

A THEMATIC
COMMENTARY
ON THE
QUR'AN

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali

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Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazālī

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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

P.O. BOX 669, HERNDON, VA 22070, USA

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ISBN 1-56564-260-0 paperback

ISBN 1-56564-261-9 hardback

Printed in the United Kingdom
by Biddles Limited, Guildford and King's Lynn

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FOREWORD

MUSLIMS ARE ENJOINED, along with the rest of humanity, to “read” the two great books of Revelation and Creation, i.e. the Qur’an and the natural world. Reading one without the other will result in an imbalance detrimental to the existence (and prosperity) of humankind on earth, indeed to the divine purpose in the cosmos. Fatalism, world-rejection and stultification of the intellect and the imagination are some of the results of a “reading” that excludes the real-existential. Arrogance and a rampant lust for power at whatever cost are among the by-products of an absorption with the material world at the expense of the spiritual and moral. In both cases, people walk away from their role as *khulafā’* (stewards) on earth and from all the responsibilities of compassion, mercy, fraternity, moderation, and other duties which that role implies in relation to God, fellow human beings, and the environment.

A Thematic Commentary by the late Shaykh al-Ghazālī is a significant contribution to the first reading, i.e., that of the Qur’an—the repository of divine truth and enlightenment. Already of course there is a wealth, indeed an abundance, of exegetical work on the Qur’an. But while the ancient scholars have endeavored to elucidate many linguistic, historical, and miraculous aspects of the sacred, ever-wondrous and challenging text, al-Ghazālī’s contribution is somewhat unique (and contemporary) in the sense that it focuses on the organic unity of each surah (chapter) highlighting the logic or inherent reasoning that courses through the surah and unifies its various components and images.

Indeed, to the uninitiated, the Qur’an can seem quite daunting, even bewildering. The titles of the surahs do not appear to reflect their subject matter; the ordering of the verses and the surahs does

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not seem to fall into a set pattern; the structuring of the topics within the individual surahs, especially the longer ones, does not appear systematic; there is often a blend of narrative, polemics, anecdotes, and straightforward instruction. The diction resorts to a variety of linguistic and stylistic devices.

There is no dispute among Muslims over the authenticity or integrity of the Qur'anic text; even secular students of Islam no longer seem to argue very much over this issue. Differences have always existed, though, over the precise interpretation and application of Qur'anic statements and injunctions. As issues proliferate and life becomes more complex, the need to throw a new light on the meaning of the Qur'anic text grows.

Shaykh al-Ghazālī's cogent method of interpretation takes account of the fact (or premise) that each surah has its unique coherent and integral character. This character is defined by a main subject, or a theme of interrelated topics which together form the body of the surah's subject matter. Once the central subject or theme is identified, the jigsaw pieces come together, enunciating how the rest of the surah falls into line with, or can be related to, that theme.

This is where Shaykh al-Ghazālī's greatest contribution lies. By adopting this method, he is able to make the Qur'an more easily accessible, and the task of unlocking its secrets less daunting, more rewarding. In addition to appreciating the beauty of the Qur'an, the reader is now able to have a clearer understanding of its meaning and flow. The surahs come alive, each one assuming distinct features and characteristics that make it stand out and claim its unique position within the whole design and sweep.

Another feature of Shaykh al-Ghazālī's work is that he places the Qur'anic subjects within their proper historic and cultural context. This has the effect of relating the Qur'anic subject matter not only to the life and career of Prophet Muhammad, but also to today's world, thereby transforming it into a source of practical guidance and a ready reference for dealing with contemporary issues.

Foreword

No exegesis is by itself sufficient for a full understanding of the Qur'an. But this work is an indispensable companion in the quest for a better comprehension of, and a closer affinity with, the sacred text.

Al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍūʿī was originally published in Arabic in three volumes. The IIIT translated and published the first two volumes separately in 1997 and 1999. The current volume incorporates all three volumes into one edition.

The translation of the meaning of the Qur'an used in this book is mainly ʿAbdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī's *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Amana Publications, 1996) and *The Message of the Qur'an* by Muhammad Asad (Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1980). However, we used several other translations and made changes whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning. Footnotes have been added by the editorial team for further clarification or explanation of terms. Following the IIIT house style, Arabic words appearing in English dictionaries have not been italicized.

We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to the translator, Ashur Shamis; the editorial and production team at the London Office and those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book: Zaynab Alawiye, Sohail Nakhooda, Shiraz Khan, Ataiya Pathan, Amanda Adams and Alexandra Grayson.

Jumada (II) 1421
September 2000

IIIT LONDON OFFICE

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THIS WORK PRESENTS a new approach to the study of the Qur'an which I had adopted in some of my earlier writings. Ever since I embarked on the task of producing this work, I have been daunted by a feeling of inadequacy, a fear of being unable to do the Qur'an the justice it deserves. My decision to go ahead with it nevertheless has been as much for my own sake as for that of the readers.

The Qur'an is a vast and rich world, with widely varying themes and subjects and endless possibilities for interpretation and analysis. This work is but a small contribution to the noble objective of understanding the Qur'an, and it is being undertaken in the hope that I might tap certain areas or open certain doors not tapped nor opened before. According to this approach, each surah of the Qur'an is treated as one whole unit. A thematic explanation, or overview, of each surah is then presented, identifying its main theme, or themes, and the subtle threads of meaning and ideas that link its subject matter. I have taken meticulous care in dealing with the main theme of each surah, regardless of the number of different issues it raises or addresses. In this, I have emulated the excellent pioneering work of the late Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd Allah Darrāz in his study of *al-Baqarah*, the longest chapter in the Qur'an.

I began learning the Qur'an during my early childhood, and committed it all to memory by the age of ten. Ever since I started to study it seriously, I have been convinced that there is a need for this type of commentary. But, as I read the Qur'an today, going through my eighties, I still find that I have grasped only a fraction of its meaning. I feel a pressing need to go deeper into it and to try and link the themes, passages, and sections found in each surah, in order to identify its character and its overall purpose.

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The method I have adopted consists of highlighting only those verses and passages that represent or enhance the features and the character of the main theme of the surah. This implicitly assumes that readers have to fill in the gaps and fit the rest of the surah into the overall picture themselves. Needless to say, this method of studying the Qur'an in no way undervalues or replaces the traditional methods and approaches adopted by other students and scholars of the Qur'an. It merely complements their great works and facilitates an easier and more accessible way of understanding the text.

Another aspect of thematic commentary on the Qur'an which I have not attempted to adopt here, is to identify the major themes of the Qur'an as a whole and discuss the issues and subjects it covers in the light of those themes. I had made use of this feature in other writings of mine, published in Arabic, such as: *Al-Maḥāwir al-Khamsah li al-Qur'an al-Karīm* (Five Central Themes of the Qur'an) and *Naẓarāt fī al-Qur'an* (Glimpses into the Qur'an). Surely, the study and understanding of the Qur'an can benefit from both approaches and from all efforts that will make its meaning, wisdom, and beauty easier to grasp and appreciate. The Qur'an shall remain an eternal fountain of knowledge, a guidance for all humanity, and a living proof of the Power and Glory of God Almighty.

Ṣafār 1413
August 1992

MUHAMMAD AL-GHAZĀLĪ

SURAH I

Al-Fātiḥah (The Opening Chapter)

“IN THE NAME OF GOD the Merciful, the Compassionate” (1). This surah, like all other surahs in the Qur’an with the exception of *al-Tawbah*, opens in the name of God, Allah (SWT),¹ the most exalted and holiest of names which, when invoked, provides protection from all harm and evil. As an expression of praise and gratitude to God the surah represents the very heart and soul of the Qur’an and, although it is one of the shorter surahs, it is often considered to be the most illustrious of them all. *Al-Fātiḥah* conveys the quintessential ideal of Islam giving expression and definition to the covenant made between human beings and God upon which the mission and task of humankind in this world has been founded. It is, moreover, an earnest prayer to God, a heartfelt plea to show humans the right way, give them guidance and make them deserving of His pleasure and benevolence.

Let us take a close look at the verse: “Praise be to God, Lord of all creation” (2). This verse articulates three concepts:

1. praise and glorification of the grandeur, magnificence, and perfection of God Almighty;
2. praise to God, the Creator and Provider, for the grace, generosity, and kindness He has shown towards His creation; and

¹ SWT—*Subḥānahu wa Ta‘ālā*: May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed. Said when referring to Allah.

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3. gratitude and thankfulness to the Creator and Provider,
for all the favors and the grace He has bestowed upon
His creation.

Every time one utters these words or expresses these feelings, one not only glorifies God, but praises and thanks Him at the same time. “Lord of all creation” (2) is an assertion that God is Master of all, from the mightiest to the humblest of creatures, wherever they may be on earth and in the universe. He is the Master of humans, animals, plants, angels, planets, stars, systems, the seen and the unseen. Everything that has existed or shall ever exist in this world is subordinate to God, subservient to Him, bound to His power, and totally dependent upon His grace, blessings, and compassion. God says elsewhere in the Qur'an:

To God is praise, Lord of the heavens and of the earth, Lord of all creation. Glory to Him in the heavens and on earth. He is Mighty and Wise. (*al-Jāthiyah*: 36–37)

“The Merciful, the Compassionate” (3). Human beings, and all other creation, live by the grace of God's mercy, which is abundant beyond all estimation. Were it not for His mercy, our existence would have been eroded by both our sins and ingratitude as well as by our arrogance and high-handed tendencies.

“Master of the Day of Judgment” (4). This refers to the day of reckoning, which heralds the beginning of a new life that will be in total contrast to our present transient one. The concept of a “Day of Judgment” has been all but obliterated and forgotten in today's materialistic society. It has become a subject for satire and ridicule. In areas of education, law, national and international politics, it has been deliberately omitted or swept aside. Nevertheless, it represents a most basic and fundamental fact of human existence and should be cherished and reckoned with.

“You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help” (5). Everyone and everything is in need of God and His favors. Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS)² was known to appeal to God: “Help me to be mindful of You and thank You and worship You, the best I can.” He was reported to have advised: “When you have a specific need, ask God to provide it, and when you are short of help seek it from God.”³

“Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favored” (6-7). A straight line is the shortest distance between two points and is therefore unique. Whoever leads a straight and righteous life will be on the right path to God, for that is the one and only sure and direct way that leads to Him. God’s religion is one religion, preached by all prophets and messengers at all stages of human history. It is founded on the oneness of God who deserves total allegiance and full praise and on whom everyone and everything depend.

This concept seems to be a matter for considerable confusion and debate among followers of some contemporary religions. But Muslims believe with certainty that everything in existence, human or otherwise, is totally subservient to and dependent on God in every aspect of its existence, now and in the life to come. And there are no exceptions to this rule; neither among human beings nor other creatures. Those who deny or overlook this fact are doomed to ruin and humiliation.

On the other hand, whoever submits willingly to God and obeys Him and His Messenger, Muhammad, will find the right and straight path and would follow it. God says elsewhere in the Qur’an:

whoever obeys God and the Messenger [Muhammad] will be in the company of those whom God has favored: the prophets, the

² ṢAAS—*Ṣalla Allāhu ‘Alayhi wa Sallam*: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him; said whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad is mentioned or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.

³ Narrated by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā’ī in their Sunan.

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believers, the martyrs and the pious; and what good company they will be! (*al-Nisā'*: 69)

As for those who take other gods, or deities, besides God or flout His commands, their plight will be hopeless and they will be wasted, wallowing under the combined effect of a total loss of direction and the wrath of God. People should strive to be clear and correct in their thinking and sincere in their vision and perception. Once shown the truth, people should uphold it, show humility towards God, and kindness and benevolence towards other beings.

God prescribed the recitation of this surah as part of all Muslim prayers, including the obligatory five daily ones. It is a refreshing, regenerative, and intimate communication between people and their Lord. It is a manifesto of fundamental truths and ideals, and an overture of humility from a modest apologetic servant to the All-Powerful Lord and Master. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have quoted God as saying:

[the fruits] of prayer are shared equally between Me and My servant, and My servant will be granted what he had asked for. As he recites: "Praise be to God," God would say: "My servant has praised Me." As he recites: "The Merciful, the Compassionate," God would say: "My servant has thanked Me." As he recites: "Master of the Day of Judgment," God would say: "My servant has glorified Me and surrendered to Me." As he says: "You alone we worship, and You alone we turn to for help," God would say: "This is between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive what he has asked for." And, as he says: "Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favored, not those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray," God would say: "This is for My servant, and he will be granted his wish."⁴

⁴ Narrated by Muslim in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*.

SURAH 1 • *Al-Fātiḥah*

We recite these blessed words of supplication and praise for the benefit of our own souls, just as washing regularly is necessary for the health of our bodies. The benefits we reap justify the regularity and repetition of the recitation. A body would not remain clean by washing it only now and then; it needs to be washed regularly all through one's life. Likewise, human temperament and behavior are never put right by a short prayer, casually repeated but soon forgotten. One has to stand before God as frequently as possible, because human recklessness and imprudence, as well as Satan's insinuations, never cease nor know any bounds. Prayer, supplication, and submission to God have to be observed and performed as a matter of habit. God says elsewhere in the Qur'an: "Prayer has been enjoined on the believers at set times" (*al-Nisā'*: 103).

In a few short lines, therefore, we have a true expression and a full definition of the natural and proper relationship between people and their Lord. The essence of this relationship is people's acknowledgment of God, their unqualified praise of Him, their eagerness to reach closer to Him, their commitment to worship Him, and their continual active and sincere efforts to beg for His favor, mercy, and grace. All this in order that God may help people to exist and live as He wishes them to do.

SURAH 2

Al-Baqarah (The Cow)

FOLLOWING THE MUSLIMS' emigration from Makkah and their settlement in Madinah around 622 AC, all attention was focused on building the first Muslim autonomous community there. By embracing the new religion, members of that community had, each in his/her own right, succeeded in breaking away from idolatry, polytheism, and other forms of pagan traditions and practices of Arabia. They had now found security and safety in their new sanctuary where they could group together and set up a state of their own.

Nevertheless, they were to face fresh hostilities from a rather unexpected source. The Jewish rabbis had always believed that religion was the prerogative of their own people and a monopoly of their 'Chosen Race.' Predictably, they were somewhat ruffled and unhappy at the arrival in Madinah of Prophet Muhammad and his followers preaching Islam. They quickly embarked on preparations for how to react to that threat and for the best way to deal with it. Scheming, overt as well as covert, began.

The Hebrew tribes who had settled in Madinah, or Yathrib as it was known then, in the fertile northwestern part of the Hijaz, had gone there as refugees to escape the oppression and persecution of Byzantine, the Eastern Roman Empire whose capital was Constantinople. Although welcome to live among the illiterate Arab tribes, they rather looked down upon them. The Jews made no effort to combat idol worship, which was widespread in the area; nor did they feel the need to pass on the teachings of their religion to their native hosts. They recognized no obligation to propagate

God's message or establish His order to replace the existing man-made one. Their view of the Arabs was wholly sanctimonious, adopting the proverbial condescending 'holier-than-thou' attitude, holding jealously onto their religious heritage, and totally beholden to the erroneous belief that religion was their privilege and theirs alone.

What, then, was their (or, more specifically, their elders') reaction to Islam? They rejected it. They began to distort, conceal and otherwise obliterate religious and historical facts in order to preempt the spread of the new religion.

In contrast, Prophet Muhammad, the last of God's prophets and the benefactor of the new religion, spared no effort in appealing to them and soliciting their understanding and cooperation. However, their malaise was deep and irrepressible, and increasingly their hostile intentions began to be reflected in their behavior. In view of this the Muslims found themselves, in their new sanctuary, building their community on the one hand and defending it on the other. They were laying the foundations of their nascent state, under the guidance and direction of the divine Revelation being received by Muhammad, while at the same time having to ward off the impending threat posed by enemies living in their midst, who were intent on undermining their existence and everything they were building.

It was in this atmosphere that *al-Baqarah*, the longest and most wide-ranging chapter in the Qur'an, was received. The surah obliquely cited the fallacy of Jewish claims of exclusivity by describing the Qur'an as "the Book over which there is no doubt, a guidance to those who fear God" (2), thereby highlighting the view that other 'Books' or scriptures were less viable as sources of guidance and law, and less authoritative as references for or expressions of the divine will.

In over thirty different places, the surah elaborates extensively on the features and merits of the God-fearing category of human beings. This aspect is unique to the surah. Fear (alternatively,

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awareness) of God is a quality required of human beings by all religions. God says in the Qur'an: "To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on the earth; and We have recommended to those who had received the Book before you, as We have recommended to you, that you should all fear God" (*al-Nisā'*: 131).

The surah is also remarkable for referring to all the five principles of the religion of Islam in the following verses:

- Tawhīd*: "People; worship your Lord who had created you and those before you" (21);
Salah: "Observe salah, especially the middle one, and submit to God" (238);
Zakah: "Believers; spend of what We have given you before a day comes when there will be no trade and no friendship and no intercession" (254);
Sawm: "Believers, sawm has been prescribed for you as it had been for your predecessors" (183); and
Hajj: "Complete the Hajj and the *ʿumrah* for God's sake" (196).

The revelation of the surah was completed over a period, with the Prophet adding verses and passages that related to its subject matter when he was directed to do so through revelation.

According to established sources, the last Qur'anic verse revealed to Muhammad was number 281 of this surah, which says, "Fear the day when you shall return to God; when each soul shall be requited according to its deserts and none shall be wronged." The Prophet instructed the scribes to include it with the verses dealing with usury, which appear towards the end of the surah.

Reading through the early part of the surah, we find that it describes God-fearing people in three verses, the unbelievers in two, and the hypocrites in thirteen, an indication of the last's wickedness and the threat they pose to the whole Muslim community. Following a general call for belief in God and the Day of Judgment, and a brief

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account of the miraculous aspects of the Qur'an itself, the veracity of Muhammad, its proponent, and the ill-fate awaiting his opponents, the surah returns to the description of the various human groups: the believers, the rejectionists, and the renegades, and how each reacted to God's message. The surah then inquires whether God deserves to be understood and addressed in such an improper and ungrateful manner by the unbelievers and the skeptics who fail to acknowledge His grace and benevolence. It asks them pointedly:

How can you deny God when He gave you life, after you were dead, and He will cause you again to die and then restore you to life so that you eventually return unto Him? (28)

Having dealt with that subject, it would follow naturally to address the issue of creation and how humans came to be charged with their role in this world, and the perennial confrontation between Adam, father of the human race, and Satan, humankind's archetypal enemy, along with his supporters. This confrontation was reenacted in a bitter conflict between Muhammad, the last of God's prophets to humankind, and some descendants of Israel who in that instance chose to take Satan's side in a crucial battle between truth and falsehood.

Being the first surah revealed in Madinah, it was imperative that it should deal with the issue of the Jews; their elders' negative attitude towards the message of Islam, and their history, both ancient and recent. This begins in the surah with:

Children of Israel, remember the favors I have bestowed upon you, keep your covenant and I shall keep Mine and fear Me. Believe in what I have revealed, confirming that which you had received [the scriptures], and do not be the first to deny it. (40-41)

The confirmation in the Qur'an of the scriptures of which the

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Jews had possession was a confirmation in general terms and not in all details. The People of the Book, Jews and Christians, were seen as different from other religious groups because they believed in the One and only God. Unlike the idolaters and the pagans, they did not deny the existence of God and divine Revelation. The Qur'an endorsed the claims of the Jews with regard to their belief in the One God, revelation, and the responsibility and accountability of human-kind. But it did not endorse, among other things, the allegation in their scriptures that God regretted bringing about the Great Flood or His needing to be reminded not to do it again. Likewise, the Qur'an does not endorse the Old Testament tale of God walking on earth, leaning towards Abraham, and eating with him. Nor does it accept the story of God's wrestling with Jacob one long night, and not being released until He promised Jacob the name 'Israel.' The Qur'an's endorsement of the Jewish scriptural legacy was general and not specific nor total. Furthermore, the Qur'an cites those parts of Jewish scriptures it endorses mainly to hold their elders accountable for their faithfulness to and respect for those scriptures and their teachings. All in all, this surah cites sixteen different issues concerning Jewish dissent all through the people's long and checkered history as documented in the Torah. In all these cases, the dissenters prove disappointing even to their own prophets, and wanting in their observance of God's commands and their gratitude to and reverence for Him.

The account begins with the verse: "Remember how We delivered you from Pharaoh's people, who had inflicted upon you the worst type of torture" (49). Did the rebellious among the Jews appreciate that favor? Although God went on to drown their enemy before their eyes, did they recognize God's justice or acknowledge His grace as He destroyed their oppressors? These issues are debated over several passages, always inquiring whether the Jewish conscience had been aroused or the Jewish faith in God rekindled. Would the Jews of Arabia, after such a detailed interrogation and

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analysis of their ancestors' record, persist with their obduracy and rejection of Prophet Muhammad, to whom the Qur'an was being revealed? The outcome of this discussion of the long history of the Jews is an assertion of the veracity and efficacy of the concept of religious unity as expounded in the Qur'an.



In the face of narrow-minded religious fanaticism, Islam emerged to promote a tolerant religious unity, addressed to and embracing all of humankind, built on pristine human nature and sound common sense. The Jewish and the Christian establishments had grown accustomed to seeing truth as their own monopoly, and salvation as theirs alone. Islam questioned that judgment and the attitudes underlying it. We read in the surah:

They [the Jewish and the Christian elders] declared, "Only Jews and Christians shall enter Paradise!" Such are their wishful fancies. Say, "Bring forth your proof, if you were really truthful." (111)

There are other people in the world who have come to know God truly, and who have submitted themselves to Him and dedicated their lives and energies to His service, and whose efforts should not be allowed to go to waste. The surah thus affirms:

Indeed, those who surrender themselves to God and do good works shall be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear or to regret. (112)

It was on this basis that the Qur'an called upon the People of the Book to believe in God and *all* His messengers, and to cast aside their religio-centricity which led each group to claim a monopoly on truth. The surah cites their spokesmen's allegations:

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They said, "Accept the faith of the Jews or the Christians and you shall be rightly guided." Say, "By no means! We shall accept the religion of Abraham, the pious one, who was never an idolater."
(135)

It also advised them to believe in all the prophets sent by God to guide humanity, since there would be no meaning in excluding any one of them. The surah says:

Say, "We believe in God and in that which is revealed to us, and that which was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and to God we have surrendered ourselves." (136)

These are the basic principles of the unity of religion as expounded in this surah and presented to the Jews and the Christians, for them to adopt and share with the Muslims. At the beginning of this exposition, the Qur'an makes it clear that Islam, as such, is not a new religion but the same religion preached by all preceding messengers.

Jews have always taken pride in the fact that they are the sons of Jacob, known also as Israel, after whom the modern Jewish state is named. But who was Jacob? He was a pious man who acknowledged God and surrendered to Him, and who taught his children to do likewise. Before he passed away, he made sure that his legacy continued intact in his descendants. The surah relates:

Were you present when death came to Jacob, and he said to his children: "What will you worship after I die?" They said: "We shall worship your God and the God of your forefathers Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac; the One God to whom we all surrender." (133)

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Surrender to God or, to use the Arabic term, *Islām*, is the only natural and logical position creation can assume in relation to the Creator, the definitive bond between humankind and God. It is only natural for creation to surrender to its Creator and yearn for His mercy and pleasure. This is the essence of true religion rather than rebellion against God; it is neither transgression nor adherence to manmade religions.

Muhammad restored for religion its true and proper place in the world and chartered a unique and sure way towards God, as the surah states:

So if they accept what you have believed in, they shall be rightly guided; but if they reject it, they shall be in schism. God will defend you against them; He hears all and knows all. (137)

The verse advances two morals, the first being to offer the Jews of Madinah the choice of accepting the new faith, and the second being neither to condemn nor scold them for their rejection of it. They were merely left to their own devices, and if they were to initiate hostilities, God would help and protect the Muslims against them.

Thus was the overall framework of religious unity as presented in this surah. However, one possible misunderstanding remains to be clarified: this concerns the statement that all messengers were Muslims, although we know that Islam was the message that Muhammad, the last Prophet and Messenger, had established. The answer lies in the fact that religion has always been one. It entails faith in God and a righteous life of good deeds, which are the very essence of the religion of Islam. For faith to be complete, mere or abstract knowledge is not sufficient. A believer has to attest to his or her belief and indicate to God that he or she has received the message and is ready and willing to obey Him; or as the Qur'an puts it: "We hear and we obey, grant us Your forgiveness, Lord; to You we shall all return" (285). Satan's knowledge of the fact that one God was the

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Creator of all things did not spare him, because knowledge has to be supported by submission to God's commands and followed by exertions to please Him. Having refused to do so, Satan was ostracized and banished from God's grace.

All messengers have declared their knowledge of the true God and demonstrated their obedience to Him. This was the case with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. To list the Qur'anic verses that confirm this would take much space, but suffice it to say that they were all advocates of surrender to the will and power of God, despite the minor variations in what they had taught and preached at various periods of human history.

When people are born, they are given names which remain with them right through to their old age, although their personalities and spheres of activity widen quite extensively. Likewise, it would be naive to think that the scope and sphere of religion today can be compared to those during Noah's time, for example. The focal point and the central theme may remain the same in both cases, but the outer limits can expand according to the needs and level of development of the period. In today's technological terms, the national power grid in certain small towns can extend to only a few square kilometers, whereas in big cities it has to cover hundreds or perhaps thousands of times that area; however, the electric current flowing through both grid systems remains the same and performs the same function.

Muhammad was preceded by the tumultuous experiences of Moses and Jesus, and it would not be unusual that his commission should introduce certain amendments and corrections, or make alterations and additions that had become necessary by the passage of time. It would also have been quite normal for him to throw a new light on, or reveal fresh aspects of, religion that may not have been dealt with by his predecessors. Thus his coming was a matter of urgency to correct the direction of human history and to alert the People of the Book to the malaise and confusion they had brought upon themselves and humankind as a whole.

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As far as Christians were concerned, it was necessary to reemphasize the concept of *tawhīd*, to reinstate the identity of Jesus as a human being, and to point out that he and his disciples were ordinary mortal advocates of the true religion of Islam. In the case of the Arabian Jews, there was a need to reprimand them for their arrogance, to weaken their encroachment on authentic divine revelation, and to reaffirm the fact that God had no biased affinity towards any particular ethnic group of the human race. The surah stresses the fact that sincere and honest followers of Moses and Jesus are one with those of Muhammad in the beliefs they hold and the fate they are to receive:

The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans; whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds, shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret. (62)

But those of the People of the Book who discarded revelation, neglected their obligations towards the Lord, and chose to pursue their capricious worldly desires, vying with idolaters, would have no claim to godliness. Their plight would be made worse by their envy and hostility towards the believers. The surah inquires:

Who is more wicked than those who seek to destroy the mosques of God and forbid His name to be invoked in them? These perpetrators can only enter mosques in fear. They shall be held up to shame in this world and shall receive stern punishment in the hereafter. (114)

Having been revealed immediately after the Prophet's emigration from Makkah to Madinah, during the formative days of the new Muslim community, the surah lays down the fundamentals upon which relations among followers of various religions ought to be conducted. At the same time it calls for the unity of religion by advocating a return to the common basic teachings of all messengers.

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When Islam first emerged, the elders of the Jewish community in Arabia received it with cynicism, denial, and disdain, since they believed in their God-given monopoly over religion, and in the notion that after their race, religion would never be revealed to another human group. When the Muslims emigrated from Makkah to Madinah, Islam became too close for comfort for some Jews who were already settled there. They resolved to fight it by all available means and to scheme against its followers. Prophet Muhammad offered them a charter as a code of conduct for their relationship with the Muslims and other inhabitants of the area. The agreement was based on peace and mutual cooperation. It seems that the local Jews accepted that agreement with reluctance, for they continued to deride the new religion, to lobby against it in a hostile manner, and to undermine its veracity and stability.

Meanwhile, the Qur'anic revelations also continued with their relentless scolding and rebuke of certain Jewish attitudes in the past. However, this had little effect in subduing the more recent arrogance or softening hardened hearts. The detractors persisted in their belief in the exclusivity of their religion and in the assertion that God could not and should not have chosen prophets from outside their race. The Qur'an rejects all their claims, querying their denial of the new religion which endorsed, supported, and blessed what had been revealed to their forefathers. We read in the surah:

And when it is said to them, "Believe in what God had revealed," they reply, "We [only] believe in what was revealed to us," but they deny what had since been revealed, although it is the truth, corroborating what they had already received. Say, "Why did you then kill the prophets of God, if you were true believers?" (91)

The surah lists over ten different reminders of this kind, in the hope that the Jews of Madinah would heed God's advice and come

to their senses. While those reminders might not have dissuaded Jewish zealots from pursuing their policy, they were extremely instructive for the Muslims themselves and served as a warning to them. God had said to the Jews, “Keep My covenant and I shall keep yours” (40), and He advised the Muslims saying, “Remember Me and then I shall remember you; be thankful to Me and do not deny Me. Believers, seek help in patience and prayer” (152–53). It is saying to the Muslims that whereas other groups had clung to the outward form of their religion but ignored its essence and true spirit, and drained it of its authentic universal meaning, they, the Muslims, should look into the heart and the essence of their religion and live it with sincerity and true faith. The surah puts it thus: “Righteousness does not come about by turning your faces towards the East or the West. It is belief in God and the Last Day” (177).

The surah then gets down to the task of laying the solid ground on which the new community was to emerge and grow. It outlines the five basic foundations or pillars of Islam and turns to dealing with Muslim family affairs, giving many of the principles on which they should be established, strengthened, and preserved.

From time to time references to narrow-minded or rebellious attitudes by previous groups and nations serve as a timely, if oblique, warning to the Muslims themselves: “To whoever tampers with God’s boon after it has been bestowed on him God would mete out a severe chastisement” (211). The surah also deals with the question of protecting the larger community by means of sacrifice and hard work (Arabic: *jihad*) as well as protecting the smaller one, the family unit, with a number of rules and provisions that ensure its health, safety, and welfare—two counts on which we, the Muslims, have unfortunately been so negligent. Let us for the time being leave the family issue aside and deal briefly with the subject of war and the manner in which the Qur’an has presented it, contending, in the process, with some persistent misconceptions about *jihad*.

We Muslims abhor war, and dislike the destruction and loss of

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life it causes. Our natural disposition and tendency favor peace, harmony, and stability among relatives, neighbors, and friends. However, while condoning and encouraging these tendencies, the Qur'an also says:

Much as you dislike it, fighting has been prescribed for you. But you may despise something that is good for you, and you may love something that is bad for you. God knows, but you do not. (216)

Peace is to be welcomed when rights are protected and beliefs are respected; but if peace means abject surrender and subjugation, it cannot be easily defended on moral or realistic grounds. This delicate balance is well presented in the verse: "They ask you whether fighting is permitted during the sacred month. Say, 'fighting in it is a grave matter'" (217), meaning it is not permitted. However, what should be done if aggression is perpetrated, terrorizing peaceful communities and jeopardizing their rights of worship and belief? Should not aggression be repelled, in order to protect one's rights? The verse continues:

...but to deny God and debar people from His path and prevent them from worshipping in the Holy Mosque, and to drive its inhabitants away, is far more grave in the sight of God... (217)

In short "sedition [Arabic: *fitnah*] is a greater threat than killing" (217), and fighting or armed resistance should be permitted in defense of one's integrity and beliefs. However, in circumstances in which we are faced with enemies who will not be satisfied until we forsake our religion and way of life and adopt theirs, defensive action becomes obligatory and the blame for instigating the conflict will not fall on us but on those who were the cause of it.

These introductory remarks enable us to appreciate fully the meaning of the following verse; "fight for the cause of God those

who fight against you, but do not commit aggression because God does not love the aggressors” (190). This is an eternal principle, and everything else the Qur’an has to say on this subject agrees with it. Some commentators have been erroneously misled into believing that surah *al-Tawbah* contains injunctions that contradict this principle. The command given in that surah to undertake to fight back does not, however, prescribe fighting against fair-minded, neutral, or reasonable people. It condones it against groups who have grudges against the Muslims and are actively undermining their peace and security and inflicting harm upon them. That is the reason for the Qur’an’s condemnation that: “Evil is what they [the unbelievers] have done; they respect no pacts or agreements with the believers and they are the aggressors” (*al-Tawbah*: 9–10). Furthermore, the Qur’an emphasizes the need to confront those aggressors in a just and clean fight, by asking:

Would you not fight against those who have broken their oaths and conspired to drive the Messenger out, and attacked you first? Do you fear them? Surely you should fear God instead, if you are true believers. (*al-Tawbah*: 13)

It is difficult to see how this can be seen as prescribing waging war against those who do not commit aggression, or that it overrides the principle given in *al-Baqarah* which states clearly that fighting is undertaken only in response to aggression. This—when propounded by some Muslims—is at best a misunderstanding, and at worst an objectionable undermining of eternal Islamic principles, inviting noxious charges against Islam, for which we have only ourselves to blame. Here it is worth stressing that the Qur’an prescribes legitimate defensive war on condition that it is undertaken for the cause of God and not for personal glory nor to gain a special advantage; nor should wars be prescribed for the sake of vainglorious and bigoted nationalist interests to prove that a particular country is supreme

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and master of all! Wars conducted in recent times have been organized to usurp the wealth and the resources of weaker nations, and to colonize and control their lands and destinies for the benefit of strong and mighty ones. Far from being “just wars,” fought in the name of God, they are true works of evil. Wars are said to be conducted for God’s cause when they are fought to uphold God’s supremacy and drive out godless powers. True believers have always undertaken such proper fighting in order to keep alive the belief in and worship of the One God. The surah asks: “Who is more wicked than those who forbid God’s name being invoked in His mosques and seek to destroy them?” (114). The Qur’an observes:

And if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, corruption would surely overwhelm the earth: but God is limitless in His bounty unto all the worlds. (251)

Indeed, right can only triumph and become firmly established when those who defend it are selfless, brave, and totally devoted to uphold and preserve it.



Al-Baqarah contains a long and detailed discussion of family affairs. Since it appears at the beginning of the Qur’an, some may be misled into thinking that what it has to say about this subject is the first to be presented in the Qur’an. However, about two thirds of the Qur’an had been revealed before this surah, and the subject was dealt with extensively. In studying what the surah says about family affairs, one has to refer to what has already been said elsewhere in the Qur’an.

One of the topics under the family heading is equality between the sexes, expressed in *al-Nahl* in these words: “Those who do good, be they male or female, and are true believers, We shall certainly grant them a good life and give them their rewards according to

their best deeds” (*al-Nahl*: 97). The same principle was advocated by a believer from Moses’ generation who defied Egypt’s Pharaoh and his henchmen, and is quoted elsewhere in the Qur’an to have said:

Those who do evil shall be rewarded with like evil, but whoever do good, be they males or females, and are true believers, shall enter Paradise, and therein receive limitless blessings. (*Ghāfir*: 40)

In another surah, we read: “One of His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, that you may find peace and harmony with them, and induce among you love and kindness” (*al-Rūm*: 21). This was stressed again in surah *al-Nahl*, when listing God’s favors upon people, which included giving them “spouses from among yourselves, and through them He gave you children and grandchildren” (*al-Nahl*: 72).

Since the status of women and the position of the family in society have already been dealt with in other parts of the Qur’an, it will not come as a surprise that *al-Baqarah* should deal with details relating to family disputes or other aspects of family life that may arise for which God’s rulings and guidance have to be sought. Hence, we find the surah dealing with oaths, divorce, child-bearing, breast-feeding, and so on. However, family legislation cannot endure and be effective without a firm basis of morality, faith, and piety. The surah points out that divorcees, men and women, might have second thoughts and choose not to sever the relationship altogether. They should use reason and common sense, on which the surah gives eight successive guidelines, for it says:

If you divorce women and they have reached [the end of] their waiting period,

- a) retain them with honor, or
- b) let them go with dignity.
- c) You shall not detain them to harm them or to do them wrong.

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- d) Whoever does this will wrong his own soul.
- e) Do not take God's revelations in vain;
- f) remember God's favors upon you and what He had revealed to you of the Book and wisdom in order to enlighten you.
- g) Fear God and
- h) remember that He is aware of all things. (231)

What more can any religious system offer for a more amicable and courteous separation, and a more equitable and responsible way of protecting the rights and the future of all concerned in the family? Nevertheless, divorce in some Muslim communities has become rife, and one still comes across some ludicrous situations that have led to tragic family breakups, with the blame being put on Islam as being unfair to women!

I have referred on other occasions to the Qur'anic expression "the bounds [or terms] set by God," which appears six times in verses 229 and 230 of this surah, dealing with the subject of divorce. Very few Muslims have a clear understanding of this expression or the emphasis placed on it in the Qur'an and the context in which it is used. Women have been badly treated in many societies, but the odd thing is that this maltreatment is often blamed on the teachings of Islam, which have shown utmost respect and justice towards women. God says in the Qur'an: "Wives shall with justice have rights equal to those exercised against them, although men have precedence [in terms of financial responsibilities] over them" (228), which is quite clear in setting out the mutual rights and liabilities of husbands and wives. Nevertheless one notices, in certain backward communities, that women tend to give more than what they have a right to receive, or that they are treated with undue harshness and disdain. It is difficult to believe that such an attitude can have anything to do with any religion, let alone the religion of Islam.

Of course, the wife herself may sometimes instigate the quarrel, and such disputes cannot always be settled at the hands of the law.

There has to be an environment of trust in, and respect for “the terms [bounds] set by God” on the part of both sides. Enlightenment, generosity, moral integrity, as well as a sense of equity and fairness, and a God-fearing community are all essential requirements for strong, happy, and well-protected families.

The treatment of women in certain Muslim societies has been a soft target for the enemies of Islam, and has proved a dangerous breach through which they have relentlessly attacked its teachings and laws. This issue has been the Trojan horse for those who want to undermine Islam and Muslim societies by calling for the “liberation of Muslim women from the injustice and cruelty of Islam!” This has led to a bandwagon of opinion among sections of the intelligentsia in some Muslim countries, especially amongst women, who have taken up this issue with great enthusiasm. But certainly, some of those who claim to speak for Islam and grossly misrepresent it or are ignorant of the spirit of its legislation, are partly to blame.

I once described the wife’s right to divorce from her husband in return for a monetary compensation she pays to the husband (the *khulā‘ah*) as being equivalent to the husband’s right to divorce her. Accordingly, I argued, when a woman can no longer bear to live with a man for whatever reasons that she may reveal or keep to herself, and she offers to pay him back the dowry he has advanced to her, the legal authorities concerned should have no reason not to grant her wish. Someone in the audience commented that a judge could grant a wife divorce if she were threatened with real harm. I replied that even if she were not, but nevertheless were not able to live with her husband for some reason and were willing to compensate him for what he had spent on her, there should be no reason why she should be forced to stay with him. My opponent insisted it would not be permissible as long as the husband was not agreeable to the divorce. I replied that it would be permissible and it would be up to the judge either to bring about reconciliation between

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them or rule that the husband accept compensation in return for a divorce.

Some religious zealots tend to deny a woman her individual entity, while in the Qur'an we read that the wives of Noah and Pharaoh, for example, were independent of their husbands and were under no obligation to share in their actions or liabilities. When it comes to having children and setting up a family, husbands and wives share responsibilities and advantages equally, as the Qur'an says:

None should be charged with more than they can bear. A mother should not be allowed to suffer on account of her child, nor should a father... But if, after consultation, they decide by mutual consent to wean the child [or separate it from its mother], they shall incur no guilt. (233)

One important aspect of divorce which has been neglected in our societies is that of providing maintenance for divorced women. Divorce normally follows a period of much disagreement, acrimony, and bitter emotional tussles that could destroy hearts and wipe out the best goodwill in the world. However, once divorce is agreed upon, the emotional animosity it leaves behind has to be watered down with some gracious gestures. This is clearly stated in the verse that says:

Divorced women, too, have a right to maintenance that is duly incumbent on God-fearing men. Thus God makes clear His requisitions that you may comprehend. (241-42).

I earnestly call upon Muslims today to refer to the Qur'an and the example of the Messenger Muhammad and to learn properly the rules and principles governing family life in Islam, and the most honorable ways of promoting happiness and efficiency in Muslim homes. We must look around, examine and understand

what is happening in the world today. It is incredible that we should ban women from driving cars, when other societies allow them to lead nations.



In Madinah, and following their emigration from Makkah, the Muslims continued to receive Qur'anic revelation as they had done previously over a period of thirteen years. The environment and the circumstances, however, had changed. For, whereas episodes from Jewish history had hitherto been cited and related for information and education, the talk about Jews now took a much more relevant, topical, and contemporary significance, affecting the present as well as the future.

At Makkah, Muslims used to perform prayers individually, but now the mosque became the focus of the community and they flocked to it to pray collectively. Only the hypocrites or the weak and infirm stayed behind in their houses during prayer times. The essential characteristics of the new state began to emerge slowly and a new society was gradually taking shape. Narrow-minded individualism was slowly but surely giving way to collective consolidated allegiance to God's laws, in defense of which the Muslims sought strength in unity and collective vigilance.

The unitarian belief in the one God had its roots firmly established by Makkan revelation, and to expound it further in Madinah was necessary for a clearer and more enlightened understanding of its significance. The Qur'an, after all, is a self-explanatory and self-sustaining book; it resorts to a great deal of repetition and paraphrasing of ideas and concepts. This can be seen in the many verses in this surah that talk of the unity of God, such as verse 163 which says: "Your God is one God; there is no god but Him, the Compassionate, the Merciful," and verse 164 which says:

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In the creation of the heavens and the earth, the alternation of night and day, the ships that sail the ocean carrying goods that are useful to humanity...there are signs for people who understand.

These are followed by verses explaining the common bases that underlie people's emotions, feelings, and behavior. Believers who love their God more than anything else reflect the fruits of this love in their actions and expressions.

God is deserving of this adoration, because He is the ultimate manifestation of all glory, and greatness belongs to Him alone. This is beautifully articulated in the most magnificent verse of the Qur'an, also known as the verse of the Throne, which begins with the words: "God: there is no god but Him, the Living, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His is what the heavens and the earth contain" (255). Yet, in order to establish the faith, it may be necessary to debate and argue on its behalf with those who deny or suppress it. The surah cites the confrontation of the prophet Abraham with a king of his time. It says: "Have you not heard of him who argued with Abraham about his Lord, because He had granted him power and sovereignty?" (258). Abraham, with God's guidance and support, using sincere and simple arguments, was able to confound the arrogant tyrant.

Thus we find in this surah, which was revealed early on in Madinah, another Qur'anic approach in dealing with major issues of faith and belief, without deviation from the main objectives of divine revelation. The Qur'an is a Book, as the surah states, "about which there is no doubt" (2). Muhammad and his followers excelled in their response to the teachings and commands of this surah and the revelation that followed it. As the Qur'an was being revealed, they were acting on its instructions and advice, eagerly and willingly. The Qur'an was setting out the characteristics, the framework, and the principles, showing the Muslims the way forward for them as individuals, and as members of society and citizens of a state.

They were building and implementing, turning the ideas and concepts into living realities. With the diligence and devotion of those early pioneers, Madinah was well on its way to becoming the great new capital of one of the most formidable and enduring religions the world has ever known; a citadel for what verse 143 describes as the “middle nation,” and the most righteous. It is a nation raised by divine revelation, and teachings containing guidance, sent by God to His Messenger, who in turn passed it on to his followers. The verse says: “Thus We have made you a middle nation, so that you may bear witness over all humanity, and the Messenger [Muhammad] shall in turn bear witness over you” (143).

In the last two verses of this surah, God Almighty states that Prophet Muhammad and his followers were true to their faith and diligent in their understanding and implementation of the commands and exhortations contained in this surah and in others after it, and had acted upon them faithfully and with enthusiasm, to the best of their abilities. For this reason, God had given them His support and His blessings. They excelled their predecessors who had received divine revelation but did not respect or act according to it.

The Arabs were an illiterate people who, prior to receiving the Qur’anic revelations, had little influence on the course of human civilization. Since then, however, their reputation and standing in the world began to rise and spread until they became the leading nation of the world. For centuries they were world pioneers in all fields of religion, science, law, and social affairs. The contribution they made to human civilization, when untainted by worldly or divisive concerns, was free of racial ethnocentricity and materialistic aggrandizement. Their civilization was in essence devoted to God and looked on this world as a prelude to a more meaningful and fulfilled life hereafter. The penultimate verse says:

The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do the believers. They all believe in God and His

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angels, His books, and His messengers, making no distinction among any of His messengers. They say: "We have heard and we obey; grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord; to You we shall all return." (285)

Muslims have no race to be biased towards, nor a homeland to identify with, because their allegiance is to the universal God, the Creator and Lord of all. They have no advantage over other nations or human groups except by what they pass on to them of the religion of Islam, and they are distinguished by their piety and sincere faith. The special reputation and place gained by the city of Madinah in the history of Islam are directly linked to the fact that it was the cradle of revelation and first city of the great Islamic nation that has since emerged. In it were created the first Muslim families, market-places, government cadres, centers of learning, trade enterprises, farms, and legislative councils; all under the guidance of divine revelation and the enlightened leadership of the exponent of that revelation, Muhammad. History tells us that the Prophet had once selected a very young man for a leadership post because he had memorized and learnt this surah well, indicating its distinguished and prestigious status in the Qur'an.



Finally, as we look at the last verse in the surah, our attention is drawn to the historic phenomenon that nations which attain ascendancy and supremacy usually display arrogance and conceit, and look down upon other weaker nations. Today's domineering vain-glorious civilization, which has encompassed both east and west, is a vivid living example—a culture of decadence and gross injustice thriving on the great achievements and glory of a genius elite who have split the atom and made inroads into outer space. When the Muslims were a leading nation, however, and at the height of their

SURAH 2 • *Al-Baqarah*

achievement, they were overwhelmed by a sense of submission to God and a need for His support and guidance. They have always sought God's forgiveness and looked up to His grace, praying:

Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or make mistakes,
Our Lord, do not lay upon us a burden such as You had laid
upon those before us,
Our Lord, do not burden us with more than what we can bear.
Pardon us, forgive us our sins, and have mercy upon us.
You are our Lord,
Grant us victory over the unbelievers. (286)

SURAH 3

Āl ʿImrān (House of ʿImrān)

IT IS EASY TO IDENTIFY immediately the subject matter of this surah. It revolves around two major issues: the debate with the People of the Book, the Jews and the Christians, of whom the Jews were Madinah natives incited to oppose Islam; and a review and assessment of the humiliating and tragic defeat suffered by the Muslims at the battle of Uḥud in 625 AC. The two issues are treated separately to begin with, but halfway through the surah they are brought together and from then on are discussed as almost one subject. The outcome of the whole discussion seems to focus on the fact that perseverance and steadfastness are required to face both issues: the scheming of the Jewish establishment inside Madinah and the attacks by the infidels from outside it.

Islam is a religion addressed to all human societies without coercion or discrimination. Whoever responds positively is taken into the fold, while those who turn away are left in peace. However—as mentioned earlier—those who commit aggression against Islam and the Muslims are boldly confronted. This is clear from the verse:

If they argue with you, say: “I have surrendered myself to God and so have those who followed me.” As for those who had received the scriptures and the illiterates [pagan Arabs with no revealed scriptures], ask them: “Have you surrendered yourselves to God?” If they have they shall be rightly guided; but if they turn away, then your only duty is to deliver the message to them. God is watching His servants. (20)

SURAH 3 • *Āl ‘Imrān*

The surah begins by stressing that Islam is a universal guidance, and the Qur’an a confirmation of all previous revelation. God’s revelation is one, in the sense that it sets the truth apart from falsehood in a sharp and unequivocal manner. The surah highlights the fact that Moses, Jesus and Muhammad have trodden the same path, and that the scope of Islam encompasses all other revealed religions regardless of their time and place. The Torah and the Gospel are both referred to here as “God’s revelation [or messages].” This phrase occurs ten times in the surah, as in verse 4 which says: “Those who deny God’s revelations [messages], grievous suffering awaits them; for God is Mighty and capable of retribution,” and verse 199, towards the end of the surah:

There are among the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] those who believe in God and what has been revealed to you and to them. They humble themselves before God and do not exchange God’s revelations [messages] for a trifling price.

There could be no contradiction nor differences in the basic tenets and principles of divine faith, nor in what was revealed to Muhammad and his earlier brothers in the line of prophets, Moses and Jesus. Contradictions can exist only between God’s revelation and the false notions and philosophies that people put forward. Belief, as presented in the Qur’an, applies to what has been revealed to the Muslims and to those before them. Those who deviate from it ought to repent and return to the straight path. The “People of the Book” is a term that refers to Jews and Christians. Unlike the debate with the Jews, that with the Christians in Madinah was calm and unhurried. The Jews had their own settlements inside Madinah itself and in other parts of northern Hijaz. Their elders resisted Islam, gainsaid God’s revelations and berated His Messenger. Moreover, they collaborated with the pagan Arabs in their insidious efforts and fights against Islam and the Muslims. They were encouraged by

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their wealth and economic power and the strong foothold they had secured in Madinah. This was repeatedly condemned in the surah (10, 21, 116, 196, 197), for excessive wealth and affluence would lead individuals as well as nations to ignore God and overreach themselves in pursuit of power and influence.

Although the Jewish settlements in Hijaz were much more developed and economically prosperous than other cities and towns in Arabia, they had never used any of their wealth or expertise for the development and welfare of the region as a whole. With its well-established traditions of self-dignity, honesty, and hospitality, the pagan Arab society could, in fact, be said to have been more liberal and charitable than other communities in their midst. When Prophet Muhammad began to spread his teachings, he proved to be more persuasive and endearing, and less condescending, than the Jewish spokesmen who had been exposed as arrogant and self-centered. Their attitudes and conduct had in the end led to their defeat and the end of their influence and existence in the area.

The Jews had enjoyed the honor and privilege of custodianship of God's revelation for several successive generations. They had been entrusted with it for so long that they had come to nurture the false belief that God's revelation belonged to them and to them alone—a nation that would have the eternal indisputable right to hold and interpret God's revelations and reap their benefit for ever. They were hopelessly mistaken. Honor, privilege, status, and leadership in the world have to be earned through devotion and hard work.

By the time Prophet Muhammad had emerged, the Jews' capacity to carry God's revelation forward had reached its nadir. Their rabbis' hearts had turned hard, morals had deteriorated, and selfishness had gained the upper hand; greed for material and worldly possessions and privileges had become their sole preoccupation. Worse than that, they had also displayed signs of insolence and insubordination towards and rejection of God and the mission with

SURAH 3 • *Āl ‘Imrān*

which He had entrusted their race. And so it was necessary to transfer the responsibility and the trust to another human group, which was better qualified and which would give it the effort and devotion it deserved. The surah expresses this in the following verse:

Say, “Lord, Sovereign of all creation, You bestow sovereignty on whom You will and take away from whom You will. You raise whomever You will and abase whomever You will. All Goodness lies in Your hands. You have power over all things.” (26)

This fundamental assertion is preceded by elaborate reasons and considerations such as:

Have you not taken note of those who received portions of the Book [revelation]? When they are called upon to accept the judgment of God’s Book, some of them turn away and take no heed. It is because they said, “We shall suffer the fire for a few days only.” (23–24)

They were so overcome by that false sense of security that they turned to open rebellion, squandering the divine injunctions and reneging on their commitment to them.

God’s response to that was to confirm divine justice towards all people and to dispel the erroneous idea that God was biased towards any particular ethnic or racial group, saying: “What will they do when We gather them all together upon a day that is sure to come, when every soul will be given what it earned with no injustice whatsoever?” (25). In God’s eyes, people are all equal; each shall reap his or her just rewards according to their behavior and conduct. When humankind is brought before God for judgment, each human being shall face the Creator alone. The one thing that would redeem any of them shall be their piety, and the depth and sincerity of their belief in God.

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It is important to keep in mind that although those words are addressed to Jews in Arabia, they also serve as a subtle reminder to other human groups. God was not going to chastise the Jews for their deviation, and overlook the misdemeanor of the Arabs if they were to follow their example. Similar actions and activities would earn similar reactions and responses. The pitfall in which errant Jews were caught was their misconception that the Torah had been graced by them rather than the other way around, and this had led to their fateful fall from God's grace and favor. Today, there are Arabs who refuse to be associated with Islam and try to separate it from Arab culture and history. Their fate could not be any different from that of the misguided Jews of Madinah before them. God does not make any undue or unmerited preferences among humans.

The debate with the People of the Book is covered over a large part of this surah, and apart from a fleeting allusion in verse 6 to the birth of Jesus, was mainly directed at the Jews of Arabia whose animosity towards the early Muslims was much more pronounced. In saying: "It is He who creates you as He pleases inside the mothers' wombs; there is no god but Him, the Mighty, the Wise," the surah outlines God's stupendous power to create human beings and shape their form, soul, and body, and in the same breath alludes to the fact that Jesus' miraculous birth was but one of a multitude of feats and incredible acts of God. He has shown humankind veritable signs of superiority and ingenuity in His creation, endowing some people with higher qualities and aptitudes than others. Jesus' fatherless conception and birth were but two of these extraordinary and exceptional acts. This is a subject which we shall come to discuss later.



As to the hostility exhibited towards the Muslims by the Jewish establishment in Madinah, its main underlying reason was the

transfer of prophethood from their patriarchs to Muhammad. That prophethood had given them such a special and unique status over all the rest of humankind, and seeing it being taken away from them and entrusted to the Arabs enraged them and fired up their fury and hatred towards them. Their reaction was severely and immediately condemned in the Qur’an: “People of the Book! Why do you deny God’s revelations when you are witnesses to their veracity? Why do you confound the true with the false and hide the truth knowingly?” (70–71). It is clear from the tone of this reprimand that the Jewish priests and elders were aware that Muhammad was genuine in his claim of relaying God’s words and being His spokesman. It is also implicit in the address that they were guilty of transgression against God, that they rejected a reconciliation with Him, that they persisted with their refusal to acknowledge Muhammad’s prophethood, and went on to oppose and resist it with arms, seditious scheming, and active collaboration with his other enemies, the pagan Arabs. The reproach is repeated several times in the surah: “How would God guide people who rejected the faith after believing in it and having borne witness that the Messenger is true and after receiving veritable signs!” (86). Elsewhere God’s Messenger is directed to ask them, saying:

“People of the Book, why do you deny God’s revelations, when God is witness to what you do?” Say, “People of the Book, why do you drive believers away from God’s path, seeking to mislead and confuse, when you yourselves are witnesses? God is not unaware of what you do.” (98–99)

To countermand this criticism, some Jews came up with the brilliant stratagem of feigning their acceptance of Islam in order to conceal their antagonism and prove their tolerance and fair-mindedness towards the new religion. The logic of their argument would lead them to say that their rejection of, and opposition to Islam had

come as a result of direct firsthand experience of it. The surah says: "Some of the People of the Book said [to one another], 'Believe in that which is revealed to the faithful in the morning and abandon it in the evening, so that they may themselves go back on their faith'" (72). The surah also exposes this group's determined rejection of the new revelation and their dogged resentment of the transfer of divine trust away from the Hebrews, by reporting their statement: "Believe in none except those who follow your own religion" (73). The inference here is that they firmly believed in the superiority of their religion over all others.

So it was clear that the rabbis were not happy with God's decision to give preference to the Arabs and choose them this time round to be the custodians of His revelation. If they only could, they would force God to go back on that choice and change the course of history by restoring the leadership of humankind to them. God's response was clear and decisive: "Grace is in the hand of God; He bestows it on whom He will. God is Munificent and All-Knowing. He favors with His mercy whom He will. His grace is immense" (73–74). However, the group had acquired several vices, not least their self-importance, hard-headedness, and conceit, that could at times of weakness turn into deep-seated hatred and, at times of prosperity and triumph, into open hostility and belligerence. These characteristics seem to have colored much rabbinical writing, driving the Jewish people into isolation and making them tragically vulnerable to persecution by other societies and groups. The surah offers the explanation that "they [the Jewish elders] say, 'We are not bound to keep faith with the unlettered [the Gentiles].' They knowingly tell lies about God" (75). The Arabic term *ummiyīn* used in this verse literally means "unlettered," but could also mean "non-Jews" or Gentiles (Hebrew: *Goyim*). In the one case it would be a reference to the Arabs, while in the other it would be a reference to non-Jewish communities in general. Jewish religious scriptures, especially the Torah and the Talmud, as well as parts of their

literature, do advocate the idea of the superiority of the Jewish nation over other nations, and propound the concept of Jews as the ‘chosen people of God.’ The Qur’an explains very clearly that the relationship between God and humans cannot be based on false claims, but rather on sound ethical grounds, and on faith and trust. In it we read: “Indeed, for those who keep their covenant and fear God, God loves the righteous” (76).

At this point in the surah we may inquire why the subject of the pilgrimage is suddenly brought up for discussion halfway through it, having covered the debates with the People of the Book and their behavior. Indeed, we may even ask why the subject of permitted and forbidden foods is raised here also. After a great deal of reflection, and with reference to Shaykh Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā’s commentary in *al-Manār*, I was able to find the answer. As Islam was being introduced to the Jews, they questioned the idea of adopting a religion which allowed them to eat certain foods that their own religion had forbidden them. The answer they were given was that the embargo imposed on them regarding the consumption of certain foods had been temporary, and had come about as punishment for earlier intransigence and insubordination to God’s commands. This is covered more fully in surah *al-An‘ām* where it is stated:

Such is the penalty We imposed on them for their misdeeds. What We declare is true. If they do not believe you say, “Your Lord’s mercy is vast, but His punishment cannot be averted by the transgressors.” (*al-An‘ām*: 146–47)

Jesus, as we know, sought to relieve the Jews of some of the burdens placed upon them. This is given in verse 50 of this surah, which quotes Jesus as saying to the Jews: “I come to confirm the Torah already revealed and to make lawful to you some of what was forbidden you.” The Qur’an restored the divine law to its original form, forbidding only certain types of carrion meat, swine flesh, spilt

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blood, and the meat of animals slaughtered without invoking God's name—all other types of food would be permissible. Verse 93 of the surah says: "All food was lawful to the Israelites except what Israel [Jacob] forbade himself before the Torah was revealed."

The same argument applies in the case of the *qiblah*, or the direction faced by Muslims during salah. As verse 96 affirms, the Ka'bah at Makkah was the first and only *qiblah* for all humankind. And although Jerusalem, for certain temporary reasons, had been chosen as the *qibla* for worshipers of God, those reasons no longer applied and the Ka'bah was reinstated as the legitimate *qiblah* for all believers.

Putting differences between various religions and human ideologies aside, the fact remains that sound moral and ethical discipline and education have proved to be the basis for human progress at all phases of human history. We find reference to this very early in the surah where God says:

Men are tempted by the allure of women and offspring, of hoarded treasures of gold and silver, of splendid horses, cattle and vast plantations. These are the comforts of this life, but to God is the best return. (14)

True, for human life to continue, the satisfaction and pursuance of these desires is necessary. Without the sexual relationship between men and women, human existence would have ceased long ago. The same can be said of all other human desires. The crucial point here is that they should be pursued in moderation, with discipline, and within a framework of reason and common sense. Islam has permitted all that is good and useful to people, and forbidden what is harmful. Islamic laws and teachings are built on the foundation of faith in God and positive action, and they have provided for a great deal that would nurture people's relationship with God and maintain their awareness of the hereafter.

We are used nowadays to hearing national leaders warning their

citizens against the AIDS virus and advising them to take certain precautions during illicit sexual acts. They no longer call for proper lawful sexual relationships between people because they no longer believe that these are possible. This is only true in a society that has lost its faith and trust in God. Followers of formal religion shall continue to suffer from their uncontrollable desires, unless they heed the words of God, especially when He says:

Say, “Shall I tell of better things than these? For the righteous their Lord has gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they shall dwell forever, spouses of high purity and God’s grace.” God is aware of His servants, those who say: “Our Lord, we believed in You, so forgive us our sins and save us the torment of the hellfire,” those who are steadfast, sincere, devout, charitable and who pray for forgiveness during the small hours of the night. (15–17)

So we find the surah opening with a statement addressed to the People of the Book that salvation could come only with a faith based on the belief in “God, there is no god but Him, the Living, the Ever-Existing one” (2), and in a way of life that acknowledges human nature within a discipline of decency and virtue that discourages all forms of excessive deprivation or overindulgence; a discipline that renders enlightened life in this world a natural and meaningful prelude to the life that is to come.



Mary was a virgin throughout her pregnancy, having miraculously conceived Jesus. When some people began saying that Jesus was the son of God, it was clear that a groundless myth, a fallacy, was being created, pointing towards the existence of a special and intimate relationship between God and Mary, the outcome of which was Jesus. This outrageous notion reflects a deep-seated ignorance of

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the nature and status of God and the exaltation and glorification that humans owe Him. Surely, God could not be conceived of as an agent of reproduction in such a crude and salacious manner, for as God says in the Qur'an: "Were God to have offspring, He would have chosen the best of His creatures at will; Glorified is God, the One, the Almighty" (*al-Zumar*: 4). It is true that Jesus' conception and birth were abnormal and extraordinary events. Such was the will and wisdom of God in order to show humankind that God is not bound by the natural laws of causality, but rather He overrides and controls these laws. The story of Jesus and his mother is related following that of Zachariah and his wife, which had also entailed certain miraculous aspects.

Mary's own conception and birth were unexpected by her mother. As soon as she knew that she was pregnant, she dedicated her baby to serving the temple in Jerusalem, and to worshiping and being devoted to the service of other worshipers. The Qur'an quotes her as saying: "Lord, I completely dedicate to Your service that which is in my womb. Accept it from me; You are All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (35). However, contrary to her expectation, the baby turned out to be a girl and would not, therefore, be of much use in fulfilling that task which required men of strength and endurance. In the circumstances, the son she was hoping to have would have given more happiness than a daughter who would herself probably need care and looking after. Naturally, the mother was not to know that her newly born daughter was destined to be the mother of a highly regarded and noble human being and would have the privilege of nursing him in his infancy, just as Moses and Muhammad were nursed by their respective mothers. It is interesting to note in passing that these three great senior prophets had been respectively reared by mothers of humble means and status who had to seek and depend on God's help alone. History is witness here as elsewhere that women too can reach great heights in society with their nobility, magnanimity, and strong belief. Mary's mother prayed to her Lord saying:

“Lord, I have given birth to a daughter”—and God knows well of what she was delivered, and that a male is not like a female,—“and I have named her Mary. I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed one.” Her Lord graciously accepted her and made her grow up a goodly child. (36–37)

Mary was brought up by Zachariah, an old and frail man, and his as yet childless wife. Zachariah was himself melancholy and heartbroken for not having children of his own to inherit the leadership of the Israelites in whom he had little faith, but for whose future he was concerned. Despite his frailty, though, Zachariah struggled and persevered in bringing up the new addition to his family. However, Zachariah began to notice some unusually fortunate developments taking place within his household and certain provisions coming to the possession of the new girl, and so he asked her: “Mary, how did you come by this food?” She replied, “It is from God, who gives to whom He wills without stint” (37).

This inflamed Zachariah’s heart with love for, and devotion to, God. He began to look up to God for more extraordinary acts and for such favors to be bestowed on him personally. He knew that God could make a hitherto infertile female conceive and have children and give an elderly man the virility to produce offspring, and so he prayed to God, saying:

“Lord, grant me goodly offspring, You hear all prayers.” The angels called out to him while he was praying in the shrine, “God bids you rejoice in the birth of John, who shall confirm the word of God.” (38–39)

Life had returned to the despairing old couple; the barren wife would be made to conceive by her elderly and infertile husband. This only goes to show that when God wills, all the laws of nature succumb to His will. He can create and cause things to happen completely at will.

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Mary grew up in that—by then—happy, pious, and blessed household, where God's angels would be no strangers. They called on Mary with more good news:

The angels said to Mary, "God gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary. He shall be noble in this world and in the hereafter, and shall be favored by God. He shall talk to people in his cradle and in his adulthood, and shall lead a righteous life." She said, "Lord, how can I have a child when no man has touched me?" He replied, "Such is the will of God who creates whom He will. Once He decides on a matter, He says, 'Be' and it is." (45–47)

Thus Mary found herself on the threshold of a new and overwhelming experience, which a virgin girl would naturally undergo with extreme apprehension and trepidation. At one point she wished she were dead. Nevertheless, the will of God was declared and Jesus was born in that astounding and extraordinary way. Jesus was then charged with the mission to address the Israelites with the message of God in order to reform their state of affairs, break the arrogance of their chiefs, and commit them to a humble attitude towards God and their fellow humans.

Mary's family was highly respected and venerated by people, and her son was held in high esteem by those who recognized the blessings that accompanied his coming. However, there were Israelites who took a different stand towards him. The Pharisees and skeptics rejected the miracles Jesus performed and refused to recognize him as an apostle of God. Furthermore, they claimed that his birth was no act of God, but the outcome of an illicit relationship between Mary and a suitor of hers named Joseph the carpenter. Thus they compounded their disbelief with slander. Jesus sought the support and the backing of reasonable and fair-minded people, some of whom rallied around him and offered their backing, saying: "Lord,

we have believed in what You have sent down and have followed the messenger, so please enlist us among the witnesses [to the truth]” (53). The Pharisees, however, went on with their intrigues against Jesus and his followers even after, having delivered his Lord’s message, Jesus had passed away and was saved from their treachery and vicious scheming.

Although a large number of scholars believe that Jesus was raised to heaven alive, I find myself more in agreement with those scholars who say that he died a natural normal death. This would not discount the idea, as the scholar Ibn Ḥazm says, that he could have been brought back to normal life again to pursue his mission of spreading the creed of monotheism. Jesus’ story could, in this context, be compared to that of the man who passed by a town which had been destroyed, and inquired: “‘How can God bring life back to this town, now that it is dead?’ Thereupon, God caused him to die, and after one hundred years brought him back to life” (*al-Baqarah*: 259). It also can be compared to the story of the People of the Cave, who remained dead for a few hundred years and then were brought back to life. The matter is very simple and the dispute is fickle. Jesus must be perceived as an ordinary human being, not as a god or a son of God.

The surah recalls the visit to Madinah by a Christian delegation who went to debate with Prophet Muhammad aspects of the new religion he was advocating. They argued that Jesus was human in form, only asking, of course, that if he were human, who was his father? The Prophet replied that the absence of a human father did not necessarily mean Jesus was the son of God. Based on their reasoning, Adam, who had neither father nor mother, would have been more eligible to divine parentage. We read in the surah that: “Jesus is like Adam in the sight of God. He created him of dust and then said to him, ‘Be’ and he was. Truth comes from your Lord; do not ever doubt it” (59–60). Nevertheless, the quibblers insisted on their viewpoint and defended it with vehemence. The Prophet

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then proposed that the two camps, Christians and Muslims, should unite in prayer to God to curse the liars of either side. The surah continues:

Whoever disputes with you concerning Jesus after all the knowledge you have received, say to them, "Come, let us call out our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves, and then let us all jointly and earnestly pray that God's curse should fall upon the liars." This is the true version [of events]. There is no god but God; He is Mighty and Wise. (61–62)

The Christian delegation refused to take part in that joint prayer to establish the truth regarding the nature and status of Jesus, and up to this day the two religions have continued to exist apart from one another. It seems that the matter shall be settled only by Jesus himself on his second coming to earth. He might be the one who will point out the liars and confirm that the world knows only one overpowering and almighty Master.



Before closing the chapter on the People of the Book, the surah gives a critical account of the battle of Uḥud, at which the Muslims of Madinah sustained a humiliating defeat at the hands of the pagan Arabs in 625 AC. These were the original enemies of the early Muslims, who had no alternative but to face them and, as has been the case ever since, fight on two fronts simultaneously. The story begins with verse 121 referring to the Prophet's preparation for battle, and then it suddenly breaks into a discussion of usury, spending, and the urgent need for repentance. Having covered these topics, the surah picks up the account of the battle of Uḥud again, which takes us right to the end of the surah.

This leads us to look for a reason for this brief, but intriguing,

digression. The explanation seems to lie in the need for a cleansing, a review, of the Muslim internal condition; to purge it of all signs of weakness and corruption in order to qualify the Muslims for victory in the battlefield. fights such as the ones the Muslims were engaged in were not personal or nationalistic wars, but wars for values and principles. This is made very clear in the surah when it says: “It is of no concern of yours [Muhammad] when He [God] should forgive or punish them. They are transgressors” (128). Reconciliation or antipathy should be perpetrated for the sake of God only; for today’s enemies could very well be the allies of tomorrow, if they reconcile their situation with God and submit to His will and teachings. Under Islam, there is no room for private grudges or personal animosity.

The defeat at Uḥud contained a sharp lesson for the Muslims. Their earlier triumph at Badr in 624 AC had opened the door for opportunists and those with special interests to join the growing Muslim community which showed clear promise of dominating the region. One such prominent personality, ‘Abd Allah ibn Ubayy, saw it coming and recognized the victory at Badr as setting an irreversible trend that would result in the dominance of Islam. He decided to convert and take all his followers with him. The surah comments on this by saying: “God would not leave the believers in their current plight, without separating the bad from the good; nor was God to let you in on the unknown” (179). The scene was then set for a setback, a test, that would distinguish those who were sincerely upholding Islam and supporting the Prophet and the Muslims through thick and thin from those who were in it merely for personal gain or prestige.

Under such circumstances, one can normally distinguish two main groups of people: those who are sincere and dedicated to the common cause, no matter what happens; and those whose main concern is their own safety and self-interest, who hold little faith in God or their fellow human beings. The surah describes these by

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saying: “And a group who were only concerned about themselves, doubting God in their ignorant ways. They ask, ‘Do we stand to gain anything?’” (154). The latter group are always disgruntled and restless, because their views are rarely given credence and they are seldom, if ever, accorded respect or prominence. Any society, and far more an army, would be wiser to be rid of such people.

Contrary to the opinion of some, the Muslims’ defeat at Uḥud did not come as a result of bad planning or faulty tactics. It was the result of insubordination, for some Muslim fighters, at a very critical point during the battle, neglected their duties by abandoning their battle positions in pursuit of the loot. Had those fighters adhered to their orders as given by the Prophet, the outcome would have been totally different. The surah recalls:

God fulfilled His pledge to you when, by His leave, you trounced them [the unbelievers at Uḥud], until the moment when you lost heart, started squabbling among yourselves and disobeyed the Messenger just as you were close to victory. Some of you chose the gains of this world, but others chose the rewards of the life to come.
(152)

The Muslims’ attitude in the battlefield had changed and therefore the outcome had also to change. “He [God] prevented you from defeating them in order to test you. But now He has forgiven you, for He is gracious to the believers” (152).

The defeat came as a shock to the Muslims and they were shaken by it. They questioned how and why it could have happened at all, and God’s answer was:

Now that a disaster has befallen you, after you yourselves have inflicted [on your enemies] losses twice as heavy, you come to ask, “How could this have come about?” Say to them, “You have brought it upon yourselves.” God has power over all things. (165)

SURAH 3 • *Āl ‘Imrān*

True, the defeat sustained by the Muslims at Uḥud was only half as heavy as that sustained a couple of years earlier by the Arabs and their allies at Badr, giving the Muslims a slightly higher advantage. Nevertheless, they were defeated and had to face up to the consequences, especially that their defeat could have been avoided if they had not become greedy and ignored their leader's battle orders. However, the surah eloquently offers a most encouraging consolation for that tragic episode by saying to the Muslims:

This often happened to others before you. Look all over the world and see what was the fate of the unbelievers. This is a proclamation to all mankind; it is also a guide and an admonition to the God-fearing. Do not, therefore, lose heart or grieve, for you shall reign supreme as long as you uphold your belief. (137–39)

In the Qur'an, God has given the Muslims accounts of previous nations and civilizations which collapsed or were destroyed as a consequence of their stubborn rejection of God's messages and their refusal to believe. The triumph of the non-Muslim Arabs at Uḥud would be short-lived. Things would change, allowing Islam to prevail. However, for the Muslims to achieve supremacy and triumph, two things, not mutually exclusive, would be required: sincerity of intent and a proper execution of duty. Muslims are always in need of emphasizing the second condition, for some tend to imagine that good intentions and sincerity alone are sufficient to achieve success. When the Muslims' performance is assessed, their shortcomings or lack of fighting skills are not likely to be glossed over or overlooked. They have to give their utmost, no matter how little it may be, to the cause for which they are fighting and then God will give them aid and support.

We have seen wars between equally equipped sides that go on for years or decades, and others that are brought to an end in a matter of days or weeks. The worst defeat is that which comes from within, as

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a result of internal faults and weaknesses, rather than due to an enemy's strength or superiority. And so it is with Muslims all through their history. Their reversals have most often been self-inflicted, being a result of disunity and internal squabbling rather than the power of their enemies. Once they overcome those weaknesses, they regain the initiative and move ahead. The surah stresses this point very strongly when it says:

Do not, therefore, lose heart or grieve, for you shall reign supreme as long as you uphold your belief. If you have sustained casualties and loss, so has the other side, and that is how We alternate [victory and defeat] among people so that God may distinguish the true believers and choose martyrs from among you; for God does not love the transgressors. (139–40)

Human history is a continual struggle between the forces of good and evil, beauty and repugnance, meanness and nobility. God says in the Qur'an: "They will remain at odds [with one another], except for those to whom your Lord has shown mercy, and that is what He created them for" (*Hūd*: 118–19), and "We made some of you as means to test others, to see if you would endure, and your Lord is ever aware of all" (*al-Furqān*: 20). God is no doubt capable of destroying false beliefs and their adherents, but that would negate the role of the believers and undermine their efforts and the favors they would receive from God, who says: "Had God willed, He could Himself have dispersed them, but He so ordained it that He might test some of you by means of others" (*Muḥammad*: 4). And so it has been with all the previous prophets and messengers and their followers. Every achievement made on earth on behalf of God has come about as a result of human effort and endeavor. God asserts:

For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and

SURAH 3 • *Āl ‘Imrān*

mosques—in [all of] which God’s name is abundantly extolled—
would surely have been destroyed [ere now]. (*al-Hajj*: 40)

So God most wisely recalled these facts in the present surah to Muhammad’s followers when He was consoling them over their ordeal at Uḥud. He said:

Many a prophet went into battle supported by multitudes of devotees, but they were never daunted by what befell them for the sake of God. They neither weakened nor let up abjectly; God loves the steadfast. Their only words were, “Our Lord, forgive us our sins and our excesses, give us strength and victory over the unbelievers.”
(146–47)

The surah then continues to dress the Muslims’ wounds and raise their morale and prompt them to regain their unity and self-confidence. It is important to recall here that the defeat at Uḥud had uncovered some high-caliber individuals who had displayed extreme courage and self-denial, and cared nothing for worldly gains. There were men who held to their positions even as things looked very desperate. Women too entered the battlefield with a tenacity and valor like that of the men. The battle claimed a number of martyrs, men and women, who sacrificed their own lives for the cause of God and His Messenger. The battle of Uḥud was to remain engraved in the memory of Muslims, generation after generation. Muhammad himself was to remember Uḥud constantly for the rest of his life, saying, “Uḥud is a mountain that loves us as we love it.”

Martyrdom commands a place of very high regard in Islam. Martyrs are chosen by God Himself, as the surah confirms, saying: “And [God] chooses martyrs from among you” (140). Those chosen are usually the believers who give God’s cause precedence in their actions over all else and who devote their whole life to the promotion, reinforcement, and defense of their faith and the Islamic way of

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life. We have some exceptional examples among the martyrs of Uḥud. Take Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr, for instance, who was one of the most handsome and well-to-do youths of Makkah. He adopted Islam, left all his wealth behind, and spent the rest of his days in poverty; instead of silk, he was reduced to wearing clothes made of sheepskin. He emigrated to Madinah very early and was charged with teaching the new religion to its inhabitants. He spared no effort to carry out that task. But there he was dying in Uḥud, unable to afford his own burial cloth. And look at 'Abd Allah ibn Ḥaram, father of a son and six daughters, who asked his son to stay and look after his sisters because he did not want to remain behind when the Messenger went to battle. He joined the fighters and was killed.

Martyrs were extolled in the surah as God says:

Never think that those who were slain in the cause of God are dead. They are alive and well provided for by their Lord. They are pleased with God's gifts and rejoicing for those they left behind that they should have nothing to fear or to regret. (169–70)

God has thereby reassured those who were martyred that their fellow Muslims will continue to uphold the true faith and support the cause of God and His Messenger, and that they will eventually join them in Paradise.

During the battle of Uḥud, the Muslim camp became extremely dangerously exposed when the archers abandoned their positions. In a desperate struggle, seventy of their number were killed and rumor had spread that the Prophet himself was among them. Despite the Muslims' defeat, the Arab tribes were not able to proceed to enter Madinah and were forced to return to Makkah. It is important, moreover, to remember here what the Muslims did after their defeat at Uḥud. They regrouped, tried to rise above their wounds, and made their way towards Makkah, chasing their Arab enemies who were still contemplating a return to Madinah to

complete their attack on it. When they realized that they were being followed by the Muslims, the Arabs hastened their pace and made for Makkah. This was noted in the surah which says: “As for those who after sustaining defeat responded to the call of God and the Messenger, those of them who do what is right and fear God shall be richly rewarded” (172).

At this point the surah, for a while, turns back to recount the behavior of the local Jews, and we note that the discussion alternates between them and the pagan Arabs. This is not surprising, since the Muslim community was facing both camps at the same time, as the surah itself indicates:

You shall be tested in your possessions and your persons, and you shall hear much that is hurtful from among those to whom the Book was given before you and from the pagans. However, if you persevere and remain God-conscious, then that will indeed be a commendable act. (186)

The Jews of Madinah had by then overreached themselves. In the Qur’an, God calls on the Muslims to spend of their wealth for the cause of God, whether to support the war effort or to provide welfare and help for their needy and poor people. This appeal is made in another surah with such eloquence and with a powerful incentive. It says: “Who will grant God a generous loan? He will repay him many times over. God retains and He gives abundantly and to Him you shall all return” (*al-Baqarah*: 245). Some Jews in Madinah, nonetheless, were saying something different. They were claiming that God was in need of people’s aid, and that He was resorting to usury while condemning it. Surah *Āl ‘Imrān* quotes them as saying: “‘God is poor, but we are rich.’ We [God] shall record what they have said” (181). Such statements were more suited to people who had neither faith in God nor consciousness of Him, and were symptomatic of a group who lived on corruption

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and traded spite and envy in contravention of the teachings of the wise and pious among them. Earlier prophets could only exhort their people to lead other nations in piety, teach them God's word, and show kindness towards them, but never look down upon them or manipulate and exploit them. The surah observes:

God made a covenant with those to whom the Book was given that they should proclaim it to all humanity and never suppress it. But they cast it behind their backs and sold it for a paltry sum. What an evil bargain they had made! Never think that those who congratulate themselves and love to be praised for what they had not done, will escape the scourge. A woeful chastening awaits them. (187–88)

Then the surah takes us into a different atmosphere, far removed from the past and its bittersweet reminiscences.

As ordinary honest human beings living in this world, experiencing and observing its complexities, intricacies, and marvels, are we not sometimes tempted to conclude that there is a God behind it all? Does it not then lead us to thank that God and praise Him? Let us leave religion and interreligious strife aside for a while. Let us simply use our minds and our logic and think of where we shall all end after we depart from this world in which we live. Why should people deny the existence of God and turn away from Him? Would it not be more sensible and more conducive to acknowledge and accommodate Him in our hearts and our lives? All through human history, voices have called forth and exhorted humanity to believe in God and be close to Him. Is it not time that people stopped to think and give heed to these calls, as the surah says:

Our Lord, we have heard someone calling to the true faith saying, "Believe in your Lord," and we believed. Our Lord, forgive us our sins and absolve us of our misdeeds and make us die righteous. (193)

God replies that He will overlook none of the good actions and deeds of people, whether men or women, black or white. Race and rank do not come into this at all and only good deeds count.

What is it, we may ask, that some people find so difficult in believing a person who calls them to lead a righteous life based on surrender to God and the pleasure of His grace? What is it that drives some of us to oppose such individuals, stand in their way, and persecute them? Such was the way in which the pagan Arabs and the bigots among the People of the Book greeted the mission of Prophet Muhammad and behaved towards him and his followers. They repressed and persecuted them, and drove them out of their homes and homelands. The Muslims withstood all that persecution, faced up to all kinds of hardship, and eventually had to emigrate from Makkah and seek refuge in Madinah. Their sole concern was the preservation of their faith and the defense and protection of their new religion and their community. Accordingly, the surah reassured them:

Their Lord answered them, saying: “I shall not deny any of you, man or woman, the reward of their labor... Those who emigrated, were driven out of their homes, suffered persecution for My sake and fought and were slain, I shall forgive them their sins and admit them to gardens with rivers running thereunder.” (195)

Following this extensive coverage of the surah’s two main subjects, it closes with two verses. The first one talks about the People of the Book and the stance expected of them towards Prophet Muhammad. It says:

There are some from among the People of the Book who truly believe in God, and in what was revealed to you and what had been revealed to them. They humble themselves before God and do not sell God’s revelations for a trifling price. These shall be rewarded by their Lord. (199)

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The verse, as we can see, extends to the Jews and the Christians an open invitation that is there for posterity, to heed the call of the Prophet of Islam and accept the message he delivered on behalf of God to all humankind.

The second verse, and the closing one in the surah, is addressed to the Muslims. "Believers, persevere in patience and constancy; vie in such perseverance; strengthen each other; and fear God; that you may prosper" (200). This is a directive addressed to those who believed in Muhammad and followed him to hold fast to the message he delivered and with which God had honored them. They are expected to show a much higher degree of steadfastness than their predecessors in upholding it, and to vigorously defend it, its followers, and their lands at all times. They are not to give any leeway to their enemies to overwhelm or dominate them, as witnessed over the last century or so when European colonialism swept over Muslim lands and controlled the lives and destinies of hundreds of millions of Muslims for decades. It is a call addressed to Muslims everywhere and of every generation, and it is up to every one of us to respond to it.