

SŪRAH 52

Al-Ṭūr

(Mount Sinai)

Prologue

This *sūrah* constitutes a profound and effective address to the human heart. It aims to eradicate doubts, misrepresentations and false assumptions that may linger in some corners of the human mind. It refutes every argument or excuse to justify deviation from the path of faith. It seeks to do this with an irresistible onslaught, one that inevitably forces submission. In order to achieve this, the *sūrah* employs all aspects of the Qur'ānic discourse including choice vocabulary, connotations, images, musical notes and beats. From start to finish, its verses flow like missiles fired in quick succession, its bears like thunderbolts and its images like a running, captivating film that does not stop for even a moment.

The *sūrah* begins with God's oath by some sacred things in the heavens and earth, some of which are well known and others that belong to the realm that lies beyond human perception: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea.*" (Verses 1–6) This oath confirms something really awesome and it fills its listeners with terror. It is expressed in words that most suit its feared outcome, painting an image that leaves the heart shuddering: "*your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 7–10) As we visualize this

scene, we see and hear the horror that causes violent shaking, coupled with a well-deserved rebuke: *"Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.'"* (Verses 11–16)

This represents the first part of the *sūrah*. It is immediately followed by a change of tone and colour. The *sūrah* now aims to hold before the very hearts and minds that saw the foregoing horror the prospect of safety and bliss. It depicts a scene of those who are God-fearing and the reward prepared for them. This is shown at ease, dwelling on pleasant details. It thus takes us from an air of punishment and suffering to one of happiness and enjoyment: *"The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'"* (Verses 17–28)

In its third part the *sūrah* seeks to refute all doubts, misconceptions, excuses and false arguments. It presents the truth as simple, clear and powerful, and speaks with an irrefutable logic that allows no room for evasion. It holds out the truth forcing people to its acknowledgement and acceptance. This part begins by telling the Prophet to continue with his reminders to people, despite their ill treatment of him and his Companions. He should confront them with his overpowering logic:

"So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him." (Verses 29-43)

This list of questions comes in quick succession, like thundering missiles that blow falsehood into smithereens, and silence every stubborn argument that tries to defy the truth. The *sūrah* portrays the unbelievers' stubbornness showing how they defy the truth in the face of every tangible reality: "Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'" (Verse 44) Needless to say, there is a huge difference between a portion of sky falling and clouds moving *en masse*. Yet still they try to justify themselves. Hence, the *sūrah* aims its final missile at them, threatening them with the prospect of hell that is promised at the beginning: "Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support." (Verses 45-46) It then threatens them with a punishment that overtakes them before that promised day: "Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it." (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* concludes on a happy note addressed to the Prophet whom they used to describe as a poet whose death they would await, or as a soothsayer or a madman. This happy ending is given so as to comfort and assure him of his position of honour. Indeed, this happy note has no parallel in the Qur'ān, and it was never previously addressed to any

other prophet or messenger: *“So, await in patience your Lord’s judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord’s limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.”* (Verses 48–49) This is a note of kindness that ensures that all the troubles the Prophet met with would not have the least effect on him.



Al-Ṭūr (Mount Sinai)

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

By Mount Sinai; (1)

by a scripture inscribed (2)

on unrolled parchment; (3)

by the much-visited House; (4)

by the vault raised high; (5)

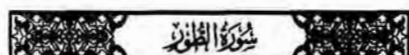
by the swelling sea; (6)

your Lord's punishment will
indeed come to pass. (7)

Nothing can stop it. (8)

On the day when the sky will
shake and reel, (9)

and the mountains will move
away. (10)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالطُّورِ ١

وَكُتِبَ مَسْطُورٍ ٢

فِي رَقٍّ مَنْشُورٍ ٣

وَالْبَيْتِ الْمَعْمُورِ ٤

وَالسَّافِرِ الْمَرْفُوعِ ٥

وَالْبَحْرِ الْمَسْجُورِ ٦

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ لَوَاقِعٌ ٧

مَا لَمْ يَمْنَعْ دَافِعٌ ٨

يَوْمَ تَمُورُ السَّمَاءُ مَوْرًا ٩

وَتُسِيرُ الْجِبَالُ سِيرًا ١٠

Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11)

قَوْلَ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١١﴾

who idly play with vain trifles. (12)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي حَوْضٍ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13)

يَوْمَ يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعَاءَ ﴿١٣﴾

[and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14)

هَذِهِ النَّارُ الَّتِي كُنْتُمْ بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15)

أَفَسِحْرُ هَذَا أَمْ أَنْتُمْ لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

أَصْلَوْهَا فَاصْبِرُوا أَوْ لَا تَصْبِرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, (17)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَعِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. (18)

فَنِكَاهٍ بِمَاءٍ غَنِمْتُمْ رِيشًا وَوَقَّهْتُمْ رِيشَهُمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٨﴾

'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' (19)

كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا هَنِيئًا بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. (20)

مُتَكِبِينَ عَلَى سُرُرٍ مَّصْفُوفَةٍ وَزَوَّجْنَاهُمْ
بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unire them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. (21)

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَاتَّبَعَتْهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتُهُمْ
بِإِيمَانٍ لِّحَقْنَاهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَمَا لَنَنْهَاهُمْ
مِّنْ عَمَلِهِمْ مِّنْ شَيْءٍ كُلُّ امْرِئٍ بِمَا كَسَبَ
رَهِيْنٌ ﴿٢١﴾

We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. (22)

وَأَمَدَدْنَاهُمْ فِيكَهْفِهِمْ وَلَحْمِ مِثَاقٍ
يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. (23)

يَسْرَعُونَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا لَا لَغْوٌ فِيهَا
وَلَا تَأْسٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. (24)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غِلَمانٌ لَهُم مَّكَانُهُمْ
لَوْ لَوْ مَكُونٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

They will turn to one another, asking each other. (25)

وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, (26)

قَالُوا إِنَّا كُنَّا قَبْلُ فِي أَهْلِنَا مُشْفِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. (27)

فَمَنْ أَلَّهِ عَلَيْنَا وَفَنَّا عَذَابَ
السَّمُورِ ﴿٢٧﴾

We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (28)

إِنَّا كُنَّا مِنْ قَبْلُ نَدْعُوهُ إِنَّهُ
هُوَ الْبَرُّ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. (29)

فَذَكِّرْ فَمَا أَنْتَ بِنِعْمَتِ رَبِّكَ
بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' (30)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَتَرَبَّصُّ بِهِ رَيْبَ
الْمَنُونِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' (31)

قُلْ تَرَبَّصُوا فَإِنِّي مَعَكُمْ مِنَ
الْمُتَرَبِّصِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? (32)

أَمْ تَأْمُرُهُمْ أَحْلُمُهُمْ بِهَذَا أَمْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ
طَاغُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. (33)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَقُولُهُ بِإِذْنِنَا أَمْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ
لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. (34)

فَلْيَأْتُوا بِحَدِيثٍ مِثْلِهِ إِنْ كَانُوا
صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Were they created out of nothing?
Were they the creators? (35)

أَمْ خُلِقُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَيْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ الْخَالِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Did they create the heavens and
the earth? No. They have no
faith. (36)

أَمْ خَلَقُوا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بَلْ
لَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Do they possess your Lord's
treasures? Or are they in ultimate
control? (37)

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمْ خَزَائِنُ رَيْكِ أَمْ هُمُ
الْمُصِيطِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Or have they a ladder to climb,
in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's
secrets]? Let their eavesdropper
produce a clear proof. (38)

أَمْ لَهُمْ سُلَّمٌ يَسْتَمِعُونَ فِيهِ فَلْيَأْتِ مُسْتَمِعُهُمْ
بِسُلْطَانٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Is He to have only daughters and
you sons? (39)

أَمْ لَهُ الْبَنَاتُ وَلَكُمْ الْبَنُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a
payment from them that would
be burdened with debt? (40)

أَمْ تَسْأَلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُمْ مِنْ مَفْرُوقٍ مُنْقَلَبُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Do they have knowledge of the
hidden reality so that they can
write it down? (41)

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمُ الْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Or do they want to entrap you?
It is the unbelievers who are truly
entrapped. (42)

أَمْ يُرِيدُونَ كَيْدًا فَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا هُمْ
الْمَكِيدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Have they, then, any deity other
than God? Exalted is God far
above anything they associate
with Him. (43)

أَمْ لَهُمْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ
عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (44)

وَأَن يَرَوْا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ سَاقِطًا يَقُولُوا
سَحَابٌ مَّرْكُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; (45)

فَذَرَهُمْ حَتَّى يَلْقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي
فِيهِ يُصْعَقُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. (46)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا
وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. (47)

وَأَن لِّلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا عَذَابًا دُونَ ذَلِكَ
وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, (48)

وَأَصْدِرْ بِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ فَإِنَّكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَسَبِّحْ
بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٤٨﴾

and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (49)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَإِدْبَرَ الْجُجُومِ ﴿٤٩﴾

No Way Out

By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will

move away. Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done. (Verses 1–16)

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as *Waṭ-Ṭūr*, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*. The Arabic word, *Ṭūr*, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'ān, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the *much-visited House* and the *vault raised high*. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The *much-visited House* may refer to the Ka'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic *ḥadīth* giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do..." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The Prophet's statement means that the angels perform *ṭawāf* around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the *vault raised high* refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyān quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The *swelling sea* means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective *masjūr*, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another *sūrah* we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81: 6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous: "*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it.*" (Verses 7–8) It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this *sūrah* in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.' He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this *sūrah*, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 9–10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the

sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the *sūrah* hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles.*" (Verses 11–12) Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'ān describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'ān. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence

of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'ān presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'ānic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole. The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'ān puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'ānic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'ān addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'ān. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over? The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give

man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The *sūrah* issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles *"on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell."* (Verse 13) This is a violent image. The *sūrah* uses the Arabic word *da'an*, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: *"This is the fire you used to deny."* (Verse 14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: *"So is this sorcery, or do you not see?"* (Verse 15) They used to label the Qur'ān as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'ān?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: *"Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done."* (Verse 16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.

For Believers and Offspring

The second section of the *sūrah* is one of excitement, spreading comfort and happiness, particularly after the preceding scenes of outright distress:

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (Verses 17–28)

This scene is close to material comfort. It is of the type that addresses feelings in the early period, tempting the human soul with physical pleasures in their refined form. It contrasts with the scene of crude painful suffering that those who are oblivious to the truth have to face: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire.*" (Verses 17–18) Just mere protection from the suffering of the fire which has already been described is a great blessing. How is it to be viewed then when it is coupled with admission into gardens and bliss? Moreover, these believers enjoy what God provides them with. It is all comfort and luxury plus hospitality and honour: "*Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.*" (Verse 19) This in itself is a great blessing.

As they are so addressed from on high, they are told that they deserve whatever reward they are given. Furthermore, they will "*recline on couches arranged in rows*," giving them the pleasure of their brethren's company in such blissful surroundings. Yet, "*We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes*." (Verse 20) This represents man's best enjoyment.

Further honour is granted as their offspring, who are also believers, join them in their place of bliss. This is added care. Even if their offspring do not attain the standards of the God-fearing, as long as they are believers, they join their parents without detracting anything from their parents' reward. In no way, however, does this detract from personal responsibility and individual accountability. Rather, it is a favour that God bestows on them all: "*As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward of their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds*." (Verse 21)

More is added to the scene as we are introduced to other aspects of enjoyment in an atmosphere of perfect happiness. These dwellers of heaven are given varieties of fruits and meat, and they pass around a cup containing a drink that is totally different from the wines of this present world which loosen tongues with foul and dirty speech and tempt people into physical and mental sin. It is a pure drink causing no wrong: "*They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin*." (Verse 23) They are gathered together as they pass it around, enjoying each other's company. At the same time they are served by youths who reflect pure innocence and a shining friendliness: "*They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells*." (Verse 24)

This warm and happy scene is carried further as we are shown how these people in heaven converse, recalling memories of their worldly lives and outlining the reasons that ensured their happy end, with all its security, luxury, gratification and bliss. Thus the secret is given out and the way leading to this blissful ending is marked for all travellers: "*They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching*

wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.”
(Verses 25–28)

Thus, the secret is that they were always apprehensive about their outcome on the Day of Judgement. They feared what would happen when their records would be laid open and they would be called to account for their deeds. They entertained such apprehensions when they were with their families, enjoying seeming security, deceptive safety and dealing with worldly preoccupations. Yet they were neither deceived nor distracted. Therefore, God bestowed His grace on them and spared them the sort of suffering that seeps through the blood system like scorching poison. They realize that they are spared such suffering only by God's grace, which is bestowed in response to their fearing what the Day of Judgement might bring them. They certainly know that on its own, good action is not enough to admit the person doing it into heaven unless God bestows His grace on the person doing it. All that good action achieves is to testify that its doer has done his best, choosing what pleases God and earning His grace.

With all this fear and apprehension, the believers used to pray in earnest: *“We used to pray to Him.”* They were fully aware of those attributes of God that ensure goodly reward for His servants: *“He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.”* (Verse 28)

A Reminder of God's Blessings

The *sūrah* now begins a series of rhetorical questions fashioned to a fast beat, presenting clear facts and addressing any remaining doubts the human soul might have. This round is full of strong challenges which no human heart can withstand:

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, ‘He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.’ Say: ‘Wait if you will. I too am waiting.’ Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, ‘He has fabricated it himself?’ They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created

out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (Verses 29–44)

The address here is to the Prophet: “*So, remind people.*” (Verse 29) He should continue to remind people, undeterred by their rude and impolite behaviour or their false accusations. They used to say of him that he was a soothsayer, or a madman. These two descriptions are linked by the common notion that soothsayers received their information from the *jinn*, and that the *jinn* possessed those who were mad. Thus, the devil was the common element in both descriptions. What made them use either adjective – poet or sorcerer – to describe the Prophet was the fact that they were overwhelmed by the Qur’ān. Its address was so unfamiliar to them even though, by nature, they were highly eloquent. Since they could not even think of admitting that it was God’s word, they felt that they needed to provide some plausible explanation for its superiority over anything they or others could say. Hence they claimed that it was imparted by the *jinn*, or that the *jinn* helped in its composition. They alleged that the man reciting it, i.e. Muḥammad, was either a soothsayer receiving information from the *jinn*, or a sorcerer relying on the *jinn*’s help, or a poet who had a *jinnee* friend, or a madman possessed by a *jinnee* who gave him such wonderful speech.

This is a wicked accusation. Therefore, God consoles His Messenger showing it to be of no importance and reassuring him that he continues to enjoy His favours which allow no element of soothsaying or madness to affect him: “*By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman.*” (Verse 29) This is followed by a denunciation of their

assertion that he was a poet: "*Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.'*" (Verse 30) They indeed said that. Some of them counselled others to "bear with him, stick to our ways and soon enough he will die and we will be rid of him." Hence the Prophet is instructed to give them an implicit threat in his reply: "*Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.'*" (Verse 31) Soon enough, you will know who will end up in a better position.

Some of the Quraysh elders were accorded a position of respect on account of their perceived wisdom in conducting affairs. These are referred to here with a clear note of sarcasm, as their attitude to Islam is the antithesis of wisdom and logic. The *sūrah* sarcastically wonders whether the descriptions they attach to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) are what their wise elders have arrived at? Or is it that they are arrogant, unjust people who do not listen to what the wise elders counsel: "*Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people?*" (Verse 32) The first question is loaded with sharp sarcasm; the second carries an accusation that should put them to shame. One or the other is indeed true when they adopt such an absurd attitude.

They were always rude in what they said about the Prophet. They even accused him of fabricating what he said to them. The *sūrah* disapprovingly wonders whether they have made such a claim of fabrication against the Prophet, implying that such an allegation could never have been made: "*Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?'*" (Verse 33) It immediately explains what lies behind such a singular allegation: "*They certainly do not believe.*" (Verse 33) The fact that in their hearts they did not really believe is the reason why they made such a statement. They simply cannot appreciate the true nature of the Qur'ān. Had they appreciated it they would have known that no human being could have authored it, and that it could only have been delivered by a man of truth.

Since their hearts cannot appreciate the truth of this revelation, the *sūrah* challenges them to provide irrefutable proof: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34) This challenge occurs several times in the Qur'ān, yet those who deny the truth of the Qur'ān could not take up the challenge. Furthermore, this

challenge remains valid for the rest of time, and no one will ever be able to produce anything like the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān has a special secret which is felt by everyone who begins to look at its text, before even attempting to identify its many miraculous aspects. He feels that the very words themselves speak with special authority. He senses that there is something extra, beyond the meanings the words impart to us; something that is felt by the heart as soon as one listens to the Qur'ān. Some people feel this very clearly, while others sense it even though they cannot identify it. Nonetheless it is there. It cannot be traced back to anything in particular: the phraseology, the meaning, the images and connotations, the special music that is so different from the rhythm of any other speech. Or is it produced by a combination of all these elements, or by these and something else beyond them that we cannot identify? This is something that is present in every Qur'ānic text, and it is felt initially by everyone who handles a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Beyond this, there are phenomena that we can recognize and understand when we study the Qur'ān and contemplate its meanings and construction.

These phenomena are recognized in the clear, comprehensive and true concept the Qur'ān presents to our hearts and minds of the truth of human existence, of existence as a whole, and the essential truth of God Almighty. They are seen in the Qur'ānic method that seeks to implant this concept in man's mind as it addresses his nature in a way that is totally unfamiliar in human address. The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind with all its many facets, reflecting profound knowledge of man's every angle. We see the superiority of the Qur'ān in the comprehensiveness, balance and coherence of its directives that are all placed on the same level. This phenomenon is unknown in the works of human beings that cannot maintain the same situation or the same standard, and cannot address all aspects at the same time. Nothing that man produces can reflect absolute balance that admits neither increase nor decrease, and suffers neither shortage nor extravagance. No human work achieves absolute coherence that admits no discord or conflict either in essence or detail.

These and similar phenomena, as well as the subtle and the undeniably secret, combine to give the Qur'ān its quality of an absolute miracle that

remains valid for all time. No self respecting person can argue about this. He will readily admit the truth that stares him clearly in the face whenever he looks at the Qur'an with an open mind: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34)

The next question wonders at their own existence, a truth staring them in the face which they cannot explain in any way other than what the Qur'an states: God, the Creator of all that exists has brought them into existence: "*Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators?*" (Verse 35) The thought that they just existed out of nothing is against the logic of nature. It merits no argument. On the other hand, neither they nor any other creature can claim that they created themselves. As neither case can be logically entertained, there only remains the true case stated in the Qur'an, confirming that they are all creatures of God, the only Creator and Originator. Since no one can claim any share of His attributes of creation and origination, then Lordship and Godhead belong solely to Him. This is clear and true logic.

The *sūrah* then directs their attention to the heavens and the earth: are they the ones who created these? Needless to say, the heavens and the earth did not create themselves, in the same way as humans do not do so: "*Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith.*" (Verse 36) Neither they, nor anyone listening to the logic of nature, claim that the heavens and the earth created themselves or came into existence without being created. Nor do those people claim that they created them. Yet they stand in front of people like a question requiring an answer. When those very unbelievers were asked who created the heavens and the earth, they said that God created them. Yet this truth did not acquire such clarity as to produce its normal effects in their hearts and minds, leading them to formulate true and clear conviction: "*They have no faith.*" (Verse 36)

The *sūrah* then takes them a step lower than that of the creation of either themselves or the world around them. It asks them whether they own God's treasures or have control of these so as to be able to cause benefit and harm: "*Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control?*" (Verse 37) If they make no such claim, then who owns these treasures and controls all things? The Qur'an says that God is the One who gives in plenty or in small measure, and who determines

all affairs in the universe. This is the only explanation of what happens in the universe.

A further step down is then taken, and the *sûrah* asks whether they have any means to listen to the source of revelation: "*Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof.*" (Verse 38) Muḥammad (peace be upon him) tells them that he is a Messenger of God and that he receives revelations from on high. They reject this, claiming it as false. The *sûrah* asks whether they have the means to climb up and listen to what He says, gaining information that supports their claims that he receives no such revelations, and asserts that the truth is contrary to what he says. This requires that they provide compelling evidence in support of their claims. This is an allusion to the great authority the Qur'ân speaks with, yet they reject its clear and powerful message.

The *sûrah* then brings into focus one of their absurd claims, alleging that the angels are God's daughters. It addresses them directly, adding an element of further reproach: "*Is He to have only daughters and you sons?*" (Verse 39) They considered girls to be inferior to boys, and anyone of them would be full of gloom and frustration when they were told that they had begot girls. Yet they unashamedly attribute female offspring to God Almighty. Thus the *sûrah* uses their own traditions and values to shame them.

They disliked receiving the Prophet's address. They disliked his message of guidance, feeling that it was a burden, even though it was given to them clear and pure. He asked no wages or payment for his trouble. The least that such a free presentation deserves is an appreciative response and a gentle refusal if they did not want to accept what he offered. Hence, the *sûrah* denounces their unjustified attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 40) Since they are not asked to pay anything for it, their attitude appears to be totally indefensible and unwarranted. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Again, the *sûrah* puts before them their true position in this universe. They are creatures with certain limitations. They are given access to a certain portion of this world, beyond which they cannot penetrate. It all belongs to the Creator. What lies beyond their reach is God's own

preserve and they have no knowledge of it: *"Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?"* (Verse 41) They are well aware that they have no knowledge of what lies beyond their perception even though it is a reality. They have no means of accessing it. It is God who writes in its record whatever He determines for His creatures, while they cannot write a thing in it.

The One who is in control of that hidden reality and whatever occurs in that hidden realm is indeed the One who can derermine and scheme. How come, then, that in their position of inability to record anything they try to scheme against you, aiming to entrap you? Why do they imagine that they can determine any future event, saying of the Prophet that he is a poet who would soon die? *"Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped."* (Verse 42) It is they who are subject to whatever is determined by the Creator and Controller of the hidden reality. His schemes will certainly apply to them and take their effect. He is the best of all schemers.

"Have they, then, any deity other than God?" (Verse 43) Does such a deity, if they have one, protect them against what God determines for them? *"Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him."* (Verse 43) How absurd is their false concept of God!

With this exaltation of God and its clear statement of His oneness this series of rhetorical questions, characterized by a powerful beat, is concluded. All their arguments have been refuted, and all doubts removed. They are presented with the clear truth and left without any excuse to justify their hostility to it. At this point their stubbornness in rejecting the clear truth is put clearly before their eyes: *"Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'"* (Verse 44) This means that even if God decides to punish them by making a part of the sky fall down upon them, destroying their world, and they see it falling on their heads, they would still claim that it is but a mass of clouds, bringing rain and prosperity. It is just like the one who denies the truth of what he sees, even with a sword piercing his neck, as it were. This may be a reference to what the people of 'Ad said when they saw the clouds heralding their own destruction. They claimed: *"This cloud will bring us rain."* (46: 24) The truth was then told to them: *"No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a*

stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.” (46: 24–25)

Perfect Contrast

At this point, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to leave them alone. They will certainly face the day mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* and the severe punishment it will bring them. He is to remain steadfast in the face of whatever is determined by his Lord who bestows His care on him. He is to glorify his Lord when he wakes up early in the morning, in the depths of the night and at the time when the stars disappear:

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (Verses 45–49)

This final passage begins with a clear warning against what will happen on that frightening day when the trumpet is first blown and they are all rotally stunned. This takes place shortly before the resurrection, when nothing will be of benefit and no help can be expected from any quarter. If, in this life, they are able to scheme and take action, nothing can stave off what will happen on that day. However, they will also endure another type of suffering before that. This is left unspecified, but it is certain to happen: “*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*” (Verse 47)

Thus this long and determined attack is concluded, bringing the unbelievers face to face with the severe punishments that await them, one close at hand and the other to occur later. The *sūrah* then speaks to the Prophet who was the target of their false accusations. He is instructed to face such adversity with patience. He is to remain steadfast, continuing his efforts to advocate God's message, and to leave the decision to God

who determines whatever He will: *"So, await in patience your Lord's judgement."* (Verse 48)

Yet this directive is coupled with a confirmation of God's kindly care. Such loving care is certain to remove all hardship that the Prophet may have to face. Thus, perseverance in the face of adversity becomes acceptable, and even welcome, since it is the means to such compassionate care: *"For you are under Our watchful eyes."* (Verse 48) This expression is unique, describing a position that has never been attained by any human being. Nowhere else in the Qur'ān is this expression used, even though some similar expressions of overflowing care are used.

Moses, for example, is told: *"Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed."* (20: 13) *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye."* (20: 39) *"I have chosen you for Myself."* (20: 41) All these expressions speak of highly exalted positions, but Muhammad (peace be upon him) is given an even higher distinction with this unique expression: *"For you are under Our watchful eyes."* (Verse 48) This statement implies a unique aspect of friendliness and care. It imparts unparalleled connotations that no human expression can adequately describe. Therefore, we will not attempt any more than this reference to the fact.

Finally, the way to maintain this close contact is outlined: *"Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat."* (Verses 48–49) Thus, throughout the day, as one wakes up, during the night, at the time when stars begin to disappear at dawn, there is a clear chance to enjoy such friendly care. Glorifying God imparts strength, friendliness and the chance of a heartfelt address to God Almighty. All this stems from a dearly loving heart!



SŪRAH 53

Al-Najm

(The Star)

Prologue

As a whole, this *sūrah* comes across as a superb symphony. From start to finish, a fine tune runs through its verbal structure, as well as its rhyming verse endings. This is especially apparent and deliberate at certain points, where a word is added or preferred to maintain the beat or the rhyme, in addition to how it enhances the meaning. One example is found in the two verses saying: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Had the second verse said, 'and Manāt, the third', the metre would have been broken and the beat would not have been maintained. On the other hand, had it said, 'and Manāt, the other one,' the rhyme would not have been maintained. Each of the words used contributes to the meaning, but maintaining the metre and the rhyme is also deliberate. The same may be said where the word then is used in the verses: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This word *idhan*, or then, is necessary to maintain the metre and the beat, but it also serves an artistic purpose.¹

1. Needless to say, we are speaking here of the original Arabic text. The translation cannot maintain any metre or rhyme. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the *sūrah*, apart from the last six verses when it varies. – Editor's note.

The beat in this *sūrah* is of a special musical type in which we note an easy variation and flow, particularly in the first and the last sections. Such variation and flow are in harmony with the images, lively shades and connotations we note in the opening section, as also with the meanings and superb touches in the closing section.

The opening provides images from the world on high where the events to which the *sūrah* refers take place. Further connotations are added by reference to the free movement of the trustworthy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, as he appeared before the Prophet. All these images, scenes, connotations, movements and spiritual atmosphere interact with the tune and the beat in perfect harmony, mutually strengthening their effects. This imparts a special atmosphere to the whole *sūrah*, leaving a marked effect on its succeeding sections, until it concludes on a profoundly powerful note, one that is felt by every part of our souls and every cell in our bodies.

The theme the *sūrah* tackles is the one that pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah: faith and its major concepts consisting of revelation, God's oneness and the hereafter. The *sūrah* tackles this from a particular angle emphasizing the truth of revelation and the solid foundation of faith as compared with the fallacy of idolatry, which lacks foundation.

The first section illustrates the truth and nature of revelation. It describes two scenes that confirm its actual process. This documents the fact that the Prophet received revelation from Gabriel, the angel, whom he saw, as also from the greatest signs of his Lord.

In the second section, the *sūrah* speaks of the unbelievers' alleged deities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt. It also discusses their superstitions about the angels being God's daughters. It states that the unbelievers rely on nothing but conjecture, which is devoid of truth. By contrast, the Prophet calls on them to believe in his message, which is certain to be true, with solid evidence.

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet in its third section that he should ignore those who turn away from God's message, those who preoccupy themselves with this present world, knowing nothing beyond it. It also refers to the hereafter and what it provides of requital for people's actions. It mentions that God knows all beings, ever since He originated them from the earth and when they were still in their mothers' wombs. Indeed,

He knows them better than they know their own selves. Their requital will be based on this certain knowledge; it defines their destiny.

The fourth and final section speaks about the main themes of faith, which have remained the same since the earliest of the divine messages: namely, individual responsibility, accurate reckoning, just reward, and the return of all creatures to their Lord who determines what happens to them as He wills. Added to this is a quick reference to the fate suffered by earlier communities that denied the divine message. The *sūrah* then concludes with a strong beat commanding all mankind to prostrate themselves before God and worship Him alone. Thus, the opening and the end provide a harmony of images, connotations, effects and musical tones.



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the star as it sets. (1)

وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ ①

This fellow-man of yours has not
gone astray, nor is he deluded.
(2)

مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ ②

He does not speak out of his own
fancy. (3)

وَمَا يَنْطَلِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ③

That [which he delivers to you]
is nothing less than a revelation
sent down to him, (4)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ④

something that a very mighty one
has taught him, (5)

عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ⑤

[an angel] of surpassing power,
who stood (6)

ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ ⑥

on the highest horizon, (7)

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ ⑦

and then drew near, and came
close, (8)

ثُمَّ دَنَا فَدَدَىٰ ⑧

until he was two bow-lengths
away, or even closer, (9)

فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ ⑨

and revealed to God's servant
what he revealed. (10)

فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ ⑩

[Muḥammad's] heart did not
belie what he saw. (11)

مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَى ۖ (١١)

Will you, then, contend with him
over what he sees? (12)

أَفَتُمَارُونَهُ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ (١٢)

Indeed, he saw him a second
time (13)

وَلَقَدْ رَآهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ (١٣)

by the lote tree of the farthest
limit, (14)

عِنْدَ سِدْرَةِ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ (١٤)

near to the garden of abode,
(15)

عِنْدَ هَاجِئَةِ الْمَأْوَىٰ (١٥)

when the lote tree was shrouded
with whatever shrouded it. (16)

إِذْ يَغْشَى السِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ (١٦)

The eye did not waver, nor was it
too bold; (17)

مَا زَاغَ الْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ (١٧)

he certainly saw some of the
greatest signs of his Lord. (18)

لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ الْكُبْرَىٰ (١٨)

Have you considered al-Lāt and
al-'Uzzā, (19)

أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ اللَّاتَ وَالْعُزَّىٰ (١٩)

and Manāt, the third other?
(20)

وَمَنَاةَ الثَّالِثَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ (٢٠)

Are you to have the male and He
the female? (21)

أَلَكُمُ الذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ الْأُنثَىٰ (٢١)

That would then be an unfair
division. (22)

تِلْكَ إِذْ أَسْمَعُ ضَبِيرٍ (٢٢)

These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. (23)

إِن هِيَ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ
وَأَبَاؤُكُمْ مِمَّا أُنْزِلَ اللَّهُ بِهِمَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ
إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى
الْأَنْفُسُ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ
الْهُدَى (٢٣)

Is man to have all that he may wish for, (24)

أَمْ لِلْإِنْسَانِ مَا تَشَاءُ (٢٤)

when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? (25)

فَلِلَّهِ الْآخِرَةُ وَالْأُولَى (٢٥)

Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. (26)

وَكَمِ مِنْ مَلَكٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ لَا تَغْنِي
شَفَاعَتُهُمْ شَيْئًا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ يَأْذَنَ
اللَّهُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَرْضَى (٢٦)

Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. (27)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ لَيُسَمُّونَ
الْمَلَائِكَةَ نِسَاءً الْأُنثَى (٢٧)

Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (28)

وَمَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ
وَلِإِنَّ الظَّنَّ لَا يَغْنِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا (٢٨)

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. (29)

فَاعْرِضْ عَنْ مَنْ تَوَلَّى عَنْ ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ
إِلَّا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا (٢٩)

Such is the sum of their knowledge.
Your Lord knows best who strays
from His path, and He knows
best who follows right guidance.
(30)

ذَٰلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ
أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنِ اهْتَدَى ﴿٣٠﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is
in the heavens and the earth. He
will requite those who do evil in
accordance with what they did,
and will reward those who do
good with what is best. (31)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِي الْاَرْضِ
لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِيْنَ اَسْتَوٰ اِيْمًا عَمَلُوْا وَيَجْزِيَ
الَّذِيْنَ اَحْسَنُوْا بِالْحَسَنٰى ﴿٣١﴾

As for those who avoid grave sins
and shameful deeds, apart from
casual indulgence, your Lord is
abounding in forgiveness. He
is fully aware of you when He
brings you into being out of the
earth, and when you are still
hidden in your mothers' wombs.
Do not, then, assert your own
goodness. He knows best those
who are truly God-fearing. (32)

الَّذِيْنَ يَحْتَبِئُوْنَ كَثِيْرًا الْاِثْمِ وَالْفَوْحِشِ
اِلَّا اِلَّا اللّٰهُمَّ اِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَاسِعٌ الْمَغْفِرَةُ هُوَ اَعْلَمُ
بِكُمْ اِذَا اُنْشَاَكُمْ مِنْ الْاَرْضِ وَاِذَا اُنْتَسَخَتْ
اُحْنَتُكُمْ فِىْ بُطُوْنِ اُمَهْنِكُمْ فَلَا تُزَكُّوْا
اَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ اَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اَتَقٰى ﴿٣٢﴾

Consider the one who turns away:
(33)

اَفَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِيْ قَوْلًا ﴿٣٣﴾

he gives little at first then hardens
and srops. (34)

وَاَعْطٰى قَلِيْلًا وَّاَكْثٰى ﴿٣٤﴾

Does he have knowledge of what
lies beyond the reach of human
perception so that he can clearly
see? (35)

اَعِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ الْغَيْبِ فَهَوٰىرٰى ﴿٣٥﴾

Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, (36)

أَمْ لَمْ يَلْتَمِسْ بِمَا فِي صُحُفِ مُوسَى ﴿٣٦﴾

and to Abraham who was true to his trust: (37)

وَابْرَاهِيمَ الَّذِي وَفَّى ﴿٣٧﴾

that no soul shall bear the burden of another; (38)

أَلَا نَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

that man will only have what he strives for; (39)

وَأَن لِّئْسَ لِلإِنسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

that his labour will be seen (40)

وَأَن سَعْيُهُ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

and he will be given the fullest reward for it; (41)

ثُمَّ يُجْزَاهُ الْجَزَاءُ الْأَوْفَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

that with your Lord is the ultimate end; (42)

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٢﴾

that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; (43)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَضْحَكَ وَأَبْكَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is He who deals death and gives life; (44)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَمَاتٌ وَأَحْيَا ﴿٤٤﴾

that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, (45)

وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

from a seed as it is lodged in place; (46)

مِّنْ نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

that it is He who brings about a second life; (47)

وَأَن عَلَيْهِ النَّشْأَةُ الْآخِرَىٰ ﴿٤٧﴾

that it is He who gives riches and possessions; (48)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَغْنَىٰ وَأَقْنَىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾

that He is the Lord of Sirius; (49)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ رَبُّ الشَّعَرَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; (50)

وَأَنَّهُ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا الْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; (51)

وَتَمُودَ إِفَّا الْبَقَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; (52)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْغَىٰ ﴿٥٢﴾

that it is He who brought down the ruined cities (53)

وَالْمُؤَنَّفِكَ أَهْوَىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾

enveloping them with whatever came over them. (54)

فَغَشَّاهَا مَعَشَىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (55)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾

This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. (56)

هَذَانِذِيرٌ مِّنَ النَّذِيرِ الْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٦﴾

The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. (57)

أَزِفَتِ الْآزِفَةُ ﴿٥٧﴾

None but God can remove it. (58)

لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

Do you find this discourse
strange? (59)

أَفَرَأَيْتَ هَذَا الَّذِي تَعْبُودُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Do you laugh instead of weeping,
(60)

وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَبْكُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

and pay no heed? (61)

وَأَنْتُمْ سَاهُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Prostrate yourselves before God
and worship Him alone. (62)

فَاعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَأَعْبُدُوا ﴿٦٢﴾

As the Prophet Receives Revelation

By the star when it sets. This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, something that a very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muhammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (Verses 1-18)

As we recite this opening, we live for a few moments on the sublime expanse experienced by the Prophet's heart. We rise over wings of light to join the company on high. We listen to the smooth beat echoed in the words, their meanings and the message they impart. We live with the Prophet's heart as it looks on, with all curtains and covers removed. He receives revelation from on high, listens and looks, and he commits to memory what was revealed to him. These moments were a special experience given only to his purified heart, but God favours His servants

by giving them an inspiring description that imparts to them a feeling of the message, its echoes and meanings. He describes to them the journey that took his blessed heart to the heavens above, step by step, scene by scene and stage after stage, as if they too are witnessing it all.

This inspiring description starts with an oath made by God: "*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) The brilliant shining of stars before they set on the horizon is similar to the image drawn of Gabriel, the object of the oath. He is first "*on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed.*" (Verses 7–10) Thus starts the harmony between the scene, the movement, the connotations and the rhythm.

"*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) Reports differ as to the star referred to in this oath. The closest that comes to mind is that of Sirius, which was worshipped by some people in the past. It is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, as it says of God: "*He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) People in olden times paid special attention to this star. Ancient Egyptians used to link the flooding of the Nile to Sirius as it crossed the highest orbit. They watched it carefully to monitor the level of water in the Nile. It also has a special position in Persian and Arabian legends. It is probable, therefore, that the oath by the star at the beginning of the *sūrah* refers to it. That the image chosen here is that of the star's falling and setting is significant, as it suggests that no matter how great a star is in size and position, it falls down and changes place. It does not, then, deserve to be worshipped. What is worshipped should always be high and permanent.

The main object of the oath is the Prophet and the revelation given to him:

This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him. (Verses 2–4)

This friend of yours is on the right course, well guided, sincere, gives you good advice, delivering the truth, free of error, illusions, fabrications and fancy. It is all a revelation bestowed on him from on high, and he delivers what is revealed to him in all honesty. The one who brings

him this revelation is well known, following a well-charted course. The Prophet saw him with his own eyes and mind:

A very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muhammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? (Verses 5–12)

This mighty angel of surpassing power is Gabriel. It is he who has taught your friend, Muhammad. His journey is detailed here. It began on the highest horizon where the Prophet saw him at the start of revelation. He saw Gabriel as God created him, covering the horizon with his enormous body. He then drew near and came closer towards the Prophet until he was very near to him, or, as the *sūrah* says, 'two bow-lengths away, or even closer', which indicates very close proximity. He then revealed to him whatever he revealed, leaving the subject matter vague to indicate that it is momentous.

Thus, it is a case of seeing someone very close up after he had initially appeared at a distance, and then there is revelation, teaching, looking closely and being certain. In such conditions there can be no lie in what is reported. This truth does not allow for argument or dispute: "[Muhammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?" (Verses 11–12) A heart's vision is more certain because it precludes any deception that might cloud a person's eyesight. He saw and made sure. His heart was then certain that he saw the angel bearing divine revelations. The angel is a messenger God sends to teach the Prophet and assign to him the task of delivering to mankind what he has learnt. There can be no more dispute or argument.

This was not the only time the Prophet saw the Angel Gabriel in his original form. The *sūrah* itself identifies there was another time:

Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (Verses 13–18)

This was, according to weightier reports, when the Prophet went on his night journey and ascended to heaven. Gabriel came close to the Prophet in the shape and form God gave him, and this was '*by the lote tree of the farthest limit*.' The farthest limit may mean the point where everything ends, as it is close to the garden of abode. It may also mean the point at which the Prophet's journey taking him to heaven ended. Alternatively, it could mean where Gabriel's company ended, as he stood there when the Prophet ascended a further step taking him closer to his Lord's Throne. All this is known only to God, and He gave this knowledge to His chosen Messenger. This is the only information we have of it, and it is beyond our power to fathom. No human being can understand this except by God's will, the Creator of man and angel, who knows the capabilities of each.

The *sūrah* mentions what affected the scene at the lote tree of the farthest end to further emphasize that it was all real: "*when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it*." (Verse 16) We are given no details because the matter is too serious to think about anything further. All this was absolutely certain: "*The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold*." (Verse 17) Nothing affected his eyesight so as to blur his vision. It was indeed a clear, well-defined vision that admitted no doubt. He saw on that trip some of the greatest signs of his Lord, looking directly at these essential truths as they appeared before him free of any make up.

Hence, the question of revelation is one based on clear vision, a well-defined scene, absolute certainty, direct contact, accurate knowledge, real company and an actual journey with its details outlined. It is on the basis of such certainty that your friend's mission is based, even though you continue to reject what he says, casting doubt about his claims. Yet you have known this friend for a very long time, testing his truthfulness and confirming it. His Lord confirms what he says and swears to its truth. He reports to you how he was given revelation and in what circumstances this was imparted. He tells you the circumstances when the revelation is given to him, and by whom: how he saw him and where.

Claiming Divinity for Idols

Such is the irrefutable truth in which Muḥammad (peace be upon him) called them to believe. What basis, then, do they have for their worship and superstitions of alleged deities? How can they justify their worship of al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā and Manāt? How can they prove their dubious claims that these were angels, and that the angels were God’s daughters, or that they can intercede with God on people’s behalf? Do they have anything to support these claims?

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. Is man to have all that he may wish for, when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (Verses 19–28)

Al-Lāt was a carved white rock, enclosed within a building covered with curtains, and with attendants serving it. Surrounding the building was a courtyard that the tribe of Thaqif living in Ṭā’if, as well as tribes in the surrounding area, venerated. They were considered exceptionally honoured among Arab tribes, not however surpassing the Quraysh, for having it in their hometown. Needless to say, the Quraysh had the greater honour of having the Ka‘bah, built by Abraham, in their city. It is thought that the name al-Lāt was considered as being the feminine form of God’s Arabic name, Allah.

Al-‘Uzzā was a tree around which a building was built and with curtains raised. It was at Nakhlah, between Makkah and Ṭā’if. The Quraysh in particular used to venerate al-‘Uzzā. After the Battle of

Uḥud, the Quraysh leader stood boasting, 'We have al-'Uzzā, but you have no 'Uzzā', but the Prophet instructed his Companions to reply by saying: "God is our protecting Master, but you have no master to protect you." It is thought that the name al-'Uzzā was the feminine form of God's name, *al-'Azīz*, meaning the Almighty.

Manāt was stationed at a place called al-Mushallal in Qadīd, between Makkah and Madīnah. The tribes of Khuzā'ah, al-Aws and al-Khazraj used to venerate it in their pre-Islamic days, and used to start their pilgrimage from there.

There were many other idols venerated by different tribes, but these three were the major ones. It is thought that these idols were symbols representing angels whom the Arabs considered to be female and who they also claimed to be God's daughters. Hence, why they were originally worshipped. What happens in such cases is that the original idea is lost and the symbol becomes, for the majority of people, the thing to be worshipped. Only a handful of knowledgeable people continue to remember the original legend.

God mentions these three worshipped objects, implying in the very question He asks that to worship such things is indeed singular: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Such singularity is clearly highlighted in His starting the question with, '*have you considered*', and in describing Manāt as '*the third other*'. After this initial question, He then adds that their other claim that He had daughters while they had sons was even more singular: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This suggests that these worshipped objects related to the legend that the angels were females, begotten by God – far more exalted is God above all such false claims. This confirms what we have said about those Arabs: they hated that they should beget females, but were not ashamed to make the angels, about whom they knew nothing, females and to allege that they were God's offspring. God questions them here on the basis of their own concepts, ridiculing these and whoever upholds them: "*Are you to have the male and He the female?*" Such a division you make between yourselves and God is most unfair!

The whole thing is based on illusion. It has no basis in human knowledge or in reality. No evidence or argument can be given in

support of such claims: *"These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them."* (Verse 23) These names, al-Lât, al-'Uzzâ, Manât, and all others like them, which are called deities, angels, female and God's daughters, are false and cannot be substantiated. God has given you no evidence in support of such claims. What God does not sanction is certainly false and insupportable. It carries no weight.

This address to the unbelievers ends in the middle of the verse. The *sûrah* turns away from them as if they were not even there. Indeed, it speaks of them in the third person: *"They follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls."* (Verse 23) They lack argument, fact and certainty. They base their beliefs on surmise, and turn to their whims for evidence. Faith, however, cannot be based on either surmise or whim. True faith must be based on certainty and irrefutable evidence, without reference to whim or desire. The unbelievers had no excuse to justify their following whim and surmise: *"Even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them."* (Verse 23) When the deciding factor is one's own whim and desire, nothing can be right, and no guidance is of any use. The problem is not the absence of truth or evidence supporting it; the problem is a powerful desire that wants certain things, seeking justification for what it wants. This is the worst situation man can find himself in, because then no guidance is of any benefit and no proof is convincing.

Hence the *sûrah* disapprovingly asks: *"Is man to have all that he may wish for?"* (Verse 24) Will everything man wishes come true, have reality? Things are not like that. Truth and reality are different from wishful thinking, which cannot change facts. The fact is that man errs when he follows his own desires. He is too weak to change the nature of things. Everything in this life and the next belongs to God who accomplishes whatever He wills in both worlds: *"Both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone."* (Verse 25)

We note here that the life to come is mentioned first, ahead of the present life, in order to maintain the rhyme. However, this gives an intended connotation, signifying that the life to come is more

important. This is normal in the Qur'ān, where the meaning fits well with the beat and the rhyme, allowing neither aspect to overshadow the other. This applies to everything of God's making throughout the universe, where beauty is maintained in harmony with the fulfilment of the function.

Since everything belongs to God in both this world and the life to come, there can be no basis for the unbelievers' conjectures that their false deities can intercede with God on their behalf. They used to say: *"We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God."* (39: 3) Such conjecture is baseless. None of the angels in heaven can intercede with God except when God grants them permission to do so: *"Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased."* (Verse 26)

Having been proved in the previous verses to be false, their claims now fall apart. All fallacy and doubt is now removed from faith. Everything in this world and the following one belongs to God. Whims and desires cannot change reality. Intercession can only be accepted by God's leave. The final judgement is His alone.

At the end of this section, a final discussion is given of the unbelievers' false concepts about the angels, showing them to be baseless: *"Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth."* (Verses 27–28) This final comment implicitly refers to the link between al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt and the legend that makes angels female and that further alleges that they belong to God. This whole legend lacks all foundation. The unbelievers had no means whatsoever to learn anything true about the nature of the angels. As for the angels being God's offspring, this is a fallacy, ingrained in their false surmise, which can never be a substitute for the truth.

The Attitude to Take

At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet. It directs him to ignore such people and turn away from them, leaving their fate to God. He knows the ones who do well and those who do badly, and it is He who

requires both those who follow His guidance and those who remain in error. He is the One who controls the universe, this life and the life to come. He is the One who deals in absolute justice, wronging no one, forgiving sins that are not persisted with. He knows everyone's intentions and inner thoughts, as He is the Creator of mankind who knows everyone's reality at every stage and at every moment:

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing. (Verses 29–32)

This order to ignore those who turn away from God's message and remain preoccupied with this present life is directed in the first place to the Prophet. He should not concern himself with those unbelievers whose legends and attitudes have already been discussed in the *sūrah*. It is also directed at every Muslim who must adopt a similar attitude towards anyone who refuses to believe in God, focuses all his attention on this life, disbelieves in the life to come, considers the life of this world to be the ultimate goal and adopts a way of life based on this concept. Such people sever any relation between their consciences and belief in God, for it is He who holds them to account for their deeds after the end of their time on earth. Those who are nearest to this description in our time are those who advocate materialistic creeds.

Someone who believes in God and in the life to come cannot afford to give much thought to, let alone interact with, anyone who turns away from God's message and who discards the life to come altogether. Their ways of life are so different that they cannot meet over a single point. All their standards, values and goals in life are in disagreement.

Therefore, the two cannot cooperate or collaborate in any activity. With such being the case, why should a believer concern himself with the one who turns away from God and His message? To do so is to waste effort and energy.

Moreover, to ignore them is to put them low. No matter what sort of people they are, the ones who do not believe in God and have no preoccupation other than this present life cannot see the truth or understand it. They stand behind the walls of this present life. It represents the total sum of their knowledge. It is a scanty little sum even though it may appear substantial; narrow even if it appears vast; leading into error even though it seems enlightened. A person whose feelings, heart and mind are confined to this earth, despite the fact that we see with our eyes a huge world beyond, cannot know anything of value. This huge world we see has not created itself, and the possibility of its just coming into existence must automatically be rejected by human logic. Since it has a Creator, it could not have existed as a pastime. To say that this present life is the be all and end all of this huge universe is to indulge in triviality. When we understand the true nature of this universe, whatever angle we look at it from, we will inevitably believe in the Creator, and also in the life to come. The supreme Creator who originated this huge universe does not engage in trivialities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we should ignore those who turn away from God's message and limit themselves to the confines of this present life. For one thing, ignoring them will ensure that we care only for those who deserve to be cared for. Moreover, it puts in the right place those whose knowledge does not go beyond the present life. We are commanded to do so, and God's command must be obeyed.

"Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance." (Verse 30) He knew that those people were in error. Therefore, He did not wish for his Messenger and those who follow His guidance to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of those in error, nor to befriend and associate with them. They must not be deceived by appearances that show their scanty and erroneous knowledge as great, for all such knowledge is confined to this world and prevents man from appreciating the truth that leads to believing in God and the life to come.

Errant and deviant people may acquire knowledge that appears to be great in the eyes of the masses. They may think such knowledge to have far-reaching effects in this present life. Yet possessing such knowledge does not alter the fact that they are in error, ignorant and have impaired understanding. The bond between the universe and its Creator and the link between man's action and reward are two aspects of truth that are necessary for anyone with true knowledge. Without these two truths any knowledge remains superficial. It has neither a real effect on human life, nor does it help its progress. The value of knowledge is measured by its effect on the human soul and people's moral relations. Otherwise, such knowledge produces nothing other than progress in machines and retrogression in human values. And knowledge that promotes machines at the expense of humans is miserable indeed.

A man who feels that his Creator created the universe according to a single, coherent law will inevitably find his attitude to life and all he sees around him influenced by this. He, thus, realizes that his existence has a higher objective than his own immediate life, because it is interlinked with the existence of the universe. He begins to look at himself in a different light. He will see himself as bigger than his own self with his limited lifespan. He will see himself as greater than his family with its few individuals, then of his community, country and class. He is at a higher level than all these formations.

To realize that he must submit an account to his Creator on the Day of Judgement when God will requite him for his deeds is bound to alter man's concepts, methods of evaluation, motives and goals. It will also provide a clear link between his moral sense and his destiny, for he will recognize that his salvation is dependent on how his moral values influence his actions. This is bound to strengthen and enhance his moral sense, making him stronger and better able to control his actions. He has now a watchful inner guard, keeping an eye on the final reckoning in the hereafter. Besides, he is reassured that goodness will eventually triumph, even if it appears to lose some rounds in the battle that takes place on earth. It is his duty to always support what is good and strive for its triumph, even though he himself may suffer defeat. The final outcome is not in this life on earth; it is there, with the final reckoning, in that most certain life to come.

This question of belief in God and in the Day of Judgement is of immense importance. As a human need, it is more important than food, drink and clothing. With it, man's humanity is assured, but without it, man is just another animal.

When standards, goals and life concepts are so different between believers and unbelievers, there can be no partnership, friendship, interaction or serious dealings. There can be nothing between one who believes in God and another whose preoccupation with this present life makes him turn away from God's message. To say anything different is to indulge in futile argument and to disobey God's clear order: "*Ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world.*" (Verse 29)

What Requit for Man

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. (Verse 31)

This statement, emphasizing God's full ownership of the heavens and earth, gives the question of the hereafter added strength and greater influence. The One who determines the life to come and its timing is the One to whom the heavens and earth belong. Only He is able to administer reward, and to ensure that it is administered with full justice for all: "*He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then defines the ones who do good, earning a reward according to what is best. They are the ones "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence.*" (Verse 32) Grave sins are cardinal, and shameful deeds are those sins that represent serious transgression. Scholars differ as to the meaning of the Arabic word *lamam*, translated here as casual indulgence.

Ibn Kathīr says that the exception indicated by the phrase, *apart from*, is unrelated, meaning that what follows it does not relate to what comes before it, because to him *lamam* means trivial sin. Imām Aḥmad quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "Nothing defines *lamam* better than the hadith

quoting the Prophet as saying, 'Everyone will inevitably have his share of fornication: the eye fornicates with glances, the tongue with words, and the mind with thoughts and desire; and ultimately one confirms all this going the whole way or discards it.' [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "The eye fornicates with glances, the lips with kissing, the hands with the use of force and the legs with walking. Ultimately one confirms all this with action going the whole way or not. If one goes the whole way, it is adultery, and if not then it is *lamam*." Similar views are expressed by Masrūq and al-Sha'bī, who were prominent early scholars. Likewise, Abū Hurayrah is quoted as explaining *lamam* as "a kiss, a glance, a gesture and minor action. Should genitals meet, then that is adultery requiring a full bath."

All these views are similar, defining *lamam* as trivial sin. Other scholars, however, express different views. A report by Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd ibn Aslam defines it as, 'what was done in the past'. Mujāhid says that "*lamam* means a person committing a serious sin and then desisting from it". Al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās a report saying that *lamam* means "a man indulges in a grave sin then repents". He refers to a *ḥadīth* quoting the Prophet as saying: "If You forgive me, My Lord, then You will forgive much. Who of Your servants has not dipped into *lamam*." Abū Hurayrah is also reported to have said in reference to this Qur'ānic statement, "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence*". (Verse 32): "This means a one-off indulgence in adultery then repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in stealing before repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in drinking then repentance with no repeat. Such is *lamam*." A similar view is attributed to al-Ḥasan, an early prominent scholar.

On balance, I feel that this second view is more appropriate, as it fits better with the statement that follows in the same verse: "*Your Lord is abounding in forgiveness*." (Verse 32) Describing God's forgiveness as abounding fits well with the view that *lamam* is a casual indulgence in such grave sins and shameful conduct, followed by sincere and genuine repentance. This means that the definition the *sūrah* gives of those '*who do good*' means that they are the ones who '*avoid grave sins and shameful deeds*,' unless they slip, but repent soon after and refrain from repeating such sins. In another *sūrah*, God speaks of the 'God-fearing',

defining them as *"Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God can forgive sins? – and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done."* (3: 135) He promises to reward them with forgiveness and admittance into a *"paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth."* (3: 133) This is indeed more in line with the concept of God's mercy being ever present and far extending, and of His forgiveness being abounding.

The verse concludes by the statement that God's requital of people's deeds is based on His knowledge of their inner thoughts throughout all stages of their lives: *"He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs."* (Verse 32) His knowledge, then, precedes their own actions, as it is the knowledge of their true nature which they themselves do not even know. It is known only to God, their Creator. This knowledge was present when God originated them from the earth before they were brought into existence, and when they were still in their mothers' wombs, before they were brought into the light. It is the knowledge of their truth before it takes physical shape, and of their nature before it translates into action.

When we think of God's knowledge in this way, we realize that it is pointless, and indeed impudent for a man to tell Him about himself, trying to press his good points: *"Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing."* (Verse 32) He does not need for you to tell Him about yourselves, or to suggest how your deeds measure up. His knowledge is perfect, His measure accurate, His reward just, His judgement final, and to Him all creatures return.

On Their Own

The *sūrah* moves now to its final part which maintains the same rhythm as the first part. It states the basic concept of divine faith, as it has been ever since the time of Abraham, who delivered the first full code for living. It makes their Lord known to mankind. It shows them how His will influences their lives, portraying its effects one after another in a way that strongly shakes the human conscience. It builds its effect up

to the final beats, which are very powerful and are received with softened hearts and responsive minds.

Consider the one who turns away: he gives little at first then hardens and stops. Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that man will only have what he strives for; that his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it; that with your Lord is the ultimate end; that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; and it is He who deals death and gives life; that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place; that it is He who brings about a second life; that it is He who gives riches and possessions; that He is the Lord of Sirius; that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ad; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?

This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it. Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed? Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone. (Verses 33–62)

This passage begins with a reference to the one who turns away, giving little at first before stopping altogether. His attitude is strange and the *sūrah* wonders at him. Some reports suggest that these two short verses refer to a particular man who began by making a small donation for God's cause before stopping for fear of becoming poor. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī names this person as 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, reporting a story which has no solid basis and will be dismissed as totally unreliable by anyone who knows even a little about 'Uthmān and his history of very generous donations for Islam and the Muslim community. Such donations never stopped

at any time during his life. He was a most devoted servant of Islam, with a strong and sound faith, and with good knowledge of the Islamic principles, particularly with regard to individual responsibility.²

It may be that this Qur'ānic statement refers to a particular case, but it is equally possible that it is speaking about a type, rather than an individual. Anyone who abandons this line, weakening after having come forward with effort and money in support of God's cause, invites amazement. The Qur'ān uses this example to present and clarify certain basic principles of the Islamic faith.

"Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see?" (Verse 35) Knowledge of what lies beyond our perception belongs to God and can only be seen by Him. No man can fathom it. No one can be sure what turn events will take and what effect such a turn will have on him. Therefore, one must work tirelessly, doing one's best throughout one's life. It is wrong to stop doing what is good, because nothing guarantees a good turn in the future life better than good action now, in this present life, coupled with a hope to earn God's forgiveness and pleasure.

"Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust." (Verses 36–37) This religion goes far back in history, and its latest version is closely related to its oldest one, with both having the same fundamental principles and values. Its different parts are mutually complementary, despite the fact that there have been many messages and messengers, with wide gulfs separating them in time and place. It is embodied in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham before him. Abraham is singled out here as having been true to his trust. He fulfilled every assignment given to him. This quality of Abraham's is highlighted here to provide contrast with that of doing a little good first, then stopping altogether.

2. The story mentions that 'Uthmān used to donate for good causes. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, his brother through breast-feeding, i.e. one woman breast-fed them both when they were young, said to him: "If you continue at this rate, you will soon be without money." 'Uthmān said: "I committed sins, and I hope that what I am doing will earn me forgiveness by God." 'Abdullāh said: "Give me your she-camel, with its present load, and I will bear all your sins." He gave him that and called witnesses to solemnize the deal. He then stopped his donations. Therefore, these verses were revealed. This is the story, and it is clearly false. 'Uthmān could never have behaved in this way.

What do their revelations contain? The answer is clearly stated: "*That no soul shall bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 38) No one shall bear another's burden, making it heavier or lighter. Voluntary help is not acceptable in this respect.

"*That man will only have what he strives for.*" (Verse 39) Such is the rule. No one is to be credited with anything other than his own deeds. No man or woman will be given anything extra that someone else might have done; nor will anything be taken away so as to be credited to someone else. This present life is the chance given to all to work as they please. Once a person dies, the chance has gone. No further action can be credited, except as explained by the Prophet: "When a human being dies, his deeds come to a final end except in one of three ways: a continuing act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge, and a dutiful child who prays for him." [Related by Muslim.] These three ways are, in essence, part of a person's own deeds:

On this Qur'ānic verse, al-Shāfi'ī and other scholars base their view that reading the Qur'ān and requesting God to credit the reward for its recitation to the dead is not valid. They say that the reward for such a recitation will not be credited to a deceased person, because it is not his own deed. Therefore, the Prophet did not recommend it in any explicit or implicit way. Nor was this practised by any of the Prophet's Companions. Had it been valid, they would have done it before us. When we speak about virtuous actions earning reward, we must confine ourselves to what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān and the *ahādīth*. We cannot rely on analogy or scholarly views. As for praying for the deceased and donating to charity on their behalf, these are unanimously agreed upon by scholars to be credited to them since they are expressly stated in authentic religious texts.³

"*That his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it.*" (Verses 40–41) Nothing of a person's deeds will ever be lost, as nothing will be overlooked by Him. Every action, no matter how small,

3. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, Dār al-Ma'rīfah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 276.

will be valued by God's fine and accurate measure so as to give everyone their full reward. No one will suffer even the slightest loss or injustice.

Thus, the principle of individual responsibility goes hand in hand with that of absolute justice for all. Man is thus given his full humanity based on his being a rational and responsible creature who can be trusted to look after himself. He is in a position of honour, given a chance to work for his future life and then submits his work for reckoning and reward. He is reassured that absolute justice will be done, as the reckoning is fair, unaffected by preferential treatment or oversight.

"That with your Lord is the ultimate end." (Verse 42) The only road to follow is the one leading to Him. There is no refuge other than with Him, and no abode other than what He defines, in a place of bliss or one of suffering. This truth is extremely significant in shaping man's feelings and ideas. When man realizes that everything and everyone will ultimately end with God, he knows the inevitable outcome right from the beginning, and will try to determine his own actions in accordance with this truth. His heart and mind will remain, throughout his life journey, focused on the end he knows to be inevitable.

Life's Journey

Having given us a glimpse of the ultimate end, the *sūrah* takes us back to this life, showing us some aspects of the work of the divine will at every stage and in every situation: *"That it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep."* (Verse 43) These few words embody a number of facts and generate many inspiring images. It is God who gave man the two inner qualities of laughter and weeping. No one knows quite how they work in man's complex constitution, in which the psychology is as complex as the anatomy. Indeed, we realize that both psychological and physical factors closely interact to produce laughter or weeping.

It is God who causes man to laugh or weep, by creating what makes man laugh or weep. He makes man laugh in certain situations and weep in others according to the interplay of certain secret elements within him. Man may laugh tomorrow at what causes him to weep today, or may weep now because of something that made him laugh a short time

earlier. Yet this is due to no madness or absent-mindedness. It is merely the result of changing psychological conditions as influenced by a host of factors that affect our feelings and reactions.

God also makes different people laugh or weep at the same time, each according to different influences. Some may laugh at the very thing that makes others weep. Although the situation is the same, its circumstances and outcome give it widely different effects on people. Moreover, God causes the same person to laugh and weep at the same thing. He may react to something with laughter until its outcome becomes known to him when he cries. Then he wishes that he had not laughed or reacted in the way he had. Many are those who laugh in this present life only to find themselves weeping in the life to come when regret is of no use.

All these images, connotations, feelings and situations spring to mind as we read this short verse. More are generated as we gain further experience in life, and as causes of laughter and weeping come into play. This is one more aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.

"And it is He who deals death and gives life." (Verse 44) Likewise, this short verse gives rise to endless images. It is God who initiates life and death. In another *sūrah*, we read that God *"has created death and life."* (67: 2) Both are well known to man as they always occur, but both are deeply hidden when man tries to fathom their nature. What is death; what is life? What answers do we get when we try to understand them further than the two words and the two apparent conditions imply? How does life start in a living thing? Where does it come from; and how does it go into something to make it alive? How does it progress, taking this living thing with it on its way? What is death; how does it happen before the start of life, and after its departure from living things? It is all a deep secret hidden beyond thick curtains that God's hand has drawn.

It is God who deals death and gives life. As we listen, there appear before us millions of images of life and death, in all living worlds, all at the same moment. Consider how many millions upon millions of living things have died at this moment in time! Consider also how many millions upon millions have started their life's journeys, with life springing into them from where neither they nor anyone else, apart from God, knows! How many deaths have occurred at this moment, yet they themselves give rise to life? Now let us stretch our minds to

past generations: how many have lived and died across endless centuries before human life started on this planet? We will not say anything about other types of life and death elsewhere in the universe. No human mind can ever imagine these.

These few words give rise to endless images that shake man to the core. Inevitably, he is profoundly influenced by their rhythm and widely ranging echoes.

A Sperm and Two Sexes

"That it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place." (Verses 45–46) This is a fact of momentous significance, even though man is oblivious to it because he sees it taking place all the time. It is indeed greater than the most amazing thing human imagination can ever produce. A seed is discharged. It is merely one of many types of discharge the human body makes, such as sweat, tears, mucous, etc. Then after a certain period determined by God, this discharge becomes something different. It becomes a human being, either male or female. How does this miracle happen? Had we not seen it happen, it would not have even entered our imaginations or crossed our minds. Where was this human being, with its very sophisticated and complex constitution? Where was it lodged in that little drop of semen, or indeed in one of the millions of its sperms? Look at the bones, flesh, skin, veins, hair, nails, distinctive features, characteristics, potentials and moods of a human being, and think: where was all that hidden in a single microscopic cell floating, like millions similar to it, in a drop of liquid that a man discharges? Where in particular are lodged the characteristics of male and female in that single cell?

What human mind can contemplate this great fact and continue to arrogantly argue that it all just happens in this way, or that it just learnt to move in this line? Indeed, some people try to posit a seemingly enlightened argument, saying that the sperm acts in this way because, like all living things, it has the ability of reproduction. This is a circular argument, one that gives an explanation but needs an explanation itself. Who gave the sperm this potential? Who placed into it the latent desire to preserve its kind through reproduction? Weak and tiny as the sperm

is, who made it able to reproduce its kind? Who charted its journey so as to make it proceed with its task in such a well-defined way as to fulfil its desire of reproduction? Indeed, who gave it all the characteristics of its kind so as to reproduce them all? Moreover, why should it wish to reproduce its kind, and what interest is there for this sperm to reproduce all the characteristics of its kind? Can there be any other answer to all these questions other than a wise will that has a certain design for a certain objective, and that this will is able to fulfil its design and achieve its objective?

Having stated this first initiation of man, which is a continuously repeated event that no one denies, the *sūrah* moves directly to the second: "*That it is He who brings about a second life.*" (Verse 47) This second life belongs to the realm that is beyond our perception, but the first initiation provides ample evidence of its possibility. The One who created the two sexes from a single seed can easily bring life back to bones and other remains. Such bones and dust are no way less than an ejaculated seed as production material. Moreover, the first initiation provides evidence of the wisdom behind a second life. The subtle, yet elaborate planning that leads the tiny living cell along its arduous way until it becomes a male or a female must have a goal beyond this journey on earth in which nothing is complete and where people do not receive full reward or requital for their good or evil actions. This elaborate planning has made it thus because it includes a second life, which brings everything to its fullness. We see that the first initiation gives double evidence of the second life. Hence, it is mentioned first.

In both lives, God bestows riches on whomever He wills of His servants: "*That it is He who gives riches and possessions.*" (Verse 48) Many and diverse are the types of riches God grants to His servants in this world: wealth, health, offspring, contentedness, happiness, feeling, thought as well as the unique feeling of richness generated by feeling one's bond with God. He also bestows riches of the life to come on whomever He wills. Furthermore, He gives those He chooses possessions in plenty both in this life and the next. Human beings are poor, penniless. They cannot become rich and own things unless God grants them whatever He is pleased to grant them out of His treasures. They all know this and look up to Him for more, realizing that He is

the only source. They know that His treasures are the ones that are full and endless, while everything else is empty.

"That He is the Lord of Sirius." (Verse 49) Sirius is a star that is 20 times heavier than the sun, gives 50 times the light the sun gives, and is a million times further away from us than the sun. Some people used to worship Sirius, and some used to watch it in particular, feeling that it had special importance. Therefore, stating that God is the Lord of Sirius is most fitting in this *sūrah*, which starts with an oath by the star as it sets, and speaks about the journey to the high heavens, focusing in all this on God's oneness and showing the fallacy of associating partners with Him.

The Communities of Old

That it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (Verses 50–55)

This is a quick round, with a short pause placed where the fate of each of those old communities is mentioned, coupled with a sharp rough with which we are certain to interact. The 'Ād, Thamūd and people of Noah are well known to the reader of the Qur'ān, as they are mentioned several times in this divine book. The ruined cities are those of Lot's people who were immersed in sin and went far astray. Their cities were turned upside down, but their fate is left vague here, *'enveloping them with whatever came over them,'* to add a feeling of suspense through which we see images of ruins upon ruins, leaving nothing clear or identifiable.

"Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?" (Verse 55) The calamities that befell those communities were blessings then. Did they not lead to the destruction of evil? Were they not events that hurled the truth over falsehood to make it disappear? Did they not leave signs for everyone to reflect upon? These are certainly blessings. Hence why should people still doubt them? The address here is to every heart and

mind which reflect on what God does and which see the blessing even when the event is one of calamity.

The *sūrah* now delivers its final beat, one that is profound and powerful. It is an outcry alerting us to the great, looming danger: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) This Messenger whom you doubt and who you argue about with the warnings he gives you is just like those warnings of old. When they were taken lightly, they were followed with well-known events. The imminent Hour is now close, it will sweep everything before it. It is the one that will envelop and strike all that this Messenger has been warning you about. Alternatively, the warning mentioned in the verse refers to the subject of the warning, or rather the suffering that may be inflicted. Its nature and timing are known only to God. When it takes place none but God can lift it: "*None but God can remove it.*"

The danger is now very close to you, and the compassionate warner is calling on you to save yourselves, but you are deeply indulged, paying no attention, oblivious of what is about to engulf you: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) This discourse is great and serious, defining heavy responsibilities for people while also providing them with a complete code for living. Why should they find it strange? Why should they laugh when it is given in all seriousness? The responsibilities it outlines and the fact that people will have to give full accounts of what they do in life put them in a situation that should invite weeping rather than laughter.

Now the *sūrah* ends with a loud command that strikes both their ears and hearts, telling them what they should do to save themselves from the abyss at the edge of which they perilously stand: "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.*" (Verse 62) Coming after such a discourse creating immense influences, this command struck awe in their hearts and they prostrated themselves as commanded. These idolaters, who endlessly argued about the Qur'ān and revelation, and about God and His message, prostrated themselves at this point. All the people listening to the Prophet reciting this *sūrah* felt its strong beat like a blacksmith's hammer. All of them, Muslims and unbelievers alike, saw the Prophet prostrating himself at its end and they did likewise.

They could not resist the power of the Qur'ān or question its authority. When they came to, they were stunned as they realized what they had just done.

There are numerous reports describing this event. While they are all unanimous about its details, they differ in explaining what appears to be a strange happening. In fact, though, it is not strange at all. It is an example of the effect the Qur'ān produces and how hearts interact with it.

A Fabricated Story

To me, this event of unbelievers prostrating themselves before God, alongside the Muslims, needed an explanation. However, an experience I went through clarified for me its true reasons.

I used to read the false reports of what is known as the 'story of the birds' concerning this event. These are given by Ibn Sa'd in his *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his book on history, and by some commentators on the Qur'ān as they speak in detail about the verse that says: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (22: 52) Ibn Kathīr gives the following comment on these reports: "They are all lacking in authenticity. I did not find any of them to have a sound chain of transmission."

The most detailed of these reports and the least in fabrication is the one given by Ibn Abī Hātim:

Prior to the revelation of *Sūrah* 53, The Star, the unbelievers used to say: 'If only this man [meaning the Prophet] would speak in a good way about our deities, we would approve of him and his followers. Unfortunately, he speaks of our deities in a more derogatory way than he speaks of others who differ with him, such as the Jews and the Christians. The Prophet was deeply hurt by what the unbelievers inflicted on him and his Companions, causing them much harm and accusing him of lying. He was saddened by their stubborn rejection of his message, and was eager that they should

follow divine guidance. When God revealed to him *Sūrah* 53, The Star, and he read the verses saying, '*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*' Satan threw some words at the mention of these idols, adding after their names the following couplet: 'These are exalted birds, whose intercession is desirable.' This rhyming couplet was of Satan's doing. Yet it went into the heart of every unbeliever in Makkah and they repeated it to one another, claiming that Muḥammad had reverted to his people's religion. However the Prophet continued to recite the *sūrah* to the end, when he prostrated himself, as did all those present, believers and unbelievers. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was an old man. He took a handful of dust from the earth in his hand and put his forehead on it in a gesture of prostration.

Both parties were amazed at the fact that the unbelievers prostrated themselves when the Prophet did so. The Muslims, who did not hear Satan's words to the unbelievers, wondered how the unbelievers would prostrate themselves when they did not believe. The unbelievers were happy at the words Satan added, making them feel that the Prophet read them, and considered that their prostration was in acknowledgement of the praise given to their deities. This quickly circulated among people and Satan helped to spread it further until it reached Abyssinia where a large number of the early Muslims had migrated. On hearing of what happened, these Muslims in Abyssinia thought that the people of Makkah had all accepted Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also heard that al-Walīd prostrated himself on his own palm. They felt that Makkah was now a safe place for Islam and its followers. Therefore some of them began to return.

God, however, rendered the aspersion cast by Satan as null and void, making His message clear in itself and by itself, and preserving His Messenger from the fabricated lie. He also revealed the verse saying: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes...*" (22: 52) When God confirmed His word, the unbelievers reverted to their practices of determined hostility, increasing their pressure on the believers.

Other reports go even further in fabricating lies, attributing those words about 'exalted birds' to the Prophet himself, justifying this by his desire to come to some arrangement with the Quraysh. Far be it for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to try to appease unbelievers.

Right from the outset, I rejected all these reports. For one thing, they go against the facts of the Prophet's infallibility and the preservation of the Qur'ān by God, keeping it immune from any distortion. The very flow of the *sūrah* makes such an addition absolutely impossible. In its entirety, the *sūrah* shows the fallacy of the idolaters' belief in those deities and the legends they weave around them. How can such a couplet of praise for them be inserted into such refutation? Even if we consider the argument of some who say that the couplet was heard only by the unbelievers, but not by the believers, it still remains unacceptable. Those unbelievers were Arabs who had a fine sense of their own language. How would they have felt had they heard this false couplet, followed by the verses stating: *"Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority."* (Verses 21–23) Shortly afterwards they would have heard the verses: *"Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth."* (Verses 27–28) And these are even preceded by the verse: *"Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased."* (Verse 26) Had those Arabs, endowed as they were with a fine sense of language, heard this sequence after a supposed couplet praising their idols and confirming that they can intercede with God, they would not have prostrated themselves, because the whole context would have been flawed and crooked. Those Arabs were not as stupid as the fabricators of these reports, to which Orientalists tried to give credence, either out of ignorance or to serve a purpose of their own.

The prostration by the unbelievers had, then, a reason other than this fabricated story. Likewise the return of some immigrants from Abyssinia was for a different reason. This is not the occasion to establish the reason for their return. Instead, we will only concentrate here on the question of the unbelievers' prostration.

A Personal Experience

I spent some time trying to discover the reason for this prostration. I even considered the possibility that it did not take place, and that it was rather a report explaining the return of the immigrants from Abyssinia. It was during this time, however, that I had the experience to which I referred earlier and will now recount.

We were a group of friends passing an evening together when we heard a recitation of the Qur'ān nearby. The reciter, who had an inspiring voice and a fine recitation, was reading this *sūrah*, The Star. Conversation between us ceased as we listened to the Qur'ān. Gradually, I began to feel what the reciter was reading deeply in my heart. I lived with him and felt how the Prophet went on this journey to join the community on high. I lived with him as he saw Gabriel in his angelic form God had created. That was a most remarkable event to contemplate. I reflected on his journey to the world beyond, to the tree at the farthest limit, and to the garden of abode in heaven. I lived all this, as far as my imagination could stretch, and my feelings bear. I followed him as the legends weaved by the idolaters about the angels, and how they worshipped them alleging that they were God's daughters, were shattered at the first touch of reality. I reflected on how a human being is brought into being out of the earth and how it becomes an embryo in its mother's womb, and how each of us is watched by God throughout our life's journey.

I felt a shiver as the reciter began the last part of the *sūrah*, referring to the world beyond the reach of our perception and known only to God; the actions recorded in full and accurate detail so that nothing is lost at the time of reckoning; the fact that all journeys end with God; the multitudes that laugh and the multitudes that cry; the dead and the living in countless numbers; the human seed as it finds its way in the dark before it begins to show its secrets revealing whether it is a male or a female; the second creation; the fate of past communities and the ruined cities of Lot's people as they were enveloped with whatever covered them.

I listened attentively to the last warning before the impending calamity: *"This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it."* (Verses 56–58) I then heard the last cry and felt all my body and soul

trembling: "Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?" (Verses 59–61) When the reciter read the final verse, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" the trembling was no longer only in my heart; it had spread to my whole body and took physical shape, which I could not resist. All my body was quivering and I could neither stop the quivering nor prevent my tears from pouring.

I realized then that the prostration by all those who were listening to the Prophet as he recited this *sūrah* was correct, and that its explanation is easy. Its secret is contained in the powerful effect the Qur'ān has on people and in particular the powerful rhythm this *sūrah* carries. It was not the first time I had read or listened to this *sūrah*, but on that particular occasion it had this effect on me, causing such a response. This is one of the secrets of the Qur'ān: there are special moments, which cannot be anticipated, when a verse or a *sūrah* touches special cords within us to establish direct contact with our hearts. The result is that we are profoundly affected by what we read or listen to.

One such moment touched the hearts of all present as the Prophet recited this *sūrah*, putting all his heart feelings into its recitation, living again all its images which he had already seen with his eyes. All the power in this *sūrah* poured forth from his recitation to touch the hearts of the audience, and they trembled and quivered. When they heard, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" Muḥammad and the Muslims present prostrated themselves. The unbelievers could only follow suit, and so prostrated themselves.

Someone may say to me that I am basing my argument on a personal experience at a certain moment. Furthermore, I am a Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān and feels its special effect, while those others were idolaters, rejecting God's message and denying the Qur'ān. In reply I point out two considerations. The first is that the reciter in their case was Muḥammad, the Prophet, (peace be upon him). He had received the Qur'ān directly from its source and took heart from it, living every moment of his life with it. He loved the Qur'ān so much that when he heard a person reading it in his home, he would walk slowly and listen attentively at the door until the reciter had finished. As this particular *sūrah* was read, he was re-living an experience he had gone through

on high, and with the Holy Spirit as he saw him in his original form. I was listening to a fellow man reciting it, and the difference between the two cases is vast.

The second consideration is that those idolaters were not immune to trembling when they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It was their affected stubbornness that prevented them from acknowledging the truth. The following two cases provide enough evidence of their shaking and trembling when they listened to the Qur'ān.

In his biographical note on 'Utbah ibn Abī Lahab, Ibn 'Asākir reports on the authority of Hannād ibn al-Aswad:

Both Abū Lahab and his son 'Utbah were preparing to travel to Syria, and I also was preparing to go with them. 'Utbah said: "I will go to Muḥammad and say some harsh words about his God." He went to Muḥammad and said to him that he would never believe in the one who *'drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer.'* The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Set on him one of your dogs.' 'Utbah then left him and returned to his father who asked him what Muḥammad's reaction was and 'Utbah reported the Prophet's prayer. Abū Lahab said: 'Son, I really fear for you the effect of his prayer.' Then we set on our way until we stopped at Abrāh where we went into a monk's hermitage. The monk asked us: 'What makes you stop at this place where lions are as plentiful as cats?' Then Abū Lahab said to us: 'You know that I am your eldest and I have certain rights. You also know that this man prayed against my son and I fear what may happen to him as a result. Therefore, bring all your things into the hermitage and put it in the middle, laying my son's blanket on top of it. Then spread your blankets all around it.' We did as he asked us. During the night, a lion came in and smelled all our faces. When he did not find what he wanted, he pulled himself together and leapt landing on top of our things. He smelled 'Utbah's face before hitting him and breaking his head. Abū Lahab said: 'I knew that Muḥammad's prayer was certain to catch up with him.'

The first case documented above mentions Abū Lahab, one of the Prophet's most vehement opponents who used to set people against

him. He is the one the Qur'ān specifically condemns: *"Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he. His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing. He shall have to endure a flaming fire, and his wife, the carrier of firewood, shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck."* (111: 1-5) We see in this report his true feeling about Muḥammad and what he said. We see his profound fear that Muḥammad's prayer against his son would inevitably come true.

The second case refers to 'Urbah ibn Rabī'ah, one the Quraysh chiefs and its representative who tried to negotiate a deal with the Prophet. He suggested that the Prophet should stop his advocacy that led to division among the people and stop criticizing their beliefs. In return they would give him whatever he asked for in money, position and women. When he stated his offer, the Prophet said to him: 'Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you want to say?' When he affirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: 'Then listen to this that I want to read to you.' The Prophet then started to recite from the beginning of Sūrah 41: *"A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear."* (41: 1-4) He continued his recitation until he read Verse 13 which says: *"If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.'" At this point, 'Urbah sprang to his feet, put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and was full of terror as he said to the Prophet: "I appeal to you by all ties of kinship not to do so." He then went back to his people, reported on his mission and concluded by saying: "You, the Quraysh people, know that Muḥammad never lies. I feared that a terrible fate might befall you."*

Such was the reaction of someone who never accepted Islam. Yet he clearly trembled even though his stubbornness got the better of him, preventing him from acting on what he knew to be true. When people like these listen to this sūrah, The Star, being recited by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), then they are very likely to experience a moment of total response which they cannot control. They will submit to the power of the Qur'ān and prostrate themselves with the believers. So let all fabricated stories, like that of the interceding birds, be dumped firmly in the rubbish bin.

SŪRAH 54

Al-Qamar

(The Moon)

Prologue

From start to finish, this *sūrah* represents an awesome onslaught against those who deny the warnings, but gives at the same time confident reassurance to the believers. It is divided into a series of scenes, each showing a different type of suffering inflicted on a community of unbelievers who denied God's messages. Each culminates with a violent shaking of the human heart, as it asks: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings!*" It then lets go, saying: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*"

The themes tackled in this *sūrah* are discussed in many *sūrahs* of Makkan revelation. It begins with a scene from the Day of Judgement and ends with a similar scene. In between, the *sūrah* dwells briefly on the fates of Noah's people, the 'Ād, Thamūd, Lot's people and Pharaoh and his followers. All these are tackled in different ways in other *sūrahs*. Yet all these issues are presented here in a special way, making them appear totally new. Here we see each episode as violent, tempestuous, spreading fear, engendering collapse and a sweeping destruction.

The *sūrah*'s main characteristic is that each scene paints a fast episode of punishment presented to those who deny the divine faith. They feel that they personally are involved in it, witnessing the punishment and enduring its pain. When one scene is over and listeners begin to breathe

again, a new and more awesome scene of punishment is presented to them. When seven such episodes in this suffocating and fearful atmosphere are completed, the last image is presented, providing us with a totally different aura, delivering pleasant shades of security, serenity and reassurance. It shows us the righteous and their destiny: *"The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign."* (Verses 54–55) How different is this from the condition of the unbelievers who are also told of their fate: *"On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'"* (Verse 48)



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

The Last Hour draws near, and
the moon is split asunder. (1)

Yet when the unbelievers see a
sign, they turn away and say,
'Yet another act of continuous
sorcery.' (2)

They deny the truth and follow
their own desires. Yet everything
is ultimately settled. (3)

There has come to them tidings
that should have restrained [their
arrogance], (4)

far-reaching wisdom, but warnings
have been of no avail. (5)

So turn you away from them.
On the day the Summoner will
summon them to something
unknown, (6)

with eyes downcast, they will
come out of their graves like
swarming locusts (7)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

اقْرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ ﴿١﴾

وَإِنْ يَرَوْا آيَةً يُعْرِضُوا وَيَقُولُوا
مِثْرُ مُنْثَرٍ ۖ ﴿٢﴾

وَكَذَّبُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَ هُمْ وَكُلُّ
أَمْرٍ مُسْتَقَرٌّ ۖ ﴿٣﴾

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ مِنَ الْأَنْبَاءِ
مَا فِيهِ مُزْدَجَرٌ ۖ ﴿٤﴾

حِكْمَةٌ بَالِغَةٌ فَمَا تُغْنِ النُّذُرُ ﴿٥﴾

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ يَوْمَ يَدْعُ الدَّاعِ إِلَىٰ
شَيْءٍ يُكْفَرُ ۖ ﴿٦﴾

خُشْعًا أَبْصَرُهُمْ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ
كَأَنَّهُمْ جَرَادٌ مُنْتَشِرٌ ۖ ﴿٧﴾

rushing towards the Summoner.
The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (8)

مُهْطِعِينَ إِلَى الدَّاعِ يَقُولُ الْكَافِرُونَ
هَذَا يَوْمُ عِسْرٍ ﴿٨﴾

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. (9)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ فَكَذَّبُوا عَبْدَنَا
وَقَالُوا مَجْنُونٌ وَازْدُجِرَ ﴿٩﴾

Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' (10)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَانْتَصِرَ ﴿١٠﴾

So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, (11)

فَفَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ مُثَمَرٍ ﴿١١﴾

and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. (12)

وَفَجَّرْنَا الْأَرْضَ عُيُونًا فَالْتَقَى الْمَاءُ
عَلَى أَمْرٍ قَدِيدٍ ﴿١٢﴾

We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails (13)

وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَى ذَاتِ الْأَوْجِ وَدُسْرٍ ﴿١٣﴾

which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. (14)

تَجْرِي بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَاءَ لِمَنْ كَانَ كُفِرَ ﴿١٤﴾

We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? (15)

وَلَقَدْ نَزَّ كُنْهَاءُ آيَةٍ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدْرِكٍ ﴿١٥﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (16)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنَذِيرٍ ﴿١٦﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (17)

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (18)

We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: (19)

it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. (20)

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (21)

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (22)

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. (23)

They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. (24)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ
مِنْ مُذَكِّرٍ ﴿١٧﴾

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي
وَنَذِيرِ ﴿١٨﴾

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِي يَوْمٍ
نَحْسٍ مُسْتَعِيرٍ ﴿١٩﴾

تَرَى النَّاسَ كَأَصْبَارٍ يُعْرَضُونَ فَهُمْ
كَأَعْبَارٍ مُخْلٍ مُنْقَعِرٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنَذِيرِ ﴿٢١﴾

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ
مُذَكِّرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِالنَّذِيرِ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَقَالُوا أَبَشَرًا مِثَّا وَجِدًا نَبِّعُهُ إِنَّا إِذَا
لَفِيَ ضَلَالٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' (25)

Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. (26)

We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. (27)

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. (28)

They called their friend, who took something and slew her. (29)

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (30)

We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. (31)

We have made the Qur'an easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (32)

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. (33)

أَلَمْ يَلْقَ الْذِّكْرُ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ بَيْنِنَا بَلْ هُوَ
كَذَّابٌ أَشِرٌّ ﴿٢٥﴾

سَيَعْلَمُونَ غَدًا مَنِ الْكَذَّابُ الْأَشِرُّ ﴿٢٦﴾

إِنَّا مُرْسِلُوا السَّاعَةِ وَنَنَّا لَهُمْ فَأَرْقَبَهُمْ
وَأَصْطَبِرُ ﴿٢٧﴾

وَنَبِّئُهُمْ أَنَّ الْمَاءَ قِسْمَةٌ بَيْنَهُمْ كُلُّ شَرْبٍ
مُخَضَّرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

فَنَادُوا صَاحِبَهُمْ فَتَعَاطَى فَعَقَرَ ﴿٢٩﴾

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٠﴾

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَكَانُوا
كَهَشِيرِ الْحُمْطِرِ ﴿٣١﴾

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ
مُذَكِّرٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍ بِالَّذِي نُذِرُ ﴿٣٣﴾

We sent a stone-bearing wind
against them, and only Lot's
family did We save at the break
of dawn, (34)

as an act of grace from Us: thus do
We reward the thankful. (35)

He warned them of Our
punishment, but they were in
doubt about his warnings. (36)

They even asked him to hand
his guests over to them, so We
sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My
punishment and [the fulfilment
of] My warnings.' (37)

At daybreak abiding suffering
befell them. (38)

'Taste, then, My punishment and
[the fulfilment of] My warnings.'
(39)

We have made the Qur'ān easy
to bear in mind: will anyone take
heed? (40)

Pharaoh's people also received
warnings. (41)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ حَاصِبًا إِلَّا آلَ لُوطٍ
نَّجَّيْنَاهُمْ لِسَرِّهِمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

نِعْمَةٌ مِنَّا بِكُفْرِهِمْ كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي مَنْ
شَكَرَ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَنْذَرَهُمْ بَطْشَتَنَا فَتَمَارَوْا
بِالنَّذْرِ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ رَاوَدُوهُ عَنْ ضَيْفِهِ فَطَمَسْنَا
أَعْيُنَهُمْ فَذُوقُوا عَذَابِي وَنُذِرِ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَبَحَهُمْ بِكْرَةٌ عَذَابٌ
مُتَسْقِرٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

فَذُوقُوا عَذَابِي وَنُذِرِ ﴿٣٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ
مُذَكِّرٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَ آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ النَّذْرُ ﴿٤١﴾

They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task. (42)

كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ أَخَذَ
عَزِيزٌ مُّقْتَدِرٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? (43)

أَكْفَارُكُمْ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أُولَئِكَ أَمْ أَنْتُمْ
بِرَأْيِكُمْ فِي الزُّبُرِ ﴿٤٣﴾

Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? (44)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَحْنُ جَمِيعٌ مُنْصَرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. (45)

سَيَهْرَمُ الْجَمْعُ وَيُوَلُّونَ الدُّبُرَ ﴿٤٥﴾

But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. (46)

بَلِ السَّاعَةُ مَوْعِدُهُمْ وَالسَّاعَةُ
أَذَى وَأَمْرٌ ﴿٤٦﴾

The evildoers are indeed in error and in raging flames of fire. (47)

إِنَّ الْمُبْجِرِينَ فِي ضَلَالٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' (48)

يَوْمَ يُسْحَبُونَ فِي النَّارِ عَلَى وُجُوهِِهِمْ
ذُوقُوا مَسَّ سَقَرَ ﴿٤٨﴾

We have created everything in due measure. (49)

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ ﴿٤٩﴾

Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. (50)

وَمَا أَمْرُنَا إِلَّا أَوْحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍ بِالْبَصَرِ ﴿٥٠﴾

We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? (51)

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا أَشْيَاءَكُمْ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدْكِرٍ ﴿٥١﴾

Everything they do is noted in their records. (52)

وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ فَعَلُوهُ فِي الزُّبُرِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Every single thing, small or great, is recorded. (53)

وَكُلُّ صَغِيرٍ وَكَبِيرٍ مُسْتَطَرٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, (54)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَهَرٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign. (55)

فِي مَقْعَدٍ صِدْقٍ عِنْدَ مَلِكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

The Splitting of the Moon

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (Verses 1–8)

This is a highly inspiring opening, speaking of a momentous event in the wide universe that heralds an immeasurably greater event: "*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*" (Verse 1) What a piece

of news! They saw the first event with their own eyes, and they can only anticipate the greater one. The splitting of the moon, witnessed by the Arabs, is confirmed in numerous reports; all agree that this took place, though they differ in their general and detailed descriptions of how it occurred. Here, we will give a few of these reports:

Anas ibn Mālik reports: "The people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, and the moon was split in Makkah twice. He read: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*' [Related by Mālik.] The same report by Anas is given in another version stating the people's request for a miracle, then saying: "He showed them the moon split in two halves, and they could see Mount Ḥirā' in between." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Jubayr ibn Muṭ'īm reports: "The moon was split during the Prophet's lifetime and it was seen in two halves, one over each mountain. People said: 'Muḥammad has cast a magic spell on us.' Then they said: 'If he could cast a spell on us, he cannot do that to all people.'" [Related by Aḥmad, and also by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī with different chains of transmission.]

Ibn 'Abbās is quoted by various transmitters as having said: "The moon was once split during the Prophet's lifetime." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other versions add: "This took place before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. They could see its two halves." Yet another version related by al-Ṭabarānī with a different chain of transmitters quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "The moon was eclipsed during the Prophet's time. The unbelievers said, 'A spell is cast on the moon'. A Qur'ānic revelation was bestowed from on high stating: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*'"

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar said: "The moon was split in two halves during the Prophet's time in Makkah, with one half seen at the near side of the mountain and the other at the far side. The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Be my witness.'" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports: "During the Prophet's time, the moon was split in two and people could see it. The Prophet said: 'Look at it and be witnesses.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Bukhārī adds another version of this report with a different chain of transmitters quoting Ibn Mas'ūd: "When the moon was split, the Quraysh said: 'This

is a magic spell cast by Ibn Abī Kabshah [a derogatory nickname they gave to the Prophet]. Wait until some travellers arrive, for Muḥammad cannot cast his spell on all people.' When travellers came they confirmed the splitting of the moon."

The Qur'ān clearly stated this event to the unbelievers at the time, but there is no report to suggest that they ever denied it. It must, then, have happened in a way that makes denial practically impossible. Had there been a way to deny it, they would have done so, if only for the sake of meaningless argument. All that has been reported of their reactions are their statements that the Prophet had cast a magic spell on them. Yet they too directly witnessed the event and so knew for themselves that this was no magic. Had the Prophet been able to cast a spell on them, he could not have done the same to the travellers in the desert. Such travellers, let us recall, confirmed that they had witnessed this extraordinary event.

A Miracle in Support?

We need to add here a word about the report that the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle and in response the moon was split in two showing them what they had asked for. This report is in conflict with a clear Qur'ānic statement that stipulates that the Prophet was not supported by any miracle of the type given to earlier messengers. The reason is explained in the following verse: "*Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false.*" (17: 59) This statement makes clear that, in His infinite wisdom, God decided not to show unbelievers miraculous signs in support of His message, because earlier communities had rejected them as false.

On every occasion the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle, his reply was that this was outside his remit: he was no more than a human messenger. He always referred them to the Qur'ān, declaring that it was the only sign to confirm the veracity of his message. "*Say, 'If all mankind and the jinn were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.'* Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept

anything other than unbelief. They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'" (17: 88–93)

Therefore, the claim that this splitting of the moon was in response to the unbelievers' demand for a miracle is contrary to clear Qur'ānic texts. It is also contrary to the strategy adopted by this final divine message in addressing the human mind only by the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. It is the Qur'ān that directs people's minds to reflect on the signs available in the universe and in their own constitutions, as well as in historical events. The actual miracles that were given to the Prophet and confirmed by many authentic reports were merely aspects of God's grace which He extended to His Messenger. They did not constitute proofs of His message.

We, therefore, confirm that the splitting of the moon was indeed a reality, as stated in the Qur'ān and in many authentic reports indicating its place, time and appearance. We do not, however, endorse the causes stated in some of these reports, but we will highlight the combination of the Qur'ānic confirmation of its happening with the reference to the Last Hour drawing near. This is intended to awaken the human mind so that it responds to the divine message.

The splitting of the moon, then, was a clear sign to which the Qur'ān draws people's attention, just like it draws attention to other signs available in the universe around us. It wonders at the unbeliever's attitude to all these signs, including the splitting of the moon.

Physical miracles may appear amazing to the human mind prior to its maturity; that is prior to its ability to contemplate the permanent signs already available in the universe and being influenced by what these signs clearly prove. All the physical miracles that messengers were given before mankind had attained maturity were not as great as others already available in the world around us. Yet these do not excite man's instinctive reactions like those unfamiliar miracles.

Even if we consider the splitting of the moon on this occasion to be a physical miracle, the fact remains that the moon itself is a greater miracle. Its size, position, shape, nature, ever-changing stages, cycle, bearing on life on earth and how it stays in space without support make the moon a great miracle that people can see with their eyes and contemplate with their minds. It testifies to man's heart and mind as a witness to God's creation. It cannot be denied except by one who is a stubborn unbeliever.

The Qur'ān puts the human mind face to face with the universe and what it contains of God's signs. This is far better than providing an unfamiliar sign lasting only for a brief period and seen by only one generation of people in one particular place. The entire universe then is a great sign; here everything small or large is a sign of God's immeasurable ability. The human mind is invited at every moment to look at these permanent signs and to listen to their testimony, which is always lucid and decisive. It is also invited to enjoy all the marvellous aspects of creation, which combine beauty with perfection and excite a feeling of amazement to strengthen conviction. The present *sūrah* opens with a reference to the fact that the Last Hour is drawing near and to the splitting of the moon. It thus delivers a shock to the human mind, which then anticipates the Last Hour that is soon to happen, made all the more apparent by virtue of the great event that has just taken place. It can now stretch imagination to the events that will accompany the Last Hour.

How close is the Last Hour? The Prophet is quoted as saying: "I have been given my message as close to the Last Hour as these two", pointing with his index and middle finger. [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Reactions to Great Signs

Yet close as the dreaded Hour is, and despite the exciting and great event they have just witnessed and the numerous signs around them, the unbelievers continued to stubbornly reject the message, insisting on their erring ways. Not only did they ignore the warnings, they also did not properly reflect on the pointers to the great truth that should have

brought them to faith: *"Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail."* (Verses 2–5)

They indeed turned away and when they saw the moon split in two, they said that it was a magical spell cast over their eyes. They said the same thing about the Qur'ān, which is itself a great sign. They alleged that it too was another act of sorcery. Since signs to the truth are given all the time, they argue that such sorcery is continuous and never ending. They turn away from every sign, unwilling to reflect on their nature or understand their message. Prompted by arbitrary feelings that lack all evidence, they deny these signs and what messages they deliver, refusing to reflect on the fundamental truth confirmed by everything around them in the universe.

"Yet everything is ultimately settled." (Verse 3) Everything in the universe is in its proper place, well settled, and not subject to any upheaval. The whole universe is well fixed, unaffected by fleeting desires, changing whims or blind coincidences. Everything occurs at its appropriate time, in its right place. This is clearly seen in everything around them: universal cycles, the laws of life, the stages of growth of plants and animals, the apparent characteristics of all materials, and indeed in the physiology of people's own bodies and organs which they cannot control. With everything around them settled in perfect order, as they clearly see, they are the only ones who act on the promptings of transitory whims and desires.

"There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance]." (Verse 4) They received the truth about the universal signs highlighted in the Qur'ān, news of what happened to earlier communities when they denied God's messages, news of the life to come vividly depicted in the Qur'ān. All these should have been enough to stop anyone who wants to indulge in excess. Such news and tidings carried enough wisdom to direct people's minds to God's elaborate and wise planning. Twisted minds, however, do not open to acknowledge great signs, benefit by news or heed warnings: *"far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail."* (Verse 5) It is only a mind that is ready

to receive faith that benefits by all this and enjoys the great blessings of faith.

Having given a full picture of their stubborn rejection, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to turn away from them, leaving them to face their fate on the day to the approach of which they pay little heed, despite seeing a sign like the splitting of the moon heralding it: *"So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 6–8) These verses paint a scene of that day which is fierce and grim, consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*. They also warn of the closeness of the Last Hour, highlighted by the splitting of the moon in two. All of this fits perfectly with the rhythm maintained throughout the *sūrah*.

It is a scene full of quick movement, yet it is also prominent, with clear lines and features: multitudes of people are rising from their graves, like swarming locusts, yet their eyes are downcast, humble, fearful. They rush towards the one who calls them forward, but they do not know what they are called to, and they cannot be reassured. As this gathering continues to take place, and amidst all this humility, the unbelievers say in a tone of distress that reflects their dawning awareness of the hardship ahead of them: *"Hard indeed is this day."* (Verse 8)

Such, then, is the day which draws near; still they continue to deny it. Therefore, the Prophet is to turn away from them when that day arrives. He is to leave them to face their miserable destiny.

Far Back in History

After this powerful opening, the *sūrah* begins to portray scenes of the punishment meted out to earlier communities of unbelievers, who traversed the same way as the Arabs who denied the Prophet Muḥammad's message:

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' So We opened the

gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We have made the Qur'an easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (Verses 9–17)

“Before them, Noah’s people rejected the truth.” (Verse 9) They rejected the divine message and the signs given to them. “*They rejected Our servant,*” Noah, and said, “*He is mad!*” just like the Quraysh unjustly said of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to stone him, but still ridiculing him and demanding that he desist. “*And he was harshly rebuffed.*” (Verse 9) They though should have been the ones who took heed and desisted.

Having suffered all this rejection, Noah referred to his Lord who had entrusted him with His message requiring him to deliver it to his people. He submitted his report on how things stood between him and his people and the results of his efforts. He wanted the decision to be made by God after he himself had exerted every effort: “*Therefore, he called out to his Lord: ‘I am overcome. Grant me help!’*” (Verse 10) I have done my best and I am now powerless. I can do no more. You are the One to grant help and support to Your message. All power belongs to You and the decision is Yours.

Hardly is the word uttered and the matter handed over to the Almighty when God’s mighty hand points to the great universe and its crushing wheel starts to roll: “*So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose.*” (Verses 11–12) This is a huge and overwhelming universal action described in well-chosen words and phrases. It begins by attributing the action directly to God: “*We opened*”, so that we see that it is the hand of the Almighty that opened “*the gates of heaven,*” in the plural, “*with water pouring down in torrents,*” one wave after another. By the same token and movement, We “*caused the earth to burst forth with springs*”. We see through the words water bursting forth everywhere, as though the whole earth has become an

immense and gushing spring. Thus the water pouring from the skies and the water gushing from the earth "*met for a preordained purpose*". These waters met in implementation of what God had preordained, obeying His divine command and bringing it to fulfilment.

When it was a huge flood, covering the face of the land, washing off the dirt that had lingered for long until the messenger despaired of ever being able to remove it, the Mighty and Compassionate hand was extended to that messenger ensuring his safety and giving him the honour he deserved: "*We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected.*" (Verses 13–14) It is clear in the phraseology of these verses that it is intended to impart an air of grandeur to the vessel, which is described as having planks and nails. It is only described, rather than named, to add to its importance. It floats under God's own eyes and care. This is all "*a reward for him who had been rejected*", and threatened. It is a reward that replaces people's rejection by divine care and ridicule by honour. It describes the great power at the disposal of one who is defeated after having done his best. This is what is available to those who exert their maximum efforts in advocating His cause, and also then put the matter to Him praying for His help. All powers in the universe are mobilized to support such people, and all, with God's permission and under His guidance.

This scene of truth's complete victory and the total eradication of advocates of unbelief is followed by an address to those who look at it as if it were happening before their very eyes: "*We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 15) This great event, with its well-known circumstances and results, is left as a sign and a reminder for future generations. Will any take heed? Then another gesture is added to awaken people's hearts telling them that the warnings given to them are all correct and the punishment that might be inflicted is severe indeed: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 16)

It all took place as the Qur'ān describes. The Qur'ān remains present, available to all, easy to understand, attractive by its sincerity and straightforwardness, consistent with nature, full of wonders and always retaining its power. Never is it weakened by familiarity. But rather

whenever it is contemplated, it gives more of its treasures. The more it is read, the better we are comforted by it: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 17)

This last verse provides the comment that occurs after each scene. The *sūrah* uses it by way of a pause inviting hearts to reflect after they have been shown one of the calamities that befell earlier deniers of the truth.

The 'Ād and the Stormwind

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (Verses 18–22)

This is the second scene of powerful punishment that befell a whole community of unbelievers. It begins by reporting that the 'Ād rejected the truth, but before any details are given, the *sūrah* adds the question intended to magnify the severity of the punishment meted out: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 18) The answer is immediately given by the *sūrah*: "*We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks.*" (Verses 19–20) The Arabic description of the wind, *ṣarṣar*, gives by its very sound a feeling of that wind which carries unceasing misfortune. Probably no misfortune could be worse than that which happened to the 'Ād. The wind lifted the people and smashed them, leaving them like uprooted palm trunks.

The scene is violent and fearful; the stormwind sent against the 'Ād was one of God's forces. It is a natural phenomenon God has placed in the universe. It operates according to the universal system He has chosen. He sends it against whomever He wishes. It continues to operate within natural laws, where there is no conflict between its normal operation in the planned order of things and its fulfilment of God's orders whatever they happen to be. It is He who set this natural law and issued the

command. *"How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings."* (Verse 21) This statement is now repeated after the scene has been shown providing the answer. The episode concludes with the other comment repeated throughout the *sūrah* according to its own flow: *"We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?"* (Verse 22)

Aggressors Against God's Sign

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. They called their friend, who took something and slew her. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (Verses 23–32)

The Thamūd was the tribe that succeeded the 'Ād as the major power in Arabia. The 'Ād lived in the south, while the Thamūd were based in the north of the Peninsula. Despite the fact that the 'Ād's fate was well documented in the whole of Arabia, the Thamūd took no heed and rejected God's warnings just like the 'Ād before them.

"They said: Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar." (Verses 24–25) This reiterates the same old argument that troubled unbelievers one generation after another. Could this man have been chosen from among us all to receive a divine message? Again, their attitude smacks of a hollow arrogance that does not consider the message itself, but rather looks at the person advocating it: *"Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves?"* (Verse 24)

Yet, why should it seem strange that God, who knows best to whom to entrust His message, should choose one particular person and give him revelations embodying reminders and directives? Why should it trouble them that God makes a choice when it is He, the Creator of all, who knows the one whose abilities and qualities make him the right choice. After all, it is God who gives the message. Their argument is baseless, and can only be entertained by deviant minds that do not look at the message itself to realize how true it is. They only look at the man advocating it, feeling too proud to follow one of their own number. They do not want to grant him position and status. Hence they say: *"Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly."* (Verse 24)

The most peculiar thing is that they describe themselves to be in error if they were to follow divine guidance, and to be lost in folly if they accept faith. Hence, they point their fingers at the messenger God has chosen to lead them along the way of truth, accusing him of lying and of being greedy: *"No, he is indeed an insolent liar."* (Verse 25) The accusation of lying means that he did not receive a message from God, and the accusation of insolence means that he was after a position of honour for himself. The same accusations have been levelled at all advocates of divine faith. They are often accused of using the divine message as a cover to seek position and personal interest. Such false accusations are the product of twisted minds that cannot discern what motivates people.

As the *sūrah* reports the story in narrative form, it suddenly changes course and continues as though it is happening at this very instance. It now speaks about what is going to happen, stating it in the form of a threat: *"Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar."* (Verse 26) This is one of the tools employed in Qur'ānic narratives to give an air of actuality, transforming them from a mere tale to events taking place before spectators who are full of anticipation about their development.

"Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar." (Verse 26) They will see the truth for themselves. They will not be immune to the consequences of this truth which heralds destruction for insolent liars: *"We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient."*

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn." (Verses 27–28) We stand watching with expectation to see what will happen when God sends them the she-camel as a test to prove their reality. Their messenger is also looking with expectation, carrying out the divine order that he should wait patiently until the test is completed. He has to deliver the instructions: the water the tribe has is to be shared equally, assigning one share to all the cattle and one to this she-camel alone. This must have been a she-camel with very special qualities, making her a miraculous sign. She takes the water one day, but does not disturb the other cattle on their day. She alternates with them in fairness.

The *sūrah* then reverts to the narrative style, reporting what happened afterwards: *"They called their friend, who took something and slew her."* (Verse 29) This friend belonged to a group of evildoers in their city. The group itself is described in the Qur'an thus: *"There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good."* (27: 48) This one in particular is given an even apter description: *"their most hapless wretch."* (91: 12) It is reported that this man got himself so drunk that he did not hesitate to undertake the miserable deed of killing the she-camel God had sent them as a sign. Their messenger had warned them against harming her, as this would render them liable to God's punishment. *"They called their friend, who took something and slew her."* (Verse 29) Thus the test ended and the punishment was incurred: *"How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?"* (Verse 30) It is a question meant to emphasize the seriousness of what happened before mentioning the punishment inflicted when the warnings were not heeded.

"We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder." (Verse 31) The Qur'an does not give us any details here about this blast. However, it is described in *Sūrah* 41 as a thunderbolt: *"If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ad and Thamūd."* (41: 13) The thunderbolt may only be a description of the blast making it a 'thunderbolt blast', or it may be a true description of its nature making the blast and the thunderbolt one and the same thing. Alternatively, the blast may be the sound produced by the thunderbolt, or the thunderbolt may merely

be an effect of the blast about which we know very little. Be that as it may, one blast was sent against those people, causing great havoc and leaving them like the *dry twigs* of one who needs such material to build a sheepfold, or used by a farmer as food for his cattle kept in a sheepfold. That blast reduced the people of Thamūd to a state of *dry twigs*. It is a fearful image raised against their earlier arrogance. All that remains of them is utter humiliation.

Now the *sūrah* draws its addressees' attention to the Qur'ān so that they may reflect. The Qur'ān provides an easy reminder: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 32) The curtains are drawn, leaving a glimpse of dry twigs that irritate one's eyes and shudder one's mind, while the Qur'ān steadfastly calls upon people to reflect and take heed.

Lot's People

When the curtains are raised again, we have another episode taking place close to Arabia:

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (Verses 33–40)

The story of Lot's people is given in detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Its mention here is not intended to provide details, but rather to draw a lesson from what happens when people deny the truth and to remind them of the severe punishment that they may suffer. Hence, it starts with reporting their rejection of God's warning, followed by mentioning the punishment they suffered in consequence: "*Lot's people also rejected*

[My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful." (Verses 33–35) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān their punishment is described in the form of "stones of clay," (51: 33) Here, the description adds that it was a wind that bears the sound of hurling stones. This description fits well with the fierce atmosphere that characterizes the whole *sūrah*. Only Lot's family, except his wife, were saved in an act of God's grace and as a reward for their faith in and gratitude to Him: "Thus do We reward the thankful." They are to be blessed even in the midst of a great calamity.

The story is thus told from both ends: the unbelievers' initial rejection of the truth and their ultimate punishment. Then the *sūrah* provides us with some further details. Again, this is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses in its narratives to emphasize certain ideas.

The details given here are: "He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them." (Verses 36–38) Lot took much pain in warning his people against the perverted indecency they used to practise, but they doubted all his warnings, circulating their doubts among themselves. They argued with him, disputing what he said. Their reckless audacity went beyond limits, to the extent that they even tried to persuade him to hand over his angel guests. They thought them to be handsome young men, and their dirty and perverted lust was uncontrollable. They shamelessly wanted to assault his guests. They cared little for the sanctity of their prophet's home, despite his repeated warnings against their perverted practices.

At this point, God's mighty hand took action. The angels began to do what they were assigned to do: "So We sealed their eyes." The unbelievers could no longer see anything or anyone. They could not persuade Lot or catch his guests. The reference to sealing their eyes occurs so clearly only in this instance. In another *sūrah* the angels say to Lot: "We are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you." (11: 81) Here, what made the unbelievers unable to do what they wanted is specified as sealing their eyes.

As the *sūrah* tells its narrative, it suddenly shows the event as if it is happening now. The address is made to those who deserve punishment: "*Taste, then, My punishment and the fulfilment of [My] warnings.*" You have been warned against incurring this punishment, but you disputed those very warnings.

The sealing of their eyes took place in the evening, but it was in the morning that God determined to inflict punishment on them all: "*At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verse 38) This refers to the punishment already mentioned, which was the stone-bearing wind that purged the earth of their perversions.

Once more the mode of address changes so that we see the event as if it is taking place now. The punished are addressed as they suffer: "*Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.*" (Verse 39) This is followed by the familiar comment mentioned after the scene of turmoil: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 40)

These historical accounts are concluded with a brief reference to the fate of a famous community of unbelievers, outside Arabia: "*Pharaoh's people also received warnings. They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task.*" (Verses 41–42) Thus the whole story of Pharaoh and his entourage is summed up by mentioning its beginning and end: their receiving warnings, their rejection of all the signs and miracles that the messenger sent to them showed them, and their subsequent punishment by the Almighty. The reference here to God's might and ability to carry out His will indicate that their end was violent and calamitous. It implies an allusion to the hollowness of Pharaoh's power and his ability to inflict injustice. All his might is shown to be worthless. He could avail himself of nothing. God inflicted such a punishment on him and his host that can only be carried out by the Almighty. This is most fitting because of the injustice and tyranny they practised for so long.

A New and Powerful Warning

Now that the curtrains have fallen after all these scenes of punishment and suffering, the *sūrah* addresses those who rejected the final message.

They have been reminded of the fates of those earlier peoples, and those images are still present in their minds. Now, they are given their own warning so that they avoid a similar fate. Indeed, they are warned against an even more terrible fate:

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' We have created everything in due measure. Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.
(Verses 43–53)

It is a warning of punishment in this life and further suffering in the life to come. It removes any doubt about the veracity of this warning, sealing any loophole of hope to escape it, and any possibility of false accounting to evade it.

All those communities met their respective fates: what prevents a similar fate happening to you? "*Are your unbelievers better than those others?*" (Verse 43) What distinguishes you from earlier unbelievers? "*Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books?*" (Verse 43) Such immunity recorded in sacred books might have had some effect. However, neither situation applies: you are no better than them and you have no immunity. Therefore, the only fate awaiting you is one similar to theirs, in the form God determines.

The *sūrah* then makes a general address, wondering at their attitude, particularly when they inspect their forces and feel themselves very powerful. They claim that they cannot be defeated: "*Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious?'*" (Verse 44) At this point, a clear and decisive statement is loudly echoed: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" (Verse 45) Neither large forces

nor powerful hosts will be of any avail. The One who announces this to them is none other than God Almighty. It came true at the time and it will always be true.

Al-Bukhārī reports on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet was standing under a canopy and praying: "Lord! I appeal to You to fulfil Your promise. Lord! If You so wish, You may not be worshipped on earth again." Abū Bakr held his hand and said: "Messenger of God! This is enough. You have appealed hard to your Lord." He came out rushing, and saying: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" In another report attributed to 'Ikrimah: "When this verse was revealed, 'Umar said: 'What host will be defeated and routed?' He later said: 'When on the day of the Battle of Badr I saw God's Messenger coming out and reading, "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee,*" I knew its fulfilment."

Such was the defeat in this present life, but it is neither the final nor the most crushing and bitter one. Therefore, the *sūrah* leaves it aside to speak about the one that is to follow: "*But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter.*" (Verse 46) It is far more bitter and terrible than any suffering they could ever experience in this life on earth. It is more calamitous than any scene of punishment drawn for their understanding; worse than the floods, the howling, cold wind, the blast, the stone-bearing wind and Pharaoh and his host's drowning.

Details are given to indicate how it is more calamitous and bitter. In this way, a powerful image of the Day of Judgement is drawn: "*The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verses 47–48) They are in an error that torments minds and souls, and in a raging fire that burns skin and bodies. This is because they and their like used to say in this world: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24) They will come to realize where error lies and what folly leads to. They will be dragged on their faces into the raging fire. Such humiliation contrasts with the pride they used to take in their might. Their suffering is increased even further by mental

pain, and all this is painted as though it were taking place now: "*Taste now the touch of hell-fire.*" (Verse 48)

Most Accurate Measure

The *sūrah* now makes a clear statement addressed to all mankind, but specifically to those Arabs, to drive home to them the fact that everything is subject to God's will, wisdom and planning. The punishment administered in this life and the one inflicted in the life to come, the messages and warnings given before them, the revelations given to God's messengers, and everything surrounding all this in terms of creation, events and planning are all subject to God's plan and will. All these and everything large or small are created in accordance with an accurate measure and are wisely planned. Nothing occurs haphazardly or by coincidence: "*We have created everything in due measure.*" (Verse 49) This applies to all creatures, silent or endowed with speech, moving or motionless, past and present, known or unknown: their creation is subject to an accurate measure. It is this measure that determines the nature, qualities, quantities, time and place of everything, as well as their links with others around them and the effect they produce.

This short Qur'ānic statement refers to a major and momentous truth that is confirmed by the universe. It is acknowledged by the mind as it looks at the world around it and responds to it. The human mind is bound to feel that the universe is finely coordinated. Everything in it is according to a measure that achieves absolute balance and coordination.

Observation, research and experience will understand this truth in as far as these methods can achieve and the human mind can fathom. Yet there remains beyond it what is greater and more perfect. Human nature appreciates the harmonious influence the universe leaves on it, since it is indeed part of this same coordinated and harmonious universe, in which everything is created in due measure.

Modern science has managed to reach some aspects of this truth, using what is available of tools and practises. It knows now the relative distances between planets and stars, their sizes and gravity to the extent that scientists are able to determine the positions of some planets before

they can actually see them. They make their assumptions on the basis that overall coordination requires that such planets be in the positions they have defined. Only the existence of such planets in their positions explains certain aspects of the movement of the planets they have monitored. Later on, their assumptions are proved true, which means that all celestial bodies are placed in space according to accurate relations that admit no error.

Scientists now realize that balance and coordination in the position of our planet earth are absolutely necessary to ensure the continuity of the type of life God has willed to place on it. They say that should this balance be disturbed in any aspect, all life on earth will be destroyed or would not have been possible in the first place. The size of the earth, its mass, distance from the sun, the mass of the sun, its temperature, the angle of its axis, its speed as it rotates and moves in orbit, the position of the moon in relation to the earth, its size and mass, the relation between sea and dry land on earth, and scores of other aspects and relations are all made according to an accurate measure. Should any of these be disturbed, everything would change resulting in the end of life on earth.

Our understanding of the balance and coordination between a large number of factors that are necessary to keep life on earth under control and establish the proper interrelations between living creatures and the conditions in which they live, and between different species of creatures, is such that we can now appreciate the profound truth the Qur'ānic verse refers to. The factors of life and survival on the one hand and those of death and extinction on the other in the environment and the nature of living creatures are always kept in such a fine balance as to ensure the continuity of life and its progress without allowing it to increase to the extent that there would not come a time when there is not enough of what is necessary for sustenance and survival.

We spoke at length on the harmony and balance in the universe and on earth in an earlier volume,¹ and it is fitting that we discuss here the balance in the interrelation between different species:

1. Volume XII, pp. 370–382.

Birds of prey are small in numbers because they lay few eggs. They also live in a special environment. On the other hand, they live longer than other birds. Had they been able to procreate at a higher rate and to live as long as they do in all environments, they would have ensured the extinction of smaller and more numerous birds or greatly reduced their numbers. These smaller birds are needed in such large numbers because they are part of the food chain and they fulfil an important role in the continuity of life on earth.

A fly lays millions of eggs, but its life span is two weeks. Had flies lived for a few years laying eggs at the same rate, the face of the earth would have been entirely covered with flies. Human life, as well as the life of many other species, would have become impossible. However, the balance established by the Almighty determines the relation between life span and the rate of procreation to ensure the continuity of life.

Among all living things, microbes are the largest in number and fastest in multiplication and devastation; but at the same time they have the weakest resistance and the shortest life span. They die in their millions as a result of many factors, such as cold, heat, light, acids, plasma, etc. They overpower only a limited number of animals and humans. Had they had stronger resistance or a longer life span, they would have destroyed life altogether.

Every living species is equipped with a weapon to protect itself against its natural enemies and to ensure its own survival. Such weapons vary from moving in numbers to ferocity of attack. In between there is a great variety of weapons and methods of self defence. Small snakes have their poison and move at speed to evade their enemies, while large ones rely on the strength of their muscles. Hence, the poisonous ones are fewer among large snakes. Beetles, which have little in the way of self defence, can discharge on whatever touches them a foul-smelling caustic substance to protect themselves. Deers can jump and run at a fast speed, while lions are extremely powerful. Such are all living creatures, large and small.

Likewise, man, animals, birds and all other creatures, including the lowest species, are equipped with the means to obtain their

food and to benefit by what they feed upon. The fertilized egg which clings to the uterus needs nourishment. It causes a tear in the wall of the uterus, making a pool of blood which it can feed upon, and thus it grows. An embryo feeds through the umbilical cord that links it to its mother. Had the cord been too long, the food would have become fermented before it reached the embryo, and had it been too short, the food would have gushed through it, and harmed the embryo.²

When birth takes place a white, slightly yellowish liquid is produced from the mother's breasts. One of the wonders of God's creation is that this liquid consists of dissolved chemicals to protect the newborn from illness. One day after the child's birth milk begins to flow. God's elaborate planning ensures that the quantity of the mother's milk is increased day after day, amounting to one and a half litres a day by the time the child is one year old, while it weighs only a few ounces in the early days. It is not merely the quantity of the milk that increases to satisfy the child's needs, but also its ingredients change in kind and concentration. In the early days it is more like water containing a small amount of carbohydrates, but as time goes on the concentration of sugar, carbohydrates and proteins increases day after day, to ensure the child's healthy growth.³

When we study the different systems in man's body, their functions, physiology and role in ensuring man's health and survival, we are amazed at the elaborate planning. We see God's hand taking care of every individual, and indeed every organ and cell. We cannot discuss here this world of wonders. Therefore, we will only refer to the fine tuning of endocrine glands:

These are small chemical factories providing the body with the chemicals it needs. They are so powerful that a fraction of one billionth of them will seriously affect the body. They function in such an order that the secretion of each gland complements the secretion of another. All that we know about these secretions is that

2. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Hadīth*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 46–47.

3. Ibid., pp. 47–48.

they are surprisingly complex. Should their secretion be disturbed, this will cause general harm in the body, which could be very serious if it continues even for a short while.⁴

Animals have different systems according to their different natures, as well as the environments and circumstances in which they live.

Lions, tigers, wolves, hyenas, and other predators that need to hunt and kill their prey, have sharp teeth and firm molars. They also have strong leg muscles, as well as sharp claws. Their stomachs secrete the necessary acids and enzymes to digest raw meat and bones.⁵

Ruminant animals that graze in meadows have been equipped with different tools:

Their digestive systems have been designed in a way that suits their environments. Their mouths are relatively wide, without canine teeth or molars. Instead they have sharp front teeth that help them to eat grass and plants quickly, swallowing them in gulps so as to be able to provide their natural service for man. Divine care has given these animals a most peculiar digestive system. The food they eat goes first to the rumen, which serves as a storage place. When the animal has finished its day's work and sits for rest, the food it has eaten goes to another part called the reticulum, and then it is sent back to the mouth where it will now be chewed well before it is sent to a third compartment of the stomach called the omasum. The final stage is a fourth compartment called the abomasum. This very long process also serves to protect these animals which are often attacked in their grazing places by predators. Therefore, they often need to swallow their food fast and hide. Scientists say that this process of digestion is necessary, indeed vital. Grass is hard to digest because of the cellulose it contains, which means that the animal needs a long time for digesting its food. Had it not had a rumen to store the food, these animals would have had to spend

4. Ibid., pp. 51-52.

5. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

a long time, may be a whole day, in grazing without even giving them enough nourishment. The very process of cutting the grass and eating it would have been tiring to the animal. As it is, taking the food in gulps and storing it in the rumen where it is softened and fermented somewhat, then bringing it back to the mouth for further chewing, enables these animals to fulfil all functions: doing their work, eating and proper digestion. All glory belongs to God who created everything in an elaborate design.⁶

Birds of prey such as the owl and the kite are given sharp, curved, hook-like beaks to be able to tear flesh. Geese and ducks are, by contrast, given wide, flat and spoon-like beaks suitable for catching food in mud and water. They even have on both sides of their beaks little lumps which serve as teeth to cut grass. Domestic fowls and pigeons which pick up seeds from the ground have short and pointed beaks. The swan has a conspicuously long beak at the bottom of which there is a sack that serves like a fisherman's net because swans feed mainly on fish. The hoopoe has a long and pointed beak that serves to look for insects and worms that are often below the surface of the ground. Scientists often say that a glance at a bird's beak is enough to tell us what it feeds on. The rest of the digestive system of birds is wonderfully peculiar. Since birds do not have teeth, they are given a crop and a gizzard for digestion. Birds also pick some hard objects and stones to help the gizzard in its digestive function.⁷

If we were to look at all the different species in the same way, it would take far too long in this exercise and would deviate from the method we have followed in this work. Therefore, we will now just look at the amoeba, the single-celled creature, to see how God has set its role in life and how He takes care of it.

The amoeba is a microscopic organism that lives in ponds or stagnant water, or on stones settled at the bottom of such waters. Its body is jellylike, changing shape as needed. When it moves, it

6. Ibid., pp. 72–73.

7. Ibid., pp. 73–74.

pushes forwards parts of its body to use like feet. When it finds food, it picks it up with similar protrusions. It secretes a digestive fluid so as to digest what is useful to it and ejects the remainder. It breathes with all its body, taking oxygen from water. Imagine this little creature which can never be seen with the naked eye performing all life functions, including taking nourishment, breathing, discharging unwanted stuff and moving around. When it has completed its growth, it divides into two, with each forming a separate amoeba...

The wonders of the plant world are no less amazing than those of human, animal and bird life. Elaborate planning is equally observed in plants: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*"⁸ (25: 2)

A Far Greater Perspective

Yet the question of elaborate planning is far greater than this. Indeed everything that takes place in the universe: all events in all directions, large and small, take place according to a plan and in a set measure. This applies to every occurrence in history, every feeling experienced by every individual, every breath, etc. Each breath takes place in due measure with regard to time, place and other factors and circumstances. It is related to the universal system and taken into account in the overall universal balance, just like major events. A wild, little plant that sends out its shoot in the open desert is placed there according to an accurate measure. It fulfils a function that is related to the existence of the universe. The same applies to a single ant moving to its destination, a particle in the air, an organism floating on water, just as it applies to the huge celestial bodies in this vast universe. All are there in due measure with regard to time, place, quantity, shape and form, maintaining due balance in all situations.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Jacob's marriage to a second wife who gave him his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, was not

8. Ibid., pp. 101-102.

a personal affair, but rather an intended event serving an overall plan? It was planned that Joseph's half brothers should feel very jealous of him, take him and throw him in the well, after they had thought of killing him, so that a travelling caravan would pick him up and sell him in Egypt where he would find a home in the palace of the Chief Minister. There, he would then be subjected to the Minister's wife's advances, but he resisted all temptation and as a result was thrown into prison. Why? There he would meet two of Pharaoh's servants and interpret their dreams. Why? Until that moment, there is absolutely no answer. People wonder why Joseph should go through all this suffering? Why should his father, who is a prophet, suffer until he loses his eyesight? The first answer comes after a quarter of a century of suffering. Divine will has been preparing him to supervise the affairs of Egypt, its people and the populations of the surrounding areas during seven years of drought. And then what? He brings his parents and brothers to Egypt where their offspring constitute the Children of Israel who were later persecuted by Pharaoh. Then Moses is born and his life is also carefully planned. Beyond that, various issues, events and trends arise, having a bearing on human life throughout the world until today.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Abraham's marriage to Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a personal affair, but rather, along with the events preceding it in Abraham's life, part of a careful plan. It involved all the events leading to his forsaking his home town in Iraq, going to Egypt where he married Hagar and she gave him his first son, Ishmael. Then he took Ishmael and his mother, leaving them in the neighbourhood of the yet to be built Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Muhammad, (peace be upon him), would then be born out of Abraham's seed in Arabia, the most suitable place on earth for the Islamic message. This series of events then culminated in the most important one in the history of mankind.

God's will remains behind the far end of every thread, every event: birth, point, step, change and ultimate result. All occur in accordance with His will which is profound, all comprehensive and inevitable. People sometimes see only the near end of the thread, but not its far end. There could be an extended, long span of time between the beginning and end in their own lives, which makes them unable to see the wisdom

behind what takes place. They will then try to hasten things, and may also offer suggestions. They may even go beyond this, demonstrating anger and impudence. God teaches them in the Qur'ān that everything occurs in due measure and appropriate proportion. Therefore, they should leave things to the One who controls all. This will give them comfort and reassurance, and they will then be sure of the balance and coordination brought about by God's will.

Operating the Divine Will

Along with the elaborate planning and the assigning of due measures goes God's power, which accomplishes the greatest of events by the simplest means: "*Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye.*" (Verse 50) It takes just a signal or one word and everything, great or tiny, is done. In fact there is nothing to distinguish great from tiny; it is all part of how human beings see things. Nor is there a question of time, not even the twinkling of an eye; it is merely a metaphor to help people understand. Time is no more than a human conception that arises from the position of the earth and its rotation. As far as God and His plans are concerned, it has no significance.

The command is given just once and this entire universe comes into existence. Similarly, any change in it can be accomplished. Just one command and it will all go away as God wishes. In everything, the command is given once only: bringing anyone into life, taking it here or there, causing it to die, bringing it back in some shape or form, resurrecting all creatures from all generations to gather them for the reckoning and reward. It is a once only command that requires no effort or time, because it comes from the Almighty in due measure and with perfect ease.

It was always a once-only command to bring about the terrible fate of communities that rejected the truth of God's message. The *sūrah* reminds its addressees of the fates suffered by communities who, like them, rejected the truth: "*We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.*" (Verses 51–53) Those fates are mentioned in the *sūrah*, but people need to take heed and think of the likely outcome

of the position they take towards God's message. Yet the story is not over for those communities that suffered such calamities; they have to face further reckoning that takes account of every little thing: "*Everything they do is noted in their records,*" which will be submitted on the Day of Reckoning. "*Every single thing, small or great, is recorded,*" so that nothing is forgotten.

Now the *sūrah* shows a different image of trust and safety. It is the destiny enjoyed by the righteous: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) They enjoy all this while the evildoers are in error, in raging flames where they are dragged with their faces down and rebuked.

This image describes the bliss which the God-fearing enjoy in its two components, the physical and the spiritual. The physical aspect, granted for the senses, is summed up in an all-embracing phrase, '*in gardens and running waters*'. The very sound of these words adds connotations of ease, comfort and enjoyment. The spiritual component touches the heart and mind; it is the bliss of being close to God: "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" It is a steady, firm seat, giving pleasure and reassurance because it is close to where all eyes are focused. This is all because these righteous people fear God and are apprehensive of what may become of them. God will not allow double fear to overwhelm anyone: fearing Him in this present life and fear in the life to come. Whoever truly fears Him in this world will be safe and reassured in the next. As good believers enjoy security at the time and place of greatest fear, they are granted a pleasant environment and honour.

With this soft rhythm and pleasant outcome, the *sūrah* that portrayed a series of distressing and fearful images comes to an end. This gives its conclusion a more profound effect. It is a perfect way of educating by the One who knows how to influence hearts and souls. This is yet another aspect of operating the accurate measure by the One who has created everything in due measure. All glory to the One who knows all.

SŪRAH 55

Al-Raḥmān

(The Lord of Grace)

Prologue

The composition of this Makkan *sūrah* has a special and prominent pattern. Essentially, it provides a general announcement, made in the open space of the universe, highlighting the blessings God bestows from on high. These are easily discernible in the beauty of everything He has created, in the great favours He grants to all, in the way He controls all existence, and in the fact that all creatures look up to see His face, etc. It is an invitation to all the universe to be witnesses against the two worlds of *jinn* and humans. Both are addressed in this *sūrah* on an equal basis, in the presence of all creatures in this vast universe. Both are challenged to deny, if they can, any of God's blessings. The challenge is repeated after every single blessing mentioned, each with their detailed aspects. The great universe, then, is the stage where all these blessings are exhibited.

The distinctive ring of the announcement is apparent in the *sūrah's* structure as also in the endings of its verses, with a final rising note in each, coupled with a long vowel pointing far. It is also apparent in the opening of the *sūrah*, which gives an air of expectation of what will follow. It begins with a single word, *al-Raḥmān*, as a subject without a predicate. This word, which is a name and an attribute of God that we

translate as *the Lord of Grace*, stresses mercy and adds emphasis to the announcement. Beyond that, the *sūrah* is a great exhibition of God's grace and blessings.

The first blessing put forward in this great exhibition is the teaching of the Qur'ān, the greatest favour God has bestowed on man. This is mentioned ahead of man's own creation as also his faculty of speech, his most important and distinctive quality. The *sūrah* then opens up pages of the universe that show God's blessings: the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the skies, the balance, the earth and what it contains of fruit, dates, grains and aromatic plants, the *jinn*, mankind, the two risings and the two settings, the two great bodies of water and the barrier between them, what is taken out from them and what goes through them. When these great pages have been shown in full, the *sūrah* then adds an image showing them all as perished, where no creature is left alive yet God's face remains full of majesty. To Him all creatures turn awaiting His decision regarding them.

Against the background of these two extremes of absolute extinction and absolute presence, a fearsome warning is issued to both man and *jinn*: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of jinn and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without [God's] authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 31–36)

This is followed by a scene of the end, i.e. the Day of Judgement, against a backdrop of the universe in which we see the sky flowing with the colour of a red rose, and the suffering endured by evildoers. A long and detailed scene of the reward given to the God-fearing then follows. This great exhibition of God's blessings aptly concludes with a verse that says: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)

Al-Rahmān
(The Lord of Grace)

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

[It is] the Lord of Grace (1)

who has taught the Qur'ān. (2)

He created man (3)

and taught him to articulate
thought and speech. (4)

The sun and the moon function
in due measure. (5)

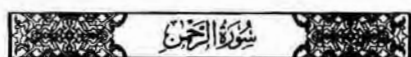
The stars and the trees prostrate
themselves [before Him]. (6)

He has raised the skies high, and
has set the balance, (7)

so that you may not exceed the
balance. (8)

Weigh, therefore, with justice and
do not fall short in the balance.
(9)

He has laid the earth for His
creatures, (10)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الرَّحْمٰنُ ۝۱

عَلَّمَ الْقُرْءَانَ ۝۲

خَلَقَ الْاِنْسَانَ ۝۳

عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ۝۴

الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ۝۵

وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ۝۶

وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ ۝۷

اَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِي الْمِيزَانِ ۝۸

وَاقِمْوْا الْوَزْنَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا تُخْسِرُوْا

الْمِيزَانَ ۝۹

وَالْاَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْاَنْامِ ۝۱۰

with all its fruits, its palm trees
with sheathed clusters, (11)

its husked grain and its sweet-
smelling plants. (12)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(13)

He created man from dried clay,
like pottery, (14)

and created the *jinn* from raging
flames of fire. (15)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(16)

He is the Lord of the two risings
and the Lord of the two settings.
(17)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(18)

He has given freedom to the two
great bodies of water, so that they
may meet; (19)

yet between them is a barrier
which they do not cross. (20)

فِيهَا فَكِهَةٌ وَالنَّخْلُ ذَاتُ الْأَكْمَامِ ﴿١١﴾

وَالْحَبُّ ذُو الْعَصْفِ وَالرَّيْحَانُ ﴿١٢﴾

فَيَايَا آلَاءَ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٣﴾

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَلٍ
كَالْفَخَّارِ ﴿١٤﴾

وَخَلَقَ الْجَانَّ مِنْ مَارِجٍ مِنْ نَارٍ ﴿١٥﴾

فَيَايَا آلَاءَ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٦﴾

رَبُّ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ وَرَبُّ الْمَغْرِبَيْنِ ﴿١٧﴾

فَيَايَا آلَاءَ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٨﴾

مَرَجَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ يَلْتَقِيَانِ ﴿١٩﴾

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَا يَبْغِيَانِ ﴿٢٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(21)

Pearls and corals come from both.
(22)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(23)

His are the lofty ships that sail
like floating mountains through
the seas. (24)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(25)

All that lives on it perishes; (26)

but forever will remain the face
of your Lord, full of majesty,
granting grace. (27)

Which, then, of your Lord's
blessings do you both deny?
(28)

Everyone in heaven and earth
entreats Him. Every day He
manifests Himself in some
wonderful way. (29)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢١﴾

يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُمَا اللُّؤْلُؤُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٢٢﴾

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٣﴾

وَلَهُ الْجَوَارِ الْمُنشَآتُ فِي الْبَحْرِ كَالْأَعْلَامِ ﴿٢٤﴾

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٥﴾

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَبَقِيَ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٨﴾

يَسْتَعْلِهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ
هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(30)

We shall attend to you two huge communities [of *jinn* and mankind]. (31)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(32)

Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority.
(33)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(34)

A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support.
(35)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(36)

When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil. (37)

فَيَايَءَ آلَءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٠﴾

سَنَفْعُ لَكُمْ آيَةَ الثَّقَلَانِ ﴿٣١﴾

فَيَايَءَ آلَءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٢﴾

يَمْعَشَرُ الْجِنُّ وَالْإِنْسُ إِنِ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَنْ
تَنْفُذُوا مِنْ أَقْطَارِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
فَأَنْفُذُوا وَلَا تَنْفُذُوا إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّكُمْ

فَيَايَءَ آلَءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٤﴾

يُرْسَلُ عَلَيْكُمَا شَوْابُ مِّنْ نَّارٍ وَنُحَاسٌ
فَلَا تَنْصِرَانِ ﴿٣٥﴾

فَيَايَءَ آلَءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٦﴾

فَإِذَا انشَقَّتِ السَّمَاءُ فَكَانَتْ وَرْدَةً
كَالدِّهَانِ ﴿٣٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(38)

On that day neither mankind nor *jinn* will be asked about their sins. (39)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(40)

The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.
(41)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(42)

This is the hell which the guilty deny. (43)

They will go round between its flames and scalding water. (44)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(45)

For those who stand in fear of their Lord's presence there shall be two gardens. (46)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٨﴾

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَا يُسْأَلُ عَنْ ذُنُوبِهِ إِنْسٌ وَلَا جَانٌّ ﴿٣٩﴾

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٠﴾

يَعْرِفُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ سِيمَنَّهُمْ فَيُؤْخَذُ
بِالنَّوْصَى وَالْأَقْدَامِ ﴿٤١﴾

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٢﴾

هَذِهِ جَهَنَّمُ الَّتِي يُكَذِّبُ بِهَا الْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

يَطُوفُونَ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ حَمِيمٍ ءَانِ ﴿٤٤﴾

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَلِمَن خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ جَنَّاتٌ ﴿٤٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(47)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٧﴾

With shading branches. (48)

ذَوَاتَا أَفْنَانٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(49)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٩﴾

With a pair of flowing springs.
(50)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ تَجْرِيَانِ ﴿٥٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(51)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥١﴾

With every kind of fruit in pairs.
(52)

فِيهِمَا مِنْ كُلِّ فَاكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(53)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٣﴾

They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade; and the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach. (54)

مُتَكَبِّرِينَ عَلَى فُرُشٍ بَطَائِنُهَا مِنْ إِسْتَبْرَقٍ
وَحِىَ الْجَنَّتَيْنِ دَانٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?
(55)

فَيَايَءَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٥﴾

In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor *jinn* will have touched before. (56)

فِيهِنَّ قَصِيرَاتُ الْإِطْرَفِ لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ
إِنْسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَانٌّ ﴿٥٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (57)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٧﴾

[These mates look] like rubies and corals. (58)

كَأَنَّهُنَّ الْيَاقُوتُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٥٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (59)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٩﴾

Shall the reward of good be anything but good? (60)

هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَنِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَنُ ﴿٦٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (61)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦١﴾

Besides these two there are two other gardens. (62)

وَمِنْ دُونِهِمَا جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٦٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (63)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٣﴾

Both of the deepest green. (64)

مُدَّهَا مَتَّانِ ﴿٦٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (65)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٥﴾

With two gushing springs. (66)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ نَضَّاخَتَانِ ﴿٦٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (67)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٧﴾

With fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees. (68)

فِيهِمَا فَاكِهَةٌ وَنَخْلٌ وَرُمَّانٌ ﴿٦٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (69)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٩﴾

There will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful. (70)

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ حَسَنٍ ﴿٧٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (71)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧١﴾

[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions. (72)

حُورٌ مَّقْصُورَاتٌ فِي الْبُيُوتِ ﴿٧٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (73)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٣﴾

Neither man nor *jinn* will have touched them before. (74)

لَمْ يَطْمِئِنَّ إِلَيْهِمْ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جِآنٌ ﴿٧٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (75)

فَيَايَءَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٥﴾

They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets. (76)

مُتَكِمِينَ عَلَى رَفْرَفٍ خُضْرٍ وَعَبْقَرِيٍّ
حَسَنٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (77)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٧﴾

Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (78)

بِذِكْرِ اسْمِ رَبِّكَ ذِي الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٧٨﴾

Man's Creation and Education

In total, the *sūrah* is a general announcement issued from on high and echoed throughout the universe. Furthermore, it is understood by all who dwell in the universe.

It begins with a verse consisting of one word, *al-Raḥmān*, which we translate as 'the Lord of Grace'. This opening is intended in meaning, pronunciation and cadence. *Al-Raḥmān*: the word has a ring which is echoed everywhere far and loud. *Al-Raḥmān*: its rising intonation resonates throughout the universe, speaking to every creature. It fills the skies and the earth, and reaches every ear and every heart.

Al-Raḥmān. Just the one word, and the verse is finished. The whole universe hearkens, awaiting the great news that follows this great opening. It comes immediately:

[It is] the Lord of Grace who has taught the Qur'ān. He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech. The sun and the moon function in due measure. The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (Verses 1–13)

This is the first section detailing some of the blessings bestowed by the Lord of Grace. It gives the first news after the announcement He “*has taught the Qur'ān.*” This is indeed the highest possible favour that most splendidly reflects God’s grace as it is bestowed on man. The Qur’ān is the complete and accurate translation of the laws of the universe and the code of living chosen by heaven for people on earth. It establishes a clear relation between such laws and code, building faith, concepts, values, standards, systems and affairs on the same solid foundation of the universe. It thus gives man comfort, reassurance, understanding and a mutual response with the universe.

The Qur’ān opens up man’s senses and feelings to this beautiful universe, just as if it were being seen for the first time. It thus renews people’s feelings about their own existence and the existence of the universe around them. It also goes even further than this, giving everything around them life such that it interrelates with humans. Thus wherever man travels or stays, throughout his journey on earth, he finds himself among caring and loving friends.

The Qur’ān instils in people’s minds that they are placed in charge of the earth, honoured by God, given the great trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains were reluctant to undertake. It thus enables them to feel their own value, derived from the fulfilment of their higher human quality that can only be acquired through faith. It is faith that awakens the breath of God’s spirit in people’s souls and brings alive the highest favour God bestows on man.

The Faculty of Speech

Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions teaching the Qur’ān ahead of man’s creation: “*He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech.*” (Verses 3–4) We will leave aside for now the point of man’s creation, as the *sūrah* will presently mention this again. What is specifically intended here is man’s teaching so that he is able to express what is in his mind.

We see man speaking and articulating his thoughts, explaining his ideas, and responding to others, but we do not give much thought to this great favour God has granted. It is indeed a great miracle to which

the Qur'ān often alerts us. What is man? How does he begin? And how does he learn to articulate himself?

It is one cell that begins its life journey in the uterus, infinitely small, hardly visible under the microscope, and cannot reveal anything by itself. Yet soon enough this single cell becomes an embryo made up of millions of cells of a great variety: some are bone, some cartilage, flesh, nerve, skin, etc. They make up the different organs with their fascinating functions, such as hearing, sight, taste, smell, touch, and even the most important and greatest of these priceless favours: mental perception, verbal articulation, sensing and inspiration. All this from that microscopic cell: how? With what power? It is all from the Lord of Grace, and by His making.

Let us consider how such articulation occurs, remembering the facts mentioned in the following Qur'ānic verse: *"God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful."* (16: 78)

The system of speech is an infinitely amazing wonder: the lips, tongue, jaws, teeth, larynx, trachea, bronchi and lungs, all participate in the vocalization process and form a ring in the chain of speech articulation. Greatly amazing as this is, it represents only the mechanical aspect of this highly complex process, which is also related to the brain, hearing and nerves. More significant is the fact that it relates to the mind, which we only know by name. We know nothing about its nature or formation, or even about how it functions.

How does a speaker articulate one word? It is a highly complex process, with numerous steps and stages, involving several organs and systems. In some stages it remains unknown to us. It begins with a feeling of a need to utter this word for a specific purpose. This feeling is transmitted in some unknown way from the faculty of perception, or the mind, or the soul to the action centre, i.e. the brain, which in turn issues a command through the nervous system to utter this word. The word itself is part of what God has taught man, as He gave him its meaning. When the command is made, the lungs expel a measure of air that passes from the bronchi, to the trachea, to the larynx where it goes through the vocal cords. These are incomparably superior to the strings of any man-made musical instrument, and indeed to all musical instruments

with their greatly varied sounds. At the larynx, the air movement makes the sound desired by the brain: high or low, fast or slow, coarse or soft, gentle or sharp, etc. This sound now passes through the mouth where certain pressures are applied at different points. The tongue is so agile at this point that it ensures the production of different sounds through pressures at different points of articulation. All this is needed to utter one word, let alone an expression, a sentence, an idea, past and present feelings, etc. Each one of these is an amazing world, initiated by man, the most extraordinary of creatures. It all comes by the grace of God, the Lord of Grace.

The Sun and the Moon

The *sūrah* moves on highlighting God's favours: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5) The accuracy of each such measure and coordinated movement fills us with wonder as we try to appreciate the facts to which this statement refers. The sun is certainly not the largest celestial body. In open space, to which we can offer no definition of boundaries, there are millions upon millions of celestial bodies, many of which are larger and hotter, and produce more light than the sun. Sirius, for example, is 20 times heavier than the sun, and gives off 50 times more light. Arcturus is 80 times bigger in size than the sun and emanates 8,000 times more light. Other celestial bodies are even greater in size, weight and light. Yet for us, the inhabitants of this little planet earth that rely on the sun for light and heat, the sun is the most important of all of these.

The moon is a small satellite of the earth, but has a great influence on its life. It is indeed the most important element in the tidal movements of the sea.

The sizes of both the sun and the moon, their respective temperatures, distances from us and movement in their orbits are most accurately calculated so as to produce their desirable effects on life on earth. Furthermore, they are placed in their proper respective positions in relation to other celestial bodies.

We will now point out some of the accurate measures regarding life on earth. The sun is 92.5 million miles away from the earth. Had it been

nearer, the earth would have been burnt, or melted or evaporated. Had it been further away, all living creatures on earth would have been frozen. The amount of heat that reaches the earth from the sun represents no more than one of two-million parts of the heat emanating from that body. It is this little fraction only that best suits our life here. Had Sirius, in its present size and heat, been placed in the position of the sun, the earth would have evaporated and been lost in space, long ago.

The same applies to the moon. Had it been larger in size, or nearer in position, the tides it effects in the seas would have drowned everything on earth.

The gravity of both the sun and the moon is also an important factor on the earth's stability, position and movement in space. Our solar system moves in space at a speed of 20,000 miles an hour, heading in one direction. Yet it never collides with any other celestial body.

In this great expanse, not a single star or planet moves even a hairbreadth out of orbit. Absolute balance of size and movement is maintained for all celestial bodies. It is just as God Almighty says: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5)

Submissive Universe

"*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) The last reference was to the accurate measure observed in the structure of the great universe. Now the reference is to what direction the universe follows. This brief statement contains a highly inspiring reference to an enlightening and fundamental truth.

There is a bond of worship and submission between this universe and its Creator and Originator, God Almighty. The stars and the trees are two examples of creatures that live in the universe. They give a clear idea of the direction the universe follows. Commentators have different views about the meaning of the word *najm*, or star, which occurs in this verse, with some saying that it refers to the stars in the sky, while others claim that it refers to plants that do not stand erect like trees. Whichever interpretation we take the point this verse stresses is the same, identifying the bond between the universe and its Creator. The universe is a living

creature with a soul that differs in degree and nature from one creature to another, but its essence remains the same.

Long ago, the human heart realized this fact about the universe and its soul. This realization is based on the sensitive quality God gave it. This fact, however, became blurred every time man tried to capture it with his mind, in the light of his own experience. Man, however, has recently been able to recognize the unity of the structure of the universe, but he remains far from understanding the nature of the universe's living soul. Scientists tend to believe that the atom is the unit of the universe, and that the atom is essentially radiation. They also believe that movement is the characteristic common to everything in the universe. It is pertinent to ask, then, what goal does the universe try to achieve?

The Qur'ān says that every apparent step of the universe, which is in essence an expression of its spirit, looks up to its Originator. This is stated in numerous verses of the Qur'ān, such as the one we are discussing: *"The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]."* (Verse 6) Two other such verses expressing the same idea are as follows: *"The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises."* (17: 44) *"Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him."* (24: 41) To contemplate this truth and observe the universe as it worships and glorifies its Lord gives our hearts a special type of comfort and pleasure. We feel a mutual sympathy with everything around us as all looks up to the Lord, the Creator of all. We feel that we are in a friendly universe where everything and all creatures have the same aim. This is a feeling with far reaching and profound effects.

"He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance." (Verses 7-9) The reference to the skies is intended, like all other references in the Qur'ān to the two immediate aspects of the universe, to awaken minds and hearts that have become oblivious to the wonders around them, because of long familiarity. These minds and hearts should look at the universe, appreciate its wonderful beauty, harmony and coordination, and glorify the One who initiated all.

Whatever is meant by the skies, the reference to them lifts our sight to the great space above us, which appears without boundaries, and in which float trillions of huge celestial bodies, yet no collision occurs between them, either individually or in clusters. A cluster may include as many as a billion stars, as in the galaxy which includes our own solar system. Our sun has a diameter of 2.3 million kilometres, yet within our galaxy there are many smaller stars and many that are larger by thousands of times. All these stars and clusters of stars and planets move in space at frightening speeds, but in the great space above they are no more than particles floating far apart from each other.

Along with raising the sky high, God has '*set the balance*' of truth. This is well established so as to define the values of things, events and people. Thus, values are measured by the balance of truth, not according to different, ignorant desires or personal preferences. Moreover, this balance is set within human nature and in the divine message advocated by all God's messengers and defined in the Qur'ān. He has set the balance, "*so that you may not exceed the balance,*" going too high or too low. "*Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance,*" so as to ensure justice to all in all situations.

Thus, the truth on earth and in human life relates to the universe and its structure. It relates to the sky in its abstract significance that points to the source of revelation, and in its physical significance as a manifestation of God's infinite power. The two meanings converge to add further inspiration.

"*He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants.*" (Verses 10–12) Because we have lived on earth for so long, and we are well familiar with all that is on it, we do not feel the significance of its being '*laid*' for God's creatures, and to enable us to function so comfortably. Therefore, we do not feel the great significance of the stability of the earth and how much grace God has bestowed on us by such stability unless a volcano erupts or an earthquake occurs, filling us with fear. Only at such times do we fully appreciate God's grace in making the earth stable.

Yet people should remember this truth at every moment. They should remember that this planet where they feel so secure is no more than

to suit. Therefore, when God reminds humans and *jinn* of His favour of having created them, He is referring to a blessing that is beyond comprehension.

God – all glory belongs to Him – then states the substances used for creating humans and *jinn*. These are also created by God. Man is created from clay that has dried and gives a sound when beaten with a stick or the human hand. The verse may refer to a stage in the process of creation from dust or clay, or it may simply be a reference to the fact that man and the earth are made of the same material.

Modern science has proven that the human body contains the same elements as the earth, including carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, nitrogen, calcium, potassium, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, iodine, fluorine, cobalt, zinc, silicon and aluminium. These are the same elements that form dust. Their proportions differ from one person to another. Needless to say, they differ in man from dust. Yet they are the same elements.¹

What science has proven should not be taken as the ultimate interpretation of the Qur'ānic text. The fact to which the Qur'ān refers may mean what has been scientifically proven, or it may mean something totally different. It may refer to another of the numerous aspects that endorse the meaning of man's creation out of dust, or wet or dry clay.

We stress, most emphatically, that we must not limit the meaning of a Qur'ānic text to a scientific discovery that admits the possibility of error, or the possibility of change with human progress. Some scholars with sincere intentions try to highlight that Qur'ānic statements give identical import to scientific discoveries, proven or still under observation. They cite this as a proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān. What we say is that the Qur'ān is miraculous, whether its statements are confirmed by scientific discoveries or not. What the Qur'ān says is broader in scope than what science says at any one time. Scientific discoveries are always subject to amendment and change, and sometimes they are proven erroneous. We can certainly use science to broaden our understanding

1. Nawfāl, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 180.

of Qur'ānic texts, whenever it explains some aspects of the wonders pertaining to man and the universe. We must not, however, say that a certain Qur'ānic text refers only to a particular scientific discovery. All that we can say is that the scientific discovery may be part of what the Qur'ānic text refers to.

As for the creation of the *jinn* from raging flames of fire, this is something beyond human knowledge. The only source on this is the Qur'ān, given by God who knows what He has created. The fire is described here as *mārij*, which means lit and moving like flames in a windy place. The *jinn* have been given the ability to live on this earth, together with man. However, we do not know how the *jinn* live. What is certain, though, is that they are also addressed by the Qur'ān; it is as much a message to them as it is to man. We explained this in Volume XV, when discussing the verse that says: "*We sent to you a group of jinn to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (46: 29) This is also confirmed in this *sūrah*.

The address here is to both *jinn* and humans, reminding both of God's blessing in their creation out of their respective origins. This is the central blessing, which brings with it all other blessings. Therefore, it is followed by the comment that signifies putting their testimony on record: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 16) Needless to say, denial is pointless.

"*He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 17–18) This reference fills our hearts with great feelings of God's presence, wherever we turn or move, and wherever we look on the wide horizon. Wherever something rises or sets, there is God, the Lord of all, the Sovereign who extends His light and guidance to all. The two risings and two settings may refer to the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, considering that both have already been mentioned in the *sūrah* as part of God's blessings. The verse may also be understood as a reference to the two different positions of sunrise and sunset in summer and winter respectively.

Be that as it may, the import of this reference is more worthy of attention. It points to the fact that God's hand controls stars, planets

and everything else in the universe. His Lordship is seen more clearly on the horizon. When we contemplate universal phenomena and look at the stars rising and setting, our hearts, minds and souls are filled with greater reassurance.

God's Lordship of the two risings and the two settings reflects some of His blessings. Hence, the comment familiar in this *sūrah* is repeated: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 18) The two risings and settings are not only signs pointing to God, but are also part of His blessings granted to humans and *jinn*. They bring much good to all inhabitants of the earth. We see how life begins with the sun rising. It certainly also needs the sunset. Should either one of them, or both, suffer some dysfunction, life itself would be disrupted.

Blessings in Seas and Rivers

We now turn back to the earth and its waters, which God has made in exact measure that determines quantity, type, how it runs and how it is used:

He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Pearls and corals come from both. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (Verses 19–25)

The two bodies of water, expressed in the Arabic text as '*the two seas*', are in fact the salty bodies of water including seas and oceans and the unsalty ones or rivers. God left them free to run and to meet, but did not allow them to exceed their limits. Each will fulfil its own function. In between them there is a barrier of the same nature, which God has put in place. The quantities of water on earth are not the result of any coincidence; they are determined by exact measure. Salty waters cover three-quarters of the earth's surface and they are mostly connected, while dry land represents only about one quarter of the earth. This very large quantity of salty water is the amount needed to keep the earth's atmosphere clean and suitable for supporting life.

In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence. The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea.²

From this great mass of water evaporation takes place because of the heat of the sun, and what evaporates comes back in the form of rain which is the source of sweet water in all its forms, the most important of which finds its way into rivers. The careful proportion of the vastness of the sea, the heat of the sun, the cold temperatures in the upper atmosphere and other climatic conditions produce rain that provides unsalty waters, which is the mainsray of life for plants, animals and man.

Almost all rivers end in the sea, transporting various salts and compounds from land to sea. Thus, rivers do not change the nature of sea water. Normally rivers run at a higher elevation than sea level. Thus, the sea does not encroach on a river's course, flooding it with salty water. Had that been the case, the nature of rivers would have altered and their function ceased. In between the two there is always this barrier which God has put in place, ensuring that these two water bodies continue to fulfil their respective natural functions. It is no wonder that all this is mentioned here as being among God's great blessings: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* also adds here some of the blessings God has placed in these two bodies of water, some of which can easily be seen: "*Pearls and corals come from both.*" (Verse 22) The pearl is originally formed by a mollusc animal.

Perhaps the pearl is one of the most marvellous wonders of the sea. The mollusc goes to the bottom of the sea inside its hard shell which keeps it safe from danger. It is different from other animals in form and life pattern. It has a fine, wonderful net, similar to that of a fisherman, which allows air, water and food to enter, but

2. Morrison, A.C., *Man Does not Stand Alone*, The World's Work, Surrey, p. 28.

stops sand, stone and similarly unwanted objects. Below it are the mouths of the animal, each with four lips. Should a grain of sand or a small stone or a harmful organism get through the net, the mollusc immediately covers it with a sticky discharge which then solidifies to form a pearl. The size of the pearl differs according to the size of the foreign object that finds its way inside.³

Coral is among God's amazing creation. It is found in the sea at depths ranging from 5 to 300 metres. It fixes its lower edge to a rock or weeds, keeping its mouth at the top. Around its mouth it has several protrusions used to capture food. Should a little creature touch any of these protrusions, it is immediately paralysed and sticks to the protrusion, which then shrinks and bends towards the coral mouth where the paralysed prey is pushed through a small passage similar to man's oesophagus.

Coral reproduces itself by discharging reproductive cells which fertilize the eggs, and the baby coral will then stick itself to a stone or a weed, starting an independent life like its mother.

Another sign of God's wonderful creation is that corals reproduce in another way, producing extensions that remain stuck to the main body. Thus the coral tree is formed with a wide trunk and narrower branches that may become very fine. The coral tree can reach 30 centimetres in length. Coral concentrations differ in colour: some are orange, some are of red carnation colour, some emerald blue, and others pale and dusty in colour. Red coral is the solid stem that remains after the living part has died. Coral stone-like concentrations can form large colonies. One of these is a chain of coral rocks known as the Great Barrier Reef, to the north east of Australia. The reef is 1,350 miles long and 50 miles wide.⁴

Man makes precious jewellery from both pearls and corals. God mentions both as part of His blessings and the *sūrah* adds here the usual comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 23)

3. Nawfal, op. cit., p. 105.

4. Nawfal, ibid., pp. 106–107.

The *sūrah* then mentions the ships that sail through the sea, some of which are very large, looking like mountains: “*His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas.*” (Verse 24) The *sūrah* refers to these floating ships as belonging to God. They indeed sail by God’s will. Nothing keeps them afloat in the sea, through its waves and currents except God’s care. Hence, they belong to Him. They remain among the great favours with which He blesses human life. They provide a means of livelihood, transportation and comfort that people cannot deny. Hence, the comment: “*Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?*” (Verse 25)

The Eternal

Having taken us on this round in the great universe, referring to different types of creatures that will inevitably die, the *sūrah* now mentions the only One who is eternal, and to whom all glory and majesty belong. As we see death overtaking all creatures, we are conscious of the truth of God, the Eternal:

All that lives on it perishes; but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny? (Verses 26–28)

All sounds become hushed, breathing faint, and limbs stop moving. The air of death spreads over all living creatures, stopping every move throughout the heavens and earth. Only the majesty of the Eternal face overshadows all creatures, time, place and the entire universe. Human expression cannot depict the scene. It cannot add to the Qur’ānic text which gives us a feeling of humble tranquillity, complete silence and total majesty. It paints a scene of total emptiness that leaves the whole universe motionless after it had been bustling with life. Yet it instils in us an image which we cannot understand from our experience but can comprehend. The same comment is added, as the *sūrah* considers the full understanding of this fact to be one of the blessings humans and *jinn* are reminded of: “*Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?*” (Verse 28)

It is indeed a blessing; nay, it is the source of all blessings. It is this Eternal Existence that creates all and gives them their special characteristics, systems, forms and laws. It is what determines their fate and destiny. God the Eternal is the One who creates, originates, protects and looks after His creation, holds them to account and gives them their reward. It is then the truth of His being the Eternal that gives all blessings. Indeed this world and all its affairs are put in place as a result of the truth of God's eternity while all else comes to an end.

Appeals from All

The truth of God's eternity gives rise to another truth: all creatures are bound to perish and, therefore, they all address everything related to their existence to the One who is without equal, eternal and in control of everything in the universe:

Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?" (Verses 29–30)

They all address their entreaties and appeals to Him alone because He is the only One to receive such requests. All else will perish, so they cannot be addressed with such appeals. He is the only One to answer requests, and none who appeals to Him alone will ever end in failure. Anyone who entreats or appeals to someone other than God is utterly in error. What can a creature that will inevitably perish do to another who will also perish? What can one in need give to another also in need?

All glory to Him, He manifests Himself every day in a different way. This universe, the limits of which are unknown to us, is in its entirety subject to His will, functioning under His control. Such control applies generally to the universe as a whole, and applies at the same time to every individual creature on its own, and to every organ, cell and molecule in every individual. He gives everything its due, assigns to it its function and watches how it fulfils that function. Such controls monitor every shoot that comes out of the earth, every leaf that falls, every grain in the earth's deep darkness, every fresh or dry thing, every fish at sea, worm in

the ground, every insect, beast or bird in their hiding places, every egg, chick, feather and cell in everything that lives. The One who controls all is never preoccupied with something so as to turn aside from some other thing. Nothing hidden or manifest ever escapes His knowledge. Part of what He controls is the affairs of His creatures on earth, humans and *jinn*. Hence He records this blessing as He addresses them: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 30)

A Frightening Threat

Having stated this fundamental truth of God's eternality while everything else perishes and its correlate making clear that He controls all the affairs of all His creatures, the *sūrah* begins a new section that starts with a threat that sends fear into all hearts. This is a prelude to the discussion of the Day of Judgement that follows later in the *sūrah*:

We shall attend to you two huge communities [of jinn and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (Verses 31–36)

"*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of jinn and mankind].*" (Verse 31) What a frightening threat that neither man nor *jinn* can face. Indeed firm mountains, stars and galaxies tremble to hear it. God Almighty, in all His power and majesty, says that He will attend to the reckoning of these two humble creatures, man and *jinn*, giving His statement an air of warning! It is unimaginably terrible!

A more literal translation of the threat would say: "We shall be free to attend to you two..." God – limitless is He in His glory – is not preoccupied with something so as to need to free Himself of what preoccupies Him. This is merely an expression intended to make it easier for us to understand, and to deliver the warning in a stunning and crushing way. This entire universe was originated and put in place with

a single word, 'Be', and once the word was uttered the whole universe came into existence. Likewise, its total disappearance needs nothing more than the command to be issued once, in less than the twinkling of an eye. What can happen, then, to these two communities of creatures, man and *jinn*, when God attends fully to them alone, administering their punishment? Under the shadow of this fearful threat, they are both asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 32)

The *sūrah* continues with this frightening tone, challenging both man and *jinn* to pass beyond their own world: "*Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so.*" (Verse 33) How, and where to? "*You cannot pass beyond them without authority.*" (Verse 33) No authority can be given except by the One who has it. Once more, they are faced with the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 34) Do they have, within themselves, anything that amounts to a lie to say, or even a word to utter? Nonetheless the onslaught continues to the end, adding further threats and revealing their miserable end: "*A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 35–36) The horror painted in this image is beyond the scope of human imagination, or any creature's imagination for that matter. It is a unique image. Although there are a few images akin to it in the Qur'ān, none are exactly similar to this one: "*Leave Me alone with those who deny the truth and enjoy life's blessings.*" (73: 11) "*Leave Me alone [to deal] with him whom I have created alone.*" (74: 11) The fact remains that this present verse, and the warning it implies, is far more frightful: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of jinn and mankind].*" (Verse 31)

The Last Day

The *sūrah* devotes its remaining part to images and scenes of the Last Day, starting with a universal upheaval, followed by images of reckoning, requital and reward. This commences with an image of the universe that fits with the opening of the *sūrah*: "*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) We are introduced to a picture of the sky turning rose-red or looking like a red rose and

flowing like oil. The sum of the verses describing the universe on the Day of Judgement confirm the total destruction of all celestial bodies, after they break loose of the system which controls their operation and coordinates their orbits and movements. One of these verses is the one we are now discussing. Others may be cited, such as: *"When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust."* (56: 4-6) *"When eyes are dazzled, and the moon eclipsed, and the sun and the moon are brought together."* (75: 7-9) *"When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight."* (81: 1-6) *"When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode..."* (82: 1-3) *"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!"* (84: 1-5) All these verses, and many others, refer to this great event that will overcome the entire universe, the nature of which is known only to God.

"When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil." (Verse 37) The same question is again asked: *"Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?"* (Verse 38) No denial can then be either contemplated or uttered.

"On that day neither mankind nor jinn will be asked about their sins." (Verse 39) This applies to a particular situation on that day when all will be present. It is a day with different situations: in some people will be questioned and in some others no question will be put to them. In some, every soul will argue its own case, trying to put the blame on its associates, and in others no word of argument or dispute will be allowed. It is a long, extended day, with many positions and situations, each of which is awesome, and each is witnessed by multitudes of creatures. This verse speaks of a particular situation when no human or *jinn* will be asked about their sins. Everything is already well known, and the deeds of all are out in the open. Signs of misery appear as black on some faces, and signs of triumph appear white on others. Every face tells of what is going to happen. Can there be any denial on that day?

Hence, the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 40)

"*The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.*" (Verse 41) This is a scene that combines force with humiliation: forelocks and feet are tied together and the guilty are so cast into hell. Can there be any denial then? As this is going on, the *sūrah* addresses its audience, as if they are witnessing this continuing process of casting the guilty, with their forelocks and feet combined, into hell: "*This is the hell which the guilty deny.*" (Verse 43) It is present here, as you are now seeing it. "*They will go round between its flames and scalding water.*" (Verse 44) It is exceedingly hot; they have nowhere to go other than round and between the flames and scorching fluids. Look at them as they go round now: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 45)

This is all that is said about those enduring this most painful suffering. The *sūrah* then turns its attention to those enjoying honour and bliss.

The Four Gardens

For the first time in the Qur'ān so far two gardens are mentioned, and there are probably more within the great garden of heaven. Their mention here, in particular, may be to stress their importance. In the next *sūrah*, The Inevitable Event, we learn that the dwellers of heaven form two large groups: the ones to the fore who will be brought nearest to God, and the people to the right. Each will experience great bliss. Here also we feel that these two gardens are designated for a group with a high position. It may be the group described in the next *sūrah* as being closest to God. We see another two gardens which are less refined than the first two and we feel that they belong to a group that comes next to the ones already mentioned. This group may be the people to the right. Whatever the case may be, let us look at this first grouping of two gardens, feeling their bliss. They are "*With shading branches.*" (Verse 48) The Arabic word used for branches, *afnān*, conveys in particular newly springing branches that spread an air of freshness. These gardens have "*a pair of flowing springs.*" (Verse 50) Thus, they are never short of water.

Moreover, they are "*With every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Their fruits are plentiful and varied. How will the dwellers of these gardens live? "*They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade.*" (Verse 54) Such is the lining of their couches: the top is left to our imagination. And then "*the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach.*" (Verse 54) It is near and easy to reach.

This, however, does not complete the aspects of luxury that await these people. There is still more to consider: "*In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn will have touched before.*" (Verse 56) Their modest gaze reflects their chastity. They do not look to anyone other than their spouses. Besides, they instil a sense of luxury and brightness, appearing "*like rubies and corals.*" (Verse 58)

All this comes as the reward for a person who stands in this life in fear of his Lord's presence and worships Him as if he sees Him. He feels that God sees him and he works to attain the superior grade of excellence that the Prophet described as "to worship God as if you see Him. If you do not, then know that He sees you." As such they deserve more from the Lord of Grace for their excellence: "*Shall the reward of good be anything but good?*" (Verse 60)

In this presentation of these two lofty gardens and what they contain, every aspect of blessing and comfort is followed by the familiar comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 61)

The *sūrah* then describes what the other group, also with two gardens, will have: "*Besides these two there are two other gardens.*" (Verse 62) The description shows them to be in some way less than the first two: "*Both of the deepest green.*" (Verse 64) Their green colour is very dark, almost black. They have "*two gushing springs.*" (Verse 66) Their water gushes forth, which is again different from, or less than, the flowing water of the springs in the first two gardens. Here we have "*fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees,*" (Verse 68) while we had there "*every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Moreover, "*there will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful.*" (Verse 70) Further aspects are added in the next verse: "*[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions.*" (Verse 72) The pavilions, or decorated tents, add connotations of bedouin luxury, gratifying those used to desert life. The mates they have here are '*sheltered*', while the ones in the other two gardens are '*of*'

modest gaze'. However both groups of mates share in the same qualities of chastity and faithful devotion: "*Neither man nor jinn will have touched them before.*" (Verse 74)

We see the dwellers of these two gardens enjoying their luxuries: "*They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets.*" (Verse 76) The fine quality of the carpets in these gardens is given a special description in Arabic, '*abqarī*', which is an adjective used of the 'Abqar Valley; in olden times the Arabs believed this to be the dwelling place of the *jinn*. Hence they attributed every marvellous thing to this valley, describing it as '*abqarī*', as the carpets are here described. When compared with what the first two gardens contain, these are clearly more modest. Yet the familiar comment is added after every aspect of blessing mentioned here: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 77)

The *sūrah* concludes with a final note of glorification of the Lord whose face, full of majesty, will remain after all creation has perished. This is the most apt conclusion to a *sūrah* that bears the name of the Lord of Grace: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)



SŪRAH 56

Al-Wāqī‘ah

(The Inevitable Event)

Prologue

Al-Wāqī‘ah, The Inevitable Event, is the name given to this Makkan *sūrah* explaining its subject matter. The main issue discussed is resurrection. The *sūrah* specifically refutes the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur’ān and associating partners with God. They always wonder: “*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*” (Verses 47–48) Therefore, the *sūrah* begins by describing resurrection, giving it a name, *al-wāqī‘ah*, that makes its happening absolutely clear, leaving no room for doubt: “*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass.*” (Verses 1–2) It highlights the events that distinguish that day from all others: people’s positions are totally changed, as is the earth’s appearance. These fearful events produce a different earth and entirely new values: “*abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust, you shall be divided into three classes.*” (Verses 3–7)

The *sūrah* then describes the fates of these three classes, the ones to the fore, those to the right and those to the left. It gives us a very detailed description of what they receive of favours and blessings, or misery and suffering. This makes us feel that it will all undoubtedly happen, and

especially as every detail is set before our eyes. The unbelievers are made to see their fate and that of the believers and hear what is said about them after detailing their misery: *"In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?'"* (Verses 45–48) The description gives the impression that the punishment is being meted out now and that life on earth is long gone, mentioned only to show how hideous and repugnant some people's way of life was.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part discusses the question of faith in its entirety, placing particular emphasis on the main topic, i.e. resurrection. The *sūrah* then makes a number of highly effective touches, pinpointing matters that all people know and see, whatever their environment and level of experience. It cites the beginning of each person's life journey with the discharge of semen, and shows their death only to be replaced by a new generation. This is cited as evidence of the second life, which is just as easy and simple as the first one, which they all know. The *sūrah* then cites the evidence provided by plants and agriculture, which is an initiation of a certain form of life by God's will. Had He willed, it would not have come about and would not have yielded its fruit. Next, water is cited; this commodity is necessary for all life. Its availability is totally dependent on God's will since it is He who sends it down from the clouds. Had He willed, He would have made it salty, unsuitable for bringing about or sustaining life. Finally, fire is cited together with its basic material, the trees. At this point, a warning is given reminding them of the fire of hell which they doubt. All these images are familiar to them, and they are only asked to reflect on how they come about by God's will.

This part also speaks about the Qur'ān, which tells them about the inevitable event yet still they doubt its warnings. A very serious oath follows, emphasizing that these revelations constitute a noble reading preserved in a well-guarded record, touched only by purified angels.

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, it paints a very powerful scene of man's situation at the point of death, when his soul is in his throat. All those around him stand helpless, unable to assist. They know nothing about what is happening inside or to this person. As he is about to depart this

life, none other than God can do aught to him. He sees his path ahead, but he cannot say anything about what he sees.

The *sūrah* concludes by re-emphasizing the true news, adding further glorification of God, the Supreme: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) It thus ensures that the beginning and the end form a perfect harmony.



Al-Wāqī'ah
(The Inevitable Event)

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

When that which is certain to
happen will have come to pass
(1)

no one will then deny its having
come to pass, (2)

abasing [some], exalting [others].
(3)

When the earth is violently
shaken (4)

and the mountains crumble away
(5)

and scatter abroad into fine dust,
(6)

you shall be divided into three
classes: (7)

There are the people of the right
side: what people are they? (8)

And the people of the left side:
what people are they? (9)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِذَا وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ①

لَيْسَ لَوْفَعِهَا كَاذِبَةٌ ②

خَافِضَةٌ رَافِعَةٌ ③

إِذَا رُجَّتِ الْأَرْضُ رَجًا ④

وُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًا ⑤

فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً مُتْبِنًا ⑥

وَكُنتُمْ أَزْوَاجًا ثَلَاثَةً ⑦

فَأَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ
الْمَيْمَنَةِ ⑧

وَأَصْحَابُ الشِّمَالِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الشِّمَالِ ⑨

And there are those to the fore,
who shall be foremost. (10)

وَالسَّابِقُونَ السَّابِقُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

These will be brought nearest to
God, (11)

أُولَئِكَ الْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

in gardens of bliss. (12)

فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

A good many of them are from
earlier times (13)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

and a few from later generations.
(14)

وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنَ الْآخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

On gold-encrusted couches (15)

عَلَى سُرُرٍ مَّوْضُونَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾

they will recline facing each other.
(16)

مُتَّكِئِينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَابِلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Immortal youths shall wait upon
them (17)

يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

with goblets, ewers, and cups
filled with water from unsullied
springs. (18)

يَا كُؤُوبٌ وَأَبَارِيقٌ وَكَأْسٌ مِّن مَّعِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

From it they will not be dispersed,
nor will they be in short supply.
(19)

لَّا يَصُدُّوْنَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يَنْزِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

And with fruit of any kind they
may choose, (20)

وَفَلَاحَةٌ مِّمَّا يَخْيَرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and with the meat of any fowl
they may desire. (21)

وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

There will be for them companions
with large beautiful eyes (22)

وَحُورٌ عِينٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

like hidden pearls: (23)

كَأَمْثَلِ اللُّؤْلُؤِ الْمَكْنُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾

a reward for what they used to
do. (24)

جَزَاءُ يَوْمَ كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

There they will hear no idle talk,
no sinful speech, (25)

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْيِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.
(26)

إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَامًا سَلَامًا ﴿٢٦﴾

As for those on the right, what
people are they? (27)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

They will dwell amid thornless
lote trees (28)

فِي سِدْرٍ مَّخْضُودٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

and flower-clad acacias (29)

وَطَلْحٍ مَّنْضُودٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

with extended shade, (30)

وِظَلٍّ مَّتْدُودٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

constantly flowing water, (31)

وَمَاءٍ مَّسْكُوبٍ ﴿٣١﴾

abundant fruits, (32)

وَفَلَاحَةٍ كَثِيرَةٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

unfailing, never out of reach,
(33)

لَا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

[reclining on] couches raised high. (34)

وَفُرُشٍ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation, (35)

إِنَّا أَنشَأْنَهُنَّ إِنشَاءً ﴿٣٥﴾

making them virgins, (36)

جَعَلْنَهُنَّ أَبْكَارًا ﴿٣٦﴾

full of love, of matching age, (37)

عَمَّا أَتْرَابًا ﴿٣٧﴾

for those on the right. (38)

لِأَصْحَابِ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٨﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (39)

ثَلَاثَةٌ مِّنَ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

and a good many from later generations. (40)

وَلَثَلَاثَةٌ مِّنَ الْآخِرِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And those on the left, what people are they? (41)

وَأَصْحَابُ الشِّمَالِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الشِّمَالِ ﴿٤١﴾

They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water (42)

فِي سُمُومٍ وَجَمِيمٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

in the shadows of black smoke, (43)

وَضِلٍّ مِّنْ يَّحْمُومٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither cool nor refreshing. (44)

لَّا بَارِدٍ وَلَا كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury (45)

إِنْتُمْ كَانُوا قَبْلَ ذَلِكَ مُتْرَفِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and persisted in heinous sin,
(46)

saying, 'What! When we have
died and become mere dust and
bones, are we to be raised up
again? (47)

And our forefathers, too? (48)

Say: 'All people of the earliest and
latest generations (49)

will indeed be gathered together
at an appointed time on a specific
day. (50)

Then, you who have gone astray
and denied the truth (51)

will eat from the fruit of the
Zaqqūm tree, (52)

filling your bellies with it, (53)

and will drink scalding water;
(54)

yet you will drink it like insatiably
thirsty camels drink.' (55)

Such will be their dwelling place
on the Day of Judgement. (56)

وَكَاؤُاٰصِرُوْنَ عَلٰٓى لٰغٰثِ الْعَظِيْمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَكَاؤُاٰيَقُوْلُوْكَ اِيْذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا
وَعِظْمًا اِهٖٓ نَّالْمَبْعُوْثُوْنَ ﴿٤٧﴾

اَوْ اٰبَاؤُنَا الْاَوَّلُوْنَ ﴿٤٨﴾

قُلْ اِنَّكَ الْاَوَّلِيْنَ وَالْاٰخِرِيْنَ ﴿٤٩﴾

لَمَجْمُوْعُوْنَ اِلٰٓى مِيْقٰتٍ يَّوْمٍ مَّعْلُوْمٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

ثُمَّ اِنَّكُمْ اِيَّهَا لَصَّاٰلُوْنَ الْمُكْذِبُوْنَ ﴿٥١﴾

لَا تَكُوْنُوْنَ مِنْ شَجَرٍ مِّنْ زُقُوْمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

فَالِئُوْنَ مِنْهَا الْبٰطِلُوْنَ ﴿٥٣﴾

فَشَرِبُوْا عَلٰٓيْهِ مِّنَ الْحَمِيْمِ ﴿٥٤﴾

فَشَرِبُوْا مِّمَّنْ شَرَبَ الْهٰمِيْمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

هٰذَا نَزْلُكُمْ يَّوْمَ الدِّيْنِ ﴿٥٦﴾

It is We who have created you:
will you not believe? (57)

فَنَحْنُ خَالِقُكُمْ فَلَوْلَا تُصَدِّقُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Consider the semen you discharge:
(58)

أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا تُمْنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

do you create it, or are We the
Creator? (59)

أَمْ أَنْتُمْ خَالِقُونَهُ ۖ أَمْ نَحْنُ الْخَالِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

We have decreed that death shall
be among you. Nothing can
prevent Us (60)

فَنَحْنُ قَدَرْنَا بَيْنَكُمْ الْمَوْتَ وَمَا نَحْنُ
بِمُسْبِقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

from replacing you by others like
yourselves or bringing you into
being anew in a way unknown
to you. (61)

عَلَىٰ أَنْ يُبَدِّلَ أَمْثَلَكُمْ وَتُنْشِئَكُمْ فِي
مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

You have learned how you have
come into being in the first
instance. Why, then, do you not
reflect? (62)

وَلَقَدْ عَلَّمْتُمُ النَّشْأَةَ الْأُولَىٰ فَلَوْلَا
تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Consider the seeds you sow in the
ground: (63)

أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا تَحْرَثُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

is it you who makes them grow,
or We? (64)

أَمْ أَنْتُمْ تَرْزَعُونَهُ ۖ أَمْ نَحْنُ الزَّارِعُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

Were it Our will, We could turn
it into chaff and leave you to
wail, (65)

لَوْ نَشَاءُ لَجَعَلْنَاهُ حُطَامًا فَظَلْتُمْ
تَفَكَّهُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

'We are burdened with debt;
(66)

إِنَّا الْمَغْرُمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

we have been deprived.' (67)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Consider the water you drink:
(68)

أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ الْمَاءَ الَّذِي تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

is it you who brings it down from
the clouds, or We? (69)

ءَأَنْتُمْ أَنْزَلْتُمُوهُ مِنَ الْمُزْنِ أَمْ نَحْنُ
الْمُنزِلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Were it Our will, We could make
it salty and bitter. Why, then, do
you not give thanks? (70)

لَوْ نَشَاءُ جَعَلْنَاهُ أُجَاجًا فَلَوْلَا
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Consider the fire you kindle:
(71)

أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ النَّارَ الَّتِي تُورُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

is it you who grows its tree, or
We? (72)

ءَأَنْتُمْ أَنْشَأْتُمْ شَجَرَتَهَا أَمْ نَحْنُ
الْمُنشِئُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We made it a reminder for man,
and a comfort for desert travellers.
(73)

نَحْنُ جَعَلْنَاهَا تَذْكِرَةً وَمَتَاعًا
لِّلْمُقْوِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name
of your Lord, the Supreme. (74)

فَسَبِّحْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

I do swear by the positions of the
stars (75)

فَلَا أَقْسَمُ بِمَوْقِعِ النُّجُومِ ﴿٧٥﴾

— a mighty oath, if you but knew
it! — (76)

وَلَإِنَّهُ لَقَسَمٌ لِّوَتَلْعَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

that this is indeed a most
honourable Qur'an, (77)

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٧٧﴾

in a well-guarded record (78)

فِي كِتَابٍ مَّكْنُونٍ ﴿٧٨﴾

that only the purified can touch:
(79)

لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

a revelation from the Lord of all
the worlds. (80)

تَنْزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Would you look on this discourse
with disdain? (81)

أَفَيْهَذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَنْتُمْ مُدْهِنُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Do you make it your livelihood
that you persistently deny it?
(82)

وَتَجْعَلُونَ رِزْقَكُمْ أَنَّكُمْ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

When the soul [of a dying person]
comes up to the throat (83)

فَلَوْلَا إِذَا بَلَغَتِ الْحُلُقُومَ ﴿٨٣﴾

while you are helplessly looking
on (84)

وَأَنْتُمْ حِينِيذٌ تَنْظُرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

We are closer to him than you,
although you do not see Us.
(85)

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْكُمْ وَلَكِنْ
لَّا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Why, if you think you are not to
be judged, (86)

فَلَوْلَا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ غَيْرَ مَدِينِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

can you not restore that [ebbing
life], if what you claim is true?
(87)

تَرْجِعُونَهَا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, (88)

فَأَمَّا إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. (89)

فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّتْ نَعِيمٌ ﴿٨٩﴾

If he is one of those on the right, (90)

وَأَمَّا إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ أَصْحَابِ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٠﴾

a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. (91)

فَسَلَامٌ لَّكَ مِنَ أَصْحَابِ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٩١﴾

But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, (92)

وَأَمَّا إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ الضَّالِّينَ ﴿٩٢﴾

he will be welcomed with scalding water, (93)

فَنُزْلٌ مِنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٩٣﴾

and the heat of a blazing fire. (94)

وَنَصِيلَةٌ جَوْجٍ ﴿٩٤﴾

This is surely the indubitable truth. (95)

إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ حَقُّ الْيَقِينِ ﴿٩٥﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (96)

فَسَبِّحْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

Unfinished Conditional

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust. (Verses 1-6)

This opening is clearly intended to add suspense to its presentation of this awesome but inevitable event. It employs a special style that clearly indicates this. Twice, it begins a conditional sentence, employing the word 'when', without finishing what the result or the outcome will be. It first says: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others].*" (Verses 1–3) But it does not say what will take place when this inevitable event comes to pass. It simply says there can be no denying that it will happen. Without saying what comes next, the *sūrah* commences a new beginning with another conditional sentence: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (Verses 4–6) Again, the *sūrah* does not tell us what happens after this exceedingly alarming event. Thus we are left with the impression that all this is merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.

This special style particularly suits the extremely frightening image the *sūrah* opens with. The *sūrah* denotes the event of resurrection by the term *al-wāqī'ah*, which primarily refers to something that falls hard. The very sound of the word gives the impression of a heavy object dropping from a high position and then settling where it cannot be moved or removed: "*No one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verse 2) As this heavy object falls, we expect it to produce some turmoil or shaking up. This expectation is fulfilled as the event is described as "*abasing [some] exalting [others].*" (Verse 3) It will certainly put down people who were looked up to during their lives on earth, and it will elevate others who were thought of as commanding little respect. Standards and values will be set straight in God's scale, after they have been out of balance in this world.

The frightening event then begins to take shape in the very structure of the earth, which people always think to be firm and stable. The event shows it being violently shaken, a reality that fits well with the sound of the fall. Firm and solid mountains are transformed into heaps of dust that the wind blows away: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" How ignorant and feeble-minded those people are who face this fearful prospect in full denial of the Day of Judgement, refusing to believe in God's oneness when it produces such an effect on the earth and its mountains.

Three Groups

As this strongly shaking scene concludes, we are then introduced to the effects of this inevitable event as some people are elevated while others are abased. This takes place when everyone faces their different fate:

You shall be divided into three classes: There are the people of the right side: what people are they? And the people of the left side: what people are they? And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.
(Verses 7–10)

Here, people are divided into three groups, unlike in most other Qur'ānic statements where they are shown to be in two groups. The *sūrah* first mentions the people of the right side, but does not give us any details about them. Instead, a question is asked about them, enhancing the feeling of expectation: "*There are the people of the right side: what people are they?*" (Verse 8) The same method is used for the opposite group: "*And the people of the left side: what people are they?*" (Verse 9) The third group is then mentioned, and these are the ones to the fore. They are described by the same quality of being ahead of all: "*there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.*" (Verse 10) It is as if the *sūrah* says these are the ones, and this is enough. No further description is necessary, it would add nothing.

The *sūrah* then mentions their position with their Lord and describes in detail what blessings He has prepared for them. This is all described in a way that the addressees can understand, in light of their own knowledge and experience:

These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss. A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations. On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other. Immortal youths shall wait upon them with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'. (Verses 11–26)

The *sūrah* begins this detailed account by mentioning the greatest aspect of their elevated position, the bliss of being close to their Lord: "*These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss.*" (Verses 11–12) The gardens of bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favour of being nearest to God.

The *sūrah* takes a short pause here to say who achieves this grade. Thus, we are told: "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations.*" (Verses 13–14) They are, then, the chosen ones, constituting a limited number. Most of them belong to earlier generations, but a minority come from later ones. Views differ as to which are the earlier generations and which are the later ones. The first view suggests that the earlier generations refer to those who attained to a high degree of faith from among the communities that lived prior to the advent of Islam, while the few from the later generations refers to the ones who were the first to accept Islam and strive hard for its cause. The second view says that both the majority and the minority belong to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), with the ones of '*earlier times*' belonging to its first generations, and the others to later ones.

This second view is the one preferred by Ibn Kathīr, who cites in support quotations from al-Ḥasan and Ibn Sīrīn. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Those to the fore are gone, but we pray to God to include us among the people of the right side." Then he explained the meaning of "*A good many of them are from earlier times,*" saying that these are "from the earlier generations of the Muslim community." Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Scholars used to say, or to hope, that they all belong to the Muslim community."

Now the *sūrah* begins to enumerate the types of luxuries they will enjoy in heaven. These are of course of the types they can imagine and visualize. Beyond these there are other luxuries and aspects of happiness and bliss, which they will recognize when they are ready to appreciate them in their future lives. These are things 'no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard of and no mind has ever imagined.'

"*On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other.*" (Verses 15–16) They are comfortable, free of all worries and preoccupations,

reassured as to the continuity of their happiness, knowing that it will never end. Hence, they come together, in an atmosphere of mutual love. *"Immortal youths shall wait upon them."* (Verse 17) These youths are unaffected by the passage of time; they retain their youthful looks. They go round carrying *"goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs."* (Verse 18) Their drink is made of pure wine that causes no intoxication. *"From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply."* (Verse 19) They are not turned away from it, nor will it ever be used up. Everything here is always plentiful; nothing is ever out of stock. *"And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire."* (Verses 20–21) Nothing is unavailable, while everything is given in the way those happy ones may desire. *"There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls."* (Verses 22–23) Hidden pearls are those that are carefully treasured. No hand has ever put a needle through them, and no eye has ever cast a piercing look at them. A host of gentle connotations, both mental and physical, are implied in this description of these companions with their large beautiful eyes. All this is *"a reward for what they used to do."* (Verse 24) It is a reward for what is done during that stage of life where action is required. In that life, nothing people do attains perfection, but here in this life, in heaven, the reward is absolutely perfect.

Moreover, they are greeted gently in a way that disdains all idle talk: *"There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace!'"* (Verses 25–26) Their lives are peaceful; peace that spreads all around them. They are saluted by the angels with a greeting of peace, and they exchange the same greeting with one another, and an even better greeting of peace is extended to them from the Lord of Grace. It is all then a life of peace.

The Other Groups

The *sūrah* follows this account of the superior group with a similarly detailed one of the second group, to which a quick reference was made in the opening of the *sūrah*. The details of their situation in the life to come are now provided at the right point, beginning with a repetition

of the same question posed at the outset that gives a sense of seriousness and awe: "*As for those on the right, what people are they?*" (Verse 27) .

This group are also enjoying a luxurious and happy life, but its description gives a sense of nomadic roughness. It answers all the needs of a nomadic people as they can best imagine a life of comfort and bliss. Thus, "*They will dwell amid thornless lote trees.*" (Verse 28). The lote tree is known for its thorns, but here it is thornless. "*And flower-clad acacias.*" (Verse 29) The acacia is a thorny type of leguminous tree well known in the Hijaz region of Arabia. However, the acacia trees in heaven are without thorns, have abundant fruit and are so situated as to enable real comfort. "*With extended shade, constantly flowing water.*" (Verses 30–31) These are all types of comfort dreamt of by the bedouin. "*Abundant fruits, unfailing, never out of reach.*" (Verses 32–33) These are left undetailed here, after having already outlined those types well-known by name to the bedouins. "*[Reclining on] couches raised high.*" (Verse 34) These couches are nor described as gold-encrusted, nor as having fine embroidery. They are merely 'raised high'. Raising high conrains a double meaning, physical and menral, both of which complement each other. As they are raised high, both meanings converge. In position, they are far removed from all types of impurity, kept clean. Mental elevation, on the other hand, is also far removed from all that strains. Therefore, the next aspect of their blessing describes rhe companions they have in heaven: "*We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation.*" (Verse 35) These mates are either new ones, referring to the mates God assigns them from among the creatures that originally dwell in heaven, or they are their wives in this world, after they have been resurrected as virgins in the prime of youth, "*making them virgins.*" (Verse 36) They are "*full of love, of matching age.*" (Verse 37) And they are specially assigned and devored "*for those on the right.*" (Verse 38)

These people on the right consist of "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a good many from later generations.*" (Verses 39–40) This means that they are greater in number than the first group of people to rhe fore, raking into account rhe two views we explained in reference to earlier and later generations.

The *sūrah* now speaks about rhe third group, the people on the left, to whom a general reference was made earlier on:

And those on the left, what people are they? They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too? Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, filling your bellies with it, and will drink scalding water; yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (Verses 41–56)

While the people on the right enjoy extended shade and constantly flowing water, these on the left “*dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.*” (Verses 42–44) The whole atmosphere is of a scorching heat that penetrates and burns the skin. The water they have to drink is also scalding, giving no refreshment. They also have shade, but it is no more than the shadows of black smoke. It is a shade painted in irony, for such shade is devoid of coolness, inviting no rest, and giving no sensation other than that produced by suffocating heat. Such hardship is a fitting requital, for “*in times gone by, they overindulged in luxury.*” (Verse 45) The absence of comfort for those who are used to indulging and excessing in luxury is hard indeed. They also “*persisted in heinous sin*”, associating partners with God. The Arabic word used here for sin is *hīn*, which means ‘breach, violation’. It implies, thus, a reference to the pledge given by human nature to maintain faith in God’s oneness and not to associate partners with Him. They are certainly in breach of that pledge. They used to say: “*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*” (Verses 47–48) The *sūrah* clearly uses the past tense in these last two points, saying that they persisted in sin and denied the resurrection, thus treating this present life of the addressees as though it has already ended. In other words, this scene of suffering is made to appear as though it is presently occurring.

After all, this whole life is no more than a twinkling of the eye, whilst the life to come is ultimate and permanent.

The *sūrah* seizes this appropriate moment to answer their question, which they unfold in an exaggerated sense of incredulity: "*Say: All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day.*" (Verses 49–50) The specific day is the one that has just been painted. It has been shown as though they are enduring it right now.

The *sūrah* resumes the description of the suffering that awaits those who deny the truth of God's oneness: "*Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree.*" (Verses 51–52) No one knows anything about the Zaqqūm tree other than the description God gives us in another *sūrah*, stating that "*its fruit is like devils' heads.*" (37: 65) Again no one has ever seen devils' heads, but the very phrase gives us a clear sense. Besides, the very name, Zaqqūm, implies a hard, rough surface with thorns that pierce hands and throats. This is in contrast to the thornless lote trees and flower-clad acacias that the people on the right enjoy. Although the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree looks like devils' heads, these people will eat it "*filling your bellies with it.*" (Verse 53) Hunger is overpowering. Hard and thorny food will inevitably require a drink to ease its swallowing and refresh the stomach. They, however, "*will drink scalding water.*" (Verse 54) Such a drink can never refresh or satisfy a thirsty person. Yet these people "*will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.*" (Verse 55) These camels have a well known illness making them always thirsty. "*Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 56) A dwelling place is one that is supposed to give comfort and a sense of permanent settlement, but this dwelling for those on the left gives neither. This is how they are welcomed and this is the place assigned to them on the Day of Judgement, which they held in doubt, always rejecting what the Qur'ān told them about it. They also associated partners with God, disbelieving His warnings of what they may suffer on that day.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah* which has given us a detailed account of people's fates on the day when the inevitable takes place.

Stating the Case

The second part of the *sūrah* aims to establish the Islamic faith in full, but the issue of resurrection and future life receives the main focus. This provides an example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature, utilizing indicators that encourage faith. It makes a gentle address to people's hearts as it presents great issues in an easy to understand way.

The Qur'ān presents phenomena that are very familiar to us and often repeated in our lives as great facts setting clear universal laws. It, thus, moulds this into a profound and comprehensive faith giving a complete concept of existence. It also uses such phenomena as a method for reflection, alerting minds and souls and awakening feelings. Thus people are able to clearly understand universal phenomena that they may often be oblivious to, despite the fact that they are always before their eyes. They can also be better aware of wonders that take place within their own selves.

The Qur'ān does not rely on a few individual miracles in its address to mankind. It does not require people to look for miracles and signs that are far removed from them, their lives and immediate natural phenomena. It does not lead them through sophisticated philosophical theories, or complex mental tasks, or through scientific experiments that no one can undertake in order to present them with the faith it advocates.

They themselves are of God's own making, and the natural phenomena in their immediate world are all His creation. There is a miracle in everything He makes. This Qur'ān is His own book. The One who takes them by the hand to such miracles within themselves and in the world around them is simply highlighting to them what is familiar and happening before their own eyes, yet they do not appreciate this because of long familiarity with them. He opens their eyes to these so that they can appreciate their great secret, the secret of His creative power and His absolute oneness. It is the secret of the eternal law that works within their own constitution and throughout the universe around them. It is the law that embodies the proofs of divine faith, alerting their nature to these proofs.

This is the line the *sūrah* follows in its second part. It shows them signs of God's limitless power in their own creation, in the plants they cultivate with their own hands, in the water they drink and the fire they light. These are among the simplest things they see all the time. It describes the approaching end of their lives on earth and the beginning of the next life in the world beyond. This is the inevitable moment everyone will have to face. At this moment, all are powerless. All creatures stand face to face before God's limitless power, as He executes His will. At this moment, all excuses are false. Only the truth prevails.

The method of the Qur'ān in addressing human nature is itself proof of its own source. It is the same source that gave rise to the universe. The same method of structure applies to the Qur'ān as it does to the universe, whereby elementary materials are used to produce gigantic and complex entities. Scientists think that the atom is the material from which the universe is built, and the cell is the unit used to build life. Yet infinitely small as they are, the atom and the cell are miracles in their own right. Here, the Qur'ān uses some simple scenes that have long been familiar to man to build the most profound religious faith and the broadest concept of existence. These scenes or observations are part of every human being's experience: newborns, plants, water, fire and death. Which human being, indeed which cave dweller has not witnessed the birth of a child, a new plant shoot, water falling, fire being lit, or a moment of death? The Qur'ān uses such scenes to present its faith, because it addresses every human being in every social environment. Yet these very simple scenes, as well as the reference to the positions of stars, are among the most important universal truths and divine secrets. In their profound simplicity, they address the nature of every human being; and in their essence they have been, and will always remain, the subject of study by the greatest scientists.

The positions of stars refer to the way the universe is designed. The origin of human life is the secret of all secrets, and the origin of plants is, like the origin of animal life, the mother of all miracles. Water is the essence of life, and fire is the miracle behind human civilization. This method of building the case for faith is not one man uses. When human beings address such issues, they do not pay attention to such elementary

materials. Should they even do so, they still do not present them in such a gentle and easy way. On the contrary, they employ an abstract, complex logic, that may only be grasped by the intellectual elite.

God's method is the one we see in this *sūrah*: using basic materials to build faith in total ease and simplicity. He does the same with the universe, building it with basic materials. The same method appears in both, and the Creator's stamp is clearly evident in both.

The Beginning and End

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator? We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (Verses 57–62)

This whole issue of faith is the same as the first instance of creation and the end, the giving of life and inevitable death. It is familiar, seen at all times. How come, then, that people do not believe that it is God who creates them? The weight of this truth on human nature is too heavy for anyone to challenge: "*It is We who have created you: will you not believe?*" (Verse 57)

"*Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator?*" (Verses 58–59) Man's role in the process of creation is no more than the man depositing his seed in the woman's body. Their respective roles are finished at that. From then on, the hand of God takes over. It works on its own, giving the embryo growth and development, building its skeleton and dressing it up, then breathing spirit into it. Right from the first moment, and at every subsequent moment, a miracle occurs that remains totally unknown to man. Indeed, man does not know how it occurs, let alone plays a role in it.

This measure of reflection on creation is understood by all people. It is enough to appreciate the miracle that takes place and reflect on its message. In fact, the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all

imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.

This single cell begins to multiply, and within a short period of time the number of cells reaches many millions, divided into groups with different characteristics. Each group is assigned its own task, to produce a particular aspect of the human being: one group produces bones, another muscles, a third nerves, and a different one produces the skin, while others produce nerves, etc. Another group of cells make an eye, another a tongue and a third an ear. A more specialized group will produce glands. Each group knows its position of work. The cells which make an eye will never miss its position so as to produce the eye, say, in the abdomen or the foot. Had these cells been transplanted so as to be based in the abdomen, they would make an eye there. However, each cell is guided to its proper place, and we never find a case where the eye's cells produce an eye in the abdomen, or the ear's cells produce an ear in the foot. All function properly to produce a human being, who is given the best shape and form, under God's care. Humans have no role in all this.

Such is the beginning; but the end is in no way less miraculous or amazing, even though it is so familiar a sight: "*We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us.*" (Verse 60) What is death, the inevitable end of every living thing? What is it? How does it occur? How come it overpowers all? It is nothing less than God's decree. Hence, no one can escape it. No one can spring ahead of it so as to miss it. It is a stage in the chain of existence that must be completed: "*Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves,*" to be in charge of the earth after you have gone. God who has decreed death has also decreed life. He has decreed that people shall die, and that He will replace them with others like them, until the time span decreed for this stage of life comes to its end. Once it is over, then the second life begins: "*or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you.*" (Verse 61) This is in the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception. It is a great realm about which humans know nothing other than what God is pleased to tell them. At that point, the journey comes to its end.

Such is how people are brought into being a second time: "*You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do*

you not reflect?" (Verse 62) The two are not dissimilar in nature. There is nothing strange about it.

In such a simple approach, and with such ease the Qur'ān portrays the two great events of bringing humans into being. With such ease and simplicity, it makes human nature face the logic it knows well. It cannot dispute this logic because it is based on its own basic facts and on what people see in their own lives. It is an approach that is free of complication, abstraction and sophistication. It is the approach of God, the Creator of man and the universe who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

Plant, Water and Fire

Once more the Qur'ān, in perfect ease and simplicity, puts before people something which is well known to them and which they repeatedly see. It shows how God's hand works to bring it about, showing them the miracle they overlook when it is always happening in front of their very own eyes:

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: is it you who makes them grow, or We? Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.'
(Verses 63–67)

What role do humans play in plant growth that culminates in fruition? They certainly till the earth and plant the seeds made by God, but that is about it. Their role is then finished, leaving the matter entirely to God's hand. It is He who completes this miraculous work.

The seed or the grain begins its journey to reproduce its kind, moving on like one who knows the way, stage after stage, one who will never commit the like of a human error, who will never change course or deviate from the path. It is the hand of God that guides it throughout this remarkable journey. No one could have ever believed this miracle, and no mind could have imagined it; yet it happens all the time and everyone of us sees it in one form or another. How else could anyone have believed that a wheat grain incorporates a stalk and leaves, as well

as an ear holding together a large number of grains? Who could have imagined that a date stone can produce such a large palm tree, with all that it contains?

What mind could have gone so far as to imagine this amazing wonder, had it not been for the fact that it happens before our very eyes? Can any person claim any role in producing this miracle other than planting the seeds and grains which are of God's own making?

Yet people say: "We have planted" when they have not gone beyond laying the seeds. As for the miracle that shoots out and grows, it is all of God's making. Had He willed, it would not have started its journey, or would not have completed it. Had He willed, He would have turned it into chaff even before it yielded its crop. It is by God's will that the seed and grain progress along the way to the end of their respective journeys. Had any of this not taken place, people would say: "*We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.*" (Verses 66–67) It is God who, in His grace, grants them the fruits of their plants, allowing the plant to complete its cycle of life, which is similar to that which a human seed goes through from the moment it is discharged. Both are pictures of life as God makes it.

Such is the first time life comes into being. Why should a second time be thought strange?

Consider the water you drink: is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks? (Verses 68–70)

Water is the source of life, its most essential component. God has so willed that without water no life is possible. What role does man play with water? Is it anything beyond the fact that he drinks it? The One who made water out of the elements that produce it, and who caused it to fall from the clouds bearing it, is none other than God – limitless is He in His glory. It is He who has made water sweet. Had He willed otherwise, He could have made it '*salty and bitter*', undrinkable, and unable to produce life. Is it not right then that they should express their gratitude to God for having willed it so?

Those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān realized that the very water that falls from the clouds was essential for their lives. They were always delighted to see it falling. Indeed, talking about it gave them pleasure; they even sang its praises in their poetry. Human progress and civilization has in no way reduced the importance of water; on the contrary, it has almost doubled. Scientists who try to understand how water first came about realize its importance to a higher degree. Thus we see that water is the focus of attention for a bedouin in the desert as well as for a scientist in his laboratory.

*Consider the fire you kindle: is it you who grows its tree, or We?
We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers*
(Verses 71–73)

The discovery of fire was a greatly important event in mankind's life. It was perhaps its most important event as it signalled the beginning of civilization. Fire, however, has become so familiar that it stirs no interest. Man certainly kindles fire, but who grows the tree that becomes its fuel? The *sūrah* has already mentioned plants, and trees are a type of plant. Yet another point is mentioned by the reference to '*its tree*'. The Arabs used to ignite fire by rubbing a branch of one tree against another from a different tree, in the way still used in some primitive social environments. This, thus makes this description a close parallel of their own experience. As for the miracle of fire and its secret which scientists study, these are areas that deserve more attention. The mention of fire here is also used as a reminder of the fire of hell: "*We made it a reminder for man,*" reminding man of the life to come. God has also made fire "*a comfort for desert travellers.*" (Verse 73) This last point was particularly relevant to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān, as it referred to their own life experience.

The *sūrah* now points to the ultimate truth that all these facts lead to: God's Lordship of the universe and His ultimate power that now manifests itself, in all its glory, to human nature. It instructs the Prophet to recognize this truth, give it its due, and bring it to the forefront so that it exercises its profound influence on people's hearts: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 74)

A Great Oath

Now the *sūrah* directs its address to those who denied the truth of the Qur'ān in another way, providing a relationship between it and the universe in a great oath by God, the Lord of all the worlds:

I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (Verses 75–80)

Those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelation knew no more about the positions of the stars than what they could see with the naked eye. Therefore, the *sūrah* tells them that the oath already made was a mighty one, even though they did not know it at the time. Today, we appreciate the greatness of this oath far more than they did, but we too know only very little about the greatness of the positions of the stars. The little we have discovered with our seemingly advanced observatories and allegedly powerful telescopes tells us that one of the countless clusters in open space, the one that constitutes the galaxy that contains our solar system, includes one billion stars.¹

Astronomers say that some of these stars and planets, which number many billions, can be seen with the naked eye, while others can only be seen with powerful telescopes. Others still can only be sensed by such very powerful telescopes. All these run in their respective orbits in space. The possibility of a magnetic field of one of these stars coming close to another, or of a planet crashing into another, is as remote as that of a boat in the Mediterranean crashing into one travelling in the Indian Ocean, when both are travelling in the same direction at the same speed. The chances of such a crash ever taking place are so remote that it is certainly impossible.²

1. In its shorter version, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that "The Milky Way system contains hundreds of billions of stars and large amounts of interstellar gas and dust." It is well known that the earth's solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. The author's mention that it includes one billion stars was perhaps the estimate at the time he wrote. – Editor's note.

2. Nawfal, A.R., *Allah wal-ʿIlm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 33.

Every star in its position, which is so distant from its sister stars, is placed there in accordance with God's wisdom and careful measure. Each interacts with other stars and planets to produce a measured equilibrium between all these entities floating in space. All this is part of the greatness of the positions of the stars. It goes far beyond the knowledge of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. At the same time, it is immeasurably less than the total truth of the greatness of stars and their positions.

"I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it!" (Verses 75–76) These verses make an oath which is correctly rendered in the translation here. However, the *sūrah* employs a special mode of expression, often used in the Qur'ān which would say, if literally translated, "I do not swear by..." This stylistic feature mentions an oath, then appears to turn away from it. It is as if God is saying: "I do not need to make this oath by..." Yet this does not convey exactly the same meaning. The Arabic original is far more powerful in its deliverance of what is intended. Hence, the emphasis on the oath in the way it is rendered in English. The point is that this great truth does not need an oath to establish it, as it is already clear and well confirmed: *"This is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 77–80)

The Qur'ān is indeed a most honourable discourse. It is unlike anything the unbelievers allege about it, claiming that it is the work of a monk or a madman or that it is fabricated, or a host of ancient legends, or that it is delivered by devils, or whatever. It is most honourable by its source, by itself and by the message and teachings it imparts.

Further description of the Qur'ān is added in the next two verses, the second of which provides an explanation of the first: *"In a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch."* (Verses 78–79) The unbelievers alleged that the Qur'ān was given to the Prophet by devils. This verse refutes this. No devil can touch this record, which is well-guarded, kept safe under God's care. It is purified by angels that bring it down to the Prophet. This is the better explanation of the verse that says that only the purified can touch the Qur'ān. The negation here is a statement, not a command. In this life on earth anyone can handle the Qur'ān: someone who is purified or someone who is contaminated, a believer or

an unbeliever. To take the negation as applying to the book containing the Qur'ān would be erroneous. It can only be true when we take it as refuting the unbelievers' allegations. The divine record containing the Qur'ān in heaven is untouchable by anyone other than purified angels. This is further confirmed by the statement that follows, confirming that the Qur'ān is "*a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 80)

Two *ḥadīth* reports state a different meaning, implying that only a person who has purified himself by ablution can touch the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, however, makes clear that neither of these reports has been authentically transmitted.

At the Moment of Death

The final passage in the *sūrah* speaks of the moment of death, which sends a shudder of fear into everyone. This is the moment when all argument stops, when a person stands at the end of one road and the beginning of another. It is a point of no return:

Would you look on this discourse with disdain? Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true? (Verses 81–87)

Are you in doubt about what you are told concerning a second life, denying the truth of the Qur'ān and what it tells you about the Day of Judgement, or the principles of faith it lays down for you? "*Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it?*" (Verse 82) Your denial is all that you earn and save in this life for your second life. How miserable a livelihood! What will you do when your soul is in your throat, standing on a road that leads you to the unknown?

The *sūrah* paints this situation in an inspiring way, drawing all its aspects in quick touches: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verses 83–85) We almost hear a rattling

sound in the throat, see the features decline and sense the distress: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat.*" We almost see the despair on the faces of those attending the dying person: "*while you are helplessly looking on.*"

At this point, when the soul is no longer concerned with anything in this world; when it has put the whole earthly world behind it; when it is about to see a world totally unknown and for which it has no provisions other than its deeds in this life; when it sees a new world and cannot say anything about it; when it has separated from all around it who only see a dying body but who stand helpless, then human power and knowledge are at their end. At this point, people realize that they are absolutely helpless: they see nothing, know nothing and can do nothing. All power and knowledge belong to God alone, with no one able to cast any doubt about this truth: "*We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verse 85)

At this point God's majesty is clearly felt, and people experience a sense of awe resulting from His presence. He is no doubt present at all times, but the Qur'ānic statement reawakens the feeling of this truth which people often overlook. Hence, the scene of death is overshadowed by feelings of God's majesty and awe, in addition to people's own helplessness.

The *sūrah* now puts forward a challenge that ends all argument: "*Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?*" (Verses 86–87) If it is true that there will be no reckoning of deeds and no requital for them and you are free, with no accounting to make, then try, if you can, to restore this soul that has come up to the throat and put it back in place. Try, if you can, to prevent its march towards that reckoning while you helplessly look on.

Thus all excuses, arguments and disputes end. This truth is felt to be so weighty that no man can stand up to it, except through stubborn and baseless denial.

The Final Destination

The *sūrah* now explains the fate of the soul that has turned its back on this world to begin its new and permanent life:

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. If he is one of those on the right, a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire. (Verses 88–94)

In the early part of the *sūrah* we saw images of the blessings granted to those who are close to God. The soul of such a person will now see what awaits it: *'repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss.'* The very sound of these words overflows with comfort, ease and happiness.

"If he is one of those on the right." This person is now directly addressed with a greeting sent to him by his brethren who are on the right. It is a gentle and delightful greeting, giving him reassurance. He begins to look forward to his forthcoming life with the people on the right.

"But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire." (Verses 92–94) How miserable a welcome! How terrible is the suffering of scalding water and blazing fire! It all appears before such a person and he knows that he will have to experience it.

Now that this climax has been reached, the conclusion is profound and serious in its tone: *"This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme."* (Verses 95–96) The great weight assigned to this absolute truth in God's scales thus combines with the inevitable event mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The final feeling reflects the effect of this firm belief with glorification of God, the Supreme.

