

SŪRAH 98

Al-Bayyinah

(The Clear Proof)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: (1)

لَمْ يَكُنِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ مُنْفِكِينَ حَتَّى تَأْتِيَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَةُ

﴿١﴾

a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, (2)

رَسُولٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ يَتْلُوا صُحُفًا مُّطَهَّرَةً ﴿٢﴾

wherein are sound decrees of high value. (3)

فِيهَا كُتِبَ قِيمَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had been given to them. (4)

وَمَا تَفَرَّقَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ
بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَةُ ﴿٤﴾

*Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their *zakaat*. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight. (5)*

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ
الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُوا
الزَّكَاةَ وَذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيمَةِ ﴿٥﴾

The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. (6)

But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. (7)

Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they with Him. This is for him who is God-fearing. (8)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ فِي نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
أُولَئِكَ هُمْ شَرُّ الْبَرِيَّةِ ﴿٦﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
أُولَئِكَ هُمْ خَيْرُ الْبَرِيَّةِ ﴿٧﴾

جَزَاؤُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِي
مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا رَضِيَ
اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ خَشِيَ
رَبَّهُ ﴿٨﴾

Overview

As stated in our copies of the Qur'ān and according to the greater number of reports, this *sūrah* is a Madinan revelation. There are, however, some reports which classify it as Makkan. Although its classification as a Madinan revelation carries more weight in view of these reports and its mode of expression and style, yet the possibility of its being Makkan cannot be ruled out. The fact that it mentions *zakāt*, i.e. the obligatory charity, and the people of earlier revelations is not a clear-cut argument against the Makkan possibility. Some *sūrahs* which are indisputably Makkan mention the people of earlier revelations. Furthermore, there were some Makkans, a few, who followed earlier divine religions. Some of these adopted Islam but others did not. Moreover the Christians from Najran came to the Prophet when he was still in Makkah, and they accepted the Islamic faith, as it is well-known. Moreover, *zakāt* is mentioned in some *sūrahs* that were indisputably revealed in Makkah.

This *sūrah* deals in a positive manner with a number of facts relating to history and faith. The first fact is that the sending of God's Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), was essential to the transformation of people of earlier revelations and idolaters, who had found their way into disbelief. They could not leave their erring ways behind without the Prophet's mission: "It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their

ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, wherein are sound decrees of high value.” (Verses 1-3)

Secondly, religious discord and conflict among the people of earlier revelations did not arise out of ignorance of their own religion, or from any obscurity or ambiguity in it. On the contrary, they ran into discord after they had received true knowledge and clear proof: *“Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had been given to them.” (Verse 4)*

Thirdly, with regard to its origin, divine faith is one. Its fundamentals are simple and clear and do not, by themselves and by their plain and easy nature, make for division or conflict: *“Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their zakāt. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight.” (Verse 5)*

Fourthly, those who disbelieved after receiving clear proof are the worst creatures of all, while those who believe and do good deeds are the best. Hence the two receive totally different rewards: *“The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they with Him. This is for him who is God-fearing.” (Verses 6-8)*

Need for a Divine Message

It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, wherein are sound decrees of high value. (Verses 1-3)

The world was desperately in need of a new message. Corruption was so widespread that reform could not come about except by means of a new message, a new method of orientation and a new movement. Disbelief had become the characteristic of the followers of all creeds and doctrines, whether pagan or earlier divine revelations [i.e. the Jews and the Christians]. They could only turn away from disbelief by means of this new message and at the hands of a messenger who would himself be the proof, clear, unmistakable and specific. *“A Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity;”* that is, purified of all idolatry and disbelief, *“wherein are sound decrees of high value.”* The Arabic term *kutub*, which in modern usage means ‘books’, is given in our translation as ‘sound decrees’. In the past, it was normally used in reference to the subject under discussion and its instructions or obligations.

These pure revelations are indeed the Qur'ān which contains valuable and important directives.

Hence the message delivered by the Prophet came at a most suitable time. The new revelations, with all that they included of themes and decrees, were vouchsafed so that they could bring about a far-reaching reform of this world. As to how badly the world needed this message, let us content ourselves with some inspiring remarks from Sayyid Abū'l Ḥasan `Alī Nadwī:

The sixth century of the Christian era, it is generally agreed, represented the darkest phase in the history of our race. Humanity had reached the edge of the precipice, towards which it had been tragically proceeding for centuries, and there appeared to be no agency or power in the whole world which could come to its rescue and save it from crashing into the abyss of destruction.

In his melancholy progress from God-forgetfulness to self-forgetting, man had lost his moorings. He had grown indifferent to his destiny. The teachings of the prophets had been forgotten: the lamps that they had kindled either had been put out by the storms of moral anarchy or the light they shed had become so feeble that it could illumine the hearts of but a few men, most of whom had sought refuge in passivity and resignation. Having been vanquished in the battle between spiritualism and materialism, they had shut themselves up in monasteries or gone into the wilderness. Such of them as were still left in the whirlpool of life had aligned themselves with the ruling classes of their lands. They helped them in the satisfaction of their sensual desires and in the maintenance of unjust political and economic systems and cooperated with them in reaping unlawful benefits out of the wealth of the people...

Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased ecclesiastics who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they could not have recognized them. In consequence of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere got entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for their personal conduct nor any abiding and rational principles for running a state.³⁷

This outlines briefly the condition of mankind and religions just before the advent

³⁷ Abu'l Hasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World*, Academy of Islamic Research Publications, Lucknow, 1980, pp. 13-14.

of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). The Qur'ān refers in various parts to the aspects of disbelief which spread among the people of the earlier revelations as well as the idolaters. Among these references to the Jews and Christians are: *"The Jews say: Ezra is the son of God,' while the Christians say: 'The Christ is the son of God.'"* (9: 30) *"The Jews say the Christians have no basis for their faith and the Christians say the Jews have no basis for their faith."* (2: 113) The Qur'ān also refers to the Jews as follows: *"The Jews say, 'God's hand is shackled.' It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills."* (5: 64) It says about the Christians: *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary'"* (5: 72) And: *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity'"* (5: 73) The Qur'ān also speaks about the idolaters: *'Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine.'"* (109: 1-6) There are many other statements in the Qur'ān which support this view.

In addition to such disbelief, there were backwardness, division, ruin as well as other evil spread throughout the world.

There was, briefly, not a single nation in the whole world of the sixth century of the Christian era that could be called healthy in temperament, not a single society that was imbued with high ethical ideas, nor a single State that was based on principles of justice, equity and fairness, nor yet a leadership that possessed knowledge and wisdom, nor a religion that represented the pure teachings of the Prophets of God.³⁸

Hence, the divine grace extended to mankind required that a messenger be sent by God to recite purified scriptures containing valuable and important themes. There was no other way of putting an end to such widespread corruption except by sending a messenger, who would deliver mankind from their misery and provide them with divine guidance.

Internal Division and Hostility

Having made this fact clear at the outset, the *sūrah* goes on to state that the people of earlier revelations in particular did not experience religious conflict and division as a result of ignorance, on their part, or confusion or complication on the part of their religion. Instead, their divisions occurred after true knowledge and clear signs were delivered to them through God's messengers: *"Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had*

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

been given to them.” (Verse 4)

The first division occurred among the Jews who split into sects and groups before the advent of the Prophet Jesus. Although their prophet was Moses and the Torah was their book, they divided into five main sects, namely, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Asians, the Extremists and the Samaritans. Each had their own characteristics and their own ways. Later on a division between the Jews and Christians took place in spite of the fact that Jesus was the last prophet sent to the Children of Israel. He came to endorse the Torah and confirm it. Nevertheless, the quarrel between the Jews and Christians reached a high level of violent enmity and hatred. History tells us about the horrifying massacres that took place between the two parties.

The mutual jealousy and hatred between Christians and Jews, which did not permit them to forego any opportunity of settling an old score, was brought to its climax towards the close of the sixth century. In 610 A.D. the Jews of Antioch rebelled against the Christians, and the Emperor Phocas sent his famous general, Bonosus, to put down the uprising. It was he who set about his business with such enthusiasm that the whole of the Jewish population was wiped out. Thousands of Jews perished by the sword, while hundreds more were either drowned, burnt alive or thrown to the wild beasts.³⁹

Such atrocities were repeated again and again between the Jews and Christians. Al-Maqrīzī says in his book *Al-Khitāṭ*, “During the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Phocas, Chosroes, the Shah of Persia, dispatched his armies to Syria and Egypt. They destroyed the churches of Jerusalem, Palestine and the rest of the Syrian land. They wiped out all the Christians and pursued them to Egypt, where they slaughtered them in large numbers and enslaved an unimaginable number. The Jews helped them in fighting the Christians and destroying their churches. They poured from all directions to help the Persians and came from Tiberia, the Mount of Galilee, Nazareth village and the City of Tyre and all around Jerusalem. They committed all sorts of atrocities against the Christians, organized ghastly massacres, destroyed two Christian churches in Jerusalem, burnt their places, stole a piece of the pillar of the Cross and captured the Patriarch of Jerusalem and a great many of his friends and companions...” Al-Maqrīzī goes on to relate the Persian conquest of Egypt; then he writes: “At that time, the Jews in the City of Tyre rebelled and sent messengers from among themselves to other cities and towns and all agreed to lay a trap for the Christians and kill them. A war broke out between the Jews and Christians in which the number of the Jews

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

was around 20,000. They destroyed the Christian churches around Tyre. But the Christians surrounded them and raised much greater numbers, so the Jews suffered a ghastly defeat and a great number were killed. At the time Heraclius ascended to power in Constantinople. He defeated the Persians by setting a trap for the Shah, who left him eventually and went away. Then he marched from Constantinople to re-establish his authority over Syria and Egypt and to renew what the Persians had destroyed. The Jews from Tiberia and other places went out to meet him. They presented him with precious gifts and begged him to guarantee their security and to take an oath to this effect. He granted their request. He went on to Jerusalem where he was received by the Christian population holding up their Bibles, crosses, and incense, and burning candles. He was very much displeased at seeing the city and its churches destroyed. He expressed his sorrow to the local Christians who told him about the uprising by the Jews and their siding with the Persians, the massacre of the Christians and the destruction of their churches. They told Heraclius to level a blow to the Jews but he protested that he had already guaranteed their security and had taken an oath to that effect. Their monks, cardinals and priests gave their judgement that the killing of the Jews was justifiable on the grounds that they had played a trick in order to win that assurance from him before he knew what they had done. The clergy also pledged to atone for Heraclius' oath by committing themselves and all Christians to fast a certain Friday every year for the rest of time. Thus he leaned to their argument and wreaked such a savage vengeance upon the Jews that in the Byzantine provinces of Syria and Egypt those alone could save themselves who could take to flight or go into hiding.

These reports give us an idea about the degree of savagery the two parties had reached, their watching for every chance to strike their enemy and heeding no rules in the process.⁴⁰

Then divisions and differences broke out among the Christians themselves in spite of the fact that their book is one and their messenger is one. They were divided first in matters of faith; then they split up into hostile and warring factions. Their differences concerned the nature of Jesus and whether he had a divine or human nature, the nature of Mary, his mother, and also the nature of the Trinity which they claim constitutes God. The Qur'ān relates two or three of their sayings on these issues: *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary.'" (5: 72)* And: *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity.'" (5: 73)* And, *"God will say: Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to people, 'Worship me and my mother as deities beside*

⁴⁰ Abu'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, *Mādhā Khasir al-'Ālam binḥiṭāṭ al-Muslimīn*, which is the Arabic edition of *Islam and the World*, n.d., pp. 9-11.

God?' [Jesus] answered: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! I could never have claimed what I have no right to [say] '(5: 116)

The most violent of doctrinal divisions was that which erupted between the Byzantine State and the Christians of Syria and the Christians of Egypt, or, in a more accurate definition, the Melkites and the Monophysites. The main dispute centred around the alleged combination of the divine and human natures in Jesus. The Melkite Christians of Syria held that he was both divine and human, while the Monophysites of Egypt insisted upon his being truly divine, the human part of his nature having lost itself in the divine as a drop of vinegar loses its identity in an ocean. The dispute between the two parties became so strong during the sixth and seventh centuries that it looked as if it were a ceaseless war between two rival religions, or a dispute between Jews and Christians. Each faction saying to the other that its stand was without foundation.

Emperor Heraclius (610-641) tried after his victory over the Persians in 638 to reconcile the contending creeds in his state and to unite them by compromise. This compromise took the shape of a general ban on indulging in any argument on the nature of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and whether he had a single or dual nature. But everyone had to accept the doctrine of a single energy in Christ.⁴¹ Agreement on this was established at the beginning of 631, and thus the Menothelian creed was declared the official creed of the state and all those of its populations who belonged to the Christian Church. Heraclius was determined to give the new creed overall supremacy, and he utilized all means to this end. But the Copts disputed his authority and declared their total rejection of this innovation and deviation. They took the opposing stand and sacrificed their all for the old faith. The Emperor tried once again to unite all the creeds and settle the differences. He was content that people should accept that there is a single will for Christ.⁴² As for the other issue, namely, the realization of that will by action, he deferred taking a stand on it altogether. He also banned all parties from indulging in arguments and debates on these issues. He included all this in an official message which he delivered to all parts of the Eastern world. But the message failed to end the storm. Instead, brutal persecution of a sort that would send a shiver through any mortal, was administered by the Emperor in Egypt for ten years. Men were savagely tortured before being drowned. Huge torches were

⁴¹ The doctrine of a single energy in Christ was that the allegedly divine and human natures in Jesus had one active force.

⁴² The doctrine of a single energy was repudiated, and the doctrine of a single will (the Monothelete formula) was propounded in 638.

lit and directed onto the miserable prisoners until the fat ran from both sides of their bodies to the floor. Prisoners were put in sacks which were then filled with sand and thrown into the sea.⁴³

All these disputes among the people of earlier revelations took place after “*clear evidence of the truth had been given to them.*” (Verse 4) They were not lacking in knowledge and proof, but they were blindly driven by their desires into deviation.

Clear and Simple

Yet religion is clear in its original form and the faith is simple in its essence: “*Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their zakāt. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight.*” (Verse 5)

This is the basis of divine religion throughout history and in all its forms. It is simply the worship of God alone. A sincere and pure submission to Him, a detachment from polytheism in all its shapes and forms, the establishment of regular worship and the payment of the regular obligatory charity, or *zakāt*: “*That is surely the right religion, pure and straight.*” (Verse 5) It is a pure and sincere faith that is firmly established in the heart, the worship of God alone which is a translation of this faith, and spending money for God’s cause as He has stated. He who fulfils these injunctions has met the requirements of faith, as the people of earlier revelations were commanded to do, and as these requirements are outlined in all forms of divine faith. It is one religion, the same faith in all the successive messages, as preached by the messengers of God. It is a religion free from all ambiguity and complication; a faith which gives no reason for division and dispute. It is very clear and very simple. How completely different this religion is from those complicated and confusing concepts and from those lengthy polemics.

Since clear evidence was given to them formerly in their own religions through their own prophets, and since clear evidence was given to them again, full of life, in the form of a messenger from God reciting pure revelations, and offering them a clear and simple faith, then the true path becomes very clear. So does the destiny of unbelievers, as also that of believers: “*The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they*

⁴³ Nadwī, *Mādhā Khasir al-`Ālam*, pp. 3-5. This is summarized in the English edition, *Islam and the World*, p. 15.

with Him. This is for him who is God-fearing.” (Verses 6-8)

Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the last messenger, and Islam, which he preached, the final message. Messengers from God came successively every time corruption spread in human life. Their objective was to make mankind return to righteousness. Those who deviated from the right path had one chance after another to correct their behaviour. But now that God had willed to close His messages to earth by this final, comprehensive, perfect and accomplished message, then the last chance was also given. This entailed either the adoption of faith leading to salvation, or the denial of faith ending in destruction. For disbelief now is an established evidence of unlimited evil, while accepting the faith is proof of goodness which goes to its absolute end.

“The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures.” (Verse 6) It is a clear and absolute verdict which leaves no room for argument or dispute. It is applicable even if some of their actions, values or systems were good, since these were not based on believing in this final message and messenger. No appearance of goodness makes us entertain even the slightest doubt in this judgement, since apparent goodness is detached from the upright method of living laid down by God.

“But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures.” (Verse 7) This is also an absolute verdict that makes for no dispute or argument. Its condition is also clear, free from any ambiguity or deception. The condition is faith, not merely being born in a land which claims to be Islamic, or in a family which claims to belong to Islam. Nor is it a few words which one repeats again and again. It is the acceptance of faith which establishes its effects on actual life, *“and do righteous deeds.”* It is entirely different from the words that go no further than the lips. As for righteous deeds, these are everything God has commanded to be done in matters of worship, behaviour, action and day-to-day dealings. The first and most important of these righteous deeds is the establishment of God’s law on this planet, and the government of people according to what God has legislated. Those who act accordingly are the best creatures of all.

“Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever.” (Verse 8) These gardens are a specially prepared, permanent and happy dwelling. Happiness is symbolized here by security against death and by a prevalent feeling of contentment as against anxiety which mars and disrupts all earthly comforts. It is also symbolized by the running waters flowing through these gardens; a picture which adds a sense of ease, life and beauty.

The *sūrah* then adds some refined touches to the picture it portrays of their perpetual happiness: *“God is well pleased with them and they with Him.” (Verse 8)* God’s

pleasure with them is much more exalted and far more enjoyable than any happiness. Moreover, in their inmost souls they feel happy with their Lord. They are well pleased with the destiny He has set for them, delighted with the grace He has granted them, and enchanted by this relationship with their Lord: *"God is well pleased with them and they with Him."*

"This is for him who is God-fearing." (Verse 8) This is the final assertion. It stresses that all that has been said is dependent on the nature of the relationship between man's heart and God. It also depends on man having a feeling of God which urges him to all sorts of good deeds and militates against all sorts of deviation. It is a feeling which removes barriers, lifts curtains and makes man's heart stand bare before God, the One, the All-Powerful. Such a feeling helps make worship and submission to God pure and purges human actions from all elements of hypocrisy and idolatry. So he who truly fears his Lord cannot allow his heart to entertain the slightest shred of influence by any being other than God, the Creator of all. Such a person knows that God rejects any deed done for the sake of anyone other than Him. For God is in no need of partners. Every action must be purely for Him or else He rejects it.