

SŪRAH 79

Al-Nāzi`āt

(The Pluckers)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

By those that pluck out vehemently, (1)

and those that move forward rapidly; (2)

by those that float along at ease, (3)

and those that outstrip swiftly, (4)

and those that conduct matters. (5)

*On the day when a violent convulsion will [be
overwhelming], (6)*

to be soon followed by a further [convulsion], (7)

all hearts shall be filled with terror, (8)

and all eyes shall be downcast. (9)

وَالنَّزَعَتِ غَرَقًا ﴿١﴾

وَالنَّشِطَتِ دَشَاطًا ﴿٢﴾

وَالسَّيِّحَتِ سَبْحًا ﴿٣﴾

فَالسَّيِّقَتِ سَبَقًا ﴿٤﴾

فَالْمُدَبِّرَاتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٥﴾

يَوْمَ تَرْجُفُ الرَّاجِفَةُ ﴿٦﴾

تَتَّبِعُهَا الرَّاْدِفَةُ ﴿٧﴾

قُلُوبٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَاجِفَةٌ ﴿٨﴾

أَبْصَرُهَا خَشِيعَةٌ ﴿٩﴾

They say, 'What! Are we being restored to our former state, (10)

even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?' (11)

They say, 'That will be a return with loss.' (12)

But with just one blast (13)

they shall be alive on earth. (14)

Have you heard the story of Moses? (15)

His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of *Timmā*, (16)

saying: 'Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, (17)

and say to him. 'Would you like to reform yourself?' (18)

I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him.'" (19)

He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, (20)

but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. (21)

He then turned away hastily. (22)

He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: (23)

يَقُولُونَ أَءِنَّا لَمَرْدُودُونَ فِي الْحَافِرَةِ ﴿١٠﴾

أَءِذَا كُنَّا عِظْمًا خِزَّةً ﴿١١﴾

قَالُوا تِلْكَ إِذًا كَرَّةٌ خَاسِرَةٌ ﴿١٢﴾

فَإِنَّمَا هِيَ زَجْرَةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ ﴿١٣﴾

فَإِذَا هُمْ بِالسَّاهِرَةِ ﴿١٤﴾

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَى ﴿١٥﴾

إِذْ نَادَاهُ رَبُّهُ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ﴿١٦﴾

أَذْهَبَ إِلَى فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ طَغَى ﴿١٧﴾

فَقُلْ هَلْ لَكَ إِلَهٌ إِلَّا أَن تَزَكَّى ﴿١٨﴾

وَأَهْدِيكَ إِلَى رَبِّكَ فَتَخْشَى ﴿١٩﴾

فَأَرَاهُ الْآيَةَ الْكُبْرَى ﴿٢٠﴾

فَكَذَّبَ وَعَصَى ﴿٢١﴾

ثُمَّ أَدْبَرَ يَسْعَى ﴿٢٢﴾

فَحَشَرَ فَنَادَى ﴿٢٣﴾

I am your supreme Lord', he said. (24)

God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. (25)

Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing. (26)

Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? (27)

He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, (28)

and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. (29)

After that He spread out the earth. (30)

He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; (31)

and the mountains He set firm, (32)

for you and your cattle to delight in. (33)

Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass — (34)

on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, (35)

when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; (36)

then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, (37)

فَقَالَ أَنَا رَبُّكُمُ الْأَعْلَى ﴿٢٤﴾

فَأَخَذَهُ اللَّهُ نَكَالَ الْأَخِرَةِ وَالْأُولَى ﴿٢٥﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَعِبْرَةً لِمَن تَخْشَى ﴿٢٦﴾

ءَأَنْتُمْ أَشَدُّ خَلْقًا أَمِ السَّمَاءُ بَنَاهَا ﴿٢٧﴾

رَفَعَ سَمَكَهَا فَسَوَّاهَا ﴿٢٨﴾

وَأَغْطَشَ لَيْلَهَا وَأَخْرَجَ ضُحَاهَا ﴿٢٩﴾

وَالْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ دَحَاهَا ﴿٣٠﴾

أَخْرَجَ مِنْهَا مَاءَهَا وَمَرْعَاهَا ﴿٣١﴾

وَالْجِبَالَ أَرْسَاهَا ﴿٣٢﴾

مَتَاعًا لَّكُمْ وَلِأَنْعَمِكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

فَإِذَا جَاءَتِ الطَّامَّةُ الْكُبْرَى ﴿٣٤﴾

يَوْمَ يَتَذَكَّرُ الْإِنْسَانُ مَا سَعَى ﴿٣٥﴾

وَبُرُزَّتِ الْجَحِيمُ لِمَن يَرَى ﴿٣٦﴾

فَأَمَّا مَنْ طَغَى ﴿٣٧﴾

and chose this present life (38)

will have hell for his dwelling place. (39)

But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire (40)

will dwell in paradise. (41)

They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? (42)

But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? (43)

The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. (44)

Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. (45)

On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning. (46)

وَأَثَرَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ﴿٣٨﴾

فَإِنَّ الْجَحِيمَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ
عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ السَّاعَةِ أَيَّانَ مُرْسِنُهَا ﴿٤٢﴾

فِيمَ أَنْتَ مِنْ ذِكْرِهَا ﴿٤٣﴾

إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ مُنْتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٤﴾

إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُنذِرٌ مَنِ تَخَشَنَهَا ﴿٤٥﴾

كَأَنَّهُمْ يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَهَا لَمْ يَلْبَثُوا إِلَّا عَشِيَّةً أَوْ
ضُحًى ﴿٤٦﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is just one example of many in this part of the Qur'ān which shares a common objective; namely, to drive home to man the reality of the hereafter, its inevitability and its awesome nature, and to stress its importance to the divine planning of man's life in this world. Such planning culminates in man's death and subsequent resurrection in a new life. As it sets out to drive this idea home to man, the *sūrah* touches upon our emotions in a variety of ways that are directly relevant to its central theme.

First we have an ambiguous opening which creates an air of fear and worried expectation. The rhythm here is quick and throbbing; it helps evoke feelings of fear,

surprise and wonder: *“By those that pluck out vehemently, and those that move forward rapidly; by those that float along at ease, and those that outstrip swiftly, and those that conduct matters.”* (Verses 1-5)

This equivocal, shaking opening is followed by the first of those scenes which deal with the hereafter. The style and tempo of the opening is here maintained and thus serves as a framework for the overall scene: *“On the day when a violent convulsion will [be overwhelming], to be soon followed by a further [convulsion], all hearts shall be filled with terror, and all eyes shall be downcast. They say, ‘What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?’ They say, ‘That will be a return with loss.’ But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth.”* (Verses 6-14)

Having cast an air of awe, the *sūrah* then provides an account of the end met by some of the unbelievers during the time of Moses and Pharaoh. Here the rhythm is quieter and more relaxed to suit the narrative style: *“Have you heard the story of Moses? His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā, saying: ‘Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: ‘Would you like to reform yourself? I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him.’” He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: I am your supreme Lord’, he said. God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing.”* (Verses 15-26) This account serves as an introduction to the great principle the *sūrah* aims to establish.

Leaving history aside, the *sūrah* then takes up the open book of the universe. It paints great scenes of the universe which testify to the limitless power and careful planning of God, the Creator of the universe who controls its destiny both in this life and in the life to come. These scenes are drawn in a powerful style and contain a strong rhythm in harmony with the opening of the *sūrah* and its general cadence. *“Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm, for you and your cattle to delight in.”* (Verses 27-33)

Then comes a statement about the great and overwhelming event, which will be accompanied by the distribution of rewards for actions done in this life. The rewards are portrayed in such a way as to fit in harmoniously with the event itself: *“Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass – on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place. But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise.”* (Verses 34-41)

At this point, when we are overwhelmed by the respective fates of the

transgressors who prefer this life to the next, and the God-fearing who restrain themselves, the *sūrah* turns to those who deny resurrection, yet ask the Prophet to fix its time. The rhythm here is superb. It further contributes to the awe produced by the account of the Last Hour. *"They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning."* (Verses 42-46) Perhaps we should note that these verses end with the sound 'āhā', which adds length to the metre, intensifying the effect of majesty and awe.

The Pluckers and the Event

By those that pluck out vehemently, and those that move forward rapidly; by those that float along at ease, and those that outstrip swiftly, and those that conduct matters. (Verses 1-5)

Some commentators say of these verses that they refer to the angels who pluck out souls vehemently, move along with ease and speed, float along as they move in the outer world, outstrip other creatures to embrace the faith and carry out God's commands and conduct whatever affairs they are charged with. Other commentators maintain that they refer to the stars which come on as they traverse their orbits, move rapidly in phases, float in space, outstrip others as they run fast and bring about certain phenomena and results which are entrusted to them by God and which affect life on earth. A third group of commentators are of the view that the pluckers, runners, floaters and outstrippers refer to the stars while the conductors of affairs are the angels. Another group believe that the first three are the stars while the outstrippers and conductors of affairs are the angels.

Whatever the referents of these terms are, their mention in this particular way produces a shock and a feeling of expectation of something fearful. Thus, they contribute, right at the outset, to preparing our minds for the frightening account of the first and second quakes and of the overwhelming event mentioned later in the *sūrah*.

Perhaps it is better not to go into great detail in trying to explain and discuss these verses. It is perhaps more fruitful to let these verses produce their effect naturally. The Qur'ān seeks to achieve its objective of awakening people's hearts in different ways. If we do this we simply follow the example of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. He once read *Sūrah* 80, The Frowning. When he reached the verse which reads '*wa fākihātan wa abba*', he wondered, "we know the fruit trees, *fākihātan*, but what is *abba*?" But

then he reproached himself, saying: "You, Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, are being really fussy today! What harm is there in your not knowing the meaning of a word used in God's book?" He then said to the people around: "Follow what you understand of this book; what you do not understand you may leave alone." His statement, aimed at discouraging people from trying to explain what may be equivocal to them, without the backing of perfectly sound authority, represents an attitude of veneration towards God's words. Indeed, some words and phrases may deliberately have been left equivocal so as to fulfil a certain objective.

The opening of the *sūrah* takes the form of an oath, to confirm the event related in verses that immediately follow: "*On the day when a violent convulsion will [be overwhelming, to be soon followed by a further [convulsion], all hearts shall be filled with terror, and all eyes shall be downcast. They say, 'What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?' They say, 'That will be a return with loss.' But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth.*" (Verses 6-14) It has been suggested that the convulsion refers to the earth being overwhelmed by a violent quake. This is based on what the Qur'ān says in another *sūrah*: "*On the day when the earth and the mountains will be convulsed.*" (73: 14) It has also been suggested that the convulsion that follows affects the sky, as it follows the earth in witnessing its own upheaval causing it to split and the stars to scatter. An alternative suggestion claims that the first convulsion refers to the first blast on the Trumpet which causes the earth, the mountains and all creation to quake and tremble, and makes all who are in heaven and on earth fall down fainting, except those who are spared by God. The follower, it is claimed, refers to the second blast on the Trumpet which brings all creation back to life as stated in verse 68 of *Sūrah* 39.

Whichever suggestion is correct, these verses make men's hearts feel the convulsion and shake with fear and worry. They prepare us for the terror that will fill people's hearts on the Day of Judgement: "*All hearts shall be filled with terror and all eyes shall be downcast.*" (Verses 8-9) Thus, it is a combination of worry, fear, humiliation and breakdown. This is what happens on that day, and it is this fact which the oath at the opening of the *sūrah* seeks to establish. In both sense and rhythm, the scene portrayed by these verses fits in perfectly with the opening.

The *sūrah* goes on to speak of people's surprise and wonder when they are resurrected: "*They say: 'What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?'*" (Verses 10-11) They wonder whether they are being returned to life again. Amazed, they ask how this can be done after they have been dead for so long that their bones are hollow. Then they realize that their awakening does not take them back to their life on earth, but to their second life. At this point they feel their great loss and cry: "*That will be a return with loss.*" (Verse 12) They have not banked on such a return, and have not prepared for it, so they have

everything to lose by it. The Qur'ānic comment is to state what will actually happen: *"But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth."* (Verses 13-14)

The 'blast' is a shout, but it is described here as a blast to emphasize its force, and to strike a note of perfect harmony between this scene and others drawn in the *sūrah*. The term used for 'the earth' here refers to a bright white earth which is the land of resurrection. We do not know its exact location. All we know of it is that which the Qur'ān or the authentic traditions of the Prophet relate. We have no intention of adding anything unauthoritative to their account. Other Qur'ānic statements lead us to the conclusion that this one blast is most probably the second blow on the Trumpet, i.e. the blow of resurrection. The expression used here gives a sense of speed. The blast itself is associated with speed, and the general rhythm of the *sūrah* is a rapid one. Terrified hearts also beat fast. Hence the perfect harmony between the sense, the rhythm, the scenes and the *sūrah* as a whole.

Instructions Given to Moses

The rhythm then slows down a little in order to suit the style of narration. For next we have an account of what took place between Moses and Pharaoh, and the end which Pharaoh met after he had tyrannized and transgressed all bounds: *"Have you heard the story of Moses? His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā, saying: 'Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: "Would you like to reform yourself? I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."' He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: "I am your supreme Lord", he said. God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing."* (Verses 15-26)

The story of Moses is the most frequent and detailed of Qur'ānic historical accounts. It is mentioned in many other *sūrahs*, in different ways and with varying emphasis. At times, certain episodes are given greater prominence than others. This variation of style and emphasis aims at striking harmony between the historical account and the *sūrah* in which it occurs. Thus, the story helps to make the message of the *sūrah* clearer. This method is characteristic of the Qur'ān. Here the historical account is given in quick successive scenes which open with the call Moses receives in the sacred valley and end with the destruction of Pharaoh in this life and perdition in the life to come. Thus, it fits very well with the main theme of the *sūrah*, namely the hereafter. The part given here of Moses's history spans a long period, yet it is conveyed by only a few short verses that fit in well with the rhythm and message of the *sūrah* as whole.

They start with an introductory question addressed to the Prophet: *"Have you*

heard the story of Moses?" (Verse 15) The question serves to prepare us to listen to the history and contemplate its lessons. Moses's story is described here as history to emphasize that it actually happened. It starts with Moses being called by God: *"His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā."* (Verse 16) Ṭuwā is probably the name of the valley which lies to the right of Mount Ṭūr in Sinai, as one comes up from Madyan in North Ḥijāz.

The moment this call was made was an awesome one. The call from God to one of His servants is beyond description, yet it embodies a secret of divinity, and a secret of how God has made man susceptible to His call. No one can comprehend what is involved here without inspiration from God Himself.

The communication between God and Moses is discussed in more detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. However, with the brevity and rapid rhythm that characterize this *sūrah*, it is touched upon here only very briefly, before God's command to Moses is stated: *"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: 'Would you like to reform yourself I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him.'"* (Verses 17-19)

"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds." (Verse 17) The Arabic term for 'transgress', which is *ṭaghā*, also suggests tyranny. Neither tyranny nor transgression should be allowed to take place or be left unchecked. They lead to corruption and to what displeases God. So God [limitless is He in His glory] selects one of His noble servants and charges him with the task of trying to put an end to them. The instructions given to this noble servant require him to go to a tyrant in an attempt to turn him away from his erring ways, so that he has no excuse should God decide to exact His retribution.

"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds." God teaches Moses how to address this tyrant in the most persuasive manner: *"Say to him: 'Would you like to reform yourself?"* (Verse 18) The first question then is whether or not the tyrant would like to purify himself of the stains of tyranny and abominable disobedience to God. Would he like to know the path of the pious, the blessed?: *"I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."* (Verse 19) The offer here is for Pharaoh to be shown the way acceptable to God. Once he knows it, he will feel the fear of God in his heart. Man does not transgress and tyrannize unless he loses his way and finds himself taking a road which does not lead to God. His heart hardens as a result, and he rebels and resorts to tyranny.

Moses was told all this when God called to him. He of course puts these questions to Pharaoh when he encounters him. The *sūrah*, however, does not repeat them when it describes the encounter. It skips over what happens after God's call to Moses and deletes what Moses says when he conveys his message. It is as if the curtain falls

after the call to repentance. When it is lifted again, we are presented with the end of the encounter: *“He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled.”* (Verses 20-21)

Unrivalled Insolence

Thus, Moses conveys the message with which he has been entrusted in the manner God has taught him. This warm, friendly attitude, however, cannot win over a heart that has been hardened by tyranny and ignorance of the Lord of the universe. So Moses shows him the great miracles of the stick turning into a snake and Moses’s own hand becoming a brilliant white, as they are described in other *sūrahs*, *“but he cried lies and rebelled.”* (Verse 21) The scene ends with Pharaoh’s rejection and rebellion against God.

Pharaoh then turns away to mobilize his forces and bring forward his sorcerers for an encounter between magic and the truth. Essentially, Pharaoh was determined not to accept the truth or submit to right. *“He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: I am your supreme Lord’, he said.”* (Verses 22-24) The *sūrah* does not give any details of Pharaoh’s efforts to muster his magicians, sorcerers and men. It simply says that he went away to do so, and then uttered his impertinent proclamation: *“I am your supreme Lord”*. (Verse 24)

Pharaoh’s declaration betrays the fact that he was deceived by his people’s ignorance and their submission to his authority. Nothing deceives tyrants more than the ignorance and abject submission of the masses. A tyrant is in fact an individual who has no real power or authority. The ignorant and the submissive simply bend their backs for him to ride, stretch out their necks for him to harness with reins, hang down their heads to give him a chance to show his conceit, and forego their rights to be respected and honoured. In this way they allow themselves to be tyrannized. The masses do all this because they are deceived and afraid at the same time. Their fear has no real basis except in their imagination. The tyrant, an individual, can never be stronger than thousands or millions, should they attach proper value to their humanity, dignity, self-respect and freedom. Every individual in the nation is a match for the tyrant in terms of power. No one can tyrannize a nation which is sane, or knows its true Lord, believes in Him and refuses to submit to any creature who has no power over its destiny.

Pharaoh, however, found his people so ignorant, submissive and devoid of faith that he was able to make his insolent, blasphemous declaration, *“I am your supreme Lord!”* (Verse 24) He would never have dared to make it had his nation possessed the qualities of general awareness, self-respect and faith in God.

Against such intolerable insolence, the Supreme Power moved in: *“God smote him*

with the scourge of both the life to come and this life.” (Verse 25) The scourge of the life to come is mentioned first because it is much more severe and perpetual. It is indeed the real punishment for tyrants and transgressors. It is also appropriate to give it prominence since the life to come is the main theme of the *sūrah*. Besides, it fits in perfectly with the general rhythm of the *sūrah*.

Nevertheless, the scourge that engulfed Pharaoh in this life was fearful and severe, but that of the life to come will be much more so. Pharaoh had power, authority and glory, yet none of this will be of any use to him. One can only imagine what the fate that will be faced by unbelievers who do not have similar power, authority or glory but who still resist God's message and try to suppress it.

“Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing.” (Verse 26) Only those who know their true Lord and fear Him will benefit from the lessons of Pharaoh's history. Those who do not fear God will continue in their erring ways until they reach their appointed end, when they shall suffer the scourge of both this life and the life to come.

Having mentioned the end met by tyrants who thought themselves very powerful, the *sūrah* turns to the present unbelievers who also depend on their own power. It directs their attention to some manifestations of the work of the Supreme Power in the universe. Their power holds no sway against God's: *“Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm, for you and your cattle to delight in.”* (Verses 27-33)

The question these verses start with, *“Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built?”* admits of one answer only: heaven. So the question seems to infer another: 'Why should you think so highly of your own power when heaven is much stronger in constitution than you and the Lord who created it is much stronger than it?' The question may also be carried forward in a different direction: 'Why do you think resurrection is impossible, when God has created heaven, the creation of which requires more power than your own creation?' Resurrection is merely a repetition of creation. It follows that He who has built heaven will find your resurrection an easier proposition.

It is He who has 'built' heaven. The term 'build' suggests strength and firm constitution. Heaven is indeed so. Its planets are held together in perfect harmony. They neither scatter, nor fall out of their orbits.

Conducive to Life

"He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape." (Verse 28) We need no more than a glance in order to recognize the perfect coherence and harmony in the building of heaven. Knowledge of the laws which govern the existence of the creatures in the sky above us and provide a perfect balance between their actions, movements and mutual effects helps us to understand the full meaning of this verse. It intensifies our feeling of the limitlessness of their very real world, of which human knowledge has uncovered only a tiny part. It overwhelms us with wonder and astonishment. We stand speechless at the infinite beauty of the universe. We can give no explanation for it except that a superhuman power has planned and governs it. This explanation is now accepted even by most of those who profess not to believe in any religion.

"And gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight." (Verse 29) The Arabic words used in this verse add to the strength of the general tone. They also have stronger connotations than the translation suggests. They are used here because they are more fitting with the general context. The succession of darkness and light, at night and in the morning, is a phenomenon recognized by all, but it may be overlooked because we are so familiar with it. Here, the Qur'ān reminds us of its permanent novelty. For it is repeated anew every day, producing the same effects and reactions. The natural laws governing this phenomenon are so precise and miraculous that they continue to impress and astonish man as his knowledge increases.

"After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm." (Verses 30-32) Spreading out the earth is a reference to the levelling of its surface so that it becomes easy to walk on, and to the formation of a layer of soil suitable for cultivation. Setting the mountains firm is a result of the final shaping of the surface of the earth and its cooling down to a level suitable for the emergence of living organisms. God also brought out water from the earth. This applies to springs that allow deep waters to flow out onto the surface of the earth. It also applies to rain water, since it comes originally from the earth. He also brought forth the pastures, which is, in this context, a reference to all plants upon which man and animals feed, and which directly and indirectly sustain life.

All this happened after heaven was built, the night darkened and the earth spread. Recent astronomical theories support this Qur'ānic statement, for they assume that the earth was moving in its orbit, with day and night succeeding each other for hundreds of millions of years before it was levelled and spread out, becoming suitable for vegetation, and before its surface took its final, present shape of plains, valleys, mountains and oceans.

The Qur'ān declares that all this is *"for you and your cattle to delight in."* (Verse 33) This is a reminder to man of what God has made for him, and of His perfect and elaborate planning. It is not by chance that heaven was built in this fashion and the

earth spread out to take its present shape. Man's existence, as God's vicegerent, was taken into account. Indeed, human life and progress depend on so many factors which operate in the universe generally, and in the solar system in particular, and even more particularly on the earth itself. All these factors must be made to function in absolute harmony.

Following the Qur'ānic method of delivering a short statement which embodies the basic fact, yet is rich with hints and inferences, the *sūrah* names just a few of these harmonized factors – the building of heaven, the darkening of the night, the bringing forth of daylight, the spreading of the earth, the manipulation of its waters and pastures and the setting firm of mountains – for man and his cattle to delight in. This statement ensures the elaborate planning of the universe is understood by everybody, regardless of education standard. It addresses all mankind, throughout all ages and societies, whether primitive or advanced. The reality of such meticulous and elaborate planning, however, goes far beyond the level mentioned here. The very nature of this universe rules out any possibility of its formation by chance, for no chance construct could result in such perfect and absolute harmony on such an immeasurable scale. The harmony starts with the fact that our solar system is unique among millions and millions of planetary systems, and our earth is also a unique planet with regard to its location in the solar system. It is this uniqueness that makes life on earth possible.

Life may appear on a certain planet if certain conditions are met: the planet must be of suitable size, at a medium distance from the sun, and it has to be of a composition which mixes the elements in the right proportion to permit the emergence of life. The suitable size is necessary because the atmosphere of the planet is conditioned by the force of its gravity. The medium distance is also a necessary condition because the planets which are near to the sun are so hot that nothing can solidify on them, and those that are far from the sun are so cold that nothing on them can have any measure of elasticity. The right composition of elements is necessary because such a composition in the right proportion is a must for the growth of vegetation which is, in turn, essential for the sustenance of life. The Earth has the ideal location to satisfy all these conditions which are conducive to the emergence of life in the only form which we now know.¹

Establishing the fact of elaborate planning of the grand universe, and giving man a special place in it prepares man's heart and mind to receive and accept the statement about the reality of the hereafter and its final judgement. If the origins of the universe and of man are such, then the cycle must be completed, and everyone must have

¹ A.M. Al-Aqqad, *Aqā'id al-Mufakkirīn fī al-Qarn al-`Ishrīn*, Beliefs of Twentieth Century Thinkers, Maktabat al-Anglo – al-Maṣriyyah, Cairo, n.d., p. 36.

their reward. It is inconceivable that the final end comes with the end of man's short life in this world, or that evil and tyranny can get away without retribution, or that good, justice and right can be left to suffer whatever hardship is visited on them in this life, without there being a chance to put matters right. Such an assumption is, in its very essence, contrary to the fact of elaborate planning so apparent everywhere in the universe. Hence the reality touched upon in this part of the *sūrah* serves as an introduction to the reality of the hereafter, which is the main theme of the whole *sūrah*.

Different Dwellings

Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass – on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place. But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise. (Verses 34-41)

This present life is a period of comfort and enjoyment which are given in precise and accurate measure. Its duration is determined according to the overall planning of the universe and human life. Its comfort and enjoyment will end at the time appointed for their expiry. When the great event takes place, it ravages all and overwhelms all. The fleeting comfort of this life is extinguished. The whole universe, its built heaven, spread out earth and firm mountains are overturned and all living creatures are overwhelmed. At that moment *"man will clearly remember what he has done."* (Verse 35) He might have been distracted by the events and comforts of this life and he might have overlooked what he has done. But he will recall it all then, when remembrance brings him nothing but sadness and grief as he realizes what a miserable end he faces. *"When hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on."* (Verse 36) The term *'bringing in sight'* is particularly powerful. It is rich in connotations and further strengthens the rhythm. The result is an image so vivid we almost see it in front of us now.

Then, people will have different destinies and the aim of earlier planning in the first life is revealed: *"Then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place."* (Verses 37-39) The Arabic term, *ṭaghā*, rendered here as *'transgress the bounds of what is right'* means literally *'tyrannize'*, but this term is used here, as elsewhere in the Qur'ān, in a much wider sense than the strict despotism of rulers and dictators. *'Tyranny'* is used here as being synonymous with exceeding the limits of right and truth. Hence these three verses refer to all

those who transgress the boundaries of right, prefer this life to the future life, taking no heed of the latter. Since consciousness of the hereafter defines the values and standards to be applied, he who prefers this present life suffers a breakdown of values and standards resulting in his adoption of faulty standards of behaviour. This puts him in the category of despots and transgressors. Thus, hell which is brought in sight of everybody on that great day will be his dwelling place.

“But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise.” (Verses 40-41) The one who fears to stand in front of God does not indulge in sin. If he slips and commits a sin, in a moment of weakness, his fear of God will lead him to repent and pray for forgiveness. Thus, he remains within the area of obedience, the central point of which is the control of one's caprice and desires. Indulgence of desire and caprice is essentially the cause of all forms of tyranny and transgression. It is the spring of evil. Man hardly ever falls for any reason other than succumbing to caprice and desire. Ignorance is easy to cure. Desire, once ignorance has been cured, is a plague which requires a long and hard struggle to overcome. Yet fear of God is the only solid defence against violent attacks of desire. Indeed, there is hardly any other defence which can withstand such attacks. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions fear of God and control of desire together in one verse. This fact is here stressed by God, the Creator of man and the only One who knows the human soul, its weaknesses and their effective cure.

God does not ask man to suppress his desires, because He knows that it is not possible for him to do so. He simply asks man to control his desires and not to let them control him. He tells him that fear of standing before his Lord, the Almighty, should be of great assistance. He has fixed his reward for this hard struggle: paradise as a dwelling place. For God knows perfectly well the hardships involved in this struggle and the high standards to which man is elevated by the same. This struggle, self-control and elevation help man fulfil his humanity. Such fulfilment cannot be achieved by giving way to all desires, and following caprice wherever it leads, on the pretext that desire and caprice are part of human nature. God, who made man sensitive to certain urges, also gave him self discipline. He also gives him paradise as a reward when he elevates himself to a high standard of humanity.

There are two types of freedom. The first is achieved through scoring a victory over one's desires and releasing oneself from the chains of caprice. When man achieves such a victory he finds himself able to fulfil these desires and caprices in a controlled and balanced way which emphasizes his freedom of choice. This type of freedom is human, one which suits the honour God has bestowed on man. The other type is animal freedom, represented in man's defeat, his enslavement by his desires, and his loss of control over himself. This type of freedom is advocated only by those who have lost their humanity, so they try to cover their slavery with a dress of

deceptive freedom.

The Timing of the Last Hour

The last part of the *sūrah* is expressed in a rhythm which evokes awe. *“They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning.”* (Verses 42-46)

Every time the diehards among the pagan Arabs heard a description of the fearful events of the Day of Judgement, and the reckoning which then takes place, they used to ask the Prophet (peace be upon him) to specify its time: *“When will it come to pass?”* The answer given here to such questions takes the form of a rhetorical question, *“But why should you be concerned with its exact timing?”* (Verse 43) It is an answer which suggests that the Last Hour, or the Day of Judgement, is so great and majestic that the questions put by the unbelievers concerning it sound stupid and pitiful. Moreover, such questions are only put forward by the impudent. The great Prophet himself is asked, *“Why should you be concerned with its exact timing?”* It is so great that neither you nor anyone else should ask to be informed of its exact time. This knowledge belongs to God alone, not to anybody else. *“The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord.”* (Verse 44) He is the Master of everything which relates to it. The Prophet’s own duties, and the limits he should not, and need not exceed are well defined: *“Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it.”* (Verse 45) He is to warn those who will benefit by such warnings. Such people will then live according to their firm belief that it will arrive at the time appointed by God.

The majesty and awe of the Last Hour is explained through the description of its effects on men’s feelings and the comparison that is drawn between its duration and the length of this present life.

“On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning.” (Verse 46) It so grips the soul that our present life with all its epics, events and luxuries will seem to those who lived them shorter than a single day, just one evening or one morning. So, the whole world, its centuries and generations will shrink to nothing longer than a morning or an evening in the sight of the very people who quarrel and fight for it, preferring it to their share in the life to come. Yet for such passing enjoyment they abandon the hereafter and forego the certain prospect of dwelling in paradise. This is definitely the greatest stupidity of all, which no man who has ears to hear and eyes to see can ever perpetrate.