

Sūrah Kahf (1)

Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī

Period of Revelation, Theme and Relationship with the Previous Sūrah

Like the previous *sūrah*, this *sūrah* was also revealed in the part of the Makkan period when the conflict between good and evil of the Prophet's preaching mission had entered its final phase. The Quraysh with all their guiles were preparing to completely obliterate the message of the Qur'ān. The Jews and the Christians too, as was indicated earlier, were supporting them so that the new message could be wiped out through the Quraysh right at the place where it was initiated from, and they themselves were not needed to openly engage in conflict.

In the background of these circumstances, there are a few special aspects that have become prominent in the *sūrah*:

1. The Quraysh are warned that in the wake of their worldly successes they should not try to arrogantly deny an obvious reality. The punishment of God is hovering over them. If they do not desist from their arrogance, not far is the time when punishment will visit them.

2. The Prophet (saws) and his companions are urged to be patient and steadfast. Certain subtle indications are made of the upcoming phases of migration etc and glad tidings are given to them in those phases regarding certain victories they will achieve at the behest of God.

3. Just as in the previous *sūrah*, Sūrah Banī Isrā'īl, the Jews are exposed, in this *sūrah* and in the next one – Sūrah Maryam – the Christians are exposed. The purpose is to warn the Quraysh that if at the behest of those who themselves have no basis they deny the great favour which God wants to bestow on them, will lose the opportunity that is knocking at their doors because of the enmity others have for it.

Analysis

Verses (1-8): The Prophet (sws) is urged to be patient since his only responsibility is to warn and give glad tidings to his nation. If the rebellious among them do not profess faith in the Qur'ān, it is not because there is something wrong in the Book or there is something lacking in his preaching. The reason for this is that these people have become blind in their infatuation with the lures of this world. He should not fret over such people. A day will come when the artificial make-up of this world will become evident and its actual face will be exposed. At that time, these people will utterly regret their behaviour.

Verses (9-26): An objection raised by the Prophet's opponents regarding the dwellers of the cave is answered. As a result, their real life, aside from needless details, becomes evident. In its reflection, it is shown to the Prophet (sws) and his companions that the phase of preaching they are passing through was also encountered by the dwellers of the cave. If like them, they too persevere on the right path in spite of all the dangers they may face, God will ease their hardships the way He did for them. He will provide them with the means and resources the way He provided them. He never lets those who persevere for His cause lose their way.

Verses (27-31): The Prophet (sws) is urged to focus his attention on his poor and indigent companions while disregarding those who had become slaves to the wealth of this world. These companions may be deprived of worldly wealth but they have the wealth of faith in abundance. They are engrossed in God's remembrance day and night and spreading the message of His religion. In this regard, God has also stopped the Prophet (sws) from grieving at the attitude of the disbelievers: if they are not professing faith, he should leave them to themselves. They will be dealt with according to the established practice of God and no one can change this practice.

Verses (32-49): A similitude is cited to show that the reminder of the Hereafter weighs down heavily on those who think that the real success is the success of this world. They regard their worldly successes to be a proof that they are following the right path. For this reason, when a servant of God warns them of the Hereafter, they ask him if they are better off or him? If the answer is obviously that they are better off, why should they not

believe their own beliefs and practices are correct too? Such people do not believe that the riches and good fortune they have today will ever be taken away from them. They regard the Hereafter to be very farfetched and if they hypothetically do believe in it, they do so thinking that if the fanatic Muslims warn them of the Hereafter, they will have a high status there too since they are very successful in this world. The purpose of citing this similitude is to make evident to the Prophet (sws) that today he is facing exactly the same type of arrogant people. These people are not going to listen to him. They will only realize when it is too late – when they are visited by God's scourge. He should make them understand the reality of this world and this life – which has lured them away – through a similitude that the pleasures of this life are all transient. Nothing from this world will go with them. Only their righteous deeds will go with them. So, they who want to gather something for the next world should gather these deeds.

Verses (50-59): The anecdote of Adam (sws) and Satan is reminded of. The purpose is to warn the arrogant Quraysh of their wretchedness: they have made Satan and his progeny their friends and guardians because of their own evil ways even though he is an open enemy of Adam's progeny. In this regard, they are rebuked on their wretchedness: God blessed them with a great favour when He sent down to them a Book that explains the truth in various ways. However, instead of accepting it, these people became adamant in their demand to show them a sign of the punishment the Qur'ān was warning them of. God, however, is very merciful and gracious. His mercy supersedes His punishment. Yet these wretched people hastily demand His punishment.

Verses (60-82): The anecdote of a journey undertaken by Moses (sws) is narrated. It was undertaken at God's behest to train and instruct him. The purpose was to make him aware of certain secrets of this universe with the help of a special person: whatever happens in this world happens with God's will and His will is entirely based on wisdom. In this world, it apparently seems that the unjust and the rebellious are given the opportunity to make hay and the adherents of the truth are made to pass through various trials and tribulations. This situation causes the faith of many to dwindle and it becomes very difficult for them to remain on the right path. In this trial, only those remain

steadfast who fully know that whatever is happening here is happening under God's will and under the requisites of His wisdom. However, their limited knowledge cannot grasp the wisdom and expediencies envisaged by the Almighty. For this reason, the correct attitude in this regard is that whatever adverse circumstances people face while treading the path of the truth, they should not get frustrated and disappointed; in fact, they should adhere to their stance in a steadfast manner and wait for the manifestation of God's wisdom and hope that if not in this world, it will definitely manifest in the next.

This wisdom is the foundation of patience on which the whole edifice of religion stands. Thus, when God chose Moses (sws) for a great mission, He sent him to a special person who could train him in this trait of patience because it can only be learnt through practice. This anecdote has been narrated to the Prophet (sws) and through him to his followers so that they should not be over-awed and scared to see the rebellious and the defiant spreading mischief while they themselves are being oppressed in spite of adhering to the truth. If in this world a hole is drilled in the ship of the poor, there is great wisdom in it and if in the city of oppressors a dilapidated wall that is about to fall is restored, there is profound wisdom in it too but the limited knowledge of human beings is not able to grasp all these secrets of God.

Verses (83-101): While answering a question, a just ruler – Dhu al-Qarnayn – is mentioned. The purpose is to make the rebellious among the Quraysh learn a lesson. They regarded the warnings of the Prophet (sws) to be a joke and their own political authority to be eternal. By referring to him, they are told at their own query that even after conquering all the territories of the east and the west, he regarded all his victories to be a blessing of God. He would take every step according to the will of God. On the other hand, such are they that by getting a small share of political leadership, they have become so inebriated with it that they have started to make fun of God and the Hereafter.

Verses (102-110): This is the concluding section of the *sūrah*. The topic of warning with which the *sūrah* began is once again brought up. It is as if at the end, a reminder is sounded in a new style about a reality which is actually the theme of the *sūrah*. At the same time, people who were making fun of the statements of the Qur'ān replete with wisdom and demanding a miracle are

answered. They are told that if they have eyes to see, there are so many signs of God in the world within them and in that around them that if oceans become ink, even then they cannot all be penned. At the end, it is declared from the tongue of the Prophet (sws) that showing signs and miracles is the prerogative of God. He himself is a servant of God like them. He recites to them whatever is divinely revealed to him.

This concise analysis of the meanings of the *sūrah* is sufficient to explain its coherence and central theme. With God's name, I now begin its exegesis. May God help me.

Section 1: Verses (1-8)

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا ۖ قَيِّمًا لِّيُنذِرَ بَأْسًا
شَدِيدًا مِّنْ لَّدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ۖ
مَّا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ أَبَدًا ۖ وَيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ وَلَدًا ۚ مَّا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا
لِبَابِهِمْ كِبْرٌ ۚ كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِطَغْوَاهُمْ ۖ إِذْ يَقُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا ۚ فَلَعَلَّكَ بَاخِعٌ نَّفْسَكَ عَلَى
آثَارِهِمْ إِن لَّمْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِهَذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا ۚ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لِّهَا لِنَبْلُوَهُمْ
أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۚ وَإِنَّا لَجَاعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيْهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا ۚ

In the name of God, the Most-Gracious, the Ever-Merciful.

Gratitude is for the God Who revealed the Book to His servant and did not leave any ambiguity in it. It is very lucid and effective so that it can inform the rejecters of a stern torment from Him and give glad tidings to the believers who are doing righteous deeds that for them is a very nice reward wherein they shall abide forever and inform those who say: "God has begotten children." They do not have any knowledge of this matter: neither they, nor their forefathers. Very grave are the words which they are uttering from their mouths. It is mere lies that they are speaking. (1-5)

So, you may well take your life because of sorrow while venturing after them if they do not profess faith in this word. Whatever is on the earth, We have made it its adornment so that We test people that who among them does good deeds. And We

shall ultimately destroy all the things on it making everything a barren field. (6-8)

Explanation

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا¹

This *sūrah* begins with the same topic on which the previous *sūrah* ended (see verses: 105-111). The obligation the Arabs owe to the favour that God has bestowed on them in the form of the Qur'ān is to show gratitude and not otherwise. Unfortunate are the people who do not value this favour and invent all kinds of excuses to deny it.

One of the attributes of this Book is that it has no ambiguity or complexity in it, neither in its text nor in its meaning. It is in lucid Arabic and it guides people to the straight path. Arguments which reinforce this straight path are found not only in human nature and intellect but also in the world within and outside human beings. The Qur'ān has presented them in such a variety of ways that no one who uses his intellect can be deprived of them. In verse 9 of *Sūrah Banī Isrā'īl*, this very attribute of the Qur'ān is referred to thus: إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلْبَاقِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ (indeed, this Qur'ān guides to the path that is straight).

فَبِمَا يُنْذِرُ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِّنْ لَّدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا² مَا كَثِيرٌ فِيهِ اِبْدَاءٌ³ وَيُنْذِرُ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ وَلَدًا⁴

The first of these verses states the purpose for which this Book was revealed. In the first part of the first verse, the word لِنُكَافِرِينَ or لِنُكَذِّبِينَ is suppressed as evidenced by the parallel mention of the word الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ahead.

The subject of the verb يُنْذِرُ can be God and the Prophet (sws) also who is referred to in the previous verse by the word عَبْد.

1. Gratitude is for the God Who revealed the Book to His servant and did not leave any ambiguity in it.

2. It is very lucid and effective so that it can inform the rejecters of a stern torment from Him and give glad tidings to the believers who are doing righteous deeds that for them is a very nice reward wherein they shall abide forever and inform those who say: "God has begotten children."

In the first case, the meaning would be that God has revealed this specially from Himself to inform the disbelievers of a grave torment.

In the second case, the meaning would be that God's messenger informs people of divine punishment.

In the first case, the word *مِّنْ لَّدُنْهُ* signifies special attention and favour of God and in the second case, it refers to the intensity of the torment: this torment will not be an ordinary one; it will be God's wrath from which no one will be able to save them.

The words "wherein they shall abide forever" mean that they will abide in the nice reward forever. They actually refer to Paradise. This is the consequence of the "nice reward." Referring to the consequence of a thing while mentioning the thing is a common Arabic style, examples of which can be seen in earlier *sūrahs* as well as in the succeeding ones.

The last of the above mentioned verses is a mention of the specific after the general. The implication is that those who worship partners they ascribe to God and have become oblivious to God while depending entirely on the intercession of these partners should be specially warned. This refers both to the idolaters of Arabia and to the Christians. The Idolaters regarded the angels to be daughters of God and the Christians regarded Jesus (sws) to be the son of God.

مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا لِآبَائِهِمْ³ كَبُرَتْ كَلِمَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ أَفْوَاهِهِمْ^ط إِنَّ يَقُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا^٣

The word "knowledge" here means "conclusive proof." The implication is that those who ascribe children to God and make them His associates have fabricated all this. Neither has God ever ratified this nor do these foolish people have any proof of it. They are indulging in this foolishness while blindly following their forefathers. It was mere ignorance on their part and they too are following them in their footsteps. It is a false accusation on God and a matter of grave disrespect to Him. If they do not desist from this contemptuous attitude, they will soon meet their fate.

3. They do not have any knowledge of this matter: neither they, nor their forefathers. Very grave are the words which they are uttering from their mouths. It is mere lies that they are speaking.

فَلَعَلَّكَ بَاخِعٌ نَفْسَكَ عَلَى آثَارِهِمْ إِنْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِهِذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا ۝⁴

This is an assurance sounded to the Prophet (sws) in a very fond and affectionate way. It is evident from this how conscientious the Prophet (sws) was in his obligations. He was expending every bit of his energy in his preaching endeavour and still thinking that if the people did not accept faith, it was because he was lacking in his effort. It was because of this thought that both his hard work and agony was continuously increasing. So the Almighty checked him on this attitude in a very affectionate way: he was not to go overboard in discharging his duty. If the ungrateful and wretched people do not profess faith in the Book, he should not think that it is because they were having any difficulty in understanding it or there is something amiss in his efforts. The real reason is something else.

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لِّهَا لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۝⁵

This verse mentions the real reason for their aversion and denial. This world is a place of trial and test. In it, God is testing who using his intellect and brains seeks the Hereafter, and who following his desires ends up seeking this world. For the purpose of the test, God has adorned the face of this earth with make-up that is deceptively pleasing to the eye. There is great lure and attraction in wealth and children, in orchards and gardens, in fields and crops, in cars and villas, in buildings and castles, in positions of high social and political status of this world. All its pleasures are at hand and easy to attain while its pains are hidden. On the other hand, all the successes of the Hereafter are as yet concealed from the eyes, and those who seek them are immediately faced with a lot of hardships in this world. Indeed, this is a severe trial. Not every slave to his passions can come through it. Only those will sail through it who are perspicacious enough not to be misled by these worldly lures which may attempt to deceive them in one guise or another and are never prepared to lose the favours of the Hereafter by getting caught in

4. So, you may well take your life because of sorrow while venturing after them if they do not profess faith in this word.

5. Whatever is on the earth, We have made it its adornment so that We test people that who among them does good deeds.

the lures and attractions of this world. As for those who have who have blinded their eyes of intellect and heart and have become slaves of their desires, they are not ready to lose the immediate gains to acquire the deferred gains of the Hereafter even though every speck of this universe bears witness to them.

وَأَنَّا لَجَاعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيْهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا⁶

The word جُرُزْ refers to barren land. The implication is that the things of this world which these people are infatuated with are all transient. One day God will totally destroy them and make this land barren. This topic is also discussed in verses 46-48 ahead. There it shall insha'Allāh be explained further.

Section II: Verses (9-26)

The way the Quraysh were opposing the Qur'ān and the Prophet (sws) is stated in the previous verses. Another aspect of this opposition was that in order to harass and corner him, they would pose all sorts of questions to him that were implanted in their minds by the People of the Book. The Quraysh would pose these questions to him and seek answers from him. Questions regard rūḥ, Dhū al-Qarnayn and some other ones which the Qur'ān has referred to were actually raised by the People of the Book. A similar question related to the cave-sleepers and was posed to the Prophet (sws) by the Quraysh. These irrelevant questions were obviously not meant to seek the real truth. They were only meant to tease and corner him. The purpose was that if the Prophet (sws) was unable to answer them, they would make that an excuse to oppose him and say that a person who claimed to be a prophet of God had no answer to their questions. If the Prophet (sws) was able to answer them and the answer was against their beliefs, they thought that they would say that he was saying something incorrect from his own self while the truth, on the contrary, was different.

The anecdote of the cave-dwellers has been mentioned as a result of a question posed by the Prophet's opponents, as is evident from

6. And We shall ultimately destroy all the things on it making everything a barren field.

the Qur'ān itself. It is stated in verses 22-24 ahead that the Qur'ān has referred to this incident while answering a question. The advice of the Qur'ān about such questions, as will become evident later, is that they should be ignored. However, if some question is beneficial or its answer can be beneficial for education, the Qur'ān has answered it to the extent it can be useful. Since the life of the cave-dwellers could have provided useful guidance to the Prophet (sws) and his companions in the testing times they were passing through in their preaching because they too were passing through the same phases as the cave-dwellers, the Almighty narrated to them the part of their anecdote that was true. In this way, not only the question raised was answered, the Prophet (sws) was also instructed in perseverance and patience through a past anecdote and a very important chapter in the history of the seekers of the truth was cleansed from all sorts of wrong details and revived in its original form.

Who were the cave-dwellers, when did they inhabit the earth and whose ancestors they were are questions that cannot be answered with certainty. In this regard, what can be known with certainty is what the Qur'ān has narrated about them. The rest are all folk-tales about them. After narrating the correct version of their history that could have provided useful guidance, the Qur'ān has stopped us from further inquiry into them, as will become evident later. Thus, I would not like to try and seek something from which the Qur'ān has stopped us. However, it does become evident from concomitant indications that the cave-dwellers were not from the ancestors of the Quraysh or the Jews; they were from the ancestors of the Christians. They have historical anecdotes among them which are similar to the account of the cave-dwellers. In my opinion, they belonged to the initial period of the Christians when they were persecuted by the Romans and they responded in a manner that inscribed a new tale of the truth in the annals of history that is referred to by the Qur'ān. They fearlessly invited people to monotheism and warned them of the accountability in the hereafter. The consequence was that everyone became their enemy and the danger of they being stoned to death looked imminent. When matters reached this extent, they took refuge in a cave and the Almighty provided for them the means and resources – which only He could provide – to protect them. When people came to know of their circumstances and the grand way in which

they were helped by God, memorials were constructed for them and every group started to claim connection with them. In this way, their anecdote was preserved as a sacred tradition in Christian history. Gradually, this tradition became confined to some miraculous feats and baseless details about them. Their real achievement was lost to posterity. Christians did indulge in polemical debates about their number and whether their dog was the fourth besides them or the fifth, but no one knew what their real message was and the extent of sacrifices they gave. This mention survived probably as long as some adherents of real Christianity survived. Later when Saint Paul distorted the teachings of Jesus (sws), the true history of the ancestors of Christians too was obliterated. It seems that some narratives about them circulated among the Arab Christians but were distorted. It was at the instigation of those Christians that this question was posed to the Prophet (sws). The Qur'an answered it because he could receive great assurance and strength in the adverse circumstances he and his companions were passing through, as is pointed out earlier. Just as the cave-dwellers were oppressed and persecuted by their rivals, the Prophet (sws) and his companions too had to face tremendous trials at the hands of the Quraysh. Just as the cave-dwellers had to seek refuge in a cave, the Prophet (sws) and his companions too would soon be faced with the ordeals of migration to Abyssinia, refuge in the Thawr-cave and then migration of Madinah.

Readers may now proceed to study these verses in the light of this background.

Text and Translation

أَمْرَحَسِبْتُ أَنْ أَصْحَبَ الْكَهْفِ وَالرَّقِيمِ ۖ كَانُوا مِنْ آيَاتِنَا عَجَبًا ﴿١﴾ إِذْ أَوَى الْفِتْيَةُ إِلَى الْكَهْفِ فَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا آتِنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢﴾ فَضَمْنَا عَلَىٰ أَذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا ﴿٣﴾ ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْطَىٰ لِمَا لَبِثُوا أَمَدًا ﴿٤﴾ نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ نَبَأَهُم بِالْحَقِّ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ فِتْيَةٌ آمَنُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ وَزِدْنَاهُمْ هُدًى ﴿٥﴾ وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَنْ نَدْعُوَ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا لَقَدْ قُلْنَا إِذَا شَطَطًا ﴿٦﴾ هَؤُلَاءِ قَوْمُنَا اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهَةً ۖ لَوْلَا يَأْتُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِسُلْطَانٍ بَيِّنٍ ۖ فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ

كَذِبًا ﴿١٥﴾ وَإِذِ اعْتَرَفْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يُعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأَوَّا إِلَى الْكَهْفِ يَنْشُرُ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ وَيَهَيِّئُ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَمْرِكُمْ مَرَفَقًا ﴿١٦﴾ وَتَرَى الشَّسْأَ إِذَا طَلَعَتْ تَرَوُورَ عَنْ كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَتْ تَقَرَّبُ مِنْهُمْ ذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ وَهُمْ فِي فَجْوَةٍ مِنْهُ ذَلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِ وَمَنْ يُضِلِلْ فَلَنْ تَجِدَ لَهُ وَلِيًّا مُرْشِدًا ﴿١٧﴾ وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ آيِقَظًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ ۚ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ ۚ وَكَلْبُهُمْ بِأَسْطٍ ذِرَاعِيهِ بِالْوَصِيدِ ۚ لَوِ اطَّلَعْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلَّيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَكَلْبَتْ مِنْهُمْ رُعْبًا ﴿١٨﴾ وَكَذَلِكَ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِيَتَسَاءَلُوا بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا مِمَّا أَوْ بَعْضُ يَوْمٍ ۖ قَالُوا رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ فَابْعَثُوا أَحَدَكُمْ بِوَرِقِكُمْ هَذِهِ إِلَى الْبَدِينَةِ فَلْيَنْظُرْ أَيُّهَا أَزْكَى طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُمْ بِرِزْقٍ مِنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿١٩﴾ إِنَّهُمْ إِنْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْجُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِي مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَنْ تُفْلِحُوا إِذَا أَبَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾ وَكَذَلِكَ أَعَثَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا ۖ إِذْ يَسْتَنَازِعُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَمْرَهُمْ فَقَالُوا ابْنُوا عَلَيْهِمْ بُيُوتًا ۖ رَبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِهِمْ ۚ قَالَ الَّذِينَ غَلَبُوا عَلَى أَمْرِهِمْ لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ مَسْجِدًا ﴿٢١﴾ سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةٌ رَابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْبًا بِالْغَيْبِ ۚ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ ۚ قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعَدَّتِهِمْ مَّا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ ۚ فَلَا تَبَارَفِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَآءَ ظَاهِرًا ۚ وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾ وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَايٍ إِنْنِي فَاعِلٌ ذِيكَ عَدَا ۚ ﴿٢٣﴾ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ ۚ وَادْكُرْ رَبَّكَ إِذَا نَسِيتَ وَقُلْ عَسَى أَنْ يَهْدِيَنِّي رَبِّي لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ هَذَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢٤﴾ وَ لَبِثُوا فِي كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِينَ وَازْدَادُوا تِسْعًا ﴿٢٥﴾ قُلِ اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثُوا ۚ لَهُ غَيْبُ السَّمُوتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ أَبْصِرْ بِهِ وَأَسْمِعْ ۚ مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ ۚ وَلَا يُشِيرُكَ فِي حُكْمِهِ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

Did you regard the dwellers of the cave and *raqīm* as a very strange sign of Ours. At the time when some youngsters took refuge in the cave and prayed: “Our Lord! Bless us with mercy from Yourself and guide us in this matter of ours.” So, We lulled them to sleep for many years in the cave. Then We woke them up to see which of the two groups correctly counts the period of their stay. (9-12)

We relate to you their anecdote in truth. They were a few youngsters who professed faith in their Lord and We increased them in their guidance and strengthened their hearts at that time when they rose and declared: “Our Lord is He Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We shall never call upon anyone

except Him as God. If we do this, we will say what is totally far from the truth. These are the people of our nation who have made some others besides Him as deities. Why do they not present clear evidence in their favour? Then who will be more unjust than those who invent falsehood against God?" (13-15)

And now that you have separated yourselves from them and from their deities who they worship besides God, go and seek refuge in the cave. Your God shall spread His mercy for you and shall provide you in this phase of yours whatever you need. (16)

And You see the sun when it rises, it declines from the right of their cave and when it sets, it moves away to the left side and they lie in its open space. This is from among the signs of God. He who is guided by God, is the one guided and he whom God leads astray, you will not be able to find for him any helper and guide. (17)

And you would have thought that they are awake even though they were asleep. And We also continued to turn them on their right and left, and their dog sat at the cave entrance with hands outstretched. Had you caught their glimpse, you would have turned and fled and you would have been awe-struck by them. (18)

And in this way, We woke them that they may mutually question one another. An asker from them asked: "How much time would you have stayed here?" They replied: "We must have stayed for a day or even less." They said: "Only your Lord knows best the period you stayed. So, send anyone among you to the city with this currency of yours; then he should fully scrutinize in which part of the city pure food is found and should bring from it some edibles for you. And he should go there in secrecy and not let anyone know about you. If they get to know about you, they will stone you to death or will force you back to their religion and then you will never succeed." (19-20)

And in a similar way, We informed people about them so that they know that the promise of God is true and there is no doubt in the advent of the Hereafter. Think also of the time when people were disputing among themselves about them. So, they said: "Build a monument on their cave. Their Lord knows them better." Those who held the dominant opinion in their matter, said: "We will build a mosque on their cave." (21)

Now they will say: "They were three and the fourth was their dog," and will say: "They were five and the sixth was their dog."

Mere conjecture! and will say: "They were seven and the eighth was their dog." Say: Only my Lord knows better their number. Few people know them. And do not debate about them except if you have to say something to divert them and do not ask about them from any of them – and do not say about any matter: "I shall do it tomorrow." Except if God intends. And when you forget, remember your Lord and say: Hopefully, my Lord will guide me to what is correct in even lesser time than this. (22-24)

And they remained in their cave for three hundred years and a further nine as well. Say: only God knows full well the time of their stay. It is He alone Who has knowledge of the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. How amazing is He in seeing and hearing! No one except Him is their guardian, and He also does not allow anyone share His authority. (25-26)

Explanation

أَمْ حَسِبْتَ أَنَّ أَصْحَابَ الْكَهْفِ وَالرَّقِيمِ كَانُوا مِنْ آيَاتِنَا عَجَبًا ۖ

It is not necessary that the word *حَسِبْتَ* be addressed to the Prophet (sws). The address can be general like *أَنْتُمْ تَر*. Such an address is directed to every individual of a group and has more emphasis in it than a plural address. In fact, in this very section (see verses 17 and 18), there are instances in which the addressed entity is singular but is not directed at the Prophet (sws). It is directed to every individual of the group.

Also worthy of consideration here is the question as to the purpose of addressing the Prophet (sws) in this verse. In the first place, he was not even aware of the anecdote of the cave-dwellers and it was through this revelation that he came to know about them. And if it is supposed that he even had some information about them, what was the occasion of showing wonder, as the verse says. Stranger tales had already been recited to him about the previous prophets. In my opinion, this question is addressed to the people who had raised this issue and their purpose was to decrease the worth of the Prophet (sws) and his companions in the eyes of people. They wanted to show to people that when such saintly people as the cave-dwellers had lived in their past for whom such divine signs of splendour manifested themselves, how

7. Did you regard the dwellers of the cave and *raqīm* as a very strange sign of Ours.

could they be in need of any further guidance and that too from a prophet in whom they could observe no such splendour? It may be noted that in those times, the Jews and the Christians used to declare openly that he who wanted to be guided should adopt their religion; the new religion had no foundation – even polytheism was better than it. Thus, while keeping this mentality of the questioners in consideration, the Qur'ān has begun the answer by stating that if they thought that the incident of the cave-dwellers was very strange, they were mistaken. This was just one sign among numerous other signs of God. Similar signs have manifested themselves earlier and will manifest in future too for those whom God wills. These signs are under His control and not the monopoly of a particular group.

This is my opinion regarding the address found in the verse. However, if someone regards the verse to address the Prophet (sws), then in that case, it would mean that if he according to famous traditions regarded this incident to be a strange one, it is not so. Such signs have appeared in the past and will appear in the future too. These words are in fact glad tidings for the Prophet (sws) and his companions: just as God had been protecting the earlier adherents of his religion through His signs of might and power, He would do so for them too.

As for the question as to why those people were called *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf wa aṣḥāb al-raqīm*, the answer to this question is that they were known by this title among the People of the Book of Arabia. Their ascription to *al-kaḥf* obviously is because they took refuge in the cave. As for *al-raqīm*, then the correct opinion about this is the one reported by 'Ikramah from 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās (rta) that in the opinion of Ka'b (rta), it was the name of a city from which these youngsters came and took refuge in the cave. It was also called the valley of *raqīm*. As for why a place is given a specific name, it is not necessary to find it out and it is difficult too. When non-Arabic names are Arabicised, they change so much that finding out their original names is virtually impossible and this does not have any utility for the purpose of education either. If this name had been kept by the Qur'ān, then research into its meanings and origins does have a special significance. However, as just pointed out, this name has been adopted by the People of the Book, in particular the Christians, of Arabia. The Qur'ān has only taken it from them. Some researchers of current times think that

this is the name of the city which was famous by the name of Petra and the Arabs called it Batrā.

إِذْ أَوَى الْفِتْيَةُ إِلَى الْكَهْفِ فَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا آتِنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا⁸

The verb رَشَدَ means that he was guided and bestowed with steadfastness. The expression رَشَدَ أَمْرُهُ would mean that he was guided in his matter and the verse وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا would mean: Lord! Guide us and make us persevere in this path that we have adopted.”

This is the supplication which these youngsters made when they intended to take refuge in the cave. It is evident from the words of the verse that these were young people. When the sense of honour for the truth once awakened in them, they did not care for any expediency or danger. However, these people not only had the exuberance of youth in them, they also had the light of wisdom granted to them by God. For this reason, they supplicated to God for guidance and perseverance at that precarious instant, and this is precisely what was apt for them.

It may be kept in mind that this verse and the next two present a summary of the whole anecdote. They briefly describe it to the reader. Thereafter, the whole anecdote is presented. The utility of this style of briefly describing something before details are given is that it highlights the real purpose and secondary details do not let it disappear from the mind of the reader. This style is adopted at many instances in the Qur'ān in the anecdotes mentioned in it.

فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَى آذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا⁹

The literal meaning of the expression ضَرَبَ عَلَى الْآذَانِ is to put a seal on the ears or to pat someone on the ears. From here, this idiom began to be used to mean to stop someone from listening or affectionately lulling someone to sleep. This is because when a child is put to sleep his ears are patted.

After these youngsters took refuge in the cave, they were peacefully put to sleep for many years. These words of putting

8. At the time when some youngsters took refuge in the cave and prayed: “Our Lord! Bless us with mercy from Yourself and guide us in this matter of Ours.”

9. So, We lulled them to sleep for many years in the cave.

them to sleep are used as an eloquent metaphor and connote putting someone to sleep in a very loving and caring manner.

10 **ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْضَىٰ لِمَا لَبِثُوا أَمَدًا ۝**

The letter **ل** on **لِنَعْلَمَ** is meant to express the consequence and the verb **نَعْلَمَ** means to see and evaluate something. The verse means that God woke them up from their long sleep so that this matter reached the consequence that they become divided into two groups and argued with each other about the period they had slept. Different speculations were made and it ultimately became evident that none of them was true. It further became evident to them that the life of Barzakh will be no different. No one will be able to have a true estimate of its extent. Every person will think that he had fallen asleep just a short while ago. In verse 19 ahead, this topic is discussed in more detail and all its hidden aspects will become evident.

11 **نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ نَبَأَهُم بِالْحَقِّ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ فِتْيَةٌ آمَنُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ وَزِدْنَاهُمْ هُدًى ۝**

From here onwards, their anecdote is narrated in detail. It is qualified by the word **بِالْحَقِّ**. It means that the Qur'ān has presented its true details while ignoring the famous ones that carry no truth. Secondly, the purpose of the Qur'ān is not to narrate something in secrecy as others do; the purpose is to inform people of the wisdom concealed in this anecdote.

How actually this guidance manifested in their increase in guidance is mentioned in the next verse. The word **فِتْيَةٌ** here should be kept in mind. By pointing out that these individuals belonged to the younger generation, the Qur'ān has directed the attention of the youngsters of the time of Prophet Muḥammad (sws) to learn a lesson from them. They should follow the right path disregarding the enmity of their nation. God will be their helper.

10. Then We woke them up to see which of the two groups correctly counts the period of their stay.

11. We relate to you their anecdote in truth. They were a few youngsters who professed faith in their Lord and We increased them in their guidance.

وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَنْ نَدْعُو مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا
لَقَدْ قُلْنَا إِذَا شَطَطًا¹²

The expression ربط الله على قلبه would mean “God strengthened his heart.”

The word شط means “to draw away,” and شَطَط means “to draw away from the truth.” The implication is that even though the questions were very tough and the task of inviting people to the truth was a very difficult one, the Almighty blessed the faith of these youngsters. The consequence was that they did not content themselves with mere possession of faith and withdrew to their homes; on the contrary, they embarked upon the mission of preaching monotheism. At this, the Almighty, in accordance with His established practice, strengthened their hearts and they openly declared among their people that their Lord was only the One Who was the Lord of the heavens and the earth and that they were not prepared to accept anyone else as their Lord. If they did this, it would be something baseless and far from the truth.

هَؤُلَاءِ قَوْمُنَا اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا لَوْلَا يُاتُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِسُلْطَانٍ بَيِّنٍ فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى
عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا¹³

The word قَوْم refer to the people of Raqīm. The verse states the challenge thrown by those youngsters to their nation. Those who have a flair for Arabic know that the way the word هَؤُلَاءِ is used in the verse and the way the indirect address is employed, express disgust by these youngsters for the beliefs of their nation. The implication is that they openly asked as to why the foolish elements of their nation who had set up other deities besides God did not bring any evidence in their favour. Who could be more

12. And strengthened their hearts at that time when they rose and declared: “Our Lord is He Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We shall never call upon anyone except Him as God. If we do this, we would say what is totally far from the truth.

13. These are the people of our nation who have made some others besides Him as deities. Why do they not present clear evidence in their favour? Then who will be more unjust than those who invent falsehood against God?”

unjust than a person who invented falsehood against God?

وَإِذِ اعْتَزَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يُعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأَوْأَىٰ إِلَى الْكَهْفِ يَنْشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِّن رَّحْمَتِهِ وَيُهَيِّئْ لَكُمْ مِّن أَمْرِكُمْ مَّرْفَقًا¹⁴

The word مَرْفَقٌ refers to something useful for a person.

This verse depicts glad tidings for them from the Almighty. Concomitant indications show that the following part of the discourse is suppressed here: ultimately, the conflict between them and their nation reached to the extent that the danger of stoning them to death looked imminent, as is evident from verse 20. So, they decided to seek refuge in a cave which they had already chosen. At that time, the Almighty divinely inspired these glad tidings to them that as they had left their nation and its idols for the His sake, they should seek refuge in the cave they had selected. Their Lord would embrace them with His mercy and provide them with whatever they needed. He only wants His servants to show resolve and tread the path that leads to Him. When such individuals take this initiative, God Himself provides the means and resources for them to reach their destination. It is stated thus in verses 2-3 of Sūrah al-Ṭalāq: وَمَنْ يُزِرْقُهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَخْتَسِبُ¹⁵ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا

It is possible that a question arise in the minds of people if those people were appointed by God as they were sent divine revelation. The answer to this question is that it was a particular type of divine revelation and was similar to the one sent to Moses' mother to place him in a box and set it afloat on the sea.

Some *sufīs* have tried to derive from this verse the blessing and superiority of isolating oneself from the world. However, I do not regard this to be correct. Those people took refuge in the cave at a time when they had reached the phase of risking their lives to reform their society and were in danger of being stoned to death by its people. The Prophet (sws) too encountered a

14. And now that you have separated yourselves from them and from their deities who they worship besides God, go and seek refuge in the cave. Your God shall spread His mercy for you and shall provide you in this phase of yours whatever you need.

15. And they who fear God, God will find a way out for them and will provide for them from where they cannot even think.

similar phase when he had to seek refuge in the cave of Thawr. Those people had not adopted a life of isolation because of any inclination towards monasticism. They were forced to seek refuge to protect themselves from the enemies of the truth.

Our exegetes have generally not regarded this verse to imply glad tidings. They think that it actually constitutes a statement from the cave-dwellers – something said mutually among them. However, this is not correct. The absolute certainty with which this verse constitutes the promise of divine help cannot be stated by a humble individual. Such an individual can only give this statement in the form of a supplication or a yearning. Thus, in verse 10, there is a reference to a supplication offered by the cave-dwellers.

و تَرَى الشَّمْسَ إِذَا طَلَعَتْ تَزُورُ عَنْ كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَتْ تَقْرِضُهُمْ ذَاتَ الشِّمَالِ وَهُمْ فِي فَجْوَةٍ مِّنْهُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ ۚ مَن يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِ ۚ وَمَن يُضِلِّ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُ وَلِيًّا مُّرْشِدًا ۝۱۶

The word *تَزُورُ* is actually *تَتَزَوَّرُ*. Its meaning is to withdraw to one side.

The word *قَرَضَ الْبَكَانَ* means to move away. Thus the idiom *قَرَضَ الْبَكَانَ* means “he moved away from his place or left his place.”

فَجْوَةٍ refers to a gap between two things, a fissure or a corner place. From here it came to be used as the open space in a house.

In the previous verse, the Almighty had promised to provide the cave-dwellers with provisions they needed. It is evident from this verse that the opening of the cave was situated such that light and air easily reached inside it. However, the heat of the sun could not enter it. Our exegetes have tried to determine the whereabouts of the cave and its opening; however, this is a needless exercise. Various possibilities can be supposed for this but nothing can be said with certainty. The correct view in this regard is that they are one of the signs of God. He had provided for His servants a cave

16. And You see the sun when it rises, it declines from the right of their cave and when it sets, it moves away to the left side and they lie in its open space. This is from among the signs of God. He who is guided by God, is the one guided and he whom God leads astray, you will not be able to find for him any helper and guide.

where the requirements of sustenance were made available to them by Him. It seemed that if the sun passed by them, it too passed in a very respectful way without disrupting their peace.

The verse goes on to state that this is from among the great signs of God. As far as such signs are concerned, one after another great sign is present but only those are guided by these signs who are given the urge by God. Those who are deprived of this urge are helped by none.

وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ آيِقَاطًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ ۚ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ الشِّمَالِ ۚ وَكَلْبُهُمْ بَاسِطٌ ذِرَاعَيْهِ بِالْوَصِيدِ ۖ لَوِ اطَّلَعَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلِيَّتٌ مِنْهُمْ فَزَارَا وَكَلِمَتٌ مِنْهُمْ رُعبًا ۚ¹⁷

This verse states the arrangement of protection made by God: even though they were sleeping in a cave, such was their spectacle that it would have startled an onlooker. Seeing them asleep he would not have dared harm them; he would have thought that they were aware of their surroundings and well-protected. Such was their position while sleeping that a passerby would have thought that they were just resting and not in deep sleep.

They were turned on their sides by God because this was necessary for their physical health and also because it would have made their bodies stiff if they lay on one side. They had slept for a very long period. Thus, just as an affectionate mother keeps turning her child on his sides in the cradle, providence did the same for them too.

A protective measure taken to safeguard them was that their faithful dog sat at the opening of the cave with outstretched limbs. Obviously, the dog too must have slept during this period but his sleeping position was not the same as that of how dogs normally sleep. He slept in a way that sentinel dogs do. This arrangement was made so that no one including wild animals dare enter the cave.

The last part of the verse expresses how an onlooker would be bewildered at this spectacle and dash away from it. He would

17. And you would have thought that they are awake even though they were asleep. And We also continued to turn them on their right and left, and their dog sat at the cave entrance with paws outstretched. Had you caught their glimpse, you would have turned and fled and you would have been awe-struck by them.

wonder who those people were sleeping in a cave right in the middle of the mountains. Should he regard them as good people or evil ones, robbers or monks, heavenly or earthly, angels or the jinn? Whatever be the case, he would definitely be overcome with a certain amount of fear. This element of fear was created by providence to protect them. The rulers of this world sleep in castles encircled by barbed wires and armed sentinels guard them – and still they are not safe. The servants of God sleep in caves and forests and even birds cannot enter them.

وَكَذَلِكَ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِيَتَسَاءَلُوا بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ۖ قَالُوا رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ فَابْعَثُوا أَحَدَكُمْ بِرِiquكُمْ هَذِهِ إِلَى الدِّينَةِ فَلْيَنْظُرْ آيَهَا ۖ أَزْكَى طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُمْ بِرِiqu مِّنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا ۚ¹⁸

The word *وَكَذَلِكَ* refers to the fact that just as the Almighty showed His magnificent sign of help mentioned earlier, in the same way He woke them so that they question each other about their period of sleep and ultimately acknowledge that they were absolutely unable to do it. Only God had its knowledge.

The mutual questions and answers mentioned in the verse are the ones which are rather briefly referred to in verse 13 earlier. Here, details are given which show that these questions and answers took place between those very people. Here too the *ل* on *لِيَتَسَاءَلُوا* is for consequence: God wanted that their resurrection from sleep result in the fact that they investigate the extent of time they had slept and it ultimately become evident that they were not able to do so and what further become evident to them was that the life of *barzakh* after death would be quite similar. When people will rise on the Day of Judgement, they will think that they have been in their state of sleep for a very short while.

18. And in this way, We woke them that they may mutually question one another. An asker from them asked: “How much time would you have stayed here?” They replied: “We must have stayed for a day or even less.” They said: “Only your Lord knows best the period you stayed. So, send anyone among you to the city with this currency of yours; then he should fully scrutinize in which part of the city pure food is found and should bring from it some edibles for you. And he should go there in secrecy and not let anyone know about you.

In the expression *أَيُّهَا أَزْكَى طَعَامًا*, the word *أَيُّهَا* implies *أى أطراف المدينة* or *أى نواحى المدينة* and *أزكى* refers to pure food. These youngsters had taken refuge in the cave when their nation did not care whether to eat *halāl* or forbidden food. This was because of the dominance of the creed of polytheism and disbelief. For this reason, they stressed on the person who was sent to fetch food to specially investigate and only bring back food that was *halāl*. It may well have been that some People of the Book were living in Raqīm. For this reason, it was expected that they would be sensitive to the nature of food consumed. However, the investigation could expose the youngsters as well. So they stressed upon their companion to be very careful. The word *تلف* means to accomplish a task in a very circumspect, clever and apprehensive way.

People have generally translated the word *وَرِق* as “coin” while I have translated it as “currency” because this *وَرِق* actually means silver and it can refer to coins in itself too. Thus I have adopted a word that can be used for both coins and other forms of money.

19 *إِنَّهُمْ إِنْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْجُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِي مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَنْ تُفْلِحُوا إِذَا أَبَدَا* ﴿١٩﴾

This verse expresses the apprehension because of which their messenger was asked to go in secrecy and with care. At the time when they took refuge in the cave, the righteous were being persecuted to the ultimate extent and it was feared that they would be stoned to death.

وَكَذَلِكَ أَعْتَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا إِذْ يَتَنَازَعُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَمْرَهُمْ فَقَالُوا ابْنُوا عَلَيْهِم بُنْيَانًا رَبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِهِمْ ط قَالَ الَّذِينَ غَلَبُوا عَلَىٰ أَمْرِهِمْ لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيْهِم مَّسْجِدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

This *كَذَلِكَ* is co-ordinated to the one in verse 19. The

19. “If they get to know about you, they will stone you to death or will force you back to their religion and then you will never succeed.”

20. And in a similar way, We informed people about them so that they know that the promise of God is true and there is no doubt in the advent of the Hereafter. Think also of the time when people were disputing among themselves about them. So, they said: “Build a monument on their cave. Their Lord knows them better.” Those who held the dominant opinion in their matter, said: “We will build a mosque on their cave.”

implication is that just as God showed His majesty mentioned there, He also showed His majesty by informing people about them. It has not been mentioned here how people became aware of those youngsters. It is possible that the person who had gone to the market to fetch food became a means of this information and some keen-eyed people saw him and began investigating about his origins. Gradually they were able to know them. After deliberation, it becomes evident that when the companions of the cave had the inkling that their news had reached outside, they became stationed in the cave. In this state, God gave them death and it was after their passing away that people got to fully know about them.

The greatest doubt the disbelievers had about the Day of Judgement was that they regarded being raised to life again after death to be improbable. The incident of the cave-dwellers presented a fresh evidence against this doubt. It is evident from concomitant indications that just as the Almighty guided people to their cave, He also informed them about how they spent their lives in the cave. Though this verse does not specify it, it is evident that people were aware of this and it was in fact because of this that their lives became a strange miracle in the eyes of people and they became a fountainhead of respect for them after their passing away. It may well be that when people tried to investigate the origins of the cave-dwellers, this secret was revealed at that time and later it became common knowledge and the whole account was transmitted to later generations in a perpetually concurrent way.

Now the Qur'ān has referred to the complete change in circumstances that ensued after their death. There was a time when fearing being stoned to death they had taken refuge in a cave and now people were disputing with one another to ascribe themselves to the cave-dwellers. Obviously, this dispute must have taken place between different groups and families and must have happened because each group wanted the cave-dwellers to be ascribed to it. This is how the truthful have always been treated by the people of this world. During their lifetimes, they are persecuted but after their demise they are worshipped as idols. The cave-dwellers too were treated similarly as different groups vied with one another to ascribe themselves to them. One of the groups was of the opinion that their religious beliefs be

consigned to God and a memorial building be constructed on their cave. The other group which was in majority said that they would build a mosque to commemorate their feat. The latter group prevailed. This shows the change in circumstances that arose after the sacrifices of the cave-dwellers: the people who were in majority in the country were monotheists. The other group which though had not undergone this transformation to such an extent became tolerant enough to desire a monument be built in memory of the cave-dwellers.

There is a governing noun (*muḍāf*) suppressed in the verse رَبُّهُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ مَسْجِدًا ie. رَبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِدِينِهِمْ. Similarly, in سَبْعَةً وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعَدَّتِهِمْ مَّا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ²¹ فَلَا تَنَارَ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً ظَاهِرًا وَلَا تَسْتَنُفِتْ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا²¹ also, there a governing noun is suppressed ie. عَلَى كَهْفِهِمْ. By calling the memorial constructed by them a mosque, the Qur'ān has made it evident that those people believed in one God. Deviation crept up in their beliefs when they took to polytheistic beliefs. Thus, in verse 22 of Sūrah al-Ḥajj the Qur'ān has called the synagogues and churches of the Jews and Christians as mosques.

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةً رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ^{٢١} وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةً سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجَبًا بِالْغَيْبِ^{٢١} وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةً وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعَدَّتِهِمْ مَّا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ^{٢١} فَلَا تَنَارَ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً ظَاهِرًا^{٢١} وَلَا تَسْتَنُفِتْ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا^{٢١}

This is a parenthetical sentence addressed to the Prophet (sws).

The word مِمَّا means “debate and argument.” The implication is that the people will engage in such questions about them before him and will try to involve the Prophet (sws) also in the debates. However, he should not the slightest incline himself to these and just pass by them by giving a brief answer. There was no need to ask any detail about the cave-dwellers when the Qur'ān had narrated their actual account.

It is explained in this verse that people who are afflicted with the ailment of polemical debate and argument have no interest in

21. Now they will say: “They were three and the fourth was their dog,” and will say: “They were five and the sixth was their dog.” Mere conjecture! and will say: “They were seven and the eighth was their dog.” Say: Only my Lord knows better their number. Few people know them. And do not debate about them except if you have to say something to divert them and do not ask about them from any of them.

the truth itself. If they are answered on one front, they find another one to continue with their rant. Thus, it is not befitting for any wise person to try to persuade such people. The best way is to leave them to themselves and instead of engaging in serious debate with them politely ignore them.

Some exegetes have regarded the last statement of the Qur'ān to be its verdict on the actual number of the cave-dwellers. The reason for this is that the first two opinions have been regarded as mere conjecture by the Qur'ān but it has not commented on the third. This opinion seems to be the correct one but my own opinion in this regard is the same as what the Qur'ān has said thus: "only my Lord knows better their number; few people know them."

وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَآئٍ إِنِّي فَاعِلٌ ذَٰلِكَ غَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ ۚ وَادْكُرْ رَبَّكَ إِذَا نَسِيتَ وَقُلْ
عَسَى أَنْ يَهْدِيَنَّ رَبِّي لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ هَٰذَا رَشْدًا ۚ ۞²²

Now in this regard, the Prophet (sws) is told that he should not promise people on his own that he will answer a question the next day. This directive probably was given to him when he was questioned regarding the cave-dwellers, he must have said that he would answer this question the next day. Such questions, as has been pointed out before, were posed to him as a test. Thus, it was his natural desire that they be answered as soon as possible and he would make a commitment relying on future divine guidance. He had the intense wish in him to prove that his message was correct and hence he wanted to answer every question and objection of his opponents forthwith so that they were left with no excuse. However, this matter has another aspect which was being ignored: at times God's wisdom entails that a question not be answered or answered later. For this reason, it is not appropriate for the Prophet (sws) to give an unconditional commitment in this regard. He should in fact make every promise conditional to God's will and if he sometimes forgets, he should remember God when he recalls his mistake. At the same time, he can tell those whom he had promised

22. And do not say about any matter: "I shall do it tomorrow." Except if God intends. And when you forget, remember your Lord and say: Hopefully, my Lord will guide me to what is correct in even lesser time than this.

that it may well be that his Lord guides him to the right answer even before the promised time.

وَلَبِشُوا فِي كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِينَ وَازْدَادُوا تِسْعًا²³

The parenthetical sentence that began with verse 22 ended on verse 24. This verse relates to the statements regarding the number of cave dwellers that were referred to just before verse 22. In other words, just as they will guess their number, they will also try to guess the number of years of their stay to be three hundred and nine.

Generally people have taken this number to be from God. However, in my opinion, the Qur'ān has said nothing about their period of stay. In verse 11, the words *سِنِينَ عَدَدًا* occur. They do mean that they stayed in the cave for many years but any person having a flair for Arabic knows that they are absolutely inapt to imply three hundred and nine. Moreover, the words “only God knows full well the time of their stay” of the very next verse also negate this. If God is informing us that they remained for three hundred and nine years in the cave, what then is the purpose of saying only God knows their time of stay.

No one should be under the misconception that I am unique in this opinion. Several other exegetes also hold this view.

قُلِ اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِشُوا لَهُ غَيْبُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْ يُصِرَّ بِهٖ وَأَسْبَغَ^{٢٤} مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا يُشْرِكُ فِي حُكْمِهِ أَحَدًا²⁴

This is the answer the Prophet (sws) is asked to give to those who had raised this question: just as their guess regarding the number of cave-dwellers is mere conjecture, their guess about the time of their stay is also totally wrong. As indicated earlier, the words “only God knows full well

23. And they remained in their cave for three hundred years and a further nine as well.

24. Say: only God knows full well the time of their stay. It is He alone Who has knowledge of the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. How amazing is He in seeing and hearing! No one except Him is their guardian, and He also does not allow anyone share His authority.

the time of their stay” totally negate that the number three hundred and nine be interpreted to mean it was the year count given by God. Here the aspect of language should also be kept in mind that if this statement was God’s verdict the sentence would not have begun by the particle of coordination (and). The existence of this particle shows that it is among among the baseless conjectures cited earlier.

The verse states that true knowledge of the secrets of the heavens and the earth is with God. Others know only the portion He has informed them of and the rest is all baseless. It does not have the status that on its basis human beings make fun of the knowledge given by God. The benefit of the knowledge they have gathered today from research and scientific inquiry cannot be denied. However, this cannot in any way parallel the knowledge provided by the Qur’ān.

The words **أَبْصَرُ بِهِمْ وَأَسْمِعُ** express exaggeration and extreme praise. There is nothing which is beyond the hearing and sight of God. The implication is that when the all-knowledgeable God has answered a question, who else can answer it better so that people need to turn to him.

Once the extent of God’s knowledge was stated, it became a prelude for the negation of all deities and intercessors, as expressed in the last part of the verse. Thus, when He is the most informed of all, how can these intercessors that people have made up for themselves be of any avail to them. God is perfect and complete and does not include others in His authority.

