

Almighty, to whom the unbelievers ascribe partners.

The *sūrah* then derides them for turning away from all the pointers to the right guidance in this present life. On that day theirs will be the sharpest of hearing and seeing: *“How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error.”* (Verse 38) Their situation is amazing: they do not hear or see when hearing and seeing are the means to discern guidance and follow it in order to escape doom. Yet they hear and see extremely well when these faculties are used to stress their humiliation. They will be made to hear what they dislike and see what they are wont to avoid.

*“Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress.”* (Verse 39) That is a day when distress will be at its most acute, when distress will be a quality of the day itself. They need to be warned, because such distress is of no use to anyone: *“When everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief”* (Verse 39) It is as though the day is directly linked to their unbelief and heedlessness.

God’s Messenger is commanded to warn people against that day, which will come, no doubt. For, everything and everyone on earth shall return to God, like inheritance that reverts to the Only Heir: *“We alone shall remain after the earth and all who live on it have passed away. To Us they shall all return.”* (Verse 40)

## 2

# A Long Line of Prophets

*Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. (41)*

وَأذْكَرٌ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٤١﴾

*He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? (42)*

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ لِمَ تَعْبُدُ مَا لَا  
يَسْمَعُ وَلَا يُبْصِرُ وَلَا يُغْنِي عَنْكَ شَيْئًا

*My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. (43)*

﴿٤٢﴾  
يَأْتِبْتِ إِنِّي قَدْ جَاءَنِي مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَمْ  
يَأْتِكَ فَاتَّبِعْنِي أَهْدِكَ صِرَاطًا سَوِيًّا ﴿٤٣﴾

*My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. (44)*

يَأْتِبْتِ لَا تَعْبُدِ الشَّيْطَانَ ۗ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ  
كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ عَصِيًّا ﴿٤٤﴾

*My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.' (45)*

يَأْتِبْتِ إِنِّي أَخَافُ أَنْ يَمَسَّكَ عَذَابٌ مِّنْ  
الرَّحْمَنِ فَتَكُونَ لِلشَّيْطَانِ وَلِيًّا ﴿٤٥﴾

*He answered: 'Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!' (46)*

قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَ أَنْتَ عَنْ ءِالِهَتِي يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ  
لَئِنْ لَّمْ تَنْتَهَ لِأَرْجُمَنَّكَ ۖ وَاهْجُرْنِي مَلِيًّا

*Abraham replied: Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. (47)*

*But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest.' (48)*

*When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. (49)*

*We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying] the truth. (50)*

*And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. (51)*

*We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. (52)*

*We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet. (53)*

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قَالَ سَلِّمْ عَلَيْكَ سَأَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكَ رَبِّي

إِنَّهُ كَانَ بِي حَفِيًّا ﴿٤٧﴾

وَأَعْتَرْتُكُمْ وَمَا تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ

وَأَدْعُوا رَبِّي عَسَىٰ أَلَّا أَكُونَ بِدُعَاءِ رَبِّي

شَقِيًّا ﴿٤٨﴾

فَلَمَّا أَعْتَرَهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ

وَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ كُلًّا جَعَلْنَا

نَبِيًّا ﴿٤٩﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِنَا وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ لِسَانَ

صِدْقٍ عَلِيًّا ﴿٥٠﴾

وَأَذْكُرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ مُوسَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مُخْلَصًا

وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥١﴾

وَنُنَادِيهِ مِنْ جَانِبِ الطُّورِ الْأَيْمَنِ

وَقَرَّبْنَاهُ نَجِيًّا ﴿٥٢﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ مِنْ رَحْمَتِنَا أَخَاهُ هَارُونَ نَبِيًّا

*And mention in the Book Ismael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. (54)*

*He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him. (55)*

*And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. (56)*

*We raised him to a lofty station. (57)*

*These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings — of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We had guided and chosen. When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping. (58)*

*They were succeeded by generations who neglected their prayers and followed only their lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.*

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وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥٤﴾

وَكَانَ يَأْمُرُ أَهْلَهُ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَكَانَ  
عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ مَرْضِيًّا ﴿٥٥﴾

وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِدْرِيسَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ  
صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥٦﴾

وَرَفَعْنَاهُ مَكَانًا عَلِيًّا ﴿٥٧﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ  
مِن ذُرِّيَةِ آدَمَ وَمِمَّنْ حَمَلْنَا مَعَ نُوحٍ  
وَمِن ذُرِّيَةِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْرَائِيلَ وَمِمَّنْ  
هَدَيْنَا وَأَجْتَبَيْنَا ۚ إِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُ  
الرَّحْمَنِ خَرُّوا سُجَّدًا وَبُكِيًّا ﴿٥٨﴾

﴿ فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ أَضَاعُوا  
الصَّلَاةَ وَاتَّبَعُوا الشَّهْوَاتِ ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَلْقَوْنَ

(59)

*Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, believe and do righteous deeds. These will enter the Garden and will not be wronged in any way:*

(60)

*the gardens of Eden which [God] the Most Merciful has promised to His servants, in the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Indeed, His promise is certain of fulfilment. (61)*

*There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace. And their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening. (62)*

*Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit. (63)*

*We descend only by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between. Never does your Lord forget anything. (64)*

*He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His? (65)*

غِيَا ﴿٥٩﴾

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا  
فَأُولَئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ

شَيْئًا ﴿٦٠﴾

جَنَّاتِ عَدْنٍ الَّتِي وَعَدَ الرَّحْمَنُ عِبَادَهُ  
بِالْغَيْبِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ وَعْدُهُ مَأْتِيًا ﴿٦١﴾

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا إِلَّا سَلَامًا وَهُمْ  
رِزْقُهُمْ فِيهَا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا ﴿٦٢﴾

تِلْكَ الْجَنَّةُ الَّتِي نُورِثُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا مَنْ  
كَانَ تَقِيًّا ﴿٦٣﴾

وَمَا نَنْتَزِلُ إِلَّا بِأَمْرِ رَبِّكَ لَهُ مَا بَيْنَ  
أَيْدِينَا وَمَا خَلْفَنَا وَمَا بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ وَمَا  
كَانَ رَبُّكَ نَسِيًّا ﴿٦٤﴾

رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا  
فَاعْبُدْهُ وَاصْطَبِرْ لِعِبَادَتِهِ هَلْ تَعْلَمُ  
لَهُ سَمِيًّا ﴿٦٥﴾

## A Son's Passionate Appeal

The account given in this *sūrah* of the birth of Jesus is concluded with a statement showing the fallacy and singularity of the myth making Jesus God's son. This is a fabrication upheld by some Christians in their distorted beliefs. The *sūrah* now gives an account of part of Abraham's story, demonstrating the singularity and fallacy of pagan beliefs. Abraham is the great ancestor from whom the Arabs claim to descend. In fact the pagan Arabs claimed the custodianship of the Ka (bah, built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael.

In this account, Abraham's contented, patient and gentle character is shown in sharp relief. We see these aspects of his character in his approach and language. They are also clearly apparent in his behaviour and how he responds to his father's overbearing attitude. We also feel how God has bestowed His grace on Abraham, compensating him for his father and people, all unbelievers, with goodly offspring that beget a whole nation which has its generous share of prophets and saintly divines. Yet these are followed by generations who neglected prayers and deviated from the path shown them by Abraham to pursue their desires. Those were the unbelievers.

God describes Abraham in the Qur'ān as being 'a man of truth and a prophet'. The Arabic word, *ṣiddīq*, translated here as 'a man of truth' has a wider sense than merely being truthful. It connotes that he was always truthful and a firm believer in the truth. Both qualities fit well with his character:

*Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.'* (Verses 41-45)

It is with such a passionate appeal that Abraham addresses his father, trying to guide him to the goodness God had taught him and to which He had directed him. His appeal is an endearing one, stressing his position as a loving son. He asks him: "Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you?" (Verse 42) The normal practice is that people address their worship to someone who is more exalted, knowledgeable and stronger than man. Indeed worship is always presented to someone exalted above man's position. How is it, then, that in this case it is presented to something below the level of man, and indeed below the level of animals; something that does not hear or see anything and can cause no benefit or harm. This was the case of Abraham's father and community. They worshipped idols, just like the Arabs of the Quraysh who opposed Islam.

This is the first point in Abraham's appeal to his father. He follows it with a statement that he does not make this claim at his own behest. Rather, he makes it on the basis of true knowledge that has been vouchsafed to him by God to set him on the path of true guidance. He was certainly younger and less experienced than his father, but what had been bestowed on him from on high gave him a clear recognition of the truth. Hence he gives his advice to his father who had not received such knowledge. He wanted his father to follow suit so that he would be on the road of truth: *"My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path."* (Verse 43)

There is nothing wrong with a father following his son when this son has a direct recourse to a higher source able to give true guidance. In this case, the son is the one who follows the right way, leading only to what is good.

Having shown his father the fallacy of idol worship and outlined the source of guidance he received, which is the cornerstone of his appeal to his father, Abraham makes it clear that the way followed by his father is that of Satan. His own aim is to guide his father to the way acceptable to God, the Most Merciful. He fears that his father may incur God's anger and thus become a close friend of Satan:

*My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.* (Verses 44-45)

It is Satan who tempts people to worship idols. This means that whoever worships idols is in the same position as one who worships the devil himself. Satan, it must not be forgotten, is a rebel who disobeys God in every way. Abraham warns his father against incurring God's displeasure. For if he does, he will become Satan's friend and follower and so liable to God's punishment. This shows clearly that when God guides a servant of His to obey Him, that in itself is a blessing, while befriending Satan is a scourge leading to God's punishment and a position of utter ruin on the Day of Judgement.

### **Insolent Answer to a Compassionate Appeal**

Abraham's appeal, made in the most compassionate language, cannot however find its way to his father's hardened heart. The father retorts with rejection and threats:

*Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!* (Verse 46)

His father's answer was harsh, arrogant and threatening. He considered Abraham's rejection of idols to be impertinent. It was a crime for which Abraham deserved a cruel punishment: i.e. death by stoning. Hence, he advised him to stay away, or else punishment would be forthcoming.

It is with such ignorance and cruelty that the father replies to the son's passionate and polite appeal. No regard is given for the son's care and concern for his father. This is indeed the pattern of response that advocates of faith receive from those who are hardened by disbelief and lack of guidance.

Abraham, however, does not allow anger to dictate his attitude. He does not lose sight of his dutifulness to his father. Hence, he continues to address him with respect and compassion:

*Abraham replied: Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest. (Verses 47-48)*

Abraham makes it clear that he will not respond to the threat, nor will he indulge in futile argument. He promises his father to pray to God to forgive him and not to punish him by allowing him to go further astray. He will pray to God to have mercy on his father and guide him to the truth. He tells him that he is used to God's generous favours, as He answers his prayers. Then he adds that if his own presence and appeal irritate his father, then he will withdraw, leave his father and people, abandoning the deities they invoke instead of God. He will only worship God alone, hoping that by doing so he will avoid being unblest. Such is a believer's politeness and humility. Abraham does not feel that he is deserving of favours from God more than being spared misery, unhappiness and withdrawal of blessings.

Thus Abraham left his father, his community and homeland, as well as their idols and worship practices. God, however, blessed him with offspring and gave him what was better than that which he had sacrificed.

*When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth. (Verses 49-50)*

Isaac was Abraham's son, born to him by his wife Sarah who, prior to his birth, was childless. Jacob was Isaac's son, but he is mentioned here as though he were Abraham's own son, because he was born during his grandfather's lifetime, growing up under his care. Thus, he was close to his grandfather, just as though he were his

own son. He learnt faith from him directly and he taught it to his own children. Both Isaac and Jacob were prophets.

*"We bestowed on them of Our mercy."* (Verse 50) This is a reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as to their offspring. They were all recipients of God's mercy, which is mentioned here as the most bounteous gift granted by God in the general ambience of the *sūrah*. Furthermore, it was the quality of God's bounty that compensated Abraham for the loss of his people and homeland, giving him reassurance in his new solitary environment. *"We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth."* (Verse 50) They were truthful in their mission, enjoying trust and honour among their people. Their word was listened to and received well.

The *sūrah* moves on, speaking about the same branch of Abraham's seed and reminding us of Moses and Aaron: *"And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet."* (Verses 51-53)

Moses is described here as one who was chosen for the task of dedication to God's call. He is identified as a prophet who is entrusted with a message that he must deliver to people. A prophet is not given the same task. He is an advocate of faith which he receives from God directly. Among the Children of Israel there were many prophets who were given the task of advocating the message delivered by Moses and judging among people according to the Torah revealed to him by God: *"Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light. By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses."* (5: 44)

The grace granted to Moses is highlighted as he was called out from the right side of Mount Sinai. [That was the right side of Moses as he stood at that moment facing the Mount.] He was drawn so close as to be spoken to in communion. We do not know how this communication took place, or how Moses understood it. Was it a voice heard by Moses through his ears in the normal way, or was it an address received by his whole being. Nor do we know how God prepared Moses to receive His own words. But we believe that all this took place. It is simply very easy for God to accomplish it, bringing His servant into communion with Him while at the same time retaining his humanity. We must not forget that man acquired his status with the breathing in of God's spirit into him.<sup>§</sup>

The *sūrah* mentions how God bestowed His mercy on Moses by giving him the

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<sup>§</sup> For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

support of Aaron, his brother, whom God also made a prophet. It was Moses who requested this help and God granted it: *“My brother Aaron is far better in speech than I am. Send him, therefore, as a helper, so that he might bear witness to my speaking the truth; for I fear indeed that they will accuse me of lying.”* (28: 34) Indeed, throughout the *sūrah* there is an unmistakable air of divine mercy.

### More Prophets

Now the *sūrah* refers to the other branch of Abraham’s seed, bringing in Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, for special mention:

*And mention in the Book Ishmael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him. (Verses 54-55)*

The *sūrah* highlights a special quality of Ishmael’s, which was his being true to his promise. This is a characteristic common to all prophets and all God-fearing men and women. The fact that it is highlighted here suggests that in Ishmael’s case it must have had very special significance. Moreover, Ishmael is given the status of messenger of God, which means that he preached God’s message to the Arabs of old. Indeed he was their highest grandfather. We know that even shortly before the advent of the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, there were some individual Arabs who believed in one God. Most probably they were the last remnants of Ishmael’s followers.

The *sūrah* also mentions that the fundamentals of his faith included prayer and *zakāt*, which he ordered his family and his people to observe. Moreover, the *sūrah* leaves us in no doubt that Ishmael earned God’s pleasure, which imparts a sense of contentment and satisfaction to anyone. This contentment is another aspect that permeates the whole *sūrah*, in the same way as mercy. In fact the two aspects of mercy and contentment are mutually related.

The last prophet to be mentioned in this *sūrah* is Idrīs: *“And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. We raised him to a lofty station.”* (Verses 56-57) We have no way of determining during which period of history Idrīs lived. Most probably he was ahead of Abraham. He was not one of the Jewish prophets. There is no mention of him in the Jewish books. The Qur’ān describes him as a man of truth and a prophet. It records the fact that God granted him honour and made him worthy of praise, elevating him to a lofty position.

There is a view we would like to mention here without suggesting whether it is true or false. Some Egyptologists suggest that Idrīs is an Arabicized form of Osiris in