

SŪRAH 20

Ṭā Hā

Prologue

This *sūrah* begins and ends with an address to the Prophet explaining his task and outlining the limits of his duties. It is not a mission of distress that has been imposed on him, nor is it an affliction which he has to endure. It is a mission of advocacy and admonition, giving good news and warning against wrongdoing. The ultimate judgement over people is exercised by God, the One, who has no partners, and who controls the whole universe, with all that appears of it and what remains hidden. God is the One who is fully aware of all hearts' secrets, and to whom all people prostrate. It is to Him that all people, obedient and sinners, refer. Hence, the Prophet should not be bothered by whoever chooses the path of unbelief. He should not be distressed over their denial of the truth.

Between the opening and the close, the *sūrah* relates the history of Moses from the point when he received his first revelations to the adoption by the Israelites of the calf as an object of worship. All is related here in full detail, especially the discourse between God and His servant Moses, the argument between Moses and Pharaoh, and the contest between Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers. Within the story, we see how God takes good care of Moses, whom He brought up the way He wanted. It was to Moses and his brother that He said: "*Have no fear; for I shall be with you: I hear all and I see all.*" (Verse 46)

Adam's story is given in a short, quick account, highlighting the grace God bestowed on him after he committed his offence. It speaks of the guidance God gave him as also how He allowed his offspring to make their own free choice, whether to follow divine guidance or fall into error, after they were repeatedly warned.

This story is surrounded by scenes of the hereafter, which makes it sound as

though it is a complement to what happened on high, right at the very beginning of human life. Thus God's obedient servants will return to heaven, while those who disobey Him are destined for the fire, in confirmation of what was said to Adam at the time he descended to earth. Thus the *sūrah* is made of two parts: the first includes the opening address to the Prophet: *"We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing."* (Verses 2-3) This is followed by the story of Moses, which is given as an example of the care God takes of those whom He chooses to convey His message to people. They will not suffer distress on account of their task, as they receive His care.

The second part of the *sūrah* provides some scenes of the Day of Judgement as well as Adam's story. Both fit in well with the opening of the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. The end of the *sūrah* is thus similar to its beginning, providing a consistent and distinctive atmosphere.

The *sūrah*, however, is distinguished by a special, sublime and majestic air which touches our hearts. It generates a sense of reassurance and submission to God Almighty. This air is generated by the scene when God, the Most Merciful, makes His presence felt by His servant Moses in the sacred valley, and the long discourse in the deep silence of the night, when Moses is totally alone, except for his Lord's presence. The whole universe responds to this long discourse. This is further amplified by the scene of God's presence on the Day of Resurrection when all creatures are gathered: *"All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air."* (Verse 108) *"All faces will be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord."* (Verse 111)

The rhythm of the whole *sūrah* employs the same beat, from start to finish, providing a pleasant, relaxing feeling that opens up to the universe. It is further enhanced by the choice of a long 'a sound for verse endings, throughout the entire *sūrah*, excepting a small number of verses.

1

The Purpose of Revelation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Tā Hā, (1)

We did not bestow this Qur'an on you from on high to cause you distress, (2)

but only as an admonition to the God-fearing. (3)

It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, (4)

the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. (5)

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil. (6)

If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden. (7)

طه

مَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ لِتَشْقَى ﴿٢﴾

إِلَّا تَذْكَرَةً لِّمَن تَخْشَى ﴿٣﴾

تَنْزِيلًا مِّمَّنْ خَلَقَ الْأَرْضَ وَالسَّمَوَاتِ

الْعُلَى ﴿٤﴾

الرَّحْمَنِ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى ﴿٥﴾

لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا

بَيْنَهُمَا وَمَا تَحْتَ الثَّرَى ﴿٦﴾

وَإِنْ تَجَهَّرَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَإِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ

وَأَخْفَى ﴿٧﴾

[He is] God; there is no deity other than Him.
His alone are all the attributes of perfection. (8)

Have you learnt the story of Moses? (9)

When he saw a fire, he said to his family: 'Wait
here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a
lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire.'
(10)

But when he came close to it, a voice called out to
him: Moses, (11)

I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you
are in the sacred valley of *Timmā*. (12)

Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to
what is being revealed. (13)

Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity
other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and
establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise.
(14)

Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the
Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul
may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove
for. (15)

Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its
coming and follows only his own desires turn your
thoughts from it, lest you perish. (16)

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ لَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ

۞

وَهَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَىٰ ۞

إِذْ رَأَىٰ نَارًا فَقَالَ لِأَهْلِهِ امْكُثُوا إِنِّي

ءَانَسْتُ نَارًا لَّعَلِّي آتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِقَبَسٍ أَوْ

أَجْدُ عَلَى النَّارِ هُدًى ۞

فَلَمَّا أَتَاهَا نُودِيَ يَمْوَسَىٰ ۞

إِنِّي أَنَا رَبُّكَ فَاخْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ إِنَّكَ بِالْوَادِ

الْمُقَدَّسِ طَوًى ۞ وَأَنَا آخَرْتُكَ

فَأَسْتَمِعْ لِمَا يُوحَىٰ ۞

إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدْنِي وَأَقِمِ

الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي ۞

إِنَّ السَّاعَةَ آتِيَةٌ أَكَادُ أَخْفِيهَا لِتُجْزَىٰ

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا تَسْعَىٰ ۞

فَلَا يَصُدُّكَ عَنْهَا مَنْ لَا يُؤْمِنُ بِهَا وَاتَّبَعَ

هَوَاهُ فَتَرْدَىٰ ۞

Now, what is this in your right hand, Moses?'
(17)

He answered: 'It is my staff; upon it I lean, and with it I beat down the leaves for my sheep; and other uses have I for it.' (18)

Said He: 'Throw it down, Moses.' (19)

So he threw it down, and thereupon it was a snake, moving rapidly. (20)

Said He: 'Take it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state. (21)

Now put your hand under your armpit. It will come out [shining] white, without blemish: another sign. (22)

We shall show you some of Our most wondrous signs. (23)

Go to Pharaoh; for he has indeed transgressed all bounds.' (24)

Said [Moses]: 'My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], (25)

وَمَا تِلْكَ بِيَمِينِكَ يَا مُوسَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

قَالَ هِيَ عَصَايَ أَتَوَكَّؤُا عَلَيْهَا وَأَهشُّ
بِهَا عَلَىٰ غَنَمِي وَلِيَ فِيهَا مَآرِبُ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٨﴾

﴿١٨﴾

قَالَ أَلْقِهَا يَا مُوسَىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

فَأَلْقَاهَا فَإِذَا هِيَ حَيَّةٌ تَسْعَىٰ ﴿٢٠﴾

قَالَ خُذْهَا وَلَا تَخَفْ سَنُعِيدُهَا سِيرَتَهَا
الْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

وَأَضْمَمْ يَدَكَ إِلَىٰ جَنَاحِكَ تَخْرُجَ بَيْضَاءَ
مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوءٍ ؕ آيَةٌ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٢٢﴾

لِنُرِيكَ مِنْ ءَايَاتِنَا الْكُبْرَىٰ ﴿٢٣﴾

أَذْهَبَ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ طَغَىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي ﴿٢٥﴾

and make my mission easy for me, (26)

and free my tongue from its impediment, (27)

so that people may understand what I say. (28)

Appoint for me a helper from among my kinsmen, (29)

Aaron, my brother. (30)

Grant me strength through him, (31)

and let him share my task, (32)

so that together we may extol Your limitless glory (33)

and remember You always. (34)

You are surely watching over us. (35)

Said He: 'You are granted all that you have asked for, Moses. (36)

And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by, (37)

when We inspired your mother, saying: (38)

وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي ﴿٢٦﴾

وَأَحْلِلْ لِي لِسَانِي ﴿٢٧﴾

يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي ﴿٢٨﴾

وَأَجْعَلْ لِي وَزِيرًا مِّنْ أَهْلِي ﴿٢٩﴾

هَارُونَ أَخِي ﴿٣٠﴾

أَشَدِّدْ بِهِ أَرْزِي ﴿٣١﴾

وَأَشْرِكُهُ فِي أَمْرِي ﴿٣٢﴾

كَيْ نُسَبِّحَكَ كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾ وَنَذْكُرَكَ

كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾ إِنَّكَ

كُنْتَ بِنَا بَصِيرًا ﴿٣٥﴾

قَالَ قَدْ أُوتِيتَ سُؤْلَكَ يَا مُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ مَنَنَّا عَلَيْكَ مَرَّةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

إِذْ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمِّكَ مَا يُوحَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

‘Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore, and one who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up.’ I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye. (39)

Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh’s people]: “Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?” Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve. And [when you came of age,] you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief, although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; (40)

for I have chosen you for Myself. (41)

Go forth, then, you and your brother, with My signs, and never slacken in remembering Me. (42)

Go forth, both of you, to Pharaoh; for he has transgressed all bounds of equity! (43)

But speak to him mildly, so that he may yet take

أَنْ أَقْدِفِيهِ فِي التَّابُوتِ فَأَقْدِفِيهِ فِي الْيَمِّ
فَلْيُلْقِهِ الْيَمُّ بِالسَّاحِلِ يَأْخُذْهُ عَدُوٌّ لِي
وَعَدُوٌّ لَهُ^{٣٩} وَالْقَيْتُ عَلَيْكَ مَحَبَّةً مِنِّي
وَلِتُصْنَعَ عَلَيَّ عَيْنِي ﴿٣٩﴾

إِذْ تَمْشِي أُخْتُكَ فَتَقُولُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ
عَلَىٰ مَنْ يَكْفُلُهُ^{٤٠} فَرَجَعْنَاكَ إِلَىٰ أُمِّكَ كَيْ
تَقَرَّ عَيْنُهَا وَلَا تَحْزَنَ^{٤١} وَقَتَلْتَ نَفْسًا
فَنَجَّيْنَاكَ مِنَ الْغَمِّ وَفَتَنَّاكَ فُتُونًا فَلَبِثْتَ
سِنِينَ فِي أَهْلِ مَدْيَنَ ثُمَّ جِئْتَ عَلَيَّ قَدَرًا
يَمُوسَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَأَصْطَفَيْنَاكَ لِنَفْسِي ﴿٤١﴾

أَذْهَبْ أَنْتَ وَأَخُوكَ بِآيَاتِي وَلَا تَنِيَا فِي
ذِكْرِي ﴿٤٢﴾

أَذْهَبَا إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ طَغَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

فَقُولَا لَهُ قَوْلًا لَّيِّنًا لَّعَلَّهُ يَتَذَكَّرُ أَوْ
تُخَشَىٰ ﴿٤٤﴾

heed, or may be filled with apprehension.’ (44)

They said: ‘Our Lord! We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us.’ (45)

Answered He: ‘Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all. (46)

Go, then, you two to him and say, ‘We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God’s] guidance. (47)

It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it.’ (48)

[Pharaoh] said: ‘Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?’ (49)

He replied: ‘Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them.’ (50)

Said [Pharaoh]: ‘And what of all the past

قَالَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّا نَخَافُ أَنْ يُفْرِطَ عَلَيْنَا أَوْ
أَنْ يَطْغَى ﴿٤٥﴾

قَالَ لَا نَخَافَا ۗ إِنَّنِي مَعَكُمْ أَسْمَعُ
وَأَرَى ﴿٤٦﴾

فَأْتِيَاهُ فَقُولَا إِنَّا رَسُولَا رَبِّكَ فَأَرْسِلْ
مَعَنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَلَا تُعَذِّبْهُمْ ۗ قَدْ
جِئْنَاكَ بِبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۗ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَيَّ مَنِ
اتَّبَعَ الْهُدَى ﴿٤٧﴾

إِنَّا قَدْ أُوحِيَ إِلَيْنَا أَنَّ الْعَذَابَ عَلَيَّ مَنِ
كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى ﴿٤٨﴾

قَالَ فَمَنْ رَبُّكُمَا يَمُوسَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَىٰ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ
ثُمَّ هَدَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

قَالَ فَمَا بَالُ الْقُرُونِ الْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

قَالَ عَلِمَهَا عِنْدَ رَبِّي فِي كِتَابٍ لَّا يَضِلُّ
رَبِّي وَلَا يَنْسَى ﴿٥٢﴾

generations?' (51)

[Moses] answered: 'Knowledge of that rests with my Lord alone, recorded in a Book. My Lord does not err, and neither does He forget. (52)

He it is who has made the earth your cradle, and has traced on it paths for you to walk on, and who sends down waters from the sky with which We bring forth diverse pairs of plants. (53)

Eat, then, and graze your cattle. In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason. (54)

Out of this [earth] have We created you, and into it shall We return you, and out of it shall We bring you forth once again. (55)

And, indeed, We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused [to take heed]. (56)

He said: 'Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic?' (57)

In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it. Set, then, for us an appointment which neither we nor you shall fail to

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمْ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَسَلَكَ

لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا وَأَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً

فَأَخْرَجْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِّنْ نَّبَاتٍ شَتَّى ﴿٥٢﴾

كُلُوا وَارْعَوْا أَنْعَمَكُمُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ

لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٥٣﴾

﴿٥٤﴾ مِمَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ وَفِيهَا نُعِيدُكُمْ وَمِنْهَا

نُخْرِجُكُمْ تَارَةً أُخْرَى ﴿٥٥﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرَيْنَاهُ آيَاتِنَا كُلَّهَا فَكَذَّبَ وَأَبَىٰ

﴿٥٦﴾

قَالَ أَجِئْتَنَا لِتُخْرِجَنَا مِنْ أَرْضِنَا

بِسِحْرِكَ يَمْوَسَىٰ ﴿٥٧﴾

فَلَنَأْتِيَنَّكَ بِسِحْرٍ مِّثْلِهِ ۗ فَاجْعَلْ بَيْنَنَا

وَبَيْنَكَ مَوْعِدًا لَا نُخْلِفُهُ نَحْنُ وَلَا أَنْتَ

مَكَانًا سُوًى ﴿٥٨﴾

قَالَ مَوْعِدُكُمْ يَوْمَ الزَّيْنَةِ وَأَنْ تُحْشَرَ

keep, at a suitable, open place.' (58)

Answered Moses: 'Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high.' (59)

Thereupon Pharaoh withdrew and put together the artful scheme which he would pursue; and then turned up. (60)

Moses said to them: 'Woe betide you! Do not invent any falsehood against God, lest He afflict you with most grievous suffering. He who contrives such a lie is sure to come to grief.' (61)

So they debated among themselves as to what to do; but they kept their counsel secret. (62)

They said: 'These two are surely sorcerers intent on driving you away from your land by their sorcery, and on doing away with your exemplary way of life. (63)

Hence, decide on the scheme you will pursue, and then come forward in one single body. For, indeed, he who prevails today shall ever be successful.' (64)

Said [the sorcerers]: 'Moses! Either you throw

النَّاسُ ضُحَىٰ ﴿٥٨﴾

فَتَوَلَّىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فَجَمَعَ كَيْدَهُ ثُمَّ أَتَىٰ

﴿٥٩﴾

قَالَ لَهُم مُّوسَىٰ وَيَلْكُم لَأ تَفْتُرُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ
كَذِبًا فَيُسْحِتَكُم بِعَذَابٍ ۖ وَقَدْ خَابَ

مَنْ أَفْتَرَىٰ ﴿٦٠﴾

فَتَنَزَعُوا أَمْرَهُم بَيْنَهُمْ وَأَسْرُوا النَّجْوَىٰ

﴿٦١﴾

قَالُوا إِنَّ هَذَانِ لَسَاحِرَانِ يُرِيدَانِ أَنْ
يُخْرِجَاكُم مِّنْ أَرْضِكُمْ بِسِحْرِهِمَا وَيَذْهَبَا

بِطَرِيقَتِكُمُ الْمُتَّكِلِ ﴿٦٢﴾

فَأَجْمِعُوا كَيْدَكُمْ ثُمَّ آتُوا صَفًّا ۚ وَقَدْ

أَفْلَحَ الْيَوْمَ مَنْ أَسْتَعَلَىٰ ﴿٦٣﴾

قَالُوا يَمُوسَىٰ إِمَّا أَنْ تُلْقَىٰ وَإِمَّا أَنْ نَكُونَ

أَوَّلَ مَنْ أَلْقَىٰ ﴿٦٤﴾

قَالَ بَلْ أَلْقُوا ۖ فَإِذَا حِبَالُهُمْ وَعِصِيُّهُمْ

[first], or we shall be the first to throw.’ (65)

He answered: ‘You throw first!’ And by virtue of their sorcery, their ropes and staffs seemed to him to be moving rapidly. (66)

And in his heart Moses became apprehensive. (67)

But We said [to him]: ‘Have no fear! It is you who shall certainly prevail. (68)

Now throw that which is in your right hand and it shall swallow up all that they have wrought. For, they have wrought nothing but a sorcerer’s deceitful tricks; and sorcerers can never come to any good, whatever they may do.’ (69)

So down fell the sorcerers, prostrating themselves, and declared: ‘We do believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.’ (70)

Said [Pharaoh]: ‘Do you believe in him before I have given you permission? Surely, he must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm trees. You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a

تَحْتَلُّ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ سِحْرِهِمْ أَنَّهَا تَسْعَى ﴿٦٦﴾

فَأَوْجَسَ فِي نَفْسِهِ خِيفَةً مُوسَى ﴿٦٧﴾

قُلْنَا لَا تَخَفْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْأَعْلَى ﴿٦٨﴾

وَأَلْقَى مَا فِي يَمِينِكَ تَلْقَفَ مَا صَنَعُوا إِنَّمَا

صَنَعُوا كَيْدُ سِحْرٍ وَلَا يُفْلِحُ السَّاحِرُ

حَيْثُ أَتَى ﴿٦٩﴾

فَأَلْقَى السَّحْرَةَ سُجَّدًا قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ

هَرُونَ وَمُوسَى ﴿٧٠﴾

قَالَ ءَامَنْتُمْ لَهُ قَبْلَ أَنْ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّهُ

لَكَبِيرُكُمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ السِّحْرَ

فَلَا قُطِعَ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَرْجُلُكُمْ مِّنْ

خَلْفٍ وَلَا أُصْلِبْنَكُمْ فِي جُدُوعِ النَّخْلِ

وَلَتَعْلَمَنَّ أَيُّنَا أَشَدُّ عَذَابًا وَأَبْقَى ﴿٧١﴾

قَالُوا لَنْ نُؤْتِرَكَ عَلَىٰ مَا جَاءَنَا مِنِ

الْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالَّذِي فَطَرَنَا فَاقْضِ مَا أَنْتَ

قَاضٍ إِنَّمَا تَقْضِي هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا

more severe and longer lasting punishment.’ (71)

They answered: ‘Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being! Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life. (72)

As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us. God is certainly the best and He is Everlasting.’ (73)

He who shall appear before his Lord [on Judgement Day] laden with sin shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live. (74)

But he who shall appear before Him as a believer, having done righteous deeds, shall be exalted to the highest ranks, (75)

abiding in the gardens of Eden, through which running waters flow. Such shall be the recompense of those who keep themselves pure. (76)

Then We thus inspired Moses: ‘Go forth with My servants by night, and strike out for them a dry path through the sea. Have no fear of being

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إِنَّا ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّنَا لِيَغْفِرَ لَنَا خَطِيئَتَنَا وَمَا
أَكْرَهْتَنَا عَلَيْهِ مِنَ السِّحْرِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ
وَأَبْقَى ۗ

إِنَّهُرْ مَنْ يَأْتِ رَبَّهُ مُجْرِمًا فَإِنَّ لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ
لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحْيَىٰ ۗ

وَمَنْ يَأْتِهِ مُؤْمِنًا قَدْ عَمِلَ الصَّالِحَاتِ
فَأُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الدَّرَجَاتُ الْعُلَىٰ ۗ

جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ
خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَاءُ مَنْ تَزَكَّىٰ ۗ

وَلَقَدْ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَسْرِ بِعِبَادِي
فَأَضْرِبْ لَهُمْ طَرِيقًا فِي الْبَحْرِ يَبَسًا لَّا
تَخَافُ دَرَكًا وَلَا تَخْشَىٰ ۗ

فَاتَّبَعَهُمْ فِرْعَوْنُ يَجُنُّدُهُ ۚ فَغَشِيَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّيْلِ
مَا غَشِيَهُمْ ۗ

overtaken, and dread nothing.' (77)

Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. (78)

For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright. (79)

Children of Israel! We saved you from your enemy, and then We made a covenant with you on the right flank of Mount Sinai. We sent down manna and quails for you. (80)

Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin; (81)

but I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path. (82)

[And God said]: Now what has caused you, Moses, to leave your people behind in so great a

وَأَضَلَّ فِرْعَوْنُ قَوْمَهُ وَمَا هَدَىٰ ﴿٧٦﴾

يَبْنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ قَدْ أَجْجَيْنَاكَ مِنْ عَدُوِّكَ
وَوَاعَدْنَاكَ جَانِبَ الطُّورِ الْأَيْمَنِ وَنَزَّلْنَا
عَلَيْكَ الْمَنَّاءَ وَالسَّلْوَىٰ ﴿٧٧﴾

كُلُوا مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ وَلَا تَطْغَوْا
فِيهِ فَيَحِلَّ عَلَيْكُمْ غَضَبِي ۗ وَمَنْ سَخَلَ
عَلَيْهِ غَضَبِي فَقَدْ هَوَىٰ ﴿٧٨﴾

وَإِنِّي لَغَفَّارٌ لِّمَنْ تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ
صَالِحًا ثُمَّ اهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٧٩﴾

﴿٨٠﴾ وَمَا أَعْجَلَكَ عَنْ قَوْمِكَ يَمُوسَىٰ

﴿٨١﴾

قَالَ هُمْ أَوْلَاءِ عَلَىٰ أَثْرِي وَعَجِلْتُ إِلَيْكَ
رَبِّ لِتَرْضَىٰ ﴿٨٢﴾

قَالَ فَإِنَّا قَدْ فَتَنَّا قَوْمَكَ مِنْ بَعْدِكَ

haste?’ (83)

He answered: ‘They are treading in my footsteps, while I have hastened to You, my Lord, so that You might be well-pleased with me.’ (84)

Said He: ‘Then [know that] in your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriy has led them astray.’ (85)

Thus Moses returned to his people full of wrath and sorrow: ‘My people,’ he said, ‘Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you? Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord’s condemnation fall upon you, and so you broke your promise to me?’ (86)

They answered: ‘We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will, but we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people’s ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire], and likewise this Sāmiriy threw.’ (87)

Thus he produced for them the effigy of a calf, which made a lowing sound. ‘This,’ they said, ‘is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has

وَأَضَلَّهُمُ السَّامِرِيُّ ﴿٨٥﴾

فَرَجَعَ مُوسَىٰ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ غَضْبَانَ أَسِفًا
قَالَ يَتِقَوْمِ أَلَمْ يَعِدْكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ وَعَدًّا
حَسَنًا أَفَطَالَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْعَهْدُ أَمْ أَرَدْتُمْ
أَنْ يَحِلَّ عَلَيْكُمْ غَضَبٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ
فَأَخْلَفْتُم مَّوْعِدِي ﴿٨٦﴾

قَالُوا مَا أَخْلَفْنَا مَوْعِدَكَ بِمَلِكِنَا وَلَكِنَّا
حُمَلْنَا أَوْزَارًا مِّن زِينَةِ الْقَوْمِ فَقَذَفْنَاهَا
فَكَذَلِكَ أَلْقَى السَّامِرِيُّ ﴿٨٧﴾

فَأَخْرَجَ لَهُمْ عِجْلًا جَسَدًا لَهُ خُورٌ
فَقَالُوا هَذَا إِلَهُكُمْ وَإِلَهُ مُوسَىٰ فَنَسِيَ
﴿٨٨﴾

أَفَلَا يَرَوْنَ إِلَّا يَرْجِعُ إِلَيْهِمْ قَوْلًا وَلَا
يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا ﴿٨٩﴾ وَلَقَدْ

قَالَ لَهُمْ هَارُونُ مِنْ قَبْلُ يَتِقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا

forgotten.’ (88)

Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them? (89)

And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you.’ (90)

But they had replied: ‘By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us.’ (91)

[Moses] said: Aaron! What has prevented you, when you saw that they had gone astray, (92)

from following me? Why have you disobeyed me?’ (93)

‘Son of my mother,’ he replied, ‘do not seize me by my beard, or by my head! I was afraid that you might say, “You have caused a split among the Israelites and did not wait for my orders.”’ (94)

Said [Moses]: ‘What is then your case, Sāmiriy?’ (95)

فَتِنْتُمْ بِهِ ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ الرَّحْمَنُ فَاتَّبِعُونِي
وَأَطِيعُوا أَمْرِي ﴿٨٩﴾

قَالُوا لَنْ نَبْرَحَ عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفِينَ حَتَّىٰ يَرْجِعَ
إِلَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ ﴿٩٠﴾

قَالَ يَهْرُونَ مَا مَنَعَكَ إِذْ رَأَيْتَهُمْ ضَلُّوا
﴿٩١﴾

أَلَّا تَتَّبِعَنِ ۗ أَفَعَصَيْتَ أَمْرِي ﴿٩٢﴾

قَالَ يَبْنَؤُمْ لَا تَأْخُذْ بِلِحْيَتِي وَلَا بِرَأْسِي ۗ
إِنِّي خَشِيتُ أَنْ تَقُولَ فَرَّقْتَ بَيْنَ بَنِي
إِسْرَائِيلَ وَلَمْ تَرْقُبْ قَوْلِي ﴿٩٣﴾

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكَ يُسْمِرِيُّ ﴿٩٤﴾

قَالَ بَصُرْتُ بِمَا لَمْ يَبْصُرُوا بِهِ ۗ فَقَبَضْتُ
قَبْضَةً مِّنْ أَثَرِ الرَّسُولِ فَنَبَذْتُهَا
وَكَذَلِكَ سَوَّلَتْ لِي نَفْسِي ﴿٩٥﴾

قَالَ فَادْهَبْ فَإِنَّ لَكَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ أَنْ
تَقُولَ لَا مِسَاسَ ۗ وَإِنَّ لَكَ مَوْعِدًا لَّنْ
تُخْلَفَهُ ۗ وَانظُرْ إِلَىٰ إِلْهِكَ الَّذِي ظَلْتَ

He answered: 'I have gained insight into something which they were unable to see; and so I took a handful of dust from the trail of the messenger and flung it away; for thus has my mind prompted me to act.' (96)

Said [Moses]: 'Begone, then! It shall be your lot to say throughout your life, "Do not touch me." But you shall be faced with a destiny from which you shall have no escape. Now look at this deity of yours to whose worship you have become so devoted: we shall most certainly burn it, and then scatter it far and wide over the sea.' (97)

Your only deity is God, other than whom there is no deity. His knowledge encompasses all things. (98)

عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفًا لَّنَحْرَقَنَّهُ ثُمَّ لَّنَنْسِفَنَّهُ فِي

الْيَمِّ نَسْفًا ﴿٩٧﴾

إِنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ

وَسِعَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا ﴿٩٨﴾

Knowledge Going Deeper than Secrets

Ṭā Hā. We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing. It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil. If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden. [He is] God; there is no deity other than Him. His alone are all the attributes of perfection. (Verses 1-8)

These opening verses give the sūrah a tender start beginning with two letter sounds, Ṭā Hā, to indicate that this sūrah, like the entire Qur'ān, is made up of letters from the Arabic alphabet, as we have explained in earlier volumes. The two letters chosen here have the same sound-ending as the verses of the sūrah.

We then have a reference to the Qur'ān, in the same way as other sūrahs commencing with separate letters, but the reference here is made in the form of an

address to the Prophet [peace be on him] . *“We did not bestow this Qur’ān on you from on high to cause you distress.”* (Verse 2) We have not revealed this Qur’ān so that it leads you to a state of distress. We do not want to make things hard for you requiring that you recite it in worship going beyond the limits of human ability. In fact, the Qur’ān is made easy for remembrance, and whatever requirements and duties it imposes are easy for people to fulfil. It only imposes duties that are well within human ability. Reciting it during worship is a blessing, providing us with an opportunity to be in touch with the Supreme Society from whom we derive strength, reassurance, contentment and a feeling of companionship.

Nor did We reveal this Qur’ān so that you would become distressed when people refused to accept it as divine revelation. You are not required to force them to faith, nor to overstretch yourself in trying to convince them of the truth of your message. This Qur’ān is bestowed from on high to you as a reminder and a warning: *“But only as an admonition to the God-fearing.”* (Verse 3)

When God’s Messenger gives such an admonition, reminding people of God and warning them against disbelief and disobedience of God’s orders, his mission is fulfilled. God’s Messenger is not required to open sealed hearts, nor is it his task to overpower minds and souls. This can only be done by God, who has bestowed this Qur’ān from on high. He is the One who is in full control of the whole universe and who knows every heart’s secrets: *“It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil.”* (Verses 4-6)

The One who has revealed this Qur’ān is God who created the earth and the high heavens. This shows that the revelation of the Qur’ān is a universal phenomenon, like the creation of the heavens and earth. It is a revelation from on high. The *sūrah* thus links the laws that govern the universe with those that bring revelation. There is thus perfect harmony here between the high heavens, the earth and the Qur’ān, revealed as it is from on high to the earth.

The One who bestowed the Qur’ān from on high, and created the earth and the high heavens is God, the ‘Most Merciful’. Hence, He has not given it to His servant, Muḥammad, to cause him distress. His attribute of limitless grace is highlighted here to emphasize this. Besides, He is the One in control of the whole universe, God, *“the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness.”* This is an expression indicating complete control and total power. So, the fate of all people is in His hands, while His Messenger’s role is only to admonish those who are God-fearing.[§]

[§] For further discussion on the *Istiḥā* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of ‘In the Shade of the Qur’ān*.

But in addition to His control of the universe, He has complete dominion: *“To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil.”* (Verse 6) Scenes of the universe are used to highlight the concepts of dominion and knowledge in a way that can be understood by human intellect. Otherwise, the reality is much greater than this. God is the owner of all existence, and this is greater by far than all creatures in the heavens, the earth, and in between them and what is under the soil.

God’s knowledge encompasses everything in His dominion: *“If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden.”* (Verse 7) Again there is perfect harmony between the inferences from this verse speaking about God’s knowledge of secrets and what is more deeply hidden on the one hand and the verse speaking of God’s dominion on the other. We note the contrast between what is visible in the universe and what is open of people’s words, and also between what is hidden under the soil and that which is hidden in people’s thoughts: that is, secret thoughts and things more deeply hidden. A secret is covered in shrouds, and what is ‘more hidden’ denotes further degrees of covering, as in the case of something buried very deep underground.

This address provides the Prophet with reassurance, comfort and knowledge that God listens to him. He does not leave him alone to feel distressed by his task of delivering the message of the Qur’ān, or facing the unbelievers alone without support. If the Prophet appeals to his Lord aloud, he should know that God knows all secrets and what is buried deeper than secrets. When we realize that God is near to us, knowing our thoughts and secret appeals, we are reassured and content. We no longer feel our isolation in the midst of hostile opponents who reject our faith and entertain different views.

This section concludes with a declaration of God’s oneness, after stating His total dominion, control and perfect knowledge: *“He is God; there is no deity other than Him. His alone are all the attributes of perfection.”* (Verse 8) The Arabic term, *husnā*, rendered here as ‘perfection’ is specially selected to contribute to the rhythm while also adding to the general ambience of grace and care which is characteristic of the whole *sūrah* and of its opening in particular.

More Details about Moses

Now God begins to tell His Messenger, Muḥammad, the story of Moses, as an example of the care He takes of those whom He chooses to hear His message. Accounts of Moses are more frequent in the Qur’ān than those of all other messengers. This history is given in the Qur’ān in episodes, each of which fits perfectly with the general theme of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. So far, we have seen

such episodes in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow; 5, The Repast; 7, The Heights; 10, Jonah; 17, The Night Journey; and 18, The Cave. Other references are also made in later *sūrahs*.

The account given in *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, tells how the Children of Israel stood at a distance from the Holy Land, refusing to enter it because of the powerful residents living there. In *Sūrah* 18, The Cave, also in this volume, we saw Moses' encounter with the pious man and what occurred when the two travelled together. Here, however, we have a long and detailed history covering several episodes, as was the case in *Sūrahs* 2, 7, and 10. The episodes given in each *sūrah* may be totally different, but where there are similarities, these are portrayed from different angles, so that they fit more perfectly with the general line of the *sūrah* in which they occur.

Thus, in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, Moses' story is preceded by that of Adam and how he was honoured in heaven, how he was given charge of the earth and the grace God bestowed on him when He granted him forgiveness. In the same vein, the story of Moses and the Children of Israel provides a reminder of God's grace, God's covenant with them, their salvation from Pharaoh, their prayer for rain and how they were given manna and quails for food. It also mentions Moses' appointment with his Lord and how the Children of Israel took to worshipping the calf in his absence, God's forgiveness and binding covenant under the mountain, their breach of the Sabbath and the story of the cow.

In *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, Moses' story is preceded by warnings and an outline of the fate suffered by earlier communities who denied God's messages after they were given different signs and miracles. Hence, the story in this *sūrah* begins at the point when Moses was given his message. It refers to the various signs given to him, such as his staff and hand, as well as the floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood, and speaks in detail about the encounter with the sorcerers, the fate of Pharaoh and his people. It then mentions how the Israelites worshipped the calf in Moses' absence. It culminates with an announcement of the heritage of God's grace and guidance being passed over to those who follow the last Messenger, the unlettered Prophet.

In *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, Moses' story is preceded by a short account of the destruction of earlier communities for rejecting God's guidance despite the clear evidence provided for them. The account of Moses given in this *sūrah* again begins with his message and his encounter with the sorcerers, followed by a detailed picture of the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. In the present *sūrah*, this comes immediately after the opening verses which speak about the grace God bestows on those whom He selects to convey His message. The story has the same aura of divine grace, starting with the dialogue between Moses and God. It includes examples of the care God took of Moses and the support He gave him. It mentions that such care started long before his message, during his early childhood, when God provided him with protection and love: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My*

watchful eye.” (Verse 39)

An Address from On High

Have you learnt the story of Moses? When he saw a fire, he said to his family: ‘Wait here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire.’” (Verses 9-10)

The Prophet is asked a rhetorical question about whether or not he had heard of Moses’ history and how it reflects God’s grace and the guidance He provides for those whom He chooses as His messengers.

Here we see Moses (peace be upon him) on the road between Madyan and Egypt, close to Mount Sinai, returning with his wife after he had completed the term he had agreed with the Prophet Shu`ayb. This agreement meant that Shu`ayb would give him one of his two daughters in marriage in return for eight or ten years during which he would be his assistant. He most probably spent ten years before he felt that he could leave with his wife to return to the country where he grew up. There the Children of Israel, Moses’ people, lived in subjugation.¹

Why is he returning to Egypt having fled there after killing an Egyptian whom he found quarrelling with an Israelite? He had after all found safe refuge with Shu`ayb, his father-in-law. So why would he leave that place of security and return to Egypt? Here we see human homesickness as the tool used by God to bring Moses to the place where he was to play an important role. Thus is life. We are motivated by feelings, passions, aspirations, hopes and memories, but all these are merely the outward causes of the desired result. They are what we see on the surface, but below them is the will that no sight can see. It is God’s will, and He is the Almighty who accomplishes everything He wants.

Thus we see Moses on his way back to Egypt, losing his way in the desert, accompanied only by his wife, and perhaps a servant. He loses his way in the darkness of the night in the open desert. We sense this from the way he says to his companions: *“Wait here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire.”* (Verse 10) People living in the desert normally lit their fires on high ground so that those travelling at night could see it, find their way or come over to it where they would find a welcome and hospitality, as well as directions to continue their journey.

Moses saw the fire as he was walking through the desert and he was warmed by

¹ An account of the situation the Children of Israel lived under occurs in *Sūrah* 28, The Story, which was revealed earlier than the present *sūrah*.

hope. He moved towards it in order to fetch a firebrand, as night in the desert is normally cold. He also felt he might find some guidance as to which direction to travel in. He went there to bring back a torch, but was in for a great surprise. For he found the fire that warms souls and spirits, and provides guidance for the greatest journey of all:

But when he came close to it, a voice called out to him: Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā. Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed. Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise. Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove for. Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish.’ (Verses 11-16)

This is an awe-inspiring scene. We shudder as we imagine Moses alone in the open desert, engulfed in the complete darkness and silence of the night, making his way towards the fire by the side of the mountain. Then suddenly, the whole universe echoes the great address: *“Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā. Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed.” (Verses 12-13)*

That small, insignificant particle that is a human being is here faced with that great majesty which no human can envisage. Compared with such majesty, the heavens and earth shrink into insignificance. Nevertheless, that human being received a divine address from on high. How? *We* only say: by God’s grace! How else? At that moment, all humanity, represented by Moses (peace be upon him), is elevated.

It is sufficient for a human being to receive this grace for one moment. Humanity as a whole is honoured by simply having the ability to sustain such a communication in some way. Yet how does it occur? We do not know. It is not the function of the human mind to judge. All that we can do is to look on in admiration and believe what we see.

“When he came close to it, a voice called out to him: Moses.” (Verse 11) The calling out is expressed in the original Arabic text in the passive voice with no reference to who or what made the address. In English we say, ‘a voice called out’. We cannot define the source of this address, its direction, form or nature; nor can we be sure how Moses heard or received it. There was simply an address of a certain nature and it was received accordingly. We accept that this has taken place, without asking how, because that is part of the way in which God accomplishes His business.[§]

[§] For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of ‘In the Shade of the Qur’ān.’*

“Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā.” (Verse 12) You are in the presence of God Almighty, so take off your shoes. You must not step with your shoes in the valley over which God’s presence is made. *“Know that I have chosen you.”* (Verse 13) What honour is granted to the man chosen directly by God. Moses is, after all, merely one servant among the great multitude living on a planet that is no more than a small particle in a much larger group. Yet this group is merely a small particle in the great universe. This universe came into existence when God willed it to exist. We can thus imagine the great care God has taken of man.

When this announcement of God’s honour, reflected in God’s selection of Moses as His messenger is made, he is asked to prepare for what is coming by taking off his sandals. Then he is told to be ready to learn: *“Listen, then, to what is being revealed.”* (Verse 13)

This brief revelation sums up three crucial aspects of the divine faith: belief in God’s oneness, addressing all worship to Him alone, and belief in the Last Hour. These are the foundation of God’s message that remained the same throughout human history: *“Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise. Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove for. Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish.”* (Verses 14-16)

God’s oneness is the cornerstone of faith. In His address to Moses, God emphasizes it in different forms: first in a statement bearing a strong emphasis, *“Indeed, I alone am God.”* (Verse 14) Then Godhead is clearly stated as applicable to no one else: *“There is no deity other than Me.”* (Verse 14) When Godhead is thus established, worship follows. Worship means that every activity should aim to please God. Singled out among all human activity is prayer: *“Establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise.”* (Verse 14) Prayer is the most complete and perfect of all types of worship celebrating God’s praise. In fact its sole purpose is such. It discards everything else. Thus in prayer we are prepared for contact with God.

The Last Hour is the time appointed for administering rewards, in all justice and fairness. People think of this time and make sure that they keep it in mind. They move on in life, looking with watchful eyes, fearing to slip. God makes it clear that this Last Hour is certain to come: *“Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come.”* (Verse 15) What people know about this Last Hour is limited to the information God has given them. This is all that they need to know, as determined by divine wisdom. That something should remain unknown is essential in human life. For we need to have something unknown to aspire towards. With human nature as it is, if everything were clearly exposed, activity would cease and life would become sterile. In fact, we continuously seek the unknown: we watch carefully, entertain

hopes and aspirations, experiment and learn, and uncover what we can of our own potentials and those of the universe around us. We contemplate God's signs all around us. We invent and produce new things. When we think of the Last Hour, whose timing remains unknown, we do not lose sight of it. Since we do not know its timing, we remain conscious of it, ready for its arrival. Needless to say, this applies only to those of us who preserve our sound human nature. Those who distort it however are bound to fall and fail: *"Let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish."* (Verse 16)

Indeed, pursuing one's desire is the cause of denying the Last Hour. Sound human nature believes that humanity cannot attain its super status during this present life, where justice is not seen to be done. There must then be another life where man attains perfection and absolute justice is carried out.

Moses' Mission Defined

This was an address to which the whole universe responded. In it, God gave His chosen messenger the fundamental truth of His oneness. Moses must have forgotten all about himself and the purpose for which he aimed towards the fire. He was now only following this voice coming to him from on high. He was attentive to the divine instructions being given to him. As he is so absorbed, with his mind and soul fully attentive to it, he is asked a question which requires no answer from him: *"Now, what is this in your right hand, Moses?"* (Verse 17)

Of course Moses had his staff in his hand, but where was his mind at that moment? Well, he remembers and gives his reply: *"He answered: It is my staff; upon it I lean, and with it I beat down the leaves for my sheep; and other uses have I for it."* (Verse 18) The question did not ask about the uses he had for his staff, but rather about the object he was holding. Nevertheless, Moses realizes that he was not being asked to name the object in his hand, but to state what he did with it. Hence his answer outlining the purposes for which he used it. He used it for support when walking and beat the leaves of the trees so that they fell and were eaten by his sheep. We know that Moses tended sheep for Shu`ayb, his father-in-law. It is also reported that he had a number of sheep given him as his share. Furthermore, he had other uses for his staff to which he refers in general without going into specifics, because what he has already stated gives a clear indication of them.

The omnipotent power, however, does with his staff what he could have never imagined. This comes as part of his preparation for his task: *"Said He: 'Throw it down, Moses.' So he threw it down, and thereupon it was a snake, moving rapidly. Said He: 'Take it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state.'"* (Verses 19-21)

Thus he saw in front of his eyes the great miracle that occurs every moment while

people remain oblivious to it. That is the miracle of life: the staff became a rapidly moving snake. Millions and millions of lifeless atoms or objects are transformed into living things all the time, but they do not fill man with wonder and amazement like a staff being transformed into a snake. Man lives in a world demarcated by his senses and experiences. He cannot go far beyond what he can perceive. To see a staff made of wood transformed into a snake that moves quickly was bound to shock his senses. He was thus profoundly alert. The hidden aspects of how life first came about and the miraculous nature of life springing up at every moment are too subtle to capture man's mind and imagination. This is particularly the case when something becomes too familiar; it thus goes unnoticed.

The miracle of life took place, and Moses was full of amazement, with fear tearing at his heart. But the command was given: *"Take it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state."* (Verse 21) It will once again be a staff. The *sūrah* does not mention Moses' other reaction, which in another *sūrah* shows him running away. Here we have only a subtle reference to the fear that overwhelmed him. This is because the general atmosphere in this *sūrah* is one of safety and reassurance. It is not to be disturbed by speaking about such overwhelming fear that causes a man to run away.

Thus Moses was reassured, he picked up the snake and it was a staff again, regaining its original shape and form. Thus the other aspect of the miracle took place, with life departing from a living creature.

Another command was issued to Moses from on high: *"Now put your hand under your armpit. It will come out [shining.] white, without blemish: another sign."* (Verse 22) Moses did as he was told. It should be noted that the Qur'ān uses a different expression to denote the position where Moses was to put his hand, his armpit. It is described as his 'wing' which gives an air of freedom of movement and freedom from the earth's gravity. Thus his hand came out shining white, but its whiteness indicates no illness or malignancy. This is indeed another sign to be added to that of his staff. He is thus made to see some of the great miracles God works out: *"We shall show you some of Our most wondrous signs."* (Verse 23) When he has seen these with his own eyes, he will be reassured and able to carry out his great task with greater determination.

"Go to Pharaoh; for he has indeed transgressed all bounds." (Verse 24) Up to this point Moses was unaware that he was chosen for this very hard task. He has first hand knowledge of Pharaoh, since he himself was brought up in Pharaoh's own palace, witnessing his tyranny and how he treated his people with unabating cruelty. Since he is now in audience with his Lord, feeling the great honour God has bestowed on him, he asks for assistance and reassurance to better execute his mission: *"Said [Moses]: My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say. Appoint for*

me a helper from among my kinsmen, Aaron, my brother. Grant me strength through him, and let him share my task, so that together we may extol Your limitless glory and remember You always. You are surely watching over us.” (Verses 25-35)

Requests Granted

So, Moses requests his Lord to open up his heart, so that the hard task before him would be a pleasure to undertake. It would also motivate him to carry on with it without impediment. He further prays to God to facilitate his task. When God facilitates a task for anyone, it is certain to succeed. For, what can man accomplish on his own, unless God facilitates matters for him? How can he achieve success when he has only limited ability and deficient knowledge while the road ahead is long, difficult and unknown.

The first thing Moses prayed for was heart reassurance that he would clearly feel, and then that God should facilitate things for him. What can man do without such help, relying on his little ability and limited knowledge? But Moses requests more to help him with his task. He wanted his tongue to be freed so that people could understand him easily when he spoke. It has been reported that he suffered from some sort of speech impediment. Most probably this is what he means here. It is further supported by what he is quoted as saying: *“My brother Aaron is far better in speech than I am.”* (28: 34) The prayer Moses said here was made first in general terms. Now he adds details which he feels necessary for the task ahead.

First he asks for a helper from his own family, and that was Aaron. He knew Aaron to be outspoken, courageous and yet someone who could control his feelings. Moses himself was passionate and rather hot-tempered. Therefore, he requested his Lord for support, letting his brother share in the fulfilment of his task. He realized that his task required much glorification of God, constant remembering of Him and contact with Him through prayers. Thus we see Moses requesting God to open up his heart and facilitate his task, to free him of his speech difficulty, and give him a helper from among his family. All this he needed not to carry on the task entrusted to him, but rather so that he and his brother could glorify God and remember Him often as He should be remembered and glorified. Thus, they would be able to receive His guidance, as He is the One who knows their situation best. *“You are surely watching over us.”* (Verse 35) You know our limited resources and our need for Your help.

God, benevolent and compassionate as He is, does not let His guest go back empty-handed. Nor does He delay answering his prayer: *“Said He: ‘You are granted all that you have asked for, Moses.’”* (Verse 36)

Just a simple word, without the need for detail, sums up the positive and

immediate response. Moses has been granted all that he requested. The way this response is phrased indicates that all that Moses requested became a reality immediately. Then, Moses hears his Lord addressing him by name. What is more honourable than that God in His majesty should mention one of His servants by name?

This is more than anyone can hope for of God's grace and compassion. The meeting took its time and the address was made in full, with a complete and positive response to Moses' prayer. Yet God's grace continues to be bestowed in abundance. There is no check to slow down or prevent God's mercy when He grants it. Therefore, He gives Moses even further reassurance as He reminds him that His grace has been shown to him for a long time. Moreover, every moment longer he stays in his Lord's presence gives him further happiness and greater strength to pursue his mission.

And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by, when We inspired your mother, saying: Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore, and one who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up.' I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye. Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh's people]: 'Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?' Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve. And [when you came of age,] you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; for I have chosen you for Myself (Verses 37-41)

Moses was going to meet the most powerful man on earth, a tyrant who knew no mercy. Against him he was to conduct the battle between faith and unfaith. He would be in the thick of things, facing all sorts of difficulties, against Pharaoh at first, then against his own people whose nature had been corrupted by long subjugation. They did not have the necessary qualities to fulfil the mission entrusted to them after they were liberated from Pharaoh's tyranny. Hence, God tells him that he, Moses, has been fully equipped for the task, as he was reared under God's watchful eye, given the necessary skills for taking on seemingly impossible tasks, right from the time of his infancy. God took care of him in his formative years when he placed him right under Pharaoh's nose, without any other care or support. Yet Pharaoh's hand could not harm him, because it was God who took care of him. He need not worry now about Pharaoh's power, as he still enjoys God's help and care in his adulthood. It is God who has chosen him for His mission.

Reminder of Past Favours

God responded by saying that all Moses' requests were granted. This was an act of grace by the One who is Most Merciful. But with this he is also given a reminder of God's past favours. Such a reminder is certain to reassure Moses that with God's support he can face any power or dictator. *"And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by."* (Verse 37) The One who granted him all this protection and support will not let him down now. In the past, His favours were continuous, so it is unlikely that they will stop now after Moses has been assigned a mission by God. The favour mentioned first is that given to his mother which any woman in her condition would have needed. Her inspiration then told her: *"Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore."* (Verse 39)

We note here that the text describes rough and violent actions: a child being pushed into a wooden chest, and the chest thrown into the river. Then the river casts the box and the child inside onto the shore. But what then? To whose care will this child be entrusted? The answer is: *"One who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up."* (Verse 39) Amidst all this Moses is also told: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye."* (Verse 39)

All this is an aspect of divine providence which transforms love and compassion into a shield to protect the child from all the blows, waves and currents. None of the powers of evil is able to harm the recipient of such love, even though he is no more than an infant of only a few days who cannot indicate his needs or express his feelings.

We have in this image a rare contrast between the great tyrannical forces lying in wait for the tiny infant and the hard circumstances engulfing him on the one hand and, on the other, the flowing compassion guarding him from all fears and protecting him against all dangers. His protection comes about as tender love, without the need for fighting or confrontation: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye."* (Verse 39) Nothing further can be added to explain such gentle, loving tenderness than this most perfect Qur'ānic expression of how Moses was reared under God's watchful eye. How can human expression describe a creature reared under such care? The most that we can do is contemplate the situation and what it meant for Moses' development. It is a great honour for any human being to have direct divine care for just a moment in his life. What honour is then bestowed on one who is reared under such care? Perhaps this is what made Moses able to receive this address direct from God.

Thus Moses is reared under God's protection right under Pharaoh's nose, and Pharaoh is the enemy of both God and Moses. Thus, as a young child, he is always within an arm's reach of Pharaoh, without any human guard or protector.

Nevertheless, Pharaoh's evil hand is restrained by the fact that God has lavished His love on Moses, the child, so that he attracts love by all who see him. Needless to say, with Moses being reared under God's watchful eye, no harm could come to him from Pharaoh or anyone else.

But this is not all. Not only was Moses taken care of, but his mother could not be left at home worrying about her child. The two were soon reunited. *"Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh's people]: 'Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?' Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve."* (Verse 40) That was part of God's design. He prevented the little baby from taking just any woman's breast. No wet nurse would breast-feed him. Pharaoh and his wife, who had adopted the baby cast to them by the river, were searching for a wet nurse, and this became well known. On instructions from her mother, Moses' sister went to them saying that she knew the best woman to take care of the baby. [All this is described in detail in *Sūrah* 28.] She brought them the baby's own mother and he took her breast immediately. Thus, God's design for mother and child was accomplished, for the mother had done as she was told, throwing her baby into a wooden chest in the Nile. This action brought the baby to the enemy who was killing all Israelite children. Thus, the safety of this child was accomplished by giving him to his enemies to remain with them, with no other support or guardianship.

The next favour Moses is reminded of is his escape after having killed a man: *"And you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; for I have chosen you for Myself"* (Verses 40-41)

The killing of this man took place some time during Moses' early adult years, having grown up in Pharaoh's palace. He had gone to the market one day and found two people quarrelling, one an Israelite the other an Egyptian. The Israelite appealed to him for help, and Moses pushed the Egyptian, but rather too strongly for the latter fell and was killed. Moses did not intend to kill the man, but simply to push him away. When he saw him dead, he was full of grief. It is good to remember here that Moses was brought up under God's own care, right from his early childhood. Hence, it was only natural that he was filled with remorse, blaming himself for over-reacting. God reminds him here of His favour, as He directed him to seek forgiveness, which alleviated his sorrow.

However, God did not let him simply get away with this without a lesson to learn and benefit from in his future task. Hence, He set him the test of fearing the consequences of his offence and his subsequent attempt to escape punishment. The test took then another form, forcing him to flee the land where he was born and brought up, departing alone without friend or companion. Moreover, having been brought up in the palace of the greatest ruler of the time, enjoying every comfort and

luxury, he now had to earn a living. Thus, he had to serve others, and work as a shepherd.

At the appointed time, when he attained maturity, after passing the tests to which God subjected him, and when circumstances in Egypt were most suited, with the Israelites subjected to much oppression, Moses was brought in from Madyan. He might have thought that he had chosen to travel at that time himself, but the fact of the matter was that stated in the Qur'ānic verse: *"Now you have come here, Moses, as ordained (by Me)."* (Verse 40) So his return was at a time God had determined as most suitable.

"I have chosen you for Myself" (Verse 41) Thus, Moses was trained and prepared so as to be completely devoted to God's message and to serving His cause. He was purged of all the temptations of this worldly life, so as to be purely dedicated to the task God appointed for him. All that had passed in his life was part of his training to fulfil the mission that was about to be entrusted to him. Here God tells him that neither himself, nor his family, nor anyone else had any claim on his time or services. He was chosen by God for whatever God wanted him to do.

Moses' Mission Outlined

Having made this very clear to Moses, God gives him his first instructions:

Go forth, then, you and your brother, with My signs, and never slacken in remembering Me. Go forth, both of you, to Pharaoh; for he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak to him mildly, so that he may yet take heed, or may be filled with apprehension. (Verses 42-44)

Moses is told to go with his brother Aaron, equipped with the signs God has given them. He has seen two of these in the transformation affecting his staff and his hand. They are told not to slacken in remembering God, for such remembrance is the best equipment and support they can have. Moses is reminded that God protected him from Pharaoh and his wickedness even when he was a helpless child, thrown in the Nile. Nothing of that hardship caused him any harm. Now that he has completed his training, he can approach his task with ease and reassurance, trusting to God's care.

As Moses is directed to go to Pharaoh, he is told that Pharaoh has transgressed all bounds and resorted to tyranny and oppression. Nevertheless, his instruction is that he and his brother are to *"speak to him mildly."* (Verse 44) Mild and gentle words which do not trigger a hardening of attitude or insolence and arrogance, which is commonly adopted by tyrants, may yet reawaken Pharaoh's heart and alert him to the consequences of his actions. Thus, Moses and Aaron were to go about their task,

hoping that Pharaoh might take heed, and never despairing of his reform and positive response to God's guidance. An advocate of faith who gives up on people and thinks that they never respond positively to his message cannot deliver it in the way it should be delivered. Nor is he able to hold on to it in the face of rejection and denial.

God certainly knew how Pharaoh would respond, but taking the necessary measures in preaching God's message is prerequisite. God takes people to account after they act, even though He is aware of their actions before they are made. His knowledge of future events is the same as His knowledge of the present and the past.

How to Confront a Tyrant

So far we have discussed what Moses was told when God addressed him directly alone in the desert. The *sūrah* then takes us across time and place, covering an indeterminable period of time and distance, to show us both Moses and Aaron expressing their concerns to their Lord about their forthcoming confrontation with Pharaoh. They feared most that he might be quick to punish and harm them severely when they called on him to believe in God.

They said: 'Our Lord! We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us.' Answered He: 'Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all. Go, then, you two to him and say, "We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance. It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it."' (Verses 45-48)

For certain, Aaron was not with Moses when his Lord first spoke to him, favouring him with a long interactive discourse, clarifying all necessary issues and allowing him to ask questions and giving him the answers he needed. The fact that now both Moses and Aaron make the reply together, saying, "*We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us*". This, then, suggests that this statement was made at a later time. This is part of the Qur'ānic method of skipping over time and place, leaving gaps in the scenes and events of a story, which are gathered and understood as one reads on. Thus, the Qur'ān concentrates on events, actions and attitudes which inspire the reader and listener.

So, some time after Moses left the place where he received God's long address, close to Mount Sinai, he met with his brother, Aaron. The latter also received God's revelation commanding him to be with his brother and that together they should address Pharaoh. Hence, the two together express their concerns to their Lord: "*We*

fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us." (Verse 45) They feared Pharaoh's impulsive reaction, which might be too strong, and they feared his tyranny, which was much more profound than mere physical harm. In his power, Pharaoh could be expected to resort to either of these or to both of them.

At this point they receive God's decisive answer which leaves no room for fear or worry: *"Answered He: Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all."* (Verse 46) Thus, God Almighty who has power over all creatures and who creates the universe and all creatures in it, using nothing more than His will to bring them into existence, tells them that He is with them. This should have been sufficient, but God adds to this what increases their certainty of help. This is evidenced by the fact that He hears all and sees all. What could Pharaoh do against the power of the Almighty, whether in a precipitate reaction or a well considered one?

Coupled with this reassurance Moses and Aaron are given guidance on the form of address they should make to Pharaoh and on how to argue their case: *"Go, then, you two to him and say, 'We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance. It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it.'"* (Verses 47-48)

Thus they should start by stating the foundation of their message: *"We are the emissaries of your Lord."* (Verse 47) This would give him right from the first moment the understanding that it is God who is his and all people's Lord. He is not the Lord of Moses and Aaron, or the Children of Israel alone. It was a superstition of the days of pagan ignorance that each group of people, or each tribe, had its own deity or deities. Moreover, it was commonly held during some periods of history that Pharaoh was a deity, of godly descent, and as such, he was to be worshipped.

When the basic element of their message was thus outlined, Moses and Aaron explained their immediate concern: *"Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more."* (Verse 47) This was the limit of their message to Pharaoh, to save the Children of Israel and bring them back to their monotheistic faith. They would then lead them to the blessed land which God had assigned to them for settlement, up to the time when they would sink into corruption and be destroyed in consequence.

They further showed Pharaoh a sign to prove that they were telling the truth when they said that they were messengers from his Lord: *"We have now come to you with a message from your Lord."* (Verse 47) They follow this with an element of encouragement, hoping that he might respond: *"Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance."* (Verse 47) It might be that when he had listened to this that he would respond to the greeting of peace and accept God's guidance.

They then add an element of implicit warning, in order not to stir his arrogance

and hostility: *"It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it."* (Verse 48) It might be that he would decide not to include himself among those who deny the truth and turn away from it.

We see here how God gave Moses and Aaron reassurance and showed them the way to follow. He indeed outlined their course for them so that they would approach their task with peace, reassurance and clear guidance.

At this point the curtains are drawn, only to rise again when we see Moses and Aaron in confrontation with the tyrant.

Calling on a Tyrant to Believe

The *sūrah* does not mention how Moses and Aaron were admitted into Pharaoh's presence, but nonetheless they were. For certain, their Lord was with them hearing and seeing what took place, and no doubt guiding their communication. But what power, and what authority was at the disposal of Moses and Aaron to enable them to communicate to Pharaoh, great as he might have been, what God, their Lord, commanded them to convey to him? The *sūrah* paints a vivid picture of the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh, starting with this question and answer: *"[Pharaoh] said: 'Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?' He replied: 'Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them.'" (Verses 49-50)* It is clear that Pharaoh does not wish to acknowledge God's Lordship, which the two prophets had made clear to him saying they were *'the emissaries of your Lord.'* Pharaoh realized that Moses was the main advocate of the message. Hence, he puts his question to him: *"Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?" (Verse 49)* In whose name are you addressing me to demand the release of the Israelites?

Moses replies emphasizing God's attributes of creation, initiation and providing guidance and balance: *"Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them."* (Verse 50) Thus it is: our Lord is the one who has given everything its existence in the form and the nature it has. He then guides each and everyone to fulfil their respective roles, providing them all with the means for such fulfilment. The Arabic text of this verse uses the conjunctive, *thumma*, or then, separating the creation of everything and imparting guidance to it. This conjunctive is rendered in the translation as 'further' to indicate the true meaning of the verse. There is no lapse of time between creating a creature and giving it guidance. The conjunctive is used to indicate the difference in rank between the mere creation of something and giving it the necessary knowledge to fulfil its role. Providing such guidance is more elevated than leaving creatures to their own devices.

This description of God given by Moses sums up the highest and most perfect attributes of God the Creator who controls everything in the universe. It is He who

gives every creature its form, nature and role. When man casts his eye and contemplates as best he can this endless universe, he sees the results of what the great power of God makes of every existence, great or small, starting with the minute atom up to the largest creature, spanning life between a one-celled creature to the most sophisticated form of life, i.e. man.

The great universe is made up of countless atoms, cells, substances, creatures and living things. Every atom in the universe interacts, every cell has a life, every living being moves, and every creature influences and is influenced by others. But all work, individually and collectively, within the boundaries of the laws God has planted in their natures and constitutions, without conflict, defect, or slackening at any moment. Yet every individual creature is, on its own, a complete world: its cells, organs and systems work in accordance with its nature, within the overall law God operates in the universe, in perfect order and perfect complementarity.

Let us leave aside the great universe and look for a moment at each creature on its own. Human knowledge and endeavour is limited in its ability to study and understand such a creature. We are talking here of studying the characteristics, role, illnesses and treatment of creatures in our world. We are not speaking about creating these creatures or guiding them to fulfil their respective roles. This is something totally beyond man's knowledge or ability. Man himself is one of God's creatures. God has given him existence in the form he has, and assigned to him his role like all other creatures. The One who gives every creature its nature and form and further guides them to perform their roles is God, the only deity in the universe.

Here Pharaoh puts another question: "*And what of all the past generations?*" (Verse 51) Where have all those past generations gone? Who was their Lord? What happened to them since they died unaware of the Lord Moses spoke about?

"[Moses] answered: Knowledge of that rests with my Lord alone, recorded in a Book. My Lord does not err, and neither does He forget." (Verse 52) Thus Moses refers all this unknown matter to his Lord whose knowledge is perfect, encompassing every single detail of every little creature, and who never forgets anything. It is He alone who knows about all those generations, their past and future. The realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception belongs totally to God, who alone determines the eventual outcome of mankind and their life.

Moses continues to draw Pharaoh's attention to some of the results of God's action in the universe and how these results affect human life. He selects results which could be seen close by, and which were well-known in Egypt with its rich soil, abundant water, and plentiful crops and cattle:

He it is who has made the earth your cradle, and has traced on it paths for you to walk

on, and who sends down waters from the sky with which We bring forth diverse pairs of plants. Eat, then, and graze your cattle. In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason. (Verses 53-54)

An Argument Too Powerful

The whole earth is a cradle for mankind at all places and in all times. It is indeed the same as a child's cradle; for human beings are the children of the earth in whose lap they grow up and on whose produce they feed. At the same time, it has been levelled for them so that they can walk on it, pursue their life affairs, cultivate it and benefit by its treasures. God made it so on the day He gave nature and forms to all His creatures. Thus, He gave the earth its structure which enables it to sustain the type of life He assigned to prosper on it. Similarly, He gave human beings their nature and form which make them able to live on the earth He made a cradle for them. The two senses imparted by the verse are closely interlinked.

Both the cradle image and the quality of being level are most clearly seen in Egypt, with its highly fertile valley which requires only the minimum effort from its people to yield its rich produce. The whole valley of Egypt is like a warm cradle nurturing a small child.

The wise Creator who has levelled the earth has also opened up on it paths for people to travel and has sent down waters from the sky. It is from the rain pouring from the sky that rivers form and run to provide irrigation. One of these is, of course, the Nile running close to where Pharaoh had his palace. With such plentiful water, plants are brought forth in a great variety of pairs.

God in His wisdom has willed that, like all living things, plants should grow in pairs. Indeed this duality is a consistent phenomenon that applies to all living creatures. In most cases, plants carry the male and female cells in the same shoot, but there are types where one shoot has only male cells and another female, in the same way as in most animal species. This provides perfect harmony that applies to all living things. Hence, the statement: *"In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason."* (Verse 54) Indeed, no sound mind could reflect on such phenomena without concluding that it is the work of the wise Creator who has given every living thing its nature and form, and guided them all.

The *sūrah* continues the reporting of what Moses said, but uses the form of a direct address by God Himself: *"Out of this [earth] have We created you, and into it shall We return you, and out of it shall We bring you forth once again. And, indeed, We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused [to take heed]."* (Verses 55-56) It is from this earth, made as a cradle for mankind, and which supports the diverse cultivation of plants for food and grazing, that mankind are created, and to it they

shall return and then from it again they are resurrected after death.

Man is certainly created from the same substance as this earth. All the components of his body are largely the same as the components of the earth. Furthermore, he eats of its produce, drinks its waters, breathes its air, and benefits from it as his cradle. Then, he goes back to it a dead corpse, when his remains become part of its soil and atmosphere. From the earth he is resurrected for a second life, just as he was created for the life of this world.

This reminder of the relationship between man and the earth fits well with the exchange between Moses and Pharaoh, the tyrant who arrogantly claims a godly position when he too originated from the earth and to it he will certainly return. He is no more than any object God has created on earth and guided to fulfil its assigned role. *"We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused to take heed."* (Verse 56) God showed him all sorts of signs in the great universe, and Moses pointed these out to him. The two signs of Moses' staff and hand are not specified here since they are included among the general category of God's signs. The signs in the universe are far greater and more permanent. It is implied however that Pharaoh has already been shown Moses' own special signs. His reply to all God's signs is mentioned in detail, and we realize that he is actually referring to these two signs: *"Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic? In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it. Set, then, fir us an appointment which neither we nor you shall fail to keep, at a suitable, open place."* (Verses 57-58)

Ready to take up the challenge, Moses delivered a straight answer: *"Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high."* (Verse 59)

How to Avoid a Losing Argument

Pharaoh simply stopped arguing. He realized that Moses had the stronger case, supported by the clearest proof, namely, God's signs seen everywhere in the universe, as well as his own two special signs. Hence, he resorted to an old ploy, often used by tyrants and opponents of God's messages. He pointed an accusing finger at Moses, describing him as a sorcerer, claiming that it was through sorcery that Moses turned the staff into a snake and made his hand look shining white, without blemish. Magic was the thought presenting itself immediately to Pharaoh, because it was widely practised in Egypt. The two signs given to Moses seemed, on the surface, similar to magic, which is no more than the deception of the senses that could sometimes lead to false feelings so as to produce tangible effects. Thus, under the influence of magic, a man may see things that are not present, or he may see them in a form other than their own. At times a person who is under a magical spell may

be physically and psychologically affected, as though the spell has had its effect on him in reality. But Moses' signs were not of this sort. They were signs given to him by God, the Creator of all things, the One who can bring about both temporary and permanent transformations.

"He said: Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic?" (Verse 57) It appears that the persecution of the Israelites was motivated by political reasons, with Pharaoh fearing that their numbers would increase to give them numerical strength. For the sake of retaining power and maintaining their rule or kingdom, tyrants will commit the most ghastly and inhumane crimes, paying no heed to moral or ethical considerations. They are prepared to silence the voice of even their own conscience and honour. Thus, Pharaoh pursued a policy of weakening and humiliating the Israelites, killing their male offspring and sparing the females, while forcing the adults among them into hard labour. Therefore Moses and Aaron demanded their release, saying to him: *"Let the children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more."* (Verse 47) His reply to their request was indicative of his fears: *"Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic?"* (Verse 57) To Pharaoh, such a release was a step towards ousting him from government.

According to Pharaoh's thinking, Moses made this demand for the release of the Israelites for no other reason, and the only thing he was prepared to put forward in support of his demand was an act of sorcery. It was easy, therefore, to reply to him in kind: *"In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it."* (Verse 58) Tyrannical rulers cannot see beyond the obvious. They think that those who advocate a divine faith use it as a cover for worldly aims. They imagine that they want to take over the reins of government. When they realize that such advocates of faith have something miraculous, either of the type given to Moses or something that touches people's hearts and wins them over, they respond with something of an apparently similar nature. Their thoughts run along the following lines: if the advocate of a message resorts to magic, then we will produce similar magic; if he uses fine words, these are also at our command; if he advocates moral values, we will support high moral values; if he does good and benevolent works, we will do the same. Such tyrants do not understand that advocates of a divine message rely on their faith and on God's support. These are the weapons which ensure their triumph.

With such thinking and motivation, Pharaoh asks Moses to set an appointment for his confrontation with the sorcerers. In order to give the appearance of power, Pharaoh leaves it to Moses to choose the time: *"Set, then, for us an appointment."* (Verse 58) In order to give an even stronger impression of his confidence, he re-emphasizes the importance of that appointment *"which neither we nor you shall fail to keep."* (Verse 58) He only asks for the match to be in an open area for the challenge to be seen, *"at a suitable, open place."* (Verse 58)

Moses accepts Pharaoh's challenge and sets the appointment for a festival day when the people are in the mood to celebrate, gathering in the main squares and open areas: *"Answered Moses: Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high."* (Verse 59) Thus he sets the best time when everything is at its clearest and people will be out and about in numbers. He does not set a very early time when people would still be at home, nor at midday when the heat could prevent their gathering, nor in the evening when darkness might discourage their attendance or impair their vision.

Thus ends the first scene of confrontation between faith and tyranny. The curtains fall to be raised again and we see the match in full view.

In Confrontation with the Sorcerers

"Thereupon Pharaoh withdrew and put together the artful scheme which he would pursue; and then turned up." (Verse 60) In this short verse the *sūrah* sums up all that Pharaoh said, the advice he was given by the powerful elite among his government, the discussion with the sorcerers and his encouragement and promises of rich reward to them, as well as the schemes he and his advisers finally plotted. Indeed, this short verse, comprising only six words in the Arabic text, shows three successive movements: Pharaoh's withdrawal into his own quarters, mapping out his strategy and turning up for the confrontation.

Before the confrontation began, Moses felt that he should give the sorcerers some honest and sincere advice. Thus, he warned them against attributing false fabrications to God. So doing, he hoped that they would accept God's guidance and abandon sorcery, which is blatant falsehood: *"Moses said to them: Woe betide you! Do not invent any falsehood against God, lest He afflict you with most grievous suffering. He who contrives such a lie is sure to come to grief"* (Verse 61)

A sincere piece of advice can touch the hearts of those it addresses. This might have been the case here, for some of the sorcerers were touched by Moses' words and began to have second thoughts. Those who were keen to go through with the showdown however began to argue with them in whispers, fearing that Moses would overhear them. *"So they debated among themselves as to what to do; but they kept their counsel secret."* (Verse 62)

The more hardened of them tried to encourage those who were reluctant, and warned them against a gloomy future under Moses and Aaron. They described the two prophets as being driven by a desire for power, hoping to rule Egypt and change the faith of its people. To forestall their schemes, they needed to demonstrate their unity and confront them as one body, without hesitation. It was a day of outright and decisive confrontation, and the winner would take all.

They said: These two are surely sorcerers intent on driving you away from your land by their sorcery, and on doing away with your exemplary way of life. Hence, decide on the scheme you will pursue, and then come forward in one single body. For, indeed, he who prevails today shall ever be successful. (Verses 63-64)

One sincere word motivated by faith falls like a powerful explosive in the camp of falsehood. It shakes unbelievers' hearts and weakens their ranks. They are no longer sure of their own ability, and they entertain doubts about their own beliefs. Hence the doubters needed such encouragement. They were reminded that Moses and Aaron were merely two men, against a much larger group of sorcerers, backed by Pharaoh, his kingdom, wealth and army. They forgot however that Moses and Aaron were supported by God who hears and sees all.

Perhaps this gives us an explanation of the attitude of Pharaoh and his arrogant tyranny, as well as the attitude of the sorcerers who enjoyed his support. To start with, who are those two men, Moses and Aaron, to be given such importance, with Pharaoh himself putting a challenge to them and accepting their own challenge? What is their position which compels him to put together a deceitful strategy, mustering in the process a large force of skilful sorcerers, who were the best in his land, and bringing all the people to witness the confrontation? How come that he himself comes along and sits with his full entourage to see the confrontation? How is it that Pharaoh is prepared to listen to Moses' argument, which denies him all the privileges he claims for himself, when Moses is no more than an Israelite whose people are continually persecuted under his own rule? This was all due to the dignity God has imparted to Moses and Aaron which inspired awe among all those who listened to them. Moreover, God was with them, listening and seeing all that was taking place.

It was also that awe-inspiring dignity that made one word of Moses sufficient to cause much confusion among the sorcerers, requiring them to hold secret council, magnifying the dangers and motivating one another to remain firm, steady and united.

After all this, they came forward, giving Moses the choice: *"Said [the sorcerers]: Moses! Either you throw [first], or we shall be the first to throw."* (Verse 65) This is a challenge aiming to show a united, powerful front and a commendable degree of fairness. Hence, his answer was to accept the challenge: *"You throw first."* (Verse 66) He allowed them to start and produce whatever they wanted so that he could have the final say. And what was the result? They apparently produced a magnificent piece of magic, taking the whole multitude by surprise and even affecting Moses.

"And by virtue of their sorcery, their ropes and staffs seemed to him to be moving rapidly. And in his heart Moses became apprehensive." (Verses 66-67) The Qur'ānic expression,

awjasa fī nafsihī khīfatan, suggests a truly mighty magic, which filled the whole arena. Moses felt fear creep into his heart, even though God was with him hearing and seeing everything as it took place. Needless to say, Moses would not have entertained any fear unless the whole thing was so awesome that for a moment he became oblivious to the fact that he was much stronger. Hence, he needed reminding that he relied on a much superior power:

But We said [to him]: Have no fear! It is you who shall certainly prevail. Now throw that which is in your right hand and it shall swallow up all that they have wrought. For, they have wrought nothing but a sorcerer's deceitful trick; and sorcerers can never come to any good, whatever they may do. (Verses 68-69)

You are the one supporting the truth, while they enjoin nothing but falsehood. You have the faith, while they have their tricks and craft. You believe in the truth of your message, while they have nothing but the reward they hope to receive from Pharaoh and the pleasures of this life. You are the one who derives his strength from God Almighty while they serve a human creature who will die despite his tyrannical power.

Thus God reassures Moses telling him to have no fear. He further tells him: “*Now throw that which is in your right hand.*” (Verse 69)

What he has in his hand is not specified so as to give an air of awe. “*And it shall swallow up all that they have wrought.*” (Verse 69) For it is all sorcery and witchcraft. Sorcerers can never achieve ultimate success, no matter what they do, what device they use or which way they follow. They rely on trickery and deception. There is no real substance to what they do. Hence they fare no better than anyone else who confronts the truth with false appearances. They may put up quite a show and may inspire awe and fear, but then the power of the truth, steady, factual, unboastful, will strike. With that blow falsehood will be defeated immediately, left to retreat into oblivion.

Then Moses threw down his staff. The *sūrah* describes the magnitude of the surprise which then occurred by mentioning how it affected the sorcerers who had come full of hope to win the challenge. Only a few moments earlier, their sorcery, which was of the highest standard, had generated fear among all the spectators, including Moses himself. He, a messenger of God, thought that their ropes and staffs turned into snakes, alive and moving rapidly.

Now the surprise Moses produced completely transformed their feelings and thoughts. So much so that words could not express their reaction: “*So down fell the sorcerers, prostrating themselves, and declared: We do believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.*” (Verse 70) That was like a touch on a very raw nerve, and the whole body is

shaken violently. It was like a light being switched on to dispel all darkness. Such power is felt by reawakened hearts, filling them, in a split second, with unshakeable faith.

A Tyrant's Threat

Do tyrants understand this inner reaction? Do they realize how hearts can be transformed? With a long history of tyranny and injustice, during which they see their subordinates bow to their every command, hasten to fulfil their desire at the slightest indication, tyrants forget that it is God who changes hearts and minds. They cannot appreciate that when a heart responds to contact with God, the bond is complete. The believer, then, derives strength and light from Him alone. Thus, no one can subjugate such a believer to his own power. Hence, Pharaoh's reaction: *"Said [Pharaoh]: Do you believe in him before I have given you permission? Surely, he must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm-trees. You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a more severe and longer lasting punishment."* (Verse 71)

"Do you believe in him before I have given you permission?" (Verse 71) Such is the retort of a tyrant who cannot understand how others feel faith touch their hearts such that they cannot turn it away. After all, people's hearts are, as the Prophet says, held between two of God's, the Most Merciful's, fingers and He turns them around as He wills.

"Surely, he must be your master who has taught you witchcraft!" (Verse 71) For Pharaoh, this was the only reason for the sorcerer's submission to Moses. He could not perceive of faith touching their hearts. He could not understand that God's hand had lifted the cover blurring their vision and that they could now see things for what they were.

Pharaoh follows this with the normal kind of threat tyrants use when they feel they have no power over others' hearts and souls. They threaten physical torture and punishment on those who do not submit to their tyranny: *"I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm-trees."* (Verse 71) Arrogant and boastful, he continues with his claims to authority and power. His is a Brutal force, ready to tear human bodies apart. Thus brute force is utilized to counter solid, logical argument: *"You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a more severe and longer lasting punishment."* (Verse 71)

Hearts Touched by Faith

But it was too late for Pharaoh. Faith had touched the hearts of those sorcerers and the small, insignificant person within each of them was now in firm contact with the great source of real power. Hence, they were now very strong, while all earthly powers were weak. Indeed the whole life on earth is too small when compared to the broad, bright horizons to which those believing hearts now looked up. All that pertains to life on earth is of no consequence: *“They answered: Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being! Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life. As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us. God is certainly the best and He is Everlasting.”* (Verses 72-73)

This is the sort of change faith brings about in the hearts of people who, until a moment earlier, were submissive to Pharaoh, considering their highest achievement to be close to him, receiving his favours. Now they are ready to confront him with a determination that puts his power, throne and wealth in proper perspective: *“Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being!”* (Verse 72) Such evidence is much more precious in our view, and God, our Creator, is far dearer to us than anything else. *“Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree.”* (Verse 72) This is a challenge to Pharaoh to do his worst. He cannot stop them. *“You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life.”* (Verse 72)

This is as far as Pharaoh’s power extends. They tell him clearly that he has no authority over them anywhere other than in this worldly life, which is short, momentary and of little value. Whatever punishment he may inflict on them is too trivial to be feared by a heart that has established close contact with God and hopes to receive His reward in the hereafter. *“As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us.”* (Verse 73) They tell him that in the past they could not disobey him when he forced them to practise magic. Now that they have faith, they hope to be forgiven by God who, they realize, is the best and the everlasting. His reward is far more plentiful and enjoyed for much longer than any worldly reward.

The sorcerers who came to believe in God were inspired by their faith to adopt an attitude that looked down on Pharaoh and his power:

He who shall appear before his Lord [on Judgement Day] laden with sin shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live. But he who shall appear before Him as a believer, having done righteous deeds, shall be exalted to the highest ranks, abiding in the gardens of Eden, through which running waters flow. Such shall be the recompense of those who keep themselves pure. (Verses 74-76)

Pharaoh had originally threatened them, saying that his punishment was more

severe and longer lasting. Their reply provides an image of one who comes on the Day of Judgement to meet his Lord, being fully laden with sin. The punishment such a person receives is indeed the longer lasting and more painful, because such a person “*shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live.*” (Verse 74) He does not enjoy the termination of pain that a dead person normally has, nor is he living so as to enjoy life’s pleasures. He simply receives a painful punishment that leads to neither life nor death. On the opposite side the highest ranks are shown. These are the gardens of bliss, irrigated by running waters. Such is “*the recompense of those who keep themselves pure,*” purging themselves of all sin.

Thus these new believers take no notice of a despot’s threats, and instead stand up to him with the powerful words of faith. They are profoundly confident, issue a warning based on faith and express their hopes based on a newly-found faith.

This confrontation is recorded in the history of mankind as a declaration of man’s freedom, after throwing away the shackles of this worldly life, its powers, worries and aspirations. No human heart can adopt such a confrontational attitude unless it believes in God and relies on His support.

The Drowning of Pharaoh and His Army

The curtains are drawn only to lift again on a new scene in Moses’ history. Now we see the triumph of faith and truth in practical life, after their victory as an idea and belief. What we have seen so far is the triumph of the sign given to Moses over sorcery, the new faith in the sorcerers’ hearts over their hopes of gain and fears of loss as well as over Pharaoh’s threats and punishment. Now we see a related victory for truth over falsehood, guidance over error, and faith over tyranny. All this takes place in real life after it has been achieved in people’s consciences. In fact advocates of the truth cannot openly demonstrate their high moral ground until they have triumphed within themselves over all temptation.

Truth and faith have a certain reality which, once materialized within one’s conscience, finds its way into real life. Should faith remain an outward appearance that does not touch the heart, and truth remain a raised slogan that has not sunk deep into people’s hearts and minds, then tyranny and falsehood may be victorious. They can achieve such a victory with the physical power under their command, one which cannot be matched by the mere appearance of faith and slogans of truth. It is only when the latter are truly established in hearts and minds that they become stronger than the physical might which falsehood and tyranny can muster. This is the fact which we clearly see in Moses’ attitude towards the sorcerers and their ploys, and later in the sorcerers’ attitude towards Pharaoh and his noblemen. This is the prelude to victory as we see in the next scene in the *sūrah*.

Then We thus inspired Moses: 'Go forth with My servants by night, and strike out for them a dry path through the sea. Have no fear of being overtaken, and dread nothing. Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright. (Verses 77-79)

The *sūrah* does not mention here what happened after the confrontation between faith and tyranny, nor what measures Pharaoh took against the sorcerers after they declared their belief in God, defying his power and tyranny, as well as all earthly temptation. It simply paints this scene of total victory so that the triumph in one's own conscience is directly related to triumph in real life. We also see here how God provides total care for His servants. By the same token, the *sūrah* does not dwell on the scene of departure from Egypt, and the standing before the sea, as these are painted in detail in other *sūrahs*. In fact, it shows the victory scene here without preliminaries, because these concerned people's hearts.

All we have here is the inspiration given to Moses to depart from Egypt at night with the Children of Israel, and to strike out for them a dry path across the sea. We see Moses with complete reassurance as he and his followers receive God's care. Thus, he has no fear of his people being overtaken by Pharaoh or of being overwhelmed by the parted sea. God's will which made the sea such a great volume of water with all its characteristics is able to part it for a while to give those believers a dry path through so as to continue their journey.

"Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright." (Verses 78-79) Thus the *sūrah* sums up how Pharaoh and his host were overwhelmed by the sea. It gives no further details. In this way, it retains its total effect. We realize that Pharaoh had led his people into error in their way of life in the same way as he led them into error by pursuing the believers into the sea. In both cases, he led them to utter ruin.

We prefer not to dwell on the details of what happened to Pharaoh and his people, so that we move on with the *sūrah* as it relates the story. We will, however, reflect for a moment on the lessons that we can derive from this scene.

When God Intervenes

It was God who conducted the battle between faith and tyranny. The believers were not required to do anything other than follow the inspiration received by Moses and to move out at night. The believers were no match for the unbelievers in terms of material power. Moses and his men were weak and powerless, while Pharaoh and his army held all the material power. Hence, a battle between the two parties could

not take place. Therefore, God took over, but only after the truth of faith was fully engrained in the hearts of those whose only strength was that which they derived from faith. Thus we see the tyrant delivering his threat and warning the believers of doom: *“I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm trees.”* (Verse 71) To this, the believers, with their hearts full of faith, reply: *“Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life.”* (Verse 72)

The simple truth of the matter is that when the battle between faith and tyranny reached this level in people’s hearts, God himself took up the banner of truth and hoisted it high, leaving the banner of falsehood trampled upon. All this took place without the believers exerting any effort whatsoever.

We also learn from this account that when the Children of Israel accepted the humiliation Pharaoh imposed on them, by virtue of his persecution campaign, killing their men and sparing their women, God did not interfere on their side. They simply accepted their subjugation, fearing Pharaoh and his power. But when faith was paramount in the hearts of those who believed in Moses and his message, and when they were ready to withstand the torture with their heads held high, declaring their rejection of Pharaoh and their belief in God, then God intervened and conducted the battle. Thus, victory was achieved on the battlefield as it was earlier achieved within their hearts and souls.

Such is the lesson driven home in this *sūrah* as it portrays the two scenes in quick succession, without dwelling on further detail. This is what people of faith should understand, so that they know when to expect God’s help to achieve their victory.

The Price for God’s Intervention

Yet to those who were saved and granted victory a reminder and a warning are given so that they do not forget or abandon their most important weapon:

Children of Israel! We saved you from your enemy, and then We made a covenant with you on the right flank of Mount Sinai. We sent down manna and quails for you. Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin; but I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path. (Verses 80-82)

They have passed the danger zone and have surged on towards Mount Sinai, leaving Pharaoh and his army drowned. Their deliverance was a recent event which they remember well, but it is recorded here as a reminder, so that they may give thanks.

The appointment at the right hand side of Mount Sinai is mentioned here as though it is an accomplished event, when it was a meeting for which Moses had to prepare himself for over a period of forty nights. He would then receive the tablets and the laws recorded therein. This was a law to regulate the lives of the people entrusted with a mission in the Holy Land after their departure from Egypt.

The fact that they were given manna, a sweet type of food that gathers on leaves, and quails, a type of bird that is easy to catch and eat, was another aspect of God's grace, of His taking care of them in the barren desert where they found themselves. God was looking after them, even to the point of providing them with their daily food, and in such a way that required no hard effort.

God reminds them of all these favours and warns them against transgression, in the form of indulgence in physical pleasure and neglect of the duties they left Egypt to fulfil. God is preparing for them an assignment which they must undertake. The Arabic word used here for transgression, *taṭghaw*, is the same word that signifies the tyranny they experienced in their very recent past. Hence, they are warned: *"Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin."* (Verse 81) Pharaoh had thrown himself into such ruin only recently, falling off his throne and drowning in the sea. To experience such ruin is to fall from high, which contrasts with tyranny that exalts the tyrant and assumes for him a high position of power. The Qur'ān here juxtaposes such contrasting elements in word and meaning to achieve both heightened effect and perfect harmony.

With this warning against indulgence in easy pleasures and neglect of the task assigned for them, the door for repentance is left open for anyone who slips so that he may return to the proper path. *"But I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path."* (Verse 82)

Repentance is not merely a word we say with our mouths. It is a resolve in one's mind that manifests itself in strong faith and good deeds, as well as practical behaviour. So when faith is settled in a person's heart, faith is purged of all alien traces, and confirmed by good deeds. In this way, man sets himself on the right path, guided by faith and benefiting by the guarantee provided by good action. Achieving guidance is shown here as the result of strong faith and determined action.

Thus ends the scene of victory and the comments the *sūrah* has to make on it. The curtains fall and lift again to show us the second scene of an address made directly to God by the side of Mount Sinai.

Promises Fulfilled or Broken

God has appointed a time for Moses to meet Him at the Mount after forty days, when he would be given the commandments outlining the tasks his people have to fulfil after the victory they were given. Victory carries with it its own responsibilities, as does faith. Hence, it was necessary for Moses to be psychologically prepared and ready to receive God's commandments.

Thus, Moses went up the Mount, leaving his people at the bottom, after asking his brother Aaron to deputize for him. Moses longed dearly for this encounter, when he would stand in front of his Lord and address Him. He had had this experience once before and was keen to experience it again. Hence, he made haste to stand in the presence of his Lord. He was however totally unaware of what his people had perpetrated after he had left.

His Lord tells him the news, pointing out what has taken place. The scene is shown to us and we listen to the conversation:

[And God said]: Now what has caused you, Moses, to leave your people behind in so great a haste?' He answered: 'They are treading in my footsteps, while I have hastened to You, my Lord, so that You might be well pleased with me.' Said He: 'Then [know that] in your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriyy has led them astray.' (Verses 83-85)

Thus Moses is faced with a terrible shock. He was in haste to meet his Lord, after forty days of diligent preparation, eager to listen to His directives and commandments which would constitute the basis of the new way of life for the Children of Israel. It was to be a way of life suited for a community that had been freed from the shackles of subjugation so that it would become the bearer of a divine message.

The long period they had spent in subjugation and humiliation under Pharaoh's rule and his idolatrous beliefs had had a damaging effect on the nature of the Israelites. Their ability to withstand the difficulties that attend the fulfilment of a hard task, and to remain true to their promises in the face of hardship, was certainly suspect. Psychologically, they suffered an impairment which made them always keen to have a comfortable life, even if this meant a willingness to be led without troubling to think. No sooner did Moses leave them under Aaron's stewardship than they allowed their faith to collapse at the first hurdle. Hence, they needed repeated tests and trials in a process of psychological rebuilding. The first test to which they were subjected was that of the golden calf which the Sāmiriyy had produced. *"In your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriyy has led them astray."* (Verse 85) Moses did not know about this test until his appointment with his Lord.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of the direct address between God and Moses very

briefly in order to describe Moses' reaction to what he learnt, his speedy return, his anger and his sorrow. How could his people do this after God had saved them from humiliating subjugation by tyrannical idolatry, and favoured them with easy provisions and care in the desert? He had only very recently reminded them of God's favours, warning them against going astray. Yet now they follow the first one to call them back to paganism and the worship of a calf?

The *sūrah* does not tell us any details about how they were led to this situation. It moves on to the scene of Moses hurriedly returning to his people. However, the way this is described tells us something of these details. Moses has returned, angry, sad, remonstrating with his people and scolding his brother. He must have known the magnitude of their ghastly deed:

Thus Moses returned to his people full of wrath and sorrow: My people,' he said, Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you? Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord's condemnation fall upon you, and so you broke your promise to me?' They answered: 'We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will, but we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people's ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire], and likewise this Sāmīriy threw.' Thus he produced for them the effigy of a calf which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten. Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them? And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you.' But they had replied: 'By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us.' (Verses 86-91)

Such was the trial to which the Israelites were put. It is revealed to us as Moses confronts his people. It is not reported in the scene of the meeting between Moses and his Lord. It is left to the scene of inquiry undertaken by Moses upon his return.

Justifying Deliberate Error

Enraged and full of sorrow, Moses asked his people: "*Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you?*" (Verse 86) God had promised them victory and to enter the Holy Land as a community believing in His oneness. Only very recently had they witnessed the initial steps towards the complete fulfilment of this promise. Hence, he remonstrated with them: "*Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord's condemnation fall upon you?*" (Verse 86) Their action was akin to that perpetrated by one who wants to bring God's condemnation on his head, so he wilfully and deliberately does what incurs it. Moses asked them if this was why they broke their promise to him to maintain the path he

had shown them until his return.

They gave him a singular excuse which exposed the effects on their mentality of their long time living in subservience. It is a ludicrous excuse: *“We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will.”* (Verse 87) It was beyond our ability and control. *“But we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people’s ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire].”* (Verse 87) They had carried with them loads of jewellery borrowed from Egyptian women. Now they say they wanted to get rid of all these because they were taken unlawfully. The Sāmīriy took these gold articles and made of them the golden calf. The Sāmīriy was either a man from Samaria accompanying them or one of them known by this appellation. When he made the calf, he purposely placed some holes in it, so that when the wind blew, it produced a lowing sound, despite the fact that it had no life or soul. It was merely an inanimate object. But no sooner did they see such a golden calf making such a noise than they forgot their true Lord who had saved them from their humiliation. Most stupidly and inexcusably they started to worship the calf, repeating the ludicrous statement that Moses had been misled when he went to the mountain looking for his deity, while the deity was there with them, as they claimed. They said: *“This is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten.”* (Verse 88)

Their stupid remarks also detract from the position of their prophet, Moses, who was the one to accomplish their salvation under God’s guidance. What they said about the calf alleged that Moses had no guiding relationship with his Lord. Hence, he did not know how to find Him, taking the wrong path and looking for him in the wrong place.

Yet they were fooled by a simple trick, which they should have easily recognized for what it was. *“Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them?”* (Verse 89) It was not even a living calf that could hear them and respond in the way that cows and calves respond. It could not aspire to the status of an ordinary animal. It could not bring them the least harm or benefit, not even fighting with its horns or drawing water from a stream.

Moreover, Aaron, their other prophet who deputized for his brother Moses, their saviour, had given them honest and sincere advice, pointing out to them that it was all a test: *“And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you.”* (Verse 90) He assured them that the proper course for them to take was to follow him as they had promised Moses. He told them that Moses was certain to return when his Lord had finished His business with him. Rather than follow his advice, they evaded their responsibility and abandoned their commitment to obey their prophets, saying: *“By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us.”* (Verse 91)

Thus Moses returned, sorrowful and angry. He listened to his people's excuses which revealed the extent of their twisted logic. In his anger, he turned to his brother dragging him by his head and beard, crying in his anger: "*Aaron, what has prevented you, when you saw that they had gone astray, from following me? Why have you disobeyed me?*" (Verses 92-93) He scolded him for allowing them to worship the calf without taking effective action to prevent them. But Aaron was merely obeying his brother's orders when he had told him not to do anything serious until he returned. Did Aaron, then, disobey his brother by doing so?

The *sūrah* has already stated Aaron's attitude. Now he explains to his brother what he did, trying to calm his fury and awaken his compassion. He reminds him of their close relationship: "*'Son of my mother,' he replied, do not seize me by my beard, or by my head! I was afraid that you might say: You have caused a split among the Israelites and did not wait for my orders.*" (Verse 94)

Here we find Aaron to be far more in control of his emotions. He touches on a tender point in Moses' feelings, reminding him of their being siblings. He also explains to him that he simply wished to do what his brother had bid him. He feared that should he adopt strong measures the Children of Israel might split into factions, some worshipping the calf, and others following his advice. Since his brother wanted him to take care of them all, keeping them together, he felt that his attitude was simply one of following the orders he had been given.

Temptation of the Golden Calf

Now Moses addresses all his anger to the Sāmīriy, the perpetrator of the whole trouble. He did not speak to him first because the people themselves should have known better than to follow someone who came up with an outrageous idea. Aaron, as their trusted leader, was also responsible for making sure that they did not slip, should they be faced with temptation. The Sāmīriy takes less importance, since he did not use brute force to compel them to follow his lead, nor did he cast a screen over their faculties of thinking. He simply presented a temptation and they fell for it. They could very easily have remained true to the guidance of their first prophet, Moses, and benefited by the counsel of their second prophet, Aaron. Hence, responsibility lay with them in the first place, then with their leader, and finally with the perpetrator of the trouble.

"*Said [Moses]: What is then your case, Sāmīriy?*" (Verse 95) How come all this has happened because of you? The way the question is phrased is indicative of the seriousness of the whole affair.

He answered: I have gained insight into something which they were unable to see; and

so I took a handful of dust from the trail of the messenger and flung it away; for thus has my mind prompted me to act. (Verse 96)

There are countless reports that try to explain the Sāmiriyy's answer: What did he see? Who was the messenger of whose trail he took a handful? What did this have to do with the calf he made and how did throwing this handful affect the calf he made? It is frequently mentioned in these reports that he saw Gabriel the angel in the form he takes when he descends to earth. So he took a handful of dust from underneath his foot or his horse's hoof and threw the dust at the golden calf to produce the lowing sound, or that this was the cause behind making the jewellery into a lowing calf.

The Qur'ān does not tell us here what really happened; it simply quotes what the Sāmiriyy said. We are inclined to consider this an excuse the Sāmiriyy concocted in order to evade responsibility for what actually happened. We feel that it was he who made the calf out of the jewellery the Israelites threw away, having taken it deceptively and unlawfully from the Egyptian women. As he made it, he deliberately ensured that as the wind went through its hollow inside it produced such a noise. When questioned about it, he sought an excuse, hence his suggestion that he had seen Gabriel and took a handful of his trail.

Be that as it may, Moses punished him by expelling him for life from the Israelite community, leaving his destiny in the hereafter to God Almighty. He further took a strong and effective measure concerning the deity he had made with his own hands, aiming to show his people that it was an inanimate object, unable to protect its maker or to save itself: *"Said [Moses]: Begone, then! It shall be your lot to say throughout your life, Do not touch me.' But you shall be faced with a destiny from which you shall have no escape. Now look at this deity of yours to whose worship you have become so devoted: we shall most certainly burn it, and then scatter it far and wide over the sea."* (Verse 97)

Thus the Sāmiriyy was ostracized: no one could go near him either to harm or benefit him. Nor was he allowed to touch anyone either. This was one of the penalties prescribed in Moses' faith: expelling the offender and ostracizing him to the extent that no one went near him. The other aspect is that of God's punishment at His own time.

Still angry and furious, Moses ordered the calf to be burnt, cast away and its ashes thrown in the sea. Such a strong action seems to be a characteristic of Moses. In this instance, however, his anger is in defence of God's faith. In such a situation, strong action is commendable.

With the false deity being burnt and blown away, Moses declared the basic principle of true faith: *"Your only deity is God, other than whom there is no deity. His knowledge encompasses all things."* (Verse 98)

With this declaration we come to the end of the story of Moses as related in this *sūrah*. The overriding tone here is that of the grace God bestows on His servants, His care and forgiveness, even when they err. The *sūrah* does not add any other episode of Moses' history, because subsequent events tell of the punishment God metes out to them for their sinful and corrupt ways. The overall atmosphere of this *sūrah* is one of mercy, compassion and grace, and later episodes do not fit with such an atmosphere.

2

Man's Long Drawn Battle

Thus do We relate to you some of the history of past events; and thus have We given you, out of Our grace, a reminder. (99)

كَذَلِكَ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ مَا قَدْ
سَبَقَ وَقَدْ آتَيْنَاكَ مِنْ لَدُنَّا ذِكْرًا ﴿٩٩﴾

All who shall turn away from it will certainly bear a heavy burden on the Day of Resurrection. (100)

مَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَنْهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَحْمِلُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ
وِزْرًا ﴿١٠٠﴾

For ever shall they bear it; and grievous for them will be its weight on the Day of Resurrection, (101)

خَالِدِينَ فِيهِ وَسَاءَ لَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ حِمْلًا
﴿١٠١﴾

the day when the Trumpet is blown. For on that day We shall assemble all the guilty ones, their eyes dimmed [by terror], (102)

يَوْمَ يُنْفَخُ فِي الصُّورِ وَنَحْشُرُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ
يَوْمَئِذٍ زُرْقًا ﴿١٠٢﴾

whispering to one another, 'You have spent but ten days on earth.' (103)

يَتَخَفَتُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا عَشْرًا
﴿١٠٣﴾

We know best what they will be saying when the most perceptive of them shall say: 'You have spent there but one day!' (104)

نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذْ يَقُولُ أَمْثَلُهُمْ
طَرِيقَةً إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا يَوْمًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

They ask you about the mountains. Say: My Lord will scatter them far and wide, (105)

and leave the earth level and bare, (106)

with no curves or ruggedness to be seen. (107)

On that day, all will follow the summoning voice from which there will be no escape. All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air. (108)

On that day, intercession will be of no avail to any except a person in whose case the Most Merciful will have granted permission, and whose word He will have accepted. (109)

He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them, whereas they cannot have thorough knowledge of Him. (110)

All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord; and undone shall be he who is burdened with evildoing; (111)

but anyone who will have done righteous deeds, being a believer, need have no fear of being

وَدَسَّوْنَاكَ عَنِ الْجِبَالِ فَقُلْ يَنْسِفُهَا رَبِّي

نَسْفًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

فَيَذَرُهَا قَاعًا صَفْصَفًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

لَا تَرَى فِيهَا عِوَجًا وَلَا أَمْتًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَتَّبِعُونَ الدَّاعِيَ لَا عِوَجَ لَهُ^ط
وَخَشَعَتِ الْأَصْوَاتُ لِلرَّحْمَنِ فَلَا تَسْمَعُ

إِلَّا هَمْسًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

يَوْمَئِذٍ لَا تَنْفَعُ الشَّفِيعَةُ إِلَّا مَنْ أَذِنَ لَهُ
الرَّحْمَنُ وَرَضِيَ لَهُ قَوْلًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا
يُحِيطُونَ بِهِ عِلْمًا ﴿١١٠﴾

وَعَنْتِ الْوُجُوهُ لِلْحَيِّ الْقَيُّومِ^ط وَقَدْ
خَابَ مَنْ حَمَلَ ظُلْمًا ﴿١١١﴾

وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ^و
فَلَا يَخَافُ ظُلْمًا وَلَا هَضْمًا ﴿١١٢﴾

wronged or deprived. (112)

And thus have We bestowed from on high the Qur'an in the Arabic tongue, and have given in it many facets to all manner of warnings, so that they may be God-fearing or that it may be for them a source of remembrance. (113)

Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. Be not in haste with the Qur'an before it has been revealed to you in full, but always say: 'My Lord, increase my knowledge.' (114)

Long ago, We made a covenant with Adam; but he forgot it, and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose. (115)

And when We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; except Iblis, who refused. (116)

'Adam,' We said, 'this is indeed a foe to you and your wife; so let him not drive the two of you out of the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction. (117)

It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, (118)

and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun. (119)

But Satan whispered to him, saying: 'Adam, shall I lead you to the tree of life eternal, and to a

وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا وَصَرَّفْنَا فِيهِ
مِنَ الْوَعِيدِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ أَوْ يُحَدِّثُ بِهِمْ
ذِكْرًا ﴿١١٢﴾

فَتَعَلَى اللَّهِ الْمَلِكُ الْحَقُّ وَلَا تَعْجَلْ
بِالْقُرْآنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يُقْضَىٰ إِلَيْكَ
وَحْيُهُ وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا ﴿١١٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ عَاهَدْنَا إِلَىٰ آدَمَ مِنْ قَبْلِ فَنَسَىٰ
وَلَمْ يَجِدْ لَهُ عَزْمًا ﴿١١٥﴾

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ
فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ ﴿١١٦﴾

فَقُلْنَا يَتَّعَادُمُ إِنَّ هَذَا عَدُوٌّ لَكَ
وَلِزَوْجِكَ فَلَا يُخْرِجَنَّكَ مِنَ الْجَنَّةِ
فَتَشْقَىٰ ﴿١١٧﴾

إِنَّ لَكَ أَلَّا تَجُوعَ فِيهَا وَلَا تَعْرَىٰ ﴿١١٨﴾

وَأَنَّكَ لَا تَظْمَأُ فِيهَا وَلَا تَصْحَىٰ ﴿١١٩﴾

فَوَسَّوَسَ إِلَيْهِ الشَّيْطَانُ قَالَ يَتَّعَادُمُ
هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَىٰ شَجَرَةِ الْخُلْدِ وَمُلْكٍ لَّا
يَبْلَىٰ ﴿١٢٠﴾

kingdom that will never decay?’ (120)

They both ate of its fruit; and thereupon their shameful parts became visible to them, and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the Garden. Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and thus did he stray into error. (121)

Then his Lord elected him [for His grace], accepted his repentance, and bestowed His guidance upon him. (122)

‘Get down, both of you, and be out of it;’ He said, ‘each of you shall be an enemy to the other. When guidance shall come to you from Me, he who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery;’ (123)

but he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection.’ (124)

‘Lord,’ he will say, ‘why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?’ (125)

He will reply: ‘Thus it is: Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion.’ (126)

For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord’s revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring. (127)

Can they not see how many generations We have destroyed before their time? They walk about in the very places where they dwelt. In this there are

فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَتَ لَهُمَا سَوْءَاتُهُمَا
وَوَطَّفَقَا يُخِصِّفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِنْ وِرْقٍ أَلْجَنَّةِ
وَعَصَىٰ آدَمَ رَبَّهُ فَغَوَىٰ ﴿١٢١﴾

ثُمَّ أَجْتَبَهُ رَبُّهُ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ وَهَدَىٰ ﴿١٢٢﴾

قَالَ أَهْبِطَا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ
عَدُوٌّ فِيمَا يَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ مِنِّي هُدًى فَمَنْ
اتَّبَعَ هُدَايَ فَلَا يَضِلُّ وَلَا يَشْقَىٰ ﴿١٢٣﴾

وَمَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَن ذِكْرِي فَإِنَّ لَهُ
مَعِيشَةً ضَنْكًا وَنَحْشُرُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ
أَعْمَىٰ ﴿١٢٤﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ لِمَ حَشَرْتَنِي أَعْمَىٰ وَقَدْ كُنْتُ
بَصِيرًا ﴿١٢٥﴾

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ أَتَتْكَ آيَاتُنَا فَنَسِيْتَهَا
وَكَذَلِكَ الْيَوْمَ تُنْسَىٰ ﴿١٢٦﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي مَنْ أَسْرَفَ وَلَمْ يُؤْمِنْ
بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِ ۗ وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَشَدُّ
وَأَبْقَىٰ ﴿١٢٧﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِّنَ
الْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِي مَسْجِدِهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ

signs for people of wisdom. (128)

Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable. (129)

Hence, bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment. (130)

Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy in order that We may test them thereby. Whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting. (131)

Enjoin prayer on your people, and be diligent in its observance. We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (132)

They say: 'Why does he not bring us a sign from his Lord?' Has there not come to them a clear evidence of the truth in the earlier scriptures? (133)

Had We destroyed them with a calamity before his coming, they would have said, 'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger, we would have followed Your revelations rather than be humiliated and disgraced.' (134)

لَا يَأْتِيَنَّ لِلْأُولَىٰ النَّهْيُ ﴿١٢٨﴾

وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِنْ رَبِّكَ لَكَانَ لِزَامًا
وَأَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى ﴿١٢٩﴾

فَاصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ
رَبِّكَ قَبْلَ طُلُوعِ الشَّمْسِ وَقَبْلَ غُرُوبِهَا
وَمِنْ عَآءَانَايِ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْ وَأَطْرَافَ النَّهَارِ
لَعَلَّكَ تَرْضَىٰ ﴿١٣٠﴾

وَلَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ
أَزْوَاجًا مِنْهُمْ زَهْرَةَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا لِنَفْتِنَهُمْ
فِيهِ وَرِزْقُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ ﴿١٣١﴾

وَأْمُرْ أَهْلَكَ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَاصْطَبِرْ عَلَيْهَا لَا
نَسْأَلُكَ رِزْقًا نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُكَ وَالْعَاقِبَةُ
لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ﴿١٣٢﴾

وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا يَأْتِينَا بِآيَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّهِ ؎ أَوَلَمْ
تَأْتِهِمْ بَيِّنَةٌ مَا فِي الصُّحُفِ الْأُولَىٰ ﴿١٣٣﴾

وَلَوْ أَنَّا أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ
لَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا لَوْلَا أَرْسَلْتَ إِلَيْنَا رَسُولًا
فَتَتَّبَعْنَا آيَاتِكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ نُنزِلَ وَنُخْزَىٰ
﴿١٣٤﴾

قُلْ كُلُّ مُتَّبِعٍ فَتَرْتَبُوهَا فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ
مَنْ أَصْحَابُ الصِّرَاطِ السَّوِيِّ وَمَنْ

Say: 'Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided.' (135)

أَهْتَدَى

Overview

The *sūrah* started with a discussion on the Qur'ān, making it clear that the purpose of its revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not that he might be afflicted by it. Part of the Qur'ān covers the story of Moses and how it reflects the care God took of Moses, his brother Aaron and their people. Now that the story has been told, the *sūrah* resumes speaking about the Qur'ān, the role it is intended to play and the fate which is bound to be suffered by those who turn their backs to it. This fate is shown in a scene of the Day of Judgement in which the days of this present life are seen to be infinitesimal, the earth loses its mountains and is seen flat and bare; sounds are hushed before God the Most Merciful; and faces are humbled before God, the Ever-Living. This scene, and the warnings made in the Qur'ān, are intended to arouse feelings of God-consciousness, reminding people of their relationship with God. This passage concludes by giving the Prophet renewed comfort with respect to the Qur'ān which was being revealed to him. He must not hasten to repeat its words during the process of receiving it as he used to do fearing that he might forget some parts of it. He need not entertain any such fear, because God has taken it upon Himself to preserve the Qur'ān and make it easy for recitation and study. In this context, the Prophet is instructed to pray to God to give him more knowledge.

Since the Prophet was keen to repeat the Qur'ānic revelations as they were given to him, for fear of forgetting them, the *sūrah* mentions how Adam forgot God's covenant. This is followed by the declaration of hostility between him and Satan, stating the different ends of the people who remember their covenant with God and those who forget it. These two different ends are shown in one of the scenes of the Day of Resurrection the Qur'ān portrays, as though the Day gives the end of the journey which started in heaven and aims to return there.

The *sūrah* concludes with fine touches aiming to comfort the Prophet so that he is not afflicted by those who deny the truth of his message or those who turn away from it. They have their appointed term. He should not attach any importance to the worldly riches they may have been given, because this is all a test which they have to pass.

Instead, he should be more preoccupied with his worship and with glorifying and praising God so that he can find reassurance and contentment. Generations were destroyed before these and they provided the example and the warning, but God now willed to send them His last Messenger so that they had no excuse for rejecting the truth. Since they turned away from him, he should leave them alone to face their inevitable end: *“Say: Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided.”* (Verse 135)

Reasons for Qur'ānic History

Thus do We relate to you some of the history of past events; and thus have We given you, out of Our grace, a reminder. All who shall turn away from it will certainly bear a heavy burden on the Day of Resurrection. For ever shall they bear it; and grievous for them will be its weight on the Day of Resurrection, the day when the Trumpet is blown. For on that day We shall assemble all the guilty ones, their eyes dimmed [by terror], whispering to one another, ‘You have spent but ten days on earth.’ We know best what they will be saying when the most perceptive of them shall say: ‘You have spent there but one day!’ (Verses 99-104)

Just as Moses' history is related in the Qur'ān, so do We also relate other past events. The Qur'ān is described here as 'a reminder', because it reminds us of God, His signs and messages, as well as other signs given to people of old.

Those who turn away from this reminder are described here as guilty, and they are shown in a scene from the Day of Judgement. We see them carrying their burdens like a traveller carries his luggage, but theirs are foul, troublesome burdens. When the trumpet is blown to gather all creatures, the guilty come forward with blue faces showing their grief and worry. Terrified, they speak to one another in whispers: they cannot raise their voices. All this describes the fear that overwhelms them at that moment when all the dead are raised. But what is the subject of their whispers? They simply try to guess the duration of their life on earth, for that life has become so short in their view that they imagine it to have lasted only a few days. Some of them say: *“You have spent but ten days on earth.”* (Verse 103) However, those with a better judgement and a more accurate view feel life on earth to have been much shorter than that. They tell the others: *“You have spent there but one day.”* (Verse 104)

Thus their life on earth, with all its pleasures, comforts, grief and worries, shrinks into insignificance. It lasted only a brief period of time, and was of little value to anyone. For what is the value of ten days, even when they bring all sorts of happiness and enjoyment? And what price may be attached to one night, even though its every minute was one of pleasure and happiness? How could these compare with the endless time which awaits them after the Day of Resurrection?

All Submit to God

This awesome scene is further enhanced by returning to a question they had asked during their life on earth about the mountains and what would happen to them. The answer vividly describes the state of fear in which they find themselves:

They ask you about the mountains. Say: 'My Lord will scatter them far and wide, and leave the earth level and bare, with no curves or ruggedness to be seen. On that day, all will follow the summoning voice from which there will be no escape. All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air. On that day, intercession will be of no avail to any except a person in whose case the Most Merciful will have granted permission, and whose word He will have accepted. He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them, whereas they cannot have thorough knowledge of Him. All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord; and undone shall be he who is burdened with evildoing; but anyone who will have done righteous deeds, being a believer, need have no fear of being wronged or deprived.' (Verses 105-112)

These images come clearly to our eyes, and we see the great mountains, which we have known to be firmly rooted and stable, being blown and scattered. They are raised no more; indeed they are flat, level with no curves or any rugged surface. The whole earth is flat, level, having neither hills nor valleys.

But after the blowing away of the mountains, the storm dies down and the gathered multitudes listen attentively. Every movement and every little sound is hushed. They all listen to the voice that calls them to group together, and they follow its commands submissively, acting promptly, turning neither here nor there. This is a totally different reaction from the one they showed in this life when they were called on to follow divine guidance, but they turned away and refused. We note the perfect harmony of expression when the response to the summoning voice is total, with no escape, while the old mountains are now part of the flat, level earth that has no curve or elevation.

This is followed by a state of perfect silence, with no sound to be heard: *"All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air... All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord."* (Verses 108 and 111)

The whole scene is majestic, whereas the whole place, vast and infinite, is still, silent, and quiet. Whenever anyone speaks, they only whisper. Questions are raised very quietly, for all feel their humility. God's majesty imparts an air of great reverence. No one can intercede except a person whose words are acceptable to God. All knowledge belongs to God, while creatures cannot have full knowledge of Him. The wrongdoers will be burdened with the wrongs they have perpetrated, which

will lead them to ruin, while the believers are reassured, fearing no injustice or lack of appreciation of their good works. The whole scene is one of great majesty, witnessed by God, the Most-Merciful.

And thus have We bestowed from on high the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, and have given in it many facets to all manner of warnings, so that they may be God-fearing or that it may be for them a source of remembrance." (Verse 113)

It is in the same pattern that the Qur'ān gives a whole variety of warnings, painting scenes of awesome and reverential fear to remind those who reject its message of what they will face in the life to come. Perhaps they will take heed, or realize that they need to act before it is too late. Hence, at the beginning of the *sūrah* God says to His Messenger: "We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing." (Verses 2-3)

At the beginning of his message, the Prophet used to repeat the words of God's revelations before the angel had finished them. He did so because he was very keen that he should not forget a word. This was not easy for him. Hence, his Lord reassures him that he will not forget what is entrusted to him.

"Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. Be not in haste with the Qur'ān before it has been revealed to you in full, but always say: My Lord, increase my knowledge." (Verse 114) Most sublime is God, the true King of the whole universe. Before Him all heads are hung down, and all perpetrators of injustice are powerless, while believers who have done well are reassured. It is He who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high. Therefore, you, Muḥammad, need not hasten to repeat its words. He has sent it down for a definite purpose, and He will not allow it to be lost. All you need to do is to pray to Him for increased knowledge, reassured that what He has given you will not be taken away. True knowledge is that imparted by God. It is a knowledge that lingers, brings benefit, yields good fruits and is never wasted.

Man's Lack of Purpose

The *sūrah* gives a brief account of Adam's story, when he forgot the commitment he made to God. When he was tempted by the prospect of immortality, he yielded, listening to Satan and his promptings. This was a test which God wanted him to go through before he was placed in charge of the earth. It also provided an example of what Satan can do, so that Adam's offspring would learn the lesson. When the test was completed, God bestowed His mercy on Adam, assigning his role to him, and providing him with guidance.

Every story related in the Qur'ān is made to fit with the context in which it is

given. In this *sūrah*, Adam's story follows soon after the reference to the Prophet's hasty repetition of Qur'ānic revelations, for fear of forgetting them. Hence, Adam's forgetting of his commitment is referred to at the outset. Moreover, the story is given in a *sūrah* which reveals many aspects of God's grace bestowed on those chosen servants whom He places under His care. Therefore, in this story the point is made that God chose Adam, accepted his repentance and provided him with guidance. This is followed by a scene of the Day of Resurrection portraying the two different ends of God's obedient servants on the one hand and, on the other, those who persist in disobedience. This is shown like a journey back from earth to the first abode where everyone is given their rightful reward. Let us now look at the story as it is related in this *sūrah*.

"Long ago, We made a covenant with Adam; but he forgot it, and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose." (Verse 115) God's covenant with Adam was that he could eat of all the fruits in the Garden except for one tree that represented the prohibition necessary to strengthen willpower, assert one's personality and liberate oneself of the oppressive pressure of desire. All this is necessary to give the human soul the freedom to do without its supposed needs, so that it is not enslaved by desire. This is indeed the true measure of human excellence. Whenever man's will weakens under the pressure of desire, he sinks closer to the level of animals.

Hence, God so tested man initially in order to prepare him for his role of building human life on earth. Thus the test is seen to be part of God's grace which He bestows on man in abundance: his power to resist temptation is alerted and enhanced. His eyes are opened to the struggle awaiting him between the pleasures raised before him by Satan and his will to honour his commitment to God. The results of this first test are made public: *"He forgot it [i.e. his commitment], and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose."* (Verse 115) The result is declared before the details of the test have been given.

"And when We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; except Iblīs, who refused." (Verse 116) This first episode of the story is given in very general terms, without the details given in other *sūrahs*. The general context here is one of mercy, care and blessings. Hence, these aspects are brought forth very quickly: *"Adam,' We said, 'this is indeed a foe to you and your wife; so let him not drive the two of you out of the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction. It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun.'"* (Verses 117-119)

We see how God takes care to alert Adam to the wicked designs employed by his enemy, warning him against Satan's treachery, after he disobeyed God's command to prostrate himself before Adam. The warning is very precise, showing the inevitable result of listening to Satan and his promptings: *"Let him not drive the two of you out of*

the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction." (Verse 117) Once Adam is thrown out of heaven, all he will have is affliction: hard labour, going astray, worry, indecision, endless waiting, agony, deprivation, etc. As long as he is in Paradise, he is immune to all affliction: *"It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun."* (Verses 118-119) All that man needs is available in plenty in Paradise, which means that man should ensure he stays there. We note here how hunger and nakedness are shown to be parallel to thirst and intense heat. These four represent man's initial concerns as he tries to find food, clothing, drink and shade.

Adam however was without experience. Moreover, he was burdened by weakness, such as his desire for survival and his other desire to feel himself powerful. It was through these weaknesses that Satan was able to tempt him: *"But Satan whispered to him, saying: Adam, shall I lead you to the tree of life eternal, and to a kingdom that will never decay?"* (Verse 120)

We see here how Satan touches Adam's raw nerve. Man's life and power are limited. Hence, he longs for survival and lasting power. These two desires provided Satan with suitable openings. As we have said, Adam had all human weaknesses planted in him for a definite purpose. Hence, he forgot his commitment and transgressed the permitted limits: *"They both ate of its fruit; and thereupon their shameful parts became visible to them, and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the Garden. Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and thus did he stray into error."* (Verse 121)

It appears that what Adam and his wife saw were their genitals, which had thus far been covered. This is the more likely explanation, since they started to cover themselves again, piecing together leaves from the trees in heaven. On the other hand, the expression may mean that their action aroused their sexual desire. Prior to sexual feelings, man does not feel any shame in leaving his private parts exposed. Indeed, he may not be aware of them unless he feels such urges. It is then that he experiences shame and feels too shy to expose himself.

It may be that the tree was forbidden to Adam and his wife because its fruits could awaken their sexual desire. Perhaps it was intended to leave this desire dormant for a time. It could be, on the other hand, that their forgetting of their commitment to God and their disobedience of His orders resulted in a weakening of their willpower and a break of their bond with the Lord Creator, giving way to the emergence of sexual and reproductive desires. It is only in this way that man can extend his life beyond his own term. All these are possible explanations for the association between their eating of the forbidden tree and their becoming aware of their nakedness. The Qur'an does not say, "their shameful parts became visible"; rather, these parts became visible "to them". This suggests that these parts were screened from them and then

became exposed through their own inner feelings. In another *sūrah* the Qur'ān says: *"Satan whispered to them both, so that he might show them their nakedness, of which they had previously been unaware."* (7: 20) *"[Satan] stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness."* (7: 27) Perhaps the clothing that Satan removed was not physical, but rather, a protective feeling of innocence, purity and closeness to God. These are mere hypotheses which we neither emphasize nor give weight to. We state them only to make the first human experience with temptation clearer.

But God extended His grace to Adam and his wife after he had disobeyed Him. This was only the first experience: *"Then his Lord elected him [for His grace], accepted his repentance, and bestowed His guidance upon him."* (Verse 122) Realizing the enormity of his error, Adam repented and sought God's forgiveness, but this is not mentioned here in order to leave God's grace to be seen most clearly.

Drawing the Lines of Battle

The order was then given to the two combatants to descend to earth, which would be the battleground in this long-lasting war: *"Get down, both of you, and be out of it; each of you shall be an enemy to the other."* (Verse 123) Thus, the enmity was declared the whole world over. This means that there is no excuse for Adam and his progeny. None can claim to have been taken unawares. Everyone knows the score and the unabating hostility. The whole universe is aware of it: *"Each of you shall be an enemy to the other."* (Verse 123)

Along with this declaration which resounded throughout the heavens and the earth, and which was witnessed by all the angels, God has willed, out of His grace, to send His messengers bringing guidance to mankind, before He punishes them for their sins. Thus, at the same time He alerts His servants to this enmity between Adam and Satan, He announces to them that He will provide them with guidance. He will then give them their reward according to whether they follow His guidance or reject it:

When guidance shall come to you from Me, he who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery; but he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection. 'Lord,' he will say, 'why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?' He will reply: 'Thus it is: Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion. 'For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring. (Verses 123-127)

This promise of the guidance mankind will receive from God is made immediately

after Adam's story, as though it constitutes a part of it. It is declared there in heaven at the conclusion of the story. It is, then, final, determined long ago, admitting no cancellation or amendment.

"He who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery." (Verse 123) When human beings follow divine guidance, they are immune from going astray and suffering misery. Both eventualities however exist, but God protects those of His servants who follow His guidance from them. Misery is attendant on following error, even though a person has all the pleasures the world can give. Indeed, such pleasures are part of his misery both in this life and in the life to come. For every forbidden pleasure is succeeded by pain and negative consequences. When human beings stray from God's guidance, they sink into worry, confusion and instability. They swing from one extreme to the other. Misery will always be the result of such worry and confusion, even though a person enjoys all the riches life can give. But the ultimate misery is that suffered in the hereafter. However, those who follow God's guidance are protected from error and misery in this earthly life. This compensates them for their lost Paradise until they return to it on the appointed day.

"But he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) When human life severs its links with God, depriving itself of His abundant grace, it becomes straitened, even though it may be materially affluent. It is a type of stress attendant on being isolated from God and the reassurance of His mercy. It is a stress that demonstrates itself in worry, doubt and confusion; holding tight to what one owns and fearing unexpected loss; coveting all manner of comfort and pleasure; nurturing aspirations and ambitions, etc. People do not feel true reassurance except when they place their trust in God, holding tight to their bond with Him. The reassurance generated by faith in God adds much to life's dimensions in length, breadth, depth and expanse. Without such reassurance, life is nothing but a continuous misery and is far harder than what man suffers through poverty and deprivation.

"We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) This is the same type of going astray as that which man went through in the life of this world. It comes by way of recompense for his turning away from God's message in this first life. Hence, he asks: *"Lord, why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?"* (Verse 125) The answer is not long coming: *"Thus it is.. Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion. For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring."* (Verses 126-127)

Anyone who turns his back on God's message certainly transgresses. He walks away from the guidance brought to him by God's Messenger when it is the richest

blessing and the most valuable resource. He transgresses as he turns his sight to objects he was not meant to look at, yet remains oblivious to God's revelations. It is not surprising that he lives a straitened life. Moreover, on the Day of Resurrection he will be raised up blind.

We note here how the wording and the images drawn provide complementary and contrasting scenes: the fall from heaven is followed by misery and going astray. It contrasts with the return to heaven where one is free from all such misery. A life of ease contrasts with a straitened life, and guidance contrasts with blindness. All this comes by way of comment on Adam's story, which is the story of all mankind. It starts and ends in heaven, as we saw earlier in *Sūrah 7, The Heights*. However the scenes here are different. In each case, they fit the general emphasis of the *sūrah* in which they are drawn.

The Lessons of History

The *sūrah* now moves us along to look at how earlier communities met their fate, which is much closer to us than the Day of Judgement. Moreover, we can see their destruction and what is left of them with our own eyes, while we cannot see resurrection.

Can they not see how many generations We have destroyed before their time? They walk about in the very places where they dwelt. In this there are signs for men of wisdom. Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable. (Verses 128-129)

When we look with our eyes and minds at the fate of earlier communities; when we look closely at the lands where they lived and prospered; when we imagine their dwellings and how they became empty with no one living in them; when we stretch our imagination to see them walking through their lands, going here and there, moving along, taking rest, looking to their futures, dealing with their worries, and then open our eyes to see nothing but emptiness, we realize that we are at the edge of a precipice that threatens to engulf us like it did earlier communities. We know that the great power that overwhelmed earlier generations is able to overwhelm the present ones as well. We understand then the meaning of the warning given to us, because the lesson is there for us to see. How come, then, that people do not recognize divine guidance when the fate of earlier generations provides every guiding indication to anyone who has a mind to use: *"In this there are signs for people of wisdom."* (Verse 128)

Divine wisdom has willed that God will not eliminate them by a calamity that befalls them in this present world. This is the reason why they do not meet a similar

fate. This is a situation God has decreed, giving them respite up to a term appointed for them. Otherwise they too would have been punished for their rejection of the truth: *“Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable.”* (Verse 129)

The Way to Contentment

We mentioned that the unbelievers had been given respite. They will have their term, but they have definitely not been abandoned. The Prophet is told not to pay much attention to them or to the luxuries and comforts they have been given in this life. All this is a test for them. What God has given him of His blessings is much better and greater. He is to remain patient and steadfast:

Hence, bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment. Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy in order that We may test them thereby. Whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting. Enjoin prayer on your people, and be diligent in its observance. We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (Verses 130-132)

The Prophet is instructed to bear with patience whatever the unbelievers say. He is not to answer their blasphemy, rejection or ridicule. *He* should be neither distressed by what they say, nor grieved at what may await them. He is to turn to his Lord, glorifying Him before sunrise and sunset: early with the fresh breath of dawn as life awakens, and late as everything begins to cool down when the sun is about to set and the whole universe seems to close its eyes, ready to sleep. He is to glorify God and praise Him intermittently through the day and the night, so as to keep his link with Him throughout.

Such glorification is urged on the Prophet, and all his followers, *“so that you may attain a state of contentment.”* (Verse 130) When we glorify God, we have a direct link with Him, and the person who maintains such a link is contented, reassured. He is in a state of contentment as everything around him feels content; and he is reassured because he knows that, with God's help, he is safe and secure. Thus, contentedness is the fruit of worship and God's glorification. In itself, it is a reward that is generated within one's heart.

So the Prophet is instructed to turn his face to God offering his worship. He is further instructed: *“Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this*

world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy" (Verse 131) There is plenty of splendour in this life which may appear very tempting. There are luxuries, pleasures, wealth, children, high position and power. But all this is merely a 'flower', to use the exact word of the Qur'ān; and like a flower, all this splendour will fade within a very brief period. Hence, they are given all this splendour to enjoy *"in order that We may test them thereby."* (Verse 131) Thus, their true metal will be known by the way they use what God has favoured them with of the splendour of this life. But then they must realize that at the end of the day, *"whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting."* (Verse 131) This refers to what the believers are given in the life to come. These provisions are for enjoyment, not a test. They have no special lure to turn people away from what is better. They are the better provision and they are everlasting.

We must not understand this verse as encouraging self-denial or disdain for the comforts of this life. It is rather an encouragement to hold on to true and lasting values, to maintain one's ties with God and be contented. This is the best way to resist the temptation of the splendour and attractions of this life. When we maintain such values, we are free to rise above the lure of false temptations, splendid as they may appear.

"Enjoin prayer on your people." (Verse 132) The first duty of a Muslim is to make his home a Muslim home, enjoining his family to attend to their prayers so that they all maintain their ties with God. Thus, they are united in their approach to life. Life in a home where all members turn to God for worship is certainly a happy one.

"And be diligent in its observance." (Verse 132) Be diligent so that you offer your prayers complete and its effect becomes a reality. Prayer restrains man from loathsome deeds and indecency. This is its true effect. To attain the level where prayer provides such restraint requires diligence in its observance. Unless we reach the stage that our prayer yields this fruit, it remains a mere sequence of phrases and movements.

Prayer and worship generally are duties assigned to the Prophet and believers. God does not gain anything by them. He is in need of no one: *"We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you."* (Verse 132) Worship nurtures God-consciousness within the worshipper. Hence, *"the future belongs to the God-fearing."* (Verse 132) It is man who benefits by prayer, both in this life and in the life to come. He offers his worship to God and he enjoys, as a result, a state of contentment. He is comfortable, reassured. Furthermore, he ultimately receives a much greater reward in the hereafter. As for God, He needs nothing from anyone.

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it refers again to those people who, enjoying position and power, reject God's revelations and demand that the Prophet deliver a

miracle. They make such demands even after the Prophet has given them the Qur'ān which explains in all clarity what previous messages from God were like.

"They say: 'Why does he not bring us a sign from his Lord?' Has there not come to them a clear evidence of the truth in the earlier scriptures?" (Verse 133) They need no physical miracle. Hence, their demands betray their arrogance. The Qur'ān is more than sufficient as proof. It links the new message with God's previous messages, uniting them all and clarifying what was left in general terms in previous messages.

God has given those who deny the truth everything they need to recognize the truth and believe in it when He sent them His last Messenger: *"Had We destroyed them with a calamity before his coming, they would have said, 'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger, we would have followed Your revelations rather than be humiliated and disgraced.'"* (Verse 134)

At the time when this verse was recited, they had been neither humiliated nor disgraced. The verse describes their inevitable end which will bring them humiliation and disgrace. It may be that they will then say: *'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger.'* Now a Messenger is sent to them and they have no excuse to justify their rejection.

As the *sūrah* describes their end, the Prophet is commanded to leave them alone, without grieving for them. He should announce to them that he will await the end, and let them await it as they wish: *"Say: Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided."* (Verse 135)

Thus the *sūrah* ends. It started with assuring the Prophet that the Qur'ān was not revealed to him to cause him any distress. It defined the role of the Qur'ān as *'an admonition to the God-fearing.'* (Verse 3) The end is in full harmony with the beginning. It provides a reminder and an admonition for those who may benefit thereby. As the Prophet conveyed his message complete, the only thing that remains is to await the end, which is determined by God.