



WOMEN IN THE QUR'AN

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Contents

What Does the Quran Say About Women?	2
A Single Origin for the Human Race	2
Equal Worth of the Sexes	3
Same Reward and Punishment	4
Fairness	5
Relationship Between the Spouses	7
Polygamy, Witnesses, Inheritance, and A Degree	9
The Spouse of Adam	13
The Creation of Adam and His Spouse	13
The Fundamentals of Human Society	22
The Spouse of Egypt’s ‘Aziz	25
Moses’ (PBUH) Mother, Sister, and Wife	28
A’isha bint Abi Bakr (RA)	31
Mary (PBUH) in the Quran	35
Asiya, Pharaoh’s Wife	38
Khawlah bint Tha’labah (RA)	39
The Queen of Sheba	41
The Wife of ‘Imran	45

What Does the Quran Say About Women?

In the Islamic tradition, the creation of the human race was borne of two partners. Several verses in the Quran stress this fact and the Arabic word to describe these two partners is *Zawj*. The word *Zawj* in Arabic means two partners who were created from the same source, who both have equal worth and enjoy the same general rights, and who both have the same responsibilities toward their creator.

A Single Origin for the Human Race

“People, be conscious of your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created, of like nature, its mate and spread from these two, many men and women. Be conscious of God, in whose name you demand your mutual rights. Beware of severing the ties of the wombs; certainly God is ever watching over you.” (4: 1) This address is directed to the whole of humanity to remind them of the concept of the Oneness of their Creator and the common root of their race. People need to reflect on these simple, yet weighty statements. How did humankind come to this world? Who brought them? Through God’s will, we were created and have been given unique characteristics and talents to cope with the many facets of life. The power that creates knows everything about that which has been created and this power has the right to organize lives and to determine the norms and principles which should govern societies.

Human life started with a single decision from God and then humanity sprung from that common root. This makes the whole of humanity one family, connecting all people to one another. Therefore all societies, ideological or otherwise, that discriminate between people on the basis of skin colour, gender, or class have no real justification. So too, the long history of discrimination practices on the basis of gender should have been avoided entirely. Souls of males and females are equal in their uniqueness, complexity and right to be respected. They were created to complement each other. Each has a mission to fulfill and each has been gifted, in their own right, with the skill to fulfill this mission.

The verse above also underscores the importance of the family as the building block of society. Humanity started with a single soul that was complemented with its mate. The idea of starting humanity with a single family stresses the important role that the family plays in enhancing the ties between members of society. These ties; however, cannot be formed if the family unit itself is unhealthy or broken and Islam’s social system paid great attention to developing and strengthening the means which support and protect the family structure. A solid family unit cannot be established while one of the partners is being ill-treated, abused or wronged in any way. To this end, Islam paid great attention to establishing women’s rights as human beings at a time when this was a novel and revolutionary idea.

The verse above urges people to remain conscious of their Lord and to conduct their dealings and create their connections, fulfilling each other’s rights, with His pleasure in the forefront of their minds. There are two expressions we’d like to focus on, the first being God consciousness (*Taqwa*) which is understood and repeated throughout the Quran. The second expression is, “Conscious of the wombs” an equally important awareness, yet far more difficult to explain. It enlivens the feelings of the human being. The expression impresses upon the believer to be sensitive to the needs and rights of family relationships. It urges believers to avoid hurting, or

committing injustice against those with whom we share a familial tie. Those who are ‘God conscious’ will also be ‘conscious of the wombs’ as they will remember that God is ever watchful over all of us. There is nothing we can hide from Him as He is fully aware of our deeds and even our innermost thoughts.

“It is He who created you from a single soul, and from it made its mate, in order that he might dwell with her (in love). When he covered her, she bears a light burden and carries it about. When she grows heavy, they both pray God their Lord, (saying), ‘If You give us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful.’” (7: 189) Females and males are created from the same soul; however, their functions are different. This difference is intentional and serves as a strength for both individuals, so that spouses can find comfort and tranquility in the company of each other.

“He created you from a single being, then from that (being) He made its mate; and He brought down for you cattle - eight kinds in pairs. He creates you in the wombs of your mothers, creation after creation, in a threefold of darkness. That is God, your Lord. His is the Sovereignty. There is no God save Him. How then you are turned away?” (39: 6) Humans have been created with certain basic characteristics which are common to every person who has lived on earth since the beginning of the human race. These characteristics distinguish us from all other creatures. Humans are created of a soul and a body. Islam provides a plan by which the needs, aspirations, and fulfillment of both the soul and the body are guaranteed.

This verse also refers to the stages of the development of the fetus in the womb. The verse mentions three levels of darkness, which modern medicine has helped us decode. The first level of darkness is formed by the placenta which surrounds the fetus. The placenta is surrounded by the uterus which represents the second level of darkness and finally the uterus is enclosed in the mother’s abdomen which represents the third level of darkness. Conception and development in the womb is at once a normal occurrence, as it happens every day, and a miraculous occurrence, as the stages of development are truly a marvel. This verse is a reminder that we must be conscious of God in all situations; the mundane and the awe-inspiring.

“People, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) most conscious of God. Indeed, God is Omniscient, Totally-Aware.” (49: 13) This verse addresses all humankind. The Creator is telling all people that we were created from a single source. The whole human race came from one pair: a male and a female. They were then spread into different nations so that they would learn about one another and work together. People should not, and are not in the eyes of God, valued according to their race, language, color, or nationality. All people have equal worth in the sight of God. The only standard by which their individual worth is measured is in their level of God consciousness.

Equal Worth of the Sexes

“The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil; they establish regular prayers and pay the prescribed alms; and they obey

God and His Messenger. God will have mercy on them. God is Eminent, Wise.” (9: 71) The verse describes the believers as “protectors” of one another. Offering protection requires a noble character which is built on courage and sacrifice and such attributes are part of the character of a believer. The believers are engaged in enjoining in what is good and forbidding what is evil. Such actions require a united front which is formed by the believers, men and women, standing side by side. They establish prayers and pay the prescribed charity due and obey God. They follow the commands of God and His Messenger (PBUH) and they are happy with whatever God and His Messenger (PBUH) decree for them. They will gain the mercy of God in this life as mercy is not meant to be enjoyed in the Hereafter only. If an honest life has been lived for God’s sake, mercy will be granted to the believers in this life as well. So what defines a believer? The believers possess four attributes: they enjoin what is right, they forbid what is evil, they establish prayers, and they pay the prescribed charity due. The subsequent verse promises equal reward for males and females, *“God promised the believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God. That is the supreme felicity.” (9: 72)*

Another verse that states the equality of the sexes in rights and responsibilities in unequivocal terms, *“For Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women, truthful men and truthful women, perseverant men and perseverant women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who engage much in God’s praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.” (33: 35)*

The word Muslim means the one who submits. A believer is a person who believes in the truthfulness of the faith. The two words are closely linked together. They are two sides of the same coin. True belief leads to submission; hence submission is the epitome of accepting the faith. Devotion is the voluntary obedience that comes with submission and belief. True devotion emanates from an inner feeling not from an external influence. Truthfulness is an essential trait of Muslims. The Quran says, *“It is those who do not believe in God’s revelations that forge falsehood.” (16: 105)* Perseverance is an essential trait for each Muslim, to be able to fight back against temptation and to fulfill the undertakings of faith. A Muslim should persevere in adversity and when calamities strike. Humility in religion softens the heart and is obtained through standing in awe in front of God. Those who give charity do so to work towards purifying their inner self of greed and stinginess. Giving charity is an expression of gratitude to God and an awareness of the collective responsibility from members of the society. The verse implies that fasting is a trait which indicates that the reference here is to fasting which has become a habit for the believer. Fasting teaches the believer self-discipline. Guarding one’s chastity is a testimony for the strong control over the person’s lowly desires. Remembrance of God is the link that connects people to God. It allows the heart to shine with the light of guidance and reminds the believer to hold tight to this most trustworthy link. Those who enjoy these traits are promised a great reward, *“for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.”*

Same Reward and Punishment

And their Lord has heard them, and answered them, “Never will I let the work of any of you be lost, be he a male or a female, each like the other in reward.” (3: 195) God responded favorably to the supplication of the believers. The verse clearly indicates that God does not differentiate

between males and females in the reward. Both sexes will be rewarded according to the same standard.

The same principle is articulated in the following verse, “*And whoever does good deeds, whether male or female and he (or she) is a believer, they shall enter the garden, and not the least injustice will be done to them.*” (4: 124)

The same principle is reiterated in the following verse, “*We will give, whoever does right whether a man or a woman and is a believer, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their deeds.*” (16: 97) Both males and females are equal in the sight of God. Both are required to do good deeds and both will be rewarded equally. Good deeds are grounded in the belief in God. A strong faith in God instills in the believer the desire to perform good deeds. Good deeds are then transformed from sporadic occurrences to every day events in the life of the believer.

God promised those who believe in Him and carry out good deeds, a good life in this world, and a great reward in the Hereafter. The goodness of the worldly life that they are promised is not measured in terms of material gains only; there is more to a good life than money. A Good life is achieved when the elements of security, health, contentment are combined with God’s blessings. A good life is a life where the individual is continuously connected to God. Good life is a life when the individual lives in harmony with family. A good life is the best reward a believer can hope for. The same principle has been reiterated in verses (40: 40), (48: 5), (57: 12), and (57: 18). Equal punishments for males and females who transgress the law are prescribed, (5: 38) and (24: 2).

Fairness

As Islam was being introduced in its entirety, new Muslims were eager to learn the codes that would shape their new way of life. Islam was a way of life that differed in many ways from what people were used to practicing. Old traditions and practices were replaced and people were born anew with the adoption of Islam. Their eagerness was rewarded with a grace from God and He answered all their questions. This verse answered one of the queries that Muslims asked, “*And they ask you for a ruling about women. Say to them, ‘God himself gives you ruling concerning them, and the Scripture that is recited to you regarding female orphans whom you do not give what is ordained for them while you desire to marry them, and concerning the weak among children, and that you should deal towards orphans with equity; and whatever good you do, God certainly knows it.’*” The verse answers a specific question about a tradition that the pre-Islamic Arabs used to practice; a tradition that abused orphan girls. The verse nullified that appalling and terrible practice.

Ali bin Abi Talha (RA) narrated that he heard Ibn Abbas (RA) explaining this verse, he said, “*Before Islam the guardian of an orphan girl had the right to throw his garment over the girl, once he had done that, she was not allowed to marry anyone else. Her guardian can marry her if he so wished. However, if he did not marry her she would not be able to marry anyone else. He*

would have control over her wealth while she was alive and he would inherit her when she died.” (4: 127) The verse above came to put an end to this practice.

This tradition gives an idea of how orphan girls were treated by their guardians before Islam. Guardians were greedy. They were more interested in the wealth of the child under their care than in the child’s welfare. Similarly, they deprived young children and women of their inheritance rights. The argument used to support this oppressive practice was that young children and women do not contribute to the fighting power of the tribe, so they do not deserve to have a share in the estate left by a deceased relative. The vulnerable had no power and they could not defend themselves against such injustices. Islam came to reverse these unfair practices and replace them with fair and compassionate ones. This was not merely a sudden change in human behavior; it was the complete rebirth of a nation.

It is important to note that the rebirth that occurred was not preceded by introductory steps that made the change logical, nor was it the result of a revolutionary change in the life of the nation. The social change in the status of women and children and the new rights that they gained did not result because there was a change in society’s need for warriors nor was there a change in the status of warriors. Warriors were needed to protect the growing Muslim society. The move from a system that awards rights on the basis of status to a system that awards rights on the basis of being a member of society was brought about by the arrival of Islam. Islam established the principle of equal worth for all. The change occurred without a revolution but was brought about by a verse in a book that gave birth to a new society. The new values were espoused by the same people who lived on the same land and under the same economic conditions. The verse reminds Muslims again about the connection between values and the originator of these values. Every good deed is recorded and no reward will be lost.

“And you will never be able to do justice between wives, even though it may be your ardent desire, but do not turn away from one altogether, leaving her in suspense; and if you arrange a reconciliation and remain conscious of God, then certainly God is All-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy. And if they separate, God will render them both free from want out of His abundant bounty, and God is All-embracing, Wise.” (4: 129) God who created the human soul knows the nature of this soul. It is natural to aspire to that which one does not have. Therefore, God has provided individuals with the ability to control these desires and to refine them, but not to completely eliminate them.

Polygamous men, regardless of their personal feelings towards their wives, are commanded to be fair in their treatment towards their wives, in spending equal time with their wives and in providing equally for their wives. A man has to treat his wives fairly in all aspects of life that are under his control and men are warned not to deprive any wife of her stated rights. Men are again reminded of doing the right thing and to be conscious of God in their treatment of women.

If all measures to save the marriage fail and the marriage is dissolved, then God will provide for each one of them.

The following verses paint an ugly picture of one of the mindset of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic era. *“When one of them receives tidings of the birth of a female, his face remains darkened, and*

he suppresses his grief. He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that which he was informed of. Shall he keep her with disgrace or bury her (alive) in the dust? Now verily evil is what they decide.” (16: 58) The verse describes the reaction of a father when he would receive the news that his wife delivered a baby girl; his face would turn black reflecting the anger and sadness he felt. Islam stated that there is no gender hierarchy in birth; a baby girl is like a baby boy: they are both gifts from God. The process through which a sperm-drop meets the egg and grows to become a human being is a miraculous process. The resulting new life, whether a boy or a girl, should be celebrated.

The following verses address the etiquette of the encounters between males and females. Islam pays special attention to maintaining the integrity of the community by avoiding situations where sexual desires are provoked. The society aims at creating a respectable and decent environment for the encounter between the sexes. Verses (24: 30) and (24: 31) give similar commands to both men and women to behave decently towards each other, “*Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. God is aware of what they do.*” (24: 30) Men should lower their gaze and be modest. This provides a framework for male behavior in the presence of women. Lowering the gaze and being modest require a degree of self-discipline and this self-discipline is motivated by the fact that, “*That is purer for them. God is aware of what they do.*” Similarly, women are also directed to behave modestly, “*And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest.*” (24:31)

Relationship Between the Spouses

“*It is permitted to you, on the night of the fast, to go in unto your wives. They are your garments and you are their garments.*” (2: 187) This beautiful allegory elevates the interaction between husband and wife from a mere physical relationship to one of kindness, tenderness and protection. It expresses the security and comfort that each spouse should provide for one another and find in one another.

“*They ask you (Prophet) about menstruation. Say, ‘It is a painful condition, so let women alone at such times and do not approach them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as God has enjoined upon you. Truly God loves those who turn to Him, and loves those who purify themselves.’ Your wives are your tilth so approach your tilth as you may desire; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and be conscious of God. And know that you are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give good tidings to the believers.*” (2: 222-223) These two verses deal with several issues. The first issue is sexual intercourse during menstruation. The verse indicates that sexual intercourse during menstruation is not allowed. The reason for this prohibition is not explained. One should be careful in understanding the expression, “when they have purified themselves.” The verse does not mean that a woman during her menstruation is “unclean,” and as such she is considered a threat to holiness. Intimate relationship between a man and woman, short of having sexual intercourse, are allowable during this time. The verse also raises the objectives of the relationship between husband and wife to higher levels even when discussing physical intimacy between the two spouses. Sexual intercourse is not an end in and of itself but it is a means to a higher goal, the goal of the

continuation of life on earth. A third point that verses postulate is the that the spiritual relationship between a man and woman is the indispensable basis for a healthy sexual relationship.

“And give women their bridal gift upon marriage, but if they of themselves be pleased to give up to you a portion of it, then take it with enjoyment.” (4: 4) This verse establishes the right of the bride to receive a wedding gift which will be solely hers to own and she has the right to use it when and as she sees fit. This single verse put an end to previous traditions that were common in the pre-Islamic society which robbed women of their rights in receiving and disposing of their wedding gifts on their own terms. Before Islam, a woman’s guardian, who would be male, had free reign in deciding whom she should marry; had the right to receive the wedding gift on her behalf and to dispose of it according to his own will. This practice resulted in many of these marriages being treated as business deals to benefit the guardians. This verse came to abolish these oppressive practices and give the woman the right to decide for herself.

It has been observed that a human baby needs a longer period to mature and become independent than the period required for a baby from any other species; and the education of children takes even longer. The objective of sexual relationships in the animal world is solely for the preservation of the species. Of course, the objective of human relationship goes far beyond procreation and sexual pleasure. The relationship between married parenting couples is a long term commitment to provide care and education for the children and prepare them to become active participants within society. Day-to-day life between couples does not revolve solely around sexual pleasure. Just like in the animal world, attraction is a powerful initial tool in bringing couples together to start a long term relationship. These considerations support the notion of building the relationship between couples on the foundation of the concept of family. The sanctity of the institution of family should be protected.

Another aspect of importance of the institution of the family is that it provides an environment for the spiritual and physical security for the man and wife. Several verses discuss the spiritual and physical aspects of marriage and how they are inter linked. See verse (2: 223) which commands men to advance for themselves before sexual intercourse, verse (2:187) which describes man and wife as garments to each other, and verse (30:21) which indicates that the relationship between man and woman should be based on tranquility and mercy. They have been created to live together in a peaceful environment and family life is the Islamic answer to this need.

God created the whole universe on the concept of duality *“and from each thing We created a pair, if you remember,”* (51:49). As a part of the universe, the human race is created on the basis of the concept of duality as well. So, living in pairs satisfies the initial natural human disposition. God created this pair from a single soul. God made each member of this pair to be a cause of tranquility, security, comfort, and protection to one another. He made their union a source for sustaining life on earth. Because they were created from the same soul, they stand equal in the sight of God. They are treated equally by God in matters of reward and punishment. They are equal in a court of law, when they are involved in a civil dispute. They have equal rights in owning property.

Men and women have equal worth as human beings but they were created to fulfill different missions. God created each with the appropriate physical and psychological form suitable for the achievement of their respective missions. Along with the appropriate capabilities came a fair distribution of responsibilities. Women's anatomy was created to allow women to bear children. Traditionally, a man was required to support his family. The verse alluded to the physical and psychological preparation of men and women to be able to carry out their respective tasks and also referred to the man's responsibility in providing the financial support to his family.

Polygamy, Witnesses, Inheritance, and A Degree

“And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women who seem good to you, two or three or four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hand possesses; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.” U'rwah bin Al-Zubair (RA) asked A'isha (RA) about this verse. She said, *“Son of my sister, this is regarding wealthy female orphans whose guardians marry them for the sake of their wealth and beauty but they don't give them their bridal gifts as they would have given other women.”* This verse above came to abolish the unfair practice described by A'isha. If the guardians are not able to treat those in their care fairly, they should seek matrimony with other women. This removes any chance of abuse of the vulnerable. This tradition shows that Muslims continued to practice dishonest and unjust pre-Islamic traditions until the Quran once again commanded the believers to relinquish these practices and to be careful in their treatment of orphans. The verse insists upon the guardians to exercise justice. Justice is a moral value in Islam that needs to be heeded in all its forms and in any circumstance.

The verse provides a license for polygamy with a certain caveat: fairness has to be observed in the husband's treatment of his wives. If a man fears that he will be unable to treat all his wives with absolute fairness, then he should not marry more than one wife. This license is a source of debate between those who are against and those who are pro the practice of polygamy. It has also been used as a spring board to launch attacks against Islam. We need to consider this carefully to show the rationale behind this license and the historical background for the practice.

Before Islam, the practice of polygamy was prevalent in Arabia and there was no limit on how many wives a man could have. This verse was revealed not to establish a new norm but to modify an existing norm. Men are not allowed to marry more than four wives with the caveat that they should treat them all fairly. Equal and fair treatment is a condition that must be fulfilled, otherwise polygamy is not permissible.

However, one could ask, why has Islam allowed the practice of polygamy to continue? Islam is a system which understands realistic, legitimate, and necessary human needs. It provides a system which endeavors to refine human behavior, neither ignoring it nor allowing the indulgence in desires without limits.

A system of polygamy which is based on the establishment of justice and the approval of all parties concerned provides a practical solution to social problems that have existed in societies since the dawn of time and will continue to exist till the end of time.

Islam provided a system of legal and restricted polygamy that ensures the rights and preserves the dignity of all parties involved. Islam allows polygamy but does not mandate it. Those who understand the spirit of Islam recognize that Islam does not condone polygamy for its own sake nor as a mechanism to abuse women for the sake of satisfying uncontrolled and unwarranted sexual desires. Islam recognizes polygamy as a necessary solution to certain social problems. It is the exception rather than the norm. It is not left without constraints or controls and should only be exercised under very special circumstances. The permission to engage in polygamy is controlled by the requirement of the fair and equal treatment of all wives. The husband must treat his wives equally in all aspects of life. Islam recognizes that humans have no control over their inner feelings. So, it is not logical to create laws controlling human emotions. Thus, the scope of the treatment that requires fairness does not include inner feelings or emotions. This exemption has been mentioned in the verse: *“and you will not be able to treat women with absolute fairness, even if you tried keenly.”* (4:129) Some tried to argue that this verse is a proof that polygamy is not allowed in Islam. This is not so. We cannot imagine that the Quran allows a practice in one verse and prohibits it in another. The scope of fairness in treatment mentioned in the first verse encompasses material and physical aspects of life like daily interactions and intimate relationships. Fairness is a necessity in satisfying the material and physical needs of the different wives. The second verse; however, points to the inability of human beings to fully control their inner feelings. Matters of the heart lie in God’s domain of control.

To reiterate, polygamy existed before the advent of Islam. Islam introduced controls and constraints to the practice of polygamy. Islam does not consider polygamy to be the norm but it is an exception that can be used in special circumstances. The fact that some Muslims abuse this license does not warrant its abolishment. The right to marry more than one wife is conditional on the ability of the man to be fair in his treatment of his wives. Fairness in treating all wives is a condition for the license to practice polygamy. Fairness should be observed by the husband in providing for his wives, and allotting equal shares of his time and attention. This condition does not apply to feelings and emotions, since these are beyond the control of human beings.

The verse ends by explaining the rationale behind all these rules, *“that you may not deviate from the right course.”* The right course is the just course. Justice is an objective of all Islamic laws and social justice is a requirement for a sound and healthy society.

The issue of right of a woman to be a witness in a court of law is indicated in the following verse, which describes the rules regarding lending and borrowing money, *“Believers, when you contract a debt for a stated term, put it down in writing. Have a scribe write down justly the terms between the parties. No scribe should refuse to write, as God has taught him, so let him write. Let him who incurs the liability dictate, but let him be conscious of his Lord God, and not diminish anything of what he owes. If the party liable is mentally deficient, or weak, or unable himself to dictate, then let his guardian dictate justly. Call two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as you choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her. The witnesses should not refuse when they are called upon. Do not disdain to put it in writing for a future period, whether it is small or big. It is more equitable in the sight of God, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves; but if it be a transaction which you carry out on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if you do not put it in writing. Have witnesses present*

whenever you make a commercial contract; and let no harm to be suffered by neither a scribe nor a witness. If you do such harm, it will be sinful conduct on your part. So be conscious of God. God teaches you. And God is well acquainted with all things.” (2: 282)

“Call two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as you choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her.” Two witnesses are required. The witnesses should be known for their integrity, and they should be agreed upon by both parties involved in the transaction. The verse offers an alternative to having two men as witnesses. If securing two male witnesses proved to be difficult, then one man and two women can become the witnesses. The reason for accepting the testimony of two females in lieu of a single male is mentioned, *“so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her.”* The error referred to here may result from the lack of business experience. Having another woman allows the two women to remind each other of the conditions of the transaction.

In other situations, the testimony of one woman is considered sufficient. This indicates that there is no intrinsic deficiency in the woman as a woman but different types of litigations require different number of witnesses. An example of this is the requirement of two male witnesses in some cases and in other cases four male witnesses is necessary.

The rules of inheritance are delineated in Surat Al-Nisaa (Chapter 4). The following two verses give some of these rules, *““God commands you regarding your children: the male shall have the equal of the portion of two females; then if they are more than two females, they shall have two-thirds of what the deceased has left, and if there is one, she shall have one half; and as for his parents, each of them shall have the sixth of what he has left if he has a child, but if he has no child and (only) his two parents inherit him, then his mother shall have the third; but if he has brothers, then his mother shall have the sixth after (the payment of) a bequest he may have bequeathed or a debt he may have incurred; your parents and your children, you do not know which of them is more beneficial to you; this is an injunction from God, certainly God is Omniscient, Wise. And you shall have half of what your wives leave if they have no child, but if they have a child, then you shall have one-fourth of what they leave after (payment of) any bequest they may have bequeathed or a debt they may have incurred; and they shall have one-fourth of what you leave if you have no child, but if you have a child then they shall have one-eighth of what you leave after (payment of) a bequest you may have bequeathed or a debt you may have incurred; and if a man or a woman dies leaving no parents or offspring, but he (or she) has a brother or a sister, then each of them shall have one-sixth of the inheritance, but if there are more siblings, they shall share one-third of inheritance between them, after (payment of) any bequest that may have been bequeathed or a debt that may have been incurred with no harm done to others; this is ordained by God, and God is Omniscient, Forbearing.”* These two verses, in addition to a third one at the end of Surat Al-Nisaa, establish the basis for the methodology of distributing an estate among the heirs of a deceased person. These rules were detailed by the Prophet (PBUH) in some cases, and by the work of the scholars in other cases. We will reflect briefly on the interpretation of these verses. More details can be found in books on Islamic jurisprudence. The verses start by stating that these are God’s commands. He knows what is best for the believers. He is the Provider, and it is He who divides the shares among people. The male has twice the share of the female. When these verses were revealed, many of the Arabs who embraced Islam expressed their dissatisfaction with the new rules. They were

used to the practice of giving most of the estate to those who can fight and provide protection for the tribe and they wanted this practice to continue. These objections were not appropriate nor were they warranted. God knows best what is beneficial for His servants. Thus, Islam came to change all of this; the female shall have the right to inherit. However, the female share is half that of the male. This division is not rooted in a feeling of patriarchal supremacy. It is congruent with the obligations that males are expected to undertake. It is the husband's responsibility to provide for his wife and their children. The wife has no obligation to provide for her family. It is only fair that the male's share of the inheritance to be twice the share of a female in the same category.

People are reminded that there is a rationale behind the legislation of these laws. Heirs whether parents or children should be treated fairly and objectively. God knows better who of them is more deserving than the other. These are God's commands and they should be obeyed. God is Omniscient, Wise.

The responsibilities of a man towards his wife and children are referred to in verse (4: 34), “*Men should take full care of their wives with the bounties God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their property.*” (4: 34) This verse organized family life and allocated responsibilities to each of the two human beings who are necessary for the establishment of a family in the first place. Allocation of responsibilities removes potential friction and competition between the partners and establishes the basic rule that any dispute should be settled by referring to God's rules. The verse established the principle that males are responsible for taking full care of their wives. Males have been given this leadership role because of their intrinsic characteristics and because they are responsible for maintaining the family. The verse also prescribed a procedure for dealing with family disputes. These organizational rules were necessary to maintain the integrity of family life.

The division of responsibilities between the male and the female in a family setting is imperative if fairness is to prevail. Each has a role to play and each has been prepared for that role. Females are given the responsibility of child birth and child care. These are major responsibilities, but females have been created with biological and psychological characteristics which enable them to undertake such responsibilities. It is only fair that the other partner in the family organization be given the responsibility of providing the financial necessities needed to maintain the family. Males are given biological and psychological characteristics which prepare them to fulfill their prescribed roles as well.

The rationale for asking men to be in charge and to take full care of their wives rests on two fundamental elements: the characteristics that they were given and the requirement of providing for the family.

The Spouse of Adam

Many stories are told throughout the Quran to address certain events. The events dictated within each story determine how the details of the story will be shared and developed. Often times the same story will be narrated at different points throughout the Quran; however, each time a story is shared, a new element is added in order to present the appropriate spiritual, intellectual, and artistic context for the event and to underscore the moral takeaway of the story. A superficial examination, has led many to believe that the Quran is repetitive, because aspects of the same story are mentioned in different places of the Quran. However, a careful examination shows that not a single story is repeated in the same way or with the same level of detail. Whenever a story is retold a new element of the narrative is being explored.

The Creation of Adam and His Spouse

The Quran does not mention the first woman whom God created by name instead she is simply referred to as Adam's spouse. Adam spouse is known as Eve in the non-Islamic literature and as Hawa' in the Arabic literature. For simplicity, we are going to refer to her as Eve in this article. The stories of the creation of the first male and female are intertwined and thus it is difficult to discuss them separately. The stories surrounding the creation of the first couple has been mentioned in several Suras in the Qur'an.

The story of the creation of Adam and his spouse is mainly mentioned in three Suras: Al-Baqara (2), Al-A'raf (7), and Ta Ha (20).

The Story of Adam and Eve in Surat Al-Baqara

These verses do not only explore the progression of life on earth but they also examine the development of the whole universe. Earth, one of the signs of God, has been created with all its contents, for the benefit of humankind. God created Adam and struck a covenant with him to undertake the responsibility of being a vicegerent on earth. God gave Adam the knowledge he needed to fulfill this awesome responsibility.

"And when your Lord said to the angels, 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.' They said, 'Will You place therein one who will make mischief and shed blood? While we do celebrate Your praise and glorify Your Holy (name)?' He said, 'I know what you know not.'" (2: 30)

It was God's plan to make this new creation a vicegerent on earth. The plan gave humankind the freedom, ability, and creativity to manage the earth according to the will of God. Individuals were given the responsibility to discover, analyze, form, change, and develop the treasures of this earth. God gave people the permission and authorization to use the world's resources available to them responsibly in fulfilling the enormous undertaking that was entrusted to them from God. God also endowed us with the ability, knowledge, and aptitude needed to fulfill such a remarkable undertaking. These are some of the ideas which the hallowed statement "*I will create a vicegerent on earth,*" embodies.

“They said, ‘Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? While we do celebrate Your praise and glorify Your Holy (name)?’” This question suggests that the angels may have had a previous experience or some sort of insight that made them suspect that this new species would make mischief and shed blood. The angels with their innocent minds, which accept nothing but absolute goodness and comprehensive peace, thought that celebrating God’s praises and glorifying Him were the ultimate goal and the only purpose for creation; and since, they were already performing these functions there was no need for another form of creation. They were not privy to the rationale behind the will of God to place a vicegerent on earth. God willed a civilization to be established on earth and it was His will to entrust that responsibility for growing, developing, and improving this civilization, to one of His creations. We have all been appointed by God as a vicegerent. This creature may make mischief and he/she may shed blood in the process of achieving a higher good, the good of continuous growth, development, and improvement. This good involves constant trial and effort that will continuously push the envelope. God’s answer to the angels’ question was, *“I know what you know not.”* The new species was different from the angels in the fact that God bestowed on its members the ability to make decisions freely.

“And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said, ‘Tell me the names of these if you are truthful.’ They said, ‘Glory is to You. We have no knowledge, except that which You have taught us. Verily, You are the Omniscient, the Wise.’ He said, ‘Adam, tell them their names.’ When he had told them the names, God said, ‘Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and earth, and I know what you reveal and what you conceal?’” (2: 31-33) Through these conversations, certain insight is given to the reader and we experience what the angels experienced in their high place. We see aspects of God’s mystery being bestowed on humankind when Adam was asked to undertake the responsibility of being a vicegerent on earth, the mystery of the ability to use vocal symbols to identify physical things and beings.

“When, We said to the angels, ‘Bow down before Adam’ and they bowed down.” (2: 34) This is the highest honour to be given to a species. Humankind was given the aptitude to attain knowledge and the free will which enables one to make his or her own choices. The rationale for receiving this high honour lies in the duality of the nature of humankind. The duality that allows humans to use their will to make and follow through on the decisions needed for human life to continue on earth, and to act as a beacon which will guide towards God’s path. The angels bowed in obedience, *“all save Iblis: he refused and was haughty. He was one of those who rejected faith.”* (2: 34) Evil is manifested in disobeying God’s commands, behaving arrogantly, and being stubborn and narrow minded. The way the story is told shows that Iblis was not an angel, because if he was, he would not have disobeyed God. An angel’s first and basic attribute is, *“they do not disobey God in what He commands them, and they do as they are commanded.”* (66:6) Iblis was simply present with the angels when the command was issued. The use of the exception style *“all save Iblis”* should not be taken as an evidence to support the conclusion that Iblis was an angel. Linguistically it is valid to use the exception style to single out an individual who is not part of a group but happened to be present when a command was issued to the group. The Qur’an states unequivocally that Iblis belongs to a different kind of creation called jinn.

With this story, the field for the eternal battle has been established. It is the battle between Iblis, the embodiment of evil, and God's vicegerent on earth. This is the eternal battle for the human conscience. It is a battle in which the victory of goodness is contingent on observing the pledge with God. Disobedience to God and succumbing to the temptation of carnal desires will help evil to prevail.

"We said, 'Adam, dwell you and your spouse in the Garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as you will; but approach not this tree lest you become wrongdoers.'" (2: 35) While in heaven, Adam and his spouse were given permission to eat from all the trees in heaven except for one. Why? Perhaps, this one tree was a symbol of all prohibited things which would exist on earth, to give meaning to the concept of free will. What would be the point of free will if everything was allowable and nothing was prohibited? There would be no meaning for the concept of free will if everything was allowable and nothing was prohibited. Without the temptation to commit the forbidden, what then would be the criterion to differentiate between a free-willed person and a forcibly-led animal? People with free-will have the choice either to honour the pledge with God by following His commands or to succumb to the temptations that satisfy their desires.

"But Satan made them slip from the (garden), and got them out of the state (of felicity) in which they had been." (2: 36) What an image that is formed by the use of the phrase *"made them slip."* One can almost see them fall as Satan was pushing them over the edge away from the garden. This verse indicates that both Adam and his spouse disobeyed God's command and succumbed to the temptation of Satan; and with this, they failed the trial. The verdict was issued swiftly, *"We said, 'Get out, all of you, with enmity between yourselves. On earth you will have a dwelling-place and means of livelihood - for a time.'"* (2: 36) The eternal battle between humankind and Satan had begun; however, Adam's nature and God's mercy brought him and his spouse up from their fall. From this we see that God's mercy is there for whosoever seeks it. *"Then Adam received from his Lord's words of inspiration, and his Lord relented towards him; for He is the Ever-Relenting, the Giver of Mercy."* (2: 37)

The final word of God has been decreed. The contract with humankind has been declared and this includes the means which guarantee success in life. *"We said, 'Get out all of you; but when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject faith and deny Our revelations, they shall be companions of the fire; they shall abide therein.'"* 2; 38) This eternal battle will continue till the end of time. Humans can find their way to victory if they so choose, but they can also end up losing their way if they so choose, and so is the delicate balance of free will.

Let us go back to the story of the beginning of humanity. God said to the angels, *"I will create a vicegerent on earth."* and so Adam and his spouse were created to live on earth. Why then were Adam and his spouse put to the test and why was that specific tree prohibited for them? One could argue that this was intended as a training program to sharpen their wits so that they could recognize their enemy and prepare themselves for resisting temptation. It was the objective of this training period to show them both the consequences of succumbing to temptation and how to seek refuge with God when one surely fails. The story of the forbidden tree, the temptation of

Satan, forgetting the pledge and consequently disobeying God, the realization of wrongdoing, the remorse, and seeking forgiveness: all these stages reflect the ever-repeating human experience. It is a mercy from God that humankind was trained for its intended role before placing it in the position of responsibility.

Let us outline briefly some of the thoughts and important messages that may be generated by this story. Among these are, the high stature that Islam confers on humankind, the importance of our role on earth, the relationship between us and our Creator, the responsibility of humankind in this universe, the standards that can be used to evaluate our success and failure, and the promise between God and humankind. Not only did God declare Adam to be a vicegerent on earth but He also commanded the angels to bow to him. When Iblis refused in arrogance to bow, he was expelled from Heaven. This presents to the reader the rank of the master and guardian of the earth. Humankind is valued highly above any other material value and it is the most honored creature on earth. This high status of humankind is inextricably linked to the high morals and supreme ethical values that should be upheld and promoted by humankind. Upholding these ethical values and promoting these morals makes up an integral part of the covenant with God. Although, the vicegerency is usually concerned with the achievement of materialistic and administrative goals, ethical values are of paramount importance in relation to those goals. Administrative and materialistic objectives should always be guided by the high moral code detailed within Islam.

The human will is highly valued in Islam because it is at the centre of the covenant with God and the system of reward and punishment. Humankind can elevate itself to a rank higher than that of the angels by honoring its covenant with God using self-discipline to rise above temptation. This Islamic view bestows honour on humankind. It also acts as a constant reminder of the point of demarcation between happiness and misery; between honour and shame; and between the ranks of the free-willed human and an animal controlled by brute force.

The story is also a constant reminder of the ever continuing battle between humankind and Satan. It is the battle between keeping God's covenant and succumbing to the temptation of Satan. It is the battle between faith and rejection, between right and wrong, and between guidance and loss. The battle field is the human psyche. The human being can either win or lose this battle.

Finally, the Islamic perspective regarding the concepts of sin and repentance is explored. Islam refuses the concept of original sin. An individual is not responsible for a sin committed before he or she was born.

The Story of Adam and Eve in Surat Al- A'raf

These verses start by describing how God empowered humans to be able to fulfill their duties as vicegerents on earth. The narrative sets the stage for the beginning of life for the human race on earth, "*And We have given you (humankind) power on earth, and appointed for you therein livelihoods. Little you give thanks.*" (7: 10) God the Creator, of the earth and the creatures that reside therein, fashioned the earth to make it suitable for the survival of humans and gave people the characteristics and skills needed to use the earth's resources to make it inhabitable. It is God who created the earth with its atmosphere, composition, size, distance from the sun and the

moon, its rotation around the sun, its tilted axis of rotation, its rotational speed, and all the necessary characteristics which make it a suitable residence for humans. God created the resources necessary to start and sustain human life on earth and appointed humankind as the master of all creatures living on earth. He gave humankind the talents, skills, and the characteristics which enable him to dominate and domesticate these creatures. God gave humankind the ability to discover and understand the rules and laws that govern the universe; and use them to advance life on earth.

Humankind would not have been able to “conquer nature” – a term that people, who do not understand God’s role, like to use – without the power that God bestowed upon them. The old Greek and Roman postulates – which form the basis of modern material western thought – imply an existing confrontation between humankind and the universe. They depict life on earth as a battle between humankind and nature. The process which humankind uses to discover, understand, and use the rules that govern the universe is called “conquering nature.” These postulates are not correct. Had nature been an enemy to humankind, humankind would not have been able to exist without God’s empowerment.

Islam provides a holistic perspective on the creation. God created the universe, humankind, and nature. He controls all of them and it was His will to make the universe in such a way to allow human life to start and to flourish. This perspective allows humankind to live in harmony with the universe under the guidance of God; and enables humankind to lead secure and peaceful life and to fulfill the duties of God’s vicegerent on earth for which he was created. But few people are grateful.

“And certainly We created you, then fashioned you, then told the angels, ‘Fall you prostrate before Adam.’ And they fell prostrate, all save Iblis who was not of those who prostrated. He (God) said, ‘What prevented you to prostrate when I commanded you?’ (Iblis) said, ‘I am better than him. You created me of fire while You created him of mud.’ He (God) said, ‘Then go down from here. It is not for you to show pride here, so go forth. You are of the abject ones.’ He said, ‘Give me respite till the day they are raised up.’ He (God) said, ‘You are among those who are given respite.’ He said, ‘Now, because You sent me astray, verily I shall lurk in ambush for them on Your straight path. Then I shall come upon them from before them and from behind them and from their right sides and from their left sides. And You will not find most of them thankful.’ He (God) said, ‘Get out of here, despised, banished. I will fill Hell with all of those who follow you.’” These verses describe the first scene of the story. It is an exciting and volatile scene. However, we will delay the commentary on the story until we have finished the review of all the details of the story. In these verses the creation may mean formation of the body while fashioning may mean completion of the shape and characteristics. These are two levels in the process of creation and not two stages of development. From the linguistic point of view, the adverb “then” may indicate two concurrent events. So, these two events, the creation and fashioning, may have been two concurrent and not consecutive stages. This is similar to the verse, *“Our Lord is He who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature, then gave it guidance,”* (20:50) which indicates that God gave guidance to each created thing at the time of its creation in order that each creature would conduct the duties that he/she was created to perform. So, there is no time difference between the two levels. This is the view that we adopt in view of all the verses which deal with the creation of humankind. The conclusion that one can

make from these verses is that humankind was created as a human being from the outset. We do not accept that humankind was the result of the evolution of a low level creation according to Darwin's theory. The unique biological, physiological, spiritual, and intellectual characteristics of the human being are a proof that humankind was created in a separate process and it did not evolve from another species.

The birth of the humankind was announced by God in a big celebration attended by God's high host. God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam (PBUH). The angels are a creation of God. They have their own characteristics and duties, but we only know of their characteristics that which has been mentioned earlier in the Quran. Iblis is another creation of God, different from the angels, "*Iblis. He was of the jinn, so he rebelled against his Lord's command.*" (18:50) Jinn were created from fire therefore, they are different from angels. However, Iblis was included in the command to the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam (PBUH). The angels, who were created to do what God commands them to do, prostrated themselves to Adam (PBUH). The command illustrates the honor that God bestowed on humankind and the compliance by the angels reflects their obedient nature. However, Iblis disobeyed God and refused to prostrate himself to Adam (PBUH).

The scene depicts three types of God's creation, each has a different nature: the angels, the jinn, and humankind. The angels are a model of absolute and total obedience. Iblis is a model of stark disobedience and hateful arrogance. The characteristics of humankind will be discussed later. Iblis did not comply with the command and was disobedient to his Lord. We will know later the thoughts that he entertained and caused him to disobey, knowing well that God is his Lord and his Creator. God asked Iblis about his reasons for disobeying God's command, Iblis's response was, "*I am better than him. You created me of fire while You created him of mud.*" He chose to disobey in spite of God's clear command. When the Creator issues an unequivocal command, the created has no choice but to comply. God's punishment was pronounced immediately, "*Then go down from here. It is not for you to show pride here, so go forth. You are of the abject ones.*" Iblis did not benefit of his knowledge of God's existence and characteristics and chose to adopt a decision different from that which was decreed by God. Thus, he came under the general rule: whoever refuses to accept any of God's commands is considered a disbeliever. It is a premeditated rejection of faith because Iblis had full knowledge that God is the only true God. It was neither the lack of knowledge of the existence of God, nor the lack of belief in God as the Creator that made Iblis a disbeliever. It was the disobedience that made him a disbeliever. For that, he was expelled from paradise, deprived of the mercy of God, and was cursed.

Iblis did not forget that it was Adam (PBUH) who was the cause of his doom. He did not give up. He asked God to give him respite till the Day of Judgment. When he was granted the respite, he announced his plan. He will seduce humankind and sway them away from the straight path. This was an expression of the premeditated evil and deliberate intention to sway humankind off the straight path. He vowed that he will approach humankind from all directions and ways and will cause them to be ungrateful.

God granted Iblis's request so that it would be a source of trial for humankind. God created humankind with a initial natural disposition that has equal propensity to goodness and evil. Humankind was given the intellect to be able to choose and make decisions, and the divine

message to guide him in making these decisions. The ways for guidance and misguidance were delineated and humankind was given the tools for making the decision to choose which one to follow. Iblis was expelled from paradise and was deprived of God's mercy. This is the destiny of those who follow him. God gave Iblis the power to seduce and gave humankind the power to choose.

“Adam, dwell you and your wife in the Garden and eat from wherever you desire, but come not near this tree lest you become wrongdoers.” (7: 19) The Quran does not specify which tree they were forbidden to eat from. This indicates that the prohibition was not related to the specific type of tree but it was a test in obedience. God gave Adam (PBUH) and his spouse the right to enjoy the fruits of the Garden and commanded them to observe His command which prohibited them to eat the fruits of a single specific tree. This was part of a training program to train humankind to respect the limits that God has set. It is a training to improve self-control and self-restraint. This training was required because humankind is endowed with carnal desires. The ability to control these desires is the criterion which separates humans from animals. Humankind are the masters of their desires while animals are controlled by their desires.

Iblis was looking for a way to seduce this new creature: humankind - the creature which has been honored by God, whose creation was celebrated by the higher host, to whom the angels prostrated themselves, and who was the cause of the expulsion of Iblis from paradise. This new creature has propensity for both good and evil. The carnal desires of humankind, if not controlled, are their weakness. This is the door, which if left unchecked, can be accessed by Iblis. Iblis realized this, *“Then Satan whispered to them that he might manifest to them that which was hidden from them of their shame, and he said, ‘Your Lord forbade you from this tree lest you should become angels or become of the immortals.’ And he swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser.”* (7: 20-21) We do not know exactly how does Satan whisper to people, but we know from the authentic source – which is the only source that we can rely upon – that Satan is able to tempt people to sin. The strength of Satan lies in the innate natural weakness of humankind. This weakness can be remedied by enhancing one's faith and the remembrance of God. Satan has no authority on the believer who often remembers God. Satan's scheming is weak.

Satan's objective was to reveal to them their private parts. However, he chose to appeal to the two deeply hidden desires that are part of the initial natural disposition of all humans. Humankind want to become immortal and to have an everlasting kingdom. He swore to them that he is their sincere advisor. Adam and his spouse forgot God's warning that Satan is their avowed enemy and fell under his spell. They forgot the prohibition and ate from the tree, *“Thus did he lead them on with guile. And when they tasted of the tree their shame was manifest to them and they began to heap on themselves some of the leaves of the Garden. And their Lord called them, (saying), ‘Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you that Satan is your open enemy?’”* (7: 22) Satan tightened his noose and they fell in the trap. They discovered that they were naked and they were able to see each other's private parts for the first time. They heard words of rebuke from their Lord. How did God talk to them? How did He talk to the angels and to Iblis? These are all matters of the unseen. We believe that it happened but we do not know how it happened.

One of the characteristics of humankind becomes apparent, humankind tend to forget and make mistakes. Humankind have a weakness that can be used by Satan to tempt them. Humankind may not be able to stay continuously committed to the straight path but they have the virtue that they realize quickly their mistakes and they seek God's forgiveness. They do not persist in their disobedience like Satan. *"They said, 'Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves. If You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we will certainly be lost.'"* (7:23) This is the unique characteristic of humankind which connects them to their Lord. Human beings are able to repent and seek God's forgiveness. They are able to recognize their weaknesses and they know that salvation can only be achieved through God's power and mercy. This completes the first experience that Adam and his spouse went through in preparation for their mission on earth as vicegerents of God. This was also the beginning of the never ending battle with their enemy, *"He (God) said, 'Go down (from hence), one of you is a foe to the other. There will be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a while. There you shall live, and there you shall die, and thence shall you be brought forth.'"* (7: 24-25)

It is interesting to note that these verses were written in the dual form. This shows that both Adam and Eve were given the command not to eat from the tree, both of them were forewarned about the enmity of Satan, both of them disobeyed God, both of them prayed for God's forgiveness, and both of them were forgiven by God. This shows clearly that both male and female members of the human race share the responsibility of building a civilization on earth; both of them are vicegerents.

The Story of Adam and Eve in Surat Taha

"We had already, beforehand, taken the covenant of Adam, but he forgot, and We found him lacking in firm resolve." (20: 115) This was the covenant that Adam (PBUH) pledged to God to obey His command not to eat the fruits of the forbidden tree. Adam (PBUH) was allowed to eat the fruits of all trees in paradise except for this single tree. The covenant exemplified the concept of the lawful and forbidden. This was a necessary training course to build up the determination and the discipline which free humankind from the control of the carnal instincts and human desires. Self-discipline is a true measure of the ability of the soul to be free of the control of material desires. It is a valid measure for the progress of human civilisation. Animals have no self-discipline; their behavior is totally controlled by their instincts and desires. The divine wisdom willed that Adam (PBUH) and his spouse should be trained for his role on earth. Their determination was tested to awaken their ability to resist Satan's temptation and to alert them to the never ending battle between them and Satan.

"And when We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves to Adam,' they prostrated themselves except Iblis; he refused." (20: 116) The details of the scene have been omitted here and are mentioned in details in other Suras because the focus of the present verses is on God's blessings on Adam (PBUH) and his spouse, *"Therefor we said, 'Adam, this is an enemy to you and to your wife, so let him not drive you both out of the Garden so that you come to toil. Surely it is (promised) for you that you shall neither be hungry therein nor unclothed; you will neither suffer thirst, nor will you be exposed to the sun's heat.'"* (20: 117-119) God warned Adam (PBUH) to

beware of Satan. When God commanded Satan to prostrate to Adam (PBUH) and he refused to obey, he vowed to be the eternal enemy for humankind. God told Adam (PBUH) and his spouse that Satan will do whatever he can to drive them out from the Paradise, *“So, let him not drive you both out of the Garden so that you come to toil.”* (20: 117) God told Adam (PBUH) and his spouse that they will enjoy a life in Paradise that is free of toil, stress, uncertainty, pain, and loss. But Satan discovered the areas of human weakness in Adam (PBUH) and approached him, *“But Satan whispered evil to him, he said, ‘Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and a kingdom that never decays?’”* (20: 120) Two vulnerabilities that humankind have: love of immortality and power. Satan promised him that he will get both when he eats the fruits of the forbidden tree. Adam (PBUH) forgot God’s warning and succumbed to the temptation. Their nakedness became apparent to them, *“They both ate of the tree, and so their nakedness became apparent to them. They began to sew together, for their covering, leaves from the Garden. And Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred.”* (20: 121) It may be understood that when they ate of the tree they suddenly became aware of their nakedness. Their private parts became apparent to them, so they became ashamed of their nakedness and started using the tree leaves to cover their private parts. Entertaining sexual desires and thoughts may have made them feel ashamed. The message that one gets from the verse is that there was a connection between eating the fruits of the tree and the awareness of being naked. The verse stated that, *“their nakedness became apparent to them,”* which implies that they were naked before but they were not aware of their nakedness. The awareness may have resulted from inner feelings that they entertained. There are other versions of the same verses, *“But Satan whispered to them to make apparent to them that which was concealed from them of their private parts.”* (7: 20) and *“Children of Adam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts.”* (7: 27) The word clothing in this verse may not be a reference to physical clothing but rather to a psychological cover. It may be a reference to innocence, purity, and being connected to God. However, these are all conjectures.

God then bestowed His mercy on Adam and his wife and forgave them, *“Then his Lord chose him, and relented toward him, and guided him.”* (20: 122) The details of them seeking forgiveness are not mentioned to leave the ambience for the mercy of God. The command was issued to the two enemies to go down to the earth, the field of the long battle between the two, *“He (God) said, ‘Go down hence, both of you, one of you a foe to the other.’”* (20: 123) The Children of Adam were thus forewarned of the enmity of Satan. God willed to bestow His mercy on the Children of Adam, so He sent His messengers to guide people to the straight path, *“But when there comes to you from Me a guidance, then whoso follows My guidance, he will not go astray nor come to grief. But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him life will be hard, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment.”* (20: 124) Those who follow God’s guidance will be protected from going astray and they will never grieve. Grief is the fruit of going astray. Going astray may be accompanied with pleasure but it is a pleasure that will promote grief; grief in this life and in the Hereafter. Forbidden pleasure is always followed by pain and leads to bad consequences. Those who turn away from guidance will endure a life of hardship and will be raised blind in the Hereafter.

The Fundamentals of Human Society

Surat Al- Nisa'

“People, be conscious of your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created, of like nature, its mate and spread from these two, many men and women; and be conscious of God, in Whose name you demand your mutual rights, Beware of severing the ties of the wombs; certainly God is ever watching over you.” (4: 1)

This is an address to the whole humanity to remind them of the concept of the oneness of the Creator and the common root of their race. People need to reflect on these statements. How did humankind come to this world? Who brought them? Before being created they were nothing, they came to life by God’s will. They were given unique characteristics and talents to cope with life on earth. The power that brought them to existence knows everything about them. This power has the right to organize their lives and to determine the norms and principles which should govern their societies.

Human life started with a single decision from God and the whole humanity sprung from one common root. This makes the whole humanity a one family, and all people are related to each other. Understanding this fact should help diminish the differences that divide people and break up the ties between them. The evils of race discrimination and genocide would have been avoided had the human race recognized and understood this fact. All traditions that discriminate between people on the basis of skin color, gender, or class have no real justification. The long history of discrimination practices on the basis of gender should have been avoided. Souls of males and females are the same. Males and females share the same nature and the same human characteristics. They were created to complement each other. Each has a mission to fulfill and each has been created with the appropriate aptitude to fulfill this mission.

The verse also underscores the importance of the family as the building block of the human society. Humanity started with a single soul and it was complemented with its mate, both formed a single family from which sprang the whole human race. If God had willed He would have created many men and women in the first instance. The idea of starting the creation with a single family highlights the important role that the family plays in enhancing the human ties between the members of the human society. The social system in Islam paid great attention to developing and strengthening the means which support and protect the family structure. This is one of the major themes dealt with in this Sura as well as in many others. The family consists of two partners. A strong family structure cannot be established while one of the partners is being ill treated, abused or wronged in any way. Islam paid great attention to establishing women’s rights as human beings and giving them their due respect.

When we reflect further on this verse, we cannot but wonder of how many different men and women sprang from one single family. People born over the centuries, since the beginning of the creation, are all different. They are different in form and shape. They are different in their aptitudes and abilities. They are different in their dispositions and feelings. Who else is able to do this except God, the Creator?

The verse urges people to remain conscious of their Lord in whose name they conduct their transactions and request their rights from each other. It urges them to remain conscious of God when they deal with each other. The meaning of the expression “God consciousness” is understood and it is oft repeated in the Quran. However, the expression “conscious of the wombs” is a different one, it is an amazing expression and difficult to explain. It enlivens the feelings of the human being. The expression exhorts the believer to be sensitive to the needs and rights of family relationships. It exhorts the believers to avoid hurting, or committing injustice against those with whom we share a relationship through the wombs. Remember that God is ever watching over us. He is the Creator who knows His creation. There is nothing we can hide from Him. He is fully aware of our deeds and our thoughts.

Male- Female Relationship

“It is He who created you from a single soul, and from it made its mate, in order that he might dwell with her (in love). When he covered her, she bears a light burden and carries it about. When she grows heavy, they both pray God their Lord, (saying), ‘If You give us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful.’” (7: 189) The verse displays the role of the initial natural disposition which God created in each human being, in shaping the behavior of the human being. The first reaction of the human being in times of need and fear is to seek God’s help. The verse refers to the first couple of the human race. The male and the female were created from the same soul. However, their functions were different. The difference is intentional so that the spouses can find comfort and tranquility in the company of each other. This is Islam’s perspective of the relationship between human males and females. This is the original perspective that Islam introduced more than fourteen hundred years ago, at a time when distorted religions held that women were responsible for the misery of the human race and the idolaters treated women as chattel or at least as servants to men of no value or consequence.

Then the story starts, *“When he covers her, she bears a light burden and carries it about.”* The Quran uses a decorous expression, *“he covers her,”* to describe the intimate physical relationship between the spouses which is congruent with the atmosphere of tranquility referred to earlier. It is as if the verse describes the meeting of two apparitions rather than the meeting of two physical bodies. This alludes to the difference that should exist in the way the intimate physical relationship between the spouses is conducted in the human and animal domains. The humans’ way is characterised by decency while the animals’ way is characterised by pure physical lust.

Similarly, the early stage of pregnancy is described as, *“a light burden,”* it is carried unnoticed. Then the second stage is reached, *“When she grows heavy, they both pray God their Lord, (saying), ‘If You give us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful.’”* When the pregnancy became a reality and the love of the baby started to grow in the hearts of its parents, they started to worry about their baby. Is the baby going to be of sound body and mind? They sought God’s help and support. They asked God to give them a goodly child, but, *“But when He gave them a goodly child, they ascribed to others a share in the gift they have received; but God is Exalted high above the partners they ascribe to Him.”* (7: 190)

A brief description of the origin of humankind is mentioned, “*And among His signs is that He created you from dust; and then you are human beings scattered (far and wide).*” (30: 20) The dust from which human beings were created is a dead material. This is a miracle. It also points to the close relationship between humans and the earth they live on and are affected by the laws that control it. One should ponder the miracle of creation, appreciate the process of creation and glorify and praise God for His favors. Not only humans were created from dust but they were also created in pairs, “*And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He planted affection and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect.*” (30: 21) God created humans in pairs and instilled in them the natural attraction to each other and the ability to harbor and express emotions towards each other. Each one of the spouses finds a safe haven with the other. Affection and compassion necessary for the development of new lives are instilled in the hearts of the spouses.

Significance of the Story of Adam (PBUH) and Eve

The several points that can be gleaned from these verses.

1. Humankind are composed of two partners, a male and a female, who have the same nature and similar rights and responsibilities.
2. Humankind were created to live on earth. The first couple were created originally in Paradise to train them for the task they were destined to undertake on earth.
3. God bestowed on humankind the qualities that enables them to discharge their responsibilities on earth. Humankind are able to learn, to teach, to discern right from wrong, and to choose freely.
4. Humankind are entrusted with the guardianship of earth, its resources, and its creatures.
5. Satan is the avowed enemy for the human being. Satan mission is to tempt human beings. However, he has no power over them.
6. It is human to err. Human beings live in paradise, as long as they are obedient to God, when they sin they no longer live in paradise. Their way to go back is to repent and seek God’s forgiveness.

The Spouse of Egypt's 'Aziz

The story of the wife of the Egyptian Dignitary (Egypt's 'Aziz) is mentioned as a part of the story of Prophet Joseph (PBUH) in the Sura named after him (Chapter 12). One of the specific characteristics of the story of Prophet Joseph (PBUH) is that it was mentioned in its totality in one Sura. The part of the story that we are concerned with here starts when the caravan from Egypt found Prophet Joseph (PBUH) in the well. He had been thrown there earlier by his brothers. He was bought in slavery by a person who is described as the Egyptian Dignitary. Some scholars are of the opinion that he was the Governor of Egypt, while others are of the opinion that he was the first minister. However, we know that Joseph's (PBUH) time of difficulty has ended and that he is now secure in this new place, "*The man in Egypt who bought him, said to his wife, 'Make his stay (among us) honorable, he may bring us much good, or we shall adopt him as a son.'*" (12: 21) The man asked his wife to make Joseph's (PBUH) stay with them pleasant. He hoped that Joseph (PBUH) would bring goodness to his house or that they may even adopt him as a son – some scholars are of the opinion that the couple did not have children.

The narrative digressed to emphasize that these developments happened by God's leave. Establishing Joseph (PBUH) in the land started by settling him securely in the house of the Governor. God's will cannot be overturned, "*Thus, did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of narratives (dreams and events).*" Joseph's (PBUH) brothers plotted to harm him, but God's will have foiled their plotting and saved Joseph (PBUH), "*God has full power and control over His affairs; but most among humankind know it not.*" (12: 21)

The verses continued to follow Joseph (PBUH) as he grew up, "*When Joseph attained His full manhood, We gave him power and knowledge. Thus, do We reward those who do right.*" (12: 22) Joseph (PBUH) was given insight and wisdom to discharge the affairs that he was entrusted with. However, it was not long before Joseph (PBUH) faced the second time of difficulty in his life. This time he faced a worse trial than the one he faced before, "*But she, in whose house he was, sought to seduce him to do an evil act. She bolted the doors, and said, 'Now come, you (dear one).'*" He said, "*God forbid. Truly, he (your husband) is my lord. He treated me honorably. Certainly, the wrongdoers do not prosper.*" (12: 23) Joseph (PBUH) must have been a teenager at that time and he was facing the temptation of a grown up woman who knew what she wanted, she plotted to get it, and she was determined to get it. Her invitation to Joseph (PBUH) was unambiguous; she bolted the doors and prepared herself to seduce him.

The subsequent verse may pose a problem in reconciling the chastity of Joseph (PBUH) and the fact that he could have had entertained a desire to succumb to her temptation, but the following translation agrees with the interpretation given by most of the scholars, "*And (with passion) did she desire him, and he would have desired her, had it not that he saw the evidence of his Lord. Thus (did We order) that We ward off from him (all) evil and shameful deeds, for he was one of Our chosen servants.*" (12: 24) The language of this verse describes the persistence of the woman in trying to seduce Joseph (PBUH) and the steadfastness of Joseph (PBUH) in refusing her. When at a moment of human weakness, he was about to fall for her, God intervened and

saved him from this fall.

When he “*saw the evidence of his Lord,*” he ran towards the door to escape and she was in pursuit, she was about to catch him but instead she ripped his shirt off his back, “*And they raced each other to the door, and she tore his shirt from behind,*” Suddenly, they came face to face with her husband, “*and they met her husband at the door.*” But she was an intelligent woman. She was able to find a way out of the trap she found herself in, “*She said, ‘What shall be his reward the one who intended evil to your wife, save prison or a painful chastisement?’*” (12: 25) Joseph (PBUH) responded truthfully, “*It was she that sought to seduce me.*” A member of her family provided a resolution to the dispute; he suggested that they should examine the ripped shirt, “*If his shirt is torn from the front, then she has told the truth and he is of the liars, and if his shirt is torn from behind, then she has lied and he is of the truthful.*” (12: 26) The verses do not detail the circumstances during which the dispute was resolved. We do not know when or where her family member was consulted, but the verse intimates that he was consulted and he gave his suggestion. However, it is interesting to note the reaction of the husband when he realized that his wife lied, “*So when he saw his shirt was torn at the back, (her husband) said, ‘This is another instance of your cunning. Indeed, your (women’s) cunning is great. Joseph, turn away from this, and you, (woman), ask forgiveness for your sin. Indeed, you were of the sinful.’*” (12; 28) First, he deflected the blame to the whole feminine sex, blaming her act of seduction on women’s cunning nature. Then, he turned to the innocent Joseph (PBUH) to say, “*, turn away from this,*” meaning that Joseph (PBUH) not only should ignore the whole story but he should also keep it a secret. This was the important thing for him, not to make the story public. He was afraid of the scandal. Finally, he asked his wife to repent for her sin.

Life in the palace continued as usual; Joseph (PBUH) continued to live in the palace in close proximity with the woman who tried to seduce him. Very soon after that, rumors started to circulate, “*And some women in the city said, ‘The governor’s wife is seeking to seduce her slave-boy; indeed, he has impassioned her with love. We see her (to be) in plain error.’*” (12: 30)

Her reaction reflected both her audacity and her cunning, “*When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them. She gave each of them a knife; and she said (to Joseph), ‘Come out before them.’ When they saw him, they were stunned with his beauty and (in their amazement) they cut their hands. They said, “God is perfect. This is not a human being. This is none but a gracious angel.”* (12: 31) She invited those aristocratic women to a party in her house. They were leaning on cushions while eating. She gave each one of them a knife to use in cutting up food. She then, commanded Joseph (PBUH) to come out before them while they were busy cutting meat or peeling fruits using the knives. They were stunned when they saw Joseph (PBUH). They said, “*God is Perfect,*” expressing their amazement of how perfect God’s creation can be.

This was the reaction she expected of them and thus, she felt vindicated, “*She said, ‘There before you is the man about whom you did blame me.’*” See for yourselves how handsome he is. Like you, I admired him and, “*I did seek to seduce him but he did firmly save himself guiltless;*” (12: 32) She did not refrain from admitting her guilt in front of her women friends. She did not show

any remorse, instead she promised to relentlessly pursue him and punish him if he does not yield to her wishes, *“but if he does not do what I command him to do, he shall certainly be cast into prison, and shall be of those who are in a state of ignominy.”* (12: 32)

When Joseph (PBUH) heard the conversation, he had no choice but to seek God’s help, *“He said, ‘My Lord, I would prefer prison to that which they are inviting me to. Unless You protect me from their plotting, I shall incline to them and become of the foolish.’”* (12: 33) This is the prayer of a man who knew the inherent human weaknesses and he did not want to expose himself to the risk, so he prayed for the help of God to strengthen him while facing this difficult test. God responded favorably to his prayer, *“So his Lord heard his prayer and fended off their cunning from him. He is All-Hearing, Omniscient.”* (12: 34) God’s support could come in different ways. God may have made the women despair of being able to seduce Joseph (PBUH) so they would leave him alone, or God may have strengthened Joseph (PBUH) so he would become immune to their seduction. Thus, Joseph (PBUH) was able to cross safely the second trial in his life.

After years of incarceration, Joseph (PBUH) had the chance to request that the king to investigate the incident. The king asked the women, *“What happened when you tried to seduce Joseph?”* They answered, *“God is perfect. We know no evil about him.”* (12: 51) Joseph (PBUH) was declared innocent and the wife of the Governor had to admit her guilt, she said, *“Now the truth is out. I tried to seduce him, and he is indeed of the truthful.”* (12: 52)

Significance

1. Joseph (PBUH) faced several trials. He was thrown in the well by his brothers, he was sold in slavery, he was wrongfully accused and incarcerated, and he was seduced by the wife of the Governor of Egypt. In all his trials, he persevered. However, when he was seduced by the Governor’s wife, it was the only time that he prayed God to support him and protect him from this seduction.
2. Although the wife of the Governor was able to put Joseph (PBUH) behind bars for a few years, his innocent eventually was declared and she confessed to her crime.
3. It is ironic that the imprisonment of Joseph (PBUH) paved the way for him to gain the trust of the king of Egypt and to become the first minister of Egypt.

Moses' (PBUH) Mother, Sister, and Wife

The Quran mentions four women who play important roles in the story of Prophet Moses (PBUH). These are his mother, his sister, his wife, and Pharaoh's wife.

The following verses in Surat Al-Qasas (28) narrate the events that took place after Moses' (PBUH) birth. Several verses in the Quran describe the difficult circumstances which the Children of Israel were experiencing in Egypt during that time. Pharaoh was warned by a fortune teller that one the male babies born to the Israelite will grow up to threaten the throne of the Pharaoh. Pharaoh ordered the execution of all the Israelite male babies, sparing the lives of all female babies, *"Remember God's favor on you when He delivered you from Pharaoh's people who were afflicting you with dreadful torment, and were slaying your sons and sparing your women; that was a tremendous trial from your Lord."* (14: 6) The following verse from Surat Al-Qasas describes the state of Moses' mother when she delivered Moses (PBUH) and how God reassured her, *"And We inspired the mother of Moses, saying, 'Suckle him and, when you fear for his safety, then cast him into the river and fear not nor grieve. We shall bring him back to you and shall make him (one) of Our messengers.'" (28: 7)* Consistent with the style of the Quran, it mentions the Quranic response to Moses' mother's predicament. One can imagine the apprehension and fear of Moses' mother during such a highly chaotic time. What would possess a mother to do something as seemingly careless as casting her baby into a river? Fear and a deep sense of protection are powerful motivators during dangerous times. Fearing Pharaoh's soldiers, who could knock at any moment, would arrive demanding to execute the newly born baby, Moses' mother was inspired by God to cast her baby boy into the river. Instead of feeling anxious about the plan, the inspiration brought by God provided a deep sense of comfort and security to Moses' mother, as she was told, do not fear nor grieve, God will take care of him and will return him safe and sound. Moses' mother entered into an agreement with God and He assured her and delivered on His promise as we will see in the next few verses when God said, not only will Moses (PBUH) be saved, he will be made a Messenger of God. This was certainly a difficult test for Moses' mother, but her ability to follow through reflects her deep sense of trust in God.

Through the stories in the Quran, we are able to follow the basket that served as Moses' cradle as it is carried by the Nile into Pharaoh's palace where he was picked up by the guards, *"And the family of Pharaoh picked him up, that he might become for them an enemy and a source of grief, indeed, Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts were deliberate sinners."* (28: 8) Pharaoh's soldiers were looking everywhere for the newborn male babies to slay them, and here is one that floats right into the palace. The verse indicates clearly the intention of bringing the harmless, helpless Moses (PBUH) into the hands of Pharaoh. He will become for them, *"an enemy and a source of grief."* God made Pharaoh's wife feel a sense of tenderness toward the baby and she pleaded with her husband, *"The wife of Pharaoh said, '(Here is) joy of the eye, for me and for you. Do not slay him. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' And they perceived not (what they were doing)."* (28: 9) Moses (PBUH) was therefore protected from Pharaoh's persecution, and it's interesting to note that his change of heart came not by force but by love.

The verses then return to Moses' mother. The verses share her state of worry and concern about the whereabouts and condition of Moses (PBUH). She acted according to God's inspiration but was now filled with apprehensive and fear over what might happen to her baby, "*And the heart of the mother of Moses became void, and she would have betrayed him if We had not fortified her heart, that she might be of the believers.*" (28: 10) The Quran uses an extremely expressive word to describe and create powerful imagery over the mother's feelings, "*And the heart of the mother of Moses became void.*" Meaning, her heart became void of all means of rationalization or power to think. She was about to give her secret away, "*would have betrayed him,*" but God gave her the strength to trust in His promise and to remain steadfast, "*if We had not fortified her heart.*"

However, she wanted to know her son's fate so she enlisted her daughter to look into Moses' whereabouts, "*And she said to his sister, 'Follow him.' So she observed him from afar, and they were unaware.*" (28: 11) Moses' sister must have located him and seen him in the hands of Pharaoh's servants while they were looking for a woman to nurse this new baby they had found. It was part of the divine will that Moses (PBUH) would refuse to suckle from any of the women that were ready to nurse him, "*And We ordained that he would refuse to be suckled by any foster-mother,*" His sister then came forward suggesting a solution to save the baby, "*so she (his sister) said, 'Shall I tell you about a household who will take care of him for you?'*" (28: 12) This suggestion was happily embraced by the people of Pharaoh. So, he was brought back to his mother, "*So We returned him to his mother that she might be comforted and not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of God is true. But most of them do not know.*" (28: 13)

The baby was returned safe and sound back to his mother, protected by Pharaoh, and loved by Pharaoh's wife.

These verses are all the Quran reveals regarding Moses' mother and sister. Though small in number, these verses show the commitment of Moses' mother and her strong trust in God. They also show that his sister was an agile, resourceful, and clever individual.

The following verses from the same Sura follow Moses (PBUH) as he escapes from Egypt, fleeing the vengeance of Pharaoh after he had killed an Egyptian. Moses (PBUH) long journey finds him at a watering place in Madyan. Moses (PBUH) is tired and exhausted, not just from the journey but one could assume also from the stress surrounding the need for such a quick escape. As he arrives, he sees a crowd of shepherds watering their sheep and notices two women keeping their sheep away from the watering place. His thoughtful nature compelled him to ask the ladies if they need help, "*What is the matter with you?*" They said, "*We cannot water (our flocks) until the shepherds take back (their flocks). And our father is a very old man.*" (28: 23) So he watered their sheep for them. This may seem like a simple act; however, a deeper understanding helps us to understand the nobility of Moses' (PBUH) character. He was a fleeing man, tired and exhausted; resting under the shade of a tree after a long journey. Yet, he was concerned about the situation of the two helpless ladies. Unflustered by his own dire situation, he was not consumed with worry about himself or his safety. Even under trauma, he showed his

character by focusing his worry on helping those in need, “*So he watered (their flocks) for them;*” (28: 24)

As it was a hot, sunny day, Moses took refuge from the heat in some shade and prayed to God, “*Then he turned back to the shade, and said, ‘My Lord, truly I am in (desperate) need of any good that You send down for me.’*” (28: 24) Moses (PBUH) pleaded with God saying he was in desperate need for help. The response was quick, “*Then one of the two women came to him, walking modestly. She said, ‘My father invites you, that he may reward you having watered (the flock) for us.’*” (28: 25) One of the two women, whom he had helped earlier, came walking shyly toward him. The verse stresses her approach to Moses (PBUH) inviting him to meet her father. Although she was shy her speech was clear. The following verse takes us to the meeting between Moses (PBUH) and the old man. The Quran does not reveal the identity of the old man, but only narrates the dialogue between him and Moses (PBUH), “*Then, when he came to him and told him the (whole) story, he said, ‘Fear not, you escaped from the wrongdoers.’*” (28: 25) The old man reassured Moses (PBUH) that he was safe in Madyan.

“*One of the two women said, ‘My father, hire him. Indeed, the best (man) that you can hire is the strong, the trustworthy.’*” (28: 26) The two women worked hard to take care of the sheep, feed them, and water them. The previous verses described the difficulty they were facing in watering the sheep and how they had to compete with strong men to be able to do it. The two ladies were reluctant to engage in such a competition with the other shepherds. One of them saw an opportunity for a solution that would benefit them and at the same time benefit this stranger. She advised her father to hire him. She described him as “*strong and trustworthy,*” refined traits that she had been able to pick up on after only a short interaction with Moses, which shows how perceptive this woman was. The old man accepted the idea and approached Moses (PBUH) in a straight forward way, “*He said, ‘I desire to wed one of these my daughters to you, on condition that you serve me for eight years; but if you complete ten years, it will be (a grace) from you. But I intend not to place you under any difficulty. You will find me, indeed, God willing, one of the righteous.’*” (28: 27) This was a simple and straight forward offer combined with a promise of fair working conditions. The old man did not promote himself but expressed his hope that Moses (PBUH) would find him to be a righteous person which reflects his modesty and good character. Moses accepted, “*He said, ‘That (is settled) between you and me. Whichever of the two terms I fulfill, there will be no injustice to me, and God is a witness over what we say.’*” (28: 28) The conditions for the contract were clearly stated and accepted by both men. It was narrated that Moses (PBUH) completed the longer term although it was his choice to stop after the eight years as agreed upon in the contract.

Significance

1. The actions of Moses’ mother show a woman with a strong faith and deep trust in God.
2. The actions of Moses’ sister show a woman with great acumen and ingenuity.
3. Moses wife is depicted as a woman with great insight and deep perception of human nature.

A'isha bint Abi Bakr (RA)

The following verses describe a real event that involved the slander of the Prophet's (PBUH) wife A'isha (RA), *“Those who brought forward the lie are a gang among you. Do not think it to be an evil thing for you; on the contrary it is good for you. To every man among them (will come the punishment) of the sin that he earned, and to him who took on himself the lead among them, will be a grievous punishment. Why did not the believers - men and women - when you heard of the affair, think good of their own people, and say, ‘It is an evident falsehood?’ Why did they not produce four witnesses? Since they did not produce any witnesses, they verily are liars in the sight of God. Had it not been for the grace of God and His mercy on you in the world and the Hereafter a grievous torment would have certainly touched you on account of the discourse which you entered into. When you welcomed it with your tongues, and uttered with your mouths that whereof you had no knowledge, you thought it was a trifle but it is very great in the sight of God. And why you did not, when you heard it, say, ‘It is not right of us to speak of this. Glory to God, this is a most serious slander?’ God admonishes you, that you may never repeat such (conduct), if you are (true) believers. And God makes the verses plain to you; for God is Omniscient, Wise.”* (24: 11- 18)

The incident of the slander of A'isha (RA) was a very painful experience for the Prophet (PBUH), his wife, and the whole community. Doubts destroyed the serenity of the hearts of the Prophet (PBUH), his close friend and father in law, and the companion of the Prophet (PBUH) Safwan bin Al Mu'atal (RA) for a whole month. Let us listen to the description of the incident as it was narrated by A'isha (RA).

“Each time the Prophet (PBUH) wanted to go on a trip he used to choose one of his wives to accompany him. The process he followed was to draw a toss between his wives whoever wins the toss would accompany him. On one of these trips, after Hijab has been mandated, it was my turn to accompany the Prophet (PBUH). My camel had a tent for me to sit in. While I was visiting the toilet, the Prophet (PBUH) commanded his army to prepare for the return trip to Medina. On my way back to the place where I left my camel, I found out that I lost my rosary so I went back to fetch it. In the meantime, the driver of my camel came and drove the camel never realizing that I was not inside my tent on top of the camel. When I came back to the place of the camp I found that the army had left. I decided to stay where I was thinking that soon they will realize that I am not in my tent on top of the camel and they will come back for me. I was tired so I was overcome by sleep. While I was sleeping Safwan (RA) happened to be passing by and saw me. Safwan (RA) knew who I was. So he took me on his camel until we caught up with the army. When I reached Medina I became sick and continued to be sick for about a month. In the meantime, Abdu Allah ibn Salool made up the story slandering me and he circulated the slander among people. People were talking about the slander and all the time I was unaware of what was going on. I was a bit suspicious of the Prophet's (PBUH) behavior. The Prophet (PBUH) was always warm towards me, but during this month I sensed a change in his attitude, but he never mentioned anything. One day, after my recovery I was going to the toilet outside the house with Um Mustah (RA). While we were walking I heard Um Mustah (RA) cursing her son Mustah. I was deeply concerned that a man who participated in the battle of Badr would be cursed by his mother. I asked her why she was doing this. She said, ‘Did you not know about the rumor being circulated?’ I said, ‘No, what rumor.’ She told me about the rumor accusing me of a relationship

with Safwan (RA). This was extremely painful, I became ill again and I went home crying. I spent the whole night crying. The Prophet (PBUH) asked Ali ibn Taleb (RA) and Usama ibn Zaid (RA) for advice. Usama (RA) defended me and attested to my innocence. Ali (RA) on the other hand said to the Prophet (PBUH) that he can always marry another one if he wanted, but he also asked him to ask my servant of my behavior. My servant attested to my innocence.

The Prophet (PBUH) came to enquire about my health, so I asked him to let me go visit my mother, I wanted to ask my mother about the rumor. She confirmed what I heard from Um Mustah (RA). The next day my parents were with me and the Prophet (PBUH) came to see me. He sat on the bed and told me about what was going on, he said, 'If you are innocent, God will announce your innocence, but if you were guilty then you should repent. God forgives all sins.' I did not know how to answer back. I asked my mother to respond but she did not say anything. I said, 'By God, I know that you heard the rumor and believed it. If I say I am innocent, you will not believe me but if I confess my guilt, while God knows my innocence, you would believe me. I can only say what the father of Joseph said, "Beautiful patience is most befitting, I seek God's help regarding what you say." (12: 18)'. I was certain of my innocence but I could not fathom the idea that God would send a revelation to declare my innocence. My best hope was that the Prophet (PBUH) would see in his dream that I am innocent. Suddenly, I realized that the Prophet (PBUH) was in the state of receiving a revelation. When he came around, he was smiling and he said, 'A'isha, praise your Lord. He declared you innocent.' The Prophet (PBUH) then recited the ten verses in Surat Al-Nur which talked about the slander."

Mustah who spread the rumor about A'isha (RA) was Abu Bakr's (RA) cousin. Abu Bakr (RA) used to help Mustah (RA) financially as a form of charity. Abu Bakr (RA) decided that he will stop helping Mustah (RA) as he used to before the incident. But then a verse was revealed which made Abu Bakr (RA) change his mind, "*And let not those who possess dignity and abundance among you swear not to give to the near of kin and to the needy, and to those who have fled in God's way. Let them forgive and show indulgence. Do you not yearn that God forgive you? God is All-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy.*" (24:22)

For a whole month the Prophet (PBUH) and A'isha, Abu Bakr (RA) and his wife, Safwan (RA), and indeed the whole Muslim community suffered through this horrible experience. The young, pure, and innocent A'isha (RA) was slandered and her reputation had been tarnished. Not only did she feel the pain of being falsely accused, but she was horrified at the thought that the Prophet (PBUH) had doubts about her innocence. Her parents suffered with her. Safwan (RA) a companion of the Prophet (PBUH) was deeply pained by the accusations launched against him. The whole episode continued for a month before the decisive verses declaring A'isha's (RA) innocence were revealed. The slander was not only meant to harm A'isha (RA); it was also meant to hurt the Prophet (PBUH). The rumors were meant to undermine the Prophet (PBUH), his message, and his leadership. It was planned and executed by a group of people, "*Those who brought forward the lie are a gang among you. Do not think it to be an evil thing to you; on the contrary it is good for you.*" It was a gang of people led by Abd Allah ibn Saloul the leader of a group of hypocrites. The gang included a few Muslims who were deceived by the hypocrites, e.g. Hamna bint Jahsh, Hassan ibn Thabet, and Mustah ibn Athatha. This verse indicates the enormity of the conspiracy and reassures the believers that in this incident, although stressful and divisive for a time, also contained some positive elements. The good that could be drawn from

this scenario is that it exposed those who were scheming against Islam and bent on hurting the Prophet (PBUH) and his wives. It was also good because it alerted the believers to the dire consequences of slander. Slandering people has a grievous impact not only on the falsely accused but also on the whole community. This incident provided the opportunity to address the standards for the proper Islamic behavior during times of trials. The pains that the Prophet (PBUH), A'isha (RA), and indeed the whole Muslim community suffered were the price that had to be paid to pass safely through this trial. Those who fabricated and propagated the lie will face their punishment, each according to his/her share in the crime. Abd Allah ibn Saloul who twisted the facts, fabricated the lie, and worked hard to propagate it will have the greatest share of the punishment.

“Why did not the believers - men and women - when you heard of the affair, think good of their own people, and say, ‘It is an evident falsehood?’” This verse describes the proper Islamic behavior when faced with such trials. The believers should have consulted their hearts and listened to their gut feelings, then they would have naturally reached the conclusion that it was a lie. They should have known that A'isha (RA), would not have committed such an indecency. There are stories that indicate that this was exactly the reaction of some Muslims e.g. Abu Ayoub Al-Ansari (RA).

This verse and the following one describe the proper process to handle rumors that slander people. The process consists of two steps. The first step requires the believer to reflect on the accusation and to give the accused the benefit of the doubt. The second step is to assume the innocence of the accused until proven guilty on the basis of hard and concrete evidence. A rigorous methodology in investigating the evidence should be followed, *“Why did they not produce four witnesses? Since they did not produce any witnesses, they verily are liars in the sight of God.”* A heinous accusation such as this should be proven beyond a shred of a doubt before a verdict can be reached; four eyewitnesses should come forward to substantiate the accusation. If the person who has launched the accusation is unable to produce four eyewitness accounts to substantiate his/her claim, then he/she is considered a liar. The believers did not follow this process when the accusation was launched against A'isha (RA). The verses warn the believers not to commit such a mistake again, *“Had it not been for the grace of God and His mercy on you in the world and the Hereafter a grievous torment would have certainly touched you on account of the discourse which you entered into.”*

The verses go on to describe the details of the believers' disgraceful reaction to the accusations, *“When you welcomed it with your tongues, and uttered with your mouths that whereof you had no knowledge, you thought it was a trifle but it is very great in the sight of God.”* The verse describes how rumors can take on a life of their own when people repeat what they hear without verifying the facts. . People repeat false accusations not realizing the damage that they are causing. Their reaction should have been to shun those who were spreading the rumors, *“And why you did not, when you heard it, say, ‘It is not right of us to speak of this. Glory to God, this is a most serious slander?’”* The verses end with an admonition and a warning, *“God admonishes you, that you may never repeat such (conduct), if you are (true) believers. And God makes the verses plain to you; for God is Omniscient, Wise.”*

Significance

1. This story shows how strong and independent A'isha (RA) was. She refused to cower to the rumor mill. She had a strong head on her shoulders, a strong sense of self and a strong connection with her Lord. Her deep trust in God carried her through this trial. From her account, one can sense that she was certain that God will probe her innocence.
2. The story also shows the human nature of the Prophet (PBUH) and how he suffered and endured. His trust in God gave him the strength to act in a rational and fair way. He sought the advice of his companions but acted wisely and in a way that was in the best interest of the Muslim community.

Mary (PBUH) in the Quran

Mary (PBUH) is mentioned 39 times in the Quran. Thus, giving her the honor of being the most mentioned woman in the Quran.

The Description of Mary (PBUH) in the Quran

The Quran states that God has singled out Mary (PBUH) from among all women, He purified her and chose her to be one of His signs. (3: 42), (23:50) Mary (PBUH) was a sincere truthful (saint) woman, (5: 75) chaste, (21: 91) she believed in God's word, and was a devout servant of God (66: 12)

The Story of Mary (PBUH) in the Quran

The story of Mary (PBUH) is mentioned in detail in two places in the Quran. The first is narrated in surat Al-Imran (Chapter 3) and the second is found in surat Mary (Chapter 19). In surat Al-Imran, the verses describe how Mary (PBUH) was conceived, how she was chosen to serve in the temple, and how she was raised and prepared to be part of God's miracle of delivering Jesus through virgin conception. In surat Mary, the verses continue to describe the life of Mary during this miraculous time, such as the encounter between Mary (PBUH) and the angel who gave her the news of her pregnancy, the delivery of Jesus (PBUH), and the encounter between Mary (PBUH) and her people.

The Story in Surat Al-Imran

This group of verses starts with a statement emphasizing the special status of Adam, Noah, the families of Abraham and Imran. These people were chosen by God to deliver His guidance to the rest of the world. (3: 33-34) The significance of starting Mary (PBUH)'s story with this verse is twofold. First, it emphasizes that Jesus (PBUH) is a human being, a descendant of a human family that can be traced back to Adam (PBUH). Second, it confirms that God's miracles are part of His plan of creation and are prepared according to His knowledge.

When Mary's mother finally became pregnant in her old age, she prayed to God to give her a son and promised to dedicate him to the service of God. (3: 35) She felt disappointed when she delivered a baby girl fearing that her daughter would not be fit to serve in the temple. The norm was only males can serve at the temple. Nevertheless, she prayed to God to protect her daughter and her offspring from the temptation of the devil. The Quran tells us that God accepted Mary (PBUH). It seems that several of the elders in her family wanted to act as guardians, however when they drew a lot, Zakary (PBUH) was the winner. This indicates the great interest of each of these elders in acting as a guardian of such a blessed girl. (3: 44) And so under the guardianship of Zakary (PBUH), Mary (PBUH) served in the temple (3: 37) Her service in the temple was part of the preparation she needed to be able to carry out the responsibility that she was destined for.

Verse (3:37) takes us to a scene in the inner chamber of the temple which Mary (PBUH) used as a sanctuary. Her guardian comes to visit her and finds that she had food. Only Zakary (PBUH) was allowed to visit her, so where did the food come from? Her answer was, "*From God. God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.*" (3: 37) This wisdom delivered from

a little girl motivated Zakary (PBUH) to ask God for a son. Zakary (PBUH) was an old man, his wife was barren. It would take a miracle for such a couple to get pregnant and carry a baby full term but Mary's (PBUH) experience revived the hope in his heart. God answered and gave Zakary (PBUH) the son whom he had longed for. (3: 39)

After a brief detour to discuss Zakary's (PBUH) experience, the narrative returns to Mary (PBUH) being addressed by the angels, *"And when the angels said, 'Mary, God has chosen you, purified you, and chosen you above the women of the world. Mary, worship your Lord devoutly. Prostrate yourself, and bow down with those who bow down in prayer.'"* (3: 42-43) Having prepared her to receive the blessing that was intended, the angels deliver the good news, *"The angels said, 'Mary, God gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him. His name will be the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and one of those drawn near to God.'"* (3: 44-45) Mary (PBUH) asked, *"My Lord, how shall I give birth to a son when no man has touched me?"* He said, *"So it will be, God creates what He wills. If He decrees a thing, He says Be and it will Be."* (3: 47)

This brings us to the end of Mary's story contained in surat Al-Imran.

The Story in Surat Mary (PBUH)

The story in surat Mary (PBUH) starts with the meeting between Mary (PBUH) and the Holy Spirit, while she is in seclusion in the sanctuary. Gabriel (PBUH) was sent as a messenger of God to give her the news of the blessing that God bestowed on her in the form of a son (19:17). When she showed her surprise of giving birth while she was still a virgin, she was told that God creates what He wills. (19: 20- 21) The miraculous birth of Jesus (PBUH) was meant to be a sign for the Children of Israel. Mary's (PBUH) question was a natural human reaction to the news. Although she had experienced God's miracles before, this was something different and she wanted to state her chastity clearly and unequivocally. When Mary (PBUH) was given the answer that this was God's decree, she fully accepted and embraced the decision.

Mary (PBUH) received the spirit of God, became pregnant, and withdrew to a place away from people. (19: 22) When she felt the pains of childbirth, she wished she had died before she had become pregnant. (19: 23) The angel called upon her again in a merciful tone to console her and reassure her of the availability of the help and care of God. (19: 24) The angel pointed to the arrangements that were made for her to give birth safely, and afterwards eat, and feed the baby. Water and food in the form of dates were provided. She was resting her back to the trunk of a palm-tree laden with fruits and a stream of fresh water was running under her feet. (19: 25 – 26)

It is interesting to note that the verses show that she was asked to "shake" the trunk of the palm-tree for the dates to fall down. This seems strange. Would a woman delivering a baby and suffering the pains of childbirth be able to shake the solid trunk of a palm-tree? This is an indication that although God bestows His blessings as He wishes, and the success of any endeavor is contingent on His will God still wants to see his servants making the effort, no matter how small.

Gabriel (PBUH) also reassured Mary (PBUH) about God's support for her when she will ultimately meet with her family and have to deal with their reaction. Of course she must have anticipated the level of shock her news would bring when her family discovers she has given birth to a baby. In an effort to mitigate the stress on her, she was instructed to indicate to them that she had taken a vow of silence, allowing the baby to speak on her behalf and explain her innocence of any wrong doing. (19: 27 – 33)

Significance of the Story of Mary (PBUH)

There are several lessons that can be gleaned from this story.

1. It is a confirmation of the prophet-hood of Muhammad (PBUH). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had no way of knowing the details mentioned in this account. It refutes the claim that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) copied these stories from the Bible. The details of the story as mentioned in the Quran are different from that mentioned in the Bible. (3:44)
2. There is a difference in opinion regarding whether Mary (PBUH) is a prophet of God or not. Al-Qurtobi is of the opinion that since she received a revelation from God, she is considered a prophet. (19: 17)
3. Although God is capable of providing for His servants with no effort on their part (3:37), it is through God's law that people should earn their living. Even if the effort they spend in earning their living is symbolic (19: 25)
4. The verses emphasize that Mary (PBUH) is a human being that was chosen by God to demonstrate God's power and miracles (5: 17, 5: 75)
5. One of the signs of the strength of Mary's (PBUH) faith in God, is that she never asked for a sign to confirm the angel's message that she will have a baby while she is still a virgin. She simply accepted the news as a decree from God.
6. Training and preparation of individuals to fulfill their tasks are important for the success of their efforts.

Asiya, Pharaoh's Wife

Asiya was the Queen of Egypt when the water current carried Moses' (PBUH) cradle into Pharaoh's palace. Asiya immediately fell in love with the young baby carried in the basket. She pleaded with her husband, "*(Here is) joy of the eye, for me and for you. Do not slay him. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son. ' And they perceived not (what they were doing).*" (28: 9) She must have realized that the baby was an Israelite boy. She knew that the soldiers will kill him, since Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite male babies should be killed. It seems that she was successful in convincing her husband to spare the boy's life. Moses' (PBUH) life was spared and grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh.

Asiya must have watched him closely growing up in the place. She must have realized that he is not like all other boys, because when Moses (PBUH) called Pharaoh to believe in God, she was the one who accepted the guidance and believed in God. The Quran does not tell us how and when she believed in God, nor does the Quran tell us what happened to her when Pharaoh discovered that she was a believer. But the Quran immortalized her as an example for all believers, "*And God sets forth, an example of the believers, the wife of Pharaoh. She said, 'My Lord, build for me, in nearness to You a mansion in the Garden, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoers. '"* (66: 11) God praises the wife of Pharaoh who had the courage, wisdom, and strength to believe even though she was living in the midst of a disbelieving environment. She disowned Pharaoh and his evil deeds. In her, the reader of these verses finds the highest example of sacrifice all for the sake of her faith. The verses assign a high rank for the wife of Pharaoh and she has been cited as an example for all believers, men and women.

Significance

Asiya was the queen of Egypt. She must have belonged to the royal family, a family of gods. But she must have been searching for the truth and found it in what Moses (PBUH) brought. She gave up all the glory, the power, and the comfort of the life in the palace and chose to believe in the One True God. This required great courage and sacrifice. The reward is that God used her as an example for all believers.

Khawlah bint Tha'labah (RA)

The story of Khawlah bin Tha'labah (RA) is narrated in Surat Al-Mujadilah (58) and the story is quite remarkable. A Muslim woman feels that her husband is treating her unfairly and so she decides to approach the Prophet (PBUH) to share her story and ask for guidance. The Prophet (PBUH) had no solution for her as he was not the law maker, so he advised her to persevere. Unsatisfied with this, Khawlah (RA) continues returning to the Prophet (PBUH) pleading her case and arguing with him, until God sent down a law that redressed the harm that had been inflicted on her and so many other women in her generation. This is where the title of the Sura was taken from, Al-Mujadilah in Arabic means the one who argues.

The Sura starts with an amazing example of the connection between heaven and earth. The example shows the way the Quran deals with matters of everyday life to rectify people's shady behavior and mistakes, "*God has indeed heard the statement of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband and complains to God. And God hears your dialogue. God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.*" (58: 1) This verse shows how heaven intervened not only to resolve a dispute that plagued a simple family, but also to rectify the unfair norms of the society. God heard the voice of the woman who was arguing with the Prophet (PBUH) and complaining to God. The verses paint an image which fills the heart with the feelings of God's nearness, mercy, and kindness.

The dispute which is the subject of this Sura is about an old tradition that the Arabs used to practice before Islam. Before Islam when a man got very angry at his wife, he would say to her, "*You are like the back of my mother.*" Once he uttered these words the wife became legally estranged from her husband; however, she would not be considered divorced. This forced the wife to live in a state of limbo as it meant that normal marital relations were now forbidden, yet she was not considered a divorcee. Up until this incidence with Khawlah (RA) had occurred, there was no Islamic ruling regarding this tradition. This is an example of the kind of abuse women suffered before Islam. Khawlah bint Tha'labah (RA) was married to Awas ibn Al-Samet (RA) who was old and had become increasingly impatient. One day, he became angry with his wife and said to her, "*You are like the back of my mother.*" He then left the house to go meet with his friends. When he returned, he wanted to have sex with his wife; however, Khawlah (RA) pushed him away saying, "*I would not have sex with you until God and His Messenger (PBUH) settle this matter between us.*" Awas (RA) tried hard to get to her but she was able to push him away and left to ask the Prophet (PBUH) for God's verdict regarding this situation. She complained to the Prophet (PBUH) about the ill treatment that she was getting from her husband. There was no Islamic ruling regarding this situation; the Prophet (PBUH) could not help Khawlah (RA) so he advised her to be patient. But Khawlah (RA) would not give up and she kept arguing with the Prophet (PBUH) until God's decree which resolved the problem was revealed. The decree did not only resolve Khawlah's (RA) dilemma but also established a ruling to be followed by Muslim forever.

"Those of you who estrange their wives by equating them with their mothers (Zihar) - they are not their mothers. None can be their mothers except those who gave birth to them. And they indeed utter an ill word and a lie. And God is Effacer of Sins, Giver of Mercy." (58: 2) This

verse addresses those husband who practiced unfair tradition and used it to oppress their wives. Words uttered by an angry husband do not change the reality of the creation.

The process for redressing the wrong committed is then outlined, *“Those of you who legally estrange their wives by equating them with their mothers, then wish to go back on the words they uttered, (the penalty) in this case (is) the freeing of a slave before they touch one another. This is what you commanded to do; and God is Totally-Aware of what you do.”* (58: 3) The first act of penance is to free a slave. God made the freeing of those who were enslaved as a result of war, a step towards reparation of sins. An incentive for abstaining from sin is to remember that God is Totally-Aware of what we do. For those who did not have the means to free a slave they were told, *“let him fast for two successive months before they touch each other; as for him who is not able, let him feed sixty needy persons; that is in order that you may have faith in God and His Messenger, and these are God's limits, and the disbelievers shall have a painful torment.”* (58: 4) Applying God’s rulings in matters of daily life is an expression of faith in God and His Messenger (PBUH). Those who willfully and obstinately transgress the boundaries set by God’s commands are considered among the disbelievers.

The Significance

1. The story entails God response to a complaint of one of His servants. Although, that response came in the form of a revelation because the Prophet (PBUH) was still alive, but God also promised to respond to the invocation made by His servants until the end of time.
2. Islam opposes tyranny and oppression. Any act of oppression- be it on the basis of gender, race, or for any other reason- is completely forbidden.
3. It is the duty of Muslim men and women to speak up against injustice. Even if it necessitates arguing with the highest authority in the land.
4. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was not a law maker, he was only a Messenger of God. He cared and was deeply concerned about the conditions of those around him.

The Queen of Sheba

We find the story of the Queen of Sheba in surat Al-Naml (27: 22- 44). The verses within this surah narrate the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon (PBUH) the Prophet-king. The background theme for this account is the knowledge and the supernatural powers that God granted Solomon (PBUH). The name Al-Naml is translated as “The Ants” and is taken from verse 18, in which Solomon (PBUH) heard an ant who sensed the approaching army of Solomon (PBUH) and was warning its community to move away from the path of the advancing troops. We do not know how the ant recognized that this was Solomon’s (PBUH) army, but we do know that God gifted Solomon (PBUH) the supernatural power of understanding the language of birds and insects.

The story begins with a verse in which Solomon (PBUH) expresses his annoyance that he could not find the hoopoe, a colorful bird known for its distinctive crown of feathers, standing with the rest of the birds who had formed a battalion in his army. The awareness of this bird’s absence illustrates one of Solomon’s (PBUH) traits; his keen observation skills and his firm expectations of his soldiers. The hoopoe was missing and he had left without permission, such careless behavior should be punished. Solomon (PBUH); however, was a prophet, not a tyrant and so he deferred his final judgment until he had heard from the hoopoe itself, *“I will certainly punish him with a severe penalty, or I will execute him, unless he brings me a valid excuse.”* (27: 21) When the hoopoe returned, he brought with him some surprising news, *“But the hoopoe tarried not far. He (came up and) said, ‘I have learnt something that you do not know, and I have come to you from Sheba with certain information. I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given (abundance) of all things, and hers is a mighty throne. I found her and her people worshipping the sun besides God. Satan has made their deeds seem pleasing to them, and has kept them away from the straight path, so they became misguided. So that they do not worship God, who brings forth the hidden in the heavens and the earth, and who knows what you hide and what you declare. God, there is no deity save Him, the Lord of the great throne.”* (27: 22 – 26) It is important to note that the hoopoe begins his speech to the king with a bold statement, *“I have learnt something that you do not know.”* This must certainly have been intended to capture the king’s attention. The hoopoe then continues to tell the details of its discovery of a woman who reigns over a people in South Yemen in a kingdom with the name of Sheba. She was given an abundance of everything and she had a great throne. But they were worshipping the sun. The hoopoe deduced that the devil must have lured them away from the straight path. We find ourselves in front of an astonishing bird. The verses not only depict an intelligent bird that understands and expresses itself in an eloquent way but also a bird who believes in God and who has the ability to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong.

Although what Solomon heard was upsetting, he (PBUH) did not hasten to make a decision regarding the news he had been given. In order to move forward, Solomon (PBUH) needed to determine if what he had heard was true, *“(Solomon) said, ‘Soon we shall see whether you are telling the truth or you are lying. Go with this letter of mine and throw it down to them; then turn away and see what (answer) they return.’”* (27: 27 – 28) The contents of the letter were not disclosed at this point.

The following verse depicts another scene, the scene of the Queen's court. The Queen was asking her counselors, "*Chiefs, a noble letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it is (as follows), 'In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy; do not be haughty with me but come to me in submission (to God).'*" (27: 29 – 31) As the Queen of Sheba tells her court she has received a letter, it is important to note that at this time, she did not know how or by whom, the letter was delivered. Yet void of these important details, the Queen of Sheba still describes the letter as, "*a noble letter.*" There must have been something about this simple letter that made her make this statement. One can assume that Solomon (PBUH) must have been well known to her and her people, because she mentioned him by name. The letter itself was a simple letter. It had only one request, "*Do not be haughty with me but come to me in submission (to God).*" (27: 31) The letter was a request for them to submit to God.

Having shared the contents of the letter with them, she seeks their advice, "*She said, 'Chiefs, advise me in my affair; I would not make a decision except in your presence.'*" (27: 32) This showed a leadership that believes in consultation. Her counselors responded, "*We are people of might and great power, but the decision is yours, so consider what you will command.*" (27: 33) Her response reflects her aversion to violence, "*Indeed kings, when they enter a country, they ruin it, and subjugate its dignified people. And thus do they behave. But I am going to send them a present, and (wait) to see with what (answer) will messengers return.*" (27: 34 - 35) Clearly the Queen of Sheba knows the devastation that is brought on by war and her preference is to avoid this. Furthermore, she extends an olive branch by sending Solomon (PBUH) a gift. Sheba's gift is also intended to be a test to find out what kind of a man Solomon (PBUH) is; is he after money, or is he a man of principle? Clearly Sheba is an astute leader, and her initial dealings with Solomon (PBUH) shows a wisdom in dealing with sensitive matters of the state.

The narrative moves to describe the scene of Solomon (PBUH) receiving the queen's gift, "*(the king) said, 'What! Are you offering me wealth? What God has given me is better than that which He has given you. It is you (and not I) who rejoice in your gift.'*" (27: 36) Solomon (PBUH) expressed his dismay over the gift loud and clear. His focus is singular: to guide them to the worship of God alone. He then issues a dire threat, "*Return to them. We shall verily come upon them with hosts that they cannot resist, and we shall drive them out from their land in disgrace, and they will be abased.*" (27: 37)

The verses do not detail what happened next, but we understand from the text that Solomon (PBUH) knew that the queen and her entourage had accepted his invitation and were on their way to meet him. He may have also anticipated this from the way she handled the situation and guessed at her intention to avoid war. Then Solomon (PBUH) makes a curious request, to the members of his court, "*He said (to his own men), 'Chiefs, which of you can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' A powerful one from among the jinn said, 'I will bring it to you before you rise from your place; indeed, I am strong and trustworthy.'* The one who had knowledge of the Book said, '*I will bring it to you within the twinkling of an eye.'*" (27: 38 – 40) Why did Solomon (PBUH) want to bring Queen Sheba's throne before she arrived? Most probably that was his way of impressing her with his power and resources. One of the jinn offered to bring the throne to him before he had finished his meeting, but the one who had

knowledge of the Book said that he could bring it in a twinkling of an eye. The verses do not explain who was that who had the knowledge, nor did they specify which Book that had this knowledge. But we understand that he was a believer and that he was given extraordinary powers as a gift from God.

When Solomon (PBUH) saw the throne in front of him, he expressed his gratitude to God, *“Then when (Solomon) saw it placed firmly before him, he said, ‘This is by the Grace of my Lord to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful - and if any is grateful, truly his gratitude is for his own soul; but if any is ungrateful, truly my Lord is Rich, Generous’”* (27: 40) Solomon (PBUH) realized the responsibility of being blessed by God and responded by expressing his gratitude. It is a great trial when God bestows His blessings on people. They should recognize the source of their blessings and they should be grateful to Him. Gratitude does not increase or decrease God or His majesty, in any way. When we live in a state of gratitude towards God, it is for our own benefit.

Solomon (PBUH) wanted to test the queen, *“He said, ‘Disguise her throne for her that we may see whether she will be guided or remains one of the misguided.’”* (27: 41) This was also a way to test the wisdom of the queen when faced with such a surprise. She was asked, *“Is this like your throne?”* She did not know for sure that this was her throne. So, she was cautious in her answer. She said, *“It is as though it were the very one.”* (27: 42)

The following verse commented on why she was not a believer, *“And what she worshipped besides God prevented her, surely she was of one of people who disbelieve.”* (27: 43) She was following the tradition of her forefathers in worshipping the sun.

Yet, there was another surprise that Solomon (PBUH) had for her, *“It was said to her, ‘Enter the hall.’ And when she saw it she thought it was a pool and bared her legs. (Solomon) said, ‘It is a hall, paved with smooth glass.’ She said, ‘My Lord, I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to God, the Lord of the Worlds.’”* (27: 44) The crystal floor of the hall tricked her into thinking she was entering a shallow pool. She then realized that Solomon (PBUH) was given supernatural powers and she submitted herself to God. She understood that submission is to God alone and that whatever powers Solomon (PBUH) had were from God.

Significance of the Story of the Queen of Sheba

1. The story gives a lesson in humility. Solomon (PBUH) was given vast knowledge and supernatural powers, yet he did not disdain to learn from one of his subjects, the hoopoe. He was not aware of the existence and practices of the Queen and people of Sheba until the hoopoe discovered them and brought it to his attention.
2. Birds and insects are nations that communicate with each other.
3. Solomon’s (PBUH) awareness that he was blessed with enormous powers and knowledge did not make him a tyrant but motivated him to be grateful to God.

4. The verses depict the Queen of Sheba to be a wise, prudent, and judicious leader. She reacted wisely to the surprise letter from Solomon (PBUH). She consulted her advisors but she developed an intelligent plan to gauge the situation before taking a drastic measure.
5. The Queen of Sheba accepted the truth when she was presented with a clear proof.
6. Although Solomon's (PBUH) approach was firm and he behaved from a position of power, he was not disrespectful towards the Queen of Sheba and provided enough evidence for her to be able to see the truth.

The Wife of 'Imran

The Quran narrates the story of the vow that 'Imran's wife made to God. When she became pregnant, she vowed to dedicate her son to the service of God in the temple. The story is told as an introduction to the story of Mary (PBUH). The story starts with a verse which lists those whom God has chosen from among His servants to carry the responsibility of bringing His guidance to people. There was a continuous chain of messengers that were chosen to deliver God's message; a single message that was revealed to humankind over the years since the beginning of time, *"God did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of 'Imran above all people, offspring, one of the other. And God is All-Hearing, Omniscient."* (3: 33- 34) The word "offspring" does not necessarily mean that there is a blood relation between the messengers; however, they all are the offspring of Adam and Noah (PBUT). The verse mentions two people, Adam and Noah (PBUT) and two families, the families of Abraham and 'Imran. This indicates that Adam and Noah were chosen by God as individuals, while in the case of Abraham and 'Imran (PBUT), not only were they chosen as individuals, but their offspring were also chosen as well. The term "offspring" is meant to indicate that prophet-hood is not granted according to familial ties, but rather, it is given on the basis of the legacy of faith.

"When the wife of 'Imran said, 'My Lord, I do dedicate what is in my womb entirely for Your special service. So accept this of me. You are the All-Hearing, the Omniscient.'" (3: 35) But the baby came out to be a female, *"When she was delivered, she said, 'My Lord, I am delivered of a female child'- and God knew best what she brought forth – 'And the male is not like the female. I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from Satan, the rejected.'"* (3: 36)

The story of the vow that the wife of 'Imran, the mother of Mary, made reveals a heart full of faith. She vowed to entrust the most precious thing she had, her child yet still in her womb, to the service of God. This voluntary dedication of her child to the service of God is an act filled with emotion. It suggests that absolute freedom can only be attained by those who dedicate themselves fully to God. The belief in the oneness of God and the application of His law frees individuals from any kind of slavery to others. The humble prayer made by the wife of 'Imran reflected her absolute submission to God. She was; however, hoping for a son because the tradition at that time was that only males were accepted to serve in the temple. The verses express how Mary's mother appealed to God to accept her offering asking Him in the words of a person who feels the closeness to God, to protect her gift and her progeny from the rejected one. God responded to her sincerity and accepted her gift, *"Her Lord graciously accepted her. He made her grow in purity and beauty under the care of Zachary. Whenever Zachary went into the sanctuary where she was, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said, 'Mary, whence comes this to you?' She said, 'From God. God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.'"* (3: 37)

This was God's reward for the sincerity that filled the heart of the mother. God entrusted Mary to the care of Zachary (PBUH), a descendent of the Prophet Aaron (PBUH) and the chief of the temple. She grew up in a pure environment and was supplied with provisions from God. There is no need to discuss the details of the provisions; we will simply say that she was given provisions that made Zachary (PBUH) wonder. He asked her about this, her response was the response of a

humble believer who does not boast or brag about the blessings bestowed on her. She simply said it is, *“From God. God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.”* This was an indication for the miracles to come with the births of John and Jesus (PBUT).

Significance

Sometimes we want to please God in a certain way and forget that God chooses the way for us to please Him. The wife of ‘Imran wanted a son to dedicate for the service of God. This was her wish because she knew that only males can serve God in the temple. Not only did God give her a daughter and allowed the daughter to serve in the temple but He chose the daughter to be a virgin mother. This was a miracle for the whole world.

