



الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ



*Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the  
Worlds;*

## *Quran English Translation & Commentary*

*By*

*Abdullah Yusuf Ali*

### *Appendix VI*

#### **Who was Dhu al Qarnayn?**

**(see 18:83-98)**

As stated in my note 2428 to 18:83, I do not consider that historical or geographical considerations have much bearing on a story treated as a Parable, as Dhu al Qarnayn's story is.

Indeed all stories or narrations are referred to in the Quran as Parables, for their spiritual meaning. Heated controversies or dogmatic assertions as to precise dates, personalities, or localities, seem to me to be out of place. But a great deal of literature has been piled up among our writers on the subject, and it seems desirable to set down a few notes as to the different views that have been expressed.

What is the meaning of the name or title Dhu al Qarnayn-  
"Lord of two Qarns"?

"Qarn" may mean:

1. a horn in the literal sense, as in the case of a ram or bull.
2. a horn in a metaphorical sense, as in English, the horns of a crescent, or by a further metaphor (not used in English), the home of a kingdom or territory, two portions at opposite ends.
3. by another metaphor, a summit, a lock of hair, typifying strength, a crest such as Eastern Kings wear on their diadems;
4. referring to time, an Epoch, an Age, a Generation.

Meaning

- is inapplicable to a man or a great king: but see the next paragraph about Alexander the Great.

The other three meanings may be applicable, as implying:

- Lord of East and West, Lord of wide territory or of two kingdoms;
- Lord of two crests on his diadem, typifying two kingdoms, or a rank superior to that of an ordinary king;
- Lord of more than one Epoch; one whose power and influence extend for beyond his life time.

If we accept the popular identification of Dhu al Qarnayn with Alexander, all the three latter designations would be applicable to him,

- as he was lord of the West and East, lord of the Greek States united for the first time (Hellenic Captain-General) and of the widely extended Persian Dominion which included all Western Asia, Egypt, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Punjab (at least portions).

- He is represented on his coins with two horns on his head: he considered himself a son of Jupiter Ammon (who had the two horns of a ram), with a divine mission. He revolutionized the history of Europe, Asia, and Africa (Egypt), and his influence lasted for many generations after his death at the young age of 33. He lived from B.C. 356 to 323, but his name was one to conjure with for many centuries after him.

It was not only on account of his political power, but his cultural influences. Through his conquests, Greek art gave the impulse to Gandhara art in Central Asia and Northern Asia and Northwest India. The city of Alexandria which he founded in Egypt became the cultural centre, not only for Greece and Rome, but for Judaism and Christianity, and retained its supremacy till the sixth century of the Christian era. Justinian closed its schools of philosophy in 529. Its philosophic and scientific schools spread their influence over even a wider area than the Mediterranean basin.

Now the generality of the world of Islam have accepted Alexander the Great as the one meant by the epithet Dhu al Qarnayn. But some of our Ulama have raised doubts about it and made other suggestions.

- One is that it was not the Macedonian Alexander the Great, but an earlier prehistoric king contemporary with Abraham; because they say Dhu al Qarnayn was a man of Faith (18:88-98), while Alexander the Great was a Pagan and believed in Grecian gods.

An identification with a supposed prehistoric king, about whom nothing is known is no identification at all.

On the other hand, all that is known about Alexander the Great shows that he was a man of lofty ideals, he died over three centuries before the time of Jesus, but does not mean he was not a man of Faith, for Allah revealed Himself to men of all nations in all ages.

Alexander was a disciple of the philosopher Aristotle, noted for his pursuit of sound Truth in all departments of thought. Alexander's reference to Jupiter Ammon may have been no more than a playful reference to the

superstitions of his time. Socrates spoke of the Grecian gods, and so did Aristotle and Plato; but it would be wrong to call them idolaters or men without Faith. In the Ethiopic traditional stories of Alexander the Great, he is represented as great prophet.

- Another suggestion made in the Dhu al Qarnayn was an ancient king of Persia.

A king of Persia is referred to as a Ram with two horns in the book of [Daniel \(8:3\)](#) in the Old Testament. But in the same Book, the Ram with the two horns was smitten, cast down to the ground, and stamped upon by a he-goat with one horn ([8:7-8](#)).

There is nothing in our literature to suggest that Dhu al Qarnayn came to any such ignominious end.

Nor is the Book of Daniel an authority worth consideration. Its authenticity is very doubtful. There is no question that it is a patchwork as parts of it are in the Aramaic (or Chaldee) language and parts in Hebrew, and there are in it a number of Greek words.

The Septuagint version contained large additions. "Daniel" whoever the writer or writers were-refers to historical Persian kings. If it is argued that it was some old prehistoric Persian king who built the Iron Gates ([18:96](#)) to keep out the Gog and Magog tribes ([18:94](#)), this is no identification at all. There is no unanimity about the identity of the Iron Wall or the Gog and Magog tribes.

Both these subjects will be referred to presently.

Another suggestion made is that he was some old prehistoric Himyrite king from Yemen about whom nothing else is known. This, again, is no identification at all.

The question of Yajuj and Majuj (Gog and Magog) and the iron barrier built to keep them out is of some interest. It is practically agreed that they were the wild tribes of Central Asia which have made inroads on settled kingdoms and Empires at various stages of the world's history. The Chinese Empire suffered from their incursions and built the Great Wall of china to keep out the Manchus and Mongols. The Persian Empire suffered from them at various times and at various

points. Their incursions into Europe in large hordes caused migrations and displacements of population on an enormous scale, and eventually broke up the Roman Empire. These tribes were known vaguely to the Greeks and Romans as "Scythians", but that term does not help us very much, either ethnically or geographically.

If we could locate the iron barrier or iron gates referred in to in [18:96](#), we should have a closer idea of the tribes whom the barrier was meant to keep out.

It is obvious that the Great Wall of china is out of the question. Begun in the third century B.C. and continued later, it covers the enormous length of 1,500 miles, and goes up the hills and down the valleys, with towers 40 feet high at intervals of 200 yards. Its average height is 20 to 30 feet. It is built of stone and earth. There is no particular point in it which can be identified with the iron barrier in the text. No one has suggested that Dhu al Qarnayn was a Chinese Emperor, and none of the great Conquerors of Western Asia can be credited with the building of the Chinese Wall.

The Barrier in the text must have been more in the nature of iron gates than an iron wall. Two Iron Gates, geographically far apart, have been suggested in the alternative. Sometimes they have been mixed up by writers not strong in geography. Both of them have local associations with the name of Alexander the Great. Both are near a town Derbend, and have borne the name of Bab al Hadid (Arabic for "Iron Gate"). Let us examine the case of each in turn.

The best known in modern times is at the town and seaport of Derbend in the middle of the western coast of Caspian Sea. It is now in Soviet territory, in the district of Daghistan. Before the southern expansion of Russia in 1813 it belonged to Persia. A spur of Mount Caucasus here comes up north, close to the sea. The Wall in question is 50 miles long, with an average height of 29 feet. As Azerbaijan (in Persia) is not far from this place, some writers have mixed up the Derbend Iron Gate with Azerbaijan, and some with the Caucasian town of Kharz (Kars) which is to the south of the Caucasus.

There are local traditions here, and in the Astrakhan region at the mouth of the river Volga, higher up the Caspian, connecting this Caucasian Iron Gate with the name of

Alexander, but there are good reasons why we should reject this as the site of the Iron Gate in the Quranic story.

1. This does not correspond exactly to the description in [18:96](#) ("the space between the steep mountain sites"); the gap is between the mountain and the sea.
2. Alexander the Great (assuming that Dhu al Qarnayn is Alexander), is not known to have crossed the Caucasus.
3. there is an Iron Gate which corresponds exactly to the description, in a locality which we know Alexander to have visited.
4. in the early days, when Muslims spread to all parts of the world, local legends were started by ignorant people connecting the place they knew with places referred to in Quran.

We now come to the Iron Gate which corresponds exactly to the Quranic description, and has the best claim to be connected with Alexander's story, it is near another Derbend in Central Asia, Hissar District, about 150 miles southeast of Bukhara. A very narrow defile, with overhanging rocks, occurs on the main route between Turkistan and India;: latitude 38 degree N; longitude 67 degree E.

It is now called in Turkish Buzghol-Khana (Goat-house), but was formerly known as the Iron Gate (Arabic, Bab al Hdid; Persian, Dar-i-ahani; Chinese The'ie-men-kaun.

There is no iron gate there now, but there was one in the seventh century, when the Chinese traveler Hiouen Tsiang saw it on his journey to India. He saw two folding gates cased with iron hung with bells. Nearby is a lake named Iskandar Kul, connecting the locality with Alexander the Great. We know from history that Alexander, after his conquest of Persia and before his journey to India, visited Sogdiana (Bukhara) and Maracanda (Samarqand). We also know from Muqaddasi, the Arab traveler and geographer, who wrote about A.H. 375 (A.C. 985-6) that the Abbasi Khalifa Wathiq (842-846 A.C.) sent out a mission to Central Asia to report on this Iron Gate. They found the defile 150

yards wide: on two jambs, made with bricks of iron welded together with molten lead, were hung two huge gates, which were kept closed. Nothing could correspond more exactly with the description in 18:95-96.

If, then, the Barrier in [18:95-96](#) refers to the Iron Gate near Bukhara, we are able to proceed to a consideration of the Gog-Magog people with some confidence. They were the Mongol tribes on the other side of the Barrier, while the industrious men who did not understand Dhu al Qarnayn's language were the Turks, with their agglutinative language, so different from the languages then spoken in Western Asia.

The Barrier served its purpose for the time being. But the warning that the time must come when it must crumble to dust has also come true. It has crumbled to dust. Long since, the Mongols pushed through on their westward journey, pushing the Turks before them, and the Turks became a European Power and still have a footing in Europe.

We need not bother about the legends of the Gog and Magog people. They were reputed to be giants, and two tiny hills in flat Cambridge shire are derisively called the Gog-Magog hills! Similarly the statues of Gog and Magog in the Guildhall in London, which Mawlvi Muhammad Ali takes so seriously, only remind us how legends are apt to grow and get transported to strange places.

In the Alexander legends of medieval Europe, Gog and Magog are said to have come with 400,000 men to the help of Porus whom Alexander defeated, and to have fled after that defeat. They fled to the mountains, and Alexander built a wall with brass gates to prevent their interruptions.

See Paul Meyer, *Alexandre le Grand dans la litterature francaise du Moyen Age*: Paris 1886; Vol 2, pp. 386-389.

Personally, I have not the least doubt that Dhu al Qarnayn is meant to be Alexander the Great, the historic Alexander, and not the legendary Alexander, of whom more presently.

My first appointment after graduation was that of Lecturer in Greek history. I have studied the details of Alexander's extraordinary personality in Greek historians as well as in modern writers, and have since visited most of the localities

connected with his brief but brilliant career. Few readers of Quranic literature have had the same privilege of studying the details of his career.

It is one of the wonders of Quran, that, spoken through an Ummi's mouth, it should contain so many incidental details which are absolutely true. The more our knowledge increases, the more we feel this. There are little touches which need not have been mentioned. They come in incidentally like the incidental remarks of a person full of knowledge, who does not intend to put forward these points but whose fullness of knowledge brings them in inevitably.

One such point occurs in the mention of Alexander's westward journey ([18:86](#)). He saw the sun set in a piece of murky water which is described as a "Spring".

Most commentators have understood the "spring" to be the sea, and the "murky water" to be its dark-blue water.

Nizami, in his Romance of Alexander, takes Alexander right west along North Africa to Andalusia and the Atlantic Ocean. There is no historic proof that Alexander ever reached the Atlantic. But he was of course familiar with the deep-blue waters of the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean interpretation may pass if we had not a closer explanation. Alexander's first exploits were when he was a mere boy, in the reign of his father Philip. The region of Illyricum was due west of Macedonia, and Macedonia's first expansion was in that direction. The town of Lychnis was annexed to Macedonia and thus the western frontier of Macedonia was secured.

The Northern frontier towards the Danube had already been secured, and the lesson he subsequently gave to Thebes secured him against attack from the Greek States to the south, and prepared the way for his great march east against the Persian Empire. To the west of the town of Lychnis is a lake 170 square miles in area, fed by underground springs that issue through limestone rocks and give out murky water. Both town and lake are now called Ochrida, about 50 miles west of Monastir. The water is so dark that the river which forms the outlet of the lake to the north is called the Black Drin.

Looking at the sunset from the town, the observer would see the sun set in a pool of murky water (18:86). It was a question before the boy Alexander-the dreamy, impulsive, fearless rider-whether he would put the barbarous Illyricans to the sword or show them mercy. He showed true discrimination and statesmanship. He punished the guilty but showed kindness to the innocent, and thus consolidated his power in the west. This I construe to be the meaning of [18:87](#); otherwise these verses do not seem to be perfectly clear.

Another point may be noted.

- The three episodes mentioned are the journey to the west,
- the journey to the east, and
- the journey to the Iron Gate.

The journey to the west I have just explained.

The journey to the east was to the Persian Empire. Here he found a people who lived in the open and wore little clothing. This might apply to people who live in an island place in the latitude of Persepolis or Mutani. He left them alone as they were ([18:91](#)). He was not warring against populations; he was warring against proud but effete Persian Empire. He left them as they were, with their local institutions, and under their local chiefs. In feeling, he treated them as his own, not as alien.

In some things, he himself adopted their ways. His followers misunderstood him. But Allah understood, for he approves of all things that lead to Unity among mankind.

The direction of the third journey is not mentioned.

The commentators suggest the north, but they might with better reason have suggested the south, as Alexander visited Egypt. But the visit to the Iron Gate was to the East - a continuation of his journey east. That is why the direction is not mentioned again.

Here his mission was different. He had to protect a peaceful industrious population, whom perhaps the Persian Empire had failed to protect, against turbulent and restless invaders.

He helped them to protect themselves, but warned them that all human precautions, though good and necessary, are vain without Allah's help.

Each of the episodes mentioned is historical. But the pomp and glitter of military conquest are not mentioned. On the contrary, spiritual motives are revealed and commended. We need not know or learn any history or geography or science or psychology or ethics to understand them. But the more real knowledge we have, the more completely shall we understand them and the lessons to be drawn from them. The earthly journeys are treated as mere symbols to show us the evolution of a great and noble soul which achieved so much in a short earthly life.

His career was so extraordinary that it impressed his contemporaries as a world event. It undoubtedly was one of the greatest world events in history. Legends began to grow up round his name. In many cases the legends overlaid the history.

Today the world is thrilled by Sir Ayrel Stein's identification of Aornos, a very small geographical detail in a great career full of lessons, in political, ethical, and religious wisdom. But the generations immediately following Alexander's period wrote and transmitted all sorts of wonderful legends that passed current in East and West.

The philosopher Kallisthenes had been with Alexander in Asia. Under his name was produced a Greek book in Alexander some time before the second century of the Christian era. It was translated into Latin in the third century. Translations were subsequently made into most of the "wight that hath discretion" (the Monk in Canterbury Tales).

Alexandria was a focus of Christian and Jewish learning for some centuries. The Christians also made Alexander a saint.

The Jews carried the Alexander cycle into the East.

Our Persian poet Jami (A.H. 535-599. A.C. 1141-1205) worked in up into his epic Iskandar-nama. He is careful to show the historical or semi-historical and the ethical parts separately. The one relates to action or exploits (Iqbal) and

the other to wisdom (Khird). He had the advantage of the Quranic story before him.

That story mentions three historical episodes incidentally, but draws out attention to matters of the weightiest spiritual significance, and that is the chief thing to note in the story.

---



**© Copy Rights:**

*Zahid Javed Rana, Abid Javed Rana*

**Lahore, Pakistan**

**[www.quran4u.com](http://www.quran4u.com)**