

# SŪRAH 19

## Maryam

(Mary)

### Prologue

The central theme of this *sūrah* focuses on God's oneness, rejecting all concepts and ideas assigning a son or a partner to Him. It also touches on the important issue of resurrection, intertwined as it is with the concept of God's oneness. In this, the *sūrah* follows the same pattern as most, if not all, *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah.

The *sūrah* explores its theme through several stories, beginning with that of Zachariah and his son, John, and follows this with the story of Mary and the birth of Jesus. We then have a part of Abraham's story with his father, followed by brief references to other prophets: Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Ishmael, Idrīs, Adam and Noah. These stories take up nearly two-thirds of the *sūrah*, driving home the truth of God's oneness, resurrection, the non-existence of any children or partners with God. They also clearly outline the attitudes towards the prophets of those who follow guidance and those who go astray.

The *sūrah* also includes some scenes of the Day of Judgement, some arguments against those who deny resurrection, and a reference to the fate of the unbelievers who deny God's message, both in this life and in the life to come. All this fits perfectly with the drift of the stories the *sūrah* relates and reinforces its central theme. The *sūrah* has its distinctive atmosphere which permeates through all its accounts and pervades its themes.

The *sūrah* portrays a full range of reaction and feeling within the human soul as also within the universe around it. This world which we imagine to be senseless is shown to have a soul of its own capable of sense and feeling. This adds to the general

atmosphere of the *sūrah* as we see the heavens, the earth and the mountains in anger, reacting so strongly as to almost be rent asunder or levelled down. All this because “people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself son.” (Verses 91-92) Reactions within the human soul are shown throughout the *sūrah* from start to finish. Its main stories are full of such reactions, particularly in that of Mary and the birth of Jesus.

The *sūrah* has a distinctive ambience of compassion, contentedness and direct relation with God. It opens with an account of the grace God bestowed on Zachariah, and how he addressed God in a secret appeal: “This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah: when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart.” (Verses 2-3) The words of grace, compassion and their synonyms are frequently mentioned throughout the *sūrah*, together with God’s attributes of beneficence and mercy. The happiness the believers will enjoy in the life to come is described as love: “As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.” (Verse 96) Among the favours God bestowed on John is that he was compassionate: “We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous.” (Verses 12-13) Similarly, Jesus was, by the grace of God, dutiful to his mother, gentle and friendly in his manners: “He has made me kind to my mother, not haughty or bereft of grace.” (Verse 32)

We indeed feel God’s abounding grace extending over all human life in the vocabulary and sentence structure of the *sūrah*. We also feel that the whole universe shudders to the sound of the preposterous claims that God has partners. For the universe cannot countenance such absurdity. We recognize that the *sūrah* has a distinctive musical rhythm and tempo. Even the sound of its vocabulary and the words ending its verses impart a clear sense of ease. Where the context requires firmness, such verse-endings have a doubled, voiced sound of either the plosive or fricative variety, to enhance the impression of firmness or power.

The *sūrah* provides good examples of variations in cadence, verse-endings and rhymes according to the subject being discussed and the overall atmosphere. At the start, when the *sūrah* relates its account of the prophets Zachariah and John, the verses rhyme with the syllable, ‘ya’ giving a medium vowel at the end. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the story of Mary and Jesus as well as the brief accounts of other prophets that follow. When these accounts are concluded, the *sūrah* comments on the truth about Jesus, son of Mary, with the final verdict on his sonship. Here we have a different kind of verse-ending where words with a long ‘ee’ or ‘oo’ vowel are followed by a nasal ‘m’ or ‘n’ giving the impression of a settled and final matter.

When this is complete, the *sūrah* resumes its accounts of earlier prophets commencing with Abraham and his father. The earlier, easy and gentle rhyme is

picked up again until the *sūrah* begins its discussion of the punishment that awaits those who reject the truth and oppose God's message and messengers. Here the cadence becomes stronger, and the rhyme changes to be a medium vowel 'a' preceded by the voiced, plosive 'd' sound. When the attitude of the unbelievers comes in for criticism and denunciation, the rhythm becomes even more powerful, reflected by a doubled 'd' sound for the rhyme. Thus the *sūrah* provides a perfect example of manipulated rhyme and rhythm such that it is in flawless harmony with the overall meaning and atmosphere. Both contribute to the general ambience of the *sūrah* as it moves with perfect ease from one subject to another.

The whole *sūrah* may be divided into three parts. The first includes the story of Zachariah and his son John, together with the story of Mary and her son Jesus, culminating in a comment that gives the final verdict on Jesus whose birth and nature were the subject of much controversy among both the Jews and Christians.

The second part includes an episode from Abraham's life story, in which he dissociated himself from the beliefs of his idolatrous community. It tells how God compensated him with offspring that brought a whole nation into being. It includes brief references to other prophets, those who followed their guidance and those who erred in succeeding generations, explaining the ultimate destiny of both groups. It ends with a declaration that Lordship in the universe is one and the Lord must be worshipped without association of partners with Him: *"He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?"* (Verse 65)

The final part begins with the arguments advanced about resurrection, portraying some scenes from the Day of Judgement. It provides an image of the rejection of all polytheistic claims by the whole universe. It ends with a highly effective scene of the doom of earlier communities: *"How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them [now], or hear so much as a whisper of them?"* (Verse 98)

# 1

## God's Unbridled Will

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

*Kāf. Hā. Yā. `Ayn. Ṣād. (1)*

*This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah: (2)*

*when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, (3)*

*he prayed: 'My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. (4)*

*Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor (5)*

*who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.' (6)*

كَهَيَّعَصَ ۝

ذِكْرُ رَحْمَتِ رَبِّكَ عَبْدَهُ زَكَرِيَّا ۝

إِذْ نَادَى رَبَّهُ نِدَاءً خَفِيًّا ۝

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَهَنَ الْعَظْمُ مِنِّي وَأَشْتَعَلَ

الرَّأْسُ شَيْبًا وَلَمْ أَكُنْ بِدُعَائِكَ رَبِّ

شَقِيًّا ۝

وَإِنِّي خِفْتُ الْمَوَالِيَ مِنْ وَرَائِي وَكَانَتِ

أُمْرَأَتِي عَاقِرًا فَهَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ وَلِيًّا ۝

۝

يَرِثُنِي وَيَرِثُ مِنْ عَالِ يَعْقُوبَ ۖ وَأَجْعَلْهُ

'Zachariah! We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son whose name shall be John. Never have We given this name to anyone before him.'  
(7)

[Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?' (8)

He said: 'Thus it is. Your Lord says, "This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing."' (9)

[Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! Give me a sign.'  
He replied: 'Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people.'  
(10)

He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night. (11)

[To his son We said]: 'John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength.' We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, (12)

as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous, (13)

رَبِّ رَضِيًّا ﴿٦﴾

يَنْزَكِرِيًّا إِنَّا نُبَشِّرُكَ بِغُلْمٍ اِسْمُهُ تَحْيَىٰ  
لَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ سَمِيًّا ﴿٧﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ اُنَى يَكُونُ لِي غُلْمٌ وَكَانَتْ  
اِمْرَاَتِي عَاقِرًا وَقَدْ بَلَغْتُ مِنَ الْكِبَرِ عِتِيًّا  
﴿٨﴾

قَالَ كَذٰلِكَ قَالَ رَبُّكَ هُوَ عَلَيَّ هَيِّنٌ  
وَقَدْ خَلَقْتُكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَلَمْ تَكُ شَيْئًا  
﴿٩﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ اَجْعَلْ لِيْ اٰيَةً ۗ قَالَ اٰيَتُكَ اَلَّا  
تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلٰثَ لَيَالٍ سَوِيًّا ﴿١٠﴾

فَخَرَجَ عَلٰى قَوْمِهِ مِنَ الْمِحْرَابِ فَاَوْحٰى  
اِلَيْهِمْ اَنْ سَبِّحُوْا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا ﴿١١﴾

يٰحْيٰى خُذِ الْكِتٰبَ بِقُوَّةٍ ۗ وَاَتَيْنٰهُ  
الْحِكْمَ صَبِيًّا ﴿١٢﴾

and kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. (14)

So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again. (15)

Relate in the book [the story of] Mary and how she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, (16)

where she kept herself in seclusion from them. We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being. (17)

She said: 'May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.' (18)

'I am but an emissary of your Lord,' he said, '[and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity.' (19)

She said: 'How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?' (20)

He answered: 'Thus did your Lord speak: This is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us. It is a

وَحَنَانًا مِّن لَّدُنَّا وَزَكَاةً ۖ وَكَانَ تَقِيًّا

﴿١٣﴾

وَبَرًّا بِوَالِدَيْهِ وَلَمْ يَكُن جَبَّارًا عَصِيًّا ﴿١٤﴾

وَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْهِ يَوْمَ وُلِدَ وَيَوْمَ يَمُوتُ وَيَوْمَ يُبْعَثُ حَيًّا ﴿١٥﴾

﴿١٥﴾

وَأذْكَرٌ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَرْيَمَ إِذِ انْتَبَذَتْ مِنْ أَهْلِهَا مَكَانًا شَرْقِيًّا ﴿١٦﴾

﴿١٦﴾

فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا ﴿١٧﴾

﴿١٧﴾

قَالَتْ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ مِنْكَ إِنْ كُنْتَ تَقِيًّا ﴿١٨﴾

﴿١٨﴾

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَنَا رَسُولُ رَبِّكِ لِأَهَبَ لَكِ غُلَامًا زَكِيًّا ﴿١٩﴾

﴿١٩﴾

قَالَتْ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَلَمْ يَمَسِّنِي بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكُ بَغِيًّا ﴿٢٠﴾

﴿٢٠﴾

matter [We have] decreed.' (21)

So she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place.  
(22)

And the throes of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm- tree. [In her anguish] she cried: 'Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!' (23)

But [a voice] from below called out to her: 'Do not give in to grief. Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you. (24)

And if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will drop you fresh ripe dates. (25)

eat and drink and be happy. Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: 'I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being.'" (26)

At length, she went to her people carrying the child. They said: 'Mary, you have indeed done an amazing thing! (27)

Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!' (28)

But she pointed to the child. They said: 'How can

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ رَبُّكَ هُوَ عَلَيَّ هَيِّنٌ ۝

وَلَنَجْعَلَنَّهَا آيَةً لِلنَّاسِ وَرَحْمَةً مِنَّا ۝

وَكَانَ أَمْرًا مَّقْضِيًّا ﴿٢١﴾

فَحَمَلَتْهُ فَانْتَبَذَتْ بِهِ مَكَانًا قَصِيًّا ﴿٢٢﴾

فَاجَاءَهَا الْمَخَاضُ إِلَى جِذْعِ النَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَلَيْتَنِي مَتُّ قَبْلَ هَذَا وَكُنْتُ نَسِيًّا مَنَسِيًّا ﴿٢٣﴾

فَنَادَتْهَا مِنْ تَحْتِهَا أَلَّا تَحْزَنِي قَدْ جَعَلَ رَبُّكَ تَحْتِكَ سَرِيًّا ﴿٢٤﴾

وَهَزَىٰ إِلَيْكَ بِجِذْعِ النَّخْلَةِ تُسْقِطُ عَلَيْكَ رُطْبًا جَنِيًّا ﴿٢٥﴾

فَكُلِي وَأَشْرَبِي وَقَرِّي عَيْنًا ۖ فَمَا تَرَيْنَ مِنَ الْبَشَرِ أَحَدًا فَقُولِي إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لِلرَّحْمَنِ صَوْمًا فَلَنْ أُكَلِّمَ الْيَوْمَ إِنْسِيًّا ﴿٢٦﴾

فَأْتَتْ بِهِ قَوْمَهَا تَحْمِلُهُ ۖ قَالُوا يَمْرِئٌ لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا فَرِيًّا ﴿٢٧﴾

يَأْتَحْتِ هَدْرُونَ مَا كَانَ أَبِيكَ أَمْرًا سَوْءًا

*we talk to a babe in the cradle?’ (29)*

*Whereupon he said: ‘I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet, (30)*

*and made me blessed wherever I may be. He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. (31)*

*He has made me kind to my mother, not haughty or bereft of grace. (32)*

*Peace was on me on the day when I was born, and [will be on me] on the day of my death and on the day when I shall be raised to life again.’ (33)*

*Such was, in the words of truth, Jesus the son of Mary, about whose nature they still dispute. (34)*

*It is not conceivable that God should beget a son. Limitless is He in His glory! When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is. (35)*

*God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path. (36)*

*Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the unbelievers when a momentous*

وَمَا كَانَتْ أُمُّكَ بَغِيًّا ﴿٢٩﴾

فَأَشَارَتْ إِلَيْهِ <sup>ط</sup> قَالُوا كَيْفَ نُكَلِّمُ مَنْ  
كَانَ فِي الْأَمْهَدِ صَبِيًّا ﴿٣٠﴾

قَالَ إِنِّي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ ءَاتَنِي الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلَنِي  
نَبِيًّا ﴿٣١﴾

وَجَعَلَنِي مُبَارَكًا أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُ وَأَوْصَانِي  
بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ مَا دُمْتُ حَيًّا ﴿٣٢﴾

وَبِرًّا بِوَالِدَتِي وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْنِي جَبَّارًا شَقِيًّا ﴿٣٣﴾

وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَيَّ يَوْمَ وُلِدْتُ وَيَوْمَ أَمُوتُ  
وَيَوْمَ أُبْعَثُ حَيًّا ﴿٣٤﴾

ذَٰلِكَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ <sup>ج</sup> قَوْلَ الْحَقِّ  
الَّذِي فِيهِ يَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

مَا كَانَ لِلَّهِ أَنْ يَتَّخِذَ مِنْ وَلَدٍ <sup>ط</sup> سُبْحٰنَهُ  
إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ  
فَيَكُونُ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُوهُ <sup>ج</sup> هٰذَا  
صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

day arrives. (37)

*How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error. (38)*

*Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress, when everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief. (39)*

*We alone shall remain after the earth and all who live on it have passed away. To Us they shall all return. (40)*

فَاخْتَلَفَ الْأَحْزَابُ مِنْ بَيْنِهِمْ ۗ فَوَيْلٌ  
لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ مَّشْهَدٍ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣٧﴾  
أَسْمِعْ بِهِمْ وَأَبْصِرْ يَوْمَ يَأْتُونَنَا لَكِنِ  
الظَّالِمُونَ الْيَوْمَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾  
وَأَنْذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ الْحَسْرَةِ إِذْ قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ  
وَهُمْ فِي غَفْلَةٍ وَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾  
إِنَّا لَنَحْنُ نَرِثُ الْأَرْضَ وَمَنْ عَلَيْهَا وَإِلَيْنَا  
يُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

### A Passionate Prayer Answered

“Kāf. Hā. Yā. `Ayn. Şād.” (Verse 1) These are separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. A number of *sūrahs* begin with such separate letters which we explain as being some of the letters used in the composition of the Qur’ān. Yet the Qur’ān has its unique, inimitable style, the like of which human beings can never produce, despite the fact that the same letters and words are available to them. They simply cannot devise any construction that even remotely approaches the style employed by the divine power that produced this Qur’ān.

Having mentioned these letters, the *sūrah* immediately begins the first story of Zachariah and John, in which compassion provides both the central idea and the overall atmosphere. Hence grace is mentioned at the outset: “This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah.” (Verse 2) The story begins with a scene of earnest supplication by Zachariah in total secrecy:

*When he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, he prayed: My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your, a grace, a successor who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.’ (Verses 3-6)*

He is alone, addressing his appeal to God, away from watching eyes and listening ears. He wants to lay his troubled heart open before his Lord, recounting his worries. He addresses Him as if he were speaking to someone who is very close, without even using the Arabic address article, *Ya*. Needless to say, his Lord hears and sees, without the need to be addressed or called upon. But a person troubled by worries finds comfort in vocalizing his concern. Most Gracious as He is, God knows this to be part of human nature. Hence, He likes that His servants pray to Him, making a clean breast of all that worries them: *"Your Lord says: Pray to Me and I will answer you."* (40: 60) When they do, they find relief from their heavy burden. They are reassured because they have assigned such burdens to the One who is more able and powerful. They feel that they are in contact with the Most Merciful who will not disappoint anyone who appeals to Him and relies on Him.

Zachariah complains to his Lord that his bones have become feeble, and when bones are feeble, the whole body is weak. After all, the bones are the stiffest part of the body. They form the skeleton which the muscles flesh up. He also complains that his head glistens with grey hair. The Qur'ānic expression here, *ishta`ala al-ra'su shaybā*, shows the greyness of hair like a fire being ignited, and the man's head covered with this fire, so as to leave no black hair. Both feeble bones and grey hair signify old age and the weakness associated with it. It is this weakness that is the subject matter of Zachariah's complaint as he presents his case, and his hopes, to his Lord.

He then makes a clear acknowledgement: *"Never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered."* (Verse 4) He is used to having his prayers answered. He was not disappointed when he prayed to Him in his time of strength and vigour. Now in his old age and weakness, the need for his prayers to be answered is even more pressing.

Having presented his case, expressed his fears and hopes, he makes his request. The point is that he fears that those who will succeed him might not be up to looking after his heritage properly. Being one of the major prophets of the Children of Israel, Zachariah's heritage involved serving God's cause as well as looking after the people of his household. One of those was Mary whose upbringing was entrusted to him. She served in the sanctuary which he managed. Again his property, which he managed properly and spent on only good purposes, was among his concerns. His worry was that those who succeeded him might not follow the course he had charted, perhaps because he knew them not to be up to that task. *"Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone."* (Verse 5)

What added to his worries was the fact that he was childless: *"For my wife is barren."* (Verse 5) She had given him no child to bring up and prepare as a successor. This was his concern. As for his hope, he requested that God grant him a successor

who would properly manage and look after the heritage of Jacob's household, i.e. his ancestors: *"Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob."* (Verses 5-6) Zachariah, a God-fearing prophet, does not forget to specify what he hopes this successor would be like: *"And make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased."* (Verse 6) He should not be arrogant, tyrannical, or greedy. He should be one who is content with what God gives him. Such contentedness should furthermore spread a sense of ease and happiness all round.

### **A Child Is Born Against All Probability**

The moment of truth comes: the prayer is answered, bringing with it God's grace and acceptance. It is the Lord Himself that calls out to His servant from His sublime presence: *"Zachariah!"* He immediately gives him the good news: *"We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son."* (Verse 7) He bestows on him further kindness, by choosing for him the name of that son: *"Whose name shall be John."* (Verse 7) This is a special name, not previously given to anyone: *"Never have We given this name to anyone before him."* (Verse 7)

This is but an example of God's grace as it is given in abundance to His servant whose secret supplication was passionate, and which clearly expressed his fears and hopes. Zachariah's prayer was motivated by fear that his heirs would not be able to look after the heritage of the true faith properly. He feared that they would not fulfil the trust in a way that earns God's pleasure. Hence, God bestowed on him what corresponded to his good intention.

Zachariah, who was deeply involved in his supplication, passionately expressing his desire and urging his case, was suddenly alerted by this speedy answer to his prayer. The reality stares him in the face: he is well advanced in years, his bones feeble, his hair completely grey, and his wife barren, having given him no child when he was in his prime. How is he to have a child of his own? He wants to be reassured and to know the means by which God will give him this son: *"My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?"* (Verse 8)

He is facing the reality, as well as God's promise. He certainly trusts that God's promise will be fulfilled. He only wants reassurance and to know how, considering his circumstances, the fulfilment will take place. That would give him much needed reassurance. It is a perfectly normal condition in a situation like that faced by the noble and God-fearing prophet, Zachariah. Needless to say, he was only a human being who cannot ignore the reality. Hence, he would love to know how God will reverse it.

The answer to all his enquiries is straightforward. It is all perfectly easy for God to

accomplish. God reminds him of something that he knows well, namely his own bringing into existence. This is something to be considered by every living creature. It applies to everything in this universe: *"He said: Thus it is. Your Lord says, 'This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing.'"* (Verse 9)

With regard to creation, there is nothing to be classified as easy or difficult in as far as God is concerned. In all cases of creation, whether it is something large or small, trivial or gigantic, the method is the same: it is only a matter of God willing that thing to be and it comes into existence. It is God who makes a barren woman childless, and an old man unable to procreate. He is certainly able to reverse this situation, removing the cause of a woman's barrenness and renewing a man's ability to cause his wife to conceive. By human standards, this is easier than initiating life in the first place. But with God, everything is easy, whether it involves origination or rebirth.

Nevertheless, Zachariah's eagerness to be reassured motivates him to ask for a sign indicating the realization of the happy news he was given. The sign God gave him was most fitting to the general atmosphere of his prayer and how it was answered. This sign gives him a further way to thank, glorify and praise God for giving him a son in his old age. He was to isolate himself from all worldly concerns for three days and live in direct contact with God. His speech would be normal when he glorified God, but he would not be able to utter a word of normal human speech. Yet he would remain in sound health, no illness affecting him. *"He replied: Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people."* (Verse 10)

This was exactly what took place: *"He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night."* (Verse 11) He wanted them to live in the same mental condition he was in, to feel God's grace at its most abounding, and to give thanks for the grace He had bestowed on Zachariah, and on them.

### **John: A Prophet in His Own Right**

The *sūrah* now leaves Zachariah in complete silence dealing with other people and his glorification and praise of God. As that scene closes, the *sūrah* reveals a new one in which we see John, the child given to Zachariah, as fully grown. It is his Lord who calls out to him from on high: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength."* (Verse 12) This follows the Qur'ānic method of highlighting only the most important events, portraying images that are full of life and vigour.

Before we have even a single word about John himself, his account commences with an address from on high. It portrays an awesome scene giving us a good idea of John's position. It also shows us how God responded to Zachariah's prayers when he

requested an heir who would fulfil the trust that he himself had been fulfilling, as it related both to faith and kin. Thus the first scene in which John is involved is the one where he is elected to bear the highest responsibility: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength."* (Verse 12) The book referred to here is the Torah, given to Moses. All the Israelite prophets were charged with its preservation and implementation. They were also given the task of educating people in the Torah, so that they would know what was lawful to them and what was unlawful. John inherited his father Zachariah. He is here told to rise to the task and fulfil his trust with all his resolve and strength. He must never weaken or slacken. He should never abdicate his responsibilities.

The *sūrah* tells us what John was given to equip him for the great tasks he was assigned: *"We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous."* (Verses 12-13) These were indeed the qualifications that suited him for his task. They provided great help in the fulfilment of his duties. Now let us look closer at these qualifications.

God granted him wisdom in his youth, which made him unique in his personality, as he was unique in his birth and name. Wisdom is normally acquired as one grows in years, but in John's case, God granted him this in his early years.

God also granted him compassion as a special gift implanted in his very nature. He did not have to train or persuade himself to be compassionate. Such compassion is necessary for a prophet who takes care of people's hearts and souls, trying always to set them on the course of goodness with ease.

John was further granted purity and cleanliness of heart and practice. Thus, he was able to counter the effects of other people's hard natures and wickedness and so help them grow in purity.

The other quality that served John well was his righteousness. He keenly sensed his close tie with God, and knew that He was not only watching him but with him in all situations, public or private. That completes the qualities that John was given to qualify him for his task. They were given to him when he was still in his youth, so that he could inherit his father, who had appealed to God to give him an heir.

Thus the account of John is brought to its conclusion with two verses highlighting the fact that he was *"kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again."* (Verses 14-15) As we see in this short passage, the line he followed throughout his life was clearly laid out. No further details of the story of Zachariah requesting a son, nor of that son John could have provided anything extra in as much as the lessons we can draw are concerned. Hence it is brought to a close.

## Suspending the Law of Procreation

John's birth, remarkable as it is, is not however the most wonderful that the *sūrah* tells us about. It has another story to tell, even more remarkable and wonderful. This is the birth of Jesus. The *sūrah* gives its account of John's birth first, with its remarkable aspect of him being born to a barren mother and a father well advanced in years. Jesus, on the other hand, was born to a virgin mother who had had no intimate contact with any man in her life. This is indeed far more wonderful and remarkable.

If we leave aside for a moment the creation of man in his present form and in the way God tells us of how He created him, the birth of Jesus, son of Mary, should be considered the most remarkable event of human history. It is an event that has no parallel.

Man did not witness his own creation, a remarkable event that heralded human life. That involved the creation of the first man ever to exist, born of no father and no mother. Countless centuries then passed before divine wisdom willed to bring about a second most remarkable event. This was the birth of Jesus without a father. In this, the event does not follow the pattern that subsequently applied after the creation of the first human being. This new birth was witnessed by human beings and remained an event of great importance to which people's attentions were drawn generation after generation. Needless to say, the creation of the first human being could not have been witnessed by people, as it was this creation that first ushered in human life on earth.

Divine wisdom has determined that life continues through procreation, involving the union of a male and a female. This applies to all species without exception. Even in the case of species where there are no fully distinguished males and females, every creature has male and female cells in its body. This law of procreation continued in operation for endless periods of time. People thought it was the only method of creation, forgetting the first event that brought man into existence, because that event was special, and could not be compared with procreation.

It was God's will, then, to give them this example of the creation of Jesus, son of Mary, to remind people of His free-will and unrestrained power which cannot be subject to the laws He sets in operation. Jesus' birth has not been repeated in history, because it is only proper that God's law should come into operation and be seen with all its effects. This single event remains for all time indisputable evidence that God's will is always free, unshackled by any factor whatsoever. Hence God says of Jesus: "*We will make him a sign for mankind.*" (Verse 21)

Because the event was so remarkable and unfamiliar, some people could not conceive of how it could happen and could not appreciate the wisdom of publicizing

it in this way. Hence, they attributed to Jesus, son of Mary, qualities of divinity, inventing tales and superstitions about his birth. They thus fell foul of God's purpose, distorting the pure faith based on God's oneness.

In this *sūrah*, the Qur'ān relates how this remarkable event took place, highlighting its great significance and showing such tales and superstitions to be absolutely false. The *sūrah* relates the story in a series of highly emotional scenes, which leave a profound effect on anyone who reads them: it is as though he is witnessing the events as they take place.

### The Most Remarkable Birth in History

*Relate in the book [the story of] Mary and how she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, where she kept herself in seclusion from them. We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being. She said: May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.' 'I am but an emissary of your Lord,' he said, [and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity. 'She said: 'How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?' He answered: 'Thus did your Lord speak: This is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us. It is a matter [We have] decreed.'* (Verses 16-21)

This is the first scene: Mary is a young, virgin woman, a saint whose mother vowed, when she was still an unborn baby, that she would serve in the temple. No one had ever witnessed from her anything other than perfect purity and chastity. In fact people associated her with Aaron, the first of the temple's devout servants. For generations, her family were renowned for being God-fearing and a model of piety.

We see this young woman going off to be alone. The *sūrah* does not specify why she wanted to be alone, but there must have been something to so require her to be by herself, unseen by anyone else. It may have been a very private matter that girls normally experience.

Once she is alone, screened from everyone and assured of complete privacy, she receives a great shock. She finds in front of her a man in his prime: "*We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being.*" (Verse 17) She is both shocked and shaken, which is only the normal reaction of a chaste virgin. Her immediate reaction is to seek God's protection and to appeal to Him for support. She appeals to the man's sense of fearing God. She reminds him of God so that he may be restrained from attempting anything evil. So she says to him: "*May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.*" (Verse 18) Should he be a God-fearing person, he would respond to the mere mention of God's name and His attribute of mercy. He would then resist any evil motive and restrain his

desire.

We can visualize this young woman, a pure devout virgin, and what she might have gone through in that moment when she was surprised by a young man appearing before her in her place of privacy. This was her first shock.

Yet what answer does she receive? The man tells her something she could never have imagined: *"I am but an emissary of your Lord," he said, "[and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity."* (Verse 19) We can imagine the panic and shock that must have overwhelmed Mary when that perfect man, whom she did not yet know to be an emissary from her Lord, spoke to her. For all she knew, he might have been an assailant playing a trick on her, exploiting her innocence. Yet what he tells her, in the privacy of that place, well away from others, is that he wants to give her a child. How shocked must Mary have been? We cannot even begin to imagine. That is the second great shock for Mary.

*"She said: How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?"* (Verse 20) Now she speaks frankly and plainly to him. She is all alone with him, and the reason why he surprised her is now clear. She does not know yet how he will give her a child. Nor does it make matters any easier or less worrying for her that he has declared himself to be God's emissary. Nothing that he says about that child, stating that he will be pure and that nothing evil will be attached to his birth or moral conduct, is sufficient to reassure her. It is a situation where modesty is completely out of place. She must have the matter out and clear at once. How, then, could she have a child when she is a virgin, untouched by any man? She is not a loose woman about to agree to a sexual act that could produce a child.

Her questioning in this fashion suggests that up to that moment she could not conceive of any way by which that person could give her a child except the familiar way of sexual contact between a male and a female. This is the natural way, according to human perception.

*"He answered: Thus did your Lord speak. That is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us."* (Verse 21) This miraculous event that Mary cannot even begin to imagine is easy for God to accomplish. His is the power that says to anything, 'Be,' and it immediately exists. Hence, everything is easy for Him, whether it is accomplished according to natural laws that are familiar to man or in some other fashion. The angel, who is referred to in this instance as 'the Spirit' tells her that it is God who says that it is easy for Him, and that He wants this unique and remarkable event to be a sign for all mankind, making clear to them His power and free, unshackled will. He also wants this child to be a mercy and a blessing to the Israelites in the first place and to all humanity thereafter. It is by showing them this

miraculous event that they know Him, believe in Him and worship Him, seeking to earn His pleasure.

Thus ends the dialogue between the trusted angel and the Virgin Mary. The *sūrah* does not mention what happened after that exchange, leaving a gap in the story, which frequently happens in the Qur'ān. But it does mention that what the angel said to Mary about the birth of her son is a matter that has been settled and finalized. *"It is a matter [We have] decreed."* (Verse 21) But how? Nothing is mentioned here by way of explanation.

However, we can refer here to the use of the phrase, Our Spirit, which is mentioned in this instance and in another *sūrah*. Here it occurs in the verse: *"We, then, sent to her Our Spirit, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being."* (Verse 17) In the other context, the phrase occurs as follows: *"And Mary, daughter of `Imrān, who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed of Our Spirit into her."* (66: 12)

Now the question arises as to whether the reference in these two *sūrahs* is to the same thing or not. From our point of view, the references would appear to be different on each occasion. In the present *sūrah*, Mary, it refers to Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, who was God's emissary to Mary. In *Sūrah* 66, The Prohibition, it refers to the spirit that God breathed into Adam when He created him to make of him a human being. He again breathed of it into Mary to bring about her conception. It is this divine breathing of the spirit that gives life with all its human characteristics. These include the qualities and faculties that enable man to be in contact with the Supreme Society, while also giving him his human feelings, intellect, thought, emotions and inspiration. In Mary's case, Gabriel carried this breath of the spirit from God to place it into her. We must also add however that we do not know anything about the nature of the spirit, neither when it refers to Gabriel himself, nor when it has a different connotation. Both belong to the realm which is beyond our perception. We simply try to understand the relevant text in the two *sūrahs* and consider that the usage differs in each case.

The story then continues, and we are shown the outcome of all this. We see this baffled virgin going through something much harder for her: *"So she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place. And the throes of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. [In her anguish] she cried: 'Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!'"* (Verses 22-23) This was the third great shock Mary received.

### **How Jesus Was Born**

The *sūrah* does not mention how she conceived Jesus or the length of her pregnancy. It gives no details about whether it was an ordinary pregnancy, with the breathing of spirit into Mary starting the life process within the egg, which then goes

through the growth process, with the implantation of the conceived egg that becomes a germ-cell then a morsel, to which bones are then added before they are covered with flesh. That would mean that the foetus completed its normal period of nine-months gestation. All this is possible. Equally possible in this special case is that the female egg took a different course so as to reduce the different stages of growth, and ensure the development of the foetus so rapidly that the period of pregnancy was made much shorter. There is nothing in the text of the *sūrah* to indicate either. Hence, there is no point in pursuing this avenue further.

As we read on, we see Mary in a remote place, away from her family and community. She is now in a far more terrible situation. Previously, she was up against all that her upbringing has instilled in her of moral values; but that was an internal struggle with herself. Now she is about to be faced with a public scandal. Besides, she was in great physical pain added to her psychological distress. In the midst of labour and childbirth she is driven to lean against the trunk of a palm tree. She is all alone, a true virgin and suffering the pains of childbirth, not knowing about how to cope with the situation and having none to give her even moral support. In her anguish she cries: *"Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!"* (Verse 23) We almost see her face, feel her confusion, and sense her agony as she wishes herself into oblivion.

In the midst of all this anguish, she is confronted with the greatest surprise:

*But [a voice] from below cried out to her: Do not give in to grief. Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you. And if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will drop you fresh ripe dates. So eat and drink and be happy. Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being.'* (Verses 24-26)

O God! What is happening here! A child born this very moment crying out to her, comforting her and reaffirming her bond with her Lord, directing her as to how to obtain food and drink, and providing her with the argument and evidence to use when she sees people.

The first thing the voice says to her is that she must not grieve. *"Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you."* (Verse 24) God has not forsaken you. Indeed, He has made this brook run at your feet, which most probably started its course at that very moment, either from a spring or from a high point nearby. Besides, the palm tree against which she leant provided food. She only need to shake it and *"it will drop you fresh ripe dates."* (Verse 25) Thus she has essential food and water. Sweet food is good for a mother who has just delivered her baby. Dates are perhaps the best food she could eat. *"So eat and drink and be happy."* (Verse 26) All the necessary

reassurance is given her.

Then she is told how to deal with her predicament when she meets other people. She need only impart to anyone by signal, not words, that she has made a vow not to speak to anyone. She is in full and complete devotion which prevents her from answering any questions: *"Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being."* (Verse 26)

We imagine that her surprise lingered long, and that she took a while to take stock of her situation and stretch her hand to the trunk of the tree and shake it for her meal of dates. But when she fully realized what was happening, she was reassured that God would not abandon her. Indeed, He had given her all the proof she needed. He gave her a child who spoke from the moment of his birth to explain the miracle that had brought him into being.

### **As Mary Confronts Her People**

Then we glimpse a highly dramatic scene: *"She went to her people carrying the child."* (Verse 27) We can easily imagine the great surprise on their faces. Most probably, these were her immediate family. They had known their daughter, Mary, to be exemplary in her purity. She was indeed a virgin dedicated to worship in the temple; but there she was with a baby in her arms. Hence their exclamation: *"Mary, you have indeed done an amazing thing! Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!"* (Verses 27-28)

They start by reproaching her: *"You have done an amazing thing!"* It is a wicked, most dreadful thing that you have perpetrated. But then their reproach takes a different tone, adding sarcasm and ridicule. They call her: 'Sister of Aaron!' Aaron was a prophet who was in charge of the Temple, passing this duty to his offspring. Mary was often associated with Aaron because of her exemplary devotion in the service of the Temple. How ironic that the girl associated with Aaron's perfect devotion should perpetrate such an enormity: *"Your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!"* (Verse 28) Such a sin is only committed by loose women and prostitutes.

In her own defence, Mary says nothing other than carrying out what her amazing child has instructed her to say: *"But she pointed to the child."* (Verse 29) Again we are left to imagine their amazement, anger and fury at this young woman, virgin as she was, carrying her child openly in her arms, and then refusing to answer their questions, only pointing to the child and indicating that they should ask him. *"They said: How can we talk to a babe in the cradle?"* (Verse 29) But then a supernatural event occurs again and the baby speaks out:

*Whereupon he said: I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet, and made me blessed wherever I may be. He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, not haughty or bereft of grace. Peace was on me on the day when I was born, and [will be on me] on the day of my death and on the day when I shall be raised to life again.' (Verses 30-33)*

Thus Jesus declared his status: a servant of God. He is not God's son, as some sects claim; nor was he divine as claimed by others, nor one of a Trinity constituting one God while being three, as claimed by others. He declares that God has made him a prophet, which means that he was neither God's son nor partner. God has blessed him and enjoined him to keep his prayers and be charitable throughout his life.

He is also enjoined to be very kind towards his mother and to show humility to his people. This means that he has a limited life duration, he dies and will be resurrected. God has bestowed on him peace, security and reassurance on the day of his birth, the day of his death and the day of his resurrection. The statement is very clear here in respect of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It admits no argument or different interpretation.

The Qur'ān does not add anything beyond painting this scene. It does not tell us how the people reacted to this miraculous event. Nor does it inform us what happened to Mary and her remarkable son after that. It does not mention anything about the time when he became a prophet. It simply says, quoting Jesus: "*He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet.*" (Verse 30) The theme here is the birth of Jesus. Hence, when the *sūrah* has given its account of his birth, culminating in that miraculous scene, with Jesus talking to Mary's family, the scene is drawn to a close. This is followed by an emphatic statement of the truth concerning Jesus:

*Such was, in the words of truth, Jesus the son of Mary, about whose nature they still dispute. It is not conceivable that God should beget a son. Limitless is He in His glory! When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, Be,' and it is. God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path. (Verses 34-36)*

### **The Full Truth about Jesus**

This is the whole truth about Jesus. It has nothing of the claims advanced by those who assign to him a divine nature, or those who make false accusations against his mother. What God states here is the complete truth, giving details of his origin and birth. There is no room for doubt or argument. It is not for God to take for Himself a son. Most sublime is He in His glory. He needs no son, because offspring are only needed by mortals, so that their line of existence is continued. Alternatively,

offspring are needed by the weak so that they have the support of their children against their enemies. But God is immortal, and able to do what He wills, having power over all things. All creatures come into existence when He says to them, 'Be'. This means that He accomplishes any purpose of His merely by willing it to take place, not by having help from a son or partner.

Jesus concludes his words by declaring the truth that God is his Lord and the Lord of all mankind. Hence, they must worship Him alone, assigning to Him no partners: *"God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path."* (Verse 36) With this statement made by Jesus himself, and with this account of his birth there is no room left for legend or myth in the whole affair. This is the full import of his statement and the way it is phrased.

The *sūrah* then refers to the conflicting views and beliefs advanced by various groups concerning Jesus, his birth, nature and status. All are highly objectionable as compared with the clear and simple truth.

*"Yet are the sects at variance among themselves."* (Verse 37) Constantine, the Roman Emperor, held one of three famous synods, attended by 2,170 bishops. They differed a great deal about Jesus. Each group expressed a certain view. Some said that he was God who descended to earth in person, giving life to whomever He willed and caused others to die, before returning to heaven. Some said that he was God's son, while others claimed that he was one of the three entities forming the Godhead: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A different group claimed that he was one of three deities: God was one, Jesus another and his mother the third. However, another group said that Jesus was God's servant, messenger, spirit and word. Others made yet different claims. All in all, no more than 308 agreed on any one view. The Emperor decided to support that view, expelling all those who did not agree, and persecuting those who opposed it, particularly those who advocated God's oneness.

Since such deviant beliefs were established by synods composed of large numbers of bishops, the *sūrah* warns unbelievers about what happens to those who deviate from the faith based on God's oneness. This warning tells them of a scene that will take place on a great and eventful day witnessed by much larger numbers:

*Woe, then, to the unbelievers when a momentous day arrives. How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error. Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress, when everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief (Verses 37-39)*

Woe to them when they witness a momentous day, referred to here in an indefinite mode to impart to it a more awesome air. It is a day witnessed by all human beings and *jinn*, as well as the angels. All shall stand in the presence of God

Almighty, to whom the unbelievers ascribe partners.

The *sūrah* then derides them for turning away from all the pointers to the right guidance in this present life. On that day theirs will be the sharpest of hearing and seeing: *"How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error."* (Verse 38) Their situation is amazing: they do not hear or see when hearing and seeing are the means to discern guidance and follow it in order to escape doom. Yet they hear and see extremely well when these faculties are used to stress their humiliation. They will be made to hear what they dislike and see what they are wont to avoid.

*"Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress."* (Verse 39) That is a day when distress will be at its most acute, when distress will be a quality of the day itself. They need to be warned, because such distress is of no use to anyone: *"When everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief"* (Verse 39) It is as though the day is directly linked to their unbelief and heedlessness.

God's Messenger is commanded to warn people against that day, which will come, no doubt. For, everything and everyone on earth shall return to God, like inheritance that reverts to the Only Heir: *"We alone shall remain after the earth and all who live on it have passed away. To Us they shall all return."* (Verse 40)

## 2

# A Long Line of Prophets

*Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. (41)*

وَأذْكَرٌ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٤١﴾

*He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? (42)*

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ لِمَ تَعْبُدُ مَا لَا  
يَسْمَعُ وَلَا يُبْصِرُ وَلَا يُغْنِي عَنْكَ شَيْئًا

*My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. (43)*

﴿٤٢﴾  
يَأْتِبْتِ إِنِّي قَدْ جَاءَنِي مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَمْ  
يَأْتِكَ فَاتَّبِعْنِي أَهْدِكَ صِرَاطًا سَوِيًّا ﴿٤٣﴾

*My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. (44)*

يَأْتِبْتِ لَا تَعْبُدِ الشَّيْطَانَ ۗ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ  
كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ عَصِيًّا ﴿٤٤﴾

*My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.' (45)*

يَأْتِبْتِ إِنِّي أَخَافُ أَنْ يَمَسَّكَ عَذَابٌ مِّنْ  
الرَّحْمَنِ فَتَكُونَ لِلشَّيْطَانِ وَلِيًّا ﴿٤٥﴾

*He answered: 'Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!' (46)*

قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَ أَنْتَ عَنْ ءِالِهَتِي يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ  
لَئِنْ لَّمْ تَنْتَهَ لِأَرْجُمَنَّكَ ۖ وَاهْجُرْنِي مَلِيًّا

Abraham replied: 'Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. (47)

But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest.' (48)

When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. (49)

We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying] the truth. (50)

And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. (51)

We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. (52)

We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet. (53)

٤٦

قَالَ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكَ سَأَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكَ رَبِّي

إِنَّهُ كَانَ بِي حَفِيًّا

وَأَعْتَرْتُكُمْ وَمَا تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ  
وَأَدْعُوا رَبِّي عَسَىٰ أَلَّا أَكُونَ بِدُعَاءِ رَبِّي

شَقِيًّا

فَلَمَّا أَعْتَرَهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ  
وَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ كُلًّا جَعَلْنَا

نَبِيًّا

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِنَا وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ لِسَانَ

صِدْقٍ عَلِيًّا

وَأَذْكُرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ مُوسَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مُخْلَصًا

وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا

وَنُنَادِيهِ مِنْ جَانِبِ الطُّورِ الْأَيْمَنِ

وَقَرَّبْنَاهُ نَجِيًّا

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ مِنْ رَحْمَتِنَا أَخَاهُ هَارُونَ نَبِيًّا

*And mention in the Book Ismael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. (54)*

*He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him. (55)*

*And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. (56)*

*We raised him to a lofty station. (57)*

*These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings — of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We had guided and chosen. When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping. (58)*

*They were succeeded by generations who neglected their prayers and followed only their lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.*

٥٣

وَأذْكَرَ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥٤﴾

وَكَانَ يَأْمُرُ أَهْلَهُ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَكَانَ  
عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ مَرْضِيًّا ﴿٥٥﴾

وَأذْكَرَ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِدْرِيسَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥٦﴾

وَرَفَعْنَاهُ مَكَانًا عَلِيًّا ﴿٥٧﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ  
مِن ذُرِّيَةِ آدَمَ وَمِمَّنْ حَمَلْنَا مَعَ نُوحٍ  
وَمِن ذُرِّيَةِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْرَائِيلَ وَمِمَّنْ  
هَدَيْنَا وَأَجْتَبَيْنَا ۚ إِذَا تُلِيٰ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُ  
الرَّحْمَنِ خَرُّوا سُجَّدًا بُكِيًّا ﴿٥٨﴾

﴿ فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ أَضَاعُوا  
الصَّلَاةَ وَاتَّبَعُوا الشَّهْوَاتِ ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَلْقَوْنَ

(59)

*Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, believe and do righteous deeds. These will enter the Garden and will not be wronged in any way:*  
(60)

*the gardens of Eden which [God] the Most Merciful has promised to His servants, in the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Indeed, His promise is certain of fulfilment.* (61)

*There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace. And their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening.* (62)

*Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit.* (63)

*We descend only by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between. Never does your Lord forget anything.* (64)

*He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?* (65)

غَيًّا ﴿٥٩﴾

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا  
فَأُولَئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ  
شَيْئًا ﴿٦٠﴾

جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ الَّتِي وَعَدَ الرَّحْمَنُ عِبَادَهُ  
بِالْغَيْبِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ وَعْدُهُ مَأْتِيًا ﴿٦١﴾  
لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا إِلَّا سَلَامًا وَهُمْ  
رِزْقُهُمْ فِيهَا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا ﴿٦٢﴾

تِلْكَ الْجَنَّةُ الَّتِي نُورِثُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا مَنْ  
كَانَ تَقِيًّا ﴿٦٣﴾

وَمَا نَنْزِلُ إِلَّا بِأَمْرِ رَبِّكَ لَهُ مَا بَيْنَ  
أَيْدِينَا وَمَا خَلْفَنَا وَمَا بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ وَمَا  
كَانَ رَبُّكَ نَسِيًّا ﴿٦٤﴾

رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا  
فَاعْبُدْهُ وَأَصْطَبِرْ لِعِبَادَتِهِ هَلْ تَعْلَمُ  
لَهُ سَمِيًّا ﴿٦٥﴾

The account given in this *sūrah* of the birth of Jesus is concluded with a statement showing the fallacy and singularity of the myth making Jesus God's son. This is a fabrication upheld by some Christians in their distorted beliefs. The *sūrah* now gives an account of part of Abraham's story, demonstrating the singularity and fallacy of pagan beliefs. Abraham is the great ancestor from whom the Arabs claim to descend. In fact the pagan Arabs claimed the custodianship of the Ka (bah, built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael.

In this account, Abraham's contented, patient and gentle character is shown in sharp relief. We see these aspects of his character in his approach and language. They are also clearly apparent in his behaviour and how he responds to his father's overbearing attitude. We also feel how God has bestowed His grace on Abraham, compensating him for his father and people, all unbelievers, with goodly offspring that beget a whole nation which has its generous share of prophets and saintly divines. Yet these are followed by generations who neglected prayers and deviated from the path shown them by Abraham to pursue their desires. Those were the unbelievers.

God describes Abraham in the Qur'ān as being 'a man of truth and a prophet'. The Arabic word, *ṣiddīq*, translated here as 'a man of truth' has a wider sense than merely being truthful. It connotes that he was always truthful and a firm believer in the truth. Both qualities fit well with his character:

*Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.'* (Verses 41-45)

It is with such a passionate appeal that Abraham addresses his father, trying to guide him to the goodness God had taught him and to which He had directed him. His appeal is an endearing one, stressing his position as a loving son. He asks him: "Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you?" (Verse 42) The normal practice is that people address their worship to someone who is more exalted, knowledgeable and stronger than man. Indeed worship is always presented to someone exalted above man's position. How is it, then, that in this case it is presented to something below the level of man, and indeed below the level of animals; something that does not hear or see anything and can cause no benefit or harm. This was the case of Abraham's father and community. They worshipped idols, just like the Arabs of the Quraysh who opposed Islam.

This is the first point in Abraham's appeal to his father. He follows it with a statement that he does not make this claim at his own behest. Rather, he makes it on the basis of true knowledge that has been vouchsafed to him by God to set him on the path of true guidance. He was certainly younger and less experienced than his father, but what had been bestowed on him from on high gave him a clear recognition of the truth. Hence he gives his advice to his father who had not received such knowledge. He wanted his father to follow suit so that he would be on the road of truth: *"My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path."* (Verse 43)

There is nothing wrong with a father following his son when this son has a direct recourse to a higher source able to give true guidance. In this case, the son is the one who follows the right way, leading only to what is good.

Having shown his father the fallacy of idol worship and outlined the source of guidance he received, which is the cornerstone of his appeal to his father, Abraham makes it clear that the way followed by his father is that of Satan. His own aim is to guide his father to the way acceptable to God, the Most Merciful. He fears that his father may incur God's anger and thus become a close friend of Satan:

*My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.* (Verses 44-45)

It is Satan who tempts people to worship idols. This means that whoever worships idols is in the same position as one who worships the devil himself. Satan, it must not be forgotten, is a rebel who disobeys God in every way. Abraham warns his father against incurring God's displeasure. For if he does, he will become Satan's friend and follower and so liable to God's punishment. This shows clearly that when God guides a servant of His to obey Him, that in itself is a blessing, while befriending Satan is a scourge leading to God's punishment and a position of utter ruin on the Day of Judgement.

### **Insolent Answer to a Compassionate Appeal**

Abraham's appeal, made in the most compassionate language, cannot however find its way to his father's hardened heart. The father retorts with rejection and threats:

*Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!* (Verse 46)

His father's answer was harsh, arrogant and threatening. He considered Abraham's rejection of idols to be impertinent. It was a crime for which Abraham deserved a cruel punishment: i.e. death by stoning. Hence, he advised him to stay away, or else punishment would be forthcoming.

It is with such ignorance and cruelty that the father replies to the son's passionate and polite appeal. No regard is given for the son's care and concern for his father. This is indeed the pattern of response that advocates of faith receive from those who are hardened by disbelief and lack of guidance.

Abraham, however, does not allow anger to dictate his attitude. He does not lose sight of his dutifulness to his father. Hence, he continues to address him with respect and compassion:

*Abraham replied: Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest. (Verses 47-48)*

Abraham makes it clear that he will not respond to the threat, nor will he indulge in futile argument. He promises his father to pray to God to forgive him and not to punish him by allowing him to go further astray. He will pray to God to have mercy on his father and guide him to the truth. He tells him that he is used to God's generous favours, as He answers his prayers. Then he adds that if his own presence and appeal irritate his father, then he will withdraw, leave his father and people, abandoning the deities they invoke instead of God. He will only worship God alone, hoping that by doing so he will avoid being unblest. Such is a believer's politeness and humility. Abraham does not feel that he is deserving of favours from God more than being spared misery, unhappiness and withdrawal of blessings.

Thus Abraham left his father, his community and homeland, as well as their idols and worship practices. God, however, blessed him with offspring and gave him what was better than that which he had sacrificed.

*When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth. (Verses 49-50)*

Isaac was Abraham's son, born to him by his wife Sarah who, prior to his birth, was childless. Jacob was Isaac's son, but he is mentioned here as though he were Abraham's own son, because he was born during his grandfather's lifetime, growing up under his care. Thus, he was close to his grandfather, just as though he were his

own son. He learnt faith from him directly and he taught it to his own children. Both Isaac and Jacob were prophets.

*"We bestowed on them of Our mercy."* (Verse 50) This is a reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as to their offspring. They were all recipients of God's mercy, which is mentioned here as the most bounteous gift granted by God in the general ambience of the *sūrah*. Furthermore, it was the quality of God's bounty that compensated Abraham for the loss of his people and homeland, giving him reassurance in his new solitary environment. *"We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth."* (Verse 50) They were truthful in their mission, enjoying trust and honour among their people. Their word was listened to and received well.

The *sūrah* moves on, speaking about the same branch of Abraham's seed and reminding us of Moses and Aaron: *"And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet."* (Verses 51-53)

Moses is described here as one who was chosen for the task of dedication to God's call. He is identified as a prophet who is entrusted with a message that he must deliver to people. A prophet is not given the same task. He is an advocate of faith which he receives from God directly. Among the Children of Israel there were many prophets who were given the task of advocating the message delivered by Moses and judging among people according to the Torah revealed to him by God: *"Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light. By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses."* (5: 44)

The grace granted to Moses is highlighted as he was called out from the right side of Mount Sinai. [That was the right side of Moses as he stood at that moment facing the Mount.] He was drawn so close as to be spoken to in communion. We do not know how this communication took place, or how Moses understood it. Was it a voice heard by Moses through his ears in the normal way, or was it an address received by his whole being. Nor do we know how God prepared Moses to receive His own words. But we believe that all this took place. It is simply very easy for God to accomplish it, bringing His servant into communion with Him while at the same time retaining his humanity. We must not forget that man acquired his status with the breathing in of God's spirit into him.<sup>§</sup>

The *sūrah* mentions how God bestowed His mercy on Moses by giving him the

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<sup>§</sup> For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

support of Aaron, his brother, whom God also made a prophet. It was Moses who requested this help and God granted it: *“My brother Aaron is far better in speech than I am. Send him, therefore, as a helper, so that he might bear witness to my speaking the truth; for I fear indeed that they will accuse me of lying.”* (28: 34) Indeed, throughout the *sūrah* there is an unmistakable air of divine mercy.

### More Prophets

Now the *sūrah* refers to the other branch of Abraham’s seed, bringing in Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, for special mention:

*And mention in the Book Ishmael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him. (Verses 54-55)*

The *sūrah* highlights a special quality of Ishmael’s, which was his being true to his promise. This is a characteristic common to all prophets and all God-fearing men and women. The fact that it is highlighted here suggests that in Ishmael’s case it must have had very special significance. Moreover, Ishmael is given the status of messenger of God, which means that he preached God’s message to the Arabs of old. Indeed he was their highest grandfather. We know that even shortly before the advent of the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, there were some individual Arabs who believed in one God. Most probably they were the last remnants of Ishmael’s followers.

The *sūrah* also mentions that the fundamentals of his faith included prayer and *zakāt*, which he ordered his family and his people to observe. Moreover, the *sūrah* leaves us in no doubt that Ishmael earned God’s pleasure, which imparts a sense of contentment and satisfaction to anyone. This contentment is another aspect that permeates the whole *sūrah*, in the same way as mercy. In fact the two aspects of mercy and contentment are mutually related.

The last prophet to be mentioned in this *sūrah* is Idrīs: *“And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. We raised him to a lofty station.”* (Verses 56-57) We have no way of determining during which period of history Idrīs lived. Most probably he was ahead of Abraham. He was not one of the Jewish prophets. There is no mention of him in the Jewish books. The Qur’ān describes him as a man of truth and a prophet. It records the fact that God granted him honour and made him worthy of praise, elevating him to a lofty position.

There is a view we would like to mention here without suggesting whether it is true or false. Some Egyptologists suggest that Idrīs is an Arabicized form of Osiris in

the same way as Yohanna is Arabicized as Yaḥyā, and Eliesha as Al-Yasa`. We know that around Osiris many a legend has been woven. It is said that old Egyptians believed that he was elevated to heaven where he was established on a throne. Whoever, after death, is found to have to his credit more good deeds in this life than bad ones will join Osiris who has become an Egyptian deity. He is also said to have taught the Egyptians all that they knew before he was elevated to heaven.

Be that as it may, we confine ourselves to what the Qur'ān states about Idrīs, without indulging in speculation. We only say that it is more probable that he lived before the time of Abraham.

The *sūrah* mentions all these prophets in order to compare them, a group of God-fearing believers, with later generations of pagan Arabs and unbelieving Israelites. The gulf separating the two is vast. There is nothing to bring the newcomers close to their ancestors.

*These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings – of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We had guided and chosen. When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping. They were succeeded by generations who neglected their prayers and followed only their lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion. (Verses 58-59)*

In this scene of the role of prophethood in human history, we see only the main features delineated: *of the seed of Adam,* and *of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah,* and also *'of the seed of Abraham and Israel.'* Adam's seed includes all, and Noah refers to all who came after him, while Abraham combines the two major branches of prophethood: Jacob as the head of the Israelite tree and Ishmael to whom the Arabs belong and from among whom came the last of all prophets.

Those prophets together with those from among their offspring whom God guided and chose of pious people share a main quality in common: *"When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping."* (Verse 58) They are truly God-fearing, very sensitive to what pleases or displeases God. They shudder when His revelations are recited. This sensation is so strong that they cannot express their inner feelings in words. Their eyes are tearful and they fall down prostrating themselves before God and weep.

Yet such highly God-fearing people are succeeded by generations that are distant from God, by people who neglect their prayer and deny it as a duty incumbent on them. Instead, they follow only their lusts and indulge in every loose activity. The

difference is so clear and the contrast complete.

The *sūrah* warns those who turned away from the path followed by their God-fearing forefathers, and shows them that they are bound to lose their way and end in ruin. Indeed, their end looms large: *“These will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.”* (Verse 59) Disillusion will lead them into error, and error will take them to utter destruction.

### God’s Door Remains Open

The *sūrah* makes it clear that the door remains wide open for all who wish to repent and mend their ways. Through that door comes the scent of God’s mercy and the aura of abounding grace:

*Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, believe and do righteous deeds. These will enter the Garden and will not be wronged in any way: the gardens of Eden which [God] the Most Merciful has promised to His servants, in the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Indeed, His promise is certain of fulfilment. There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace. And their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening. Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit. (Verses 60-63)*

Repentance that initiates a sincere acceptance of the divine faith and good works, thus making its positive significance a clear reality, ensures escape from that ruinous fate. Those who resort to such repentance will not end up in disillusion, but will rather go to heaven, where they are subjected to no wrong. They go there for permanent abode. God has promised entry into this garden to His servants and they believed in it before they could ever see it, because God’s promise always comes true.

The *sūrah* then draws an image of heaven and its dwellers: *“There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace.”* (Verse 62) Their talk is free of idle remarks, loud noise, futile argument. It is a conversation when only one type of voice is heard. It is the type that fits in with this pleasant atmosphere, full of contentment. That is the voice of peace. Provisions are certain to come in this heaven, without the need for hard work, worry or anxiety. They will never be exhausted: *“Their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening.”* (Verse 62) In such a blissful atmosphere, requests, demands and worries are out of place.

*“Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit.”* (Verse 63) Anyone who wishes to share in this inheritance is aware of the way to ensure it: repentance, firm belief and good works. Descent and ancestry are of no avail. Certain people descended from those God-fearing prophets and the goodly people who followed divine guidance and whom God selected for honour, but their

descendants neglected their prayers and followed their own wanton desires. Their descent benefited them nothing. They are certain to end in disillusion.

### God's Absolute Lordship

This passage of the *sūrah* ends with a declaration of God's total Lordship of the universe. Hence, people are directed to worship Him alone and to bear with patience the hard tasks involved. Furthermore, the possibility of anyone having something in common with God is absolutely negated.

*We descend only by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between. Never does your Lord forget anything. He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His? (Verses 64-65)*

Reports are unanimous that the angel Gabriel was ordered to say the first statement to the Prophet: *"We descend only by the command of your Lord."* (Verse 64) This was in reply to the Prophet when he felt that revelation was slow in coming. In fact Gabriel had not come to see him for some time, and he experienced a feeling of loneliness, keenly missing the angel whom he loved. Gabriel was then ordered by God to tell him: *"We descend only by the command of your Lord."* He conducts all our affairs: *"To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between."* (Verse 64) He forgets nothing. Revelations are bestowed when He in His wisdom wills that they be bestowed.

The verse ends with the statement: *"Never does your Lord forget anything."* (Verse 64) It is fitting that this comment should be followed with the injunction to worship God alone and remain steadfast, declaring at the same time His Lordship over all things: *"He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them."* (Verse 65) No one else has any share in this Lordship.

*"Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship."* (Verse 65) Worship Him and persevere in shouldering the responsibilities that such worship entails. These include the responsibility of attaining the high standard that allows one to present oneself before Him and of maintaining this high standard. Worship Him alone and mobilize all your abilities and potential for meeting Him and for learning from that sublime source. This is a hard task, requiring one to free oneself of all restrictions and responsibilities, activities and distractions. Yet this task is coupled with a pleasure that cannot be fully appreciated except by those who have experienced it. Yet the pleasure cannot be gained except by those who rise to the task and fulfil it with the determination it deserves. Dedication is the key word here, and

without dedication, the pleasure will not be forthcoming, nor the results one hopes for.

*“Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship,”* remembering that worship in Islam does not denote merely the rituals of worship. It includes all activities, feelings, intentions and thoughts. It is hard to direct all these towards heaven and make their aim the winning of God’s pleasure. As it is hard, it requires perseverance. It requires that one directs every human activity on earth to pleasing God, ensuring that it remains free of all restrictions, temptations and desires.

Thus we see how Islam is truly a comprehensive system for life. When man implements this system, feeling that whatever he does, large or small, is meant as worship of God, he rises to the pure and enlightened level of worship. Such a system requires, for its proper fulfilment, perseverance and endurance at the time of suffering.

The command is given to us all that we must *“worship Him alone.”* He is the only One in the universe who deserves to be the recipient of our worship. The passage concludes with the rhetorical question: *“Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?”* (Verse 65) This question also asks whether we know any equal to God. Supreme is He above all things!

## 3

## Two Interlinked Lives

*'What!' says man, 'When I am once dead, shall I be raised up alive?' (66)*

*Does not man remember that We earlier created him, when he was nothing? (67)*

*By your Lord, We shall most certainly bring them forth together with the evil ones, and then We shall most certainly gather them, on their knees, around hell; (68)*

*and thereupon We shall drag out from every group those who had been most obstinate in their rebellion against the Most Merciful. (69)*

*For, indeed, We know best who most deserve to be burnt in the fire of hell. (70)*

*There is not one among you who shall not pass over it: this is, for your Lord, a decree that must be fulfilled. (71)*

*But We shall save those who are God-fearing, and leave the wrongdoers there, on their knees. (72)*

وَيَقُولُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَإِذَا مَا مِتُّ لَسَوْفَ  
أُخْرَجُ حَيًّا ﴿٦٦﴾

أَوَلَا يَذْكُرُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ  
قَبْلُ وَلَمْ يَكُ شَيْئًا ﴿٦٧﴾

فَوَرَبِّكَ لَنَحْشُرَنَّهُمْ وَالشَّيَاطِينَ ثُمَّ  
لَنَحْضِرَنَّهُمْ حَوْلَ جَهَنَّمَ جِثِيًّا ﴿٦٨﴾

ثُمَّ لَنَنْزِعَنَّ مِنْ كُلِّ شِيعَةٍ أَيُّهُمْ أَشَدُّ  
عَلَى الرَّحْمَنِ عِتِيًّا ﴿٦٩﴾

ثُمَّ لَنَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِالَّذِينَ هُمْ أَوْلَىٰ بِهَا صِلِيًّا  
﴿٧٠﴾

وَإِنْ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا وَارِدُهَا كَانَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ  
حَتْمًا مَّقْضِيًّا ﴿٧١﴾

ثُمَّ نُنَجِّي الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا وَنَذَرُ الظَّالِمِينَ  
فِيهَا جِثِيًّا ﴿٧٢﴾

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?' (73)

How many a generation have We destroyed before their time, who were superior in material riches and in splendour. (74)

Say: As for those who live in error, may the Most Merciful lengthen their span of life! But when they see the fulfilment of that of which they have been forewarned, be it suffering or the Last Hour, they will realize who is worst in position and weaker in forces. (75)

God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns. (76)

Have you ever considered [the case of] the one who denies Our signs and boasts: 'I shall surely be given wealth and children!' (77)

Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception? Or has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful? (78)

By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering, (79)

وَإِذَا تُلِيٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايٰتُنَا بَيِّنٰتٍ قَالَ الَّذِيْنَ  
كَفَرُوْا لِلَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا اىُّ الْفَرِيْقَيْنِ خَيْرٌ  
مَّقَامًا وَّاَحْسَنُ نَدِيًّا ﴿٧٣﴾

وَكَمْ اَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِّنْ قَرْنٍ هُمْ اَحْسَنُ  
اَثْنًا وَّرِيْبًا ﴿٧٤﴾

قُلْ مَن كَانَ فِي الضَّلٰلَةِ فَلْيَمْدُدْ لَهُ  
الرَّحْمٰنُ مَدًّا حَتّٰى اِذَا رَاوْا مَا يُوعَدُوْنَ  
اِمَّا الْعَذَابَ وَاِمَّا السَّاعَةَ فَسَيَعْلَمُوْنَ  
مَن هُوَ شَرٌّ مَّكَانًا وَّاَضْعَفُ جُنْدًا ﴿٧٥﴾

وَيَزِيْدُ اللّٰهُ الَّذِيْنَ اَهْتَدَوْا هُدًى  
وَالْبٰقِيٰتُ الصّٰلِحٰتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ  
ثَوَابًا وَّخَيْرٌ مَّرَدًّا ﴿٧٦﴾

اَفَرءَيْتَ الَّذِيْ كَفَرَ بِءَايٰتِنَا وَقَالَ  
لَا اُوْتِيْنِ مَالًا وَّوَلَدًا ﴿٧٧﴾

اَطَّلَعَ الْغَيْبَ اَمِ اَتَّخَذَ عِنْدَ الرَّحْمٰنِ  
عَهْدًا ﴿٧٨﴾

كَلَّا سَنَكْتُبُ مَا يَقُوْلُ وَنَمُدُّ لَهُ مِّنْ  
الْعَذَابِ مَدًّا ﴿٧٩﴾

and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of, and he shall appear before Us all alone. (80)

They have taken to worshipping deities other than God, hoping that they will give them power and glory. (81)

By no means! They will renounce their worship and turn against them. (82)

Have you not seen how We let loose satanic forces upon the unbelievers to repeatedly incite them to evil? (83)

So, be not in haste: We only allow them a fixed number of days. (84)

The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests, (85)

and drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd. (86)

None will have power to intercede for them except one who has received permission from [God] the Most Merciful. (87)

They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' (88)

Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, (89)

at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! (90)

وَنَزَّهَهُ مَا يَقُولُ وَيَأْتِينَا فَرْدًا ﴿٨٠﴾

وَاتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ ءَالِهَةً لَّيَكُونُوا  
هُمَّ عِزًّا ﴿٨١﴾

كَلَّا سَيَكْفُرُونَ بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ وَيَكُونُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ  
ضِدًّا ﴿٨٢﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا الشَّيَاطِينَ عَلَى  
الْكَافِرِينَ تَؤْزُهُمْ أَزًّا ﴿٨٣﴾

فَلَا تَعْجَلْ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّمَا نَعُدُّ لَهُمْ عَدًّا  
﴿٨٤﴾

يَوْمَ نَحْشُرُ الْمُتَّقِينَ إِلَى الرَّحْمَنِ وَفْدًا ﴿٨٥﴾

وَنَسُوقُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ وَرِدًّا ﴿٨٦﴾

لَّا يَمْلِكُونَ الشَّفْعَةَ إِلَّا مَنِ اتَّخَذَ عِنْدَ  
الرَّحْمَنِ عَهْدًا ﴿٨٧﴾

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَلَدًا ﴿٨٨﴾

لَقَدْ جِئْتُمْ شَيْئًا إِدًّا ﴿٨٩﴾

تَكَادُ السَّمَوَاتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِنْهُ وَتَنْشَقُّ  
الْأَرْضُ وَخُرُّ الْجِبَالُ هَدًّا ﴿٩٠﴾

*That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, (91)*

*although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son. (92)*

*Not one of all [the beings] that are in the heavens or on earth but shall appear before the Most Merciful as a servant. (93)*

*Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers, (94)*

*and, on the Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone. (95)*

*God will certainly bestow love on those who believe and do righteous deeds. (96)*

*And so have We made [the Qur'an] easy to understand, in your own tongue, so that you may give good tidings to the God-fearing and give warning to those who are given to futile contention. (97)*

*How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them now, or hear so much as a whisper of them? (98)*

أَنْ دَعَوْا لِلرَّحْمَنِ وَلَدًا ﴿٩١﴾

وَمَا يُنْبَغِي لِلرَّحْمَنِ أَنْ يَتَّخِذَ وَلَدًا ﴿٩٢﴾

إِنْ كُلُّ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا  
ءَاتَى الرَّحْمَنَ عَبْدًا ﴿٩٣﴾

لَقَدْ أَحْصَاهُمْ وَعَدَّهُمْ عَدًّا ﴿٩٤﴾

وَكُلُّهُمْ ءَاتِيهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَرْدًا ﴿٩٥﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ  
سَيَجْعَلُ لَهُمُ الرَّحْمَنُ وُدًّا ﴿٩٦﴾

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَاهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لِتُبَشِّرَ بِهِ  
الْمُتَّقِينَ وَتُنذِرَ بِهِ قَوْمًا لُدًّا ﴿٩٧﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِّنْ قَرْنٍ هَلْ تُحِسُّ  
مِنْهُمْ مِّنْ أَحَدٍ أَوْ تَسْمَعُ لَهُمْ رِكْرًا ﴿٩٨﴾

## Overview

So far the *sūrah* has given us accounts of a number of prophets, including Zachariah and the birth of John, his son, Mary and the birth of Jesus, Abraham and his split from his community and their false deities. We have also heard about the generations that followed them, and whether they lived in accordance with the guidance God gave them or they fell into error. The *sūrah* comments on these accounts declaring that Lordship belongs solely to God, who alone deserves to be worshipped, without partners. This is the essential truth that these histories of earlier prophets bring out in full relief.

Now we look at this final passage which discusses the pagan beliefs that ascribe divinity to other beings beside God and deny resurrection. It portrays a number of scenes of the Day of Judgement and people's different destinies. These are drawn very vividly, full of action, incorporating the reactions of the whole universe, whether the heavens, earth, human beings, jinn, believers or unbelievers. The *sūrah* alternates scenes of the Day of Judgement with scenes of this life, so as to establish a real link between the two lives. Thus, our beginnings are shown to take place in this world and we see the results in the life to come, as though the gulf between them is covered in a few short verses, or even a few words. This gives us the sense that the two worlds are interlinked.

### **The Reality of Resurrection**

The passage begins with a scene in which man is shown to be astonished about the reality of resurrection. *"What!" says man, 'When I am once dead, shall I be raised up alive?'"* (Verse 66) The first point here is that this surprise is attributed to mankind in general. In fact, this same comment was expressed by many peoples during different periods of history. Hence, it is only normal that it should be attributed to the human kind in general. The surprise, or the objection results from man being oblivious of how he came into being. Where and what was he before entering this life? The fact is that he had no existence and then he began to exist. Had man remembered this fact, it would have been easier for him to visualize his return to life after death. Hence, the answer comes in the form of a rhetorical question: *"Does not man remember that We earlier created him, when he was nothing?"* (Verse 67)

This denial of the truth of resurrection is followed by an oath implying a stern warning. God, in His glory, swears by Himself, which makes this the most solemn and serious oath, that they will all be resurrected and gathered together. This is, then, a forgone conclusion: *"By your Lord, We shall most certainly bring them forth."* (Verse 68) But they will not be alone. They will be driven *"together with the evil ones."* (Verse 68) This shows them to be one category with the evil ones who always incite them to deny the truth of faith. Thus the two groups are leaders and followers.

At this point, a vivid picture is drawn showing them sitting on their knees around hell, in total misery and humiliation: *"Then We shall most certainly gather them, on their knees, around hell."* (Verse 68) It is a fearsome scene, with multitudes upon multitudes of people brought together to the vicinity of hell and made to sit on their knees around it, suffering its heat and watching its fierce fire burn. They expect to be thrown into it at any time. They, thus, feel their misery to be compounded with humiliation.

The humiliation is even worse in the case of those who are proud and arrogant in

this life. Hence, this image is followed with one in which we see the most hardened of these evil-doers being pulled and dragged towards it: *“Thereupon We shall drag out from every group those who had been most obstinate in their rebellion against the Most Merciful.”* (Verse 69) The sound here is stressed heavily, so that it gives an even more graphic and lifelike picture of how they are dragged out. Although the next image is left to our imagination, we nonetheless see them being thrown into hell.

God certainly knows best which people are more deserving of punishment in hell. No one is taken at random, or by chance from that huge multitude. It is God who has brought them here and He knows them all, one by one. He knows what each and every one of them deserves: *“For, indeed, We know best who most deserve to be burnt in the fire of hell.”* (Verse 70) Those, then, are the ones who will be chosen first for the fire.

The believers witness this fearful scene as they too are brought near to it: *“There is not one among you who shall not pass over it: this is, for your Lord, a decree that must be fulfilled.”* (Verse 71) They arrive there, look at hell as it burns fiercely, asking for more feed. They also see the tyrants and the hardened sinners as they are made to enter into it. The believers, however, have a different end: *“But We shall save those who are God-fearing, and leave the wrongdoers there, on their knees.”* (Verse 72)

### **What Gives Better Returns**

Now the *sūrah* leaves with us this scene of the Day of Judgement to paint an image of this world in which the unbelievers are shown behaving arrogantly towards the believers, branding them as poor and weak, and boasting about their own wealth and petty social values.

*“When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers say to those who believe: ‘Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?’* (Verse 73) These people have their own social clubs demonstrating all the material values which the wealthy and powerful are keen to emphasize in their corrupt world. By contrast, we see humble gatherings where there are no such material riches or adornments. Instead, there are only the values of faith which unite people in these other groups. The two are juxtaposed so as to fully demonstrate their contrast.

The first side stands out with its wide variety of temptations: wealth, beauty, power and influence. It uses all these to serve people’s interests, and provide them with all manner of pleasures. The second side appears too humble by comparison, yet it looks with disdain at wealth and beauty and it ridicules power and influence. It calls on people to join its ranks, without offering them any personal gain, material interest or favours that rulers and governments can provide. It simply offers them the faith, pure and simple, without adding to it any adornment. It seeks strength

through being on God's side, nothing else. In fact, it makes clear to mankind that accepting it will involve hardship, effort and struggle. Also clear is the fact that none will be rewarded for anything in this life. The reward to be expected will be in the form of being close to God, enjoying His pleasure in the life to come.

The elders of the Quraysh at the time of the Prophet used to listen to God's revelations being recited to them, but then they would say to the believers who lacked all riches: "*Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?*" (Verse 73) Which side: the elders who denied Muḥammad's message, or the humble who responded to him? Al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith, 'Amr ibn Hishām, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and their powerful clique, or Bilāl, 'Ammār, Khabbāb and their brothers, poor and deprived as they were? Had the message preached by Muḥammad been any good, would his followers be those who had no power or influence in the Quraysh society? Would they have met in a humble place like al-Arqam's house? Would his opponents be those who enjoyed all the luxuries and social prominence?

Such is worldly logic, advanced by those who have no aspiration to any truly high horizon. It is divine wisdom that keeps faith free of all adornment and superficial attraction, offering no temptation. Thus, only those who take it for its real value, without hope of immediate gain, will accept it. By contrast, those who are after wealth, worldly interests, pleasures and the like will turn away from it.

The *sūrah* comments on the boasts of those arrogant unbelievers, speaking proudly about what they enjoy in this life of pleasures and luxuries. The comment draws their attention to how earlier peoples were destroyed, despite the great riches they enjoyed: "*How many a generation have We destroyed before their time, who were superior in material riches and in splendour.*" (Verse 74) They benefited nothing by all their splendour, nor were their material privileges of any avail to them when God visited His punishment upon them.

Human beings always forget! Had they remembered and reflected, they would not have been deceived by appearances. The end suffered by one generation after another of the unbelievers of old should serve as a clear warning but people remain heedless. They continue to ignore the destiny awaiting them, should they follow in the footsteps of those who preceded them. After all, those earlier unbelievers were of greater strength and enjoyed larger followings and more wealth.

The *sūrah* then instructs the Prophet to pray against them in the form of a joint appeal to God to add to the misery to be suffered by the side which persisted in error. This is to continue until God fulfils His promise either in this life or in the life to come:

*Say: As for those who live in error, may the Most Merciful lengthen their span of life!*

*But when they see the fulfilment of that of which they have been forewarned, be it suffering or the Last Hour, they will realize who is worst in position and weaker in forces. God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns. (Verses 75-76)*

They claim that they follow better and superior guidance to that advocated by Muḥammad and his followers, and their evidence is their wealth and luxuries. Be that as it may! Muḥammad will appeal to his Lord to give increase to each side: the one in error and the one following right guidance. Then when what Muḥammad promises comes to pass, which is the triumph of the believers over those in error, or the final punishment they receive on the Day of Judgement, they will realize which of the two sides is worse in position, weaker in forces. On that day, the believers will rejoice and feel their superiority: *"God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns."* (Verse 76) This is certainly better than all that in which human beings find pleasure and enjoyment.

### **A Promise Coming True**

The *sūrah* then picks up on another type of boast and decries it also:

*Have you ever considered [the case of] the one who denies Our signs and boasts: 'I shall surely be given wealth and children!' Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception? Or has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful? By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering, and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of and he shall appear before Us all alone. (Verses 77-80)*

The immediate cause of the revelation of these verses is reported by Khabbāb ibn al-Aratt who said: "I was an ironmonger, and I had money due to be paid to me by al-ʿĀṣ ibn Wā'il. I went to him to demand payment. He said, 'By God! I am not going to repay you until you reject Muḥammad and his message.' I said, 'I shall not reject Muḥammad until you have died and been resurrected.' He said to me, 'Well! Wait then. For, when I have been resurrected after my death, I will have wealth and children. You can come to me then and I will pay you what I owe you.' God then revealed these verses."

Al-ʿĀṣ's words serve merely as an example of the ridicule with which the unbelievers responded to the call of Islam and their derision of the whole concept of resurrection. The Qur'ān highlights the singularity of his claims: *"Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception?"* (Verse 78)

That would be a good source of information, giving him knowledge of what may happen in that world. “Or has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful?” (Verse 78) In such a case, he would be certain that God’s covenant will be fulfilled. This is followed by an expression of categorical negation which, in Arabic, adds connotations of a prohibition: “By no means!” (Verse 79) He neither attained to any such realm, nor made any covenant with God. He merely rejects the truth and derides its promise.

A stern warning is, then, very apt here to stop such arrogant claims: “By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering.” (Verse 79) We will write down whatever he says, so that it is not forgotten, admitting no dispute on the Day of Judgement. This is again a merely descriptive image, because no dispute or argument is possible as God’s knowledge encompasses every little detail. Moreover, the punishment meted out to such sinners will be increased manifold, in time and volume, so as to continue without interruption.

A further image of warning is added: “and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of and he shall appear before Us all alone.” (Verse 80) Thus, everything that he speaks about of his wealth and children will be taken away from him, so that he is left with nothing. The Arabic text here, *narithuhū mā yaqūl*, gives an image of inheritance, in order to make the deprivation total, just as when an heir takes away all that a deceased person has left behind, discarding nothing. “He shall appear before Us all alone.” (Verse 80) He will have nothing of what gave him his standing in society. Thus, he will have no money, property, relatives, followers or supporters as he appears before God all alone, a powerless individual.

Have you, then, considered this person who denies God’s revelation, yet speaks about his fortunes on a day when he has no position or influence? It is a day when he will be deprived of all that gave him power in this life. This is just one type of unbelief, false claims and ridicule of the truth.

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of different aspects of unbelief:

*They have taken to worshipping deities other than God, hoping that they will give them power and glory. By no means! They will renounce their worship and turn against them. Have you not seen how We let loose satanic forces upon the unbelievers to repeatedly incite them to evil? So, be not in haste: We only allow them a fixed number of days. The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests, and drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd. None will have power to intercede for them except one who has received permission from [God] the Most Merciful. (Verses 81-87)*

Those who deny God’s revelations ascribe divinity to beings other than God, and

they will worship such false deities hoping that they will give them power, victory and glory. Some worshipped angels, while others worshipped *jinn*. They called on those whom they worshipped, appealing to them for support against their enemies. But the very angels and *jinn* they worship now denounce their action, disassociate themselves of their worship and condemn their attitude. As the Qur'ān describes their position, those who were worshipped in this present life will on the Day of Judgement "*turn against them,*" and will give a testimony that condemns the unbelievers who worshipped them.

Satanic forces, or devils, will always incite them to commit sinful actions. These forces have been given the chance to tempt and misguide human beings, ever since Satan, or *Iblīs*, requested God to allow him such opportunity. The Prophet is instructed not to precipitate matters: "*So, be not in haste.*" (Verse 84) He should not be over-grieved about them. They are given a chance, with a definite time limit, during which everything they do or say is counted and recorded. The verse here describes the accuracy of the reckoning: "*We only allow them a fixed number of days.*" (Verse 84) Perhaps we should add that this is an inadequate translation of the Arabic statement, *na`ddu lahum `addā*. In the Arabic text, the object of what is being numbered is deleted so as to give us an impression of the meticulous counting and recording of everything. This is an awesome image, because when the recording is made by God, it does not overlook or miss anything out. Someone who feels that his boss is carefully monitoring his actions so as to identify any mistake will inevitably feel uneasy and worried. So how does the person who knows that God Almighty is watching him feel?

The outcome of all this reckoning is shown in yet another image of the Day of Judgement. The believers will come to God in a procession met with honour and hospitality: "*The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests.*" (Verse 86) On the other hand, the unbelievers will be driven like cattle until they arrive at their last abode: "*And drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd.*" (Verse 86) There will be no intercession on that day, except for one who has done a good deed in this worldly life. Such a deed will be like a promise from God which He will honour. God has promised those who do good works to give them an abundant reward, and God does not fail to honour His promises.

### **Monstrous Claims by the Unbelievers**

The *sūrah* then refers to another monstrous claim often made by different unbelievers. The Arab idolaters of the past used to claim that the angels were God's daughters, while the unbelievers among the Jews claimed that Ezra was the son of

God, and the unbelievers among the Christians made the same claim for Jesus. The whole universe shudders as such false claims are alleged, because monotheism is inherent in the nature of the whole universe.

*They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself son. (Verses 88-92)*

The very sound of these verses and their rhythm add to the air of anger at this false claim. In fact the whole universe rejects this claim most vehemently. It shudders and quivers with abhorrence as it hears this falsehood against God Almighty. It is a reaction similar to that of a person who feels that his very integrity is attacked, or that the honesty of someone he loves is assailed. The shudder is common to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. In their beat, the words here show the movement of a violent quake.

As soon as the offensive word is uttered, "*They say: The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son,*" the expression of horror immediately follows: "*Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood.*" (Verse 89) Everything that is settled and stable is thus shaken. The whole universe is in anger at this false allegation against God, the Creator. The statement is shocking to everything in nature. The universe is created and functions on the basis of the basic principle of God's oneness: "*Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son.*" (Verses 89-92)

In the midst of this universal anger, a clear and definitive statement is issued:

*Not one of all [the beings] that are in the heavens or on earth but shall appear before the Most Merciful as a servant. Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers, and, on the Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone. (Verses 93-95)*

All beings that live anywhere in the heavens and on earth are servants of God, subject to His will, submitting to Him willingly. He has neither son nor partner. All are His creatures and servants.

Fear creeps into our hearts as we contemplate the significance of this statement by God, the Most High: "*Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers.*" (Verse 94) None is forgotten and none will be able to escape. "*On the*

*Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone.*" (Verse 95) God watches everyone. They will all come to Him on the Day of Resurrection, each on his or her own. None will have the support or encouragement of anyone else. Indeed, all community feeling is gone, for in front of God, everyone speaks for oneself.

In contrast with this loneliness and isolation, the believers are given a comforting, friendly surrounding: *"God will certainly bestow love on those who believe and do righteous deeds."* (Verse 96) The mention of love in this context is bound to comfort and penetrate people's hearts. It is a type of love that spreads in heaven and spills over to fill the earth and comfort people. The whole universe is given a full share of it.

Abū Hurayrah, a companion of the Prophet, reports that God's Messenger said: "When God loves a human being, He calls in Gabriel and says to him: 'Gabriel, I love this person, so you love him too.'

Gabriel then loves that person and calls out to all those living in heaven, saying: 'God loves this person, so you all love him too.' Thus all those who live in heaven start to love that person. He will also be loved on earth. But if God dislikes someone, He also calls in Gabriel and says: 'Gabriel, I dislike this person, so you hate him too.' Gabriel then hates that person and calls out to all those living in heaven, saying: 'God dislikes this person, so you all hate him too.' Thus all those who live in heaven start to hate that person. He will also be hated on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Aḥmad]

This happy news to the believers and this warning to those who deny the truth and argue against it are the message the Qur'ān gives. God has made the Qur'ān easy for the Arabs to read and understand, as He has put it in His Messenger's own language: *"And so have We made [the Qur'ān] easy to understand, in your own tongue, so that you may give good tidings to the God-fearing and give warning to those who are given to futile contention."* (Verse 97)

The *sūrah* concludes with a scene that we contemplate in our minds for a long time, hardly able to shift our gaze:

*How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them now, or hear so much as a whisper of them?* (Verse 98)

This scene begins with a violent shock before overwhelming us with a total and deep silence. It is as though it takes us to the valley of death to show us how earlier people met their fate. In that great valley which stretches much further than the eyes can see, our minds imagine the life that used to prosper on earth, the people that moved about everywhere, their feelings, hopes and aspirations. But all that is gone.

Complete silence pervades. For death has overtaken all, leaving only a host of rotting cadavers. Not a single one stirs, not a single sound, not even a breath. *“Can you find a single one of them now?”* (Verse 98) Look around and see. *“Or can you hear so much as a whisper of them?”* (Verse 98) Listen as much as you wish. There is nothing but a deadly silence. None remain except the One who never dies. Eternal He is and limitless in His glory.