

SŪRAH 96

Al-`Alaq

(The Germ-Cell)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Read in the name of your Lord who has created
(1)

— created man out of a germ-cell. (2)

Read — for your Lord is the most Bountiful One,
(3)

who has taught the use of the pen, (4)

taught man what he did not know. (5)

Indeed, man becomes grossly overweening, (6)

once he thinks himself self-sufficient. (7)

Surely to your Lord all must return. (8)

Look at the one who tries to prevent (9)

أَقْرَأُ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ﴿١﴾

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَنَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ﴿٢﴾

أَقْرَأُ وَرَبِّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ ﴿٣﴾

الَّذِي عَلَمَ بِالْقَلْمِ ﴿٤﴾

عَلَمَ الْإِنْسَنَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ﴿٥﴾

كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَنَ لَيَطْغَى ﴿٦﴾

أَنْ رَءَاهُ أَسْتَغْفِرُ ﴿٧﴾

إِنَّ إِلَيْ رَبِّكَ الْرُّجْعَى ﴿٨﴾

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَا ﴿٩﴾

a servant of God from praying! (10)

عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّى ﴿١﴾

Think: does he follow the right guidance (11)

أَرَءَيْتَ إِنْ كَانَ عَلَى أَهْدَى ﴿١١﴾

and enjoin [others to be] God-fearing? (12)

أَوْ أَمْرَ بِالْتَّقْوَى ﴿١٢﴾

*Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back,
(13)*

أَرَءَيْتَ إِنْ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلََّ ﴿١٣﴾

does he not realize that God sees all? (14)

أَلَمْ يَعْلَمْ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَى ﴿١٤﴾

*Nay, if he does not desist, We will most certainly
drag him by his forelock, (15)*

كَلَّا لَيْنَ لَمْ يَنْتَهِ لَنْسَفَعًا بِالنَّاصِيَةِ ﴿١٥﴾

his lying, sinful forelock. (16)

نَاصِيَةٌ كَذِبَةٌ حَاطِعَةٌ ﴿١٦﴾

Then let him call his henchmen. (17)

فَلِيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُرٌ ﴿١٧﴾

We will call the guards of hell. (18)

سَنَدْعُ الْزَّبَانِيَةَ ﴿١٨﴾

*No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself
and draw closer to God. (19)*

كَلَّا لَا تُطِعْهُ وَاسْجُدْ وَاقْرَبْ ﴿١٩﴾

The First Revelation

It is universally agreed that the opening of this *sūrah* was the first Qur’ānic revelation. The accounts stating that other verses were revealed first are not authentic. Imām Aḥmad transmits the following *ḥadīth* on the authority of `Ā’ishah, the Prophet’s wife:

The first aspect of revelation to God’s Messenger was that his dreams came true. Whatever vision he might have in his sleep would occur exactly as he had seen. Then, he began to enjoy seclusion. He used to retreat alone into the

cave of Ḥirā' where he would spend several days in devotion before going back to his family. He used to take some food with him, and when he came back, he would take a fresh supply for another period. He continued to do so until he received the truth while in the cave of Ḥirā'. The angel came to him and said, 'Read.' He replied, 'I am not a reader.' The Prophet says, 'He held me and pressed hard until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, 'Read,' and I replied, 'I am not a reader.' o, he held me and pressed me hard a second time until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, 'Read.' I replied, 'I am not a reader.' He then held me and pressed me hard for the third time. Then he said, 'Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell. Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.' The Prophet returned home to Khadijah trembling and said, 'Wrap me! Wrap me!' They wrapped him and his fear subsided. He turned to Khadijah and exclaimed, 'What has happened to me?' and related to her what had happened and said, 'I fear for myself.' And Khadijah replied, 'Fear not, be calm and relax. God will not let you suffer any humiliation, because you are kind to your relatives, you speak the truth, you assist anyone in need, you are hospitable to your guests and you help in every just cause.' Then she took him to Waraqah ibn Nawfal, her paternal cousin who was a Christian convert and a scholar with a good knowledge of Arabic, Hebrew and the Bible. He had lost his eyesight and had grown very old. Khadijah said to Waraqah, 'Cousin, would you like to hear what your nephew has to say?' Waraqah said, 'Well, nephew, what have you seen?' The Prophet related to him what he had seen. When he finished, Waraqah said, 'It is the same revelation as was sent down to Moses. I wish I was a young man so that I might be alive when your people turn you away from this city.' The Prophet exclaimed, 'Would they turn me away?' Waraqah answered 'Yes! No man has ever preached a message like yours but was met with enmity. If I live till that day, I will certainly give you all my support.' But Waraqah died soon after that...

This *ḥadīth* is related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim in both of the most authentic books of the Prophet's traditions. Al-Ṭabarī also relates the following *ḥadīth* on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr:

The Prophet said, 'While I was asleep he came to me carrying a case made of very rich material in which there was a book. He said, 'Read.' I replied, 'I am not a reader.' He pressed me so hard that I felt I was about to die. Then he released me and said, 'Read.' I asked 'What shall I read?' (I said this only out of fear that he might repeat what he had already done to me.) He said, 'Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell.

Read — for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.' I read it. He stopped, then left me and went away. I woke up feeling that it was actually written in my heart.' The Prophet went on to say, 'No man was ever more loathsome to me than poets or the deranged. I could not bear even looking at either. I thought, 'The man (meaning himself) is undoubtedly a poet or deranged. This shall not be said about me among the Quraysh. Let me climb high up in the mountain and throw myself down and get rid of fall.' I went to carry out this intention. When I was half way up in the mountain I heard a voice coming from the heavens saying, 'Muhammad, you are God's Messenger and I am Gabriel.' I raised my head up to the sky and I saw Gabriel in the image of a man with his feet one next to the other, up on the horizon. He said again, 'Muhammad, you are God's Messenger and I am Gabriel.' I stood in my place looking up at him. This distracted me from my intention. I was standing there unable to move. I tried to turn my face away from him and to look up at the sky, but wherever I looked, I saw him in front of me. I stood still, moving neither forward nor backward. Khadijah sent her messengers looking for me and I remained standing in my place all the while until they went back to her. He then left me and I went back to my family.

This tradition is related in these details by Ibn Ishāq, on the authority of Wahb ibn Kaysān.²⁸

A Momentous Event

I reflected for a while upon this event. We have all read it many times in books; either those of the Prophet's biography or those explaining the meaning of the Qur'ān. But we either read it casually or give it little thought and go on with our reading.

Yet this is an event which has immense significance. It is an event which has an important bearing on the life of humanity; but much as we try today to perceive its great value, many of its aspects remain beyond our perception. It is no exaggeration to describe this event as the greatest in the long history of human existence.

The true nature of this event is that God, the Great, the Compeller, the Almighty, the Supreme, the Sovereign of the whole universe, out of His benevolence, has turned to that creation of His which is called man, and which takes its abode in a hardly visible corner of the universe, the name of which is the earth. He has honoured this species of His creation by choosing one of its number to be the

²⁸ Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyah*, Dār al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, n.d., pp. 252-3.

recipient of His divine light and the guardian of His wisdom.

This is something infinitely great. Some aspects of its greatness become apparent when man tries, as best as he can, to perceive the essential qualities of God: absolute power, freedom from all limitations and everlastingness; and when he reflects, in comparison, on the basic qualities of God's servants who are subject to certain limitations of power and life duration. One may then perceive the significance of this divine care for man. He may realize the sweetness of this feeling and manifest his appreciation with thanksgiving, prayer and devotion. He feels that the whole universe shares in the general happiness spread by the revelation of divine words to man in his obscure corner of the universe.

What is the significance of this event? With reference to God, it signifies that He is the source of all great bounties and unfailing compassion. He is the Benevolent, the Loving, who bestows His mercy and benefactions for no reason except that benevolence is one of His divine attributes. As for man, this event signifies that God has bestowed on him an honour the greatness of which he can hardly ever appreciate and for which he can never show enough gratitude, not even if he spends all his life in devotion and prostration. This honour is that God has taken notice and care of him, established contact with him and chosen one of the human race as His Messenger to reveal to him His words; that the earth, man's abode, has become the recipient of these divine words, which the whole universe echoes with submission and devotion.

This great event began to bear on the life of humanity as a whole right from the first moment. It marked a change in the course of history, following the change it brought about in the course followed by human conscience. It specified the source man should look up to in order to derive his ideals, values and criteria. The source is heaven and divine revelations, not this world and man's own desires. When this great event took place, the people who recognized its true nature and adapted their lives accordingly enjoyed God's protection and manifest care. They looked up to Him directly for guidance in all their affairs, large and small. They lived and moved under His supervision. They expected that He would guide them along the road, step by step, stopping them from error and leading them to the right way. Every night they expected to receive some divine revelation concerning what they had on their minds, providing solutions for their problems and saying to them, 'Do this and leave that.'

The period which followed the event was certainly remarkable: 23 years of direct contact between the human race and Supreme Society. The true nature of this cannot be recognized except by those who lived during this period and experienced it: witnessed its start and end, relished the sweet flavour of that contact and felt the divine hand guiding them along the road. The distance which separates us from that

reality is too great to be defined by any measure of length this world has known. It is a distance in the world of conscience incomparable to any distance in the material world, not even when we think of the gaps separating stars and galaxies. It is a gap that separates the earth and heaven; a gap between human desires and Divine revelation as sources from which concepts and values are derived; a gap between *jahiliyyah* and Islam, the human and the divine.

The people who lived at the time were fully aware of its uniqueness, recognized its special place in history and felt a huge loss when the Prophet passed away to be in God's company. This marked the end of that unique period.

Anas related that Abū Bakr said to 'Umar after the Prophet had passed away: 'Let us go to visit Umm Ayman as the Prophet used to do.'²⁹ When they went to her she burst into tears. They said, 'What are you crying for? Don't you realize that God's company is far better for the Prophet?' She replied, 'That is true, I am sure. I am only crying because revelation has ceased with his death.' This made tears spring to their eyes and the three of them cried together. [Related by Muslim.]

The impact of that period has been in evidence in the life of humanity ever since its beginning up to this moment, and it will remain in evidence until the day when God inherits the earth and all that walks on it. Man was reborn when he started to derive his values from heaven rather than earth and his laws from divine revelation instead of his own desires. The course of history underwent a change the like of which has never been experienced before or since. That event, the commencement of revelation, was the point at which the roads crossed. Clear and permanent guidelines were established which cannot be changed by the passage of time or effaced by events. Human conscience developed a concept of existence, and human life and its values became unsurpassed in comprehensiveness, clarity and purity of all worldly considerations. The foundations of this divine code were firmly established in the world and its various aspects and essential standards were made clear, '*so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth.*' (8: 42) There would no longer be any excuse of lack of clarity. Error and deviation would be upheld deliberately, in the face of clear guidance.

The beginning of revelation was a unique event at a unique moment marking the end of one era and the start of another. It was the demarcation line in the history of mankind, not merely in the history of a certain nation or a particular generation. It was recorded by the universe and echoed in all its corners. It was also recorded in man's conscience which today needs to be guided by what God has revealed and

²⁹ Umm Ayman was the nurse who took care of the Prophet during his childhood. He remained grateful to her throughout his life. — Editor's note.

never lose sight of it. Man needs to remember that this event was a rebirth of humanity which can take place only once in history.

A Special Type of Education

It is self evident that the rest of the *sūrah* was not revealed at the same time as its opening but at a later date. It refers to a certain situation and later events in the Prophet's life, after he was instructed to convey his message and offer his worship in public, and after he was met with opposition by the unbelievers. This is indicated in the part of the *sūrah* which begins: "*Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying!*" (Verses 9-10) Yet there is perfect harmony between all parts of the *sūrah*. The facts it relates after the opening part are also arranged in a perfect order. These two factors make the *sūrah* one perfectly harmonious unit.

*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell.
Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen,
taught man what he did not know.* (Verses 1-5)

This is the first *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, so it starts with the name of God. It instructs God's Messenger right at the very first moment of his blessed contact with the Supreme society and before taking his very first step along the way of the message he was chosen to deliver, to read in the name of God, '*Read in the name of your Lord.*' The first attribute of God's it mentions is that of creation and initiation: ... *your Lord who has created.*' Then it speaks in particular of the creation of man and his origin: '*created man out of a germ-cell.*' He is created from a dried drop of blood which is implanted in the womb: a humble and unsophisticated substance. This reflects the grace and mercy of the Creator as much as it reflects His power. It is out of His grace that He has elevated this germ-cell to the rank of man who can be taught and who can learn: '*Read! For your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*' The gulf between the origin and the outcome is very wide indeed. But God is limitless in His ability and generosity; hence this extremely wonderful change.

Here also emerges the fact of man's teaching by the Creator. The pen has always been the most widespread means of learning and it has always had the most far-reaching impact on man's life. This fact was not as clear at the time of revelation as it is now. But God knows the value of the pen; hence, this reference to the pen at the beginning of this His final message to humanity, in the first *sūrah* of the Qur'ān. Yet God's Messenger charged with the delivery of this message could not write. Had the Qur'ān been his own composition, he would not have stressed this fact at the first moment. But the Qur'ān is a message God has revealed.

The *sūrah* then states the source of learning, which is God. From Him man receives all his knowledge, past, present and future. From Him man learns any secret revealed to him about this universe, life and himself.

This single paragraph revealed at the very first moment of the Islamic message states the comprehensive basis of faith and its concepts. Everything starts, works and moves in His name. He is the One who creates, originates and teaches. Whatever man learns and whatever experience and knowledge he acquires come originally from God. He has taught man what he did not know. The Prophet recognized this basic Qur'ānic fact. It governed his feelings, teachings and practices for the rest of his life because it is the principal fact of faith.

Imām Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah summarizes the Prophet's teaching concerning remembrance of God:

The Prophet was the most perfect man with regard to his remembrance of God. Indeed whatever he spoke was in the line of such remembrance. His commands, prohibitions, legislation, what he taught about the Lord and His attributes, judgements, actions, promises and threats were all part of this remembrance. o were his praise and glorification of God, prayers, his feelings of fear and hope and even his silence. He was conscious of God at all times and in every state. His praise of God was part of his very nature as if he praised Him with every breath. Indeed he praised Him as he stood up, sat or reclined and when walking, riding, moving, at home or travelling.

When he woke up he used to say, 'Praise be to God who has given us life after He had caused us to die. To Him we shall be resurrected.' [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

‘Ā’ishah said that the Prophet used to say when he woke up at night, 'God is Supreme,' and would repeat it ten times. Then he would repeat ten times the statement, 'There is no deity but God,' and pray, 'My Lord, I seek refuge with You against constraint in this life and on the Day of Resurrection,' repeating it also ten times. Then he would start his formal prayers. ‘Ā’ishah also said that when the Prophet woke up at night for his devotion he would say, 'There is no God but You, my Lord. Praise be to You. I beseech You to forgive my sins and appeal to You for mercy. My Lord, enrich my knowledge and cause not my heart to go astray after You have granted me Your guidance. Grant me Your mercy, for You are the most Bountiful One.' [Both *ahādīth* are related by Abū Dāwūd.]

The Prophet has also taught us that whoever gets up at night and says, 'There is no deity other than God alone; He has no partner; to Him belongs all dominion and to Him is due all praise; He is able to do everything; praised is

God who is limitless in His glory; there is no deity but God; God is great; no power can operate without His permission; He is the Great, the Supreme,' and after this says, 'My Lord, forgive me,' or any other prayer, his prayers will be answered. Should he make ablution and offer prayers, these will be accepted. [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

God's Messenger once stayed overnight at Ibn `Abbās's home, who later reported that when the Prophet woke up he raised his hands to the sky and read the last ten verses of *sūrah Al `Imrān* before going on to say, 'My Lord, to You belongs all praise; You are the light of heaven and earth and all therein; praise be to You, the true Lord; Your promise is true; whatever You say is true; the meeting with You is true; heaven is true; hell is true; the Prophets are true; and the Hour is true. I submit myself to You, I believe in You and depend on You. To You I shall return. Any dispute I may enter into is for You. To You I turn for judgement. Forgive me all my sins, past and future, public and secret. You are my Lord and there is no God but You. No power can operate without God's permission; He is the Great, the Supreme.' [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Ahmād.]

‘Āishah related that when the Prophet woke up at night to worship he used to say, 'My God, the Lord of Gabriel, Mikā'il and Isrāfil, the Creator of heaven and earth, who knows what is concealed and what is made public. You judge between Your servants in their disputes. Guide me, with Your own will, to the truth over which people argue and dispute, for You guide whom You will to the straight path.' She might have also said that he used to say this at the start of his prayers. [Related by Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.]

After offering the *witr* prayer, the Prophet used to repeat three times, 'Glorified be God, the Holy One.' [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and Ahmād]. When he went out of his house he would say, 'In the name of God. I place my trust in God. My Lord, I appeal to You to guard me against going astray or causing anyone to go astray, and against making a slip or causing anyone to slip, and being unjust to anyone or being victim to any injustice by others, and against acting ignorantly, or being ignorantly done by.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and Ahmād.]

The Prophet said, "Whoever says as he leaves his home: 'In the name of God. I place my trust in God. No power is operative without God's leave,' will be answered: 'You are rightly guided and well protected,' and the devil will be made to turn away from him." [Related by al-Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd.]

Referring to the night when he was host to God's Messenger, Ibn `Abbās said

that when the Prophet left for the dawn prayers at the mosque he said, 'My Lord, give me light in my heart, tongue, ears and eyes: give me light in front of me, over me and below me, and make the light You give me abundant.' [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Abū Said al-Khudrī relates that the Prophet said: "When a man goes out to the mosque for prayers and says, 'My Lord, I appeal to You by the right of those who pray to You, and the right of my journey to You. I have not come out with any feeling of self-sufficiency, nor in hypocrisy or conceit, nor to seek reputation. I have come out with the hope of avoiding Your anger and earning Your pleasure. I pray to You to save me from hell and to forgive me my sins; You are the only One who forgives sins;' seventy thousand angels will be charged with praying for his forgiveness and God will receive and welcome him until he finishes his prayers." [Related by Aḥmad and Ibn Mājah.]

Abū Dāwūd related that the Prophet used to say when he entered the mosque, 'I seek refuge with God, the Great, and His Holy face, and His old power against Satan, the outcast.' When a man says this, the Devil says, 'He is now protected against me for the rest of the day.'

The Prophet said: "Whenever any of you comes to the mosque, let him pray and ask peace for the Prophet and say, 'My Lord, open to me the doors of Your mercy.' When he leaves the mosque, let him say, 'My Lord, I pray to You to give me out of Your grace.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah.]

It is also related that when the Prophet entered the mosque, he would ask peace for Muḥammad (himself) and his household, then he would say, 'My Lord, forgive me my sins and open the doors of Your mercy to me.' When he left, he would again ask peace for Muḥammad and his household, and say, 'My Lord, forgive me my sins and lay open to me the doors of Your grace.' [Related by Aḥmad and al-Tirmidhī.]

After offering the dawn prayers, God's Messenger used to stay in his praying place until sunrise, utilizing his time in remembrance of God.

In the morning, he would say, 'Our Lord, we have lived till this morning by Your will, and we also live till evening by Your will. We live and die by Your will. To You we will return.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah.]

He also used to say, 'The morning has appeared. This morning all dominion belongs to God, praised be He. There is no deity but God alone. He has no partner; to Him belongs all the universe and to Him is all praise due. He is

able to do what He wills. My Lord, I pray to You to give me of the best of this day and the best of the days to follow. I seek refuge with You against the evil of this day and the days to follow. My Lord, I seek Your refuge against laziness and the evils of old age, against suffering in hell and suffering in the grave.' In the evening he would repeat the same prayer substituting evening for morning. [Related by Muslim.]

Abū Bakr, the Prophet's Companion said once to him: "Teach me some prayers to say in the morning and in the evening." God's Messenger taught him the following prayer, 'My Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, who knows the visible and the unseen, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the Lord and Possessor of all, I declare that there is no deity but You. I appeal to You to protect me against my own evil and the evil of Satan;

I seek Your refuge against doing myself any harm or causing harm to any Muslim.' The Prophet told Abū Bakr to say this prayer in the morning, evening and before going to bed. [Related by al-Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd.]³⁰

When God's Messenger had a new garment, he would mention it by name (for example, a shirt, gown or turban) and say, 'My Lord, praise be to You. You have given me this. I pray to You to give me its goodness and the goodness for which it was made; and to guard me against its evil and the evil for which it was made.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Ahmad and al-Nasā'ī].³¹

The Prophet was in the habit of saying the following prayer when he returned home, 'Praise be to God who has given me this shelter and what is sufficient for me; and praise be to God who has given me food and drink, and praise be to God who has given me abundance out of His generosity. I pray to You to extend Your protection to me against hell.' [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

It is confirmed in the two most authentic *Hadīth* anthologies by al-Bukhārī and Muslim that, as the Prophet was about to enter the toilet, he used to say, 'My Lord, I pray to You to rid me of evil things.'³²

When he finished his toilet, he used to say, 'I seek Your forgiveness, my Lord.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī]. It is also reported that he would say, 'Praise be to God who has riden me of harm and given me good health.' [Related

³⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma`ād*, Beirut and Kuwait, 1994, Vol. 2, pp. 365-371. Many more *ahādīth* are also included under the same chapter.

³¹ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 379.

³² Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 383.

by Ibn Mājah.]³³

It is also confirmed that he once put his hand in a water container and said to his Companions, ‘Make ablutions in the name of God.’ [Related by al-Nasā’ī.]³⁴

When he saw the new moon, he used to say, ‘My Lord, let it come to us with security, faith, safety and submission to You. New moon, God is my Lord and Your Lord.’ [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Aḥmad and al-Dārimī.]³⁵

When he started eating, he used to say, ‘In the name of God.’ He also said, ‘When any of you eats, let him mention the name of God. If he forgets to do so, let him say [when he remembers], in the name of God at the beginning and at the end.’ [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]³⁶

Thus was the life of God’s Messenger. It was conditioned, down to every single detail, by the divine instruction which he received at the very first moment of his message. This instruction helped his faith to be established on a genuine basis.

Arrogance and Ingratitude

It is God, then, who creates, teaches and bestows His abundant bounties on man. This implies that man should acknowledge God’s benevolence and be grateful for it. But what actually happens is something different.

The second part of the *sūrah* deals with man’s transgression. “*Indeed, man becomes grossly overweening, once he thinks himself self-sufficient. Surely to your Lord all must return.*” (Verses 6-8) It is God who gives to man in abundance and makes him independent. He also creates and teaches him and extends to him His generous treatment. But men in general – except for those guarded by faith – are not thankful for their independence which is made possible by what they are given. They do not recognize the source of this grace, which is the same as the source of their creation, knowledge and livelihood. They behave arrogantly and transgress all limits instead of being dutiful and thankful.

The image of the transgressing, conceited person who has forgotten his origin is followed by a comment charged with an implicit warning: “*Surely to your Lord all must return.*” (Verse 8) Where can this proud and overweening person then turn?

At the same time a fundamental rule of the Islamic faith is emphasized. That is, all

³³ Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 386-387.

³⁴ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 387.

³⁵ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 396.

³⁶ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 397.

must refer to God in every matter, thought or action. He is the only resort and refuge. The good and the bad, the obedient and the sinner, the righteous and the wrongdoer, the rich and the poor, will all return to Him. Even the man who tyrannizes when he thinks himself independent will come to Him eventually.

Thus, the first two sections of the *sūrah* lay down the essential components of the Islamic ideological concept: creation, education and honour come from God alone, and to Him all will return: “*Surely to your Lord all must return.*” (Verse 8)

The third section of this short *sūrah* tackles a particularly appalling form of tyranny. Its description in the inimitable Qur’ānic style fills us with wonder and dismay that it should take place at all. “*Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying! Think: does he follow the right guidance and enjoin [others to be] God-fearing? Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back, does he not realize that God sees all?*” (Verses 9-14)

Our dismay is enhanced by the manner of expression which takes the form of address and conversation, using short sentences that follow in rapid succession. The effect can hardly ever be produced by ordinary written language. ‘Look at’ this ghastly business actually taking place! “*Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying.*” (Verses 9-10) Have you seen this repulsive sight? Have you realized how repugnance is doubled by the fact that the person being prevented from his prayers is in fact following divine guidance. He merely enjoins righteousness and piety, yet he is discouraged and told to desist!

Yet the transgressor outdoes himself by taking a still more abhorrent stand, “*Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back.*” (Verse 13) The closing note is one of implicit warning, similar to that of the previous paragraph, “*Does he not realize that God sees all?*” (Verse 14) He sees everything: the denial of truth, the turning away from it, as well as the prevention of believers from offering their prayers. Since God sees all, something must be done on the basis of what He sees. This is the implicit warning.

Thus, we have a scene of tyranny trying to suppress the call of faith and obedience to God. This is followed immediately by a stern warning stated explicitly this time: “*Nay, if he does not desist, We will most certainly drag him by his forelock, his lying, sinful forelock. Then let him call his henchmen. We will call the guards of hell.*” (Verses 15-18) The Arabic term, *lanasfa`n*, used for ‘drag’ has a marked violence about it. The dragging is by the forelock, the part of the head raised high by every conceited tyrant. It undoubtedly deserves to be hit violently: “*His lying, sinful forelock!*” The tyrant may think of calling his clan and supporters to come to his aid: “*Then let him call his henchmen.*” On the other side, “*We will call the guards of hell,*” and they are powerful and ruthless. The outcome of the battle is never in doubt.

In the light of this frightening destiny for the unbelievers, the *sūrah* concludes with an instruction to God's obedient servants to persevere and follow the path of faith: "No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself and draw closer to God." (Verse 19) Do not obey this tyrant who tries to stop you from offering your devotion and conveying your message. Prostrate yourself before your Lord and bring yourself closer to Him through worship and obedience. As for the tyrant, leave him to the guards of hell who are sure to mete out to him what he deserves.

Some authentic reports say that the *sūrah*, with the exception of the first part, refers to Abū Jahl who once passed by the Prophet while he was praying at *Maqām Ibrahīm*, close to the Ka`bah. He turned to him and said, 'Muhammad, have I not ordered you to stop these practices?' He also added some warning to the Prophet who gave him a stern reply. This was possibly the time when the Prophet seized Abū Jahl by the collar and warned him of his impending doom. Abū Jahl said, 'Muhammad, what do you threaten me with? I am sure I have the largest following in this valley.' Hence, the revelation, '*Let him call his henchmen.*' Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's learned Companion, said in comment: "Had he called them, the angels charged with meting out punishment would have taken him away there and then."

The *sūrah*, however, is general in its significance. It refers to every obedient believer calling men to follow the path of God and to every tyrant who forbids prayer, threatens the believers and acts arrogantly. The concluding divine instruction is therefore: "No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself and draw closer to God." (Verse 19)