

THE QUR'AN

610-632

The word *qur'an* literally means "the recitation." For Muslims, the Qur'an is not so much a book as a living and vibrant act of speech that has been passed down through an unbroken chain of human beings from the time of Muhammad, who with his companions in seventh-century Arabia formed the first community of Muslims. At the same time, the Qur'an is also conceived of as a book: not a literal object on the shelf but a divine work that exists only in the heavenly realm of paradise. Any physical copy of the Arabic text is thought of as a pale reflection of that ideal book, a tool to enable the reader to memorize and then recite the Qur'anic text. As divine speech, moreover, the Qur'an can never be rendered perfectly in the medium of the human voice, a deficiency that testifies to its fundamental inimitability, or *i'jaz*. In accord with this view of the nature of the Qur'an, no translation into any other language is thought of as actually being the holy book itself. The most that any translation can be, for the believer, is an aid to understanding the original.

The Qur'an presents itself as the last of a sequence of revealed holy books, including the Torah (in Arabic, *Tawrat*), the Psalms (*Zabur*), and the Gospels (*Injil*). Similarly, Muhammad is presented as one in a lineage of prophets (that is, those who have received communications directly from God) that begins with the first man, Adam. Earlier holy books each have an associated prophet: for the Torah, Moses; for the Psalms, David; and for the Gospels, Jesus and also Mary—who, despite being female, is also recognized as part of the prophetic lineage. Indeed, a minority of classical Muslim scholars, including Ibn

Hazm (d. 1065), considered her to be a prophet outright. Stories and characters from Jewish and Christian scripture reappear in the Qur'an, as seen in the chapters (or *suras*) on Jonah, Joseph, and Mary. When hearing these verses, the earliest converts to Islam, drawn from the local Christian and Jewish communities located in Arabia, would have marveled at the different perspective brought to bear on familiar stories by this new revelation. The Qur'an recognizes the followers of other monotheistic religions, such as Jews and Christians, as "people of the Book"—those who follow the word of God as revealed by his prophets. From the point of view of Islam, the people of the Book who lived before the revelation of the Qur'an were also followers of *islam*, in the literal sense of "submission" to God's will. Those who continued to reverence their own, pre-Islamic holy books, such as Jews and Christians, could be tolerated within the Muslim community, but this inclusiveness of monotheism had its limits. Muslims generally viewed their Prophet as the last of his kind, "the seal of prophets," and the Qur'an as the last holy book that would ever be revealed to humanity. The Torah and the Gospels, while divine in their inspiration, had become corrupt over time. Only through submission to the divine will as revealed in the Qur'an, Muslims believed, could the faithful be sure they would enter into paradise and avoid the punishments of hell.

Only from the nineteenth century on has the Bible begun to be read as a work of literature as well as a divinely inspired text, and so too this dual focus on the Qur'an has been recent. From the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century,

Western readers of the Qur'an have all too often condemned what they saw as its theological deviance and narrative incoherence. As a result, Muslims have hesitated to offer up the Qur'an for study within the framework of literary history or to allow it to move beyond the conservative framework of faith-based perspectives. This attitude has begun to change, however, because of innovative approaches to Qur'anic interpretation on the part of Muslim communities and an increasing willingness to place the Qur'an into dialogue with other sacred scriptures. The Qur'an itself invites comparison with other literary traditions—most explicitly, the rich traditions of oral poetry found in pre-Islamic Arabia. In that context, it appears as a marvel of literature whose divine inspiration is manifest in the form of lyrical chant and resonant verse. Reading the Qur'an on the page, in translation, weakly conveys its virtue, which can be appreciated only in the musical oral recitation (*tajwid*) that reveals the rhythmic quality of the verse and the haunting repetition of syllables at the ends of successive lines. It is possible to get a sense of this music in the repeated refrain of the sura "The Lord of Mercy" ("Ar Rahman"), translated below.

The Qur'an is divided into 144 suras, some of which are quite short; others are very long, resembling a biblical book in form. Each sura is made up of a number of verses (*ayat*; singular *aya*). The Qur'an is also conventionally divided up into thirty sections (*ajza'*; singular *juz'*) of roughly equal length to facilitate recitation of the entire work over the period of one month. Because of the emphasis placed on its oral recitation, which must be performed as part of the five daily prayers, Muslims begin to memorize the Qur'an at a young age; they start with the introductory sura, "The Opening" ("Al Fatiha"), and continue on with the short Meccan suras that are concentrated near the end of the Qur'an, including "Purity"

("Al Ikhlas"). Instead of being arranged in the order that Muhammad received them, the suras are arranged as Muhammad said he had been instructed by God. Some of the suras were revealed at Mecca, when the Muslim community was starting to develop, and others at Medina, where the persecuted community took refuge; the two types tend to differ not only in length but also in subject matter and in tone. Instead of being carefully separated, however, the Meccan and Medinan suras are intermingled, and many of the Meccan suras dating from early in Muhammad's prophetic mission appear near the end of the text. The effect is one of fragments arranged in a mosaic—yet that mosaic has a very clearly defined form, delineated by strands running throughout. The repetition of phrases and motifs across suras, often from different periods, creates a pattern as intricate as a woven tapestry.

With the exception of "The Feast" and "The Lord of Mercy," which were revealed at Medina, the excerpts reproduced here are Meccan suras, which tend to be relatively short. Our aim was to provide entire chapters rather than abbreviated selections, so that the highly structured nature of the suras could be grasped. The tightly ordered form illustrated on the level of the individual sura is also evident more generally in the Qur'an, in which the parts all contribute to make up the whole, but each part can also stand for the whole. Several of the suras are known by another name, reflecting this part-whole relationship: "The Opening," which is the first sura, is also known as "The Mother of the Book," while sura "Yasin" is sometimes called "The Heart of the Qur'an." One of the last suras, "Purity," was described by Muhammad himself as being "one-third of the Qur'an," because its highly condensed verses on the unity of God encapsulate the very core of Islamic theology. Other suras, such as "Jonah," "Joseph," and "Mary," illuminate the extent to

which the Qur'an is intertwined with Jewish and Christian faith traditions. These connections can also be seen in one of the Medinan suras excerpted here, "The Feast," which begins with a description of allowed and prohibited foods that recalls the intricate rules laid down in Leviticus, thus elaborating one important area of common practice shared by Judaism and Islam. Yet the table, an image that is central to "The Feast," represents more than just a literal piece of furniture. It is also the figurative table shared by the people of the Book, given form in the table spread with food that Jesus presides over at the Last Supper. In the latter part of the sura, Jesus thanks God for what he has already given and asks for something more for the table: "Send down to us a feast from heaven. . . . Provide for us: You are the best provider." God replies, "I will send it down to you." This final gift for the table is understood as being the Prophet Muhammad, or even the Qur'an itself.

The Qur'an was received by Muhammad through the mediation of the angel Gabriel (Jibreel) over a period of about twenty-three years, beginning when he was forty years old and ending with his death in 632. During that time, the Qur'an existed as an oral recitation, repeated both by Muhammad himself and by the growing community of Muslims. After Muhammad's death, the community recognized the need to record the oral text to ensure that errors not creep into the recitation. The closest companions of Muhammad, under the

supervision of the first caliph (or ruler) of the Muslim community, Abu Bakr, assembled the Qur'an in written form. The third caliph, Uthman, supervised the finalized version of the text, which was completed in 651, and then ordered all imperfect copies to be destroyed. It is this version of the Qur'an that we read today. Translations began to be produced almost immediately, beginning with a rendering of "The Opening" into the Persian language by Salman, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. A full Persian translation of the Qur'an was made in the ninth century, attesting to the rapid embrace of Islam by the inhabitants of Persia (modern Iran). As is the case today, these translations were not made with the purpose of substituting Qur'anic verses in the local vernacular for the Arabic originals during prayer; instead, they were aids to understanding intended to enable fuller assimilation of the Arabic scripture within a new culture. Western audiences started to read the Qur'an in the Middle Ages, beginning with Robert of Ketton's Latin translation in 1143. The Qur'an is never accompanied by pictorial illustrations, in keeping with the Islamic practice of iconoclasm (the prohibition of any representation of living things, thereby avoiding the temptation of idolatry). It is, however, often rendered in elaborate calligraphy, a style of writing so ornate that it becomes art, fusing word with image in the aural masterpiece that is the Qur'an.

FROM THE QUR'AN¹

1. The Opening

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.

5. The Feast

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

You who believe, fulfil your obligations. Livestock animals are lawful as food for you, with the exception of what is about to be announced to you. You are forbidden to kill game while you are on pilgrimage—God commands what He will, so, you who believe, do not violate the sanctity of God's rites, the Sacred Month, the offerings, their garlands, nor those going to the Sacred House² to seek the bounty and pleasure of their Lord—but when you have completed the rites of pilgrimage you may hunt. Do not let your hatred for the people who barred you from the Sacred Mosque induce you to break the law: help one another to do what is right and good; do not help one another towards sin and hostility. Be mindful of God, for His punishment is severe.

You are forbidden to eat carrion; blood; pig's meat; any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked; any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey, unless you still slaughter it [in the correct manner]; or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars. You are also forbidden to allot shares [of meat] by drawing marked arrows³—a heinous practice—today the disbelievers have lost all hope that you will give up your religion. Do not fear them: fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam*: [total devotion to God]; but if any of you is forced by hunger to eat forbidden food, with no intention of doing wrong, then God is most forgiving and merciful.

They ask you, Prophet, what is lawful for them. Say, 'All good things are lawful for you.' [This includes] what you have taught your birds and beasts of prey to catch, teaching them as God has taught you, so eat what they catch for you, but first pronounce God's name over it. Be mindful of God: He is swift to take account. Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book⁴ is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them. So are chaste, believing, women as well as chaste women of the people who were

1. Translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem; the bracketed material in the text is his.

2. The Ka'aba, central point of the pilgrimage to Mecca that takes place during "the Sacred Month" of the hajj. According to the Qur'an it was originally established by Abraham as a

place to worship the one true God, and Muslims always face it when they pray.

3. That is, casting lots by a method commonly used in pre-Islamic Arabia to make decisions or select an individual.

4. The Jews.

given the Scripture before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and married them, not taking them as lovers or secret mistresses. The deeds of anyone who rejects faith will come to nothing, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers.

You who believe, when you are about to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles and, if required,⁵ wash your whole body. If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman, and can find no water, then take some clean sand and wipe your face and hands with it. God does not wish to place any burden on you: He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful. Remember God's blessing on you and the pledge with which you were bound when you said, 'We hear and we obey.' Be mindful of God: God has full knowledge of the secrets of the heart.

You who believe, be steadfast in your devotion to God and bear witness impartially: do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God. Be mindful of God: God is well aware of all that you do. God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward to those who have faith and do good works; those who reject faith and deny Our revelations will inhabit the blazing Fire.

You who believe, remember God's blessing on you when a certain people were about to raise their hands against you and He restrained them. Be mindful of God: let the believers put their trust in Him.

God took a pledge from the Children of Israel. We made twelve leaders arise among them, and God said, 'I am with you: if you keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, believe in My messengers and support them, and lend God a good loan, I will wipe out your sins and admit you into Gardens⁶ graced with flowing streams. Any of you who now ignore this [pledge] will be far from the right path.' But they broke their pledge, so We distanced them [from Us] and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of [revealed] words and have forgotten some of what they were told to remember: you [Prophet] will always find treachery in all but a few of them. Overlook this and pardon them: God loves those who do good. We also took a pledge from those who say, 'We are Christians,' but they too forgot some of what they were told to remember, so We stirred up enmity and hatred among them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done.

People of the Book,⁷ Our Messenger has come to make clear to you much of what you have kept hidden of the Scripture, and to overlook much [you have done]. A light has now come to you from God, and a Scripture making things clear, with which God guides to the ways of peace those who follow what pleases Him, bringing them from darkness out into light, by His will, and guiding them to a straight path. Those who say, 'God is the Messiah,⁸ the son of Mary,' are defying the truth. Say, 'If it had been God's will, could anyone have prevented Him from destroying the Messiah, son of Mary, together with his

5. For example, if unclean from sexual intercourse or menstruation.

6. The heavenly paradise, depicted in the Qur'an as a garden.

7. Here, the Jews and the Christians.

8. In Jewish belief, the promised redeemer who will come at the end of time; in Christian belief, that redeemer is identified with Jesus Christ.

mother and everyone else on earth? Control of the heavens and earth and all that is between them belongs to God: He creates whatever He will. God has power over everything.' The Jews and the Christians say, 'We are the children of God and His beloved ones.' Say, 'Then why does He punish you for your sins? You are merely human beings, part of His creation: He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. Control of the heavens and earth and all that is between them belongs to Him: all journeys lead to Him.' People of the Book, Our Messenger comes to you now, after a break in the sequence of messengers, to make things clear for you in case you should say, 'No one has come to give us good news or to warn us.' So someone has come to you, to give you good news and warn you: God has the power to do all things.

Moses said to his people, 'My people, remember God's blessing on you: how He raised prophets among you and appointed kings for you and gave you what he had not given to any other people. My people, go into the holy land which God has ordained for you—do not turn back or you will be the losers.' They said, 'Moses, there is a fearsome people in this land. We will not go there until they leave. If they leave, then we will enter.' Yet two men whom God had blessed among those who were afraid said, 'Go in to them through the gate and when you go in you will overcome them. If you are true believers, put your trust in God.' They said, 'Moses, we will never enter while they are still there, so you and your Lord go in and fight, and we will stay here.' He said, 'Lord, I have authority over no one except myself and my brother: judge between the two of us and these disobedient people.' God said, 'The land is forbidden to them for forty years: they will wander the earth aimlessly. Do not grieve over those who disobey.'⁹

[Prophet], tell them the truth about the story of Adam's two sons:¹ each of them offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one and not the other. One said, 'I will kill you,' but the other said, 'God only accepts the sacrifice of those who are mindful of Him. If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you. I fear God, the Lord of all worlds, and I would rather you were burdened with my sins as well as yours and became an inhabitant of the Fire: such is the evildoers' reward.' But his soul prompted him to kill his brother: he killed him and became one of the losers. God sent a raven to scratch up the ground and show him how to cover his brother's corpse and he said, 'Woe is me! Could I not have been like this raven and covered up my brother's body?' He became remorseful. On account of [his deed], We decreed to the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind. Our messengers came to them with clear signs, but many of them continued to commit excesses in the land. Those who wage war against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter, unless they repent before you overpower them—in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful.

9. Compare Numbers 13.1–14.35.

1. Cain and Abel; see Genesis 4.1–15.

You who believe, be mindful of God, seek ways to come closer to Him and strive for His cause, so that you may prosper. If the disbelievers possessed all that is in the earth and twice as much again and offered it to ransom themselves from torment on the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them—they will have a painful torment. They will wish to come out of the Fire but they will be unable to do so: theirs will be a lasting torment.

Cut off the hands of thieves, whether they are man or woman, as punishment for what they have done—a deterrent from God: God is almighty and wise. But if anyone repents after his wrongdoing and makes amends, God will accept his repentance: God is most forgiving, most merciful. Do you [Prophet] not know that control of the heavens and earth belongs solely to God? He punishes whoever He will and forgives whoever He will: God has power over everything.

Messenger, do not be grieved by those who race to surpass one another in disbelief—those who say with their mouths, 'We believe,' but have no faith in their hearts, and the Jews who listen eagerly to lies and to those who have not even met you, who distort the meanings of [revealed] words and say [to each other], 'If you are given this ruling, accept it, but if you are not, then beware!'—if God intends some people to be so misguided, you will be powerless against God on their behalf. These are the ones whose hearts God does not intend to cleanse—a disgrace for them in this world, and then a heavy punishment in the Hereafter—they listen eagerly to lies and consume what is unlawful. If they come to you [Prophet] for judgement, you can either judge between them, or decline—if you decline, they will not harm you in any way, but if you do judge between them, judge justly: God loves the just—but why do they come to you for judgement when they have the Torah² with God's judgement, and even then still turn away? These are not believers. We revealed the Torah with guidance and light, and the prophets, who had submitted to God, judged according to it for the Jews. So did the rabbis and the scholars in accordance with that part of God's Scripture which they were entrusted to preserve, and to which they were witnesses. So [rabbis and scholars] do not fear people, fear Me; do not barter away My messages for a small price; those who do not judge according to what God has sent down are rejecting [God's teachings]. In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound:³ if anyone forgoes this out of charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds. Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are doing grave wrong.

We sent Jesus, son of Mary, in their footsteps, to confirm the Torah that had been sent before him: We gave him the Gospel with guidance, light, and confirmation of the Torah already revealed—a guide and lesson for those who take heed of God. So let the followers of the Gospel judge according to what God has sent down in it. Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are lawbreakers.

We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and with final authority over them: so judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their

² The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (literally, "law" [Heb.]), traditionally ascribed

to Moses.

³ See Leviticus 24.19–21; Deuteronomy 19.21.

whims, which deviate from the truth that has come to you. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good, you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. So [Prophet] judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, and take good care that they do not tempt you away from any of what God has sent down to you. If they turn away, remember that God intends to punish them for some of the sins they have committed, a great many people are lawbreakers. Do they want judgement according to the time of pagan ignorance? Is there any better judge than God for those of firm faith?

You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies, they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them—God does not guide such wrongdoers—yet you [Prophet] will see the perverse at heart rushing to them for protection, saying, 'We are afraid fortune may turn against us.' But God may well bring about a triumph or some other event of His own making: then they will rue the secrets they harboured in their hearts, and the believers will say, 'Are these the men who swore by God using their strongest oaths that they were with you?' All they did was in vain: they have lost everything.

You who believe, if any of you go back on your faith, God will soon replace you with people He loves and who love Him, people who are humble towards the believers, hard on the disbelievers, and who strive in God's way without fearing anyone's reproach. Such is God's favour. He grants it to whoever He will. God has endless bounty and knowledge. Your true allies are God, His Messenger, and the believers—those who keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, and bow down in worship. Those who turn for protection to God, His Messenger, and the believers [are God's party]: God's party is sure to triumph.

You who believe, do not take as allies those who ridicule your religion and make fun of it—whether people who were given the Scripture before you, or disbelievers—and be mindful of God if you are true believers. When you make the call to prayer, they ridicule it and make fun of it: this is because they are people who do not reason. Say [Prophet], 'People of the Book, do you resent us for any reason other than the fact that we believe in God, in what has been sent down to us, and in what was sent before us, while most of you are disobedient?' Say, 'Shall I tell you who deserves a worse punishment from God than [the one you wish upon] us? Those God distanced from Himself, was angry with, and condemned as apes and pigs, and those who worship idols: they are worse in rank and have strayed further from the right path.'

When they come to you [believers], they say, 'We believe,' but they come disbelieving and leave disbelieving—God knows best what they are hiding. You [Prophet] see many of them rushing into sin and hostility and consuming what is unlawful. How evil their practices are! Why do their rabbis and scholars not forbid them to speak sinfully and consume what is unlawful? How evil their deeds are! The Jews have said, 'God is tight-fisted,' but it is they who are tight-fisted, and they are rejected for what they have said. Truly, God's hands are open wide: He gives as He pleases. What has been sent down to you from your Lord is sure to increase insolence and defiance in many of them. We have

sown enmity and hatred amongst them till the Day of Resurrection. Whenever they kindle the fire of war, God will put it out. They try to spread corruption in the land, but God does not love those who corrupt. If only the People of the Book would believe and be mindful of God, We would take away their sins and bring them into the Gardens of Delight. If they had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below: some of them are on the right course, but many of them do evil.

Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord—if you do not, then you will not have communicated His message—and God will protect you from people. God does not guide those who defy Him. Say, 'People of the Book, you have no true basis [for your religion] unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and that which has been sent down to you from your Lord,' but what has been sent down to you [Prophet] from your Lord is sure to increase many of them in their insolence and defiance: do not worry about those who defy [God]. For the [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Sabians,⁴ and the Christians—those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds—there is no fear: they will not grieve.

We took a pledge from the Children of Israel, and sent messengers to them. Whenever a messenger brought them anything they did not like, they accused some of lying and put others to death; they thought no harm could come to them and so became blind and deaf [to God]. God turned to them in mercy but many of them again became blind and deaf: God is fully aware of their actions. Those who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary,' have defied God. The Messiah himself said, 'Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. No one will help such evildoers.

Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God! If they persist in what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist. Why do they not turn to God and ask His forgiveness; when God is most forgiving, most merciful? The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a messenger; other messengers had come and gone before him; his mother was a virtuous woman; both ate food [like other mortals]. See how clear We make these signs for them; see how deluded they are. Say, 'How can you worship something other than God, that has no power to do you harm or good? God alone is the All Hearing and All Knowing.' Say, 'People of the Book, do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religion and do not follow the whims of those who went astray before you—they led many others astray and themselves continue to stray from the even path.'

Those Children of Israel who defied [God] were rejected through the words of David,⁵ and Jesus, son of Mary, because they disobeyed; they persistently overstepped the limits, they did not forbid each other to do wrong. How vile their deeds were! You [Prophet] see many of them allying themselves with the disbelievers. How terrible is what their souls have stored up for them: God is

4. Apparently a monotheistic group in Iraq who especially venerated the Psalms; they, too, were people of the Book.

5. Second king of Israel, according to the Hebrew

Bible (see Samuel, 1 Kings, and 1 Chronicles); the model for later monarchs, despite his moral lapses, he is traditionally credited with authorship of the Psalms.

angry with them and they will remain tormented. If they had believed in God, in the Prophet, and in what was sent down to him, they would never have allied themselves with the disbelievers, but most of them are rebels.

You [Prophet] are sure to find that the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate other deities with God; you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians,' for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics. These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the Truth [in it]. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses. Why should we not believe in God and in the Truth that has come down to us, when we long for our Lord to include us in the company of the righteous?' For saying this, God has rewarded them with Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay: that is the reward of those who do good. Those who reject the truth and deny Our messages will be the inhabitants of Hellfire.

You who believe, do not forbid the good things God has made lawful to you—do not exceed the limits: God does not love those who exceed the limits—but eat the lawful and good things that God provides for you. Be mindful of God, in whom you believe. God does not take you [to task] for what is thoughtless in your oaths, only for your binding oaths: the atonement for breaking an oath is to feed ten poor people with food equivalent to what you would normally give your own families, or to clothe them, or to set free a slave—if a person cannot find the means, he should fast for three days. This is the atonement for breaking your oaths—keep your oaths. In this way God makes clear His revelations to you, so that you may be thankful.

You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices, and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts—Satan's doing—shun them so that you may prosper. With intoxicants and gambling, Satan seeks only to incite enmity and hatred among you, and to stop you remembering God and prayer. Will you not give them up? Obey God, obey the Messenger, and always be on your guard: if you pay no heed, bear in mind that the sole duty of Our Messenger is to deliver the message clearly. Those who believe and do good deeds will not be blamed for what they may have consumed [in the past] as long as they are mindful of God, believe and do good deeds, then are mindful of God and believe, then are mindful of God and do good deeds: God loves those who do good deeds.

You who believe, God is sure to test you with game within reach of your hands and spears, to find out who fears Him even though they cannot see Him: from now on, anyone who transgresses will have a painful punishment. You who believe, do not kill game while you are in the state of consecration [for pilgrimage]. If someone does so intentionally the penalty is an offering of a domestic animal brought to the Ka'ba⁶ equivalent—as judged by two just men among you—to the one he has killed; alternatively, he may atone by feeding the needy or by fasting an equivalent number of days, so that he may taste the full gravity of his deed. God forgives what is past, but if anyone re-offends, God will exact the penalty from him: God is mighty, and capable of exacting the penalty. It is permitted for you to catch and eat seafood—an enjoyment for you and the

6. Also "Ka'aba"; see p. 74, n. 2.

traveller—but hunting game is forbidden while you are in the state of consecration [for pilgrimage]. Be mindful of God to whom you will be gathered.

God has made the Ka'ba—the Sacred House—a means of support for people, and the Sacred Months, the animals for sacrifice and their garlands: all this. Know that God has knowledge of all that is in the heavens and earth and yet most forgiving and merciful. The Messenger's duty is only to deliver the message: God knows what you reveal and what you conceal.

Say [Prophet], 'Bad cannot be likened to good, though you may be dazzled by how abundant the bad is. Be mindful of God, people of understanding, so that you may prosper.' You who believe, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, might make things difficult for you—if you ask about them while the Qur'an is being revealed, they will be made known to you—for God has kept silent about them: God is most forgiving and forbearing. Before you, some people asked about things, then ignored [the answers]. God did not institute the dedication of such things as *bahira*, *sa'iba*, *wasila*, or *ham*⁷ to idols; but the disbelievers invent lies about God. Most of them do not use reason: when it is said to them, 'Come to what God has sent down, and to the Messenger,' they say, 'What we inherited from our forefathers is good enough for us,' even though their forefathers knew nothing and were not guided. You who believe, you are responsible for your own souls; if anyone else goes astray it will not harm you so long as you follow the guidance; you will all return to God, and He will make you realize what you have done.

You who believe, when death approaches any of you, let two just men from among you act as witnesses to the making of a bequest, or two men from another people if you are journeying in the land when death approaches. Keep the two witnesses back after prayer, if you have any doubts, and make them both swear by God, 'We will not sell our testimony for any price, even if a close relative is involved. We will not hide God's testimony, for then we should be doing wrong.' If it is discovered that these two are guilty [of perjury], two of those whose rights have been usurped have a better right to bear witness in their place. Let them swear by God, 'Our testimony is truer than theirs. We have said nothing but the truth, for that would make us wrongdoers': that will make it more likely they will give true and proper testimony, or fear that their oaths might be refuted by others afterwards. Be mindful of God and listen; God does not guide those who break His laws.

On the Day when God assembles all the messengers and asks, 'What response did you receive?' they will say, 'We do not have that knowledge: You alone know things that cannot be seen,' Then God will say, 'Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My favour to you and to your mother: how I strengthened you with the holy spirit, so that you spoke to people in your infancy and as a grown man; how I taught you the Scripture and wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel; how, by My leave, you fashioned the shape of a bird out of clay, breathed into it, and it became, by My leave, a bird; how, by My leave, you healed the blind person and the leper; how, by My leave, you brought the dead back to life; how I restrained the Children of Israel from [harming] you when you brought them clear signs,

7. Different classes of animals consecrated to idols in pre-Islamic Arabia.

and those of them who disbelieved said, "This is clearly nothing but sorcery";⁸ and how I inspired the disciples to believe in Me and My messengers—they said, "We believe and bear witness that we devote ourselves [to God]."

When the disciples said, 'Jesus, son of Mary, can your Lord send down a feast to us from heaven?' he said, 'Beware of God if you are true believers.' They said, 'We wish to eat from it; to have our hearts reassured; to know that you have told us the truth; and to be witnesses of it.' Jesus, son of Mary, said, 'Lord, send down to us a feast from heaven so that we can have a festival—the first and last of us—and a sign from You. Provide for us: You are the best provider.' God said, 'I will send it down to you, but anyone who disbelieves after this will be punished with a punishment that I will not inflict on anyone else in the world.'

When God says, 'Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, "Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God"?' he will say, 'May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said such a thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen—I told them only what You commanded me to: "Worship God, my Lord and your Lord." I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things and if You punish them, they are Your servants; if You forgive them, You are the Almighty, the Wise.' God will say, 'This is a Day when the truthful will benefit from their truthfulness. They will have Gardens graced with flowing streams, there to remain for ever. God is pleased with them and they with Him: that is the supreme triumph.' Control of the heavens and earth and everything in them belongs to God: He has power over all things.

10. Jonah

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

*Alif Lam Ra*¹

These are the verses of the wise Book. Is it so surprising to people that We have revealed to a man from among them that he should warn people, and give glad news to those who believe, that they are on a sure footing with their Lord? [Yet] those who disbelieve say, 'This man is clearly a sorcerer.'

Your Lord is God who created the heavens and earth in six Days, then established Himself on the Throne, governing everything; there is no one that can intercede with Him, unless He has first given permission: this is God your Lord so worship Him. How can you not take heed? It is to Him you shall all return—that is a true promise from God. It was He who created [you] in the first place, and He will do so again, so that He may justly reward those who believe and do good deeds. But the disbelievers will have a drink of scalding water, and agonizing torment, because they persistently disbelieved.

8. This account of Jesus' miracles is similar to that found in apocryphal Christian accounts of his childhood (the so-called infancy gospels).

1. Letters of the Arabic alphabet; their meaning in this context is unclear.

It is He who made the sun a shining radiance and the moon a light, determining phases for it so that you might know the number of years and how to calculate time. God did not create all these without a true purpose; He explains His signs to those who understand. In the succession of night and day, and in what God created in the heavens and earth, there truly are signs for those who are aware of Him. Those who do not expect to meet Us and are pleased with the life of this world, contenting themselves with it and paying no heed to Our signs, shall have the Fire for their home because of what they used to do. But as for those who believe and do good deeds, their Lord will guide them because of their faith. Streams will flow at their feet in the Gardens of Bliss. Their prayer in them will be, 'Glory be to You, God!' their greeting, 'Peace,' and the last part of their prayer, 'Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.'²

If God were to hasten on for people the harm [they have earned] as they wish to hasten on the good, their time would already be up. But We leave those who do not expect to meet Us to wander blindly in their excesses. When trouble befalls man he cries out to Us, whether lying on his side, sitting, or standing, but as soon as We relieve him of his trouble he goes on his way as if he had never cried out to Us to remove his trouble. In this way the deeds of such heedless people are made attractive to them. Before you people, We destroyed whole generations when they did evil—their messengers brought them clear signs but they refused to believe. This is how We repay the guilty. Later We made you their successors in the land, to see how you would behave.

When Our clear revelations are recited to them, those who do not expect to meet with Us say, 'Bring [us] a different Qur'an, or change it.' [Prophet], say, 'It is not for me to change it of my own accord; I only follow what is revealed to me, for I fear the torment of an awesome Day, if I were to disobey my Lord.' Say, 'If God had so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have made it known to you. I lived a whole lifetime among you before it came to me. How can you not use your reason?'

Who could be more wicked than someone who invents lies against God or denies His revelations? The guilty will never prosper. They worship alongside God things that can neither harm nor benefit them, and say, 'These are our intercessors with God.' Say, 'Do you think you can tell God about something He knows not to exist in the heavens or earth? Glory be to Him! He is far above the partner-gods they associate with Him! All people were originally one single community, but later they differed. If it had not been for a word from your Lord, the preordained judgement would already have been passed between them regarding their differences. They say, 'Why has no miraculous sign been sent down to him from his Lord?' Say [Prophet], 'Only God knows the unseen, so wait—I too am waiting.' No sooner do We let people taste some mercy after some hardship has afflicted them, than they begin to scheme against Our revelations. Say, 'God schemes even faster.' Our messengers³ record all your scheming.

It is He who enables you to travel on land and sea until, when you are sailing on ships and rejoicing in the favouring wind, a storm arrives: waves come at those on board from all sides and they feel there is no escape. Then they pray to God, professing sincere devotion to Him, 'If You save us from this we shall

² This phrase, taken from "The Opening," is repeated several times in each one of the five

prescribed daily prayers.

³ That is, angels (in Greek, *angeloi*).

be truly thankful.' Yet no sooner does He save them than, back on land, they behave outrageously against all that is right. People! Your outrageous behaviour only works against yourselves. Take your little enjoyment in this present life; in the end you will return to Us and We shall confront you with everything you have done.

The life of this world is like this: rain that We send down from the sky is absorbed by the plants of the earth, from which humans and animals eat. But when the earth has taken on its finest appearance, and adorns itself, and its people think they have power over it, then the fate We commanded comes to it, by night or by day, and We reduce it to stubble, as if it had not flourished just the day before. This is the way We explain the revelations for those who reflect.

But God invites [everyone] to the Home of Peace, and guides whoever He will to a straight path. Those who did well will have the best reward and more besides. Neither darkness nor shame will cover their faces: these are the companions in Paradise, and there they will remain. As for those who did evil, each evil deed will be requited by its equal and humiliation will cover them—no one will protect them against God—as though their faces were covered with veils cut from the darkness of the night. These are the inmates of the Fire, and there they shall remain.

On the Day We gather them all together, We shall say to those who associate partners with God, 'Stay in your place, you and your partner-gods.' Then We shall separate them, and their partner-gods will say, 'It was not us you worshipped—God is witness enough between us and you—we had no idea that you worshipped us.' Every soul will realize, then and there, what it did in the past. They will be returned to God, their rightful Lord, and their invented [gods] will desert them.

Say [Prophet], 'Who provides for you from the sky and the earth? Who controls hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living from the dead and the dead from the living, and who governs everything?' They are sure to say, 'God.' Then say, 'So why do you not take heed of Him? That is God, your Lord, the Truth. Apart from the Truth, what is there except error? So how is it that you are dissuaded?' In this way, your Lord's word about those who defy [the Truth] has been proved—they do not believe. Ask them, 'Can any of your partner-gods originate creation, then bring it back to life again in the end?' Say, 'It is God that originates creation, and then brings it back to life, so how can you be misled?' Say, 'Can any of your partner-gods show the way to the Truth?' Say, 'God shows the way to the Truth. Is someone who shows the way to the Truth more worthy to be followed, or someone who cannot find the way unless he himself is shown? What is the matter with you? How do you judge?' Most of them follow nothing but assumptions, but assumptions can be of no value at all against the Truth: God is well aware of what they do.

Nor could this Qur'an have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of what was revealed before it and an explanation of the Scripture—let there be no doubt about it—it is from the Lord of the Worlds. Or do they say, 'He has devised it'? Say, 'Then produce a sura like it, and call on anyone you can beside God if you are telling the truth.'⁴ But they are denying what

4. This challenge is based on literary merit: the Qur'an dares any poet to match the eloquence of a single sura.

they cannot comprehend—its prophecy has yet to be fulfilled for them. In the same way, those before them refused to believe—see what was the end of those evildoers!

Some of them believe in it, and some do not: your Lord knows best those who cause corruption. If they do not believe you, [Prophet], say, 'I act for myself, and you for yourselves. You are not responsible for my actions nor am I responsible for yours.' Some of them do listen to you: but can you make the deaf hear if they will not use their minds? Some of them look at you: but can you guide the blind if they will not see? God does not wrong people at all—it is they who wrong themselves.

On the Day He gathers them together, it will be as if they have stayed [in the world] no longer than a single hour, and they will recognize one another. Those who denied the meeting with God will be the losers, for they did not follow the right guidance. Whether We let you [Prophet] see some of the punishment We have threatened them with, or cause you to die [first], they will return to Us: God is witness to what they do. Every community is sent a messenger, and when their messenger comes, they will be judged justly; they will not be wronged. They ask, 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say is true?' Say [Prophet], 'I cannot control any harm or benefit that comes to me, except as God wills. There is an appointed term for every community, and when it is reached they can neither delay nor hasten it, even for a moment.' Say, 'Think: if His punishment were to come to you, during the night or day, what part of it would the guilty wish to hasten? Will you believe in it, when it actually happens?' It will be said, 'Now [you believe], when [before] you sought to hasten it?' It will be said to the evildoers, 'Taste lasting punishment. Why should you be rewarded for anything but what you did?'

They ask you [Prophet], 'Is it true?' Say, 'Yes, by my Lord, it is true, and you cannot escape it.' Every soul that has done evil, if it possessed all that is on the earth, would gladly offer it as ransom. When they see the punishment, they will repent in secret, but they will be judged with justice and will not be wronged. It is to God that everything in the heavens and the earth truly belongs: God's promise is true, but most people do not realize it. It is He who gives life and takes it, and you will all be returned to Him.

People, a teaching from your Lord has come to you, a healing for what is in [your] hearts, and guidance and mercy for the believers. Say [Prophet], 'In God's grace and mercy let them rejoice: these are better than all they accumulate.' Say, 'Think about the provision God has sent down for you, some of which you have made unlawful and some lawful.' Say, 'Has God given you permission [to do this], or are you inventing lies about God?' What will those people who invent lies about Him think on the Day of Resurrection? God is bountiful towards people, but most of them do not give thanks.

In whatever matter you [Prophet] may be engaged and whatever part of the Qur'an you are reciting, whatever work you [people] are doing, we witness you when you are engaged in it. Not even the weight of a speck of dust in the earth or sky escapes your Lord, nor anything lesser or greater: it is all written in a clear record. But for those who are on God's side there is no fear, nor shall they grieve. For those who believe and are conscious of God, for them there is good news in this life and in the Hereafter—there is no changing the promises of God—that is truly the supreme triumph. Do not let their words grieve you

[Prophet]. Power belongs entirely to God; He hears all and knows all; indeed, all who are in the heavens and on the earth belong to Him. Those who call upon others beside God are not really following partner-gods; they are only following assumptions and telling lies. It is He who made the night so that you can rest in it and the daylight so that you can see—there truly are signs in this for those who hear.

They say, 'God has children!' May He be exalted! He is the Self-Sufficient One; everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to Him. You have no authority to say this. How dare you say things about God without any knowledge? Say [Prophet], 'Those who invent lies about God will not prosper.' They may have a little enjoyment in this world, but then they will return to Us. Then We shall make them taste severe punishment for persisting in blasphemy.

Tell them the story of Noah.⁵ He said to his people, 'My people, if my presence among you and my reminding you of God's signs is too much for you, then I put my trust in God. Agree on your course of action, you and your partner-gods—do not be hesitant or secretive about it—then carry out your decision on me and give me no respite. But if you turn away, I have asked no reward from you; my reward is with God alone, and I am commanded to be one of those who devote themselves to Him.' But they rejected him. We saved him and those with him on the Ark and let them survive; and We drowned those who denied Our revelations—see what was the end of those who were forewarned!

Then, after him, We sent messengers to their peoples bringing them clear signs. But they would not believe in anything they had already rejected: in this way We seal the hearts of those who are full of hostility. After them We sent Moses and Aaron with Our signs to Pharaoh⁶ and his leading supporters, but they acted arrogantly—they were wicked people. When the truth came to them from Us, they said, 'This is blatant sorcery.' Moses said, 'Is this what you say about the Truth when it comes to you? Is this sorcery? Sorcerers never prosper.' They said, 'Have you come to turn us away from the faith we found our fathers following, so that you and your brother can gain greatness in this land? We will never believe in you.' And Pharaoh said, 'Bring me every learned sorcerer.' When the sorcerers came, Moses said to them, 'Throw down whatever you have.' When they did so, Moses said, 'Everything you have brought is sorcery and God will show it to be false. God does not make the work of mischief-makers right; He will uphold the Truth with His words, even if the evildoers hate it.' But no one believed in Moses except a few of his own people, for fear that Pharaoh and their leaders would persecute them: Pharaoh was domineering in the land and prone to excess.

Moses said, 'My people, if you have faith in God and are devoted to Him, put your trust in Him.' They said, 'We have put our trust in God. Lord! Do not make us an object of persecution for the oppressors. Save us, in Your mercy, from those who reject [Your message].' We revealed to Moses and his brother: 'House your people in Egypt and make these houses places of worship; keep up the prayer; give good news to the believers!' And Moses said, 'Our Lord, You have given Pharaoh and his chiefs splendour and wealth in this present life and here they are, Lord, leading others astray from Your path. Our Lord, obliterate

5. Compare Genesis 5.28–9.29.

6. Compare Exodus 6.26–14.31.

their wealth and harden their hearts so that they do not believe until they see the agonizing torment.' God said, 'Your prayers are answered, so stay on the right course, and do not follow the path of those who do not know.'

We took the Children of Israel across the sea. Pharaoh and his troops pursued them in arrogance and aggression. But as he was drowning he cried, 'I believe there is no God except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him.' 'Now? When you had always been a rebel, and a troublemaker! Today We shall save only your corpse as a sign to all posterity. A great many people fail to heed Our signs.' We settled the Children of Israel in a good place and provided good things as sustenance for them. It was only after knowledge had come to them that they began to differ among themselves. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection regarding their differences.

So if you [Prophet] are in doubt about what We have revealed to you, ask those who have been reading the scriptures before you. The Truth has come to you from your Lord, so be in no doubt and do not deny God's signs—then you would become one of the losers. Those against whom your Lord's sentence is passed will not believe, even if every sign comes to them, until they see the agonizing torment. If only a single town had believed and benefited from its belief! Only Jonah's people did so, and when they believed, We relieved them of the punishment of disgrace in the life of this world, and let them enjoy life for a time. Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe? No soul can believe except by God's will, and He brings disgrace on those who do not use their reason. Say, 'Look at what is in the heavens and on the earth.' But what use are signs and warnings to people who will not believe? What are they waiting for but the punishment that came to those before them? Say, 'Wait then, I am waiting too.' In the end We shall save Our messengers and the believers. We take it upon Ourselves to save the believers.

[Prophet] say, 'People, even if you are in doubt about my religion, I do not worship those you worship other than God, but I worship God who will cause you to die, and I am commanded to be a believer.' [Prophet], set your face towards religion as a man of pure faith. Do not be one of those who join partners with God; do not pray to any other [god] that can neither benefit nor harm you: if you do, you will be one of the evildoers. If God inflicts harm on you, no one can remove it but Him, and if He intends good for you, no one can turn His bounty away; He grants His bounty to any of His servants He will. He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful. Say, 'People, the Truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever follows the right path follows it for his own good, and whoever strays does so to his own loss: I am not your guardian.' [Prophet], follow what is being revealed to you, and be steadfast until God gives His judgement, for He is the Best of Judges.

12. Joseph

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Alif Lam Ra

These are the verses of the Scripture that makes things clear—We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you [people] may understand.

We tell you [Prophet] the best of stories in revealing this Qur'an to you. Before this you were one of those who knew nothing about them. Joseph said to his father,¹ 'Father, I dreamed of eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them all bow down before me,' and he replied, 'My son, tell your brothers nothing of this dream, or they may plot to harm you—Satan is man's sworn enemy. This is about how your Lord will choose you, teach you to interpret dreams, and perfect His blessing on you and the House of Jacob, just as He perfected it earlier on your forefathers Abraham and Isaac:² your Lord is all knowing and wise.'

There are lessons in the story of Joseph and his brothers for all who seek them. The brothers said [to each other], 'Although we are many, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we are—our father is clearly in the wrong.' [One of them said], 'Kill Joseph or banish him to another land, and your father's attention will be free to turn to you. After that you can be righteous.' [Another of them] said, 'Do not kill Joseph, but, if you must, throw him into the hidden depths of a well where some caravan may pick him up.'

They said to their father, 'Why do you not trust us with Joseph? We wish him well. Send him with us tomorrow and he will enjoy himself and play—we will take good care of him.' He replied, 'The thought of you taking him away with you worries me: I am afraid a wolf may eat him when you are not paying attention.' They said, 'If a wolf were to eat him when there are so many of us, we would truly be losers!'

Then they took him away with them, resolved upon throwing him into the hidden depths of a well—We inspired him, saying, 'You will tell them of all this [at a time] when they do not realize [who you are]!'—and at nightfall they returned to their father weeping. They said, 'We went off racing one another, leaving Joseph behind with our things, and a wolf ate him. You will not believe us, though we are telling the truth!' and they showed him his shirt, deceptively stained with blood. He cried, 'No! Your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient: from God alone I seek help to bear what you are saying.'

Some travellers came by. They sent someone to draw water and he let down his bucket. 'Good news!' he exclaimed. 'Here is a boy!' They hid him like a piece of merchandise—God was well aware of what they did—and then sold him for a small price, for a few pieces of silver: so little did they value him.

The Egyptian who bought him said to his wife, 'Look after him well! He may be useful to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' In this way We settled Joseph in that land and later taught him how to interpret dreams: God always prevails in His purpose, though most people do not realize it.

1. Compare Genesis 37.9–11.

2. Isaac is Jacob's father.

When he reached maturity, We gave him judgement and knowledge: this is how We reward those who do good. The woman in whose house he was living tried to seduce him:³ she bolted the doors and said, 'Come to me,' and he replied, 'God forbid! My master has been good to me; wrongdoers never prosper.' She made for him, and he would have succumbed to her if he had not seen evidence of his Lord—We did this in order to keep evil and indecency away from him, for he was truly one of Our chosen servants. They raced for the door—she tore his shirt from behind—and at the door they met her husband. She said, 'What, other than prison or painful punishment, should be the reward of someone who tried to dishonour your wife?' but he said, 'She tried to seduce me.' A member of her household suggested, 'If his shirt is torn at the front, then it is she who is telling the truth and he who is lying, but if it is torn at the back, then she is lying and he is telling the truth.' When the husband saw that the shirt was torn at the back, he said, 'This is another instance of women's treachery: your treachery is truly great. Joseph, overlook this; but you [wife], ask forgiveness for your sin—you have done wrong.'

Some women of the city said, 'The governor's wife is trying to seduce her slave! Love for him consumes her heart! It is clear to us that she has gone astray.' When she heard their malicious talk, she prepared a banquet and sent for them, giving each of them a knife. She said to Joseph, 'Come out and show yourself to them!' and when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, 'Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!' She said, 'This is the one you blamed me for. I tried to seduce him and he wanted to remain chaste, but if he does not do what I command now, he will be put in prison and degraded.' Joseph said, 'My Lord! I would prefer prison to what these women are calling me to do. If You do not protect me from their treachery, I shall yield to them and do wrong,' and his Lord answered his prayer and protected him from their treachery—He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing.

In the end they thought it best, after seeing all the signs of his innocence, that they should imprison him for a while. Two young men went into prison alongside him. One of them said, 'I dreamed that I was pressing grapes'; the other said, 'I dreamed that I was carrying bread on my head and that the birds were eating it.' [They said], 'Tell us what this means—we can see that you are a knowledgeable man.'

He said, 'I can tell you what this means before any meal arrives: this is part of what my Lord has taught me. I reject the faith of those who disbelieve in God and deny the life to come, and I follow the faith of my forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of God's grace to us and to all mankind, we would never worship anything beside God, but most people are ungrateful. Fellow prisoners, would many diverse gods be better than God the One, the All Powerful? [No indeed!] All those you worship instead of Him are mere names you and your forefathers have invented; names for which God has sent down no sanction. Authority belongs to God alone, and He orders you to worship none but Him: this is the true faith, though most people do not realize it. Fellow prisoners, one of you will serve his master with wine; the other will be crucified and the birds will peck at his head. That is the end of the matter on

3. Compare Genesis 39.7–41.45.

which you asked my opinion.' Joseph said to the one he knew would be saved, 'Mention me to your master,' but Satan made him forget to do this, and so Joseph remained in prison for a number of years.

The king said, 'I dreamed about seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; seven green ears of corn and [seven] others withered. Counsellors, if you can interpret dreams, tell me the meaning of my dream.' They said, 'These are confusing dreams and we are not skilled at dream-interpretation,' but the prisoner who had been freed at last remembered [Joseph] and said, 'I shall tell you what this means. Give me leave to go.'

'Truthful Joseph! Tell us the meaning of seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, seven green ears of corn and [seven] others withered, then I can return to the people to inform them.' Joseph said, 'You will sow for seven consecutive years as usual. Store all that you reap, left in the ear, apart from the little you eat. After that will come seven years of hardship which will consume all but a little of what you stored up for them; after that will come a year when the people will have abundant rain and will press grapes.'

The king said, 'Bring him to me,' but when the messenger came to fetch Joseph, he said, 'Go back to your master and ask him about what happened to those women who cut their hands—my Lord knows all about their treachery.' The king asked the women, 'What happened when you tried to seduce Joseph?' They said, 'God forbid! We know nothing bad of him!' and the governor's wife said, 'Now the truth is out: it was I who tried to seduce him—he is an honest man.' [Joseph said, 'This was] for my master to know that I did not betray him behind his back: God does not guide the mischief of the treacherous. I do not pretend to be blameless, for man's very soul incites him to evil unless my Lord shows mercy: He is most forgiving, most merciful.'

The king said, 'Bring him to me: I will have him serve me personally,' and then, once he had spoken with him, 'From now on you will have our trust and favour.' Joseph said, 'Put me in charge of the nation's storehouses: I shall manage them prudently and carefully.' In this way We settled Joseph in that land to live wherever he wished: We grant Our mercy to whoever We will and do not fail to reward those who do good. The reward of the Hereafter is best for those who believe and are mindful of God.

Joseph's brothers came⁴ and presented themselves before him. He recognized them—though they did not recognize him—and once he had given them their provisions, he said, 'Bring me the brother [you left with] your father!⁵ Have you not seen me giving generous measure and being the best of hosts? You will have no more corn from me if you do not bring him to me, and you will not be permitted to approach me.' They said, 'We shall do all we can to persuade his father to send him with us, indeed we shall.' Joseph said to his servants, 'Put their [traded] goods back into their saddlebags, so that they may recognize them when they go back to their family, and [be eager to] return.'

When they returned to their father, they said, 'Father, we have been denied any more corn, but send our brother back with us and we shall be given another measure. We shall guard him carefully.' He said, 'Am I to entrust him to you as I did his brother before? God is the best guardian and the Most Merciful of the

4. Compare Genesis 42.3–46.7.

5. Benjamin, Joseph's full brother; his other brothers had different mothers.

merciful.' Then, when they opened their packs, they discovered that their goods had been returned to them and they said, 'Father! We need no more [goods to barter]: look, our goods have been returned to us. We shall get corn for our household; we shall keep our brother safe; we shall be entitled to another camel-load of grain—an extra measure so easily achieved!' He said, 'I will never send him with you, not unless you swear by God that you will bring him back to me if that is humanly possible.' Then, when they had given him their pledge, he said, 'Our words are entrusted to God.' He said, 'My sons, do not enter all by one gate—use different gates. But I cannot help you against the will of God: all power is in God's hands. I trust in Him; let everyone put their trust in Him; and, when they entered as their father had told them, it did not help them against the will of God, it merely satisfied a wish of Jacob's. He knew well what We had taught him, though most people do not.'

Then, when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother apart and said, 'I am your brother, so do not be saddened by their past actions,' and, once he had given them their provisions, he placed the drinking-cup in his brother's pack. A man called out, 'People of the caravan! You are thieves!' and they turned and said, 'What have you lost?' They replied, 'The king's drinking-cup is missing,' and, 'Whoever returns it will get a camel-load [of grain],' and, 'I give you my word.' They said, 'By God! You must know that we did not come to make mischief in your land: we are no thieves.' They asked them, 'And if we find that you are lying, what penalty shall we apply to you?' and they answered, 'The penalty will be [the enslavement of] the person in whose bag the cup is found: this is how we punish wrongdoers.' [Joseph] began by searching their bags, then his brother's, and he pulled it out from his brother's bag.

In this way We devised a plan for Joseph—if God had not willed it so, he could not have detained his brother as a penalty under the king's law—We raise the rank of whoever We will. Above everyone who has knowledge there is the One who is all knowing.

[His brothers] said, 'If he is a thief then his brother was a thief before him,' but Joseph kept his secrets and did not reveal anything to them. He said, 'You are in a far worse situation. God knows best the truth of what you claim.' They said, 'Mighty governor, he has an elderly father. Take one of us in his place. We can see that you are a very good man.' He replied, 'God forbid that we should take anyone other than the person on whom we found our property: that would be unjust of us.' When they lost hope of [persuading] him, they withdrew to confer with each other: the eldest of them said, 'Do you not remember that your father took a solemn pledge from you in the name of God and before that you failed in your duty with regard to Joseph? I will not leave this land until my father gives me leave or God decides for me—He is the best decider—so go back to your father and say, "Your son stole. We can only tell you what we saw. How could we guard against the unforeseen? Ask in the town where we have been; ask the people of the caravan we travelled with: we are telling the truth."'

Their father said, 'No! Your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient: may God bring all of them back to me—He alone is the All Knowing, the All Wise,' and he turned away from them, saying, 'Alas for Joseph!' His eyes went white with grief and he was filled with sorrow. They said, 'By God! You will ruin your health if you do not stop thinking of Joseph, or even

die.' He said, 'I plead my grief and sorrow before God. I have knowledge from God that you do not have. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother and do not despair of God's mercy—only disbelievers despair of God's mercy.'

Then, when they presented themselves before Joseph, they said, 'Mighty governor, misfortune has afflicted us and our family. We have brought only a little merchandise, but give us full measure. Be charitable to us: God rewards the charitable.' He said, 'Do you now realize what you did to Joseph and his brother when you were ignorant?' and they cried, 'Could it be that you are Joseph?' He said, 'I am Joseph. This is my brother. God has been gracious to us: God does not deny anyone who is mindful of God and steadfast in adversity the rewards of those who do good.' They said, 'By God! God really did favour you over all of us and we were in the wrong!' but he said, 'You will hear no reproaches today. May God forgive you: He is the Most Merciful of the merciful. Take my shirt and lay it over my father's face: he will recover his sight. Then bring your whole family back to me.'

Later, when the caravan departed, their father said, 'You may think I am senile but I can smell Joseph,' but [people] said, 'By God! You are still lost in that old illusion of yours!' Then, when the bearer of good news came and placed the shirt on to Jacob's face, his eyesight returned and he said, 'Did I not tell you that I have knowledge from God that you do not have?' The [brothers] said, 'Father, ask God to forgive our sins—we were truly in the wrong.' He replied, 'I shall ask my Lord to forgive you: He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful.'

Later, when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to him—he said, 'Welcome to Egypt: you will all be safe here, God willing'—and took them up to [his] throne. They all bowed down before him and he said, 'Father, this is the fulfilment of that dream I had long ago. My Lord has made it come true and has been gracious to me—He released me from prison and He brought you here from the desert—after Satan sowed discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is most subtle in achieving what He will: He is the All Knowing, the Truly Wise. My Lord! You have given me authority; You have taught me something about the interpretation of dreams; Creator of the heavens and the earth, You are my protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Let me die in true devotion to You. Join me with the righteous.'

This account is part of what was beyond your knowledge [Muhammad]. We revealed it to you: you were not present with Joseph's brothers when they made their treacherous plans. However eagerly you may want them to, most men will not believe. You ask no reward from them for this: it is a reminder for all people and there are many signs in the heavens and the earth that they pass by and give no heed to—most of them will only believe in God while also joining others with Him. Are they so sure that an overwhelming punishment from God will not fall on them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly when they least expect it? Say, 'This is my way: based on clear evidence, I, and all who follow me, call [people] to God—glory be to God!—I do not join others with Him.'

All the messengers We sent before you [Muhammad] were men to whom We made revelations, men chosen from the people of their towns. Have the [disbelievers] not travelled through the land and seen the end of those who went before them? For those who are mindful of God, the Home in the Hereafter is better. Do you [people] not use your reason? When the messengers lost all hope and realized that they had been dismissed as liars, Our help came to

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them: We saved whoever We pleased, but Our punishment will not be turned away from guilty people. There is a lesson in the stories of such people for those who understand. This revelation is no fabrication: it is a confirmation of the truth of what was sent before it; an explanation of everything; a guide and a blessing for those who believe.

19. Mary

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Kaf Ha Ya 'Ayn Sad

This is an account of your Lord's grace towards His servant, Zachariah,¹ when he called to his Lord secretly, saying, 'Lord, my bones have weakened and my hair is ashen grey, but never, Lord, have I ever prayed to You in vain: I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] when I am gone, for my wife is barren, so grant me a successor—a gift from You—to be my heir and the heir of the family of Jacob. Lord, make him well pleasing [to You].' 'Zachariah, We bring you good news of a son whose name will be John—We have chosen this name for no one before him.' He said, 'Lord, how can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am old and frail?' He said, 'This is what your Lord has said: "It is easy for Me: I created you, though you were nothing before."'

He said, 'Give me a sign, Lord.' He said, 'Your sign is that you will not [be able to] speak to anyone for three full [days and] nights.' He went out of the sanctuary to his people and signalled to them to praise God morning and evening.

[We said], 'John, hold on to the Scripture firmly.' While he was still a boy, We granted him wisdom, tenderness from Us, and purity. He was devout, kind to his parents, not domineering or rebellious. Peace was on him the day he was born, the day he died, and it will be on him the day he is raised to life again.

Mention in the Qur'an the story of Mary. She withdrew from her family to a place to the east and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a perfected man. She said, 'I seek the Lord of Mercy's protection against you: if you have any fear of Him [do not approach]!' but he said, 'I am but a Messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of a pure son.' She said, 'How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste,' and he said, 'This is what your Lord said: "It is easy for Me—We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us."' And so it was ordained: she conceived him. She withdrew to a distant place and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, 'I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!' but a voice cried to her from below, 'Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you, so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: "I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today."'

She went back to her people carrying the child, and they said, 'Mary! You have done something terrible! Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man;

1. Compare Luke 1.5–64.