

## Part 19 Surah 27 Al-Naml Verses 15-19

### 15 A Brief Reference and a Detailed Account

*For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants. (15)*

This is the starting signal that opens the story. It reports on the most important favour God granted to David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). As for David, the details of what knowledge God imparted to him are given in other *surahs*. These include his fine and enchanting recitation of Psalms which was echoed by the universe around him. The mountains and the birds sang God's praises with him because of the sweetness of his voice, his profound sincerity and deep feeling as he addressed his Lord. All barriers and impediments between him and the universe were removed. He was skilled in making protective garments which were particularly useful in war. Iron and sharp, tough objects were softened for him so that he was able to use them the way he liked. He was also taught how to judge between people, which was a favour also shared by Solomon.

The *surah* also gives us an account of some of the favours God granted Solomon, particularly his knowledge of the speech of birds and other creatures. This is in addition to what is mentioned in other *surahs*, such as his ability to judge in intricate disputes, and the fact that the winds were made subject to his command, by God's grace.

The story begins with the reference to knowledge: *"For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon... (15)"* Before the verse concludes we are told of their thanksgiving to God for this favour. They stress the great value and benefit of knowledge, and declare their praise of God for it. Thus, the value of knowledge is enhanced, and it becomes clear that people with knowledge are favoured highly.

We are not told here of the type or speciality of the knowledge given to these two prophets because the emphasis is on knowledge in its entirety. This gives us the further connotation that all knowledge is a gift from God, and that it behoves every person of knowledge to know the source of such knowledge. This makes all those endowed with knowledge turn to God, praising Him, and motivates them to use their knowledge in ways that please the great Giver. Thus, knowledge, which is an aspect of God's favour, does not turn people away from God. Any knowledge that does so is deviant, moving away from its source and missing its goal. Nor does it bring happiness to the one who possesses it. Instead, it brings only misery, fear, worry and destruction.

such favours as they truly are: *"This is indeed a manifest favour [from God]." (16)* It is a favour that makes its source known to all. No one can teach the language of birds to man other than God, and no one can give anyone a measure of all good things except God.

Birds, animals and insects have their own means of communication, which are in fact their languages. God, the Creator of all these says: *"There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own."* (6: 38)

They cannot form communities unless they have ties and bonds which they maintain, and some means of communication with which to understand each other. This is clearly observed in many species of bird, animal and insect. Biologists who are interested in certain species try hard to understand a little of their languages, but they can only rely on guesswork which does not approach any degree of certainty. What God granted to Solomon was something special, a miracle that goes beyond the laws of nature familiar to man. The knowledge he acquired was not through any attempt he had made to understand these species; it was a gift from God.

It is important to emphasize this point so as to make it clearly understood. Some contemporary commentators on the Qur'an are too impressed by modern scientific achievements. Hence they try to explain what the Qur'an says about Solomon as similar to the attempts by biologists to understand the methods of communication used by birds and animals. Thus, they force the miracle God granted to Solomon out of its nature. They also give scientific discoveries a degree of importance far greater than what they deserve. It is perfectly easy for God to teach one of His servants the languages of birds, animals and insects, as a special favour, and without any effort on that person's part. This does not require more than the lifting of some barriers God has placed between different species when He created them all.

Yet this is only one part of the miracle God granted to Solomon, His servant. The other part was that a number of the *jinn* and birds were placed under his command, serving him like human servants would. Moreover, the birds thus placed under him were given special faculties far greater than ordinary birds of the same species. This is clearly apparent in the story of the hoopoe who was able to understand the situation at the Queen of Sheba's court as clearly as a most intelligent and religious person. This is again a miraculous aspect.

It is a fact that the law God has set for His creation allows birds a measure of understanding that may vary, but this measure remains well below what man understands. That birds have their own form is merely part of the overall balance maintained in the universe. It is subject to the general law of creation.

Today humanity has achieved a good standard in a particular branch of science, being able to induce nuclear fusion and use nuclear energy. But what has humanity benefited by such knowledge whose possessors neither remember, fear or praise God, nor use their knowledge in His service? What result has humanity reaped other than the horrific tragedy of nuclear bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the worry and fear of destruction that people in the West and the East experience?<sup>1</sup>

The story then progresses concentrating on Solomon only: *"Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].'" (16)* David was given kingship alongside prophethood and knowledge, but it is knowledge, rather than kingship, that is mentioned in this context because being a king is too trivial by comparison.

It is clear that the inheritance intended here is that of knowledge, because it is the main blessing which deserves mention. This is confirmed by Solomon's declaration to his people: *"O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things... (16)"* (Verse 16) He highlights the fact that he has been taught the language of birds, and mentions other favours in a general way, but he attributes both to the same source, which is not David, his father. Indeed, none of this did he inherit from his father.

### 16 Removing the Barriers of Nature

*"O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things... (16)"* Thus Solomon announces to all people that these are aspects of God's favours granted to him. He seeks no special position as a result. Indeed, he describes

<sup>1</sup> After two bombs were dropped on Japan, a member of the industrial authority working on production of the British bomb, and who was a professor at the University of Birmingham, wrote: "I am certain that it will not be long before the production of bombs, with greater explosive power, perhaps by 10,000 tons or more, and then there will be bombs with explosive power reaching one million tons. Nothing will ensure protection against such bombs, six of which will be sufficient to wipe England off the face of the earth." His prediction has been fulfilled, and the great powers have produced bombs so powerful that they make the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem no more than children's toys. Perhaps we should mention here that the Hiroshima bomb immediately killed between 210,000 and 240,000 other than causing burns and disfigurement to scores of thousands of people. \* It should be remembered that this was written in 1954, when the arms race was in full swing. The author does not give the source of his quotation, and the name of the professor is written in Arabic letters only, making it very difficult to identify him with any degree of accuracy. — Editor's note.

Another fact is that a hoopoe living today is exactly the same as other hoopoes that have lived on earth for a very long time. Its genes are such that they make it, practically, a clone of the first hoopoe. Whatever adaptations the hoopoe has gone through does not enable it to move on to a higher species. This is clearly part of the system and balance God has set for His creation.

The two facts mentioned above cannot preclude the working of a miracle whenever God, the Creator of all species and laws governing them wants it. The miracle itself may be a part of the overall law of creation, which we do not know in full. If it is, then this part occurs at the time appointed for it, which is known only to God. As it occurs, it transcends the natural laws familiar to man, but it thus complements the divine laws of creation and balance. This explains how Solomon's hoopoe came into existence, and perhaps all the birds that were placed under Solomon's command at that time.

### 17-19 A Majestic Procession for Solomon

*"Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks." (17)* This is a big procession in which are marshalled all troops, *jinn*, human and bird. Naturally, men are well known to us, but the *jinn* are creatures about whom we know nothing more than what God has said in the Qur'an. They were created from flames, and can see us while we cannot see them: *"Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them."* (7: 27) [The reference in this verse is to *Iblis*, or Satan, who belongs to the *jinn*.] They are able to prompt people and tempt them to take evil and sinful actions. We do not know how this takes place. We also know that a group of them believed in God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He did not meet or see them, but God informed him of what happened: *"Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a group of the jinn listened [to the Qur'an]'; and said: 'We have listened to a wonderful discourse that guides to what is right, and so we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate any partners with our Lord.'" (72: 1-2)* We also know that God made some of them serve Solomon, making for him whatever he wished of sanctuaries, statues, and large cauldrons for cooking. They also dived into the sea for him, and did his bidding. Some were in his procession side by side with humans and birds.

We say that God placed under Solomon's command only a section of the *jinn*, birds, and humans. Thus it is clear that not all people on earth were his subjects, because his kingdom stretched over an area that includes today's Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, up to the Euphrates. Similarly, not all the *jinn* or birds were under his command; rather it was a section of each type.

In support of this view about the *jinn* we cite the fact that *Iblis*, or Satan, and his offspring belong to the *jinn* as the Qur'an states:

*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblis, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command.'* (18: 50) *God also says about Iblis: "who whispers in the hearts of mankind, from among jinn and mankind. (114: 5-6)*

Thus *Iblis* and his offspring who all belonged to the *jinn* continued to whisper in people's hearts tempting them to sin during Solomon's reign. Had they been placed under his command, they would not have been able to do so since he was a prophet advocating what is right. Hence, it is clear that only a section of them were loyal to Solomon.

In support of our view concerning the birds, we say that Solomon learnt of the hoopoe's absence when he inspected the birds. Had all birds, including all hoopoes, been placed under him, they would have been marshalled in his procession, and he would never have been able to discover the absence of one hoopoe among millions of hoopoes, and many millions of birds. He would not have wondered: *"Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? ... (20)"* Indeed, this question suggests that it was a particular hoopoe which he identified. It might be that it was the only hoopoe under Solomon's command, or that it was the one in a group of hoopoes whose duty was to take part in that particular procession. What supports this view is that we soon realize that the hoopoe in question was gifted with an understanding that transcends what hoopoes and all birds normally possess. Such gifts must have been granted to those placed under Solomon's command, and not to hoopoes and birds in general. Indeed, the hoopoe in the story appears to have a gift of understanding matched only by intelligent and God-fearing humans.

So, this great procession was ready before Solomon, *"and they were all lined in orderly ranks," (17)* so that there would be no chance of disorder. They are described as 'troops' in the verse to indicate the orderly nature of the procession.

*At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.'* (18) *He smiled joyously at her words, and said: My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.'* (19)

So the procession moved forward in an orderly manner, until they reached a valley where ants were in plenty. In fact the *surah* describes the place as a valley of ants. At this point, an ant supervisor made an announcement to all other ants in the vicinity. It should be remembered that, like bees, ants live in complex

social colonies in which different ants have different functions and duties that are organized according to an elaborate system that we might find too difficult to emulate, despite our superior intelligence. So, the supervisor ant announced in the manner of communication used by ants that they should hasten back to their dwellings, so that Solomon and his troops would not crush them unawares.

Solomon understood what she said and was pleased. His pleasure was two-fold: he smiled at her words like an adult smiles to a child who tries to evade him, fearing that the adult wants to punish him when he has no such intention. Plus he was gratified that God has given him this gift which opened up for him worlds that are normally closed to mankind. He was also joyful at the fact that ants should have such understanding, with the ability to give orders and carry them out.

When Solomon gathered what the ant said, *he smiled joyously at her words.* Yet he soon realized what had just happened. He realized that it was all a great gift God had granted him, lifting the barriers that separate different types of creation. He therefore turned to God in acknowledgement of His favours: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents... (19)"* It is a direct address to his Lord, one that expresses the feeling that He is so close to him. He wants his whole being: organs, feelings and thoughts; heart, mind and tongue; words, actions and directions; talents, abilities and energies to be brought together to offer thanks for all the favours bestowed on him and his parents. Solomon's prayer indicates how profound his appreciation of God's grace was. He felt that God's blessings overwhelmed his whole being as also his parents'. Hence, he wanted to give due thanks with his whole being: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents... (19)"*

*"And that I may do righteous deeds which will please You... (19)"* To do good deeds is also a blessing from God to which He directs those who are genuinely grateful for His gifts. Solomon, a truly grateful servant of God who prays for His help so that he would wholeheartedly express his gratitude, also prays to Him to guide him to do what will earn His pleasure.

*"And include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants."* (19) Solomon knows that to be included among God's righteous servants is an aspect of God's mercy. When it is bestowed on a servant of God, it guides him to do righteous deeds, and thus he is included in this best group of God's servants. We note that Solomon, a prophet at whose disposal God placed large sections of *jinn*, birds and people, does not take anything for granted. He fears lest his deeds or thanksgiving

might not be up to the standard expected of him. This is a case of refined sensitivity that enhances Solomon's aspiration to gain God's pleasure and receive His mercy. It is expressed at the moment God's grace is brought into view, as when the ant's warning to other ants focuses attention on God's grace that made Solomon understand her speech.

We see here two miracles, not one. The first is Solomon listening to the ant and understanding her warning to her community. The second is the ant's awareness that the approaching people were Solomon and his troops. We know that the first pertains to what God taught Solomon, a man and a prophet. Comparatively speaking, this is more probable than the second miracle which is clear in the ant's words. An ant may recognize that the approaching procession consists of gigantic creatures who could easily crush tiny ones like ants if they step on them. Prompted by the survival instinct God has given them, ants may flee such a danger. But for an ant to recognize Solomon and his troops is miraculous indeed.