

The Qur'ān: Cover to Cover

Sūrat al-Baqara

سورة البقرة

Volume One: Āyahs 1–82

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imamwrites.com

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Sūrat al-Baqara, Volume One: Āyahs 1–82

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 first eighty-two āyahs of Sūrat al-Baqara and develops the notes taken from them into connected prose.

The Qur'ānic Arabic is given in the 'Uthmānī text. The English rendering of the āyahs follows the register of Muftī Muḥammad Taqī 'Uthmānī and M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, with the parenthetical clarifications of the former and the plain modern idiom of the latter.

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Contents

Transliteration Key	5
The Author's Introduction	7
The Qur'ān and Its Tafsīr	10
What Tafsīr Is, and What It Is Not	11
The Tools of the Mufasssīr	11
How to Read This Book.....	12
The Isti'ādha and the Basmala.....	14
Sūrat al-Baqara.....	16
An Introduction to the Sūra	16
The Virtues of the Sūra.....	17
The Disconnected Letters (Āyah 1)	20
The Book Without Doubt (Āyahs 2–5)	22
Those Who Have Disbelieved (Āyahs 6–7)	29
The Hypocrites (Āyahs 8–16)	33
The Two Parables (Āyahs 17–20).....	45
The Call to Worship (Āyahs 21–22)	51
The Challenge of the Qur'ān (Āyahs 23–24)	55
Glad Tidings of the Garden (Āyah 25)	63
The Parable of the Gnat (Āyahs 26–27)	66
How Can You Disbelieve? (Āyahs 28–29).....	70
Ādam and the Angels (Āyahs 30–33)	75
The Refusal of Iblīs (Āyahs 34–36)	82
The Repentance of Ādam (Āyahs 37–39)	91
O Children of Isrā'īl (Āyahs 40–46).....	98
The Day of No Intercession (Āyahs 47–48).....	114

Deliverance from Fir'awn (Āyahs 49–57)	121
The Gate and the Word (Āyahs 58–62).....	132
The Mountain and the Sabbath (Āyahs 63–66).....	141
The Cow (Āyahs 67–74)	146
The Scholars Who Concealed (Āyahs 75–82).....	156
Addendum: On the Shape of the Passage.....	164
Bibliography	168
Glossary	170

Transliteration Key

A word about the system used throughout this book may spare the reader some puzzlement. Long vowels are written with a macron rather than a doubled letter, so that the reader will find *ṣalāh* and not *salaah*, and *Ibrāhīm* and not *Ibraahiim*. Diphthongs are written *aw* and *ay*, so that the fast of Ramaḍān is *ṣawm* and a teacher of the sacred sciences is a *Shaykh*. The letter ‘ayn is marked with ‘ and the hamza with ’, and the reader who cannot yet hear the difference between them is asked to be patient, for the difference is real and the ear learns it in time.

The *tā’ marbūṭah* is dropped when a word stands alone and rendered *-at* when the word is joined to another, so that we write *Sūra*, *Fātiḥa* and *Fāṭima* on their own, and *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* when the two are bound together. A handful of words have lived amongst us in English long enough to have earned their own spelling, and these are left as they are, so the reader will find *Ummah* and *Sunnah* rather than *Umma* and *Sunna*, and *Makkah* and *Madīnah* rather than *Makka* and *Madīna*. Arabic words which have not yet been adopted into the English dictionary are set in italics, and wherever the sense can be carried by an English word without loss, the English is given first and the Arabic follows it.

Letter	Roman	Approximate sound
ع	’	a catch in the throat, as in the Cockney <i>bo’le</i> for bottle
ث	th	as in <i>think</i> , never as in <i>this</i>
ح	ḥ	a strong breath from the middle of the throat
خ	kh	as in the Scottish <i>loch</i>
ذ	dh	as in <i>this</i>

ص	ṣ	an emphatic <i>s</i> , pronounced with the tongue lowered
ض	ḍ	an emphatic <i>d</i>
ط	ṭ	an emphatic <i>t</i>
ظ	ẓ	an emphatic <i>dh</i>
ع	ʿ	a voiced constriction of the throat, with no English parallel
غ	gh	as in the French <i>r</i> of <i>Paris</i>
ق	q	a <i>k</i> sounded far back against the uvula
/ ا و / ي	ā / ū / ī	the three long vowels

The definite article is written *al-* before names and titles as they occur in the running text, whatever the following letter, so that the reader will find al-Baqara, al-Raḥmān and al-Shayṭān rather than *ar-Raḥmān* and *ash-Shayṭān*. The tongue assimilates these when the words are actually recited, and the reader who has learnt his Arabic will hear himself doing it without being told, but a name set on a page is written as it is spelt and not as it is sounded, and this book keeps to the written form throughout. There is no inconsistency in this, only the difference between a name written and a word spoken.

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.

This book began as a set of notes, and it began without any intention of becoming a book at all. Since 2023 it has been my privilege to sit with a small gathering on a Thursday night and to read the Qur'ān with them from its opening to its close, twenty minutes at a sitting, a few āyahs at a time, without hurry and without any ambition beyond understanding what is in front of us. The gathering asked, as gatherings do, for the notes to be written out, and the notes grew, and in time it seemed less troublesome to set them in order than to keep apologising for their disorder. What the reader holds is the first fruit of that ordering, covering the opening eighty-two āyahs of Sūrat al-Baqara.

I should say plainly at the outset what this book is not. It is not a work of original scholarship, and it does not pretend to be. 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, Mawlānā 'Āshiq Ilāhī رحمه الله in his *Anwār al-Bayān*, and Imām Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir 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, the fine points of grammar and the disputes over rare readings and the long chains of transmission, 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. If a point of scholarship serves those three things, I have included it. If it does not, I have let it pass, and I have left it for abler hands than mine.

A word about the arrangement. Every āyah discussed appears in full, in the Arabic of the ‘Uthmānī text, with its translation beneath it, and the commentary follows. I have resisted the temptation to summarise an āyah in prose and move on, because the reader who does that for eighty-two āyahs has read a book about the Qur’ān rather than the Qur’ān itself, and that is precisely the habit this series was begun to break. The Book comes first and the commentary serves it, and where my words and the Book seem to say different things, the reader should abandon my words without hesitation.

Sūrat al-Baqara is a long sūra, the longest of them all, and the reader who sets out to cross it in a single sitting will grow tired and put it down, and that is the whole tragedy of our relationship with this sūra in miniature. It is meant to be lived in rather than crossed. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ told us that it is the pinnacle of the Qur’ān and that the house in which it is recited is a house the Shayṭān flees, and there is no shortcut to that blessing other than the slow and unglamorous business of reading it, a little at a time, again and again, until it begins to read us back.

I ask the reader for two things. The first is a du‘ā’, for me and for my teachers and for my parents and for the gathering out of which these notes grew, for we

are all of us in more need of it than we know. The second is correction, offered gently, for I have no doubt at all that there are mistakes in these pages, and the one who shows me my mistake has done me a kindness and not an injury.

This is a small effort of mine, and it is offered with the full knowledge that it falls very far short of its subject. May Allāh ﷻ accept it, and overlook what is wrong in it, and make it of benefit to somebody, somewhere, long after I am no longer able to benefit from anything but the du‘ā’ of the believers. Āmīn.

The Qur'ān and Its Tafsīr

Before we open the sūra, it is worth a few pages to settle in the reader's mind what it is that we are opening, because a great deal of the confusion that surrounds the Qur'ān amongst us comes from a quiet uncertainty about its nature, and that uncertainty, left unattended, works its way into everything that follows.

The Qur'ān is the speech of Allāh ﷻ, revealed in Arabic to Muḥammad ﷺ through the angel Jibrīl عليه السلام over some twenty-three years, recited in worship, transmitted by an unbroken chain of memorisation from the first generation to this one, and preserved in its wording without alteration by the promise of the One who sent it down. Every part of that sentence carries weight. It is speech before it is meaning, which is why a translation, however careful, is never the Qur'ān but only a report of what the Qur'ān says. It came down in Arabic, which is why the meanings of its words are settled by the usage of the Arabs and not by whatever a later reader would like them to mean. It came down over twenty-three years and not in a single night, and so it answers real situations as they arose, which is why the circumstances of revelation, the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, so often unlock an āyah that seems opaque on the page. And it is recited, which is to say that it was never intended to be a book that sits on a shelf and is consulted, but a recitation that lives on the tongue and in the breast.

The reader will notice that the sūras are not arranged in the order they were revealed, and this troubles some people until they think about it. The order in which the sūras stand in the muṣḥaf is not an accident of collection and it is not the judgement of a committee. It is the order the Messenger ﷺ himself indicated under the direction of revelation, and it is a second arrangement laid over the first, so that the Book has a history in the order of its coming down and a shape in the order of its standing. The Fātiḥa is a prayer for guidance, and al-Baqara opens by saying that here is the guidance you asked for, and no one who reads them in that order can think it a coincidence.

What Tafsīr Is, and What It Is Not

The word *tafsīr* comes from a root that means to uncover something, to draw back what is covering a thing so that it may be seen, and the image is a careful one, because it tells us at once what the work is and where its limits lie. The mufasssīr does not put meaning into the Qur'ān. He draws back what stands between the reader and a meaning that was already there, whether that veil is the reader's ignorance of an Arabic word, or of a historical circumstance, or of a Sunnah that explains an instruction the āyah leaves general. When the veil is drawn and the meaning is seen, the mufasssīr's work is finished, and if he continues talking past that point he has stopped serving the Book and started performing.

This is why the 'ulamā' have always been so severe about the difference between tafsīr and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y al-madhmūm*, which is to say, commentary by mere opinion. The Messenger ﷺ warned that whoever speaks about the Qur'ān from his own opinion should take his seat in the Fire, and the warning is not aimed at the sincere student who reaches for a meaning and gets it wrong. It is aimed at the man who has decided in advance what he wishes the Qur'ān to say, and who then goes to the text to fetch it, and there is a great deal of that about in our age, on all sides, from those who wish the Book to be harsher than it is and from those who wish it to be softer.

The Tools of the Mufasssīr

The scholars have set out an order of resort, and the reader who understands it will be able to judge for himself, when he hears two people arguing about an āyah, which of them is doing the work properly. The Qur'ān is explained first by the Qur'ān, because what is left general in one place is very often made specific in another, and the Book is its own best commentary. Where the Qur'ān does not explain itself, we turn to the Sunnah, because the Messenger ﷺ was sent precisely so that he might make clear to the people what was sent down to them, and the āyah which commands us to establish the ṣalāh tells us nothing about

how many units to pray or when, and every last detail of it comes to us from him. Where the Sunnah is silent, we turn to the understanding of the Companions رضي الله عنهم, who were present when the words came down and who knew the Arabic natively and who saw the occasions with their own eyes, and after them to the great scholars of the generations that followed. And only after all of that is exhausted does a scholar reach for his own reasoning, and he does so with a trembling hand, and he says *Allāhu a‘lam* when he has finished.

The reader will find in the pages that follow that the ‘ulamā’ sometimes disagree, and that I have often reported two or three explanations of a single word without choosing between them. This is not indecision and it is not a failure of nerve. A great deal of what the Qur’ān says is deliberately capacious, and the tradition has always understood that where Allāh ﷻ could have narrowed a word and did not, the breadth is itself part of the meaning, and to force it shut in the name of tidiness is to take something away from the Book rather than to add to it.

How to Read This Book

The reader will get the most from these pages by reading them slowly and in small portions, and by reading the Arabic aloud before reading anything I have written about it, even if he does not understand a word of it, because the Qur’ān was a sound before it was ever a text and the ear is a door that the eye cannot open. After the Arabic, the translation, and after the translation, the commentary, and then, if he is able, the Arabic once more, and he will find the second time that it is not the same as the first.

Above all, the reader should come to this Book expecting to be addressed. It is very easy, when reading about the hypocrites of Madīnah or the Children of Isrā’īl in the wilderness, to settle comfortably into the position of a spectator watching other people be criticised, and this is precisely the disposition the sūra is designed to dismantle. The Companions رضي الله عنهم, who were the best of this Ummah, did not read these āyahs that way. Sayyidunā ‘Umar رضي الله عنه

asked Hudhayfa رضى الله عنه whether his own name was on the register of the hypocrites, and if the fear of hypocrisy was appropriate to ‘Umar, the reader may draw his own conclusion about whether it is appropriate to him.

The Isti‘ādha and the Basmala

Allāh ﷻ has commanded that we should seek His protection before we begin to recite, and He has told us why, saying, *So when you recite the Qur’ān, seek refuge with Allāh from the accursed Shayṭān.* The command is placed before the recitation and not after it, and this is worth pausing over, because it tells us that the moment of greatest danger is not when we are heedless but precisely when we are turning towards Allāh ﷻ, and the enemy who has been content to leave us alone all day grows attentive the moment we open the muṣḥaf.

أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

I seek refuge with Allāh from the accursed Shayṭān.

The word *a‘ūdhu* is the speech of somebody who has run out of his own resources and has taken shelter behind another, as a child runs behind his father, and there is a confession folded into it, that we cannot manage this enemy ourselves. The Shayṭān is called *al-raḡīm*, the driven-away, the pelted, and the description is a comfort as much as a warning, because it reminds us at the very moment we are afraid of him that he has already been expelled and that his whole strategy rests on our forgetting it.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Then, having sought refuge, we begin in His name. The Basmala stands at the head of every sūra but one, and it is the first thing the child learns and the last

thing the dying man says, and it has been observed by the ‘ulamā’ that the two names chosen here are both names of mercy and that no name of might or vengeance appears amongst them. We are about to read a Book that contains a great deal about the Fire, and Allāh ﷻ has us open it by naming Himself twice as merciful, and the reader who keeps that in view will not misread what follows.

The scholars have differed as to whether the Basmala is an āyah of every sūra or a separator placed between them, and Imām Abū Ḥanīfa رحمه الله held that it is an independent āyah revealed for the purpose of separation and blessing, which is why in the Ḥanafī school it is recited quietly and is not counted amongst the āyahs of the sūra that follows. The reader who prays behind an imām reciting it aloud should know that he is not witnessing an error but a difference of long standing amongst people who all took the matter with great seriousness, and this is the first of many places in this book where he will be asked to hold two views at once without losing his temper about either.

Sūrat al-Baqara

The Cow

Madanī · 286 āyahs · The second sūra of the Qur'ān

The longest sūra of the Book, and the first revealed at Madīnah

An Introduction to the Sūra

Sūrat al-Baqara is a Madanī sūra, which is to say that it came down after the Hijra, and the ‘ulamā’ tell us that it was the first sūra revealed at Madīnah, though it continued to come down over a long stretch of years, so that the last of it was amongst the last revelation of all. A single āyah within it is held to be Makkan in the technical sense that it was revealed after the conquest, the āyah **وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا تُرْجَعُونَ فِيهِ إِلَى اللَّهِ**, which came down on the Day of ‘Īd at Minā during the Farewell Pilgrimage, and which is by common report the last āyah of the Qur'ān to be revealed. There is something fitting in that, that the longest sūra should open the Madanī period and close the revelation, so that it stands like a pair of gates on either side of the whole community's life.

Being a Madanī sūra, it carries what Madanī sūras carry. The Makkan revelation was largely occupied with the foundations, with the oneness of Allāh ﷻ, with the Resurrection, with the truth of the Messenger ﷺ, and it addressed a persecuted minority. The Madanī revelation addresses a community that has a mosque and a treasury and neighbours and enemies and a court, and so it is occupied with law, with the ordering of society, with marriage and divorce and debt and warfare and inheritance, and it is occupied with the two groups that only appear once there is something worth infiltrating, which is to say the hypocrites within and the People of the Book without. All of this is in al-Baqara, and the reader who wonders why a sūra should move from the disconnected

letters to the story of a cow to the laws of divorce is asking a question that answers itself once he sees that this is not an essay but the constitution of a living community.

The sūra also does something no other sūra does at this length, which is to set out the relationship between the three communities that trace themselves to Ibrāhīm عليه السلام. It speaks at length to the Children of Isrā'īl, it addresses the Christians, it recovers Ibrāhīm عليه السلام himself from both of them and returns him to the pure monotheism he actually practised, and it establishes this Ummah as the middle nation with its own qibla and its own Book and its own Messenger ﷺ. Much of what a Muslim needs to understand about the two faiths nearest to his own is settled in this sūra, and settled without rancour, and the reader who takes his understanding of the matter from the newspapers rather than from these āyahs will find himself very badly served.

As for the name, the sūra is called al-Baqara, the Cow, after the incident of the cow which the Children of Isrā'īl were commanded to sacrifice, and which the reader will find at āyahs sixty-seven to seventy-three of this volume. It is worth noticing that the sūra is not named after the Throne Verse, which is its most exalted passage, nor after the two closing āyahs, which are its greatest gift, but after an episode in which a people were given a simple instruction and made it impossible for themselves by asking questions they had not been invited to ask. There is a lesson in the naming, and we shall come to it in its place.

The Virtues of the Sūra

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ has told us of the great virtue of this sūra taken as a whole, and of particular passages within it, such as the Throne Verse and the two āyahs that close it, and it will do the reader good to have these narrations in front of him before he begins, because a man reads differently when he knows what he is holding.

اقْرَؤُوا الْقُرْآنَ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْتِي يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ شَفِيعًا لِأَصْحَابِهِ، اقْرَؤُوا
 الزَّهْرَاوَيْنِ الْبَقْرَةَ وَالْإِمْرَانَ فَإِنَّهُمَا يَأْتِيَانِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كَأَنَّهُمَا
 غَمَامَتَانِ أَوْ غَيَايَتَانِ أَوْ كَأَنَّهُمَا فِرْقَانِ مِنْ طَيْرٍ صَوَافٍ يُحَاجَّانِ عَنْ
 صَاحِبَيْهِمَا، اقْرَؤُوا الْبَقْرَةَ فَإِنَّ أَخْذَهَا بَرَكَةٌ وَتَرْكُهَا حَسْرَةٌ وَلَا
 تَسْتَطِيعُهَا الْبَطَلَةُ

*Recite the Qur'ān, for it will come on the Day of Resurrection as an intercessor for those who kept its company. Recite the two radiant ones, al-Baqara and Āl 'Imrān, for they will come on the Day of Resurrection as though they were two clouds, or two shades, or two flocks of birds in ranks, pleading on behalf of the one who kept them. Recite al-Baqara, for taking hold of it is a blessing and abandoning it is a cause of regret, and the workers of magic cannot withstand it.*¹

The reader should notice how much is packed into that last clause. The sūra is a blessing when taken and a regret when left, and there is no third possibility offered, no neutral ground where a man neither reads it nor loses anything by not reading it. And it is called a *ḥasra*, which is not simply sadness but the particular grief of a man who realises too late what was within his reach the whole time, and it is the word the Qur'ān uses for the regret of the Day of Judgement.

لَا تَجْعَلُوا بُيُوتَكُمْ مَقَابِرَ، إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ يَنْفِرُ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ الَّذِي تُقْرَأُ
 فِيهِ سُورَةُ الْبَقْرَةِ

*Do not make your houses into graves. The Shayṭān flees from a house in which Sūrat al-Baqara is recited.*²

1. Muslim, on the authority of Abū Umāma al-Bāhili رضي الله عنه. Mu'āwiya رضي الله عنه remarked that he had been informed that al-baṭala means the workers of magic.

2. Muslim.

A house in which the Qur'ān is not recited is a grave, and the Messenger ﷺ does not say that it is like a grave, he says that it is one, and the reader who has been in a home where nobody has opened the muṣḥaf in a year will know exactly what is meant by it. And there is a further narration, reported by Ibn Ḥibbān and al-Ḥākim on the authority of Sahl b. Sa'd رضي الله عنه, that everything has a summit and that the summit of the Qur'ān is Sūrat al-Baqara, and that the Shayṭān does not enter for three nights a house in which it has been recited at night.

Perhaps the most instructive of these narrations, for our purposes, is one that Imām al-Tirmidhī reports on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ was despatching a company of men, and he tested each of them on what he had memorised of the Qur'ān, and when he came to the youngest amongst them and asked him what he had, the young man said that he had such and such, and Sūrat al-Baqara. The Messenger ﷺ said, *You have Sūrat al-Baqara?* He said, *Yes.* He said, *Then go, for you are their commander.* One of the noblemen amongst them said that nothing had kept him from learning Sūrat al-Baqara except the fear that he would not be able to stand with it in the night prayer, and the Messenger ﷺ said that they should learn the Qur'ān and recite it, for the likeness of the Qur'ān for the one who learns it and recites it and stands with it is a bag stuffed with musk whose fragrance fills the air all around, and the likeness of the one who learns it and then sleeps with it inside him is a bag of musk tied shut.³

A boy was made commander over older and better-born men because of what he carried in his chest, and the whole hierarchy of that little army was rearranged around Sūrat al-Baqara in a single sentence, and if we wonder why our own gatherings are arranged around wealth and lineage and the ability to speak well, this narration has already answered us.

3. Al-Tirmidhī, who graded it *ḥasan*. The final image deserves the reader's attention: the musk is present in both bags, and the difference between the two men is not what they possess but whether anybody else can smell it.

The Disconnected Letters



Alif. Lām. Mīm.

al-Baqara 2:1

These are the *ḥurūf al-muqattaʿāt*, the disconnected letters, which open twenty-nine sūras of the Qurʾān and about which more ink has been spilt than about almost anything else in the Book. The reader should be told at once that a body of the ‘ulamā’ has held that the right course here is silence, that these letters are amongst the secrets between Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ, that we were not given their meaning, and that a man who was not given a thing should not pretend to it. That position is a respectable one and it is held by serious people, and if the reader adopts it he will be in good company.

Others have spoken, and their explanations are worth setting out, not because any one of them is certain but because each of them teaches something true even if it does not settle the question. It has been said that the meaning is hidden from man deliberately, so that we are rewarded for reciting what we do not understand, which is itself a discipline, because it strips the recitation of every motive except obedience. It has been said that they are a code between Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ, a private word in a public letter. It has been said that some of them are names of the Prophet ﷺ, as with Ṭā Hā, and that some are names of Allāh ﷻ, and it is reported of Sayyidunā ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه and Sayyidunā ‘Alī رضي الله عنه that they would call upon Allāh ﷻ using them, saying *Yā Ḥā Mīm ‘Ayn Sīn Qāf*, as one might say, O Revealer of such and such. It has been said that they are an oath, Allāh ﷻ swearing by the letters of the language in which He chose to speak. And it has been said that they are abbreviations, so that Alif stands for *Ālā’ Allāh*, His instruments, and Lām for *Lafẓuhu*, His word, and Mīm for *Mulkuhu*, His dominion, or, on

another reading, Allāh and Jibrīl and Muḥammad ﷺ, the sender and the carrier and the receiver of the revelation named in the very first breath of the sūra.

Imām al-Rāzī رحمه الله offers an explanation which seems to me to serve the ordinary worshipper best of all. These letters, he says, show man at the outset that there is knowledge which belongs to Allāh ﷻ alone, and they do so before a single item of guidance has been given, so that the reader is humbled before he begins. There is a precise parallel with the Fātiḥa, where we ask Allāh ﷻ to guide us before we are given anything, and here we are shown that we do not even know what three letters mean before we are told that this is a Book without doubt. A man who opens the Qur'ān certain of his own understanding will get very little out of it, and Allāh ﷻ has arranged that the very first thing he meets should take that certainty away from him.

And there is one further point, which the sūras themselves press upon us. The disconnected letters are very often followed immediately by a mention of the Book and a challenge to those who deny it, as they are here, and the arrangement is not accidental. These are your letters, the ones you know, the ones out of which your poets built the odes you hang on the Ka'ba, and the Qur'ān is made of nothing else. Now produce something like it. The challenge is all the more devastating for being made in the alphabet of the challenged.

As for reward, the Messenger ﷺ told us that whoever reads a letter of the Book of Allāh ﷻ has a good deed for it, and that the good deed is multiplied by ten, 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. Ḥaḍrat Shaykh رحمه الله took this to mean that the recitation of this single āyah carries the weight of ninety, and the reader may consider what that means for a sūra of two hundred and eighty-six.

The Book Without Doubt

ذٰلِكَ الْكِتٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيْهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِيْنَ ﴿٢﴾

That is the Book, in which there is no doubt, a guidance for those possessed of taqwā.

al-Baqara 2:2

The first word to detain us is *dhālika*, that, which in Arabic is the demonstrative of distance, and the reader is entitled to ask why a Book that is in our hands should be pointed at as though it were far away. The ‘ulamā’ have offered several answers, all of them illuminating. It has been said that the distance is one of rank and not of place, that the Book is elevated and high and beyond us, and that *dhālika* points upwards rather than away. It has been said that the reference is to the sūras already revealed at Makkah, so that the meaning is, those revelations you have already received. It has been said that *dhālika* here carries the sense of *bādhā*, this, and that the Qur’ān is being placed directly in front of the reader. And it has been said, most beautifully, that it points back to the Fātiḥa, where we asked to be shown the straight path, and that Allāh ﷻ answers, that path you wanted, here it is.

The truth is that all of these can stand together, and the combination is exactly right. The Book is close enough to touch and elevated beyond our reach at the same time, and every reader who has ever held a muṣḥaf and felt both of those things at once will recognise the description.

Then, *lā rayba fīh*, in which there is no doubt. The construction is absolute and admits of no exception, and it is worth being plain about the consequence, which is that for a person to manufacture doubt about the Qur’ān is *kufṛ*, and this is not a small matter dressed up in strong language. But the āyah is doing something more interesting than issuing a threat, and Muftī Muḥammad Shafī رحمه الله draws it out in his tafsīr. When a man reads a text and does not understand it, there are only two possibilities. Either the text is weak, or the

reader is. Allāh ﷻ has closed off the first possibility in four words, and the reader is left, whether he likes it or not, with the second. The man who says the Qur'ān does not make sense has told us something about himself, and he has told it more loudly than he intended.

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

Those who believe in the unseen, and establish the ṣalāh, and spend out of what We have provided for them.

al-Baqara 2:3

Before we come to the qualities, a word about the *muttaqīn* for whom the guidance is meant. *Taqwā* comes from *waqā*, *yaqī*, *wiqāyatan*, which means to protect and to prevent, and the word carries in its root the picture of a man putting something between himself and a danger. The word means protection. Terror does not come into it, and neither does piety in the sense of a pleasant religious feeling.

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله sets out its grades. The first is to accept Islam itself, and the Qur'ān uses the word in exactly this sense when it speaks of Allāh ﷻ binding the believers to the word of *taqwā*. The second is to protect oneself from the major sins and from persistence in the minor ones. And the third is to avoid everything that displeases Allāh ﷻ or distracts from Him, and this is what is meant by the command to fear Him as He deserves to be feared. The poet has said it more memorably than any prose can:

خَلَّ الذُّنُوبَ صَغِيرَهَا وَكَبِيرَهَا فَهُوَ التَّقَى
وَكُنْ فَوْقَ مَا شِ فَوْقَ أَرْضِ الشَّوْكِ يَحْذَرُ مَا يَرَى
لَا تَحْقِرَنَّ صَغِيرَةً إِنَّ الْجِبَالَ مِنْ الْحَصَى

Leave the sins, the small of them and the great, for that is taqwā. Be like a man walking on thorny ground, watching every step he takes. And never belittle a small thing, for the mountains are made of pebbles.

Now, the āyah before us tells us that the guidance in this Book is for such people, and Muftī Shafī رحمه الله in *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* distinguishes three levels of guidance to make sense of it. There is the guidance given to all of creation, the guidance of nature itself, which is what is meant when Allāh ﷻ says that He gave each thing its form and then guided it, and the tree and the bee and the migrating bird all have it. There is the guidance offered to every rational being through revelation, which is put in front of all mankind and which the disbelievers reject. And there is the guidance given personally, the *tawfiq*, the actual enabling to act, and this last is only for those who have already begun to protect themselves. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله states the principle plainly: you will receive guidance in proportion to your taqwā. The man who complains that he reads the Qur'ān and feels nothing has usually not been shortchanged on the Book. He has been shortchanged on the preparation.

And Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله notices something else, which once seen cannot be unseen. Sūrat al-Fātiḥa is the servant praising his Lord. Sūrat al-Baqara opens with the Lord praising His servants. The whole relationship is there in the joint between the two sūras.

As to the qualities themselves, the first is *īmān bi'l-ghayb*, belief in the unseen, and it is placed first because everything else rests on it. There is no great achievement in believing in what stands in front of you, and belief only becomes belief when its object is hidden. This is why the faith of a man who accepts Islam after the sun has risen from the west will not be accepted, and why the faith of Fir'awn, declared as the water closed over him, was not accepted.

Once the unseen is seen, there is nothing left to believe in, only something to acknowledge, and acknowledgement is not what was asked of us.

The reader should also understand that *īmān* is more than knowledge. A man may know a thing and not believe it, and the disbelievers of Makkah knew perfectly well who the Messenger ﷺ was. *Īmān* is unwavering conviction, and it is only *īmān* when it is entire, so that a man cannot select from it, keeping what suits his temperament and setting aside what does not. *Īmān* is the standard, fixed, and it is the conviction built upon it that rises and falls with a man's experience, and it is his Islam, the outward practice, that grows and shrinks in step with it. The distinction between the two is worth holding onto: *īmān* is the inward conviction, between a man and his Lord alone, and Islam is the public showing of it, and a man's Islam is generally an accurate report of his *īmān*. Which is why it will not do for a man to say that he has a good heart and leave it there. He has told us about half of the job and said nothing at all about the other half.

The second and third qualities are worship and generosity, and Allāh ﷻ has ordered them as He has ordered them for a reason, mentioning the inward before the outward and the greater before the lesser.

Yuqīmūn al-ṣalāh, and He does not say that they pray. He says that they establish it, that they set it upright, and the difference is the whole of *iḥsān* in worship. To establish the *ṣalāh* is to give it its due, its sunnahs and its optional prayers and its manners, rather than merely discharging it. And the reader will find, if he looks, that Allāh ﷻ tends to use the plain verb *ṣallā*, *yuṣallī* precisely when He is speaking of those whose prayer is defective. Of the people of the Fire He reports their confession that they were not amongst those who prayed. Of the man who turned away He says that he neither affirmed nor prayed. And He says, woe to those who pray. The verb of praying appears where the establishing has failed.

Then, *wa mim mā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn*, and of what We have provided them they spend. Two words carry the weight here. The first is *razaqnāhum*, We have provided them, which is a quiet demolition of the whole architecture of our

pride, because a man who has understood that the wealth was given to him has nothing left to boast of when he gives some of it away. And the second is *mim-mā*, from what, a portion and not the whole, and Allāh ﷻ has not asked us for everything. The ‘ulamā’ have compared the zakāh to the seed within the fruit: we eat the fruit and are asked only to surrender the seed, and the seed, once given, is sown and becomes a tree and returns to us as more fruit than we began with. It is the worst bargain in the world to keep the seed.

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَبِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ
يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

And who believe in what has been sent down to you, and what was sent down before you, and who are certain of the Hereafter.

al-Baqara 2:4

The āyah names two more qualities, and both of them repay careful reading.

The first is belief in this revelation and in what came before it, and the reader should notice the phrase *min qablik*, before you, and the silence that follows it. There is no mention of believing in anything sent down after him ﷺ, and the silence is not an oversight. This is amongst the proofs of *khatm al-nubuwwa*, the finality of prophethood, drawn not from a single explicit statement but from the shape of the sentence itself, and it is all the more powerful for that. The believers are defined by belief in what came before and what came with him, and the door is simply not there for anything to come after.

The Messenger ﷺ was explicit where the āyah is structural. He said that there is no prophet after him. He gave the parable of a palace built beautifully but for the space of a single brick, and said that he was that brick and the seal of the prophets. He told Sayyidunā ‘Alī رضي الله عنه that he was to him as Hārūn عليه السلام was to Mūsā عليه السلام, except that there is no prophet after him, and the exception was added precisely so that the comparison could not be

misused, and it has been misused anyway. And he warned that thirty liars would come after him, each claiming to be a prophet, and each of them a liar. The reader will understand why this matters in an age which has produced the Qādiyānīs and will produce others.

There is a further practical note in *min qabliq* for those who come to Islam from another faith, and the Companions رضي الله عنهم of that description understood it well. To believe in what came before is not to keep what came before. The old faith is given up and the new one accepted, and the belief in the former scripture is a belief in its origin, not an ongoing allegiance to what has become of it.

The second quality is *wa bi'l-ākhirati hum yūqinūn*, and of the Hereafter they are certain. This is a critical article of faith, and it is the article which does the most work in ordinary life, because it is the belief that keeps a man on the straight path when nobody is watching, and it is the only thing that will ever make him the same in private as he is in public. The Hereafter is called in the Qur'ān *Dār al-Ḥayawān*, the Abode of Life, and *Dār al-Qarār*, the Abode of Settlement, and both names are a comment on this world by contrast. And it is a comfort as much as a warning, for the man who has been wronged and has seen his wronger prosper and die comfortably in his bed has nowhere to put that grievance except the Day of Judgement, and Allāh ﷻ has undertaken that justice will be done.

The reader who wishes to see what a person looks like when this belief is absent should read Sūrat al-Mā'ūn, where a man's contempt for the orphan and his indifference to feeding the poor and the hollowness of his prayer are all traced back, in the opening āyah, to his denying the Recompense. Everything else in that sūra is a symptom.

A Word on Yaqīn

Notice that Allāh ﷻ does not say that they believe in the Hereafter, He says that they are certain of it, and *yaqīn* is stronger than *īmān*, being conviction with no

trace of doubt in it at all. The ‘ulamā’ have described three degrees of it, and the illustration they use is a fire.

The first degree is *‘ilm al-yaqīn*, the certainty that comes from knowledge. Smoke rises in the distance, and we know from that smoke that there is a fire, and our certainty is real but it is inferred. The second is *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, the certainty that comes from seeing. We walk to the place where the smoke rises and we see the flames with our own eyes. And the third is *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, the certainty of direct experience, when we put our hand into the fire and know its burning quality in a way that neither the inference nor the sight could give us.

A man may come to certainty about the Hereafter by many roads, through revelation, through the seeing of the heart, through reasoning, through a true dream, through study, and every one of these, however powerful, remains certainty of the first degree, the certainty of knowledge. The second and third degrees are not available to us in this world at all, and this is precisely the point, and it is why the āyah joins *yaqīn* in the Hereafter to *īmān* in the unseen a line earlier. We are being asked for the highest certainty about the one thing we are furthest from seeing, and that, and nothing less than that, is what Allāh ﷻ means when He praises the people of *taqwā*.

أُولَٰئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Those are upon a guidance from their Lord, and those are the successful.

al-Baqara 2:5

Having named the five qualities, Allāh ﷻ now names the reward, and the āyah is built out of two clauses which Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله reads as the two halves of a man’s account. The first, that they are upon guidance from their Lord, is his portion in this world. The second, that they are the successful, is his portion in the next. Guidance now, and *ḥalāl* then.

The word *budā* is worth a moment. It comes from the same family as *hadiyya*, a gift, and the āyah insists that this guidance is *min rabbihim*, from their Lord, so that even after a man has believed and prayed and spent and been certain, the guidance remains a gift and not a wage. We need His mercy for the knowledge, and for the enabling, and for the acceptance, and for the consistency, and a man who thinks he has arrived by his own effort has misread the āyah at the very moment he was congratulating himself on it.

Falāḥ is the end point, the destination of the whole religion, and the reader hears it called out over the rooftops five times a day in the *adhān*, *ḥayya ‘ala’l-falāḥ*, come to success. It is not an accident that the call to success is a call to the ṣalāḥ. The muezzin has been telling us the shortest route for fourteen centuries.

One point of style deserves notice. The word *ulā’ika*, those, is repeated, where the Arabic could easily have carried on with a pronoun, and the rhetoricians call this *al-iḡbār fī maqām al-iḡmār*, making a thing explicit in a place where it might have been left implicit. It is done for emphasis, to point at these people and hold them up, and the Qur’ān uses the device elsewhere to the same end, as when it says of the Sleepers of the Cave that *they were young men who believed in their Lord*, naming them rather than referring to them. Here the effect is to say: these ones, precisely these, and nobody else.

Those Who Have Disbelieved

Before the āyah itself, the reader will be helped by seeing the shape of the passage he has entered, because the opening twenty āyahs of this sūra are arranged with a symmetry that the ‘ulamā’ have long noticed.

The first five āyahs are about the people of taqwā. The next fifteen are about everybody else, and those fifteen divide again, the first two being about those who disbelieve openly and the remaining thirteen being about those who were secretly hostile. And the proportions are themselves a lesson, for Allāh ﷻ has given nearly seven times as much space to the enemy within as to the enemy without.

The connection to the Fātiḥa is exact and it is not a coincidence. In the Fātiḥa we asked to be placed on the path of those whom Allāh ﷻ has favoured, and here at the head of al-Baqara are the people of that path, described in five āyahs, their belief and their practice and their reward. Then we asked to be kept from the path of those who have earned anger and those who have gone astray, and here are the fifteen āyahs that describe them. The prayer is in the first sūra and the answer is in the second, and the reader who moves from one to the other without noticing has walked past the hinge of the whole Book.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَأَنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

As for those who have disbelieved, it is all one to them whether you warn them or do not warn them, they will not believe.

al-Baqara 2:6

The verb is in the past tense, *kafarū*, those who have disbelieved, and this is the first thing to notice, because it tells us that a particular set of people is meant and not disbelievers as such. These are the men of Makkah who had made their minds up and settled into it, ‘Utba and Shayba and Abū Jahl and Abū Lahab and their like, and the āyah is a statement of Allāh’s ﷻ knowledge about them and not a decree issued against the human race. The reader who takes this āyah as licence to write off his neighbour has taken a report about the dead and used it on the living.

How does a man arrive at such a state? The Messenger ﷺ described the mechanism: with every sin a black spot is placed upon the heart, and when the spots multiply the heart is covered over. There comes a point at which so many black dots have accumulated that a man is no longer able to feel the next one, and this is the deadliest condition a person can be in, because the alarm which was supposed to warn him has been the first thing to break.

The word *kufir* itself means to cover and to conceal, and the Arabs would call the farmer a *kāfir* because he covers the seed with earth, and they would call the night *kāfir* because it covers everything. From that root comes both of its religious senses. Ingratitude is covering up one's knowledge of a blessing, and disbelief is covering up belief, denying what one has in fact recognised. In both cases something is present and something is being pulled over the top of it.

And *indbār*, warning, is the other word here, and it is not the word for a threat. To warn, in this sense, is what a parent does, and it proceeds from love and concern for the one warned, and this is the whole manner of *da'wa* in a single word. A man who warns his neighbour out of contempt has not warned him at all, whatever he has said.

Finally, there is a mercy in this āyah directed at the Messenger ﷺ himself, and through him at everybody who has ever tried to guide somebody and failed. He was carrying a weight over these people that Allāh ﷻ elsewhere describes as very nearly killing him, and here he is told that it is all one whether he warns them or not, which is to say, this is not on you, and your reward is for the effort and not for the outcome. The effort is the worship. The outcome was never ours.

خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَى سَمْعِهِمْ وَعَلَى أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشْوَةً وَلَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

Allāh has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and over their eyes is a covering, and for them is a tremendous punishment.

al-Baqara 2:7

The sixth āyah told us that they will not believe, and this one tells us why. They cannot reach the guidance, because the faculties by which a man reaches it have been closed, and the closing is the fulfilment of a choice they themselves made.

Notice which faculty is named first. Allāh ﷻ, describing the believers a few āyahs ago, began with belief, which is an act of the heart, because the greater part of what a man does begins there, and if the heart is corrupt the limbs cannot follow. The Messenger ﷺ said that in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it is sound, the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupt the whole body is corrupt, and that it is the heart. So the seal is placed at the source. The heart is sealed off from good things, from gratitude and from shame and from every quality that would have made a man reachable, and the man notices nothing, because the organ that would have noticed is the one that has been shut.

The seal is on the heart and on the hearing, and only a covering is placed over the eyes, and Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله and others have drawn out the precision of it. The heart and the ears are exposed from every direction, and so they require a seal, something that closes and secures. The eyes look in one direction only, and so a covering laid over them is sufficient to render them useless. And there is something bitter in the fate of the eyes here, because these people saw the Messenger ﷺ with those eyes, they watched him for forty years and called him the Trustworthy, and they still did not believe.

Now the reader will want to ask the question that every honest reader asks at this point. Is it fair that Allāh ﷻ should seal a man's heart and then punish him for not believing? The Qur'ān has anticipated the question and answered it in several places, and the answer is that the sealing is a consequence and not an initiative. Allāh ﷻ says, *No indeed, rather the rust has covered their hearts because of what they used to earn*, and the phrase *because of what they used to earn* settles the matter, for nobody applies rust to iron, and iron does it to itself when it is left out in the weather. And in Sūrat al-Jāthiya the sequence is set out in order: *Have you seen the one who has taken his desire as his god, and Allāh has sent him astray upon knowledge, and has sealed his hearing and his heart*. The man takes his desire as his god first. The sealing comes afterwards, and it comes *upon knowledge*, which is to say, upon Allāh's ﷻ knowledge of what that man is and what he has chosen. He asked for the door to be shut, at length and with persistence, and it was shut, and that is the whole of it.

Allāh ﷻ says elsewhere, *And We shall turn their hearts and their sights away, just as they did not believe in it the first time*, and the clause *just as they did not believe the first time* is the hinge of the āyah. The turning away is measured out to match the refusal. It is not arbitrary and it is not first.

The Hypocrites

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَبِالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَمَا هُمْ
بِمُؤْمِنِينَ

And amongst the people are those who say, we believe in Allāh and in the Last Day, whilst they are not believers.

al-Baqara 2:8

We come now to the thirteen āyahs on the hypocrites, and the reader should prepare himself, because this is the longest sustained description of any group in the opening of the sūra and Allāh ﷻ does not spend thirteen āyahs on a small matter.

The word *nifāq* literally denotes a tunnel with an opening at either end, and the Arabs used it of the burrow of the jerboa, which digs two holes so that when a predator comes down one it slips out of the other. That is the picture. The hypocrite enters from one side and leaves from another, and he has arranged his life so that there is always a second exit.

The *munāfiq* receives the worst punishment of all, *al-dark al-asfal min al-nār*, the lowest depth of the Fire, beneath the disbelievers, and the reader should sit with that for a moment because it is not what he expects. The open disbeliever declares himself and can be dealt with. The hypocrite is a secret enemy, and an undeclared enemy is the most dangerous kind there is. He is dishonest, and so his malice is free to work without limit. He is inside the community, and so his

access is total. And the historical record bears the āyah out with painful exactness, for the harms that have come to the Muslims from within have always been greater and more lasting than those that came from outside the faith. Derision, trickery, lying, showing off: these are found more amongst the hypocrites than amongst the unbelievers, and this is why the Qur'ān has described them at such length and warned the believers against acquiring their attributes through careless association with them.

In the time of the Messenger ﷺ they were a specific body of people. He knew who they were, by revelation, and yet he could not move against them, because they had said the words and prayed the prayers and the door of judgement was closed to him by their own declaration. In our time, a little attention to the qualities the Qur'ān describes here will call to mind the committees of evil and the underground gangs and the secret circles which have been setting fire to the world for centuries, and the reader will find that the description has aged very well.

Two things drive such people. The first is that their commitment to a cause lasts exactly as long as the cause benefits them, and they go wherever the wind blows. The second is jealousy, and enmity, and the love of wealth and position, and there is nothing more to them than that.

The Hypocrites of Madīnah

A little history will make the whole passage clear. Madīnah before the Hijra was governed by two great tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, each running its own hierarchy, and after long years of feuding they had at last agreed upon a single chief for the city, 'Abdullāh b. Ubayy, the head of the Khazraj. The crown was, by some reports, already being prepared.

Then the Messenger ﷺ arrived, and the city gave itself to him, and 'Abdullāh b. Ubayy lost the position he had spent his life acquiring, in an afternoon, to a man from Makkah. He was not a fool, and he understood that he could not fight for it in the open, and so he did the intelligent thing, which was to step inside the Muslim ranks and try to climb from within. He needed a line to the

Prophet ﷺ without losing his standing amongst his own people, and he brought with him a good number of his tribe who had lost what he had lost and wanted what he wanted, and they assumed, as such men always assume, that this was a short-term arrangement for a short-term problem, and that the whole business would blow over and they would have their city back. It did not blow over. And having committed themselves, they spent the rest of their lives doing whatever damage they could from the inside. Allāh ﷻ describes their condition in Sūrat al-Munāfiqūn and in a dozen other places, and it is one of the mercies of the Qur'ān that it preserved their strategy for us so that we would recognise it when it was tried again.

Do Hypocrites Exist Amongst Us Today?

This question is asked in every gathering and deserves a careful answer, because a great deal of harm has been done by people who answer it too quickly.

There are only two ways of establishing that a particular person is a hypocrite in the sense the Qur'ān means here. The first is revelation, which told the Messenger ﷺ exactly who they were, and revelation has ended. The second is that a man exposes himself through open action, as with somebody who spies on the Muslims and displays plain *kufr* whilst hiding amongst them, and the moment he does that we are no longer dealing with hypocrisy at all but with disbelief in the open, which has its own rulings.

Which means that the door is shut. No living person amongst us has the standing to look at another Muslim and pronounce him a hypocrite in the sense of these āyahs, and the reader who has been in the habit of doing so should understand that he has been claiming for himself a faculty which ended with prophethood. The āyahs are here to be turned inward and not outward, and every generation which turned them outward has torn itself apart.

يُخَدِّعُونَ اللَّهَ وَالدِّينَ ءَامِنُونَ وَمَا يُخَدِّعُونَ إِلَّا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَمَا

يَشْعُرُونَ

They seek to deceive Allāh and those who believe, and they deceive none but themselves, and they do not perceive it.

al-Baqara 2:9

The closing words are the most frightening in the āyah. *Wa mā yash'urūn*, and they do not perceive it. There are hypocrites who do not know their own disease, and this tells us that the category is not confined to the conscious infiltrator. There are those who are deliberately spying on the Muslims and know exactly what they are, and there are others who sit amongst us, and pray with us, and do not know what is in them. The second sort are the reason Sayyidunā 'Umar رضي الله عنه asked about himself.

Consider what they are attempting. They cannot harm Allāh ﷻ, because He knows all things and deception requires a gap in the knowledge of the deceived, and there is no such gap. They cannot ultimately harm the believers, because the believers have the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, and a community which holds to those two has a defence which no strategy can breach. So the deception, launched at two targets it cannot reach, travels the whole way round and lands on the man who threw it.

Notice also that Allāh ﷻ says they seek to deceive Allāh and those who believe, and the 'ulamā' have understood the mention of Allāh ﷻ here to include His Messenger ﷺ, on the principle the Qur'ān states elsewhere, that whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed Allāh. Ḥaḍrat Thānawī رحمه الله draws a broader lesson from the pairing: this āyah is proof that whenever a person sets out to interfere with the people of Allāh ﷻ, he has taken on Allāh ﷻ Himself, and the Ḥadīth Qudsī in which He declares war on whoever shows enmity to a friend of His says the same thing in plainer words.

The verb *yukhādī‘ūn* is of the pattern *mufā‘ala*, which in Arabic implies an exchange between two parties, and this opens onto something the next āyahs will develop. Allāh ﷻ mocks them back. He gives them hope, and lets them feel that they are part of something, and grants them *istidrāj*, the slow rope of prosperity in this world, and then the Hereafter arrives and their hands are empty.

A distinction is needed here which will save the reader a great deal of anxiety. Hypocrisy is of two kinds. *Nifāq i’tiqādī* is hypocrisy of belief, in the heart, disbelief concealed behind a declaration of faith, and this is what these āyahs describe, and this is what puts a man in the lowest depth of the Fire. *Nifāq ‘amalī* is hypocrisy of action, the gap between what a man knows and what he does, and this does not expel a man from Islam, but it is a disease and it was the disease the Companions رضي الله عنهم feared for themselves. When Ḥanẓala رضي الله عنه came weeping and said that Ḥanẓala had become a hypocrite, because the state he was in when sitting with the Messenger ﷺ left him when he went home to his family, he was speaking of this second kind, and the Messenger ﷺ did not tell him that his fear was foolish. He told him that if they remained always in that state the angels would shake their hands in the streets, but that it is an hour and an hour.

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَّرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ بِمَا كَانُوا
يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

In their hearts is a disease, so Allāh has increased them in disease, and for them is a painful punishment because of the lies they used to tell.

al-Baqara 2:10

Why do they deceive? Because they are ill. And Allāh ﷻ leaves the illness unnamed, *marad*, a disease, without the definite article and without specification,

and the vagueness is exact, because the sicknesses of the heart are very often undiagnosed and the man carrying one usually cannot name it either.

The word *marad* is used when a part of the body is not performing its function, and we need not be physicians to recognise the condition. If the eye cannot see, it has a *marad*. If the tongue cannot speak or cannot taste, it has a *marad*. And if the heart cannot recognise Allāh ﷻ, then the heart, whatever else it is doing, has a *marad*, because recognising Him is the function it was issued for.

To be rid of an illness a man needs three things, and he needs them in order. He must recognise that he is ill. He must know what the remedy is. And he must actually take the medicine. Every one of the three is a place where the process can stop, and the hypocrite fails at the first, which is why he never reaches the other two.

There is a modern illustration which the reader will not need explained. In the recent epidemic, one of the symptoms was that the sense of taste was lost, and it did not then matter in the slightest what food was placed in front of the patient, because the fault was not in the food. So it is here. You may expose such a person to the very best of what we have, to the finest recitation and the most learned company and the most beautiful example, and it will register as nothing, because their hearts are so rusted that there is no way back through the senses.

And why should the disease increase? Because revelation itself, and the sight of prophethood succeeding, feeds the jealousy that was the disease in the first place. Every victory of the Muslims made ‘Abdullāh b. Ubayy sicker. The medicine, taken by a man in that condition, works as a poison.

The Punishment for Lying

The punishment is *alīm*, painful, and it is permanent, and Allāh ﷻ attaches it to a cause: *bimā kānū yakdhibūn*, because of the lies they used to tell. The construction *kānū* with the present tense denotes a settled habit, something they did continuously, and the permanence of the punishment answers the permanence of the lying. The reader should note how seriously the Qur’ān takes

lying here. Of all the crimes of the hypocrites, this is the one Allāh ﷻ names as the ground of the sentence.

Imām Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله observes that the hypocrites' inward diseases are all proved out of their own recorded words in these āyahs, and he lists them, and the list is worth having in front of the reader, because it is a diagnosis assembled entirely from the patient's own speech. There is lying, from *bimā kānū yak-dhibūn*. There is *ghabāwa*, dullness and unawareness, from *wa mā yash'urūn*. There is *‘ujb*, self-conceit, from their sneer, *shall we believe as the fools believe?* There is *ghurūr*, delusion, from their claim, *we are only putting things right*. There is *jahl*, ignorance, from *but they do not know*. And there is *safah*, foolishness, from the divine retort, *truly it is they who are the fools*. Six diseases, and every one of them convicted out of the mouth of the man who had it.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا تُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ
مُصْلِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And when it is said to them, do not spread corruption in the land, they say, we are only putting things right.

al-Baqara 2:11

أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ الْمُفْسِدُونَ وَلَكِنْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Truly it is they who are the corrupters, but they do not perceive it.

al-Baqara 2:12

Here is another of their evils, and it is the worst yet, because it is the point at which the instrument of judgement has itself been broken. They are so thoroughly deceived by their own hypocrisy that they have lost sight of good and evil altogether and the two have run together into a blur. Sickness looks to

them like health, and health like sickness, and a man in that condition cannot be argued with, because every argument must be weighed on the scales, and it is the scales that are broken.

What did their corruption actually look like? They would share their doubts about the religion and about the Messenger's ﷺ message and pass it off as thinking for oneself. They would encourage the enemies of Madīnah. They would carry the Prophet's ﷺ secrets out and the enemy's rumours in, and take tales from both camps to the other, and consider themselves, throughout, to be men working to improve matters. The posture is always the same: you are one party, and they are another party, and we are neither, we stand in the middle and we are the reasonable ones. The reader has met this man. He is in every community and he is always, by his own account, the only adult in the room.

And this *fitna* has a modern form which the 'ulamā' have had to address, the movement to unite the faiths under the banner of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, the *it-tiḥād-i-millat* as our elders called it, in which the differences that Allāh ﷻ placed between belief and disbelief are dissolved in the name of harmony. It is presented as reconciliation. It is what this āyah calls *fasād*.

Corruption is the greatest *fitna* precisely because it works on the joints of a community rather than on its members, and a community with discord in it can be destroyed by an enemy a tenth of its size. And Allāh ﷻ ends by saying that they do not perceive it, which the 'ulamā' call compound ignorance, *jahl murakkab*, where a man does not know that he does not know, and there is no remedy for it while it lasts, because a man will not seek what he believes he already has.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا كَمَا ءَامَنَ النَّاسُ قَالُوا أَنُؤْمِنُ كَمَا ءَامَنَ
 السُّفَهَاءُ أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ السُّفَهَاءُ وَلَكِن لَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

And when it is said to them, believe as the people have believed, they say, shall we believe as the fools have believed? Truly it is they who are the fools, but they do not know.

al-Baqara 2:13

Something very great has happened in this āyah and the reader should not pass it without stopping. Allāh ﷻ has been asked, in effect, what the standard of acceptable belief is, and He does not answer with a definition or a creed. He answers by pointing at a group of men and saying, believe as *they* have believed. The imān of the Companions رضي الله عنهم is the measure.

Why should this be? Because they believed without hesitation, at a time when belief cost everything and promised nothing. Because they sacrificed, and what they gave up was their homes and their families and their trade and in many cases their lives. And because their *yaqīn* was of a strength that has not been seen since. Allāh ﷻ did not find a better standard available to Him, and He looked over all of creation before He chose them.

And notice further that Allāh ﷻ defends them. Somebody sneered at the Companions رضي الله عنهم and the sneer was answered from above the seven heavens, and the answer was to turn the word straight back: *truly it is they who are the fools*. The reader may work out for himself what this implies about the practice, in some quarters, of speaking ill of them. If Allāh ﷻ took it upon Himself to answer a hypocrite of Madīnah for one contemptuous remark, it is not clear what protection a man in our time imagines he has.

The pattern recurs in Sūrat al-Munāfiqūn, where these same people said, *do not spend on those who are with the Messenger of Allāh until they disperse*, and, *when we return to Madīnah, the mightier will surely drive out the weaker*. It is the

same instinct: starve them, isolate them, and above all establish that they are the lesser sort of people. And Allāh ﷻ answered that too, in the same sūra, saying that might belongs to Allāh ﷻ and to His Messenger ﷺ and to the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.

The closing words of our āyah, *but they do not know*, together with the *but they do not perceive* of the previous one, are doing careful work. The Qur'ān is telling us that only through knowledge and a sound view of things can a man tell truth from falsehood and the way of faith from the way of hypocrisy. This is why the Book asks so often, *do they not reason?*, and *do they not reflect?*, and *will they not take heed?* The appeal of Islam is pitched at knowledge and sound reasoning and wisdom, and it expects that anyone with an intellect in working order and the willingness to use it will accept it. Ignorance, falsehood, blind imitation and captivity to prejudice are the native soil of superstition and disbelief and hypocrisy, and they are named as such here.

وَإِذَا لَقُوا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْا إِلَىٰ شَيَاطِينِهِمْ قَالُوا إِنَّا
مَعَكُمْ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُسْتَهْزَءُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

And when they meet those who believe, they say, we believe. But when they are alone with their devils, they say, we are with you, we were only mocking.

al-Baqara 2:14

اللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ وَيَمُدُّهُمْ فِي طُغْيَانِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Allāh mocks them, and prolongs them in their transgression, wandering blindly.

al-Baqara 2:15

They are like chameleons, and worse than chameleons, because the chameleon changes colour to survive and does not despise the branch it is sitting on.

The most telling thing in the fourteenth āyah is the difference in weight between the two statements. Before the believers, they manage only *āmannā*, we believe, a bare word. Behind closed doors, with their own people, it is *innā ma‘akum*, with the emphatic particle, *truly we are with you*, and the reader can hear the relief in it. A man's real allegiance is audible in which of his sentences carries the emphasis.

And there is a general principle in this which is worth carrying about. Real believers do not need to keep announcing that they are believers, because it shows. The effort to convince is itself the evidence, and the harder a man works to persuade a gathering of his faith, the more the gathering is entitled to wonder why the faith is not doing the work by itself.

Then Allāh ﷻ says that He mocks them, and the reader should not soften this. Allāh ﷻ took their hypocrisy personally, and He is avenging the believers directly, and the form the vengeance takes is that nothing happens. They mocked, and no punishment came, and they grew comfortable, and this comfort is the punishment. *Do they think that in the wealth and children with which We prolong them, We are hastening to them good things? No, but they do not perceive.*

The image the ‘ulamā’ use is of an animal caught in a trap but not killed, so that the death it is going to die is postponed and the postponement is not a mercy, or of a dog on a long leash which runs joyfully to the end of its rope and is choked by the very speed it built up. *Wā yamudduhum*, and He prolongs them, is the rope paying out. And as for the Hereafter, Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما said that a door of the Garden will be opened for them and they will run towards it and it will be shut in their faces, and the believers inside will look on and laugh, as these people once laughed at them, and Allāh ﷻ says in Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn that on that Day it is those who believed who will be laughing at the disbelievers.

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ اشْتَرَوُا الضَّلَالَهَ بِالْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَارَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا

مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Those are the ones who have purchased error at the price of guidance, so their trade has brought no profit, and they were not guided.

al-Baqara 2:16

The metaphor is commercial and the Arabs of Makkah and Madīnah understood commerce, and Allāh ﷻ chose His audience's own vocabulary in which to tell them they were fools.

The picture is exact. They had guidance in their hands, in the sense that it was offered and available and within reach, and they let it go and took error in exchange. They were not robbed. They traded. And the word *ishtarawu* tells us they went looking for the deal.

So their trade brought no profit, and the phrase is drier and more devastating than any threat, because it addresses these men in the language of their own competence. They thought themselves shrewd, and they made a loss.

And then the closing words, *wa mā kānū muhtadīn*, and they were not guided, which raise a question. If they sold guidance, they must have had it. The 'ulamā' answer that they were never truly guided at all, that guidance had never entered their hearts, that what they possessed was proximity to guidance and not guidance itself. They stood next to it for years, in the mosque, in the rows, behind the Messenger ﷺ himself, and it never got in. And that is a more sobering thought than anything else in this passage, because there is no shortage, amongst us, of men who have stood in those rows for forty years.

The Two Parables

Before the parables themselves, the reader should have in front of him the division the Qur'ān is about to draw, because two parables are coming and they are not describing the same men.

There is a kind of hypocrite who is thoroughly evil, who has made an active choice to disbelieve, and who is like a man who stood in darkness, found a light, and then deliberately walked back into the dark. And there is another kind, the unfortunate sort, hesitant, half-tempted to believe, drawn towards it again and again, but never taking the step, because taking it would cost him something his desires are not willing to pay. The first is described by the parable of the fire. The second by the parable of the rainstorm. Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله sets this out plainly, and the reader who holds the distinction will find the next four āyahs open easily.

مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي اسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَلَمَّا أَضَاءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُ ذَهَبَ اللَّهُ
بُنُورَهُمْ وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِي ظُلُمٍ لَا يَبْصُرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Their likeness is that of one who kindled a fire, and when it lit up what was around him, Allāh took away their light and left them in darknesses, unable to see.

al-Baqara 2:17

Who kindled the fire? The ‘ulamā’ offer two readings and both are worth having. On the first, the one who kindles is the Messenger ﷺ, who lit a fire to give light and warmth to a people sitting in the cold, and the word the Qur’ān chooses, *adā’at*, from *diyā’*, is significant, because *diyā’* is a light that carries heat with it, as Allāh ﷻ says, *He it is who made the sun a radiance and the moon a light*, giving the sun *diyā’* and the moon *nūr*. The fire the Messenger ﷺ kindled warmed as well as lit. a people who had been freezing for generations.

On the second reading, the one who kindles is the group of hypocrites themselves, referred to in the singular because their intention was single and identical, and because īmān, had they taken it, would have been the thing that made them one. There is a quiet judgement in the grammar: they are a crowd, and Allāh ﷻ speaks of them as one man, because there was never anything individual about any of them.

Then the light is taken. Notice that Allāh ﷻ says He took away their light, and He does not say that He put out the fire. The Qur'ān is described as *nūr*, and the light was meant for them, it was lit precisely so that they could see by it, and it was taken from them and not from the world. And notice what is left behind. When a fire is taken away, what remains is not simply an absence. What remains is the smoke, and the smell, and the ash, and the scorched ground, and a man who has been near a fire and lost it is in a worse condition than a man who never approached one, because he has all the residue and none of the light.

And they are left *fī ḡulumāt*, in darknesses, in the plural. The Qur'ān is exact about this throughout: light is always singular and darkness is always plural, because there is one truth and the ways of missing it are without number. The plural here is every evil trait at once, and no light by which to see any of them.

إِنَّمَا مَثَلِي وَمَثَلُ النَّاسِ كَمَثَلِ رَجُلٍ اسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا، فَلَمَّا أَضَاءَتْ مَا
حَوْلَهُ جَعَلَ الْفَرَاشُ وَهَذِهِ الدَّوَابُّ الَّتِي تَقَعُ فِي النَّارِ يَقَعْنَ فِيهَا،
فَجَعَلَ يَنْزِعُهُنَّ وَيَغْلِبْنَهُ فَيَقْتَحِمْنَ فِيهَا، فَأَنَا آخِذٌ بِحُجَزٍ كُمْ عَنِ
النَّارِ وَهُمْ يَقْتَحِمُونَ فِيهَا

The likeness of myself and of the people is that of a man who kindled a fire, and when it lit up what was around him, the moths and these creatures that fall into fire began to fall into it, and he set about pulling them out, but they overcame him and plunged in. So I am taking hold of you by your waists to keep you back from the Fire, and you are plunging into it.⁴

The reader should sit with that image rather than admire it. The Messenger ﷺ is not standing at a distance calling out warnings. He has his hands on our belts, physically, and he is being overpowered, and the thing overpowering him is our own eagerness to get into the fire. And no malice drives a moth into a flame. It is drawn there by the very light that was meant to guide it.

صَمُّكُمْ عَمِّي فَهُمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ

Deaf, dumb, blind, so they will not return.

al-Baqara 2:18

Three words and a verdict. Deaf, so they cannot hear the truth. Dumb, so they cannot speak it. Blind, so they cannot see it. And the grammar is worth noticing, because these are plural adjectives applied without qualification to the whole group, which means that it is not that some are deaf and others blind, but that all of them have all three at once. Every route in is closed and every route out is closed, and so they will not return.

Allāh ﷻ says of a similar people, *And We had granted them hearing and sight and hearts, but their hearing and their sight and their hearts availed them nothing at all, since they went on rejecting the signs of Allāh, and they were encompassed by that which they used to mock.* The faculties were issued. They were simply never used for the purpose they were issued for, and an instrument that is never used for its purpose eventually cannot be.

Imām al-Rāzī رحمه الله reports from al-Suddī a reading of the whole parable which draws it together, and Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله relates it approvingly. Allāh ﷻ

4. Al-Bukhārī 6483 and Muslim 2284, with slight variation in the wording. A second narration has: مَثَلِي

وَمَثَلُكُمْ كَمَثَلِ رَجُلٍ أَوْقَدَ نَارًا, my likeness and yours is that of a man who lit a fire and the insects and moths began to fall into it, and he tries to drive them away. I am taking hold of you by your waists and you are escaping from my hands. Muslim 2285.

has likened these people, in their purchase of error at the price of guidance and their passing from sight into blindness, to a man who kindled a fire, and when it lit up what was around him he benefited from it and saw what was to his right and his left and grew comfortable in it, and then, whilst he was in that state, his fire went out, and he was left in a deep darkness, seeing nothing and finding no way. And on top of that he is deaf and cannot hear, and dumb and cannot speak, and blind, so that even if there were light he would not see it. And so he does not return to what he was before. And al-Rāzī رحمه الله adds that the comparison is exact for a further reason: by their initial declaration of faith they acquired a light, and by their subsequent hypocrisy they destroyed it, and so they fell into a bewilderment greater than any other, for there is no bewilderment greater than bewilderment in religion.

أَوْ كَصَيْبٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ فِيهِ ظُلُمَاتٌ وَرَعْدٌ وَبَرْقٌ يَجْعَلُونَ أَصْبَعَهُمْ
فِيْٓ أَذَانِهِمْ مِّنَ الصَّوَاعِقِ حَذَرَ الْمَوْتِ وَاللَّهُ مُحِيطٌ
بِالْكَافِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Or like a rainstorm from the sky, in which are darknesses and thunder and lightning. They put their fingers in their ears against the thunderclaps, in dread of death. And Allāh encompasses the disbelievers.

al-Baqara 2:19

Now the second sort, and the parable changes entirely, because these men are no longer the confirmed enemies of the first parable. Their guilt is weak belief and a confused notion of the religion. They are here for the good times and not the hard ones.

The rain is the revelation, which is life, and Allāh ﷻ likens His guidance to rain throughout the Qur'ān. But rain arrives with weather. There is darkness and thunder and lightning, which are the trials and the commands and the warnings

that come with faith, and these men want the water without the storm, and there is no such arrangement available.

So they put their fingers in their ears, and the ‘ulamā’ have read this in two ways which are not really two. It may be simple terror. Or it may be that they are trying to shut out what they do not wish to hear, as though not hearing the thunder would stop the lightning, and the gesture is that of a man closing his eyes at the dentist. Either way it is futile, and the āyah closes by saying so, for Allāh ﷻ encompasses the disbelievers, and there is nowhere outside Him to put one's fingers in one's ears.

يَكَادُ الْبَرْقُ يَخْطَفُ أَبْصَرَهُمْ كُلًّا أَضَاءَ لَهُمْ مَشَوْا فِيهِ وَإِذَا أَظْلَمَ
عَلَيْهِمْ قَامُوا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَذَهَبَ بِسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَرِهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى
كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

The lightning all but snatches away their sight. Whenever it gives them light they walk in it, and when it darkens over them they stand still. Had Allāh willed, He would have taken away their hearing and their sight. Truly Allāh has power over all things.

al-Baqara 2:20

Here is the whole of the second kind of hypocrite, and it is the whole of a great many of us as well. When there is light, they walk. When it goes dark, they stop. Their religion is a function of the weather.

And there is one word here which should not be passed over. *Mashaw*, they walked. They did not run. Even in the light, when everything was going their way and the path was plain in front of them, they managed a walk. And Allāh ﷻ does not ask us to walk. He tells us to race one another to forgiveness, and to hasten, and to compete, and the man who strolls through the brief moment of light he has been given has misjudged how long the light lasts.

The Qur'ān says of this man elsewhere, *And amongst the people is he who worships Allāh upon an edge. If good befalls him, he is content with it, and if a trial befalls him, he turns about on his face, and he has lost this world and the next*, and it is the same portrait in different words: a man standing on the rim, ready to fall whichever way the ground tilts.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله carries the parable forward to the Day of Judgement, and it is worth following him, because he shows that the image describes this life and previews the next. On that Day people will be given light according to their faith. Amongst them will be one given light enough to see for a great distance, and another less, and another more. And amongst them will be one whose light goes out and then returns, so that he walks a while upon the bridge and then stops, walking and halting exactly as this āyah describes. And amongst them will be those whose light is extinguished entirely, and these are the pure hypocrites of whom Allāh ﷻ says, *On the Day when the hypocrite men and hypocrite women will say to those who believed, wait for us, let us borrow from your light, it will be said, go back behind you and seek a light*. Whilst of the believers He says, *On the Day you will see the believing men and believing women, their light running before them and on their right, glad tidings for you this Day, gardens beneath which rivers flow, and, On the Day Allāh will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him, their light running before them and on their right, they will say, our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us, truly You have power over all things*.

The man who walks and stops in this world will walk and stop on the bridge. Nothing new is issued there. What we are given on that Day is what we brought.

The Four Kinds of Men

With the parables complete, Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله draws the whole opening of the sūra together, and his summary is the best map of these twenty āyahs that exists. Once this is established, he says, people fall into categories. There are the pure believers, who are those described by the four āyahs at the opening of al-Baqara. There are the pure disbelievers, described by the two āyahs after them. And there are the hypocrites, and they are of two sorts: the unalloyed, for whom the

parable of the fire was struck, and the wavering, for whom flashes of faith appear at times and then die away, and they are the people of the parable of the water, and their condition is lighter than that of the ones before them.

Four kinds, and the reader has now met all of them, and the only remaining question is the one the sūra has been building towards for twenty āyahs, which is which of them he is. He is about to be addressed directly.

The Call to Worship

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may attain taqwā.

al-Baqara 2:21

Something changes here and the reader should feel it. For twenty āyahs Allāh ﷻ has been speaking in the third person, about them, those who believe, those who disbelieve, those who say. Now He turns and addresses us in the second person, and the whole temperature of the sūra alters. It is the first command in the Qur'ān.

The address is *yā ayyuha'l-nās*, O mankind, and the choice is deliberate. Allāh ﷻ has just spent twenty āyahs dividing humanity into believers and disbelievers and hypocrites, and now He gathers all three back together and speaks to them at once. The word *nās* is related by the 'ulamā' to *nisyān*, forgetting, and to the root of *ins*, and the connection is not idle. We are, as a species, the ones who forget, and this is why the Qur'ān repeats itself, and why we are commanded to five prayers rather than one, and why the reminder never stops coming. We know. We fail to remember.

Then, *rabbakum*, your Lord, and this single word is the justification for the entire command. Why should we worship, and why should we have taqwā? Because He is the Master, and the word *Rabb* means far more than lord in the English sense. It carries the whole business of nurturing a thing from nothing to its completion, of owning it and sustaining it and bringing it to its perfection.

And somebody might say that any person can perform *tarbiya*, that a father raises a child and a teacher brings a student to maturity, so what is special in the claim. Allāh ﷻ answers before the objection is finished: *alladhī khalaqakum*, the One who created you. That is what a *Rabb* does that no father does. Your father nurtured what was already there. He did not bring it out of nothing.

Then, *wa'lladhīna min qablikum*, and those before you, and this clause is doing two things at once. The first is that one of the great temptations holding these people back was the path of their forefathers, the whole weight of ancestry saying that this is not how we do things, and Allāh ﷻ disarms it without naming it: He created you, and He created them, and if their practice were an argument then their Creator is a better one. The second, as the 'ulamā' have noted, is that the phrase looks forward as much as back, for Allāh ﷻ speaks of those before you and never of those after you, and here again, as in the fourth āyah, the silence carries the doctrine.

Finally, *la'allakum tattaqūn*, so that you may attain taqwā, and Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله points out the neat circle that has just been closed. The second āyah told us that this Book is guidance for the people of taqwā, and the reader was entitled to ask how a man is supposed to acquire taqwā in the first place if the guidance is reserved for those who already have it. Here is the answer, nineteen āyahs later: worship. That is the door. Taqwā is not a temperament you are born with or a feeling that descends on you. It is the residue of worship, and the man who wants the guidance of the second āyah is told in the twenty-first exactly where to go and get the qualification.

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ فِرَاشًا وَالسَّمَاءَ بِنَاءً وَأَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ
مَاءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِ مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ رِزْقًا لَّكُمْ فَلَا تَجْعَلُوا لِلَّهِ أُندَادًا
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He who made the earth a bed for you and the sky a canopy, and sent down water from the sky and brought forth thereby fruits as provision for you. So do not set up rivals to Allāh whilst you know.

al-Baqara 2:22

The previous āyah gave the first reason to believe, which is Allāh ﷻ Himself and what He is. This one gives the second, which is what He has done for us, and the argument moves from His nature to our debt.

Look at what is claimed. The earth is a *firāsh*, a bed, a thing spread out. Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī رحمه الله in *Bayān al-Qur’ān* makes the necessary observation that this does not mean the earth is flat, and that the word is chosen for the desert-dweller to understand what is in front of him, which is the horizon and the ground he sleeps on. The Qur’ān describes the world as it is experienced, and a bed is a bed whether or not the planet is a sphere.

And consider what a mercy is folded into that one word. The earth is firm enough to bear us and soft enough to be walked on and dug and ploughed, and the margin between those two is narrow, and we did not set it.

Then the water, and Mawlānā ‘Āshiq Ilāhī رحمه الله in *Anwār al-Bayān* draws out the thing we have all seen and never noticed: from one water come hundreds of different fruits and crops, each with its own colour and flavour and season, drawn out of the same rain falling on the same ground. If the water were the cause, the fruits would be identical. They are not identical, and so the water can only ever be the means, and something is choosing.

And notice that Allāh ﷻ does not say that He gave us what we need to survive. He says *rizqan lakum*, provision for you, and provision here is fruit, which nobody needs. He could have given us the bare minimum, a single edible thing sufficient to keep a body alive. He gave us the world and its fruits and the capacity to enjoy them, and the reader who has ever eaten a mango has been given an argument.

All of these blessings cannot be the work of man, for the simple and unanswerable reason that they were here before he was. And the reader who wishes to see the argument pressed to its sharpest point should look at Sūrat al-Wāqī'a, where Allāh ﷻ asks about the seed a man emits, whether he creates it or Allāh ﷻ is the Creator, and about the seed he sows in the ground, whether he makes it grow or Allāh ﷻ does, and about the water he drinks and the fire he kindles, and there is not one of these that a man can claim.

Then the conclusion: *fā lā taj'alū lillāhi andādan wa antum ta'lamūn*, do not set up rivals to Allāh whilst you know. The final clause is the sting. He charges them with knowing better, which is graver than ignorance.

And a *nidd*, a rival, is a wider thing than a stone idol, and Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله preserves an incident which shows how carefully the Messenger ﷺ policed the border. A man said to him, *whatever Allāh wills and you will*, and he said, *have you made me a rival to Allāh?* One conjunction. That is all it took. And if *and you will* was too much when spoken to the Messenger ﷺ himself, the reader may consider the phrases in ordinary circulation amongst us.

The Challenge of the Qur'ān

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ
وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our slave, then produce a sūra of the like of it, and call your witnesses besides Allāh, if you are truthful.

al-Baqara 2:23

Allāh ﷻ has just offered proofs of His power drawn from the created world, the kind that nobody can replicate and nobody can claim a share in. Now He offers a proof of another kind, drawn from His speech, and the logic is continuous: no one can claim to have made the earth, and no one can claim to have made this either. A messenger proves his truth by a miracle, and here is the miracle, in the reader's hands.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله points out the structure. Allāh ﷻ gave two āyahs to the proof of His own godhood, and now gives two āyahs to the proof of His Messenger's ﷺ truthfulness, and the sūra is arranged in matched pairs. Imām Ibn 'Āshūr رحمه الله supplies the occasion: Allāh ﷻ had told the disbelievers to worship Him and to attribute no partners to Him, and their reply was, *had the All-Merciful willed, we would not have worshipped them*, which is to say, our idolatry is His doing, and He must be content with it or He would have stopped us. This āyah is the response. If you doubt what has come down, the door is open, and the test is a literary one rather than a theological one, and you may bring whomever you like.

Take the words one by one. *In kuntum fī rayb*, if you are in doubt. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī رحمه الله in his *Mufradāt* defines *rayb* as a doubt, a suspicion, a hesitation without any basis to it, and this is not the honest uncertainty of a man who

has looked and cannot decide. Intelligent people do not entertain baseless doubt. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله adds that the indefinite form here is for *taḥqīr*, belittlement, a tiny doubt, a feeble thing.

Imām Ibn ‘Ashūr رحمه الله notes that the word is *in* rather than *idhā*, and both can be rendered if, but *in* carries a suggestion of unlikelihood, so that Allāh ﷻ is questioning the doubt as He mentions it: are you actually in doubt, or are you merely too proud to say what you know? This sūra will later state flatly that the People of the Book recognised the Messenger ﷺ as they recognise their own sons. They knew. Doubt was the costume, not the condition.

The reader who wants proof that this was so need only look at what the leaders of Makkah did in private. Sayyidunā ‘Umar رضي الله عنه said, before he accepted Islam, that he went out one night meaning to trouble the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ, and found that he had reached the mosque before him, and so he stood behind him, and the Messenger ﷺ began Sūrat al-Hāqqa. And ‘Umar رضي الله عنه said, I began to marvel at the composition of the Qur’ān, and I said to myself, by Allāh, this man is a poet, as the Quraysh say. And he recited, *truly it is the speech of a noble Messenger, and it is not the speech of a poet, little do you believe*. And I said, a soothsayer. And he recited, *nor is it the speech of a soothsayer, little do you take heed, a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds, and if he had invented against Us some sayings, We would have seized him by the right hand, then We would have cut from him the aorta, and not one of you could have prevented it*, to the end of the sūra. And Islam fell into my heart in every place.⁵

And there is the celebrated account which Muḥammad b. Ishāq relates from al-Zuhrī, and which Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله records. Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb, and al-Akhnas b. Sharīq each came, one night, to listen to the Messenger ﷺ reciting the Qur’ān in his house, and each was unaware that the others had come. They listened until the morning, and then left, and met one another on the

5. Reported by Aḥmad. The reader should notice the mechanism: ‘Umar رضي الله عنه produced two hypotheses, and both of them were answered before he could say them aloud, and it was not the argument that broke him but the fact that the argument arrived unprompted.

road, and each asked the others what had brought them there, and they told each other, and they vowed not to do it again, lest the young men of the Quraysh should hear of it and imitate them.

The second night, each of them came back, each thinking that the other two would honour the vow. In the morning they met on the road again, and reproached one another, and vowed again. The third night, they came again. And in the morning they vowed again.

Then, during the day, al-Akhnas took his staff and went to Abū Sufyān in his house and said, tell me, Abū Ḥanzāla, what is your opinion of what you heard from Muḥammad? And Abū Sufyān said, by Allāh, Abū Tha'laba, I heard things I recognise and know the meaning of, and I heard things whose meaning and intent I do not know. And al-Akhnas said, and I, by the One you swore by, am the same.

Then he left him and went to Abū Jahl and said, Abū al-Ḥakam, what is your opinion of what you heard from Muḥammad? And Abū Jahl said this, and the reader should attend to it, because it is the most honest sentence any enemy of Islam has ever spoken: We competed with the Banū 'Abd Manāf for honour. They fed the pilgrims, so we fed them. They gave, so we gave. Until, when we were neck and neck with them like two horses in a race, they said, there is a prophet amongst us, to whom revelation comes from the heavens. And how are we ever to compete with that? By Allāh, we will never believe in him, and we will never accept what he says.

There is not one word about doubt in it. He knew. And Ali Ünal makes the remark that closes the case: if these intelligent men had been able to argue with the Qur'ān in words, they would never have chosen to put their property and their lives at risk instead. But as al-Jāḥiẓ observed in his *Nazm al-Qur'ān*, since they could not argue with it in words, they were compelled to argue with their swords.

Return now to the āyah. *Nazzalnā*, We sent down, and Imām Ibn 'Āshūr رحمه الله observes that the form denotes sending down bit by bit, gradually, which was itself one of the things the disbelievers objected to and one

of the things that most infuriated them, and Allāh ﷻ chooses the very word for the thing they complained about.

‘*Alā ‘abdinā*, upon Our slave, and there are two beautiful readings here. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله notes the possessive: *Our* slave, an honouring, and the preposition ‘*alā*, upon, which conveys the high place from which the Qur’ān descended and how it came down over him and enveloped him. Imām Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله sees a further subtlety: the āyah is glancing back at the opening of this very *rukū’*, where mankind was told to worship their Lord, as if to say, this slave of Mine is what a worshipper looks like, he has fulfilled the brief I gave to you.

And this opens onto something the reader should carry with him for the rest of the Book. Allāh ﷻ has made us His slaves, and this is the greatest honour available to a created thing, not the price of it. Whenever Allāh ﷻ speaks of the Messenger ﷺ at his highest station, nearest to Him, He calls him ‘*abd*. He describes him as Messenger and Prophet, He calls him the Enwrapped and the Cloaked, but when He speaks of the Night Journey, at the opening of the fifteenth Juz’, He says, *Glory be to Him who took His slave by night*. And when the Messenger ﷺ had come so close that even Jibrīl عليه السلام could come no further, Allāh ﷻ says, *so He revealed to His slave what He revealed*. And here, where He speaks of revelation itself, He calls him a slave. The nearer he is brought, the more insistently the word is used, and the reader may draw the conclusion.

Then, *bi sūratin*, a sūra, and Muftī Shafī رحمه الله notes that it is indefinite, which means any sūra at all, including the shortest, three lines of it. The challenge has been reduced to almost nothing and it has still never been met. And the word *sūra* is itself worth a remark: the Arabs never used it in this sense. It came in with the Qur’ān, and it carries the sense of something walled and fortified and protected, as a city has a wall.

The Qur'ān Amongst the Arabs

To feel the force of this challenge, the reader must understand who it was addressed to. When the Qur'ān was revealed, eloquence and oratory and poetry were held amongst the Arabs in the way that we hold wealth, and a tribe's standing rose and fell on the quality of its poets, and the finest odes were hung on the Ka'ba itself. This was not a people who valued literature. This was a people for whom literature was the currency of honour. And it was to these people, first, that the challenge was issued, and then to the whole of humankind until the Last Day.

And the reader should see how the challenge was graded, for all of these āyahs are Makkan except the last:

قُلْ لِّئِنْ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيراً

*Say, if mankind and the jinn gathered together to produce the like of this Qur'ān, they could not produce its like, even if they backed one another up.*⁶

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُوْرٍ مِّثْلِهِ مُفْتَرِيَاتٍ وَادْعُوا مَنْ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

*Or do they say, he has invented it? Say, then bring ten sūras like it, invented, and call upon whomever you can besides Allāh, if you are truthful.*⁷

Ten, then one, and then in our āyah, at Madīnah, years later, with the whole Book in front of them and the community established and the enemy at leisure to prepare, one sūra, and bring anyone you like to help you. The challenge did

6. *Al-Isrā'* 17:88. The whole Qur'ān, and every creature with a tongue, and the verdict is delivered in advance.

7. *Hūd* 11:13. Then, in *Yūnus* 10:38, the demand falls to a single sūra.

not soften over twenty-three years because the case was weakening. It softened because the case was closing.

The Wondrous Qur'ān

Every prophet was given a miracle suited to his people, and every one of those miracles was an event, tied to a place and a moment, witnessed by those present, and finished with the death of the prophet who bore it. The staff of Mūsā عليه السلام is not available for inspection. The Qur'ān is the only miracle that did not end, and it is the reason why the final Messenger ﷺ needed no other, and why we, fourteen centuries later, are not at any disadvantage compared to those who saw the moon split.

What makes it so? The means of its revelation, first of all, coming to an unlettered man amongst a largely illiterate people, a man with no plausible route to the matters the Qur'ān speaks of. Then the absence of any discrepancy across twenty-three years of revelation delivered in fragments under every conceivable pressure, when the most careful author, writing at leisure and able to revise, contradicts himself within a single volume. Then its prophecies, which have stood the test of time, that the defeated Romans would defeat the victorious Persians, that Abū Lahab would die upon disbelief, which was a standing invitation to refute the Qur'ān by a single insincere sentence, and which he never took. Then the stories of the past, told to a desert Arab who could not have known them, and affirmed by the Jews and Christians who possessed the books. Then its acceptance across every language and nation. Then the fact that a man may recite it again and again for a lifetime and not tire of it, which is true of no other book ever written. Then the miracle of its memorisation, that it lives complete in the chests of children in every country on earth. Then its power over the emotions, that it left men dumbfounded when they heard it and leaves them so now. And then its preservation in its original form, without a single revision, when every other scripture has a history of editions.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله mentions in his tafsīr that whole books have been written on this subject alone, and the reader who wishes to go further will find the shelves waiting for him.

فَإِنْ لَّمْ تَفْعَلُوا وَلَنْ تَفْعَلُوا فَاتَّقُوا النَّارَ الَّتِي وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ
أُعِدَّتْ لِلْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

*And if you do not, and you will never do it, then guard yourselves against the Fire
whose fuel is people and stones, prepared for the disbelievers.*

al-Baqara 2:24

Read the second clause again, because it is one of the most audacious sentences in any book in the world. *Wa lan taf'alū*, and you will never do it. Not, and you have not done it. Not, and you probably will not. You never will, for as long as the world lasts.

Abū al-Su'ūd رحمه الله notes that this is a promise to those who disbelieve, and that the promise is itself a proof of the Qur'ān's authenticity. Consider the position it creates. The Qur'ān will remain until the Day of Judgement, and so will this challenge, and so will this claim, standing in the open, in the possession of its enemies, for fourteen hundred years, requiring only one counter-example ever to collapse. Only a man absolutely certain of what he is saying makes a claim like that, and only One who knows the future can make it and be right.

And so the conclusion follows: if the very best of you cannot produce anything like it, then concede. The magicians of Fir'awn were the finest practitioners of their art in the world, and when they saw the miracle of Mūsā عليه السلام at close quarters, they knew, because they alone were qualified to know, and they went into *sajda* on the spot in front of the king who was about to crucify them. The expert's surrender is the most valuable testimony there is, and the experts here have not surrendered but they have not produced anything either.

Then the Fire. Its fuel is people and stones, and the 'ulamā' have understood the stones to be the very idols they carved and worshipped, and the Qur'ān says elsewhere, *truly you and what you worship besides Allāh are fuel for Hell*. There is a

terrible justice in it: the thing you bowed to burns beside you, and it cannot help you, and it never could.

And there is a lesson in the fuel that has nothing to do with idols. Stones do not burn. That is what stones are for, and it is why we build fireplaces out of them. A fire that consumes stone is not a fire of the kind we have any experience of, and the Messenger ﷺ told us that this fire is seventy times the fire of this world. And notice that the people are the fuel itself. They are what makes it burn, each one feeding the punishment of the others.

Two careful notes to close. The Fire is *u'iddat li'l-kāfirīn*, prepared for the disbelievers, and prepared is not the same as reserved, and it remains possible for Muslims to enter it for a time, just as the Garden is prepared for the believers without being closed to those who arrive by mercy. And as for eternity in it, Allāh ﷻ is not being disproportionate: the man in question gave his entire life to disbelief, one hundred per cent of what he had, and had he been given a thousand years he would have given those too, and the punishment answers the whole of an intention rather than the span of a life.

Glad Tidings of the Garden

وَبَشِّرِ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ
تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ كُلَّمَا رُزِقُوا مِنْهَا مِنْ ثَمَرَةٍ رِزْقًا قَالُوا هَذَا الَّذِي رُزِقْنَا
مِنْ قَبْلُ وَأُتُوا بِهِ مُتَشَبِهًا وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ وَهُمْ فِيهَا
خَالِدُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

And give glad tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds, that theirs are gardens beneath which rivers flow. Whenever they are provided with a fruit from them, they will say, this is what we were provided with before, and they will be given it in likeness. And therein they shall have purified spouses, and therein they shall abide forever.

al-Baqara 2:25

Notice the placement. Allāh ﷻ has just spoken of a fire fuelled by men and stones, and He does not leave us there. This is His method throughout the Book, that He never speaks of the Fire at length without opening a door of hope beside it, and the reader who finds the Qur'ān frightening has usually stopped reading one āyah too early.

And notice who is told to deliver the good news. *Bashshir*, give glad tidings, addressed to the Messenger ﷺ, and it is the first command given to him in the Qur'ān in the order of the muṣḥaf. Allāh ﷻ could have announced it Himself. He delegates it to His Messenger ﷺ, and the delegation is another proof of his standing, placed immediately after two āyahs establishing his truth.

Then the condition: those who believe *and do righteous deeds*. Faith alone is named first because it is the foundation, but the deeds are not decoration. The 'ulamā' put it neatly: īmān gets you into the Garden, and the deeds furnish it.

And the deeds intended are the sincere, the correct, and the continuous, for a deed lacking any one of those three is not what is meant here.

Now look at what is described, and notice that every item is something we already want. Gardens, in a desert. Rivers, to a people who measured wealth in wells. Fruit, and shade, and a spouse, and permanence. Allāh ﷻ is not describing the Garden as it is, which is beyond describing. He is naming the things we happen to desire, and using them as a lure, and He says so plainly elsewhere when He tells us that no soul knows what has been hidden for them of comfort for the eyes.

The rivers are specified in Sūra Muḥammad: rivers of water that does not spoil, and rivers of milk whose taste does not change, and rivers of wine delicious to the drinkers, and rivers of purified honey. And the verb here is *ruziqū*, they are provided, in the passive, they are served, and Sūrat al-Dahr sets out the three ascending levels of it: that they will drink, and that they will be given to drink, and that their Lord will give them to drink, and the last of those is not about the drink at all.

Then the puzzling clause. Whenever they are provided with a fruit, they say, this is what we were provided with before. It reads at first like a complaint, the same food again, and it is the opposite. It is the exclamation of a man delighted, do you remember, we had this before, and then he tastes it and it is nothing like it, for Allāh ﷻ says *wa utū bihi mutashābihan*, they are given it in likeness, alike only in appearance. The recognition is the setup and the taste is the surprise, every single time, forever. Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī رحمه الله in *Bayān al-Qur’ān* notes that some of the Sufis have read the fruit here as a figure for acts of worship, which are enjoyed in this world and served back to the worshipper in the next.

Purified Spouses

A good house, good food, and a good spouse. Allāh ﷻ describes the companions of the Garden in Sūrat al-Raḥmān, pure within and without.

The reader will have heard the question raised, sometimes in earnest and sometimes as an attack: why are men promised so many beautiful women, and what is promised to the women themselves? The answer begins with the word. *Azwāj* means counterparts, spouses, and it is not gendered, and it serves the woman exactly as it serves the man. The Qur'ān is not, in this āyah, promising women to men. It is promising spouses to people.

And behind the word is the method. Allāh ﷻ is tempting each person with what tempts that person, and it is a plain fact about men that they are strongly drawn to women, and so that is the lure held out. It is a lure, and not an inventory. And Allāh ﷻ closes the question Himself when He says, *and therein you shall have whatever your souls desire*. Whatever. There is nothing left to be aggrieved about.

Then, *mutābhara*, purified, and the purification is not only of the body. Allāh ﷻ will purify them of every evil trait, of everything that turns a person off their spouse over years, the resentments and the accumulated small cruelties and the boredom. It is as though you were married today, before any of it had begun, and it is that state that lasts forever.

And see how the promises answer the actual costs these people were paying. You left your home for this? I will give you a house. You were driven into poverty? Every food you can think of. You restrained yourself? Then this. Each glad tidings is aimed precisely at a wound.

And, *khālidūn*, abiding, which removes the last thing that spoils every joy in this world, which is that we know it will end. There is no losing them to another and no losing them to time, and a man who has buried someone he loved will understand that this single word is worth more than the rivers.

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله, and Sayyid Aḥmad ʿUthmānī رحمه الله likewise, observe that by this point in the sūra the three questions a human being must have answered have all been answered: *Mabdaʿ*, where did I come from? *Maʿāsh*, how am I to live? *Maʿād*, where am I going? The opening āyahs gave the Book and the belief, the twenty-first and twenty-second gave the Lord and

the world He furnished, and the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth give the two destinations. Everything after this is detail.

The Parable of the Gnat

ج
 *إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا فَأَمَّا
 الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا فَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
 فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِهَذَا مَثَلًا يُضِلُّ بِهِ ۖ كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِي بِهِ
 كَثِيرًا وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِ إِلَّا الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Truly Allāh is not ashamed to strike a parable of a gnat, or of what is above it. As for those who believe, they know it is the truth from their Lord. But as for those who disbelieve, they say, what did Allāh intend by this as a parable? He sends many astray by it and guides many by it, and He sends none astray by it except the transgressors.

al-Baqara 2:26

Much of what has come has been about the Qur'ān, as a guide and as a miracle, and here is another angle on it, and it arises out of a sneer.

The Arabic idiom is *darb al-mathal*, to strike a parable, and the verb is worth keeping, because a parable in the Qur'ān is struck, the way a blow lands, and never merely offered. The example hits you.

Fa mā fawqahā, or what is above it, and the 'ulamā' read this two ways which are both true. Above it in smallness, meaning even beyond a gnat, even smaller. Or above it in size, meaning anything from a gnat upwards. And the Qur'ān has indeed struck a parable smaller still: *O mankind, a parable is struck, so listen to it. Truly those you call upon besides Allāh will never create a fly, even if they gathered*

together for it. And if the fly should snatch something from them, they could not retrieve it from it. Feeble is the seeker and the sought. The gods of the world, all of them together, against one fly, and the fly wins.

Now, what is happening in this āyah? The disbelievers, having failed to meet a challenge that had been lowered to a single sūra, needed something to say, and what they found to say was that a serious book would not talk about insects. This is what an advocate does when he has lost on the facts. He objects to the manner. The Qur'ān records the objection and answers it, and the answer is worth having, because the same objection is still being made.

The first part of the answer is the word *yastahyī*, ashamed. Shame attaches to a defect, and there is no defect in a gnat. It is only a lowly thing to us, and it is lowly to us because it inconveniences us, which is a very poor standard by which to rank creation.

The second part goes deeper. What human beings call small is not always small, and what they call great is not always great, and it is often precisely the other way round. In many respects the smaller a thing is, the greater the artistry it displays. In terms of the art involved there is no difference at all between the solar system on the one hand and the eye of a gnat or the belly of a flea on the other, and it might fairly be argued that the artistry of the second is the greater, since these are the working organs of a living creature, and the solar system is not alive. A man who is impressed by the sun and bored by a gnat has told us only that he is impressed by size, which is the aesthetic of a child.

Then, *yudhillu bihi kathīran wa yahdī bihi kathīran*, He sends many astray by it and guides many by it, and the reader may ask how a single parable does two opposite things. It does them because the parable is a mirror and not a lamp. The same words meet a believer, who knows it is the truth from his Lord, and meet a disbeliever, who finds in it a reason to sneer, and the difference is not in the words. The pronoun *bihi*, by it, may refer to the Qur'ān or to the striking of parables in particular, and either way the outcome depends on what the reader brought with him.

And Allāh ﷻ closes the door on any injustice: *wa mā yuḍillu bihi illa l-fāsiqīn*, He sends none astray by it except the transgressors. It is not arbitrary. It falls on those who had already put themselves outside.

There is one more lesson here which the ordinary worshipper should take to heart. Allāh ﷻ has made this Book easy. He says so four times in a single sūra. He speaks in gnats and flies and spiders and seeds and rain, because He is addressing everybody, and the Qur'ān is not a technical dissertation or a manual of theology, and it was never meant to require an intermediary. The men who complained that it was beneath them were, without noticing, complaining that it was accessible to people they despised.

The Fāsiqūn

Fasaqa means to go outside a boundary that has been set, to break out, and the Arabs used it of a date coming out of its skin. From there it comes to mean to transgress, and in usage it carries the sense of sinning persistently and without repentance, and it is this last that the Qur'ān generally intends.

The word is used across a range in the Book, and the reader should know the range so that he does not misapply it. It is used of the hypocrites: *truly the hypocrites, they are the transgressors*. It is used of Muslims with bad practices: *wretched is the name of transgression after faith*, which of course presupposes the faith. And it is used of bad people generally: *O you who believe, if a transgressor comes to you with news, verify it*. So it covers the sinning Muslim and the disbeliever both, and its force in any place is set by its context.

الَّذِينَ يَنْقُضُونَ عَهْدَ اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مِيثَاقِهِ وَيَقْطَعُونَ مَا أَمَرَ اللَّهُ
بِهِ أَنْ يُوْصَلَ وَيَفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Those who break the covenant of Allāh after its binding, and sever what Allāh has commanded to be joined, and spread corruption in the earth. Those are the losers.

al-Baqara 2:27

Now the transgressors are defined, and by three things.

The first is breaking Allāh's ﷻ covenant, and the reader will want to know which covenant, and the 'ulamā' answer that it is left general because it is several. There is the primordial covenant of *alastu*: *And when your Lord took from the children of Ādam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, am I not your Lord? They said, yes indeed, we testify*. There is the covenant implicit in the faculties He gave us, for an eye is a trust and a tongue is a trust and each of them was issued on terms. There is the specific covenant taken from the Children of Isrā'īl in the Torah, to believe in the final Prophet ﷺ when he came. And there is the covenant taken from the People of the Book generally, of which Allāh ﷻ says, *and when Allāh took the covenant*.

The word for breaking is from *na-qa-da*, which is used for the unravelling of a thick, strong rope, undoing the twist strand by strand until nothing is left but fibre. Which tells us what the covenant is: a strong rope, binding people to one another and humanity to its Lord. And the word *mīthāq*, from a root meaning to bind fast and make firm, confirms the image. A cable is being picked apart, strand by strand, by somebody who means to.

The second is severing what Allāh ﷻ has commanded to be joined. And again He leaves it open, and the openness is the point: every single relation. Our ties to one another as Muslims, our ties of blood, our obligations by contract, all of it. The 'ulamā' speak of a natural hierarchy in these, beginning with parents, then the contracts we have entered into, then family, then friends, and the order is instructive, but the āyah names none of them precisely so that none can be excluded.

And the joining of the two crimes in one āyah is the real teaching. A man who has broken his covenant with Allāh ﷻ is very unlikely to keep faith with anybody else. If the vertical rope has been unravelled, the horizontal ones will not hold, because they were spun from the same fibre. The reader who has ever wondered why a man who abandoned his prayer also abandoned his mother has the answer here.

The third is spreading corruption in the earth, which we have met already at the eleventh āyah, and it is placed last because it is the consequence of the first two. Break the covenant, sever the ties, and corruption follows without anybody having to intend it.

And the believers are the exact photographic negative of these people, as Allāh ﷻ says in Sūrat al-Ra'd: *Only those of understanding take heed, those who fulfil the covenant of Allāh and do not break the pledge, and those who join what Allāh has commanded to be joined.* Same three items, in the same order, reversed. The Qur'ān has given us both columns of the ledger and left us to find our own name.

How Can You Disbelieve?

كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَكُنْتُمْ أَمْوَاتًا فَأَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ
ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تَرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

How can you disbelieve in Allāh, when you were dead and He gave you life, then He will cause you to die, then He will give you life, then to Him you will be returned?

al-Baqara 2:28

This is *istifhām inkārī*, the rhetorical question of rebuke, and it is what a person says when argument has been exhausted and something more than argument is called for. How? How, after all this? The Arabic *kayfa* at the head of the sentence carries the whole weight of a raised voice.

And Allāh ﷻ recounts the blessings again, in the second person, and the reader should remember what we said about the word *nās*. We forget. So He tells us again, and this time He does not point to the earth and the sky and the rain. He

points at us, and He gives the whole of a human life from its beginning to its end in eleven words.

Wa kuntum amwātan, and you were dead. Which means there was something there to be dead, and the ‘ulamā’ take this to indicate a prior existence, matter, particles, elements dispersed through the world before the soul was breathed in, and the reader will notice that the Qur’ān does not say you were nothing, it says you were dead, which is a different claim.

Fa ahyākum, and He gave you life. *Thumma yumītukum*, then He will cause you to die, and here is the pivot of the whole argument, because death is the one item on the list that nobody disputes. Every man is a believer in death. And so the argument runs: you accept the third item, and you accepted the first two by being here, so on what grounds do you reject the fourth? And death is itself a proof, because it is not a natural process that we have any purchase on. It cannot be prevented, or delayed, or bargained with, and no amount of wealth has ever bought a single hour of it. It is the one appointment that no man has ever missed.

And the reader may ask whether death is a blessing, since the āyah lists it amongst blessings. It is, and it may be a greater one than life. Every degree of life in this world ends in a death, and every death in it opens onto a higher degree of life. The plant consumed by the animal dies and rises to the degree of animal life. The animal consumed by a man dies and rises to the degree of human life. A seed annihilates itself under the soil and becomes a tree that yields thousands of its own kind, and it could never have done so while it remained intact and comfortable and a seed. And a man, dying and going into the earth, begins his eternal life. Looked at that way, death is the only way the story gets anywhere.

And the last clause: *thumma ilayhi turja’un*, then to Him you will be returned, and the passive is doing work. You will be returned, whether you like it or not, and you will see the reality for yourself, and that is the answer to every man who has said that he will believe it when he sees it. He will.

The breathing of the soul made you a human being. The blowing of the trumpet will finish you. And the blowing of the trumpet will bring you back.

Three breaths, and the whole of the human career is between the first and the last.

Allāh ﷻ presses the same argument in Sūrat al-Ṭūr with a coldness that has never been answered: *Or were they created out of nothing, or are they the creators? Or did they create the heavens and the earth? No, rather they have no certainty.* Three possibilities, and only three, and two of them are absurd.

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ
فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَوَاتٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

He it is who created for you all that is in the earth, then He turned to the heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. And He is Knower of all things.

al-Baqara 2:29

Khalaqa lakum, created for you, and the preposition is the whole āyah. The world was created for us. We were not created for the world. We were created for Allāh ﷻ, and everything else was created for us, and every disorder in a human life can be traced to getting those two the wrong way round.

The world is a place of benefit, and the reader may take it as a general truth that everything natural in it is, in principle, of use to us. From this the jurists derive one of the great principles of Islamic law, *al-aṣlu fi'l-ashyā' al-ibāḥa*, the default in things is permissibility. Everything is lawful until the Sharī'a says otherwise. And the reader should notice the temperament this creates, because it is the opposite of the anxious, suspicious temperament that assumes a thing is forbidden until somebody proves it is not. The burden of proof was placed, by this āyah, on prohibition.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله takes *thumma*, then, at face value, and reads the āyah as establishing that the earth was created before the heavens, and he notes that this is how human beings build, laying the foundation before raising the roof.

But there is another āyah, in Sūrat al-Nāzi‘āt, which appears to reverse the order, mentioning the heaven and then saying that He spread out the earth afterwards. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله, reporting from Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما, gives the answer, and it is simple and complete: Allāh ﷻ created the barren earth first, then turned His attention to the heavens and fashioned them, and then returned to the earth and sent down the rain and brought out the pasture, and so made it useful. The creation of the earth precedes the heavens. The furnishing of the earth follows them. Both āyahs are exactly right and neither has to give way.

Thumma istawā ila’l-samā’, then He turned to the heaven, or rose above it, and the reader has arrived at the first of the *mutashābihāt*, the āyahs whose full meaning is not disclosed to us. We do not ask how, and we do not press for detail, because the āyah itself closes with *wa huwa bi kulli shay’in ‘alīm*, and He is Knower of all things, which is a full stop and not an invitation.

Imām Mālik رحمه الله was asked about *istiwā’*, and his answer has never been improved upon in twelve centuries of trying:

الِاسْتِوَاءُ مَعْلُومٌ، وَالْكَيفُ مَجْهُولٌ، وَالْإِيْمَانُ بِهِ وَاجِبٌ، وَالسُّؤَالُ
عَنْهُ بَدْعَةٌ

The istiwā’ is known, and the how of it is unknown, and belief in it is obligatory, and asking about it is an innovation.

Four clauses, and each of them refuses a different error. The word is known, so we do not empty it. The manner is unknown, so we do not liken Him to His creation. Belief is obligatory, so we do not set it aside as a puzzle. And the question is an innovation, so we do not spend our lives on it. There are men who have wasted whole careers on what Imām Mālik رحمه الله settled before he finished his tea.

The Symmetry of These Āyahs

Before we move to the account of Ādam عليه السلام, the reader should be shown something about the passage he has just crossed, because it has a shape, and the shape is easy to miss when reading forwards, one āyah at a time.

The āyahs from the twenty-first to the twenty-ninth are arranged as a ring, folding back on themselves around a centre, and they may be read from both ends inwards.

Āyah twenty-one calls mankind to worship the Lord who created them and those before them. Its partner, āyah twenty-eight, asks how they can disbelieve in the One who took them through every stage of life. The same argument from creation, opened and closed.

Āyah twenty-two describes the world He made around them, the earth and the sky and the water and the fruit. Its partner, āyah twenty-nine, says that He created for them all that is in the earth and fashioned the seven heavens. The same furnished world, given and given again.

Āyah twenty-three challenges those who doubt the Qur'ān sent to the final Messenger ﷺ to bring the like of it. Its partner, āyah twenty-seven, describes those who break their covenant with Allāh ﷻ, which was, for the People of the Book, precisely the covenant to believe in that Book and that Prophet ﷺ when he came, and who instead doubt and spread corruption.

Āyah twenty-four tells them they will fail, and to fear the Fire. Its partner, āyah twenty-six, says that Allāh ﷻ is not ashamed to strike parables, and that by them He guides many and misguides many, and that the transgressors are not guided. The Fire on one side, and the road to it on the other.

And at the centre, alone, unpaired, stands āyah twenty-five: the glad tidings of the Garden. The whole structure closes around it.

The reader may make of that what he wishes, but he should at least notice that a Book delivered piecemeal over twenty-three years to a man who could not read has this in it, and that nobody was pointing it out at the time.

Ādam and the Angels

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۖ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

And when your Lord said to the angels, I am placing a vicegerent on the earth, they said, will You place therein one who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, whilst we glorify You with Your praise and sanctify You? He said, truly I know what you do not know.

al-Baqara 2:30

Allāh ﷻ spoke of mankind and gave glad tidings of the Garden, and now He turns to the first man, and it is worth noticing where his story begins. It begins in the Garden, eating a fruit, with his wife. The reader who has just been promised a garden with fruit and a spouse is being told, before anything else, that he has been there before.

Idh, when, in the past, and the idiom is the Qur'ān's way of saying, remember when. *Rabbuka*, your Lord, addressed to the Messenger ﷺ, and the possessive is a comfort placed in the middle of an argument with deniers: whatever they say, He is yours.

Khalīfa, and the word does not mean deputy in the sense of somebody standing in for an absent master, for Allāh ﷻ is not absent. It comes from a root meaning to come after, to succeed, and the sense is of one generation following another, authority passing down a line. It is used of prophets, as when Allāh ﷻ says, *O Dāwūd, We have made you a vicegerent on the earth*, and of mankind at large. And notice that Allāh ﷻ announces this before He announces Ādam عليه السلام. The office existed before the man.

Now, the angels' question, and the reader must be careful here, because angels do not object. This is a request for instruction, and it is asked with perfect courtesy, and Allāh ﷻ preserved it for us precisely because the answer is the whole reason for our existence.

But how did they know? They had never seen a human being. The 'ulamā' give three answers, each satisfying. The first is that the jinn, who resemble mankind in having free will and intellect and anger and appetite, had already been on the earth and had already caused sedition and bloodshed, and the angels reasoned from the precedent. The second is that the word *khalīfa* itself implies authority, and where there is authority there is the abuse of it, and no further information was required. And the third, which Qatāda رحمه الله states, is simply that Allāh ﷻ told them.

Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī رحمه الله draws out the two verbs the angels use of their own worship, and they offer a comparison in good faith rather than a boast. *Nusabbihū*, we glorify, which is the purification of Allāh ﷻ from all defect by word and by act. *Nuqaddisu*, we sanctify, which is the same purification in belief. Together the two are comprehensive, covering the outward and the inward, and the angels are saying, in effect: the post appears to require constant worship, and we already provide it, so what is the deficiency?

And underneath the question lies a genuine puzzlement which is perhaps the most interesting thing in the āyah. The angels were curious as to how intelligence could ever be strong enough to overcome desire. They had never seen it done, because they have no desire to overcome. To them, a creature with appetites and free will was a creature that would inevitably follow its appetites, and their reasoning was impeccable and their conclusion was wrong, and it was wrong in a way that could only be shown and not argued.

Which is why Allāh ﷻ answers them in two ways and not one. First, with authority: *innī a'lamu mā lā ta'lamūn*, I know what you do not know. That would have been sufficient, and for an angel it was sufficient. But He does not leave it there. He then answers with wisdom, by demonstration, by producing Ādam عليه السلام and showing them what he could do. And there is a lesson in

that for anybody who teaches, that Allāh ﷻ, who owed no explanation to anyone, gave one anyway.

Why Did Allāh Tell the Angels at All?

He did not need to. He announced His intention to a creation that had no vote, and the ‘ulamā’ ask why, and give two answers. The first is that He wished to display His *ikhtiṣār*, His free choosing, and His power, and to show them how He creates, and there is no obligation in it, only a disclosure. The second is more useful to us: to teach mankind the importance of *mashwara*, of consultation. The Lord of the Worlds informed His creatures of what He was about to do, and He was not obliged to, and the man who makes decisions over his family or his community without a word to anybody has a rather higher opinion of his own authority than Allāh ﷻ exercised over the angels.

The Angels

A word about them, since they are half of this conversation.

They are a different creation altogether, belonging to the unseen world, and the reader who finds that difficult should reflect that we have discovered several hundred new species on this planet since 1993, and that the confident assumption that we have catalogued reality is refuted every few months by a beetle.

They are made from light. They are neither male nor female. Being servants with no evil-commanding soul in them, they obey the commandments issuing from the Eternal Will that governs the universe, and there is nothing amongst them to cause a quarrel or a dispute, because they are innocent, and their realm is vast, and their nature is pure, and their stations are fixed. Each of the heavenly bodies is a place of worship for them.

Allāh ﷻ says of them that they do not disobey Him in what He commands them and that they do as they are told, and that they are honoured servants who do not precede Him in speech and who act by His command. They glorify Him without pause and without tiring, day and night, and a human being does not

have that capacity and was never built for it, and this is worth remembering when we compare ourselves unfavourably to them. We were not made to do their job.

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي
بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

And He taught Ādam the names, all of them, then He presented them to the angels and said, tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful.

al-Baqara 2:31

The demonstration begins, and the instrument of it is knowledge.

What are the names? The names of everything, of people and things and their properties, the qualities of everyone and everything. The point was never vocabulary. It is the capacity to know a thing as it is and to hold that knowledge in language, and it is the faculty out of which every science and every art and every civilisation has come.

The reader will ask the obvious question, and it is the right one: why not simply teach the angels? Why create an entirely new species for this? And the answers open up the whole matter of who we are.

The first is that the angels could never know these things in the way required, because knowledge of this kind is not information. To know what a thing does to a human being, you must be the kind of creature it can be done to. An angel can be told what wine is. He cannot know what wine is, because he cannot be tempted by it, and the knowledge that the *khalīfā* needed was knowledge of exactly that sort.

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله states it in terms of the office: a *khalīfā* must have the capacity to love and to be angry and to want and to fear, because he must feel what those he governs feel, and a ruler who has never felt hunger will

legislate about bread very badly. The qualification for the post was the ability to be moved, and purity had nothing to do with it.

And there is a third answer, which turns the whole thing round. Allāh ﷻ could witness more of His own great qualities within human beings than within angels, because there are favours of His that only a creature with needs can receive, and only a creature that has received them can give thanks for them. The angels do not need food, or drink, or health, or rest, or shelter, or healing, and so the entire range of Allāh's ﷻ providing and nourishing and curing and sheltering finds no object in them. He made a creature that could be hungry, so that there could be a creature that says *alḥamdulillāh* after eating.

How was Ādam عليه السلام taught? The 'ulamā' mention that it may have been privately or publicly, or that it may have been intrinsic, placed in him rather than transmitted to him, in the way that a newborn knows how to take milk and a duckling knows how to swim, having been taught by nobody. The last is perhaps the most striking, because it means the knowledge was not an accomplishment of Ādam's عليه السلام but a design feature of the species, and every child born since has arrived with it.

Why Only Humans Were Suited to the Khilāfa

This is worth stating plainly, because it settles what our value is and what it is not.

Purity is a beautiful quality in a leader. It is not the qualifying one. What qualifies is knowledge, knowledge of people, of their natures, of what things do to them. The angels were purer than Ādam عليه السلام and it did not help them for a moment, and the whole episode is a demonstration that *ilm* wins.

And if the angels had been given this knowledge and free will along with it, they would no longer be angels. That is the answer to the whole objection. The proposal to have angels do it dissolves on inspection, because the beings who did it would not be angels any more.

Here is the heart of it. The angels never do evil, and the Shayṭān never does good, and the human being alone has been given the capacity for both. And this is the design itself. We are responsible for using and developing our capacity for good, and for resisting our potential for evil, and, best of all, for taking that potential and turning it towards what is good. Envy can be channelled into competing in righteousness. Obstinacy can be turned into steadfastness upon the truth. Anger can become *ghayra* for the sacred. Nothing is thrown away, it is redirected.

And by doing good, and above all by struggling against the whisperings of the Shayṭān and against the evil-commanding soul, a human being ascends, and can go on ascending without limit, whilst the stations of the angels are fixed exactly where they are and always were, because they have no seduction to resist and no evil tendency to fight. They are magnificent and they are stationary. We are flawed and we are moving. That is what Allāh ﷻ knew and they did not.

قَالُوا سُبْحَنَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ
الْحَكِيمُ

*They said, glory be to You, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us.
Truly You are the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.*

al-Baqara 2:32

The answer of the angels, and it should be set beside the answer of Iblīs two āyahs from now, because the two of them together are the whole of the human predicament.

They begin with *subḥānak*, glory be to You, before they say anything about themselves. The first movement of a creature confronted with its own ignorance is to declare its Lord free of all defect, and the reader should notice that they did not say, we were mistaken, or, we did not mean it. They purified Him first.

Then, *lā ʿilma lanā illā mā ʿallamtanā*, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us, and they are being accurate rather than modest. Everything they had, He gave. Everything we have, He gave. Allāh ﷻ taught everything, the worldly knowledge and the other, and the surgeon and the engineer and the poet are all standing exactly where the angels are standing, and the only difference is that the angels know it.

Then the two names. *Al-ʿAlīm*, the One who knows everything. *Al-Ḥakīm*, the One who knows why. And the pairing is the answer to their own question, because their question had been a question about wisdom and not about facts. They knew what a human being would do. They did not know why it was worth it. And they close by naming Him the One who knows why, which is to say, we withdraw the question.

Half of knowledge is admitting that we do not know, and the angels have just given the finest demonstration of it in the Book.

قَالَ يٰٓآدَمُ اَنْبِئْهُمْ بِاسْمَائِهِمْ ۖ فَلَمَّ اَنْبَاَهُمْ بِاسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ اَلَمْ اَقُلْ
لَكُمْ اِنِّيۤ اَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْاَرْضِ وَاَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُوْنَ وَمَا
كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُوْنَ ﴿٣٣﴾

He said, O Ādam, inform them of their names. And when he had informed them of their names, He said, did I not tell you that I know the unseen of the heavens and the earth, and I know what you disclose and what you used to conceal?

al-Baqara 2:33

Ādam عليه السلام becomes a teacher, and the first thing the first man does in the Book, after being taught, is teach. Allāh ﷻ arranged for them to receive it from Ādam عليه السلام himself, in the flesh, so that the demonstration was complete and the pupil became the master in front of the class.

And Allāh ﷻ is once again showing His total knowledge and total control. He knows the unseen of the heavens and the earth, and He knows what is disclosed and what is concealed, and this last clause has troubled readers, because it seems to accuse the angels of concealing something, and angels do not conceal. The ‘ulamā’ have offered several readings, of which the safest is that it refers to what was in the hearts of all present, including Iblīs, who was standing amongst them, and whose refusal is one āyah away, and who was concealing at that moment exactly what he was about to reveal. Allāh ﷻ announced that He knew what was being hidden, and then let the next āyah demonstrate it.

The Refusal of Iblīs

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ
وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

And when We said to the angels, prostrate to Ādam, they prostrated, except Iblīs. He refused and was arrogant, and he was of the disbelievers.

al-Baqara 2:34

The name first. It is said to be a foreign word, and it is said to be from *iblās*, which means despair, the state of a man who has given up on mercy, and the second is a description of him even if it is not the derivation of his name.

Was he one of the angels? No, and the Qur’ān answers it explicitly elsewhere: *except Iblīs, he was of the jinn, and he transgressed against the command of his Lord.* He was of the jinn, and by the length and quality of his worship he had been saved from the destruction that overtook his kind and had been raised to reside amongst the angels, but he was never of them, and the exception in our āyah is an exception from the company he kept and not from the species he belonged to.

And that fact carries one of the most sobering lessons in the sūra. He lived amongst the angels. He worshipped for ages. He had the finest company that has ever existed, and none of it saved him, because the thing in him was constitutional and the company did not touch it. The reader who assumes that proximity to the pious will make him pious should sit with this. And the ‘ulamā’ note that this was itself a form of *istidrāj* with Iblīs, that his long ascent through worship and station was the rope paying out, small successes granted to a creature so that his fall, when it came, would be total.

Now, why was the prostration commanded at all? Allāh ﷻ created the human being with honour and made him a *khalīfa*, and the angels were made to acknowledge it. But the reader should see what the command does to the human being as much as what it does for him. The real power is Allāh’s ﷻ, and though man is the leader of this world, he is required to understand that there is an authority over him. He is honoured by a prostration and, in the same instant, shown that the honour was issued by somebody.

Prostration to Other Than Allāh

The reader will want this settled, because the question comes up and is often answered badly.

Prostration in the meaning of worship belongs to Allāh ﷻ alone, without exception and without qualification. When the angels obeyed Allāh’s ﷻ command to prostrate before Ādam عليه السلام, they were in reality prostrating to Him, for the act took its meaning from the One who commanded it, and Ādam عليه السلام was the direction and not the object.

Prostration to other than Allāh ﷻ out of honour, as to a parent, is *ḥarām* in our Sharī‘a, but it is not *kufr*, and it was permitted to communities before us, which is why the brothers of Yūsuf عليه السلام fell prostrate before him without sin. Prostration to other than Allāh ﷻ as worship is *kufr*, whoever does it and whatever he calls it.

And Allāh ﷻ does not tolerate competitors in worship. We cannot call our masters *Rabb* or our servants *‘abd*. We cannot bow or prostrate to them. We do not make images to honour the dead or raise statues to them. And the Messenger ﷺ closed the door at its narrowest point, for when Qays b. Sa’d رضي الله عنه came to him having seen the Persians prostrate to their ruler and said that he was more deserving of it, he forbade it absolutely, and said that if he were to command anyone to prostrate to anyone he would have commanded a wife to prostrate to her husband, and then did not command it.⁸ If prostration to the Messenger ﷺ himself is forbidden, and to his grave, then every avenue has been closed, and the closing was deliberate.

Istikbār

Two words describe what Iblīs did, and they are not the same. *Abā*, he refused, which is the outward act. *Wa’stakbara*, and he was arrogant, which is the inward cause. The refusal was what we could see. The arrogance was what was actually there, and it had been there all along, concealed, as the previous āyah warned.

What was in it? He felt that Ādam عليه السلام was beneath him. That is all. He wanted to be noticed and to be reckoned above, and it is the same disease that moved Qābīl against Hābīl when a sacrifice was accepted from one and not the other, and the same disease that moved the brothers of Yūsuf عليه السلام when they saw their father’s affection settle elsewhere. Hatred of the other man rarely comes into it. What burns is the intolerable sensation of not being the one.

Recognition is a killer, and the desire to be somebody has destroyed more religious men than wine ever has, because wine at least announces itself. The Messenger ﷺ was told by a man who worried that his fine clothes might be pride, and he said that Allāh ﷻ is beautiful and loves beauty, and that pride is to reject the truth and to look down on people. Two things, and neither of them is

8. Abū Dāwūd. The reader should notice the logic: the prohibition is demonstrated by naming the strongest imaginable case for an exception and then refusing it.

a garment. It is a posture of the heart towards the truth and towards other human beings, and a man in rags can have all of it.

And humility beautifies whoever carries it. Allāh ﷻ raises the humble and lowers the proud, and He alone controls *izza* and *dhilla*, as He declares in Sūra Āl Imrān, that He gives dominion to whom He wills and takes it from whom He wills, and honours whom He wills and humiliates whom He wills, and in His hand is all good. Iblīs wanted to be raised and did the one thing that guarantees lowering, and he did it in the presence of the One who controls the outcome.

وَقُلْنَا يٰٓآدَمُ اَسْكُنْ اَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ
شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

And We said, O Ādam, dwell, you and your wife, in the Garden, and eat from it freely wherever you wish. But do not approach this tree, or you will be amongst the wrongdoers.

al-Baqara 2:35

Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله draws out the words one by one and the reader will see that the whole of our own situation is in them.

Uskun, dwell, settle, find peace. And Allāh ﷻ does not say forever. He says reside, as a tenant resides, and the word contains the term of the tenancy without stating it.

Anta wa zawjuk, you and your wife, and Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله notes the order and what it establishes: the husband is addressed and the husband is responsible. The command came to him, and the account will be taken from him.

Raghadan, freely, abundantly, without care. Everything was permitted and nothing was rationed.

Wa lā taqrabā, and do not approach, and this is where the reader should stop. Allāh ﷻ did not say, do not eat from this tree. He said, do not go near it. And the jurists have built a principle on this, the closing of the doors to sin, *sadd al-dharā'i'*, and they apply it exactly where it needs applying. Allāh ﷻ does not say, do not commit *zinā*. He says, *do not go near zinā*. The prohibition is placed at a distance from the act, with a margin, because He knows that a man standing at the edge of a thing has already lost most of the argument.

And which tree? Allāh ﷻ does not say, and the ‘ulamā’ have been content not to know, and this is itself a principle of the Qur’ān which the reader will meet again and again. Where the Book leaves a thing vague, the vagueness is deliberate, and the energy we spend identifying the tree is energy taken from the lesson about the fence.

And look at what has just been described. Live here. Enjoy yourselves. Eat whatever you like, as much as you like, wherever you like. Except this one thing. This is our entire life in the world, in a single āyah, and the reader who complains that Islam is restrictive should count the ratio: an entire garden, and one tree.

فَأَزَلَّهُمَا الشَّيْطَانُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ وَقُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا
بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتْعَةٌ إِلَىٰ

حِينَ

Then the Shayṭān caused them to slip from it, and expelled them from where they had been. And We said, descend, some of you enemies to others. And for you on the earth is a dwelling place and enjoyment for a time.

al-Baqara 2:36

The verb is *azallahumā*, he caused them to slip, and it is a word about footing and not about intention. They did not defect. They slipped, and somebody had oiled the ground.

The name *Shayṭān* is from a root carrying the sense of distance, of being far from mercy, and used in its proper form it refers to Iblīs himself.

And the Qur'ān indicates that Ādam عليه السلام and Ḥawwā' عليها السلام did not know him for an enemy, for the account in Sūrat al-A'rāf has him swear to them, *and he swore to them, truly I am to you a sincere adviser*. He took an oath. And that detail is the most useful thing in the whole episode, because a man does not swear unless he senses resistance. Ādam عليه السلام knew that something was off. The oath was manufactured to answer a doubt that was already there, and it worked, and it has been working ever since.

So why did Ādam عليه السلام eat? Muftī Shafī' رحمه الله offers an explanation of great delicacy. A particular tree was pointed out to him, and he understood the prohibition to attach to that individual tree, when the intent was any tree of that kind. It was a misreading, and the reader who has ever been caught by a technicality of his own devising will recognise the shape of it. And the Qur'ān itself supplies the other half: *and We had made a covenant with Ādam before, but he forgot, and We found in him no firm resolve*. He forgot. Allāh ﷻ says so, and there is no need for us to improve on it.

Mimmā kānā fīh, from what they had been in, and Allāh ﷻ does not name the blessing they lost, and the 'ulamā' read the silence as a measure of the Garden itself, which cannot be inventoried, so that what was lost cannot be stated because it was without limit.

Mawlānā 'Āshiq Ilāhī رحمه الله takes the plain lesson: sins cause the loss of blessings. Not the punishment of sins, at some later date, in some other place. The sin itself removes the blessing, immediately, as a matter of cause and effect, and the man who wonders why the sweetness has gone out of his prayer usually has the answer if he is honest for thirty seconds.

And Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله adds a note that is worth more than a page of theology. Two who love each other can bear physical separation. What they cannot bear is the other's displeasure. Ādam عليه السلام was not weeping over the fruit or the garden or the climate. He had displeased his Beloved, and that was the whole of the catastrophe, and everything else was scenery.

The Purity of the Prophets

The reader has just been told that a prophet made a mistake, and he is entitled to some care with the matter, because a great deal depends on it.

Allāh ﷻ hand-selects the prophets. They are the best of people, chosen and not applying. He has made their obedience His own obedience, and He says, *whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed Allāh*, and He made the pledge given at the Prophet's ﷺ hand a pledge given to Himself, saying that the hand of Allāh ﷻ is above their hands. They are the guides of humanity, and a guide at whom fingers can be pointed is not a guide.

Iblīs was the first creature to question the standing of a prophet, and the reader has just seen what became of him, and the precedent should be kept in view by anybody tempted to speak lightly of them.

Notice also the order in which Allāh ﷻ has arranged this narrative. He announced the *khilāfa* of man, and the teaching of the names, and the prostration of the angels, and only then, with the honour fully established, did He mention the slip. The honour is placed before the error, deliberately, exactly as He speaks of the forgiveness of the Messenger ﷺ in Sūrat al-Faṭḥ before He mentions anything at all that might require it. The reader is not permitted to arrive at the mistake until he has been made to understand who is making it.

So they can have mishaps, human errors, and not deliberate sins of the kind we commit daily and cheerfully. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله offers an illustration which settles the matter better than an argument. Water is pure and clean and cold. It can be heated by an external fire, and while it is hot it is not behaving as water behaves, but there is nothing in the water that produced the

heat, and once the fire is removed it returns to itself. And in every state, hot or cold, water will still put out a fire. That quality never leaves it. The prophets have no intrinsic evil, and whatever mishap occurs is from an external influence, and the extinguishing quality is never lost.

And Allāh ﷻ magnifies even these errors precisely because of their station, for the higher the standing the finer the accounting, and the good deeds of the righteous are the shortcomings of the near. Meanwhile, at our level, a scholar who exercises his judgement and gets it wrong is still rewarded once, and this is the mercy we live on.

Al-Rāzī's Four Categories

Imām al-Rāzī رحمه الله divides the question into four, and the division is so clean that it ends most of the confusion around it.

The first is *'aqīda*, core belief. By consensus, the prophets are free of any trace of *kufr*, before prophethood and after it, without exception.

The second is *tablīgh*, the conveying of the message. By consensus, they are free of adding to it, or omitting from it, or forgetting it, or altering it. Whatever came down, came through, entire.

The third is their rulings and their exercises of judgement and their public decisions, and here a suboptimal decision is possible, as with the ransoming of the prisoners at Badr, but such a decision would always be corrected by revelation, and the correction is itself part of the protection.

The fourth is their actions and habits and ordinary conduct, where slips and minor errors are possible, as with the sleeping through Fajr on a journey. They were human beings with human needs, and they could err, and nothing deliberate and nothing major.

Descend From Here

The command *ihbiṭū* is plural, and not dual, and so it addresses more than Ādam عليه السلام and Ḥawwā' عليها السلام. It addresses their descendants, which is to say, us. We were in the sentence.

Now, a matter must be settled here plainly, because we differ from those who came before us over it, and the difference is not a small one.

Some, under the influence of narrations from Biblical sources, have argued that Ḥawwā' عليها السلام led Ādam عليه السلام to be deceived. This is the approach of the Old Testament, where the serpent addresses the woman and she takes the fruit and gives it to her husband,⁹ and from it woman was considered evil and held in disgrace through much of medieval Christianity, with consequences that ran for a thousand years. The Qur'ān does no such thing. It centres the event on Ādam عليه السلام. It is he who received the words. It is he, more than she, who had to implore forgiveness, although they both did. And when the Qur'ān mentions the eating, it mentions them both together, as in Sūra Ṭā Hā, *so they both ate of it*. There is no original sin here, and there is no woman to blame for it, and the reader who has absorbed the opposite from the surrounding culture should notice that he did not get it from this Book.

Nor do we believe that Ādam عليه السلام and Ḥawwā' عليها السلام were sent to the earth as a punishment, and the proof of this is structural and it is decisive. The very first mention of Ādam عليه السلام in this sūra, at the thirtieth āyah, is Allāh ﷻ announcing that He is placing a *khalīfā* on the earth, and He announced it before the narrative of the tree had even begun. The descent to earth was the plan, stated in advance, and it was not the consequence of the slip. The Catholics built monasticism on the opposite premise, treating the world as a cursed sentence to be endured and withdrawn from, and the whole edifice rests on a reading the Qur'ān has already refused.

9. Genesis 3:1–6. The order of the account matters: the woman is approached, the woman is persuaded, and the man receives the fruit from her hand. The Qur'ān's account corrects this one rather than varying it.

Then, *ba'dukum li ba'din 'aduww*, some of you enemies to others, and the enmity is of several kinds. There is the enmity between the Shayṭān and mankind, which is the original one and the honest one, declared on both sides. There is the enmity of human beings amongst themselves, which is a second affliction laid on top of the first, and which we administer to ourselves with an enthusiasm that requires no encouragement from Iblīs at all. And there is the enmity that has been set between men and women, which the reader may observe working itself out around him at this moment, and which is precisely what the Shayṭān wanted when he separated the first two.

And then the mercy that closes the āyah: *wa lakum fi'l-arḍi mustaqarrun wa matā'un ilā ḥīn*, and for you on the earth is a dwelling place and enjoyment for a time. Even in the sentence of descent, a provision is made, and the last three words, *ilā ḥīn*, for a time, are the kindest in the āyah, because they tell us that the arrangement is temporary and that we are going home.

The Repentance of Ādam

فَتَلَقَّىٰ آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ ۖ كَلِمَتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

*Then Ādam received words from his Lord, and He turned to him in mercy. Truly
He is the Ever-Relenting, the Ever-Merciful.*

al-Baqara 2:37

Fa talaqqā, and the *fā'* at the head of it implies speed, that it all happened quickly, and the sequence matters. Allāh ﷻ inspired him with words and he repented immediately, and the inspiration came as a result of his remorse, which means the remorse came first. He was already broken before he was given anything to say.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله draws out the beauty of it: his remorse was so great that he was lost for words entirely, and Allāh ﷻ had to dictate them to him. He wanted to apologise and could not speak. And Imām al-Ālūsī رحمه الله notes that the verb *talaqqā* indicates that he received the words welcomingly, with anticipation, reaching for them, which is the posture of a man to whom a rope has been thrown.

Other āyahs tell us that Allāh ﷻ questioned him, calling out, *did I not forbid you that tree, and say to you that the Shayṭān is a manifest enemy to you?* And the reader should hear what is in that question. That is the voice of a father who has been hurt, and no judge has ever spoken like it.

The words themselves are preserved in Sūrat al-A'rāf: *Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we shall surely be amongst the losers.* There is no excuse in it. There is no mention of the Shayṭān, who was in fact to blame, and who had sworn an oath, and who would have made a perfectly serviceable defence. There is only, we have wronged ourselves.

Now set that beside the answer of Iblīs. He also had a case. He also had been placed in a situation and had failed in it. And what he said was, *I am better than him, You created me from fire and created him from clay.* Two creatures, two failures, one moment. One said, I was wrong. The other said, You were. And the entire difference between the people of the Garden and the people of the Fire is contained in the gap between those two sentences, and the reader should understand that the gap is humility, and neither intelligence nor knowledge.

And notice the teaching order: Allāh ﷻ taught Ādam عليه السلام, and Ādam عليه السلام taught Hawwā' عليها السلام, and from this the 'ulamā' derive that a man is responsible for his wife's education in the religion, and it is a duty that a great many men amongst us have quietly outsourced to nobody at all.

Then the two names, and the placement of them is the whole mercy of the āyah. Allāh ﷻ has already told us that He accepted the repentance, the matter is closed, Ādam عليه السلام is forgiven. And then He adds, *truly He is the Ever-Re-*

lenting, the Ever-Merciful. Why? The transaction is complete. He adds it because He is advertising a service rather than reporting an event. The names are in the present, permanent, general, and they are placed at the end so that the reader closes the āyah understanding that this was never about Ādam عليه السلام at all, and that the door is standing open and he is being invited through it.

And consider what *Tawwāb* actually says. It is from the same root as *tawba*, and *tawba* means to turn back. When we repent, we turn back to Him. And He is *Tawwāb*, which means that He turns back to us. The slave who ran away turns around, and finds that the Master has already turned.

يَقُولُ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: مَنْ جَاءَ بِالْحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُ عَشْرُ امْتَالِهَا وَأَزِيدُ،
وَمَنْ جَاءَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ جَزَاؤُهُ سَيِّئَةٌ مِثْلُهَا أَوْ أَغْفِرُ، وَمَنْ تَقَرَّبَ مِنِّي
شِبْرًا تَقَرَّبْتُ مِنْهُ ذِرَاعًا، وَمَنْ تَقَرَّبَ مِنِّي ذِرَاعًا تَقَرَّبْتُ مِنْهُ بَاعًا،
وَمَنْ أَتَانِي يَمْشِي أَتَيْتُهُ هَرْوَلَةً، وَمَنْ لَقِينِي بِقُرَابِ الْأَرْضِ خَطِيئَةً
لَا يُشْرِكُ بِي شَيْئًا لَقِيتُهُ بِمِثْلِهَا مَغْفِرَةً

*Allāh, Mighty and Majestic, says: Whoever comes with a good deed shall have ten like it and more. Whoever comes with an evil deed shall be recompensed with one like it, or I forgive. Whoever draws near to Me by a handspan, I draw near to him by a cubit. Whoever draws near to Me by a cubit, I draw near to him by a fathom. Whoever comes to Me walking, I come to him running. And whoever meets Me with the earth's fill of sins, associating nothing with Me, I shall meet him with the like of it in forgiveness.*¹⁰

The reader should notice that the arithmetic is deliberately unfair in every clause. Ten for one, and more. One for one, or nothing. A handspan met with a cubit. A cubit met with a fathom. And then the sentence that no religion on earth has ever matched: whoever comes to Me walking, I come to him running.

10. Muslim 2687, on the authority of Abū Dharr رضي الله عنه.

The slave takes one hesitant step and Allāh ﷻ covers the rest of the distance at speed, and He describes Himself as doing so.

Tawba: A Full Return

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله is careful to say what *tawba* is not, because a great many of us have been performing something else under its name. It is not an emotion of remorse, and it is not a form of words. It indicates a change of mind and a full redirection, a complete turn, and a man who has said *astaghfirullāh* three hundred times and walked in the same direction has not repented, he has been counting.

Imām Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله sets out its elements as three, and the arrangement is memorable. *Ilm*, knowledge, which is the acknowledgement that this thing is a sin and that it was yours. *Hāl*, state, which is the shame and the remorse that follow the acknowledgement. And *‘amal*, action, which is the giving up of the sin now, and the resolve never to return to it, and, where the rights of another person are involved, the returning of what was taken, and, where a prayer was missed, the making up of it. Knowledge, then state, then action, and a repentance missing any one of the three is missing a leg.

And the *du‘ā’* of Ādam عليه السلام teaches us the posture, and it is the same posture in every accepted *du‘ā’* in the Book. Yūnus عليه السلام in the belly of the fish said, *there is no god but You, glory be to You, truly I was amongst the wrongdoers*. Mūsā عليه السلام said, *my Lord, I have wronged myself, so forgive me*. In each case: You are perfect, I am the problem. Not one of them explained the circumstances.

And only Allāh ﷻ can forgive. Not an imām, not a Shaykh, not a priest, not a saint, and not a committee. It is a private matter between a slave and his Lord, and there is no counter to queue at, and this is amongst the greatest mercies of this religion and one of the things that most sharply distinguishes it from what surrounds it.

Al-Sha'rānī رحمه الله, as Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله relates, observes that Allāh ﷻ created human beings and jinn with two instincts, one towards good and one towards evil, and that He inaugurated goodness with Ādam عليه السلام and evil with Iblīs, so that the two roads were opened by the two of them on the same afternoon, and every one of us has been choosing between them ever since.

And a practical lesson for parents, which the reader may act on today. Teach children to say sorry, and teach them to accept it when it is said. We have just seen that the whole difference between salvation and ruin turned on the ability to produce one sentence, and it is a skill, and it is learned at home, and the child who is never made to apologise and never sees an apology accepted is being trained in the school of Iblīs without anybody intending it.

قُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًا فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ مِنِّي هُدًى فَمَنْ تَبَعَ هُدَايَ
فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

We said, descend from it, all of you. And when guidance comes to you from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve.

al-Baqara 2:38

The command to descend is repeated, and the reader should ask why, since it was already given at the thirty-sixth āyah, and Imām Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله gives the answer: the repetition, coming after the repentance, shows that the descent was not a consequence of the mistake but an inevitability, because the command stood before the slip and it still stood after the forgiveness.

This matters enormously, and it is worth stating in full. The acceptance of the repentance of Ādam عليه السلام and Hawwā' عليها السلام did not mean that the decree of their descent to the earth would be cancelled. It meant that they began their earthly life cleansed of their error, without any blemish and without any original sin to be passed on to their descendants, exactly as every newborn begins life free of sin. And it is a principle of the Qur’ān, and one of the basic

principles of law everywhere, that no soul earns except to its own account, and that no bearer of burden bears the burden of another. The child who is born amongst us is born innocent, and owes nothing to what happened under that tree, and needs no ceremony to wash it off.

Fa immā ya'tiyannakum, and when guidance comes to you, and the Arabic here is emphatic in a way English cannot easily carry, doubling the certainty. It tells us that guidance is from Allāh ﷻ and that it is coming, and the only question is whether we have opened the vessel to receive it and whether we will follow it where it leads.

And there is a tenderness in the arrangement which the reader should not miss. Allāh ﷻ was never going to send a human being down to this place without also sending a way back. The descent and the guidance are announced in the same breath, in the same āyah, and the door out was built into the sentence of exile.

Then the two promises. *Lā khawfun 'alayhim*, no fear upon them, and fear is about the future. It is mentioned first because it is the more severe of the two, since a man can endure a great deal of past grief but very little uncertainty about what is coming. Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī رحمه الله makes a fine distinction: it does not mean that they will never feel afraid, for the prophets themselves felt fear. It means that Allāh ﷻ will not inflict upon them the thing they feared. The fear may come. The catastrophe will not.

And notice the grammar of it, for it is a noun, *khawf*, and not a verb, which conveys a settled and permanent absence.

Wa lā hum yaḥzanūn, nor shall they grieve, and this is about the past, the sadness and the regret over what has gone. And here Allāh ﷻ uses a verb rather than a noun, and the 'ulamā' read the difference exactly: sadness is temporary, it comes and it goes, and the verb conveys its passing nature. Fear is abolished as a category. Sadness is simply not permitted to settle.

And the people of the Garden will say, when they arrive, *all praise belongs to Allāh who has removed from us all grief*, and the reader may consider what it

says about this life that the first thing they think to be grateful for is not the rivers.

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَكَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا أُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا
خَالِدُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

*And those who disbelieve and deny Our signs, those are the companions of the Fire,
they shall abide therein forever.*

al-Baqara 2:39

The other half of the sentence, and with it the first great movement of the sūra closes.

The reader who has come this far should be shown what he has crossed, because these thirty-nine āyahs are a complete structure and the fortieth begins something new.

With remarkable concision, the sūra so far has informed us about guidance, and about faith and Islam and their pillars and principles. Then about disbelief and hypocrisy and the reasons for them, with a description of the qualities of all three groups. Then it presented decisive and comprehensive proofs, drawn both from the inner world of the human being and from the outer world around him, of Allāh's ﷻ existence and oneness, of the divine authorship of the Qur'ān, of the messengership of Muḥammad ﷺ, and of the Hereafter with its Garden and its Fire. Then it explained the nature and the duty of the human being and how we began our life on this earth. It has, in this way, summarised its main purposes before beginning to narrate the earthly adventure of humankind and of human communities, which will illustrate those purposes with concrete historical examples.

And in these last two āyahs it has thrown a rope back to the beginning of the sūra and tied the whole thing together. It refers directly to the guidance mentioned at the opening by mentioning guidance again in the thirty-eighth. It

expands the *falāḥ* of the fifth āyah by telling us what success actually consists of: *no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve*. And by stating that those who disbelieve and deny His signs are the companions of the Fire abiding therein, it recalls the twenty-third and twenty-fourth āyahs, which threatened those who denied the divine authorship of the Qur'ān with a Fire whose fuel is people and stones.

The circle is closed. And now the sūra turns, and for the next fifty āyahs it will speak to a single nation, and will show us, in their history, everything it has just told us in principle.

O Children of Isrā'īl

An Introduction to the Banū Isrā'īl

The sūra is about to spend fifty āyahs on a single nation, and the reader will follow none of it without a little history, so let us set it out.

Ibrāhīm عليه السلام had two famous sons who were themselves prophets, and he had others besides, as Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله records in *al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*. Ishāq عليه السلام had a son called Ya'qūb عليه السلام, and Ya'qūb عليه السلام was also called Isrā'īl, and it is from him that the Children of Isrā'īl take their name. From his twelve sons came the twelve tribes that made up the nation. After Yūsuf عليه السلام became the minister of Egypt his whole family migrated there, and the twelve tribes settled and prospered, and Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله tells us that Mūsā عليه السلام came more than four hundred years after those first twelve brothers.

So the story of the Banū Isrā'īl begins in Egypt, and they lived there peacefully for generations. Then the pharaohs enslaved them, because they were migrants and not natives of the land, and they were treated as animals are treated, and their sons were killed and their women taken. Allāh ﷻ returns to these trials several times in the Qur'ān, and He Himself says of them that in that was a tremendous trial from your Lord.

Then came the deliverance, and the sea, and the twelve paths through the water, one for each tribe. And then, instead of a short march home, forty years of wandering in the wilderness of Tih, because they refused the fight that would have taken them back to Palestine, the land of their forefathers Yūsuf عليه السلام and Ya'qūb عليه السلام. In that wilderness they troubled Mūsā عليه السلام beyond what any prophet has been troubled by his own people. They worshipped a calf whilst he was receiving the Torah. They demanded to see Allāh ﷻ with their eyes before they would believe. And the mountain was raised over them.

Mūsā عليه السلام died in that wilderness, and Yūsha' b. Nūn عليه السلام led them at last into Bayt al-Maqdis. Later they were driven out of it, and a portion of them came to settle at Madīnah, looking for the place between two lava fields where their books told them the final Prophet ﷺ would appear. They became a substantial community there, alongside the Aws and the Khazraj who had come up from Yemen. And that is who is being addressed. These are the neighbours, three streets away, who had been waiting for him for centuries and who did not accept him when he arrived.

يٰۤاَيُّهَا بَنِي إِسْرَٰئِيلَ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِيۤ اَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَاَوْفُوا بِعَهْدِيۤ
اَوْفِ بِعَهْدِكُمْ وَاِيَّيَّ فَارْهَبُوۡنِ ﴿٤٠﴾

Children of Isrā'īl, remember My favour which I bestowed upon you, and fulfil My covenant, and I shall fulfil your covenant, and fear Me alone.

al-Baqara 2:40

Four threads are tied together here, and the reader who sees them will understand why this address comes exactly where it does.

The thirty-ninth āyah ended with those who disbelieved and denied the signs. And the natural question is: who is the best example of a people who knew the guidance was true and did not follow it? From here to the end of the Juz', Allāh ﷻ answers.

Second, Ādam عليه السلام made a single mistake and lost a blessing temporarily. Now Allāh ﷻ speaks of an entire nation who were blessed beyond every other, and who through their repeated mistakes lost blessing after blessing, permanently. The scale has changed and the lesson has not.

Third, there were several groups at Madīnah in the Prophet's ﷺ time, and the sūra has now addressed the believers, the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and here it turns to those who believed in the earlier prophets.

And fourth, the third *rukū'* opened with *O mankind*, general and universal, and this one opens with *O Children of Isrā'īl*, particular and named.

Why *Banū Isrā'īl* and not *Banū Ya'qūb*? Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله answers that Isrā'īl carries the sense of the servant of Allāh ﷻ, and Allāh ﷻ is calling them by the name that reminds them what their father was, as one might say to a man, be your father's son. Every time they hear their own name they are being told what they are supposed to be.

And why this nation at all? Because they are the greatest nation of the past, the most frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān, and a lesson for the Jews of Madīnah and for the Muslims equally. Mūsā عليه السلام is mentioned more than any other prophet in the Book, and this is so that we might measure ourselves against his Ummah. They were looked up to, and rightly, for they were the progeny of prophets.

Udhkurū ni'matiya, remember My favour. And notice that gratitude comes before obligation. Allāh ﷻ does not open with the demand. He opens with the reminder of what they were given, because a man who has been reminded of a kindness is a different man from one who has merely been instructed.

Then, *wa awfū bi 'ahdī ūfī bi 'ahdikum*, fulfil My covenant and I shall fulfil yours, and the grammar makes the second clause conditional upon the first. You go first. It is not a negotiation between equals, and yet Allāh ﷻ has bound Himself in it, and there is no greater security available in this world or the next.

And *wa iyyāya fa'rhabūn*, and fear Me alone, with the object placed first for exclusivity. Fear Me, and nobody else. This is what will hold them to the covenant, because a man who fears his own people will break any promise he has made to Allāh ﷻ the moment they lean on him, and that is precisely what happened at Madīnah.

What Were the Favours, and What Was the Covenant?

The favours were these: to be favoured with a religion, and a divine Book, and prophets, and guidance, and a straight path to walk without deviation. Specifically it means Allāh's ﷻ choosing prophets and messengers from amongst them, and granting them a great kingdom, and giving them a Book, and guiding them, and settling them in the land promised to them. No nation before this Ummah was given more.

And the covenant is set out in Sūrat al-Mā'ida, where Allāh ﷻ says that He took the covenant of the Children of Isrā'īl and raised amongst them twelve chieftains, and said, *I am with you. If you establish the ṣalāh and give the zakāh and believe in My messengers and honour them and lend to Allāh a goodly loan, I shall surely remove your sins from you and admit you to gardens beneath which rivers flow. But whoever amongst you disbelieves after that has strayed from the even way.*

The heart of it, for our purposes, was this: that when a messenger came after their prophets, they would believe in him and help him. They were therefore required to believe in Muḥammad ﷺ, whom Allāh ﷻ had described to them with his particular attributes, and whose coming He had announced in the Book He sent them, and whom they consequently knew very well indeed.

And what would they have received had they kept it? Allāh ﷻ answers in the same sūra: *And if they had observed the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would surely have eaten from above them and from beneath their feet. Amongst them is a moderate community, but many of them, evil is what they do.* Eaten from above and beneath, which is the Arabic way of saying that provision would have come from every direction at once.

And the promise to this Ummah in Sūrat al-Nūr runs on the identical pattern, that Allāh ﷻ has promised those who believe and do righteous deeds that He will grant them succession in the earth as He granted it to those before them, and will establish for them their religion, and will exchange their fear for security. The condition is the same, and the reward is the same, and the reader may draw the inference about the consequence of failure.

The Banū Isrā'īl and This Ummah

Muftī Shafī' رحمه الله reports from Imām al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله an observation of great delicacy. When Allāh ﷻ compels the Children of Isrā'īl to fulfil His rights, He makes mention of His bounties upon them first, and then asks them to recognise Him. When He addresses this Ummah, He mentions no bounties at all. He says simply, *remember Me, and I will remember you*. He speaks to us directly, without the intermediary of a favour, and al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله takes this as a sign of our superiority as an Ummah. We have a direct connection to our Creator, and we are not thought to require the leverage of a gift.

And fulfilling promises is the mark of a believer. The Messenger ﷺ told us that every man who breaks his covenant will have a flag raised for him on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said, this is the treachery of so-and-so, and the flag will be raised as high as the crime was great, so that everybody recognises him. Betrayal is not punished privately.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله notes the shape of this āyah, that it contains encouragement followed by warning, and that Allāh ﷻ first called the Children of Isrā'īl with encouragement and then warned them, so that they might return to the truth and follow the Messenger ﷺ and heed the Qur'ān's commands and prohibitions and believe in what it contains.

And before the reader settles comfortably into the seat of the spectator, he should hear what the Messenger ﷺ said about us:

لَتَتَّبِعَنَّ سَنَنَ مَنْ قَبْلَكُمْ شِبْرًا بِشِيرٍ وَذِرَاعًا بِذِرَاعٍ، حَتَّىٰ لَوْ سَلَكَوْا
جُحْرَ ضَبٍّ لَسَلَكَتُمُوهُ. قُلْنَا: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، الْيَهُودُ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ؟ قَالَ:
فَنَنْ؟

You will follow the ways of those before you, handspan by handspan and cubit by cubit, so that if they went down the burrow of a lizard, you would go down it too. We said, Messenger of Allāh, the Jews and the Christians? He said, who else?¹¹

The Companions رضي الله عنهم asked the question we would have asked, hoping for a different answer, and they did not get one. These fifty āyahs are about us.

وَعَامِنُوا بِمَا أُنْزِلَتْ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا مَعَكُمْ وَلَا تَكُونُوا أَوَّلَ كَافِرٍ بِهِ ۚ
وَلَا تَشْتَرُوا بِآيَاتِي ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا وَإِيَّيَ فَاتَّقُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

And believe in what I have sent down, confirming what is with you, and do not be the first to reject it. And do not sell My signs for a small price. And fear Me alone.

al-Baqara 2:41

Wa lā takūnū awwala kāfirin bih, do not be the first to reject it, and the reader should feel the force of that phrase, because these people had every reason on earth to be the first to *accept* it.

They already believed in one God, when the Arabs around them worshipped stones. They already believed in the Hereafter. They already believed in prophethood, and in a divine Book, and their Book had told them about this

11. *Al-Bukhārī and Muslim. And in another narration: لَيَأْتِيَنَّ عَلَىٰ أُمَّتِي مَا أَتَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ* حَدَّثَوا النَّعْلَ بِالنَّعْلِ, there will surely come upon my Ummah what came upon the Children of Isrā'īl, like one sandal matching the other.

Prophet ﷺ by name and description. Every single obstacle that stood in front of a pagan of Makkah had been cleared out of their path in advance. They should have been the first through the door, and they arranged instead to be the first to slam it.

And the warning in *auwal* is precise. Whoever begins a thing carries the sin of everyone who follows him in it, as the Messenger ﷺ said, without their burdens being lessened in the least. To be first at rejection is to be first in the accounting.

Then, *wa lā tashtarū bi āyātī thamanan qalīlā*, and do not sell My signs for a small price. They were willing to distort the religion for a handful of coins, because they could not bear to watch their prestige evaporate at the hands of a prophet who was not one of theirs. Their standing rested on being the people of the Book, and here came a man who would make the Book universal, and they preferred their position to their salvation.

And *thamanan qalīlā*, a small price, describes the transaction rather than the sum. Whatever a man is paid for selling out his religion is small, because there is no fair price for it, and no figure exists that would make the trade sensible. Nothing you earn will ever be enough. And the reader will find the phenomenon alive in our own communities, amongst men selling the religion for a few pounds and a platform, and when they die they will lose the money and keep the shame, and the shame will go with them into the Hereafter. Allāh ﷻ does not love traitors to the religion.

Then, *wa iyyāya fa'ttaqūn*, and fear Me alone, and it is placed exactly here for a reason. Fear of their own people was what made them sell, and taqwā of Allāh ﷻ is the only thing that would have stopped them, particularly since their own books had told them what the punishment for distorting the religion is. They knew the penalty and they feared the wrong party.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله reports a definition of taqwā from Ṭalq b. Ḥabīb رحمه الله which is worth memorising, for it is the finest short answer anyone has given: taqwā is to act in obedience to Allāh ﷻ, upon a light from Allāh ﷻ, hoping for the mercy of Allāh ﷻ, and to avoid disobedience to Allāh ﷻ, upon a light from

Allāh ﷻ, fearing the punishment of Allāh ﷻ. Two halves, and each with three elements, and the phrase *upon a light from Allāh* in the middle of both, which is to say, upon knowledge and not upon enthusiasm.

Taking Money for Religious Work

The reader will want to know how this āyah bears on the ordinary business of paying an imām or a teacher, since it appears at first glance to forbid it.

The purest position is to take nothing at all, and this was the way of Imām Abū Ḥanīfa رحمه الله himself, who traded in cloth and taught for nothing. But the ‘ulamā’ have permitted taking payment for teaching the Qur’ān, and the permission answers a necessity, because without it the knowledge would simply be lost. If no man could feed his family whilst teaching, no man would teach, and within a generation there would be nobody left who knew.

And there is a proof from the Sunnah, in the well-known incident which al-Bukhārī records. Some of the Companions رضي الله عنهم came upon an Arab tribe who refused them hospitality, and whilst they were there the chief of the tribe was stung, and the tribe asked whether any of them had medicine or could treat with *ruqya*. They said, you refused us hospitality, so we will not treat him unless you pay us. They agreed on a flock of sheep. One of the Companions رضي الله عنه recited the Fātiḥa over the man and he recovered, and they took the sheep but refused to touch them until they had asked the Prophet ﷺ. And he laughed, and said, *how did you know it was a ruqya? Take it, and assign me a share*.¹²

The distinction the āyah draws lies between being paid for service and being paid for distortion. The man in this āyah was altering the text, and no fee was in question.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله relates from Imām al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله the exchange between the Caliph Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik and Abū Ḥāzim رحمه الله at

12. Al-Bukhārī, on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه. Note that he asked for a share himself, which removes any lingering suggestion that the payment was distasteful.

Madīnah, which every scholar who has ever been offered a position by a government should read before answering. The Caliph asked him why he would not come to them. He said, what would I do with you? If you brought me near you would try me, and if you gave me I would be tested, and I have no need of either.

وَلَا تَلْبِسُوا الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتَكْتُمُوا الْحَقَّ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

And do not mix the truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth whilst you know.

al-Baqara 2:42

Two prohibitions, and Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله reads the first as an instruction not to mix other religions with Islam, and the reader should consider Sūrat al-Kāfirūn, which exists precisely to establish that the two things do not blend and that the attempt to blend them is adulteration wearing the clothes of tolerance.

And there is a fine distinction folded into these two crimes which maps exactly onto the closing of the Fātiḥa, which we recite seventeen times a day. To follow the wrong path mistakenly is misguidance, and such a person is *ḍāll*, astray, and it is the last word of the Fātiḥa. To choose deliberately to misguide others is to earn anger, and such a person is *maghdūb ‘alayh*, and it is the phrase before it. The intention divides them, and the error does not.

The second prohibition is against concealing what one knows. And there is a plain rule of conduct here for anybody who is asked a religious question: do not confuse the matter for somebody by hiding what you know. Say, I do not know. Those three words are half of knowledge and most people cannot pronounce them.

Never hide the truth. A man who knows the truth and stays silent, our elders have said, is a silent devil, and the phrase is severe and it is meant to be.

مَنْ سُئِلَ عَنْ عِلْمٍ عَلَيْهِ ثُمَّ كَتَمَهُ، أُجِمَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ بِلِجَامٍ مِنْ نَارٍ

Whoever is asked about knowledge which he possesses and then conceals it will be bridled on the Day of Resurrection with a bridle of fire.¹³

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَارْكَعُوا مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

And establish the ṣalāh, and give the zakāh, and bow with those who bow.

al-Baqara 2:43

The discussion so far has been about their beliefs. Now Allāh ﷻ turns to their practice, and He does not ask them for a new religion, He asks them to do what they had already been commanded to do, and to do it alongside the Muslims.

Al-Zamakhsharī رحمه الله observes that the definite article on *al-ṣalāh* here points to a particular prayer, which is the prayer of the Companions رضي الله عنهم, and this makes the whole āyah snap into focus. Be as the Muslims are. Not merely pray, but pray as they pray, and the third clause makes it unmistakable.

For why should Allāh ﷻ mention bowing separately, when bowing is part of the prayer He has just commanded? He mentions it because *wa'rka'ū ma'a'l-rāki'in*, bow with those who bow, concerns the company and not the posture. The jurists take from this that the original and intended form of the ṣalāh is in congregation, and the āyah says, bow at the same moment as the men beside you, be part of a body.

And there is something in congregational prayer which no private worship can supply, which is that it puts a man shoulder to shoulder with the ordinary worshipper, with the layman, with people he would never in his life have chosen to stand beside, and it requires him to move when they move. A man who prays

13. Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Mājah and al-Tirmidhī. The choice of a bridle is exact: the punishment is placed on the mouth that would not open.

alone at home for twenty years has never once had to submit to that, and he is missing something the Sharīʿa considers essential.

Sayyidunā ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd رضى الله عنه put it as plainly as it has ever been put:

Whoever would like to meet Allāh tomorrow as a Muslim, let him guard these prayers wherever the call to them is given, for Allāh has prescribed for your Prophet the ways of guidance, and these prayers are amongst the ways of guidance. If you were to pray in your houses, as this one who stays behind prays in his house, you would have abandoned the way of your Prophet, and if you abandoned the way of your Prophet you would go astray. There is no man who purifies himself and does it well, then sets out to one of these mosques, but that Allāh records for him a good deed for every step he takes, and raises him a degree by it, and erases a bad deed from him. I have seen a time when no one stayed away from them except a hypocrite whose hypocrisy was well known. And a man would be brought supported between two others until he was made to stand in the row.¹⁴

A man carried between two others so that he could be stood upright in the row. That is what these āyahs looked like when they were being lived.

﴿أَتَأْمُرُونَ النَّاسَ بِالْبِرِّ وَتَنْسَوْنَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ﴾

*Do you order people to righteousness and forget yourselves, whilst you recite the Book?
Will you not use your reason?*

al-Baqara 2:44

The question is addressed to their scholars, and through them to every person who has ever known more than he practised, and the reader who teaches or

preaches or advises should take this āyah personally, because it was not sent for anybody else.

Are you two-faced? And notice the aggravating clause: *wa antum tatlūna'l-kitāb*, whilst you recite the Book. It is not that they did not know. The Book was in their mouths at the very moment they were forgetting what was in it, and the recitation, which should have been their defence, has been entered as evidence against them.

Not acting on the advice one gives to others is to contradict oneself, and it degrades the very knowledge and authority on which the advice rested. The advice may be true and the man has made it unbelievable.

Afalā ta'qilūn, will you not use your reason, and the word *'aql* is worth a moment, because it is not intelligence. Its root is the tying of a rope, the hobbling of a camel so that it does not wander off. To have *'aql* is to be tethered, to be disciplined and controlled, and the Arabic conception of reason is not cleverness but restraint. A man may be brilliant and have no *'aql* at all, and this āyah is addressed to exactly that man.

Practise What You Preach

A man will be brought on the Day of Resurrection and cast into the Fire, and his intestines will spill out, and he will go round and round them as a donkey goes round a millstone. The people of the Fire will gather about him and say, what has happened to you, so-and-so? Were you not commanding us to good and forbidding us from evil? He will say, I commanded you to good and did not do it myself, and I forbade you evil and did it myself.¹⁵

14. Muslim. In another narration: the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ taught us the ways of guidance, and amongst the ways of guidance is prayer in the mosque in which the call to prayer is given. Muslim 654.

15. Al-Bukhārī and Muslim, on the authority of Usāma b. Zayd رضي الله عنه.

On the night I was taken on the Night Journey, I saw men whose lips were being cut with scissors of fire. I said, who are these, Jibrīl? He said, these are the preachers of your Ummah, who used to command the people to righteousness and forget themselves, and they used to recite the Book and not understand.¹⁶

So Should We Stop Advising?

This is the question every honest man asks after reading those two narrations, and it is asked in good faith, and it must be answered carefully, because the wrong answer has silenced a great many people who should have spoken.

No. Because look at what the āyah actually condemns. It does not say, do you order people to righteousness. It says, do you order people to righteousness *and forget yourselves*. There are two obligations here and not one, and the man in the ḥadīth is being punished for the forgetting and never for the commanding. If the remedy were to stop advising, he would have discharged the problem by staying silent and keeping his sins, and nobody imagines that this is what is meant.

Enjoining good is an obligation in its own right, and it does not lapse because a man is a sinner, for if it did, the only people permitted to speak would be the sinless, and there are none. The obligation is to fix the second half, not to abandon the first. And a man may say honestly, I am telling you what is right and I do not manage it myself, and Allāh ﷻ help us both, and there is no hypocrisy in that at all. The hypocrisy is in the forgetting, which is to say, in the man who has genuinely stopped noticing that the words apply to him.

16. *Aḥmad*, and it is authentic, on the authority of *Anas b. Mālik* رضي الله عنه. The punishment falls on the lips, which were the instrument, precisely as the bridle of fire falls on the mouth that would not speak. The organ is always the one that was misused.

ج
وَأَسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And seek help through patience and prayer. It is indeed hard, except for the humble.

al-Baqara 2:45

The same instruction opens the second Juz', where Allāh ﷻ says, *O you who believe, seek help through patience and prayer*, and the repetition is worth noticing, because Allāh ﷻ does not often issue the same command twice in a single sūra.

The first thing to understand is where help sits in the sequence. Help is sought after a man has done some work himself, and not instead of it. The Arabic *isti'āna* presupposes an effort already under way that requires assistance, and a man who has done nothing has nothing to be helped with.

Allāh ﷻ is offering the complete package here, and He names the two instruments through which to seek it.

Ṣabr first, and the reader should clear out of his mind the notion that it means putting up with things. It is self-control, discipline, being grounded, not allowing what is happening in the world to shake one's core. A man of *ṣabr* continues to persevere and to toil, and Allāh ﷻ says that the human being has been created in toil, so this is the correct posture within the condition rather than an escape from it.

It operates in three places. At times of difficulty, to hold. In obedience, to persevere despite the cost. And against temptation, to refuse despite the pull. And it is *ṣabr*, and nothing else, that saves a man from selling his soul for a few pounds, which is exactly what the forty-first āyah warned about, and the reader will notice that Allāh ﷻ has supplied the remedy four āyahs after diagnosing the disease.

The 'ulamā' have said that patience is half of faith and thankfulness is the other half. And they have said that the patience which counts is the patience shown at the moment the blow lands, and not the composure a man recovers three weeks

later, which any animal manages. This is why the Messenger ﷺ told the weeping woman at the grave that patience is at the first strike. And fasting has come to be regarded as identical with patience, so much so that the meaning of *ṣabr* in this āyah has been taken by some of the ‘ulamā’ to include fasting itself.

Then *ṣalāh*, and it is placed second because it is greater. In fasting a man abstains from the lawful for a stretch of hours. In the prayer he is prohibited from the lawful entirely, from speech, from movement, from turning his head, from eating, from every ordinary permitted thing, for its whole duration. Imām al-Ghazālī رحمه الله observed that it is the only act of worship which isolates a man from the world completely, and it is offered here as the second half of the answer to every difficulty a person will face.

Wa innahā la kabīra, and it is indeed hard, and the ‘ulamā’ differ as to whether the pronoun refers to the prayer or to the seeking of help itself, and both readings are true and neither excludes the other. *Illā ‘ala’l-khāshī’in*, except for the humble, except for those whose hearts are settled and at rest.

Mawlānā ‘Āshiq Ilāhī رحمه الله in *Anwār al-Bayān* notes that this āyah is addressed to the Jews of Madīnah in their particular situation, and the reading gives it a sharp edge: join the Muslims, pray the prayer, and then have *ṣabr* when your own people turn on you for it. He is telling them the price and handing them the tools in the same sentence.

Khushū‘ and Khudū‘

A distinction the reader should carry into every prayer he prays.

Khushū‘ is of the heart, and not of the limbs. It is the inward stillness and awe, and it cannot be performed, and Allāh ﷻ does not like people being pretentious about it. The man who weeps loudly in the row may have it and may not, and the two are indistinguishable from outside.

Khudū‘ is in the action, being deliberate and mindful in the movements, not rattling through them like a machine. And the two belong together, for the

outward without the inward is theatre, and the inward without the outward is a claim nobody can check.

الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلْقُوا رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Those who are certain that they will meet their Lord, and that to Him they are returning.

al-Baqara 2:46

Who are the humble? These. And the definition rests entirely on what they are certain of, and touches their conduct nowhere, and the whole of a person's outward life is being traced back here to a single conviction.

Yazunnūn, from *ẓann*, and the word is one of the curiosities of Arabic, because it carries two opposite meanings. It can mean to suppose without evidence, a mere guess. And it can mean absolute conviction. And the 'ulamā' have observed that in the context of the Hereafter it nearly always carries the second, and the reason is worth pausing over: in the matter of meeting Allāh ﷻ, there is no such thing as a supposition. A man either knows it or he does not, and there is no middle position available, whatever he tells himself.

Mulāqū rabbihim, that they will meet their Lord, and the word is from *liqā'*, an encounter, face to face. Not that they will be judged, or assessed, or processed. That they will meet Him. It is real.

And *rāji'ūn*, returning, and the reader should set this beside the twenty-eighth āyah, where Allāh ﷻ said *turja'ūn*, you will be returned, in the passive, of those who did not want to go. Here it is the active, they are returning, of their own accord, gladly. Same journey, and the difference is entirely in the traveller.

And this is why the āyah defines humility. When a man is certain he is going home, the problems of this world become lighter, not because they shrink but because he can see the end of the tunnel, and no difficulty is futile any more. A time comes when such a man looks forward to death, and the ḥadīth tells us that

death is a gift to the believer, a bridge between a lover and his Beloved. The Messenger ﷺ said that whoever loves to meet Allāh ﷻ, Allāh ﷻ loves to meet him, and whoever hates to meet Allāh ﷻ, Allāh ﷻ hates to meet him. And when ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها said that all of us hate death, he explained that it is not that, but that the believer at his end is given glad tidings and so he loves to meet Him, and the disbeliever is given the opposite and so he hates it.

The Day of No Intercession

يٰۤاَيُّهَا اِسْرَآئِيْلَ اذْكُرُوْا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِيۤ اَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَاِنِّيۤ اَفْضَلْتُكُمْ عَلٰى
الْعٰلَمِيْنَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Children of Isrā’īl, remember My favour which I bestowed upon you, and that I favoured you over the worlds.

al-Baqara 2:47

The address of the fortieth āyah returns almost word for word, and the repetition is to bring their attention back, as a teacher repeats the opening of a lesson when the room has drifted. But something has been added: *wa annī faḍḍaltukum ‘ala l-‘ālamīn*, and that I favoured you over the worlds. This is the first of the blessings, and it is the greatest of them, and everything that follows is a specification of it.

Allāh ﷻ says elsewhere, and *We chose them, upon knowledge, over the worlds*, and He records the words of Mūsā عليه السلام to them, *my people, remember the favour of Allāh upon you, when He placed prophets amongst you and made you kings and gave you what He had not given to anyone in the worlds.*

The critical word is *faḍḍaltukum*, I favoured you, in the first person, and the reader must not let it slip past. The virtue was conferred, and nothing in them produced it. They did nothing to earn it and there was nothing in them that

produced it, and what is given can be withdrawn, and that is the whole burden of the fifty āyahs that follow.

Over which worlds? Dr Isrār رحمه الله notes the two readings: over the people of the universe, or over the people of their own time, and the second is the one most of the ‘ulamā’ take. And Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Uthmānī رحمه الله states the principle that resolves it: every Ummah holds its virtue until the point of the next revelation. Theirs held until this Book came. Then they rejected the Prophet ﷺ and set themselves against the Qur’ān, and at that moment the virtue passed, and this Ummah was named the best brought forth for mankind. Their favour was real, and it was historical, and it expired.

وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا تَجْزِي نَفْسٌ عَنْ نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا شَفْعَةٌ
وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

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

al-Baqara 2:48

Having named the favour, Allāh ﷻ immediately closes off the use they were making of it. Their whole position rested on inheritance, on being the children of prophets, on the assumption that the lineage would carry them, and this āyah takes every prop out at once.

Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله quotes Ibn ‘Aṭīyya رحمه الله with an observation of real penetration: this āyah encompasses every way in which human beings solve problems in this world. They try themselves, and that is *lā tajzī nafsun ‘an nafsin shay’ā*. They go through an intermediary who has influence, and that is intercession. They pay, and that is compensation. And they call in help by force or numbers, and that is *wa lā hum yunṣarūn*. Four methods, and there are no others, and the āyah names all four and cancels all four in one sentence.

And notice that in the final clause Allāh ﷻ conceals the agent. He does not say, nobody will help them. He says, nor shall they be helped, in the passive, leaving the helper unnamed, so that no possibility whatsoever is left open. Every door has been shut, including the ones nobody thought of.

Allāh ﷻ says elsewhere, *truly those who disbelieve and die as disbelievers, the earth's fill of gold shall not be accepted from any one of them, though he offer it as ransom. And, a Day when no soul shall possess anything for another soul, and the command that Day belongs to Allāh.*

There is no transfer of deeds in the Hereafter. And the Children of Isrāʾīl, and by extension this Ummah, are being warned: do not expect favours in the next world if you did not acknowledge them in this one.

Intercession in the Hereafter

The reader may now be alarmed, because he has heard all his life that the Messenger ﷺ will intercede, and this āyah appears to deny intercession altogether. The matter must be set out properly.

Intercession is accepted neither from the disbelievers nor for them. That is the scope of this āyah, and it is addressed to a people who were relying on precisely such a transaction. Within the community of faith, intercession is established beyond dispute.

Good believers will intercede for one another. The bearers of the Qurʾān have been promised intercession for ten of their family, though the reader should know that the narration carrying this is weak.¹⁷

The prophets will intercede. And the Praiseworthy Station promised to the Messenger ﷺ in Sūrat al-Isrāʾ, *it may be that your Lord will raise you to a*

17. Sayyidunā ʿAlī رضي الله عنه reports that whoever reads the Qurʾān and memorises it, and regards its lawful as lawful and its unlawful as unlawful, Allāh ﷻ will enter him into the Garden and allow him to intercede for ten of his family who were destined for the Fire. Al-Tirmidhī 2905, Ibn Mājah 216, Aḥmad. Imām al-Tirmidhī رحمه الله himself classified it as weak and said that this narration has no authentic chain, and it is reported here with that qualification, as honesty requires.

praiseworthy station, is understood by Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله and al-Ālūsī رحمه الله to be precisely this. And he ﷺ said, *my intercession is for the major sinners of my Ummah*, which is a sentence to hold onto, because it means that the intercession is aimed at exactly the people who assume they are beyond it.

The Praiseworthy Station

The Messenger ﷺ has told us what that Day will look like, in the narration of Anas رضي الله عنه which al-Bukhārī places in the Book of Divine Oneness, and it is long, and the reader should not skip it.

The believers will be kept waiting on the Day of Resurrection so long that they will grow anxious, and they will say, let us seek someone to intercede for us with our Lord, that He may relieve us from this place of ours.

So they will come to Ādam and say, you are Ādam, the father of mankind. Allāh created you with His own Hand, and made you dwell in His Paradise, and commanded His angels to prostrate to you, and taught you the names of all things. Will you intercede for us with your Lord, that He may relieve us? And he will say, I am not fit for it. And he will mention his error, his eating from the tree though he had been forbidden. And he will say, go to Nūḥ, the first messenger Allāh sent to the people of the earth.

So they will come to Nūḥ, and he will say, I am not fit for it. And he will mention his error, his asking his Lord without knowledge. And he will say, go to Ibrāhīm, the intimate friend of the All-Merciful.

So they will come to Ibrāhīm, and he will say, I am not fit for it. And he will mention the three words in which he was evasive. And he will say, go to Mūsā, a slave to whom Allāh gave the Torah, and to whom He spoke directly, and whom He brought near for conversation.

So they will come to Mūsā, and he will say, I am not fit for it. And he will mention his error, the killing of a man. And he will say, go to ʿĪsā, the slave of Allāh and His messenger, and a spirit from Him and His word.

So they will come to ʿĪsā, and he will say, I am not fit for it. Go to Muḥammad, a slave whose past and future have been forgiven him.

So they will come to me. And I shall ask my Lord's permission to enter His presence, and I shall be permitted. And when I see Him I shall fall prostrate before Him, and He will leave me thus as long as He wills, and then He will say, Muḥammad, raise your head and speak, for you shall be heard, and intercede, for your intercession shall be accepted, and ask, for you shall be given. So I shall raise my head and praise my Lord with praises He has taught me. Then I shall intercede, and He will set me a limit, and I shall bring them out and admit them to the Garden.¹⁸

The reader should notice the shape of this. Six of the greatest human beings who ever lived, and every single one of them, when the whole of creation is

begging, answers by naming his own worst moment. Ādam عليه السلام names the tree. Nūḥ عليه السلام names his question. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام names his evasions. Mūsā عليه السلام names the man he struck. That is what prophethood looks like at the moment of maximum honour: each of them reaches, under unimaginable pressure, not for his credentials but for his failure. And the one who is finally permitted is the one who is described not by his achievements but by his forgiveness.

Every Believer Will Enter the Garden

By the One in whose hand is my soul, none of you will plead with Allāh for a right more fervently on the Day of Resurrection than the believers will plead for their brothers in the Fire. They will say, our Lord, they used to fast with us, and pray, and perform the pilgrimage. And it will be said to them, bring out those you recognise. So their forms will be forbidden to the Fire, and they will bring out a great number. Then Allāh, Mighty and Majestic, will say, the angels have interceded, and the prophets have interceded, and the believers have interceded, and none remains but the Most Merciful of those who show mercy. And He will take a handful from the Fire and bring out of it a people who never did any good at all.¹⁹

Read that last sentence again. When every intercessor has finished, Allāh ﷻ says, in effect, now it is My turn, and He reaches in Himself and brings out people who have nothing whatever to recommend them. And there is more of the same, that Allāh ﷻ will be praised on the Day of Resurrection by people who never did any good, whom He takes out of the Fire after they are burned and admits to the Garden by His mercy, after the intercession of the intercessors.²⁰

18. *Al-Bukhārī* 7440, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, abridged. The narrator adds that the Prophet ﷺ said he would return a second time and a third, each time bringing out more, until none remained in the Fire but those whom the Qur'ān had imprisoned. And Qatāda then recited, it may be that your Lord will raise you to a praiseworthy station, and said, this is the Praiseworthy Station which Allāh ﷻ has promised your Prophet ﷺ.

19. *Muslim*. See also *al-Bukhārī* 7439 and *Muslim* 183, on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه.

And the Messenger ﷺ said that a visitor came to him from his Lord and gave him the choice between half of his Ummah entering the Garden or the intercession, and that he chose the intercession, and that it is for whoever dies without associating anything with Allāh ﷻ.²¹

The Qur'ān Intercedes

*The Qur'ān is an intercessor whose intercession is accepted, and a disputant whose testimony is believed. Whoever places it in front of him, it will lead him to the Garden. Whoever throws it behind his back, it will drive him to the Fire.*²²

It will speak either way. That is the point of the narration. The only question is which side of the case it appears on, and that is settled here, in this world, by where a man keeps it.

20. Musnad Aḥmad 9201, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضى الله عنه. And al-Tirmidhī 2438, that more people than the tribe of Tamīm will enter the Garden by the intercession of a single man of this Ummah, other than the Prophet ﷺ himself.

21. Al-Tirmidhī 2441, on the authority of 'Awf b. Mālik رضى الله عنه. He was offered a guaranteed half and refused it, because the intercession reaches further than half.

22. Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān 124, on the authority of Jābir رضى الله عنه.

Deliverance from Fir‘awn

وَإِذْ نَجَّيْنَكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ يَذْبَحُونَ
أَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيُونَ نِسَاءَكُمْ وَفِي ذَلِكَ بَلَاءٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ
عَظِيمٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

And remember when We delivered you from the people of Fir‘awn, who were inflicting on you the worst of torment, slaughtering your sons and sparing your women. In that was a tremendous trial from your Lord.

al-Baqara 2:49

The second blessing, and now the specification begins, and Allāh ﷻ will list them one after another, and the reader should keep count, because the accumulation is the argument.

Najjaynākum, We delivered you, and the form of the verb conveys a rescue repeated and thorough, and not a single escape.

A word about Fir‘awn. It is a title and not a name, given to every disbelieving king who ruled Egypt, whether from the Amalekites or otherwise, exactly as Caesar was the title of the disbelieving kings of Rome, and Kistrā of the kings of Persia, and Tubba‘ of the kings of Yemen, and Negus of the kings of Abyssinia. The Qur‘ān is naming an office rather than a man, and the reader should notice how much that widens the application.

Yasūmūnakum, they were inflicting upon you, and the verb carries humiliation as well as pain, the tormenting of a people by keeping them low.

And why? Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله preserves the history. The cursed Pharaoh saw a dream in which a fire came out of Bayt al-Maqdis and entered the houses of the Copts in Egypt, sparing the houses of the Children of Isrā‘īl, and it was interpreted to mean that his kingship would be brought down by a man from

amongst them. It is also said that some of his court told him the Children of Isrāʼil were expecting a man to arise amongst them who would establish a state. And so he ordered that every newborn boy amongst them be killed and the girls left alive, and that the men be given the work of beasts and the most degrading tasks that could be found.

The reader should sit with the futility of it. He killed a generation of children to prevent a prophecy, and the child he was looking for was raised in his own house, at his own table, by his own wife, and he paid for it.

Yastahyūna nisā'akum, and sparing your women, and the phrase is grim, because it is not mercy. It means to leave them alive, and the 'ulamā' have explained that the boys were the threat and the women were the spoil, and the word carries the sense of seeking life at the price of dishonour. A people whose sons are killed and whose daughters are kept has been erased more thoroughly than one that has simply been slaughtered.

Wa fi dhālikum balā'un min rabbikum 'azīm, and in that was a tremendous trial from your Lord. And the 'ulamā' differ over the referent, and the difference is instructive. It may point to the persecution, which was a trial of endurance. Or it may point to the deliverance itself, which was a trial of gratitude. And the second is the harder examination. Very few nations fail the test of suffering. Almost all of them fail the test of rescue.

وَإِذْ فَرَقْنَا بِكُمُ الْبَحْرَ فَأَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ وَأَغْرَقْنَا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَأَنْتُمْ
تَنْظُرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

And remember when We parted the sea for you, and delivered you, and drowned the people of Fir'awn whilst you were watching.

al-Baqara 2:50

The third blessing. And the final clause is the one to attend to: *wa antum tanẓurūn*, whilst you were watching. They stood on dry ground and watched an

army drown, with their own eyes, and the twelve paths were still open behind them.

And these are the same people who, a few weeks later, would ask for a god they could see. Allāh ﷻ has placed the phrase there deliberately, and the reader who reaches the fifty-fifth āyah will remember it.

‘Āshūrā’, a Remembrance

The day the Children of Isrā’īl were saved from Fir‘awn came to be called the day of ‘Āshūrā’, and the Messenger ﷺ attached this Ummah to it.

Imām Aḥmad رحمه الله reports from Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ came to Madīnah and found the Jews fasting the day of ‘Āshūrā’. He asked them, *what is this day that you fast?* They said, this is a good day, on which Allāh ﷻ saved the Children of Isrā’īl from their enemy, and Mūsā عليه السلام used to fast it. And the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said:

أَنَا أَحَقُّ بِمُوسَى مِنْكُمْ

I have more right to Mūsā than you have.²³

The claim is worth understanding, because it is the whole relationship between this Ummah and the earlier ones in a single sentence. He is telling them that Mūsā عليه السلام belongs to those who follow what Mūsā عليه السلام brought, and that they had let go of it, and that a prophet's inheritance passes to whoever is actually carrying it.

23. *Al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Nasā’ī and Ibn Mājah. He then fasted it and ordered that it be fasted.*

وَإِذْ وَعَدْنَا مُوسَىٰ أَرْبَعِينَ لَيْلَةً ثُمَّ اتَّخَذْتُمُ الْعِجْلَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَنْتُمْ
ظَالِمُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

And remember when We appointed forty nights for Mūsā, and then you took the calf after him, and you were wrongdoers.

al-Baqara 2:51

The fourth blessing, and it comes wrapped around a crime.

Once Fir'awn had been drowned, the Israelites, according to one report, returned to Egypt, and according to another began to live elsewhere. Having at last found a peaceful existence, they wished to receive a Sharī'a from Allāh ﷻ, a code of law to follow, and they asked for it.

Allāh ﷻ answered the prayer of Mūsā عليه السلام and promised that if he came to Mount Ṭūr and devoted himself to worship for a month he would receive a divine Book. He obeyed gladly, and was granted the Torah. But he was ordered to continue for ten days more, and the reason the 'ulamā' give for it is exquisite: he had broken his fast at the end of the month and thereby lost the particular scent which rises from the mouth of a fasting person, which is beloved to Allāh ﷻ, and so he was commanded to fast ten further days and regain it. Thus he completed forty days of fasting and devotion. And Sūrat al-A'rāf preserves the arithmetic: *and We appointed for Mūsā thirty nights, and completed them with ten.*

Whilst he was on the mountain, the thing happened. Amongst them was a man called al-Sāmīrī, who fashioned the figure of a calf out of their gold, and put into it some of the dust he had gathered from beneath the hoof of Jibrīl's عليه السلام horse at the drowning of Fir'awn, and the calf lowed. And the ignorant amongst them were so impressed that they began to worship it. And al-Sāmīrī's punishment was *lā misās*, no touching, that he and whoever touched him would sicken, so that he wandered the earth crying it out as a warning to anyone

who came near, which is a punishment fitted to a man who had infected a nation.

And a note on the night, since Allāh ﷻ says forty *nights* and not forty days. The night is particularly favoured for spiritual journeying, being quieter and freer of distraction, and this is why the last Messenger ﷺ was commanded to the long night vigils at the very beginning of his mission, because the night is more suitable for prayer and its recitation is more upright and more certain. And his own miraculous journey to Jerusalem and his ascension took place at night.

ثُمَّ عَفَوْنَا عَنْكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Then We pardoned you after that, so that you might give thanks.

al-Baqara 2:52

The fifth blessing, and it is the most extraordinary of the list. They worshipped a calf, in the shadow of the mountain, weeks after the sea, and He pardoned them.

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله notes that this came after Mūsā عليه السلام went to the appointed meeting with his Lord at the end of the forty days, and it is said that those days fell in Dhu'l-Qa'da and the first ten of Dhu'l-Hijja, after the deliverance and the crossing.

La'allakum tashkurūn, so that you might give thanks. The purpose of the pardon is stated, and it is that they should become grateful, and the whole sequence of these āyahs is Allāh ﷻ manufacturing, again and again, the conditions for a gratitude that never arrived.

وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

And remember when We gave Mūsā the Book and the Criterion, so that you might be guided.

al-Baqara 2:53

The sixth blessing. And there is a piece of word-play here which the reader will enjoy. Allāh ﷻ said at the fiftieth āyah, *faraqnā bikumu'l-bahr*, We parted the sea for you, from the root *f-r-q*, to separate. And here He gives them *al-Furqān*, from the same root, the Separator. As if to say: the miracle was a parting, and this Book is also a parting. The sea divided water from water. The Book divides truth from falsehood, right from wrong, lawful from unlawful, and it is the greater of the two partings, and they valued it less.

Al-Furqān is the criterion by which truth is distinguished from falsehood, together with the knowledge and insight and power of judgement to put that distinction into effect, for a criterion that a man cannot apply is no use to him.

And Allāh ﷻ says elsewhere, *and We gave Mūsā the Book, after We had destroyed the earlier generations, as an enlightenment for mankind, and a guidance and a mercy, that they might take heed.*

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يُقَوْمِ إِنَّكُمْ ظَلَمْتُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ بِاتِّخَاذِكُمُ الْعِجْلَ
 فَتُوبُوا إِلَىٰ بَارِيكُمْ فَاقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ عِنْدَ بَارِيكُمْ
 فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥٤﴾

And remember when Mūsā said to his people, my people, you have wronged yourselves by taking the calf, so turn in repentance to your Maker and slay yourselves. That is better for you in the sight of your Maker. Then He accepted your repentance. Truly He is the Ever-Relenting, the Ever-Merciful.

al-Baqara 2:54

The command is *faqtulū anfusakum*, and slay yourselves, and it must be understood correctly. The ‘ulamā’ explain that it means to slay the evil amongst you, and the ‘ulamā’ record that seventy thousand were killed, and then Allāh ﷻ accepted the repentance of the rest.

Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Uthmānī رحمه الله explains that there were three groups. There were those who did not prostrate to the calf and who also forbade others from it. There were those who prostrated to it. And there were those who did not prostrate themselves but who also said nothing to stop it. The second group were commanded to be slain. The third group were commanded to do the slaying, so that their silence might be atoned for by it. And the first group had no part in this repentance at all, because they had nothing to repent of.

The reader should not hurry past that. The men who stood by and said nothing were handed the sword and made to carry out the sentence, and that was their *tawba*, and it was a punishment exactly fitted to a crime of silence.

And notice the name Allāh ﷻ uses. Not *Rabb*, but *Bārī’ikum*, your Maker, twice, and it is the name of the One who brings into being from nothing. It is chosen deliberately, because they needed reminding of the favour of creation itself, which is precisely the thing a cow is entirely incapable of. Al-

Ṣābūnī رحمه الله draws the edge of it: as the cow lacks intelligence, so do you. The name is an argument and a rebuke in one word.

And then consider what it cost them to repent, and consider what it costs us. Seventy thousand dead, by the hands of their own brothers, and the survivors forgiven. And a man of this Ummah, who has done a great deal worse than admire a statue, turns his face to the wall and says he is sorry and means it, and it is done. We have no idea what we have been given.

وَإِذْ قُلْتُمْ يُوسَىٰ لَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّىٰ نَرَىٰ اللَّهَ جَهْرَةً فَأَخَذَتْكُمُ
الصَّاعِقَةُ وَأَنْتُمْ تَنْظُرُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

And remember when you said, Mūsā, we shall never believe you until we see Allāh openly. So the thunderbolt seized you whilst you were looking on.

al-Baqara 2:55

Here is the demand, and here is the phrase from the fiftieth āyah returning to convict them: *wa antum tanẓurūn*, whilst you were looking on. They watched an army drown and asked for a better demonstration, and they got one, and they were looking when it arrived.

The history is this. Mūsā عليه السلام chose seventy men from amongst his people and took them to the mountain, in order to petition Allāh ﷻ, probably that He should not inflict a greater punishment on them for the calf, and he wished also that they might witness the divine orders themselves and so persuade their people of the origin of what he was bringing. They heard the Torah being given. And having heard the speech of Allāh ﷻ with their own ears, they said that they would not believe until they saw Him.

Now the reader will ask why the Qur’ān attributes this to the whole nation when it was seventy men who said it. And the answer is one of the most important principles in the Book. Because they represented the whole of the

people, and because the people themselves were in the same mood of deviancy, the offence is attributed to all. If the collective duties that fall upon a community and must be discharged by at least some responsible group are wholly neglected, then the punishment comes upon the community entire, and Allāh ﷻ states it plainly: *and guard yourselves against a trial which will not strike exclusively those amongst you who do wrong, and know that Allāh is severe in retribution.*

For this reason the leadership of any Islamic movement must scrutinise itself and its conduct more severely than it scrutinises anybody else, because when the representatives rot, the whole body is charged.

Seeing Allāh

The vision of Allāh ﷻ is real, and it is for the believers, in the Hereafter, and the ‘ulamā’ have transmitted that it will be granted on Fridays. It is the greatest of all the gifts of the Garden, and the Messenger ﷺ told us that nothing they are given will be more beloved to them than the sight of their Lord.

The Shī’a deny it, and they do so in the face of explicit āyahs, for Allāh ﷻ says in Sūrat al-Qiyāma, *faces that Day shall be radiant, looking upon their Lord*, and the plainness of it has not been enough.

And there is a practical warning here which our elders were fond of, and which is worth passing on. Be careful how you use your eyes in this world, for fear of being deprived of that sight in the next. The organ that is squandered is the organ that is withheld.

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاكُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَوْتِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Then We raised you up after your death, so that you might give thanks.

al-Baqara 2:56

They asked to see Allāh ﷻ. And Allāh ﷻ showed them, not Himself, but something no created thing can do and no human being can even dream of doing: He brought the dead back to life, and He did it to them, in their own persons.

And this is the perfect answer to the demand, for consider what they could have done with any other proof. When they heard the voice, they could have turned round and said it was not Him. Any external sign can be argued with, and they had a lifetime of practice at it. But they could not deny what they had themselves experienced. They died and they came back and they knew it, and that is the highest certainty available to a creature, and it was given to them, and the reader may guess how long it lasted.

وَوَضَّلْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ الْجُمُحُومَ وَأَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَنَّاءَ وَالسَّلَوى كُلُوا مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ وَمَا ظَلَمُونَا وَلَكِنْ كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

And We shaded you with clouds, and sent down upon you manna and quails. Eat of the good things We have provided for you. And they did not wrong Us, but they were wronging themselves.

al-Baqara 2:57

They were in a desert, and unaided they could not have survived a season in it, and so Allāh ﷻ supplied the two things a desert does not have, which are shade and food. The cloud was assigned to them and travelled with them, and they could see it. And the food descended, without agriculture, without labour, without a market, for forty years.

Ṭayyibāt, good things, and the ‘ulamā’ note that it means, amongst other things, that the food was fresh and did not spoil, which in that climate is itself a standing miracle.

Then the closing clause, and it is one of the great sentences of the Qur’ān: *wa mā ḡalamūnā wa lākin kānū anfusahum yaḡlimūn*, and they did not wrong Us, but they were wronging themselves. Al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله notices that Allāh ﷻ

uses the past tense for the first verb and the present for the second, and the shift shows their persistence: the wronging of Him was a finished impossibility, and the wronging of themselves was a continuing occupation.

And this is the correct understanding of every sin a person commits. Allāh ﷻ is not diminished by our disobedience by so much as an atom. The Ḥadīth Qudsī states it: if the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the jinn of you, were as wicked as the most wicked heart amongst you, it would not decrease His dominion in the slightest. We are not hurting Him. We are hurting ourselves, and calling it defiance.

And what were they given all this for? Allāh ﷻ had instructed them to fight the Amalekites of Shām, who had taken by force the land of their forefathers Yūsuf عليه السلام and Ya'qūb عليه السلام. Two men joined them, and no more. Allāh ﷻ records the number: *two men said, from amongst those who feared*. The rest refused, and what they said is the most notorious sentence any nation ever said to a prophet: *go, you and your Lord, and fight. We are sitting right here*. They separated themselves from Allāh ﷻ and from Mūsā عليه السلام in one breath, and put them on the same side, and stayed behind.

And so the forty years of wandering, which were the answer and never a delay.

The Gate and the Word

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا ادْخُلُوا هَذِهِ الْقَرْيَةَ فَكُلُوا مِنْهَا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمْ رَغَدًا وَاَدْخُلُوا
الْبَابَ سُجَّدًا وَقُولُوا حِطَّةً نَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ خَطِيئَتَكُمْ وَسَنَزِيدُ

الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

And remember when We said, enter this town, and eat freely from it wherever you wish, and enter the gate prostrating, and say, relieve us. We shall forgive you your sins, and We shall increase those who do good.

al-Baqara 2:58

Which town? It is not certain, either from the Qur'ān or from the Bible, though it is commonly held to be Bayt al-Maqdis. And in recounting historical events the Qur'ān focuses on the lesson to be taken rather than on the chronicling of place and time and individuals, and the reader who has been frustrated by this in the last few āyahs should understand it now as a policy and not an omission.

What matters here is this. On entering a town in triumph after a battle, or with the aim of settling in it, one should enter humbly, prostrating, giving praise and glory and thanks to Allāh ﷻ, in loyal submission to His commands, seeking forgiveness for one's sins, and not thinking of plunder and slaughter. This is exactly what our Prophet ﷺ did when he entered Madīnah at the Hijra, and again when he entered Makkah at its conquest, when he rode in with his head lowered to the saddle until his beard nearly touched it, at the head of ten thousand men, into the city that had driven him out. And it is what Allāh ﷻ commanded in Sūrat al-Naṣr, that when the victory comes and the people enter the religion in crowds, then glorify your Lord and seek His forgiveness.

Victory is the moment of maximum spiritual danger, and Allāh ﷻ has never once permitted a believer to enjoy one without immediately turning him towards *istighfār*.

Ḥiṭṭa, and it is from *ḥaṭṭa*, to make a thing fall or drop off, as leaves drop from a tree. Take our sins down off us. One word, and they had to say it, and that was the whole of the requirement.

Iḥsān

The āyah ends, *wa sanazīdu l-muḥsinīn*, and We shall increase those who do good, and the word deserves a note.

Linguistically *iḥsān* is to do a thing beautifully, to do it well beyond what is required. And beside that lexical sense it has a technical meaning, given by the Messenger ﷺ himself in the ḥadīth of Jibrīl عليه السلام :

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.

And notice where this word has been placed. It comes four āyahs after a people demanded to see Allāh ﷻ and were struck down for it. And here is the correct relationship to that same desire: not *show me*, but *as though*. The demand destroyed them. The imagination of it is the summit of the religion. It is the same longing, and everything depends on how it is held.

فَبَدَّلَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا قَوْلًا غَيْرَ الَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمْ فَأَنْزَلْنَا عَلَى الَّذِينَ

ظَلَمُوا رِجْزًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

But those who did wrong changed the word to other than what had been said to them, so We sent down upon those who did wrong a plague from the sky, because they were transgressing.

al-Baqara 2:59

They were given a gate to enter and a word to say. They came in dragging themselves along on their backsides, and they changed the word.

The Children of Isrāʾil were commanded to enter the gate prostrating and to say, ḥiṭṭa. But they entered on their backsides, and they distorted the word, and said, ḥabbatun fī shaʿra, a grain in a hair.²⁴

A single consonant. That is the whole of the crime. They were asked to say *relieve us* and they said *wheat*, because they thought it was funny, and because a people who have been carried through a sea and fed from the sky for forty years will eventually find the whole arrangement tedious enough to make a joke of it.

Notice the rhetoric of the āyah. Allāh ﷻ says *fa anzalnā ʿalaʾlladhīna ḡalamū*, We sent down upon those who did wrong, when He could simply have said, upon them. This is *al-iḡbār fī maqām al-idmār* again, and here it is used to strip them of the pronoun and repeat the charge in place of their name, so that they are referred to in Allāh's ﷻ court not as people but as wrongdoers.

Rijz, a punishment, and it is reported to have been a plague, and al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله states that seventy thousand died of it.

24. Al-Bukhārī, on the authority of Abū Hurayra رضي الله عنه. Another narration has them saying *ḥinṭa*, wheat.

Changing the Word of Allāh

Muftī Shafīʿ رحمه الله takes this āyah as the foundation for a principle that reaches much further than the gate of a town.

Any doubt cast upon the Qurʾān, or any deliberate alteration of its wording, is unlawful, and that much is obvious. But he extends it to the ḥadīth. Where we have been taught a particular prayer, we should not change it, whether it is the wording of a duʿāʾ, or the *tashahhud*, or the motions of the ṣalāh, and the proof is a narration of great delicacy.

Al-Barāʾ b. ʿĀzib رضي الله عنه reports that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ taught him what to say on going to bed: that he should perform his ablution as for prayer, then lie on his right side, and say, *O Allāh, I have submitted my face to You, and entrusted my affair to You, and turned my back to You, in hope and in fear of You. There is no refuge and no escape from You except to You. O Allāh, I believe in Your Book which You sent down, and in Your Prophet whom You sent.* And if he died that night, he would die upon the natural way, and he should make these the last words he speaks.

Al-Barāʾ رضي الله عنه said, so I repeated them back to the Prophet ﷺ, and when I reached *I believe in Your Book which You sent down*, I said, *and Your Messenger.* He said, *no. And Your Prophet whom You sent.*²⁵

Consider it. *Rasūl* and *Nabī*. Both true of him. Both honourable. And it was not permitted, because the words were not al-Barāʾʾs رضي الله عنه to improve. And the ʿulamāʾ have taken from this that one may not alter a single word in reporting a ḥadīth, and the Messenger ﷺ said, *may Allāh brighten the face of a man who hears my words and conveys them as he heard them.* And if a man is unsure of the exact wording, he must say so openly, and this is why the books of ḥadīth are so full of the phrase *aw kamā qāl*, or as he said.

25. Al-Bukhārī. The Companion رضي الله عنه substituted one true and beautiful word for another, and was corrected on the spot, and the correction has been preserved for fourteen centuries so that we would understand exactly how much room there is.

*وَإِذِ اسْتَسْقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ فَقُلْنَا اضْرِبْ بِعَصَاكَ الْحَجَرَ
 فَانْفَجَرَتْ مِنْهُ اثْنَتَا عَشْرَةَ عَيْنًا قَدْ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُنَاسٍ مَّشْرَبَهُمْ
 كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا مِنْ رِزْقِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تَعَثُّوا فِي الْأَرْضِ مَفْسِدِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

And remember when Mūsā prayed for water for his people, and We said, strike the rock with your staff. And twelve springs gushed forth from it. Each tribe knew its drinking place. Eat and drink of the provision of Allāh, and do not go about the earth spreading corruption.

al-Baqara 2:60

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله points out the link: Allāh ﷻ spoke of heavenly food, and now He speaks of heavenly water, and the two together complete the provision of a people who had no way to produce either.

Twelve springs, one for each tribe, and each knowing its own place, and the reader should notice the administrative mercy in it. Allāh ﷻ gave them the water in a form that prevented them from fighting over it, because He knew them.

Fa'nfajarat, and they burst forth. And in Sūrat al-A'rāf the same event is described with *fa'nbajasat*, which means to trickle. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله mentions the several explanations of the difference: that the flow answered the need at different moments, or that it answered the sins of the people, or that Allāh ﷻ varied it to display His total control over a thing they had begun to treat as a fixture. Water that trickles when you are ungrateful and bursts when you are not has stopped being a spring and become a conversation.

وَإِذْ قُلْتُمْ يُمُوسَىٰ لَنْ نَّصْبِرَ عَلَىٰ طَعَامٍ وَحِدٍ فَادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُخْرِجْ
لَنَا مِمَّا تُنْبِتُ الْأَرْضُ مِنْ بَقْلِهَا وَقِثَّائِهَا وَفُومٍهَا وَعَدَسِهَا وَبَصَلِهَا
قَالَ أَتَسْتَبْدِلُونَ الَّذِي هُوَ أَدْنَىٰ بِالَّذِي هُوَ خَيْرٌ أَهْبُطُوا مِصْرًا فَإِنَّ
لَكُمْ مَّا سَأَلْتُمْ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذِّلَّةُ وَالْمَسْكَنَةُ وَبَاءُوا بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ
اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ النَّبِيِّنَ بِغَيْرِ
الْحَقِّ ذَلِكَ بِمَا عَصَوْا وَكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

And remember when you said, Mūsā, we shall not endure one kind of food, so call upon your Lord for us, that He may bring forth for us of what the earth grows, of its herbs and its cucumbers and its wheat and its lentils and its onions. He said, would you exchange what is better for what is inferior? Go down to a town, and you shall have what you asked for. And humiliation and misery were stamped upon them, and they returned with wrath from Allāh. That was because they used to reject the signs of Allāh and kill the prophets without right. That was because they disobeyed and used to transgress.

al-Baqara 2:61

Here it is. Food descending from the sky, without labour, and they are bored of it, and they want onions.

Lan naṣbira, we shall not endure, and the ‘ulamā’ have all noticed the same thing. They did not say, we are unable to. They said, we will not. There is no incapacity being pleaded here. It is a refusal, stated to a prophet, about the food Allāh ﷻ was sending them personally, and the discourtesy of it is breathtaking.

And then, *fa'd'u lanā rabbak*, call upon *your* Lord. Not our Lord. And that is the crime in this āyah, and everything else is decoration. In the middle of asking for a favour, they have separated themselves from Him. The whole of their disbelief is in a possessive pronoun.

It is a striking comparison that the apostles of 'Īsā عليه السلام made a similar demand of him using the same expression, saying, *'Īsā son of Maryam, is your Lord able to send down to us a table from heaven?* The Children of Isrā'īl used the phrase and asked for onions. The apostles used it and asked for a table from heaven. Both were wrong to say it, and there is at least a difference in ambition.

Atastabdilūna'lladhī huwa adnā bi'lladhī huwa khayr, would you exchange what is better for what is inferior? And this is a lesson for our Ummah more than for theirs, and it is asked of every one of us: why give up something divine for something from a market?

Ihbiṭū miṣran, go down to a town, and the word *ihbiṭū* is the same verb used of the descent from the Garden, and the 'ulamā' take it here as a matter of status more than of altitude. And the word *miṣr* is generic, meaning any town, but the choice of that particular word, which is also the name of Egypt, is deliberate and it is a rebuke. You want the food of Egypt? Then go back to Egypt. Go back to your old lives, and to the bricks, and to the man who killed your sons. It is available.

What Did They Receive?

Dhilla, humiliation, from the people and from their rulers. *Maskana*, misery, poverty, powerlessness. And these two were *ḍuribat 'alayhim*, stamped upon them, struck onto them as a coin is struck, which is a word about permanence.

And then *ghaḍab min Allāh*, wrath from Allāh ﷻ, and this is the worst of the three by an immeasurable distance, and the reader should recognise the phrase, because he says it seventeen times a day. *Al-maghḍūbi 'alayhim*. This is the group.

And notice that the punishment matches the crime with precision. They wanted the produce of the earth, and they were given the earth and nothing else. We author our own downfall and then deny the connection, and this āyah is Allāh ﷻ drawing the line between the two so that it cannot be missed.

Wa yaqtulūna'l-nabiyyīna bi ghayri'l-ḥaqq, and they killed the prophets without right, and the reader may ask what right there could ever be to kill a prophet, since the phrase seems to allow for one. There is none. The construction is *mubālagha*, emphasis, and it functions as our English does when we say a thing is utterly impossible. It is never right. The clause is there to close a door that was never open.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِّينَ وَالصَّابِّينَ مَنْ ءَامَنَ
بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا
خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does righteous deeds, they shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve.

al-Baqara 2:62

This āyah has been misused more than almost any other in the Qur'ān, and it must be handled with care.

What it says is that the reward turns on faith and works and not on a communal label. What it does not say is that all religions lead to Allāh ﷻ. And the proof that it does not say so is in the āyah itself: *man āmana bi'llāhi wa'l-yawmi'l-ākhir wa 'amila ṣāliḥā*, whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does righteous deeds. That is a condition, placed in the middle of the sentence, and it governs every group named before it. Faith is the condition of the Garden, and the āyah states it whilst appearing to relax it.

And we must not ignore the other parts of the Qur'ān where Allāh ﷻ warns the disbelievers of the Fire eternally. This same sūra asks, at the eighty-fifth āyah, *do you believe in part of the Book and disbelieve in part?* And Sūrat al-Bayyina states,

truly those who disbelieve amongst the People of the Book and the idolaters shall be in the fire of Hell, abiding therein. Those are the worst of creation. A reading of the sixty-second āyah which contradicts those has stopped being a reading and become a preference.

Who are the Sabians? The ‘ulamā’ differ: followers of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, or worshippers of angels, or of the sun, or of the stars.

And a word about the shape of the argument, which is worth having. Belief in Allāh ﷻ necessitates belief in the Last Day, because Allāh ﷻ is perfect, and perfection includes justice, and we plainly see injustice in this life going unanswered, and so there must be a Day on which it is answered, or He is not just. And belief in that Day necessitates righteous deeds, because a man who genuinely expects to be examined prepares. The three are a chain, and if any link is missing or weak, the others are being held with less conviction than the man imagines. Which is why the āyah names all three and not one.

And there is a *fitna* in our own time that this āyah is dragged into, the movement to fold the faiths together under a common ancestry, and the reader should see what it actually asks of him. It asks him to accept that he stands lower than the station Allāh ﷻ gave him. That is a demotion accepted voluntarily, and it has nothing to do with humility or with being a good neighbour.

Inda rabbihim, with their Lord, and it is the last kindness in the āyah. The reward is kept with Him, in deposit, and never sent out, which means that to collect it a man must go to Him. The prize is the journey.

The Mountain and the Sabbath

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَكُمْ وَرَفَعْنَا فَوْقَكُمُ الطُّورَ خُذُوا مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ بِقُوَّةٍ
وَاذْكُرُوا مَا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

*And remember when We took your covenant and raised the mountain above you:
hold fast to what We have given you, and remember what is in it, so that you may
attain taqwā.*

al-Baqara 2:63

After the blessings, the insolence. And Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله draws the contrast that gives this āyah its place: Allāh ﷻ has spoken of those with faith who fulfil His commands without a trace of doubt, and now He speaks of those who would only worship under a threat.

Mithāq, and it is from a root meaning to bind fast, and it denotes a promise entered into with full knowledge of what it requires. It is the heaviest word for a covenant that Arabic has, and it is used here because they asked for the Book and got it and were bound by it.

And the mountain was raised. The ‘ulamā’ mention two understandings: that it was shaking and its boulders were falling so that it seemed about to come down on them, or that it was literally lifted above them whilst the covenant was being taken. The Qur’ān elsewhere describes it, *and when We raised the mountain above them as though it were a canopy, and they thought it was falling upon them: hold fast to what We have given you and remember what is in it, so that you may guard yourselves.*

Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله makes the necessary clarification: it was a deterrent and not a punishment, in the way that the prescribed corporal penalties of the Sharī’a are deterrents, and a mountain held over a nation whilst they promise is a way of telling them what the promise weighs. It is the same

instinct that modern psychology arrived at very much later and with far less dignity.

Wa'dhkurū mā fīh, and remember what is in it, and the 'ulamā' read it as both remembering for oneself and reminding others, for a covenant that one generation keeps privately dies with them.

La'allakum tattaqūn, so that you may attain taqwā, and the taqwā here has two objects, for there is a punishment in both worlds: the mountain in this one, and the Fire in the next, and the mountain is the visible half of an invisible arrangement.

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ مِّنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ فَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ لَكُنْتُمْ مِنَ
الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

Then you turned away after that. And had it not been for the grace of Allāh upon you and His mercy, you would have been amongst the losers.

al-Baqara 2:64

A mountain over their heads, and they promised, and then they turned away. And the reader should ask who *you* is here, because it is two groups at once. It is the Children of Isrā'īl in the wilderness, and the reader may count for himself how many chances that makes. And it is the Jews of Madīnah, who had the whole record in front of them, who knew exactly what their forefathers had done and what it had cost, and who did the same thing anyway.

Faḍl, and the word does not mean favour in the general sense. It means giving somebody more than their due, an excess, a surplus beyond what the situation required. If a man needs one and you give him three, that is *faḍl*.

And the 'ulamā' say that the *faḍl* here was twofold: that Allāh ﷻ forgave them, repeatedly, and that He sent them another prophet. And this maps exactly onto both audiences, for the *faḍl* to the Children of Isrā'īl was Mūsā عليه السلام, and

the *fadl* to the Jews of Madīnah was Muḥammad ﷺ, standing amongst them at that moment. The greatest surplus Allāh ﷻ has ever given to anybody was three streets away and they were arguing about his lineage.

And it is the same word Allāh ﷻ uses of us in Sūrat al-Jumu'a, that the sending of the Messenger ﷺ is *the grace of Allāh, He gives it to whom He wills, and Allāh is the possessor of tremendous grace*. The pattern is identical. And so is the warning.

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ الَّذِينَ اعْتَدَوْا مِنْكُمْ فِي السَّبْتِ فَقُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً
خَاسِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

And you surely know of those amongst you who transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, be apes, despised.

al-Baqara 2:65

The first word is the one to notice: *wa laqad 'alimtum*, and you surely know. This is their own history, recorded in their own books, taught to them by their own teachers, and Allāh ﷻ is quoting it back. Nobody can claim that Islam invented the story to malign them, and the full account is in Sūrat al-A'rāf, where Allāh ﷻ says, *and ask them about the town which was by the sea*.

The episode belongs to the time of Dāwūd عليه السلام. Allāh ﷻ had appointed Saturday as the sacred day for the Children of Isrā'īl, set apart for worship, and fishing was prohibited on it. But these people lived on the shore and were very fond of fish, and the fish, as the Qur'ān tells us, came to them on the Sabbath in shoals and did not come on the other days, which was the test itself.

Al-Qurṭubī رحمه الله tells us what they did. At first they invented all sorts of clever devices for catching fish on Saturday, and gradually began to do it openly. And a division grew amongst them, with the transgressors on one side and, on the other, some scholars and pious men who tried to dissuade them. When the

first group paid no heed, the second broke away entirely and went to live in a separate part of the town.

Then one day they noticed that no sound was coming from the other quarter. They went to see, and found that every one of the transgressors had been turned into apes. Qatāda رحمه الله says that the young had become apes and the old had become swine. And the apes could recognise their relatives and their friends, and would come to them weeping out of remorse, seeking sympathy and help. And after three days they all died.

Khāsiṭin, despised, and al-Ṣābūnī رحمه الله says that it is the word you use to a dog to drive it off, in disgust. It describes a tone of voice and not an appearance.

Physical or Figurative?

Some, including M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, have suggested that they were invested with the characteristics of apes, becoming like apes in character and thought and conduct, and that the transformation was a moral one and not a physical one.

The position is not sustainable, and for several reasons. Quite apart from the fact that there were many similar unusual events in the history of the Israelites, the purpose of this transformation, as the very next āyah states, was to serve as a severe affliction exemplary for their own generation and for those to follow. A moral change is invisible, and an invisible thing cannot be made an example of. Mawlānā Idrīs Kāndhlawī رحمه الله reports that there is consensus on its being physical.

It may be that their minds were left intact whilst their bodies were changed, which is what the weeping suggests, and which is a far more terrible punishment than the loss of the mind would have been. Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله reports from al-Ḍaḥḥāk from Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما that Allāh جلّ جلاله turned them into monkeys because of their sins, and that they lived only three days, for no transformed person lives more than three days, and they did not eat or drink or have offspring.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله makes an observation about our own age which the reader may find uncomfortable and which is difficult to answer. Our modernists are all too ready to swallow without blinking the most extraordinary propositions, provided they arrive from the West. They have complete certainty about Darwin's speculation that apes evolved into men, though no verifiable data has been produced for the proposition. But when the Qur'an states that men were changed into apes, they look at it askance, although this kind of change is rationally and logically every bit as possible as the other. The objection, in other words, is to the direction of travel, and to who is reporting it.

فَجَعَلْنَاهَا نَكَالًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهَا وَمَا خَلْفَهَا وَمَوْعِظَةً لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

So We made it a warning to those of their time and those who came after, and an admonition for those who guard themselves.

al-Baqara 2:66

Nakāl is an exemplary punishment, one whose purpose is deterrence, made public so that it works on those who did not receive it.

And the closing word settles who actually benefits: *maw'izatan li'l-muttaqīn*, an admonition for those who guard themselves. Only those with *taqwā* take a lesson. Everybody saw the apes. Only some people learned anything, and the difference was not in the evidence.

On Legal Devices

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله raises here the whole question of *hiyal*, legal devices and loopholes, since the Sabbath-breakers were destroyed for precisely that, and the reader needs the distinction because the subject is badly abused in both directions.

The summary is this. To employ a device in order to *follow* a command of Allāh ﷻ and avoid falling into His disobedience is permissible. To employ one in order to make a mockery of the religion is not.

An example makes it clear. Bartering a kilo of good dates for two kilos of bad dates is a form of usury and is forbidden. The Messenger ﷺ himself suggested a device for a situation in which such an exchange is necessary: instead of bartering one commodity against another, use the exchange value of money. Sell the two kilos of bad dates for a sum, and then with that sum buy a kilo of good dates. The intention in that device is to conform to the Sharī'a, not to bypass it, and it was taught by the Lawgiver ﷺ.

The men of the Sabbath were doing the opposite. They laid their nets on Friday and drew them on Sunday and told themselves they had not fished on Saturday, and the object of the exercise was to get the fish whilst technically keeping the day. The test is what the ingenuity is in service of.

The Cow

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تَذْبَحُوا بَقَرَةً قَالُوا أَتَتَّخِذُنَا هُزُوًا قَالَ أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ أَنْ أَكُونَ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

And remember when Mūsā said to his people, Allāh commands you to sacrifice a cow. They said, are you making fun of us? He said, I seek refuge with Allāh from being amongst the ignorant.

al-Baqara 2:67

We come to the incident that gives the sūra its name, and the reader should understand from the outset that the difficulty in this story is entirely manufactured.

They were commanded to sacrifice a cow. Any cow. That was the whole instruction, and had they gone out and bought the nearest one, the matter would have ended in an afternoon. Instead they chose to make trouble about it, and the useless questions they asked, and the expressions they used, such as *your*

Lord, which displayed their disrespect, brought them to the very door of destruction. And the mercy and the gentle forbearance of Allāh ﷻ rescued them once again, and in the end they carried out the command.

Why a cow? Because the cow was precisely what they had been worshipping. They had come out of Egypt where the bull was divine, and they had made a calf in the wilderness, and Allāh ﷻ commanded them to take the animal they revered and cut its throat, and this is why the instruction was intolerable to them and why they spent so long negotiating.

Their reply, *atattakhidhunā huzuwā*, are you making fun of us, tells us how the command landed. And the answer of Mūsā عليه السلام is a lesson in itself: *a'ūdhu bi'llāhi an akūna min al-jāhilīn*, I seek refuge with Allāh from being amongst the ignorant. He neither defends himself nor argues. He treats the very suggestion that a prophet would mock his people as something to seek refuge from.

And the word *jāhil* is worth the same attention we gave to *'aql*. It does not mean uneducated. The *jāhil* is the man who cannot control himself through knowledge, who behaves according to whatever he feels at the moment, and the pre-Islamic era is called the *Jāhiliyya* not because they were stupid, for they were extraordinary, but because they were governed by their impulses. To mock is a *jāhil*'s act, and Mūsā عليه السلام seeks refuge from it.

The Background of the Command

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله supplies the second reason for the cow, and the two run together.

Amongst the Israelites, a nephew killed his uncle in order to seize his inheritance, the dead man having no other family. He then carried the body and dropped it near another man's house and accused those people of the murder. The dispute grew until they brought it to Mūsā عليه السلام. And Allāh ﷻ commanded him to tell them to slaughter a cow.

So there is a murder to solve and an idolatry to break, and one command does both, and they very nearly made it impossible.

ج
قَالُوا ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّنْ لَنَا مَا هِيَ قَالِ إِنَّهُ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٌ لَا
فَارِضٌ وَلَا بِكْرٌ عَوَانٌ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ فَافْعَلُوا مَا تُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

They said, call upon your Lord for us, that He may make clear to us what it is. He said, He says it is a cow neither old nor virgin, middling between the two. So do what you are commanded.

al-Baqara 2:68

The first question, and the noose begins to tighten around their own necks.

Innahu yaqūl, He says, and Mūsā عليه السلام is careful to make clear that the specification comes from Allāh ﷻ and not from him, and every further condition they extract is one they have extracted from their Lord and not from their prophet.

And notice how he ends: *fā'falū mā tu'marūn*, so do what you are commanded. He gives them the answer and then, in the same breath, tells them to stop. It is a door being held open one last time.

This is the great lesson of the whole passage, and it should be stated plainly. Listen to the order, and do not debate it. There is a species of religiosity which presents itself as thoroughness and is in fact the deferral of obedience, and every question it asks is sincere and the sum of them is a refusal.

People used to ask the Prophet ﷺ a great many questions of no practical relevance to anything. Once a man asked him, in front of a crowd, who his real father was. And Allāh ﷻ revealed, *O you who believe, do not ask about things which, if made clear to you, would trouble you. And if you ask about them whilst the Qur'ān is being sent down, they will be made clear to you. Allāh has pardoned that, and Allāh is Forgiving, Forbearing.*

And there is the incident which settles the matter forever. The pilgrimage was declared obligatory, and a man came and asked, is it every year? The Messenger ﷺ said nothing. He asked again. He said nothing. He asked a third time, and he said, *woe to you. Had I said yes, it would have become obligatory every year, and you would not have been able to do it, and you would have been sinful.*

The man was one syllable away from ruining the religion for everybody, and he thought he was being conscientious. Ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما caught the same disease at a later stage: a man asked him about the blood of a mosquito, whether it invalidates a garment, and he asked where he was from, and the man said, from Iraq. And Ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما said, look at this one. He asks me about the blood of a mosquito, and they killed the son of the Prophet ﷺ. And I heard the Prophet ﷺ say, *the two of them are my two sweet basils from this world.*

ج
قَالُوا ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّنْ لَنَا مَا لَوْنُهَا قَالَ إِنَّهُ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٌ
صَفْرَاءُ فَاقْعَ لَوْنَهَا تَسُرُّ النَّظِيرِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

They said, call upon your Lord for us, that He may make clear to us what colour it is. He said, He says it is a yellow cow, bright in colour, gladdening those who look at it.

al-Baqara 2:69

The second question, and now they are asking about colour, and the answer takes another large slice out of the world's supply of cows. Yellow was amongst the rarest and most exotic colours for cattle, and each question has narrowed the field further.

The rule is now visible. The more unnecessary questions you ask, the more trouble you make for yourself. The Shari‘a was simple and clear, and by demanding details that were never offered, they found hardship in its implementation. Every specification was a mercy withheld until they demanded it.

And there is a distinction here that the reader should carry with him. There is a difference between asking the Messenger ﷺ and questioning the Messenger ﷺ. The words can be identical. The posture is opposite. The Companions رضي الله عنهم asked constantly, and it was the engine of the whole religion, and they were never once rebuked for it, because they were asking in order to obey. These men were asking in order to delay.

قَالُوا ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّنْ لَنَا مَا هِيَ إِنَّ الْبَقَرَ تَشَبَهَ عَلَيْنَا وَإِنَّا إِن
شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They said, call upon your Lord for us, that He may make clear to us what it is. Cows are much alike to us. And if Allāh wills, we shall be guided.

al-Baqara 2:70

The third question, and the excuse is almost funny: cows all look the same to us. They had been given an age and a colour and they are still asking.

But look at the last clause: *wa innā in shā'a'llāhu la muhtadūn*, and if Allāh wills, we shall be guided. The 'ulamā' have all noticed it. Had they not said this, they would never have found the cow. The whole thing hung on those three words, spoken almost carelessly at the end of a complaint, and Allāh ﷻ accepted them.

The reader who says *in shā'a Allāh* out of habit twenty times a day should consider that this is what it is for.

قَالَ إِنَّهُ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٌ لَا ذَلُولَ تُبِيرُ الْأَرْضَ وَلَا تَسْقِي الْحَرْثَ
مُسَلَّمَةً لَا شِئَ فِيهَا قَالُوا آلَتَنَ جِئْتَ بِالْحَقِّ فَذَبَحُوهَا وَمَا كَادُوا
يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

*He said, He says it is a cow not broken to plough the earth or water the tillage,
sound, with no blemish on it. They said, now you have brought the truth. So they
sacrificed it, though they almost did not.*

al-Baqara 2:71

And now the specification is complete, and the reader should assemble it. They must find a cow which is middle-aged and strong, and beautiful to look at, and bright yellow, and which has never been yoked to plough or to draw water, and which is entirely without blemish or a mark of another colour anywhere on it.

A cow which has never worked, in an agricultural society, in a wilderness, kept purely for its own sake, in a rare colour, and flawless. Finding such an animal is very nearly impossible, and it is impossible except if Allāh ﷻ guides you to it, which is exactly what they had accidentally asked for one āyah earlier.

They found it with a young orphan boy. And he would not part with it until they gave him its weight in gold, and they paid. And when they had brought it, they understood at last what their questions had cost them.

Al-āna ji'ta bi'l-ḥaqq, now you have brought the truth, and the discourtesy has not left them even at the end. Now. As though he had been withholding it. As though the previous four āyahs had been his fault.

And then the closing clause, which is the most damning phrase in the whole episode: *wa mā kādū yaf'alūn*, and they almost did not do it. After all of it. After the negotiation and the gold and the orphan. Allāh ﷻ tells us that even then, standing over the animal with the knife, they very nearly walked away.

وَإِذْ قَتَلْتُمْ نَفْسًا فَادَّعَيْتُمْ فِيهَا وَاللَّهُ مُخْرِجٌ مَّا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

And remember when you killed a soul and disputed about it, and Allāh was to bring out what you were concealing.

al-Baqara 2:72

Now the murder, and the reader will immediately notice that the chronology has been inverted, for this event is the beginning of the story and it has been placed after the end of it.

Muftī Shafī رحمه الله and Abū al-Su‘ūd رحمه الله explain the arrangement, and the explanation is a small masterclass in how the Qur’ān narrates. This long section of the sūra is dealing with the transgressions of the Israelites, and that, and not storytelling, is the object. The present story contains two misdeeds: first, committing a murder and then attempting to conceal it, and second, raising uncalled-for objections to a divine command. Had the chronological order been kept, the reader would have supposed that the murder was the real subject and that the business of the cow was included merely to complete the narrative. By inverting it, both misdeeds are given equal weight, and the questioning is established as a crime in its own right and not as a colourful detail.

And notice what Allāh ﷻ does not tell us. He never says who the murderer was. Because that is not the lesson. The lesson is *wa’llāhu mukhrijun mā kuntum taktumūn*, and Allāh was to bring out what you were concealing, and He says it with the active participle, which in Arabic carries the present and the future together. He is the One who brings out what you hide. Continuously. As a matter of what He is, and not of what He did once in a wilderness.

فَقُلْنَا أَضْرِبُوهُ بِبَعْضِهَا كَذَلِكَ يُحْيِي اللَّهُ الْمَوْتَى وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

So We said, strike him with part of it. Thus does Allāh give life to the dead, and He shows you His signs, so that you may use your reason.

al-Baqara 2:73

They struck the corpse with a piece of the cow, and the dead man sat up and named his murderer, and lay back down.

Establishing faith in the Hereafter in the minds and hearts of people is one of the four cardinal purposes of the Qur'ān, and for this reason, whilst narrating an event even from a different angle and for a different purpose, if a way can be opened through it to one of those main purposes, the Qur'ān always opens it. The main reason for the command to sacrifice a cow was to break their reverence for cattle. But in order to disclose a murderer they had hidden, Allāh ﷻ created a miracle, and the corpse was restored to life and spoke.

And He tells us what it was for: *kadhālika yuhyi'llāhu'l-mawtā*, thus does Allāh give life to the dead. It was a demonstration. Allāh ﷻ can bring the dead back in any manner He wills, and it is therefore foolishness to doubt or to question whether He is able to. Such doubts indicate a deficiency in the use of the intellect, or its abuse, and this is why the āyah ends, *la'allakum ta'qilūn*, so that you may use your reason.

They had asked, in effect, for the whole religion to be proved to them, and they got a corpse sitting up and naming its killer, and the reader may guess what happened next.

ثُمَّ قَسَتْ قُلُوبُكُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ فَهِيَ كَالْحِجَارَةِ أَوْ أَشَدُّ قَسْوَةً وَإِنَّ
 مِنَ الْحِجَارَةِ لَمَا يَتَفَجَّرُ مِنْهُ الْأَنْهَارُ وَإِنَّ مِنْهَا لَمَا يَشَقَّقُ فَيَخْرُجُ مِنْهُ
 الْمَاءُ وَإِنَّ مِنْهَا لَمَا يَهْبِطُ مِنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَفِلٍ عَمَّا
 تَعْمَلُونَ

*Then, after that, your hearts hardened, so they were like stones, or harder still. For
 there are stones from which rivers gush, and there are some that split and water
 comes out of them, and there are some that fall down from the fear of Allāh. And
 Allāh is not unaware of what you do.*

al-Baqara 2:74

This is the verdict on the whole passage, and it is the most frightening āyah in this volume, and the reader should not read it about anybody else.

They saw a dead man speak. And then their hearts hardened. Not despite the miracle. After it, and the word *thumma* makes the sequence explicit, and Allāh ﷻ is telling us that a miracle cannot soften a heart that has decided to be hard. There is no evidence that would have worked, because the problem was never evidential.

And then the comparison, which is one of the great passages of the Qur'ān. Like stones, He says, and then He immediately withdraws it, because it is unfair to the stones. *Aw ashaddu qaswa*, or harder still. And He proves it, with three grades of stone, and the reader should follow them, because they are a complete taxonomy.

There are stones from which rivers gush forth, and these are the stones that compromise entirely and give everything, and they help those around them abundantly. There are stones that split and let water come out, and these give less, but they crack, they yield, something gets through. And there are stones

that fall down from the fear of Allāh ﷻ, and these give nothing to anybody, no water at all, but they are still afraid of Him.

Three grades, and the worst stone in creation still has the fear. And their hearts had less than that.

They had knowledge in their minds and no purity in their hearts to push it into action, and this is exactly what happens to us when our faith is low and we hear a ḥadīth and say, yes, I know that one, and it has never once entered the heart, because we have never once acted on it. Knowing a thing is the most effective way of never having to hear it again.

And Allāh ﷻ says to us, in Sūrat al-Ḥadīd, and He says it to *believers*, and it should stop the reader where he sits:

أَلَمْ يَأْنِ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَنْ تَخْشَعَ قُلُوبُهُمْ لِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَمَا نَزَلَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ
وَلَا يَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلُ فَطَالَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْأَمَدُ
فَقَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَكَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ فَاسِقُونَ

*Has the time not come for those who believe, that their hearts should be humbled at the remembrance of Allāh and at what has come down of the truth, and that they should not be like those who were given the Book before, so that the term was prolonged for them and their hearts hardened, and many of them are transgressors?*²⁶

That is the whole warning of this sūra in one āyah. Duration hardened them, and no catastrophe did. They had it for too long and it stopped meaning anything, and Allāh ﷻ is asking us, in the present tense, whether the time has come yet.

26. Al-Ḥadīd 57:16. The mechanism is named exactly: *fa tāla 'alayhimu'l-amad*, the term was prolonged for them. Nothing dramatic happened. Time simply passed, and they got used to it.

The Scholars Who Concealed

*أَفَتَطْمَعُونَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا لَكُمْ وَقَدْ كَانَ فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ كَلِمَ
اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يَحْرِفُونَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا عَقَلُوهُ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

Do you then hope that they will believe you, when a party of them used to hear the word of Allāh and then distort it after they had understood it, knowingly?

al-Baqara 2:75

The address turns, and Allāh ﷻ is now speaking to the believers about these people rather than to these people about themselves, and the change of direction is itself a judgement.

Allāh ﷻ speaks again of their crimes, and particularly of their scholars, for the party who heard the word of Allāh ﷻ and distorted it were the ones who could read it.

Afatatma‘ūn, do you then hope, and the word *tama‘* is stronger than hope or desire. It is an obsessive longing, a craving that will not let a man alone. And Allāh ﷻ is addressing a very tender place in the heart of His Messenger ﷺ and his Companions رضي الله عنهم, who wanted these people to believe with an intensity that was becoming a wound. Do not set your hopes on people like this. He is telling them to stop bleeding, and never to stop calling.

And notice the aggravation piled into the last clause: they distorted it *after they had understood it*, and *knowingly*. Not in error. Not in ignorance. They read it, understood it perfectly, and then changed it, and knew exactly what they were doing.

وَإِذَا لَقُوا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَا بِعَضُّهُمْ إِلَىٰ بَعْضِ
 قَائِمٍ أَتُحَدِّثُونَهُم بِمَا فَتَحَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لِيُحَاجُّوكُمْ بِهِ عِنْدَ رَبِّكُمْ أَفَلَا
 تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

And when they meet those who believe, they say, we believe. But when they are alone with one another, they say, do you tell them what Allāh has disclosed to you, so that they may use it against you before your Lord? Will you not use your reason?

al-Baqara 2:76

The reader will recognise this immediately, because he has read it before, at the fourteenth āyah, about the hypocrites of Madīnah. The same two faces, the same bare *āmannā* in public, the same conference behind closed doors.

But look at what they are actually worried about, because it is extraordinary. They are not afraid that the Muslims will use the information against them in an argument. They are afraid that the Muslims will use it against them *before their Lord*. Which means they believe. They know the descriptions of the Prophet ﷺ in their book are real, they know the Day of Judgement is coming, and their entire strategy is to prevent the evidence from reaching a court whose jurisdiction they do not dispute.

And they close by asking one another, *afalā ta‘qilūn*, will you not use your reason, which is the exact phrase Allāh ﷻ used against them at the forty-fourth āyah. They have taken the language of the revelation and turned it into the vocabulary of a cover-up.

أَوَلَا يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Do they not know that Allāh knows what they conceal and what they reveal?

al-Baqara 2:77

One line, and it destroys the entire operation of the previous āyah.

Their plan was to keep the evidence out of the record. And Allāh ﷻ asks whether they are aware that He knows what they hide as well as what they announce. The secret conference they held in order to prevent the information from reaching Him was itself minuted.

They do know, of course. That is the answer to the question. They know, and they behave as though they do not, and this is the definition of delusion, which is not ignorance but the deliberate maintenance of a position one has already refuted.

وَمِنْهُمْ أُمِّيُونَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا أَمَانِي وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا
يُظُنُّونَ

*And amongst them are unlettered ones who do not know the Book, but only wishful
fancies, and they do nothing but conjecture.*

al-Baqara 2:78

Allāh ﷻ has dealt with their scholars, and now He turns to the common people, and the reader should notice that they are not let off, but they are dealt with differently, and the difference is instructive.

Ummī is from *umm*, a mother, and it describes a person as his mother bore him, without letters. And it was one of the descriptions of the Prophet ﷺ himself, for Allāh ﷻ says, *and you did not recite any Book before it, nor did you write one with your right hand, for then the falsifiers would have doubted*. And he ﷺ said, *we are an unlettered nation, we do not write nor calculate. The month is thus and thus and thus*.

So the word is not an insult. Being unlettered was his ﷺ miracle. The crime here is what these people put in the place of knowledge.

Amānī, and it means wishful fancies, false hopes, and the ‘ulamā’ explain what these fancies were: that they would not enter the Fire but for a few days, and that they would be forgiven whatever they did, and that their forefathers would intercede for them. Their leaders fed them these, and they swallowed them, and that was the whole of their religious education.

And *in hum illā yazunnūn*, they do nothing but conjecture, and here is *ẓann* again, the word we met at the forty-sixth āyah, and here it carries its other sense, the guess without evidence. The humble had *ẓann* that meant certainty. These have *ẓann* that means nothing at all. Same word, opposite ends of the human race.

فَوَيْلٌ لِلَّذِينَ يَكْتُبُونَ الْكِتَابَ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ يَقُولُونَ هَذَا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ
لَيْشْتُرُوا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا فَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا كَتَبَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا
يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

So woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say, this is from Allāh, in order to sell it for a small price. Woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for what they earn.

al-Baqara 2:79

And here are the men who supplied the fancies.

The reader should be clear that this does not refer to charging money for the physical writing or printing of scripture, which is a trade like any other. It refers to composing something and attributing it to Allāh ﷻ.

Notice that *wayl*, woe, is repeated three times in a single āyah, which is rare in the Qur’ān. Woe for the writing. Woe for what their hands wrote. And woe for what they earned by it. The act, the artefact, and the profit are cursed separately, so that no part of the transaction is left standing.

And *thamanan qalilā*, a small price, returns from the forty-first āyah, and the principle is the same: it is always small, by definition, because it is being measured against the Qur'ān. There is no sum that is not small next to that.

وَقَالُوا لَنْ تَمَسَّنَا النَّارُ إِلَّا أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَةً قُلْ أَتَّخَذْتُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَهْدًا
فَلَنْ يُخْلَفَ اللَّهُ عَهْدَهُ أَمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

And they say, the Fire shall not touch us except for a few numbered days. Say, have you taken a covenant from Allāh, for Allāh will never break His covenant? Or do you say about Allāh what you do not know?

al-Baqara 2:80

Here is the chief of the fancies, and Allāh ﷻ answers it not with a threat but with a question, and the question is unanswerable.

Have you taken a covenant from Allāh ﷻ? Because if you have, then it is secure, and He will never break it, and you may rest. And if you have not, then you are saying about Allāh ﷻ what you do not know, which is the worst thing a human being can do, and which the Qur'ān names elsewhere as the very thing the Shayṭān commands. There is no third option. Produce the document, or stop talking.

And this fancy grows wherever wishful thinking does, and it looks, amongst us, like hanging the Throne Verse on the wall of a shop that sells alcohol. A man's little good has deceived him about the reality of his condition, and the calligraphy is doing exactly the work the numbered days were doing.

And it is a great deception to imagine that we could survive a single moment in that Fire. It is so severe that Allāh ﷻ tells us the man who is dipped in it for an instant will be asked whether he ever saw any good at all, and he will say, no, by Allāh, never. One dip erases a lifetime of pleasure. And these people were budgeting for a few days of it.

ج
بَلَىٰ مَنْ كَسَبَ سَيِّئَةً وَأَحَاطَتْ بِهِ خَطِيئَتُهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ
النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Why not? Whoever earns evil and is encompassed by his sin, those are the companions of the Fire, they shall abide therein forever.

al-Baqara 2:81

The answer, and the standard it sets is not what they expected, because it is not about which community a man belongs to at all.

The critical word is *ahāṭat*, encompassed, surrounded, from the same root as a wall around a garden. The man intended is the one whose sin has enclosed him, so that it is on every side of him and he is inside it, and there is no part of him that is outside it any longer. The sin has stopped being something he does and started being what he is.

This is the obsessive sinner, the compulsive one, for whom the thing has become an identity to be defended rather than a fault to be regretted, and the reader will find no difficulty in identifying the phenomenon in an age which has taught people to organise their entire public selves around what they cannot stop doing, and to hold parades about it. The moment a sin becomes an identity, repentance becomes an act of self-annihilation, and that is precisely why the wall is fatal.

And the heart darkens with it, spot by spot, as we saw at the sixth āyah, until it is a barrier to every good thing.

إِيَّاكُمْ وَمُحَرَّمَاتِ الذُّنُوبِ، فَإِنَّهِنَّ يَجْتَمِعْنَ عَلَى الرَّجُلِ حَتَّى يَهْلِكَنَّهُ

*Beware of the sins you belittle, for they gather upon a man until they destroy him.*²⁷

And this is how the wall is built. Not by great crimes, which announce themselves and are repented of, but by small ones which nobody notices going up.

وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ هُمْ فِيهَا
خَالِدُونَ

*And those who believe and do righteous deeds, those are the companions of the
Garden, they shall abide therein forever.*

al-Baqara 2:82

And the volume closes as the sūra opened, with the two roads set beside one another, and with the last word going to mercy.

There is one grammatical detail here which is the kindest thing in these eighty-two āyahs, and the reader should be given it as a parting gift.

Al-ṣāliḥāt, righteous deeds, is a broken plural of the pattern the grammarians call *jamʿ qilla*, the plural of paucity, which in Arabic denotes a number under ten. Set it against the previous āyah, where the sin *encompasses* the man, surrounds him entirely, on every side.

The Fire is for the man whose sins have walled him in completely. The Garden is for the man with a handful of good deeds. That is the arithmetic Allāh ﷻ has chosen, and it is not balanced, and it was never meant to be. He does not overburden us. He asks for a few, and He accepts them, and He gives an eternity for them.

And so the first eighty-two āyahs end where the Fātiḥa began, with a path, and with two ways off it, and with a Lord who has spent the whole of this sūra

telling a nation that failed exactly what it would have taken to succeed, so that we, reading it fourteen centuries later, should be left without an excuse and without a fear.

May Allāh ﷻ make us of the people of the second āyah, and of the fifth, and of the eighty-second. Āmīn.

27. *Abmad, on the authority of ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه*. He likened them to a company of travellers in a valley, each bringing one stick, until they have kindled enough to bake their bread. No single stick is worth a remark.

Addendum: On the Shape of the Passage

A book read at twenty minutes a sitting conceals its own architecture, and the reader who has now crossed all eighty-two āyahs in that fashion is owed a view from above, because this passage was built rather than accumulated.

Begin with the joint. The Fātiḥa is a request: show us the straight path. Al-Baqara answers in its second āyah: *that is the Book, in which there is no doubt, a guidance*. The reader who moves from the first sūra to the second without noticing has walked past the hinge on which the whole muṣḥaf turns, and everything that follows in these eighty-two āyahs is a working out of that one exchange.

The answer, however, arrives with a condition attached, and the condition generates the entire structure. The guidance is for the people of taqwā. Which raises the obvious difficulty: how does a man acquire taqwā if the guidance that would teach him is reserved for those who already have it? The sūra holds that question open for nineteen āyahs and then answers it in the twenty-first, and the answer is one word. Worship. Taqwā is what worship leaves behind, and it is neither a temperament nor a mood. And so the second āyah and the twenty-first are a single argument with a long pause in the middle, and the pause is filled with portraits.

Those portraits are the first movement, and their proportions are themselves an argument. Five āyahs for the believers. Two for the open disbelievers. Thirteen for the hypocrites. Allāh ﷻ has given nearly seven times as much attention to the enemy within as to the enemy without, and He has done so in a sūra revealed to a community that had just acquired something worth infiltrating. The reader who wonders why the hypocrites get the two parables and the disbelievers get four words has been answered by the arithmetic before he finished asking.

Then the second movement, and it is the argument from creation and provision, and it is arranged as a ring. The reader will find the demonstration set out in its place, at the twenty-ninth āyah, and it needs no repeating here beyond the observation that the glad tidings of the Garden sit alone at its centre, unpaired, with the whole structure closed around them. That is a claim about what the argument is for.

The third movement is Ādam عليه السلام, and it does two things at once that we usually keep apart. It establishes human honour, in the office of the *khalīfa*, in the teaching of the names, in the prostration of the angels. And it establishes human vulnerability, in the tree and the slip and the descent. Both are stated of the same creature within six āyahs, and neither cancels the other. And at the centre of it stands the exchange that the whole religion turns on: two creatures fail in the same hour, and one says *we have wronged ourselves*, and the other says *I am better than him*. Nothing separates Ādam عليه السلام from Iblīs except the ability to produce the first sentence, and the reader should notice that this is not a difference of knowledge, since Iblīs had worshipped for ages and knew perfectly well what he had done.

Then the fourth movement, which is fifty āyahs long and which does something none of the preceding movements attempted. Everything the sūra has asserted in principle, it now demonstrates in history, on a nation that had every advantage. Prophets, a Book, a kingdom, a law, a language, a lineage, and a rescue so total that they watched an army drown from dry ground. And the accumulation is the argument: blessing does not produce gratitude. Six blessings are listed and numbered, and not one of them worked. Deliverance, the sea, the forty nights, the pardon, the Book, the manna, the water from the rock, and at the end of it they wanted onions.

And the diagnosis, when it comes, is not what the reader expects. He has been waiting for a catastrophe to explain the hardening. What Allāh ﷻ names, in Sūrat al-Ḥadīd, is duration. *The term was prolonged for them, and their hearts hardened*. Nothing happened. They had it for too long, and it stopped meaning anything, and that is the whole mechanism. Which is why the cow narrative is placed where it is, and why the sūra is named after it rather than after the

Throne Verse: a people who have grown used to a command will find any question to ask about it except the one that would require them to obey. And why the corpse that sat up and named its killer changed nothing at all. A miracle cannot soften what has decided to be hard, because the problem was never evidential.

And the reader should not settle into the seat of the spectator, because the sūra has already removed it. The Messenger ﷺ was asked directly whether he meant the Jews and the Christians, and he said, *who else?* The Companions رضي الله عنهم asked the question we would have asked, hoping for the answer we want, and they did not get it. Sayyidunā ‘Umar رضي الله عنه asked Ḥudhayfa رضي الله عنه whether his own name was on the register of the hypocrites. These fifty āyahs are a mirror, and the men who read them as history were the first thing the sūra warned about.

Then the close, and it refuses every inherited guarantee at once. Not the lineage, which was the whole of their case. Not the label, for the sixty-second āyah names four communities and then places the same condition on all of them. Not the numbered days, for which no covenant can be produced. What is left is the eighty-first āyah and the eighty-second, and the standard in them is moral and it is individual: a man whose sin has walled him in, and a man with a handful of good deeds. And the grammar of that last āyah is the gift the reader should carry out of this volume, because *al-ṣāliḥāt* is a plural of paucity, fewer than ten, set against a sin that *encompasses*. The Fire requires a wall. The Garden asks for a handful. That arithmetic is not balanced and it was never meant to be.

Four things, then, and they may be put in four clauses. Knowledge must become humility, as it did with the angels who said *we have no knowledge except what You have taught us*, and did not with the one standing beside them. Blessing must become gratitude, which fifty āyahs of rescue could not manufacture. Questioning must serve obedience, or it becomes the most respectable form of refusal there is. And hope must rest on the promise of Allāh ﷻ and not on a fancy, because a fancy cannot be produced in evidence and He has asked to see the document.

May Allāh ﷻ allow us to receive His Book with sound hearts, and may He spare us the one fate this sūra describes and does not name, which is to hold the thing long enough to stop hearing it. Āmīn.

Bibliography

The tafsīr works upon which this commentary rests are not listed here, being its sources rather than works referred to within it. They are named in the Author's Introduction and again at each point of use, which is where a reader who wishes to follow one up will actually look for it. What follows is confined to the third-party works cited in these pages, and to nothing else.

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Glossary

The entries below are short by design. Where a term carries more than a line can hold, and most of them do, the reader is better served by the place in the commentary where it is actually worked out.

Āyah

A verse of the Qur'ān. The word means a sign, and the Book uses it equally of its own verses and of the created world, which is not an accident: both are put in front of us to be read.

Amānī

Fancies. Hopes about one's standing with Allāh ﷻ that rest on nothing, and cannot be produced in evidence when asked for.

Banū Isrā'īl

The Children of Isrā'īl. Isrā'īl was the second name of the Prophet Ya'qūb عليه السلام, and his twelve sons became the twelve tribes.

Basmala

The formula, in the name of Allāh, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful. Both names in it are names of mercy, and no name of might appears.

Du'ā'

Calling upon Allāh ﷻ directly. No intermediary is involved, and none is permitted.

Falāḥ

Success, in the full sense of having arrived and being safe. It is what the muezzin calls us to five times a day, and he calls us to it by way of the prayer.

Fāsiq

One who has stepped outside the boundary and stayed outside it. The root is used of a date coming out of its skin.

Fitna

A trial, a temptation, or a persecution, depending on where it sits.

Furqān

That which separates. Of a scripture, the criterion dividing truth from falsehood, together with the judgement to apply it, since a criterion a man cannot use is no use to him.

Ghayb

The unseen. Not merely what we have yet to discover, but what is closed to creation except through what Allāh ﷻ discloses.

Hadīth

A report of what the Messenger ﷺ said, did, permitted, or was.

Hadīth Qudsī

A report in which he ﷺ relates the speech of Allāh ﷻ: the meaning His, the wording his.

Ḥiyal

Legal devices. Lawful when they serve obedience, unlawful when they serve evasion, and the men of the Sabbath are the standing example of the second.

Hidāya

Guidance. It covers both the showing of the road and the enabling to walk it, and the second is the harder half.

Hurūf al-muqatta'āt

The disconnected letters opening twenty-nine sūras. Their meaning was not given to us.

Iḥsān

Doing a thing beautifully. In worship, as the Messenger ﷺ defined it: that you worship Allāh ﷻ as though you see Him, and if you do not see Him, He sees you.

Īmān

Faith. Conviction of the heart, entire rather than selective, and not the same thing as knowing.

Istidrāj

The long rope. Ease and success granted to a man as the instrument of his undoing, so that nothing appears to be going wrong until it has.

Jinn

Beings made from fire, ordinarily unseen, accountable as we are. Iblīs was one of them, and not an angel.

Khalīfa

One who comes after; the office of inhabiting the earth with responsibility for it. Announced before Ādam عليه السلام was made, which is why the descent was never a punishment.

Kbushūʿ

Stillness and awe in the heart, especially in the ṣalāh. It cannot be performed, and cannot be seen from outside.

Kufr

Disbelief. The root means to cover over, which is why the farmer burying seed and the night are both called by it: something is present, and something is being drawn across the top of it.

Muttaqī

One who has taqwā.

Nifāq

Hypocrisy. The word describes a burrow with an exit at either end. Of two kinds: of belief, which removes a man from Islam, and of action, which does not, and which the Companions رضي الله عنهم feared for themselves.

Qurʾān

The speech of Allāh ﷻ, recited to Muḥammad ﷺ, preserved in the muṣḥaf. Speech before it was ever a text, which is why a translation is a report of it and not the thing itself.

Rukūʿ

The bowing in the prayer; also a thematic section of a sūra.

Ṣabr

Not putting up with things. Self-command: holding under a blow, persevering in obedience, refusing temptation. It counts at the first strike, not three weeks later.

Ṣalāh

The prescribed prayer. The Qur'ān asks that it be established rather than performed, and uses the plain verb of praying mostly for those whose prayer has failed.

Shayṭān

A rebellious devil; used in its proper form of Iblīs. The root carries distance, being far from mercy.

Shirk

Giving to another what belongs to Allāh ﷻ alone. It reaches further than statues, and the Messenger ﷺ policed it down to a conjunction.

Sūra

A chapter of the Qur'ān; in a construct phrase, Sūrat, as in Sūrat al-Baqara. The Arabs did not use the word this way, and it carries the sense of something walled.

Sunnah

The way of the Messenger ﷺ, established by his teaching and his practice. It is where every detail of the prayer comes from.

Tafsīr

Drawing back what stands between a reader and a meaning already there. The mufasssir uncovers; he does not supply.

Taqwā

Protection. The root is to shield, and the word describes a man putting something between himself and a danger. It is acquired by worship, and guidance arrives in proportion to it.

Tawba

A full turn. Not remorse, and not a formula: knowledge that it was wrong, shame at it, and the leaving of it, with rights returned where a person was involved.

Tawhīd

Affirming that Allāh ﷻ is one, in His lordship, in the worship due to Him, and in His names and attributes.

Tawfīq

Being enabled to do the right thing. A gift and not a wage, which is why the fifth āyah calls the guidance something from their Lord.

Ummah

A community bound by a religion; used especially of the community of Muḥammad ﷺ.

Ummī

Unlettered, as one's mother bore one. A description of the Messenger ﷺ, and part of the proof rather than a deficiency in it.

Wahy

Revelation to a prophet. One of only two ways a hypocrite could ever have been identified, and it has ended.

Yaqīn

Certainty with no doubt in it. Of three degrees: of knowledge, of sight, and of direct experience. Only the first is available to us here, and it is what we are asked for.

Zakāh

The obligatory charity on qualifying wealth. The seed within the fruit, which is sown and returns as more.