeting of peace to God's messengers, and declares that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all, who has no partners

whatsoever:

Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of almightiness, above all what people attribute to Him. And peace be upon all His messengers. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (Verses 180-182)

It is indeed a fitting ending that sums up the main issues discussed in the *sūrah* as a whole.