

SŪRAH 26

Al-Shu`arā'

(The Poets)

Prologue

Faith, the main theme discussed in this *sūrah*, pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah during the early period of Islam. The subject is examined in all its major aspects from God's oneness: *"Do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment."* (Verse 213), to fearing the Day of Judgement: *"Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]."* (Verses 87-89); belief in the revelation bestowed from on high to Muhammad (peace be upon him): *"Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning."* (Verses 192-194), and explaining the risks to which anyone who denies the faith exposes himself including a destructive punishment that may take place in this world, or punishment in the hereafter that awaits the unbelievers: *"They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6) *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227)

The *sūrah* also consoles the Prophet as he faces the determined denials of his message and divine revelation: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?"* (Verse 3) It reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to endure all the hardships they faced, presenting them with examples of earlier believers who remained steadfast when confronted with

similar difficulties.

The main body of the *sūrah* is devoted to historical accounts that take up 180 verses of the *sūrah's* total of 227. Apart from these historical accounts, the *sūrah* includes a short introduction and final comments, but the three elements form a single coherent unit that presents the main theme in different styles, serving a single objective. Hence, only those episodes that are relevant to each historical situation are presented.

An air of warning, for those who reject God's messages, and the subsequent punishment He will inflict prevails throughout. This is only logical since the *sūrah* provides a response to the Quraysh unbelievers who denied the Prophet Muhammad, derided his warnings, turned their backs on God's revelations, hastened the threatened punishment and described revelation and the Qur'ān as either sorcery or poetry inspired by devils.

Although the entire *sūrah* forms one unit, we will divide it into short passages according to the order it follows.

1

If People Would Only Reflect

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Tā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? (3)

If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. (4)

Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. (5)

They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride. (6)

طسّم

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ

لَعَلَّكَ بَدِخُعُ نَفْسِكَ إِلَّا يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ

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إِنْ نَشَأْ نُنَزِّلْ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ آيَةً فَظَلَّتْ أَعْنَاقُهُمْ لَهَا خَاضِعِينَ

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِّنْ ذِكْرٍ مِّنَ الرَّحْمَنِ مُحَدَّثٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا عَنْهُ مُعْرِضِينَ

فَقَدْ كَذَّبُوا فَسَيَأْتِيهِمْ أَنْبَاءُ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ

Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? (7)

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (8)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (9)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا إِلَى الْأَرْضِ كَمْ أَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ
كُلِّ زَوْجٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٧﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ
مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

The Prophet's Unnecessary Concern

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (Verses 1-2)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate Arabic letters, *Ṭā Sīn Mīm*, indicating that the verses of the Qur'ān, the book that sets things in full clarity, including the present *sūrah*, are made out of such letters. These letters are available to those who deny divine revelation, and they cannot produce out of them anything similar to this clear book. The nature of the book is discussed at the beginning and end of the *Sūrah*, just as it is discussed in every *sūrah* which has a similar beginning employing separate letters.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet who is concerned about the idolaters and saddened by their rejection of his message and the Qur'ān. It comforts the Prophet telling him that the whole matter is not worth his concern. God could easily have forced them to believe by showing them a clear sign they would not have been able to resist: "Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission to it." (Verses 3-4)

There is here a note of remonstrance with the Prophet for showing too much concern for the unbelievers and their attitudes: "Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?" (Verse 3) The Prophet is shown to be suffering because of his certainty that their rejection will inevitably incur punishment. Since these people belonged to his own clan and community, he took the matter to heart, feeling heavy at the inevitable prospect. God, however, is too caring to leave him to his grief. The *sūrah* tells him that his responsibility does not

include bringing these people into the fold of believers. Had it been God's will, He would have sent down a miraculous, overpowering sign that would have rendered all their arguments meaningless. They would then have had no option but to declare their belief in God and submit to Him. The verse gives a graphic picture of their submission to such a sign: *"their necks will remain bent in submission."* (Verse 4) This image depicts them with their necks permanently bent, unable ever to look up.

But God Almighty has not chosen to provide such a compelling sign with His last message. Instead, He has made the Qur'ān, a complete and perfect code of living, His miraculous and overpowering sign.

The Inimitability of the Qur'ānic Style

The Qur'ān is miraculous in its construction and artistic presentation, maintaining the same features of excellence throughout. Thus, it is totally unlike human works where we note variations in standard, power and level even by the same author and within the same work. By contrast, the Qur'ān maintains its artistic characteristics at the same level throughout, demonstrating that it is the work of the One who is not influenced by changing situations and temporary circumstances.

The Qur'ān is also unique in its intellectual structure and the mutual complementarity of its parts. Nothing in it occurs by mere coincidence; nothing occurs out of place. All its directives and legislative orders are in full harmony, address human life and regulate all its aspects. There is absolutely no contradiction in it even at the level of minute detail. Not a single aspect or provision in its full volume of legislation is incompatible with human nature. Everything turns around the same pivot, serving the same aim, and maintaining full harmony. This could never have been achieved by human endeavour. It can only be the product of limitless knowledge that is free of the constraints of time and place. It is only such absolute knowledge that can produce such a complete and flawless code.

The Qur'ān is unique in the easy, flowing way it penetrates hearts and souls, opening every lock and touching every point of effect. The way it provides simple and easy solutions to intractable problems is remarkable. On the other hand, its method of educating and moulding people in accordance with its own system, using only the lightest of touches, free of complexity, irregularity or deception, is also extraordinary.

The Islamic message is designed by God to remain open to all communities and all generations. It is not meant for any particular group or location. Hence, its miracle should also remain available to all regardless of their community and generation. Hence God made the Qur'ān His miracle, rather than providing a physical miracle that leaves its onlookers speechless, having no counter argument. Physical miracles

silence only those who see them, but they subsequently become no more than a piece of history. Conversely, the Qur'ān remains today, more than 13 centuries after its revelation, an open book outlining a code for life. People today find in it all that they need to put their lives on the right course, should they but determine to implement it. It leads them to a better world, higher horizons and an infinitely superior destiny. Future generations will find in the Qur'ān much that we have not been able to discover, because the Qur'ān gives every seeker what that seeker needs, while its treasures remain self-renewing, limitless. The unbelievers were unaware of this central issue. Therefore, they continued to turn a deaf ear whenever Qur'ānic revelations were read out to them. *"Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it."* (Verse 5)

We note that God's attribute mentioned here is 'the Most Merciful' indicating His great act of mercy, namely the revelation of the Qur'ān. Thus, their turning away from it appears in its reality: it is an abhorrent act that rejects God's care and grace. They deprive themselves of such mercy when they are the ones who need it most.

Their rejection of God's mercy merits the incurrance of God's punishment: *"They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6) The threat is expressed in general, unspecified terms, with a touch of sarcasm that suits their derision of God's warnings. A more literal translation of this verse is: *they will in time receive the news of what it was they were wont to deride.* Needless to say, they will not receive any piece of news; rather, they will endure the punishment they have derided, and they, themselves will provide the news as people relate what happens to them.

They demand a miracle while ignoring the numerous miraculous signs God has placed all around them. These are sufficient for anyone with an open heart and mind. Indeed, in every aspect of this marvellous universe there is a great sign providing people with all the reassurance they need: *"Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe."* (Verses 7-8)

The growth of plants as they ease their way out of the earth is there to be watched at every moment. Moreover, plants are made as male and female, with the two growing separately in some plant species or mostly growing together in the same shoot. Yet it only needs that people should look in order for them to appreciate.

The Qur'ān establishes a direct relation between the human heart and universal scenes so as to awaken people's minds and perceptions. It demonstrates the great aspects of God's creation all around us so that we look at the living universe with an alert mind and a beating heart. This enables us to recognize God through His marvellous creation, and makes us appeal to Him whenever we see this His creation.

Thus we feel His presence at every moment of the day and night. We also realize that we are only one type of God's creatures, subject to the same natural laws that shape existence. We also recognize that we have a special role in the universe that must be fulfilled on earth, the planet which we have been placed in charge of.

"Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it?" (Verse 7) This nobility is imparted through life that is given by God, who is most noble and most generous. The phraseology of this verse suggests that we should look at God's creation with honour and respect, and not ignore or belittle it: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign."* (Verse 8) The unbelievers had been demanding a sign while in all this there is a great sign, but few are those who take heed of it: *"Yet most of them will not believe."* (Verse 8)

The *sūrah's* introduction ends with a comment that is repeated every time a point is concluded: *"And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verse 9) He is able to provide all signs and to inflict punishment on those who deny the truth. He is also 'the Merciful' who shows His signs to those who are willing to believe.

2

A Debate with Pharaoh

Your Lord called Moses: 'Go to the wrongdoing people, (10)

the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?' (11)

He said: 'My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, (12)

and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. (13)

Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me.' (14)

Said He: 'By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. (15)

Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: (16)

Let the Children of Israel go with us.' (17)

[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: 'Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many

وَإِذْ نَادَى رَبُّكَ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أُنْتِ الْقَوْمِ
الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ ۗ أَلَا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١١﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي أَخَافُ أَنْ يُكَذِّبُونِ ﴿١٢﴾

وَيَضِيقُ صَدْرِي وَلَا يَنْطَلِقُ لِسَانِي
فَأَرْسِلْ إِلَىٰ هَارُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَهُمْ عَلَيَّ ذُنُوبٌ فَأَخَافُ أَنْ يَقْتُلُونِ ﴿١٤﴾

قَالَ كَلَّا ۗ فَاذْهَبَا بِآيَاتِنَا ۗ إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ
مُسْتَمِعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

فَأْتِيَا فِرْعَوْنَ فَقُولَا ۗ إِنَّا رَسُولُ رَبِّ
الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

أَنْ أَرْسِلَ مَعَنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿١٧﴾

قَالَ أَلَمْ نُرَبِّكَ فِينَا وَلِيدًا وَلَبِثْتَ فِينَا
مِنْ عُمْرِكَ ۗ سِنِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

years of your life? (18)

Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' (19)

Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; (20)

and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. (21)

And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?' (22)

Pharaoh said: And what is that "Lord of all the worlds"? (23)

[Moses] answered: 'He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure.' (24)

[Pharaoh] said to those around him: 'Do you hear?' (25)

[Moses] said: 'He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old.' (26)

[Pharaoh] said: 'For certain, the messenger who has been sent to you is indeed a madman.' (27)

[Moses] went on: 'He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason.' (28)

[Pharaoh] said: 'If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have

وَفَعَلْتَ فَعَلْتِكَ الَّتِي فَعَلْتَ وَأَنْتَ مِنَ
الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

قَالَ فَعَلْتُهَا إِذَا وَأَنَا مِنَ الضَّالِّينَ ﴿١٩﴾

فَفَرَرْتُ مِنْكُمْ لَمَّا خِفْتُمْ فَوَهَبَ لِي
رَبِّي حُكْمًا وَجَعَلَنِي مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَتِلْكَ نِعْمَةٌ تَمُنُّهَا عَلَيَّ أَنْ عَبَّدتَّ بَنِي
إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿٢١﴾

قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ وَمَا رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

قَالَ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

قَالَ لِمَنْ حَوْلَهُ أَلَا تَسْتَبْعُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

قَالَ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ آبَائِكُمُ الْأُولِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ إِنَّ رَسُولَكُمْ الَّذِي أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ
لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

قَالَ رَبُّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

قَالَ لَئِنْ أَخَذتَّ إِلَهًا غَيْرِي لَأَجْعَلَنَّكَ
مِنَ الْمَسْجُونِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

you imprisoned.' (29)

Said [Moses]: 'Even if I bring before you a clear proof?' (30)

[Pharaoh] said: 'Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth.' (31)

So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. (32)

And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers. (33)

[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: 'This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge (34)

who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?' (35)

They said: 'Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities (36)

to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill.' (37)

So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, (38)

and the people were asked: 'Are you all present, (39)

so that we may follow the sorcerers if

قَالَ أَوْلَوْ جِئْتُكَ بِشَيْءٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

قَالَ فَآتِ بِهِ إِنْ كُنْتَ مِنَ
الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

فَأَلْقَى عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ
ثُعْبَانٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣١﴾

وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ
بَيْضَاءٌ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

قَالَ لِلْمَلَإِ حَوْلَهُ إِنَّ هَذَا
لَسِحْرٌ عَليمٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ
أَرْضِكُمْ بِسِحْرِهِ فَمَاذَا
تَأْمُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ
وَابْعَثْ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ
حَاشِرِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

يَأْتُوكَ بِكُلِّ سِحَارٍ
عَليمٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

فَجُمِعَ السَّحَرَةُ لِمِيقَاتِ
يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَقِيلَ لِلنَّاسِ هَلْ أَنْتُمْ
مُجْتَمِعُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

لَعَلَّنَا نَتَّبِعُ السَّحَرَةَ
إِنْ كَانُوا هُمُ الْغَالِبِينَ

they emerge triumphant?’ (40)

When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?’ (41)

Said he: ‘Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.’ (42)

Moses said to them: ‘Throw whatever you are going to throw!’ (43)

So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: ‘By Pharaoh’s might, it is we indeed who will prevail.’ (44)

Then Moses threw his staff, and it swallowed up their false devices. (45)

The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, (46)

and said: ‘We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, (47)

the Lord of Moses and Aaron.’ (48)

[Pharaoh] said: ‘You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.’ (49)

They said: ‘No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. (50)

We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first

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فَلَمَّا جَاءَ السَّحَرَةُ قَالُوا لِفِرْعَوْنَ أَإِنَّا لَنَأْجُرُّكَ إِن كُنَّا نَحْنُ الْغَالِبِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

قَالَ نَعَمْ وَإِنَّكُمْ إِذَا لَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

قَالَ لَهُمْ مُوسَىٰ أَلْقُوا مَا أَنْتُمْ مُلْقُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

فَأَلْقَوْا حِبَاهُمْ وَعَصِيَّهُمْ وَقَالُوا بِعِزَّةِ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّا لَنَحْنُ الْغَالِبُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

فَأَلْقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَلْقَفُ مَا يَأْفِكُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

فَأَلْقَى السَّحَرَةُ سَجْدِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

قَالَ ءَامَنْتُمْ لَهُ قَبْلَ أَنْ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّهُ لَكَبِيرُكُمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ السِّحْرَ فَلَسَوْفَ تَعْمُونَ ۚ لَا قُطْعَانَ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَرْجُلِكُمْ مِّنْ خَلْفٍ وَلَا صَلْبَيْكُمُ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

قَالُوا لَا ضَيْرَ إِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنْقَلِبُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

إِنَّا نَطْمَعُ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ لَنَا رَبُّنَا خَطِيئَتَنَا أَن

who have believed.' (51)

Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' (52)

Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, (53)

[saying]: 'These are but a small band, (54)

and most certainly they have enraged us; (55)

but we are all united, and well prepared.' (56)

Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, (57)

treasures and honourable positions. (58)

And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel. (59)

And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. (60)

When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' (61)

He replied: 'No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' (62)

And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff.' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain.

كُنَّا أَوَّلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

﴿٥٢﴾ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَسْرِ بِعِبَادِي
إِنَّكُمْ مُتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

فَأَرْسَلَ فِرْعَوْنُ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

إِنَّ هَؤُلَاءِ لَشِرْذِمَةٌ قَلِيلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَنَا لَغَائِظُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

وَإِنَّا لَجَمِيعٌ حَادِرُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

فَأَخْرَجْنَاهُمْ مِّنْ جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٨﴾

وَكُنُوزٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٥٩﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ وَأَوْرَثْنَاهَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿٦٠﴾

فَاتَّبَعُوهُمْ مُّشْرِقِينَ ﴿٦١﴾

فَلَمَّا تَرَاءَا الْجَمْعَانِ قَالَ أَصْحَابُ

مُوسَىٰ إِنَّا لَمُدْرَكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

قَالَ كَلَّا إِنَّ مَعِيَ رَبِّي سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٦٣﴾

فَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَضْرِبْ بِعَصَاكَ

الْبَحْرَ ۖ فَانفَلَقَ فَكَانَ كُلُّ فِرْقٍ كَالطَّوْدِ

(63)

And We caused the others to draw near,
(64)

*and We saved Moses and all who were
with him, (65)*

while We caused the others to drown.
(66)

*Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet
most of them will not believe. (67)*

*And indeed it is your Lord who is the
Mighty One, the Merciful. (68)*

الْعَظِيمِ ﴿١٣﴾

وَأَزَلَفْنَا ثُمَّ الْآخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

وَأُنجَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ وَمَنْ مَعَهُ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا الْآخِرِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ

مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* recounts here a major episode from Moses' history, which fits perfectly with the main theme and the emphasis it places on the fate of those who deny divine messages, accusing God's messengers of fabrication. It also comforts the Prophet as he faces the unbelievers' accusations, reassuring him that God will always take care of His message and those who believe in it and continue to advocate it in the face of determined opposition. Such advocates may be powerless, unable to match the might of the tyrannical forces lined up against them and who subject them to brutal persecution. This incidentally was precisely the case of the Muslims in Makkah at that time. Providing such historical accounts was one of the means of educating the Muslim community employed in the Qur'ān.

Earlier in the Qur'ān, episodes from Moses' story were told in *Sūrahs* 2 The Cow, 5 The Repast, 7 The Heights, 10 Jonah, 17 The Night Journey, 18 The Cave and 20 Ṭā Hā, with some brief references to it in other *sūrahs*. In each case, the presented episode or reference fits perfectly with the theme of the *sūrah* and matches the main drift of its context. The same applies here. The account clearly contributes to the illustration of the theme.

Here, we see how Moses met with opposition from Pharaoh and his people. It ends with their drowning to forestall any attempt to persecute Moses and his

followers. It also mentions the fact that Moses and the Children of Israel were saved. This confirms the truth of God's statement at the end of the *sūrah*, threatening the unbelievers: "Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take." (Verse 227) It also confirms the same threat mentioned at the opening of the *sūrah*: "They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride." (Verse 6)

This episode is divided into a number of scenes, with gaps in between. These gaps are very brief, allowing the curtains to drop on one scene before they are raised again to reveal another. This is an important aspect of the Qur'ānic approach to storytelling. We have here a total of seven scenes, beginning with one in which we see how Moses receives God's call, is assigned his message and given revelations. It also includes the dialogue that took place between him and his Lord. The second scene consists of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh and his chiefs, in which Moses shows the two signs given to him, namely, his staff and his hand becoming shining white. Pharaoh's scheming as he gathers his sorcerers and assembles all the people for the confrontation provides the third scene. We are then entertained to a scene of the sorcerers gathered in Pharaoh's presence, making sure that they will receive some handsome reward. The fifth scene shows the contest that ends with the total submission of the sorcerers and their declaration of their belief in God, followed by the threats uttered by Pharaoh. Next, we have two images: God's inspiration to Moses to move forth with God's servants by night, and Pharaoh's sending summoners to raise an army to chase the Children of Israel. The final scene is that of the two hosts drawing close by the sea and its dramatic end: the sea is parted, and the believers are saved while the unbelievers are drowned.

These scenes are also painted in *Sūrahs* 7, 10 and 20: The Heights, Jonah and Ṭā Hā respectively. But in each case, they are presented in a different way, suited to the context in which they occur. Thus they serve to highlight what is suitable for each *sūrah*. For example, in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is briefly recounted, and that of the sorcerers and their assembly is shown at a rapid pace, while the picture of Pharaoh's scheming with his chiefs is related at length, giving more detail. It also shows the signs given to Moses during his stay in Egypt following his contest with the sorcerers before showing the scene at the sea with the believers being saved and the unbelievers drowned. It then moves on to provide several images of what happened to the Children of Israel after they crossed the parted sea. Nothing of this is mentioned in this *sūrah*, while we have more detail of the argument that took place between Moses and Pharaoh about God's oneness and the revelations He vouchsafed to His messenger. This was the central point of argument between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the unbelievers in Makkah.

In *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, the first scene of confrontation is briefly shown, making no mention of the two signs given to Moses, namely the staff and his hand. It also provides a brief reference to the contest between Moses and the sorcerers, while both scenes are shown here in more detail.

Sūrah 20, 11 Ha, portrays the first scene of the dialogue between Moses and his Lord at greater length, before painting the scenes of the confrontation with Pharaoh and the contest with the sorcerers in great detail. It also accompanies the Children of Israel for a long part of their journey. In this *sūrah*, however, nothing is mentioned about what happens to them after they were saved.

Hence, we can say that there is no repetition of the story despite the fact that numerous references are made to it in the Qur'ān. The episodes chosen for discussion each time, the scenes painted, and the aspects emphasized in each scene and the way they are portrayed makes each account stand out at its particular position as new, and perfectly suited to the context in which it occurs.

God's Call to Moses

Your Lord called Moses: 'Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?' He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me. 'Said He: 'By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.' (Verses 10-17)

The address here is to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). At the opening of the *sūrah*, God says to him: "Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride." (Verses 3-6) The *sūrah* then gives him accounts of what happened to some of the communities that rejected God's messages and how they suffered His punishment.

"Your Lord called Moses: Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?" (Verses 10-11) These two verses paint the first scene which shows Moses being given his message. It begins by exposing the people he must go to, declaring that they are 'wrongdoing'. They do themselves a great wrong by

denying God's message, and they do much wrong to the Children of Israel, killing their men but sparing their women and inflicting much torture on them. Hence, the *sūrah* describes them as wrongdoing before it specifies who they are. It then calls on Moses and all people to wonder at them: "Will they have no fear of God?" Will they continue to be heedless of the likely outcome of their wrongdoing? Will they not mend their erring ways? Theirs is certainly a singular situation.

Moses, however, was not unaware of Pharaoh and his regime. Indeed, he was fully aware of his oppressive rule and the injustice he meted out to people. Hence, Moses realizes that the task assigned to him is difficult and that his mission is bound to meet with stiff resistance. Hence, he complains to his Lord of his own weakness. His complaints, however, are not those of one who does not wish to carry out the task. On the contrary, he is determined to fulfil it, but he seeks help from God.

He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me. (Verses 12-14)

What Moses' statement signifies is that he was not worried about being rejected by Pharaoh and his people; rather, what worried him was that this should happen at a time when he felt ill at ease and when his tongue lacked fluent argument. He suffered from a speech impediment, which he mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, *Ṭā Hā*, as he prayed to God to remove it: "My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say." (20: 25-28) Should this difficulty occur while one is speaking, it makes the speaker ill at ease, which in turn makes the impediment worse. Thus, the person suffering from it feels unable to express himself. This becomes a vicious circle and anger inevitably sets in. Hence, Moses feared that he might suffer this problem when he confronted a despotic tyrant like Pharaoh with God's message. Hence, he complains to God of his own weakness, and expresses his fears in respect of delivering his Lord's message. The point of his request is that God include his brother Aaron in carrying out this task. This request does not express any reluctance on Moses' part to carry out God's orders, but reflects his fear of falling short of the task. Aaron is more eloquent, which means that he has an easier temperament. Thus, should Moses suffer a block as he speaks, or should he feel straitened in heart, Aaron could then step in to provide the proper argument. Although Moses prays, as related in *Sūrah* 20, that God remove his speech impediment, he also requests that Aaron be assigned to help him in the delivery of the divine message.

The same may be said of his other statement: "Moreover, they have a charge of crime

against me, and I fear that they will kill me." (Verse 14) Again, Moses does not express any fear in confronting Pharaoh with the call to believe in God, nor does he seek to abandon the mission assigned to him; rather, this is all given as an added reason for the need to include Aaron. Should Pharaoh kill Moses, Aaron would be able to carry on the mission and complete the task. Thus, we should read Moses' prayer as a precaution aiming to ensure that the divine message was properly and fully delivered. It is exactly the kind of attitude that can be expected from a messenger like Moses whom God had chosen and reared under His own watchful eye.

Knowing how keen Moses was to fulfil his task and his worry lest his weakness make him fall short of what was expected of him, God grants his requests and gives him reassurance. The *sūrah* gives no specific mention of how his prayers were answered, how Aaron received his assignment, or how they both arrived in Egypt. Instead, it shows the two brothers receiving their detailed instructions together and at the same moment as reassurance is given to Moses and his fears are dismissed in an expression that primarily denotes an order to stop: '*kallā!*' This is translated in the text as '*By no means!*'

Said He: By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.' (Verses 15-17)

By no means! Your breast will not be straitened, your tongue will not be impaired, and they will not kill you. Remove all such thoughts from your mind, and proceed with your brother, equipped with Our signs. Moses had already seen two of these: his staff turning into a serpent and his hand changing colour such that it looked as if it shone a brilliant white. These aspects, however, are not mentioned in this sūrah because the emphasis here is on the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses, the contest with the sorcerers and the drowning of Pharaoh and his host while the believers are saved.

Moses and Aaron are told to go forth, and God also tells them: "*We are with you, listening to all.*" What power! What care and what security! All this is given to them. Indeed, God is with them and with every human being at every moment, but the companionship highlighted here is that of support at difficult moments. It is shown here in the form of listening, which denotes full attention and ready support.

Moses and Aaron are told to clearly outline to Pharaoh their assigned mission, fearing nothing and hiding nothing: "*Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds.'*" (Verse 16) The Arabic text uses the singular form for 'messenger', *rasūl*, although the task is assigned to both brothers. However, because the assignment given to both is a single one, they are treated as a single

messenger to Pharaoh, the despot who claimed to be God and declared to his people: *"I know of no deity for you other than myself!"* (28: 38) Thus, the mission assigned to them is to declare the truth of God's oneness right at the very outset and without ambiguity or hesitation. There is to be no precaution against any adverse reception. For this is the truth that allows no half measures.

As messengers from the Lord of the universe, they make their demands clear: *"We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds. Let the Children of Israel go with us."* (Verses 16-17) It is clear from this statement and similar ones in the Qur'ān that Moses was not required to address his message to Pharaoh and his people, or to call on them to believe in his faith or implement the message entrusted to him. He simply required them to set the Children of Israel free so that they could worship their Lord as they pleased. They were aware of their true faith, which they had held since the time of their first father, Israel, or Jacob, (peace be upon him). This faith, however, had weakened in their hearts allowing alien beliefs to creep in. Therefore, God sent Moses to save them from Pharaoh's injustice and to purge their monotheistic faith of all foreign and corrupt elements.

A Sarcastic Exchange with Pharaoh

Up to this point we have watched as the message is entrusted to Moses and Aaron, and how their task is outlined for them. But the curtains fall here. When, a moment later, they are raised again, we are in full view of the confrontation that takes place with Pharaoh. What happens in between is typically deleted.

[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?' (Verses 18-22)

Pharaoh is amazed as Moses makes his unexpected claim to be a messenger from God, the Lord of the universe. He is further amazed as Moses demands that he free the Children of Israel. The last thing he knew of Moses was that he was brought up in his palace after being found as a newborn child floating in a basket on the Nile. As a young man he had killed an Egyptian who was involved in a fight with an Israelite and ran away. It is said that the Egyptian he killed belonged to Pharaoh's entourage. This means that there was a huge gap between Moses' status at that time and his new claims which he puts before Pharaoh just a mere ten years later. Hence, Pharaoh is

sarcastic, asking in an affected air of surprise: *"Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever."* (Verses 18-19) Is this how you repay our kindness as we looked after you when you were a young child? Is it fair that you come today professing a religion other than ours, rebelling against the authority of the king who brought you up in his palace, and calling on people to abandon his worship?

How come that during all those years you stayed with us you did not mention anything of the wild claims you are now making, giving us no prelude to what was to come? Pharaoh then reminds Moses of the incident leading to the killing of the Egyptian, giving it an air of exaggeration: *"Yet you have done that deed of yours..."* It was a ghastly deed that should never be mentioned or described in real terms. Yet you did it *"while being an unbeliever."* You did not believe then in the Lord of all the worlds, about whom you are now telling us.

Thus we see Pharaoh making what he thought was a final argument and against which Moses would have no reply, especially his killing of an Egyptian and the punishment that could be inflicted on him. His words are clearly meant as an implied threat.

Since God answered his prayer and cured his speech impediment, Moses rejoins with a clear reply: *"I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?"* (Verses 21-22) I did it when I was ignorant, rushing to defend anyone from among my people. This is different from my present commitment to my faith which is based on sound judgement granted me by my Lord. *"I fled from you because I feared you."* But God has been good to me, bestowing on me the gift of wisdom and making me one of His messengers. I am not a unique phenomenon; rather, one of the chosen group of God's messengers.¹

Moses then uses a touch of sarcasm in reply to Pharaoh's own sarcastic remarks, but he only states the truth: *"What sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?"* The fact that I was reared in your palace came about only as a result of your enslavement of the Children of Israel, and your killing of their children. This was the reason why my mother put me in a basket to float along the Nile. When your people found me, I was brought up in your palace, not in my parents' home. What favour is this that you press against me?

¹ It should be noted here that Moses refers to himself as one of God's messengers, rather than using the singular form. This serves two purposes: (1) it fits with rhyming verse endings and thus maintains the musical beat running throughout the *sūrah*; and (2) it emphasizes the fact that he was one of many sent to different peoples in different generations to provide divine guidance to mankind.

The Challenge Continues

At this point, Pharaoh stops this line of argument and asks Moses for the central point of his claims, but his questioning carries overtones of ridicule and derision aimed at none other than God Himself. *"Pharaoh said: And what is that 'Lord of all the worlds?'"* (Verse 23) How arrogant and insolent! He is saying: what is this Lord of the worlds about whom you describe yourself as His messenger? Such a question can only mean a denial of the very point it relates to, and a ridicule of the statement and the person making it. He considers the whole situation impossible and unworthy of discussion.

Moses' reply points to God's Lordship over the entire visible universe and all that there is in it: *"[Moses] answered: He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure."* (Verse 24) Thus, his answer refutes Pharaoh's denial, rendering it worthless. He tells him that God is the Lord of the entire universe which neither Pharaoh's power nor his knowledge can ever reach. The utmost that Pharaoh can boast of is that he is a deity over the people of the Nile Valley and its overall lord. But then this is a tiny little particle when compared to the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. We discern in Moses' answer his dismissal of Pharaoh's claims as vain boasts, turning his attention to the vast universe, inviting him to contemplate its size and the One who is Lord over it all. That is certainly the Lord of all the worlds. He concludes his answer with a comment inviting the people to work for the achievement of certainty: *"If you want to be sure."*

Pharaoh turns to those around him, expressing amazement at this response. Or maybe he wanted them not to be influenced by it. This is typical of all tyrants who fear that simple words of truth might influence the hearts and minds of the masses: *"[Pharaoh] said to those around him: Do you hear?"* (Verse 25) Do you hear this singular statement which was never uttered by anyone we know?

Moses replies by stressing another attribute of God, the Lord of all creatures: *"[Moses] said: He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old."* (Verse 26) This answer is directed at Pharaoh, his status and claims even more. He tells him that God, the Lord of all the worlds, is also his Lord, while Pharaoh is nothing more than one of His servants. He is certainly not a deity as he claims. His people are also subject to God, their true Lord, while Pharaoh has no lordship over them. Indeed God is the Lord of their forefathers of old, which means that the hereditary aspect on which Pharaoh's claims rely is false. None other than God has ever been Lord of the worlds.

This hit hard at Pharaoh and he could not remain silent when his elders and nobles were listening. Hence, he derisively states that his adversary is mad: *"[Pharaoh] said: Indeed, the messenger who has been sent to you is, of a certainty, a*

madman." (Verse 27) His derision is directed at the very issue of bearing God's message so as to turn people away from it. He charges Moses with madness in order to nullify the effect of his statement that questions the very basis of Pharaoh's political and religious position, as it aims to remind people of their Lord, the Lord of their forefathers.

Nothing of Pharaoh's derision could weaken Moses and his resolve. Therefore, he continues to state the truth that hits hard at all tyrants: "[Moses] went on: He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason." (Verse 28) The Arabic words *mashriq* and *maghrib*, used for east and west, also denote the processes of planets and stars rising and setting. These are two great scenes which we see every day, but our minds seldom reflect on them because of over familiarity. These two processes are great indeed, and neither Pharaoh nor any tyrant can claim to have any control over them. Who does, then, control them, setting them in a perfect order and timing that ensures their continuity without fail or deviation? Moses' answer shakes dormant hearts and awakens sleeping souls. In this way, he calls on people to reflect and contemplate, "if you would but use your reason."

Brutal Threats versus Logical Arguments

Tyranny does not fear anything more than the reawakening of people's hearts. It does not hate anyone more than an advocate of clear vision and right thinking. Its main opponent is the one who tries to awaken people's consciences. When Moses touched people's hearts with his description of God Almighty, Pharaoh was extremely angry. He ended the argument with a clear threat of force, which is the ultimate recourse of all tyrants, when they feel that any counter argument is too powerful. "[Pharaoh] said: If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have you imprisoned." (Verse 29)

Such is the argument and the evidence supporting it: a clear threat of imprisonment. The prison is available and the measure itself has been taken against others. It is a measure that exposes the weakness of falsehood when it faces the overwhelming power of the truth. Tyrants know no other way.

Nevertheless, Moses did not lose his composure. How could he have when he is God's messenger, enjoying the support God has promised him and his brother? Hence, he keeps the argument going, reopening the book Pharaoh wants to close, and delivering a new piece of evidence: "Said [Moses]: Even if I bring before you a clear proof?" (Verse 30) Here, he asks Pharaoh: will you still have me imprisoned if I provide irrefutable proof that all I am saying is true? This put Pharaoh on the spot in front of a large gathering. He realized that if he were to refuse this new proof outright, he would only demonstrate his own weakness in the face of Moses'

powerful argument: this despite his description of Moses as a madman. He felt that his only option was to demand such proof: Hence, "[Pharaoh] said: Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth." (Verse 31)

"If you are a man of truth," may be taken to mean 'if you are truthful in what you claim to be', or 'if you truly have clear proof'. Thus we see Pharaoh continuing to raise doubts about Moses, fearing that his argument may be well received by those present.

At this point Moses produces his two physical miracles, having delayed their display until Pharaoh has thrown down his utmost challenge: "So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers." (Verses 32-33) The way these two verses are phrased suggest that the staff was physically transformed into a real, living serpent. His hand, as he drew it out, was really a shining, brilliant white. There was no delusion or fantasy of the sort sorcerers employ when they deceive the senses without altering any element of reality.

The miracle of life starting from where no human being knows occurs at every moment without people paying much attention to it, because of their long familiarity with it, or perhaps because they do not look upon it as a challenge. In Pharaoh's court, in front of his entire entourage, the production of these two miracles had the effect of nothing less than a violent earthquake.

Pharaoh recognized that he was facing a powerful miracle, and he sensed the weakness of his own position. Hence he was quick to provide a damage-limitation exercise, trying to ensure the support of his people, raising their fear of Moses and his community: "[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?" (Verses 34-35)

In Pharaoh's statement we note three important elements: (1) his acknowledgement of the powerful miracle, even though he called it sorcery – he describes Moses as a "sorcerer of great knowledge"; (2) his fear that people might be so influenced by Moses and his argument that he says Moses "wants to drive you out of your land"; (3) his adoption of a humble attitude with the people whom he wanted to look upon him as their lord. He asks them for advice, although Pharaoh never sought such advice while they prostrated themselves before him.

Falsehood Comes to Grief

This is a typical position to which tyrants resort when they feel their grip on power weakening. They seem to soften up, seeking the help of the people they have

been trampling over. They put up a facade of consultation with them, but this is only temporary until the danger has passed. When they feel they are safe again, they revert to their tyranny, tolerating no opposition whatsoever.

Those around him fell for his ploy because they shared his falsehood and were keen for the *status quo* to continue for it ensured their influential positions in the state hierarchy. They feared that Moses and the Children of Israel would take their land from them should the masses follow him and Aaron. Hence, these noble chiefs were quick to give their advice to Pharaoh, suggesting that he could match one type of sorcery with another, provided there was a period of preparation: *"They said: Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill."* (Verses 36-37) The plan, then, was to gain time while Pharaoh sent word to all Egyptian cities summoning every skilful sorcerer who could match or excel Moses.

The curtains drop here. When they are raised again we see the sorcerers assembled and the people gathering in large numbers to watch the great contest. Their support for the sorcerers is raised to a high pitch, for they enjoyed the backing of those in power. Thus, the stage was ready for the battle between truth and falsehood, divine faith and tyranny: *"So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, and the people were asked: Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers if they emerge triumphant."* (Verses 38-40)

The style used in these verses suggests a deliberate plan to excite the masses and keep people in full expectation: *"Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers?"* Are you all in attendance and ready for the contest to begin? Soon you will see with your own eyes the sorcerers defeat this Israelite called Moses! On such occasions, the masses always flock in, oblivious to the fact that tyrannical rulers manipulate them for their own ends. They bring them to such gatherings and show occasions so as to divert their attentions away from the miserable conditions and oppression they endure.

We then see the sorcerers in an audience with Pharaoh, prior to the match, making sure that they will secure his reward if they win. He is ready with a promise of a very handsome reward, and a position close to his throne: *"When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: 'Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?' Said he: 'Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.'"* (Verses 41-42)

Thus the whole thing involves nothing other than a mercenary group ready to use their skills to help Pharaoh, the tyrant, in return for some pecuniary gain. There is no question of faith or an issue of principle. It is all about personal gain and interest. It is such people that are used by tyrants everywhere and throughout all periods of

history. Their eagerness betrays their reward motive, a reward they will receive for their role in deluding the masses. Hence why Pharaoh promises them much more than just pecuniary gain. He promises them a position close to his own.

Turning the Scales against Pharaoh

The *sūrah* then draws before our eyes the whole contest and the great events that follow:

Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you are going to throw!' So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.' Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices. The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron. [Pharaoh] said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.' They said: 'No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed.' (Verses 43-51)

It all starts with an ordinary, quiet scene; yet it gives us the sense that Moses was perfectly reassured that he represented the truth. Hence, he cared little for the multitude of sorcerers gathered from all over Egypt, ready to employ their skills to prove Pharaoh's case. His reassurance is reflected in his allowing them to be the first to start: "*Moses said to them: Throw whatever you are going to throw!*" (Verse 43)

His words imply that whatever they could produce was of little interest to him. For their part, the sorcerers mustered their best efforts and skills, starting the match in Pharaoh's name and with his help: "*So they threw their ropes and staffs; and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.'*" (Verse 44) The *sūrah* does not tell us what happened to their ropes and staffs, which is detailed in *Sūrahs* 7 and 20, *The Heights* and *Ṭā Hā* respectively. Thus it retains the atmosphere of reassurance and steadfastness in support of the truth. Instead, the *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us of the result of the encounter, since this is its main purpose: "*Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices.*" (Verse 45)

This was a great surprise to the sorcerers who were not expecting anything of the sort. They had mustered all their power, using their best skills in an area in which they were the undisputed masters. What they produced was the best any sorcerer could produce. Besides, they were many, gathered from all over Egypt, while Moses stood alone, with nothing in his hand other than his staff. Yet it immediately

swallowed in one fast movement all they could produce. Besides, they were fully aware that magic relied on delusion, but his staff swallowed their ropes and staffs for real, leaving nothing of them. Had Moses used trickery, their ropes and staffs would have remained there after an imaginary scene suggesting that they were being swallowed. But as they looked around, they could see nothing remaining of their ropes and staffs. Hence, they had no choice but to submit to the clear truth staring them in the face. They were the first to know that it was the truth: *"The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.'"* (Verses 46-48)

Only a moment earlier they were ready to lend their skills for pecuniary gain, looking forward to handsome wages for their skilful manipulation. The question of faith and principle meant little to them. Now, however, as the truth touches their hearts, they undergo a complete transformation. They are shaken to the bottom of their hearts, and all falsehood is removed. Within a brief moment, their hearts are clear, ready to respond to the truth, full of faith. Thus, they voluntarily prostrate themselves and repeat the words declaring their unshakeable faith: *"We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron."* (Verses 47-48)

The human heart is amazing. A single touch on the right spot changes it completely. The Prophet states the truth as he says: "Every human heart is held within two fingers in God's hand: He sets it straight or leaves it to stray, as He pleases." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Thus, the hired sorcerers were transformed into a group of the best believers, in front of the assembled masses as well as Pharaoh and his noble chiefs. They did not think of the consequences that their declaration of conversion to faith would produce. They cared little for Pharaoh's reaction or what he would do to them.

Such a transformation must have dealt a great blow to Pharaoh. The masses were led to believe the great lie reiterated by Pharaoh's men that Moses, the Israelite, was a mere sorcerer who wanted to take over their land by means of his sorcery. If he won, he would give power to his own people. But the sorcerers were sure to overpower him and put him in his place, or so they were told. The masses were witnesses to the great encounter that unfolded, with the sorcerers producing their tricks in Pharaoh's name and under his protection. Yet in no time, they were utterly defeated, acknowledging their defeat, declaring that Moses delivered the message of the truth, and that they themselves now believed in God, the Lord of all the worlds. Their transformation meant that they disowned Pharaoh's worship only a brief moment after they were expecting to receive their wages from him.

The sorcerers' transformation represented a real threat to Pharaoh, as it deflated the legend on which his power relied, namely the legend that he was a deity, or the son of gods. The transformation was declared by the sorcerers at a time when sorcery

was a sacred profession preserved for Egypt's priesthood. It was these very sorcerers that now declared their belief in the Lord of all the worlds, He who had given Moses and Aaron their message. The masses always followed the priests in their beliefs. If these were to abandon Pharaoh, what would be left for him except brute force? Such force cannot, on its own, provide reliable support to protect a regime of government.

Brute Force to Suppress Faith

We can then imagine the panic that affected Pharaoh and his nobles as they heard the sorcerers' declaration and their profound, unshakeable belief in God, before whom they now prostrated themselves.

Enraged, Pharaoh issued a clear warning that he would inflict all sorts of punishment upon the sorcerers. He further accused them of conspiring with Moses against him and the Egyptian people:

[Pharaoh] said: You believe in him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all. (Verse 49)

The Qur'ānic text places special emphasis on Pharaoh's first words, "*you believe in him even before I have given you permission,*" so as to highlight the surrender to Moses without first obtaining Pharaoh's permission. Thus, he accuses them of a purposeful conspiracy in which they willingly participated, knowing full well its outcome. He could not appreciate what had touched their hearts. How could a tyrant feel the effect of faith on people's minds and hearts? He then delivered his hasty accusation to explain their transformation: "*Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft!*" (Verse 49) This is a very strange accusation which defies explanation unless one says that some of these priest sorcerers – since the religion that made Pharaoh a deity relied on magic-practising priests – attended to Moses' education given he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, or that he might have attended them in their temples. Hence, Pharaoh manipulates this distant relation, turning it on its head. Thus, instead of saying that Moses was their disciple, he says he was their master; this to make the situation look even more horrendous.

Pharaoh then threatens them with torture, magnifying what punishment he will inflict on those believers: "*In time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.*" (Verse 49) These are the same stupid measures to which every tyrant resorts when he feels his position or life threatened. Furthermore, Pharaoh displays no compunction about

it. He utters his words knowing that in his position of absolute power he can carry out his threats to the letter. What, then, would this small group of believers who have just seen the light of faith say in reply?

What they say is indeed inspiring. Their reply comes from their hearts: they have found true faith and will not exchange it for anything else. They realize that their newly-found relation with God enables them to totally disregard tyrant'. They now aspire to the true life of the hereafter, paying no heed whatsoever to what they may have to face in this life: *"They said: No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed."* (Verses 50-51)

'You can cause us no harm!' That you may be able to cut our hands and feet off on alternate sides, or that you may crucify us does not mean that you can harm us. Indeed, even if you kill us all, you will not harm us, because we will return to our Lord. Whatever happens on this earth will end here. Our hopes and aspirations are all centred on what will happen in the life to come where we *"certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed."*

What splendid effect faith has on a believer's mind, and how it brightens his soul, pouring reassurance and contentedness on it. Thus man, who originates from an essence of clay can attain the sublime.

When faith settles in the heart, it enriches it to the extent that all that this world can offer seems trivial and worthless.

Here, the curtains fall to retain both the effect of this splendid scene and its majestic rhythm. It is given here in this way so as to make it a lesson to be fully appreciated by the new Muslims in Makkah as they faced the Quraysh unbelievers' torture and persecution. It remains a lesson to all advocates of faith as they suffer persecution anywhere and in every generation.

Divine Care for True Believers

Thereafter, God looked after his faithful servants, while Pharaoh began raising his army, seeking to put his plans into effect:

Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, [saying]: 'These are but a small band, and most certainly they have enraged us; but we are all united, and well prepared.' (Verses 52-56)

We have here a gap in the story during which certain events are omitted. Moses

and the Israelites lived for a period in Egypt during which the signs mentioned in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, took place. It was later that God instructed Moses to leave Egypt with his people. All these events are omitted here so that the historical account better serves the theme of the *sūrah*, delivering its message most clearly.

What we know is that God instructed His messenger, Moses, to leave with his people, starting their flight by night after making all the necessary preparations and planning their departure well. God also told Moses that Pharaoh and his host would pursue them. He further commanded him to lead his people to the sea, most probably to the point where the Gulf of Suez stretches into the lakes area. Pharaoh soon learnt of the Children of Israel's night flight and he immediately ordered full mobilization of his troops, sending heralds and officials to other cities to enlist recruits, hoping to catch up with Moses and his people and undermine their efforts. Little did he realize that the plan he wanted to foil was God's own!

Pharaoh's agents went at full speed, recruiting and enlisting soldiers as they went. Yet Pharaoh also realized that such mobilization could give the impression of how worried he was, and that he recognized that Moses and his followers represented a serious threat. Otherwise, why would he, a king and a deity, need to initiate a full mobilization to counter their threat? Hence, he felt that he needed to assure his people that there was but little danger: *"These are but a small band!"* (Verse 54) This begs the question: why raise all this fuss, then? 'Why give them so much importance and mobilize such a large force? Hence, he has to further justify his action: *"Most certainly they have enraged us."* (Verse 55) They have perpetrated certain actions and made some inflammatory statements. However, *"we are all united, and well prepared."* (Verse 56) We realize how they are plotting against us, and we are in full control of the situation to ensure that they can do us no harm. This is just an example of how falsehood always finds itself at a loss when it encounters faith.

Before portraying the last scene of this encounter, the *sūrah* gives us an account of the ultimate consequences of leading Pharaoh and his people away from their riches and property. It also shows how the previously persecuted Children of Israel were able to enjoy all these things: *"Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, treasures and honourable positions. And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel."* (Verses 57-59)

The Egyptians set out to pursue Moses and his people, but this was to be their last march. It was indeed an expulsion, driving them away from all the luxuries they had been enjoying, including their gardens, springs and treasures, never to return. This final outcome is mentioned here, ahead of sequence, in order to highlight the punishment meted out to those wrongdoers who perpetrate injustices.

It is not known in history that the Children of Israel returned to Egypt after they had so departed, aiming for the Holy Land. Nor is it known that they inherited the

kingdom of Egypt, Pharaoh's treasures and seat of power. Hence, commentators on the Qur'ān explain this Qur'ānic statement by saying that they inherited something similar, which means that they inherited the type of things enjoyed by Pharaoh and his entourage.

The Drowning of Pharaoh's Army

After this interpolation we are treated to the final, decisive scene:

And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' He replied: 'No indeed.' My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain. And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (Verses 60-68)

So, Moses marched with his people at night, in accordance with God's plan. In the morning, Pharaoh and his soldiers began their chase. We then see the climax approaching, and the battle about to commence. Moses and his people find themselves close to the sea, without any boats which they could use to cross. They could not cross on foot, and they lacked the means to defend themselves. Pharaoh and his army were approaching, with his soldiers fully equipped, confident of their victory and intent on showing no mercy. All indications suggested a final tragedy for the small group with Moses: there was no escape, for the sea was ahead and the enemy to the rear. Hence they cried out: "*We shall certainly be overtaken.*" (Verse 61)

It was a time of great stress about to reach its pinnacle. To those believers with Moses it looked as if in just a few minutes they would certainly be overtaken. They were certain that Pharaoh would indiscriminately deal death and that there would be no escape. But Moses, who had received God's revelations, does not entertain any such doubt. He has complete trust in God, believing that His help will be forthcoming. He is certain that God will save them, although he does not know how. Nevertheless, it is certain and God will guide him. Hence, his reply: "*No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me.*" (Verse 62)

We note the emphasis in his reply: *No indeed.*' We will not be overtaken and we will not suffer any persecution, because God will guide me and this is certain. At the last moment, a bright ray of hope is clearly seen against the long dark night of stress and despair, as the route ahead opens at a point no one has ever thought of: "*And We revealed to Moses: Strike the sea with your staff.*" (Verse 63) The *sūrah* does not give us further details so as to say that he complied with the order and struck the sea with his staff. All this is clearly understood. The *sūrah* only gives us the result of his action: "*So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain.*" (Verse 63)

So the miracle was there for all to see. What people describe as impossible became a reality before their own eyes. People only think of natural laws according to what is familiar to them, but natural laws are created by God and He is able to make them operate in accordance with His will, at any moment of His choosing.

A miracle was enacted and the Children of Israel looked on. In between the waters of the sea, a passageway of dry land opened for them. The water stood still on both sides of the passage like great mountains, and the Israelites rushed to cross over. Pharaoh and his army stood there, overwhelmed at this miraculous event. After a long while, of watching in utter amazement, Pharaoh ordered his soldiers to chase them along the same route. Thus, God's will was done. As the Israelites were coming out at the other end, Pharaoh and his host were walking in between the two great bodies of water, drawing ever nearer to their deaths: *"And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown."* (Verses 64-66)

This was a great sign for mankind, one which has remained the subject of much discussion by countless generations. Do many people believe in it? The answer comes from none other than God: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe."* (Verse 67) Miraculous signs do not necessarily lead to people's acceptance of the truth, even though they may forcibly submit to them. Faith is generated in people's hearts as divine guidance touches them.

"And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful." (Verse 68) This is the usual comment in this *sūrah* after mentioning God's signs and people's rejection of His messages.

3

No End to God's Blessings

Relate to them the story of Abraham, (69)

when he said to his father and his people:
'What is that you worship?' (70)

They answered: 'We worship idols, and
we remain devoted to them.' (71)

Said he: 'Do they hear you when you call
on them, (72)

or benefit you or do you harm?' (73)

They said: 'But we found our forefathers
doing the same.' (74)

He said: 'Do you see those which you
have been worshipping – (75)

you and your forefathers of old? (76)

They are my enemies, except for the Lord
of all the worlds. (77)

'It is He who has created me, and is the
One who guides me. (78)

وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴿٦٩﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ أَصْنَامًا فَنَنْزِلُهَا عَنِ كِفَايِنَ ﴿٧١﴾

﴿٧١﴾

قَالَ هَلْ يَسْمَعُونَكُمْ إِذْ تَدْعُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

أَوْ يَنْفَعُونَكُمْ أَوْ يَضُرُّونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

قَالُوا بَلْ وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا كَذَلِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

﴿٧٤﴾

قَالَ أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

أَنْتُمْ وَاَبَاؤُكُمْ الْأَقْدَامُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

فَإِنَّهُمْ عَدُوٌّ لِي إِلَّا رَبَّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

الَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهْدِينِ ﴿٧٨﴾

He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. (79)

When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health, (80)

and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life. (81)

It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.' (82)

'My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous; (83)

and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations; (84)

place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss! (85)

Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray. (86)

Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; (87)

the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; (88)

but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy] (89)

Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing; (90)

whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error. (91)

وَالَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَيَسْقِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾

وَإِذَا مَرِضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَالَّذِي يُمِيتُنِي ثُمَّ يُحْيِينِ ﴿٨١﴾

وَالَّذِي أَطْمَعُ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ لِي خَطِيئَتِي يَوْمَ
الدِّينِ ﴿٨٢﴾

رَبِّ هَبْ لِي حُكْمًا وَالْحِقْنِي
بِالصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

وَأَجْعَلْ لِي لِسَانَ صِدْقٍ فِي الْآخِرِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

وَأَجْعَلْنِي مِنْ وَرَثَةِ جَنَّةِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَأَغْفِرْ لِأَبِي إِنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الضَّالِّينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَلَا تُخْزِنِي يَوْمَ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾

وَأُزْلِفَتِ الْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

وَبُرُزَّتِ الْجَحِيمُ لِلْغَاوِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship (92)

instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' (93)

They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, (94)

and Iblīs' hosts, all together. (95)

And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: (96)

'By God, we were obviously in error, (97)

when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. (98)

It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. (99)

And now we have none to intercede for us (100)

nor any loving friend. (101)

Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (102)

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (103)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (104)

وَقِيلَ لَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ هَلْ يَنْصُرُونَكُمْ أَوْ يَنْتَصِرُونَ

﴿٩٣﴾

فَكُبِّبُوا فِيهَا هُمْ وَالْغَاوِرْنَ ﴿٩٤﴾

وَجُنُودَ إِبْلِيسَ أَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

قَالُوا وَهُمْ فِيهَا تَخْتَصِمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

تَاللَّهِ إِن كُنَّا لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٩٧﴾

إِذْ نَسَوْنَا رَبَّكَ بَرَّ أَلْعَلَمِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾

وَمَا أَضَلَّنَا إِلَّا الْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

فَمَا لَنَا مِنْ شَافِعِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

وَلَا صَدِيقٍ حَمِيمٍ ﴿١٠١﴾

فَلَوْ أَنَّ لَنَا كَرَّةً فَنَكُونُ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ

مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* has given us an account of Moses and Pharaoh and the latter's ultimate end. It gives hope to the believers suffering persecution in the world, as were the small group of Muslims in Makkah at the time. The story also portrays the destruction of arrogant tyrants whose attitude was basically similar to that of the idolaters in Makkah.

The *sūrah* now moves on to tell us about Abraham and his people. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is ordered to relate this story to the unbelievers. For they claimed to be the custodians of Abraham's heritage in so far as they followed his old faith, even though they addressed their worship to multiple deities. Indeed, they went even further, placing idols in the Sacred Mosque built by Abraham as a focus for the followers of the pure faith based on God's oneness. The Prophet is required to tell them Abraham's story so that they know whether their claims are right or not.

In this *Sūrah*, historical accounts are not given in their chronological order, because it is only concerned with the lessons to be derived from these accounts. In *Sūrah 7, The Heights*, conversely, the historical line of how power was assumed by different peoples and the succession of God's messengers since Adam were important points to stress. Hence, the accounts of earlier prophets there followed a strict chronological order, starting with man's fall from heaven to begin human life on earth.

The episode in Abraham's story given in this *sūrah* concentrates on the message he delivered to his people, the debate he had with them, his denunciation of their alleged deities, addressing all worship to God alone and his reminder of the Day of Judgement. This is followed by a complete scene from the Day of Judgement when idolaters will deny those very deities they used to worship, and regret their past actions that are certain to land them with a terrible end. It is all shown as if it is already happening now. The lesson the story delivers here is aimed primarily at the idolaters. Hence, the *sūrah* speaks at length on the basics of the monotheistic faith, the fallacy of polytheism, and the destiny of idolaters. All other aspects are only briefly hinted at, while they are nonetheless detailed in other *sūrahs*.

Other episodes in Abraham's life were given in *Sūrahs 2, 6, 11, 14, 15, 19, 21* and *22*. In each, the episode chosen is the one most suited to the main theme of the *sūrah*. In *Sūrah 2, The Cow*, for example, we read the episode of his building the Ka`bah, together with his son, Ishmael. He is shown praying to God to make Makkah, the Sacred City, secure. He is also shown declaring that the Muslims will be the true heirs of the Ka`bah and its builder, as they will be the ones who will follow his faith based on God's oneness. This is not an inheritance based on blood and ancestry. This

fact is given within the context of the Israelites' disobedience and denials and their expulsion by God who gave Abraham's heritage and the House he built to the Muslims.

In the same *sūrah* we have Abraham's debate with the unbeliever king when Abraham stressed God's power telling the king that God alone causes life and death, and that it is He who causes the sun to rise in the East. He challenged the king to make it rise in the West, thus ending all argument. Abraham is also shown in this *sūrah* praying to God to let him see how He brings the dead back to life. God ordered him to slay four birds and to place parts of each on different mountains. God then brought them back to life and they flew back to Abraham. All this is given in a context that concentrates on God's power, the signs He has placed in the universe and His ability to bring the dead back to life.

Sūrah 6, Cattle, describes Abraham searching for his Lord and how he recognized Him and His power after looking carefully at the stars, the moon and the sun, and reflecting on other universal phenomena. The entire *sūrah* concentrates on faith and universal signs pointing to God, the Creator, who has no partner whatsoever.

In *Sūrah 11, Hūd*, Abraham is given the happy news of the birth of his son, Isaac, but this is given as the *Sūrah* relates Lot's story and how the angels sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah visited Abraham on their way. The episode shows the care God takes of His chosen servants and how He deals with arrogant transgressors.

Sūrah 14, named Abraham, shows him praying by the Sacred Mosque, the Ka`bah, for his offspring whom he placed in a barren valley. He praises and thanks God for giving him his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, in his old age, and prays to Him to make him and his descendants people who attend regularly to their prayers. He further appeals to God to answer his supplications, forgive him, his parents and the believers on the Day of Reckoning. The whole context of this *sūrah* then is to show all followers of God's messengers as one community, believing in one message, that of God's oneness. Those who deny God's messengers are also shown to belong to one camp. The divine message is portrayed as a large tree providing shade in an arid climate of disbelief.

Sūrah 15, al-Ĥijr, relates the same episode given in *Sūrah 11*, with more detail, within the context of bestowing mercy on believers and inflicting punishment on unbelievers.

The episode given in *Sūrah 19, Mary*, concentrates on his gentle approach to his father, the latter's stiff reply, Abraham's moving away from his people, and how he was blessed with Ishmael and Isaac. All this comes in a *sūrah* that portrays God's care for His chosen servants, generating a clearly felt ambience of love and compassion.

In *Sūrah 21, The Prophets*, we are shown how Abraham called on his father and

his people to believe in God, and how he denounced their idols and physically destroyed them. We are shown how he was thrown onto a fire and how, by God's command, it turned cool and comforting for him, and then how he and his nephew, the Prophet Lot, were saved and taken to the land God blessed for mankind. Again this comes within the context of showing the unity of the nation that follows God's messengers and how God takes care of this community as it addresses all its worship to Him alone.

Sūrah 22, The Pilgrimage, contains a reference to God's order that Abraham should cleanse and purify the Ka`bah for those who worship there.

Questioning Popular Beliefs

"Relate to them the story of Abraham, when he said to his father and his people: What is that you worship?" (Verses 69-70) The Prophet is instructed here to relate to them the story of Abraham whom the idolater Arabs considered themselves to be his heirs and the followers of his faith. The Prophet thus recounts how Abraham denounced what his father and people worshipped, which were no more than idols similar to those the unbelievers in Makkah worshipped. He also denounced their erring ways, asking them in a clear tone of disapproval: *What is that you worship?*

"They answered: We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them." (Verse 71) They certainly considered their idols deities, but the fact that they called them idols shows that they could not deny the fact that they were no more than statues made of stone, but to which they nevertheless devoted their worship. This is the ultimate degree of absurdity. Yet when people take up wrong beliefs, they lose sight of the absurdity of their concepts, worship and statements.

Abraham (peace be upon him) begins to awaken their minds and hearts, highlighting the absurdity of their position: *"Said he: Do they hear you when you call on them, or benefit you or do you harm?"* (Verses 72-73) The least that should be true of a deity to whom worship is addressed is that it should have the same faculty of hearing as its worshipper. But these deities cannot hear their worshippers who appeal to them for benefit and the removal of harm and hardship. If they cannot hear, then how can they bring benefit or cause harm? Certainly the idolaters could not claim either quality for their idols. Hence, they did not answer Abraham because they realized that he was being sarcastic. Nevertheless, they could not refute what he said. Hence, when they do speak, they expose themselves as blind followers who do not reflect on their actions: *"They said: But we found our forefathers doing the same."* (Verse 74) True, these idols cannot hear, bring benefit or cause harm, but we found our forefathers worshipping them and we follow in their footsteps.

This is a disgraceful reply, but those idolaters were not ashamed to make it, nor

were the Arabs in Makkah ashamed of doing likewise. It was sufficient that their forefathers did something for them to then accept it as valid without question. Indeed a stumbling block in the way of the Islamic message was that the idolaters were required to abandon their forefathers' religion. This they did not want to do because it would detract from those ancestors' standing and constitute an acknowledgement that they were in error. This would be too disrespectful of their forefathers. Such otiose values are thus allowed to stand in the way of the truth. In times of inflexible obduracy people stick to such values in preference to the truth. Hence, they needed to be shaken violently in order to release their minds and faculties.

Patient and calm as he was, Abraham realized that the only way forward was to give them a real jolt, declaring his enmity to those idols and to the deviant beliefs that allowed such worship: *"He said: Do you see those which you have been worshipping – you and your forefathers of old? They are my enemies, except for the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 75-77)

The fact that his own father and people worshipped such deities did not stop him from parting company with them, making clear his hostility to their errant beliefs. Thus, the Qur'ān teaches believers that on the question of faith, no consideration is given to parents, ancestors or communities. The main bond is that of faith. Whatever else there is, is of secondary importance.

Abraham makes an exception in his hostility to what they and their ancestors worshipped, and this exception applies only to *'the Lord of all the worlds'*. It might be that some of their ancestors worshipped God before deviation crept into their faith. It might also be that some of them worshipped God alongside some other alleged deities. Hence, Abraham employs this precaution in order to make his statement precise, and this is only to be expected of Abraham when he speaks of faith.

Acknowledging God's Favours

Abraham then outlines the attributes of his Lord, the Lord of all the worlds, and the bond that exists between them at all times and in all situations. As we listen to his description we feel the close, inspirational relationship that acknowledges God's hand in everything that happens in life:

It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me. He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health, and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life. It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement. (Verses 78-82)

Abraham's description of his Lord and the bond between them imparts a feeling that every part of his constitution feels this bond. Hence, all his aspirations look to God with love and trust. It is as if Abraham actually sees his Lord and feels his grace with all his heart. As the Qur'ān quotes Abraham's description, it gives it a melodious tone, one that imparts a very relaxed atmosphere, spreading its soothing, tranquil air.

"It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me." (Verse 78) He has originated me from where He knows but I know not. This means that He knows everything about me: my constitution, nature, functions, feelings, and ultimate destiny. He is the One to guide me and provide me with the line I should follow in life. It is as if Abraham feels himself like an elastic material which God shapes the way He likes, giving it whatever form He chooses. He submits himself to God with full trust, perfectly assured that he is on the right course.

"He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health." (Verses 79-80) These are aspects of the direct, compassionate and loving care Abraham feels his Lord takes of him in all situations of health and sickness. Abraham demonstrates the utmost standard of politeness with his Lord by not attributing any illness to Him, although he knows well that both sickness and health occur by God's will. He only attributes to Him the blessings he enjoys and the care he receives: his food and drink as well as his health.

Again it is God who *"will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life."* (Verse 81) This signifies complete faith that it is God who deals death, and that He is certain to bring the dead back to life.

"It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement." (Verse 82) Abraham, a prophet and a messenger of God, who knows his Lord and feels his presence and care in such a way, acknowledging such a close relationship with Him, expresses his dearest hope that on the Day of Judgement, God will forgive him his faults. He does not entertain any thought that he is without fault. Indeed he acknowledges that he has these, but hopes to receive more of God's grace. He does not feel that his deeds, good as they may be, deserve any credit, but hopes for God's mercy and forgiveness. This is the best to hope for.

This statement combines feelings of God-consciousness, politeness and self-effacement. This is the right combination to truly appreciate the grace God bestows on us, which is great indeed, and the value of our actions, which is definitely petty.

In his description of his Lord, Abraham combines all the elements of true faith: God's oneness, acknowledgement that He conducts all the affairs of human life on earth including every minute detail, resurrection after death, reckoning, God's grace and man's failings.

His people denied these, as do all those who associate partners with God.

Prayer by a Devoted Worshipper

Now Abraham addresses a long, comprehensive and humble prayer to his Lord:

My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous; and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations; place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss! Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray. Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]. (Verses 83-89)

Nothing in Abraham's prayer concerns any aspect of the comforts and pleasures of this world, not even physical health. It looks to higher aspects, motivated by pure feelings. It is a prayer made by a heart which has true knowledge of God and, as a result, attributes little value to everything else. He has known God's grace and prays for more of it, and he entertains hopes and fears in accordance with his experience.

"My Lord! Grant me sound judgement." (Verse 83) Grant me the wisdom by which I recognize the truth and distinguish true from false values so that I will continue to follow the right course. *"And join me with the righteous."* (Verse 83) This is said by Abraham, the noble prophet whose devotion is exemplary. What self-effacing humility! What concern about falling short of what is expected, and what fear of a change of heart! How keen he is to just be among the righteous! He feels that he can only achieve this if God guides him to do the righteous deeds that will bring him into such ranks.

"And grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations." (Verse 84) This is a supplication that hopes for extension in later generations, not through offspring, but through faith. What Abraham prays for is that he should have in later generations a true advocate who calls on people to follow the path of truth, bringing people back to the pure faith which he himself advocated. This may be the same prayer quoted elsewhere in the Qur'an as it speaks of his building of the Ka`bah with his son Ishmael. They both prayed: *"Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise."* (2: 127-129) God answered his prayer and gave him that advocate of the truth, sending those

people a Messenger to teach them the true faith and to purify them. Such an answer to Abraham's prayer came several thousand years later, which is a very long time in people's reckoning, but a time that is nonetheless appropriate in God's judgement.

"Place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss!" (Verse 85) Having already prayed that he should join the ranks of the righteous, through guidance to do what is good, now Abraham prays to be one of those who will be admitted to the garden of bliss which is inherited only by God's righteous servants.

"Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray." (Verse 86) He prays for his own and God's forgiveness of his father despite all the harsh treatment and serious threats he had received from him. He had promised his father that he would pray for his forgiveness and he certainly fulfilled his promise. Later, the Qur'ān makes clear that it is not permissible for a believer to pray for the forgiveness of anyone who associates partners with God, even though that person might be a close relative. The Qur'ān also clarifies that: *"Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him."* (9: 114) Abraham then realized that the true relation that should be observed is not that of blood; rather it is one of faith. This is an important aspect of correct Islamic education. The first bond that gives rise to any relation between two people is that of faith: if it is severed, then all relations are of little significance.

"Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]." (Verses 87-89) We appreciate the extent of Abraham's feeling about the hardships of the Day of Resurrection from his prayer not to be then disgraced. We also feel his humility before his Lord and his fear that he might have fallen short of what was expected of him. We also realize how profoundly he felt the nature of that great Day from his description of it: *"the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]."* (Verses 88-89) He also realizes that the only value recognized on that Day is a sincerity which makes one's heart purely devoted to God, allowing no consideration or personal desire to detract from such devotion. This is the type of sound heart that is worthy of proper value. *"The Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit."* (Verse 88) Indeed, no other quality, property or consideration is of any benefit, because all are of a temporary nature and will inevitably come to an end. They may be coveted by people who try hard to possess such things in this life, but they are of no value in the ultimate reckoning.

A Question That Needs No Answer

We then have in the present passage a scene of the Day of Judgement, which was feared by Abraham. It is so vivid that he almost sees it with his own eyes as he addresses his humble prayer to God:

Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing; whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error. It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together. And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend. Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (Verses 90-102)

The scene starts with an image of heaven being brought near, so as to be within sight of the God-fearing; those who actually remained apprehensive lest they might be made to suffer God's punishment. The fire of hell is also brought into full view of those who erred; those who strayed away from the right path and denied the Day of Judgement. As they stand within sight of hell, listening to stern rebukes for their bad deeds before they are thrown into hell, they will be first asked about the deities they used to worship. The question that will be put to them is: "Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God?" (Verses 92-93) Where are they? "Can they help you or even help themselves?" (Verse 93) No answer is heard from them. Indeed none is expected. It is only a question given by way of rebuke. Hence: "They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together." (Verses 94-95) The very word used here, *kubkibū*, translated as 'hurled into', suggests that they fall into it, one on top of another, with much noise as a result. It is the same as when a landslide occurs, immediately followed by further ones. These people who were lost in error are accompanied in hell with "Iblīs' hosts, all together." Indeed they are all part of Iblīs's hosts.

We are then made to listen to them as they speak in hell, saying to the false deities and the idols they worshipped: "By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds," (Verses 97-98), worshipping you, alongside or instead of God, as if you were equal to Him. They say it now when it is too late. They put the blame on those who led them into error and prevented them from listening to divine guidance. They now wake up to the realization that it is all too late and that apportioning blame will benefit them nothing: "And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend." (Verses 100-101) Neither deity nor friend will be of any avail to us now. But then they think that if there were a possibility of returning to life, they could still mend their erring ways: "Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that

we could be believers." (Verse 102) This is nothing more than wishful thinking. There can be no return. They are already present on Judgement Day.

This is followed by the *sūrah's* standard comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 103-104) This comment is repeated in the *sūrah* every time the fate of any community that opposed God's messengers is shown, whether it be the `Ād, the Thamūd or Lot's people, and it also follows every sign given to any group who denied God and His messengers. The scene from the Day of Judgement that we have been discussing is shown here in place of a scene of punishment in this world. It shows the end faced by Abraham's people, and indeed the ultimate end of all idolatry. Hence, it delivers the same lesson in every historical account. We should remember that scenes of the Day of Judgement are shown in the Qur'ān as if they are taking place in front of our eyes so as to touch our hearts and souls in the same way as they are touched when reflecting on the fate of past communities.

4

Judgement Belongs to God

The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. (105)

Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God?' (106)

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (107)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (108)

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (109)

So, fear God and pay heed to me.' (110)

They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?' (111)

Said he: 'What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? (112)

Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. (113)

I am not one to drive away the believers. (114)

I am only a plain warner.' (115)

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ نُوحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٠٧﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١٠٨﴾

وَمَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنِ اجْتَبَىٰ إِلَّآ

عَلَىٰ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١١٠﴾

﴿١١١﴾ قَالُوا أَنْتُمْ مِنْ لَدُنْكَ وَاتَّبَعْنَا أَلْرَّذَلُونَ

﴿١١٢﴾

قَالَ وَمَا عَلِمِي بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

﴿١١٤﴾ إِنِّ حِسَابُهُمْ إِلَّآ عَلَىٰ رَبِّي ۖ لَوْ تَشْعُرُونَ

﴿١١٥﴾ وَمَا أَنَا بِطَارِدِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

Said they: 'Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death.' (116)

He prayed: 'My Lord! My people have denied me. (117)

So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me.' (118)

So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, (119)

and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown. (120)

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (121)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (122)

إِنَّ أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

قَالُوا لَئِن لَّمْ تَنْتَهِ يَنْوُحْ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ
الْمَرْجُومِينَ ﴿١١٦﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنَّ قَوْمِي كَذَّبُونِ ﴿١١٧﴾

فَأَفْتَحْ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَهُمْ فَتْحًا وَنَجِّنِي وَمَنْ
مَعِيَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١١٨﴾

فَأَنْجَيْنَاهُ وَمَنْ مَعَهُ فِي الْفُلِّ الْمَشْحُونِ ﴿١١٩﴾

ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا بَعْدُ الْبَاقِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ
مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* as we have seen recounts Abraham's story after it had given a more detailed one of Moses, thus going back in history. Now it goes further back to tell us about Noah and his people. The chronological order is not important here because the focus is on the ultimate end of idolatry, on the end of denials of the divine message.

Like the accounts of Moses and Abraham, Noah's story is referred to in several *sūrahs*. It was given, in brief, in *sūrah* 7, The Heights, within the context of a historical account of God's messengers and their messages. There it followed Adam's fall from

heaven, concentrating on Noah's advocacy of God's oneness and his warning to his people that they were risking grievous suffering. They accused him of being deep in error, expressing their amazement that God should send them a human messenger. Their punishment by drowning is mentioned but without going into any detail.

In *Sūrah 10*, Jonah, the story is given in brief, concentrating on the end of his mission when he challenged his people, yet they still denied him. He was saved with those who followed him, while the others were drowned.

Sūrah 11, Hūd, provides many more details about the flood, the ark and what happened after the flood. It mentions, for example, Noah's prayer for his son who was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. In this *sūrah* we are also given an account of the sort of debate his people had with him about God's oneness.

In *Sūrah 23*, The Believers, Noah's account concentrates on his call to people to worship God alone, and their objection to the fact that he is a mere mortal like them. They accuse him of wanting to press his favoured position. They claim that God could have sent angels, and they accuse Noah of madness. He turns to God, appealing for support. Then follows a very brief reference to the ark and the flood.

In many instances, like the present *sūrah*, Noah's story is given together with stories of the `Ād, Thamūd, Lot's people and the Madyan. The prominent features of the account given here are Noah's call on his people to fear God and his declaration that he expects nothing by way of reward. Also important is his refusal to expel the poor who believe in God at the request of those who consider themselves noble. This was also demanded of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the elders of the Quraysh in Makkah. We are also told of Noah's appeal to God to judge between him and his community, and God's response which resulted in the drowning of the unbelievers.

When Believers are the Lowest in Society

"The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers." (Verse 105) This is the end of the story, but it is given at the beginning so as to add extra emphasis, before moving on to give the details of the story.

The fact is that Noah's people denied him only, but they are described here as denying God's messengers, because the message is one, summed up in the call to acknowledge God's oneness and to worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. Therefore, whoever rejects it denies all God's messengers as they advocated one and the same message. The Qur'ān stresses this fact in several places and in different forms, because it is a basic principle of the Islamic faith. It, thus, brings the divine faith throughout human history under one umbrella, dividing mankind

throughout all generations into two groups: believers and unbelievers. A Muslim considers that the community of believers in every divine religion, from the beginning of human life to the advent of the final divine message of Islam, as his own community. A believer accepts all God's messengers, believes in their messages and looks upon them all with the highest respect, because they all preached the same message of God's oneness.

From a Muslim's perspective, mankind are not divided into races, colours and nationalities. They are divided into the people of the truth and the people of falsehood. His own stand is with the people of the truth. This gives Muslims one criterion that applies to all history. His values are much higher than bonds of race, colour, language, country and present or past kinship. His values are embodied into the bond of faith which is the basis of mankind's accountability:

The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. So, fear God and pay heed to me.'
(Verses 105-110)

Such was Noah's message which his people denied, despite his being their brother. Such brotherhood should have ensured a peaceful relationship, leading to their belief in him and his message. But his people had no time for this bond of brotherhood, and they did not soften to their brother's call when he said to them: "Will you have no fear of God?" (Verse 106) Will you not worry about the end to which your attitudes and actions lead you?

This directive and reminder to fear God is consistent in this *sūrah*. We saw it with Pharaoh and his people as God informed Moses of his assignment. Then every prophet that succeeded Noah said the same thing to his community: "I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust." (Verse 107) He would not cheat, defraud or act dishonestly. He would not add to, or withhold anything from what he was required to deliver to his people: "So, fear God and pay heed to me." (Verse 108) In this case, Noah again reminds his people to fear God, giving it a more express definition this time. He appeals to their consciences to obey him as he calls on them to surrender themselves to God.

He then reassures them that he was neither looking for any worldly gain nor seeking any wage in return for advocating the divine message and guiding them to their Lord. He seeks only God's reward, because it was He who gave him his message. This assurance of seeking no gain or wage seems to have always been necessary for sincere advocacy of faith. It is, thus, distinguished from the familiar

pattern of religion as exploited by clerics and religious orders for personal gain and enrichment.

Now that he has reassured them of having no personal ambition, Noah again tells them to fear God, reminding them that they should obey him: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 110) Their response, a singular objection, was the same given to all messengers: *"They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?"* (Verse 111)

What they meant was that it was only the poor who followed him, because the poor are normally the first to accept divine messages and messengers. They are quick to believe in God and submit themselves to Him, because they are not deterred by any hollow status or fear of losing any interest or position as a result. The chiefs and nobles of society often fear for their interests that are based on false considerations, as also myths and legends that are given religious status. Moreover, they are unwilling to accept complete equality with the masses as a result of believing in God's oneness. Under such a belief system only faith and good action are given an appropriately high value, with the net result that some people rise and others fall by the single standard of faith that is complemented by good action.

Noah's reply, therefore, establishes true values, defining the mission of God's messenger and leaves judgement on people to God who knows best their intentions, thoughts and actions:

Said he: What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. I am not one to drive away the believers. I am only a plain warner. (Verses 112-115)

The nobility always speak in a derogative manner about the poor. They say that their habits and values are not acceptable to those who are in the higher echelons of society. They have nothing of their refinements. Noah tells them that he does not ask of people anything other than that they believe in God. Their actions are left to God to evaluate and to determine their appropriate reward. His, God's, is the right evaluation. Noah then defines his own mission: *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 115)

With such clear argument and plain logic, Noah's people were silenced. They had no meaningful reply to offer. Hence, they resorted to the same method to which tyranny resorts every time it finds itself cornered; they threatened him with brute force: *"Said they: Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death."* (Verse 116) Thus tyranny reveals its ghastly and cruel face.

Noah realized that their hardened hearts would not soften. Therefore, he turned to the One source of support that is always available to believers, never failing them:

"He prayed: My Lord! My people have denied me. So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me." (Verses 117-118) His Lord certainly knew that his people had denied him and accused him of lying, but Noah needed to address his complaint to God, appealing to Him for justice. Thus, he puts the matter in His hands: *"Judge decisively between me and them."* (Verse 118) Such decisive judgement will put an end to tyranny and injustice: *"And save me and those of the believers who are with me."* (Verse 118)

God certainly responded to His messenger's plea for help: *"So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown."* (Verses 119-120) Thus, the end of this very early battle in human history between faith and unfaith is described in a very quick sequence of words, which also tell of the outcome of every subsequent battle between the two sides in human history.

We then have the *sūrah's* now familiar comment that follows every one of God Almighty's signs: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 121-122)

How the Mighty Fall

The `Ad, too, denied God's messengers.
(123)

Their brother Hūd said to them: Will you
have no fear of God? (124)

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you,
worthy of all trust. (125)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (126)

No reward whatever do I ask of you for
it: my reward is only from the Lord of all
the worlds. (127)

'Do you build a landmark on every high
place, in a vain endeavour, (128)

and make for yourselves strong
structures, hoping to be immortal? (129)

When you exercise your power, you do so
like cruel tyrants. (130)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (131)

Fear Him who has provided you with all
that you know. (132)

He has provided you with cattle and
children, (133)

كَذَّبَتْ عَادَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ هُودٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٢٥﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١٢٦﴾

وَمَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنِ أَجْرِي إِلَّا
عَلَىٰ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

أَتَبْنُونَ بِكُلِّ رِيعٍ ءَايَةً تَعْبَثُونَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

وَتَتَّخِذُونَ مَصَانِعَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَخْلُدُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾

وَإِذَا بَطِشْتُمْ بَطِشْتُمْ جَبَّارِينَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١٣١﴾

وَاتَّقُوا الَّذِي أَمَدَّكُمْ بِمَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

أَمَدَّكُمْ بِأَنْعَامٍ وَبَنِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

and gardens and springs. (134)

Indeed, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' (135)

They answered: 'It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition. (136)

This is none but the practice of the ancients. (137)

Never are we going to be punished.' (138)

Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (139)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (140)

وَجَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٣٤﴾

إِنِّي أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ

﴿١٣٥﴾

قَالُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْنَا أَوَعَضْتَ أَمْ لَمْ تَكُنْ

مِّنَ الْوَاعِظِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

إِن هَذَا إِلَّا خُلُقُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

وَمَا لِحُنِّ بِمُعَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ

وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرَهُمْ مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٩﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٤٠﴾

Power and a Sense of Immortality

The Prophet Hūd's people lived in al-Aḥqāf, an area of extensive sand dunes not far from Ḥadramawt and in the direction of Yemen. They lived sometime after Noah, and were one of the communities that deviated from the right way sometime after the flood that punished Noah's people.

Hūd's story was told in more detail in *Sūrah 7, The Heights*, and *Sūrah 11, Hūd*. It is also mentioned in *Sūrah 23, The Believers*, without mentioning the names of Had or his community. The story here is summed up between Hūd's address to his community that encouraged them to believe in God's oneness and the end they faced as God's punishment befell them.

The story of Had and his people has the same beginning as Noah's story:

The `Ād, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Hid said to them: Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (Verses 123-127)

It is the same message given by every messenger of God: it is a call to believe in God alone and to fear Him and obey His messenger. This is coupled with a declaration disclaiming any interest in worldly luxuries or position the people may have to offer. This puts things in the right perspective. The messenger seeks nothing from them, but instead he looks to God for his reward.

Had follows this declaration by examining their own particular conditions and behaviour. He criticizes the fact that they build lofty buildings to demonstrate their ability, taking pride in their wealth. He denounces their arrogance which results from their material power and the resources that enable them to use different forces and means, in total disregard of God, oblivious to the fact of their accountability to Him: *"Do you build a landmark on every high place, in a vain endeavour, and make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verses 128-129)

It seems that they used to build on high places so as to make such structures appear from a distance as grand landmarks. They did so to emphasize their superiority and great ability. Hence the Qur'ān describes it as a *vain endeavour*'. Had it been intended as a landmark or a sign to show direction, it would not have been described as such. The Qur'ānic statement, then, implies the need to direct one's resources and abilities to what is of benefit, not merely to show off and demonstrate abilities and wealth. It also appears that the people of `Ād were well advanced in industry, using machinery to carve positions for their palaces which they built on mountains. This is indicated in Hūd's saying to them: *"and [you] make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verse 129) It even occurred to them that such strong structures built with the use of heavy machinery could spare their lives, and protect them from severe atmospheric conditions as also from enemy attack.

They have further practices that are strongly criticized by Had: *"When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants."* (Verse 130) They were mighty, hard, tyrannical and would deal with others using utmost cruelty, like many others who rely on material power.

Had, therefore, reminds them that they must fear God and obey His messenger. This would be sure to redress their cruelty and put a stop to their arrogance: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 131) He further reminds them of God's grace, as it is He who has favoured them with His blessings which they use arrogantly as also to oppress others. They should have remembered God's favours and given thanks for them. They should also bear in mind that the One who has granted them such

favours can easily take them back, or punish them for putting His favours to wrong use: *"Fear Him who has provided you with all that you know. He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs. Indeed, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day."* (Verses 132-135)

Hūd's reminder mentions first the One who granted them such blessings before enumerating them. He *"has provided you with all that you know."* It is all a gift for you, and you know it well as you benefit by it in your lives. He then gives further details: *"He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs."* (Verses 133-134)

These were the best favours that they could have enjoyed during that period of time. They are indeed a great favour at any time. He then warns them against punishment that may befall them on an awesome day. His warning expresses his fear for their end, because he is one of them, their brother, and he wants to spare them the hardship of that day which is certain to come.

But his reminders and warnings do not touch their hardened hearts. They stubbornly refuse to mend their ways: *"They answered: It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition."* (Verse 136) This is a derogatory way of speaking, one which expresses their carelessness for whatever he might say. They add a clear indication that they are hardened in their ways, relying totally on what they have inherited from previous generations: *"This is none but the practice of the ancients. Never are we going to be punished."* (Verses 137-138) Their only argument in defence of all the practices Hūd has criticized them for is that they are following earlier generations, towing their line. They then deny the possibility of being punished for following in their ancestors' footsteps: *"Never are we going to be punished."* (Verse 138)

The *sūrah* does not mention here any of the arguments that took place between them and Hūd. It proceeds straight to the end: *"Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them."* (Verse 139) These two short sentences, expressed in the original Arabic text by only two words, *fakadhhabūhu fa'ahlaknāhum*, spell out the end of the mighty people of `Ād and their great symbols of power. Nothing is left of their luxuries, cattle, children, gardens and springs.

How many a community has followed the same practices as the `Ād people, moving further away from God with every new aspect of civilization they have achieved. They always think that man can be independent of God. They try to produce weapons to destroy others while ensuring their own security. Yet it may be only a day or a night and such a community finds itself subjected to God's punishment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 139-140)

6

A Blatant Challenge to God

The Thamūd, too, denied God's messengers. (141)

Their brother Šālīh said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (142)

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (143)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (144)

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (145)

Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, (146)

among gardens and springs (147)

and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? (148)

You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill. (149)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٤١﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ صَالِحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ

﴿١٤٢﴾

إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٤٣﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا

وَمَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ إِنْ أَجْرِيَ إِلَّا

عَلَىٰ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٤٥﴾

أَتُرَكُونَ فِي مَا هَاهُنَا آمِنِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٤٧﴾

وَزُرُوعٍ وَخَلِّ طَلْعُهَا هَضِيمٌ ﴿١٤٨﴾

وَتَنْحِتُونَ مِنَ الْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا فَرِهِينَ

﴿١٤٩﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (150)

And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses(151)

– who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights.’ (152)

They said: ‘You are but one who has been bewitched. (153)

You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth.’ (154)

He said: ‘Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. (155)

Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.’ (156)

But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful. (157)

So the suffering befell them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (158)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (159)

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ١٥٠

وَلَا تُطِيعُوا أَمْرَ الْمُسْرِفِينَ ١٥١

الَّذِينَ يُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا يُصْلِحُونَ ١٥٢

قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مِنَ الْمَسْحُورِينَ ١٥٣

مَا أَنْتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِثْلُنَا فَأْتِ بِآيَةٍ إِنْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ١٥٤

قَالَ هَذِهِ نَاقَةٌ لَهَا شِرْبٌ وَلَكُمْ شِرْبٌ يَوْمَ مَعْلُومٍ ١٥٥

وَلَا تَمْسُوهَا بِسُوءٍ فَيَأْخُذَكُمْ عَذَابٌ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ١٥٦

فَعَقَرُوهَا فَاصْبَحُوا نَدِمِينَ ١٥٧

فَأَخَذَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ١٥٨

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ١٥٩

Warnings Unheeded

The same call is repeated by every messenger. The *sūrah* deliberately uses the same words as it reports what each messenger said to his people. Thus it stresses the unity of the message in its basis and essence: namely, belief in God's oneness, fearing Him and obeying His messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds what was special in the Thamūd's case. They used to inhabit an area known as al-Ĥijr, in north Arabia, between the Ĥijāz and Syria. The Prophet and his companions passed through this area on their way to Tabūk, seeing the ruined city for themselves. In this account of their history we see their brother, Ṣāliḥ, reminding them of the blessings God has favoured them with and warning them against their being withdrawn from them. He also warns them of the impending reckoning and accountability: *"Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, among gardens and springs and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill."* (Verses 146-149)

They enjoy such luxury as Ṣāliḥ describes here, but they pay no attention to it and how it came about. Nor do they express any gratitude to the One who has blessed them with it. Hence, their brother describes this in full to awaken their hearts so that they will appreciate it and fear its withdrawal. What he says to them alerts slumbering minds: *"Will you be left secure in the midst of what you have here?"* (Verse 146) Do you think that you will be left to enjoy this luxury you have been blessed with? Such luxury is given a further air of splendour as it is left unspecified. Do you, then, feel secure that it can never be terminated or withdrawn? Will you be left in such gardens, springs, plantations and palm trees that give you dates so ripe that are very easy to digest? Will you be left in these homes you skilfully carve out in rocky mountains, giving them an extra air of splendour?

Having touched their hearts with this reminder, Ṣāliḥ calls on them to fear God, remain obedient and separate themselves from those who pay no heed to what is right and indulge instead in corruption: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me. And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses – who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights."* (Verses 150-152)

His words, however, do not touch their hardened hearts, and they pay no attention to him: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched. You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth."* (Verses 153-154) They first describe him as one bewitched and, as such, one who does not know what he is talking about. It is as though only a madman will call on his people to worship God alone.

"You are only a human being like us." (Verse 154) Whenever a messenger of God addressed them, people were always troubled by this point. They always had a flawed concept of what a messenger should be like. They could not understand

God's wisdom of choosing ordinary people as His messengers, nor could they appreciate the honour God grants to mankind by choosing His messengers from among themselves, making them the leaders that receive light and guidance from Him. They felt that a messenger of God should be of a different type of creation, since he brings them information from on high, and tells them of the realm that lies beyond their perception. The fact is that humanity is incapable of appreciating that God so honoured such a man, giving him the ability to be in direct contact with the Supreme Society while still on earth. A man like others, going about his life in a normal way: eating, drinking, sleeping, marrying, walking about the streets and market places, and experiencing all the desires and feelings that occur to everyone else.

Across all generations people demanded from each messenger a miracle to prove that he was truly sent by God: *"Bring us a sign if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 154) Thus, the Thamūd demanded a miracle and God responded to His servant, Ṣāliḥ, giving him a sign in the form of a she-camel. We will not try to give details of its physical appearance, as have some commentators on the Qur'ān, because we have no authentic reliable source giving such a description. Instead, we will only say that she was a miracle, just as the Thamūd had asked for: *"He said: Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day."* (Verses 155-156)

Thus, Ṣāliḥ produced the she-camel making it a condition that the water where they took their cattle to drink should be divided between them, leaving it all for the she-camel one day and taking whatever they wanted from it on the following day. They would not trespass her rights on her day, and she would not come near them on their day. Thus, her days and her drinking were separate from theirs. He warned them against doing her any harm, for that would ensure that a mighty suffering would befall them.

What did this miraculous sign do to the stubborn and arrogant Thamūd? It did nothing to inspire their hardened hearts to accept the true faith. Nor did it give light to their souls living in darkness. The challenge the camel represented was there for them to meet, but they did not care. Nor did they even fulfil their pledges: *"But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful."* (Verse 157) The ones who actually slew her were those who had spread corruption in the land.

Ṣāliḥ had given them clear warnings, delivering these very seriously, but they feared nothing. Hence, the offence was shared by them all, as also the punishment. They regretted their crime, but such regret was too late. Hence, *"So the suffering befell them."* (Verse 158) No details are given of the punishment in order to give an impression of the speed of events.

Then the *sūrah* concludes this passage with its usual comment: *“Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.”* (Verses 158-159)

Perversion Leading to Ruin

The people of Lot, too, denied God's messengers. (160)

Their brother Lot said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (161)

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (162)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (163)

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (164)

Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, (165)

and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.'(166)

Said they: 'Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled.' (167)

He said: 'I am one who utterly abhors

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ لُوطٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٦١﴾

إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٦٢﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١٦٣﴾

وَمَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنِ أَجْرِي إِلَّا

عَلَىٰ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٦٤﴾

أَتَأْتُونَ الذُّكْرَانَ مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٦٥﴾

وَتَذَرُونَ مَا خَلَقَ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ

بَلْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ عَادُونَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

قَالُوا لَئِن لَّمْ تَنْتَهَ يَنْلُوطُ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ

الْمُخْرَجِينَ ﴿١٦٧﴾

قَالَ إِنِّي لِعَمَلِكُمْ مِنَ الْقَالِينَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

your doings. (168)

My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do.' (169)

So We saved him and all his family (170)

except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind. (171)

Then We utterly destroyed the others, (172)

and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]. (173)

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (174)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (175)

رَبِّ نَجِّنِي وَأَهْلِي مِمَّا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

فَنَجِّنْهُ وَأَهْلَهُ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

إِلَّا عَجُوزًا فِي الْغَابِرِينَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

ثُمَّ دَمَرْنَا الْأَخْرِينَ ﴿١٧١﴾

وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ مَطَرًا ط فَسَاءَ مَطَرُ الْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً ط وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٧٣﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٧٥﴾

Arrogant Perverts

The story of the Prophet Lot and his people is mentioned at this juncture, although from a historical point of view it should link up with Abraham's story. But the historical sequence is not of importance in this *sūrah* which concentrates on the unity of the divine message, the method followed by all prophets and the fate of the communities addressed by these messages. Hence, the saving of the believers is highlighted alongside the doom suffered by those who opposed God's messengers, denying their messages.

Lot begins with his people in the same way as Noah, Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, denouncing their carelessness, trying to awaken their consciences, and reminding them that they need to be God-fearing. He calls on them to believe in God and to obey him, assuring them that he will not charge them anything for guiding them to the right path. He

follows this with a clear denunciation of their wicked perversion which made them a community apart in human history:

Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.
(Verses 165-166)

Lot's people, who inhabited several villages in the Jordan Valley, were known for their sinful practice of homosexuality, which reflects a wicked perversion of human nature. God has created human males and females, making each sex naturally inclined to the other in order for human life to progress through procreation. This mutual inclination is, then, part of the universal law that ensures balance and harmony among all creatures in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, and makes them cooperate in the fulfilment of God's will that governs the entire universe. When a man has sex with another man, their practice neither fulfils any objective nor serves the nature of the universe and its laws. It is indeed singular that anyone should find pleasure in such a practice. The pleasure a man finds with a woman is indeed the means through which human nature fulfils God's will. Thus, the deviation from natural law is clear in Lot's people's actions. Hence, it was inevitable that they should refrain from their deviation or be destroyed.

Their destruction was due to the fact that they had opted out of the normal way of life and the right line of human nature. They abandoned the very purpose of their existence, which is the preservation of human life through marriage and procreation.

When Lot called on them to abandon their perversion, denouncing their neglect of the spouses God created for them and their aggression against human nature, their response clearly showed that they were not ready to return to the path that ensured the continuity of human life: *"Said they: Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled."* (Verse 167)

Lot did not belong to them by lineage. He had accompanied his uncle, Abraham, when the latter withdrew from his people and migrated. Abraham, Lot and the small number of people who believed with them crossed the Jordan. He then lived among those people until God chose him as His messenger, requiring him to call on people to return to the right path. Their response was a threat that they would drive him out of their towns unless he abandoned his call.

When things reached this point and the threat became serious, Lot spoke out loud, making it clear that he loathed their disgusting perversion: *"He said: I am one who utterly abhors your doings."* (Verse 168) He used words that vividly describe his repugnance of their practices, before adding a prayer to God to save him and his family from such evil: *"My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do."* (Verse 169)

He did not do what they did, but by his upright nature he felt it to be a way of life leading to ruin. Since he was in their midst he prayed that God would save him and his family from what was bound to come about as a result of such action.

God responded to his prayer: *"So We saved him and all his family except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind."* (Verses 170-171) This old woman was his wife as mentioned in other *sūrah*s. She was a terrible woman who helped others in their wickedness.

"Then We utterly destroyed the others, and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]." (Verses 172-173) It is reported that their villages were sunk into the ground and covered with water. One of these was Sodom, the ruins of which are thought to be under the Dead Sea in Jordan. Some geologists confirm that the Dead Sea covers towns that were fully populated at one time. Some archaeologists have discovered the remains of a fort close to the Dead Sea, as well as an altar close to it where offerings were made. However, the Qur'ān gives us Lot's story and whatever the Qur'ān states is the truth telling exactly what happened. Their end is followed by the usual comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 174-175)

Fair Dealings for All

The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan], too, denied God's messengers. (176)

Their brother Shu`ayb said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? (177)

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (178)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (179)

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (180)

Give full measure; and be not of those who give others less [than their due]; (181)

and weigh with even scales; (182)

and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption; (183)

and fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old.' (184)

كَذَّبَ أَصْحَابُ لَيْكَةِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ شُعَيْبٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٧٨﴾

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا ﴿١٧٩﴾

وَمَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنِ أَجْرِي إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

﴿١٨١﴾ أَوْفُوا بِالْكَيْلِ وَلَا تَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُخْسِرِينَ ﴿١٨١﴾

وَزِنُوا بِالْقِسْطَاسِ الْمُسْتَقِيمِ ﴿١٨٢﴾

﴿١٨٣﴾ وَلَا تَبْخَسُوا النَّاسَ أَشْيَاءَهُمْ وَلَا تَعْنُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ مُمْسِدِينَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

وَاتَّقُوا الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالْجِبِلَّةَ الْأُولِينَ ﴿١٨٤﴾

﴿١٨٤﴾

They said: 'You are but one who has been bewitched. (185)

You are only a human being like us!
And, indeed, we believe that you are lying. (186)

Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth.' (187)

Answered he: 'My Lord knows fully well all that you do.' (188)

But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was truly the suffering of an awesome day. (189)

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (190)

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (191)

قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مِنَ الْمَسْحُورِينَ ﴿١٨٥﴾

وَمَا أَنْتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُنَا وَإِن نَّظُنُّكَ لَمِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ ﴿١٨٦﴾

فَأَسْقِطْ عَلَيْنَا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ إِن كُنْتَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿١٨٧﴾

قَالَ رَبِّيَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨٨﴾

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَهُمْ عَذَابٌ يَوْمِ الظُّلَّةِ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ عَذَابٌ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٨٩﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٩٠﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٩١﴾

Widespread Corruption

This passage tells the story of the Prophet Shu`ayb which, from a historical point of view, comes before that of Moses, but it is told here for the lessons involved in all the stories given in this *sūrah*. The dwellers of the 'wooded dales' were most probably the people of Madyan. It seems that Madyan was close to this wooded land, thick with trees, as the Qur`ānic description implies. Madyan lies close to the Gulf of `Aqaba, in the area between the Ḥijāz province of Saudi Arabia and Palestine.

Shu`ayb began in the same way as other prophets calling on people, explaining to them the basic essentials of faith, and making it clear that he sought no gain in return for his advocacy. He then spoke to them about the ills that plagued their own society:

"Give full measure, and be not of those who give others less [than their due]; and weigh with even scales; and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption." (Verses 181-183)

As clearly mentioned in *Sūrah*s 7 and 11, The Heights and Hūd respectively, they used to give people short measure whenever they weighed things out for them. They also used their power to take more than what was rightly theirs, while they would give people less than what was due to them. They would buy things for less than their fair price, but would sell for higher prices. It appears that they lived close to the caravan trade routes, and this enabled them to dictate their terms. The messenger God sent them counselled them to pursue fairness in all such dealings. He preached the true faith which inevitably requires good treatment of others, and which cannot overlook injustice in dealings and interactions between people.

Shu`ayb then appealed to their sense of the fear of God as he reminded them of the Creator who brought them into existence as He did with all past generations: *"Fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old."* (Verse 184)

Their response was absurd. They accused him of being bewitched, speaking all sorts of nonsense without knowing what he said: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched."* (Verse 185) They also questioned the fact that he was God's messenger, since he was a man of their own kind. To them, a messenger of God should be different. Hence, they accused him of telling lies: *"You are only a human being like us! And, indeed, we believe that you are lying."* (Verse 186) They further challenged him to put his warnings into effect, bringing God's punishment upon them, demanding that he should cause the sky to fall upon them: *"Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 187)

Such a challenge could only be made by careless people who think little of the consequences. It is akin to the challenge the idolaters in Makkah put to the Prophet when he called on them to believe. But Shu`ayb chose not to answer their thoughtless challenge. He limited his reply to simply saying: *"My Lord knows fully well all that you do."* (Verse 188)

The *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us about the end they met, but without adding any detail: *"But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was indeed the suffering of an awesome day."* (Verse 189)

It is reported that they first suffered very hot weather that made breathing difficult and which weighed heavily on their lungs. Then they saw a cloud, which they welcomed and sought the shade it provided, feeling the coolness it initially gave them. But soon a great thunderbolt destroyed them all. This was the 'day of the darkening cloud', as the cloud was its most distinctive mark.

This is followed by the same conclusion given in the *sūrah* after each of the stories

of past communities it mentions: *“Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.”* (Verses 190-191)

The Qur'ān: A Definitive Description

Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. (192)

The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down (193)

into your heart – so that you may give warning, (194)

in the clear Arabic tongue. (195)

It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. (196)

Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]? (197)

Had We revealed it to any non- Arab, (198)

and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it. (199)

Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: (200)

وَإِنَّهُ لَتَنْزِيلُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٩٢﴾

نَزَلَ بِهِ الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ ﴿١٩٣﴾

عَلَى قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُنذِرِينَ ﴿١٩٤﴾

بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٩٥﴾

وَإِنَّهُ لَفِي زُبُرِ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٩٦﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُمْ آيَةٌ أَنْ يَعْلَمَهُرُ عُلَمَاءُ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿١٩٧﴾

وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ بَعْضِ الْأَعْجَمِينَ ﴿١٩٨﴾

فَقَرَأَهُ عَلَيْهِم مَّا كَانُوا بِهِ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٩٩﴾

كَذَلِكَ سَلَكْنَاهُ فِي قُلُوبِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٠٠﴾

they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. (201)

It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it. (202)

And then they will say: 'Could we have a respite?' (203)

Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? (204)

But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, (205)

and then the promised [punishment] befalls them – (206)

of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment? (207)

Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, (208)

and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone. (209)

No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān] (210)

It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. (211)

Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it. (212)

Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself

لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ حَتَّى يَرَوْا الْعَذَابَ
الْأَلِيمَ ﴿٢٠١﴾

فَيَأْتِيهِمْ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢٠٢﴾

فَيَقُولُوا هَلْ نَحْنُ مُنظَرُونَ ﴿٢٠٣﴾

أَفِعَذَابِنَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٢٠٤﴾

أَفَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ مَتَّعْنَاهُمْ سِنِينَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾

ثُمَّ جَاءَهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَمْتَعُونَ ﴿٢٠٧﴾

وَمَا أَهْلَكْنَا مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا لَهَا مُنذِرُونَ ﴿٢٠٨﴾

ذِكْرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا ظَالِمِينَ ﴿٢٠٩﴾

وَمَا تَنْزَلَتْ بِهِ الشَّيَاطِينُ ﴿٢١٠﴾

وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُمْ وَمَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿٢١١﴾

إِنَّهُمْ عَنِ السَّمْعِ لَمَعْزُولُونَ ﴿٢١٢﴾

فَلَا تَدْعُ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ فَتَكُونَ
مِنَ الْمَعْدُوبِينَ ﴿٢١٣﴾

among those suffering punishment. (213)

And warn your nearest kindred, (214)

and spread the wing of your tenderness
over all of the believers who follow you.
(215)

But if they disobey you, say: 'I am not
accountable for what you do.' (216)

Place your trust in the Almighty, the
Compassionate (217)

who sees you when you stand, (218)

and [sees] your movement among those
who prostrate themselves [before Him].
(219)

It is He alone who hears all and knows
all. (220)

Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the
satans descend? (221)

They descend upon every lying sinner.
(222)

They eagerly listen, but most of them are
liars. (223)

As for the poets, only those who are lost
in error follow them. (224)

Are you not aware that they roam
confusedly through all valleys, (225)

and that they say what they do not do?

وَأَنْذِرْ عَشِيرَتَكَ الْأَقْرَبِينَ ﴿٢١٤﴾

وَأَحْفِضْ جَنَاحَكَ لِمَنِ اتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢١٥﴾

فَإِنْ عَصَوْكَ فَقُلْ إِنِّي بَرِيءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ
﴿٢١٦﴾

وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْعَزِيزِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿٢١٧﴾

الَّذِي يَرَبُّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٢١٨﴾

وَتَقَلُّبُكَ فِي السَّجْدِينَ ﴿٢١٩﴾

إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٢٢٠﴾

هَلْ أَنْبَيْتُكُمْ عَلَىٰ مَنْ تَنْزَلُ الشَّيَاطِينُ
﴿٢٢١﴾

تَنْزَلُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ آفَاكٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿٢٢٢﴾

يُلْقُونَ السَّمْعَ وَأَكْثُرُهُمْ كَذِبُونَ
﴿٢٢٣﴾ وَالشُّعْرَاءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ الْغَاوُونَ ﴿٢٢٤﴾

الْمَ تَرَأَوْهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهيمُونَ ﴿٢٢٥﴾

(226)

Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged. Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take. (227)

وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٢٦﴾

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
وَذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَانْتَصَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا
ظَلَمُوا ۗ وَسَيَعْلَمُ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا أَيَّ
مُنْقَلَبٍ يَنْقَلِبُونَ ﴿٢٢٧﴾

Overview

Thus the stories telling us about God's messengers and the messages they were required to deliver, the denial of the truth by different communities, the challenges they made and the punishments meted out to them come to an end. They had begun after a short introduction at the beginning of the *sūrah* directly addressing the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his people, the Quraysh: "Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride." (Verses 3-6) Then the *sūrah* embarked on telling those stories, each of which gives an example of a community coming to understand the reality of what they used to deride and ridicule.

When the *sūrah* has concluded the stories, it picks up its main theme outlined in the introduction. Hence, its final comments talk about the Qur'ān, confirming its revelation by God, the Lord of all the worlds. While time has wiped away the history of those ancient communities, the Qur'ān, which was revealed by God, brings it all back, telling it in accurate detail. It also mentions that the learned ones among the Children of Israel were well aware of the Qur'ān and the Messenger to whom it was revealed because he is mentioned in earlier revelations. But the Arab idolaters stubbornly rejected it, despite the clear evidence of its truth, alleging that it is nothing but sorcery or poetry. Had a non-Arabic speaking person been its recipient and had he recited it to them in their own language, they still would not have believed in it. It was not the lack of clear evidence that caused them to deny it; rather, it was their stubborn refusal to see it for what it was. Indeed, it was not something given to the Prophet Muhammad by devils, as was information given to fortune tellers. Nor was it anything akin to poetry. Rather, the Qur'ān followed a clear line which it pursued

without deviation, while poets move in every direction in accordance with their feelings, caprices and reactions.

The Qur'ān was and is a reminder to all unbelievers, given by God who warned them that they must believe if they were to avert punishment. Unless they changed their ways, they would be made to see the reality which they now deride: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227)

Facts of Revelation

Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue. (Verses 192-195)

The trustworthy Spirit was the angel Gabriel, or Jibrīl, who brought the Qur'ān from God and imprinted it in the Prophet's heart. He was certainly trustworthy, keeping intact what was given into his trust. Thus, he gave it directly to the Prophet Muhammad, who understood it fully. Thus, the Prophet became a warner giving people admonition in the clear Arabic tongue, which was the language his people spoke. As they were well aware of the utmost that human beings could say, they recognized as the Prophet recited the Qur'ān to them that it was unlike what humans say despite its being in their own tongue. By its very construction, meanings, method and consistency, it clearly demonstrated that it definitely came from no human source.

This evidence came from within the Qur'ān itself. The *sūrah*, however, also provides further evidence, but this time it is external: *"It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]?"* (Verses 196-197) The description of the Messenger who would receive the Qur'ān from on high, and the fundamentals of the faith he would preach were clearly indicated in the scriptures of ancient peoples. Hence, the learned ones among the Children of Israel were expecting this last message and Messenger. They felt that the time for his appearance was fast approaching and they talked about it among themselves, as reported by Salmān and `Abdullāh ibn Sallām.² Reports concerning this are absolutely authentic.

² Salmān was the son of a Persian priest who was preparing his son to follow in his footsteps, but he left in search of the truth and met several Christian priests who told him of the Prophet Muhammad's imminent advent. He, therefore, went to Madinah to await his message. `Abdullāh ibn Sallām was a learned rabbi who made sure of the Prophet's identity according to detailed descriptions given in Jewish scriptures. Both, father and son, became Muslims and told of their prior knowledge of the

Those idolaters were knowingly stubborn in their opposition. They did not lack the evidence or the proof. Had a non-Arab come to them and recited the Qur'ān in its superb Arabic style, they would still have refused to believe: *"Had We revealed it to any non-Arab, and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it."* (Verses 198-199) This was meant to comfort the Prophet, presenting to him their stubborn refusal despite the clearest form of evidence. The *sūrah* then states that such denial of the truth, despite its clarity and certainty, was second nature to them. They would not depart from this stance until they suffered God's punishment, which would take them by surprise: *"Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* (Verses 200-202)

Thus the *sūrah* provides a physical image of their unbudging denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān, saying that it has been made to pass through their constitution in denial form. Thus it does not reach their minds and hearts except in the form of something that is denied and rejected. It remains so in their hearts *"until they see the grievous suffering."* But such suffering *"will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* Indeed, some maintained such a stubborn denial until they departed from the face of the earth. This, then, heralded their grievous suffering. For it is at the very moment of facing such suffering that realization is achieved: *"And then they will say: Could we have a respite?"* (Verse 203) Can we have another chance to rectify what has passed? That, however, will never be given.

They hastened God's punishment with their careless ridicule, believing that the comforts they enjoyed would last. Hence, they considered it improbable that they could ever move from a position of favour to one of suffering and punishment. This is a common attitude among those who enjoy a life of comfort and blessing. They rarely, if ever, think that it can all be removed. Hence, the *sūrah* wakens them to this reality, raising before them what their position will be when they suffer the punishment they now hasten: *"Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, and then the promised [punishment] befalls them – of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment?"* (Verses 204-207) The *sūrah* puts the image of hastening punishment to one side, and raises the prospect of the fulfilment of the warnings. We see the years of pleasure dwindling, as though they had never been. They benefit them in no way.

An authentic *ḥadīth*, according to Ibn Kathīr, quotes the Prophet as saying: "An unbeliever is brought forward on the Day of Judgement and he is given a quick dip into the fire. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience anything good or any luxury in your life?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did.' And the person who endured the most miserable life on earth is brought forward and he is

Prophet and his message. – Editor's note.

given a quick taste of heaven. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience any misfortune or misery?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did.'³

The unbelievers are then put on notice that the warning is a prelude to destruction. It is after all an aspect of God's grace that He does not destroy a community without first sending them a messenger pointing to the signs that should encourage them to accept the faith: "*Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone.*" (Verses 208-209)

God took a pledge from all mankind that they would worship Him alone. This is the pledge of nature which makes human nature feel the presence of the One God, unless it grows corrupt and deviates.⁴ He placed countless indications in the world around us pointing to the right faith. All these confirm the presence of the One Creator. When people forget the pledge of their own nature, and overlook the pointers to faith, God sends them a warner to remind them of what they have forgotten and puts before their eyes what they have overlooked. Thus, the divine message is meant as a reminder and an act of perfect justice and total mercy: "*Never do We wrong anyone.*" (Verse 209) This is true even with the destruction of unbelieving communities. Such destruction is fair requital for deviating from proper guidance.

The *sūrah* has more to say about the Qur'ān making the method of its revelation very clear: "*No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān]. It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it.*" (Verses 210-212)

The *sūrah* had already given a clear statement of the source of the Qur'ān: "*Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue.*" (Verses 192-195) The *sūrah* then goes on to speak about the unbelievers' denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān from on high and their hastening of their punishment by way of challenging the Prophet. Now the *sūrah* refutes their claims that it is no more than the talk of evil spirits, of the sort fortune-tellers display, claiming that some spirits bring them news of the world beyond as they listen to the angels.

This Qur'ān, which calls people to lead a virtuous life and to have faith, providing them with guidance, could not be given by evil spirits which lead people astray and advocate corruption and disbelief. They cannot initiate it even if they try, because they have been debarred from listening to it as it is revealed by God. The one who brings it down to the Prophet, by God's permission, is the trustworthy Spirit. Hence,

³ Ibn Kathīr mentions this *ḥadīth* preceded by the statement: An authentic *ḥadīth* says...!

⁴ See the comments on verse 172, *Sūrah* 7, which speaks in detail about the pledge of human nature, Vol. VI, pp. 218-224.

the evil ones cannot even touch it.

How to Give Warning

At this juncture, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, warning him against associating partners with God, even though he was always far from so doing. Yet the warning is given to him so that he could be more careful. The Prophet is assigned the task of warning his closest kinsmen, and ordered to place his trust in God who takes care of him in all situations:

Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment. And warn your nearest kindred, and spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you. But if they disobey you, say: 'I am not accountable for what you do.' Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verses 213-220)

It is impossible that God's Messenger should ever invoke anyone other than God, but this situation is assumed here to clarify the point. Therefore, when the Prophet is threatened with punishment should he do so, what chance has anyone else? How could anyone be spared such grievous punishment when there is no special treatment granted to anyone?

Having been given this personal warning, the Prophet is instructed to warn his own relatives so that they may become an example for others. The Prophet's relatives are indeed warned that they will endure grievous suffering should they persist in associating partners with God: "*And warn your nearest kindred.*"

Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate that when this verse was revealed, the Prophet went up the hill of al-Ṣafā [which is close to the Sacred Mosque] and called out to his people to gather for he wanted to tell them something important. "People responded to his call, with some coming themselves and others sending someone to find out what was afoot. The Prophet said to them: 'You clans of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Fihri and Lu'ayy! Should I tell you that a host of armed riders are close by the mountain aiming to launch a raid on you, would you believe me?' They answered in the affirmative. He said: 'I am sent to you as a warner of impending grievous suffering.' Abū Lahab said to him: 'Confound you all day long! Have you called us only to tell us this?' God then revealed the *sūrah* that says: '*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he.*'" (111: 1)

Muslim relates on `Ā'ishah's authority: "When the verse that says, 'Warn your

nearest kindred,' was revealed, the Prophet stood up and called his relatives, saying: 'Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! [i.e. his own daughter], Ṣafīyyah bint `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his aunt], you the clan of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his own clan], I can benefit you nothing against God. You can ask me whatever you wish from my own money.

Muslim and al-Tirmidhī relate on Abū Hurayrah's authority that "when this verse was revealed the Prophet called the Quraysh, speaking to them in general and to some by name. He said: 'You people of the Quraysh! Save yourselves from the fire. You people of the Ka (b! Save yourselves from the fire. Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! Save yourself from the fire. By God, I can avail you nothing against God. But you are my kinsfolk and I will be all kindness to you."

These *aḥādīth* and many others show how the Prophet received this order and how he carried it out, giving warning to his kinsfolk, making it clear that he had no power to benefit them. He left them to God to determine their fate in the hereafter. He put them on notice that their relation to him would be of no benefit unless their own actions benefitted them. Such is the clear approach of Islam which allows no intermediation between God and His servants, not even by His last Messenger.

How to Treat Believers

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet how to treat the believers who respond to God's message as a result of his efforts: "*And spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you.*" (Verse 215) Thus the Prophet is instructed to treat the believers gently, and to show his humility and kindness. This instruction is given in a physical, tangible image like a bird lowering its wings in flight but seeking to descend. The Prophet adopted this attitude with believers throughout his life. Indeed, his manners were a practical translation of the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* also tells him how he should treat those who are disobedient, dissociating himself completely from them: "*But if they disobey you, say: I am not accountable for what you do.*" (Verse 216) This order was given in Makkah, before the Prophet was given permission to fight unbelievers.

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet to turn to his Lord with whom he has a permanent relationship of care: "*Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 217-220) Leave them to their disobedience of God's orders, dissociate yourself from their actions and turn to your Lord with full trust, seeking His help in all your affairs. The *sūrah* mentions the two divine attributes frequently mentioned earlier: might and compassion. The Prophet is made to feel his closeness to God as his Lord sees him when he stands up for prayer on his own, and also sees him when he prays with a congregation as they prostrate

themselves to God. He sees him in his solitude and when he is attending to the congregation, organizing them and leading them in prayer. He sees all his movements and is fully aware of his thoughts, listening to his supplications: *"It is He alone who hears all and knows all."* (Verse 220) This sort of address comforted the Prophet, reassured him that God was watching over and looking after him.

Once more in this final passage of the *sūrah*, the Qur'ān is brought into focus. The first comment emphasized that it was a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds, brought to Muhammad through the trusted Spirit, Gabriel. Secondly, it made clear that no evil spirit could deliver it. Now the *sūrah* asserts that such evil ones do not come to a person like Muhammad (peace be upon him), who is honest, truthful and advocates a sound system. They go only to a liar, such as a wicked fortune-teller. Such people receive whatever evil spirits give them and circulate their disinformation widely after they themselves have further exaggerated it: *"Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the satans descend? They descend upon every lying sinner. They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars."* (Verses 221-223)

There were among the Arabs some fortune-tellers who claimed that the *jinn* brought them news and information. People used to go to these fortune-tellers seeking advice, and trusting their prophecies, but most were liars. To believe them was to pursue myth and wishful thinking. No such fortune-teller advocated any proper code of living, or urged people to fear God, or counselled them to believe. When the Prophet called on people to accept his message, he actually advocated a complete code of virtuous living.

At times, the Arab unbelievers described the Qur'ān as poetry, claiming that the Prophet was a poet. This was due to their utter helplessness in facing up to the Qur'ān; its powerful discourse was incomparable to anything they knew. They realized that it touched people's hearts, affected their feelings and overcame their resistance. Yet they could not stop it.

In this *sūrah*, the Qur'ān itself explains to them that the way of life Muhammad advocated and the Qur'ān outlined was totally and fundamentally different from that of poets and poetry. This Qur'ān sets a clear method and aims towards a definite objective. The Prophet did not say something one day which he contradicted the next. Nor did he pursue fleeting desires and momentary feelings. Instead, he pursued the establishment of his faith, following a straight system that admits no crookedness. Poets are totally unlike this. They are often hostage to their reactions and momentary feelings, which press for expression as they occur. They describe something as black today and white tomorrow. When they are happy, they say one thing, which they contradict when they are angry. Their moods are never consistent. Besides, they create their own imaginary world. They conjure up actions and results, then imagine these to be hard facts which influence their behaviour. Hence, their

concern for realities is diminished because they create a different, imaginary world in which they live.

Reality versus Imagination

A person with a well-defined message who wants to see it implemented in people's lives has a totally different perspective. He has an objective, method of action and a line to follow. He goes along his line, pursuing his method to achieve his end, keeping his heart and mind open and alert. He will not accept myth, or be satisfied with visions and dreams. He is only satisfied when his message becomes a practised reality in human life.

Thus the methods of God's Messenger and poets are poles apart. The two can never be confused: *"As for the poets, only those who are lost in error follow them. Are you not aware that they roam confusedly through all valleys, and that they say what they do not do?"* (Verses 224-226) Poets follow their own moods, whims and desires, which means that they are followed only by those who similarly roam about confusedly with whims and passions, having no defined objective or clear line. Moreover, poets pursue every feeling, idea or statement according to that which takes hold of them at any particular moment.

Furthermore, poets say what they do not do, because they live in a world made of their own imagination and sentiment. They prefer such an imaginary world to real life which does not particularly impress them. Hence, they exaggerate and claim things that they themselves do not fulfil. Thus, what they say has no reality in practical human life.

Since Islam is a complete life system, devised for implementation in real life, and since it has a strong bearing on people's consciences and on all aspects of life, it is by nature incompatible with the overwhelming majority of poets. A poet creates a dream in his own world and feels content with it. Islam, on the other hand, wants the dream to become a reality and works for its implementation. It transforms all feelings so that they work together to produce in the real world a perfect model of humanity.

Islam wants people to face up to the facts of life, and not to escape to an imaginary dream. If the facts of life are unsatisfactory or inconsistent with the way of life Islam wants people to implement, it urges them to change these aspects so that they can pursue its way of life. Thus, human energy is used for the fulfilment of noble objectives according to Islam's magnificent way of life.

Nevertheless, Islam does not suppress poetry and art altogether, as some people may take the statement to mean. It simply disapproves of the line followed by poetry and art, giving full rein to uncontrolled whims and reactions, as well as fanciful

dreams that absorb the energy of the dreamers so that they cannot fulfil them. When the human soul adopts the Islamic system, and interacts with Islamic values, it produces poetry and art while working at the same time to see its noble feelings realized in practice.

It is perfectly possible for the human soul to achieve an Islamic objective, looking at life from an Islamic viewpoint, and at the same time express all this in poetry and art. In such a situation, Islam approves of poetry and art, indeed encourages poets and artists.

What Makes Poetry Islamic

The Qur'ān directs people's minds and hearts to the great wonders in the universe and within the human soul, both of which are the material of poetry and art. Indeed, the Qur'ān includes passages on the wonders of creation that can never be matched by any poetry in respect of penetration, fascination and presentation.

Therefore, the Qur'ān makes an exception of the above general description of poets: *"Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged."* (Verse 227) These are not included in the general description, because they have believed and their hearts are, as a result, full of a faith while their lives follow a clear system. They do righteous deeds and their energy is directed towards what is good, beneficial and beautiful. They are not satisfied with dreams and visions. They work hard, putting all their energies into their striving, so that they can support the truth in which they believe, and achieve the victory to which they aspire.

Among the poets who fought with their poetry defending the Islamic faith and its Messenger, at the height of the battle against idolatry and idolaters during the Prophet's lifetime were Ḥassān ibn Thābit, Ka`b ibn Mālik and `Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, all of whom were from among the *Anṣār*. Also among them were `Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba`rā and Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ḥārith ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, both of whom used to abuse the Prophet in their poetry in their pre-Islamic days. When they adopted Islam, they did well and composed fine poetry in praise of the Prophet and in support of Islam.

It is authentically reported that the Prophet said to Ḥassān: "Attack them and Gabriel [the angel] will support you." `Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kai) reports that his father, Ka`b ibn Mālik, said to God's Messenger: "God has revealed what you know about poets." The Prophet said to him: "A believer defends Islam with his sword as also with his tongue. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, your words that you throw at them are just like arrows." [Related by Aḥmad.]

This type of Islamic poetry was what was needed at the time. There are other modes, however, by which poetry and art become Islamic. It is sufficient that poetry or art in general issues from an Islamic concept of life, in any field, to gain Islamic acceptance. Poetry can be perfectly Islamic without having to attack the opponents of Islam, defend Islam, glorify its values or history, or contribute directly to its advocacy. A glance at the passage of night, feeling the first breath of dawn, coupled with an expression of a Muslim's sense that relates such phenomena to the Creator, is of the very essence of Islamic poetry. A moment of inner enlightenment, feeling God's presence or action, or relating what one sees in the world around one to its Creator, is bound to produce poetry that is perfectly acceptable to Islam.

The point that distinguishes what Islam rejects from what it approves is that Islam has its own concept of life as a whole, its relations and bonds. Whatever poetry issues from such a concept is fine and acceptable from the Islamic point of view.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a general implicit warning: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227) The *sūrah* has spoken about the unbelievers and their stubborn rejection of Islam, their heedless approach to warnings, the hastening of their punishment, as well as scenes of the destruction of past communities of unbelievers. It now concludes with this strong warning that sums up its theme. The warning serves as a final strong note, one which is felt to violently shake the very foundations of wrongdoing and wrongdoers.