

and to eradicate evil. In such cases, forgiveness and patience are more effective and of greater value to the Islamic message. Their own personal position or prestige is of secondary importance when the interests of the message are better served by forgiveness and endurance. However, should such forgiveness compromise the position of the message and lead to its humiliation, then the first rule of equal retaliation is preferable.

Since endurance requires resisting one's feelings and impulses, restraining one's emotions and maintaining control over natural reactions, the Qur'an relates it to faith and earning God's pleasure. It also assures the believers that it brings them good: "*But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. Endure, then, with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient.*" (Verses 126–127) It is God who gives a believer the strength to be patient in adversity and to control his instinctive reactions. Seeking God's pleasure is the one thing that restrains the impulse to retaliate and punish.

The Qur'an encourages the Prophet, and every advocate of Islam as well, not to grieve when they see people turning their backs on God's guidance. They have their duty to fulfil. Guiding people aright or leaving them to go astray are matters determined by God, in accordance with His laws of nature which control people's souls and their striving to follow guidance or to turn away from it. "*Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues.*" (Verse 127) The Prophet should not be distressed when he sees such people scheme against him. God will protect him against their scheming and intrigue. He will never let them have the upper hand when he conveys his message, seeking no personal gain for himself. He may have to endure harm, but that is only to test his patience. He may feel that victory is slow in coming, but that is only to test his trust in God's support. The ultimate outcome is known in advance: "*God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good.*" (Verse 128) He who has God on his side need not worry about anyone's scheming or intrigue.

Such is the constitution that any advocacy of God's message should follow. It is the only way to ensure victory as promised by God. This is what God tells us, and God always tells the truth.

SŪRAH 17

Al-Isrā'

(The Night Journey)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, *Al-Isrā'*, or The Night Journey, was revealed whilst the Prophet lived in Makkah. It begins with glorifying God and ends with praising Him. It includes a number of themes, most of which directly relate to the issue of faith, but some tackle certain aspects of individual and social behaviour and its moral basis of faith. It also includes stories about the Children of Israel relevant to the Aqṣā Mosque, the Prophet's terrestrial destination on his night journey, as well as some aspects of the story of Adam and Satan, and the honour God has granted to mankind.

However, the most prominent element in the *sūrah* and its central point is the Prophet himself (peace be upon him). It examines the attitude adopted by the people of Makkah to him, as well as the message he preached, embodied in the Qur'an, and the guidance it provides and how the unbelievers received it. This leads to a discussion about the nature of the message and the role of God's messengers. It points to the distinction of the Prophet's message by virtue of it having no physical, preternatural phenomenon to support it. It has been God's will that when such a phenomenon, or miracle, was formerly given in support of a divine message, those who continued to deny the message

were shortly destroyed in consequence. It also states the principle of individual responsibility in matters of faith, guidance and error, and collective responsibility in matters of social behaviour. However all such responsibility applies after God has made His message clear to mankind through prophets and messengers whose task is to advise, warn and give sound counsel, and also to make everything clear: "*Most clearly have We spelled out everything.*" (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* repeatedly praises God and glorifies Him and mentions the need to praise and thank Him for all the blessings He bestows on His servants. It begins with glorifying Him: "*Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem]...*" (Verse 1) Soon afterwards, the Children of Israel are commanded to believe in God's oneness and are reminded that they belong to the offspring of Noah who was '*a truly grateful servant of Ours.*' (Verse 3) When the unbelievers' claims about their false deities are mentioned, the *sūrah* comments: "*Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]. The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.*" (Verses 43–44) The *sūrah* quotes some of the people of earlier divine religions who say when the Qur'ān is recited to them: "*Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.*" (Verse 108) The last verse in the *sūrah* states: "*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)

Thus the *sūrah* revolves around one axis although it tackles several subjects. Its first part mentions the night journey: "*Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed.*" (Verse 1) It also specifies the purpose of this journey: "*so that We might show him some of Our signs.*" (Verse 1) In connection with the mosque in Jerusalem the *sūrah* mentions the book revealed to Moses and what God determined in it for the Children of Israel, speaking about two episodes of destruction and diaspora because of

their injustice and corruption. They are warned about a third and a fourth time if they revert to the same ways. It then states that this last divine revelation, the Qur'ān, guides to the path that is straightest, while man is often driven by uncontrollable reactions. It also states the rule of individual responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or straying away from it, and collective responsibility with regard to behaviour and practice.

The second part speaks about the truth of God's oneness, considering it the basis upon which the whole social set up should be built, including the values of work and behaviour. This central issue of faith should be the pivot around which all human life turns.

The third part speaks of pagan superstitions which attribute daughters and partners to God. It also mentions resurrection and how the unbelievers could never imagine it would take place. It shows how they received Qur'ānic revelations and the fabrications they reiterated about the Prophet (peace be upon him). It commands the believers to say something better, unlike the falsehood of unbelievers.

In the fourth part the *sūrah* explains the reason for not giving the Prophet physical miracles or preternatural phenomena. When such miracles were given to earlier communities and they continued to deny the message of truth, the law God has set in such cases applied to them and they were destroyed. It refers to the unbelievers' attitude to the warnings based on the vision God showed to the Prophet, and their persistence in their erring ways. In this connection a part of the story of *Iblīs*, or Satan, is mentioned and his declaration that he would remain for ever man's determined foe. This part of the story appears to be an exposition of the reasons for the unbelievers going astray. It comments on this by warning mankind against incurring God's punishment, coupled with a reminder of God's grace and the honour He has given to mankind. It tells them about what awaits God's obedient servants, contrasting it with what awaits the disobedient on the day when every community is summoned by calling their leaders or guides. "*Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth.*" (Verses 71–72)

The final part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers' schemes against the Prophet (peace be upon him), and their attempts to lure him away from at least part of what was revealed to him. It mentions their attempt to expel him from Makkah. When he actually left, he did so carrying out God's orders. Had they forcibly expelled him, they would have been destroyed, as happened to communities which in former times expelled their prophets or killed them. God commands the Prophet in the *sūrah* to carry on with his mission, reciting the Qur'ān and attending to his prayers, appealing to God to enable him to enter and leave in a true and sincere manner, and to declare that the truth has come to light and falsehood is certain to wither away. The *sūrah* states that this Qur'ān is a source of cure and guidance to believers. Man's knowledge, however, remains inadequate. "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* continues to speak about the Qur'ān and its challenge to all mankind. Yet the unbelievers required physical miracles, and asked for angels to be sent down in support of the Prophet's message. They suggested that the Prophet should have a house of adornments, or a garden with date and vine trees, through which rivers run, or that he should cause a spring of water to gush forth for them, or that he himself should climb up to heaven and bring them a written letter to read. All these demands were dictated by intransigence, not by the desire to have proof to ensure conviction. The *sūrah* replies that all this is beyond the limits of the role of God's Messenger and the nature of his message. It leaves matters in this regard to God. It derides such demands and those who make them, telling them that had they had control over the treasures of God's grace, which is always abundant, never exhausted, they would still fear to give it away. It was sufficient for them to realize that everything in the universe glorifies God. They should have remembered that the miracles given to Moses did not lead the ones determined to oppose him to change their minds and follow him. Hence, God inflicted His punishment on them.

The *sūrah* concludes with a short discourse about the truth inherent in the Qur'ān. It was revealed in passages, so that the Prophet could read it to people over a long time, as would befit different occasions and circumstances. People would then be influenced by its practical

approach to living conditions. It was received by people of sound knowledge with humility. They were so influenced by it to the extent that they wept and prostrated themselves to God. The *sūrah* then concludes with praising God who has never taken to Himself a son or a partner, just as it began with glorifying Him.

A Unique Experience

The story of the night journey by the Prophet from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah to the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, and then his ascension from there to the highest heaven and the world of which we know nothing, is mentioned in several reports. It has been the subject of much controversy, which continues even today. There are various reports about the place from which the Prophet's night journey started. Some suggest that it was the mosque itself, which fits with the phraseology of the verse. One report quotes the Prophet as saying: "As I was in the mosque, at Ḥijr Ismā'īl, half asleep, Gabriel came to me with al-Burāq..." It is also reported that his journey began from the house of his cousin Umm Hānī. This report is acceptable on the basis that the term, 'the Sacred Mosque', includes the whole Ḥaram area, which surrounds the mosque. Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said, "The whole of the Ḥaram area is a mosque."

It is also reported that he was sleeping in Umm Hānī's house when he was taken on his journey and returned home before the night was over. He related the event to his cousin and told her: "I saw the prophets and led them in prayer." As he was about to leave to go to the mosque, she stopped him, saying: "I fear that people will not believe you if you tell them what you have just told me." The Prophet made clear his intention to tell them, 'even though they would not believe me.'

When the Prophet sat in the mosque, Abū Jahl, the arch-enemy of Islam, went to him and asked him whether he had any news. The Prophet told him of his night journey. Abū Jahl called on people to gather and listen to the strange news the Prophet had to tell them. As the Prophet did so, some of them started clapping as a gesture of rejecting what they heard while others put their hands on their heads in disbelief. Some who had earlier accepted Islam now turned away

declaring that they were no longer Muslims. Some went to Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest Companion, to find out what his reaction would be. When they assured him that Muḥammad actually claimed to have made the return journey to Jerusalem overnight, Abū Bakr said: "If he has actually said this, he is telling the truth." When they expressed their amazement that he would believe such a singular story, Abū Bakr said: "What is so surprising? I do believe him when he says something even more incomprehensible. He says he receives revelations from on high and I believe him." Abū Bakr was then given the title *Ṣiddīq*, which denotes 'a true and firm believer'.

Some of them had been to Jerusalem and so asked the Prophet to describe it to them. Its picture was raised before his eyes and he described it to them in detail. They said that his description was accurate. They then asked him to tell them about their trade caravan and when it would arrive. He told them the number of its camels and its condition at the time. He further told them that it would arrive at sunrise on a particular day, headed by a white camel. On the day appointed by the Prophet, they went out to make sure the caravan arrived. When the sun began to rise, they said: Here is the sun rising. Then they looked and said: And here is the caravan headed by a white camel, just like Muḥammad said. Yet still they refused to believe.

On the same night, the Prophet ascended from Jerusalem to heaven. Disagreement among scholars touches on the point of whether or not the Prophet went on this night journey when he was awake or if it was a dream-like journey. It is reported that 'Ā'ishah, his wife, said: "By God, the Prophet's body was never missing, but it was his soul which ascended." Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said that it was all in a dream he saw. Other reports make it clear that it was a journey he took, body and soul, and that his bed was still warm when he came back.

The weightier view, on the basis of all the reports we have, is that the Prophet left his bed in his cousin's home and went to the Ka'bah. When he was at Ḥijr Ismā'īl, half awake, he was taken on his journey to Jerusalem and from there he ascended to heaven, before returning to his bed which was still warm.

Having clarified this, we do not see much point in the long arguments people have engaged in over the past, and still do, concerning

the nature of this event which certainly took place. Whether it was a physical or spiritual trip, or a vision he saw while awake or asleep, does not make much difference. It does not alter much of the nature of this event to say that it was an act of unveiling that enabled the Prophet to see remote places and worlds in a brief moment. Those who understand even a little of the nature of God's power and the nature of prophethood will find nothing strange in this event. To God's power and ability, all matters, which appear easy or difficult by our human standards and according to what is familiar to us, are the same. What is familiar to us in our world is not to be taken as the criterion for making a judgement in relation to God's ability. The nature of prophethood is a link with God, which may not be compared to anything familiar in human life. That a remote place or world be shown to the Prophet, or that the Prophet visited such a place by means that we know or do not know about, are no more strange or miraculous than for him to receive God's message. Indeed Abū Bakr put the matter in its proper perspective when he told the people of Makkah that he believed the Prophet in what was even more incomprehensible: the revelations he received from on high.

The Quraysh had ample hard evidence of the truth of this journey when they asked the Prophet to tell them about their trade caravan, and their subsequent verification of every point of detail he mentioned. But they were bound to meet his story with total disbelief at first. The point to be noted here is that the Prophet did not listen to his cousin, Umm Hānī, when she tried to persuade him not to tell them about his journey for fear of their reaction to what would sound totally impossible. The Prophet's trust in the truth of his message and the reality of his journey was such that he went out and told them, paying little heed to how they would receive his news. His mission was to convey to them his message complete, and he was not one to evade his duty. Some of those who had believed in the new faith turned back. Unbelievers found in his story material for ridicule and doubt about everything he said. But none of this made him hesitate to declare the truth as he saw and believed it. In this the Prophet teaches a lesson to the advocates of Islam across all generations: they must declare the truth plainly in all situations. They should not fear what reaction this

brings about. They must not try to tailor their faith so as to fit in with what people like to hear.

We also note that the Prophet did not try to describe the event as a miracle or a supernatural happening that would make people believe in his message. In fact they were always asking him for a miracle to prove his claims. Now they had the miraculous event and they knew it to be true when they verified the details the Prophet identified. Islam does not rely on miraculous events to present itself to people. Instead it relies only on the nature of its message and its direct appeal to human nature when it is purged of all corrupting influences. When the Prophet spoke out about his journey, he did not seek to make it proof confirming the truth of his message. He only stated a true event, purely and simply because it was true.



I

God's Infinite Power

Al-Isrā' (The Night Journey)

*In the Name of God, the Merciful,
the Beneficent*

Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqsā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed – so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all. (1)

We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: 'Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. (2)

You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.' (3)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ
لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ
إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَا الَّذِي
بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنَ آيَاتِنَا
إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١﴾

وَأَتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ
هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَلَّا تَتَّخِذُوا
مِن دُونِي وَكِيلاً ﴿٢﴾

ذُرِّيَّةَ مَن حَمَلْنَا مَعَ نُوحٍ إِنَّهُ كَانَ
عَبْدًا شَاكِرًا ﴿٣﴾

We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.' (4)

When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled. (5)

Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever]. (6)

And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. (7)

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي الْكِتَابِ
لنُفْسِدَنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَنَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٤﴾

فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ أُولَاهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ
عِبَادًا لَنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا
خِلَالَ الدِّيَارِ وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَّفْعُولًا ﴿٥﴾

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ الْكَرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَمَدَدْنَاكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ أَكْثَرِ نَفِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

إِن أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ وَإِن
أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ
لِيَسْتَعْوُوا وَجُوهَكُمْ وَلِيَدْخُلُوا
الْمَسْجِدَ كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ
وَلِيُتَبَرُوا مَا عَلَوْا تَبِيرًا ﴿٧﴾

It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers. (8)

Surely this Qur'an shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; (9)

and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (10)

Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty. (11)

We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything. (12)

عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يَرْحَمَكُمْ وَإِن عُدْتُمْ عَدَا
وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ حَصِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ
أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ
الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٩﴾

وَأَنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ أَعْتَدْنَا
لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

وَيَدْعُ الْإِنْسَانُ بِالشَّرِّ دُعَاءَهُ بِالْخَيْرِ
وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ عَجُولًا ﴿١١﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ آيَاتَيْنِ فَمَنْ حَوَّنَا
آيَةَ اللَّيْلِ وَجَعَلْنَا آيَةَ النَّهَارِ مُبْصِرَةً
لِيَتَّبِعُوا فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَلِتَعْلَمُوا
عَدَدَ السِّنِينَ وَالْحِسَابَ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ
فَصَّلْنَاهُ تَفْصِيلًا ﴿١٢﴾

Every human being's action have We tied around his own neck. On the Day of Resurrection We shall produce for him a record which he will find wide open. (13)

[And We will say:] 'Read this your record! Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.' (14)

Whoever chooses to follow guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No soul shall be made to bear the burden of another. We would never inflict punishment [on anyone] until We have sent a Messenger [to give warning]. (15)

When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence. If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them. (16)

Many generations have We destroyed since Noah's time. Suffice it that your Lord is well aware of His servants' sins, and observes them all. (17)

وَكُلُّ إِنْسَانٍ لِّزَمْنِهِ لَطِيفَةٌ
فِي عُنُقِهِ وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ
كِتَابًا يَلْقَاهُ مَنْشُورًا ﴿١٣﴾

أَقْرَأْ كِتَابَكَ كَفَىٰ بِنَفْسِكَ الْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكَ
حَسِيبًا ﴿١٤﴾

مَنْ أَهْتَدَىٰ فَأِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ
ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا وَلَا نُزِرُ وَأَنْزِرُ
وَزُرَّ آخِرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ
رَسُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِذَا أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نُهْلِكَ قَرْيَةً أَمَرْنَا
مُتْرَفِيهَا فَفَسَقُوا فِيهَا فَحَقَّ عَلَيْهَا
الْقَوْلُ فَدَمَّرْنَاهَا تَدْمِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنَ الْقُرُونِ مِن بَعْدِ
نُوحٍ وَكَفَىٰ لِرَبِّكَ بِذُنُوبِ عِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا
بَصِيرًا ﴿١٧﴾

As for those who care only for [the pleasures of] this fleeting life, We readily grant of it whatever We may please to whomever We will. In the end We consign any such person to hell, where he will burn disgraced and rejected. (18)

But those who care only for the life to come, strive for it as it should be striven for, and are true believers, are indeed the ones who will have their endeavours well rewarded. (19)

On all – these as well as those – do We bestow the bounty of your Lord. Indeed your Lord's bounty is not denied [to anyone]. (20)

See how We have bestowed more bounty on some than on others. But the life to come will be higher in rank and greater in merit. (21)

A Unique Journey

The *sūrah* begins with glorifying God, the most fitting action to confirm the bond between God and His servants in the atmosphere of compassion and friendliness imparted by the mention of the night journey:

Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed – so that We

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعَاجِلَةَ عَجَلْنَا لَهُ فِيهَا
مَا نَشَاءُ لِمَنْ نُرِيدُ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ
يَصْلَاهَا مَذْمُومًا مَّدْحُورًا ﴿١٨﴾

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا
وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ
مَشْكُورًا ﴿١٩﴾

كُلًّا نُمِدُّ هُنُوًا وَهَشَوًا مِنْ عَطَاءِ
رَبِّكَ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا ﴿٢٠﴾

أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ فَضَّلْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَىٰ
بَعْضٍ ۗ وَالْآخِرَةُ أَكْبَرُ دَرَجَاتٍ
وَأَكْبَرُ تَفْضِيلًا ﴿٢١﴾

might show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He alone is the One who hears all and sees all. (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* emphasizes the position of man as God's servant: "He who transported His servant by night..." The emphasis here is needed in the context of the Prophet's ascension to heaven where no human being had gone before. It is important in this context that the status of man's servitude to God should always be remembered. There must be no confusion of status similar to that which happened in the case of Jesus on account of his birth, his being raised to heaven at the end of his life on earth, and the powers which were given to him during life. All these caused some people to confuse his status and to claim that he had a divine nature. In its simplicity and purity, Islam insists that no similarity could ever exist between God and any creature.

The Arabic text of this opening verse uses the verb, *asrā*, which denotes 'travelling during the night'. It is sufficient then to use this verb to denote the time of the action. Yet the verse adds the phrase, *laylan*, or 'by night', to give an added sense of the still night and the ease of travel. The journey from the Sacred Mosque to the Aqṣā Mosque was one chosen by God, the Compassionate who knows everything. It provided a link between all monotheistic faiths from the time of Abraham and Ishmael to the time of the last Prophet, Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). It also established a link between the holy places in all these religions. It seems that this unusual journey served as an announcement that the last Messenger was the heir to the heritage of all former messengers. His message staked a claim to all these holy places. Thus it becomes a journey that goes beyond the scope of time and place.

The opening verse describes the Aqṣā Mosque as one with blessed environs. This description shows the blessings surrounding the mosque and flowing in abundance. This impression could not have been given with a direct description such as 'the mosque which we have blessed.' This is another example of the refined use of language characteristic of the Qur'ān.

The Prophet's night journey was a telling sign, and it was accompanied by others, as the opening verse says in stating its purpose, "so that We might show him some of Our signs." Covering the distance between the Sacred Mosque in Makkah and the Aqṣā Mosque in

Jerusalem, in a very short period that did not allow the Prophet's bed to become cold, is a sign of God's power, whatever the means used to accomplish it. It opens our minds to new horizons in the universe and reveals latent potentials within mankind. It shows that those human beings chosen by God to be the bearers of His message have the latent ability to receive whatever greater powers God wishes to give them. It is God who has honoured man, giving him a favoured position among His creation, and endowed him with such potentials. "He alone is the One who hears all and sees all." (Verse 1) He indeed hears and sees all that is beyond the reach of our hearing and seeing faculties.

It is especially impressive that the opening verse of this *sūrah* starts with glorifying God, "Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night". After defining the purpose of this journey, it finishes with highlighting two of God's attributes, perfect hearing and seeing that encompass all things. This quick movement across purposes reflects the finest points of the expression used. The glorification is addressed to God Himself, and the statement about the purpose of the night journey comes from Him, while the description of God's powers is made in the form of an indisputable statement. All these forms are combined in one verse so as to give their different imports.

The Promise to the Israelites

The night journey is a remarkable sign which God wished to demonstrate. It is an amazing journey by human standards. The Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, which was the destination of the first part of this journey, is at the heart of the Holy Land which God assigned to the Children of Israel before He caused them to be driven out of it. Thus it is appropriate to relate in the passage that follows the history of Moses and his people, the Israelites:

We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: 'Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.' We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.'

When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled. Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever. And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers. (Verses 2-8)

This episode in the Children of Israel's history is mentioned only in this *sūrah* in the Qur'an. It refers to the fate of the Jews which led to the collapse of their state. It reveals the direct relationship between the spread of corruption and loose morality in a nation and its decline and destruction. This comes in fulfilment of a law of nature God has set in operation, and which the *sūrah* refers to. The law states that the corruption and immorality of the affluent in any community is the cause of its destruction by God.

The story begins here by mentioning Moses' revealed book, the Torah, and the warnings it gives to the Israelites. It reminds them of their great ancestor, Noah, God's obedient and truly grateful servant, and also of their ancestors who were carried with him in the ark. It should be remembered that only the believers were allowed on the ark: "We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours." (Verses 2-3)

Both the warning and the reminder are confirmation of the promise that the *sūrah* soon mentions. The promise makes it clear that God will not inflict punishment on any community unless He sends them

first a messenger to warn and remind them. It makes clear the primary purpose of giving the book to Moses. It serves as a source of guidance and warns them: "Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me." They must rely on none other than God and turn to Him only for guidance. This is the essence of faith. Anyone who seeks a guardian other than God is misguided and devoid of true faith.

The *sūrah* makes its address to them in the name of their ancestors who were carried in the ark with Noah. These were the best of mankind at the time of the first messenger on earth. Pointing out this relationship in this address serves to remind them of God's grace when He saved their forefathers with His truly grateful servant, Noah. Thus it establishes an age-long bond of faith. That Noah is described here as God's servant is intended to emphasize this point and also to highlight the essential quality of God's chosen messengers, which is their servitude to Him. In the first verse Muḥammad is described as 'God's servant'. This follows the Qur'ānic method of maintaining an air of harmony and coherence throughout each *sūrah*.

In the book which God gave Moses to serve as a source of guidance to the Israelites, He issued them with a warning that they would be doomed to destruction should they spread corruption on earth. The destruction was visited on them twice because its causes were repeated. This is followed by a warning of further episodes of destruction should they revert to their old ways of spreading corruption. This leads to the inevitable operation of God's laws of nature that never fail: "We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.'" (Verse 4)

This judgement is merely information given to them by God, spelling out what they will do and what will happen to them as a result. It is based on God's knowledge of their fate. It is not an act of predestination that they cannot escape, or that forces their hands so as to behave in a certain way. God does not compel anyone to be corrupt or to spread corruption. "Say: never does God enjoin what is indecent." (7: 28) It is the nature of God's knowledge that makes Him aware of what will happen in the future in the same way as He is aware of what is happening now. What is yet to happen, and is totally unknown to all human beings, is, to God, the same as what has already happened.

Same Action, Same Penalty

In the book He gave to Moses, the Torah, God warned the Children of Israel that they would spread corruption on earth twice and that they would gain power and be the masters in the Holy Land. Every time they held power and used it corruptly or spread corruption, God sent some of His servants against them who overpowered and destroyed them, abusing their rights: *"When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled."* (Verse 5)

This was the first time: they gained power in the Holy Land and they established their strong state. But then they resorted to tyranny and corruption. As a result, God brought them face to face with some of His servants who combined great might with strong determination. They overran those who had erred and spread corruption, completely subjugating them. Thus the warning came to pass, as is always the case with God's promises.

After the Children of Israel were vanquished and suffered humiliation, they turned back to their Lord, mended their ways and applied the lessons they had learnt. In the meantime, their conquerors were blinded by victory and travelled along the same road of tyranny and corruption. As a result, the tables were turned. The vanquished were victorious again: *"Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous than ever."* (Verse 6) History thus repeated itself.

Before the *sūrah* continues its account of the true prophesy and warning, it states a basic rule of action and reward: *"If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves."* (Verse 7) This is a never changing rule with effects that transcend this life into the next. It makes everything a human being does, with all its results and consequences, totally his own. Thus, reward is the natural fruit of action. Hence it is determined by the nature of the action done. This is to say that a human being is responsible for himself. It is he who chooses to do good or evil, and he alone who will receive the reward or bear the

consequences of what he does. He has only himself to blame when the result of his action leads him to suffer punishment.

Having established the rule, the *sūrah* goes on to complete the telling of true prophesy: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power."* (Verse 7)

The *sūrah* does not include in its text any account of how the Israelites spread corruption again after they regained power. Its mention of the first occasion is sufficient: *"Twice will you spread corruption on earth."* (Verse 4) But it tells us of what God inflicted on them the second time: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly."* (Verse 7) This is a vivid description of the widespread destruction that causes acute humiliation, visible even on their faces. Or the disgrace was physically painted on their faces, coupled with what they felt when they saw their sanctities desecrated. And they *"enter[ed] the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time."* (Verse 7) They wrought total destruction, leaving nothing in place.

The warning was fulfilled. God sent enemies against the Jews who overpowered them, destroyed their kingdom and left them in their great diaspora. The Qur'an does not specify the nationality of those God sent against the Jews, because such information adds nothing to the lesson to be drawn, or to the effect of the law God has made applicable to all communities.

The *sūrah* comments on this true warning and prophesy by saying that this destruction may be a way leading to God's mercy if the right lesson is drawn and acted upon: *"It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you."* (Verse 8) But if the Jews revert to spreading corruption on earth, then the law will inevitably operate and the punishment will again be inflicted: *"But if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]."* (Verse 8) They certainly did revert to their corrupt ways and God sent the Muslims against them who drove them out of Arabia. They did this again with the same results, until He caused them to be humiliated during the twentieth century. We see now how they have again reverted to tyranny and corruption in the state of Israel

which uses very cruel tactics against the Arabs, the owners of the land. God is certain to send His servants against them who will make them suffer much for their corruption in fulfilment of His firm warning and in accordance with His law which never fails. We need only wait and see this take place.

The *sūrah* concludes this episode by defining the destiny the unbelievers will suffer in the hereafter. It is the same destiny as will be suffered by those who spread corruption: "*Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) They will be surrounded, unable to escape. Furthermore, it is large enough to contain them all.

Guidance in All Fields

The *sūrah* now speaks about the Qur'ān, making it clear that it is a book of true and full guidance:

Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (Verses 9–10)

"*Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.*" This is a general statement applicable to all those who are guided by the Qur'ān and the goals to which it guides. Thus, the guidance is given to communities and generations that are not restricted by time or place. And the superiority of its guidance applies to all that they may attain when they follow any method or approach. It is also superior to every good thing to which people may be guided at any time or place.

The Qur'ān guides to that which is 'most upright' in relation to man's inner feelings and thoughts, outlining a clear faith, free of complication and ambiguity. Its guidance frees the human spirit of the burden of myth and superstition, and releases human energy so that it is constructive, bringing benefit, providing a harmonious link

between the laws that govern the universe and those governing human nature.

The Qur'ān also ensures harmony between man's outward and inward existence, feelings and behaviour, faith and action. In all this it shows the way to what is 'most upright', linking all these aspects to the true and unseverable bond that exists between man and God. This enables man to look up to a higher horizon while he is still on earth. Thus what man does in his daily life becomes an act of worship, provided that he does so seeking God's acceptance. This is true even when the action itself provides him with pure enjoyment of what is available in this life.

In the field of worship also, the Qur'ān establishes a perfect balance between duties and abilities. This ensures that duties are not seen as too hard so as to constitute a heavy burden, or induce despair of ever fulfilling one's obligations. Maintaining this balance ensures that a person neither takes matters too lightly or complacently on the one hand, nor exceeds the limits of what is reasonable and perfectly bearable on the other. Thus we can say without fear of contradiction that in worship, the Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.

The same applies to human interaction whether between individuals and couples, governments and peoples, or states and races. Relations between all these groups are established on a firm basis, influenced neither by personal prejudice and interest, nor by feelings of love and hatred. This firm foundation in human relations is chosen by God, the Creator who knows His creation and what is certain to promote goodness in their lives. The Qur'ān shows the way which gives the best course of action in the fields of politics and finance, as well as in those of social and international relations.

The Qur'ān also endorses all divine religions, establishing a firm link between them, honouring all that is sacred in them, and protecting all that they hold in reverence. This ensures that humanity, with all its divine faiths live in peace. In this again the Qur'ān provides its perfect guidance. This is all summed up in the verse which says: "*Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.*" (Verse 9)

"*It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous*