

or ear to penetrate through it. No one knows what the next moment brings. How is it that those who turn away from God's signs feel secure?

The verses of the Qur'ān, which embody God's message, are within their grasp, and the signs God has placed in the universe are also there for all to behold and contemplate. But most people pass by both paying no heed, associating partners with God, either openly or in a subtle way. God's Messenger, however, will follow his own way, joined by those who follow him, maintaining the right path, without any deviation, and allowing nothing to influence their determination to follow it. *"Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.'"* (Verse 108)

"Say: 'This is my way.'" (Verse 108) It is a straightforward road, without any crookedness or concealed turns. There is no doubt about its being the right path. *"I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me."* (Verse 108) We follow God's guidance which illuminates our way for us. We follow it with open eyes, knowledge and understanding. There is no groping in the dark or following sudden whims or fancies that lack solid foundation. We attribute to God nothing that does not suit His Lordship of the universe. We abandon those who associate partners with Him and show ourselves to follow a road that is completely distinct from any that is followed by those who associate partners with Him. *"Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him."* (Verse 108) I do no such thing, neither openly nor subtly. This is my way. Whoever wishes to follow me may do so. As for me, I am going along, regardless of who may wish to follow a different way.

The advocates of the divine cause must make this distinction very clearly. They must declare that they belong to a separate community that is distinct from anyone who does not belong to their faith, follow their way and obey their leadership. It is not sufficient that they should call on people to follow their religion while they themselves continue to be part of un-Islamic society. Such advocacy is of little value and produces little return. It is imperative that they should declare, right at the outset, that they are different from ignorant communities, and that they have their own distinctive community based on the bond of faith, and following Islamic leadership. They must distinguish themselves and their leadership from un-Islamic society and its leadership. If they stay within that society and constitute a part of it, deferring to its leadership, they undermine all the authority of their faith, all the results their message may achieve, and all the attraction that message may have.

This fact does not apply merely to Islamic advocacy among idolaters in pre-Islamic Arabia. It applies every time a state of *jāhiliyyah* prevails. *Jāhiliyyah* in the twentieth century does not differ, in its basic elements or distinctive features, from

any other state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, which the Islamic message has had to face in any period of history.

Those who believe that they may achieve something by being diluted within un-Islamic society, or by presenting the message of Islam in a subtle way through such a society are mistaken. They do not fully understand the nature of the Islamic faith and how it appeals to hearts and minds. The advocates of atheism declare their identity and their goals. Would not the advocates of Islam declare their true identity and make their way clear? Would they not make clear that the route they follow is totally different from that of *jāhiliyyah*?

The Bearers of God's Message

The *sūrah* now refers to the divine law concerning the messages given to prophets who delivered them. It also refers to some of the signs shown in the fate met by some past generations. As a Messenger of God, Muḥammad has many predecessors, and his message is not without precedent. Hence people should consider what happened to earlier communities which did not believe their messengers and rejected the faith. Their fate provides some signs that are clearly visible to all beholders.

“Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?” (Verse 109) Reflection on the fate of former communities is bound to shake even hardened hearts. We can imagine their movements, actions and feelings, and we can paint a picture of them going about their business in these places, going from one location to another, full of hope, fear and aspiration, and looking up to the future, then suddenly they are motionless, with all their faculties and senses completely dead. Their quarters are lifeless, and they have gone. All has come to nothing. A complete void is all that is left. Reflection on these facts is bound to shake even the most hardened and cruel of hearts. Therefore, the Qur'ān takes us by the hand to show us the fate of earlier communities, time after time.

“Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people.” (Verse 109) These messengers were neither angels nor any other species of creature. They were human beings, just like the people of the towns. Like you, they were not even desert people, so that they would be gentler and more compassionate, showing more perseverance in the difficult task of advocating the faith. The Prophet's message, then, follows the same pattern of revelation given to other messengers.

“Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who

lived before them?" (Verse 109) Had they done so, they would have realized that their own fate is bound to be the same as that of those earlier communities who denied their messengers when they conveyed to them God's message. They would have realized that the pattern of God's dealings with earlier communities will apply to them, and that they themselves will soon depart along the same way.

"Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing." (Verse 109) It is indeed infinitely better than this present life which is, by nature, a life of short duration. *"Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 109) You should use your reason to contemplate what happened to communities before you and guard against a similar fate. Reason will tell you to opt for the eternal life in preference to the fleeting comforts of this life.

The *sūrah* then describes the very hard period in the life of God's messengers, which precedes the decisive moment when God's promise is fulfilled and His law inevitably takes effect: *"When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty."* (Verse 110) This is a frightful scene, describing the great difficulties messengers face: the denials, persistent abuse and arrogant refusal to accept the truth. Days and years pass while they continue to convey God's message but meet with only very limited response. Years follow years while falsehood and evil continue to enjoy power and large followings, while the believers who are few in number, muster little or no power.

These are difficult times when evil swells its power, spreads tyranny and deals harshly and treacherously with advocates of the truth. God's messengers await His promise, but it is not fulfilled in this world. At these moments, disturbing thoughts occur to them: have they been belied? Have their souls deceived them when they hoped for victory in this life? No messenger of God would be in this position unless he had been exposed to a measure of distress, hardship, suffering and stress beyond the ability of any other human being to tolerate. I have never read this verse, or the other one in *Sūrah 2*, without feeling a strong shudder as I try to imagine the horror that would cause a messenger of God to entertain such feelings. The verse in *Sūrah 2* runs as follows:

"Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand." (2: 214) Every time I read either of these two verses I could imagine this great horror giving rise to such feelings of despair, affliction and distress violently shaking a messenger of God, with his morale getting so low, and the pain in his heart so intolerable.

It is at this point when distress reaches its climax, leaving even the messenger powerless, that support is given in full measure, and victory is decisive: *"Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty."* (Verse 110)

Qur'ānic Stories

Such is the normal line of events when it comes to advocacy of God's message. Hardship and adversity are necessary until all the efforts and energy of its advocates are exhausted. When people so despair of victory, it is given by God. Those who deserve to be saved will be saved from the destruction that engulfs the others who deny the truth and from the tyranny of those who wield worldly power. God's might strikes the evil-doers and they can in no way resist it. Neither their own nor their supporters' power can prevent God's punishment.

This is the normal way because God's support does not come cheap. Had it been so, there would be a lot of frivolity about the advocacy of God's message. There would be no shortage of people claiming to be advocates of the true message, since there would only be a small price to pay before God's support were given. The message of the truth should never be treated with frivolity. It provides a complete way of life and a code to be implemented. Hence, it must be protected against false advocates who are not prepared to pay the price. When the price is high, and the truth emerges clearly against the background of hardship and adversity, true advocates are also distinguished by their steadfastness. They do not abandon their message even though they may feel that they will never see victory in their lifetime.

Advocacy of the divine message is not a short-term investment which must yield returns by a certain deadline, or people move to a different investment seeking better returns. No one who undertakes advocacy of God's message in the hostile environment of un-Islamic society which submits to a power other than God's can think that his task will be an easy one, or that his investment will yield quick returns. He must be clear in his mind that he stands against all tyranny in human life that commands physical and financial power, and which deludes the masses until they do all its bidding, even describing as black what they know to be white. Tyrants even turn the masses against the advocates of God's message, tempting them with the satisfaction of their desires and putting in their minds the notion that God's message and its advocates deprive them of such satisfaction.

Those who want to call on people to follow God's message must realize that the task they undertake is tough and demanding. Not only so, but it is even tougher to join it against the power of *jāhiliyyah*. Hence the oppressed masses will not initially join it. Only those who prefer the truth, even though it requires the sacrifice of

comfort, safety and all the pleasures of the world, will rise to it. Such people are always few in number, but God will judge between them and their community on the basis of the truth after they have striven hard. It is only when God has judged for them that the masses will join them. This is when people embrace God's message in large numbers.

In Joseph's story we read about the different types of hardship he faced and his despair of people ever coming to realize the truth about him. The outcome however was very good, just as God had promised. For God's promise will always come true. Joseph's story is but an example of the histories of God's messengers. It provides lessons for those who wish to reflect. It confirms what earlier scriptures emphasized, even though Muḥammad had no access to these scriptures. What he preached could not have been a fabricated tale. Lies do not confirm one another. They neither provide guidance nor spread an air of mercy over believers' hearts. *"Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe."* (Verse 111)

Thus the beginning and the end of the *sūrah* are brought in line, just as the beginning and end of the story are perfectly matched. Comments at the opening and end of the *sūrah*, as well as those interspersed in the story relate perfectly to the theme and the way it is expressed. The religious objective of relating it is thus fulfilled, while providing an essential artistic element. This is coupled with the fact that it is a true story relating events that actually took place.

The whole story, from beginning to end, is told in a single *sūrah*, because its nature requires that. It is the gradual fulfilment of a dream, which evolves and takes shape day after day, and stage after stage. Hence, its lessons as well as artistic harmony cannot be clearly seen unless it is followed right through to its conclusion. This is different from relating episodes from the history of other messengers where highlighting a single episode serves a particular purpose. This is frequently done in the Qur'ān, as in the case of the story of the Prophet Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, or the birth of Mary, or that of Jesus, or the floods at the time of Noah. In all these cases, a single episode is related in order to serve a certain objective. Joseph's story, on the other hand, needs to be told altogether in order to draw its moral to the fore. God certainly tells the truth as He says: *"In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3)

SŪRAH 13

Al-Ra 'd

(Thunder)

Prologue

I often feel reluctant to comment on Qur'ānic texts, knowing that my style and resources are inadequate. As with *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, I find myself ill-equipped to explain the present *sūrah*. But what am I to do, realizing as I do that our generation needs to receive the Qur'ān with a detailed explanation of its nature, method, subject matter and aims? Unfortunately people have moved too far from the environment in which the Qur'ān was revealed, and from its purpose and goals. They are little aware of its import and dimensions. Even its terminology does not carry to them its true meanings. People today live in a state similar to that the Qur'ān faced at the time of its revelation, but they do not use the Qur'ān to confront this *jāhiliyyah* as the early Muslims did. Without such action, people cannot begin to formulate a proper understanding of the Qur'ān and its secrets, because such secrets remain a closed book for anyone who sits idle, unwilling to act according to Qur'ānic guidance.

Nevertheless, I am overwhelmed whenever I attempt to comment on the Qur'ān. It is impossible for me to put in words and sentences what I feel when I listen to the Qur'ān or reflect on its text. Hence, I know how wide the gulf is between the feelings the Qur'ān generates within me and what I present to my readers.

I am also profoundly aware of the great gulf that separates our generation from that which directly received the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān addressed them directly, and they felt its rhythm, viewed its images, appreciated its inspiration and recognized its hints, interacting with it and making their response clear. They aimed to fulfil its message in their approach to life and their confrontation with its opponents. Hence,

they were able to accomplish what was, by all standards, miraculous in a short time-span. They achieved a total about-turn in their feelings, concepts and life generally, and produced a similar and complete change in the life of their community, in human life generally and in the line human history would take to the end of time.

They drank at the Qur'ānic spring, allowing no intermediary between them and the Qur'ān. Their ears felt its music as it was first spoken, and they appreciated its warmth and inspiration. Hence, they took immediate action to mould their lives and thoughts in accordance with its principles, values and the facts it presented. By contrast, our present generation shapes its life pattern in accordance with this or that philosophical approach, little realizing that the opponents of such approaches are only mortals too, liable to all manner of error.

Furthermore, when we consider what those early Muslims achieved within themselves and in the life around them, which was miraculous by any standard, we try to explain such achievements by reference to our own logic based on standards and values that are fundamentally different from theirs. Hence, we err in identifying their motives and goals and in appreciating the results they achieved. We forget that they were made a different creation by the Qur'ān.

I appeal to my readers not to make the understanding of my book their aim. They should read it to draw nearer to the Qur'ān, then put the book aside and approach the Qur'ān as it is. They cannot do so unless they dedicate themselves to the implementation and fulfilment of its values and principles in their lives, fighting opposition forces under its banner.

This was my first thought as I began to look at this *sūrah*, as if I was reading it for the first time, although I had read and heard it countless times. The Qur'ān, however, gives you as much as you give to it. Each time, it opens up to you with new light, inspiration and rhythm, giving as much as you are prepared to receive. It sounds fresh every time, as though you had never read, heard or dealt with it before.

The present *sūrah* is a remarkable one, maintaining the same rhythm and giving the same ambience from start to finish.² Nevertheless, it presents us with a multitude of images, feelings and thoughts that fill our imagination and address our hearts and souls in every possible way. With its brilliant light and endless meanings, it travels

² The Qur'ānic musical rhythm uses a variety of elements, including harmony between the place and manner of articulation of individual sounds within a single word, sound harmony in each sentence or clause, the type of long vowels chosen, and the long vowels and the consonants used in the final words of each verse. [I have discussed this at length in my book *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*.] All the elements of rhythm used in this *sūrah* are consistent throughout, except for the long vowels and consonants in the final words of its verses. We note that the first five verses use words with an *'non (fin)'* ending. The rest of the *sūrah* uses a long *'ā (ā)'* followed by a plosive, or semi-plosive consonant, such as *aab (āb)*, *aad (ād)*, *aal (āl)*, *aar (ār)*.¹

with our hearts to wider worlds, times and horizons, keeping us fully aware, understanding everything we see and hear.

What we have here is not words and sentences; rather, a strong, hammering rhythm pervades the entire *sūrah*, permeating its images, meanings, and finer touches.

The main theme of the *sūrah*, like all Makkan revelations,³ is faith and the main issues which surround it: God's oneness and Lordship, submission to Him in this world and in the life to come, revelation, resurrection and its correlatives. Yet this single issue with its multiple strands is never presented in the same way in any two *sūrahs*, whether revealed in Makkah or Madinah. Every time we find it presented in a new way and new light, generating a different impact and inspiration.

These issues are not presented in the form of an academic argument, based on cold logic. Instead they are presented within a framework, which is the universe and its remarkable phenomena which serve as proofs to be appreciated by open minds. These marvellous phenomena are unending. Indeed, they look new every day, as they continue to reveal their secrets time after time. Even what was revealed earlier seems to acquire a new perspective in the light of new discovery. Hence, the issues the *sūrah* tackles remain alive.

The *sūrah* takes the human heart on a grand tour, showing it the universe in a variety of spectacular images: the heavens raised without support; the sun and the moon pursuing their courses for a definite time; the night covered by day; the spread of the earth with its firm mountains and running rivers; gardens, plants and date trees with different shapes, tastes and colours yet growing in adjacent land irrigated with the same water; the lightning generating fear and hope; the thunder glorifying and praising God; the angels standing in awe; the thunderbolt God hurls against whomever He wishes; the clouds heavy with rain that pours over riverbeds; and the foam that disappears into nothing to allow what is of benefit to stay.

The *sūrah* pursues the human heart wherever it tries to go. This pursuit is based on God's absolute knowledge which encompasses every little detail, including what is concealed or moving openly in broad daylight. It is the knowledge that records every fleeting thought occurring to any living thing. At the same time, whatever happens to be beyond the reach of human perception is encompassed by God's knowledge, including what every female conceives and whatever falls short or increases in gestation.

³ Despite the statement in some copies of the Qur'ān, based on reports indicating that the *sūrah* is a Madinan revelation, we maintain that it was revealed in Makkah. This is clearly indicated by its subject matter, method of approach, general atmosphere and ambience which is clearly noted by anyone who is well familiar with the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* gives an impression of the nature of God's power that encompasses the entire universe: the hidden and the apparent, large and small, present and removed. The part of the universe that human faculties can imagine is great and awesome indeed.

In addition, the *sūrah* includes some parables that are presented in vivid, moving scenes and images. It also adds a scene of the Day of Judgement, with its happiness for some and suffering for others, and people's reactions to both. There are also brief references to the fate of earlier generations and how they conducted themselves, and were subjected to God's law and its operation.

These are, in brief, the main themes and issues tackled in the *sūrah*. The *sūrah* is also remarkable for its artistry in presenting these issues. The general framework within which these issues are presented is the universe, with its remarkable phenomena and spectacular imagery. But the framework here has a special ambience provided by contrasting natural scenes and phenomena: heaven and earth; sun and moon; night and day; entities and shadows; firm mountains and running rivers; useless scum and penetrating water; adjacent but different pieces of land; clustered and non-clustered date trees, etc.

This element of contrast is carried further so as to include all meanings, actions and fates. Thus, the abstract contrast echoes the physical one to perfect its general atmosphere. Thus we see the clear contrast within God's supreme power as He establishes Himself on the throne making both the sun and the moon subservient; embryos in the womb fall short in gestation with others increasing; the one who speaks in whispers and the one who speaks aloud; the one who moves stealthily in the night and the one who walks in broad daylight; fear and hope regenerated by lightning; the glorification of God in praise by the thunder and in fear by the angels. The true prayer addressed to God is contrasted with the false one addressed to false deities. Similarly we see the contrast between those who know and those who are blind; the people of earlier revelations who are delighted by the Qur'an and those who deny some parts of it; the annulment and the confirmation in God's records. Everything in the *sūrah*: its meanings, directions and movements utilize the element of contrast to the full.

Another aspect of the remarkable harmony of style is seen in the fact that because the *sūrah* raises a background of natural scenes, referring to heaven and earth, sun and moon, thunder and lightning, thunderbolts and rain, it also mentions what is carried in animal wombs, coupled with a reference to "*by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase.*" These two aspects are in harmony with the water running in riverbeds and the growth of vegetation. Harmony is a consistent aspect of the Qur'anic style.

All this provides some explanation as to why I feel inadequate and reluctant to tackle Qur'ānic *sūrahs* with my inadequate style. But once more the need is compelling, because people in our generation do not live with the Qur'ān. I therefore seek God's help and support in this task.