

The Qur'ān: Cover to Cover

Sūrat al-Baqara

سورة البقرة

Volume Two: Āyahs 83–141

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The Qur'ān: Cover to Cover
Sūrat al-Baqara, Volume Two: Āyahs 83–141

This book began in a weekly gathering. Since 2023 the author has sat with a small congregation on Thursday nights and read the Qur'ān with them from its opening towards its close, twenty minutes at a sitting, a few āyahs at a time. What follows gathers those sessions on the eighty-third to the hundred and forty-first āyahs of Sūrat al-Baqara and develops the notes taken from them into connected prose. With the hundred and forty-first āyah the first Juz' of the Qur'ān closes, and so this volume completes what Volume One began.

The Qur'ānic Arabic is given in the 'Uthmānī text. The translations of the āyahs, and of the aḥādīth quoted throughout, are the author's own, and are offered in the plain register of the gathering from which they came rather than as a rival to the established renderings. They are not reproduced from any published translation.

The general introduction to the Qur'ān and to the discipline of tafsīr stands at the front of Volume One and is not repeated here. The reader who is coming to these pages first may wish to have it by him, though the commentary below has been written so that it does not depend upon it.

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Transliteration Key

Arabic words which have not been adopted into English are given in italics and transliterated according to the system set out below. Words which the English dictionary has taken in are left in their common spelling and are not italicised, so the reader will find Ummah and Sunnah rather than *umma* and *sunna*, and Makkah and Madīnah rather than *Makka* and *Madīna*.

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Roman</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Roman</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Roman</i>
ء	’	د	d	ض	ḍ
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ẓ
ث	th	ز	z	ع	‘
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh
ح	ḥ	ش	sh	ف	f
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q
ك	k	م	m	و	w
ل	l	ن	n	ي	y
ه	h				

The long vowels are written with a macron and never with a doubled letter, so the reader will find *ā*, *ī* and *ū* and never *aa*, *ii* or *uu*. The two diphthongs are written *aw* and *ay*, so that the fast of Ramaḍān is *ṣawm* and the teacher is a Shaykh, and never *saum* or *Shaikh*.

The *tā' marbūṭah* is dropped when the word stands alone, so that we write Sūra, Fātiḥa and Fāṭima. It is rendered *-at* when the word is joined to what follows it, so that the same sūra is Sūrat al-Fātiḥa when it is named in full.

The definite article is written *al-* throughout, before every letter and whatever the tongue does with it in recitation, so that the reader will find al-Baqara, al-Raḥmān and al-Shayṭān rather than the assimilated forms. This is a decision about spelling and not about sound, and the reader who recites will assimilate the article as the tongue requires without any prompting from the page.

The Author's Introduction

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All praise belongs to Allāh ﷻ, who taught the Qur'ān, who created man and taught him clear expression, and who has left His Book amongst us as a mercy and a light and a healing for what lies in the breasts. Peace and blessings upon our master Muḥammad ﷺ, who received it and lived it and delivered it whole, and upon his family and his Companions and all who follow them in excellence until the Day of Recompense.

The first volume of this small effort closed at the eighty-second āyah, in the middle of a long address to the Children of Isrā'īl, and it closed there for no better reason than that the pages had run out. This volume takes the address up again where it was left and carries it to the hundred and forty-first āyah, where the first Juz' of the Qur'ān comes to its end, and so the two volumes together give the reader the whole of that opening portion which he hears recited more often than any other part of this long sūra.

A reader who has come this far will have noticed something about these fifty-nine āyahs, that they are, for the most part, a sustained argument with one community, and that the argument is not a gentle one. It is worth saying plainly at the outset how these passages are to be read, because they are read badly rather often, and by our own people as much as by anybody. They are not a licence to think ill of the Jewish people we live amongst, and they are not a historical grievance to be nursed, and they were not sent down so that a Muslim might feel superior on a Thursday night. They were sent down as a warning to us, and the 'ulamā' have said this from the earliest generations, that Allāh ﷻ shows us in these āyahs exactly how a community which has been given a Book, and given prophets, and given every advantage, may yet let the whole inheritance slip through its fingers, and He shows it to us because He knows we are capable

of the same thing and He wishes to spare us. I have written the commentary throughout with that understanding, and where the notes from the gathering ran hot, I have let them cool. I have set out my fuller thinking on this in the addendum at the back, and I would ask the reader who finds these passages difficult to turn there first.

Everything of worth in these pages has been drawn from the tafsīr literature, from Imām Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله and Imām al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله and Imām al-Rāzī رحمه الله amongst the earlier authorities, and from Muftī Muḥammad Shafī رحمه الله in his *Ma‘ārif al-Qur‘ān*, Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī رحمه الله in his *Bayān al-Qur‘ān*, Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله, Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله in his *Safwat al-Tafāsīr*, Imām Abū al-Su‘ūd رحمه الله, and Imām Muḥammad al-Ṭāhīr Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله amongst those nearer to our own time. Where the reader finds something useful, it belongs to them. Where the reader finds an error, it belongs to me, and I ask that it be pointed out so that it may be corrected in a later printing.

Nor is this a book for the specialist. It is written for the ordinary worshipper, for the man or woman who stands in the rows at Fajr and hears these āyahs recited and wishes, quietly and without much fuss, to know what is being said. There is a great deal in the tafsīr tradition which is properly the business of the seminary, and I have left almost all of it aside, not because it is unimportant, but because it is not what this reader needs first. What this reader needs first is the meaning, and after the meaning, the lesson, and after the lesson, the encouragement to go and act upon it.

This portion of the sūra ends where the reader will be glad to arrive, with Ibrāhīm عليه السلام raising the foundations of the House with his son beside him and both of them praying that the work be accepted, and it seems to me a mercy that Allāh ﷻ closes a long and difficult argument in that way, by taking us away from the quarrel and setting us down at the Ka‘ba amongst people who did their work and then begged that it not be rejected. If this small effort of mine has anything of that spirit in it, it is from Allāh ﷻ. May He accept it, and may He put it in abler hands than mine when the time comes. Āmīn.

Where the First Volume Left Us

A word for the reader who is opening this volume without the first one at his elbow, and a reminder for the reader who has it but has been away from it a while.

The sūra opened with the disconnected letters, and then with the declaration that this is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those who are conscious of Allāh ﷻ, and it went on at once to divide mankind into three, the believers, the disbelievers, and the hypocrites, giving two āyahs to the first, two to the second, and thirteen to the third, which is a proportion worth remembering. Then came the call to worship, and the challenge to produce a sūra like it, and the parable of the gnat, and the story of Ādam عليه السلام and the prostration of the angels and the refusal of Iblīs.

From the fortieth āyah the sūra turned to address the Children of Isrā'īl directly, and it has been addressing them ever since. It reminded them of the favours, the deliverance from Fir'awn, the parting of the sea, the manna and the quails, the water from the rock, and it set each favour beside the response it drew, which was ingratitude. It told the story of the calf, and of the seventy who asked to see Allāh ﷻ openly, and of the cow which gave the sūra its name and which they very nearly failed to slaughter through their own questioning. It described hearts grown harder than stone. And at the eighty-second āyah it left the matter with the two verdicts, that whoever earns evil and is encompassed by his sin belongs to the Fire, and that those who believe and do righteous deeds belong to the Garden.

The address does not pause at that verdict. It continues straight into the eighty-third āyah with another covenant, and that is where we now take it up.

The Isti'ādha and the Basmala

أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

I seek refuge with Allāh from Shayṭān, the accursed.

Allāh ﷻ has commanded that when we recite the Qur'ān we should seek refuge with Him from Shayṭān, the accursed, and the 'ulamā' have understood from the wording that the seeking of refuge comes before the recitation and not after it, although the āyah, read flatly, might suggest otherwise. The reason is plain enough once it is said. A man about to open the Book is about to do the one thing Shayṭān most wishes him not to do, and he is therefore about to be interrupted, and the interruption will come as a wandering thought, or a sudden memory of an errand, or a small quarrel with somebody in the house, and the refuge is asked for in advance because that is when it is needed.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allāh, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.

And then the Basmala, with which every sūra but one begins, and with which we are taught to begin every matter of consequence, so that the work is done in His name and not in our own. The two names are from one root, and the 'ulamā' have said that the first is a mercy so wide that it takes in the believer and the disbeliever and the animal in the field, and the second is a mercy reserved, which Allāh ﷻ keeps for those who turn to Him. A man who says these words honestly at the head of a task has already said a great deal about who he thinks is doing the work.

Sūrat al-Baqara

Volume Two · Āyahs 83–141

Madinan · The second sūra of the Qur'ān

The closing portion of the first Juz'

The Covenant and Its Five Commands

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَٰئِيلَ لَا تَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ
إِحْسَانًا وَذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا
وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ
مُعْرِضُونَ

And remember when We took a solemn covenant from the Children of Isrā'īl: you shall worship none but Allāh, and you shall be good to parents, and to near relatives, and to orphans and the needy, and you shall speak well to people, and establish the ṣalāh, and give the zakāh. Then you turned away, all but a few of you, and you were a people averse.

al-Baqara 2:83

The word Allāh ﷻ uses for the covenant here is *mīthāq*, and Shaykh al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله has drawn attention to the fact that it is stronger than *‘ahd*, which is the ordinary word for an agreement. A *mīthāq* is a pledge into which great weight has been pressed, tied down and made binding, and it is a word which the Qur'ān reserves almost entirely for matters of religion. Allāh ﷻ is not

describing a loose understanding which the Children of Isrā'īl might have drifted out of without noticing. He is describing a bond they entered into deliberately and with their eyes open, which makes what follows worse rather than better.

It is worth pausing over who is being addressed, because the sūra is speaking to the Jews of Madīnah in the Prophet's ﷺ own day, and reminding them of a covenant taken from their forefathers, and the reminder is not a piece of antiquarian interest. It is being put to them as an argument, that they are the heirs of a pledge and that the pledge has claims on them still. Some of them heard the argument and accepted it, and 'Abdullāh b. Salām رضي الله عنه is the great example, a rabbi of Madīnah who followed Mūsā عليه السلام honestly and, when the Messenger ﷺ came, recognised what he had been waiting for and entered Islam. The Qur'ān is not talking past these people. It is talking to them, and some of them answered.

Allāh First, and Then the Parents

The covenant begins where every covenant must begin, that they shall worship none but Allāh ﷻ, and this is the highest right and the first, that He be worshipped alone and nothing be set beside Him. And then, immediately after the right of Allāh ﷻ, and before every other right of every other creature, comes the right of the parents.

The reader should notice that this is not an accident of this one āyah. Allāh ﷻ habitually mentions the parents alongside Himself. He says in Sūra Luqmān, *be thankful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the return*, and He says in Sūrat al-Isrā', *your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be good to parents*.¹ Three times the same sequence, the worship of Allāh ﷻ and then the parents, and a thing said three times in the same order is not being said carelessly.

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله has asked the question directly, why the parents should be raised so high, and his answer is worth setting down as he gave it, because it is the kind of answer which settles a matter rather than decorating it. The parents, he says, are a manifestation upon the earth of qualities which belong properly to Allāh ﷻ alone. They are the apparent cause of a child's coming into existence, and they carry out the *tarbiya* of that child in the world of means, which is to say that whatever Allāh ﷻ does for us from behind the veil, the parents are the hands through which He does a great deal of it. They raise their children with no expectation whatever of return, and they do not tire of it, and they take no days off from it, and they will exhaust themselves to see their children succeed and wish them nothing but good. A man who considers that list honestly will see why the right is placed where it is placed, and he will see also that he is very unlikely to discharge it.

And there is something to be learned from how Allāh ﷻ varies the wording. Here, and in Sūrat al-Isrā', and in Sūrat al-Aḥqāf, the command is *iḥsānā*, which is to go above and beyond, and this is the wording where the parents are Muslim. In Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt, where the parents are urging their child towards *shirk* but not forcing him, the wording softens to *ḥusnā*, do good. And in Sūra Luqmān, where the parents are actually forcing the child towards *shirk*, the wording softens again to the bare instruction to keep their company in this world with courtesy. The demand relaxes as the parents' behaviour worsens, and it never disappears. Even the parent who is dragging his son towards idolatry does not forfeit courtesy, and the son who refuses the idolatry is still required to be decent to the man.

Here is a thing to think about. On the Day of Judgement we will be ready to hand over everybody. Allāh ﷻ describes the criminal on that Day wishing he could ransom himself from the punishment with his sons, and his wife, and his brother, and the kin who sheltered him, and everyone on the earth altogether, if only it would save him.² Everybody goes. And yet the 'ulamā' have noticed that

1. Luqmān 31:14 and al-Isrā' 17:23.

2. al-Ma'ārij 70:11–14. And then the answer, *never; it is a blazing Fire.*

the one relationship the Qur'ān never shows a man wishing to trade away is the relationship with the parents. Whatever it is that binds a man to his mother and father, it survives the moment when everything else is on the table.

The Orphan and the Needy

Then the near relatives, and then the orphans, and then the needy, and the reader should notice that the orphan is mentioned before the poor man. The 'ulamā have said that this is because the orphan's need is the greater, and it is greater because he is a child. A poor adult can go out and earn, or can at least ask; a child who has lost his father can do neither, and has nobody whose business it is to notice him. So he goes first.

As for the *miskīn*, Imām Abū al-Su'ūd رحمه الله has a fine remark about the shape of the word, that it is built on a pattern from the root of stillness, as though poverty had brought the man to a standstill and pinned him where he was so that he cannot turn over or shift himself.³ That is not ordinary want. That is the poverty which takes a man's power of movement away from him, and it is worth having the picture in mind, because a word can be worn so smooth by use that we forget it was once describing something.

Speak Well to People

Then, *and you shall speak well to people*, and Allāh ﷻ has left the word *al-nās* entirely undefined, so that it takes in every person the reader will ever meet, and He has put the whole of goodness into the word *ḥusn* without narrowing it, so that it takes in every good thing a tongue can do.

The placement matters. The commands before this one all cost money. The parents, the relatives, the orphan, the needy, these are duties which will empty a man's pocket, and Allāh ﷻ knows perfectly well that not every man has a pocket to empty. So He follows them with a duty which costs nothing at all, and

3. مسكين مفعيل من السكون كأن الفقر أسكنه من الحراك وأثخنه عن التقلب — Abū al-Su'ūd, *Irshād al-'Aql al-Salīm*, at this āyah.

the message to the man who has nothing to give is that he is not thereby excused from the community. He can still speak. The Messenger ﷺ put it exactly so.

لَا تَحْقِرَنَّ مِنَ الْمَعْرُوفِ شَيْئًا وَإِنْ لَمْ تَجِدْ فَالْقَ أَخَاكَ بِوَجْهِ مَنْطِقٍ

*Do not think any act of kindness beneath your notice, and if you find nothing else, then meet your brother with an open face.*⁴

And he ﷺ said that whoever believes in Allāh ﷻ and the Last Day should speak good or keep silent, and should honour his neighbour, and should honour his guest.⁵ The three are given together and they are the same instruction three times, that the way a man conducts himself with the people at his door is a matter of faith and not of temperament.

Set against that, the warning.

إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ لَيَتَكَلَّمُ بِالْكَلِمَةِ مِنْ رِضْوَانِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى مَا يُلْقِي لَهَا بَالًا يَرْفَعُهُ اللَّهُ بِهَا دَرَجَاتٍ، وَإِنَّ الْعَبْدَ لَيَتَكَلَّمُ بِالْكَلِمَةِ مِنْ سَخَطِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى لَا يُلْقِي لَهَا بَالًا يَهْوِي بِهَا فِي جَهَنَّمَ

*A servant speaks a word which is pleasing to Allāh and thinks nothing of it, and Allāh raises him by it in degrees; and a servant speaks a word which brings the anger of Allāh and thinks nothing of it, and he falls by it into the Fire.*⁶

The phrase to sit with is that he thought nothing of it. The word which sends a man into the Fire is not, in this ḥadīth, a considered blasphemy. It is a remark. It is the sort of thing said in a doorway on the way out, about somebody who has just left the room, and the man who said it had forgotten it before he reached the car. That is the danger the Messenger ﷺ is warning us about, and it is a danger which lands on the pious as readily as anybody, because a man who has

4. Muslim, on the authority of Abū Dharr رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

5. al-Bukhārī and Muslim, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

6. al-Bukhārī, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

given up his sins will often keep his tongue, and will keep it in the belief that talk is not a sin at all.

The scholars of this Ummah have long taught that every word a man utters is a seed, and that all of them come up in their season, and that the harvest is either a blessing or a thing he would give a great deal to be rid of. It is a homely image and it is exactly right. Nobody plants a seed and expects to see it again the same afternoon.

Being Gentle With Those Who Are Not Like Us

Now, the command is to speak well to *people*, and this raises the question which the gathering always raises at this point, whether it covers the sinner and the disbeliever and the man whose religion is a mess. It does, and the ‘ulamā’ have been firm about it.

Imām al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله preserves an exchange which settles the matter better than an argument would. Ṭalḥa b. ‘Umar came to ‘Aṭā’ رحمه الله, who was one of the great masters of tafsīr and ḥadīth amongst the Successors, and said to him that he found himself surrounded by people whose beliefs were not sound, and that he was short-tempered by nature, and that when such people came to him he dealt with them harshly. ‘Aṭā’ رحمه الله told him not to behave like that, and recited this āyah to him, and said that Allāh ﷻ has commanded us to speak to people well; and if the Jews and the Christians are to be treated in this way, would the command not apply all the more to a Muslim, whatever sort of man he happens to be.⁷

Muftī Muḥammad Shafī رحمه الله makes the point with an argument which ought to end the discussion for good. When Allāh ﷻ sent Mūsā عليه السلام and Hārūn عليه السلام to Fir‘awn, He instructed them to speak to him gently, and the āyah is well known.⁸ Fir‘awn had claimed divinity and was drowning infants in the Nile. Now, says the Muftī رحمه الله, none of us who addresses another man

7. al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Abkām al-Qur‘ān*, at this āyah.

8. Ṭāhā 20:44, and speak to him gently; perhaps he may take heed or fear.

today is superior to Mūsā عليه السلام, and no man we are likely to address is viler than Fir'awn. The gentleness was commanded at the extreme of that scale. Everything the rest of us do falls somewhere inside it.

There is a limit, and it should be stated so that nobody mistakes the point. Speaking well does not mean concealing the truth in order to please people or to be thought agreeable. In matters of religion a man says what is so. The instruction is about the tone and the manner and the open face; it is not a licence to trim.

And the reason for the whole of it is that judgement is not ours. The Messenger ﷺ told the story of two men of the Children of Isrā'il who were companions, one of whom sinned and one of whom was devoted to worship, and the devout one kept finding the other at his sin and telling him to stop, until one day he found him at it again and the man said, leave me and my Lord; have you been sent to watch over me? And the devout man said, by Allāh, Allāh will never forgive you, or, He will never let you into the Garden. Then Allāh ﷻ took both their souls, and they were gathered before the Lord of the Worlds, and He said to the devout one, did you have knowledge of Me? Did you have power over what is in My hand? And He said to the sinner, go, enter the Garden by My mercy. And He said of the other, take him to the Fire.⁹

A lifetime of worship, undone by one sentence, and the sentence was about somebody else's ending. That is what the ḥadīth is for. We may encourage, and we must; we may not sentence.

Then You Turned Away

And after all of that, *then you turned away, all but a few of you*. Five commands, and the covenant of a whole nation behind them, and the outcome was a small remnant. The reader should notice that Allāh ﷻ does not say they broke it, He says they turned aside, which is the gentler and the more accurate word, because

9. Abū Dāwūd 4901, and Aḥmad 8292, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

that is how covenants actually go. Nobody announces that he is finished. He simply finds, one year at a time, that he is facing a different direction.

And notice what is in the covenant, because there is nothing in it which is not binding on us. The worship of Allāh ﷻ alone, the parents, the kin, the orphan, the needy, good speech, the ṣalāh, the zakāh. These are what Allāh ﷻ asks of every community He addresses, and they are the same things the Qur'ān calls *al-ṣāliḥāt*. Positive relationships are the whole substance of a community, and this āyah is a manual for keeping them, and it begins at home and works outwards, and the ordinary worshipper who has these eight things in decent order has more of his religion than he thinks.

Blood and Exile

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَكُمْ لَا تَسْفِكُونَ دِمَاءَكُمْ وَلَا تُخْرِجُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ
مِنْ دِيرِكُمْ ثُمَّ أَقْرَرْتُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَشْهَدُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

*And remember when We took your covenant: you shall not shed one another's blood,
nor drive one another from your homes. Then you affirmed it, and you yourselves
bore witness.*

al-Baqara 2:84

A second covenant, and this one is about the two things which destroy a community from inside, killing and expulsion. And Allāh ﷻ words it in a way the reader should not pass over. He does not say, you shall not shed *their* blood, He says *your* blood, and He does not say you shall not drive *them* out, He says you shall not drive *yourselves* out. The Muslim who kills a Muslim has killed himself; the community which expels its own has expelled itself. This is the same teaching as the Messenger's ﷺ great image of the body.

مَثَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فِي تَوَادِّهِمْ وَتَرَاحُمِهِمْ وَتَوَاصُلِهِمْ بِمَنْزِلَةِ الْجَسَدِ الْوَاحِدِ إِذَا
اشْتَكَى مِنْهُ عُضْوٌ تَدَاعَى لَهُ سَائِرُ الْجَسَدِ بِالْحُمَّى وَالسَّهَرِ

*The likeness of the believers in their affection for one another, and their mercy to one another, and their kindness to one another, is the likeness of one body: when a limb of it complains, the rest of the body is called to it with fever and sleeplessness.*¹⁰

A body does not amputate itself because one hand has annoyed the other. And what makes the rebuke land here is the closing phrase, *then you affirmed it, and you yourselves bore witness*. They were not caught out by a rule they had not heard. They signed it and stood as witnesses to their own signature.

The Situation in Madīnah

The reader needs the map, because without it the next āyah is only noise. Madīnah before the Hijra held two Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, who were idolaters and who had been at war with one another for a long time. It also held three Jewish tribes, Banū Qurayẓa, Banū Qaynuqā' and Banū Naḍīr. And the Jewish tribes had taken sides in the Arab quarrel. Banū Naḍīr were allied to the Khazraj, and Banū Qurayẓa were allied to the Aws.

The consequence is exactly what the reader will already have worked out. When the Aws and the Khazraj went to war, their Jewish allies went with them, and Jews therefore fought Jews, and killed them, and burned their houses, and drove them out, in service of an Arab feud which had nothing to do with any of them. And then, when the fighting stopped, they would ransom the prisoners back, because the Tawrāh commanded the ransoming of captives and they were scrupulous about it.

Before we go on to what Allāh ﷻ says about that, it is worth stating a principle. The rulings given to the Children of Isrā'īl bind us too, except where the Prophet ﷺ has told us otherwise, and the 'ulamā' have discussed at length the

10. al-Bukhārī and Muslim, on the authority of al-Nu'mān b. Bashīr رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

conditions under which that is so. But the plainer point for the ordinary worshipper is that these accounts are not being told to us so that we may sit in judgement on a community long dead. They are being told so that we may recognise the pattern when it turns up amongst us, and it does turn up amongst us.

ثُمَّ أَنْتُمْ هَؤُلَاءِ تَقْتُلُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَتَخْرُجُونَ فَرِيقًا مِّنْكُمْ مِّن دِيرِهِمْ
تُظَاهِرُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَنِ وَإِن يَأْتُوكُمْ أُسْرَىٰ تَفْدُوهُمْ وَهِيَ
مَحْرُمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ إِخْرَاجُهُمْ أَفْتُونُونَ بِبَعْضِ الْكِتَابِ وَتَكْفُرُونَ بِبَعْضِ
فَمَا جَزَاءُ مَن يَفْعَلُ ذَلِكَ مِّنكُمْ إِلَّا خِزْيٌ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ
الْقِيَامَةِ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ أَشَدِّ الْعَذَابِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Yet here you are, killing your own, and driving a group of your own from their homes, supporting one another against them in sin and enmity; and if they come to you as captives you ransom them, though their expulsion was itself forbidden to you. Do you then believe in part of the Book and reject part of it? What reward is there for one of you who does that, except disgrace in the life of this world, and on the Day of Rising they will be sent back to the harshest punishment. And Allāh is not unaware of what you do.

al-Baqara 2:85

The whole indictment is in one phrase, *do you then believe in part of the Book and reject part of it?* They were meticulous about the ransom because the Tawrah required the ransom. They ignored the prohibition on the killing and the expulsion, which the same Tawrah required equally, and which had come from the same place, and which stood on the same page. The Tawrah also forbade them to aid idolaters against their own brethren, and they did that too. And every part of it was for the sake of the life of this world, for a share of an Arab quarrel and a portion of its spoils.

Now this is not a Jewish disease. This is a human one, and the Qur'ān is holding it up so that we can see ourselves in it. Shaykh al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله states the principle without any softening, that to reject a single āyah is to reject every āyah, because the authority which is being rejected is not the āyah's, it is Allāh's ﷻ, and a man who accepts the Book only where he already agrees with it has not accepted the Book at all, he has accepted himself and found a Book which sometimes flatters him. And there is a good deal of this about. A man will be immovable about the length of his beard and relaxed about the source of his income; another will be tireless about justice for the oppressed abroad and will not speak to his brother at home; a third will build his life around a rule he likes and step over a rule he does not, and all three are doing what this āyah describes, and none of them would recognise himself in it if you asked.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله makes a further point about consequences, that a community which handles its own scripture in this way has disqualified itself from being trusted with it, and this is why, he says, they were not to be relied upon in what they transmitted, and in particular in what they concealed of the description of the coming Messenger ﷺ, of his appearance and his expulsion from his land and his Hijra, which the earlier prophets had told them of and which they kept amongst themselves.

A Word on How the Qur'ān Tells History

Notice what the sūra has just done. It took a covenant from long ago and set it down beside a street in Madīnah in the year the Messenger ﷺ arrived, and the two are made to face each other. This is how the Qur'ān handles the past, and it is worth naming, because it is not how a chronicle handles it. A chronicle sets events in a row and leaves them there. The Qur'ān joins the past to the present so that the past turns out to be still going on, and the account of a dead generation becomes an account of a living one, and the reader who came for a story finds he is in the dock.

And a word on how the passage bears on our own dealings with those outside the faith, because the reader will want it. Allāh ﷻ has told us plainly that He

does not forbid us from being good to those who did not fight us over religion nor drive us from our homes, and that He loves those who deal justly.¹¹ The rebuke in this passage is aimed at a specific treachery, at men who took sides against their own brethren for a share of the world. It is not a general instruction about how to live beside people who are not Muslims. The ‘ulamā’ of the subcontinent understood this well, and Mawlānā Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī رحمه الله in his day worked alongside those of other religions in a common cause and was not thought to have compromised anything, and he was right about that.

أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ اشْتَرُوا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا بِالْآخِرَةِ فَلَا يَخَفُ عَنْهُمْ
الْعَذَابُ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Those are the ones who have bought the life of this world at the price of the Hereafter. The punishment will not be lightened for them, nor will they be helped.

al-Baqara 2:86

The image is commercial, and it should be taken seriously, because nothing comes free. When a man buys, he puts something on the table, and the question is only ever what. These people put their faith on the table, and what they took away was a portion of the life of this world, and the Qur’ān’s contempt is not for the price so much as for the exchange rate.

Then the sentence, and it is exact. The punishment will not be lightened, and they will not be helped, and the reader should see that this answers precisely what they did. They did not ease up on their brethren in this world when they had them at their mercy; the punishment will not be eased for them. They sought help from idolaters against their own; there will be no help. The judgement is cut to fit the crime, which is what Allāh’s ﷻ justice always does.

11. al-Mumtaḥina 60:8.

And there is the matter of *ẓulm*, which carries disgrace in it and not only wrong. Shāh ‘Aṭā’ullāh رحمه الله used to say that no oppressor goes unpunished, and it is a saying worth keeping by, because it is easy to look at a wrongdoer prospering and to conclude, quietly and without ever saying so, that the accounts do not balance. They balance. The instalments are simply not always visible from here.

Messengers Who Did Not Suit Them

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَقَفَّيْنَا مِنْ بَعْدِهِ بِالرُّسُلِ وَءَاتَيْنَا
عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ الْبَيْنَتِ وَأَيَّدْنَاهُ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ أَفَكُلَّمَا جَاءَكُمْ
رَسُولٌ بِمَا لَا تَهْوَى أَنْفُسُكُمْ اسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ فَفَرِقْنَا كَذِبْتُمْ وَفَرِقْنَا
تَقْتُلُونَ

And We gave Mūsā the Book, and We sent messengers in succession after him. And We gave ‘Isā the son of Maryam clear signs, and We supported him with the Holy Spirit. Is it then that every time a messenger came to you with what you did not desire, you grew arrogant, and some of them you called liars and some of them you killed?

al-Baqara 2:87

The verb Allāh ﷻ uses for the sending of the messengers is from the root *qaffā*, which means to make one thing follow directly upon another, and the image the Arabic carries is of beads on a necklace, each one coming immediately after the last with no gap between them. And once the reader has the image, the āyah opens out. The necklace is being described to the Children of Isrā’īl, and it is their own. Mūsā عليه السلام is the first bead, the first great messenger sent to the twelve tribes as a whole, and ‘Isā عليه السلام is the last bead, the last of the

prophets of Banū Isrāʾīl. Allāh ﷻ is laying the whole string out in front of them and saying, look what you were given; now look what you did with it.

Because that is the shape of this whole address, from the fortieth āyah onwards. Favour, and then the response. Favour, and then the response. And the response is always some form of *kufṛ*, which is a word that means covering a thing over, and covering a thing over is exactly what ingratitude does to a gift.

The Holy Spirit

As for *al-Rūḥ al-Qudus*, the great majority of the ‘ulamā’ hold that it is Jibrīl عليه السلام. Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله gathers the authorities, and it is the view of ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd عنه رضي الله في his explanation of this very āyah, and of Ibn ‘Abbās عنه رضي الله في, and of Muḥammad b. Ka‘b, and Ismāʿīl b. Khālid, and al-Suddī, and al-Rabīʿ b. Anas, and ‘Aṭīyya al-‘Awfī, and Qatāda. And the Qur’ān itself supports it, for Allāh ﷻ says of the revelation that *the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down upon your heart, that you might be of the warners*, and the Trustworthy Spirit there is Jibrīl عليه السلام beyond dispute.¹² Some have held that it is a particular spirit with which ‘Īsā عليه السلام was strengthened, and the difference is not one to detain the ordinary reader.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله sets out the ways in which that support was given, and they are worth having in order. ‘Īsā عليه السلام was conceived through the breath of the Archangel. Jibrīl عليه السلام protected him at his birth from the touch of Shayṭān. He accompanied him afterwards and defended him from the hostility of those who sought his life. And it was through him that he was raised to the heavens. From the first moment to the last, the same angel.

And the expression is not confined to the prophets. Al-Bukhārī records from ‘Ā’isha عنها رضي الله في that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ set up a pulpit in the masjid for Ḥassān b. Thābit عنه رضي الله في to stand on, from which he answered the poets who were attacking him ﷺ in verse, and the Messenger ﷺ prayed for him.

12. al-Shu‘arā’ 26:193–194.

اللَّهُمَّ أَيْدِ حَسَّانَ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ كَمَا نَافَخَ عَنْ نَبِيِّكَ

*O Allāh, support Ḥassān with the Holy Spirit, as he has defended Your Prophet.*¹³

There is a lesson in that for anybody who works with words. The man was a poet, and his poetry was put at the service of the Messenger ﷺ, and the reward asked for him was the support of Jibrīl عليه السلام himself.

What You Did Not Desire

Now the charge: *every time a messenger came to you with what you did not desire.* That is the mechanism, and it is worth saying slowly, because it is the mechanism which operates in us. The messengers were not rejected because their arguments were weak. They were rejected because of what they asked for. The desire came first and the verdict followed it, and the reasons were assembled afterwards, as reasons always are.

Which is why the Messenger ﷺ set the standard where he set it, that a man does not believe until his desire follows what he brought.¹⁴ Not that a man silences his desire, which no man can do, but that he lets it be led rather than letting it lead. And the reader will know the difference in himself at once, because there is a particular feeling which comes when the Sharīʿa asks for something we do not want to give, and it is a feeling of looking for a way out, and that feeling is the exact thing this āyah is describing.

And then the ending, *some of them you called liars and some of them you killed*, and the Arabic puts the killing in the present tense, though it is describing something long past. Al-Zamakhsharī رحمه الله observed that Allāh ﷻ did not say "killed" here, because they had not finished. They would still try to kill the

13. Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī, on the authority of ʿĀʾisha رضي الله عنها. Al-Bukhārī records the account of the pulpit.

14. Reported by al-Baghawī in *Sharḥ al-Sunnah* and by others, on the authority of ʿAbdullāh b. ʿAmr رضي الله عنهما. Some of the ʿulamāʾ have questioned the chain, but the meaning is confirmed throughout the Qurʾān and the Sunnah.

Prophet ﷺ himself, by poison and by magic. And that is not a figure of speech. In the illness which preceded his death he ﷺ said:

مَا زَلْتُ أَكَلَةً خَيْرَ تَعَاوُدُنِي، فَهَذَا أَوَانُ انْقِطَاعِ أَبْهَرِي

*The morsel I ate at Khaybar has never stopped returning to me, and this is the moment my aorta is severed.*¹⁵

Years afterwards, and it was still working. The present tense in the āyah was not a figure of speech, and Allāh ﷻ chose it because it was still true when the words were being recited.

وَقَالُوا قُلُوبُنَا غُلْفٌ ۚ بَلْ لَعَنَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِكُفْرِهِمْ فَقَلِيلًا مَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

And they said: our hearts are wrapped up. Rather, Allāh has cursed them for their disbelief, so little is it that they believe.

al-Baqara 2:88

Notice first that the pronoun has changed. Through the previous āyahs Allāh ﷻ was addressing them directly, *you*, and now suddenly it is *they said*, in the third person, as though they had been turned away from and were being discussed rather than spoken to. The ‘ulamā’ have said this is deliberate and that it is a withdrawal of honour, that Allāh ﷻ no longer dignifies them with the second person, and the reader who has ever been in a room where somebody stopped speaking to him and began speaking about him will know exactly how that feels.

And what did they say? Our hearts are *ghulf*, wrapped, veiled, covered over. Which is to say: it is not our fault. Something has been put over our hearts and we cannot get at what you are calling us to, and Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما reports

15. al-Bukhārī, on the authority of ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها. The reference is to the poisoned sheep offered to him at Khaybar.

the sense as, our hearts are in coverings against what you invite us to. It is an excuse, and it is the excuse of a man who has decided in advance and wants the decision to look like a disability. We do not have the capacity. We are not built for it. This is not for people like us.

There is a second reading which Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما and ‘Aṭā’ الله رحمه also give, and it turns the phrase from an excuse into a boast: our hearts are vessels already full of knowledge, so we have no need of yours.¹⁶ Both readings end in the same place. Whether a man says he cannot receive or says he does not need to, he is refusing, and he is dressing the refusal up as a condition.

And Allāh’s ﷻ answer is one word, *rather*. Not that their hearts were wrapped and therefore they disbelieved, but that they disbelieved and were therefore removed from His mercy, and the ordering is the whole point. They had the sequence backwards, and every man who pleads his own incapacity has it backwards in the same way. The distance came after the refusal. It did not cause it.

The Four Hearts

Since the āyah has raised the matter of a covered heart, it is worth setting out the ḥadīth which sorts the hearts of men into four kinds, because the ordinary worshipper will want to know where he stands, and because the fourth kind is where nearly all of us actually are.

16. يعنون أن قلوبنا أوعية للعلوم فنحن مستغنون بما عندنا عن غيره. — reported from Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما and ‘Aṭā’ الله رحمه.

الْقُلُوبُ أَرْبَعَةٌ: قَلْبٌ أَجْرَدٌ فِيهِ مِثْلُ السِّرَاجِ يَزْهَرُ، وَقَلْبٌ أَغْلَفٌ مَرْبُوطٌ
عَلَيْهِ غِلَافُهُ، وَقَلْبٌ مَنكُوسٌ، وَقَلْبٌ مَصْفَحٌ

*Hearts are four: a polished heart with a lamp in it, shining; a wrapped heart with its covering tied over it; an upturned heart; and a heart laid open on both sides. As for the polished heart, it is the heart of the believer, and its lamp is its light. The wrapped heart is the heart of the disbeliever. The upturned heart is the heart of the hypocrite, who knew and then denied. And as for the heart laid open on both sides, it is a heart in which there is faith and hypocrisy together: the likeness of the faith in it is a herb fed by good water, and the likeness of the hypocrisy in it is a sore fed by pus and blood, and whichever of the two prevails over the other takes the heart.*¹⁷

The word the Jews of Madīnah used of themselves in the āyah, *ghulf*, is the very word the Messenger ﷺ uses for the second heart, and they used it as an excuse and he uses it as a diagnosis. But the heart to sit with is the fourth. Two things are growing in it at once, and both are being fed, and the herb is fed by what is clean and the sore is fed by what is foul, and neither of them stops growing while the man is alive. Which is to say that there is no settled position. Every act of obedience waters one and every sin feeds the other, and the question of which heart a man has is not answered once in his life; it is answered continuously, and the answer today is not binding on tomorrow. There is a great deal of hope in that, and a great deal to be careful about, and the ḥadīth intends both.

17. Musnad Aḥmad 10745, on the authority of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

Recognition Without Belief

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ كِتَابٌ مِّنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٌ لِّمَا مَعَهُمْ وَكَانُوا مِن
قَبْلُ يَسْتَفْتِحُونَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ مَا عَرَفُوا كَفَرُوا
بِهِ ۖ فَلَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

And when a Book came to them from Allāh, confirming what was with them, and before that they had been praying for victory over those who disbelieved, yet when there came to them what they recognised, they rejected it. So the curse of Allāh is upon the disbelievers.

al-Baqara 2:89

This is one of the sharpest āyahs in the sūra, and its force is in a single word, *recognised*.

Take the history first. Before the Messenger ﷺ came, the Jews of Madinah used to invoke Allāh ﷻ against their idolatrous neighbours by the coming prophet whom they were expecting. Abū al-Āliya رحمه الله reports that they would say, O Allāh, send the Prophet we read about in the Tawrah, so that we may torment and kill the disbelievers alongside him. And Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما reports that they would say to the idolaters, a Prophet is to be sent just before the end of this world, and we, with him, shall exterminate you as the peoples of ‘Ād and Iram were exterminated. The Aws and the Khazraj heard this from them for years. And there is a supplication preserved from them, that they asked Allāh ﷻ by the right of Muḥammad the unlettered Prophet, whom He had promised to bring out for them at the end of time.¹⁸

18. Reported by al-Ḥākim and al-Bayhaqī, and cited by al-Suyūṭī in *al-Durr al-Manthūr*.

So they were not surprised. They had advertised him. They had used him as a threat. They had prayed by his name. And then he came, and he was not one of them, and they refused him.

Now the word. Allāh ﷻ does not say, when there came to them what they had heard about, or what they had expected. He says *what they recognised*, and recognition is not a matter of information, it is a matter of the thing standing in front of you and something in you saying, this is it. They had that. And it made no difference at all.

Which teaches the ordinary worshipper something he needs, that recognising the truth is not the same as accepting it, and that a man may see a thing perfectly clearly and still refuse it, because the refusal was never happening in the part of him that sees. This is why arguing a man into Islam so seldom works, and why a man may know his prayer is due and know the value of it and still not stand up. Between knowing and doing there is a gate, and the gate is not made of knowledge.

And the last phrase, *so the curse of Allāh is upon the disbelievers*, where the reader might have expected "upon them". The 'ulamā' call this *al-iḡbār fī maqām al-iḍmār*, putting the noun where a pronoun would do, and it is done to state the reason. The curse is not on them because they are who they are. It is on them because of what they became, and the word is put there so that nobody can miss the cause.

بِئْسَمَا اشْتَرَوْا بِهِ أَنْفُسَهُمْ أَنْ يَكْفُرُوا بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بَغْيًا أَنْ يَنْزِلَ
 اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ فَبَاءُوا بِغَضَبٍ عَلَى
 غَضَبٍ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ مُهِينٌ ﴿٩٠﴾

Wretched is that for which they have sold themselves: that they should reject what Allāh has sent down, out of resentment that Allāh should send down of His bounty upon whom He wills of His servants. So they returned with anger upon anger. And for the disbelievers is a humiliating punishment.

al-Baqara 2:90

Here Allāh ﷻ names the thing which the whole passage has been circling, and it is envy. Not a disagreement about doctrine. Not a scruple about the evidence. Resentment that Allāh ﷻ should give a gift to somebody He chose to give it to.

And the reader should see what envy is, once it is stated like that, because it is a quarrel with Allāh ﷻ about His own distribution. Envy does not really say, I want that. Envy says, he should not have that, and the only party who could be at fault in such a complaint is the One who gave it. A man in the grip of it thinks he is annoyed with his neighbour. He is not. He is annoyed with the decree, and his neighbour is merely where the decree happens to be standing.

Then, *anger upon anger*, one layer laid over another, and the ‘ulamā’ have explained the two as the anger earned by their earlier rejections and the fresh anger earned by this one. And the lesson is in the stacking. Sin left alone does not stay one sin, it becomes a floor for the next one, which is exactly why the Messenger ﷺ taught the remedy the way he did:

اتَّقِ اللَّهَ حَيْثُمَا كُنْتَ، وَاتَّبِعِ السَّيِّئَةَ الْحَسَنَةَ تَمَحُّهَا، وَخَالِقِ النَّاسَ بِخُلُقٍ
حَسَنٍ

*Fear Allāh wherever you are, and follow a bad deed with a good one, and it will wipe it out, and deal with people in a good manner.*¹⁹

Follow it, he ﷺ says. Immediately, before it has time to become a floor.

Too Proud, and Therefore Disgraced

And notice the punishment: *a humiliating punishment*. Not merely painful, humiliating, and the ‘ulamā’ have said that the disgrace is the point and that it answers the pride which caused the whole thing. Allāh ﷻ states the principle elsewhere in as many words, that *those who are too proud to worship Me will enter Hell abased*.²⁰ The man refused to bow, so he will be brought low; he would not lower himself, so he will be lowered.

And Muftī Shafī رحمه الله makes a point here which the ordinary worshipper should hold on to, that this humiliation is peculiar to the disbeliever and is not what is meant for a Muslim at all. A believer may be punished, and may be punished for a long time, but he is punished to be cleaned, not to be disgraced, and the difference between the two is the difference between a surgeon and an executioner.

There is an example of the pride which the āyah has in view, and it is a small one, which is why it is worth telling. Ibn Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه said that the first sūra in which a prostration was revealed was al-Najm, and that the Messenger ﷺ prostrated when he recited it, and everyone behind him prostrated, except one man, whom he saw take a handful of dust in his hand and press his forehead to that instead. And Ibn Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه said, I saw him afterwards killed as a disbeliever, and he was Umayya b. Khalaf.²¹ He would not put his face on the

19. al-Tirmidhī 1987, on the authority of Abū Dharr رضي الله عنه, who said it is *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*.

20. Ghāfir 40:60.

21. al-Bukhārī 4863.

ground, and he was so unwilling that he improvised. He was killed at Badr, and the man who killed him was Bilāl رضي الله عنه, who had been his slave and whom he had tortured in the sand of Makkah for saying that Allāh جَلَّ is One. Umayya would not go down before Allāh جَلَّ, and he went down before the man he thought he owned.

And where it ends is described in a narration which the reader should not read quickly.

يُحْشَرُ الْمُتَكَبِّرُونَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَمْثَالَ الذَّرِّ فِي صُورِ النَّاسِ، يَعْلُوهُمْ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ
مِنَ الصَّغَارِ حَتَّى يَدْخُلُوا سِجْنًا فِي جَهَنَّمَ يُقَالُ لَهُ بُولَسُ

*The proud will be gathered on the Day of Rising like ants, in the shape of men. Everything will tower over them, from the smallness placed upon them, until they enter a prison in Hell called Būlas. The fire of fires will rise above them, and they will be given to drink from the discharge of the people of the Fire.*²²

In the shape of men, so that they are recognisable, and the size of ants, so that everything on the field is above them. A man who spent his life needing to be taller than the room is given, exactly and forever, what he was running from.

22. Musnad Aḥmad, on the authority of ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr رضي الله عنهما, and al-Tirmidhī 2492, who graded it *ḥasan*.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا بِمَا أُنزِلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا نُوْمِنُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا
وَيَكْفُرُونَ بِمَا وَرَاءَهُ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا مَعَهُمْ قُلْ فَلِمَ تَقْتُلُونَ
أَنْبِيَاءَ اللَّهِ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

And when it is said to them: believe in what Allāh has sent down, they say: we believe in what was sent down to us; and they reject what came after it, though it is the truth confirming what is with them. Say: then why did you kill the prophets of Allāh before, if you were believers?

al-Baqara 2:91

The answer they give is a masterpiece of evasion, and the reader should admire it before condemning it. They are not asked whether the Qur'ān is true. They are asked to believe in what Allāh ﷻ sent down. And they reply that they believe in what was sent down *to us*, which is not an answer to the question but sounds a great deal like one.

And what it means is that the criterion has moved. It is no longer, is this from Allāh ﷻ. It is, was this sent to us. A Book is to be judged by its address, and the address is to be judged by whether we are in it, and a man who has arranged his religion in that way has made himself the standard, and Allāh ﷻ is left to be judged by whether He has been sufficiently attentive.

Every unjust community does this, and the reader should not think it a Jewish peculiarity. Belief becomes a badge, something a community wears to display itself, and once it is a badge it follows that no prophet and no scholar will be accepted who does not belong to us. This is what nationalism does to religion, and it is what tribe does, and what caste does, and what race does, and there is plenty of it amongst us. A man will not take knowledge from a scholar because of where he is from. A community will not accept a leader because he is the wrong colour. And this is the oldest of the errors: Iblīs looked at

Ādam عليه السلام, and did not dispute the command, and did not deny that Allāh ﷻ had given it. He said, I am better than him, and he was expelled for it.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله sets out the Qur'ān's refutation of their position in three moves, and it is a tidy argument worth following. First, if the authenticity of the other Books has been established by arguments they cannot answer, what does the denial actually consist of? Had they a doubt about the arguments, they could have raised it and had it settled. A flat refusal is not a doubt. Second, the other Books confirm the Tawrah, so that to deny them is to deny it, and they have therefore undermined the very thing they claim to be defending. And third, the killing of a prophet is disbelief by the reckoning of every revealed Book, and the prophets they killed were Israelites, teaching from the Tawrah, and they did not merely kill them, they took the killers as their chiefs afterwards. A community which does that has denied the Tawrah with its hands, whatever its mouth says.

And that is what the closing question does. *Then why did you kill the prophets of Allāh before, if you were believers?* It does not argue with the claim. It sets a fact beside it, and lets the fact do the work.

The Calf They Were Made to Drink

*وَلَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مُوسَىٰ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ اتَّخَذْتُمُ الْعِجْلَ مِن بَعْدِهِ وَأَنتُمْ
ظَالِمُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

And Mūsā came to you with clear signs, then you took the calf after him, and you were wrongdoers.

al-Baqara 2:92

The clear signs are not left vague, and the reader should recall what they were, because the list is long and the failure is therefore extraordinary. There were the

signs given against Fir'awn, the flood and the locusts and the lice and the frogs and the blood, and the staff, and the hand which came out white. And there were the signs given to the people themselves after their deliverance, the parting of the sea, the cloud which shaded them, the manna and the quails which came down every day, and the stone which gave twelve springs when it was struck. Not one of these was ambiguous. Not one of them could be explained away.

And then he went up the mountain for forty nights, and they made a calf.

That is the whole argument of the āyah, and it is an argument about how little evidence has to do with it. These people had seen the sea stand up. They were eating food which arrived from the sky that morning. And the moment the man who had shown them all of it was out of sight for a few weeks, they were bowing to a piece of metal. Anybody who has ever thought that his own faith would be secure if only Allāh ﷻ would show him something should sit with that for a while.

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَكُمْ وَرَفَعْنَا فَوْقَكُمُ الطُّورَ خُذُوا مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ بِقُوَّةٍ
وَأَسْمِعُوا قَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَعَصَيْنَا وَأَشْرَبُوا فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْعِجْلَ بِكُفْرِهِمْ
قُلْ بِئْسَمَا يَأْمُرُكُم بِهِ إِيمَانُكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

And remember when We took your covenant and raised the mountain above you: take hold of what We have given you with strength, and listen. They said: we hear, and we disobey. And they were made to drink the calf into their hearts, because of their disbelief. Say: wretched is what your faith commands you, if you are believers.

al-Baqara 2:93

The word to work on is *listen*, because the Arabic *sami'a* carries more than the ear. Some of the 'ulamā' have said that the hearing meant here is the hearing which answers, and this is the sense in the ordinary Arabic phrase *sam'an wa ṭā'atan*, hearing and obedience, which does not mean that a man has heard the

words and will now consider them, it means he is already moving. It is the sense in *sami‘a Allābu li-man ḥamidah*, which we say standing up from the *rukū‘*, and which does not mean that Allāh ﷻ has detected the sound of our praise, but that He has answered the one who praised Him. And Allāh ﷻ describes the believers with the same construction, that *the only word of the believers, when they are called to Allāh and His Messenger to judge between them, is to say: we hear and we obey*.²³

So when they said, we hear and we disobey, the two halves are not a contradiction. They had reduced hearing to the ear, and the ear does not commit a man to anything. Which is exactly what the disbelievers of Makkah later recommended about the Qur’ān, that they should not listen to it and should make noise over it so that they might overcome.²⁴ They understood that the danger was not in the ear. It was in the answering, and the noise was to stop the answering, not the hearing.

And there is a mercy in the disagreement of the ‘ulamā’ over whether they actually said the words. Some hold that they said it aloud, in insolence. Others hold that they did not utter it at all, and that they said the right thing with their tongues and said this with their conduct and their bodies, and that Allāh ﷻ reported what their behaviour amounted to. If the second view is right, and many of the ‘ulamā’ have held it, then it is a great deal more frightening than the first, because it means a man may be recorded as having said, we hear and we disobey, without ever having opened his mouth.

Then the strangest phrase in the āyah, that *they were made to drink the calf into their hearts*, and the passive is deliberate, and so is the verb. It is not that they loved the calf. It is that the calf was made to soak into them, the way water goes into every vein and cannot afterwards be picked out. And some of the ‘ulamā’ have suggested it happened by a drip, little by little, because they had seen what al-Sāmirī was doing and wanted something of the same for themselves, and by

23. al-Nūr 24:51.

24. Fuṣṣilat 41:26.

the time it was in them there was no moment to which anyone could point and say, there, that is where it entered.

Which is the true account of how a thing takes a man's heart. Nobody decides to love the world. He looks at it for twenty years, a little every day, and it soaks in, and then it is in every vein and it cannot be washed out, and he never once made a decision he would recognise as a decision. Ask the ordinary worshipper what he loves most and he will answer honestly and be wrong, because the drip is not audible while it is happening.

Then Wish for Death

قُلْ إِنْ كَانَتْ لَكُمُ الدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ خَالِصَةً مِّنْ دُونِ
النَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوْا الْمَوْتَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾

Say: if the final abode with Allāh is purely yours, to the exclusion of all people, then wish for death, if you are truthful.

al-Baqara 2:94

To see the force of this, the reader has to know what they were claiming, and the Qur'ān records it in several places. They said the Fire would not touch them except for a few numbered days.²⁵ They said none would enter the Garden but a Jew or a Christian.²⁶ They said, we are the children of Allāh and His beloved.²⁷ And Allāh ﷻ put the same challenge to them in Sūrat al-Jumu'a, that if they claim to be the friends of Allāh to the exclusion of all people, let them wish for death.²⁸

25. al-Baqara 2:80.

26. al-Baqara 2:111.

27. al-Mā'ida 5:18.

28. al-Jumu'a 62:6.

Now look at what the challenge does. It does not dispute the claim. It does not produce a counter-argument, or cite the Tawrāh against them, or ask for evidence. It says: very well, then act like it.

Because a man who genuinely believes that his ticket is stamped is in the position of a man standing outside a house he owns in the rain. There is nothing keeping him out here except the door, and the door opens by dying. If the Garden is yours, purely and exclusively, then death is the only thing standing between you and it, and you should be impatient. And they were not impatient. They were, as the next āyahs will say, the most desperate of all men to stay exactly where they were.

This is a Qur'ānic proof of a kind that argument cannot supply. They could have answered a syllogism; scholars are good at that. They could have muddled the water and produced a case and left the matter looking arguable. What they could not do was take up a challenge which cost them nothing but a sentence, and everyone in Madīnah could see that they would not do it, and everyone in Madīnah could work out why. They did not believe their own claim. And the Qur'ān made them demonstrate it in public without ever having to prove a thing.

A Necessary Word on Wishing for Death

The reader will immediately want to know how this sits with what he has been taught, that a Muslim must not wish for death, and it is a fair question and needs answering before we go on, because the two things could be confused and the confusion would do harm.

What the Messenger ﷺ forbade is wishing for death because of a hardship that has landed on you.

لَا يَتَمَنَّيَنَّ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ الْمَوْتَ لِضَرٍّ نَزَلَ بِهِ، فَإِنْ كَانَ لَا بُدَّ مُتَمَنَّيَا لِلْمَوْتِ
فَلْيَقُلْ: اللَّهُمَّ أَحْيِنِي مَا كَانَتْ الْحَيَاةُ خَيْرًا لِي، وَتَوَفَّنِي إِذَا كَانَتْ الْوَفَاةُ خَيْرًا
لِي

*Let none of you wish for death because of a harm that has come upon him. If he must, then let him say: O Allāh, keep me alive as long as life is better for me, and take me when death is better for me.*²⁹

And notice that he ﷺ does not simply forbid it and leave the man where he is. He gives him something to say instead, which hands the decision back to Allāh ﷻ and leaves the man with his complaint expressed and his affairs in the right hands. That is a mercy, and any reader who is in a bad way should take the wording and use it as it stands.

The reason for the prohibition is given in another narration: none of you should wish for death or pray for it before it comes, for when a man dies his deeds come to an end, and a believer's long life increases him in nothing but good.³⁰ And in the wording of al-Bukhārī رحمه الله: let none of you wish for death; either he is a doer of good and will do more, or he is a doer of evil and perhaps he will stop. Both doors are open while a man is breathing, and death shuts both of them.

Imām al-Nawawī رحمه الله states the ruling exactly. It is disliked to wish for death because of a worldly harm, a loss, a distress, an enemy, a hardship. But if a man fears for his religion, that he will be turned from it or tried in it, it is not disliked, and a number of the Salaf did so.

And there is a ḥadīth which the reader should have beside all of this, because it prevents a misunderstanding.

29. al-Bukhārī 5671, on the authority of Anas b. Mālik رضي الله عنه.

30. Muslim 2682, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

مَنْ أَحَبَّ لِقَاءَ اللَّهِ أَحَبَّ اللَّهُ لِقَاءَهُ، وَمَنْ كَرِهَ لِقَاءَ اللَّهِ كَرِهَ اللَّهُ لِقَاءَهُ

*Whoever loves the meeting with Allāh, Allāh loves the meeting with him; and whoever hates the meeting with Allāh, Allāh hates the meeting with him.*³¹

‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها, or another of his wives, said at once: but we hate death. And he ﷺ said, that is not it. Rather, when death comes to the believer he is given the good news of Allāh’s ﷻ pleasure and His honour, and there is nothing dearer to him than what is in front of him, so he loves the meeting with Allāh ﷻ and Allāh ﷻ loves the meeting with him. And when death comes to the disbeliever he is given the news of Allāh’s ﷻ punishment, and there is nothing more hateful to him than what is in front of him, so he hates the meeting with Allāh ﷻ and Allāh ﷻ hates the meeting with him.

The reader should notice the mercy in the answer. She said the honest thing that everybody in the room was thinking, and he ﷺ did not rebuke her for it. He told her that the ḥadīth was not describing how a man feels in good health on a Tuesday. It is describing the moment itself, when the curtain lifts and a man sees where he is going, and it turns out that the fear we all carry now is not the thing being weighed at all.

ج
وَلَنْ يَتَمَنَّوهُ أَبَدًا بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِالظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾

But they will never wish for it, because of what their hands have sent ahead. And Allāh knows the wrongdoers.

al-Baqara 2:95

Never, and the Arabic is emphatic about it, and it is a prediction as much as a description. And the reason given is the phrase *what their hands have sent ahead*, which is one of the Qur’ān’s great images, that a man’s deeds are not

31. al-Bukhārī and Muslim, on the authority of ‘Ubāda b. al-Ṣāmit عنه رضي الله and ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها.

behind him at all, they have gone on in front of him and are waiting for him where he is going. Nothing is left in the past. It has all been forwarded.

And so two things were true of them at once, which they knew and would not say. They had not sent much ahead worth arriving to, so there was nothing there to draw them. And they had spent their effort and their money on the life they were in and very little of it on the one they were going to, so everything they owned was here. A man's heart is where his property is, and they had made a clear-eyed investment decision and then had to live with what it implied, which was that they could not afford to want to die.

ج
وَلَتَجِدَنَّهُمْ أَحْرَصَ النَّاسِ عَلَى حَيَوةٍ وَمِنَ الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا يُوَدُّ^ج
أَحَدُهُمْ لَوْ يَعْمُرَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ وَمَا هُوَ بِمُزَحِّزِهِ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ أَنْ
يَعْمَرَ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

And you will surely find them the greediest of people for life, and more so than those who associate partners with Allāh. Each one of them would love to be given a thousand years; but it would not remove him from the punishment that he should be given long life. And Allāh sees what they do.

al-Baqara 2:96

Ibn ʿĀshūr رحمه الله and Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله both stop at the comparison, because it is the sting of the āyah. Greedier for life than the idolaters, and the reader should ask why that is a rebuke rather than an observation.

The idolaters did not believe in the next world at all. This life was everything they had, and there was nothing on the other side of it, so of course they clung to it; there was nothing else to hold. But the Jews affirmed the next world, and not only affirmed it but claimed to have it reserved for themselves exclusively. And they wanted this one more than the men who thought this one was all there was.

The Qur'ān does not have to say another word. The behaviour has said it. Their claim was demolished by their own grip on the world, and no argument was ever needed, and the reader should notice that this is the whole method of the passage, that Allāh ﷻ does not refute them, He simply reports what they do until the claim collapses under its own weight.

Then two small things which repay attention. Allāh ﷻ says a thousand years, and He does not say a hundred or ten thousand, and the 'ulamā' have noticed that it is the number a man reaches for when he means simply, more, without any endpoint in mind. He is like a criminal on bail who wants the bail extended, and if you ask him until when, he cannot tell you, because there is no date at which he will be ready to go to court. The extension is the whole of his religion.

And the word for life is left indefinite in the Arabic, *ḥayāt*, any life, without qualification. Not a good life, not a comfortable life, not a long one. Any life at all is better than the alternative, on any terms whatever, and a man who wants existence on those terms has told you what he thinks is waiting for him.

And the closing phrase falls like a door: *and it would not remove him from the punishment that he should be given long life*. The thousand years would not help. That is what he is fleeing towards, and it does not go anywhere.

Whoever Is an Enemy to Jibrīl

قُلْ مَنْ كَانَ عَدُوًّا لِجِبْرِيلَ فَإِنَّهُ نَزَّلَهُ عَلَى قَلْبِكَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ
مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَهُدًى وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٩٧﴾

Say: whoever is an enemy to Jibrīl, it is he who brought it down upon your heart by the permission of Allāh, confirming what came before it, and a guidance and good news for the believers.

al-Baqara 2:97

The reader needs the occasion, and al-Bukhārī رحمه الله preserves it in one of the finest narrations in the collection. Anas b. Mālīk رضي الله عنه reports that when ‘Abdullāh b. Salām heard that the Prophet ﷺ had come to Madīnah, he was working on his land, and he came and said: I am going to ask you about three things which no one knows except a prophet. What is the first sign of the Hour? What is the first meal of the people of the Garden? And why does a child resemble its father, and why does it resemble its maternal uncle? And the Messenger ﷺ said, Jibrīl has just told me the answers. ‘Abdullāh said: he, of all the angels, is the enemy of the Jews. And the Messenger ﷺ recited this āyah.³²

He then answered the three questions, that the first sign of the Hour is a fire which will gather people from east to west, and that the first meal of the people of the Garden is the lobe of a fish's liver, and that as for the resemblance of the child, it goes to whichever parent's fluid precedes. And ‘Abdullāh رضي الله عنه said, I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh and that you are the Messenger of Allāh.

Then he said a thing which tells the reader everything about the community he was leaving. O Messenger of Allāh, the Jews are a slanderous people, and if they learn of my Islam before you ask them about me, they will lie about me. So he went inside the house, and the Jews came, and the Messenger ﷺ asked them what kind of man ‘Abdullāh b. Salām was. They said, he is the best of us and the son of the best of us, our master and the son of our master. He said, what if he were to accept Islam? They said, may Allāh protect him from that. And ‘Abdullāh رضي الله عنه came out and said, I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allāh. And they said, he is the worst of us and the son of the worst of us, and they went on abusing him. And he said, this is what I feared, O Messenger of Allāh.

The reader should sit with that for a moment before moving on. The same man, in the same hour, from the same mouths. Master of us all, and then the worst of

32. al-Bukhārī 3329, on the authority of Anas رضي الله عنه. Al-Bukhārī and Muslim both record the ḥadīth by another chain.

us, and nothing had changed except that he had told the truth. That is what a community does when its verdicts are for sale, and it is worth knowing that the mechanism is not confined to them.

Why an Enmity to an Angel?

Imām al-Ṭabarī رحمه الله says that the scholars of tafsīr are agreed that this āyah came down in answer to the Jews, who claimed that Jibrīl عليه السلام was their enemy and that Mikā'il عليه السلام was their friend. And the reader is entitled to find this strange, so it is worth setting out why they said it.

They held that revelation belonged to the Children of Isrā'īl, to the descendants of Ishāq عليه السلام and Ya'qūb عليه السلام, and to no one else. So a prophet who was not an Israelite was, on their reckoning, an impossibility, and yet here he was, and the Qur'ān was working on their own people, and their own scholars were losing men to it. So they laid the blame on the angel. Jibrīl عليه السلام, they said, had made a mistake. He had delivered the message to the wrong man. And they added that they knew Jibrīl عليه السلام of old as the one who brought the punishments down on the nations, whereas Mikā'il عليه السلام is associated with the rain and with mercy, and had Allāh ﷻ sent that one instead, they would have been glad to listen.

It is worth naming the shape of this, because it is not dead. It is the manoeuvre of a man who cannot attack the message and so attacks the courier, and it has turned up inside our own Ummah. Some of the extreme factions have said the same thing, that Jibrīl عليه السلام erred, and that the revelation was intended for 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib رضي الله عنه, and it is the identical error wearing our clothes. The reader who is tempted to feel superior to the Jews of Madīnah at this point should notice that we have produced the same idea ourselves.

And the answer Allāh ﷻ gives is worth the whole passage. He does not defend Jibrīl عليه السلام. He does not argue that the angel is trustworthy or set out his rank. He says: *it is he who brought it down upon your heart by the permission of Allāh*. By whose permission? That is the entire reply. The chain runs from

Allāh ﷻ to the angel to the Prophet ﷺ, and a man who attacks the middle of a chain has attacked the top of it, whatever he tells himself. They thought they were quarrelling with Jibrīl عليه السلام. They were quarrelling with the One who sent him, and cutting off their nose to spite their face.

There is a lesson in the tone. Allāh ﷻ teaches the believers a posture here, and it is unapologetic. Let them hate as they like. It does not diminish the Prophet ﷺ and it does not diminish us, and the reply is not to plead but to state the fact and let it stand. There is a great deal of anxious explaining amongst us, and this āyah is the cure for it.

As for the name, 'Ikrima رحمه الله said that *Jibr* and *Mik* and *Isrāf* all mean servant, and that *il* means Allāh ﷻ, so that the names of the three great angels are all, in the older tongue, a form of the words servant of Allāh. There is something worth noticing in that. The highest of the creation are named for the lowest station.

Upon Your Heart

Mawlānā Kāndhlawī رحمه الله draws attention to something in the wording which the reader would otherwise walk past. Allāh ﷻ says the revelation was brought down *upon your heart*, and He does not say, to your ears.

Consider how it works for the rest of us. We hear a thing, then we repeat it, then we repeat it again, and after a great deal of repetition it settles in the heart, and by the time it is in there it has been through our mouths a hundred times and every one of those passages was an opportunity for it to be damaged. That is why memorisation is hard and why errors creep into what a man has learned. The revelation came the other way. It arrived in the heart first and appeared on the tongue afterwards, and the repetition which endangers the rest of us was never required. It is a miracle of transmission, and it is the reason we have what we have without a scratch on it.

And there is the memory of Waraqa b. Nawfal, who, when the Messenger ﷺ came down from the cave and told him what had happened, said at once, this is

the *Nāmūs* which Allāh sent down upon Mūsā.³³ An old man who had read the earlier books knew immediately what had come and who had brought it. It was the same angel. Waraqa recognised him, and welcomed him, and the rabbis of Madīnah recognised him and declared war on him, and that is the difference between the two, and it was never a difference of information.

مَنْ كَانَ عَدُوًّا لِلَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَجِبْرِيلَ وَمِيكَالَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
عَدُوٌّ لِّلْكَافِرِينَ

Whoever is an enemy to Allāh, and His angels, and His messengers, and Jibrīl, and Mikā'īl, then Allāh is an enemy to the disbelievers.

al-Baqara 2:98

Notice the list, and notice what it does. Allāh ﷻ, and the angels, and the messengers, all in general, and then two angels named. And why name them, when they were covered already by the word angels? Because those were the two the Jews had separated, one to love and one to hate, and Allāh ﷻ names them both in the same breath and in the same sentence and gives them the same status, so that the distinction they had built their objection on is simply dissolved.

You cannot pick and choose whom you accept. That is the whole content of the āyah, and it is the same principle the sūra will state at its very end, where the believers say *we make no distinction between any of His messengers*.³⁴ A man does not get to keep the parts of the religion he finds congenial and hold a grievance against the rest. He takes the whole household or he has taken nothing.

A Supplication Worth Learning

And since the three great angels have been named, the reader may as well have the supplication which the Messenger ﷺ used to make when he rose in the

33. al-Bukhārī 3, on the authority of ʿĀ'isha رضي الله عنها.

night, which is recorded in the Ṣaḥīḥ and which is a beautiful thing to have by you.

اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّ جِبْرَائِيلَ وَمِيكَائِيلَ وَإِسْرَافِيلَ، فَاطِرَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ، عَالِمَ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ، أَنْتَ تَحْكُمُ بَيْنَ عِبَادِكَ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ، اهْدِنِي لِمَا اخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ مِنَ الْحَقِّ بِإِذْنِكَ، إِنَّكَ تَهْدِي مَنْ تَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

*O Allāh, Lord of Jibrīl and Mikā'il and Isrāfīl, Originator of the heavens and the earth, Knower of the unseen and the seen, You judge between Your servants in what they differed over. Guide me to the truth in what is disputed, by Your leave. You guide whom You will to a straight path.*³⁵

The reader should notice what is being asked for, because it is not what he might expect. It is not a request to be given the truth. It is a request to be guided to the truth *in what is disputed*, which is a request for help precisely where the ground is uncertain and honest men disagree, and it comes from the mouth of the one man on the earth who could not be mistaken about it. If he ﷺ asked that, the rest of us have a great deal of asking to do.

وَلَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ وَمَا يَكْفُرُ بِهَا إِلَّا الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

And We have certainly sent down to you clear signs, and none reject them except those who defy.

al-Baqara 2:99

Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله makes the argument here which the āyah is built on, and it is an argument from a fact anybody in Madīnah could check. The Qurʾān mentions the contents of the Jewish books, and it mentions the places where

34. al-Baqara 2:285.

35. Muslim 770, on the authority of ʿĀʾisha رضي الله عنها.

their rulings had been altered and their texts distorted, and it does this in detail. And Allāh ﷻ put all of it into a Book revealed to Muḥammad ﷺ.

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما puts the point in its sharpest form. You recite this Book to them night and day, though you are unlettered and never read a book in your life, and you tell them what is in their own scriptures. That, he says, should have been proof enough, if they had any interest in the truth.

The reader should feel the weight of that. The man had not read their books. He could not read at all. And he was correcting their scholars on the contents of their own library, and they knew he was right, because the corrections landed. There is no ordinary explanation available. That is what a clear sign is, and it is what the last word of the āyah answers, because *fāsiq* here does not mean an ordinary sinner. It means a man who has broken out, who has stepped over a line he could see perfectly well, and Allāh ﷻ is telling us that nobody rejects this out of confusion.

On Miracles

And a word on miracles generally, since the āyah has raised them, because the reader will meet the question sooner or later and should have an answer.

A miracle is not meant to make sense. That is not a defect in it; it is the definition. If a thing could be accounted for it would not be a sign, and the whole purpose of it is that it cannot be reproduced, which is exactly what distinguishes it from magic, and we shall come to that distinction in a few āyahs' time and it will matter a great deal there.

And the Messenger ﷺ was given a great many of them, and the reader should have some of them in mind. The moon was split.³⁶ He was taken in a night from Makkah to Jerusalem and raised through the heavens. The trunk of the date-palm he used to lean on wept aloud when a pulpit was made for him and he left it, and it was heard by the whole congregation, and he came down and

36. al-Bukhārī 3636, on the authority of Anas رضي الله عنه . And the Qur'ān, al-Qamar 54:1.

embraced it until it was quiet. Water flowed from between his fingers at Ḥudaybiya until an army had drunk. Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه was given milk to drink until he could drink no more. The food at Tabūk was blessed until it fed the whole force.

And yet the Qur'ān, in this passage and elsewhere, keeps pointing away from all of that and back to itself, back to the unlettered man reciting a Book to scholars and correcting their libraries. The miracle which is left with us, and which any man may examine at any hour of any century, is the one they were looking at and would not see.

The Book Thrown Behind Their Backs

ج
أَوَكَلَّمَا عٰهَدُوْا عٰهَدًا نَّبَذُوْهُ فَرِيْقَ مِنْهُمْ بَلْ اَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُوْنَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

Is it not so, that every time they made a covenant a party of them cast it aside?

Rather, most of them do not believe.

al-Baqara 2:100

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله gives the occasion. When the Messenger ﷺ was sent and Allāh ﷻ reminded the Jews of the covenant they had concerning him, Mālik b. al-Ṣayf said: by Allāh, Allāh never made any covenant with us about Muḥammad, nor took any pledge from us at all. And this āyah came down.

Notice the reply. Allāh ﷻ does not produce the document. He points at the pattern. Is this not exactly what you always do? And that is a devastating way to answer a denial, because it does not argue about the particular case at all, it establishes that the man denying has denied everything else as well, and a man with that record cannot be heard on this one.

And the wording is careful, and the reader should notice the care. *A party of them*, not all of them, and *most of them do not believe*, not every last one. The Qur'ān is precise even when it is condemning, and it does not tar a whole

community with what a faction did, and this is a habit of the Book which we would do well to learn from, because we are not always so careful when we speak about others.

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٌ لِّمَا مَعَهُمْ نَبَذَ فَرِيقٌ
مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَرَاءَ ظُهُورِهِمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ لَا
يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

And when a messenger came to them from Allāh, confirming what was with them, a party of those who had been given the Book threw the Book of Allāh behind their backs, as though they did not know.

al-Baqara 2:101

Muftī Shafiʿ رحمه الله notes the sequence, that the last āyah told us the breaking of pledges had become a habit with them, and this one supplies the latest and most relevant instance.

And al-Suddī رحمه الله tells us what actually happened, and it is a strange and instructive story. When the Messenger ﷺ came, they wanted to argue with him out of the Tawrah, and they found that they could not, because the Tawrah and the Qurʾān confirmed one another. So they gave up on the Tawrah. And they went instead to the Book of Āṣaf and to the magic of Hārūt and Mārūt, which did not agree with the Qurʾān, and argued from those.

The reader should follow what that means, because it is worse than it first appears. They did not abandon the Tawrah because they preferred magic. They abandoned it because it agreed with him. Their own scripture was discarded for the crime of confirming the man they had decided to oppose, and they reached for occult books which they knew perfectly well were not scripture at all, because those could be made to say what they wanted. So they were disbelievers by the reckoning of the Tawrah itself, which is the point Allāh ﷻ makes with

the phrase *as though they did not know*. They knew. They were acting as though they did not.

And here is the lesson, and it is for us and not for them. We must not abandon the Qur'ān. It sounds an easy thing to be sure of, and it is not, because nobody abandons it by announcing that he has. He abandons it by finding that the Book keeps disagreeing with the position he has taken, and by reaching, quietly, for something more accommodating, and there is always something more accommodating to hand. It might be a scholar who says what he wants, or a piece of received wisdom, or the plain feeling that things have changed. And the Book goes behind the back, and the man would swear on his life that he honours it, and he does honour it, in the way a man honours an ornament.

Sulaymān, Hārūt and Mārūt

وَاتَّبَعُوا مَا تَتْلُوا الشَّيْطَانُ عَلَىٰ مُلْكٍ سَلِيمٍ ۖ وَمَا كَفَرَ سُلَيْمٰنُ
وَلَكِنَّ الشَّيْطَانِ كَفَرُوا يُعَلِّمُونَ النَّاسَ السِّحْرَ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَى
الْمَلَائِكَةِ بِبَابِلَ هُرُوتَ وَمُرُوتَ ۖ وَمَا يُعَلِّمَانِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ حَتَّى يَقُولَا
إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ فِتْنَةٌ فَلَا تَكْفُرْ فَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مِنْهُمَا مَا يُفَرِّقُونَ بِهِ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ
وَزَوْجِهِ ۖ وَمَا هُمْ بِضَآرِّينَ بِهِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ
مَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ وَلَقَدْ عَلِمُوا لَمَنِ اشْتَرَاهُ مَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِنْ خَلْقٍ وَلَبِئْسَ مَا شَرَوْا بِهِ أَنْفُسَهُمْ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

And they followed what the devils recited concerning the kingdom of Sulaymān. Sulaymān did not disbelieve, but the devils disbelieved, teaching people magic, and what was sent down to the two angels at Bābil, Hārūt and Mārūt. And the two of them taught no one until they had said: we are only a trial, so do not disbelieve. And they learned from them that by which they separate a man from his wife, though they could harm no one by it except by the permission of Allāh; and they learned what harmed them and did not benefit them. And they knew that whoever purchased it would have no share in the Hereafter. Wretched is that for which they sold their souls, if only they had known.

al-Baqara 2:102

This is the longest āyah of the passage and the most tangled, and the reader should be told at the outset what it is doing, because otherwise the details will bury him. It is answering a slander. The Jews had put about that Sulaymān عليه السلام was a magician, and that his kingdom, with the jinn and the birds and the wind at his command, had been the work of sorcery. Allāh ﷻ is

denying it flatly, and while He denies it He is exposing where the slander came from.

Was Sulaymān a Magician?

The account which the mufasssirūn give of how the slander began is worth having in full, because it explains something about how a lie outlives the people who told it.

Before the birth of ʿĪsā عليه السلام, the devils used to climb towards heaven and listen in on the talk of the angels about what was to happen on the earth, and they would carry what they heard to the soothsayers, and the soothsayers would tell the people, and the people found that it came true. And when the soothsayers had come to trust them, the devils began to lie, adding words of their own to the true word they had stolen, until there were seventy lies to every truth. And people wrote these things down in books. And soon the Children of Isrāʾīl were saying that the jinn know the unseen.

Then Sulaymān عليه السلام was made a prophet, and he collected those books and buried them in a chest beneath his throne, and any devil that came near the place was burned. And he said, I will not hear of anyone claiming that the devils know the unseen but I will cut off his head.

Then Sulaymān عليه السلام died. And the scholars who knew the truth of the matter died after him. And a generation came who had not been there. And a devil took the shape of a man and came to some of the Children of Isrāʾīl and said, shall I lead you to a treasure you will never exhaust? They said yes. He said, dig beneath this throne, and he went with them and showed them the place. They said, come closer. He said, no, I will wait here, and if you find nothing, kill me. They dug, and found the books. And the devil said: this is how Sulaymān controlled the men and the jinn and the birds. And the word went round that Sulaymān had been a sorcerer, and the Children of Isrāʾīl took up those books, and when Muḥammad ﷺ came they argued with him out of them.

Look at what the story is describing. A prophet buried a thing so thoroughly that it took a devil to find it again, and he was successful, and the lie was dead

for a whole generation. And it came back the moment the men who remembered were gone. This is why knowledge is preserved by being transmitted and not merely by being suppressed, and it is why the death of the ‘ulamā’ is the calamity the Messenger ﷺ said it was. Sulaymān عليه السلام buried the books and the books came up again. What could not be replaced was the men who knew.

Did the Angels Teach Magic?

Now the harder question, and the reader should be warned that the ‘ulamā’ have taken more than one road here.

The Jews had claimed that Jibrīl عليه السلام and Mīkā’īl عليه السلام brought magic down to the two angels, and Allāh ﷻ refutes that. But what were Hārūt and Mārūt doing at Bābil at all?

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما describes it this way. When a man came to the two angels wanting to learn magic, they would try to turn him away, and would say to him: we are only a trial, so do not disbelieve. They had knowledge of good and evil and of what constitutes belief and disbelief, and they therefore knew that magic is a form of disbelief. And if the man insisted even so, they would direct him to a certain place, where Shayṭān would meet him and teach him. And when the man had learned it, the light of faith would leave him, and he would see it going up from him into the sky, and he would cry out, my grief! Woe to me! What have I done?

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī رحمه الله explains the whole arrangement as a trial: the angels were sent with this so that those whom Allāh ﷻ willed should be tested, and He took their pledge that they would teach no one until they had first said, we are a trial for you, do not disbelieve. And Qatāda رحمه الله says the same.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله, drawing on Ḥakīm al-Ummah Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī رحمه الله, gives an account which the reader may find settles the matter, and it is worth following carefully because it explains why angels were used for this and not prophets.

The situation at Bābil was that magic had acquired an extraordinary prestige, and magicians with it, and the confusion between magic and prophecy had become a genuine source of misguidance, because people could no longer tell which was which. So Allāh ﷻ sent two angels to Bābil to teach people what magic actually is, and what its forms are, so that they might distinguish it from the miracles of the prophets and know to keep away from the magicians and away from the practice. And just as a prophet's claim is confirmed by signs and arguments, the angelic nature of Hārūt and Mārūt was confirmed by signs, so that people would listen to them and take their guidance.

Now, why not send a prophet to do this? For two reasons, and the Muftī رحمه الله states them cleanly. First, the whole need of the hour was to draw a distinction between prophets and magicians, and the prophets were in a manner of speaking a party to the dispute, and it is proper for a third party to arbitrate. And second, the distinction could not be drawn in practice without citing the formulas which the magicians actually employed. Now, merely to report words of disbelief is not itself disbelief; this is a principle of reason and the Sharī'a accepts it, and the Qur'ān itself reports the words of Fir'awn. So a prophet could have been permitted to do it. But the prophets are the manifestation of divine guidance, and Allāh ﷻ did not ask that of them, and chose two angels for the work instead.

On this account the two angels were doing something closer to what a teacher of a dangerous subject does, and their warning was sincere and was a condition of the whole arrangement. And this is the reading which best explains why Allāh ﷻ has them saying, in every single case and to every single man, *we are only a trial, so do not disbelieve*.

Is Magic Disbelief?

The reader will want a ruling, and it needs stating with care, because there is a great deal of loose talk about this and the loose talk goes in both directions.

The Messenger ﷺ said:

مَنْ أَتَى كَاهِنًا أَوْ سَاحِرًا فَصَدَّقَهُ بِمَا يَقُولُ فَقَدْ كَفَرَ بِمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ

*Whoever comes to a soothsayer or a magician and believes what he says has disbelieved in what was revealed to Muḥammad.*³⁷

Now, what does the Qur'ān mean by magic? In the vocabulary of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, *siḥr* refers to those practices in which a man seeks the help of jinn and devils, gaining their favour by adopting certain words or actions which involve disbelief or *shirk*, or at the least sin and transgression, and thereby brings about some unusual effect. The magic of Bābil which this āyah is describing was precisely this, and it is this which the Qur'ān condemns as disbelief.

Abū Manṣūr رحمه الله held, and al-Ālūsī رحمه الله reports it in *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī* as the soundest view, that not every form of magic constitutes disbelief unconditionally and absolutely, but only that form which employs actions or speech contrary to the tenets of faith. So the position comes to this. Where magic involves acts of disbelief, such as seeking the help of devils, or holding the stars and the planets to be effective in themselves, or claiming prophethood by presenting the results of a magical procedure as a miracle, then by the consensus of the 'ulamā' it is disbelief. And where it does not involve disbelief but only sinful acts, it is a major sin. That is the distinction, and the reader should keep it, because it saves him from two errors at once, from thinking every strange practice is disbelief and from thinking none of them is.

The Rulings in Brief

Since magic is not usually free of disbelief either in belief or in action, it follows that it is forbidden to learn it, to teach it, or to practise it. Some of the jurists have permitted learning it for the purpose of protecting Muslims from harm, and even then a man must not learn more of it than the purpose requires.

As for charms and amulets, if the help of jinn or devils has been sought in preparing them, they fall under *siḥr* and are forbidden. If the words used are

37. Reported by al-Bazzār, and graded ṣaḥīḥ. Similar wording in Abū Dāwūd 3904 and al-Tirmidhī 135.

obscure and a man does not know what they mean but suspects they may be addressed to idols or to devils, even those are forbidden. Other forms of magic besides the *siḥr* of Bābil, if they involve disbelief or *shirk* in any way, are likewise forbidden. And if there is a practice which employs words or actions to which the Sharīʿa does not object, then it is permitted, on condition that it is not used for a purpose the Sharīʿa forbids.

It is permitted to use the verses of the Qurʾān, or the Divine Names, or the words of a ḥadīth, in preparing an amulet, or as a recitation for seeking Allāh's ﷻ help towards some end. But if such a use of the sacred words is made for a blameworthy purpose, such as harming somebody without cause, then even that is forbidden.³⁸

On Taʿwīdh

The reader will want to know where *taʿwīdh* stands, since it is common amongst us and there are people who condemn it wholesale and people who lean on it more than they lean on Allāh ﷻ, and both are wrong.

The soundest way to think of it is as medicine. The Messenger ﷺ said:

لِكُلِّ دَاءٍ دَوَاءٌ، فَإِذَا أُصِيبَ دَوَاءُ الدَّاءِ بَرَأَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ

*For every illness there is a cure, and when the cure meets the illness, the man recovers by the permission of Allāh, Mighty and Majestic.*³⁹

And he ﷺ said that Allāh ﷻ has sent down no illness without sending down its cure with it.⁴⁰

Now notice the phrase in the first ḥadīth, *by the permission of Allāh*. It is the same phrase as in our āyah, where Allāh ﷻ says of the magicians that *they could*

38. See *Radd al-Muḥtār* and *Fatāwā Qāḍī Khān*.

39. Muslim 2204, on the authority of Jābir رضي الله عنه.

40. Ibn Mājah 3438, on the authority of ʿAbdullāh b. Masʿūd رضي الله عنه. Al-Bukhārī 5678 has similar wording.

harm no one by it except by the permission of Allāh. And Ḥakīm al-Ummah رحمه الله draws exactly the right conclusion from it in his *Bayān al-Qur'ān*, that causes do not, of themselves and by themselves, produce the effects we habitually attribute to them, and that it is Allāh ﷻ who creates the effect as much as He creates the cause.

Which settles the whole question, if a man will let it. Medicine does not cure; Allāh ﷻ cures, and the medicine is where He has placed the cure. And a *ta'wīdh* of Qur'ān does not protect; Allāh ﷻ protects, and this is a means He has permitted. A man who takes it in that spirit has done nothing wrong at all. A man who takes it believing the paper has power in itself has fallen into precisely the error the āyah is condemning, and he has fallen into it while carrying Qur'ān in his pocket, which is a bitter thing.

Separating a Man From His Wife

And the specific harm Allāh ﷻ names is that they learned *that by which they separate a man from his wife*, and the reader should ask why this, of all the harms available.

The Messenger ﷺ answered it.

إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ لَيَضَعُ عَرْشَهُ عَلَى الْمَاءِ ثُمَّ يَبْعَثُ سَرَايَاهُ فِي النَّاسِ، فَأَقْرَبُهُمْ
عِنْدَهُ مَنْزِلَةً أَعْظَمُهُمْ عِنْدَهُ فَتَنَةٌ

*Shayṭān sets his throne upon the water and sends out his detachments amongst the people, and the nearest of them to him in rank is the greatest of them in causing discord. One of them comes and says: I did not leave so-and-so until I had made him say such and such. And Iblīs says: no, by Allāh, you have done nothing. And another comes and says: I did not leave him until I had separated him from his wife. And he draws him near and embraces him and says: yes, it is you.*⁴¹

That is the promotion, and it is worth noticing what did not earn it. The first devil brought back a sin, an actual sin, got a man to say something he should not

have said, and was told he had achieved nothing. The one who was embraced had broken a home. Which tells the ordinary worshipper where the real front line is, and it is not where he thinks. It is at his own kitchen table, and a man who guards his marriage has taken something from Shayṭān which he values more than a hundred ordinary sins.

ج
 وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ ءَامَنُوا وَاتَّقَوْا لَمَثُوبَةٌ مِّنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ لَّوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

And had they believed and been mindful of Allāh, a reward from Allāh would have been better, if only they had known.

al-Baqara 2:103

And here is the conclusion of the whole long story, in one short āyah, and the reader should not miss how much is packed into it.

Two things are named, faith and *taqwā*. And knowledge is not amongst them.

These people had knowledge. They had a very great deal of it. They knew the books, and they had studied the magic to its depths, and Allāh ﷻ says of them plainly in the previous āyah that *they knew that whoever purchased it would have no share in the Hereafter*. They knew what it cost. They knew exactly what they were doing and exactly what it would cost them, and they did it anyway, and knowledge did nothing for them whatever.

This is the lesson of the whole passage, and it is a hard one for people like us who value learning. Knowledge is not a protection. It does not save a man, and it does not even reliably slow him down, and there is no amount of it which will substitute for the two things named here. What protects a man is that he believes and that he is careful of Allāh ﷻ. A scholar without those two is in

41. Muslim 2813, on the authority of Jābir b. ‘Abdullāh عنه رضي الله.

more danger than an ignorant man, not less, because he has more to answer for and a better vocabulary with which to excuse himself.

Do Not Say Rā'inā

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَقُولُوا رِعْنَا وَقُولُوا نُنْظَرُ أَتَنْصَرُونَ
وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٠٤﴾

O you who believe, do not say rā'inā, but say unẓurnā, and listen. And for the disbelievers there is a painful punishment.

al-Baqara 2:104

The reader will need the background, because on its face this is a strange instruction, that a word should be forbidden.

The Companions رضي الله عنهم used to say to the Messenger ﷺ, *rā'inā*, which in Arabic means, attend to us, have a care for us, wait for us to catch up. It was an ordinary and innocent thing to say. But in Hebrew a word very close to it is an insult, and the Jews of Madīnah discovered this, and they began to come to him ﷺ and address him with it, meaning the Hebrew insult, and the Arabs, who did not know Hebrew, could not see what was happening. And it delighted them, because they had found a way of abusing him publicly while appearing to be polite, and better than that, they had got the Muslims saying it too.

Allāh ﷻ exposes the whole business plainly in Sūrat al-Nisā', where He describes those of the Jews who displace words from their places and say, we hear and we disobey, and, hear and may you not hear, and *rā'inā*, twisting their tongues and attacking the religion; and that had they said, we hear and we obey, and, hear us, and *unẓurnā*, it would have been better for them and more up-right.⁴² Twisting their tongues is exact. The word was bent as it left the mouth.

And there is a second sense besides the Hebrew, which some of the ‘ulamā’ have mentioned, that the Arabic word is close to *rāʿī*, a herdsman, so that there is a further sneer buried in it, addressing him ﷺ as one would address a labourer.

They did the same thing with the greeting. When they greeted the Muslims they would say *al-sāmu ‘alaykum*, which sounds close enough to the greeting of peace and means, death be upon you. And we were commanded to answer them with *wa ‘alaykum*, and upon you, so that our reply is granted rather than theirs.

43

Removing the Means

Now here is the point of law, and it is a large one hidden in a small instruction. Allāh ﷻ does not tell the Jews to stop. He tells the *Muslims* to stop saying a word which was, on their lips, entirely innocent.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله identifies the principle by its name in the science of *uṣūl*: *sadd al-dharāʾiʿ*, blocking the means. A thing which is lawful in itself is closed off because it has become a road to something unlawful. The Companions رضي الله عنهم had done nothing wrong. The word was theirs and the meaning was theirs and the intention was theirs and every part of it was clean. And it was taken away from them regardless, because it had become a cover for an insult, and the innocent use was providing the cover.

All the jurists accept the principle, and those of the Ḥanbalī school are particularly rigorous about it.⁴⁴ And the reader should see what it asks of him. It asks him to give up something harmless because of what other people are doing with it, which is a thing the human heart resists strongly, since a man’s instinct is to say, but I meant nothing by it, and he is telling the truth, and it does not matter. The Companions رضي الله عنهم meant nothing by it either.

42. al-Nisā’ 4:46.

43. al-Bukhārī 6257 and Muslim 2164, on the authority of ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها and Ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما.

44. al-Qurṭubī, at this āyah.

The Adab in the Substitute

And Allāh ﷻ does not merely subtract; He replaces, and the replacement teaches something. He gives them *unẓurnā*, look at us, wait for us.

Consider what *rā'inā* implies, even taken innocently. It says: pay attention to us. And to say that to a man is to have said, quietly, that he is not paying attention. The word carries a complaint inside it, and the complaint is aimed at the Messenger ﷺ, and the reader can see at once that this will not do. *Unẓurnā* carries no such thing. It asks for a moment. It does not allege neglect.

So there is *adab* being taught here, and it runs both ways. To the teacher, that he should look at those he is teaching, since the word Allāh ﷻ chose is the word for looking. And to the learner, in the last word of the āyah, *and listen*, which is the sting in it, because a man who had been listening properly would not need to ask for extra attention in the first place. The instruction to the student is that a good deal of what he takes for the teacher going too fast is himself not attending.

They Do Not Wish Any Good for You

مَا يَوَدُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ وَلَا الْمُشْرِكِينَ أَنْ يُنَزَّلَ
عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَخْتَصُّ بِرَحْمَتِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ ذُو
الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿١٠٥﴾

Those who disbelieve, from the People of the Book and from the idolaters, do not wish that any good should be sent down to you from your Lord. But Allāh singles out for His mercy whom He wills, and Allāh is the possessor of great bounty.

al-Baqara 2:105

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله points to the movement between the two āyahs: the previous one told us how they behaved towards the Prophet ﷺ, and this one turns to how they behaved towards the Muslims in general.

And there was a performance going on which the reader should know about, because it explains why the āyah is worded as it is. Some of the Jews used to assure the Muslims of their goodwill, and would say that they would have been delighted, truly delighted, if Allāh ﷻ had sent the Muslims something superior to what they themselves had received, because then they could have accepted it themselves. Unfortunately, they would say, Islam simply does not seem to be a better religion. What a pity.

The Qur'ān names it for what it was. They do not wish that any good should be sent down to you at all. Not a better religion; not any good thing whatsoever. The regret was theatre, and the condition was one that could never be met, because the objection was never about quality.

And then the answer, and it is not a rebuke but a fact laid down: *Allāh singles out for His mercy whom He wills*. Which is to say, this is not your business. The bounty is His, it goes where He sends it, and their disapproval is a matter between them and Him and it has no effect on the traffic whatever. There is great comfort in this for the ordinary worshipper who feels the weight of other people's disapproval and imagines it can cost him something. It cannot. Allāh ﷻ is the possessor of great bounty, and the resentment of a man who has none of it changes nothing at all.

Whatever Āyah We Abrogate

مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ
أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٠٦﴾

Whatever āyah We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it, or its like. Do you not know that Allāh has power over all things?

al-Baqara 2:106

Here the sūra turns to *naskh*, and the reader should know why it turns to it here, because the placement is not arbitrary.

The Muslims had prayed towards Bayt al-Maqdis for sixteen or seventeen months, and then Allāh ﷻ turned them to the Ka'ba. And other rulings had likewise been changed or replaced. And this gave the Jews, and some of the idolaters with them, an opening for a taunt, and the taunt was directed at the Muslims and not at the Prophet ﷺ, because its aim was to plant a doubt.

Their argument ran like this. If everything Allāh ﷻ reveals is good, as you claim, why should one ruling be replaced by another? It follows that one of the two must be good and the other not; and no revelation can be bad. Therefore this cannot be a revealed Book at all, and Muḥammad ﷺ is making the changes himself.

It is a decent-sounding argument, which is why it worked, and it deserves a proper answer.

What Naskh Is and Is Not

First, the scope. *Naskh* occurs only with commands, prohibitions and permissions. It does not touch the narratives. Allāh ﷻ does not abrogate the story of Mūsā عليه السلام, because a fact does not stop being a fact when circumstances change, and this alone disposes of a good deal of confusion.

Second, the word. *Naskh* in the language means to copy out a book. In the case of a command, it means the removal of a ruling and its replacement by another, and whether what is removed is the wording, or the ruling, or both, it is still called *naskh*.

Third, the English. The word "abrogation" is not always a happy translation, and the reader should be careful with it, because the Arabic term can signify no more than a minor amendment to an earlier rule. Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما used the term freely, and a good deal of the time he used it in a partial, limited or figurative sense, and a reader who takes every occurrence of it to mean the wholesale cancellation of an āyah will end up in a great muddle.

Mujāhid رحمه الله gives one of the readings of *or cause to be forgotten*, saying: we keep the words and change the ruling, and he traces this to the companions of ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه, and Abū al-‘Āliya رحمه الله and Muḥammad b. Ka‘b al-Qurazī رحمه الله are reported similarly.

Whether It Is Possible at All

Now the substance. Is there anything in *naskh* which a sound mind should object to?

There is not, and Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله makes the point briskly. Allāh جلّال decides what He wills as He does what He wills. And *naskh* is not new; it occurred in the earlier Books and the earlier Laws, and the examples are ones the Jews could not deny, because they are in their own history. Ādam عليه السلام was permitted to marry his daughters to his sons, and it was later forbidden. Nūḥ عليه السلام was permitted, after leaving the ark, to eat of every kind of animal, and certain foods were later prohibited. Marrying two sisters was permitted to Isrā’īl and his children, and the Tawrāh later forbade it. And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام was commanded to sacrifice his son, and the command was withdrawn before it was carried out.

That last one is worth pausing on, because it is the strongest case. A command was given, and obeyed, and then repealed at the very moment of execution, and

no one in the Jewish tradition has ever suggested that this made Allāh ﷻ inconsistent or the first command bad. So they accepted the principle. They simply did not want to accept it here.

Examples in This Ummah

And the reader should know how it worked amongst us, and the great example is wine, which was forbidden in three stages. First, they were told not to approach the ṣalāh while intoxicated. Then came the āyah which acknowledged that in wine and gambling there is great sin and some benefit for people, and that the sin is greater. And only then, *O you who believe, wine and gambling and idols and divining arrows are an abomination of Shayṭān's handiwork, so avoid it.*⁴⁵

Three steps, over years, to take a thing out of a people who had it in their blood. And the reader should look at that and learn something about how a man reforms himself, and how he reforms his household, because Allāh ﷻ Himself did not do it in one blow, and He could have.

Others: the charity that was required before speaking privately to the Messenger ﷺ, in Sūrat al-Mujādala, which was in force very briefly and then lifted. And the *qibla*, from Bayt al-Maqdis to the Ka'ba, which is the case that started this argument and which the sūra will come to in the next Juz'.

Why Allāh Abrogates

And now the answer to the taunt itself, which Muftī Shafī' رحمه الله gives with an illustration that is worth more than an argument.

The lawmaker makes a law knowing perfectly well that circumstances will change in such a way that the law will no longer suit the situation; and when the circumstances change as he knew they would, he changes the law and promulgates the new one which he had in mind from the beginning. So there was no error. There was a plan, of which the change was a part.

45. al-Nisā' 4:43; al-Baqara 2:219; al-Mā'ida 5:90.

And the illustration. A physician prescribes a medicine for a patient in view of his condition today, and he knows that in two days the condition will have changed and will need something else. So he prescribes what suits today, and returns in two days and prescribes what suits then. Now, he could perfectly well write out the entire course of treatment in advance, with every change indicated. But this would put too much on a patient who is already weak, and there would be the danger of a mistake or a misunderstanding along the way.

Which answers the whole objection. The first ruling was not bad; it was right for its day. The second is not a correction; it is the next dose. And the reason we were not given the whole prescription at once is a mercy to us and not a limitation in Him, because we are the feeble patient in the illustration and we would have made a mess of it.

Our Attitude to Naskh

A word on how the ‘ulamā’ have handled this, because the reader may hear it disputed.

There has been a long and honourable effort in this Ummah to reduce the number of āyahs considered abrogated, by reconciling āyahs which had been thought to conflict. Some of the earlier scholars counted around five hundred. Imām al-Suyūṭī رحمه الله brought the figure down to about twenty. Shāh Walīullāh رحمه الله brought it to five. That work is legitimate and it is good, and it reflects a proper reluctance to say that any part of the Book is out of use when it may not be.

But Muftī Shafī رحمه الله draws a firm line, and the reader should attend to it, because it corrects an error made by sincere people. We do not pretend that abrogation has not taken place. Those who try to deny it altogether, thinking they are defending Islam, do us greater harm than our opponents. The Companions رضي الله عنهم accepted it. The ‘ulamā’ have accepted it, and the ‘ulamā’ of Deoband accept it. A man who denies a plain reality in order to protect the religion from a difficulty has not protected it; he has told the world that the

religion cannot survive an honest question, which is a far worse thing to have said.

And there is one case the reader will certainly have heard argued, the so-called verse of the sword, and whether it abrogates the peaceful āyahs.⁴⁶ The question is a real one and the ‘ulamā’ have differed on it, and there is a good deal to be said for the view that the Makkan āyahs remain applicable to Muslims living today in conditions like those in which they were revealed. This is not a question for a book of this kind to settle, and the ordinary worshipper should be wary of anyone who settles it for him quickly and in either direction.

أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا لَكُمْ مِنْ دُونِ
اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿١٠٧﴾

*Do you not know that to Allāh belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth,
and that you have, besides Allāh, no protector and no helper?*

al-Baqara 2:107

And this is the real answer, and it puts the argument on its proper footing.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله unfolds it. Allāh ﷻ directs His servants to the fact that He alone owns His creation and does with it as He wills. His is the authority. He created them as He willed, and He gives happiness to whom He wills and misery to whom He wills, health to whom He wills and sickness to whom He wills. He judges between His servants as He wills, permits what He wills and forbids what He wills. There is no opponent to His judgement and no one may question Him about what He does, while they will all be questioned.

And then the sentence which explains the entire discussion: He tests His servants and their obedience to His Messengers *by the naskh itself*. He commands a thing which contains a benefit He knows of, and then in His wisdom

46. al-Tawba 9:5.

He forbids it. And perfect obedience consists in following His commands and His Messengers ﷺ, believing what they bring, doing what they instruct and avoiding what they prohibit.

So the change was never a flaw in the arrangement. The change was the arrangement. A servant who obeys a standing order has shown that he agrees with it; a servant who obeys an order that has just been reversed has shown that he is a servant. And the Jews had a great difficulty with the idea that the Tawrah could be subject to *naskh*, and the difficulty was never really logical. It was that they had come to regard the Law as a possession, and one does not expect one's possessions to be recalled.

Do You Wish to Question Your Messenger?

أَمْ تُرِيدُونَ أَنْ تَسْأَلُوا رَسُولَكُمْ كَمَا سُئِلَ مُوسَىٰ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمَنْ
يَتَّبَدَّلِ الْكُفْرَ بِالْإِيمَانِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ سَوَاءَ السَّبِيلِ ﴿١٠٨﴾

Or do you wish to question your Messenger as Mūsā was questioned before? And whoever exchanges faith for disbelief has strayed from the level path.

al-Baqara 2:108

The occasion is given by Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما. Rāfi‘ b. Ḥuraymila, or Wahb b. Zayd, said: O Muḥammad, bring us a Book sent down from heaven that we may read, and make rivers flow for us, and then we will follow you and believe in you. And this āyah came down in answer.

And the comparison Allāh ﷻ makes is with what was asked of Mūsā عليه السلام, and the reader will remember what that was. They asked him to let them see Allāh ﷻ openly, with their physical eyes. Allāh ﷻ draws the parallel Himself: *the People of the Book ask you to bring down to them a Book from heaven; they asked Mūsā for greater than that, for they said, show us Allāh openly.*⁴⁷

So the point is not that they asked a question. It is what the asking was for. Their intention was never to seek guidance, or to resolve a doubt, or to strengthen a faith they possessed. It was to cast a slur on a prophet, or to put a question mark against the wisdom of Allāh ﷻ. And this is the whole distinction, and it is not a distinction about the words of the question, because the same words can be asked in both spirits. Ask with sincerity and it is the beginning of knowledge. Ask out of insolence and it is what this āyah calls exchanging faith for disbelief. And the reader will find plenty of it in our own time, in the man who has arrived at his conclusion first and comes armed with questions about a ḥadīth, and who wants an answer only in order to have something to reject.

Asking Unnecessary Questions

And there is a second matter here which the ordinary worshipper needs, because it touches him directly, and it is that Allāh ﷻ forbade the believers from pressing the Prophet ﷺ with questions about things which had not yet happened.

Allāh ﷻ says it plainly: *O you who believe, do not ask about things which, if made plain to you, would trouble you; and if you ask about them while the Qur'ān is being revealed, they will be made plain to you.*⁴⁸ Which means: if you ask about a matter after it has come down, it will be explained to you properly. So do not go asking about matters which have not arisen, because they may be prohibited on account of your asking.

47. al-Nisā' 4:153.

48. al-Mā'ida 5:101.

And this is what lies behind the narration:

إِنَّ أَعْظَمَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ جُرْمًا مَنْ سَأَلَ عَنْ شَيْءٍ لَمْ يُحْرَمْ، حُرِّمَ مِنْ أَجْلِ
مَسْأَلَتِهِ

*The greatest of the Muslims in offence is the one who asked about a thing which was not forbidden, and it became forbidden because of his asking.*⁴⁹

And the great illustration is the Ḥajj. Allāh ﷻ commanded it, and the Messenger ﷺ announced it, and a man stood and said: every year, O Messenger of Allāh? And he ﷺ did not answer him. And the man repeated it. And repeated it a third time. And then he ﷺ said:

لَا، وَلَوْ قُلْتُ: نَعَمْ، لَوَجَبَتْ، وَلَوْ وَجَبَتْ لَمَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ

*No. And had I said yes, it would have become obligatory, and had it become obligatory you would not have been able to do it.*⁵⁰

Every Muslim on the earth until the end of time owes something to the silence which followed that question, and to the fact that the man did not get a fourth attempt. And then he ﷺ gave the general rule:

ذُرُونِي مَا تَرَكْتُكُمْ، فَإِنَّمَا هَلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ بِكَثْرَةِ سُؤَالِهِمْ وَاخْتِلَافِهِمْ
عَلَى أَنْبِيَائِهِمْ، فَإِذَا أَمَرْتُكُمْ بِأَمْرٍ فَاتُوا مِنْهُ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ، وَإِنْ نَهَيْتُكُمْ عَنْ
شَيْءٍ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ

Leave me as I have left you. Those before you were destroyed only by their excessive questioning and their disputing with their prophets. So when I command you with a matter, do of it what you are able; and when I forbid you a thing, keep away from it.

51

49. al-Bukhārī 7289 and Muslim 2358, on the authority of Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

50. Muslim 1337, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ.

Notice how the two halves differ, and the ‘ulamā’ have built a great deal on this. The command is to be done as far as a man is able; the prohibition is to be avoided altogether. Because a man is not always able to do, and he is always able to refrain.

And notice the diagnosis: they were destroyed by their questions. Not by their sins. Not by their enemies. By the questioning, and the reader should hold this beside the cow of this very sūra, where they were told to slaughter a cow and asked which cow, and were told any cow and asked what colour, and by the time they had finished asking, the animal they were required to find was so particular that they very nearly could not find it at all. They made it hard. Nobody made it hard for them.

And where it ends is what Allāh ﷻ describes, of those who *exchanged the favour of Allāh for disbelief, and settled their people in the abode of ruin, Hell, in which they will burn, and a wretched place of settlement it is.*⁵² Abū al-‘Āliya رحمه الله said of it: they exchanged comfort for hardship. Which is exactly what a man does when he is given a straight road and demands a map of every stone in it.

51. Muslim 1337, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

52. Ibrāhīm 14:28–29.

Forgive and Overlook

وَدَّ كَثِيرٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ لَوْ يَرُدُّونَكُم مِّنْ بَعْدِ إِيمَانِكُمْ كُفَّارًا
حَسَدًا مِّنْ عِنْدِ أَنْفُسِهِمْ مِّنْ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ الْحَقُّ فَاعْفُوا
وَأَصْفَحُوا حَتَّى يَأْتِيَ اللَّهُ بِأَمْرِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٠٩﴾

Many of the People of the Book would love to turn you back to disbelief after you have believed, out of envy from within themselves, after the truth has become clear to them. So pardon and overlook, until Allāh brings His command. Indeed Allāh has power over all things.

al-Baqara 2:109

The occasion, as reported from ‘Abdullāh b. Ka’b b. Mālīk, concerns Ka’b b. al-Ashraf, a Jew and a poet, who used to attack the Prophet ﷺ in his verse, and this āyah came down.

And Allāh ﷻ names the motive twice over, so that nobody can mistake it. *Out of envy from within themselves*, and Abū al-‘Āliya رحمه الله explains it: after it had become clear to them that Muḥammad ﷺ is the Messenger of Allāh, whom they find written of in the Tawrah and the Injil, they denied him in disbelief and transgression, because he was not one of them.

That is the whole of it. Not one of us. And the phrase *from within themselves* is doing careful work, because it tells us where the envy came from. It was not provoked. Nothing was taken from them. They had every opportunity to enter the religion, and the door was open, and ‘Abdullāh b. Salām رضي الله عنه walked through it in a single afternoon. They manufactured the grievance out of their own material and then suffered from it, which is what envy always is, a wound a man gives himself and then blames on the person he is looking at.

And a Word to Ourselves

Now, there is a thing to be said here to our own community, and the reader should not take it as bitterness, because it is not meant as bitterness. It is meant as relief.

Stop wanting to be accepted by people who have already told you what they think. The āyah says they would love to turn you back, and it says the truth has already become clear to them, so the position is not going to improve with better manners on our part. There is a great deal of effort spent amongst us on being found acceptable, on softening the religion at the edges so that it goes down more easily, on hoping that if we are pleasant enough and useful enough and quiet enough about the difficult parts, we will finally be let in. We will not be let in. And the sūra will say this outright in a few āyahs' time, that they will never be pleased with you until you follow their way, which is the one price we cannot pay.

And there is freedom in accepting it. A man who has stopped auditioning can get on with his work.

Pardon and Overlook

And now the instruction, which is the surprise of the āyah. After all of that, after the envy and the poetry and the plotting, the command is: *pardon and overlook*.

Not retaliate. Not answer in kind. Pardon and overlook, until Allāh ﷻ brings His command, and be patient with them until He does. And Allāh ﷻ prepares the believers for what this will cost, saying *you will surely bear much that grieves you from those given the Book before you and from those who associate partners*.⁵³ Much, and it will grieve you, and you are to bear it.

‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalḥa reports from Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما that this āyah was abrogated by the āyah of fighting, and the reader will notice that this is *naskh* arriving

53. Āl ‘Imrān 3:186.

in the passage which was just explaining *naskh*, which is a piece of ordering worth smiling at. But whatever the position on the ruling, the disposition it teaches is not abrogated, and the reader who is being provoked in his workplace or his street should take the instruction as it stands: pardon, overlook, and leave the command to Allāh ﷻ, who has power over all things and does not need us to arrange the accounts for Him.

ج
وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَمَا تُقَدِّمُوا لِأَنفُسِكُمْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ
تَجِدُوهُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١١٠﴾

And establish the ṣalāh and give the zakāh. And whatever good you send ahead for yourselves, you will find it with Allāh. Indeed Allāh sees what you do.

al-Baqara 2:110

And this is what to do instead, and the reader should see the sequence, because it is a complete piece of counsel. They are envious of you; you are not to fight them yet; you are to pardon and overlook. Very well, then what am I to do with myself? Pray, and pay, and send something ahead.

Allāh ﷻ turns the believers away from the quarrel and towards their own work, and the two things He names are the two which stand for the rest, the ṣalāh which is the bodily worship and the zakāh which is the financial, and by extension every good deed of either kind. And then *whatever good you send ahead*, and the phrase is left wide open. *Min khayrin*, any good at all, without qualification, and the ‘ulamā’ have said that Allāh ﷻ leaves it undefined because we do not know which of our deeds will be the one that saves us. So we should not be selective. The small ones are in the same account as the large.

And this remains the case after the command to fight was given, and the reader should notice that, because it corrects a persistent error. The obligation to pray and to give and to be good did not lapse when other obligations arrived. Nothing was ever cancelled by a larger cause.

The pattern is set out plainly in Sūrat al-Ḥijr, where Allāh ﷻ tells His Messenger ﷺ that *We know your breast is constricted by what they say; so glorify the praise of your Lord and be of those who prostrate, and worship your Lord until the certainty comes to you.*⁵⁴ Look at the answer given to a man whose heart is tight from what people are saying about him. Pray. Not: reply to them. Not: win. Pray, and keep praying until you die, and I will deal with them.

And the closing word is *Baṣīr*, He sees. Nothing is lost with Him and nothing is overlooked, whether righteous or evil, and each will be given exactly what it earned. Allāh ﷻ wants you concerned with yourself, and He sees what each of you does, and that is both the comfort and the warning of the āyah, and it depends entirely on what a man is doing when he is not being watched.

Produce Your Proof

وَقَالُوا لَنْ يَدْخُلَ الْجَنَّةَ إِلَّا مَنْ كَانَ هُودًا أَوْ نَصْرَىٰ تِلْكَ أَمَانِيُّهُمْ
قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١١١﴾

And they said: none will enter the Garden unless he is a Jew or a Christian. That is their wishful thinking. Say: produce your proof, if you are truthful.

al-Baqara 2:111

The claim has been made before in this sūra, and it is made again here, and Allāh ﷻ pairs it with the same kind of claim from Sūrat al-Mā'ida, where they said, *we are the children of Allāh and His beloved.*⁵⁵

And the word Allāh ﷻ uses to describe it is *amāniyy*, wishful thinking. Imām Abū al-Su'ūd رحمه الله makes a fine philological observation about the pattern of

54. al-Ḥijr 15:97–99.

55. al-Mā'ida 5:18.

the word, that it belongs to the same shape as the words for a wonder and for a laughing-stock,⁵⁶ which is to say that what they were dreaming of was of that order: a marvel, and something to be laughed at. Allāh ﷻ is not calling their claim false. He is calling it a daydream, which is more wounding, because a false claim at least aspires to be an argument.

And then, *produce your proof*. Which is the demand the Qur'ān makes everywhere and which our own people should hear as clearly as anybody: bring evidence. And they could not, and the reason they could not is worth understanding. They were no longer receiving revelation. The line had closed. Whatever proof they had was in the books they already possessed, and those books did not say this, and there was no way for them to get any more. A community whose claims have outrun its evidence and whose supply of evidence has been cut off is in a position from which there is no way forward, and this is precisely why the demand for proof is so devastating here.

A Note on the Modern Form of This

Now the reader in our own day will meet a version of this claim which is worth understanding, because it shapes a good deal of what happens in the world and it is not well understood amongst us.

There is a strand of evangelical Christian theology, generally called dispensationalism, which holds that the return of the Jewish people to the land is the beginning of a sequence of end-times events, a period of tribulation, the appearance of the antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, and finally the return of Christ to establish a kingdom without end. On this view, supporting the establishment and expansion of a Jewish state is not primarily a political preference; it is the advancing of a prophetic timetable. This is the theology behind organisations such as Christians United for Israel, founded in 2006 by the pastor John Hagee, which claims millions of members and is a considerable force in American politics. Hagee has himself said publicly, and repeatedly, that

56. مَا يَتَنَّى كَالْأَعْجُوبَةِ وَالْأَضْحُوكَةِ — Abū al-Su'ūd, at this āyah.

we are living on the edge of the greatest supernatural series of events the world has seen, and that God is preparing to defend Israel in a way that will take the breath from the world's dictators.⁵⁷

The reader should notice two things about this, and the second is stranger than the first.

The first is that it is exactly the claim of our āyah in a Christian costume. None will enter the Garden but by belonging to us, and the world's history is arranged around our belonging, and no proof is offered for any of it beyond the wish itself. It is *amāniyy*, and the Qur'ānic reply to it is the same reply: produce your proof.

The second is that the alliance it produces is not what it appears to be. On this theology the Jewish people are not partners; they are the mechanism, and the sequence it describes does not end well for them, since it requires their eventual conversion or destruction. And its most prominent advocate has a long record of remarks about the Jewish people which have drawn sustained condemnation from Jewish organisations, including the suggestion that they brought their historical persecution upon themselves, and a description of Hitler which no decent person could repeat. So we are looking at a support which is not affection, and which its own object has repeatedly protested about, and which continues regardless, because the support was never really about the people being supported.

And that is the connection back to our āyah, and it is worth naming plainly. When a community decides that Paradise belongs to it by right, the people outside it stop being people and start being furniture. That is what the exclusive claim does, to whoever holds it, and it is why Allāh ﷻ demands the proof. He is not merely correcting a factual error. He is dismantling the machinery by which men come to regard other men as parts of their own story.

And the mirror should be turned on ourselves before we put it down, because we are perfectly capable of the same thing, and the reader will have heard a

Muslim say something very close to *none will enter the Garden but us*, and he will have noticed that it was said with pleasure.

ج
بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُ أَجْرُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَلَا
خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

*Rather, whoever submits his face to Allāh and is a doer of good, he has his reward
with his Lord, and no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve.*

al-Baqara 2:112

And here is the answer to the whole claim, and it is not a counter-claim. It is a criterion.

The reader should notice the shape of the reply. They said, salvation belongs to a label. Allāh ﷻ does not answer, no, it belongs to *our* label. He answers with two conditions which any man on the earth may meet, and He does not name a community at all.

Mawlānā Kāndhlawī رحمه الله sets the two out cleanly. First, that a man submits his face to Allāh ﷻ, which is sound *‘aqīda*. Second, that he is a doer of good, which is sound action. And both groups being addressed in the Prophet’s ﷺ day lacked both of them, which is why the claim was empty.

The face is mentioned because it is the most honourable part of a man and the part he protects, and to submit it is to have submitted everything cheaper. And Allāh ﷻ uses the same expression when He instructs His Messenger ﷺ, that *if they argue with you, say: I have submitted my face to Allāh, and so has whoever follows me*.⁵⁸ Submission means to yield and to accept, and it is only worth the

57. See, for instance, the reporting in *The Guardian*, 30 October 2023, on American evangelical support for Israel. Hagee’s own remarks have been broadcast widely and are a matter of public record.

58. Āl ‘Imrān 3:20.

name when it goes against what a man wanted, because agreeing with an instruction one likes is not obedience, it is coincidence.

And *iḥsān*, which the Messenger ﷺ defined once and for all when Jibrīl عليه السلام asked him:

أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ

*That you worship Allāh as though you see Him; and if you do not see Him, then He sees you.*⁵⁹

And the reader who has been following the sūra should notice what this āyah is doing structurally, because it is one of the hinges of the whole chapter. It answers back to the thirty-eighth āyah, where Allāh ﷻ said, *go down from it, all of you; and when guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve.* And it answers back to the sixty-second, *those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does righteousness, they have their reward with their Lord, and no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve.* The same closing words, three times, at three points in the sūra. The condition was laid down when we were sent down to the earth. It was restated in the middle of the address to Banū Isrāʾīl. And it is restated here at the end of it. The terms have never changed and were never anybody's private property.

Great Effort, No Reward

And since the two conditions have been named, the reader should be told what happens when only one of them is present, because this is where most of us are actually in danger.

There are two conditions for a deed to be accepted, that it be for Allāh ﷻ alone and that it conform to the Sharīʿa. If a deed is sincere but does not conform, it is not accepted, and the Messenger ﷺ said:

59. al-Bukhārī 50 and Muslim 8, on the authority of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه.

مَنْ عَمِلَ عَمَلًا لَيْسَ عَلَيْهِ أَمْرُنَا فَهُوَ رَدٌّ

*Whoever does a deed which is not according to our command, it is rejected.*⁶⁰

And if a deed conforms outwardly but the man did not do it for Allāh ﷻ, it is likewise rejected, as with the hypocrites, of whom Allāh ﷻ says that *when they rise for the ṣalāh they rise lazily, showing off to people, and they do not remember Allāh except a little.*⁶¹

And the images Allāh ﷻ uses for the failed deed are worth having, because they are terrible. He says, *and We shall turn to whatever deeds they did and make them scattered dust.*⁶² He says the deeds of the disbelievers are *like a mirage in a plain, which the thirsty man takes for water until he comes to it and finds it is nothing.*⁶³ And He says of the people of the Fire, *faces on that Day humbled, labouring, weary, entering a blazing Fire.*⁶⁴

Labouring, and weary. Read that again. These are not idle people. They worked. They are tired from the work. And they arrive with nothing at all, and it is the same warning as the end of Sūrat al-Kahf, where Allāh ﷻ asks whether He should tell us of the greatest losers in deeds, *those whose effort in the life of this world went astray while they thought they were doing well.* Thought they were doing well. That is the whole tragedy in five words, and it is not the drunkard's tragedy, it is the worshipper's.

Which is why Allāh ﷻ concludes the passage of al-Kahf with the two conditions again: *so whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous work and associate none in the worship of his Lord.* Righteous work, which is the conformity, and no partner, which is the sincerity. The same two, everywhere, and there is no third and no exemption.

60. Muslim 1718, on the authority of 'Ā'isha رضي الله عنها.

61. al-Nisā' 4:142.

62. al-Furqān 25:23.

63. al-Nūr 24:39.

64. al-Ghāshiya 88:2-4.

Each Says the Other Stands on Nothing

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ لَيْسَتِ النَّصْرَى عَلَى شَيْءٍ؛ وَقَالَتِ النَّصْرَى لَيْسَتِ
الْيَهُودُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَهُمْ يَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ
مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ فَاللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ
يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

*And the Jews said: the Christians stand on nothing. And the Christians said: the
Jews stand on nothing. And they both recite the Book. Likewise those who have no
knowledge said the like of their saying. So Allāh will judge between them on the
Day of Rising concerning that in which they differed.*

al-Baqara 2:113

The occasion is recorded thus: a delegation of the Christians of Najrān came to the Messenger ﷺ and were met there by the Jews, and they fell to arguing in front of him. And Rāfi‘ b. Ḥarmala, a Jew, said to them, you stand on nothing, and rejected ‘Isā عليه السلام and the Injīl. And one of the Christians said to him, you stand on nothing, and rejected Mūsā عليه السلام and the Tawrah. And this āyah came down.

And look at what Allāh ﷻ inserts in the middle of the sentence: *and they both recite the Book*. That is the whole comment, and it is delivered without raising the voice. Each of them possessed a scripture which confirmed the other's prophet, and each of them read it, and each of them stood in front of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ and said that the other had nothing, and neither of them noticed what he was holding in his hand.

And then, *likewise those who have no knowledge said the like of their saying*. Shaykh al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله identifies them as the idolaters of Makkah, who said the same thing to the Messenger ﷺ: you have no basis for your religion. So the

sentence has been passed round the whole room. Everybody has told everybody that they have nothing, and the men with scriptures are saying it in the same words as the men with none, and Allāh ﷻ sets them side by side to show that the argument was never coming from the scripture at all. It was coming from somewhere else, and the scripture was picked up afterwards.

And the verdict is deferred: *Allāh will judge between them on the Day of Rising concerning that in which they differed.* Which is not evasion; it is the placing of the case in the only court competent to hear it, and Allāh ﷻ instructs His Messenger ﷺ to say the same in Sūra Saba': *our Lord will bring us together, then He will judge between us with truth, and He is the Judge, the Knowing.*⁶⁵

And the ordinary worshipper should take something from this, because we are not innocent here. There is a great deal of standing on nothing amongst us, group against group, madhhab against madhhab, masjid against masjid, and all of them reciting the Book, and every one of them certain that the other has no basis. The āyah is a mirror, and it was placed here for us to look into.

65. Saba' 34:26.

Who Is Greater in Wrong?

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ مَنَعَ مَسْجِدَ اللَّهِ أَنْ يُذَكَّرَ فِيهَا اسْمُهُ وَجَعَلَ فِي خَرَابِهَا أَوْلِيَّكَ مَا كَانَ لَهُمْ أَنْ يَدْخُلُوهَا إِلَّا خَائِفِينَ لَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا خِزْيٌ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١١٤﴾

And who is greater in wrong than one who prevents the masājid of Allāh from His name being mentioned in them, and strives for their ruin? Such people ought not to enter them except in fear. For them there is disgrace in this world, and for them in the Hereafter a great punishment.

al-Baqara 2:114

The question is rhetorical, and the reader should understand what it does and does not claim. It does not say that this is uniquely the greatest wrong there is. The Qur'ān asks the same question, *who is greater in wrong*, about several things: about concealing a testimony from Allāh which one possesses, which comes at the end of this very passage; about inventing a lie against Allāh ﷻ or denying His signs; about the man who is reminded of the signs of his Lord and turns away from them. Each of these is amongst the greatest of offences, and the form of words means that a man will not easily find worse.

The Fiqh of the Āyah

Muftī Shafī' رحمه الله draws the rulings out, and they are more searching than the reader may expect, because he applies them to us and not to our enemies.

It is forbidden to prevent people, in any form or manner whatever, from praying or remembering Allāh ﷻ in a masjid. The obvious form is to bar a man from entering, or from praying, or from reciting. But there is a less obvious form, and this is where the reader should sit up. To make a noise in the masjid itself, or to play music near it, and so to disturb people in their prayer or their *dhikr*, falls

under the same prohibition. And if a man recites the Qur'ān or makes *dhikr* loudly in such a way as to disturb those who are praying *nawāfil*, or reciting themselves, or making *dhikr* silently, he is guilty of the same offence, which is why the jurists have forbidden it. If there is nobody in the masjid, a man may recite aloud as he likes.

And on the same principle, it is forbidden to beg or to collect donations, even for a religious purpose, while people are engaged in prayer or in *dhikr*.

Let the reader take that in. The āyah asks who is greater in wrong than one who prevents Allāh's ﷻ name being mentioned in His houses, and the fuqahā' have brought the man with the collection tin under the shadow of it. Not because his cause is bad; it may be excellent. Because the man kneeling behind him came here to speak to his Lord, and has been interrupted, and something was taken from him which the collector had no right to take.

Laying a Masjid Waste

And the second half, *and strives for their ruin*, is broader than demolition, and Muftī Shafī رحمه الله presses it home.

All the forms of laying a masjid waste are forbidden, and this includes not only pulling it down but producing the conditions in which it becomes deserted. Because to lay a masjid waste is for few people to come to it. And a masjid is not flourishing on account of the beauty of its architecture or its decoration. It flourishes when it is full of men who come to pray and to remember Allāh ﷻ. This is what Allāh ﷻ means when He says that *the masājid of Allāh are maintained only by those who believe in Allāh and the Last Day, and establish the ṣalāh, and give the zakāh, and fear none but Allāh*.⁶⁶

And the Messenger ﷺ foretold what we now live amongst, that when the Day of Judgement draws close, the masājid of the Muslims will be beautifully designed and decorated and apparently full, and will in reality be deserted, because few will go to them for the purpose of prayer.

66. al-Tawba 9:18.

The reader should feel that. It is a heavy thing to be told that a masjid can be laid waste by the people who built it, and that the marble and the chandelier and the sound system may be part of the ruin rather than the flourishing, and that the question is only ever how many men are standing in the rows at Fajr.

Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā

Now, the āyah has been applied by the mufasssirrūn to several historical cases, chiefly to the Christians who destroyed Bayt al-Maḳdis, and to the idolaters of Makkah who barred the Muslims from the Sacred Masjid. And it contains a prophecy, which was fulfilled, that those who did the barring would not be able to enter except in fear, and the Muslims took the Sacred Masjid.

And the reader will want the āyah brought to our own day, and the case which he will have in mind is al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, so let some plain facts be set down, and let them be set down soberly, because this is a subject on which the ordinary Muslim is offered a great deal of heat and very little information.

The compound has been under Israeli control since the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967. Palestinian access to it is restricted by a number of means, among them the separation wall built in the early 2000s, which limits the entry of Palestinians from the West Bank. In September 2000 the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon entered the site accompanied by some thousand police, an act widely understood as asserting a claim over the compound in the middle of negotiations which included the question of how Jerusalem might be shared; the Second Intifada followed, in which more than three thousand Palestinians and around a thousand Israelis were killed. In May 2017 the Israeli cabinet held its weekly meeting in the tunnels beneath the mosque, on the fiftieth anniversary of the occupation of East Jerusalem. In May 2021 Israeli forces entered the compound, wounding many worshippers and arresting dozens, and the events which followed included an eleven-day war on Gaza.

The reader may draw the connection to the āyah himself, and he will draw it more soundly than any amount of rhetoric from me would let him. And he should also take the fuller lesson of the passage, which is that Allāh ﷻ asked

who is greater in wrong than the man who empties a masjid, and that the emptying may be done from outside with soldiers and from inside with neglect, and that the second is nearer to our own hands.

A Supplication

And since the āyah ends with disgrace in this world and punishment in the next, Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله records here a supplication of the Messenger ﷺ which is worth taking up, and it is narrated by Busr b. Arṭāh رضي الله عنه.

اللَّهُمَّ أَحْسِنْ عَاقِبَتَنَا فِي الْأُمُورِ كُلِّهَا، وَأَجِرْنَا مِنْ خِزْيِ الدُّنْيَا وَعَذَابِ
الْآخِرَةِ

*O Allāh, make our end good in all affairs, and protect us from disgrace in this world and the punishment of the Hereafter.*⁶⁷

And the Qur'ān's own version of the same request, from the people of understanding: *our Lord, give us what You promised us through Your messengers, and do not disgrace us on the Day of Rising; indeed You do not break the promise.*⁶⁸

The East and the West Belong to Allāh

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولُوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَسِعُ
عِلْمُهُ

And to Allāh belong the east and the west. So wherever you turn, there is the face of Allāh. Indeed Allāh is all-encompassing, all-knowing.

al-Baqara 2:115

67. Musnad Aḥmad, and the ḥadīth is ḥasan.

68. Āl 'Imrān 3:194.

Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله takes the āyah as a settling of the whole question of direction, and the reader needs it settled, because the matter is easily misunderstood in both directions.

Allāh ﷻ is not confined to a direction or a place. Therefore, when the Muslims turn to the Kaʿba, they do not in any sense worship it. The orientation is fixed for other reasons entirely, and Allāh ﷻ may be found in every direction, and His attention takes in every direction and every dimension at once.

And the proof that this is so, and not merely asserted, is in the practice of the religion itself, and Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله assembles three demonstrations of it.

The first is history. For sixteen or seventeen months after the Hijra the Messenger ﷺ and the Companions رضي الله عنهم were commanded to turn to Bayt al-Maqdis, and it was a valid *qibla*, and their prayers were accepted. If a direction had anything sacred in itself, that could not have happened.

The second is permanent, and it is the ruling on *nawāfil* while travelling. A man on a mount who wishes to pray voluntary prayers is not required to turn to the *qibla* at all. He may keep his face in whatever direction his animal is going, and pray by gestures of the head. Every day this is done, and it has been done for fourteen centuries, and nobody thinks the prayer is defective.

The third is the ruling for a man who does not know the direction and cannot determine it, because of the darkness or for some other valid reason, and can find nobody to ask. He forms his best judgement and turns the way that seems most likely, and that direction is his *qibla*. And if he finishes and then discovers that he was wrong, his prayer stands, and he does not repeat it.

Consider that last one, because it is the whole doctrine in a ruling. A man prayed in the wrong direction, and Allāh ﷻ accepted it, and did not require it again. So what was Allāh ﷻ looking at? Not the compass. He was looking at the man who did his best in the dark, and the man's best was his *qibla*, and the āyah had said so all along: *wherever you turn, there is the face of Allāh*.

They Say Allāh Has Taken a Son

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ وَلَدًا سُبْحَنَهُ ۖ بَلْ لَّهُ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
كُلُّ لَّهُ قٰنِتُونَ ﴿١١٦﴾

And they said: Allāh has taken a son. Glory be to Him. Rather, to Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are devoutly obedient to Him.

al-Baqara 2:116

The claim was made by more than one party, and the reader should have them all in view. The Christians said it of ‘Isā عليه السلام. Some of the Jews said it of ‘Uzayr عليه السلام. And the idolaters of Makkah said the angels were His daughters. Three different communities, and Allāh ﷻ answers them all in one word.

Hakīm al-Ummah رحمه الله offers an explanation of how the idea took hold, and it is worth having, because it explains a great deal about how error is manufactured. The reference to Allāh ﷻ as a father began amongst ignorant people in the past as a way of saying that He is the originator of things, and it was meant as an image. And then it caught on, and the image was taken for a reality, and men who had never heard it said as a metaphor inherited it as a doctrine. That is how a good deal of misguidance gets made. Nobody invents it. Somebody says something loosely, and two generations later it is in the creed.

The Answer

And Allāh's ﷻ reply is *subhānahu*, glory be to Him, and the reader should be told what that word is doing, because it is not a chant.

Subhān Allāh is said when we declare Allāh ﷻ pure of something. It is a denial, not a decoration. And most of us say it a hundred times a day without ever putting an object to it, and here Allāh ﷻ uses it as it is meant to be used: they

said He has a son; He is pure of it. The word is the whole refutation, and it is placed before the argument rather than after it, because the thing is repugnant before it is even examined.

And then the argument, in three words: *rather, to Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth*. He is the owner. And a father does not own his son. The relationship of ownership and the relationship of fatherhood are incompatible, and Allāh ﷻ has stated the first, so the second is not merely false, it is impossible. And Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ presses the same point from another side: if He had a child then He had a wife, and if His children were gods then they would share and challenge His dominion, and the whole thing collapses at once.

Allāh ﷻ shows elsewhere how grave this is, in words which the reader should hear, saying that they have *brought forth a monstrous thing; the heavens are almost torn apart by it, and the earth split open, and the mountains fall down in ruin, that they should attribute a son to the Most Merciful; and it does not befit the Most Merciful to take a son; there is none in the heavens and the earth but comes to the Most Merciful as a servant*.⁶⁹

And set beside that this ḥadīth, which is one of the most astonishing in the whole corpus:

لَا أَحَدٌ أَصْبَرَ عَلَىٰ أَذَىٰ سَمِعَهُ مِنْ اللَّهِ: إِنَّهُمْ يَجْعَلُونَ لَهُ وَلَدًا وَهُوَ يُرْزِقُهُمْ وَيُعَافِيهِمْ

*No one is more patient with an injury he bears than Allāh: they attribute a child to Him, and He is providing for them and keeping them well.*⁷⁰

The heavens are nearly torn apart by it. And the men who say it wake up in the morning and find their health intact and their food waiting, provided by the One they have said it about. Let the reader hold those two facts together and see what he makes of his own idea of Allāh's ﷻ forbearance, and then let him

69. Maryam 19:89–93.

70. al-Bukhārī 7378 and Muslim 2804, on the authority of Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī رضي الله عنه.

consider how quickly he himself stops being generous to a man who has spoken ill of him.

All Are Devoutly Obedient

And the closing word is *qānitūn*, and it is worth a moment. *Qunūt* is the standing of a servant before his master, humbled; a *qānit* is a man ready to obey at once, with no interval between the command and the movement. And Allāh ﷻ says that everything in the heavens and the earth is in that condition before Him, which includes the angels and the sun and the man who denies Him, since *to Allāh prostrates whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and their shadows too, in the mornings and the evenings*.⁷¹ Even the shadows. A man may refuse Allāh ﷻ with his tongue, and his shadow will go on obeying, and there is nothing he can do about it.

بَدِيعُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَإِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ
فَيَكُونُ ﴿١١٧﴾

The Originator of the heavens and the earth. And when He decrees a matter, He only says to it: be; and it is.

al-Baqara 2:117

The word is *Badīʿ*, from the root which gives us *bidʿa*, and Mujāhid رحمه الله and al-Suddī رحمه الله note that this is the linguistic meaning, that everything new is called a *bidʿa*. The name means the One who brought them into being with no pattern to follow and nothing to imitate, out of nothing at all.

And since the word has come up, it is worth clearing up a confusion which troubles people. The Messenger ﷺ said that *every innovated matter is a bidʿa*, and this is the religious usage.⁷² But there is also the linguistic usage, and the

71. al-Raʿd 13:15.

great example is ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb رضى الله عنه, who gathered the people to pray Tarāwīḥ behind one imām, which the Messenger ﷺ himself had done and had then left off for fear it would be made obligatory, and ‘Umar رضى الله عنه said: what a good *bid‘a* this is. He was using the word in its language sense, of a thing newly arranged, and he was reviving a practice of the Messenger ﷺ and not inventing one. The reader who has heard this thrown about in arguments should know that the word has two uses and that a great deal of noise comes from mixing them.

And then *be, and it is*, and Allāh ﷻ repeats this in several places with slight variations, that *His command, when He intends a thing, is only to say to it, be, and it is*, and that *Our word to a thing when We intend it is only that We say to it, be, and it is*, and that *Our command is but one, like the blink of an eye*.⁷³

And the reader should see why this stands exactly here, immediately after the denial of a son. Allāh ﷻ has just said He has no child, and now He says how things come to be: He says *be*, and they are. There is no process. There is no lineage. There is no mechanism by which anything could be born to Him, because nothing is born at all, everything is spoken. And the argument is clinched in Āl ‘Imrān, where Allāh ﷻ disposes of the whole Christian claim in one sentence: *the likeness of ‘Īsā with Allāh is as the likeness of Ādam; He created him from dust, then said to him, be, and he was*.⁷⁴ A man born without a father is remarkable. A man made without a father or a mother is standing in front of you at the head of the human race, and nobody ever called him the son of God.

72. Muslim 867, on the authority of Jābir رضى الله عنه.

73. Yā Sīn 36:82; al-Naḥl 16:40; al-Qamar 54:50.

74. Āl ‘Imrān 3:59.

If Only Allāh Would Speak to Us

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ لَوْلَا يُكَلِّمُنَا اللَّهُ أَوْ تَأْتِينَا آيَةٌ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ
الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ تَشَبَّهَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ قَدْ بَيَّنَّا الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ
يُوقِنُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

And those who have no knowledge said: if only Allāh would speak to us, or a sign would come to us. Likewise those before them said the like of their saying. Their hearts are alike. We have made the signs clear for a people who are certain.

al-Baqara 2:118

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما reports that Rāfi‘ b. Ḥuraymila said to the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ: O Muḥammad, if you were truly a Messenger from Allāh as you claim, then ask Allāh to speak to us directly, so that we may hear His speech. And this āyah came down.

And they were asking for something they knew perfectly well they would never be given, which is what makes it insolence rather than inquiry. And notice the phrase Allāh ﷻ uses to describe them, *those who have no knowledge*, which is a strange thing to say about the rabbis of Madīnah, who had a great deal of knowledge. But the request was an ignorant man’s request, whoever made it, and Allāh ﷻ names people by what they are doing.

Then, *their hearts are alike*, and this is the sentence to carry away. The disbelievers of every age make the same demand, and the Qur’ān records it again and again, and the wording barely changes. Allāh ﷻ says that *when a sign comes to them they say, we will not believe until we are given the like of what the messengers of Allāh were given*, and He answers, *Allāh knows best where to place His message*.⁷⁵ He says that *those who do not expect to meet Us said, why were*

75. al-An‘ām 6:124.

angels not sent down to us, or why do we not see our Lord?⁷⁶ And He says, rather, every man of them wants to be handed scriptures unrolled.⁷⁷

Everybody wants the exclusive treatment. That is the demand under all the demands, and it is not really a request for evidence at all, it is a request to be made a prophet. And Allāh's ﷻ answer, that He knows best where to place His message, is a rebuke with a shape to it, because the man is not saying he lacks proof, he is saying he ought to have been chosen, and Allāh ﷻ tells him who does the choosing.

And the last phrase, *for a people who are certain*, which the reader might take backwards. Shaykh al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله points out that the word is *yūqinūn*, from a form which carries the sense of seeking certainty, and that the āyah is describing people who are looking for conviction rather than people who already have it. Which is the whole difference. The signs are clear for the man who came to find out. They are never clear for the man who came to test.

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا وَلَا تُسْأَلُ عَنْ أَصْحَابِ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١١٩﴾

Indeed We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good news and a warner.

And you will not be asked about the companions of the Blaze.

al-Baqara 2:119

Two things are given to the Messenger ﷺ here, and one is taken away, and every one of us who calls anybody to anything should learn the arrangement.

The two given are good news and warning, and they come as a pair, and the reader should notice that they are always a pair in the Qur'ān. It is not all comfort. Nor is it all threat. There is a middle path here and it is easy to fall off it on either side, and we do fall off it, and we produce men whose entire religion is

76. al-Furqān 25:21.

77. al-Muddaththir 74:52.

reassurance and men whose entire religion is the Fire, and both of them are unbalanced and both of them think they are being faithful.

And what is taken away is the responsibility for the outcome. *You will not be asked about the companions of the Blaze.* The obligation is to call; it was never to compel and it was never to succeed. Allāh ﷻ says it in as many words in several places: *upon you is only the delivery, and upon Us is the reckoning;*⁷⁸ *We know best what they say, and you are not over them a tyrant; so remind by the Qur'ān whoever fears My warnings;*⁷⁹ *so remind; you are only a reminder; you are not over them a controller.*⁸⁰

Four times, in four sūras, the same relief. And the man who does not accept it will destroy himself, because he will take every refusal as his own failure, and he will start to push, and pushing is exactly what he has been told he has no authority to do. The Messenger ﷺ himself was told he was not responsible for who ended up where. Nobody reading this book is under a heavier obligation than he was.

His Description in the Tawrāh

And since the āyah says he was sent as a bearer of good news and a warner, it is worth setting beside it what the earlier scripture said of him, because it is nearly the same wording, and it is a proof of the kind this passage keeps returning to.

‘Aṭā’ b. Yasār رَحِمَهُ اللهُ said that he met ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ رضي الله عنهما and asked him to tell him of the description of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ in the Tawrāh. And he said: yes, by Allāh, he is described in the Tawrāh with some of the qualities he is described with in the Qur’ān. *O Prophet, We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner, and a refuge for the unlettered. You are My servant and My Messenger. I have named you the one who relies. He is not harsh, nor hard, nor loud in the markets. He does not repay an evil with an evil, but pardons and forgives. And Allāh will not take his soul until He has*

78. al-Ra’d 13:40.

79. Qāf 50:45.

80. al-Ghāshiyah 88:21–22.

*straightened by him the crooked religion, so that they say: there is no god but Allāh. And by him Allāh will open blind eyes, and deaf ears, and hearts that are wrapped.*⁸¹

And the reader will not have missed the last phrase, *hearts that are wrapped*, which is the very word the Jews of Madīnah used of themselves thirty āyahs ago, when they said, our hearts are wrapped. Their own scripture had promised that this man would be the one to open exactly the hearts they were claiming could not be opened. They had the promise, and they had the excuse, and the promise answered the excuse in the same word, and they held both and read neither.

They Will Never Be Pleased With You

وَلَنْ تَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصْرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ قُلْ إِنْ
هُدَىٰ اللَّهُ هُوَ الْهُدَىٰ وَلَئِنْ أَتَبَعْتَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ مِنْ
الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿١٢٠﴾

And the Jews will never be pleased with you, nor the Christians, until you follow their way. Say: the guidance of Allāh is the guidance. And if you were to follow their desires after the knowledge which has come to you, you would have no protector from Allāh and no helper.

al-Baqara 2:120

Never, and it is stated flatly, without any softening, and it is the plainest thing in this whole portion of the sūra.

And the condition is the one thing that cannot be given: *until you follow their way*. Which is the same request the idolaters of Makkah made in Sūrat al-

81. al-Bukhārī 2125, and Musnad Aḥmad, on the authority of ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr رضي الله عنهما.

Kāfirūn, when they proposed that he ﷺ worship their gods for a year and they would worship his for a year, and Allāh ﷻ gave him a sūra which does not negotiate but simply separates: *you have your religion and I have mine*. There is no deal here, because what is being asked for is the whole of it, and a religion cannot be given away by instalments.

And the reader should notice the word *millatabum*, their way, in the singular, though two communities have been named. *Al-kufr millatun wāḥida*, the ‘ulamā’ have said: disbelief is one community. The Jews and the Christians in this passage have just been telling each other that they stand on nothing, and here they are put in one word, because whatever they are to each other, they are one thing in relation to this.

The Lesson for Us

And the reader should let this āyah do its work on him, because it is aimed at a weakness we have.

Do not distort the religion in order to convince anybody. Take it as it is. There is a temptation, especially for those of us living as a minority, to sand the edges off, to present a version which will be found acceptable, to be quiet about what is awkward and loud about what is admired, and the reasoning is always that this is a means to an end and that once we are trusted we can be honest. It does not work, and the āyah says why: they will never be pleased with you until you follow their way. Not until you are pleasant. Not until you are useful. Until you follow. And since we cannot pay that, everything short of it is wasted, and the man who spends his life trimming will find at the end that he has neither the acceptance nor the religion.

And the end of it is always the same. Be like us. And we can never be, because the thing that makes us unlike them is the thing they are objecting to, and if we removed it we would be like them in the only sense that ever mattered and there would be nothing left to accept. And when it comes to it, they will abandon you anyway, and the reader who has lived long enough will have watched this happen more than once.

And the Messenger ﷺ warned of the imitation directly:

لَتَتَّبِعَنَّ سَنَنَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ شِبْرًا بِشِيرٍ وَذِرَاعًا بِذِرَاعٍ، حَتَّىٰ لَوْ دَخَلُوا بُحْرًا
ضَبٌّ تَبِعْتَهُمْ

*You will follow the ways of those before you, hand-span by hand-span and forearm by forearm, until if they entered the hole of a lizard you would follow them in. We said: O Messenger of Allāh, the Jews and the Christians? He said: who else?*⁸²

A hand-span at a time. Nobody converts. He follows, by increments so small that no single one of them is worth objecting to, and the lizard hole is reached without a decision ever having been taken.

Where Honour Actually Is

And the cure for the whole disease is one sentence of the Qur'an: *honour belongs to Allāh entirely*.⁸³

And there is the moment when 'Umar رضي الله عنه came to receive the keys of Jerusalem, and he came on a camel which he and his servant had been taking turns to ride, and it was the servant's turn, and 'Umar رضي الله عنه was walking and leading it. And Abū 'Ubayda رضي الله عنه said to him, in effect, that the people of the city would be looking, and that he might present himself better than this. And 'Umar رضي الله عنه said the words that ought to be written on the wall of every masjid in this country: we were a despised people, and Allāh gave us honour through Islam; and whenever we seek honour in anything other than that by which Allāh honoured us, Allāh will humiliate us.

That is the answer to the whole āyah. It is honour enough to belong to the Ummah of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ, and a man who has understood that has nothing left to ask anybody for.

82. al-Bukhārī 7320 and Muslim 2669, on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه.

83. Yūnus 10:65. And al-Munāfiqūn 63:8, *to Allāh belongs the honour, and to His Messenger, and to the believers*.

قُلِ
 الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَتْلُونَهُ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِ أُولَٰئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ
 وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿١٢١﴾

Those to whom We have given the Book, who recite it as it should be recited, they are the ones who believe in it. And whoever rejects it, those are the losers.

al-Baqara 2:121

And after all the condemnation, this. The reader should notice that Allāh ﷻ does not close the door, and never has closed it in this whole passage, and here at the end of it He holds it open again.

And notice the expression: *those to whom We have given the Book*. Because the ‘ulamā’ have drawn attention to two forms which the Qur’ān uses of the People of the Book, and the difference between them is not accidental. There is *We gave them the Book*, where Allāh ﷻ takes the giving to Himself, and this is used where He is speaking of them with a kind of pride, as of ‘Abdullāh b. Salām رضي الله عنه and those like him. And there is *those who were given the Book*, in the passive, where He does not mention Himself at all, and this is used where they have gone wrong. He withdraws His own name from the sentence. It is the wording of a disappointed giver, and it is a very human touch in the speech of Allāh ﷻ, and the reader who has ever given a gift that was wasted will know exactly the difference between saying "I gave him that" and "he was given that".

As It Should Be Recited

And what is it to recite the Book *as it should be recited*? The ‘ulamā’ have gathered four things under it, and they are worth having in order, because every one of them is a duty we have.

The first is *tajwīd*, that it be recited as it was revealed, in its proper sounds and its proper measure. This is the lowest rung and it is not nothing.

The second is *tafsīr*, that a man understand what he is reading, and that he not get himself entangled in the *mutashābihāt*, the āyahs whose meaning is not given to us. Which is a warning as much as an instruction, because the ordinary worshipper who begins to study will find the ambiguous passages the most interesting, and they are precisely the ones he should walk past.

The third is *tilāwa* in the fullest sense, which is that a man responds to what he reads, and ‘Umar رضي الله عنه taught this: when one comes to the description of the Garden, one should ask Allāh ﷻ for it, and when one comes to the description of the Fire, one should seek His refuge from it. Which is to say that the reciter is not a narrator. He is a party to the text.

And the fourth is *ittibā’*, that a man follows what he has read and obeys it, and this is the whole of it, and the first three are only its preparation.

And Allāh ﷻ says what this would have done for them, had they done it: *had they upheld the Tawrah and the Injil and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have eaten from above them and from beneath their feet.*⁸⁴ From above and from below, which is to say from every direction at once, and there is no reason to think it works differently for us.

A Day When No Soul Will Avail Another

يٰۤاَيُّهَا بَنِي إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ اذْكُرُوْا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِيۤ اَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَاِنِّيۤ اَفْضَلْتُكُمْ
عَلَى الْعٰلَمِيْنَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

O Children of Isrāʼil, remember My favour which I bestowed upon you, and that I preferred you over the worlds.

al-Baqara 2:122

84. al-Māʼida 5:66.

The reader will recognise these words, because they are the words with which the whole address opened at the fortieth āyah, and Allāh ﷻ repeats them now, at its close, exactly as they were.

The address is bracketed. It began with the favour and it ends with the favour, and everything in between has been what they did with it. That is a piece of composition worth admiring, and it is also a mercy, because Allāh ﷻ could have ended the indictment with the indictment. He chose to end it by reminding them of what they were given, which is to say, by reminding them that the door is not shut and that they are still the people He preferred.

And with honour comes responsibility, and the responsibility now is to accept what has come. That preference was never a possession; it was a post, and a post can be vacated.

And Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله names the thing that stood in the way, and it is what has stood in the way throughout: they should not envy their cousins the Arabs for what Allāh ﷻ gave them, and the envy should not drive them to oppose the Prophet ﷺ or hold back from following him. Cousins, and the word is exact, because Ismā'īl عليه السلام and Ishāq عليه السلام were brothers, and the whole quarrel is a family quarrel about which brother's line the gift went down. And the sūra is about to go back to that family, and to the father of both of them, and to answer the whole thing from the root.

وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا تَجْزِي نَفْسٌ عَنْ نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ
وَلَا تَنْفَعُهَا شَفْعَةٌ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

*And guard yourselves against a Day when no soul will avail another in anything,
nor will compensation be accepted from it, nor will intercession benefit it, nor will
they be helped.*

al-Baqara 2:123

And this āyah is also a repetition, of the forty-eighth, and so the pair of brackets is complete: the favour and the warning at the start, the favour and the warning at the end.

But it is not an exact repetition, and this is the kind of thing the reader should be trained to notice, because the Qur'ān does not repeat itself carelessly. In the forty-eighth āyah the order was: no soul will avail another, nor will intercession be accepted from it, nor will compensation be taken from it. Here the order is: no soul will avail another, nor will compensation be accepted from it, nor will intercession benefit it. The two middle terms have changed places.

The 'ulamā' have offered various explanations, and one which serves the ordinary reader is this. The first time, the sūra was about to embark on a long account of a people who trusted in their lineage and their status, and intercession is the thing a man of status expects, so it was put first and denied first. Here, at the close, the account has shown us what they actually preferred, which was the world, the purchase and the sale and the price and the bargain, and the āyahs have been full of buying and selling. So the ransom is put first, because that is what a man reaches for when he has spent his life trading, and it is refused first.

Whatever the explanation, let the reader take the substance, since it is what the whole passage has been building to. On that Day there are four doors, and all four are shut. Nobody will stand in for you. Nothing you own will buy you out. No connection you have will speak for you. And no one will come to help. And the sūra says this to the Children of Isrā'īl because they thought their descent from prophets would carry them, and it says it to us for exactly the same reason, because we think ours will.

The Testing of Ibrāhīm

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ ۖ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ
إِمَامًا ۚ قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

And remember when his Lord tested Ibrāhīm with certain words, and he fulfilled them. He said: I am making you a leader for mankind. He said: and from my offspring? He said: My covenant does not reach the wrongdoers.

al-Baqara 2:124

The sūra turns now, and the reader will feel the change of air. We have been eighty-four āyahs in an argument, and suddenly we are in Makkah with an old man and his son and a pile of stones, and it feels like coming out of a courtroom into the open. But the reader should not mistake the turn for a change of subject, because it is not one. It is the argument being settled at the root.

Muftī Shafi رحمه الله sets out what Allāh ﷻ is doing by bringing Ibrāhīm عليه السلام in here, and the reader should have it in front of him, because every one of these āyahs is aimed at the people the sūra has been addressing.

They claimed leadership by descent. Very well: leadership was given to Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, and it was given on a condition, and the condition was that it does not reach the wrongdoers, and their treatment of the prophets has disqualified them by the terms of the grant itself.

They despised the Ka'ba and the city around it. Very well: Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, whom they claim as their father, built it with his own hands, and prayed for that city and its people.

They objected that the final prophet was not one of them. Very well: he was the answer to the supplication of the man they claim as their father, who asked for him by description, standing on the foundations of the House they despise.

And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام was the father of all of them, before there was a Jew or a Christian to argue about it. The sūra is not changing the subject. It is going back to the beginning of the family and asking them to look at what their own father actually did.

Who Was Ibrāhīm?

Before the testing, the man, because the reader should know whom he is dealing with, and the Qur'ān describes him in terms it uses of nobody else.

Allāh ﷻ says of him simply, *and Ibrāhīm, who fulfilled*.⁸⁵ The sentence is left there, with no object. He fulfilled. Whatever it was, he did all of it.

And Allāh ﷻ says that *Ibrāhīm was a nation, devoutly obedient to Allāh, upright, and he was not of those who associate partners; grateful for His favours; He chose him and guided him to a straight path; and We gave him good in this world, and in the Hereafter he is among the righteous*.⁸⁶ He was a nation. One man, and Allāh ﷻ calls him a people, because he stood alone against everybody and the entire religion of monotheism was, for a period, resident in one body.

And then the sentence which follows immediately after, which is the point of the whole passage: *then We revealed to you: follow the way of Ibrāhīm, the upright, and he was not of those who associate partners*.⁸⁷ The Messenger ﷺ himself is told to follow him, and Allāh ﷻ instructs him to announce it: *say: my Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright religion, the way of Ibrāhīm, the upright; and he was not of those who associate partners*.⁸⁸

And the verdict on the whole dispute, which Allāh ﷻ delivers in Āl 'Imrān and which the reader should hold on to for the rest of this chapter: *Ibrāhīm was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was upright, a Muslim, and he was not of those who associate partners. The people most entitled to Ibrāhīm are those who*

85. al-Najm 53:37.

86. al-Nahl 16:120–122.

87. al-Nahl 16:123.

88. al-An'ām 6:161.

*followed him, and this Prophet, and those who believe; and Allāh is the protector of the believers.*⁸⁹

Entitlement by following, not by descent. That is the whole answer of this chapter, given in advance.

How Was He Tested?

Allāh ﷻ says He tested him *with certain words*, and He does not say which, and the ‘ulamā’ have therefore differed, and the differences are worth having because together they give a picture of a life.

Some have said the words are the laws, the commands and the prohibitions, taken generally.

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما said in one report that it was the Ḥajj. And in another, that it was the *fiṭra*, that Allāh ﷻ tested him with purity, five on the head and five on the body. As for the head: trimming the moustache, rinsing the mouth, drawing water into the nose and expelling it, using the *siwāk*, and parting the hair. And as for the body: trimming the nails, shaving the pubic hair, circumcision, plucking the underarm, and washing with water after relieving oneself.

The reader may find that a strange list to describe as a test of a prophet, and he should sit with the strangeness rather than move past it, because there is something in it. These are the smallest things a man does, and nobody sees him do them, and there is no glory in any of them. And Allāh ﷻ tested the friend of the Most Merciful with them, and passing them is part of why he was made an *imām* for mankind. The man who is looking for a great trial to prove himself in should notice that.

And then the trials everybody knows, and the reader should run through them, because the phrase *and he fulfilled them* covers all of it. There was his father, and the idols in the house, and the argument that cost him his home. There was the

89. Āl ‘Imrān 3:67–68.

reasoning with the star and the moon and the sun. There was Namrūd and the debate. There was the fire, and he went into it. There was leaving Hājar رضي الله عنها and an infant in a valley with nothing growing in it. And there was the command to slaughter Ismā'īl عليه السلام, and he took the knife to his son's throat.

Every one of them. And he fulfilled them. That is what stands behind the four words of the āyah.

The Grant and the Request

Then, *I am making you a leader for mankind*, and the word is *imām*, and the reader should ask what qualifies a man for it, because Allāh ﷻ has told us elsewhere in a sentence which reads like a formula: *and We made from amongst them leaders, guiding by Our command, when they were patient and were certain of Our signs.*⁹⁰

Two qualities: *ṣabr* and *yaqīn*. Patience and certainty. And the reader should notice what is not on the list. Not eloquence, not learning, not lineage, not charisma, not a following. The man who endures and the man who is sure. And the sentence is constructed with *lammā*, when they were patient, which means the leadership arrived after the patience and because of it. Nobody is given it first.

And then Ibrāhīm عليه السلام asks: *and from my offspring?* Which is the first thing he thinks of, and it should tell us something. He is handed the highest station Allāh ﷻ gives a man, and his immediate thought is his children. That is a father, and it is the same instinct that will fill the next five āyahs, which are almost entirely a man praying for his descendants.

And Allāh ﷻ answers, *My covenant does not reach the wrongdoers*, and the answer is doing two things at once. It is granting the request in part, and it is telling him something he had not asked. Because the reply informs

90. al-Sajda 32:24.

Ibrāhīm عليه السلام that there *will be* wrongdoers amongst his offspring. He asked for his children and was told that some of his children would not qualify, which is a hard thing to be told and he did not argue with it.

And Allāh ﷻ did grant the rest, and He says so plainly: *and We placed prophet-hood and the Book amongst his offspring*.⁹¹ Every prophet after him came from his line. He became the father of the religions, and the man is called the friend of Allāh ﷻ, and the whole of the world's monotheism traces to a childless old man in a tent.

The Ruling in the Answer

And there is a matter of law here which Ibn Khuwayz Mindād al-Mālikī رحمه الله drew out, and the reader should have it, because it is the answer to the Jews of Madīnah and it is a standing principle: the wrongdoer does not qualify to be a *khalīfa*, nor a ruler, nor one who gives religious verdicts, nor a witness, nor even a narrator of ḥadīth.

Not even a narrator. The chain of our religion is made of men, and a man who is not upright cannot carry a link of it, and this is why the 'ulamā' examined the lives of the narrators as closely as they examined the texts, and why our religion has a science of men as well as a science of words. Allāh ﷻ said His covenant does not reach the wrongdoers, and the 'ulamā' took Him at His word and built a discipline on it.

91. al-'Ankabūt 29:27.

A Place of Return and a Sanctuary

وَإِذْ جَعَلْنَا الْبَيْتَ مَثَابَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمْنًا وَاتَّخِذُوا مِن مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
مُصَلًّى وَعَهِدْنَا إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ أَن طَهِّرَا بَيْتِيَ لِلطَّائِفِينَ
وَالْعَاكِفِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ ﴿١٢٥﴾

And remember when We made the House a place of return for mankind, and a sanctuary; and take the Station of Ibrāhīm as a place of prayer. And We charged Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl: purify My House for those who circle it, and those who stay in it, and those who bow and prostrate.

al-Baqara 2:125

Two words describe the House, and both repay attention.

The first is *mathāba*, from a root meaning to return, and it is a place people come back to. Not a place they visit; a place they return to, over and over, and the word contains within it the fact that they will not be able to stay away. Any man who has stood there once will understand the word without a dictionary. And the ‘ulamā’ have said it is also a place of gathering and of safety, in the Ḥajj and beyond it.

The second is *amn*, security, and this is a ruling and not a description. The whole of the Ḥaram has been made a place of peace, and Ibn al-‘Arabī رحمه الله draws out what that means: men are forbidden to shed blood there or to take revenge within those precincts. And the exception which proves it is the day of the conquest of Makkah, when it was made lawful for the Messenger ﷺ for a few hours of one day, and he ﷺ was careful to say so afterwards:

إِنَّ مَكَّةَ حَرَّمَهَا اللَّهُ وَلَمْ يُحَرِّمْهَا النَّاسُ، فَلَا يَحِلُّ لِمَرِيٍّ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ
الْآخِرِ أَنْ يَسْفِكَ بِهَا دَمًا وَلَا يَعْصِدَ بِهَا شَجَرَةً

*Makkah was made sacred by Allāh, and men did not make it sacred. It is not lawful for a man who believes in Allāh and the Last Day to shed blood in it, or to cut a tree in it. And if anyone claims a licence from the fighting of the Messenger of Allāh, then say: Allāh permitted it to His Messenger and did not permit it to you. And He permitted it to me for an hour of a day, and its sanctity has returned today as it was yesterday. So let the one present convey to the one absent.*⁹²

He knew that men would reason from his example, and he closed the door before they reached it.

And the security is not only from swords. It is from calamity and from plunder, and from the domination of those who would destroy it, and the great proof of that is Sūrat al-Fil, where an army came with an elephant to pull the House down and was scattered by birds. And it extends to those who come to it, so that everyone who performs the Ḥajj or the ‘Umra is made safe from the Fire.

The Station of Ibrāhīm

The *Maqām Ibrāhīm* is the stone which bears his footprint, on which he stood when he called mankind to the Ḥajj as Allāh ﷻ commanded him.

And the reader should know how this āyah came down, because it is one of the most remarkable things in the whole subject. Al-Bukhārī رحمه الله records that ‘Umar رضي الله عنه said to the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ that it would be good if we took the Station of Ibrāhīm as a place of prayer. And this āyah came down.⁹³

The words a man said in Madīnah are now recited in every corner of the earth as the speech of Allāh ﷻ. And it happened to ‘Umar رضي الله عنه more than once,

92. al-Bukhārī 104 and Muslim 1354, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه and Abū Shurayh رضي الله عنه.

93. al-Bukhārī 402, on the authority of Anas رضي الله عنه.

in the matter of the captives at Badr, and in the matter of the veil, and in others. There was something in that man which was aligned, and Allāh ﷻ confirmed it from above the seven heavens, and the ordinary worshipper who has ever wondered whether his own opinion counts for anything should think about what it would take to be a man whose suggestions become Qur'an.

Purify My House

And the charge to the two of them: *purify My House*. The 'ulamā' have said this means from *shirk* and from every evil, and from physical impurity too, and both senses are meant and neither excludes the other.

And this is an *adab* for every masjid, and the reader should carry it out of the Ḥaram and into his own street. The House was to be cleaned for three kinds of people, and Allāh ﷻ lists them: *those who circle it, and those who stay in it, and those who bow and prostrate*. The *'ākiḥ* are the ones who remain there, whether the residents of Makkah or those who enter the Ḥaram and stay, and the 'ulamā' have differed. But look at the list. Every one of the three is doing something. The House is not being cleaned for visitors. It is being cleaned for people at work.

The History of the House

The reader will want to know how old it is and who first built it, and honesty requires a careful answer, because the sources are of different weights.

There is no fully authenticated ḥadīth which settles who founded the Ka'ba first, and Muftī Shafī' رحمه الله says so plainly, which is the mark of a serious scholar. Certain narrations coming from the People of the Book say that it was founded by the angels before Ādam عليه السلام came down to the earth, and that he built it a second time, or renovated it, and that this structure stood until the Flood, which destroyed it and left it a mound, and that this was the state in which Ibrāhīm عليه السلام and Ismā'īl عليه السلام found it, and they built a new structure on the site. Some of the mufasssirrūn have taken this as established and have said that the Ka'ba was the first building raised in the world. The reader

should hold it as what it is, a report of that class, and should not build on it more than it will bear.

What is certain is what the Qur'ān says: that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام and Ismā'īl عليه السلام raised its foundations, and that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام then called mankind to the Ḥajj. And that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام rebuilt it with Ismā'īl عليه السلام, the forefather of Muḥammad ﷺ, is itself a sign, since the House which the last Prophet ﷺ would make the focus of his people's worship was raised by the hands of that son and not the other.

Since then the House has been altered but has never been wholly demolished. And the reader should know the story of the rebuilding which the Messenger ﷺ took part in, because it is one of the finest things in the *sīra*.

He was thirty-five, and it was before the prophethood. The Quraysh decided to rebuild the House, because its walls had cracked and grown weak, and because there was no roof, so the treasures kept inside were being stolen. And they agreed that only pure money would be used, and that nothing gained from prostitution or usury or the oppression of anybody would go into it. Let the reader stop there for a moment. These were idolaters. And they would not put dirty money into the House of Allāh ﷻ, and the money ran out because of it, and we shall see what that cost them.

They demolished the structure down to the foundations Ibrāhīm عليه السلام had laid, and divided the work between the tribes, each taking a portion. And when they reached the place of the Black Stone, the quarrel began, over who would have the honour of setting it in. And it intensified until blood was about to be shed over the House they were building. And they agreed at last that they would accept the judgement of the first man to enter the precincts.

And the first man to enter was Muḥammad ﷺ. And they said, with relief, the trustworthy one has come, and they agreed to accept whatever he said. And he asked for a cloth, and laid the Black Stone in the middle of it, and told each tribe to take an edge and lift it together, and they carried it to its place, and then he ﷺ took the stone in his own hands and set it in.

Everybody carried it. Nobody was passed over. And the honour of the final placing went to the man they had all agreed to trust, and he had not sought the job and was not yet a prophet, and he was called the trustworthy one by men who would later drive him out of the city. The reader should notice how a dispute is actually solved, because it was not solved by an argument about who deserved it.

The Ka'ba in This Ummah

And two more pieces of the story, because they teach something the reader needs.

The first: when the Quraysh ran out of clean money, they built a smaller House than Ibrāhīm's عليه السلام, and left out a portion, and marked what they had left out with a low semicircular wall, which is the *Hijr Ismā'il*. So the Ka'ba we circle is smaller than the one Ibrāhīm عليه السلام built, and the missing part is inside that wall, which is why we go round the outside of it. And towards the end of his life the Messenger ﷺ intended to rebuild it on the original foundations, and died before he could.

‘Ā'isha رضي الله عنها preserved what he ﷺ said about it.

يَا عَائِشَةُ، لَوْلَا أَنَّ قَوْمَكَ حَدِيثُ عَهْدٍ بِجَاهِلِيَّةٍ لَأَمَرْتُ بِالْبَيْتِ فَهْدَمَ،
فَأَدْخَلْتُ فِيهِ مَا أُخْرِجَ مِنْهُ، وَالزَّقْتُهُ بِالْأَرْضِ، وَجَعَلْتُ لَهُ بَابَيْنِ: بَابًا
شَرْقِيًّا وَبَابًا غَرْبِيًّا، فَبَلَغْتُ بِهِ أَسَاسَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ

*‘Ā'isha, were it not that your people are so recently out of ignorance, I would have ordered the House pulled down, and I would have brought into it what was taken out of it, and set it level with the ground, and made it two doors, an eastern door and a western door, and reached with it the foundation of Ibrāhīm.*⁷⁴

He wanted it. He had the authority to do it. And he did not do it, because his people were new to Islam and it would have unsettled them. That is a Proph-

et ﷺ declining to implement a thing he knew to be right, on account of what it would do to the hearts of ordinary people, and the reader who is in a hurry to reform his community should read that sentence several times.

The second: al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf. When ‘Abdullāh b. al-Zubayr رضي الله عنهما held Makkah, he rebuilt the Ka’ba on Ibrāhīm’s عليه السلام original foundations, exactly as the Messenger ﷺ had described to his aunt. Then al-Ḥajjāj seized the city, and tore it down again, and rebuilt it as it had been before. Later the Caliph heard the ḥadīth from Imām Mālik رحمه الله and resolved to have it rebuilt once more on Ibrāhīm’s عليه السلام foundations.

And Imām Mālik رحمه الله advised him against it, and what he said should be written somewhere permanent: Commander of the Faithful, I implore you, for Allāh’s sake, do not make the Sacred House a plaything for kings. Every king will want to tear it down and build it the other way. And the people will cease to revere it.

He was right, and the Caliph listened, and that is why the House stands as it stands. A scholar told a ruler to leave a thing alone, and the reason he gave was not that the ruler was wrong about the building, but that he was wrong about what buildings are for. There is a kind of wisdom which knows that being right is not always the first question.

And one more, from the conquest. Every office of the Ḥajj was in the hands of some chief of the Quraysh, and when Makkah fell, every one of them lost his charge but one. The keys of the Ka’ba were brought to the Messenger ﷺ, and he had them in his hand, and every man there expected him to keep them or give them to his own family. And he returned them to ‘Uthmān b. Ṭalḥa, of the Banū Shayba, whose family had kept them for generations, and said: take it, O Banū Ṭalḥa, eternally until the Day of Rising; and it will not be taken from you except by an unjust tyrant. They hold them still.

94. al-Bukhārī 1586 and Muslim 1333, on the authority of ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها.

Make This a City of Peace

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ هَذَا بَلَدًا ءَامِنًا وَارْزُقْ أَهْلَهُ مِنْ
الثَّمَرَاتِ مَنْ ءَامَنَ مِنْهُمْ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ قَالَ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ
فَأُتِمِّعُهُ قَلِيلًا ثُمَّ أَضْطَرُّهُ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ النَّارِ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٢٦﴾

And remember when Ibrāhīm said: my Lord, make this a city of peace, and provide its people with fruits, those of them who believe in Allāh and the Last Day. He said: and whoever disbelieves, I shall let him enjoy a little, then I shall drive him to the punishment of the Fire, and wretched is the destination.

al-Baqara 2:126

Every word of this supplication rewards attention, and the reader should go through it slowly, because it is a lesson in how to ask.

He begins with *Rabb*. Not Allāh, not the Almighty, but the Lord who nurtures, who creates and sustains and brings a thing along from one state to the next. And what is he asking for? For a barren valley to be made into a city with food in it. So he has called on precisely the attribute the request requires. A man who is asking for growth addresses the One who grows things, and this is not a decoration on the *du‘ā*, it is part of the asking.

Then, *make this a city*. And Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله and others have noticed the wording against the parallel passage in Sūra Ibrāhīm, where the same man makes the same prayer and says *make this city safe*.⁹⁵ Here it is *hādhā baladan*, make this *a* city. There it is *hādhā al-balada*, make this *the* city. Because here there was no city yet. There was a valley and nothing in it. And by the time of the other prayer, it had become a city, and the Arabic marks the difference with a definite

95. Ibrāhīm 14:35.

article, and the reader who learns to notice this sort of thing will find the Qur'ān opening for him in a way it does not open for anybody else.

Then, *and provide its people with fruits*. And here is the thing to notice, and it is the whole character of the man. He does not ask for the valley to be made fertile. He asks for fruits to be brought to its people, which is not the same request at all.

Why? Because he knew what the place was for. A fertile valley would have become a distraction, and the people who lived in it would have become farmers, and the House would have been a feature of an agricultural district. He wanted the provision without the distraction, and Allāh ﷻ gave him exactly that, and anyone who has been to Makkah knows that it is still true: nothing grows there, and everything is available there, and the whole economy runs on the House and not on the land.

And Allāh ﷻ points to this Himself, in Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ, answering the men who said they were afraid of losing their position if they followed the guidance: *they say, if we follow the guidance with you, we shall be snatched from our land. Have We not established for them a safe sanctuary, to which the fruits of all things are brought as provision from Us? But most of them do not know.*⁹⁶ The fruits of all things are *brought*. They do not grow. It is the answer to Ibrāhīm's عليه السلام prayer, still arriving, thousands of years later, and the men who were living on it were afraid of losing it if they obeyed the One who was sending it.

The Condition, and the Correction

And then Ibrāhīm عليه السلام adds a condition of his own: *those of them who believe in Allāh and the Last Day*. He restricts his own request. Provision, he says, but for the believers.

And Allāh ﷻ corrects him. *And whoever disbelieves, I shall let him enjoy a little.*

The reader should sit with what has just happened, because it is one of the most instructive moments in the Qur'ān. The friend of Allāh ﷻ, at the height of his

station, tried to narrow the mercy, and Allāh ﷻ would not let him. Even the prophet's instinct was not generous enough. The disbeliever eats too, and lives in the sanctuary too, and is provided for out of the same supplication, and only afterwards is the account settled.

And this is *al-Raḥmān* operating exactly as the Basmala said He would, a mercy so wide that it does not check credentials at the door. And any Muslim who has ever caught himself wishing that Allāh ﷻ would stop providing for somebody he disapproves of should notice that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام had the same thought and was told no.

And a note on the sanctuary of Madīnah, since it belongs here. The Messenger ﷺ said:

إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَرَّمَ بَيْتَ اللَّهِ وَأَمْنَهُ، وَإِنِّي حَرَّمْتُ الْمَدِينَةَ مَا بَيْنَ لَابَتَيْهَا، فَلَا يُصَادُ صَيْدُهَا وَلَا يُقَطَّعُ عِضَاهُهَا

*Ibrāhīm made the House of Allāh sacred and gave it security; and I have made Madīnah sacred, between its two lava fields: its game is not to be hunted, nor its trees cut.*⁹⁷

And he ﷺ prayed that Madīnah be given double what was given to Makkah, and it was.⁹⁸

96. al-Qaṣaṣ 28:57.

97. Muslim 1362 and al-Nasā'ī, on the authority of Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ رضى الله عنه.

98. Muslim 1373, on the authority of Anas رضى الله عنه, and al-Bukhārī 1885.

Raising the Foundations

وَإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿١٢٧﴾

And remember when Ibrāhīm was raising the foundations of the House, and Ismā'il: our Lord, accept from us; indeed You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

al-Baqara 2:127

Notice the tense first. Allāh ﷻ uses the present, *is raising*, to describe a thing that happened long ago, and He does it to bring it in front of us. The reader is not being told about it. He is being put there, in the heat, watching the two of them at work, and this is a thing the Qur'ān does when it wants an event to be alive rather than remembered.

And now consider what they say while they work.

Here is a man who has given up everything. He left his father and his country. He was thrown into a fire. He left his wife and his infant son in a waterless valley because he was told to. He took a knife to that son's throat. And now, at the end of it, he is building the House of Allāh ﷻ with his own hands, in the sun, at a great age, and his son is passing him the stones.

If ever a man was entitled to a moment of satisfaction, it is this man in this hour. And what do they say? *Our Lord, accept from us*. Both of them. The master and the apprentice, the prophet and the prophet, saying the same words as they lift the stones, because they were afraid it would not be accepted.

That is what a believer sounds like, and Allāh ﷻ has described the type: *and those who give what they give while their hearts are trembling, because they are returning to their Lord.*⁹⁹ 'Ā'isha رضي الله عنها asked the Messenger ﷺ whether

this meant the man who steals and drinks and fears Allāh ﷻ, and he said no: it is the man who prays and fasts and gives charity, and fears that it will not be accepted from him.

Let the ordinary worshipper measure himself against that. We finish a good deed and we feel pleased. They finished the Ka'ba and were frightened.

The Story of Hājar

And the reader cannot pass this āyah without the story of how the valley came to be inhabited at all, which al-Bukhārī رحمه الله preserves from Ibn 'Ab-bās رضي الله عنهما, and which is one of the treasures of the whole tradition.

Ibrāhīm عليه السلام brought Ismā'īl عليه السلام and his mother and left them near the site of the House, by a tree above where Zamzam now is, in the upper part of the Masjid. She was still nursing him. Makkah was uninhabited and there was no water in it. He left them with a bag of dates and a skin of water, and he turned to go.

And she followed him and said: Ibrāhīm, to whom are you leaving us in this barren valley where there is nobody? She said it several times, and he did not answer, and did not look back. And then she said: has Allāh commanded you to do this?

And he said: yes.

And she said: then He will not abandon us. And she turned and went back.

The reader should stop there. The question that ended the matter was not "why", and it was not "how will we live". It was one question about whose instruction this was, and when she had the answer she needed nothing else, and she walked back into an empty valley with an infant and a skin of water and a certainty which the rest of us would give a great deal for.

And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام went on until he was out of their sight, at Thaniyya, and there he turned and faced the House and raised his hands and made the prayer

which Allāh ﷻ has preserved: *our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish the ṣalāh; so make the hearts of some people incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, that they may be grateful.*¹⁰⁰ He had not been able to answer her. He had been holding that in.

Then the water ran out, and her milk with it, and the child was thirsting, and she could not bear to look at his face. So she went to the nearest hill, which was al-Ṣafā, and climbed it and looked, hoping to see anybody, and there was nobody. And she came down into the valley and lifted her garment and ran, the way an exhausted person runs, until she reached al-Marwa. And looked. And there was nobody. And she went back and forth between them seven times. And the Messenger ﷺ said: this is why the people make that journey between al-Ṣafā and al-Marwa.

Let the reader consider what he is doing when he performs the *sa'y*. Two and a half million people, every year, retracing the steps of a single woman running back and forth in a panic because her baby was dying. Allāh ﷻ did not merely answer her. He made her footsteps a rite of the religion until the end of the world, and there is no man on the earth who performs the Ḥajj without walking where she ran.

And when she reached al-Marwa she heard a voice, and said, hush, to herself, and listened, and heard it again, and said: I have heard you. Have you any relief? And there was the angel, digging with his heel, or with his wing, where Zamzam now is. And the water came up. And she began to make a basin around it with her hands, and to fill the skin, and it kept welling out.

And the Messenger ﷺ said: may Allāh have mercy on the mother of Ismā'īl. Had she left Zamzam alone, it would have been a flowing spring on the surface of the earth.

She was so frightened of losing it that she penned it in, and it has been a well ever since instead of a river. And the Messenger ﷺ did not blame her; he asked

for mercy on her, because it is exactly what any of us would have done. But the reader should see what the ḥadīth is telling him. Allāh's ﷻ generosity was larger than her hands, and she reached out and made it the size of her fear, and the difference between a well and a river is what we do in the moment when the gift arrives and we cannot believe it.

And the angel said to her: do not fear abandonment. There will be a House of Allāh here, built by this boy and his father. And Allāh does not abandon His people.

Then a party of Jurhum came through Kadā' and camped at the bottom of the valley, and they saw birds, and were astonished, and said: birds only gather where there is water, and we know this valley has none. So they sent a scout, and he found the spring, and they came to her and asked: will you allow us to settle with you? And she said: yes, but you will have no exclusive right to the water. And they said: agreed. And Ibn 'Abbās رضي الله عنهما said that the Prophet ﷺ said: she liked to have people about her.

Notice how a city begins. A woman alone at a spring, negotiating from what looks like no position at all, and holding the water in common while she does it. Makkah was founded on a refusal to monopolise, by somebody who had every excuse to monopolise, and the reader should hold that beside everything the sūra has been saying about people who thought Allāh's ﷻ gifts were theirs alone.

They settled, and sent for their relatives, and the boy grew and learned Arabic from them and married amongst them, and his mother died.

The Thresholds

And then Ibrāhīm عليه السلام came to visit, and did not find Ismā'īl عليه السلام, and asked his wife where he was. She said, out hunting. And he asked how they were living, and she complained, and said they were in misery and poverty. And

99. al-Mu'minūn 23:60.

100. Ibrāhīm 14:37.

he said: when your husband comes, give him my greeting and tell him to change the threshold of his door.

And when Ismā'īl عليه السلام came he sensed a visitor, and asked, and she told him, an old man came and asked about you and about our condition, and I told him we live in hardship. And he asked: did he say anything? She said: he said to give you his greeting and tell you to change the threshold of your door. And Ismā'īl عليه السلام said: that was my father, and you are the threshold. Go to your family. And he divorced her.

And he married again. And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام came again, and again did not find him, and asked the wife how they were. And she said: we are well, and praised Allāh ﷻ. And he asked: what is your food and what is your drink? She said: meat, and water. And he said: O Allāh, bless their meat and their water. And the Prophet ﷺ said: they had no crops then, or he would have prayed for those too; and nobody outside Makkah could live on meat and water alone.

And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام said: when Ismā'īl comes, give him my greeting and tell him to keep the threshold of his door.

Two women, two answers, and the whole of a marriage decided by them. The reader should notice what the complaint actually was. The first woman was not lying; they were poor. She simply told a stranger about it, and did it as a grievance, and the man who heard it was her husband's father and knew at once what he was hearing. And the second was in the same poverty and praised Allāh ﷻ for it, and the food she called a blessing was meat and water in a desert. And a prophet listened to each of them for the length of one conversation and knew everything he needed to know about his son's house.

And there is *adab* in the method, and the reader should not miss it. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام did not tell his son to divorce her. He gave him a sentence and let him work it out, and a man who is told what to do about his own wife will resist, and a man who is handed the truth in a form he must open himself will accept it. That is how a father speaks to a grown son.

The Building

And then Ibrāhīm عليه السلام came again, and found Ismā'īl عليه السلام behind Zamzam, under a tree, mending his arrows. And when he saw his father he rose, and they greeted each other as a father and a son greet.

And Ibrāhīm عليه السلام said: Ismā'īl, your Lord has commanded me with something.

And he said: then obey your Lord.

And he said: will you help me? And he said: I will help you. And he said: Allāh has commanded me to build a House here, and pointed to a rise in the ground.

And they rose, and raised the foundations. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام building and Ismā'īl عليه السلام handing him the stones, and both of them saying, our Lord, accept from us; indeed You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. Going round it, part by part, saying it as they went.

And the reader will have noticed the answer the son gave, because it is the finest thing in the story. He was not told what the command was. His father said only that there was one, and he said: then obey your Lord. He did not ask what it would cost or how long it would take or what it had to do with him. It is the same answer he gave when the command was to slaughter him, and it is the same house he learned it in, and it is the same mother who said, then He will not abandon us. The whole family answers the same way, and the reader should ask himself what it takes to raise a household in which that is the reflex.

رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمِينَ لَكَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُسْلِمَةً لَكَ وَأَرِنَا
مَنَاسِكَا وَتُبَّ عَلَيْنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٢٨﴾

Our Lord, and make us both submissive to You, and from our offspring a community submissive to You; and show us our rites, and turn to us; indeed You are the Ever-Relenting, the Merciful.

al-Baqara 2:128

Look at what they ask for while building the House, because it is not what a man would expect.

They ask, first, to be made submissive themselves. Two prophets, one of whom is the friend of Allāh ﷺ and the other of whom lay down under the knife, asking to be made Muslims. If they asked for it, nobody is past asking for it, and nobody has it so securely that he can stop.

And then, immediately, their offspring. And the reader will have noticed by now that this man cannot make a supplication without his children coming into it, and it is the same instinct as the āyah about the imamate. This is what Allāh ﷻ loves in a believer, and He has described the type: *and those who say, our Lord, grant us from our spouses and our offspring the coolness of eyes, and make us a model for the God-fearing.*¹⁰¹

And the Messenger ﷺ told us why it matters so much:

101. al-Furqān 25:74.

إِذَا مَاتَ ابْنُ آدَمَ انْقَطَعَ عَمَلُهُ إِلَّا مِنْ ثَلَاثٍ: صَدَقَةٍ جَارِيَةٍ، أَوْ عِلْمٍ يُنْتَفَعُ
بِهِ، أَوْ وَلَدٍ صَالِحٍ يَدْعُو لَهُ

When the son of Adam dies, his deeds come to an end except for three: an ongoing charity, or knowledge which is benefited from, or a righteous child who prays for him.

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And then, *show us our rites*, and Mujaḥid رحمه الله tells us what happened next, and it is worth having, because it is the answer arriving in the same hour as the request.

Ibrāhīm عليه السلام made this supplication, and Jibrīl عليه السلام came down and took him to the House and said: raise its foundations. And he raised them and finished the building. Then Jibrīl عليه السلام took him by the hand and led him to al-Ṣafā and said: this is one of the rites of Allāh. And took him to al-Marwa and said: and this is one of the rites of Allāh. And took him to Minā, and when they reached the ‘Aqaba they found Iblīs standing by a tree. And Jibrīl عليه السلام said: say Allāhu Akbar, and throw at him. And he did. And Iblīs moved to the middle Jamra, and when they passed him Jibrīl عليه السلام said again: say Allāhu Akbar and throw. And he did. And Iblīs was trying to insert something evil into the rites of the Ḥajj, and could not manage it. And Jibrīl عليه السلام took his hand and led him to al-Mash‘ar al-Ḥarām and to ‘Arafāt, and said to him three times: have you learned what I have shown you? And he said: I have.

And the last request: *and turn to us*. Prophets, asking for repentance to be accepted, in the middle of building the Ka‘ba. The reader who thinks he will one day reach a station where he no longer needs to ask for that should look at these two and reconsider.

102. Muslim 1631, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ
وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٢٩﴾

*Our Lord, and raise up amongst them a messenger from themselves, who will recite
Your signs to them, and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them.*

Indeed You are the Mighty, the Wise.

al-Baqara 2:129

And here is the answer to the whole quarrel of this sūra, and the reader should feel the weight of where it stands.

The Jews of Madīnah objected that the final Prophet ﷺ was not one of them. And here is the man they claim as their father, standing on the foundations of the House, asking for him. Praying for him by description. From amongst them, he says, meaning from the people of this valley, so that the Makkans might receive him as their own. This was Ibrāhīm's عليه السلام request, made with his hands on the stones, and Allāh ﷻ answered it, and the answer is the man they were refusing.

And the Messenger ﷺ knew whose prayer he was. He said that he was the supplication of his father Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, and the good news of 'Īsā عليه السلام, and the vision of his mother.¹⁰³

The good news of 'Īsā عليه السلام is what Allāh ﷻ records in Sūrat al-Ṣaff, that he said, *and giving good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Aḥmad*.¹⁰⁴ And of the vision he ﷺ said:

103. Musnad Aḥmad 17150, on the authority of al-'Irbād b. Sāriya رضى الله عنه. The same narration reports that he ﷺ said he was written as the Seal of the Prophets while Ādam عليه السلام was still clay.

104. al-Ṣaff 61:6.

وَرَأَتْ أُمِّي أَنَّهُ خَرَجَ مِنْهَا نُورٌ أَضَاءَتْ لَهُ قُصُورُ الشَّامِ

*And my mother saw that a light came out from her, by which the palaces of Shām were lit.*¹⁰⁵

She saw it while she was carrying him, and told her people, and the story became well known amongst them. And it was Shām that was lit, which is where his religion would be firmly established, and which is why at the end of time Shām will be a refuge for Islam and its people, and where عليه السلام will descend, by the white minaret east of Damascus.

The Four Things Asked For

And the reader should take the four items of the request apart, because they are the whole job description of the Messenger ﷺ and therefore the whole shape of the religion.

Who will recite Your signs to them. The word is *yatlū*, and only the Qur'ān is subject to *tilāwa*, and this proves that recitation is an object of the Sharī'a in itself and not merely a means of getting at the meaning. Which is why *Alif Lām Mīm* is rewarded, though nobody on the earth knows what it means, because the Messenger ﷺ said that whoever reads a letter of the Book of Allāh ﷻ has a good deed for it, and that he does not say *Alif Lām Mīm* is a letter, but that *Alif* is a letter and *Lām* is a letter and *Mīm* is a letter.¹⁰⁶ The ordinary worshipper who reads without understanding is not wasting his time, and should be told so.

And teach them the Book. A different word, and a different thing. Teaching is not reciting. It needs a teacher, and expert knowledge, and the Sunnah, and it cannot be got from a page by a man on his own, and the Messenger ﷺ said of himself, *I was sent only as a teacher.*¹⁰⁷ He did not say, I was sent only as a book.

105. Musnad Aḥmad, on the authority of al-'Irbāḍ b. Sāriya رضي الله عنه.

106. al-Tirmidhī 2910, on the authority of 'Abdullāh b. Mas'ūd رضي الله عنه, who graded it *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*.

And the wisdom. The ‘ulamā’ have given several senses. Shaykh al-Hind رحمه الله said it is the profound truths, the subtle realities. Ḥakīm al-Ummah رحمه الله said it is the art of understanding properly, which is a fine definition, because it makes wisdom a skill and not a stock of facts. And it has been taken to mean the commentary and exegesis of the Qur’ān, and the *dīn* itself.

And purify them. And this is the fourth and it is the one we neglect. It is not enough to have the outward knowledge. There are illnesses inside a man, and they must be dealt with, and this is the work which the tradition calls *tazkiya*, and it is best done, as it has always been done, under the eye of a Shaykh, a teacher, somebody who can see what a man cannot see in himself.

And put the four together and you have the whole Sharī‘a in one supplication: the acts of worship, the following of the Sunnah, the understanding of the Book, and the purification of the heart. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام asked for all four, and we were given all four, and a man who has taken three of them and left the fourth has taken a religion with a hole in it.

And the closing names: *the Mighty, the Wise*. He has the power to answer, and He has the wisdom to know when, and the answer to this supplication took some thousands of years to arrive, and Ibrāhīm عليه السلام never saw it. He asked, and went to his grave, and the answer came in a cave on a mountain a very long time later. That is what it is to make *du‘ā’* to the Mighty and the Wise, and it should give a great deal of comfort to anybody who has been asking for something for a while.

107. Ibn Mājah 229, on the authority of ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr رضي الله عنهما.

Who Turns Away From the Way of Ibrāhīm?

وَمَنْ يَرْغَبُ عَنْ مِلَّةِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِلَّا مَنْ سَفِهَ نَفْسَهُ وَلَقَدْ اصْطَفَيْنَاهُ
فِي الدُّنْيَا وَإِنَّهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ لَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

And who turns away from the way of Ibrāhīm except one who has made a fool of himself? And We chose him in this world, and in the Hereafter he is amongst the righteous.

al-Baqara 2:130

The word is *milla*, and it is wider than religion in the narrow sense. It takes in everything he did, and everything he went through, and everything that was revealed to him, and to turn away from it is to turn away from a whole manner of being a servant.

And the phrase Allāh ﷻ uses of the man who does it, *safaha nafsah*, is worth noticing, because it is the very expression He used earlier in this sūra of the hypocrites, who said, shall we believe as the fools have believed, and Allāh ﷻ answered, they are the fools but they do not know.¹⁰⁸ The same word, returning. The men who thought the believers were fools are the fools, and the man who turns from Ibrāhīm's عليه السلام way has made a fool of his own soul, which is the exact phrase: he has cheapened himself, treated himself as worthless, thrown himself away.

And *istifā'* is a special selection, a picking-out, and Allāh ﷻ uses it of him in this world and vouches for him in the next, so the account is closed on both sides. What is left to argue about?

108. al-Baqara 2:13.

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ رَبُّهُ أَسْلِمْ قَالَ أَسْلَمْتُ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٣١﴾

When his Lord said to him: submit. He said: I have submitted to the Lord of the worlds.

al-Baqara 2:131

One word, and one answer, and there is not a syllable wasted in either.

Aslim. Submit. And he said: *aslamtu li-rabbi al-‘ālamīn*. I have submitted to the Lord of the worlds.

Notice that he does not say "I will". He says "I have", in the perfect tense, as of a thing already done. And notice that he does not simply say "I submit", but names the One he is submitting to, and names Him as the Lord of all the worlds, which is to say: I know exactly whom I am dealing with, and that is why the answer is immediate.

Submission is the key to servitude, and the reader should notice that the whole life we have just been reading about, the fire and the knife and the valley and the stones, is contained in that one word and that one reply. Everything else was the working out of it.

وَوَصَّىٰ بِهَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ بَنِيهِ وَيَعْقُوبُ يٰبَنِيَّ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ لَكُمُ الدِّينَ فَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

And Ibrāhīm enjoined it upon his sons, and Ya‘qūb: my sons, Allāh has chosen the religion for you, so do not die except as those who have submitted.

al-Baqara 2:132

And here Allāh ﷻ does something the reader should follow closely, because it is a piece of structure.

The previous āyahs have been about the line of Ismā'il عليه السلام, and the grand-child of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام on that side, who is Muḥammad ﷺ. And now Allāh ﷻ turns to the other son, and to Ishāq's عليه السلام son Ya'qūb عليه السلام, who is Isrā'īl himself, the father of the very people the sūra has been addressing. So both branches of the family are brought into one āyah, and both of them are shown doing the same thing: instructing their children.

And it is the whole answer to the descent argument. You are the children of Ya'qūb عليه السلام? Very well. Here is what Ya'qūb عليه السلام told his children. It was not, you are safe. It was, do not die except as those who have submitted.

And Muftī Shafī رحمه الله draws the lesson for parents, and it is the sharpest thing in his commentary on this passage. This practice of the prophets is a guidance to parents: just as they are keen to secure the worldly comfort and happiness of their children, they should give equal attention, if not more, to the discipline of their outward and inward conduct according to the Sharī'a. And then he asks the question which should be put to every one of us: is it at all reasonable that a man should strain every nerve to protect his children from the heat of the sun, and leave them exposed to the fire of Hell?

The family is the whole of *tarbiya*, and Ibrāhīm عليه السلام dealt with his children and Ya'qūb عليه السلام dealt with his, and neither of them delegated it. And the aim of it is stated here in the plainest terms: to bring your children to be Muslims, which is to say, true slaves. Not successful. Not comfortable. Not even happy. Slaves of Allāh ﷻ, and everything else after that.

At the Deathbed of Ya'qūb

أَمْ كُنْتُمْ شُهَدَاءَ إِذْ حَضَرَ يَعْقُوبَ الْمَوْتُ إِذْ قَالَ لِبَنِيهِ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ
مِنْ بَعْدِي قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ إِلَهَكَ وَاللَّهُ أَبَايَكَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ
إِلَهُا وَحِدًا وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

Or were you witnesses when death came to Ya'qūb, when he said to his sons: what will you worship after me? They said: we shall worship your God, and the God of your fathers Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl and Ishāq, one God, and to Him we have submitted.

al-Baqara 2:133

Allāh ﷻ takes us into the room. That is what the opening question does: *were you witnesses?* It is a challenge to the people arguing about Ya'qūb's عليه السلام religion, that they were not there and He was, and it is also an invitation, because the reader is now standing at the bedside of a prophet in his last hour.

And what does the man ask?

Not: divide the property this way. Not: look after your mother. Not: remember me. He asks: *what will you worship after me?*

The time of death is when a man says the most important thing to the most important people, because there is no time left for anything else, and everything that is not the one thing falls away. And this is what fell out when everything else had gone. And notice that he did not lecture them. He asked, and waited, and wanted an answer, because a man cannot be reassured by his own words at that hour; he needed to hear it from them.

And they answered, and their answer is worth taking apart. *We shall worship your God, and the God of your fathers Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl and Ishāq, one God, and to Him we have submitted.* They named the line. They took their place in it

deliberately, and were proud of it, and set their feet in the same tracks. And they said *one God*, which is the thing that had to be said, and *we have submitted*, which is the word this whole passage has been circling.

And the reader should take a practical thing from this. Our wills are about property. That is what a will is for amongst us, and it is a poor showing. The wills of the prophets were about religion. There is nothing to stop any of us writing a page for our children about what we hope they will worship after we are gone, and putting it with the paperwork, and it may be the only part of the estate that is worth anything.

تِلْكَ أُمَّةٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَلَكُمْ مَا كَسَبْتُمْ وَلَا تُسْأَلُونَ
عَمَّا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

That is a community which has passed away. It has what it earned, and you have what you earned, and you will not be asked about what they used to do.

al-Baqara 2:134

And the door closes on the whole argument.

Have pride in your lineage, and it is a good thing to have, and the sons of Ya'qūb عليه السلام had it and were praised for it in the āyah before. But a man cannot live on it, and this āyah says why: what they earned is theirs, and what you earned is yours, and the two accounts are not connected, and nobody will ask you about theirs.

Each man goes into his own grave, alone, and there is no room in it for his father.

And the Messenger ﷺ demonstrated this himself, in the most public way anybody could, and every reader should know what he did. When Allāh ﷻ revealed *and warn your nearest kin*, he stood up and called out:

يَا مَعْشَرَ قُرَيْشٍ، اشْتَرُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ، لَا أُغْنِي عَنْكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا

*O people of Quraysh, buy yourselves from Allāh; I cannot avail you anything against Allāh. O sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I cannot avail you anything against Allāh. O ‘Abbās, son of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I cannot avail you anything against Allāh. O Ṣafīyya, aunt of the Messenger of Allāh, I cannot avail you anything against Allāh. O Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad, ask me what you like of my property, but I cannot avail you anything against Allāh.*¹⁰⁹

He worked outward from the tribe to the clan to his uncle to his aunt, and then he named his own daughter, in public, and told her that being the daughter of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ would not save her, and that she could have his money and not his rank.

Let the reader hold that against every claim ever made in this Ummah on the basis of somebody's descent. If Fāṭima رضي الله عنها was told that, in those words, by that man, then the matter is closed and there is nothing more to be said about it by anybody.

And the Messenger ﷺ put it in a sentence:

مَنْ بَطَّأَ بِهِ عَمَلُهُ لَمْ يُسْرَعْ بِهِ نَسَبُهُ

*Whoever is slowed by his deeds will not be hastened by his lineage.*¹¹⁰

And this is why the sūra will repeat this whole āyah, word for word, at the very end of the Juz', which we shall come to shortly.

109. Muslim 206, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

110. Muslim 2699, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه.

Rather, the Way of Ibrāhīm

وَقَالُوا كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصْرَى تَهْتَدُوا قُلْ بَلْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا
وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٣٥﴾

And they said: be Jews or Christians and you will be guided. Say: rather, the way of Ibrāhīm, the upright; and he was not of those who associate partners.

al-Baqara 2:135

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما reports that ‘Abdullāh b. Šūriyā al-A‘war said to the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ: guidance is only what we follow. So follow us, Muḥammad, and you will be rightly guided. And the Christians said the like of it. And this āyah came down.

And the reply Allāh ﷻ gives is not a rejection but a redirection, and it is very fine. He does not say, no, be Muslims. He says: rather, the way of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام. Which is to say: you are both offering me a branch, and I am going to the root, and the root is the man you both claim and neither of you follows.

And the word *ḥanīf* is the key, and it means one who turns away from everything crooked towards what is straight. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام did not have a religion polluted with anything else. He did not have a doctrine of sons of God, or a chosen bloodline, or a set of accretions. He had one God, and he was upright, and he associated nothing, and that is the whole of it, and everything either community has added since is what the reply is refusing.

قُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ
وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَا أُوتِيَ
النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

Say: we believe in Allāh, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl and Ishāq and Ya'qūb and the tribes, and what was given to Mūsā and 'Īsā, and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted.

al-Baqara 2:136

And here is the Muslim position, stated in full, and the reader should feel how much larger it is than what was offered to us.

They said: be one of us. And Allāh ﷻ answers by having us name every prophet either of them ever had, and believe in all of them, and refuse to rank them.

Look at the list. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, and both his sons, and his grandson, and the tribes, and Mūsā عليه السلام, and 'Īsā عليه السلام, and every prophet who was ever sent. We hold all of it. We are the only community in that room which believes in the whole of both their scriptures' cast, and we were the ones being told we had no basis.

And *we make no distinction between any of them* is the phrase which the whole Juz' has been building to, because it is the exact opposite of what the Jews of Madīnah had done with Jibrīl عليه السلام and Mikā'il عليه السلام, and the exact opposite of believing in part of the Book and rejecting part of it. And Allāh ﷻ says what the alternative is, in terms which leave nothing to interpret: *those who disbelieve in Allāh and His messengers, and wish to make a distinction between Allāh and His messengers, and say, we believe in some and disbelieve in some, and wish to take a way in between: those are the disbelievers in truth.*¹¹¹

A way in between. That is what they were looking for and there is not one.

And as for *al-asbāt*, Abū al-ʿĀliya رحمه الله and al-Rabī رحمه الله and Qatāda رحمه الله explain that they are the twelve sons of Yaʿqūb عليه السلام, each of whom had a nation of people from his descendants, and this is why they were called *al-asbāt*, the tribes.

فَإِنْ ءَامَنُوا بِمِثْلِ مَا ءَامَنْتُمْ بِهِ ۖ فَقَدْ اهْتَدَوْا ۖ وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا هُمْ فِي
شِقَاقٍ ۖ فَسَيَكْفِيكَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿١٣٧﴾

So if they believe in the like of what you have believed in, they are guided. And if they turn away, they are only in schism, and Allāh will suffice you against them.

And He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

al-Baqara 2:137

The standard is set exactly: *the like of what you have believed in*. Not something in the neighbourhood of it. Not a version arrived at by their own reasoning. The like of it.

And Muftī Shafī رحمه الله makes the application which the reader needs, that the bar of faith is set by the Companions رضي الله عنهم, without adding to it or subtracting from it, and without advancing one's own interpretations or distorting the established meanings of the doctrines. That is the measure, and it is a measure of a community and not of an individual, and it is why this Ummah has always cared so much about who the Companions رضي الله عنهم were and what they held.

And it follows, though it is uncomfortable to say, that faith which fails that test is not accepted merely because it is sincerely held. There have been groups within this Ummah whose belief departed from what the Companions

111. al-Nisā' 4:150–151.

ions رضي الله عنهم held on matters which are not negotiable, and sincerity does not repair that, any more than the sincerity of the Jews of Madīnah repaired their position.

And then the promise: *Allāh will suffice you against them*. Which is the same promise given elsewhere, that *Allāh will protect you from the people*.¹¹² And it is a promise of protection and not of victory, and the reader should notice the difference, because they are not the same thing and we often ask for the wrong one.

The Colouring of Allāh

صِبْغَةَ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنَ اللَّهِ صِبْغَةً وَنَحْنُ لَهُ عِبْدُونَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

The colouring of Allāh; and who is better than Allāh in colouring? And we are worshippers of Him.

al-Baqara 2:138

This is one of the most beautiful āyahs in the sūra and it needs a piece of background before it opens.

The Arab Christians had a practice of mixing a dye into the baptismal water, so that a man who was baptised took on a colour, and the colour signified that he had taken on a new life. And Allāh ﷻ takes the image out of their hands and turns it round: you have a dye? Here is a dye. Who colours better than Allāh ﷻ?

And the reader should think about what a dye does, because it is not a coat of paint. A dye goes through. It reaches the fibre, and it does not sit on the surface, and it cannot be scrubbed off, and it changes the thing itself rather than covering it.

112. al-Mā'ida 5:67.

So: drench yourself. That is the instruction. Faith should be the colour of a man, and it should be visible, and it should not be something he can take off at the door of his workplace, and it should have gone into him far enough that there is no part of the cloth which is still the old colour.

And the reader will not have missed that this is the exact opposite of the calf, thirty-five āyahs ago, which they were *made to drink into their hearts*. Something soaks into a man either way. The only question is what.

قُلْ أَتُحَاجُّونَنَا فِي اللَّهِ وَهُوَ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ وَلَنَا أَعْمَلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَلُكُمْ
وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُخْلِصُونَ ﴿١٣٩﴾

Say: do you argue with us about Allāh, when He is our Lord and your Lord? And we have our deeds and you have your deeds, and we are sincere to Him.

al-Baqara 2:139

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله sets out where the argument has arrived, and it is worth stating so the reader sees the whole shape of it. The preceding āyahs have established that the religion of all these prophets was Islam in the general sense of the word, submission; and that the earlier Sharī'as have now been abrogated; and that the name Islam has been given specifically to the religion of Muḥammad ﷺ. And if, after all of that, they still persist in denying, then Allāh ﷻ instructs the Prophet ﷺ and the Muslims to say it plainly.

And what they are to say is this: Allāh ﷻ is the Lord of all, so He cannot show a special favour to any particular group of His creatures; and on the Day of Judgement He will assess the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims according to what each believed and how each behaved. And that is a principle the People of the Book accepted themselves, so there is no arguing with it.

And then the Muslims are to announce that they recognise no god but Allāh ﷻ, and have purified their religion of every trace of *shirk*, as against those who have

said that ‘Uzayr عليه السلام or ‘Īsā عليه السلام is a son of God, and whose Sharī‘as have in any case been abrogated.

And the same instruction is given elsewhere, in the same words: *if they deny you, then say: for me is my deed and for you is your deed; you are quit of what I do and I am quit of what you do;*¹¹³ *and if they argue with you, then say: I have submitted my face to Allāh, and so has whoever follows me.*¹¹⁴

What is being taught is how to end an argument that has stopped being an argument. You do not win it. You state your position, hand the case to Allāh ﷻ, and go back to work. And the reader who has ever been trapped in a religious dispute which was never going anywhere should learn the sentence and use it.

Ikhlāṣ

And the last word of the āyah is *mukhlisūn*, and it deserves its own treatment, because it is one of the words we have most nearly lost.

A *mukhlis* is one who has purified himself, and the word belongs to *ikhlāṣ*, the act of purifying. Sa‘īd b. Jubayr رحمه الله defined it: *ikhlāṣ* is to worship no one but Allāh ﷻ, to associate no one with Him, and to do good deeds only for the sake of obeying Him and not for the admiration of people.

And certain of the spiritual masters have said a thing about it which the reader should carry: *ikhlāṣ* is a deed which cannot be identified by men, nor by angels, nor by Shayṭān, and it is a secret between Allāh ﷻ and His servant. Men cannot see it, because it is inward. Shayṭān cannot see it, or he would corrupt it. And even the angels cannot see it. A man’s most valuable possession is the one thing about him that nothing in creation can find.

And now a word about the English, because Muftī Shafī رحمه الله makes an observation here which has become more true since he made it, not less.

Ikhlāṣ is usually rendered "sincerity", and *mukhlis* as "sincere", and it is doubtful whether the English word ever carried the full sense. But the position now is

worse than a poor fit, because the meaning of "sincerity" has been not merely weakened but inverted. The word used to imply a harmony between a man's outward action and his inward inclination, with the unspoken assumption that the outward action was, at the least, decent. In current usage it suggests compliance with one's feelings, or even with one's instincts, and the concept is now used to justify a great deal that ought not to be justified. A man is praised for being true to himself.

And that is the exact opposite of *ikhblāṣ*. Because a man cannot attain the lowest degree of *ikhblāṣ* without forming a clear intention to obey the commands of Allāh ﷻ rather than letting himself be led by his urges and his moods, whereas "sincerity" as it is now used requires him to set aside the Sharī'a, and sometimes ordinary decency with it, and do the bidding of whatever he is feeling at the moment, which reduces a man to a mechanism working on reflex.

The reader should notice how neatly this joins to the eighty-seventh āyah, where they rejected every messenger who came with what their desires did not want. That is "sincerity" in its modern sense, and it is a sin, and the whole of this Juz' has been describing what it does to a community over a thousand years.

أَمْ تَقُولُونَ إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطَ كَانُوا
هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَىٰ قُلْ أَتَيْتُمْ أَكْثَرَ أَلَمٍ أَلَلَّهُ وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ كَتَمَ شَهَدَةً
عِنْدَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَفِلٍ ۖ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

Or do you say that Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl and Ishāq and Ya'qūb and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: do you know better, or does Allāh? And who is greater in wrong than one who conceals a testimony he has from Allāh? And Allāh is not unaware of what you do.

al-Baqara 2:140

113. Yūnus 10:41.

114. Āl 'Imrān 3:20.

The question is put with a kind of weary patience, and the answer is the one Allāh ﷻ has already given elsewhere in the plainest words: *Ibrāhīm was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was upright, a Muslim, and he was not of those who associate partners.*¹¹⁵

And the argument from chronology is one a child can follow, which is why it is so devastating. The Tawrah came down to Mūsā عليه السلام, and the Injil to ʿIsā عليه السلام, and both of them came a long time after Ibrāhīm عليه السلام was in his grave. A man cannot belong to a community that will not exist for centuries. The claim is not merely false; it is not the sort of thing that could be true.

And then, *do you know better, or does Allāh?* Which is where every argument with revelation ends up, and it is worth putting to oneself, quietly, whenever one finds oneself resisting a plain text.

Concealing the Testimony

And then the charge, and the reader should notice that it is the same form of words as the āyah about the masājid, twenty-six āyahs earlier: *who is greater in wrong.* There it was the man who empties the House of Allāh ﷻ. Here it is the man who conceals a testimony he has from Allāh ﷻ.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī رحمه الله says what it was. They used to recite the Book which Allāh ﷻ had sent to them, and it stated that the true religion is Islam and that Muḥammad ﷺ is the Messenger of Allāh, and it stated that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام and Ismāʿīl عليه السلام and Ishāq عليه السلام and Yaʿqūb عليه السلام and the tribes were neither Jews nor Christians. They bore witness to these facts amongst themselves. And they hid them from the people.

Consider what is being described, because it is worse than lying. A man who lies has said something false. These men said nothing. They held a testimony which was true, and which people needed, and which they had been given precisely in

115. Āl ʿImrān 3:67.

order to deliver, and they sat on it. And the reader should feel how close this comes to him, because most of us will never falsify a scripture and every one of us knows what it is to keep quiet when speaking would cost us something. The āyah is not about forgery. It is about silence.

And the closing phrase is the answer to the whole calculation: *and Allāh is not unaware of what you do*. Concealment works on people. It is the entire technique of the thing. It has never once worked on Allāh ﷻ, and a man who conceals a testimony has hidden it from everybody except the only One whose knowing it matters.

تِلْكَ أُمَّةٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَلَكُمْ مَا كَسَبْتُمْ وَلَا تُسْأَلُونَ
عَمَّا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤١﴾

That is a community which has passed away. It has what it earned, and you have what you earned, and you will not be asked about what they used to do.

al-Baqara 2:141

And the Juz' ends where it must, on the same words as the hundred and thirty-fourth āyah, repeated exactly, letter for letter, without a syllable changed.

And the repetition is not an accident of composition. It is a hammer, and Allāh ﷻ swings it twice, and the reader should ask why He needed to.

Because this is the thing men do not accept. They will accept a great many hard truths, and they will not accept this one, that their ancestry will not carry them. It is the last handhold. A man who has given up on his deeds will still be quietly certain that he belongs to the right people, and that the belonging counts for something, and it counts for nothing, and Allāh ﷻ says so twice within eight āyahs because once was not going to be enough.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله draws it out. The fact that you are their relatives will not suffice, unless you imitate their good deeds. Do not be deceived by being their

descendants, unless you follow them in obeying Allāh's ﷻ commands and following His messengers, who were sent as warners and bearers of good news. And whoever disbelieves in even one prophet has disbelieved in all of them, and most of all if he disbelieves in the master and final Messenger from Allāh, the Lord of the worlds, sent to all mankind and the jinn.

And so the first Juz' of the Qur'ān closes. And the reader should look back down the length of it before he turns the page.

It opened with the Fātiḥa, which is a prayer for guidance, and al-Baqara answered it at once by saying, here is the Book, there is no doubt in it, a guidance. Then the three kinds of men. Then Ādam عليه السلام and the prostration. And then, from the fortieth āyah to this one, a hundred āyahs about one community and what it did with everything it was given, and the whole of it addressed to us and not to them, because they are not reading this and we are.

And it ends by taking away the last excuse. Not one man of them, and not one man of us, will be asked about what his fathers did. What they earned is theirs. What you earned is yours. And there is nothing else in the account.

And it ends, too, with the sūra having brought us to the Ka'ba and left us there, with an old man and his son lifting stones and asking that it be accepted, which is the only posture in the whole Juz' that Allāh ﷻ does not criticise. They did the work and then begged that it not be refused. Everybody else in these hundred āyahs was busy explaining why they were entitled.

May Allāh ﷻ make us of those who submit, and let us not die except as Muslims, and accept from us as He accepted from them. Āmīn.

Addendum: On Reading the Jewish Passages of al-Baqara

I said in the introduction that these āyahs are read badly rather often, and I promised the reader who found them difficult that I would say more about it here. This is that fuller word, and I have put it at the back rather than the front because I did not want it standing between the reader and the Book. But I would rather he read it than not.

The difficulty is real and it should be named. Fifty-nine āyahs, and the greater part of them are a sustained rebuke of one community, and a Muslim who reads them without care can come away with something the Qur'ān did not give him. He can come away with a grievance, or with a contempt, or with the quiet satisfaction of a man who has been told that somebody else is the problem. And he will have read every word correctly and understood none of it.

So let me set out four things which I believe the ordinary worshipper needs in order to read this passage as it was meant.

The First: These Āyahs Are About Us

This is not a modern softening, and I do not offer it as one. It is what the 'ulamā' have said from the earliest generations, and it is what the structure of the sūra itself insists on.

Consider where the passage stands. Al-Baqara opens by dividing mankind into three, the believers, the disbelievers, and the hypocrites, and it gives two āyahs to the first, two to the second, and thirteen to the third. Thirteen āyahs on the hypocrites, addressed to a community which had just arrived in Madīnah and was about to produce a great many of them. The sūra was never in the business of describing other people.

And then it turns to the Children of Isrā'īl and stays with them for a hundred āyahs, and it recites a history which the reader is meant to recognise. A

community given a Book, given prophets, given deliverance, given a covenant, given a preference over the worlds. And it loses the whole inheritance, not in a single apostasy but by inches, by turning aside, by believing part of the Book and rejecting part of it, by wanting the world more than it was willing to say aloud, by taking its lineage for a guarantee.

Every one of those is available to us. We have a Book. We have a covenant. We have been given a preference and told so. And the Messenger ﷺ told us plainly that we would follow the ways of those before us a hand-span at a time, and when he was asked whether he meant the Jews and the Christians, he said: who else? He was not warning us about them. He was warning us about ourselves, using them, and this passage is the material of that warning.

So the correct posture in front of these āyahs is not indignation. It is fear. And a man who reads a hundred āyahs about the collapse of a chosen people and comes away feeling superior has demonstrated, in the act of reading, that the collapse is already under way in him.

The Second: The Qur'ān Is Precise, and We Should Be

The reader should notice how careful the Book is, because we are not always so careful.

It says *a party of them*. It says *most of them do not believe*. It says *then you turned away, all but a few of you*, and the few are acknowledged. It never says all. And when the sūra was being recited in Madīnah there were men in that community who heard it and accepted it, and the Qur'ān names one of them, 'Abdullāh b. Salām رضي الله عنه, and al-Bukhārī رحمه الله records the story of his Islam at length and with honour, and he was a rabbi and he became a Companion of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ and his name is on our tongues fourteen centuries later.

So the passage is not a verdict on a people. It is a verdict on a conduct, and it names the men who did not do it. A Muslim who takes from it a general opinion about Jews has been less careful than the Qur'ān, which is a strange position for a man to have reached by reading the Qur'ān.

The Third: The Instruction Given Is Not What We Assume

Let the reader assemble what he has actually been told to do in this passage, because it is not what a man might expect after such a rebuke.

He is told to speak well to people, and the word is left undefined so that it takes in everybody. He is told that ‘Aṭā’ رحمه الله rebuked a man for dealing harshly with those whose beliefs he thought unsound, and recited this very passage at him. He is told that Mūsā عليه السلام was commanded to speak gently to Fir‘awn, and that none of us is above Mūsā عليه السلام and nobody we meet is below Fir‘awn. He is told the story of the devout man who told a sinner that Allāh جلّ جلاله would never forgive him, and who lost everything for that one sentence.

And in the middle of the sharpest part of the passage, after the envy and the plotting and the poetry against the Prophet ﷺ, he is told: *pardon and overlook*. And then, immediately: *establish the ṣalāh and give the zakāh*. Which is to say, leave them, and go and do your own work.

That is the instruction. It has been sitting in the passage the whole time.

The Fourth: Where the Politics Belongs

I have brought two contemporary matters into this volume, and I should say why, and where I think the limits are.

The first is the Christian Zionist theology at the hundred and eleventh āyah. I included it because it is a live instance of exactly what that āyah is describing, an exclusive claim to salvation held without evidence, and because our people meet its effects constantly and understand its causes hardly at all. And I included it partly because it complicates the picture rather than simplifying it, since the theology in question is Christian and its object is Jewish and its consequence for the Jewish people is not benign, and a reader who has understood it will find that the world is not divided the way he was told.

The second is al-Masjid al-Aqṣā at the hundred and fourteenth āyah. I have set out some plain facts and left them there, and I have not decorated them. The mufasssirrūn applied that āyah to the destruction of Bayt al-Maqdis and to the

barring of the Muslims from the Sacred Masjid, and a reader who cannot see the application in his own century is not reading. But I would ask him to take the whole of the āyah and not the half he prefers, because Muftī Shafī رحمه الله applies it to the man collecting donations during someone's prayer, and to the masjid which is beautifully decorated and empty at Fajr, and those are nearer to our hands than the compound in Jerusalem is.

And here is the limit, and it matters. A political grievance, however just, is not a religious position, and the Qur'ān is not a newspaper. A man who reads this passage and comes away with strong feelings about a conflict and no change in how he treats his mother has not been improved by it. The commentary is meant to be the servant of the āyah. Where I have let it become the master, I have failed, and I would ask to be told.

May Allāh ﷻ protect us from reading His Book to our own harm, and make us of those who take the warning where it was aimed. Āmīn.

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The Guardian, 30 October 2023, on American evangelical support for Israel.

Glossary

adab

Proper conduct; the manners appropriate to a situation, a person or a station.

al-asbāt

The tribes; the twelve sons of Ya‘qūb عليه السلام and the peoples descended from them.

amāniyy

Wishful thinking; what a man tells himself he is entitled to, without evidence.

Badī‘

A name of Allāh ﷻ: the Originator, who brings a thing into being with no pattern to imitate.

bid‘a

An innovation. In the religious sense, a thing introduced into the religion which does not belong to it. In the linguistic sense, simply a thing newly arranged.

du‘ā’

Supplication; the asking of Allāh ﷻ.

fāsiq

One who has broken out; a man who transgresses a limit he can see perfectly well.

fiṭra

The original disposition on which man is made; also the natural practices of cleanliness taught by the prophets.

ghulf

Wrapped, covered over; used of a heart which cannot receive.

Ḥajj

The pilgrimage to Makkah, the fifth pillar of Islam.

ḥanīf

Upright; one who turns away from everything crooked towards what is straight.

Ḥaram

The sacred precinct of Makkah, within which blood may not be shed nor trees cut.

Ḥijr Ismāʿīl

The semicircular wall beside the Kaʿba, marking the portion of Ibrāhīm's عليه السلام original structure which the Quraysh left out for want of clean money.

iḥsān

Excellence; to worship Allāh ﷻ as though you see Him, and if you do not see Him, knowing that He sees you.

ikhlāṣ

The purifying of intention; that a deed be for Allāh ﷻ alone. Poorly served by the English "sincerity".

imām

A leader; one who is followed. In this sūra, the station given to Ibrāhīm عليه السلام .

iṣṭifāʾ

A special selection; a picking-out by Allāh ﷻ.

ittibāʿ

Following; obedience to what has been read and understood.

Jibrīl

The angel of revelation; identified by most of the 'ulamā' with *al-Rūḥ al-Qudus*, the Holy Spirit.

kufr

Disbelief; from a root meaning to cover a thing over, which is what ingratitude does to a gift.

Maqām Ibrāhīm

The Station of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام ; the stone bearing his footprint, from which he called mankind to the Ḥajj.

mathāba

A place of return; a place people come back to and cannot stay away from.

milla

A way, a religion in the widest sense, taking in everything a prophet did and everything revealed to him.

miskīn

The destitute; from a root of stillness, as though poverty had pinned the man where he stands.

mīthāq

A solemn covenant, stronger than *‘ahd*; a pledge into which great weight has been pressed.

mufasssīr

A commentator on the Qur’ān; one who draws back what stands between the reader and the meaning.

mutashābihāt

The āyahs whose meaning is not given to us, and which the student is advised to walk past.

naskh

Abrogation; the removal of a ruling and its replacement by another. Occurs only with commands, never with narratives.

nawāfil

Voluntary prayers, beyond what is obligatory.

qānīt

One standing humbled before his master, ready to obey at once.

qibla

The direction of prayer; since the change recorded in this sūra, the Ka’ba.

sadd al-dharā’i’

Blocking the means; the closing off of a lawful thing because it has become a road to an unlawful one.

sa’y

The walking between al-Şafā and al-Marwa in the Ḥajj and the ‘Umra, retracing the steps of Hājar رضى الله عنها .

ṣabr

Patience; endurance. With *yaqīn*, one of the two qualities from which leadership is given.

ṣalāh

The prescribed prayer.

shirk

The associating of partners with Allāh ﷻ; the one sin the Qur'ān does not treat as a matter of degree.

sihr

Magic; in the usage of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, the seeking of help from jinn and devils by means involving disbelief or sin.

ta'wīdh

An amulet or written supplication. Permitted when its words are of the Qur'ān or the Sunnah and its purpose is lawful; to be understood as a means and never as a cause.

tafsīr

Commentary on the Qur'ān; from a root meaning to uncover.

tajwīd

The science of reciting the Qur'ān as it was revealed.

taqwā

Consciousness of Allāh ﷻ; the care a man takes because he knows he is seen.

tarbiya

Upbringing; the nurture of a person from one state to a better one.

tazkiya

Purification of the self; the treatment of the inward illnesses.

tilāwa

Recitation, in the full sense: not narration but response, asking for the Garden when it is described and refuge from the Fire when it is described.

yaqīn

Certainty. With *ṣabr*, one of the two qualities from which leadership is given.

zakāh

The obligatory charity, the third pillar of Islam.

ẓulm

Wrongdoing; it carries disgrace in it as well as injustice.