

them out to pasture in the morning. (6)

And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. (7)

And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge. (8)

It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright. (9)

It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. (10)

And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (11)

And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason. (12)

On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of

وَتَحْمِلُ أَثْقَالَكُمْ إِلَىٰ بَلَدٍ لَّمْ تَكُونُوا
بَلِغِيهِ إِلَّا بِشِقِّ الْأَنْفُسِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكُمْ
لَرءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

وَالْخَيْلَ وَالْبِغَالَ وَالْحَمِيرَ لِتَرْكَبُوهَا
وَزِينَةً ۚ وَخَلَقَ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨﴾

وَعَلَىٰ اللَّهِ قَصْدُ السَّبِيلِ وَمِنْهَا جَائِرٌ وَلَوْ
شَاءَ لَهَدَنَكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً لَكُمْ
مِنْهُ شَرَابٌ وَمِنْهُ شَجَرٌ فِيهِ تُسِيمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

يُنْبِتُ لَكُمْ بِهِ الزَّرْعَ وَالزَّيْتُونَ
وَالنَّخِيلَ وَالْأَعْنَابَ وَمِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ وَالشَّمْسَ
وَالْقَمَرَ ۗ وَالنُّجُومَ ۗ مُسَخَّرَاتٌ بِأَمْرِهِ ۗ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَمَا ذَرَأَّا لَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُخْتَلِفًا
أَلْوَانُهُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed. (13)

It is He who has made the sea subservient to [His laws], so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful. (14)

He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way (15)

as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided. (16)

Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? (17)

Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. (18)

God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. (19)

Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. (20)

They are dead, not living, and they do not know

وَهُوَ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ الْبَحْرَ لِتَأْكُلُوا مِنْهُ
لَحْمًا طَرِيًّا وَتَسْتَخْرِجُوا مِنْهُ حِلْيَةً
تَلْبَسُونَهَا وَتَرَى الْفُلْكَ مَوَاجِرَ فِيهِ
وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلِعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَأَلْقَى فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيَ أَنْ تَمِيدَ
بِكُمْ وَأَنْهَارًا وَسُبُلًا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ
﴿١٤﴾ وَعَلَّمَتِ بِالنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

أَفَمَنْ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ لَآ تَخْلُقُ أَفَلَا
تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ لَا تُحْصُوهَا إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُسْرُونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ
﴿١٨﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَا
يَخْلُقُونَ شَيْئًا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

أَمْوَاتٌ غَيْرُ أَحْيَاءٍ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ
يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

when they will be raised back to life. (21)

Overview

This first passage speaks about God's oneness. It makes use of all the tools we outlined in the Prologue: the numerous signs and indicators the great variety of God's creation exhibit, the countless favours He has bestowed on man in every stage of his life, His perfect knowledge of what is kept secret and what is left public, the life of this world and the life to come.

An Imminent Grave Event

God's judgement is bound to come; so do not seek to hurry it on. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him. He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.' (Verses 1-2)

The unbelievers in Makkah used to ask the Prophet to hasten their punishment in this life, or to hasten the punishment God has in store for them in the life to come. As time passed with no punishment being inflicted, they urged the Prophet more and more to hasten it, demonstrating that they could not care less. They thought that Muḥammad was warning them against something that would never happen. His only aim, as they imagined, was to get them to believe what he said and accept his faith. They could not understand God's wisdom in giving them time. Nor could they appreciate His grace. They would not reflect on the signs He has placed everywhere in the universe around them. Nor would they reflect on His revelations in the Qur'ān which address people's minds and hearts. That is after all a much more effective address than punishment and suffering. It is more worthy of man whom God has honoured when He gave him a mind, feelings and an independent will to study, reflect and make free choices.

The opening of the *sūrah* is very decisive: "God's judgement is bound to come." It implies that the command has been given, and that God's will has been made. This is sufficient for the judgement to come to pass at the time appointed for it by God Himself. "So do not seek to hurry it on." God's laws operate in accordance with His will. They cannot be hurried, nor can they be postponed to satisfy people's wishes. The statement here tells us that God's judgement, to resurrect people or to inflict His

punishment on those who deserve it, has been made. It will come to pass at the time God has determined. There will be no hurrying and no delay.

The decisive nature of this statement is especially effective, even on those who try to wear a careless face. Moreover, it expresses the truth. Whatever God wills is bound to take place. The fact that He has made a judgement means that it is carried out, and that it becomes part of reality. Hence, there is neither an overstatement of facts nor a deviation from them.

Their beliefs, associating partners with God, and all the false concepts that they formulate on that basis, are far removed from God's true nature: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him."* (Verse 1) Beliefs that ascribe divinity to anyone other than God all lack foundation. They are the result of degenerate and disgraceful thinking.

God, who does not abandon mankind to their erring beliefs and baseless concepts, sends down from on high what gives them life and saves them: *"He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases."* (Verse 2) This is God's greatest favour and blessing. He not only sends down water from the sky to make the earth quicken and to give physical life, but He also sends down the angels with His divine inspiration. The Arabic expression uses the word *rah*, which also means 'spirit', for inspiration. This adds connotations of life within people's souls, consciences and feelings, and within society so as to preserve them all from corruption. This is the first thing that God sends down to people from on high, and it is His most important blessing and bounty. God's purest creation, the angels, are sent down to His chosen servants, the prophets, giving them a message that is summed up in these words: *"Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me."* (Verse 2)

The emphasis here is on God's oneness, which is the central point of the Islamic faith. It breathes life into people's souls. It is also the parting point between the way which gives life and the way which destroys it. A soul that does not believe in God's oneness is lost, confused, pulled in all directions by diverse and contradictory concepts and beliefs. It cannot move with its whole being towards a definite goal. Use of the term *rib* in reference to God's message implies all these. Indeed it provides a fitting reference to them at the beginning of this *sūrah* which speaks of the great variety of God's favours. It is the top of all these blessings, without which all others lose their value. Indeed man does not make a proper use or derive proper benefit from anything on earth unless his soul comes alive with the great blessing of faith.

The warning is given a special mention so as to appear to be the central point of the message, because the larger part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers who deny God's blessing, prohibit what God has made lawful, violate their covenant with

God and reject faith altogether. This makes the warning more appropriate at the outset, coupled with a call to fear God and avoid incurring His displeasure.

Creation and Compassion

The *sūrah* then begins to outline the aspects of creation that emphasize the oneness of the Creator, and the aspects of blessing that confirm that it is God alone who bestows them all. These are revealed in groups that follow one another sequentially, starting with the creation of the heavens and the earth, and moving to the creation of man: *“He has created the heavens and the earth in truth; sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him. He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.”* (Verses 3-4)

“He has created the heavens and the earth in truth.” (Verse 3) The truth is at the core of their creation and their existence. Indeed the truth is an essential element in managing their affairs and the affairs of all creation. Nothing is created in vain or idle play. Everything derives its existence on the basis of the truth, and leads eventually to the truth. *“Sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him.”* (Verse 3) He is exalted above their pagan beliefs and above any creatures they associate with Him. He is indeed the One who has created the heavens and the earth and all beings that live in them. No creature is worthy of being His partner. Indeed He has no partners.

“He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.” (Verse 4) The gulf is so huge between the origin and the end, between the worthless sperm and the man in open contention. He disputes with his Lord and denies Him. He argues about His existence or His oneness. Yet the way the verse runs leaves no gap between the point of origin, the drop of sperm, and the grown up man engaged in dispute and contention. This shows the contrast to be complete and the gulf too wide. Such brevity is intended for enhanced effect.

Against the expanse of the heavens and the earth man stands out. Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions some of the creation God has made subservient to man, beginning with cattle: *“He creates cattle which give you warmth and other benefits; and from them you obtain food. And you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evening and when you take them out to pasture in the morning. And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge.”* (Verses 5-8)

In numerous situations that are similar to the environment where the Qur’ān was revealed, and in any agricultural set-up, which remains the principal one in the

whole world, the value of cattle is fully appreciated. Indeed mankind cannot survive without cattle. The better known cattle in Arabia at the time were camels, cows, sheep and goats. On the other hand, horses, mules and asses were for riding and show. They were not meant to be eaten. Indeed there is disagreement among scholars on the permissibility of eating the meat of these animals. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah relies on this verse which defines the uses of these animals to say that horses may not be eaten. The majority of scholars, however, maintain that they are permissible to eat. In this they rely on authentic *aḥādīth* and on practical *sunnah*.

As the Qur'ān refers to this aspect of God's blessings, it refers to the practical needs it fulfils in human life. Cattle give warmth as we use their hide, wool and hair. These have even further benefits. We also obtain milk and meat from cattle. We are reminded that cattle provide food for people and carry their loads when they travel. Without cattle, people would until recently have found great difficulty in reaching their destination. At the same time we enjoy their beauty, particularly when we drive them home in the evening and when we take them to pasture in the morning. Just looking at them moving along, strong and full of vigour, gives us pleasure. Rural people are better able than town dwellers to appreciate the meanings to which these verses refer.

Horses, mules and asses also meet other human needs. They are used as mounts to ride or, they are put on show for their beauty: "*And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show.*" (Verse 8) Here we encounter a particularly interesting point in the Islamic outlook of life, whereby beauty constitutes an important aspect. God's blessing does not merely satisfy essential needs, such as food, drink and mounts. It also satisfies healthy desires beyond basic needs. Here we find satisfaction of the sense that enjoys beauty and seeks pleasure, and also satisfies human feelings that are more sublime than animal desires and needs.

"Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful." (Verse 7) This comment refers in particular to the carrying of heavy loads to distant lands which people could not reach otherwise without enduring much hardship. Thus the comment directs our attention to the great blessings that God has given us by creating cattle, and to the great mercy accompanying this blessing.

"And He creates things of which you have no knowledge." (Verse 8) This sentence comments on the creation of cattle, horses, mules and asses and the different uses to which they are put and the benefits they provide. Thus it invites people's imagination to look beyond their immediate environment and the time in which they live. Beyond what exists at a particular location and in a particular time there are other forms and types of life. God wants people to expect this so as to broaden their vision. He also wants them to accept such other forms of life when they are available. They must not refuse to benefit by such new types, saying that they will only use the

cattle, horses, mules and asses their fathers used. Similarly, no one should be so rigid as to say that since the Qur'ān only mentioned these, no other form of transport can be used.

Islam is open minded and flexible. It equips its followers with the ability to use all potentials and resources that are available at any time. The Qur'ān thus prepares people's minds and hearts to receive whatever God creates and science discovers or produces in the future. A proper Islamic conscience is always ready to accept any new remarkable addition to God's creation or to scientific discovery. Over the years many new means of riding and carrying loads have been added, as well as many objects of beauty. None of these were known to people when the Qur'ān was revealed. There will be many more which are unknown to us. The Qur'ān prepares us to accept these without difficulty by stating that God "*creates things of which you have no knowledge.*" (Verse 8)

Within the context of carriage, riding and travelling to reach certain destinations on earth, the *sūrah* adds other objectives which we can reach by travelling along mental ways. Such is the road to faith, which is a straight way that has no turnings. It does not go beyond the defined goal. There are other ways that do not lead to the same destination. Now God has undertaken to make the way leading to Him clear and well defined. He points it out through the signs He has placed in the universe and through His messengers: "*It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright.*" (Verse 9)

The right path is the straight one which does not bend here or there. It goes directly to its destination, allowing for no deviation. A swerving path may lead away from the destination, or may go beyond it, without stopping at it.

"*Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright.*" (Verse 9) But it has been His will that He creates man with the dual propensity to follow His guidance or to go astray, and to let him choose to follow either way. Hence, some people follow the right path and some follow swerving ways. Neither type goes beyond God's will which has determined to allow man free choice.

Blessings Galore

The second group of great signs in God's creation and His unlimited blessings then follow:

It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (Verses 10-11)

Water pours down from the sky in accordance with laws that God has placed in nature and set into operation. It is these laws that control the running of such water and bring about its outcome in accordance with God's will. Indeed He initiates every movement and determines every result by a special act of will. The water is mentioned here as an aspect of God's grace. *"From it you drink."* So it has the quality of being suitable for drinking. Its other quality follows: *"And with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle."* (Verse 10) This reference fits in well with the earlier mention of cattle. It provides harmony between the pasture and cattle. A reference is also made to plants which serve as food for man, including olives, dates and grapes, and many other types of fruit.

"Surely in this there is a sign for people who think." (Verse 11) There is certainly a sign in the way God has designed the universe and set its laws so that they fit human life. Man would not have been able to survive on this planet had the laws of nature been unsuitable for his nature and life needs. That man is placed on the surface of the earth has not come about by blind coincidence. Nor is it a matter of coincidence that proportions and relativity between our planet and other planets and stars are as they are, or that climatic conditions are so suitable to support human life and satisfy man's needs and desires.

The people who think are the ones who understand that there is elaborate and wise planning in the universe. They relate a natural phenomenon such as rain and its effects of initiating life and helping plants and trees to grow and yield their fruit to the higher laws of existence and the evidence pointing to the Creator who has no partners. They appreciate that everything is part of His planning and under His management. The careless see such phenomena every morning and every evening, winter and summer, but it stirs nothing in their minds. They do not feel any urge to try to identify the One who has designed this unique and remarkable system.

A third group of signs are then added: *"And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 12)

Another aspect of the perfect design of creation and the blessings bestowed on mankind at the same time is the creation of the night, day, sun, moon and stars. All these help to meet our needs on earth. We do not say that they have been created for man, but they are made to serve his existence and to benefit him. The phenomenon of the succession of day and night has a profound effect on human life. If anyone is in doubt, let him imagine a day that is not followed by a night, or a night not followed by a day, and reflect what that would mean to the life of human beings, animals and plants on earth.

The same applies to the sun and moon. They have a direct bearing on life on earth,

its origin, maintenance and growth. Moreover, *"all the stars are subservient to His command."* (Verse 12) They serve the interests of man and other beings known only to God. All this is, again, part of the wise and elaborate planning that includes everything in the universe. The harmony and balance between all universal laws are appreciated by people who use their reason and contemplate what lies beyond these laws: *"In this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 12)

Yet another group of blessings that God bestows on mankind is also mentioned: *"On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed."* (Verse 13)

What God has created and placed on the earth is fantastic in its nature and diversity. We need only to mention the metals that are available in the soil. These support the life of whole communities during different periods. It is sufficient to cast a glance at these hidden resources to appreciate the great blessing to which the *sūrah* refers. These are kept for mankind until they have achieved sufficient progress to make use of these resources when they are needed. Whenever it is said that a great treasure has been exhausted, another is discovered. All this is part of the provision God has placed at man's service. *"Surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed."* (Verse 13) Such people do not forget that it is God's able hand that has kept these treasures and resources hidden for them until they are able to make use of them.

We are then alerted to another group of God's creation which is the sea and its animal life. Its water is salty and cannot be used for drinking or irrigation. Yet it includes a fantastic range of blessings that God bestows on man: *"It is He who has made the sea subservient to (His laws), so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful."* (Verse 14)

The sea and its life forms also meet many human needs and satisfy various human desires. From it we obtain fresh fish and other species to eat. In it we find pearls and corals which we use as ornaments. Some communities continue to use shells as personal ornaments or to make artefacts from them. The reference to ships also hints at the element of beauty and its satisfaction, not merely the use of shipping for transport. *"You see the ships ploughing through the waves."* (Verse 14) The expression here draws our attention to the beauty we see everywhere in the universe. Such beauty stands out just as the object we are contemplating is seen to serve a definite purpose and meet a felt need. We only need to appreciate such beauty and not confine ourselves to needs that must be satisfied.

The verses here draw our attention to the fact that we should seek what God has given us of provision and bounty, and to our duty of giving thanks to Him for having placed food, ornament and beauty for us in the salty sea: *"so that you may be*

able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful.” (Verse 14)

The last group of God’s numerous blessings mentioned in this passage refers to different aspects of God’s creation: *“He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way, as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided.” (Verses 15-16)*

Modern science gives us several theories which explain the formation of mountains, but it does not mention their function to which the Qur’ān refers. The most important of these contradictory theories is that the surface of the earth shrank as it cooled down after its initial burning stage. This then led to the formation of valleys, hills and mountains on its surface. Yet the Qur’ān mentions that the mountains ensure that the earth remains well balanced. This function is not given due attention by scientists.

In contrast with the firm mountains, our attentions are drawn to the running rivers and the roads we follow. There is a direct link between the rivers and the mountains in this scene. Many a river starts at a mountain, where rain-water gathers. The roads also have a direct link with both mountains and rivers. They provide another link to the general atmosphere of movement, cattle, mounts and transport. Juxtaposed with the roads are the landmarks which people use to ensure that they are following the right way. These include hills, mountains and open spaces, as well as the stars which guide travellers on sea and dry land alike.

False Deities That Create Nothing

Now that the aspects of creation, blessings and great design have been completed in this first passage of the *sūrah*, a comment follows to emphasize the point at issue, namely the oneness of God who is sublimely exalted above all those beings people associate as partners with Him:

Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? Should you try to count God’s blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. They are dead, not living, and they do not know when they will be raised back to life. (Verses 17-21)

This comment comes at the most opportune time. We are all ready to accept the point it makes: *“Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create?” (Verse 17)* Could there be more than one answer? No! Of course not! They are not alike. Is it possible that a human being can equate God who has created all these with false deities that create nothing? *“Will you not, then, think? (Verse 17)* The point needs no more than a