

punishment. This reassures the believers and enables them to face up to the schemes of the evil ones, especially since they are commanded to deal justly with those whom they hate because of all the hardship they may have suffered at their hands.

The *sūrah* continues to cultivate this spirit of justice and tolerance among the Muslim community, and to weaken feelings of hostility, prejudice and revenge. It reminds Muslims of God's grace which manifested itself in restraining the hands of the unbelievers when they intended to make a determined assault against the Muslims: *"Believers, remember the blessings God has bestowed on you, when certain people designed to stretch against you their hands, but He stayed their hands from you. Remain, then, God-fearing. In God let the believers place their trust."* (Verse 11)

Reports give different explanations as to whom this verse refers to. It is perhaps more correct to say that it refers to a group of unbelievers who tried to attack the Prophet and the Muslims during the days which led to the peace agreement at al-Hudaibiyah, but God foiled their design and enabled the Muslims to take them captive instead. The event itself is not as important as the lessons learnt from it. The Qur'an draws on these lessons to reduce the Muslims' hatred of these people, so that they would feel reassured as they reflected on the fact that God Himself takes care of them and protects them. In such an atmosphere, self-restraint, tolerance and the administration of justice become so much easier. Muslims would be ashamed of themselves if they were not to fulfil their covenant with God, especially when it is He who protects them from their enemies.

Perhaps we should say here very briefly that the idea of God's protection of the believers from aggression by their enemies is expressed in an image of hands being stretched to launch an aggression and then being stayed by a higher power. This charges the expression to its highest, as if the image of the events is placed in front of those who listen to the Qur'anic verse and as if they witness these events right here and now. The Qur'an employs this most expressive way in order to get its message to people in the clearest possible way.

## Broken Pledges

Indeed, God made a covenant with the Children of Israel and We appointed among them twelve captains. God said: I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path. (12)

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ وَبَعَثْنَا مِنْهُمُ اثْنَيْ عَشَرَ نَقِيبًا وَقَالَ اللَّهُ إِنِّي مَعَكُمْ لَئِنْ أَقَمْتُمُ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَيْتُمُ الزَّكَاةَ وَآمَنْتُمْ بِرُسُلِي وَعَزَّرْتُمُوهُمْ وَأَقْرَضْتُمُ اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا لَأُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْكُمْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَلَأُدْخِلَنَّكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ فَمَنْ كَفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ مِنْكُمْ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ سَوَاءَ السَّبِيلِ ﴿١٢﴾

Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover,

فِيمَا نَقَضُوا مِيثَاقَهُمْ لَعَنَّاهُمْ وَجَعَلْنَا قُلُوبَهُمْ قَاسِيَةً يُحَرِّفُونَ الْكَلِمَ عَنْ



they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind. From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery. But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do good. (13)

مَوَاضِعِهِ لَا وَنَسُوا حَظًّا مِمَّا  
ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ وَلَا نَزَالُ تَطَّلِعُ عَلَى  
خَائِنَةٍ مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِنْهُمْ  
فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاصْفَحْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ  
يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

Likewise, from those who said, "We are Christians," We have accepted a firm covenant, but they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done. (14)

وَمِنَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصَرِيُّ  
أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَهُمْ فَنَسُوا حَظًّا مِمَّا  
ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ فَأَغْرَيْنَا بَيْنَهُمُ الْعَدَاوَةَ  
وَالْبَغْضَاءَ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَمَةِ  
وَسَوْفَ يُنَبِّئُهُمُ اللَّهُ بِمَا كَانُوا  
يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much. There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book (15)

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ  
رَسُولُنَا يَبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ كَثِيرًا  
مِمَّا كُنْتُمْ تُخْفُونَ مِنَ  
الْكِتَابِ وَيَعْفُو عَنْ كَثِيرٍ  
قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ  
وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Through which God guides those who seek His good pleasure to the paths of peace. By His grace, He leads them out of darkness into light and guides them to a straight way. (16)

يَهْدِي بِهِ اللَّهُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ  
رِضْوَانَهُ سُبُلَ السَّلَامِ  
وَيُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ  
إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِهِ وَيَهْدِيهِمْ  
إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٦﴾

Unbelievers indeed are they who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth? To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things. (17)

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ  
هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ قُلْ فَمَنْ  
يَمْلِكُ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا إِنْ أَرَادَ  
أَنْ يُهْلِكَ الْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ  
مَرْيَمَ وَأُمَّهُ، وَفَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ  
جَمِيعًا وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ  
وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ  
وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٧﴾

Both the Jews and the Christians say: "We are God's children and His loved ones." Say: Why then does He punish you for your sins? You are only human beings of His creation. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will. To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and to Him all shall return. (18)

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ وَالنَّصَارَى نَحْنُ  
أَبْنَاءُ اللَّهِ وَأَحِبُّوا اللَّهَ قُلْ فَلِمَ  
يُعَذِّبُكُمْ بِذُنُوبِكُمْ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ بَشَرٌ  
مِّمَّنْ خَلَقَ يَغْفِرُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ  
وَيُعَذِّبُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ  
السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا  
وَالِيهِ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٨﴾



People of earlier revelations! Now after an interval during which no messengers have appeared, Our Messenger has come to you to make things plain to you, lest you say: "No one has come to give us good news or to warn us." Now there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner. God has power over all things. (19)

And so Moses said to his people: "My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. (20)

My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost." (21)

"Moses", they answered, "mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter". (22)

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولُنَا  
يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ عَلَى فِتْرَةٍ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ أَنْ  
تَقُولُوا مَا جَاءَنَا مِنْ بَشِيرٍ وَلَا نَذِيرٍ  
فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَشِيرٌ وَنَذِيرٌ ۖ وَاللَّهُ  
عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٩﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَى لِقَوْمِهِ يَتَقَوَّمُوا  
أَذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ  
جَعَلَ فِيكُمْ أَنْبِيَاءَ وَجَعَلَكُمْ  
مُلُوكًا وَآتَاكُمْ مَا لَمْ يُؤْتِ أَحَدًا  
مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

يَتَقَوَّمُوا أَدْخُلُوا الْأَرْضَ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ  
الَّتِي كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَلَا تَرْتَدُّوا عَلَى  
أَدْبَارِكُمْ فَتَنْقَلِبُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

قَالُوا يَمْوَسَىٰ إِنَّ فِيهَا قَوْمًا جَبَّارِينَ  
وَإِنَّا لَنَدْخُلُهَا حَتَّىٰ يَخْرُجُوا  
مِنْهَا فَإِن يَخْرُجُوا مِنْهَا فَإِنَّا  
دَاخِلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Thereupon two men who were God-fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: "Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers." (23)

They said, "Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." (24)

"Lord", he said, "I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrongdoing folk." (25)

He replied, "This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for forty years, during which they will wander aimlessly on earth. Do not grieve for these wrongdoing folk." (26)

قَالَ رَجُلَانِ مِنَ الَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ  
أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمَا ادْخُلُوا عَلَيْهِمُ  
الْبَابَ فَإِذَا دَخَلْتُمُوهُ فَإِنَّكُمْ  
غَالِبُونَ وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَتَوَكَّلُوا إِن كُنْتُمْ  
مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

قَالُوا يَمْوَسَىٰ إِنَّا لَنَدْخُلُهَا  
أَبَدًا مَا دَامُوا فِيهَا فَادْهَبْ أَنْتَ  
وَرَبُّكَ فَقَاتِلَا إِنَّا هَاهُنَا  
قَاعِدُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي لَا أَمْلِكُ إِلَّا نَفْسِي  
وَأَخِي ۖ فَافْرِقْ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَ الْقَوْمِ  
الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ فَإِنَّهَا مُحَرَّمَةٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَرْبَعِينَ  
سَنَةً يَتِيهُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَلَا  
تَأْسَ عَلَى الْقَوْمِ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾



## Overview

In the first passage of this *sūrah*, God reminds the Muslims of their covenant with Him and directs them to always remember the blessings He has bestowed on them when He accepted their covenant and bound them to it. The reminder serves as further encouragement to them to fulfil their pledges and to beware of breaking God's covenant. This new passage outlines the attitudes different groups of those formerly given Divine revelations had taken towards their covenants with God. The passage explains what punishment befell earlier communities as a result of their violation of their covenants. This serves as a reminder to the Muslim community, pointing out that God's law never fails and admits no favouritism. It also reveals the true nature of the people of earlier revelations and their attitude towards Islam. It, thus, enables the Muslims to see through them and to counter their wicked designs against Islam which they treacherously work out under the guise of following the teachings of their religions. In truth, they had turned their backs on their faith and violated their pledges to God.

This passage firstly discusses the covenant God made with the followers of Moses, when He saved them from subjugation in Egypt and their subsequent violations of this covenant. As a result, they were cursed and rejected by God. They were also denied His blessings and guidance. It also refers to the covenant God made with those who claimed to be Christians. As a result of their following a course contrary to their covenant with God, the seeds of enmity were sewn among them. Hostility among their different sects will continue until the Day of Judgement. The passage also refers to the attitude of the Jews when they cowardly refused to enter the Holy Land, although God had promised them that they would have it for themselves. They said to Moses: "Go forth, then you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." (Verse 24)

This exposition of these pledges and covenants, and the attitudes of those who were previously given revelations, also reveals the distortion that had crept into the Jewish and Christian faiths. Included in their covenants was a condition that they would continue to believe in God's oneness and fully submit to Him. By so doing, they would fulfil their part of the bargain and earn all the blessings God had bestowed on them and the guarantees of victory He had given them. They refused all this and, consequently, incurred the scourge of God's curse and ended up in disunity, suffering persecution by others.

This passage also calls on them anew to follow the Divine guidance embodied in the final message from God, conveyed by Muḥammad, His last Messenger. It refutes their argument that it had been a very long time since the last of their prophets had died and, hence, they had subsequently forgotten everything. A new Messenger who warns and gives happy news has now been sent to all mankind. Their argument is thus refuted by undeniable evidence.

Through this new call to them, the unity of the Divine faith becomes clearly apparent. God accepts the same covenant from all His servants, which binds them to believe in Him alone, and to believe in, and support, His messengers, making no distinction between them. It calls upon them to attend regularly to their prayers, to regularly pay charity and so financially support God's cause. These are the terms of the covenant with God laying down the essentials of the true faith, defining proper worship and outlining the main features of a social system that is suitable to man and acceptable to God.

## The Terms of Covenants Made with God

*Indeed, God made a covenant with the Children of Israel and We appointed among them twelve captains. God said: I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path. (Verse 12) Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover, they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind. From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery. But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do good. (Verse 13)*

*Likewise, from those who said, "We are Christians," We have accepted a firm covenant, but they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done. (Verse 14)*



The covenant God had accepted from the Children of Israel stated a specific condition and stipulated certain penalties in case of default. After explaining the circumstances leading to the confirmation of this covenant, the *sūrah* mentions its terms, conditions and penalties. It was a covenant made with the twelve captains of the Israelites, representing all twelve tribes descending from Jacob, or Israel. Each tribe descended from one of Jacob's sons. The terms of the covenant are outlined as follows: *"God said: I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path."* (Verse 12)

When God says to any group of people, *"I shall be with you"*, He gives them a great promise. He who has God on his side suffers no opposition. Whoever and whatever stands against him is of no consequence. Moreover, whoever is with God will not go astray. To be with God is sufficient to ensure the right guidance and the proper support. Anyone who is sure to be on God's side will never suffer worry or misery. He is reassured and blessed with unfailing happiness. He need not ask for anything better than what he already has.

But God does not give this blessing of being with them as a special favour or a personal gift. This comes only after its conditions are fulfilled. It is, indeed, a contract that outlines conditions and specifies penalties. The first condition is to attend to prayer. This is more than merely offering prayers. It means that prayers should become a manifestation of a true relationship between man and his Lord. This makes prayer an educative element which purifies man's behaviour and dissuades him from committing any blatant sin or gross indecency.

Second is charitable payment, in recognition of God's favour for having given us what we have and by way of acknowledgement of the fact that whatever we may own actually belongs to God. The payment of *zakāt*, or charity, is a manifestation of our obedience to God with regard to how to dispense with the money He has given us and specified the conditions of our ownership of it. Moreover, a perfect system of social security can thus be implemented in a society established on faith. Thus, the social economy becomes free of the shackles which result from the concentration of national wealth in the hands of a small minority. This leads to a situation where the majority of the

majority of the population is unable to buy its needs while a small minority enjoys all the wealth. This leads to all sorts of social corruption which can be prevented by the *zakāt* system which ensures the proper distribution of wealth.

The next condition is to believe in God's Messengers making no distinction between them. Every single one of them was sent by God to preach the same message. Therefore, to deny any single one of them is to deny them all and to disbelieve in God, who had sent them all. Moreover, believing in them must not be a mere mental exercise. To truly believe in them is to be actively involved in supporting them in order to ensure that they succeed in their mission. Believing in the Divine faith requires that a believer is always ready to do what is necessary and within his power to support his faith and to see it well established in human life. The Divine faith is not confined merely to a set of beliefs or acts of worship. It is a practical system which organises human life in a certain fashion. Hence, it requires the support of all its followers to establish and protect it. Otherwise, a believer does not fulfil his covenant with God.

In addition to *zakāt*, giving generously to support God's cause is mentioned as a loan given to God. It should be pointed out here that it is God who owns what we have, but He gracefully describes what we pay to further His cause as a loan given to Him.

These were the conditions of the covenant God accepted from the Children of Israel. The reward for the fulfilment of these conditions was to forgive them their sins. Human beings will always err, no matter how keen they are to do what is right. Therefore, the forgiveness of sins is a great reward and a manifestation of God's endless grace. The reward also includes admission into Heaven which is described in the Qur'ān as *"gardens through which running waters flow."* (Verse 12) This is again a reward which God bestows on human beings out of His grace. No man can earn this reward through his own actions. God, however, has promised this reward to those who do their utmost to fulfil their pledges to Him.

The penalty for failing to honour one's pledges is specified at the end of this verse: *"But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path."* (Verse 12) Hence, he can have no guidance and no way of return. The pledge had already been made, the guidance already provided, the way shown and the penalty



Such was the covenant God accepted from the captains of the Children of Israel on behalf of their communities. They all accepted it, which made it a covenant applicable to every single individual among them, and one with the whole nation they constituted. How, then, did the Israelites subsequently fare?

### Hardened Hearts

They have indeed broken their covenant with God; they killed their prophets for no legitimate reason, and they plotted to kill and crucify Jesus (peace be upon him) the last of their Prophets. They also distorted their revealed Scriptures, i.e. the Torah, and abandoned its laws. They adopted a hostile attitude towards the last of all Prophets, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). They schemed against him and betrayed him and adopted an uncompromising attitude of hostility towards his message, not hesitating to violate the treaty they signed with him. As a result, God denied them His guidance and rejected them. Their hearts were caused to harden so that they could no longer be the recipients of Divine guidance: *"Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover, they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind."* (Verse 13)

Indeed, God tells the truth. These were the distinctive features of the Israelites; a curse clearly apparent in their faces and deeply entrenched in their evil character, a hardness that left no room for a compassionate smile, and actions that took no heed of human feelings. They may appear gentle when they have something to fear or an interest to further, or when they try to sow the seeds of discord among people, but their hardness will nevertheless surface revealing how, deep at heart, they are cruel, devoid of mercy. Such was their essential nature that they distorted revealed words, took it all out of context. They distorted their revealed Book and presented it in a light different from that given to Moses (peace be upon him). They did this in more ways than one. They added to their Book much of what served their devious goals and gave them religious justification for pursuing their wicked ends, which they falsely attributed to God. They also interpreted such original statements as remained in their Book according to their prejudices, this to fit them to their wicked designs. Furthermore, they deliberately abandoned or forgot the tenets of their faith and left them unimplemented in

their society because such implementation would have required them to adhere to a clean and pure method, one acceptable to God.

*"From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery."* (Verse 13) This is an address to the Prophet (peace be upon him), describing the attitude of the Jews towards the Muslim community in Madinah. They never hesitated to try to betray God's Messenger (peace be upon him). Their treacherous attempts came fast and furious, one after the other. Indeed, that was their standard practice during the years when they were with the Prophet in Madinah, then in the whole of Arabia. It has continued to be their practice whenever they live within a Muslim community, despite the fact that the Muslim community has been the only one to provide them with safe refuge, allow them a life free of persecution and extend to them kindly treatment and a prosperous life. Nonetheless, they have continued to show the same attitude they adopted towards the Prophet; characteristics more suited to stealthy snakes and cunning foxes. If they are unable to level a direct blow to destroy the Muslims, they resort to tricks and wicked designs instead. They scheme with every enemy of the Muslims until they find a chance to hit them hard, without mercy or compassion, paying no heed to any covenant or treaty. This is true of the great majority of them, as God described them in His Book and as He has told us of their nature which they acquired as a consequence of their breaking their covenant with God early on in their history.

The Qur'ānic description of the situation of the Jews in Madinah and their attitude towards God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is very interesting: *"From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery."* (Verse 13) Treacherous actions, intentions, words and looks are all grouped together in an Arabic expression stating the adjective and deleting the noun it qualifies. For "treachery" in the English translation we read "treacherous" in the Arabic original, which is a mode of expression suggesting a situation so rampant that it is perpetrated by every single one of them. This is part of their nature. It is also the essence of their attitude towards the Prophet and the Muslim community.

The Qur'ān is the teacher and the guide of the Muslim nation, and it marks the road the Muslims are required to follow throughout history. The Qur'ān tells the Muslims about their enemies and their historical attitude towards God's guidance. Had this nation of believers referred to the Qur'ān and listened to its directives and implemented its instructions, their enemies would never have been able to win the



upper hand in any fight against Islam. But when the Muslims broke their covenants with their Lord and abandoned the Qur'ān, they suffered the setbacks and calamities known to everyone. It is true that they continue to be enchanted with musical recitations of the Qur'ān and may use these as charms, but this is not the purpose for which the Qur'ān was revealed. Indeed, when the Qur'ān is not implemented in the lives of the Muslim community, it is effectively abandoned by it, regardless of how much lip service is paid to it.

God tells the Muslim community what happened to the Children of Israel and how they were cursed, rejected and suffered hardened hearts as a result of breaking their covenants with God. Thus, the Muslim community is warned against breaking its own covenant with Him lest it should suffer the same fate. It is because Muslims have disregarded this warning and followed a way different from that of Islam that God has taken away from them the role of humanity's leadership, leaving them at its tail end. They will continue to be in this losing position until they return to their Lord, adhere to their covenant, and fulfil their pledges. Then and only then will God fulfil His promise to them, give them power and return them to the leadership of humanity. God's promise never fails.

At the time when this Qur'ānic verse was revealed, God instructed His Messenger in these terms: *"But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do good."* (Verse 13) To pardon their evil act is to do good, and to forgive their treachery is to do good. But a time came when forgiveness and pardon could no longer be extended. God subsequently instructed the Prophet to evacuate them from Madinah and later from the Arabian Peninsula altogether. These instructions were carried out.

### The Origins of Enmity Among the Christians

God also relates to His Messenger (peace be upon him) and to the Muslim community that He accepted a covenant from those who described themselves as Christians, but they, too, were unfaithful to their covenant and suffered the consequences: *"Likewise, from those who said, 'We are Christians', We have accepted a firm covenant, but they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done."* (Verse 14)

This verse begins with a particularly significant description: *"Likewise, from those who said: 'We are Christians', We have accepted a firm covenant."* This mode of expression tells us that they simply professed to be Christians without giving practical credence to their claims. The essence of their covenant was to believe in God's oneness. Yet it was in regard to this very issue that deviation crept into the history of Christianity. It is this central clause in their covenant which became the forgotten part of what they had enjoined. When it was forgotten, every deviation became possible and enmity broke out between the numberless sects and churches of Christianity, old and new, as we will shortly but briefly explain. God tells us that their enmity and hatred will continue until the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, they will suffer the punishment of the Hereafter, at the time when they will be shown a clear image of what they have done in this life.

Old and modern history has witnessed much conflict, hostility and enmity between those who claim to be Christians. All this gives factual endorsement to what God tells us in His truthful Book. Their wars against each other have caused much more bloodshed than the wars they fought against non-Christians throughout history. They have fought each other because of conflicts over principles of faith, disputes over religious supremacy and quarrels over political, economic and social issues. Many generations have passed but their hostility and their wars have not subsided. They will continue to flare up until the Day of Judgement as stated by the One who always says the truth. This is all a natural result of their violation of their pledges to God and their negligence of what He commanded them to do. As we have already said, the first item in their covenant is to believe in God's oneness and it is this first item that they abandoned shortly after Jesus Christ had been raised by God. Perhaps this is not the proper place to discuss the reasons for this deviation in detail.

Now that the attitude taken by the Jews and Christians towards their covenants with God has been made clear, the *sūrah* addresses both communities announcing the message of the last of all prophets and that it is addressed to them as well as to the Arabs and to all mankind. They are required to follow God's last Messenger, and this requirement is part of the firm covenant they made with God. They are told that this last Messenger has come to make public much of what they have concealed of God's revelations which were entrusted to their care, and concerning which they were unfaithful to their trust. They are also told that this last



Messenger will also forgive them much of what they have concealed, because it is no longer needed in the new message. It points out some of the deviant beliefs which the last Messenger would rectify, such as the claim by the Christians that Jesus Christ, son of Mary, was God Himself, and the assertion by both Christians and Jews that they were God's sons and beloved ones. This address is concluded with a clear statement that they would have no argument to press after the revelation of this final and clear message. Nor could they claim that a long time had lapsed after the revelation of their messages, and that this had caused them to forget and become confused.

*People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much. There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book, through which God guides those who seek His good pleasure to the paths of peace. By His grace, He leads them out of darkness into light and guides them to a straight way. (Verses 15–16)*

### A Messenger with an Unlikely Background

Those people who received revelations in the past found it rather hard to accept that a Prophet who did not belong to them should call on them to submit themselves to God. This Prophet belonged to a nation of illiterate people whom they used to despise, on account of their being unlettered while they themselves had Divine Scriptures. God wanted to bestow a great honour on those unlettered people and, therefore, He chose from among them the individual who was to become the last of all Prophets. He also gave them His final message, addressed to all mankind. He taught those unlettered people to become the ones with the highest standard of knowledge on earth. This transformation made them the ones with the highest beliefs, the most consistent and sound way of life, the most complete system and legal code, the soundest social set-up and the most sublime standard of morality. All this was part of the grace God bestowed on them when He chose Islam to be their faith. Those unlettered people could not have aspired to be the guides for humanity without this grace they received from God. Indeed, they never had and will never have anything

In this Divine address to the people of earlier Scriptures, it is made clear that they are called upon to accept Islam, believe in Muḥammad and support him, as this has been part of their covenant which God accepted from them. They are clearly told that God Himself is a witness that this Prophet who could not read and write was His Messenger to them as well as to the Arabs and to all mankind. There is no denying the fact that his message was given to him by God, and no claim can be admitted that his message was addressed to the Arabs only; it is, indeed, addressed also to the people of earlier revelations: *"People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much."* (Verse 15) He has sent a Messenger to you, and his role is to open things up to you so that you see them in their reality. You can thus see how he brings out into the open what you have conspired to suppress of the basic truth of the revelations given to you.

This applies to both the Christians and Jews. The Christians suppressed the very basic and fundamental principle of faith, namely, the concept of God's oneness, and the Jews suppressed many Divine legislations such as the punishment of adulterers with stoning and the total prohibition of usury. Both the Christians and the Jews also suppressed the news of the future mission of the unlettered Prophet, *"whom they find mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel in their hands."* (7: 157) He (peace be upon him) pardons them for much of what they had distorted or suppressed as it is not included in his revelations. God has abrogated many of the rulings of earlier Scriptures and Divine codes as these had fulfilled their purpose in the particular community to which the message had been revealed. They had no longer any role to play in human society. Now the final, comprehensive and everlasting message has been revealed and become well-established as a demonstration of the perfection of the grace God has bestowed on man, when He chose self-surrender, or Islam, as the basis of the faith acceptable to Him. No abrogation or modification can be introduced into this message.

### The Nature of God's Final Message

The nature of what the last Messenger has been given, the role it is destined to play in human life and its practical effect are then explained: *"There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book."* (Verse 15)



message of Islam more accurately and comprehensively than stating that it is "a light". In his heart of hearts, in everything in his life, in his evaluation of things, events and people, a believer realises as soon as he accepts the truth of faith that he has a light that makes everything clear to him. Everything brightens up in front of him. No longer is he confused about anything; no longer does he suffer any hesitation before taking a serious decision; no longer is he travelling an unmarked road and no longer is he uncertain of his direction. His ultimate goal is clear. His way towards it is straight and he is certain of his footsteps. Two qualities describe the message which was given to the noble Messenger: *"a light and a clear book"*.

It has been God's pleasure to choose self-surrender, or Islam, as a religion for mankind. Anyone who follows what God has been pleased to choose for him and accepts it with pleasure will be guided by God *"to the paths of peace"*. How true and accurate this description is. What this faith imparts to life as a whole is peace, in the broadest sense of the term. It is peace within the individual, the community and the whole world. It is peace with one's conscience, with one's mind and body. It is peace within the home and family, society and the community and with humanity at large. It is peace with life, the universe and with the Creator, God. Mankind never knew or experienced this sort of peace except through following this faith and implementing its laws and systems.

It is a true fact that through this religion of Islam God guides anyone who seeks His pleasure by following it *"to the paths of peace"* in all the aforementioned aspects of life. No one can appreciate how profound a blessing this is except a person who has experienced what life is like along the paths of war in ignorant societies, old and modern, or one who has experienced the turmoil of worry and restlessness generated within man's conscience by deviant faiths, or erroneous laws and systems. Those who were the first to be addressed by these Qur'anic revelations realised, as a result of their past experience in ignorant societies, the true meaning of this peace which brought happiness into their personal lives.

We badly need to understand this basic truth. We see ignorance all around us playing havoc with man's life, as it continues to cause wars to flare up within human conscience and human society, generation after generation. No one needs to understand this true wisdom more

history, only to leave it for a life of war that crushes our spirits, morality, behaviour and society. We put up with being choked by the tightening grip of darkness and endure the unabating war it wages against us, all when Islam and the peace it imparts to mankind is well within our reach. We only need to accept for ourselves what God has chosen for us to enjoy this blessed peace. What a raw deal we accept for ourselves when we barter good for evil, truth for error and peace for war.

We can save mankind from the tribulations of ignorance and the war it wages on man in all its shapes and forms. But we cannot do so until we save ourselves by turning back to what God has chosen for us and seek His pleasure by following it in order to be included among those whom God guides along the paths of peace and *"leads them out of darkness into light"* (Verse 16), by His grace. Everything that results from abandoning Islam adds to the state of darkness. There is the darkness of superstition and ill-conceived beliefs, the darkness of unrestrained desire and caprice, the darkness of worry and confusion, the darkness of confused values and mistaken judgements and standards. Light on the other hand, is the sort of clarity and brightness which lightens up man's conscience, his mind and his whole life.

He *"guides them to a straight way."* (Verse 16) It is in line with human nature and with the universe as well as the laws which govern the existence of both man and the universe. It leads straight to God and allows no confusion of issues or blurring of facts or errors of direction.

It is God, the Creator of man, human nature, the universe and its laws, who has devised this system for man and chosen this religion for the believers. It is only natural, therefore, that this system should show them the straight way, for no other system can map it out for them. God always tells the truth. He is in no need of anyone. It is neither of any benefit to Him that people follow His guidance, nor of any consequence to Him that they should sink into error. It is only because He is most gracious that He has given them this faith, which maps out for them the straight way. To claim that Jesus Christ is God is a blatant blasphemy. To say that the Jews and the Christians are God's beloved sons is a false fabrication. Such claims are pressed by people of earlier revelations who have suppressed the clear essence of the concept of God's oneness. The last Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), was sent to put it back in its clearest form, so that those who have strayed away from it may turn back.



### False Claims Leading to Disbelief

*Unbelievers indeed are they who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth? To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things. (Verse 17)*

The message Jesus (peace be upon him) conveyed as given to him by his Lord was the message of God's absolute oneness which has been given to every messenger. Total submission to God alone as the only God and the Lord of the universe was the attitude adopted by every messenger. This clear faith, however, later became distorted after pagans adopted Christianity, retaining some traces of their old pagan beliefs which they were keen to introduce into the faith based on God's oneness. As time passed, these deviant beliefs became an integral part of the whole faith.

These deviant beliefs were not introduced all at the same time. Ecclesiastical councils introduced them at different intervals until they eventually produced this singularly confusing mixture of legends and concepts that defies even those of its advocates who try to give a logical interpretation of it.

The basic concept of God's oneness was preached after Jesus (peace be upon him) by his disciples and their followers. The Gospel of Barnabas, one of many written at the time, speaks of Jesus Christ as a Messenger of God. Internal differences then broke out, with some maintaining that the Christ was not different from other messengers sent by God. Others acknowledged that he was a messenger but they claimed that he had a special relationship with God, while a third group said that he was the son of God because he was created without a father. Nevertheless, he was one of God's creation. A different group claimed that he was God's son, and that he was not created; he shared with the Father the quality of being eternal.

To settle their differences, a great synod met in 325 AD, attended by 48,000 patriarchs and bishops who were described by Ibn al-Baṭrīq, a historian of Christianity, as follows:

They differed greatly in views and faiths. Some of them maintained that both the Christ and his mother were gods, while

others, Sabilius and his followers, viewed the relationship between the Christ and the Father as a brand of fire separated from a torch, which continued to burn unaffected by this split. A third group, Ilyan and those who followed his lead, claimed that Mary did not bear Jesus for nine months, as mothers bear their children. He only passed through her belly as water runs through gutters. The Word went through her ear and came out instantly through the passage where a child is born. Another group claimed that the Christ was a human being created from the Divine with an essence similar to that of any one of us. The beginning of the son started with Mary, and he was chosen to maintain the human essence. Divine grace was bestowed on him with love and Divine will. It is for this reason that he was called the son of God. They maintained that God is an eternal, single essence and single hypostasis who had three names. They did not believe in the Word or in the Holy Spirit. This was the view advocated by Paul Shamshati, the patriarch of Antioch and his followers who were called the Bulikanians. Yet another group believed in a trinity consisting of three deities: good, evil and a middle one in between. This view was advanced by Markiun whom they claimed to be Jesus's Chief Disciple, denying Peter. A further group maintained that Jesus Christ had a Divine nature. This was the belief advocated by St. Paul and 318 bishops who followed him.<sup>1</sup>

The Roman Emperor Constantine, who embraced Christianity without understanding anything of it chose this last view and supported its advocates, giving them a chance to suppress all other beliefs and views, especially those who maintained that the Divine nature belonged only to the father and that Jesus, the Christ, was a human being.

The author of the *History of the Coptic Nation* has this to say about this decision: "The holy community and the apostolic church excommunicated everyone who claimed that there was a time when the son of God did not exist, or that he did not exist before he was born, or that he was born of nothing or that he was made of a substance or an essence other than that of God, the Father. It also excommunicated

1. Shaikh Muḥammad Abū Zahrah, *Muḥāḍarāt fī al-Naṣrānīyah*, or "Lectures on Christianity", Cairo. All that we summarise concerning these ecclesiastical councils are based on this book and its sources.



everyone who said that Jesus Christ was created, or that he was liable to change or that his shadow differed in shape."

By taking these decisions, the ecclesiastical council did not manage to win over the Unitarian followers of Aries who managed to gain power in Constantinople, Antioch, Babylon, Alexandria and Egypt.

A new disagreement erupted over the nature of the Holy Spirit, with some people maintaining that Jesus was Divine, while others rejected this. The first Synod of Constantinople met in 381 to settle these differences. The same historian of Christianity tells us of the decisions of this council as reported by the Bishop of Alexandria: "The Patriarch of Alexandria, Thimotheus said: To us the Holy Spirit does not have a meaning other than the spirit of God, and the spirit of God has no meaning other than His life. Therefore, if we were to say that the Holy Spirit was created, then we are saying that the spirit of God is created, and if we were to say that the spirit of God is created, then we are saying that His life is a creation. If we were to say that His life is a creation, then we allege that He is not the Living. If we were to allege that He is not the Living, then we disbelieve in Him. Whoever disbelieves in Him is to be cursed."

Hence, the Divinity of the Holy Spirit was established in this ecclesiastical council as the Divinity of the Christ, Jesus, was established in the earlier council. Thus the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit was finally established.

Yet another dispute broke out on the issue of the combination of the Divine and the human natures in the Christ. Nestor, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was of the view that there was a hypostasis and a nature. The hypostasis of Divinity was derived from the Father, while the humanity came through Mary. Therefore, Mary was the mother of man in Jesus, not the mother of God. Of the Christ who mixed with people and addressed them, he said, as quoted by the historian of Christianity: "This man who says he is the Christ is united with the son through love. It is said that he is God and the son of God, not in actuality but through grace."

He also says: "Nestor has maintained that our Lord, Jesus Christ, was not God himself, but a man full of blessings and grace, or he was inspired by God. He was infallible and committed no sin."

His view was rejected by the Bishop of Rome, the Patriarch of Alexandria and the Bishops of Antioch. They agreed to hold a fourth

"Mary the Virgin was the mother of God and that Jesus was a true God and a man at the same time, with two natures united in the hypostasis." The Council cursed Nestor.

The Church of Alexandria came out with yet another view which was discussed by the second synod, which concluded that "The Christ had one nature combining both Divinity and humanity."

This view was not universally accepted. Disagreement was rife and another ecclesiastical council met at Chalcedon in 451 and determined that "The Christ had two natures, not one. Divinity was a nature sacred and different from Humanity. Both met in the Christ." Thus, the second synod of Afsis was totally rejected.

The Egyptians declared that they did not recognise this decision. A bloody conflict erupted between the Egyptian Copts, the Monophysites and the Melkites of Syria whose views became the official ones of the Empire.

This note is sufficient to describe the great variety of deviant concepts about the Divinity of Jesus Christ and the enmity and hatred to which it led between various sects. These divisions and hatred continue even today.

### The True Verdict

The final message gives the ultimate ruling on this whole issue, with the final Messenger declaring to the people who received revelations in former times the true nature of the Divine faith: "*Unbelievers indeed are they who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary.'*" (Verse 17) "*Unbelievers indeed are those who claim that God is one of a Trinity.*" (Verse 73) An effort is made here to persuade them to listen to the voice of reason, upright nature and fact: "*Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth?*" (Verse 17) This represents an absolute and undeniable distinction between God, His nature, will and dominion on the one hand and the nature of Jesus (peace be upon him), his mother and all beings on the other. The difference is clear and total. God is single; nothing is like Him; His will is absolute; His authority is total; no one can do anything to reverse His will should He desire to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, his mother and everyone on earth. He, the most glorious owns and creates everything, while all else are



*all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things.*" (Verse 17)

The Islamic faith thus appears to all in its true light: simple, clear, straightforward. Its clarity is even more enhanced in comparison to all erroneous concepts, legends and pagan beliefs which have crept into the faith of a section of those who were given earlier revelations. The first distinctive feature of the Islamic faith becomes prominent as it states without any trace of ambiguity the true nature of Godhead, as well as servitude and submission to God. It separates the two positions most decisively.

### **Wishful Thinking That Comes to Nothing**

The *sūrah* then mentions another claim pressed by the Jews and Christians: *"Both the Jews and the Christians say: 'We are God's children and His loved ones.'*" (Verse 18) They allege that some sort of parenthood belongs to God. If this fatherhood is not a physical one, then it is spiritual. Whatever it is, it throws an element of doubt on the concept of God's oneness and detracts from the decisive separation between the position of God and that of His servants. The fact is that this separation is necessary for the clarity of faith and the proper order of human life. It is essential so that all worship is addressed to God by all His creation. They, thus, have a single legislative authority which sets for them their values, standards, laws and systems, with no confusion of authority resulting from a jumble of qualities and positions. It is not merely a question of deviant beliefs, but a question of their consequences that are bound to corrupt life as a whole.

As a logical consequence of their claim that they are the children of God and His loved ones, the Jews and Christians claimed that He would not punish them for their sins, and that they would not be in Hell for more than a few days, if at all. This means in plain terms that God's justice is not administered properly and that He favours a section of His servants by allowing them to spread corruption on earth without punishing them as He punishes others who would do the same. Can we imagine the sort of corrupt life that may result from such a concept?

At this point, Islam rejects most decisively such deviant beliefs and their practical consequences which corrupt life. It stresses the fact that God's justice is absolute: *"Say: Why then does He punish you for your sins? You are only human beings of His creation. He forgives whom He*

*will and punishes whom He will.*" (Verse 18) Their claims of being God's children are, thus, stated to be false. They are no more than other human beings. Forgiveness or punishment is determined by the same rule, based on God's will which has established certain reasons for forgiveness and different ones for punishment. Neither is determined by any special relationship with God.

We then have a reiteration of the fact that everything belongs to God and returns to Him: *"To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and to Him all shall return.*" (Verse 18) It goes without saying that the owner is different from what is owned. Limitless as He is in His glory, His will is absolute and to Him will all return.

A renewed address is then made to the people given earlier revelations in order to allow them no excuse whatsoever. They are made to visualise most clearly their eventual destiny: *"People of earlier revelations! Now after an interval during which no messengers have appeared, Our Messenger has come to you to make things plain to you, lest you say: 'No one has come to give us good news or to warn us.' Now there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 19)

With such decisive clarity, all issues are made plain. No longer can the people of earlier revelations claim that the unlettered Messenger has not been sent to them. God tells them: *"People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to make things plain to you."* (Verse 19) No longer can they profess that they have not been warned or given good news for a long period which might have allowed forgetfulness or deviation to creep in. Now someone to warn them and to give them happy news has come to them.

They are reminded that nothing can resist God's power; nothing can defy Him. He can send a Messenger from among the unlettered nation and He can punish the people given revelations earlier for what they may earn: *"God has power over all things."* (Verse 19)

Thus, this round of confrontation with peoples of earlier revelations comes to an end. It has exposed their deviant beliefs which they introduced in the true faith preached by their messengers. It states most clearly the only faith which God accepts from believers and pronounces as false all their excuses which they reiterate in justification of their negative attitude to the unlettered Prophet, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It calls on them to follow the Divine guidance on the path of



and weakens the effects of their scheming against the Muslim community on the other. Moreover, the way the Muslim community and all those who seek guidance must follow is clearly marked out.

### An Appeal Mixed with Worry

At this point in the *sūrah*, the attitude of the Children of Israel towards God's Messenger sent to them, Moses (peace be upon him), is given. Moses was their saviour who led them out of Egypt towards the holy land God had assigned to them. The *sūrah* also exposes their attitude to the covenant they made with their Lord and how they violated it and were punished for that violation.

*And so Moses said to his people: "My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. (Verse 20) My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost." (Verse 21) "Moses," they answered, "mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter." (Verse 22) Thereupon two men who were God-fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: "Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers." (Verse 23) They said, "Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." (Verse 24) "Lord," he said, "I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrongdoing folk." (Verse 25) He replied, "This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for forty years, during which they will wonder aimlessly on earth. Do not grieve for these wrongdoing folk." (Verse 26)*

This is only one episode in the story of the Children of Israel which is related in the Qur'ān in extensive detail to serve several purposes. One purpose relates to the fact that the Children of Israel were the first to confront the Islamic message with wicked designs, plots and open warfare both in Madinah and the whole of Arabia. Their hostile attitude could be traced back to the very early days of the Islamic message. It was they who encouraged the hypocrites to scheme against Islam and the Muslims. They also incited the pagan Arabs to fight the Muslim community and gave them their active support. It was they who started the war of false rumours against the Muslim community raising among them doubts and suspicions about the Muslim leadership and circulating distortions of the Islamic faith before they confronted the Muslim community in open warfare. It was necessary, therefore, to expose them to the Muslim community so that it knew its enemies: their nature, history, methods and means as well as the nature of the battle it had to fight against them.

Another purpose can be seen in the fact that the Israelites were the followers of a Divine faith revealed before the final faith of Islam. They had a long history before Islam, during which distortions crept into their faith and they repeatedly violated their agreement and covenant with God. The practical consequences of these violations and deviations were seen in their lives, their moral values and their traditions. As the Muslim nation is the heir to all Divine messages and the custodian of the monotheistic Divine faith as a whole, it is necessary that it be made fully aware of the history of the Israelites with all its ups and downs. This gave the Muslim community an accurate knowledge of the way it should follow, what slips lay ahead of it and the consequences of such slips, as these are reflected in the history and morality of the Jews. This enabled the Muslim community to add the experience of the Jews to the total sum of its own experience and to benefit by it in future. It could, thus, avoid the slips and deal effectively with deviation right at the start before it had a chance to develop.

Yet another purpose relates to the fact that over their long history the experience of the Jews was highly varied. God is aware that with the passage of time, people may change, and certain generations may deviate from the right path. As the Muslim nation will continue until the end of life, it is bound to go through certain periods which are not dissimilar to what the Jews have gone through. God has, therefore, chosen to make available to the leaders of the Muslim community and its reformers in different generations, clear examples of what could befall nations so that they may be able to diagnose the disease of their particular generation and administer the proper cure. It is a fact of life that those who deviate after having known the truth are the most resistant to calls and appeals to follow right guidance. Those without

hypocrites in Madinah, providing them with the means to scheme against Islam and the Muslims. They also incited the pagan Arabs to fight the Muslim community and gave them their active support. It was they who started the war of false rumours against the Muslim community raising among them doubts and suspicions about the Muslim leadership and circulating distortions of the Islamic faith before they confronted the Muslim community in open warfare. It was necessary, therefore, to expose them to the Muslim community so that it knew its enemies: their nature, history, methods and means as well as the nature of the battle it had to fight against them.



find something new which appeals to them and helps them shake off the burden of ignorance. They are most impressed by the first call that makes its appeal to them. Winning over those with an earlier experience requires a much more strenuous effort and a great deal of perseverance on the part of advocates of the Divine faith.

There are other purposes for relating the story of the Jews in such detail, but it is sufficient to make only these brief references here and go back to our commentary.

*And so Moses said to his people: "My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. (Verse 20) My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost." (Verse 21)*

Moses' words give us the impression that he may have been worried lest his people disobey. He had tried them before on several occasions. He had led them out of Egypt, liberated them from subjugation with God's help, who parted the sea for them and caused Pharaoh and his soldiers to drown. Nevertheless, when they came by a community engaged in pagan worship, they said to him: "*Moses, set up a deity for us as these people have deities.*" (7: 138) On another occasion, he had hardly left them for his appointment with his Lord when the Samaritan used the jewellery stolen from Egyptian women to make them an effigy of the calf which made a lowing sound. They started to worship the calf and claimed that it was the god Moses went to meet.

Another experience which Moses remembered well was when God made springs of water gush out for them in the desert and sent down to them manna and quail, a very wholesome food to eat. Nonetheless, they wanted to have the types of food they were familiar with in Egypt, the land where they were humiliated. They asked Moses to pray to God to bring forth for them herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions. They would not sacrifice their familiar food for a life of dignity, liberation and the pursuit of a noble goal. He also tested them when he conveyed to them God's order to slaughter a cow but they kept postponing the implementation of this order. When they finally slaughtered it, they did so most reluctantly. When he returned from his appointment with his Lord carrying the tablets which outlined the covenant they should make with God, they refused to make that

covenant and fulfil their pledges to their Lord. Despite what God had bestowed on them and the forgiveness of their sins which He granted them, they did not give their pledges until they saw with their own eyes the mountain raised over their heads, and felt that it was about to fall on top of them.

Moses had tested them on several occasions and now they were close to the holy land, their destination. God had promised them they would be the rulers in this land and that He would raise up among them prophets so that they remained in God's care. Moses, however, was worried lest they should disobey. He, therefore, coupled this his last appeal with a reminder of the happiest memories, best incentives and strongest warnings:

*And so Moses said to his people: "My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. (Verse 20) My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost." (Verse 21)*

God's promise never fails. He promises here to raise up prophets among them and to make them kings. The fulfilment of this promise brought them what God granted to no other nation until that period in time. The holy land, which they were approaching, was assigned to them by God's promise, which meant that they were certain to have it. They had already known from experience that God always fulfils His promises. Now, they were called upon to meet the conditions for yet another of His promises. To turn back was sure to bring them to ruin. But the Israelites never changed: their instinctive cowardice, argumentativeness and willingness to breach pledges was sure to surface. "*Moses*", they answered, "*mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter.*" (Verse 22)

### A Typically Cowardly Attitude

The Israelite nature appears here unmasked, without cosmetics. They were facing danger and, therefore, all attempts to put on a brave face were abandoned. Not even God's promise to them to make this land theirs was sufficient to motivate them. They wanted an easier prize



without having to pay any price. It should come to them from heaven just as manna and quails were sent down for them to eat. *"Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter."* (Verse 22)

Victory, however, does not come in this manner as the Jews wanted when they were devoid of faith: *"Thereupon two men who were God-fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: 'Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers.'"* (Verse 23) The value of having faith and of being God-fearing appears very clearly. These were two men who feared God, and being God-fearing made them totally fearless when they confronted mighty people. They had all the courage needed to dispel the imaginary danger. They made this testimony, highlighting the importance of faith and the time of trial and difficulty. They wanted to show what it meant to fear God alone at times when people fear each other. God does not combine the two feelings of fear in any one man's heart: fearing Him and fearing human beings. A person who fears God fears no one else.

*"Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious."* (Verse 23) This is a basic rule in how to fight the enemy. The Jews are advised here to launch an offensive which takes them right through into the other people's homes. Once they are in, the others will be demoralised while their own morale will be high indeed. Those attacked will suffer a total loss of confidence and the attackers will win.

*"In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers."* (Verse 23) A believer relies on no one other than God. This is the distinctive mark and the correlative of faith. But who were these two men addressing them with these true words? They were after all addressing the Israelites. True to their nature, the Children of Israel said: *"Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (Verse 24)

Cowardly people are increasingly impudent. They start to kick around like donkeys but they never step forward. Often, cowardice and impudence go hand in hand. A cowardly person is reminded of his duty, but his strength fails him. His neglect of his duty embarrasses him and he abuses this duty as well as the message which imposes on him what he does not want.

*"Go forth, then, you and your Lord and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (Verse 24) A ...

who realise that rudeness costs nothing but words. Fulfilment of their duty, on the other hand, requires them to fight in a real war. *"Go forth, then, you and your Lord, both of you."* He is, then, not their Lord if his lordship means that they will have to fight. *"We shall stay here."* We neither desire a kingdom, nor sovereignty, nor even the promised holy land, if it means that we will have to fight these mighty people.

This is now the end for Moses (peace be upon him) after the strenuous efforts he exerted with the Children of Israel and after bearing all impudence and deviation. The result was simply to turn back, to turn away from the holy land when they stood at its doors. This was a clear violation of the covenant they had made with God. But the covenant applied to Moses also. What should he do now? Whose help should he seek?

*"Lord", he said, "I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 25) This is a prayer uttered in pain. It is an appeal to God and one of total submission to Him. It also expresses total determination and a total break with those who disobeyed.

Moses was aware that God knew that he could not account for anyone other than himself and his brother. His are the feelings of weakness experienced by a person who has suffered a major letdown, the faith of a Prophet who spoke to God directly, the determination of an unshakable believer. He could not put his complaint to anyone other than God, to whom he prays to draw a dividing line between him and the evil-doers. Nothing could provide a link with them after they had abandoned their covenant with God. No relationship of family, ancestry, history or previous effort was of any significance. Their only relationship could be one of faith and the pledges they had given to God. As they breached them, then all relations had been severed. As for him, he was determined to fulfil his own promises to God, while they continued to do wrong.

This is the attitude of humble politeness shown by a Prophet and this is the action plan of a firm believer. The tie which could bring believers together was the tie of faith. Nationality, ancestry, race, language, history and all other ties known to mankind are of no significance when the tie of faith is severed.

God answered His Prophet's prayer and pronounced His judgement of the wrongdoers: *"This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for*



*grieve for these wrongdoing folk.*" (Verse 26) As they approached the holy land which God had promised them, He abandoned them to their aimless wandering. He forbade them the land He had assigned to them. The weightier view suggests that the land was forbidden to that particular generation of them, until a new generation came of age, aware of the lessons and strengthened by their upbringing in the desert. The first generation had long been used to subjugation and tyranny in Egypt. As such, it could not shoulder the tough responsibility. Tyranny and humiliation corrupt the nature of individuals as well as communities.

The *sūrah* stops at this point in their history to allow believers to reflect on the lessons learned. The Muslims also learned this tough lesson God relates to them. When they came face to face with difficulty and they were few in number confronting a mightier force of unbelievers in Badr, they said to their Prophet, Muḥammad (peace be upon him): "We will not say to you, Messenger of God, what the Israelites said to their Prophet, 'Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here.' But we will say to you: Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight; we will fight alongside you."

We see how the Qur'ānic method produces results in educating the Muslim community through relating stories from past generations of believers. We can also see what purpose is served by relating the history of the Children of Israel.



### 3

## The First Murder

Relate to them in all truth the story of the two sons of Adam: how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them while it was not accepted from the other. [The latter] said: "I will surely kill you." [The other] replied: "God accepts only from those who are God-fearing. (27)

Even if you lay your hand on me to kill me, I shall not lay my hand on you to kill you; for I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds. (28)

I would rather you should add your sin against me to your other sins, and thus you will be destined for the Fire; since that is the just retribution of wrongdoers." (29)

His evil soul drove him to kill his brother; and he murdered him, and thus he became one of

﴿وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ  
بِالْحَقِّ إِذْ قَرَّبَا قُرْبَانًا فَتُقْبِلَ  
مِنْ أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمْ يُتَقَبَّلْ مِنَ  
الْآخَرِ قَالَ لَأَقْتُلَنَّكَ قَالَ إِنَّمَا  
يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾﴾

لَئِنْ بَسَطْتَ إِلَى يَدِكَ لِتَقْتُلَنِي مَا أَنَا  
بِبَاسِطِ يَدَيَّ إِلَيْكَ لِأَقْتُلَكَ إِنِّي  
أَخَافُ اللَّهَ رَبَّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾﴾

إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ تَبْوَأَ بِإِثْمِي وَإِثْمَكَ  
فَتَكُونُ مِنَ أَصْحَابِ النَّارِ وَذَلِكَ  
جَزَاءُ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾﴾

فَطَوَّعَتْ لَهُ نَفْسُهُ قَتْلَ أَخِيهِ  
فَقَتَلَهُ فَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾﴾