

the angels before them, so that they could support him and defend his case, like they themselves used to do in tribal arguments. Absurdity knows no limit, for they even asked him to take for himself a house of gold and similarly precious metals. They further suggested to him that he should ascend to heaven as a proof of his special position. But even if he had done so, this too would not have been enough. For he was to bring back a book with him for them to read.

The childish absurdity of all these requests and conditions is clearly apparent. They are all arbitrary suggestions and widely different in scope and nature that they cannot be placed on the same level. How could residence in a luxurious house be considered of similar value to a person's ascension to heaven? And how can the digging up of a water spring he treated as equivalent to bringing God and the angels marching in ranks before them? However, to them these are all miraculous matters, so they can be grouped together. Should Muḥammad accomplish any of these miraculous events, they would consider believing in him and his message.

They overlooked the permanent miracle of the Qur'ān when they were totally unable to produce anything similar to it in style, imagery, meaning and philosophy. Such a miracle is not physical, defying the senses. Hence they demanded to have before them a clearly physical miracle.

But producing a miracle was something that the Prophet could not accomplish. Miracles are only determined by God in His wisdom. It is not appropriate for the Prophet to request such a miracle, unless God wishes to give it to him. The Prophet's understanding and appreciation of God's wisdom prevented him from requesting such a miracle. Hence, he is commanded to say in reply to them: *"Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger."* (Verse 93) He confines himself to the limits of his human status and he works according to the duties outlined for him in his message. He does not suggest to God anything beyond this.

Before the Prophet Muḥammad was sent as God's Messenger and even after he began to preach his message, people wallowed under the misconception that a human being could be God's messenger. Hence they rejected God's messengers and the messages He revealed to them: *"Nothing has ever prevented people from believing, whenever guidance came to them except that they would say: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?'"* (Verse 94). In this way they turned away from divine guidance.

This misconception results from people's low rating of their own value and the honourable position God has given them. They thought it totally unlikely that a human being could be chosen by God to be His messenger. This betrayed a lack of understanding of the nature of the universe, the angels, and how, in their angelic form, they are unsuited to life on earth. In order for angels to live on earth, their

nature must be modified which would then make it impossible for human beings to recognize them as angels.

"Say, Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven." (Verse 95) Had God willed that angels should inhabit the earth, He would have made them in the form of human beings, because it is the form that suits the laws of nature affecting the earth. He says in another verse, *"Even if We had appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man."* (6: 9) God is certainly able to accomplish any purpose He may have. However, He has willed to set in operation laws of nature and He has made His creatures fit for life under the influence of such laws of nature which He, by His own power and choice, has made permanent and unalterable. Through the operation of His laws of nature, His purpose of creation is thus fulfilled. Yet the unbelievers understand nothing of this.

Since this is the pattern God has chosen for His creation, He instructs His Messenger to end all argument with them and leave the dispute between the two parties to God. He calls on God to be his witness, leaving them entirely to God to do with whatever He pleases. He is the One who knows everything about everyone. *"Say: 'Sufficient is God for a witness between me and you. He is indeed fully aware of His servants, and He sees all things.'"* (Verse 96) This statement carries an implicit warning. The results, however, are painted in a frightening scene of what will happen on the Day of Judgement.

Devoid of all faculties

He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided; whereas for those whom He leaves to go astray you cannot find anyone to protect them from Him. On the Day of Resurrection We shall gather them together, prone upon their faces, blind, dumb and deaf. Hell shall be their abode. Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing flame. That is their reward for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like? He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection. But the evildoers refuse to accept anything other than unbelief (Verses 97-99)

God has operated certain laws concerning His guidance and people's choice of error in preference to that guidance. He has allowed people to conduct their lives as they wish, but they remain subject to these laws and they will have to face the outcome. One of these laws is that human beings either follow God's guidance or turn away from it into error. The choice is made by man himself. Whoever deserves, on the basis of his efforts and actions, to receive God's guidance will definitely be

guided aright. He is the one who will be truly guided as a result of his choice.

In the other camp we find those who deserve to be left in error because they turn away from God's revelations and blind themselves to all signs pointing the way to His guidance. Such people will have no one to protect them against God's punishment: *"You cannot find anyone to protect them from Him."* (Verse 97) On the Day of Judgement they shall suffer humiliation and will be resurrected in a terrible situation, *'prone upon their faces'*, lost as they will be *'blind, dumb and deaf'* (Verse 97) They are thus deprived of their senses by which they might have been able to find their way through the great multitude. It is a fitting result, because it was they who chose not to use their senses in life to follow the signs of divine guidance. The final outcome is that *"Hell shall be their abode."* It will be made to continue to burn fiercely: *"Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing fire."* (Verse 97)

It is certainly a horrifying end, but they have earned it through their disbelief in God's signs and revelations, and also through their denial of resurrection, the reckoning and reward: *"That is their reward, for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?"* (Verse 98)

The *sūrah* portrays the scene as though it is taking place now. It shows this life as having already come to an end and become a distant past. This follows the usual Qur'ānic method of portraying scenes of the hereafter as if they were taking place now in order to enhance their effect, so that people may take heed.

This is followed by a new argument based on what they see in real life but tend to ignore: *"Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like?"* (Verse 99) Why should the concept of resurrection be difficult to accept when simple logic confirms that God who has created this majestic universe is able to create a similar one? If He is thus able to create, He is also able to bring creatures back to life after they have died. *"He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection."* (Verse 99) He has allowed them a term of life and set a time for their resurrection. However, *"The evildoers refuse to accept anything other than disbelief"* (Verse 99) Hence their punishment will be fair, as they have had all signs, pointers and evidence to show them the path of guidance, but they refused to follow anything except error and unbelief.

A Threat to Exterminate the Believers

Yet those who made such suggestions and demands as related in the *sūrah* were themselves misers. Had they been in charge of God's grace, they would have held on to it, fearing to expend it. *"Say: Had you possessed the treasures of my Lord's mercy, you would have been tight-fisted for fear of spending them. For man has always been niggardly."*

(Verse 100) This is an image of utter stinginess, because God's grace encompasses everything. It will never be exhausted or diminished. Yet in their miserly attitude, they would have withheld God's grace from His creation, had they been placed in charge of administering it.

Miracles do not initiate faith in hardened hearts. Moses, for example, was given nine such clear signs, but Pharaoh and his people denied them until they suffered God's punishment. *"To Moses We gave nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel [about what happened]. When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched. [Moses] said, 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.' So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verses 101-104) This part of the history of Moses and the Children of Israel is mentioned here because it fits with the context of the *sūrah*. It started by mentioning the Aqṣā mosque in Jerusalem, and it then related a part of the history of the Israelites with Moses. This is followed by mentioning the hereafter when Pharaoh and his people will be brought forward. This also fits with the scene of the hereafter and the one showing the end of those who deny resurrection, mentioned a little earlier in the *sūrah*.

Moses' nine clear signs to which the *sūrah* refers were his hand turning white, his staff, and the tests to which Pharaoh's people were subjected, such as drought, shortage of fruit, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. *"Ask the Children of Israel' about what happened. They were witnesses to what took place between Moses and Pharaoh: "When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him: Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched."* (Verse 101) Thus the word of truth assigning divinity to God alone, and the call to abandon all injustice and tyranny cannot be uttered, according to the tyrant, except by someone bewitched, unable to realize the meaning of what he says. Indeed tyrants like Pharaoh cannot imagine that anyone in his right senses could ever adopt such an attitude or give expression to such demands.

Moses, on the other hand, realizes that his strength is based in the truth he preaches. His message stands out as a source of light. He is certain of God's support and that He will inevitably punish the tyrants: *"Moses said: 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost."* (Verse 102) Moses makes it clear to Pharaoh that his denial of the truth when he is fully aware that none other than God could have accomplished such clear signs will earn him a terrible punishment. These signs were clear for anyone who cared to look. They show the truth in full light, clear as the bright day. Yet Pharaoh chose to deny them all and deny God. Hence, divine

justice will inflict on him a punishment that leaves him utterly ruined.

At this point, the tyrannical Pharaoh resorts to his own material force, threatening to wipe Moses and his followers off the face of the earth. Such is the method to which all tyrants resort when they are faced with the truth. But God's will is triumphant. His law of punishing the oppressors and supporting the oppressed comes into force: *"So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verses 103-104)

Thus was the end of those who denied the clear signs which were shown to them as evidence of the truth. God gave the land to the oppressed to rule. When they are in charge, their actions will be the basis of the judgement they have to face. At the beginning of the *sūrah* we were given a clear idea of their end. Here we are only told that both they and their enemies will be gathered together on the Day of Judgement: *"When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verse 104)

Method of Qur'ānic Revelations

Pharaoh's destruction by drowning was one example of material miracles worked out in past generations. The *sūrah* tells us how such miracles were received by people bent on denying the truth and how, as a result, they were doomed to suffer God's punishment. The Qur'ān, God's last message, was revealed with the truth so that it could serve as a permanent sign and basis of guidance. It was bestowed from on high in parts, so that it may be read and reflected upon at length: *"We have bestowed [this Qur'ān] from on high in truth, and in truth has it come down. We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. We have divided the Qur'ān into parts so that you may recite it to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step."* (Verses 105-106)

The Qur'ān was revealed in order to educate a community and establish for it a system and code of life. This community would then carry it to all the corners of the earth in order to educate humanity on the basis of this perfect system. Hence the Qur'ān was revealed one part at a time, according to the practical needs of that community and the circumstances attending its first formative period. Education and the moulding of a nation and a community require time as well as practical experience. Thus the Qur'ān was not revealed as a theoretical doctrine or an abstract vision to be used for academic study and polemical argument. It was revealed part by part instead so that it could be implemented gradually during this formative period. This is indeed the reason for its gradual revelation, one part or passage at a

time, not a whole scripture or code given at the outset.

The first generation of believers received it in this light. They approached it as directives to be implemented in practice, be they prohibitions, recommendations or obligations. They never approached it as something for moral or intellectual debate like poetry and literature, or for amusement like legends and stories. They allowed it to influence their daily lives to the full, bringing their feelings, perceptions and behaviour in line with it, and moulding their way of life in accordance with its teachings. They discarded whatever was in conflict with it of their values, norms and practices.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd, a learned Companion of the Prophet says: “When any of us learnt ten verses of the Qurʾān, one would not try to learn more until we had fully learnt their meaning and how to put them into practice.”

God revealed the Qurʾān based on the truth: “We have bestowed [this Qurʾān] from on high in truth.” (Verse 105) And its purpose is to establish the truth on earth: “And in truth has it come down.” (Verse 105) Thus the truth is its fabric and ultimate aim, its substance and whole concern. This is the truth as it is ingrained in the constitution of the universe, and forming the foundation of the existence of the heavens and the earth. The Qurʾān is closely linked to the constitution of the universe, always pointing to it. Indeed the truth is the ultimate goal of the Qurʾān. The Prophet gives warnings and promises of happiness on the basis of the truth which the Qurʾān expounds.

To Believe or Not to Believe

At this point the Prophet is commanded to explain the truth plainly to his people, leaving them free to make their choice to either believe in the Qurʾān or to reject it. They will have to bear the consequences of their choice. He puts in front of their eyes an example of its reception by Jewish and Christian people who were given sound knowledge before its revelation. They may feel that they will do well to follow in the footsteps of such learned people when they themselves have not been granted such knowledge:

Say, ‘You may believe in it or you may not.’ Those who were given knowledge before it was revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, and say, ‘Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.’ And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility. (Verses 107-109)

This is an inspiring image showing people endowed with knowledge listening to

the Qur'ān, touched by its truth and falling down on their faces in humble prostration. They cannot restrain themselves. They do not merely prostrate themselves, but fall down on their faces in complete humility. They give expression to what they feel in their hearts of God's greatness and the fulfilment of His promise: *"Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled."* (Verse 108) But then their feelings are further enhanced and they are deeply touched so that words are insufficient to express their feelings. Tears pour down from their eyes telling of their profound emotion: *"And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility."* (Verse 109) It is a scene of profound feelings demonstrated by people receiving the Qur'ān with open hearts, having learnt from their earlier scriptures of the truth it explains.

This inspiring scene is painted after the *sūrah* has given the Arabs the choice of believing in the Qur'ān or rejecting it. It is followed with a statement leaving it up to them to call on God with whatever names they choose. In their days of ignorance they declined to call God as *Raḥmān*, which means, 'Most Merciful'. Hence they are told that they may call on God with whichever one of His names they choose: *"Say: Call upon God or call upon the Most Merciful. By whichever name you invoke Him, His are the most gracious names."* (Verse 110) Their prejudices concerning His names have no basis other than myth that they used to believe in their ignorance. They have no sound basis.

The Prophet is then instructed to recite his prayers in a middle voice. This is because the unbelievers used to ridicule him whenever they saw him praying. It is also true to say that a voice pitched in the middle is the most suited to prayer: *"Do not raise your voice too loud in prayer, nor say it in too low a voice, but follow a middle course in between."* (Verse 110)

The *sūrah* closes in the same way as it opened, praising God and asserting His oneness, and reiterating the facts that He has neither son nor partner and is in need of no help or support from anyone. This is indeed the pivot round which the *sūrah* turns: *"And say: All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness."* (Verse 111)

SŪRAH 18

Al-Kahf

(The Cave)

Prologue

The most important thing to be noted about this *sūrah* is its preponderant narration of events that took place in the past. First we have the story of the sleepers in the cave, followed by that of the man with two gardens, then a reference to Adam and Satan. In the middle of the *sūrah* we see what happened between Moses and the pious man, and at the end there is an account of Dhu'l-Qarnayn. These stories form the major part of the *sūrah*, taking 71 out of its 110 verses. Most of the remaining verses comment on the stories and outline the lessons to be learnt from them. In addition, the *sūrah* also contains some scenes of the Day of Judgement, and others drawn from human life to explain an idea or emphasize a concept. In all these, we see examples of the Qur'ānic method of emphasizing its ideas through vivid imagery.

The central theme in the *sūrah*, to which all its accounts and ideas relate, is to purge faith of all alien concepts. It seeks to establish correct and accurate thought and reasoning, as also establish values that are sound according to the criterion of the Islamic faith.

Purging faith of alien concepts is determined both at the outset and conclusion. The *sūrah* opens with these verses: *"All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward which continues to be theirs forever. Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.'*

No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter.” (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* concludes with: *“Say: ‘I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as partner.”* (Verse 110) Thus the *sūrah* begins and ends with declaring God’s oneness, rejecting any concept that associates partners with God, accepting revelation as true, and making a clear and absolute distinction between God and other beings.

The *sūrah* touches on this theme several times, in various ways. As it relates the history of the sleepers in the cave, those young believers are quoted as saying: *“Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity!”* (Verse 14) In its commentary on their story, the *sūrah* says: *“No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule.”* (Verse 26)

As it relates the story of the man with two gardens, the *sūrah* quotes the argument of the believer as he says to his friend: *“Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall associate with my Lord.”* (Verses 37-38) In the final commentary on this story, the *sūrah* includes: *“He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome.”* (Verses 43-44)

As it draws one of the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* says: *“One day He will say, ‘Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!’ They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them.”* (Verse 52) And in comment on another scene the *sūrah* says: *“Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers.”* (Verse 102)

The establishment of clear and accurate thought and reasoning is made manifest in the rejection of the claims of all those who associate partners with God, because they assert what they do not know. They have no evidence to prove what they claim. The *sūrah* also directs human beings to make their judgement only on what they know for certain. What they do not know, they should leave to God to determine. Thus at the beginning of the *sūrah* we have the verse stating: *“It warns those who assert, ‘God has taken to Himself son.’ No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers.”* (Verses 4-5)

The sleepers in the cave are quoted as saying: *“These people of ours have taken for*

worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their belief." (Verse 15) When they wonder how long they have been in that state of sleep, they leave the issue to God who has perfect knowledge of everything: "They said: Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus." (Verse 19) The story also includes clear disapproval of those who speak about the number of the sleepers, relying only on guesswork: "Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.'" (Verse 22)

In the story of Moses and the pious man, the latter reveals to him at the end the secret behind each of his apparently wild and unreasonable actions to which Moses had objected. He says to Moses that it was all done "by your Lord's grace. I did not do any of this of my own accord." (Verse 82) Thus all issues and situations are attributed to God alone.

The main purpose of the *sūrah* is to make faith the basis for the evaluation of concepts, ideas, practices and values. This is shown in various places. All proper and good values are attributed to faith and good action. Any other value which does not have its basis in faith is unworthy, even though it may seem highly attractive. All that appears fascinating and beautiful in this life is meant as a test. It will all come to an end: "We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust." (Verses 7-8) To be under God's protection is to be in a wide and comfortable environment, even though one may have to seek refuge in a narrow and barren cave. Those young believers who abandoned their community and went to the cave are clear about their purpose: "Now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs." (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, requiring him to persevere and be patient, associating with those who believe, paying no regard to the adornments of this world or to those who overlook their duty towards God: "Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.'" (Verses 28-29)

The story of the two gardens and their owner portrays how a believer is proud of