

SŪRAH 38

Şād

Prologue

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* addresses three issues: God's oneness, revelation, and the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. These three issues are discussed in its first part comprising 16 verses. Here the Makkan elders' amazement at the Prophet's call on them to believe in God's oneness and that he was chosen by God to be His Messenger is described. *"They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?'"* (Verses 4-8) In these verses we are also told how they met God's warnings of punishment in the life to come: *"They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning."* (Verse 16)

Basically, they found it impossible to believe that God would choose one of their own number to deliver His message and moreover that this person should be Muḥammad ibn Abdullah who had not held a position of authority among them. Therefore, in reply to their question about His choice, God too questions them: *"Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace, the Almighty, the Munificent? Or do they have control over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them? Let them, then, try to ascend by all conceivable means."* (Verses 9-10) This tells them that when God wishes to open the gates of His mercy to anyone, nothing can withhold it. They are further told that human beings own nothing in the heavens and earth; it is a matter of God's sustenance and mercy, which He bestows on whomever He wishes. It is He who chooses those He knows to deserve His bounty and bestows on them whatever He will, without limit or restriction.

Within this context the *sūrah* gives an account of David and Solomon and the favours God blessed them with, including prophethood, kingdom, and the fact that the mountains, birds, *jinn* and wind were subjected to them. Yet they were ordinary human beings afflicted by the same type of human weakness as anyone else. They too then needed God's mercy and care to overcome such weaknesses. In this respect, their repentance is accepted and they are set on the way to God's pleasure.

By means of both stories the Prophet is instructed to persevere in the face of all the opposition the unbelievers put up against him. He should look to God's grace and care as demonstrated to David and Solomon: *"Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us."* (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* also gives a brief account of the Prophet Job, describing how God may test His true servants with hardship and affliction. The patience Job showed in adversity provides a splendid example of how to remain steadfast. The account also describes the good end Job experienced as God bestowed His mercy on him, dispelling all his pain. The Muslims in Makkah are thus shown how to find solace amidst the constant hardship the unbelievers try to inflict on them. They are reminded that such hardship invariably opens the way to God's mercy, which is inexhaustible.

These stories form the second and major part of the *sūrah*. It also includes a reply to the unbelievers' hastening of God's punishment, presenting a scene from the Day of Judgement, describing the happiness that awaits the God-fearing and the blazing fire that awaits those who reject the truth. The values of truth are well established in the life to come, providing the criterion for judgement. The arrogant Makkan chiefs will realize this when they see their fate and compare it with that of the weak elements on whom they poured their derision, claiming that God's mercy would never be shown to those so weak. The scene so described provides contrasting images: *"The God-fearing will certainly have a good place to return to: gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open to them. They will be comfortably seated there, and they will call for abundant fruit and drink, having beside them well-matched mates of modest gaze."* (Verses 49-52) On the other hand, *"those who transgress the bounds of what is right will have the most evil place to return to: hell will they have to endure; and how evil a resting place. Let them, then, taste this: a scalding fluid and a dark, disgusting food, and coupled with it, further [suffering!] of a similar nature."* (Verses 55-58) They will argue, quarrel and curse one another in hell, and they will remember how they used to ridicule the believers: *"They will say: How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?"* (Verses 62-63) They cannot find such people in hell, because they are the ones who belong to heaven. This then is the answer to both their hastening of God's

punishment and their ridicule of the believers. This scene forms the third part of the *sūrah*.

In reply to their disbelieving reaction to what the Prophet had told them of the revelations he received from on high, he tells them about Adam and what happened on high. The Prophet was not present when this took place; he was only told about it by God. Indeed no human being, other than Adam, was present. From this account we learn about *Iblīs*' condemnation and that it was his envy at God's preference for Adam that brought about his expulsion from heaven. Since the unbelievers thought it was too big a favour for God to choose Muḥammad from among them, their attitude is not dissimilar to that of *Iblīs*. This last part of the *sūrah* concludes with a clear statement from the Prophet: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, and in time you will certainly come to know its truth.*" (Verses 86-88)

The *sūrah*, in all its four parts, depicts the destruction of earlier communities when they resorted to arrogance, accusing God's messengers of lying and holding the believers in contempt. In short, they themselves sealed their own defeat and humiliation: "*Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised will suffer defeat. Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's people, the Ad, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the wooded dales: these were different groupings; yet each one of them accused God's messengers of lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due.*" (Verses 11-14) The *sūrah* contrasts this with the favours God bestows on His chosen servants, giving them power and taking good care of them. This is made abundantly clear in the stories about David, Solomon and Job.

The *sūrah* also takes us on a round in which we see what lies in store beyond the Day of Judgement, giving us images of happiness and bliss on the one hand, and torment on the other. The last round in the *sūrah* gives the story of the first human being and the hostility shown by his first enemy, the one who deliberately leads people astray, and who they follow unaware of his designs.

The *sūrah* also includes a special touch that is meant to alert hearts to the truth reflected in the creation of the heavens and earth. This is the truth that God wants to establish on earth through the messengers He sends. The two are interrelated: "*We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose.*" (Verse 27)

1

Unjustifiable Reaction

Ṣād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition. (1)

But the unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and hostility. (2)

How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy], but it was too late to escape. (3)

They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. (4)

Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' (5)

Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is an intended design. (6)

Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. (7)

Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?' In fact they are in doubt concerning My reminder; they have not yet tasted My punishment. (8)

صَّ وَالْقُرْءَانَ ذِي الذِّكْرِ ﴿١﴾

بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي عِزَّةٍ وَشِقَاقٍ ﴿٢﴾

كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنْ قَرْنٍ فَنَادَوا
وَلَاتَ حِينَ مَنَاصٍ ﴿٣﴾

وَعَجِبُوا أَنْ جَاءَهُمْ مُنذِرٌ مِنْهُمْ ۗ وَقَالَ
الْكَافِرُونَ هَذَا سِحْرٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٤﴾

أَجْعَلِ الْأَلِهَةَ إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا ۗ إِنَّ هَذَا
لَشَيْءٌ عَجَابٌ ﴿٥﴾

وَأَنْطَلِقَ الْأَمَلَاءُ مِنْهُمْ أَنْ أَمْشُوا وَأَصْبِرُوا
عَلَىٰ آيَاتِ الْهَيْكُمِ ۗ إِنَّ هَذَا لَشَيْءٌ يُرَادُ ﴿٦﴾

مَا سَمِعْنَا بِهَذَا فِي الْأَمَلَةِ الْأَخْرَةِ ۗ إِنَّ هَذَا
إِلَّا أَحْتَلِقُ ﴿٧﴾

أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْهِ الذِّكْرُ مِنْ بَيْنِنَا ۗ بَلْ هُمْ فِي
شَكٍّ مِّنْ ذِكْرِي ۗ بَلْ لَمَّا يَدُوقُوا عَذَابِ

﴿٨﴾

*Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace,
the Almighty, the Munificent? (9)*

*Or do they have dominion over the heavens and
the earth and all that is between them? Let them,
then, try to ascend by all conceivable means. (10)*

*Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised
will suffer defeat. (11)*

*Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's
people, the `Ad, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, (12)*

*the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the
wooded dales: these were different groupings; (13)*

*yet each one of them accused God's messengers of
lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due. (14)*

*These, too, have but to wait for one single blast;
and it shall not be delayed. (15)*

*They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of
punishment even before the Day of Reckoning.'
(16)*

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمْ خَزَائِنُ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّكَ الْعَزِيزِ
الْوَهَّابِ ﴿٩﴾

أَمْ لَهُمْ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا
بَيْنَهُمَا فَلْيَرْتَقُوا فِي الْأَسْبَابِ ﴿١٠﴾

جُنُودًا مَّا هُنَالِكَ مَهْزُومٌ مِّنَ الْأَحْزَابِ
﴿١١﴾

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ ذُو
الْأَوْتَادِ ﴿١٢﴾

وَتَمُودُ وَقَوْمُ لُوطٍ وَأَصْحَابُ لَيْكَةِ
أُولَئِكَ الْأَحْزَابِ ﴿١٣﴾

إِن كُلُّ إِلَّا كَذَّبَ الرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ عِقَابِ
﴿١٤﴾

وَمَا يَنْظُرُ هَتَّوَلَاءِ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً مَّا
لَهَا مِنْ فَوَاقٍ ﴿١٥﴾

وَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا عَجِّلْ لَنَا قِطْعَةً قَبْلَ يَوْمِ
الْحِسَابِ ﴿١٦﴾

Arrogance and Hostility

Şād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition. The unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and

hostility. How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy], but it was too late to escape. (Verses 1-3)

God states an oath by an Arabic letter of the alphabet, Ṣād,¹² as well as by the Qur'ān, which He describes here as *lull of admonition*.' This letter is made by God, who created it as a sound when it is spoken by people. It is also one letter of the alphabet that makes up the Qur'ānic style and address. The complete alphabet has always been available to people, but the Qur'ān has never been within their ability to produce, because it is God's book, which He made. Humans are incapable of producing anything like that which God makes, be that with regard to the Qur'ān or to anything else. The sound symbolized by the letter Ṣād is vocalized by people without effort, but it is also by God's will. For it is He who made the larynx tract and all the sounds it voices. If people only contemplated this one small but miraculous aspect of their own creation they would realize there is nothing unusual in God choosing one of their own number to receive His revelations. To reveal a message from on high is no more amazing than giving them such miracles as are contained within themselves.

"Ṣād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition." The Qur'ān includes admonition as well as other things, such as legal provisions, stories, and instruction on how to refine manners. Admonition as well as reminding people of their need to turn to God and seek His favours are the primary purposes of the Qur'ān. Indeed, the stories and legal provisions are part of the admonition and the remembrance of God. It should be said that the Arabic text uses the word *dhikr*, which is rendered in the translation as *'full of admonition'*. However, the word also means *'to be well known'*. The verse could then be rendered as *"Ṣād By the Qur'ān, a widely known divine Book."* This is also a true description of the Qur'ān.

"But the unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and hostility." (Verse 2) The verse begins with the word, *'but'*, which suggests that there is a move away from the initial subject matter: the oath by the letter Ṣād and the Qur'ān. The oath sounds incomplete because what it intends to affirm is not mentioned. The *sūrah* simply states the oath and talks about the idolaters and their profound hostility. Yet this very departure from the initial issue heightens our interest in the next. The very fact that an oath by the letter Ṣād and the Qur'ān is made indicates the intention to discuss something of great importance, one that merits an oath by God Almighty. Yet next to this, the *sūrah* mentions the idolaters' arrogance and hostility to the Qur'ān, indicating that the issue remains the same both before and after the conjunction, *'but'*. This departure in the mode of address focuses our attention on the great gulf that lies

¹² This letter is pronounced as a velarized variation of 's', sharing its other features of friction and voicelessness, and having the same place of articulation. — Editor's note.

between the immense status God attaches to the Qur'ān and the idolaters' arrogance and hostility to it.

Mention of the fate of those before them who held a similar attitude then follows. It shows such people appealing for help, but none was forthcoming. Their cries mark a radical change in their attitude, but it is all too late to be of any significance: "*How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy, but it was too late to escape.*" (Verse 3) Their end is shown to the new unbelievers so that they may change their attitude of hostility and arrogance while there is still time for them to do so. Otherwise, they will end up in the same position: appealing for mercy, but none will be shown.

A Strange Amazement

This initial shock is intended to awaken their hearts. Details of their arrogance then follow:

They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?'" (Verses 4-8)

Such is the arrogance: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?'" And such is the hostility: "Does he make all the gods into one God?... Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days!... This is a sorcerer telling lies. .. It is all an invention."* Amazement that God's messenger should be human is an oft-repeated story. Since the beginning of divine messages every community took the same stance. Every new messenger was human, yet their fellow men continued to express amazement at this.

"They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them." (Verse 4) Yet the most natural and logical thing is that the messenger who warns them should be human who thinks and feels like them: a man who appreciates what thoughts they may harbour, their weaknesses, desires, abilities and what obstacles they may encounter or influences they may fall under. When a man is given the message to warn them, he lives among them, setting a practical example for them to follow. They know that he is one of them and that they are required to follow the life system he endorses. It is not difficult for them to do so, since a man like them has set the example. Moreover, he is of their own generation, speaking their language, knowing their traditions and the way they go about their affairs. Mutual response is easily established between them. There is no thought of him being alien to them or to their

lives.

Yet this most natural and logical situation was always the cause of amazement and the basis for levelling accusations at God's messengers. The unbelievers simply did not appreciate the purpose behind such a choice, nor did they understand the nature of the divine message. To them, it should not provide practical leadership on the way to God; rather, it should be mysterious, full of secret, an enigma. They wanted it to be engulfed in obscurity, removed from practical life. Then they could treat it as just another legend or superstition that formed the basis of their unsound beliefs.

God, however, wanted something different for humanity, especially in the case of His last message, Islam. He wanted it to be the norm for human society: for it to provide a clean, pure and sublime way of life that is practical, free of mystery as also one that is easy to implement.

"The unbelievers say: This is a sorcerer telling lies." They said this, discounting the possibility that God might have sent His revelations to one of them. In saying so, they hoped to turn ordinary people away from the Prophet, to cause confusion and mar the clear truth that was being stated by the man who was known for his honesty, integrity and truthfulness.

The plain fact is that the Quraysh elders did not for an instant believe that Muḥammad, whom they knew very well, was a sorcerer or a liar, as they alleged. Their allegations were simply propaganda tools aimed at misleading people. The Quraysh elders recognized that the truth Muḥammad preached would do away with all their privileges; privileges that relied on deception and false values. On one occasion the Quraysh elders held a conference on how to counter the effects of what the Prophet said to people, and how to turn pilgrims from other tribes away from him. It is useful to quote this again here. Al-Walid ibn al-Mughirah, a distinguished figure among the Quraysh chaired that conference:

In his opening address, al-Walid said: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend [meaning the Prophet]. So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. What concerned al-Walid most was that the opinion they would come out with should take account of the fact that Muḥammad was asking people to listen to the Qur'ān, God's message, expressed in beautiful language and a powerful style. The description they would attach to Muḥammad should also account for his persuasive, eloquent argument.

Descriptions like ‘fortune-teller’, ‘madman’, ‘poet’ and ‘magician’ were proposed. None was considered convincing by al-Walid, who pointed out weaknesses in each, one after the other. He told his people that what Muḥammad said was nothing like what was said by such men. When nobody could suggest anything more plausible, they asked al-Walid if he had a better suggestion.

He said: “What Muḥammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan.” They all approved of al-Walid’s suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign to make the pilgrims wary of Muḥammad and unwilling to meet him.¹³

Such was the scheming of the Quraysh elders and such was their agreed strategy whereby they would accuse the Prophet of sorcery and lying. They said this deliberately even though they knew it was all a lie. They were fully aware that Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was neither a sorcerer nor a liar.

They were also amazed at him calling on them to worship God alone, which is the most truthful statement anyone can make: *“Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange! Their leaders go about saying: Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention.”* (Verses 5-7)

The Qur’ān describes their great surprise at this basic truth: *“Does he make all the gods into one God?”* (Verse 5) The question is asked in such a way that makes it sound as if no one could have ever thought it possible. *“This is indeed most strange!”* (Verse 5) In Arabic, the *sūrah* uses the word *‘ujāb*, which is an unusual derivative of *ajīb*, meaning strange, to emphasize the peculiarity of the claim. The *sūrah* also describes the method they employed to neutralize the effects of the divine message among their people seeking to ensure that they would stick to their traditional beliefs. They implied that the new message contained something highly suspicious, and that in their high positions, they knew this and were intent on countering it: *“Their leaders go about saying: Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is an intended design.”* (Verse 6) This is not a question of religion and faith, although there is something different about it. Hence, ordinary people should attend to their business, maintain their traditions and let the leaders uncover this new plot, because it is only they who can establish what is concealed behind outward appearances. Basically, then, they sought to reassure people that they would look after their interests.

¹³ The translated text differs slightly from the one quoted by the author as I preferred to quote it from my own rendering of the report of this misrepresentation conference. See my book, *Muḥammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, 2002, pp. 119-120. — Editor’s Note.

This is a well known device that those in power use to divert peoples' interest in public affairs or their searching for the truth. To allow the public to search for the truth by themselves would represent a serious threat to authority, as ultimately it leads to the exposure of false leadership.

The Quraysh elders also tried to deceive people by pointing to the faiths of the people of earlier revelations who had allowed superstitions to creep into their faith, diverting it from the pure concept of God's oneness: *"Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention."* (Verse 7) By that time, the concept of trinity had spread among the Christians while the legend of Ezra being God's son had infiltrated Judaism. Hence the elders specifically referred to these, saying: *"Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days!"* They claimed to have never before heard anyone advocate God's absolute oneness as did Muḥammad. Hence, it could only be fabrication.

Islam has always sought to purge the monotheistic faith from all traces of legend, alien elements and the deviation that affected earlier religions, because monotheism is the fundamental truth that forms the basis of all existence. Indeed, the whole universe confirms this truth, providing evidence in support of it. Moreover, unless human life is based on monotheism it cannot be sound either in its fundamentals or its details. As we consider the resistance of the Quraysh, as well as earlier communities of unbelievers, to the monotheistic principle, it is fitting that we should briefly outline its importance.

The unity of the general laws that operate in this universe which we behold is clear, testifying to the fact that the will that set these laws in operation must by necessity be a single will. Wherever we look around us in this universe we find this fact staring us in the face. Everything in the universe is in constant and regular movement. The atom, which is the basic unit of everything in the universe, animate or inanimate, is in motion, as it consists of electrons that move around the nucleus composed of protons just as the planets move in orbit around the sun in our own solar system, and like the galaxy composed of numerous solar systems and celestial mass rotate. All planets, the sun, and the larger galaxy move in one anticlockwise direction, from west to east. The elements which make up the earth, other planets and the stars are the same, and they are all made of atoms composed of electrons, protons and neutrons. Indeed, these are the bricks that make up all these planets and stars.

While all matter is made of three bricks, scientists believe that all powers: light, heat, x-rays, wireless waves, gamma rays and all types of radiation are in fact different forms of electromagnetic power. They all travel at the same speed, but the difference between them is the difference in wavelength.

Matter, then, is made of three bricks, and power is in essence waves. In his special relativity theory, Einstein equates matter with energy. Experiments endorsed his claims. In recent times, an experiment endorsed it in the loudest sound ever heard in this world, produced by nuclear fission in an atom bomb.¹⁴

Such is the unity in the make-up of the universe, as man has come to learn through physical experiment. We also know how this unity is reflected in the law of continuous motion common to all things in a coherent and balanced way so that no object interferes or collides with another. The clearest example is the countless number of planets, stars and galaxies floating in space. *"Each floats in its own orbit."* (36: 40) They all testify to the truth that they are set in their respective positions in space and given their movements, dimensions and coordinates by One who is fully aware of their nature, determining all this in His overall design of this wonderful universe.

This brief word here about the overall unity of the universe is sufficient for it testifies that human life can only be set right on this basis. When this fact is clearly understood, people formulate a sound concept of the universe around them, their position in it, their interrelation with other beings, as also their relation with the One God and with everything else in the universe. This is exceedingly important in shaping people's emotions and understanding of all that life entails.

A person who believes in God's oneness and understands the meaning of His oneness, sets his relation with his Lord on this basis, and puts his relations with everyone and everything other than God in their respective positions. Thus, his energy and feelings are not manipulated by a host of other different deities nor are other people able to impose themselves on him.

A believer who knows that God, the One, is the originator of this universe deals with the universe and all that exists in it on the basis of cooperation and friendship. This gives life a taste and vitality that are totally different from that which is felt by those who do not believe in any of this.

Anyone who believes in the unity of the system God has set for the universe will receive His orders and legislation in a special way, knowing that the implementation of God's law in human life will provide harmony between all that exists. This truth necessarily sets human conscience on a sound footing, giving it consistency and enlightenment. It also clarifies the bonds between man and his Creator on the one hand and between man and the universe on the other. This then has clear effects on the practical, moral, social and behavioural aspects of human life.

¹⁴ Ahmad Zaki, *Ma`a Allāh fī al-Samā'*, Cairo, 1965

The Qur'ān places much emphasis on the concept of God's oneness, and persistently clarifies this and what it entails. This is particularly true in Makkan *sūrahs*, but it is also true in *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, although the way it is presented in the latter changes so as to fit the subject matter of these *sūrahs*.

Yet this is the truth the unbelievers were most amazed at, endlessly debating this with the Prophet, and wondering at his insistence on it. They also called on people to express amazement at it, doing their utmost to turn them away from it. Indeed, they went even further, expressing amazement that the Prophet was chosen to be entrusted with God's message to mankind: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?*" (Verse 8) This is nothing but plain envy, a trait that motivated their hostility to his message despite their awareness that this was the truth.

The Qur'ān had its attraction even to the most outspoken enemies of Islam. They realized that Muḥammad spent some time every night in worship reading the Qur'ān in prayer. Therefore, protected by the cover of darkness, some of them sat just outside his house, listening to the Qur'ān being recited inside. Every one of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about his action. One can only assume that the motivation was either to try to judge the message of Muḥammad objectively, or to learn the truth about it, or to listen to the superb literary style of the Qur'ān. As the day began to break, each one of them went back so that no one could find out about his action. Soon, the three of them: Abū Jahl himself, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Shariq met. There was no need to ask each other what they were doing. There was only one reason for their presence there at that particular time. Therefore, they counselled each other against such action: "Should some of your followers *see you*," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against their 'irresponsible' action. Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they felt ashamed of themselves. One of them suggested that they should give each other their word of honour not to come again. They did so before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Shariq went to see Abū Sufyān in his home. He asked him what he thought about what he heard Muḥammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him.

Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocuter: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."¹⁵

We see clearly that nothing stopped Abū Jahl from admitting the truth with which he wrestled on three consecutive nights, being beaten every time, except his envy. He was envious that Muḥammad should have attained a position to which no one else can aspire. This was indeed the secret motivation behind those who said: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?*" (Verse 8) They were the ones who repeatedly said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān bestowed from on high on some great man of the two cities?*" (43: 31) The two cities were Makkah and Ṭā'if where the Arab elders and noblemen lived. Whenever they heard about a new prophet, such people sought to gain power through religion. They were thus extremely shocked and envious when God chose Muḥammad (peace be upon him), bestowing on him of His grace what He knew Muḥammad alone deserved.

The answer the *sūrah* gives to their question is laden with sarcasm and warning: "*In fact they are in doubt concerning My reminder; they have not yet tasted My punishment.*" (Verse 8) They had asked: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us.*" This when they doubted the very message itself and were unable to accept that it was from God, even though they realized no human being could have produced anything like it.

The *sūrah* sets aside what they said about the Qur'ān to issue them with a warning: "*they have not yet tasted My punishment.*" (Verse 8) It is as if the *sūrah* is stating that they say whatever they say because they are still safe, not having tasted anything of God's punishment. When they do experience this, they will say nothing of it because then they will know.

The *sūrah* then comments on their wonder at God's choice of Muḥammad to be His Messenger. It asks them whether they control God's mercy: "*Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace, the Almighty, the Munificent?*" (Verse 9) Do they seek to interfere with what belongs to God to decide? It is God who gives whatever He wishes to any of His servants and who withholds it from anyone He wishes. He is the Almighty whose will applies to all and cannot be resisted, and whose grace is

¹⁵ This report is quoted as in Adil Salahi, *Muḥammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, 2002, pp. 173-174. – Editor's note.

limitless. If they find it hard to accept that God has chosen Muḥammad (peace be upon him) for his role, by what right and in what capacity can they decide how God's favours be granted when they do not own the treasures of His grace?

"Or do they have dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them?" (Verse 10) This is something that they do not dare to claim. It is the One who owns and controls the heavens and the earth who decides who should receive what and who should be assigned to what role. If they do not have dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, how come they interfere with the decisions of the One who has this dominion? A sarcastic and reproachful comment then follows: *"Let them, then, try to ascend by all conceivable means."* (Verse 10) If that is the case, let them take control of the universe and administer the treasures of God's grace. Let them decide who should receive such favours and who should be deprived.

This sarcastic remark is followed by a statement of fact describing their real status: *"Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised will suffer defeat."* (Verse 11) They are no more than the remnants of a defeated army left aside. They have no ability to change or object to God's will. The phraseology of this verse makes it hard to capture its *sense* in translation. The subject, *'whatever hosts'*, refers to something insignificant that no identity can be assigned to. The verbal phrase, *'will suffer defeat'*, is expressed in the Arabic original in one adjectival word, *mahzūm*, which suggests that defeat is an essential characteristic of such hosts and that they cannot get rid of it. This is a very true description. God's enemies can never be in any position other than the one indicated by this Qur'ānic expression which connotes powerlessness and absolute lack of control, no matter how mighty they may appear or when they appear.

The *sūrah* gives examples of former communities who treaded the same course, and we discover that they all faced utter defeat: *"Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's people, the Ad, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the wooded dales: these were different groupings, yet each one of them accused God's messengers of lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due."* (Verses 12-14) These communities were the Quraysh's predecessors. All of them, including Pharaoh who built the pyramids that stand firm like tent pegs, and Shu 'ayb's people who dwelled in the wooded dales, rejected God's messages. What eventually happened to these tyrannical peoples?

God's retribution fell due and they were all decimated. There is nothing left of them except the ruins that tell of their defeat.

Such was the fate of past communities of unbelievers. As for the present ones, they are, generally, left until a blast brings about the end of life on earth just before the Day of Judgement: *"These, too, have but to wait for one single blast; and it shall not be*

delayed.” (Verse 15) Once this blast falls due, it will not be delayed even for a short moment. It occurs at its appointed time. God has willed that this community of the last message will be given its time, and that He will not destroy it as He did past communities. This is an act of grace, but they do not appreciate this or thank God for it. On the contrary, they hasten their own punishment, asking God to give them their lot now, before the day He has appointed: *“They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning.”* (Verse 16)

At this point the *sūrah* ends its reference to the unbelievers and turns instead to the Prophet. He is comforted and directed to remember what happened to earlier messengers, the hard tests they went through and the grace God bestowed on them when they proved themselves.

2

Tests for Prophets

Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us. (17)

We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, (18)

and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise. (19)

We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement. (20)

Have you heard the story of the litigants who surmounted the walls of the sanctuary? (21)

When they went in to David, he was alarmed. They said: 'Have no fear. We are but two litigants: one of us has wronged the other; so judge between us with justice, and do not be unfair. Show us the way to rectitude. (22)

This is my brother: he has ninety-nine eyes and I have only one eye. Yet he said: "Let me take charge of her," and has been hard on me in his speech.' (23)

أَصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَاذْكُرْ عَبْدَنَا
دَاوُدَ ذَا الْأَيْدِ ۗ إِنَّهُ أَوَّابٌ ﴿١٧﴾

إِنَّا سَخَّرْنَا الْجِبَالَ مَعَهُ يُسَبِّحْنَ بِالْعِشِيِّ
وَالْإِشْرَاقِ ﴿١٨﴾

وَالطَّيْرَ مَحْشُورَةً كُلٌّ لَهُ أَوَّابٌ ﴿١٩﴾

وَشَدَدْنَا مُلْكَهُ وَاتَيْنَهُ الْحِكْمَةَ وَفَصَّلَ
الْحِطَابِ ﴿٢٠﴾

۞ وَهَلْ أَتَاكَ نَبُؤُا الْخَصْمِ إِذْ تَسَوَّرُوا
الْمِحْرَابَ ﴿٢١﴾

إِذْ دَخَلُوا عَلَىٰ دَاوُدَ ففَزِعَ مِنْهُمْ قَالُوا لَا
تَخَفْ خَصْمَانِ بَغِي بَعْضُنَا عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ
فَاحْكُم بَيْنَنَا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا تُشْطِطْ وَاهْدِنَا
إِلَىٰ سَوَاءِ الصِّرَاطِ ﴿٢٢﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا أَخِي لَهُ تِسْعٌ وَتِسْعُونَ نَعْجَةً
وَلِي نَعْجَةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ فَقَالَ أَكْفِلْنِيهَا وَعَزَّنِي
فِي الْحِطَابِ ﴿٢٣﴾

Said [David]: 'He has certainly wronged you by demanding that your eye be added to his eyes! Thus do many partners wrong one another, except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, but how few are they!' Then David realized that We were only testing him. He prayed for his Lord's forgiveness, fell down in prostration and turned to God in repentance. (24)

We forgave him that, and in the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received. (25)

David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between people with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it leads you astray from the path of God. Those who go astray from the path of God will have a severe punishment for having ignored the Day of Reckoning. (26)

We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose. That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire. (27)

Are We to equate those who believe and do righteous deeds with those who spread corruption in the land? Are We to equate the God-fearing with the wicked? (28)

This is a blessed book which We have revealed to you so that people may ponder over its message, and that those endowed with insight may take it

قَالَ لَقَدْ ظَلَمَكَ بِسُؤَالِ نَعَجْتِكَ إِلَىٰ
نَعَاجِهِ ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الْخُلَطَاءِ لَيَبْغِي
بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَقَلِيلٌ مَّا هُمْ ۗ وَظَنَّ
دَاوُدُ أَنَّمَا فَتَنَّهٗ فَاسْتَغْفَرَ رَبَّهُ ۗ وَحَرَّ
رَاكِعًا وَأَنَابَ ﴿٢٤﴾

فَغَفَرْنَا لَهُ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ ۗ وَإِنَّ لَهُ عِندَنَا لَزُلْفَىٰ
وَحُسْنَ مَّآبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

يٰۤدَاوُدُ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ
فَاحْكُم بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعِ
الْهَوَىٰ فَيُضِلَّكَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ
يَظْلُمُونَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
شَدِيدٌ ۖ بِمَا نَسُوا يَوْمَ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
بَطْلًا ۗ ذَٰلِكَ ظَنُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ۗ فَوَيْلٌ
لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنَ النَّارِ ﴿٢٧﴾

أَمْ جَعَلُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ كَالْمُفْسِدِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَمْ
جَعَلُ الْمُتَّقِينَ كَالْفُجَّارِ ﴿٢٨﴾

كِتَابٌ أَنزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوا
ءَايَاتِهِ ۗ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٢٩﴾

to heart. (29)

To David We gave Solomon: how excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (30)

When, one evening, nobly-bred, swift-footed steeds were brought before him, (31)

he kept saying: 'My love of good things is part of my remembering my Lord!' until they disappeared from sight. (32)

'Bring them back to me!' He then stroked their legs and their necks. (33)

We had tried Solomon, and placed a body on his throne. He then turned to Us, (34)

and prayed: 'My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver.' (35)

We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, (36)

and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, (37)

and others bound together in fetters. (38)

وَوَهَبْنَا لِدَاوُدَ سُلَيْمَانَ نِعَمَ الْعَبْدِ إِنَّهُ أَوَّابٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

إِذْ عُرِضَ عَلَيْهِ بِالْعَشِيِّ الصَّفِيفَتُ الْجِيَادُ ﴿٣٠﴾

فَقَالَ إِنِّي أَحْبَبْتُ حُبَّ الْخَيْرِ عَنْ ذِكْرِ رَبِّي حَتَّى تَوَارَتْ بِالْحِجَابِ ﴿٣١﴾

رُدُّوهَا عَلَيَّ ۖ فَطَفِقَ مَسْحًا بِالسُّوقِ وَالْأَعْنَاقِ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا سُلَيْمَانَ وَأَلْقَيْنَا عَلَى كُرْسِيِّهِ جَسَدًا ثُمَّ أَنَابَ ﴿٣٣﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَهَبْ لِي مُلْكًا لَا يَنْبَغِي لِأَحَدٍ مِّنْ بَعْدِي ۗ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ ﴿٣٤﴾

فَسَخَّرْنَا لَهُ الرِّيحَ تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ رُخَاءً حَيْثُ أَصَابَ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَالشَّيَاطِينَ كُلَّ بَنَّاءٍ وَغَوَّاصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَأَآخِرِينَ مُقَرَّنِينَ فِي الْأَصْفَادِ ﴿٣٧﴾

هَذَا عَطَاؤُنَا فَامْنُنْ أَوْ أَمْسِكْ بِغَيْرِ

This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account. (39)

In the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received. (40)

Remember Our servant Job who cried out to his Lord: 'Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!' (41)

'Strike [the ground] with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.' (42)

We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight. (43)

'Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath.' We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (44)

Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: all men of strength and vision. (45)

We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come. (46)

In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good. (47)

And remember Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu'l-Kijf: each belonged to the truly good. (48)

حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٩﴾

وَإِنَّ لَهُ عِنْدَنَا لَزُلْفَىٰ وَحُسْنَ مَّآبٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَأذْكُرْ عَبْدَنَا أَيُّوبَ إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَسَّنِيَ الشَّيْطَانُ بِنُصْبٍ وَعَذَابٍ ﴿٤١﴾

أَرْكُضْ بِرِجْلِكَ ۗ هَذَا مُغْتَسَلٌ بَارِدٌ وَشَرَابٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ أَهْلَهُ وَمِثْلَهُم مَّعَهُمْ رَحْمَةً مِنَّا وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُولَى الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٤٣﴾

وَخُذْ بِيَدِكَ ضِغْتًا فَاضْرِبْ بِهِ وَلَا تَحْنُتْ ۗ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَاهُ صَابِرًا نِعَمَ الْعَبْدِ ۗ إِنَّهُ أَوَّابٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

وَأذْكُرْ عَبْدَنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ أُولَى الْأَيْدِي وَالْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٤٥﴾

إِنَّا أَخْلَصْنَاهُمْ بِخَالِصَةٍ ذِكْرَى الدَّارِ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَإِنَّهُمْ عِنْدَنَا لَمِنَ الْمُصْطَفَيْنَ الْأَخْيَارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

Overview

This long passage is devoted to aspects of the histories of earlier messengers so that the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) would remember them and disregard all the rejections, accusations, amazement and fabrications the unbelievers levelled at him. All this was certain to weigh hard on anyone, but the Prophet is told to bear it all and remain patient in adversity.

At the same time, the stories present the effects of God's grace as it was bestowed on earlier messengers. It shows how God granted them favours of all sorts, including power, authority, care and blessings. This contrasts with the amazement expressed by the Quraysh at God's favouring the Prophet (peace be upon him) with His message. He was not a unique case among God's messengers. To some of them God granted a kingdom, in addition to their being His messengers. Among them one was favoured with the mountains and birds echoing his glorification and praise of God, and to another the wind and *jinn* were made subservient. Such were David and Solomon. What is strange, then, for God to have chosen from among all the Quraysh, Muḥammad, the man of truth, upon whom to bestow His revelations?

These stories describe the care God always took of His messengers and how He instructed them so that they became worthy of their mission. Like Muḥammad, they were ordinary human beings, experiencing the weaknesses all people do. God took care of them so that their weaknesses did not get the better of them. He explained things to them and gave them directives. He also tested them so that He would forgive them their errors and grant them favours. This was bound to reassure the Prophet that God would take care of him at every step.

David Ruling in a Dispute

Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us. We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise. We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement. (Verses 17-20)

'Bear with patience...' This is a reference to the road taken by all God's messengers. It groups them together. Everyone of them took it: everyone suffered, was tested and remained patient in adversity; each at his own step in the lofty ladder of prophethood. The life of each one of them was a series of tests, each bearing much pain. Even when things were pleasant and comfortable, this represented a different form of test so as to ensure that they remained patient when life was easy in the same

way as they were patient in adversity. Both situations require endurance. When we contemplate the lives of all God's messengers, as told to us in the Qur'ān, we realize that patience was the most prominent element. In essence, their lives were a long series of trials and tests.

The lives of God's messengers were in fact an open book for all humanity to read, with every page speaking about trials, afflictions and patience. The records show how the human soul triumphs over pain and necessity. How it rises above all that to which the present world attaches value, and how it discards desires and temptations, so as to achieve full dedication to God, and in so doing passes the test He has set. It shows the meaning of choosing Him over everything else so as to say to mankind: 'This is the way to rise; it is the only way leading to God's acceptance.'

"Bear with patience whatever they say." (Verse 17) They said much, such as: *"This is a sorcerer telling lies."* (Verse 4) *"Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange."* (Verse 5) *"Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?"* (Verse 8) Indeed they said much more. God directs the Prophet to bear their statements with patience, and tells him that in his mind and heart he should live with a different type of people: the select few, God's messengers with whom he has a strong affinity and close relationship. Indeed, he used to refer to them as though they were his immediate relatives, saying: 'May God have mercy on my brother Joseph,' and 'I have a stronger bond with my brother Moses,' etc.

"Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us." (Verse 17) David is referred to here as a strong person who turned to God. The *sūrah* earlier mentioned (Verses 12-13) the peoples of Noah, the `Ād, Thamūd, Pharaoh, Lot's people and the community that lived in the wooded dale near Madyan. All of these were tyrannical, and it was such tyranny that gave them the impression of power. David, on the other hand, was a man of strength, but he always turned to God, repenting of his sins, glorifying God and worshipping Him. He did so when he was truly powerful, with a kingdom to rule.

In *Sūrah 2, The Cow*, we have an account of David in his youth, when he was a soldier in Saul's army. At the time, which was long after Moses. The Israelites asked one of their prophets to assign one of them as king and they promised that they would fight for God's cause under his leadership. God appointed Saul as their king and he marshalled them to face Goliath's mighty army. It was David who killed Goliath. From that day, his standing was enhanced, such that, in turn, he became king. Yet having a throne did not lead him astray. He continued to turn to God in repentance, glorifying and worshipping Him.

Apart from prophethood and a kingdom, God also blessed David with an alert

heart and a melodious voice, which he used to good effect as he sang his psalms and hymns. He would be so absorbed in his devotion that barriers between him and the universe would disappear and the mountains would echo his glorification, while birds gathered around him, all glorifying the Lord Creator. *“We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise.”* (Verses 18-19) People may be speechless when they hear that the mountains, inanimate entities, should join David in his constant glorification of God as he chants his songs of praise. Not only that but the birds also flock to him, listen and join in with the chorus to his hymns. Their surprise results from the fact that it runs counter to everything they have been used to. They only know that man, birds and mountains belong to totally separate realms.

Yet, why should anyone be surprised? All these creatures, different as their races, shapes, forms and characteristics are, share in one fundamental fact: they turn to the Lord who created the whole universe with all its animate and inanimate objects. When man’s relation with his Lord attains sublime purity, barriers between different elements are removed. The whole matter is simple: God gave His servant David this unique characteristic, and caused the mountains to join him in extolling His glory morning and evening, and gathered the birds around him to echo his praises. This was simply an additional gift by virtue of God’s grace.

“We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement.” (Verse 20) Thus, his kingdom was strong and well established. He administered his government with wisdom and clear, decisive vision. The phrase ‘*decisive judgement*’ means that his views were clear, not subject to hesitation. When this is coupled with wisdom, it makes for perfect government within man’s world. However, this did not spare David from being subjected to tests and trials. Nevertheless, God continued to take care of him and guided his footsteps:

Have you heard the story of the litigants who surmounted the walls of the sanctuary? When they went in to David, he was alarmed. They said: Have no fear. We are but two litigants: one of us has wronged the other; so judge between us with justice, and do not be unfair. Show us the way to rectitude. This is my brother: he has ninety-nine ewes and I have only one ewe. Yet he said: “Let me take charge of her,” and has been hard on me in his speech.’ Said [David]: Re has certainly wronged you by demanding that your ewe be added to his ewes! Thus do many partners wrong one another, except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, but how few are they!’ Then David realized that We were only testing him. He prayed for his Lord’s forgiveness, fell down in prostration and turned to God in repentance. (Verses 21-24)

These verses tell of a test to which David was subjected. David used to devote some of his time to conducting the affairs of his kingdom and to judge in people’s disputes. The rest of his time he devoted to his worship, preferring seclusion when

he sang his psalms. When he went into the sanctuary, no one was allowed in.

One day, David was surprised when he saw two people climbing over the wall into the sanctuary. He was alarmed. No good believer or trustworthy person would enter in this way. Therefore, they immediately tried to reassure him, saying that they were in dispute and wanted him to judge between them in fairness, showing them the way to justice. One of them immediately started putting his case forward, saying that the other man, his brother, had 99 ewes while he only had one. Yet he insisted on taking charge of his single ewe, placing it with his 99.

As stated by one of the disputants, the case is one of gross injustice that cannot be condoned. Hence, David immediately started to give his judgement without speaking to the other man or asking him to give his side of the story. Instead, he told the first man that the other had been unfair in his demands, and that many people behave in this way, except those who are good believers and do righteous deeds. These, however, are few in number.

It seems that at this stage the two men disappeared. In fact, they were two angels who had come to test David, the prophet God had placed in a position of authority to judge between people in fairness, making sure who is right before passing judgement. They had put the case to him in a very sentimental way, one that invited immediate sympathy. However, a judge must not allow sentiment to take charge. He must not be hasty. Above all, he must not rely on the statement of one party, without allowing the other party to present his case and submit his evidence. Some aspects of the case, if not all of it, may then be seen in a different light. In other words, appearances can often be deceptive or incomplete.

At this point David realized that this was a test: *"Then David realized that We were only testing him."* (Verse 24) His good nature surfaced again, because he was a man always ready to accept what is right: *"He prayed for his Lord's forgiveness, fell down in prostration and turned to God in repentance."* (Verse 24)

God's response was to accept his repentance: *"We forgave him that, and in the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received."* (Verse 25) Some commentators on the Qur'ān picked up some Israelite reports and made much of these which cannot be acceptable because they are incompatible and irreconcilable with the nature of prophethood. Even the reports that tried to moderate these legends accept certain parts of them. The fact is that these legends do not merit consideration, because they cannot fit with God's assertion in reference to David: *"He is to be close to Us and will be well received."* (Verse 25)

The Qur'ānic comments given after the story explain the nature of the test and specify the line God wants His servant to whom He assigned judgement between people to take:

David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between people with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it leads you astray from the path of God. Those who go astray from the path of God will have a severe punishment for having ignored the Day of Reckoning. (Verse 26)

It is then a case of David being given the position of vicegerent on earth, one whereby he is required to judge between people in all fairness. He is told not to follow vain desires, which means in the case of a prophet, not to be hasty in one's first reaction. For this can easily lead to going astray from God's path. Rather, he must make sure of all the facts before passing judgement. The concluding sentence in the verse gives a general rule that applies to all cases of going astray from God's path. It exposes the person concerned to severe punishment on the Day of Reckoning.

One aspect of the care God took of His servant David is that He drew his attention at the first hurdle, and put him back on the right track at the first rash move, warning him of the ultimate result, when he had not even made one step towards it. Such is God's favour that He bestows on His chosen servants. Since they are human, they may slip when they travel an uneven patch of the road, but God takes them by the hand putting them back on course and teaching them how to repent. Then He forgives them and bestows even greater favours on them.

A Reminder to Grasp

Having stated the main principle in conducting the position of vicegerent on earth and in judging people's disputes, the context of the truth on which the whole system that sustains the universe is based is then stated. Broader as it is than man's whole world and role, this basic truth deals with the very existence of the universe and with the life to come. Furthermore, the last divine message to mankind is based on this truth. Indeed, the Qur'ān is the book that explains this great truth:

We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose. That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire. Are We to equate those who believe and do righteous deeds with those who spread corruption in the land? Are We to equate the God-fearing with the wicked? This is a blessed book which We have revealed to you so that people may ponder over its message, and that those endowed with insight may take it to heart. (Verses 27-29)

These three verses set this great truth, one that is profound and accurate. For certain, the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them was not without purpose. Their creation is based on the truth and for a definite intent. It is from this great truth that all else stems whether it be man's vicegerency on earth,

the right to judge between people, or setting feelings and actions on the right course so that those who do good deeds are not equated with those who spread corruption on earth, and that the God-fearing are not grouped together with the wicked. The truth embodied in God's blessed book is given to people with insight and understanding so that they can study its verses and reflect on the essential facts of existence. Such truth and facts cannot even be imagined by unbelievers, because they do not relate to the great truth on which the universe is based. Hence, they entertain ill thoughts about their Lord and will not understand the truth: *"That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire."* (Verse 27)

The law God has laid down for human life is part of His law for the universe. His revealed book, the Qur'ān, explains the truth on which His universal law is based. The justice required of those who are in authority, i.e. vicegerents, and those who judge between people are part of the total truth. People's lives cannot be properly established unless this part is in harmony with the rest of the parts. This means that deviation from the divine law, the truth in discharging the responsibilities of man's vicegerency on earth and from fairness when judging disputes is in effect a deviation from the universal law that sustains the universe. It is, therefore, a very serious and grave matter, one that leads to a collision with the immense universal forces. Anyone heading for such a collision will end in ruin. No wrongdoing tyrant can withstand such crushing forces. This must always be remembered and reflected upon by people endowed with insight.

A Test for Solomon

The *sūrah* picks up the thread of the story to show us the favour God granted David as He gave him Solomon for a son. It also speaks of the great favours He bestowed on Solomon, the test he was subjected to, the care God took of him and the blessings showered on him when the test was over:

To David We gave Solomon: how excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. When, one evening, nobly-bred, swift-footed steeds were brought before him, he kept saying: My love of good things is part of my remembering my Lord!' until they disappeared from sight. 'Bring them back to me!' He then stroked their legs and their necks. We had tried Solomon, and placed a body on his throne. He then turned to Us, and prayed: My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver' We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, and others bound together in fetters. This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account. In the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received. (Verses 30-40)

The references in the story to nobly-bred steeds and the body placed on his throne have been interpreted in a variety of ways. However, I do not feel comfortable with any such interpretation considering them either unfounded reports from Israelite sources or else lacking any supporting evidence. I cannot visualize the two incidents in any satisfactory way so as to explain them to my reader. Nor can I find any authentic report to rely upon in interpreting them. The only authentic *ḥadīth* I have found may or may not relate to either event. This *ḥadīth*, related by al-Bukhari on Abi Hurayrah's authority, says: "Solomon said: 'I will consort tonight with 70 women, so that each one of them will give birth to a warrior who fights for God's cause,' but he did not add, 'God willing.' He consorted with them, but only one of them became pregnant, and then she gave birth to half a person. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, had he said, 'God willing,' they would have been warriors fighting for God's cause." It is possible that this was the test which Solomon had to go through and to which these verses refer. It is also possible that the body placed on his throne was this half person. This, however, is only a possibility. As for the story about the horses, it is said that Solomon reviewed some of his horses towards the end of the day. This caused him to miss an evening prayer which he used to offer before sunset. Upset, he asked for the horses to be brought back. When they were, he hit their necks and legs as punishment for diverting his attention from worship. In a different report, it is suggested that he rubbed their necks and legs because they were kept for fighting for God's cause. Neither version, however, has much to support it, and it is thus impossible to ascertain the truth of either one.

Thus anyone who is careful about what he says cannot give any details of these two incidents with any degree of certainty. All he can say is that Solomon underwent some test concerning the way he conducted his kingdom's affairs, just as God tests prophets to guide them and keep them from error. We also learn that Solomon turned to his Lord in submission and sought His forgiveness.

He then prayed with hope and dedication: "*My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver.*" (Verse 35) The proper interpretation of Solomon's request is that he did not ask for something to show that he was the most favoured person, but that he asked instead for a special thing, to distinguish him from any future king and master. It was to be of a special nature, not repeated for others. It should also be something not normally possessed by kings.

God answered his prayer: "*We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, and others bound together in fetters.*" (Verses 36-38) That God made the wind subservient to one of His servants, is nothing extraordinary because the wind is undoubtedly subservient to His will: it runs by His command in accordance with His

laws. If at any time God facilitates one of His servants to express His will, in this case allowing the wind to run with ease wherever Solomon wished, it is nothing strange for God Almighty. Similar things occur in a variety of ways. God also said to the Prophet Muḥammad in the Qur'ān: *"If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while."* (33: 60) What does this mean? It means that unless they change their ways, Our will is going to give you power over them so as to drive them out of Madinah. This will take the form of making you desirous to fight and drive them out. Thus, our will concerning them will be made to take effect through you. This is one way of making God's will and the Prophet's will identical, but it is through God's will that it is done. We, however, see it through what the Prophet wishes and does. In this way we can also understand how the wind was made subservient to Solomon as this was identical with God's command.

God also made the *jinn* subservient to him. They built whatever he wished them to build, and they also dived into the earth and the sea to bring him whatever he wished. He further gave him the authority to punish anyone who disobeyed him or who caused corruption and to chain them by their hands and feet, or every two or more together, as he deemed fit or needed.

Solomon was then told that he had full authority over whatever favours God granted him. He could give to anyone or withhold from anyone as he wished: *"This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account."* (Verse 39) This was a further honour granted him by God. Added to all of this, Solomon is told that he has been given closeness to God in this present life and that he will be granted a warm welcome in the life to come: *"In the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received."* (Verse 40) Thus did God grant Solomon a very high standard of care, blessing and favour.

The Symbol of Patience in Adversity

We are then given more of the story of tests, patience in adversity, followed by favours bestowed from on high. This time, the prophet who is tested is Job:

Remember Our servant Job who cried out to his Lord: 'Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!' 'Strike [the ground! with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.] We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight. 'Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath.' We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (Verses 41-44)

The story of Job and his steadfastness in face of a severe test is well known, and often cited as an example of patience in adversity. However, it is also coloured with Israelite distortions. The part that sounds correct in the story is that Job was God's good servant who always turned to Him in humility and submission. God tested him and he remained patient. It seems that the test he endured entailed the loss of his wealth, family and health. Nevertheless, he maintained his bond with God, trusting to Him, and was satisfied with what God had given him.

He had a few well-wishers who remained faithful to him, including his wife, but Satan tried to convince these that had God loved Job, He would not have subjected him to such a-severe situation. When they told him this, it was harder for him than the test itself. His wife spoke to him repeating some such whispers, and Job was very upset. He swore that should God restore his health, he would beat her up, specifying the number of times he would hit her, which is said to be one hundred.

At this point Job complained to God about the trouble Satan's schemes and whispers were causing him: "*Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!*" (Verse 41) When he had proved his sincerity beyond any doubt, and when he had rejected all Satan's attempts to weaken him, complaining that these were hard for him, God bestowed His grace on him, ending his test, and restoring his health. He ordered him to hit the ground with his leg, and a cool spring would gush forth. He was to wash himself with its water and drink from it. This was enough for him to recover his health: "*Strike (the ground] with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.*" (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* states: "*We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 43) Some reports suggest that God brought back to life his sons who had died earlier or that He gave him a similar number of sons. However, there is nothing in the Qur'ānic text to suggest that He brought anyone back to life. It may actually be that the Qur'ānic statement means that when his health was restored, he regained his family that had almost been lost to him. He also gave him more as additional favours. This serves as a reminder to those who have insight and understanding.

What is important in the stories related in this *sūrah* is that they show how God bestows favours and grace on His servants. Although He subjects them to tests they remain patient in adversity, bearing their hardship with assured resignation, knowing that whatever God decides is ultimately good.

God also bestowed His grace on Job and his wife with regard to the oath he had made about beating her. She had looked after him during his days of hardship and was also patient during their adversity. Therefore, God ordered Job to take in his hand a bunch of dried sticks, in the number he had stated in his oath, and hit her

with the bunch once only. In this way, he would fulfil his oath: *“Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath.”* (Verse 44) Such care and blessings were in return for what God knew of Job’s patience in adversity, his being a model of obedience, always turning to Him for support: *“We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us.”* (Verse 44)

Other Prophets

Having related these three stories in some detail, to remind the Prophet that he too should remain steadfast in the face of opposition, the *sūrah* makes a very brief reference to other prophets. They too endured tests and remained patient; they also received God’s favours as a result. Some of these lived earlier than David, Solomon and Job, and we know the periods they lived in, while we do not know the others’ time of life, because the Qur’ān and other sources available to us have not specified it.

Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: all men of strength and vision. We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come. In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good. And remember Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu’l-Kifl: each belonged to the truly good. (Verses 45-48)

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, as well as Ishmael, undoubtedly lived earlier than David and Solomon, but we do not know in what time relation they were to Job. Elisha and Dhu’l-Kifl are mentioned only very briefly in the Qur’ān. The Arabic name given to the first of these two is Alyasa`, which is closer to the Hebrew version of Elisha. Most probably they refer to the same person. As for Dhu’l-Kifl, we know nothing of him apart from how he is described here: he *‘belonged to the truly good.’*

God, limitless is He in His glory, describes Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *‘men of strength and vision’*, which refers to their good actions, whether physical, done by hand, or mental, relying on sound vision and good judgement. This implies that a person who does not do good deeds is without a hand, and the one who does not think well is without a mind or a vision.

Another of their good characteristics is that God gave them a distinctive quality to remember the life to come. This they did with complete disregard for everything else: *“We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come.”* (Verse 46) This is the quality that gave them their distinction and choice position: *“In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good.”* (Verse 47)

Similarly, God states that Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu’l-Kifl were truly good. He

instructs His last messenger to remember them and to contemplate their patience in adversity and the grace He bestowed on them. He too should remain patient in the face of denial and rejection. Steadfastness and patience is the proper course for all advocates of the divine message, particularly God's messengers. God will not abandon such servants. Instead, He will reward them for their patience. What He has for them is certainly better than anything else. When compared with God's grace and care, the schemings and rejections of the unbelievers are of little significance.

3

Contrasting Ends

Let all this be a reminder. The God-fearing will certainly have a good place to return to: (49)

gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open to them. (50)

They will be comfortably seated there, and they will call for abundant fruit and drink, (51)

having beside them well-matched mates of modest gaze. (52)

This is what you are promised for the Day of Reckoning: (53)

this, Our provision for you will never end. (54)

This is so! Indeed those who transgress the bounds of what is right will have the most evil place to return to: (55)

hell will they have to endure; and

how evil a resting place. (56)

Let them, then, taste this: a scalding fluid and a dark, disgusting food, (57)

وَأَذْكُرْ إِسْمَاعِيلَ وَالْيَسَعَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ
وَكُلٌّ مِّنَ الْأَخْيَارِ ﴿٤٩﴾

هَذَا ذِكْرٌ وَإِنَّ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ لَحُسْنَ مَّآبٍ
﴿٥٠﴾

جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ مَّفْتَحَةٌ لَهُمُ الْأَبْوَابُ ﴿٥١﴾

مُتَّكِنِينَ فِيهَا يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِفِكَهَةٍ
كَثِيرَةٍ وَشَرَابٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

﴿٥٣﴾ وَعِنْدَهُمْ قَصِيرَاتُ الْطَّرْفِ أَرْبَابٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

هَذَا مَا تُوْعَدُونَ لِيَوْمِ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٥٥﴾

﴿٥٦﴾ إِنَّ هَذَا لَرِزْقُنَا مَا لَهُ مِنْ نَفَادٍ ﴿٥٧﴾

هَذَا وَإِنَّ لِلطَّاغِيْنَ لَشَرَّ مَّآبٍ ﴿٥٨﴾

﴿٥٩﴾ جَهَنَّمَ يَصَلَوْنَهَا فَبئْسَ الْمِهَادُ ﴿٦٠﴾

هَذَا فَلْيَذُوقُوهُ حَمِيمٌ وَغَسَّاقٌ ﴿٦١﴾

and coupled with it, further [suffering] of a similar nature. (58)

Here is another crowd of people rushing headlong to join you. No welcome to them! They too shall burn in the fire. (59)

These others will say: 'No, but it is you! No welcome to you either! It is you who brought this on us! How vile a place to be in!' (60)

They will say: 'Our Lord! Give double punishment in the fire to whomever has brought this on us.' (61)

They will say: 'How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, (62)

and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?' (63)

This is in truth how it will be: the people of the fire will quarrel among themselves. (64)

وَأَخْرُ مِنْ شَكْلِهِ أَزْوَاجٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

هَذَا فَوْجٌ مُّقْتَحِمٌ مَّعَكُمْ لَا مَرْحَبًا بِهِمْ
إِنَّهُمْ صَالُوا النَّارِ ﴿٥٩﴾

قَالُوا بَلْ أَنْتُمْ لَا مَرْحَبًا بِكُمْ أَنْتُمْ
قَدْ مَتَّمُّوهُ لَنَا فَبِئْسَ الْفِرَارُ ﴿٦٠﴾

قَالُوا رَبَّنَا مَنْ قَدَّمَ لَنَا هَذَا فَزِدْهُ عَذَابًا
ضِعْفًا فِي النَّارِ ﴿٦١﴾

وَقَالُوا مَا لَنَا لَا نَرَى رِجَالًا كُنَّا نَعُدُّهُمْ
مِّنَ الْأَشْرَارِ ﴿٦٢﴾

أَتَّخَذْنَاهُمْ سِخْرِيًّا أَمْ زَاغَتْ عَنْهُمْ
الْأَبْصَارُ ﴿٦٣﴾

إِنَّ ذَلِكَ لِحَقٌّ تَخَاصُمُ أَهْلِ النَّارِ ﴿٦٤﴾

A Quarrel in Hell

The previous passage presented a taste of the life of some of God's chosen people, as they were tested and endured hardship with patience and resignation. They were then granted God's favours and grace. In this way some of the most noble lives in this present world were depicted. Now the *sūrah* continues its discourse, speaking about God-fearing people in contrast to those who are tyrannical and commit excesses. It shows them however in the next world, where life is everlasting. Thus it paints a scene of the Day of Judgement.

First, a picture is drawn of two completely contrasting images, both in their general outlook and detail. Thus, the God-fearing will have 'a good place to return to,'

while the transgressors will have *'the most evil place to return to.'* The former will be in gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open, where every comfort is available and they are well seated, enjoying all the food and drink they desire, as also female companions of the same age. Although they are still young women, they are *'of modest gaze,'* which means that they are not looking around for anything or coveting what others have. This is all part of what God will provide them with, and whatever He provides will never be exhausted.

As for the others, they have a place where they will be stationed, but there is no rest there, for it is hell, which is described as *'how evil a resting place.'* They have scalding hot drinks, and food that fills them with disgust. It is what flows and seeps through those who occupy hell. Or they have something else of the same type, which is described here as ensuring similar suffering.

The scene is completed with a third image that comes alive with the dialogue it reports. A group of transgressors who used to have close ties in this world are shown to be exchanging accusations and insults. Some used to tempt others into further error, while others behaved arrogantly towards believers, ridiculing their faith and their belief in heaven. Indeed they were no different to those among the Quraysh who used to refer to the Prophet and wonder: *"Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?"* (Verse 8)

Now they are depicted as going straight to hell, one lot after another, with some referring to others and saying: *"Here is another crowd of people rushing headlong to join you."* (Verse 59) What answer do they receive? It is an angry and rash one: *"No welcome to them! They too shall burn in the fire."* (Verse 59) Would those who heard this insult take it in silence? Not they! Their response comes quickly: *"No, but it is your No welcome to you either! It is you who brought this on us! How vile a place to be in!"* (Verse 60) This is a direct accusation, blaming them for bringing about such a fate. They follow this accusation with a prayer that reveals how angry they are, wishing to wreak revenge on the others: *"They will say: Our Lord! Give double punishment in the fire to whomever has brought this on us."* (Verse 61)

What happens next? They look around searching for the believers whom they treated with arrogance in their first life, thinking ill of them and ridiculing their claims. They do not see them rushing into the fire alongside them. Hence, they ask: Where are they? Where have they gone? Or could it be that they are here but our vision is impaired so we do not see them: *"They will say: How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?"* (Verses 62-63) Yet those who are missed by the dwellers of hell are enjoying their abode in heaven.

The scene concludes with a statement about the actual situation of the people of

hell: *“This is in truth how it will be: the people of the fire will quarrel among themselves.”* (Verse 64) There is a wide gulf between their fate and that of the believers whom they ridiculed and refused to believe would be God’s chosen ones. How miserable is their own lot which they were once keen to hasten: *“Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning.”* (Verse 16)

4

Man's First Creation

Say: 'I am but a warner; and there is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all, (65)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا مُنذِرٌ وَمَا مِنَّ إِلَهِ إِلَّا اللَّهُ
الْوَّاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ ﴿٦٥﴾

the Lord of the heaven and the earth and all that is between, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving!' (66)

رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ ﴿٦٦﴾

Say: 'This is a great message; (67)

قُلْ هُوَ نَبَأٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٦٧﴾

yet you turn away from it. (68)

أَنْتُمْ عَنْهُ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

No knowledge would I have of what those on high argue. (69)

مَا كَانَ لِي مِنْ عِلْمٍ بِالْمَلَائِكَةِ إِذْ
تَخْتَصِمُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

It is only revealed to me that I am here to give clear warning.' (70)

إِنْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ إِلَّا أَنَّمَا أَنَا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧٠﴾

Your Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to create a human being out of clay; (71)

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَلِقُ بَشَرًا مِّنْ
طِينٍ ﴿٧١﴾

when I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down before him in prostration.' (72)

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُّوحِي
فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾

The angels prostrated themselves, all of them

فَسَجَدَ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

together. (73)

Not so Iblīs. He gloried in his arrogance and was one of those who reject the truth. (74)

Said [God]: 'Mils! What prevents you from bowing down to one whom I have created with My hands? Are you too proud, or do you deem yourself superior?' (75)

Answered [Iblīs]: 'I am better than he: You have created me out of fire, but created him from clay.' (76)

Said He: 'Then get out from it: you are accursed; (77)

My rejection shall follow you until the Day of Judgement.' (78)

Said [Iblīs]: 'My Lord! Grant me a respite till Resurrection Day.' (79)

Said He: 'You are one of those granted respite (80)

till the day of the appointed time.' (81)

[Iblīs] then said: 'I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all (82)

except Your true servants.' (83)

[And God] said: 'This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state: (84)

I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of

إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ اسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

٧٤

قَالَ يٰٓإِبْلِيسُ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَنْ تَسْجُدَ لِمَا خَلَقْتُ بِإَيْدِي ۗ اسْتَكْبَرْتَ أَمْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الْعَالِينَ

٧٥

قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَّارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ

٧٦

قَالَ فَأَخْرَجْ مِنْهَا فإِنَّكَ رَجِيمٌ

٧٧

وَإِنَّ عَلَيْكَ لَعْنَتِي إِلَى يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

٧٨

قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنْظِرْنِي إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ

٧٩

قَالَ فإِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنظَرِينَ

٨٠

إِلَى يَوْمِ الْوَقْتِ الْمَعْلُومِ

٨١

قَالَ فَبِعِزَّتِكَ لَأُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

٨٢

إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمْ الْمُخْلِصِينَ

٨٣

قَالَ فَالْحَقُّ وَالْحَقُّ أَقُولُ

٨٤

لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنْكَ وَمِمَّن تَبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

٨٥

them as shall follow you.’ (85)

Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. (86)

This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, (87)

and in time you will certainly come to know its truth.’ (88)

قُلْ مَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ وَمَا أَنَا مِنَ

الْمُتَكَلِّفِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

وَلَتَعْلَمَنَّ نَبَأَهُ بَعْدَ حِينٍ ﴿٨٨﴾

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* reaffirms the issues presented at its outset: God’s oneness, revelations and requital in the life to come. It mentions Adam’s story as evidence of the truth of revelation, citing in support what took place on high and what was determined then of accountability for man’s actions on the Day of Reckoning. The story shows an aspect of Satan’s envy which caused his ruin and expulsion from God’s mercy. This was when he envied Adam what God had bestowed on him of His favours. The passage also depicts the ever-raging battle between Satan and mankind. His aim is to tempt and seduce the largest number of people possible so that they will join him in hell; this to avenge himself on Adam whom he blamed for his expulsion. It is a battle with well defined objectives. Yet still people surrender to their old enemy.

The *sūrah* concludes by reconfirming the fact of revelation, and the great issue behind it. Needless to say, the unbelievers remain oblivious to these facts.

A Plain Warning

Say: I am but a warner; and there is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all the Lord of the heaven and the earth and all that is between, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving! (Verses 65-66)

The Prophet is given instructions as to what to say to the idolaters who were surprised and amazed at what he preached, wondering: “Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!” (Verse 5) He is to say to them that this is the plain truth: “There is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all.” He is to further inform them that he himself has no say in all this, apart from giving warnings and

leaving people to their Lord to judge. He is *"the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between."* He has no partners. No one can find shelter against His will whether it be in the heavens and the earth, or in between them. For He is *"the Almighty, the All-Forgiving."* He has all power and He forgives anyone seeking forgiveness and who turns back to Him in repentance.

The Prophet's instructions make it clear that what he has brought people is far greater than what they think, and that it is a prelude to something they choose to remain oblivious of: *"Say: This is a great message; yet you turn away from it."* (Verses 67-68) It is indeed far greater than it appears at first sight. It is part of God's will that applies to the entire universe and its system. It cannot be separated from the creation of the heavens and the earth, or from the distant past and the far away future.

This message is addressed to people far beyond the Quraysh in Makkah, the Arabs in their Peninsula and the generation that witnessed its revelation. It transcends the boundaries of place and time to address humanity across all generations, shaping its destiny, from the time of its revelation until God inherits the earth and all those living on it. It came at its appropriate time to fulfil its mission in the time set for it by God.

Mankind's course has been changed with This great message: it is now set on a path demarcated by God. This is true both with regard to those who accept it or reject it, fight for or against it, and in its then current generation or subsequent ones. Nothing and no event in the history of mankind has had greater influence on man than this message. It laid down concepts, rules and systems and set values that apply to the whole earth, for all times. The Arabs could not have imagined anything like this to be possible, not even in their dreams. How could they have imagined that this message, initially addressed to them, would change the face of the earth and the course of history. How could they have thought that it would influence the conscience and life of humanity, accomplish God's will with regard to human destiny and link all these to universal existence and to the truth inherent in the creation of the heavens and the earth. Nor could they have thought for one moment that it was a message that would remain valid for all time, fulfilling its role in directing people's lives.

Today, Muslims adopt the same attitude towards this message as the Arabs of old: they do not understand its nature or its link with the whole universe. They do not recognize the truth inherent in it as part of the truth inherent in the universe. Nor do they look at its influence on human history in a realistic, objective way that is not borrowed from the enemies of this faith who always try to belittle Islam and its effects. This makes Muslims today totally unaware of their true role in the past, present or future, or that they are required to play this role to the end of time.

The Arabs of old thought that the matter concerned them and Muḥammad, not least the fact that it was he who was chosen to receive revelations. All their worry focused on this question. Therefore, the Qur'ān tells them that the matter is far greater than this issue. It is greater than them and Muḥammad who is no more than a messenger delivering what was entrusted to him. He did not invent it, and he could not have learnt what lies beyond it until God had taught him. He was not present with those on high when it all began. It was God who told him of it: *"No knowledge would I have of what those on high argue. It is only revealed to me that I am here to give clear warning."* (Verses 69-70)

How it All Started

At this point, the *sūrah* tells us how the human story first began and what happened on high. This defines its course as well as its fate and destination. Muḥammad was sent at the end of time to warn people of all this:

Your Lord said to the angels: I am about to create a human being out of clay; when I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down before him in prostration. (Verses 71-72)

We do not know how God said this to the angels or how He speaks to them. Nor do we know how the angels receive what God imparts to them. We do not know anything of the angels' nature except what God has told us about them in His revealed book. Therefore, it is useless to try to delve further into this. We should instead consider the significance of the story as told in the Qur'ān.

God created man out of clay, just like the rest of living things on earth. All the elements in their constitutions are derived from clay, with the exception of the secret of life, about which we do not know how or where it came from. Apart from this secret and the breathing of a soul into man, all the constituents of his body stem from mother earth. He will be transformed again into these constituents when the unknown secret departs from his body together with the effects of the sublime breath of soul which defined his course in life.

Again we do not know the nature of the sublime breathing of a soul into man, but we know its effects which distinguished man from the rest of creation on earth. It distinguished him with the quality of aspiring to the sublime, with mind and spirit, which allowed him to look at past experiences and make future plans, and facilitated his spirit to go beyond what is received by his senses and understood by his mind to reach to what neither the senses nor the mind can comprehend. This quality of aspiring to the sublime is unique to man, shared by no other living creature on earth. It never happened in the long history of the earth that any species, or any individual

from any species, made this leap even when we accept that physical evolution occurs.

God breathed of His soul into man because His will wished to place him in charge of the earth, managing its affairs within the limits He set, so that he would build human life on it. God gave man the ability to gain higher knowledge. Ever since, man has risen higher whenever he is in contact with the source of his soul, deriving his values from there and maintaining a straight course. When he deviates from this source, the knowledge within him will be in discordance, unable to follow a coherent, progressive, and forward movement. In fact, these discordant trends will threaten his course and may lead to a setback in his human quality, pulling him down, even though his scientific knowledge and experience in some areas at least are well advanced.

This creature of small stature, limited ability, short life duration and basic knowledge could not have attained such honour except for this aspect of divine grace bestowed on him. Otherwise, what is man? He is this small, weak creature living on earth alongside millions of other species. The earth is only a small satellite of a mere star of which there are millions and millions in the great space whose boundaries are known only to God. Who is this creature, man, before whom the angels are required to prostrate? It is because of this subtle, yet great secret that man deserves his position of honour. When this is discarded, man goes back to his origin, the clay of the earth.

The angels acted on God's orders, as they naturally do: *"The angels prostrated themselves, all of them together."* (Verse 73) How, when and where? All this is part of God's knowledge. To know does not add significance to the story. Instead, the significance is seen in the position and value given to man, a creature made of clay, when he rose above his origin through this breath of God's soul. The angels prostrated themselves in compliance with God's order, knowing that His wisdom is infinite.

"Not so Iblīs. He gloried in his arrogance and was one of those who reject the truth." (Verse 74) Was Iblīs one of the angels? Most probably not, because if he were an angel, he would not have disobeyed God. Angels do not disobey any order issued to them by God, and they always do what they are bidden. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān that he was created of fire, while it is known that the angels were created from light. Yet he was with the angels and the order to prostrate before Adam included him. He is not specifically mentioned in connection with the order so as to belittle his position. Yet we know that the order applied to him because of the reproach he received as a result of his disobedience.

"Said [God]: Iblīs! What prevents you from bowing down to one whom I have created with

My hands? Are you too proud, or do you deem yourself superior?" (Verse 75) God is the Creator of all. Therefore, the mention that He has created man is particularly significant because it refers to the special care given to this creature who has been given a breath of His soul.[§] Are you too proud to obey My orders? Or do you deem yourself superior like all others who refuse to submit?

"Answered [Iblīs]: I am better than he: You have created me out of fire, but created him from clay." (Verse 76) The answer overflows with envy. It also ignores the noble element that Adam has in addition to his creation from clay. Thus, it is a rude retort stemming from a nature that had abandoned all goodness.

At this point, the divine order was issued expelling this rebellious creature: *"Said He: Then get out from it: you are accursed; My rejection shall follow you until the Day of Judgement."* (Verses 77-78) We cannot define the referent of the pronoun 'it'. It could refer either to heaven, or to God's grace. Both interpretations are possible. There need be no argument over this. In both cases the meaning is clear: *Iblīs* was expelled and cursed as he incurred God's displeasure by rebelling against His orders.

However, *Iblīs's* envy turned into a grudge and determination to avenge himself on Adam and his progeny: *"Said [Iblīs]: My Lord! Grant me a respite till Resurrection Day."* (Verse 79) For some purpose, God granted *Iblīs* his request, allowing him the chance he wanted: *"Said He: You are one of those granted respite till the day of the appointed time."* (Verse 81) Satan then revealed his -goal which summed up his grudge: *"[Iblīs] then said I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants."* (Verses 82-83) Thus *Iblīs* defined his plan of action. He swore by the Lord of power that he would tempt all human beings, except those over whom he had no power. This was not a gesture of nobility on his part; but rather an acknowledgement of the uselessness of his efforts. Thus he told us about the barrier between him and those who are safe from, and immune to his temptation. It is their worship of God that makes them safe. This is in accordance with God's design and will. God declares His will, defining the way ahead: *"[And God] said: This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state: I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verses 84-85)

God always states the truth. The Qur'ān repeatedly states this fact and re-emphasizes it in a variety of ways. In this *sūrah* there are several references to different aspects of the truth, such as the demand of the disputants who climbed the walls of David's sanctuary that he should judge between them in fairness. The Arabic text adds clear connotations that the judgement should be made on the basis of truth. Similarly, the comments on David's story refer to the creation of the heavens and the

[§] For further discussion on the *Yad* attribute, please refer to section 1.6 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

earth on the basis of the truth. Now, God Almighty reaffirms the truth, saying: *"This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state."* (Verse 84) Thus, these references emphasize different aspects of the truth, but its nature is always the same. It includes this true promise: *"I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verse 85)

It is, then, a battle between Satan and Adam's children: they go into it with full knowledge, aware of the consequences which are made clear in this true promise. They bear responsibility for their choices. Yet in His mercy, God has decided not to leave them without enlightenment. Therefore, he sent them His messengers to warn them.

At the end of the *sūrah*, the Prophet is instructed to say his final word:

Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, and in time you will certainly come to know its truth. (Verses 86-88)

It is a sincere call to them to save themselves when the warning has been given and the fate has been shown. The caller, advocating the truth, plain and simple, makes no false claims or pretensions, demanding no reward from anyone. He orders nothing except what sound human nature readily endorses. He simply delivers a reminder to all the worlds, since people may forget or choose to be oblivious. They may ignore the great message that has been delivered to them, but they will eventually come to know its truth. Indeed within a few years of receiving this address, the Arabs knew the truth of this message, and they will come to know it on Judgement Day, when God's promise will be fulfilled: *"I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verse 85)

Thus, the ending of the *sūrah* is in full harmony with its beginning as also with the themes and issues it has tackled. It is given in a powerful note suggesting that what is to come is grave indeed: *"in time you will certainly come to know its truth."* (Verse 88)