

SŪRAH 87
Al-A`lā
(The Most High)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your
Lord, the Most High, (1)*

who creates and proportions well, (2)

who determines and guides, (3)

who brings forth the pasturage, (4)

then turns it to withered grass. (5)

We shall teach you and you shall not forget, (6)

*except what God wills. He knows what is
manifest and what is kept hidden. (7)*

*And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease.
(8)*

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى ﴿١﴾

الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّى ﴿٢﴾

وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى ﴿٣﴾

وَالَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الْمَرْعَى ﴿٤﴾

فَجَعَلَهُ رُغَاءً أَحْوَى ﴿٥﴾

سَنُقَرِّئُكَ فَلَا تَنْسَى ﴿٦﴾

إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ وَمَا

يَخْفَى ﴿٧﴾

وَنُيَسِّرُكَ لِلْيُسْرَى ﴿٨﴾

Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use. (9)

He who fears God will heed it, (10)

but the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it, (11)

who shall be cast into the great fire, (12)

in which he shall neither die nor remain alive. (13)

Successful will be he who purifies himself, (14)

and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays. (15)

Yet you prefer this present life, (16)

while the life to come is better and longer lasting. (17)

All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; (18)

the scriptures of Abraham and Moses. (19)

فَذَكِّرْ إِن نَّفَعَتِ الذِّكْرَى ﴿٩﴾

سَيَذَكَّرُ مَنْ تَحَشَى ﴿١٠﴾

وَيَتَجَنَّبُهَا الْأَشْقَى ﴿١١﴾

الَّذِي يَصِلَى النَّارَ الْكُبْرَى ﴿١٢﴾

ثُمَّ لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحْيَى ﴿١٣﴾

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى ﴿١٤﴾

وَذَكَرَ اسْمَ رَبِّهِ فَصَلَّى ﴿١٥﴾

بَلْ تُؤْتِرُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا ﴿١٦﴾

وَالْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى ﴿١٧﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا لَفِي الصُّحُفِ الْأُولَى ﴿١٨﴾

صُحُفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى ﴿١٩﴾

Overview

Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal relates on the authority of `Alī, the Prophet's cousin and Companion, that the Prophet loved this *sūrah*. The famous *Ḥadīth* anthologist, Muslim, also relates that the Prophet used to read this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 88, The Enveloper, in `Id prayers and also in Friday prayers. If one of the festivals fell on a Friday, the Prophet would be sure to read these two *sūrahs* in the prayers.

The Prophet is right to love this *sūrah* as it turns the whole universe into a temple whose four corners echo the praises and glorification of God, the Sublime. *“Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides, who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass.”* (Verses 1-5) The rhythm of the *sūrah*, characterized by the long vowels with which each of its verses ends, imparts a feeling of the praises echoed everywhere in the universe.

The Prophet is also right to love this *sūrah* as it brings him good news. As God charges him with the double task of delivering His message and warning people, He promises him: *“We shall teach you and you shall not forget, except what God wills. He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden. And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease. Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use.”* (Verses 6-9) o God takes upon Himself the responsibility of making His Messenger not forget anything of the Qur’ān. He also promises that his path will be smoothed in all his affairs, whether they are personal or concerned with his message. This is certainly a great favour.

Again, the Prophet is right to love this *sūrah* as it includes the basic ingredients of the Islamic concept of life and existence: the oneness of the Creator; the reality of divine revelation; and the certainty of the life to come with the reward and punishment it involves. The *sūrah* also affirms that these basic principles have well-established roots in earlier divine messages. *“All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; the scriptures of Abraham and Moses.”* (Verses 18-19) All this is in addition to the impression it imparts of the easy nature of the Islamic ideology, the Messenger who conveys it, and the nation it builds.

Glorifying the Creator

“Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides, who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass.” (Verses 1-5) The *sūrah* opens with an order to praise the Lord, which means to glorify Him, recognize His supremacy and infallibility in everything, and remember His divine attributes. It is much more than verbal repetition of the phrase ‘*Subhān Allah*’, which we normally translate as ‘limitless is God in His glory.’ It is a genuine feeling of the sublimity of His attributes.

As the *sūrah* inspires us with the splendour of a life based on constant appreciation of divine attributes, we experience a feeling which is very real and very difficult to describe at the same time.

The two immediately presented attributes are Lordship and Highness. The “Lord” or the Arabic equivalent, *Rabb*, is the one who tends and nurtures. The connotations

of this attribute fit in very well with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah*, the happy news it brings and its easy rhythm. The 'Highness' attribute prompts one to look up to endless horizons. Having a genuinely vivid feeling of this attribute is indeed the essential purpose of praising God and glorifying Him.

The *sūrah* opens with an order addressed by God to the Prophet in the first instance: "*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High.*" (Verse 1) The order is given with an air of friendliness and compassion almost beyond description.

Whenever the Prophet read this *sūrah* he used to fulfil this order promptly by stopping after the first verse to say: "Limitless in his glory is my Lord, the Most High". Thus, he would receive the order, carry it out promptly and read on. When this *sūrah* was revealed the Prophet told the Muslims to fulfil the divine order as they prostrated themselves in their daily prayers. Similarly he told them to carry out the other order to '*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most Great,*' (56: 96) as they bowed in prayer. These praises, warm with life, have been included in the prayers as a direct response to a direct order, or more precisely to a direct permission. For God's permission to His servants to praise Him is one of the favours He has bestowed on them. It is a permission to them to be in contact with Him in a way, given their limited abilities, they can appreciate. He, out of His grace, has permitted them to do this so that they may know Him and His attributes as best they can.

"Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides." (Verses 1-3) Everything God has created is well proportioned and perfected. Every creature is assigned its own role and given guidance so that it may know its role and play it. It is told the purpose of its creation, given what it needs for sustenance and guided to it. This is clearly visible in everything around us, large or small, important or trivial. For everything is well perfected and guided to fulfil the purpose of its creation. Furthermore, all things are also collectively perfected so that they may fulfil their role together.

The Perfection of God's Creation

A single atom is well balanced between its electrons and protons, to the same degree as the solar system, its sun, planets and satellites are well balanced. Each of the two knows the way it is assigned to travel and fulfils its role. A single living cell is also perfect and well equipped to do everything it is asked to do, in the same measure as the most advanced and complex species. This perfect balance, in the individual and collective sense, is easily noticed in every one of the countless types of creation that fill the gap between the single atom and the solar system or between the single cell and the most advanced living creature.

This basic fact, evidenced by everything in the universe, is well recognized by the human heart as it contemplates what is in the universe. This sort of inspiration and recognition is within the reach of every man in every age, regardless of his standard of education. All that is required is an open mind which contemplates and responds. Increased knowledge then endorses and emphasizes, with numerous examples, what inspiration has already proven at first glance. The results of study and research endorse, within their limited scope, this basic truth which applies to everything in the universe.

The American scientist, A. Cressy Morrison, Head of the Science Academy in New York, says in his book *Man Does Not Stand Alone*:

Birds have the homing instinct. The robin that nested at your door may go south in the autumn, but will come back to his old nest the next spring. In September, flocks of many of our birds fly south, often over a thousand miles of open sea, but they do not lose their way. The homing pigeon, confused by new sounds on a long journey in a closed box, circles for a moment then heads almost unerringly for home. The bee finds its hive while the wind waving the grasses and trees blots out every visible guide to its whereabouts. This homing sense is slightly developed in man, but he supplements his meagre equipment with instruments of navigation. We need this instinct and our brain provides the answer. The tiny insects must have microscopic eyes, how perfect we do not know, and the hawks, the eagle and the condor must have telescopic vision. Here again man surpasses them with his mechanical instruments. With his telescope he can see a nebula so faint that it requires two million times his vision, and with the electron microscope he can see hitherto invisible bacteria and, so to speak, the little bugs that bite them.

If you let old Dobbin alone he will keep to the road in the blackest night. He can see, dimly perhaps, but he notes the difference in temperature of the road and the sides with eyes that are slightly affected by the infra-red rays of the road. The owl can see the nice warm mouse as he runs in the cooler grass in the blackest night. We turn night into day by creating radiation in that short octave we call light.¹²

The honey-bee workers make chambers of different sizes in the comb used for breeding. Small chambers are constructed for the workers, larger ones for the drones, and special chambers for the prospective queens. The queen bee lays unfertilized eggs in the cells designed for males, but lays fertilized eggs in the proper chambers for the female workers and the possible queens. The workers, who are the modified females, having long since anticipated the

¹² A. Cressy Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Morrison & Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 58-59.

coming of the new generation, are also prepared to furnish food for the young bees by chewing and predigesting honey and pollen. They discontinue the process of chewing, including the predigesting, at a certain stage of the development of the males and females, and feed only honey and pollen. The females so treated become the workers.

For the females in the queen chambers the diet of chewed and pre-digested food is continued. These specially treated females develop into queen bees, which alone produce fertile eggs. This process of reproduction involves special chambers, special eggs, and the marvellous effect of a change of diet. This means anticipation, discretion, and the application of a discovery of the effect of diet. These changes apply particularly to a community life and seem necessary to its existence. The knowledge and skills required must have been evolved after the beginnings of this community life, and are not necessarily inherent in the structure or the survival of the honey bee as such. The bee, therefore, seems to have outstripped man in knowledge of the effects of diet under certain conditions.

The dog with an inquiring nose can sense the animal that has passed. No instrument of human invention has added to our inferior sense of smell, and we hardly know where to begin to investigate its extension. Yet even our sense of smell is so highly developed that it can detect ultra-microscopic particles. How do we know that we all get the same reaction from any single odour? The fact is that we do not. Taste also gives a very different sensation to each of us. How strange that these differences in perception are hereditary.

All animals hear sounds, many of which are outside our range of vibration, with an acuteness that far surpasses our limited sense of hearing. Man by his devices can now hear a fly walking miles away as though it was on his eardrums, and with like instruments record the impact of a cosmic ray.¹³

One of the water spiders fashions a balloon-shaped nest of cobweb filaments and attaches it to some object under water. Then she ingeniously entangles an air bubble in the hairs of her under-body, carries it into the water, and releases it under the nest. This performance is repeated until the nest is inflated, when she proceeds to bring forth and raise her young safe from attack by air. Here we have a synthesis of the web, engineering, construction, and aeronautics. Chance perhaps, but that still leaves the spider unexplained.

The young salmon spends years at sea, then comes back to his own river, and, what is more, he travels up the side of the river into which flows the tributary in which he was born. The laws of the States on one side of the dividing

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-63.

stream may be strict and the other side not, but these laws affect only the fish which may be said to belong to each side. What brings them back so definitely? If a salmon going up a river is transferred to another tributary he will at once realize he is not in the right tributary and will fight his way down to the main stream and then turn up against the current to finish his destiny. There is, however, a much more difficult reverse problem to solve in the case of the eel. These amazing creatures migrate at maturity from all the ponds and rivers everywhere, those from Europe across thousands of miles of ocean, all go to the abysmal deeps south of Bermuda. There they breed and die. The little ones, with no apparent means of knowing anything except that they are in a wilderness of water, start back and find their way to the shore from which their parents came and thence to every river, lake and little pond, so that each body of water is always populated with eels. They have braved the mighty currents, storms and tides, and have conquered the beating waves on every shore. They can now grow and when they are mature, they will, by some mysterious law, go back through it all to complete the cycle. Where does the directing impulse originate? No American eel has ever been caught in European waters and no European eel has ever been caught in American waters. Nature has also delayed the maturity of the European eel by a year or more to make up for its much greater journey. Do atoms and molecules when combined in an eel have a sense of direction and willpower to exercise it?¹⁴

A female moth placed in your attic by the open window will send out some subtle signal. Over an unbelievable area, the male moths of the same species will catch the message and respond in spite of your attempts to produce laboratory odours to disconcert them. Has the little creature a broadcasting station, and has the male moth a mental radio set beside his antennae? Does she shake the ether and does he catch the vibration? The cricket rubs its legs or wings together, and on a still night can be heard half a mile away. It shakes six hundred tons of air and calls its mate. Miss Moth, working in a different realm of physics and, in apparent silence, calls quite as effectively. Before the radio was discovered, scientists decided it was odour that attracted the male moth. It was a miracle either way, because the odour would have to travel in all directions, with or without the wind. The male moth would have to be able to detect a molecule and sense the direction from whence it came. By a vast mechanism, we are developing the same ability to communicate, and the day will come when a young man may call his loved one from a distance and without mechanical medium and she will answer. No lock or bars will stop them. Our telephone and radio are instrumental wonders and give us means

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

of almost instant communication, but we are tied to a wire and a place. The moth is still ahead of us, and we can only envy her until our brain evolves an individual radio. Then, in a sense, we will have telepathy.

Vegetation makes subtle use of involuntary agents to carry on its existence – insects to carry pollen from flower to flower and the winds and everything that flies or walks to distribute seed. At last, vegetation has trapped masterful man. He has improved nature, and she generously rewards him. But he has multiplied so prodigiously that he is now chained to the plough. He must sow, reap, and store; breed and cross-breed; prune and graft. Should he neglect these tasks starvation would be his lot, civilization would crumble, and earth return to her pristine state.¹⁵

Many animals are like a lobster, which, having lost a claw, will by some restimulation of the cells and the reactivation of the genes discover that a part of the body is missing and restore it. When the work is complete, the cells stop work, for in some way they know it is quitting time. A fresh-water polyp divided into halves can reform itself out of one of these halves. Cut off an angle worm's head and he will soon create a new one. We can stimulate healing but when will our surgeons, if ever, know how to stimulate the cells to produce a new arm, flesh, bones, nails, and activating nerves?¹⁶ An extraordinary fact throws some light on this mystery of recreation. If cells in the early stages of development are separated each has the ability to create a complete animal. Therefore, if the original cell divides into two and they are separated, two individuals will be developed. This may account for identical twins but it means much more – each cell at first is in detail potentially a complete individual. There can be no doubt then, that you are you in every cell and fibre.¹⁷

An acorn falls to the ground – its tough brown shell holds it safe. It rolls into some earthy crevice. In the spring the germ awakes, the shell bursts, food is provided by the egg-like kernel in which the genes were hidden. They send roots into the earth, and behold a sprout, a sapling, and in years a tree. The germ with its genes has multiplied by trillions and made the trunk, bark and every leaf and acorn identical with that of the oak which gave it birth. For hundreds of years in each of the countless acorns is preserved the exact

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁶ At the time when this book was published, such tasks seemed a long time coming. However, most of them now seem possible. Still, the argument is correct and the more advancements science makes the more amazing God's creation appears to be. – Editor's note.

¹⁷ A.C. Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

arrangement of atoms that produced the first oak tree millions of years ago.¹⁸

The author says in another chapter:

Every cell that is produced in any living creature must adapt itself to be part of the flesh, to sacrifice itself as a part of the skin, which will soon be worn off. It must deposit the enamel of teeth, produce the transparent liquid in an eye, or become a nose or an ear. Each cell must then adapt itself in shape and every other characteristic necessary to fulfil its function. It is hard to think of a cell as right-handed or left-handed, but one becomes part of a right ear, the other becomes part of the left ear. Some crystals that are chemically identical turn the rays of light to the left, others to the right. There seems to be such a tendency in the cells. In the exact place where they belong, they become a part of the right ear or the left ear and your two ears are opposite each other on your head, and not as in the case of a cricket, on your elbows. Their curves are opposite, and when complete, they are so much alike you cannot tell them apart. Hundreds of thousands of cells seem impelled to do the right thing at the right time in the right place.¹⁹

Elsewhere in his book Morrison says:

In the melee of creation many creatures have come to exhibit a high degree of certain forms of instinct, intelligence, or what not. The wasp catches the grasshopper, digs a hole in the earth, stings the grasshopper in exactly the right place so that he becomes unconscious but lives as a form of preserved meat. The wasp lays her eggs exactly in the right place, perhaps not knowing that when they hatch, her children can eat without killing the insect on which they feed, which would be fatal to them. The wasp must have done all this right the first and every time, or there would be no wasps of this species. Science cannot explain this mystery, and yet it cannot be attributed to chance. The wasp covers a hole in the earth, departs cheerfully, and dies. Neither she nor her ancestors have reasoned out the process, nor does she know what happens to her offspring. She doesn't even know that she has worked and lived her life for the preservation of the race.²⁰

In the same book we also read:

In some species, the workers bring in little seeds to feed the other ants through the winter. The ants establish what is known as the grinding room,

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 86-87.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

in which those which have developed gigantic jaws especially built for grinding, prepare the food for the colony. This is their sole occupation. When the autumn comes and the seeds are all ground, 'the greatest good for the greatest number' requires that the food supply be conserved and as there will be plenty of grinders in the new generation, the soldier ants kill off the grinders, satisfying their entomological conscience by believing perhaps that the grinders had had reward enough in having had first chance at the food while they ground.

Certain ants, by means of instinct or reasoning (choose which you prefer), cultivate mushrooms for food in what may be called mushroom gardens, and capture certain caterpillars and aphids (plant lice). These creatures are the ants' cows and goats, from which they take certain exudations of a honey-like nature for food. Ants capture and keep slaves. Some ants, when they make their nests, cut the leaves to size, and while certain workers hold the edges in place, use their babies, which in the larval stage are capable of spinning silk, as shuttles to sew them together. The poor baby may be bereft of the opportunity of making a cocoon for himself, but he has served his community.

How do the inanimate atoms and molecules of matter composing an ant set these complicated processes in motion? There must be Intelligence somewhere.²¹

True, there must be a Creator who guides these and other creatures, large and small. He is the One "*who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides.*" (Verses 2-3)

The examples we have quoted above are but a few of the large number of remarkable aspects science has recorded in the worlds of plants, insects, birds and animals. But all these aspects reflect only a part of the import of the two verses: "*who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides.*" (Verses 2-3) For our knowledge covers only a scanty part of what is in the visible universe, beyond which extends a whole world of which we know nothing apart from the few hints God has chosen to drop us, as befits our limited abilities.

Having fired such a great volley of praises to God, resounding in even the remotest corners of the universe, the *sūrah* complements this with an inspiring insight from the realm of plants: "*who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass.*" (Verses 4-5) The pasturage, as used here, refers to all plants. Every plant is suitable for one sort of species or another. The term then has a much wider sense

²¹ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

than the familiar pastures where cattle feed. God has created this planet and provided on it enough food to nourish every single living creature which walks, swims, flies or hides itself underground.

The pasturage is green when it first shoots forth, but it withers away and blackens. It may be used for feeding when green, after it blackens and withers, or in between. Thus, it is useful in every condition, and it serves a purpose according to the elaborate planning of the One who creates, proportions, determines and guides.

The reference here to the life of plants carries also an implicit connotation that all plants are reaped and harvested. Similarly, every living being will come to its appointed end. This connotation fits in well with the reference to the two worlds of man: *"Yet you prefer this present life, while the life to come is better and longer lasting."* (Verses 16-17) This life is a pasture which comes to its end when it withers away and blackens, while the life to come is the one which lasts.

Happy News for the Prophet

As the beginning of the *sūrah* opens up this limitless horizon, it provides a framework for the fundamental facts tackled in this *sūrah* to be related to the whole universe. This framework is especially suitable, for it is in perfect harmony with the atmosphere of the *sūrah*, its rhythm and shades of meaning.

The *sūrah* then gives the Prophet, and the Muslim nation in general, a very welcome tidings: *"We shall teach you and you shall not forget, except what God wills. He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden. And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease. Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use."* (Verses 6-9) The happy news starts with sparing the Prophet the trouble of memorizing the Qur'ān. All he needs to do is to read as he is taught and God will ensure that he will never forget any part of it. *"We shall teach you and you shall not forget."* (Verse 6) So keen to keep the Qur'ān in his memory, the Prophet used to repeat it after Gabriel, the angel, delivered it to him. He felt that it was part of his responsibility to keep it registered in his mind. But God decided that He would look after this task. The promise is also a happy one for the Islamic community, since it is a reassurance that the faith the Prophet preaches is authentic. It is from God and He looks after it. This is part of God's grace. It shows how weighty the question of purity of faith is in His scales.

Every time the Qur'ān states a definite promise or constant law, it follows it with a statement implying that divine will is free of all limitations and restrictions, even those based on a promise or law from God. For His will is absolute. Here, the *sūrah* emphasizes this principle after the promise is made to the Prophet that he will never forget any part of the Qur'ān: *"except what God wills."* (Verse 7) The two are

complementary in the sense that the promise is within divine will. So we look forward to God's fulfilment of what He has willed to promise.

"He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden." (Verse 7) This is stated here by way of giving a reason for all that has passed: teaching to read, freedom from forgetfulness and the exception made to it. Everything is decided according to the wisdom of the One who knows the secret and the manifest. He views everything from all angles and makes His decisions on the basis of His unfailing knowledge.

Then follows another promise, happy and all-embracing: *"And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease."* (Verse 8) This is again happy news for the Prophet personally and for the Muslim community at large. It is furthermore a statement of the nature of Islam, its role in human life and in the universe. This verse, which is rendered in Arabic in no more than two words, states one of the most fundamental principles of faith and existence. It provides a link between the nature of the Prophet and the nature of Islam on the one hand and the nature of the whole universe on the other. It is a universe created by God with ease; it follows its appointed way with ease and draws nearer its final objective with ease. Thus it is an inspiration lighting limitless horizons.

If God smooths a certain person's path, he finds ease in everything in his life. For he will move along his way to God with the universe, which is characterized by its harmony of construction, movement and direction. Hence he does not clash with those who digress, for these are of no importance, compared with the vast universe. Ease will pervade his whole life. It will be evident in his hand, tongue, movement, work, concepts, way of thinking and in the way he conducts all affairs and tackles all matters. Ease will be the main feature of how he carries himself and how he deals with others as well.

A Life Characterized by Ease

Such was the Prophet in all affairs. His wife, `Ā'ishah, reports that "whenever faced with a choice, the Prophet would always choose the easier of the two alternatives." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] She also reports: "Whenever the Prophet was alone with his family at home, he was the easiest of men, always smiling and laughing." Al-Bukhārī also relates: "Any woman would take the Prophet by the hand to take him wherever she wished." His guidance in matters of clothing, food, household furniture and other matters of day to day life pointed to a preference for what is easy.

Imām Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah speaks in his book, *Zād al-Ma`ād*, of the Prophet's guidance concerning what to wear:

He had a turban which he gave to ʿAlī as a gift, but he used to wear it over a cap. But he also wore either the turban or the cap separately. When he wore the turban, however, he used to leave the end part of it hanging between his shoulders. This is related by Muslim in his Ṣahīḥ anthology of authentic *aḥādīth*, on the authority of ʿUmar ibn Ḥarīth, who said, 'I saw the Prophet speaking on the platform of the mosque, wearing a black turban with its end hanging between his shoulders'. Muslim also relates on the authority of Jābir ibn ʿAbdullāh that the Prophet entered Makkah wearing a black turban, but nothing is mentioned here about his leaving its end part hanging. This signifies that the Prophet did not always leave the tail of his turban hanging between his shoulders. It is also said that the Prophet entered Makkah wearing his fighting attire, with a helmet on his head, which suggests that he used to wear what suited the occasion.²²

The best method, it is true, is that followed by the Prophet and which he encouraged his Companions to adopt. His guidance regarding clothes is, in short, that he used to wear whatever was available, whether woollen, cotton, linen or other types of material. He used Yemeni gowns and had a green gown. He also used different types of dress such as overcoat, long robe, shirts, trousers, top gown, sandals and shoes. He left the end of his turban hanging between his shoulders on occasions, and not on other occasions.²³

On food, the Prophet's guidance gives a similar message:

The Prophet never refused what was available at home, nor did he ever go out of his way to get what was not. He would eat whatever was served of good food and he never slighted any sort of food whatsoever. If he did not like something he would simply not eat it, but would not forbid it. An example of his attitude is the case of lizard, which he would not eat without forbidding others to eat it. On the contrary, he was present when others ate it at his own table.

He liked sweets and honey, used to eat dates, fresh and preserved... drank milk, pure and mixed, added water to ice and honey and drank a drink made from dates. He also ate *khazīrah*, which is a thick soup made of milk and flour. He ate cucumber with fresh dates, butter, dates with bread, bread with vinegar, bread with meat, dried meat, a dish called *dubbā'* (which was one of his favourites), boiled meat, rice and meat cooked with fat, cheese, bread with oil, water melon with fresh dates, and he used to like dates cooked with

²² Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, and Maktabat al-Manar, Beirut and Kuwait, 1994, Vol. I, pp. 135-136.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 143.

butter. In short, he never refused good food, nor did he go to any trouble to get it. His guidance was to eat what was available. If he did not have anything to eat, he would simply go hungry, etc.²⁴

As for the Prophet's example regarding sleep:

He used to sleep sometimes on a mattress, sometimes on a simple animal skin. Occasionally he would sleep on a rough mat, or on the cold earth with nothing under him. He sometimes used a bed; a plain one at times and covered with a black bedspread at other times.²⁵

The Prophet's traditions urging the adoption of an easy, gentle and tolerant attitude in all matters, especially those which concern religious duties are numerous. By way of example we may quote: "This religion is of an easy nature. Anyone who pulls hard against it shall be the loser." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "Do not be hard on yourselves lest it should be made hard for you. A former community chose to be hard and it was made harder for them." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] "A rider driving hard neither reaches his destination nor keeps his transport." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "Make it easy, not difficult, for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Concerning social dealings, the Prophet says: "May God have mercy on any person who is tolerant when he buys, sells and asks for his rights." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "A believer is gentle and friendly." [Related by al-Bayhaqī.] "A believer gets on well with others and is easy to get on well with." [Related by al-Dāraquṭnī.] "The type of man God dislikes most is the quarrelsome one who does not budge." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

A highly significant feature of his character is that he hated hardness even in names and physical features. This shows how God moulded his nature and smoothed even his temperament. Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib reports that the Prophet asked his father what his name was, since al-Musayyib was his nickname. He answered, *Ĥāzn*, [which means rough and difficult]. The Prophet said, "No, you are *Sahl* [i.e. plain and easy]."²⁶ The man said, "I will never change a name given to me by my father." Saʿīd comments, "As a result, we have always had a trace of hardness in our characters." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Ibn ʿUmar reports that the Prophet changed the name of a woman from *ʿĀṣiyah* [meaning disobedient] to *Jamīlah* [meaning pretty]." [Related by Muslim.] He also said: "It is part of kindness to receive your brother with a smiling face." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Thus we realize how refined and gentle the Prophet was, disliking even names and features which smacked of roughness and trying to substitute for them what related to gentility and

²⁴ Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 147-148.

²⁵ Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 155.

²⁶ This was the Prophet's way of changing a name which he did not approve of. — Editor's note.

kindness.

Ease in Practice

The Prophet's life story is composed of pages of gentility, ease, tolerance and understanding in all affairs. Let us quote here an incident which reveals his method of dealing with people of difficult temperament: "Once a bedouin came to the Prophet asking something. The Prophet granted his request then said, 'Have I treated you well?' The bedouin said, 'No, and you have not been kind either!' The Prophet's Companions present felt very angry and wanted to punish the man. The Prophet, however, motioned them to leave him alone. He then went into his house, sent for the man and gave him something over and above his original request. He then asked him: 'Have I treated you well?' The man said: 'Yes, indeed. May God reward you well for you are a good kinsman and a good tribesman.' The Prophet then said to him: 'When you said what you said you made my Companions feel angry with you. Would you now like to tell them what you have just told me so that they hold nothing against you.' The man said: 'I will.' The following day he came and the Prophet said: 'This bedouin said yesterday what you heard. We gave him more and he claimed that he was satisfied. Is that so?' The bedouin said: 'Yes indeed! May God reward you well, for you are a good kinsman and a good tribesman.' The Prophet then said to his Companions: 'My affair with this bedouin is similar to that of a man who had a she-camel which ran loose. Other people rushed to try to catch her but they managed only to make her run wild. The owner then appealed to them to let him alone with his she-camel as he was gentler to her and knew her temperament. The owner then went towards her, having picked something to feed her with. He approached her gently until she responded and sat down. He then saddled her and mounted her back. Had I left you alone when the man said what he said, you would probably have killed him and he would have gone to hell.'

So gentle, simple and compassionate was the Prophet's attitude towards any person of rough nature. Examples of this attitude abound in the records of his life. These examples are practical manifestations of how his path was smoothed for him to achieve perfect ease in every aspect of life. He was given a tolerant, understanding nature so that he might carry out his mission as God's Messenger to mankind. In this way his nature and the nature of Islam, the message he carried and delivered, are alike. He was able, with God's grace, to fulfil the great task with which he was entrusted. For when his path was smoothed, the heavy burden of his mission became an enjoyable sport.

The Qur'an carries descriptions of Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and the role assigned to him: "*We have sent you forth only as a mercy to mankind.*" (21: 107) "*Those*

who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel that are with them. He commands them to do what is right and forbids them to do what is wrong, and makes lawful to them the good things of life and forbids them all that is foul. He lifts from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them.” (7: 157) As the Qur’ān states, Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a messenger bringing mercy to mankind, lifting their burdens which were imposed on them when they sought to make things hard.

The Qur’ān also describes the message the Prophet delivered in statements of like import: *“We have made the Qur’ān easy for warning: but will any take heed?”* (54: 22) *“He has laid on you no hardships in the observance of your religion.”* (22: 78) *“God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear.”* (2: 286) *“God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but He wants to purify you.”* (5: 6) The message of Islam is made easy for people to follow since it takes into consideration the limitations of human abilities. It imposes no burdens which are too heavy. This easy nature of Islam is readily identifiable in its spirit as well as in its commandments: *“Follow the upright nature God has endowed mankind with.”* (30: 30)

When we look carefully through this religion we find that care has been taken to make it easy for people to follow, without overstraining themselves. It takes into consideration the different situations man finds himself in, and the conditions he faces in different environments. The faith itself is based on concepts which are easy to grasp: a single deity; none like Him; He has created everything; He has guided everything to realize the purpose of its existence; He has also sent messengers to remind people of their role in life and to call them back to their Lord who created them. All obligations imposed by this faith fit perfectly together: there are no conflicts, no contradictions. People have to fulfil these obligations according to their abilities. There need be no overstraining, no heavy burdens. The Prophet teaches us: *“When I give you an order, fulfil it as much as you can; but leave off what I forbid you.”* [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Prohibition may also be relaxed *“He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you [to eat] unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity.”* (6: 119) These basic principles provide the limits within which the Islamic commandments and principles operate.

Hence the Messenger and the message have in common this basic feature of easy nature. So does the Muslim community which is brought into being by Islam, the easy message: it is a ‘middle’ community, merciful, the recipient of divine mercy, easy natured, enjoying a life which is perfectly harmonious with the wider universe. The universe itself with its perfect harmony provides a true picture of how God’s creation moves easily and smoothly, without clash or crash. Millions and millions of stars move in their orbits in the great space God has provided, each with its own gravity, yet none moves out of step and none crashes into another. There are

countless millions of living creatures, each moving through life to its appointed aim, near or distant, according to a perfect plan. Each is given the abilities which make its aim easy to achieve. Endless millions of movements, events and conditions come together then go their separate ways; yet they are much the same as the sounds of the different instruments in an orchestra: so different but which combine together to produce beautiful harmonies.

In short, perfect harmony exists between the nature of the universe, the message, the Messenger and the Muslim community. They are all the creation of God, the One, the Most Wise.

The Prophet's Great Task

"Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use." (Verse 9) God has taught the Prophet so as not to forget, smoothed his way to perfect ease so that he may be able to discharge his great task of warning mankind. For this he has been the subject of careful preparation. Hence, he is asked to warn whenever he has a chance to address people and to convey to them God's message.

"Regardless of whether such warning is of use." Warning is always useful. There will always be, in every land and every generation, those who will listen to the reminders and warnings and will benefit by them, no matter how corrupt their society is and how hardened their people are.

If we ponder a little over the verses in this *sūrah* and their sequence, we realize how great the message entrusted to the Prophet is. To deliver it, and to give the warnings he is asked to give, he needs special equipment: a smooth way to perfect ease in everything, to be taught what to say, and God's preservation of the message intact.

Once the Prophet has delivered his message, his task is fulfilled. Everyone is left to choose his way. Destinies differ according to the choice of ways people follow: *"He who fears God will heed it, but the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it, who shall be cast into the great fire, in which he shall neither die nor remain alive. Successful will be he who purifies himself and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays."* (Verses 10-15) The Prophet is told here that his warnings will benefit those who fear God and dread to incur His displeasure. Any intelligent person will shudder when he learns that there is a Creator who proportions well, determines and guides. For he realizes that such a Creator must hold everyone responsible for their actions, good or evil, and will reward them accordingly. Hence they fear Him and heed the warnings they are given.

"But the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it." (Verse 11) If a man does not

listen to the warning given, then he is absolutely *“the most hapless wretch.”* He lives in a void, uninspired by the facts surrounding him, turning a deaf ear and a senseless mind to the evidence they give. Such a person lives in constant worry, striving hard to attain the paltry pleasures of this world. Hence he is the most wretched in this life. But he is also the most wretched in the hereafter as he will there suffer endless torment: He *“shall be cast into the great fire, in which he shall neither die nor remain alive.”* (Verses 12-13) The great fire is that of hell. It is indeed the greatest of all fires in intensity, duration and size. He who suffers it finds it endless. He neither dies to rest from its torment, nor does he live in it a life of rest and security. It is an unending agony which makes the sufferer yearn for death as his greatest hope.

At the other end we find prosperity accompanied with self- purification and a heeding of warnings: *“Successful will be he who purifies himself and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays.”* (Verses 14-15) Purification is used here in the widest sense of the word: purification from everything filthy or sinful. The person who seeks to purify himself, glorifies his Lord, feels His power and majesty in his inmost soul and prays, [whether praying is taken in its general sense or its specific Islamic sense] will definitely be successful, as God states here. He will achieve success here in this life as he enjoys his relationship with God and the perfect bliss that results from his glorification of God. He will achieve even greater success in the hereafter as he escapes hell and is rewarded with perfect happiness in heaven. How different the two destinies are.

Having sketched the two different ends of the most wretched and the God-fearing, the *sūrah* points out to the addressees the real reason for their great wretchedness, the failure which drives them headlong into the great fire: *“Yet you prefer this present life, while the life to come is better and longer lasting.”* (Verses 16-17) This short-sighted preference is the real reason for every misery which befalls man. It is indeed the cause of man’s taking no heed of the warnings given to him. The Qur’ān calls the present life *dunia* which connotes both contempt and easy access. The life to come is better in kind and duration. Only the foolish who are deprived of sound judgement would, in the circumstances, prefer the present life to the next.

In conclusion, the *sūrah* points out that the message of Islam is not new; its roots go back far deep in time. *“All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; the scriptures of Abraham and Moses.”* (Verses 18-19) The basics of the grand faith contained in this *sūrah* are the same old basic facts outlined in the ancient scriptures of Abraham and Moses.

The truth is one and the faith is one. This results from the fact that their origin is one, God, whose will it was to send messengers to mankind. The messengers deliver basically the same message, the same simple truth. Details of the messages may differ according to local or temporal needs, but the basics are the same. They have one

Al-ʿAlā (The Most High)

origin: God, the Most High, who creates, proportions well, determines and guides.