

Surah 18. Al-Kahf

18.1 ALL PRAISE is due to God who has bestowed this divine writ from on high upon His servant, and has not allowed any deviousness to obscure its meaning¹ :

18.2 [a divine writ] unerringly straight, mean to warn [the godless] of a severe punishment from Him, and to give unto the believers who do good works the glad tiding that theirs shall be a goodly reward -

18.3 [a state of bliss] in which they shall dwell beyond the count of time.

18.4 Furthermore, [this divine writ is meant] to warn all those who assert, "God has taken unto Himself a son."

18.5 No knowledge whatever have they of Him,² and neither had their forefathers: dreadful is this saying that comes out of their mouths, [and] nothing but falsehood do they utter!

18.6 But wouldst thou, perhaps,³ torment thyself to death with grief over them if they are not willing to believe in this message?⁴

18.7 Behold, We have willed that all beauty on earth be a means by which We put men to a test,⁵ [showing] which of them are best in conduct;

18.8 and, verily, [in time] We shall reduce all that is on it to barren dust!

18.9 [AND SINCE the life of this world is but a test,⁶ dost thou [really] think that [the parable of] the Men of the Cave and of [their devotion to] the scriptures could be deemed more wondrous than any [other] of Our messages?⁷

18.10 When those youths took refuge in the cave, they prayed: "O our Sustainer! Bestow on us grace from Thyself, and endow us, whatever our [outward] condition, with consciousness of what is right!"⁸

18.11 And thereupon We veiled their ears in the cave⁹ for many a year,

18.12 and then We awakened them:¹⁰ [and We did all this] so that We might mark out [to the world]¹¹ which of the two points of view showed a better comprehension of the time-span during which they had remained in this state.¹²

18.13 [And now] We shall truly relate to thee their story:¹³ Behold, they were young men who had attained to faith in their Sustainer: and [so] We deepened their consciousness of the right way¹⁴

18.14 and endowed their hearts with strength, so that they stood up¹⁵ and said [to one another]: "Our Sustainer is the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we invoke any deity other than Him: [if we did,] we should indeed have uttered an enormity!

18.15 These people of ours have taken to worshipping [other] deities instead of Him, without being able to¹⁶ adduce any reasonable evidence in support of their beliefs;¹⁷ and who could be more wicked than he who invents a lie about God?¹⁸

18.16 Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and from all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in that cave: God will spread His grace over you, and will endow you - whatever your [outward] condition - with all that your souls may need!"¹⁹

18.17 And [for many a year] thou might have seen the sun, on its rising, incline away from their cave on the right, and, on its setting, turn aside from them on the left, while they lived on in that spacious chamber,²⁰ [bearing witness to] this of God's messages: He whom God guides, he alone has found the right way; whereas for him whom He lets go astray thou canst never find any protector who would point out the, right way.

18.18 And thou wouldst have thought that they were awake, whereas they lay asleep. And We caused them, to turn over repeatedly, now to the right, now to the left; and their dog [lay] on the threshold, its forepaws outstretched. Hadst thou come upon them [unprepared], thou wouldst surely have turned away from them in flight, and wouldst surely have been filled with awe of them.²¹

18.19 And so, [in the course of time,] We awakened them,²² and they began to ask one another [as to what had happened to them].²³ One of them asked: "How long have you remained thus?" [The others] answered: "We have remained thus a day, or part of a day."²⁴ Said they [who were endowed with deeper insight]: "Your Sustainer knows best how long you have thus remained."²⁵ Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you thereof [some] provisions. But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you:

18.20 for, behold, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith - in which case you would never attain to any good!"²⁶

18.21 AND IN THIS way²⁷ have We drawn [people's] attention to their story,²⁸ so that they might know - whenever they debate among themselves as to what happened to those [Men of the Cave]²⁹ - that God's promise [of resurrection] is true, and that there can be no doubt as to [the coming of] the Last Hour. And so, some [people] said: "Erect a building in their memory;³⁰ God knows best what happened to them." Said they whose opinion prevailed in the end: "Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory!"

18.22 [And in times to come] some will say,³¹ "[They were] three, the fourth of them being their dog," while others will say, "Five, with their dog as the sixth of them" - idly guessing at something of which they can have no knowledge - and [so on, until] some will say, "[They were] seven, the eighth of them being their dog." Say: "My Sustainer knows best how many they were. None but a few have any [real] knowledge of them. Hence, do not argue about them otherwise than by way of an obvious argument,³² and do not ask any of those [storytellers] to enlighten thee about them."

18.23 AND NEVER say about anything, "Behold, I shall do this tomorrow,"

18.24 without [adding], "if God so wills."³³ And if thou shouldst forget [thyself at the time, and become aware of it later], call thy Sustainer to mind and say: "I pray that my Sustainer guide me, even closer than this, to a consciousness of what is right!"

18.25 AND [some people assert], "They remained in their cave three hundred years"; and some have added nine [to that number].³⁴

18.26 Say: "God knows best how long they remained [there]. His [alone] is the knowledge of the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth: how well does He see and hear! No guardian have they apart from Him, since He allots to no one a share in His rule!"

18.27 AND CONVEY [to the world] whatever has been revealed to thee of thy Sustainer's writ. There is nothing that could alter His words;³⁵ and thou canst find no refuge other than with Him.

18.28 And contain thyself in patience by the side of all who at morn and at evening invoke their Sustainer, seeking His countenance, and let not shine eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of this world's life:³⁶ and pay no heed to any whose heart We have rendered heedless of all remembrance of Us³⁷ because he had always followed [only] his own desires, abandoning all that is good and true.³⁸

18.29 And say: "The truth [has now come] from your Sustainer: let, then, him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it. "Verily, for all who sin against themselves [by rejecting Our truth]³⁹ We have readied a fire whose billowing folds will encompass them from all sides,⁴⁰ and if they beg for water, they will be given water [hot] like molten lead, which will scald their faces: how dreadful a drink, and how evil a place to rest!

18.30 [But,] behold, as for those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds - verily, We do not fail to requite any who persevere in doing good:

18.31 theirs shall be gardens of perpetual bliss - [gardens] through which running waters flow wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of silk and brocade, [and] wherein upon couches they will recline:⁴¹ how excellent a recompense, and how goodly a place to rest!

18.32 AND PROPOUND unto them the parable of two men, upon one of whom We had bestowed two vineyards, and surrounded them with date-palms, and placed a field of grain in-between.⁴²

18.33 Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed therein in any way, for We had caused a stream to gush forth in the midst of each of them.

18.34 And so [the man] had fruit in abundance. And [one day] he said to his friend, bandying words with him, "More wealth have I than thou, and mightier am I as regards [the number and power of my] followers!"

18.35 And having [thus] sinned against himself, he entered his garden, saying, "I do not think that this will ever perish!

18.36 And neither do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if [it should come, and] I am brought before my Sustainer,⁴³ I will surely find something even better than this as [my last] resort!"

18.37 And his friend answered him in the course of their argument: "Wilt thou blaspheme against Him who has created thee out of dust,⁴⁴ and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end has fashioned thee into a [complete] man?"

18.38 But as for myself, [I know that] He is God, my Sustainer; and I cannot attribute divine powers to any but my Sustainer."⁴⁵

18.39 And [he continued:] "Alas,⁴⁶ if thou hadst but said, on entering thy garden, Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power save with God!' Although, as thou seest, I have less wealth and offspring than thou,

18.40 yet it may well be that my Sustainer will give me something better than thy garden - just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [thy garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust

18.41 or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that thou wilt never be able to find it again!"

18.42 And [thus it happened:] his fruitful gardens were encompassed [by ruin], and there he was, wringing his hands over all that he had spent on that: which now lay waste, with its trellises caved in; and he could but say, "Oh, would that I had not attributed divine powers to any but my Sustainer!"

18.43 for now he had nought⁴⁷ to succour him in God's stead, nor could he succour himself.

18.44 For thus it is: all protective power belongs to God alone, the True One. He is the best to grant recompense, and the best to determine what is to be.⁴⁸

18.45 AND PROPOUND unto them the parable of the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth: but [in time] they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. And it is God [alone] who determines all things.

18.46 Wealth and children are an adornment of this world's life: but good deeds, the fruit whereof endures forever, are of far greater merit in thy Sustainer's sight, and a far better source of hope.⁴⁹

18.47 Hence, [bear in mind] the Day on which We shall cause the mountains to disappear and thou shalt behold the earth void and bare: for [on that Day] We will [resurrect the dead and] gather them all together, leaving out none of them.

18.48 And they will be lined up before thy Sustainer, [and He will say:⁵⁰] "Now, indeed, you have come unto Us [in a lonely state], even as We created you in the first instance⁵¹ - although you were wont to assert that We would never appoint for you a meeting [with Us]!"

18.49 And the record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid open; and thou wilt behold the guilty filled with dread at what [they see] therein; and they will exclaim: "Oh, woe unto us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, be it small or great, but takes everything into account!" For they will find all that they ever wrought [now] facing them, and [will know that] thy Sustainer does not wrong anyone.

18.50 AND [remember that] when We told the angels, "Prostrate yourselves before Adam,"⁵² they all prostrated themselves, save Iblis: he too was one of those invisible beings,⁵³ but then he turned away from his Sustainer's command. Will you, then, take him and his cohorts⁵⁴ for [your] masters instead of Me, although they are your foes? How vile an exchange on the evildoers' part!⁵⁵

18.51 I did not make them witnesses of the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor of the creation of their own selves;⁵⁶ and neither do I [have any need to] take as My helpers those [beings] that lead [men] astray.⁵⁷

18.52 Hence, [bear in mind] the Day on which He will say, "Call [now] unto those beings whom you imagined to have a share in My divinity!"⁵⁸ - whereupon they will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them: for We shall have placed between them an unbridgeable gulf.⁵⁹

18.53 And those who were lost in sin will behold the fire, and will know that they are bound to fall into it, and will find no way of escape therefrom.

18.54 THUS, INDEED, have We given in this Qur'an many facets to every kind of lesson [designed] for [the benefit of] mankind.⁶⁰ However, man is, above all else, always given to contention:

18.55 for, what is there to keep people from attaining to faith now that guidance has come unto them, and from asking their Sustainer to forgive them their sins - unless it be [their wish] that the fate of the [sinful] people of ancient times should befall them [as well], or that the [ultimate] suffering should befall them in the hereafter?⁶¹

18.56 But We send [Our] message-bearers only as heralds of glad tidings and as warners - whereas those who are bent on denying the truth contend [against them] with fallacious arguments, so as to render void the truth thereby, and to make My messages and warnings a target of their mockery.

18.57 And who could be more wicked than he to whom his Sustainer's messages are conveyed and who thereupon turns away from them, forgetting all [the evil] that his hands may have wrought?⁶² Behold, over their hearts have We laid veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears, deafness; and though thou call them onto the right path,⁶³ they will never allow themselves to be guided.

18.58 Yet, [withal,] thy Sustainer is the Truly-Forgiving One, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them [at once] to task for whatever [wrong] they commit, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment [then and there].⁶⁴ but nay, they have a time-limit beyond which they shall find no redemption⁶⁵ -

18.59 as [was the case with all] those communities that We destroyed when they went on and on doing wrong:⁶⁶ for We had set a time-limit for their destruction.

18.60 AND Lo!⁶⁷ [In the course of his wanderings,] Moses said to his servant:⁶⁸ "I shall not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas, even I [have to] spend untold years [in my quest]!"

18.61 But when they reached the junction between the two [seas], they forgot all about their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight.⁶⁹

18.62 And after the two had walked some distance, [Moses] said to his servant: "Bring us our mid-day meal; we have indeed suffered hardship on this [day of] our journey!"

18.63 Said [the servant]: "Wouldst thou believe it?⁷⁰ When we betook ourselves to that rock for a rest, behold, I forgot about the fish - and none but Satan made me thus forget it!⁷¹ and it took its way into the sea! How strange!"

18.64 [Moses] exclaimed: "That [was the place] which we were seeking!"⁷² And the two turned back, retracing their footsteps,

18.65 and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed grace from Ourselves and unto whom We had imparted knowledge [issuing] from Ourselves.⁷³

18.66 Moses said unto him: "May I follow thee on the understanding that thou wilt impart to me some thing of that consciousness of what right which has been imparted to thee?"

18.67 [The other] answered: "Behold, thou wilt never be able to have patience with me -

18.68 for how couldst thou be patient about something that thou canst not comprehend within the compass of [thy] experience?"⁷⁴

18.69 Replied [Moses]: "Thou wilt find me patient, if God so wills: and I shall not disobey thee in anything!"

18.70 Said [the sage]: "Well, then, if thou art to follow me, do not question me about aught [that I may do] until I myself give thee an account thereof."

18.71 And so the two went on their way, till [they reached the seashore; and] when they disembarked from the boat [that had ferried them across], the sage⁷⁵ made a hole in it - [whereupon Moses] exclaimed: "Hast thou made a hole in it in order to drown the people who may be [travelling] in it? Indeed, thou hast done a grievous thing!"

18.72 He replied: "Did I not tell thee that thou wilt never be able to have patience with me?"

18.73 Said [Moses]: "Take me not to task for my having forgotten [myself], and be not hard on me on account of what I have done!"

18.74 And so the two went on, till, when they met a young man, [the sage] slew him - [whereupon Moses] exclaimed: "Hast thou slain an innocent human being without [his having taken] another man's life? Indeed, thou hast done a terrible thing!"

18.75 He replied: "Did I not tell thee that thou wilt never be able to have patience with me?"

18.76 Said [Moses]: "If, after this, I should ever question thee, keep me not in thy company: [for by] now thou hast heard enough excuses from me."

18.77 And so the two went on, till, when they came upon some village people, they asked them⁷⁶ for food; but those [people] refused them all hospitality. And they saw in that [village] a wall which was on the point of tumbling down, and [the sage] rebuilt it - [whereupon Moses] said: "Hadst thou so wished, surely thou couldst [at least] have obtained some payment for it?"

18.78 [The sage] replied: "This is the parting of ways between me and thee. [And now] I shall let thee know the real meaning of all [those events] that thou wert unable to bear with patience:

18.79 "As for that boat, it belonged to some needy people who toiled upon the sea - and I desired to damage it⁷⁷ because [I knew that] behind them was a king who is wont to seize every boat by brute force.

18.80 "And as for that young man, his parents were [true] believers - whereas we had every reason to fear⁷⁸ that he would bring bitter grief upon them by [his] overweening wickedness and denial of all truth:

18.81 and so we desired that their Sustainer grant them in his stead [a child] of greater purity than him, and closer [to them] in loving tenderness.

18.82 "And as for that wall, it belonged to two orphan boys [living] in the town, and beneath it was [buried], a treasure belonging to them [by right].⁷⁹ Now their father had been a righteous man, and so thy Sustainer willed it that when they come of age they should bring forth their treasure by thy Sustainer's grace. "And I did not do [any of] this of my own accord:⁸⁰ this is the real meaning of all [those events] that thou wert unable to bear with patience."

18.83 AND THEY will ask thee about the Two-Horned One. Say: "I will convey unto you something by which he ought to be remembered."⁸¹

18.84 Behold, We established him securely on earth, and endowed him with [the knowledge of] the right means to achieve anything⁸² [that he might set out to achieve];

18.85 and so he chose the right means [in whatever he did].⁸³

18.86 [And he marched westwards] till, when he came to the setting of the sun,⁸⁴ it appeared to him that it was setting in a dark, turbid sea,⁸⁵ and nearby he found a people [given to every kind of wrongdoing]. We said: "O thou Two-Horned One! Thou mayest either cause [them] to suffer or treat them with kindness!"⁸⁶

18.87 He answered: "As for him who does wrong [unto others⁸⁷] - him shall we, in time, cause to suffer; and thereupon he shall be referred to his Sustainer, and He will cause him to suffer with unnameable suffering."⁸⁸

18.88 But as for him who believes and does righteous deeds - he will have the ultimate good [of the life to come] as his reward; and [as for us,] we shall make binding on him [only] that which is easy to fulfill."⁸⁹

18.89 And once again⁹⁰ he chose the right means [to achieve a right end].

18.90 [And then he marched eastwards] till, when he came to the rising of the sun,⁹¹ he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it:

18.91 thus [We had made them, and thus he left them⁹²]; and We did encompass with Our knowledge all that he had in mind.⁹³

18.92 And once again he chose the right means [to achieve a right end].

18.93 [And he marched on] till, when he reached [a place] between the two mountain-barriers,⁹⁴ he found beneath them a people who could scarcely understand a word [of his language].

18.94 They said: "O thou Two-Horned One! Behold, Gog and Magog⁹⁵ are spoiling this land. May we, then pay unto thee a tribute on the understanding that thou wilt erect a barrier between us and them?"

18.95 He answered: "That wherein my Sustainer has so securely established me is better [than anything that you could give me];⁹⁶ hence, do but help me with [your labour's] strength, [and] I shall erect a rampart between you and them!

18.96 Bring me ingots of iron!" Then, after he had [piled up the iron and] filled the gap between the two mountain-sides, he said: "[Light a fire and] ply your bellows!"⁹⁷ At length, when he had made it [glow like] fire, he commanded: "Bring me molten copper which I may pour upon it."

18.97 And thus [the rampart was built, and] their enemies⁹⁸ were unable to scale it, and neither were they able to pierce it.

18.98 Said [the King]: "This is a mercy from my Sustainer! Yet when the time appointed by my Sustainer⁹⁹ shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground: and my Sustainer's promise always comes true!"¹⁰⁰

18.99 AND ON that Day¹⁰¹ We shall [call forth all mankind and] leave them to surge like waves [that dash] against one another; and the trumpet [of judgment] will be blown, and We shall gather them all together.

18.100 And on that Day We shall place hell, for all to see, before those who denied the truth -

18.101 those whose eyes had been veiled against any remembrance of Me because they could not bear to listen [to the voice of truth]!

18.102 Do they who are bent on denying the truth think, perchance, that they could take [any of] My creatures for protectors against Me?¹⁰² Verily, We have readied hell to welcome all who [thus] deny the truth!¹⁰³

18.103 Say: "Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do?

18.104 "[It is] they whose labour has gone astray in [the pursuit of no more than] this world's life, and who none the less think that they are doing good works:

18.105 it is they who have chosen to deny their Sustainer's messages and the truth that they are destined to meet Him." Hence, all their [good] deeds come to nought, and no weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day.¹⁰⁴

18.106 That will be their recompense - [their] hell - for having denied the truth and made My messages and My apostles a target of their mockery.

18.107 [But,] verily, as for those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds - the gardens of paradise will be there to welcome them;

18.108 therein will they abide, [and] never will they desire any change therefrom.

18.109 SAY: "If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer's words, the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer's words are exhausted! And [thus it would be] if we were to add to it sea upon sea."¹⁰⁵

18.110 Say [O Prophet]: "I am but a mortal man like all of you. It has been revealed unto me that your God is the One and Only God. Hence, whoever looks forward [with hope and awe] to meeting his Sustainer [on Judgment Day], let him do righteous deeds, and let him not ascribe unto anyone or anything a share in the worship due to his Sustainer!"

Author Comments

1 - Lit., "and has not given it any deviousness". The term 'iwaj signifies "crookedness", "tortuousness" or "deviation" (e.g., from a path), as well as "distortion" or "deviousness" in the abstract sense of these words. The above phrase is meant to establish the direct, unambiguous character of the Qur'an and to stress its freedom from all obscurities and internal contradictions: cf. [4:82](#)- "Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction!"

2 - Most of the classical commentators (and, as far as I am aware, all the earlier translators of the Qur'an) relate the pronoun in bihi to the assertion that "God has taken unto Himself a son", and hence take the phrase to mean, "They have no knowledge of it", i.e., no knowledge of such a happening. However, this interpretation is weak inasmuch as absence of knowledge does not necessarily imply an objective negation of the fact to which it relates. It is, therefore, obvious that bihi cannot signify "of it": it signifies "of Him", and relates to God. Hence, the phrase must be rendered as above - meaning that they who make such a preposterous claim have no real knowledge of Him, since they attribute to the Supreme Being something that is attributable only to created, imperfect beings. This interpretation is supported, in an unequivocal manner, by Tabari and, as an alternative, by Baydawi.

3 - Lit., "it may well be that thou wilt...", etc. However, the particle la'alla does not, in this context, indicate a possibility but, rather, a rhetorical question implying a reproach for the attitude referred to (Maraghi XIII, 116).

4 - This rhetorical question is addressed, in the first instance, to the Prophet, who was deeply distressed by the hostility which his message aroused among the pagan Meccans, and suffered agonies of apprehension regarding their spiritual fate. Beyond that, however, it applies to everyone who, having become convinced of the truth of an ethical proposition, is dismayed at the indifference with which his social environment reacts to it.

5 - Lit., "We have made all that exists on earth as its adornment in order that We might put them [i.e., all human beings] to a test": meaning that God lets them reveal their real characters in their respective attitudes - moral or immoral - towards the material goods and benefits which the world offers them. In further analysis, this passage implies that the real motive underlying men's refusal to believe in God's spiritual message (see preceding verse) is almost always their excessive, blind attachment to the good of this world, combined with a false pride in what they regard as their own achievements (cf. [16:22](#) and the corresponding note [15]).

6 - This interpolation establishes the elliptically implied connection between the long passage that follows and the preceding two verses.

8 - Lit., "and provide for us, out of our condition (min amrina), consciousness of what is right" - which latter phrase gives the meaning of the term rushd in this context. This passage is a kind of introduction to the allegory of the Men of the Cave, giving a broad outline of what is expounded more fully in verses {13} ff.

9 - I.e., God caused them to remain cut off - physically or metaphorically - from the sounds and the bustle of the outside world. The classical commentators take the above phrase to mean that God "veiled their ears with sleep".

10 - Or: "sent them forth" - which may indicate a return to the active life of this world.

11 - Lit., "so that We might take cognizance of": but since God embraces all past, present and future with His knowledge, His "taking cognizance" of an event denotes His causing it to come into being and, thus, allowing it to become known by His creatures: hence, "marking it out" to the world.

12 - Lit., "which of the two parties" - alluding, metonymically, to the two viewpoints mentioned in verse {19} below - "was better at computing the time-span.. .", etc.: it should, however, be borne in mind that the verb *ahsa* does not merely signify "he computed" or "reckoned", but also "he understood" or "comprehended" (Taj al-'Arus). Since a "computing" of the time which those seekers after truth had spent in the cave could have no particular bearing on the ethical implications of this parable, *ahsa* has here obviously the meaning of "better at comprehending" or "showing a better comprehension" - namely, of the spiritual meaning of the time-lapse between their "falling asleep" and their "awakening" (see note [25] below).

13 - I.e., without the many legendary embellishments which, in times past, have obscured the purport of this story or parable.

14 - Lit., "We increased [or "advanced"] them in guidance".

15 - Lit., "when they stood up" - i.e., stood up to their misguided fellow-men, or to the rulers who persecuted the believers (see note [7]).

16 - Lit., "Why do they not.. .", etc., in the form of a rhetorical query introducing a new sentence.

17 - Lit., "any clear evidence [or "authority"] in their support". The adjective *bayyin* ("clear", "obvious",

"manifest") implies an evidence accessible to reason.

18 - I.e., invents imaginary deities and thus gives the lie to the truth of His oneness and uniqueness, or even denies His existence altogether.

19 - The term mirfaq signifies "anything by which one benefits", whether concrete or abstract; in this context it has obviously a spiritual connotation, marking the young men's abandonment of the world and withdrawal into utter seclusion.

20 - Lit., "while they were in a broad cleft thereof". The cave evidently opened to the north, so that the heat of the sun never disturbed them: and this, I believe is an echo of the many Qur'anic allusions to the happiness of the righteous in paradise, symbolized by its "everlasting shade" (see, in particular, surah {4}, note [74], on the metaphorical use of the term zill in the sense of "happiness").

21 - I.e., an accidental onlooker would immediately have felt the mystic, awe-inspiring aura that surrounded the Men of the Cave, and would have become conscious that he stood before God's elect (Tabari, Razi, Ibn Kathir, Baydawi).

22 - See note [10] above.

23 - It seems to me that the prefix li in li-yatasa'alu (which most commentators take to mean "so that they might ask one another") is not a particle denoting a purpose ("so that") but, rather, a lam al-'a^qibah-that is, a particle indicating no more than a causal sequence-which in this context may be brought out by the phrase "and they began...", etc.

24 - Cf. {2: 259}, where exactly the same question is asked and exactly the same wondering answer is given in the parable of the man whom God caused to be dead for a hundred years and thereupon brought

back to life. The striking verbal identity of question and answer in the two passages is obviously not accidental: it points, in a deliberately revealing manner, to the identity of the idea underlying these two allegories: namely, God's power to "bring forth the living out of that which is dead, and the dead out of that which is alive" ({3: 27}, {6: 95}, {10: 31}, {30: 19}), i.e., to create life, to cause it to disappear and then to resurrect it. Beyond this, the above verse alludes to the deceptive, purely earthbound character of the human concept of "time".

25 - I.e., they understood-in contrast to their companions, who were merely concerned about what had actually happened to them - that the lapse of time between their "falling asleep" and their "awakening" had no reality of its own and no meaning, just as it has no reality or meaning in connection with a human being's death and subsequent resurrection (cf. [17:52](#) and the corresponding note [59]): and this explains the reference to the "two viewpoints" (lit., "two parties") in verse {12} above.

26 - During their "sleep", time had stood still for the Men of the Cave, and so they assumed that the outside world had remained unchanged and was, as before, hostile to them. - At this point, the story as such ends abruptly (for, as we know, the Qur'an is never concerned with narratives for their own sake) and is revealed in the sequence as an allegory of death and resurrection and of the relativity of "time" as manifested in man's consciousness.

27 - I.e., by means of the legend which has grown up around the Men of the Cave and, more particularly, by means of the allegoric use which the Qur'an makes of this legend.

28 - Lit., "given knowledge about them [to others]".

29 - Lit., "debate their case (amrahum) among themselves": an indication of the fact that the legend of the Men of the Cave occupied men's minds for a long time, leading to many discussions and conflicting interpretations. The next sentence explains why God has "drawn [people's] attention" to this story in the context of the Qur'an.

30 - This, to my mind, is the meaning of the expression 'alayhim (lit., "over them") occurring here as well as in the subsequent reference to the building of a house of worship at the suggestion of those "whose

opinion prevailed in the end" (alladhina ghalabu 'ala amrihim).

31 - The future tense in sayaqulun points once again to the legendary character of the story as such, and implies that all speculation about its details is irrelevant to its parabolic, ethical purport.

32 - I.e., for the sake of the self-evident ethical lesson to be derived from their story: an allusion to the first paragraph of verse {21} above.

33 - According to almost all of the commentators, this parenthetical passage (verses {23-24}) is primarily addressed to the Prophet, who, on being asked by some of the pagan Quraysh as to what "really" happened to the Men of the Cave, is said to have replied, "I shall give you my answer tomorrow" - whereupon revelation was temporarily withheld from him in token of God's dis-approval; in the second instance, this exhortation expresses a general principle addressed to all believers.

34 - This obviously connects with the "idle guesses" mentioned in the first paragraph of verse {22} above - guesses refuted by the subsequent statements, "My Sustainer knows best how many they were" in verse {22}, and "God knows best how long they remained [there]" in verse {26}. This was, in particular, the view of 'Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud, whose copy of the Qur'an is said to have contained the words, "And they [i.e., some people] said, 'They remained...'," etc. (which was probably a marginal, explanatory remark added by Ibn Mas'ud), as well as of Qatadah and of Matar al-Warraaq (Tabari, Zamakhshari and Ibn Kathir). My interpolation, at the beginning of the verse, of the words "some people asserted" is based on the word qalu ("they said") used by Ibn Mas'ud in his marginal note.

35 - According to Razi, it is on this passage, among others, that the great Qur'an-commentator Abu Muslim al-Isfahani based his rejection of the so-called "doctrine of abrogation" discussed in my note [87] on {2: 106}.

36 - For an explanation of this verse, see [6:52](#) and the corresponding note [41].

37 - See surah {2}, note [7]. Zamakshari and Razi explain the verb aghfalna - agreeably with Qur'anic doctrine - as meaning "whom We have found to be heedless". (See also my note [4] on the second part of [14:4](#).)

38 - Lit., "and whose case (amr) was one of abandonment of [or "transgression against"] all bounds [of what is right]".

39 - Thus Razi explains the expression az-zalimun (lit., "the evildoers") in the above context.

40 - The expression suradiq-rendered by me as "billowing folds"-literally denotes an awning or the outer covering of a tent, and alludes here to the billowing "walls of smoke" that will surround the sinners (Zamakhshari): a symbolism meant to stress the inescapability of their suffering in the hereafter (Razi).

41 - Like all other Qur'anic descriptions of happenings in the hereafter, the above reference to the "adornment" of the believers with gold and jewels and silk (cf. similar passages in [22:23](#), [35:33](#) and [76:21](#)) and their "reclining upon couches (ara'ik)" is obviously an allegory - in this case, an allegory of the splendour, the ever-fresh life (symbolized by "green garments"), and the restful fulfilment that awaits them in result of the many acts of self-denial which their faith had imposed on them during their earthly life. - Referring to the symbolism of these joys of paradise Razi draws our attention to the difference in the construction of the two parts of this clause: the first part is in the passive form ("they will be adorned...") and the second, in the active ("they will wear..."). In his opinion, the active form alludes to what the righteous will have earned by virtue of their deeds, whereas the passive form denotes all that will be bestowed on them by God above and beyond their deserts.

42 - This parable connects with verses {7-8} of this surah, and serves as an illustration of the statement that "all beauty on earth is a means by which God puts men to a test".

43 - Lit., "brought back [or "referred"] to my Sustainer" - i.e., for judgment.

44 - See second half of note [47] on {3: 59}, and note [4] on {23: 12}.

45 - Lit., "I shall not [or "do not"] associate anyone [or "anything"] with my Sustainer" - i.e., "I cannot associate in my mind wealth or poverty with any power or creative cause other than Him" (Qiffal, as quoted by Razi).

46 - For an explanation of my rendering of law-la as "alas", see note [119] on {10: 98}.

47 - Lit.. "he had no host whatever".

48 - Lit., "the best as regards the consequence".

49 - Lit., "are better in thy Sustainer's sight as regards merit, and better as regards hope". The expression al-bagiyat as-salihah ("good deeds, the fruit whereof endures forever") occurs in the Qur'an twice - in the above verse as well as in {19: 76}.

50 - I.e., to those who in their lifetime denied the truth of resurrection.

51 - Cf. [6:94](#).

52 - This short reference to the oft-repeated allegory of God's command to the angels to "prostrate themselves before Adam" is meant, in the above context, to stress man's inborn faculty of conceptual thinking (see {2: 31-34} and the corresponding notes) and, thus, his ability and obligation to discern between right and wrong. Since man's deliberate choice of a morally wrong course - of which the preceding passages speak - is almost invariably due to his exaggerated attachment to the allurements of worldly life, attention is drawn here to the fact that this attachment is the means by which Satan (or Iblis) induces man to forgo all moral considerations and thus brings about his spiritual ruin.

53 - Denoting, in this instance, the angels (see Appendix III).

54 - Lit., "his offspring" - a metonym for all who follow him.

55 - Lit., "for the evildoers". As regards Satan's symbolic "rebellion" against God, see note [26] on [2:34](#) and note [31] on [15:41](#).

56 - I.e., "since they are but created beings, and not co-existent with Me, how can you take them for your masters?"-an allusion to the beings, real or imaginary, to which men ascribe divine qualities, either consciously or (as in the case of one's submission to the "whisperings of Satan") by subconscious implication.

57 - Since God is almighty, all-knowing and self-sufficient, the belief that any being or power could have a "helping" share in His divinity, or could "mediate" between Him and man, causes the latter to go utterly astray.

58 - Lit., "those partners of Mine whom you supposed [to exist]": see note [15] on [6:22](#).

59 - Or: "a gulf [or "a barrier"] of perdition": an allusion to the wide gulf of unreality that separates those sinners from the blasphemous figments of their imagination or, more probably, the gulf that separates them from the saintly persons whom they were wont to worship despite the fact that the latter had never made any claim to divine status (Zamakhshari and Razi in one of their alternative interpretations, with specific mention of Jesus and Mary).

60 - Cf. note [104] on {17: 89}, explaining my translation of mathal, in this context, as "lesson".

61 - Lit., "face to face" or "in the future" (Zamakhshari) - both these meanings of qubulan being comprised in the concept of "the hereafter" or "the life to come".

62 - I.e., persevering in his unrighteous behaviour (Razi).

63 - Lit., "to guidance".

64 - Lit., "He would indeed hasten the punishment for them"-the implication being that He invariably allows them time to repent and mend their ways.

65 - Cf. somewhat similar passages in [16:61](#) and [35:45](#). The "time-limit" (maw'id) signifies, in this context, the end of the sinners' life on earth or - as in the next verse - the "point of no return" beyond which God does not allow them to sin with impunity.

66 - Lit., "when [or "after"] they had been doing wrong" - i.e., persistently and for a long time.

67 - The particle *idh* (which usually signifies "when", but is, I believe, properly rendered here as "lo!") often serves in the Qur'an to draw attention to a sudden turn in the discourse, without, however, involving a break in the continuity of thought. In this instance, it evidently marks a connection with verse {54} above ("many facets have We given in this Qur'an to every kind of lesson [designed] for [the benefit of] mankind"), and introduces an allegory meant to illustrate the fact that knowledge, and particularly spiritual knowledge, is inexhaustible, so that no human being- not even a prophet- can ever claim to possess answers to all the questions that perplex man throughout his life. (This idea is brought out fully in the last two verses of this surah.) The subsequent parable of Moses and his quest for knowledge (verses {6-82}) has become, in the course of time, the nucleus of innumerable legends with which we are not concerned here. We have, however, a Tradition on the authority of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (recorded in several versions by Bukhari, Muslim and Tirmidhi), according to which Moses was rebuked by God for having once asserted that he was the wisest of all men, and was subsequently told through revelation that a "servant of God" who lived at the "junction of the two seas" was far superior to him in wisdom. When Moses expressed his eagerness to find that man, God commanded him to "take a fish in a basket" and to go on and on until the fish would disappear: and its disappearance was to be a sign that the goal had been reached. - There is no doubt that this Tradition is a kind of allegorical introduction to our Qur'anic parable. The "fish" mentioned in the latter as well as in the above-mentioned hadith is an ancient religious symbol, possibly signifying divine knowledge or life eternal. As for the "junction of the two seas", which many of the early commentators endeavoured to "identify" in geographical terms (ranging from the meeting of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean at the Bab al-Mandab to that of the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean at the Straits of Gibraltar), Baydawi offers, in his commentary on verse {60}, a purely allegorical explanation: the "two seas" represent the two sources or streams of knowledge - the one obtainable through the observation and intellectual coordination of outward phenomena ('ilm az-zahir), and the other through intuitive, mystic insight ('ilm al-batin) - the meeting of which is the real goal of Moses' quest.

68 - Lit., "young man" (*fata*)-a term applied, in early Arabic usage, to one's servant (irrespective of his age). According to tradition, it was Joshua, who was to become the leader of the Israelites after the death of Moses.

69 - Lit., "burrowing [into it]". Their forgetting the symbolic "fish" (see last third of note [67]) is perhaps an allusion to man's frequently forgetting that God is the ultimate source of all knowledge and life.

70 - Lit., "Didst thou see?" Although formulated as a question, this idiomatic phrase often expresses-as does its modern equivalent, "Would you believe it?"-no more than a sudden remembrance of, or surprise at, an unusual or absurd happening.

71 - Lit., "made me forget it lest I remember it".

72 - I.e., the disappearance of the fish indicated the point at which their quest was to end (see note [67]).

73 - In the Tradition on the authority of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (referred to in note [67]) this mysterious sage is spoken of as Al-Khadir or Al-Khidr, meaning "the Green One". Apparently this is an epithet rather than a name, implying (according to popular legend) that his wisdom was ever-fresh ("green") and imperishable: a notion which bears out the assumption that we have here an allegoric figure symbolizing the utmost depth of mystic insight accessible to man.

74 - Lit., "that thou dost not encompass with [thy] experience (khubran)": according to Razi, an allusion to the fact that even a prophet like Moses did not fully comprehend the inner reality of things (haqa'iq al-ashya' kama hiya); and, more generally, to man's lack of equanimity whenever he is faced with something that he has never yet experienced or cannot immediately comprehend. In the last analysis, the above verse implies - as is brought out fully in Moses' subsequent experiences-that appearance and reality do not always coincide; beyond that, it touches in a subtle manner upon the profound truth that man cannot really comprehend or even visualize anything that has no counterpart - at least in its component elements - in his own intellectual experience: and this is the reason for the Qur'anic use of metaphor and allegory with regard to "all that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception" (al-ghayb).

75 - Lit., "he".

76 - Lit., "asked its people".

77 - Lit., "to cause a fault in it" - i.e., to make it temporarily unserviceable.

78 - Lit., "we feared" - but it should be borne in mind that, beyond this primary meaning, the verb khashiya sometimes denotes "he had reason to fear" and, consequently, "he knew", i.e., that something bad would happen (Taj al-'Arus, with specific reference to the above verse): and so we may assume that the sage's

expression of "fear" was synonymous with positive "knowledge" gained through outward evidence or through mystic insight (the latter being more probable, as indicated by his statement in the second paragraph of the next verse, "I did not do [any of] this of my own accord").

79 - I.e., left to them as an inheritance. Presumably that treasure would have been exposed to view if the wall had been allowed to tumble down, and would have been stolen by the avaricious village folk, who had shown their true character by refusing all hospitality to weary travellers.

80 - Implying that whatever he had done was done under the impulsion of a higher truth-the mystic insight which revealed to him the reality behind the outward appearance of things and made him a conscious particle in God's unfathomable plan: and this explains the use of the plural "we" in verses {80-81}, as well as the direct attribution, in the first paragraph of verse {82}, of a concrete human action to God's will (Razi).

81 - Lit., "I will convey unto you a remembrance [or "mention"] of him" - i.e., something that is worthy of remembrance and mention: which, I believe, is an allusion to the parabolic character of the subsequent story and the fact that it is confined, like the preceding parable of Moses and the unknown sage, to a few fundamental, spiritual truths.- the epithet Dhu 'l-Qarnayn signifies "the Two-Horned One" or "He of the Two Epochs", since the noun -qarn has the meaning of "horn" as well as of "generation" or "epoch" or "age" or "century". The classical commentators incline to the first of these meanings ("the Two-Horned"); and in this they appear to have been influenced by the ancient Middle-Eastern imagery of "horns" as symbols of power and greatness, although the Qur'an itself does not offer any warrant for this interpretation. In fact, the term -qarn (and its plural qurun) occurs in the Qur'an-apart from the combination Dhu 'l-Qarnayn appearing in verses {83}, {86} and {94} of this surah - twenty times: and each time it has the meaning of "generation" in the sense of people belonging to one particular epoch or civilization. However, since the allegory of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn is meant to illustrate the qualities of a powerful and just ruler, it is possible to assume that this designation is an echo of the above-mentioned ancient symbolism, which-being familiar to the Arabs from very early times-had acquired idiomatic currency in their language long before the advent of Islam. Within the context of our Qur'anic allegory, the "two horns" may be taken to denote the two sources of power with which Dhu 'l-Qarnayn is said to have been endowed: namely, the worldly might and prestige of kingship as well as the spiritual strength resulting from his faith in God. This last point is extremely important- for it is precisely the Qur'anic stress on his faith in God that makes it impossible to identify Dhu 'l-Qarnayn, as most of the commentators do, with Alexander the Great (who is represented on some of his coins with two horns on his head) or with one or another of the pre-Islamic, Himyaritic kings of Yemen. All those historic personages were pagans and worshipped a plurality of deities as a matter of course, whereas our Dhu 'l-Qarnayn is depicted as a firm believer in the One God: indeed, it is this aspect of his personality that provides the innermost reason of the Qur'anic allegory. We must, therefore, conclude that the latter has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power (see the concluding passage in the introductory note to this surah).

82 - According to Ibn 'Abbes, Mujahid, Sa'id ibn Jubayr, 'Ikrimah, Qatadah and Ad-Dahhak (all of them quoted by Ibn Kathir), the term *sabab* - lit., "a means to achieve [anything]" - denotes, in this context, the knowledge of the right means for the achievement of a particular end.

83 - Lit., "he followed [the right] means": i.e., he never employed wrong means to achieve even a righteous goal.

84 - I.e., the westernmost point of his expedition (Razi).

85 - Or: "abundance of water" - which, according to many philologists (cf. Taj al-'Arus), is one of the meanings of *'ayn* (primarily denoting a "spring"). As for my rendering of the phrase "he found it (*wajadaha*) setting...", etc., as "it appeared to him that it was setting", see Razi and Ibn Kathir, both of whom point out that we have here a metaphor based on the common optical illusion of the sun's "disappearing into the sea"; and Razi explains this, correctly, by the fact that the earth is spherical. (It is interesting to note that, according to him, this explanation was already advanced in the-now lost-Qur'an-commentary of Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i, the famous Mu'tazili scholar who died in 303 H., which corresponds to 915 or 916 of the Christian era.)

86 - This divine permission to choose between two possible courses of action is not only a metonymic statement of the freedom of will accorded by God to man, but establishes also the important legal principle of *istihsan* (social or moral preference) open to a ruler or government in deciding as to what might be conducive to the greatest good (*maslahah*) of the community as a whole: and this is the first "lesson" of the parable of Dhu'l-Qarnayn.

87 - Cf. [11:117](#) and the corresponding note [149].

88 - I.e., in the hereafter - implying that nothing that pertains to the life to come could ever be imagined or defined in terms of human experience.

89 - Since righteous behaviour is the norm expected of man, the laws relating thereto must not be too demanding-which is another lesson to be drawn from this parable.

90 - For this rendering of the particle thumma, see surah {6}, note [31].

91 - I.e., the easternmost point of his expedition (similar to the expression "the setting of the sun" in verse {86}).

92 - This is Razi's interpretation of the isolated expression kadhalika ("thus" or "thus it was") occurring here. It obviously relates to the primitive, natural state of those people who needed no clothes to protect them from the sun, and to the (implied) fact that Dhu 'l-Qarnayn left them as he had found them, being mindful not to upset their mode of life and thus to cause them misery.

93 - Lit., "all that was with him" - i.e., his resolve not to "corrupt [or "change"] God's creation" (cf. the second half of my note [141] on {4: 119}) - which, I believe, is a further ethical lesson to be derived from this parable.

94 - This is generally assumed to be the Caucasus. However, since neither the Qur'an nor any authentic Tradition says anything about the location of these "two mountain-barriers" or the people who lived there, we can safely dismiss all the speculations advanced by the commentators on this score as irrelevant, the more so as the story of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn aims at no more than the illustration of certain ethical principles in a parabolic manner.

95 - This is the form in which these names (in Arabic, Yajuj and Majuj) have achieved currency in all European languages on the basis of certain vague references to them in the Bible (Genesis x, 2, I Chronicles i, 5, Ezekiel xxxviii, 2 and xxxix, 6, Revelation of St. John xx, 8). Most of the post-classical commentators identify these tribes with the Mongols and Tatars (see note [100] below).

96 - It is generally assumed that the phrase "that wherein my Sustainer has so securely established me (makkanni)" refers to the power and wealth bestowed on him; but it is much more probable - and certainly more consistent with the ethical tenor of the whole parable of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn - that it refers to God's guidance rather than to worldly possessions.

97 - Lit., "Blow!"

98 - Lit., "they".

99 - Lit., "my Sustainer's promise".

100 - Some of the classical commentators (e.g., Tabari) regard this as a prediction of a definite, historic event: namely, the future break-through of the savage tribes of "Gog and Magog", who are conceived of as identical with the Mongols and Tatars (see note [95] above). This "identification" is mainly based on a well-authenticated Tradition - recorded by Ibn Hanbal, Bukhari and Muslim - which tells us that the Apostle of God had a prophetic dream to which he referred on awakening, with an exclamation of distress: "There is no deity save God! Woe unto the Arabs from a misfortune that is approaching: a little gap has been opened today in the rampart of Gog and Magog!" Ever since the late Middle Ages, Muslims have been inclined to discern in this dream a prediction of the great Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, which destroyed the Abbasid Empire and, thus, the political power of the Arabs. However, the mention, in verses {99-101} of this surah, of "the Day" - i.e., the Day of Judgment - in connection with "Gog and Magog" shows that "the time appointed by my Sustainer" relates to the coming of the Last Hour, when all works of man will be destroyed. But since none of the Qur'anic references to the "approach" or the "nearness" of the Last Hour has anything to do with the human concept of time, it is possible to accept both of the above interpretations as equally valid in the sense that the "coming of the Last Hour" comprises an indefinite - and, in human terms, perhaps even immensely long- span of time, and that the break-through of the godless forces of "Gog and Magog" was to be one of the signs of its approach. And, finally, it is most logical to assume (especially on the basis of {21: 96-97}) that the terms Yajuj and Majuj are purely allegorical, applying not to any specific tribes or beings but to a series of social catastrophes which would cause a complete destruction of man's civilization before the coming of the Last Hour.

101 - I.e., on the Day of Judgment alluded to in the preceding verse.

102 - This is an allusion not only to the worship of created beings or forces of nature, but also to the popular belief that saints, whether alive or dead, could effectively "intercede" with God in behalf of anyone whom He has rejected.

103 - I.e., of God's oneness and uniqueness, and hence of the fact that no created being can have any "influence" on God's judgment.

104 - Although each of their good actions will be taken into account on Judgment Day in accordance with the Qur'anic statement that "he who shall have done an atom's weight of good, shall behold it" ({99: 7}), the above verse implies that whatever good such sinners may do is far outweighed by their godlessness (Al-Qadi 'Iyad, as quoted by Razi).

105 - Lit., "if We were to produce the like of it [i.e., of the sea] in addition". It is to be noted that, as pointed out by Zamakhshari, the term al-bahr ("the sea") is used here in a generic sense, comprising all the seas that exist: hence, the expression "the like of it" has been rendered by me as "sea upon sea". (See also [31:27](#)).

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