



إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا



Certainly! We shall not suffer to be lost the reward of anyone who does his (righteous) deeds in the most perfect manner.

Quran English Translation & Commentary

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Introduction and Summary

It has been explained in the introduction to Surah 17 how the five Surahs 17 to 21 develop the theme of the individual soul's spiritual history, and how they fit into general scheme of exposition.

This particular Makkan Surah may be called a lesson in the brevity and mystery of Life.

- First there is the story of the Companions of the Cave who slept therein for a long period, and yet thought they had been only a day or less.

- Then there is the story of the mysterious Teacher who shows Moses how Life itself is a parable.
- And further there is the story of Dhu al Qarnayn, the two-horned one, the powerful ruler of west and east, who made an iron wall to protect the weak against the strong.

The parable refer to the brevity, uncertainty, and vanity of this life; to the many paradoxes in it, which can only be understood by patience and the fullness of knowledge; and to the need of guarding our spiritual gains against the incursions of evil.

Summary- The Quran is a direction and a warning. This life is brief and subject to vicissitudes. Our ideas of Time are defective, as shown in the story of Companions of Cave, who had faith, truth, patience, and other virtues. But their life was a mystery that can be fathomed but by few (18:1-22, and C. 133).

Knowledge is for Allah: be on your guard against idle conjectures and cocksure hopes. Learn from the Quran the Parable of the man who is puffed up with this world's goods and is brought to naught (18:23-44, and C. 134).

This life is uncertain and variable: goodness and virtue are better and more durable. For the Day of Reckoning will come, with its Mercy and its Wrath (18:45-59, and C. 135).

Moses in his thirst for knowledge forgot his limitations. Patience and faith were enjoined on him, and he understood when the paradoxes of Life were explained (18:60-82, and C. 136).

Dhu al Qarnayn had a wide dominion; he punished the guilty and rewarded the good; he protected the weak from the lawless; but he had faith, and valued the guidance of Allah. Allah is One, and His service is righteousness (18:83-110, and C. 137).

C.133 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

(18:1-22)

*The Book of Revelation gives straight
Direction to make our lives straight-
To warn us against Evil and guide us
To the Good everlasting. Teach the Truth.
But fret not about men rejecting it.
The Parable of the Companions of the Cave
Shows how Allah works wonders beyond
Our fathoming: how Faith is a sure
Refuge in ways we know not; how
Time itself works Allah's Plan
Before we know how it passes;
How He can give us rest, and raise
Us back to life against all odds;
And how futile it is to engage
In controversies about matters we know not.*

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

الْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ ...

1. Praise be to Allah,

C2325. See n. 2324 to 17:111.

The theme of the last Surah, that Allah is good and worthy of all praise from His creatures, to whom He has granted a clear revelation, is continued in this Surah. The spirit of man makes gradual progress upwards, through the grace and mercy of Allah.

... الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا (١)

Who hath sent to His Servant the Book, and hath allowed therein no Crookedness:

C2326. Some people's idea of a Sacred Book is that it should be full of mysteries-dark corners, ambiguous expressions, words so far removed from human speech that they cover anything or nothing.

Pagan oracles were couched in language which suggested one meaning to the hearer and claimed to have the very opposite meaning in the light of events which actually happened subsequently. They were distinctly crooked, not straight.

In the next verse the word "Straight" (qaiyim) is used to characterize the Quran, in contrast to this word "crooked" ('iwaj).

See also 19:36, n. 2488.

قَيِّمًا لِّيُنذِرَ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِّن لَّدُنْهُ...

2. (He hath made it) Straight (and Clear) in order that He may warn (the godless) of a terrible Punishment from Him,

C2327. Qaiyim:

- straight, that which has no bends and no corners to mystify people,
- that which speaks clearly and unambiguously,
- that which guides to the right path.

Cf. 9:36, where the adjective is used for a straight usage, in contrast to usages, which tend to mystify and deceive people.

The Quran is above all things straight, clear, and perspicuous. Its directions are plain for everyone to understand.

Any book that deals with the highest mysteries of spiritual life must necessarily have portions whose full meaning is clearer to some minds than to others not so well prepared. But here there is nowhere any mystification, any desire to wrap up things in dark sayings repugnant to human reason. Allah's purpose is to give clear warning of spiritual dangers and lead up to the highest bliss.

... وَيُنَبِّئُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا (٢)

and that He may give Glad Tidings to the Believers who work righteous deeds, that they shall have a goodly Reward.

مَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ أَبَدًا (٣)

3. Wherein they shall remain forever:

C2328. Cf. 4:122, 43:71, 65:11, 98:8.

وَيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ وَلَدًا (٤)

4. Further, that He may warn those (also) who say, "Allah hath begotten a son":

C2329. The warning is not only needed for those who deny Allah or deny His Message, but also for those whose false ideas of Allah degrade religion in supposing that Allah begot a son, for Allah is One and is High above any ideas of physical reproduction.

مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا لِآبَائِهِمْ...

5. No knowledge have they of such a thing, nor had their fathers.

... كَبُرَتْ كَلِمَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ أَفْوَاهِهِمْ...

It is a grievous thing that issues from their mouths as a saying.

C2330. The attribution of a son "begotten" to Allah has no basis in fact or in reason.

It is only a "word" or "saying" that issues out of their mouths. It is not even a dogma that is reasoned out or can be explained in any way that is consistent with the sublime attributes of Allah.

... إِنْ يَفُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا (٥)

What they say is nothing but falsehood!

فَلَعَلَّكَ بَاخِعٌ نَفْسَكَ عَلَى آثَارِهِمْ إِنْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِهِذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا (٦)

6. Thou wouldst only, perchance, fret thyself to death, following after them, in grief, if they believe not in this Message.

C2331. In a reasonable world the preaching of a reasonable Faith like that of Islam would win universal

acceptance. But the world is not altogether reasonable. It caused great distress to the unselfish Preacher of Islam that his Message met with so much opposition. He wanted to point the way to salvation. He only got, in the Makkans period, abuse from the chiefs of the Makkans- abuse and persecution, not only for himself but for the Truth which he was preaching.

A heart less stout than his might have been appalled at what seemed the hopeless task of reclaiming the world from falsehood, superstition, selfishness, wrong, and oppression. He is here consoled, and told that he was not to fret himself to death: he was nobly doing his duty, and, as after-events showed, the seed of Truth was already germinating, although this was not visible at the time.

Besides, these "chiefs" and "leaders" were only strutting in false plumes: their glory was soon to fade for ever.

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَهَا ...

7. That which is on earth We have made but as a glittering show for the earth,

C2332. This world's goods- worldly power, glory, wealth, position, and all that men scramble for,- are but a fleeting show.

The possession or want of them does not betoken a man's real value or position in the coming world, the world which is to endure. Yet they have their uses.

They test a man's sterling quality. He who becomes their slave loses rank in the next world. He who uses them if he gets them, and does not fall into despair if he does not get them, shows his true mettle and quality. His conduct proclaims him.

... لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا (٧)

in order that We may test them -- as to which of them are best in conduct.

وَإِنَّا لَجَاعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيْهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا (٨)

8. Verily what is on earth We shall make but as dust and dry soil (without growth or herbage).

C2333. The fairest sights on the earth will become as dust and waste when this earth vanishes, and true spiritual values are restored.

... أَمْ حَسِبْتِ ...

9. Or dost thou reflect

C2334. A wonderful story or allegory is now referred to. Its lessons are:

- the relativity of Time,
- the unreality of the position of oppressor and oppressed, persecutor and persecuted, on this earth,
- the truth of the final Resurrection, when true values will be restored, and
- the potency of Faith and Prayer to lead to the Right.

... أَنْ أَصْحَابَ الْكَهْفِ ...

that the Companions of the Cave

C2335. The unbelieving Quraish were in the habit of putting posers to the holy Prophet-questions which they got from Christians and Jews, which they thought the Prophet would be unable to answer. In this way they hoped to discredit him.

One of these questions was about the floating Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. The Prophet not only told them the main story but pointed out the variations that were current, and rebuked men for disputing about such details (18:22).

Most important of all, he treated the story (under inspiration) as a parable, pointing to lessons of the highest value. This is Revelation in the highest sense of the term.

The story is recapitulated in [n. 2337](#) below.

... وَالرَّقِيمِ كَانُوا مِنْ آيَاتِنَا عَجَبًا (٩)

and of the Inscription were wonders among Our Signs?

C2336. Raqim: Inscription. So interpreted by the Jalalayn, and the majority of Commentators agree. See [n. 2337 below](#).

Others think it was the name of the dog: see [18:18](#), and [n. 2350 below](#).

إِذْ أَوَى الْفِتْيَةُ إِلَى الْكَهْفِ فَقَالُوا...

10. Behold, the youths betook themselves to the Cave: they said,

C2337. The bare Christian story (without the spiritual lessons taught in the Quran) is told in Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (end of chapter 33).

In the reign of a Roman Emperor who persecuted the Christians, seven Christian youths of Ephesus left the town and hid themselves in a cave in a mountain near by. They fell asleep, and remained asleep for some generations or centuries. When the wall which sealed up the cave was being demolished, the youths awoke.

They still thought of the world in which they had previously lived. They had no idea of the duration of time. But when one of them went to the town to purchase provisions, he found that the whole world had changed. The Christian religion, instead of being persecuted was fashionable: in fact it was now the State religion. His dress and speech, and the money which he brought, seemed to belong to another world. This attracted attention. The great ones of the land visited the Cave, and verified the tale by questioning the man's Companions.

When the story became very popular and circulated throughout the Roman Empire, we may well suppose that an Inscription was put up at the mouth of the Cave. See [verse 9](#) and [n. 2336](#).

This inscription was probably to be seen for many years afterwards, as Ephesus was a famous city on the west coast of Asia Minor, about forty to fifty miles south of Smyrna. Later on, the Khalifah Wathiq (842-846 A.C.) sent an expedition to examine and identify the locality, as he did about the Dhul al Qarnayn barrier in Central Asia (Appendix VI at the end of this Surah).

A popular story circulating from mouth to mouth would necessarily be vague as to dates and vary very much in details. Somewhere about the 6th century A.C. a Syriac writer reduced it to writing. He suggested that the youths were seven in number; that they went to sleep in the reign of the Emperor Decius (who reigned from 249 to 251 A.D., and who was a violent persecutor of Christianity); and that they awoke in the reign of Theodosius 11, who reigned from 408 to 450 A.D. In our literature Decius is known as Daqyanus (from the adjectival Latin from Decianus), and the name stands as a symbol of injustice and oppression, and also of things old fashioned and out-of-date, as *res Decianae* must have been two or three centuries after Decius.

... رَبَّنَا آتِنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا (١٠)

"Our Lord! bestow on us Mercy from Thyself, and dispose of our affair for us in the right way!

C2338. The youths hid in the cave, but they trusted in Allah, and made over their whole case to Him in prayer.

Then they apparently fell asleep, and knew nothing of what was happening in the world outside.

فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَى آذَانِهِمْ ...

11. Then We drew (a veil) over their ears,

C2339. Drew (a veil) over their ears: i.e., sealed their ears, so that they heard nothing. As they were in the Cave they saw nothing. So they were completely cut off from the outer world.

It was as if they had died, with their knowledge and ideas remaining at the point of time when they had entered the Cave. It is as if a watch stops at the exact moment of some accident, and any one taking it up afterwards can precisely fix the time of the accident.

... فِي الْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا (١١)

for a number of years, in the cave, (so that they heard not):

لَمْ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ ...

12. Then We roused them,

C2340. Roused them: or raised them up from their sleep or whatever condition they had fallen into (18:18), so that they began to perceive the things around them, but only with the memories of the time at which they had ceased to be in touch with the world.

... لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْصَى لِمَا لَبِئُوا أَمَدًا (١٢)

in order to test which of the two parties was best at calculating the term of years they had tarried!

C2341. When they awoke to consciousness, they had lost all count of time. Though they had all entered together, and lain together in the same place for the same length of time, their impressions of the time they had passed were quite different.

Time is thus related to our own internal experiences. We have to learn the lesson that men as good as ourselves may yet differ as to their reactions to certain facts, and that in such matters disputes are unseemly. It is best to say. "Allah knows best" (18:19).

Section 2

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ نَبَأَهُم بِالْحَقِّ ...

13. We relate to thee their story in truth:

... إِنَّهُمْ فِيهِ آمَنُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ وَزِدْنَاهُمْ هُدًى (١٣)

they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We advanced them in guidance:

C2342. Their Faith carried them higher and higher on the road to Truth. Faith is cumulative. Each step leads higher and higher, by the grace and mercy of Allah.

وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ ...

14. We gave strength to their hearts:

C2343. So that they were not afraid to speak out openly, and protest the truth of the Unity which they clearly saw in their own minds and hearts.

... إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا ...

Behold, they stood up and said:

C2344. We may suppose them to have taken their stand and made a public protest before they betook themselves to the Cave (18:16).

The story really begins at 18:13, and the verses 18:9-12 may be considered as introductory.

As the emphasis is on spiritual lessons, the facts stated in the introductory part are passed over lightly in the story.

... رَبُّنَا رَبُّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَنْ نَدْعُوَ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا ...

"Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth: never shall we call upon any god other than Him:

... لَفَدْنَا إِذَا شَطَطًا (١٤)

if we did; we should indeed have uttered an enormity!"

هَؤُلَاءِ قَوْمًا اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ آلِهَةً ...

15. "These our people have taken for worship gods other than Him:

C2345. Besides the heathen gods, the cult of the Emperors also became fashionable in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries of the Christian Era. The statue of Diana (Artemis) at Ephesus had been one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The city was a great seaport and the capital of Roman Asia. We may therefore imagine how the heathen cults must have flourished there.

St. Paul spent three years preaching there, and was mobbed and assaulted, and compelled to leave (Acts, 19:1-4).

... لَوْلَا يَأْتُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِسُلْطَانٍ بَيِّنٍ ...

why do they not bring forward an authority clear (and convincing) for what they do?

... فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا (١٥)

Who doth more wrong than such as invent a falsehood against Allah?

وَإِذْ اعْتَزَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأْوُوا إِلَى الْكَهْفِ...

16. "When ye turn away from them and the things they worship other than Allah betake yourselves to the Cave:

... يَنْسُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِّن رَّحْمَتِهِ وَيُهَيِّئْ لَكُمْ مِّنْ أَمْرِكُمْ مِّرْفَقًا (١٦)

your Lord will shower His mercies on you and dispose of your affair towards comfort and ease."

C2346. That is,

'do not be afraid of anything: put your whole case in the hands of Allah: at present you are being persecuted; he will solve your difficulties and give you ease and comfort'.

The public protest ends at verse 15. In verse 16 they are taking counsel among themselves. After they go into the Cave, verse 17 introduces us to the scene where they are lying in the midst of the Cave in tranquil confidence in Allah.

وَتَرَى الشَّمْسَ إِذَا طَلَعَتْ تَزَاوَرُ عَنْ كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ...

17. Thou wouldst have seen the sun, when it rose, declining to the right from their Cave,

C2347. In the latitude of Ephesus, 38* north, i.e., well above the sun's northern declination, a cave opening to north, would never have the heat of the sun within it, as the sunny side would be the south.

If the youths lay on their backs with their faces looking to the north, i.e., towards the entrance of the Cave, the sun would rise on their right side, declining to the south, and set on their left sides, leaving them cool and comfortable.

... وَإِذَا غَرَبَت تَّقَرَّبُ خَلْفَهُمْ ذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ...

and when it set, turning away from them to the left,

... وَهُمْ فِي فَجْوَةٍ مِّنْهُ ...

while they lay in the open space in the midst of the Cave.

... ذَلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ ...

Such are among the Signs of Allah:

... مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِي ...

he whom Allah guides is rightly guided;

C2348. The youths, having faith and trust in Allah, found safety and refuge in the Cave.

They were protected from the persecution and violence of the heathen. Their prayer (18:16) was heard.

... وَمَنْ يُضِلِلْ فَلَنْ تَجِدَ لَهُ وَلِيًّا مُّرْشِدًا (١٧)

but he whom Allah leaves to stray – for him wilt thou find no protector to lead him to the Right Way.

Section 3

... وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ أَيْقَاظًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ ...

18. Thou wouldst have deemed them awake, whilst they were asleep,

C2349. Perhaps their eyes were open, even though their senses were sealed in sleep. They turned about on their sides as men do in sleep.

... وَتَقَلَّبُوهُمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ الشِّمَالِ ...

and We turned them on their right and their left sides:

... وَكَلْبُهُمْ بَاسِطٌ ذِرَاعَيْهِ بِالْوَصِيدِ ...

their dog stretching forth his two forelegs on the threshold:

C2350. The name of their dog is traditionally known as Qitmir, but see n. 2336 above.

... لَوْ أَطَّلَعْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَأَيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَلَمُلِيتَ مِنْهُمْ رُعبًا (١٨)

if thou hadst come up on to them, thou wouldst have certainly turned back from them in flight, and wouldst certainly have been filled with terror of them.

C2351. This graphic picture of the sleepers explains the human mechanism by which their safety was ensured by Allah from their Pagan enemies.

وَكَذَلِكَ بَعَثْنَاَهُمْ لِيَسْأَلُوا بَيْنَهُمْ...

19. Such (being their state), We raised them up (from sleep) that they might question each other.

C2352. This is the point of the story.

Their own human impressions were to be compared, each with the other. They were to be made to see that with the best goodwill and the most honest enquiry they might reach different conclusions; that they were not to waste their time in vain controversies, but to get on to the main business of life; and that Allah alone had full knowledge of the things that seem to us so strange, or inconsistent, or inexplicable, or that produce different impressions on different minds.

If they entered the Cave in the morning and woke up in the afternoon, one of them might well think they had been there only a few hours-only part of a day. This relative or fallacious impression of Time also gives us an inkling of the state when there will be no Time, of the Resurrection when all our little impressions of this life will be corrected by the final Reality.

This mystery of time has puzzled many contemplative minds. Cf. "Dark time that haunts us with the briefness of our days" (Thomas Wolfe in "Of Time and the River").

... قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِيتُمْ...

Said one of them, "How long have ye stayed (here)?"

... قَالُوا لَبِيتْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ...

They said, "We have stayed (perhaps) a day, or part of a day."

... قَالُوا رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِئْتُمْ...

(At length) they (all) said, "Allah (alone) knows best how long ye have stayed here..."

... فَأَبْعَثُوا أَحَدَكُمْ بِوَرِقِكُمْ هَذِهِ إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ...

Now send ye then one of you with this money of yours to the town:

C2353. They now give up barren controversy and come to the practical business of life. But their thoughts are conditioned by the state of things that existed when they entered the Cave.

The money they carried was the money coined in the reign of the monarch who persecuted the Religion of Unity and favoured the false cults of Paganism.

... فَلْيَنْظُرْ أَيُّهَا أَزْكَى طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُمْ بِرِزْقٍ مِنْهُ...

let him find out which is the best food (to be had) and bring some to you, that (ye may) satisfy hunger herewith:

C2354. Best food:, i.e., purest, most wholesome perhaps also most suitable for those who rejected idol worship, i.e., not dedicated to idols.

For they still imagined the world in the same state in which they had known it before they entered the Cave.

... وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا (١٩)

and let him behave with care and courtesy, and let him not inform anyone about you.

إِنَّهُمْ إِنْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْجُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِي مِلَّتِهِمْ...

20. "For if thy should come upon you, they would stone you or force you to return to their cult,

C2355. They think that the world had not changed, and that the fierce persecution they knew. was still raging, under which a man had to pay by his life for his religious faith, if he could not conform to Pagan worship.

... وَلَنْ تُفْلِحُوا إِذَا أَبَدًا (٢٠)

and in that case ye would never attain prosperity."

C2356. That is, never succeed in keeping your religion.

To become a renegade, to give up the Truth which you have won, simply on account of the fear of men, is the most despicable form of cowardice, and would rightly close the door of salvation if strict justice were to be done. But even then Allah's Mercy comes to the coward's aid so long as the door of repentance is open.

وَكَذَلِكَ ...

21. Thus

C2357. Thus: in this way, by these means, i.e., by the sending out of one of the Sleepers with the old money to the town to buy provisions. His old-fashioned dress, appearance, and speech, and the old uncurrent money which he brought, at once drew the attention of people to him .

When they learnt his story, they realized that Allah, Who can protect His servants thus and raise them up from sleep after such a long time, has power to raise up men for the Resurrection, and that His promise of goodness and mercy to those who serve Him is true and was exemplified in this striking way.

On the other hand, to the men of the Cave themselves, it became clear that Allah can change the situation before we are aware, and our hope in Him is not futile, and that even when we are on the brink of despair, a revolution is surely working in the world before the world itself realises it.

... أَعْرَضْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ ...

did We make their case known to the people, that they might know that the promise of Allah is true,

... وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا ...

and that there can be no doubt about the Hour of Judgment.

... إِذْ يَنْتَازِعُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَمْرَهُمْ ...

Behold they dispute among themselves as to their affair.

C2358. The perversity of man is such that as soon as ever a glimpse of truth becomes manifest, men fall into controversies about it.

The Sleepers could not judge about the duration of their stay in the Cave, but they wisely left the matter and attended to the urgent business of their lives.

The townsfolk could not agree as to the significance of the event; they fell to discussing immaterial details.

What sort of a memorial should they raise?

a house or a place of worship or a tablet?

The place of worship was built. But the real significance was missed until explained in the Quran.

... فَقَالُوا ابْنُوا عَلَيْهِمْ بُيُوتًا ...

(Some) said, "Construct a building over them":

... رَبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِهِمْ ...

their Lord knows best about them:

... قَالَ الَّذِينَ غَلَبُوا عَلَىٰ أَمْرِهِمْ لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ مَسْجِدًا (٢١)

those who prevailed over their affair said, "Let us surely build a place of worship over them."

... سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةٌ رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ ...

22. (Some) say they were three, the dog being the fourth among them;

... وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ ...

(others) say they were five, the dog being the sixth -- doubtfully guessing at the unknown;

C2359. The controversy in after ages raged about the number of the Sleepers: were they three or five or seven?

People answered, not from knowledge, but from conjecture.

Gibbon's version, which has now become best known, makes the number of Sleepers seven.

The point was immaterial: the real point was the spiritual lesson.

... وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةً وَتَمِيمُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ...

(yet others) say they were seven, the dog being the eighth.

... قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِمْ مَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ...

Say thou: "My Lord knoweth best their number; it is but few that know their (real case)."

C2360. The true significance of the story is known only to a few. Most men discuss futile' details, which are not in their knowledge.

... فَلَا تُمَارَ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً ظَاهِرًا ...

Enter not, therefore, into controversies concerning them, except on a matter that is clear,

C2361. It is unprofitable to enter such immaterial controversies and many others that have been waged about Religion by shallow men from time immemorial.

Yet, if there is a matter of clear knowledge from experience that matters, we must openly proclaim it, that the world may be brought to listen to Allah's Truth.

... وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا (٢٢)

nor consult any of them about (the affair of) the Sleepers.

C2362. Vulgar story-mongers as such know little of the true significance of stories and parables. We have a clear exposition in the Quran.

What need is there to go into details of the number of men in the Cave, or of the time they remained there?

C.134 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

(18:23-44)

*True knowledge is with Allah alone.
We are not to dispute on matters
Of conjecture, but to rely on the Truth*

*That comes from Allah, as in Parable.
The man who piles up wealth
And is puffed up with this world's goods,
Despising those otherwise endowed,
Will come to an evil end,
For his hopes were not built on Allah.*

Section 4

وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِيْ سَيِّئٌ اِنِّيْ فَاعِلٌ ذٰلِكَ غَدًا (٢٣)

23. Nor say of anything, "I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow" --

إِنَّا اَنْ يَّشَاءَ اللّٰهُ...

24. Without adding, "So please Allah!"

C2363. Verses 23 and 24 are parenthetical. We must never rely upon our own resources so much as to forget Allah. If by any chance we do forget, we must come back to Him and keep Him in remembrance, as did the Companions of the Cave.

... وَادْكُرْ رَبَّكَ اِذَا نَسِيتَ...

And call thy Lord to mind when thou forgettest,

... وَقُلْ عَسَى اَنْ يَّهْدِيَنِّيْ رَبِّيْ لِاَقْرَبَ مِنْ هٰذَا سَبِيْلًا (٢٤)

and say, "I hope that my Lord will guide me ever closer (even) than this to the right road."

C2364. In geometry the perfect circle is an ideal. Any given circle that we draw is not so perfect that we cannot draw one closer to the ideal. So in our life, there is always the hope of drawing closer and closer to Allah.

وَلَبِثُوْا فِيْ كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلٰثَ مِاٰتٍ سِنِيْنَ وَاَزْدَادُوْا تِسْعًا (٢٥)

25. So they stayed in their Cave three hundred years, and (some) add nine (more).

C2365. This verse should be read with the next verse.

In the floating oral tradition the duration of time in the Cave was given differently in different versions. When the tradition was reduced to writing, some Christian writers (e.g., Simeon Metaphrastes) named 372 years, some less.

In round numbers 300 years in the solar Calendar would amount to 309 in the lunar Calendar. But the next verse points out that all these are mere conjectures: the number is known to Allah alone.

The authority on which Gibbon relies mentions two definite reigns, that of Decius (249-251 A.D.) and that of Theodosius 11 (408-450 A.D.). Taking 250 and 450, we get an interval of 200 years. But the point of the story does not lie in the name of any given Emperor, but in the fact that the beginning of the period coincided with an Emperor who persecuted: the Emperor's name at the end of the period may be taken as approximately correct, because the story was recorded within two generations afterwards.

One of the worst Emperors to persecute the Christians was Nero who reigned from 54 to 68. If we took the end of his reign (A.D. 68) as the initial point, and (say) 440 A.D. as the final point, we get the 372 years of Simeon Metaphrastes.

But none of these writers knew any more than we do. Our best course is to follow the Quranic injunction, "Say, Allah knows best how long they stayed" (18:26).

There is also a rebuke implied: 'do not imitate these men who love mischievous controversies!' After all, we are given the narrative more as a parable than as a story.

قُلِ اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِئْتُمْ...

26. Say:

"Allah knows best how long they stayed:

... لَهُ عَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ...

with Him is (the knowledge of) the secrets of the heavens and the earth:

... أَبْصِرْ بِهِ وَأَسْمِعْ...

how clearly He sees, how finely He hears (everything)!

... مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ ...

They have no protector other than Him;

C2366. Who are "they" in this sentence?

- They may be the Companions of the Cave, for they put themselves under the protection of Allah, and disowned all attribution of partners to Him. Or
- "they" may refer to the people in general who go wrong and become "Mushriks" i.e., attribute imaginary partners to Allah.

... وَلَا يُشْرِكُ فِي حُكْمِهِ أَحَدًا (٢٦)

nor does He share His Command with any person whatsoever.

C2367. His Command: i.e., Allah's sovereignty of the world, or in His Judgment on the Day of Judgment.

وَأَتْلُ مَا أُوْحِيَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ كِتَابِ رَبِّكَ...

27. And recite (and teach) what has been revealed to thee of the Book of thy Lord:

... لَا مُبَدَّلَ لِكَلِمَاتِهِ وَلَنْ تَجِدَ مِنْ دُونِهِ مُلْتَحَدًا (٢٧)

none can change His Words,

C2368. His Words: His Commands, Decrees, Orders.

and none wilt thou find as a refuge other than Him.

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ بِالْعَدَاةِ وَالْعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ...

28. And keep thy soul content with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking his Face;

C2369. Cf. 6:52 and n. 870.

The true servants of Allah are those whose hearts are turned to Him morning, noon, and night, and who seek

not worldly gain, but Allah's Grace, Allah's own Self, His Presence and nearness.

Even if they are poor in this world's goods, their society gives far more inward and spiritual satisfaction than worldly grandeur or worldly attractions.

... وَلَا تُعَدُّ عَيْنَاكَ عَنْهُمْ تُرِيدُ زِينَةَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ...

and let not thine eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this Life;

... وَلَا تُطِيعْ مَنْ أَغْفَلْنَا قَلْبَهُ عَن ذِكْرِنَا ...

nor obey any whose heart We have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us,

... وَاتَّبِعْ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرُطًا (٢٨)

one who follows his own desires, whose case has gone beyond all bounds.

C2370. For those who stray from Allah's path, Allah's Grace is ever anxious: it seeks to reclaim them and bring them back to the path.

If such a one resists, and follows his own lusts, a point is reached when his case becomes hopeless. Allah's Grace does not then Teach him, and he is abandoned to his pride and insolence. Beware of following the example or advice of such a one or seeking his society, or hankering after his wretched idols.

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ...

29. Say, "The Truth is from your Lord":

... فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ ...

let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it):

C2371. Our choice in our limited Free-will involves a corresponding personal responsibility. We are offered the Truth: again and again is it pressed on our attention,

If we reject it, we must take all the terrible consequences which are prefigured in the Fire of Hell. Its flames and roof will completely enclose us like a tent.

Ordinarily there is water to quench the heat of thirst: here the only drink will be like molten brass, thick, heavy, burning, sizzling. Before it reaches the mouth of the unfortunates, drops of it will scald their faces as it is poured out.

... إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهِمْ سُرَادِقُهَا ...

for the wrongdoers We have prepared a Fire whose (smoke and flames), like the wall and roof of a tent, will hem them in:

... وَإِنْ يَسْتَعِينُوا يُعَاثُوا بِمَاءٍ كَالْمُهْلِ يَشْوِي الْوُجُوهَ ...

if they implore relief they will be granted water like melted brass that will scald their faces.

... بِئْسَ الشَّرَابُ وَسَاءَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا (٢٩)

How dreadful the drink!

How uncomfortable a couch to recline on!

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا (٣٠)

30. As to those who believe and work righteousness, verily We shall not suffer to perish the reward of any who do a (single) righteous deed.

C2372. The righteous will be rewarded, as has been said again and again, beyond their merits: [28:84](#): [30:39](#).

Not a single good deed of theirs will lose its reward, and the mercy of Allah will blot out their sins.

... وَأُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ...

31. For them will be Gardens of Eternity; beneath them rivers will flow;

... يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ مِنْ ذَهَبٍ وَيَلْبَسُونَ ثِيَابًا خُضْرًا مِّنْ سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ ...

they will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold, and they will wear green garments of fine silk and heavy brocade;

C2373. Heaven is figured by all the pictures of ease and comfort which we can imagine in our present state:

Gardens: perpetual springs of crystal water, which we can see as in a landscape from above; the finest and most costly ornaments; the most beautiful clothes to wear; green is the colour mentioned, because it is the most refreshing to the eye, and fits in well with the Garden; the wearer takes the choice of fine silk or heavy brocade; and for rest and comfort, high thrones of dignity on which the blessed ones recline.

... مُتَّكِنِينَ فِيهَا عَلَى الْأَرَائِكِ...

they will recline therein on raised thrones.

... نِعْمَ الثَّوَابُ وَحَسُنَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا (٣١)

How good the recompense!

How beautiful a couch to recline on!

C2374. This picture is in parallel contrast to the picture of Misery in the last verse.

Section 5

وَأَضْرِبْ لَهُم مَّثَلًا رَجُلَيْنِ...

32. Set forth to them the parable of two men:

... جَعَلْنَا لِأَحَدِهِمَا جَنَّتَيْنِ مِنْ أَعْنَابٍ وَحَفَفْنَاهُمَا بِنَخْلٍ...

for one of them We provided two gardens of grapevines and surrounded them with date-palms:

... وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمَا زَرْعًا (٣٢)

in between the two We placed corn-fields.

C2375. Here is a simple parable of the contrast between two men.

- One was purse-proud, and forgot that what he had was from Allah, by way of a trust and a trial in this life.
- The other boasted of nothing: his trust was in Allah.

The worldly wealth of the first was destroyed, and he had nothing left. The second was the happier in the end.

كَلِمَاتُ الْجَنَّتَيْنِ آتَتْ أَكْلَهَا وَلَمْ تَظَلِمْ مِنْهُ شَيْئًا ...

33. Each of those gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least therein:

... وَقَجَّرْنَا خِلَالَهُمَا نَهْرًا (٣٣)

in the midst of them We caused a river to flow.

وَكَانَ لَهُ ثَمْرٌ فَقَالَ لِصَاحِبِهِ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُ ...

34. (Abundant) was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument:

... أَنَا أَكْثَرُ مِنْكَ مَالًا وَأَعَزُّ نَفَرًا (٣٤)

"More wealth have I than you, and more honor and power in (my following of) men."

C2376. The two men began to compare notes.

The arrogant one was puffed up with his possessions, his income, and his large family and following, and thought in his self-complacency that it would last for ever.

He was also wrong in looking down on his Companion, who, though less affluent, was the better man of the two.

وَدَخَلَ جَنَّتَهُ وَهُوَ ظَالِمٌ لِّنَفْسِهِ ...

35. He went into his garden in a state (of mind) unjust to his soul:

C2377. It was not wealth that ruined him, but the attitude of his mind. He was unjust, not so much to his neighbour, as to his own soul. In his love of the material, he forgot or openly defied the spiritual.

As [verse 37](#) shows, he took his companion with him, to impress him with his own importance, but the companion was unmoved.

... قَالَ مَا أَظُنُّ أَن تَبِيدَ هَذِهِ أَبَدًا (٣٥)

He said, "I deem not that this will ever perish.

وَمَا أَظُنُّ السَّاعَةَ قَائِمَةً...

36. "Nor do I deem that the Hour (of Judgment) will (ever) come:

... وَلَئِن رُّدِدْتُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّي لَأَجِدَنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهَا مُنْقَلَبًا (٣٦)

even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find (there) something better in exchange."

C2378. Here comes out the grasping spirit of the materialist.

In his mind "**better**" means more wealth and more power, of the kind he was enjoying in this life, although in reality, even what he had, rested on hollow foundations and was doomed to perish and bring him down with it.

قَالَ لَهُ صَاحِبُهُ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُ...

37. His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him:

... أَكْفَرْتَا بِالَّذِي خَلَقَكَ مِن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ سَوَّأَكَ رَجُلًا (٣٧)

"Dost thou deny Him Who created thee out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned thee into a man?"

C2379. The three stages of man's creation:

first dust, or clay, itself created out of nothing and forming the physical basis of his body; then, out of the produce of the earth as incorporated in the parents body, the sperm drop (with the corresponding receptive element), and then when the different elements were mixed in due proportion, and the soul was breathed into him, the fashioned man.

Cf. 87:2, and 15:28-29.

لَكِنَّا هُوَ اللَّهُ رَبِّي وَلَا أُشْرِكُ بِرَبِّي أَحَدًا (٣٨)

38. "But (I think) for my part that He is Allah, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord.

وَلَوْلَا إِذْ دَخَلْتَ جَنَّتَكَ قُلْتَ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَأُقُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ...

39. "Why didst thou not, as thou wentest into thy garden, say:

'Allah's Will (be done)!

There is no power but with Allah!

C2380. The companion's argument divides itself into five parts.

1. He remonstrates against the proud man denying Allah.
2. He, from his own spiritual experience, proclaims that Allah is One and that He is good.
3. He points out to him the better way of enjoying Allah's gifts, with gratitude to Him.
4. He expresses contentment and satisfaction in Allah's dealings with him.
5. He gives a warning of the fleeting nature of this world's goods and the certainty of Allah's punishment for inordinate vanity.

... إِنْ تُرِنَ أَنَا أَقَلَّ مِنْكَ مَالًا وَوَلَدًا (٣٩)

If thou dost see me less than thee in wealth and sons,

فَعَسَى رَبِّي أَنْ يُؤْتِيَنِي خَيْرًا مِّنْ جَنَّتِكَ ...

40. "It may be that my Lord will give me something better than thy garden,

... وَيُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهَا حُسْبَانًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ فَيُصْبِحَ صَعِيدًا زَلَقًا (٤٠)

and that He will send on thy garden thunderbolts (by way of reckoning) from heaven, making it (but) slippery sand! --

C2381. The punishment was that of thunderbolts (**husbanan**), but the general meaning of the word includes any punishment by way of a reckoning (*hisdb*), and I think that an earthquake is also implied, as it alters water-courses, diverts channels underground, throws up silt and sand, and covers large areas with ruin.

أَوْ يُصْبِحَ مَآوُهَا عَوْرًا فَلَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ لَهُ طَلْبًا (٤١)

41. "Or the water of the garden will run off underground so that thou wilt never be able to find it."

وَأَحِيطَ بِتَمَرِهِ فَأَصْبَحَ يُقَلِّبُ كَفَّيْهِ عَلَى مَا أَنْفَقَ فِيهَا...

42. So his fruits (and enjoyment) were encompassed (with ruin), and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property,

C2382. "Fruits", "spent", "twisting of the hands", should all be understood in a wide metaphorical sense, as well as the literal sense.

He had great income and satisfaction, which were all gone. What resources he had lavished on his property! His thoughts had been engrossed on it; his hopes had been built on it; it had become the absorbing passion of his life. If he had only looked to Allah, instead of to the ephemeral goods of this world!

... وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا...

which had (now) tumbled to pieces to its very foundations,

... وَيَقُولُ يَا لَيْتَنِي لَمْ أُشْرِكْ بِرَبِّي أَحَدًا (٤٢)

and he could only say,

"Woe is me! would I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!"

C2383. In this case, in his mind, there was his own Self and his Mammon as rivals to Allah!

وَلَمْ تَكُنْ لَهُ فِئَةٌ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مُنْتَصِرًا (٤٣)

43. Nor had he numbers to help him against Allah, nor was he able to deliver himself.

C2384. He had built up connections and obligated dependents, and was proud of having his "quiver full". But where were all things when the reckoning came? He could not help himself; how could others be expected to help him!

هَذَاكَ الْوَلَايَةُ لِلَّهِ الْحَقِّ...

44. There, the (only) protection comes from Allah, the True One.

... هُوَ خَيْرٌ تَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ عُقْبًا (٤٤)

He is the Best to reward, and the Best to give success.

C2385. All else is vanity, uncertainty, the sport of Time. The only hope or truth is from Allah. Other rewards and other successes are illusory: the best Reward and the best Success come from Allah.

C.135 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

(18:45-59)

*The life of this world is ephemeral,
And its gains will not last. Good Deeds
Are the best of possessions in Allah's sight;
All will be leveled up on the Day
Of Judgement, and a new Order created
On the basis of Truth, according to the Book
Of Deeds. Pride is the root of Evil,
Rebellion, and wrong. Who will choose
Evil ones in preference to Allah? Let us accept
Truth, for though Falsehood may flourish
For a time, it must perish in the end.*

Section 6

وَأَضْرِبْ لَهُمْ مَثَلًا الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا...

45. Set forth to them the similitude of the life of this world:

... كَمَا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ الْأَرْضِ...

it is like the rain which We send down from the skies: the earth's vegetation absorbs it,

... فَأَصْبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذْرُوهُ الرِّيَّاحُ...

but soon it becomes dry stubble, which the winds do scatter:

C2386. Rain-water is a good thing in itself, but it does not last, and you can build no solid foundations on it.

It is soon absorbed in the earth, and produces the flourishing appearance of grass and vegetation-for a time. Soon these decay, and become as dry stubble, which the least wind from any quarter will blow about like a thing of no importance.

The water is gone, and so is the vegetation to which it lent a brave show of luxuriance temporarily. Such is the life of this world, contrasted with the inner and real Life, which looks to the Hereafter.

Allah is the only enduring Power we can look to, supreme over all.

... وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّقْتَدِرًا (٤٥)

it is (only) Allah Who prevails over all things.

... الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا...

46. Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world:

... وَالْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا (٤٦)

but the things that endure, Good Deeds, are best in the sight of thy Lord, as rewards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes.

C2387. Other things are fleeting: but Good Deeds have a lasting value in the sight of Allah. They are best as (or for) rewards in two ways:

1. they flow from us by the Grace of Allah, and are themselves rewards for our Faith:
2. they become the foundation of our hopes for the highest rewards in the Hereafter.

... وَيَوْمَ نُسَيِّرُ الْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً...

47. One Day We shall remove the mountains, and thou wilt see the earth as a level stretch,

C2388. On the Day of Judgment none of our present landmarks will remain.

... وَحَشَرْنَاهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا (٤٧)

and We shall gather them, all together, nor shall We leave out any one of them.

وَعَرَضُوا عَلَى رَبِّكَ صَفًّا...

48. And they will be marshalled before thy Lord in ranks, (with the announcement),

... لَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا كَمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ...

"Now have ye come to Us (bare) as We created you first:

C2389. We shall stand as we were created, with none of the adventitious possessions that we collected in this life, which will all have vanished.

... بَلْ زَعَمْتُمْ أَلَّن نَجْعَلَ لَكُمْ مَوْعِدًا (٤٨)

aye, ye thought We shall not fulfil the appointment made to you to meet (Us)!"

C2390. The skeptics will now at length be convinced of the Reality which will be upon them.

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ...

49. And the Book (of Deeds) will be placed (before you); and thou wilt see the sinful in great terror because of what is (recorded) therein;

... وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لَ هَذَا الْكِتَابِ...

they will say,

"Ah! woe to us! what a book is this!

... لَا يُعَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا...

It leaves out nothing small or great, but takes account thereof!"

... وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا...

They will find all that they did, placed before them:

... وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا (٤٩)

and not one will thy Lord treat with injustice.

C2391. Personal responsibility, for all deeds in this life will then be enforced. But it will be done with perfect justice.

Expressed in the forms of this world, it will amount to a clear statement of all we did in this life; the record will be put before us to convince us.

As it will be a perfect record, with no omissions and no wrong entries, it will be perfectly convincing. Where there is punishment, it has been earned by the wrong-doer's own deeds, not imposed on him unjustly.

Section 7

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ ...

50. Behold! We said to the angels, "Bow down to Adam":

C2392. Cf. 2:34, where the story is told of the fall of mankind through Adam.

Here the point is referred to in order to bring home the individual responsibility of the erring soul.

Iblis is your enemy; you have been told his history; will you prefer to go to him rather than to the merciful Allah, your Creator and Cherisher?

What a false exchange you would make!'

... فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ ...

they bowed down except Iblis.

... كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ ...

He was one of the Jinns, and he broke the Command of his Lord.

C2393. Cf. 6:100, n. 929.

... أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِي ...

Will ye then take him and his progeny as protectors rather than Me?

C2394. Satan's progeny: we need not take the epithet only in a literal sense.

All his followers are also his progeny.

... وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ...

And they are enemies to you!

... بِنَسِ لِّلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا (٥٠)

Evil would be the exchange for the wrongdoers!

C2395. Out of the limited free-will that man has, if he were to choose Evil instead of Good, Satan instead of Allah, what a dreadful choice it would be!

It would really be an evil exchange. For man is Allah's creature, cared for and cherished by Him. He abandons his Cherisher to become the slave of his enemy!

مَا أَشْهَدْتُهُمْ خَلْقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَا خَلْقَ أَنْفُسِهِمْ...

51. I called them not to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor (even) their own creation:

... وَمَا كُنْتُ مَتَّخِذَ الْمُضِلِّينَ عَضُدًا (٥١)

nor is it for Me to take as helpers such as lead (men) astray!

C2396. Allah wants man's good: how can He take Evil for His partner?

وَيَوْمَ يَقُولُ نَادُوا شُرَكَائِيَ الَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ فَدَعَوْهُمْ...

52. One Day He will say, "Call on those whom ye thought to be My partners,"

... فَلَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَهُمْ ...

and they will call on them, but they will not listen to them;

... وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمْ مَوْبِقًا (٥٢)

and We shall make for them a place of common perdition.

C2397. Some Commentators construe: "And We shall make a partition between them": i.e., the Evil ones will not even be seen by their misguided followers, much as the latter may go on calling on them.

وَرَأَى الْمُجْرِمُونَ النَّارَ فَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُم مُّوَاقِعُوهَا...

53. And the Sinful shall see the Fire and apprehend that they have to all therein;

... وَلَمْ يَجِدُوا عَنْهَا مَصْرِفًا (٥٣)

no means will they find to turn away therefrom.

Section 8

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لِلنَّاسِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ...

54. We have explained in detail in this Qur'an, for the benefit of mankind, every kind of similitude:

... وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ أَكْثَرَ شَيْءٍ جَدَلًا (٥٤)

but man is, in most things, contentious.

C2398. If men had not cultivated the habit of contention and obstinacy, they would have found that the parables and similitudes of Scripture had fully met their difficulties, and they would gladly have obeyed the call of Allah.

وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّهُمْ...

55. And what is there to keep back men from believing, now that Guidance has come to them, nor from praying for forgiveness from their Lord,

... إِلَّا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ سُنَّةٌ الْأَوَّلِينَ ...

but that (they ask that) the ways of the ancients be repeated with them,

C2399. But man's obstinacy or contrariness asks or calls for a repetition of what happened to the wicked and those who rejected Faith in ancient times.

Out of curiosity, or by way of challenge, they seem to court the Punishment and ask that it be brought to pass at once.

But it will come soon enough, and then they will think it too early! Cf. 13:6 and n. 1810.

... أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ قُبُلًا (٥٥)

or the Wrath be brought to them face to face?

وَمَا نُرْسِلُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ...

56. We only send the Messengers to give glad tidings and to give warnings:

C2400. The Prophets of Allah are not sent to humour us with dialectics or satisfy the vulgar curiosity for miracles or dark unusual things.

There is no "crookedness" (18:1) in their preaching. They come to preach the Truth, -not in an abstract way, but with special reference to our conduct.

They give us the good news of salvation lest we despair in the presence of Sin, and to warn us clearly of the dangers of Evil. Vain controversies about words only weaken their mission, or turn it into ridicule.

The ungodly have a trick also of treating the earnest preaching to them itself as a jest and ridiculing it.

... وَيُجَادِلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا بِهِ الْحَقَّ...

but the Unbelievers dispute with vain argument, in order therewith to weaken the truth,

... وَاتَّخَذُوا آيَاتِي وَمَا أُنذِرُوا هُزُوًا (٥٦)

and they treat My Signs as a jest, as also the fact that they are warned!

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ دُكِّرَ بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِ...

57. And who doth more wrong than one who is reminded of the Signs of his Lord,

... فَأَعْرَضَ عَنْهَا وَنَسِيَ مَا قَدَّمَتْ يَدَاهُ...

but turns away from them, forgetting the (deeds) which his hands have sent forth?

C2401. Considering the power of sin, and how it gets hold of the hearts of men, and considering all the wrongs that men have done, it is the height of folly and injustice

on their part to turn away from warnings which are given expressly for their good.

But a stage of callousness is reached, when, by their own choice, they have rendered themselves impervious to Allah's Grace. At that stage a veil is put over their hearts and they are left alone for a time, that they may commune with themselves and perhaps repent and seek Allah's Mercy again. If they do not, it is their own loss.

See next verse.

... إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَنْ يَفْقَهُوهُ وَفِي آذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا ...

Verily We have set veils over their hearts lest they should understand this, and over their ears, deafness.

... وَإِنْ تَدْعُهُمْ إِلَى الْهُدَى فَلَنْ يَهْتَدُوا إِذًا أَبَدًا (٥٧)

If thou callest them to guidance, even then will they never accept guidance.

وَرَبُّكَ الْعَفُورُ ذُو الرَّحْمَةِ ...

58. But your Lord is Most Forgiving, Full of Mercy.

... لَوْ يُؤَاخِذُهُمْ بِمَا كَسَبُوا لَعَجَّلَ لَهُمُ الْعَذَابَ ...

If He were to call them (at once) to account for what they have earned, then surely He would have hastened their Punishment:

... بَلْ لَهُمْ مَوْعِدٌ لَنْ يَجِدُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ مَوْئِلًا (٥٨)

but they have their appointed time, beyond which they will find no refuge.

C2402. Min duni hi: should we take the pronoun to refer to "the appointed time." or to "your Lord" mentioned at the beginning of the verse?

Most Commentators take the former view, and I have translated accordingly. But I agree with those who take the latter view, and the better translation would be:

"But they have their appointed time, and except with Allah, they will find no refuge."

That means that even during the period allowed them, when they are left to wander astray as they have

rejected Allah's Grace, Allah's Mercy is open to them if they will repent and return; but nothing but Allah's Mercy can save them.

وَتِلْكَ الْقُرَىٰ أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ لَمَّا ظَلَمُوا...

59. Such were the populations We destroyed when they committed iniquities;

... وَجَعَلْنَا لِمَهْلِكِهِم مَّوْعِدًا (٥٩)

but We fixed an appointed time for their destruction.

C2403. The instances of exemplary Punishment in former times were also subject to this rule, that Allah gives plenty of rope to the wicked, in case they might turn, repent, and obtain His Mercy.

C.136 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

(18:60-82)

*Moses was up against mysteries
Which he wanted to explore. He searched
Out a man endued with knowledge
Derived from the divine springs from which
Flow the paradoxes of life. He is shown
Three such paradoxes and how human
Impatience is inconsistent with their true
Understanding. The highest knowledge
Comes not except by divine gift,
And a constant, patient striving,
With Faith, to apprehend something
Of the Purpose of the All-Wise Allah.*

Section 9

وإذ قال موسى لفتاه...

60. Behold, Moses said to his attendant,

C2404. This episode in the story of Moses is meant to illustrate four points.

1. Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Even so that wisdom did not comprehend everything, even as the whole stock of the knowledge of the present day, in the sciences and the arts, and in literature, (if it could be supposed to be gathered in one individual), does not include all knowledge. Divine knowledge, as far as man is concerned, is unlimited.

Even after Moses received his divine mission, his knowledge was not so perfect that it could not receive further additions.

2. Constant effort is necessary to keep our knowledge square with the march of time, and such effort Moses is shown to be making.

3. The mysterious man he meets (18:65 and n. 2411), to whom Tradition assigns the name of Khidhr (literally, Green), is the type of that knowledge which is ever in contact with life as it is actually lived.

4. There are paradoxes in life;

apparent loss may be real gain;

apparent cruelty may be real mercy; returning good for evil may really be justice and not generosity (18:79-82).

Allah's wisdom transcends all human calculation.

... لا أبرح حتى أبلغ مجمع البحرين ...

"I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas

C2405. The most probable geographical location (if any is required in a story that is a parable) is where the two

arms of the Red Sea join together, viz., the Gulf of 'Aqaba and the Gulf of Suez.

They enclose the Sinai Peninsula, in which Moses and the Israelites spent many years in their wanderings.

... أَوْ أَمْضِي حُقُبًا (٦٠)

or (until) I spend years and years in travel."

C2406. Huqub means a long but indefinite space of time. Sometimes it is limited to 80 years.

... فَلَمَّا بَلَغَا مَجْمَعَ ...

61. But when they reached the Junction,

C2407. literally, 'the Junction of (the space) between the two,' i.e., the point at which the two seas were united.

... بَيْنَهُمَا نَسِيًا حُوتُهُمَا ...

they forgot (about) their Fish,

C2408. Moses was to go and find a servant of Allah, who would instruct him in such knowledge as he had not already got. He was to take a fish with him.

The place where he was to meet his mysterious Teacher would be indicated by the fact that the fish would disappear when he got to that place.

... فَأَتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ سَرَبًا (٦١)

which took its course through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel.

... فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَا قَالَ لِفَتَاهُ آتِنَا غَدَاءَنَا ...

62. When they had passed on (some distance), Moses said to his attendant:

"Bring us our early meal;

... لَقَدْ لُقِينَا مِنْ سَفَرِنَا هَذَا نَصَبًا (٦٢)

truly we have suffered much fatigue at this (stage of) our journey."

C2409. When they came to the Junction of the Seas, Moses forgot about the fish, and his attendant forgot to tell him of the fact that he had seen the fish escaping into the sea in a marvelous way.

They passed on, but the stages now became heavier and heavier, and more fatiguing to Moses.

قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَ إِذْ أَوَيْنَا إِلَى الصَّخْرَةِ فَإِنِّي نَسِيتُ الْحُوتَ...

63. He replied:

"Sawest thou (what happened) when we betook ourselves to the rock?

I did indeed forget (about) the Fish:

... وَمَا أَنْسَانِيهِ إِلَّا الشَّيْطَانُ أَنْ أَذْكُرَهُ...

none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it:

C2410. The attendant actually saw the fish swimming away in the sea, and yet "forgot" to tell his master. In his case the "forgetting" was more than forgetting. Inertia had made him refrain from telling the important news. In such matters inertia is almost as bad as active spite, the suggestion of Satan.

... وَاتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ عَجَبًا (٦٣)

it took its course through the sea in a marvelous way!"

قَالَ ذَلِكَ مَا كُنَّا نَبْغُ...

64. Moses said: "That was what we were seeking after":

... فَأَرْتَدَّا عَلَى آثَارِهِمَا قَصَصًا (٦٤)

so they went back on their footsteps, following (the path they had come).

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا...

65. So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves

C2411. One of Our servants: his name is not mentioned in the Quran, but Tradition gives it as Khidhr.

Round him have gathered a number of picturesque folk tales, with which we are not here concerned.

"Khidhr" means "Green": his knowledge is fresh and green, and drawn out of the living sources of life for it is drawn from Allah's own Knowledge. He is a mysterious being, who has to be sought out. He has the secrets of some of the paradoxes of Life, which ordinary people do not understand, or understand in a wrong sense, as we shall see further on.

The nearest equivalent figure in the literature of the People of the Book is Melchizedek or Melchisedek (the Greek form in the New Testament). In Gen. 14:18-20, he appears as king of Salem, priest of the Most High God: he blesses Abraham, and Abraham gives him tithes.

St. Paul allegorizes him in his Epistle to the Hebrew (5:6-10, 7:1-10):

"he was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life".

That is to say, he appeared mysteriously: neither his parentage nor his pedigree is known, and he seems to live all time.

These qualities are also attributed to Khidhr in popular Muslim tradition.

... وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِنْ لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا (٦٥)

and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence.

C2412. Khidhr had two special gifts from Allah:

- Mercy from Him, and
- Knowledge from Him too.

The first freed him from the ordinary incidents of daily human life; and the second entitled him to interpret the inner meaning and mystery of events, as we shall see further on.

قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَى...

66. Moses said to him:

... هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُعَلِّمَنِي مِمَّا عَلَّمْتَنِي رُشْدًا (٦٦)

"May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?"

C2413. Moses, not understanding the full import of what he was asking, makes a simple request. He wants to learn something of the special Knowledge which Allah had bestowed on Khidhr.

قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا (٦٧)

67. (The other) said:

"Verily thou wilt not be able to have patience with me!

C2414. Khidhr smiles, and says that there will be many things which Moses will see with him, which Moses will not completely understand and which will make Moses impatient.

The highest knowledge often seems paradoxical to those who have not the key to it.

وَكَيْفَ تَصْبِرُ عَلَىٰ مَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ خُبْرًا (٦٨)

68. "And how canst thou have patience about things about which thy understanding is not complete?"

C2415. Khidhr does not blame Moses.

Each one of us can only follow our own imperfect lights to the best of our judgment, but if we have Faith, we are saved many false steps.

قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ صَابِرًا ...

69. Moses said:

"Thou wilt find me, if Allah so will, (truly) patient:

... وَلَا أَغْصِي لَكَ أَمْرًا (٦٩)

nor shall I disobey thee in aught."

C2416. Moses has Faith. He adopts the true attitude of the learner to the Teacher, and promises to obey in all things, with the help of Allah.

The Teacher is doubtful, but permits him to follow him on condition that he asks no questions about anything until the Teacher himself mentions it first.

قَالَ فَإِنِ اتَّبَعْتَنِي فَلَا تَسْأَلْنِي عَنْ شَيْءٍ حَتَّىٰ أُحَدِّثَ لَكَ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا (٧٠)

70. The other said:

"If then thou wouldst follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to thee concerning it."

Section 10

فَانطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا رَكِبَا فِي السَّفِينَةِ خَرَقَهَا...

71. So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it.

C2417. The explanation follows in [18:79](#).

... قَالَ أَخْرَقْنَاهَا لِنُغْرِقَ أَهْلَهَا ...

Said Moses:

"Hast thou scuttled it in order to drown those in it?"

... لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا إِمْرًا (٧١)

Truly a strange thing hast thou done!"

قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لِنَاسِكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا (٧٢)

72. He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

قَالَ لَّا نُوَاخِدُنِي بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرْهِقْنِي مِنْ أَمْرِي عُسْرًا (٧٣)

73. Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case."

فَانطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَامًا فَقَتَلَهُ...

74. Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young man, he slew him.

C2418. The explanation follows in [18:80-81](#).

... قَالَ أَقْتَلْتَ نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ ...

Moses said:

"Hast thou slain an innocent person who had slain none?"

... لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا نُكْرًا (٧٤)

Truly a foul (unheard-of) thing hast thou done!"

قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكَ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا (٧٥)

75. He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

قَالَ إِنْ سَأَلْتَكَ عَنِ شَيْءٍ بَعْدَهَا فَلَا تُصَاحِبْنِي...

76. (Moses) said:

"If ever I ask thee about anything after this, keep me not in thy company:

... قَدْ بَلَغْتَ مِنْ لَدُنِّي عُذْرًا (٧٦)

then wouldst thou have received (full) excuse from my side."

فَانطَلَقَا حَتَّى إِذَا أَتَيَا أَهْلَ قَرْيَةٍ...

77. Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town,

... اسْتَطَعَمَا أَهْلَهَا فَأَبَوْا أَنْ يُضَيِّقُوا هُمَا...

they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality.

C2419. The inhabitants were churlish. They broke the universal Eastern rule of hospitality to strangers, and thus showed themselves beyond the pale of ordinary human courtesies.

Note that they would have been expected to offer hospitality of themselves, unasked. Here Moses and his companion actually had to ask for hospitality and were refused point-blank.

... فَوَجَدَا فِيهَا جِدَارًا يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَنْقَضَ فَأَقَامَهُ ...

They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight.

... قَالَ لَوْ شِئْتَ لَاتَّخَذْتَ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا (٧٧)

(Moses) said: "If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!"

C2420. As they were refused hospitality, they should, as self-respecting men, have shaken the dust of the town off their feet, or shown their indignation in some way. Instead of that, Khidhr actually goes and does a benevolent act.

He rebuilds for them a falling wall, and never asks for any compensation for it. Perhaps he employed local workmen for it and paid them wages, thus actually benefiting a town which had treated him and his companion so shabbily!

Moses is naturally surprised and asks, "Could you not at least have asked for the cost?"

قَالَ هَذَا فِرَاقُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنِكَ ...

78. He answered:

"This is the parting between me and thee:

... سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِمَا أُوَيْلَ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا (٧٨)

now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience.

C2421. The story and the interpretation are given with the greatest economy of words. It would repay us to search for the meaning in terms of our own inner and outer experience.

أَمَّا السَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسَاكِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ فِي الْبَحْرِ ...

79. As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water:

... فَأَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَعْيِبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَاءَهُمْ مَلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا (٧٩)

I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.

C2422. They went on the boat, which was plying for hire. Its owners were not even ordinary men who plied for trade. They had been reduced to great poverty, perhaps from affluent circumstances, and deserved great commiseration, the more so as they preferred an honest calling to begging for charity.

They did not know, but Khidhr did, that that boat, perhaps a new one, had been marked down to be commandeered by an unjust king who seized on every boat he could get-it may have been, for warlike purposes. If this boat had been taken away from these self-respecting men, they would have been reduced to beggary, with no resources left them.

By a simple act of making it unseaworthy, the boat was saved from seizure. The owners could repair it as soon as the danger was past.

Khidhr probably paid liberally in fares, and what seemed an unaccountably cruel act was the greatest act of kindness he could do in the circumstances.

وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنِينَ...

80. "As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith,

... فَخَشِينَا أَنْ يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا (٨٠)

and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to Allah and man).

C2423. This seemed at first sight even a more cruel act than scuttling the boat. But the danger was also greater.

Khidhr knew that the youth was a potential parricide. His parents were worthy, pious people, who had brought him up with love.

He had apparently gone wrong. Perhaps he had already been guilty of murders and robberies and had escaped the law by subtleties and fraud. See next note.

فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبَدِّلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُ زَكَوَّةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا (٨١)

81. "So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection.

C2424. The son was practically an outlaw, -a danger to the public and a particular source of grief to his righteous parents.

Even so, his summary capital punishment would have been unjustified if Khidhr had been acting on his own. But Khidhr was not acting on his own: see the latter part of the next verse.

The plural "we" also implies that he was not acting on his own. He was acting on higher authority and removing a public scourge, who was also a source of extreme sorrow and humiliation to his parents.

His parents are promised a better-behaved son who would love them and be a credit to them.

وَأَمَّا الْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَامَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ...

82. "As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the Town;

... وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُ كَنْزٌ لَهُمَا وَكَانَ أَبُوهُمَا صَالِحًا...

there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled:

their father had been a righteous man:

C2425. The wall was in a ruinous state. If it had fallen, the treasure buried beneath it would have been exposed and would certainly have been looted, among so churlish and selfish a people.

See [n. 2419 above](#).

The treasure had been collected and buried by a righteous man. It was not, in any sense of the word, ill-gotten gains; it was buried expressly in the interests of the orphans by their father before his death. It was intended that the orphans should grow up and safely take possession of their heritage. It was also expected that they would be righteous men like their father, and

use the treasure in good works and in advancing righteousness among an otherwise wicked community.

There was thus both public and private interests involved in all the three incidents. In the second incident Khidhr uses the word "we", showing that he was associating in his act the public authorities of the place, who had been eluded by the outlaw.

... فَأَرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يَبْلُغَا أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنْزَهُمَا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ...

so thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure -- a mercy (and favor) from thy Lord.

C2426. Age of full strength: Cf. 17:34 and n. 2218.

... وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُ عَنْ أَمْرِي ...

I did it not of my own accord.

C2427. Those who act, not from a whim or a private impulse of their own, but from higher authority, have to bear the blame, for acts of the greatest wisdom and utility.

... ذَلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا (٨٢) ...

Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience."

C.137 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

(18:83-110)

*Three episodes in the life of a great king
Dhu al Qarnayn illustrated how power
And opportunities should be used in the service
Of Allah; he punished the guilty indeed,
But was kind to the righteous; he left
Primitive people their freedom of life;
And he protected industrious people from grasping*

*Neighbors. But he relied upon Allah, and made them
Remember the Day of Judgement, when all
Will see the Truth and receive the Punishments
And Rewards earned in their present Life.*

Section 11

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ ذِي الْقُرْنَيْنِ...

83. They ask thee concerning Dhul al Qarnayn.

C2428. Literally, "the Two-horned one", the King with the Two Horns, or the Lord of the Two Epochs.

Who was he?

In what age, and where did he live?

The Quran gives us no material on which we can base a positive answer. Nor is it necessary to find an answer, as the story is treated as a Parable.

Popular opinion identifies Dhul al Qarnayn with Alexander the Great.

An alternative suggestion is an ancient Persian king, or a pre-historic Himyarite King.

Dhul al Qarnayn was a most powerful king, but it was Allah, Who, in His universal Plan, gave him power and provided him with the ways and means for his great work.

His sway extended over East and West, and over people of diverse civilisations. He was just and righteous, not selfish or grasping. He protected the weak and punished the unlawful and the turbulent.

Three of his expeditions are described in the text, each embodying a great ethical idea involved in the possession of kingship or power.

... فَلَ سَأَلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْهُ نَكَرًا (٨٣)

Say, "I will rehearse to you something of his story."

إِنَّا مَكَّنَّا لَهُ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ سَبِيلًا (٨٤)

84. Verily We established his power on earth, and We gave him the ways and the means to all ends.

C2429. Great was his power and great were his opportunities ("ways and means"), which he used for justice and righteousness.

But he recognised that his power and opportunities were given to him as a trust by Allah. He had faith, and did not forget Allah.

فَاتَّبَعَ سَبِيلًا (٨٥)

85. One (such) way he followed,

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَرْغَبَ الشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَغْرُبُ فِي عَيْنٍ حَمِئَةٍ...

86. Until, when he reached the setting of the sun, He found it set in a spring of murky water:

C2430. This is the first of the three episodes here mentioned, his expedition to the west. "Reaching the setting of the sun" does not mean the extreme west, for there is no such thing. West and East are relative terms.

It means a western expedition terminated by a "spring of murky water." This has puzzled Commentators, and they have understood this to mean the dark, tempestuous sea.

If Dhul al Qarnayn is Alexander the Great, the reference is easily understood to be to Lychnitis (now Ochrida), west of Macedonia. It is fed entirely by underground springs in a limestone region, where the water is never very clear.

... وَوَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا قَوْمًا...

near it he found a People:

... فُلْنَا يَا دَا الْقَرْنَيْنِ إِمَّا أَنْ تُعَذِّبَ وَإِمَّا أَنْ تَتَّخِذَ فِيهِمْ حُسْنًا (٨٦)

We said: "O Dhul al Qarnayn! (thou hast authority), either to punish them, or to treat them with kindness."

C2431. He had great power and a great opportunity. He got authority over a turbulent and unruly people. Was he going to be severe with them and chastise them, or was he going to seek peace at any price, i.e., to wink at violence and injustice so long as it did not affect his power?

He chose the better course, as described in the next verse. To protect the weak and the innocent, he punished the guilty and the headstrong, but he remembered always that the true Punishment would come in the Hereafter-the true and final justice before the throne of Allah.

قَالَ أَمَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نُعَذِّبُهُ...

87. He said:

"Whoever doth wrong, him shall we punish;

... ثُمَّ يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِ فَيُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا نُّكْرًا (٨٧)

then shall he be sent back to his Lord; and He will punish him with a punishment unheard-of (before).

C2432. Though most powerful among kings, he remembered that his power was but human, and given by Allah. His punishments were but tentative, to preserve the balance of this life as he could appraise it.

Even if his punishment was capital ("wrong doer sent back to his Lord") it was nothing compared to the dire consequences of sin, in the final Justice of Allah.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ آمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُ جَزَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ...

88. "But whoever believes, and works righteousness -- he shall have a goodly reward,

... وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا (٨٨)

and easy will be his task as we order it by our command."

C2433. He never said like Pharaoh. "I am your Lord Most High!" (79:24).

On the contrary his punishments were humbly regulated as not being final, and he laid more stress on the good

he could do to those who lived normal lives in faith and righteousness.

His rule was easy to them: he imposed no heavy tasks because of his power, but gave every opportunity to rich and poor for the exercise of virtue and goodness. Such is the spiritual lesson to be learned from the first episode.

ثُمَّ أَتَى سَبَبًا (٨٩)

89. Then followed he (another) way.

حَتَّى إِذَا بَلَغَ مَطْلِعَ الشَّمْسِ...

90. Until, when he came to the rising of the sun,

C2434. We now come to the second episode.

This is an expedition to the east. "Rising of the sun" has a meaning corresponding to "setting of the sun" in 18:86, as explained in [n. 2430](#).

... وَجَدَهَا تَطْلُعُ عَلَى قَوْمٍ لَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُمْ مِّنْ دُونِهَا سِتْرًا (٩٠)

he found it rising on a people for whom We had provided no covering protection against the sun.

C2435. The people here lived very simple lives. Perhaps the climate was hot, and they required neither roofs over their heads, nor much clothing to protect them from the sun.

What did he do with them?

See [next note](#).

كَذَلِكَ وَقَدْ أَحَطْنَا بِمَا لَدَيْهِ خُبْرًا (٩١)

91. (He left them) as they were:

We completely understood what was before him.

C2436. They were a primitive people. He did not fuss over their primitiveness, but left them in the enjoyment of peace and tranquility in their own way.

In this he was wise. Power is apt to be intolerant and arrogant, and to interfere in everything that does not accord with its own glorification. Not so Dhul al Qarnayn.

He recognised his own limitations in the sight of Allah: man never completely understands his own position, but if he devoutly looks to Allah, he will live and let live. This is the spiritual lesson from the second episode.

ثُمَّ أَتَعَ سَبَبًا (٩٢)

92. Then followed he (another) way

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ بَيْنَ السَّيِّئِينَ ...

93. Until, when he reached (a tract) between two mountains,

C2437. Cf. 21:96.

... وَجَدَ مِنْ دُونِهِمَا قَوْمًا لَّا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ قَوْلًا (٩٣)

he found, beneath, them a people who scarcely understood a word.

C2438. It does not mean that they had no speech. It means that they did not understand the speech of the Conqueror. But they had parleys with him (through interpreters), as is evident from the verses following (18:94-98).

قَالُوا يَا ذَا الْقُرْنَيْنِ إِنَّ يَا جُوجَ وَمَاجُوجَ مُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ ...

94. They said:

"O Dhu al Qarnayn! the Gog and Magog (people) do great mischief on earth:

C2439. What we are mainly concerned with is its interpretation.

The Conqueror had now arrived among a people who were different in speech and race from him, but not quite primitive, for they were skilled in the working of metals, and could furnish blocks (or bricks) of iron, melt metals with bellows or blow-pipes, and prepare molten lead (18:96).

Apparently they were a peaceable and industrious race, much subject to incursions from wild tribes who are called Gog and Magog. Against these tribes they were willing to purchase immunity by paying the Conqueror tribute in return for protection. The permanent protection they wanted was the closing of a mountain gap through which the incursions were made.

... فَهَلْ نَجْعَلُ لَكَ خَرْجًا عَلَىٰ أَنْ نَجْعَلَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَهُمْ سَدًّا (٩٤)

shall we then render thee tribute in order that thou mightest erect a barrier between us and them?"

قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ...

95. He said:

"(The power) in which my Lord has established me is better (than tribute):

C2440. Dhul al Qarnayn was not greedy and did not want to impose a tribute to be carried away from an industrious population. He understood the power which Allah had given him, to involve duties and responsibilities on his part -the duty of protecting his subjects without imposing too heavy a taxation on them.

... فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ ...

help me therefore with strength (and labor):

He would provide the motive force and organizing skill. Would they obey him and provide the material and labour, so that they could close the gap with a strong barrier, probably with well-secured gates?

... أَجْعَلُ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا (٩٥)

I will erect a strong barrier between you and them:

The word **radm**, translated "Barrier," does not necessarily mean a wall, but rather suggests a blocked door or entrance.

أَتُونِي زُبَرَ الْحَدِيدِ...

96. "Bring me blocks of iron."

C2441. I understand the defences erected to have been a strong barrier of iron, with iron Gates. The jambs of the Gates were constituted with blocks or bricks of iron, and the interstices filled up with molten lead, so as to form an impregnable mass of metal.

It may be that there was a stone wall also, but that is not mentioned. There was none in the Iron Gate near Bukhara.

... حَتَّىٰ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ الصَّدَفَيْنِ قَالَ انْفُخُوا ...

At length, when he had filled up the space between the two steep mountain sides, he said,

"Blow (with your bellows)."

... حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَعَلَهُ نَارًا قَالَ ...

Then, when he had made it (red) as fire, he said:

C2442. Made it (red) as fire. what does "it" refer to?

Probably to the iron, either in sheets or blocks, to be welded with the molten lead.

... أَنُؤْنِي أَفْرَعٌ عَلَيْهِ قَطْرًا (٩٦)

"Bring me, that I may pour over it, molten lead."

فَمَا اسْطَاعُوا أَن يَظْهَرُوهُ وَمَا اسْتَطَاعُوا لَهُ نَقْبًا (٩٧)

97. Thus were they made powerless to scale it or to dig through it.

C2443. The iron wall and gates and towers were sufficiently high to prevent their being scaled and sufficiently strong with welded metal to resist any attempt to dig through them.

قَالَ هَذَا رَحْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّي ...

98. He said:

"This is a mercy from my Lord:

C2444. After all the effort which Dhul al Qarnayn has made for their protection, he claims no credit for himself beyond that of discharging his duty as a ruler. He turns

their attention to Allah, Who has provided the ways and means by which they can be helped and protected.

But all such human precautions are apt to become futile. The time must come when they will crumble into dust. Allah has said so in His Revelation; and His word is true.

And so the lesson from the third episode is:

Take human precautions and do all in your power to protect yourselves from evil. But no protection is complete unless you seek the help and grace of Allah. The best of our precautions must crumble to dust when the appointed Day arrives.

... فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي جَعَلَهُ دُغَاءً ...

but when the promise of my comes to pass, He will make it into dust;

... وَكَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي حَقًّا (٩٨)

and the promise of my Lord is true."

وَتَرَكْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَمُوجُ فِي بَعْضٍ ...

99. On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another;

C2445. And so we pass on to the Last Days before the Great Summons comes from Allah. All human barriers will be swept away. There will be tumultuous rushes. The Trumpet will be blown, and the Judgment will be set on foot.

... وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَجَمَعْنَاهُمْ جَمْعًا (٩٩)

the trumpet will be blown, and We shall collect them all together.

وَعَرَضْنَا جَهَنَّمَ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَرْضًا (١٠٠)

100. And We shall present Hell that day for Unbelievers to see, all spread out --

C2446. If men had scoffed at Faith and the Hereafter, their eyes will be opened now, and they will see the terrible Reality.

الَّذِينَ كَانَتْ أَعْيُنُهُمْ فِي غِطَاءٍ عَن ذِكْرِي...

101. (Unbelievers) whose eyes had been under a veil from Remembrance of Me,

... وَكَانُوا لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَمْعًا (١٠١)

and who had been unable even to hear.

C2447. Those very men who refused to see the many Signs of Allah which in this world convey His Message and to hear the Word of the Lord when it came to them, will then see without any mistake the consequences fully brought up before them.

Section 12

أَفَحَسِبَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَن يَتَّخِذُوا عِبَادِي مِن دُونِي أَوْلِيَاءَ...

102. Do the Unbelievers think that they can take my servants as protectors besides Me?

... إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ نُزُلًا (١٠٢)

Verily We have prepared Hell for the Unbelievers for (their) entertainment.

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِالْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَالًا (١٠٣)

103. Say:

"Shall we tell you of those who lose most in respect of their deeds? --

C2448. That is, those who prided themselves on their works in this life, and now find that those works are of no avail. Their loss is all the greater because they had a misplaced confidence in their own deeds or in the assistance of false "protectors".

Allah is the only Protector: no one else's protection is of any use.

الَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يُحْسِبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِبُونَ صُنْعًا (١٠٤)

104. "Those whose efforts have been wasted in this life, while they thought that they were acquiring good by their works?"

C2449. Many people have such a smug sense of self-righteousness that while they go on doing wrong, they think that they are acquiring merit.

So, in charity, all the elements that make for outward show or selfishness (as to get some worldly advantage) nullify the deed of charity.

In the same way hypocrites sometimes affect to be surprised that their declared effort for somebody's good is not appreciated, when they are really seeking some hidden gain or false glory for themselves.

The sincere are only those who believe in their spiritual responsibility and act as in Allah's sight.

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ وَلِقَائِهِ فَحَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ...

105. They are those who deny the Signs of their Lord and the fact of their having to meet Him (in the Hereafter):
vain will be their works,

... فَلَا نُقِيمُ لَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وَزْنًا (١٠٥)

nor shall We, on the Day of Judgment, give them any Weight.

C2450. What weight can be attached to works behind which the motives are not pure, or are positively evil?

They are either wasted or count against those who seek to pass them off as meritorious!

ذَلِكَ جَزَاءُهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ بِمَا كَفَرُوا وَاتَّخَذُوا آيَاتِي وَرُسُلِي هُزُوًا (١٠٦)

106. That is their reward, Hell; because they rejected Faith, and took My Signs and My Messengers by way of jest.

C2451. False motives, pretence, deception, and hypocrisy, flourish because people do not take the higher life seriously. In effect they treat it as a jest. Signs and Messengers are sent as a special and personal Mercy from Allah, and for such things the first person singular is used as in this verse, even when it involves a sudden transition from the first person plural as in the last verse.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ الْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا (١٠٧)

107. As to those who believe and work righteous deeds, they have, for their entertainment, the Gardens of Paradise,

C2452. Firdaus in Persian means an enclosed place, a park.

In technical theological language the word is used for the inner circle of Heaven, or the highest Heaven, the destination of those who perfectly fulfil both requirements, viz.; a sound faith, and perfectly righteous conduct. Small faults in either respect are forgiven; the Mercy of Allah steps in.

خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يَبْغُونَ عَنْهَا حَوْلًا (١٠٨)

108. Wherein they shall dwell (for **blue**):
no change will they wish for from them.

فَلَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لَكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي...

109. Say:

"If the ocean were ink (**wherewith to write out**) the words of my Lord,

... لَنفَدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي...

sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord,

C2453. The Words and Signs and Mercies of Allah are in all Creation, and can never be fully set out in human language, however extended our means may be imagined to be.

... وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا (١٠٩)

even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid."

فَلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهُ وَاحِدٌ...

110. Say:

"I am but a man like yourselves, (**but**) the inspiration has come to me, that your Allah is one Allah:

فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُو لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا...

whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness,

... وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا (۱۱۰)

and in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner."

C2454. Righteousness and true respect for Allah; which excludes the worship of anything else,

- whether idols, or deified men,
- or forces of nature,
- or faculties of man,
- or Self-these are the criteria of true worship.



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