The Cave

_al-Kahf_

_**Al-Kahf** is a late Makkansūrah, although a minority hold that the first eight verses are Madinan (Q). Several reports indicate that reciting the first and last ten verses of this sūrah has the power to protect one from the trials of the grave (Q) or from al-Dajjāl, identified with the Antichrist or the figure whom Christ will defeat in the end times (IK, Q). This sūrah contains three main narratives—that of the inhabitants of the cave, from which the sūrah takes its name (vv. 9–26); the tale of Moses and the mysterious servant (vv. 60–82); and the story of Dhu’l-Qarnayn (vv. 83–98)—as well as a lengthy parable about the dangers of enjoying the good things of this world, without gratitude to God, while neglecting the Hereafter (vv. 32–46). Between these narrative sections are woven various warnings to the disbelievers, including reminders about the coming of judgment and punishment in the Hereafter. The sūrah closes by evoking the inexhaustibility of God’s Word (v. 109), followed by a reminder that the Prophet is but a human being to whom Divine Revelation has been sent (v. 110).

The narratives of the inhabitants of the cave and of Dhu’l-Qarnayn were reportedly revealed to the Prophet in response to a challenge from the Quraysh. According to a widely reported account, the Quraysh sent Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith and ʿUqbah ibn Abī Muṭī to some Jewish religious scholars of Madinah to ask them about Muhammad and his claims to prophethood. The Jewish scholars told them that in order to know the validity of Muhammad’s claims to prophethood, they should ask him about
three matters, and if he could not answer, then he was not a true prophet: (1) a group of young men of ancient times who had an extraordinary story (the inhabitants of the cave); (2) a man who had journeyed until he reached the east and west of the earth (Dhu’l-Qarnayn); and (3) the Spirit. They returned and questioned the Prophet. He told them that he would give them his response the next day, expecting that a revelation concerning them would come to him. When fifteen days had passed and no revelation had come, the Prophet grew worried, and the Quraysh began to assume that he had no answers to these questions and that his claims of prophethood were therefore false. The revelation finally came to him, but in v. 6 the Quran reprimands the Prophet for being overly concerned with the disbelief of the Quraysh (IQ, Ṭṣ), and in vv. 23–24 the Prophet is warned not to promise anything in the future (such as answers to questions the next day) without acknowledging that all matters depend on God’s Will.

The three main narratives share some thematic elements, including that of journeying or leaving the comfort of one’s home. The youths of the cave leave home to escape religious persecution; Moses goes off in search of the servant of God he has been told is more knowledgeable than himself; and Dhu’l-Qarnayn journeys from east to west to establish righteous sovereignty over the land. These three narratives are also concerned with intermediate states of being and hence with the concept of the barzakh, which signifies both the meeting point of opposites and the barrier between them. The concept is elucidated in the Quran through reference to the barrier between the “two seas” of saltwater and freshwater (25:53; 55:19–20), at which point the two waters briefly intermingle, but neither trespasses into the realm of the other.

In Islamic tradition barzakh came to denote the temporal state between the death of the individual soul and universal judgment, or the period of testing and punishment in the grave, as well as an intermediate posthumous state or number of states between Heaven and Hell. In its mystical interpretation, it refers ontologically to the state of the soul as the intermediate realm between pure spirit and base matter, which together constitute the state of human beings; epistemologically it refers to the realm of the imaginal, known through the power of imagination, which is a mode of knowing between sense perception and pure intellection. The youths of the cave, seeking refuge from religious persecution,
are made to sleep in the cave for hundreds of years, and their sleep represents an intermediate realm between life and death and thus, by analogy, the state between individual death and universal resurrection. Moses can only encounter the mysterious servant and esoteric figure, identified traditionally with the enigmatic prophet Khaḍir or Khîdr, at the *junction of the two seas* (v. 60), at which point the two prophets—one representing exoteric and the other esoteric knowledge—are able to meet and briefly journey together. And Dhu’l-Qarnayn, after journeying to the extremes of west and east, returns to the place of an opening *between the two mountain barriers* (v. 93), which he then seals up, forming a barrier to hold back Gog and Magog from terrorizing people. This barrier will only hold for the intermediate period of earthly life and will be destroyed by God before the Day of Resurrection.

Finally, these three narratives involve figures who are granted miracles and marvelous powers, even though they are not prophets or their prophetic status is somewhat ambiguous. The youths of the cave are righteous men, but not prophets; yet they are given protection by God through a miraculous sleep. Khîdr is considered by most to be a prophet who is kept alive by God beyond the range of ordinary human life, even beyond the very long lifetime of certain ancient prophets, such as Noah. But his vocation is exclusively a secret and hidden one, in contrast to the vocation of other prophets who are ordered by God to proclaim revelation publicly, give glad tidings, and issue warnings. Dhu’l-Qarnayn is considered by most commentators to have been a righteous king who was nonetheless granted miraculous means for conquering the world and was spoken to directly by God (v. 86). He is compared by commentators to the prophet-king Solomon, and most commentators have considered him to be Alexander the Great.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 Praise be to God, Who sent down the Book unto His servant, and placed no crookedness therein, 2 upright, that He may warn of a great might coming from His Presence
and give glad tidings unto the believers who perform righteous deeds that theirs shall be a beautiful reward, wherein they shall remain forever, and that He may warn those who say, “God has taken a child.” They have no knowledge thereof, nor do their fathers. A monstrous word it is that issues from their mouths. They speak naught but a lie. Yet perhaps thou wouldst destroy thyself with grief for their sake, should they believe not in this account. Surely We made whatsoever is on the earth an adornment for it, that We may try them as to which of them is most virtuous in deed. And surely We shall make whatsoever is upon it a barren plain! Dost thou reckon that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription are a marvel among Our signs? When the youths took refuge in the cave, they said, “Our Lord! Grant us mercy from Thy Presence, and make us incline to sound judgment concerning our affair.” So We placed [a veil] over their ears in the cave for a number of years. Then We raised them up again, that We might know which of the two parties had best calculated how long they had tarried. We recount their story unto thee in truth. Verily they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance. And We fortified their hearts. When they arose, they said, “Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We shall call upon no god apart from Him, for then we would have certainly uttered an outrage. These, our people, have taken gods apart from Him. Why do they not bring a clear authority concerning them? For who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God?
Verse 16: And when you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship save God, then take refuge in the cave. Your Lord will spread forth something of His Mercy for you, and make you incline to ease in your affair.

Verse 17: Thou wouldst have seen the sun when it rose, slanting away from their cave to the right; and when it set, turning away from them to the left, while they were in an open space within it. That is among the signs of God. Whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whomsoever He leads astray, thou wilt find no protector to lead him aright.

Verse 18: Thou wouldst have thought them awake, though they were asleep. And We turned them to the right and to the left, with their dog stretching forth his paws at the threshold. Hadst thou come upon them, thou wouldst have turned away in flight and been filled with terror on their account.

Verse 19: And in this way We raised them up again, that they might question one another. One of them said, “How long have you tarried?” They said, “We have tarried a day or part of a day.” They said, “Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried. So send one of you with this money of yours into the city, and let him observe which of them has the purest food and bring you some provision therefrom. Let him be discreet and make no one aware of you.

Verse 20: Verily, if they come to know of you, they will stone you, or make you revert to their creed, and then you will never prosper.”

Verse 21: And in this way We caused them to be discovered, that they might know that God’s Promise is true, and that there is no doubt about the Hour. When they were disputing among themselves about their affair, they said, “Erect a building
over them; their Lord knows them best.” Those who prevailed over their affair said, “We shall build a place of worship over them.”

They say, “[They were] three, and the fourth was their dog.” And they say, “Five, and the sixth was their dog”—guessing at the unseen. And they say, “Seven, and the eighth was their dog.” Say, “My Lord knows best their number; none know them save a few.” So dispute not concerning them, save with clear argument, nor consult any of them about them. And say not of anything, “Surely, I shall do it tomorrow.” Save that God wills. And remember thy Lord when thou dost forget, and say, “It may be that my Lord will guide me nearer than this to rectitude.”

And they tarried in their cave three hundred years, plus nine more. Say, “God knows best how long they tarried. Unto Him belongs the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. How well He sees, how well He hears! They have no protector apart from Him, and He makes no one a partner unto Him in His Judgment.” Recite that which has been revealed unto thee from the Book of thy Lord. None alters His Words. And thou wilt find no refuge apart from Him. Make thy soul patient with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face. Turn not thine eyes away from them, desiring the adornment of the life of this world, nor obeying one whose heart We have made heedless of the remembrance of Us and who follows his caprice and whose affair exceeds the bounds. And say, “It is the truth from your Lord! So whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.” Verily We have
prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose canopies will encompass them. And if they plead for relief, they will be showered with water like molten lead that will scald faces—an evil drink indeed, and how evil a resting place! As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds, surely We neglect not the reward of one who is virtuous in deed. For such as these, theirs shall be the Gardens of Eden with rivers running below. Therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and shall wear green garments of fine silk and rich brocade, reclining upon couches. Blessed indeed is the reward, and how beautiful a resting place! Set forth for them the parable of two men: For one of them We made two gardens of grapevines, and surrounded them with date palms, and placed crops between them. Both gardens brought forth their produce and failed not in the least, and We made a stream gush forth in their midst. And he had [abundant] fruit and said unto his companion as he conversed with him, “I am greater than you in wealth and stronger in men.” And he entered his garden, wronging himself, and said, “I think not that this will ever perish. Nor do I think that the Hour is imminent. And if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find something better than this in the Hereafter.” His companion said unto him as he conversed with him, “Do you disbelieve in the One Who created you from dust, then from a drop, then fashioned you as a man? But He is God, my Lord, and I ascribe none as partner unto my Lord. When you entered your garden, why did you not say, ‘[This is] as God wills. There is no strength save in
God.’ If you see that I am less than you in wealth and children, it may be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, and unleash against it a reckoning from the sky, so that it becomes a flattened plain. Or its water may sink deep, so that you cannot seek after it.” And his fruit was encompassed. So he began to wring his hands on account of what he had spent on it while it lay in waste upon its trellises, saying, “Would that I had not ascribed anyone as partner unto my Lord!” And he had no party to help him apart from God; nor could he help himself. There, protection belongs to God, the Real. He is best in reward and best in requital. Set forth for them a parable of the life of this world: [It is] like water We send down from the sky. Then it mixes with the vegetation of the earth. Then it becomes chaff, scattered by the winds. And God is capable of all things. Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world, but that which endures—righteous deeds—are better in reward with thy Lord, and better [as a source of] hope. On the Day We will set the mountains in motion, and you will see the earth an open plain. And We will gather them, and leave not one of them behind. They shall be arrayed before thy Lord in ranks. “Indeed, you have come unto Us as We created you the first time. Nay, but you claimed that We would never appoint a tryst for you.” And the Book will be set down. Then thou wilt see the guilty fearful of what is in it. And they will say, “Oh, woe unto us! What a book this is! It leaves out nothing, small or great, save that it has taken account thereof.” And they find present
whatsoever they did. And thy Lord wrongs no one. When We said unto the angels, “Prostrate before Adam,” they prostrated, save Iblīs. He was of the jinn and he deviated from the command of his Lord. Will you then take him and his progeny as protectors apart from Me, though they are an enemy unto you? How evil an exchange for the wrongdoers! I did not make them witnesses to the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor to their own creation. And I take not those who lead astray as a support. On the Day when He says, “Call those whom you claimed as My partners,” they will call upon them, but they will not respond to them, and We will place a gulf between them. The guilty will see the Fire, and know they shall fall into it, but they will find no means of escape therefrom. And indeed We have employed every kind of parable for mankind in this Quran. And man is the most contentious of beings. And naught prevents men from believing when guidance comes unto them, and from seeking forgiveness of their Lord, save that [they await] the wont of those of old to come upon them, or the punishment to come upon them face-to-face. And We send not the messengers, save as bearers of glad tidings and as warners. And those who disbelieve dispute falsely in order to refute the truth thereby. They take My signs and that whereof they were warned in mockery. And who does greater wrong than one who has been reminded of the signs of his Lord, then turns away from them and forgets that which his hands have sent forth? Surely We have placed coverings over their hearts, such that they understand it not, and in their ears a
deafness. Even if thou callest them to guidance, they will never be rightly guided. And thy Lord is Forgiving, Possessed of Mercy. Were He to take them to task for that which they have earned, He would have hastened the punishment for them. Nay, but theirs is a tryst, beyond which they shall find no refuge. And those towns, We destroyed them for the wrong they did, and We set a tryst for their destruction. And when Moses said unto his servant, “I shall continue on till I reach the junction of the two seas, even if I journey for a long time.” Then when they reached the junction of the two, they forgot their fish, and it made its way to the sea, burrowing away. Then when they had passed beyond, he said to his servant, “Bring us our meal. We have certainly met with weariness on this journey of ours.” He said, “Didst thou see? When we took refuge at the rock, indeed I forgot the fish—and naught made me neglect to mention it, save Satan—and it made its way to the sea in a wondrous manner!” He said, “That is what we were seeking!” So they turned back, retracing their steps. There they found a servant from among Our servants whom We had granted a mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence. Moses said unto him, “Shall I follow thee, that thou mightest teach me some of that which thou hast been taught of sound judgment?” He said, “Truly thou wilt not be able to bear patiently with me. And how canst thou bear patiently that which thou dost not encompass in awareness?” He said, “Thou wilt find me patient, if God wills, and I shall not disobey thee in any
He said, “If thou wouldst follow me, then question me not about anything, till I make mention of it to thee.” So they went on till, when they had embarked upon a ship, he made a hole therein. He said, “Didst thou make a hole in it in order to drown its people? Thou hast done a monstrous thing!” He said, “Did I not say unto thee that thou wouldst not be able to bear patiently with me?” He said, “Take me not to task for having forgotten, nor make me suffer much hardship on account of what I have done.” So they went on till they met a young boy, and he slew him. He said, “Didst thou slay a pure soul who had slain no other soul? Thou hast certainly done a terrible thing!” He said, “Did I not say unto thee that thou wouldst not be able to bear patiently with me?” He said, “If I question thee concerning aught after this, then keep my company no more. Thou hast attained sufficient excuse from me.” So they went on till they came upon the people of a town and sought food from them. But they refused to show them any hospitality. Then they found therein a wall that was about to fall down; so he set it up straight. He said, “Hadst thou willed, thou couldst have taken a wage for it.” He said, “This is the parting between thee and me. I shall inform thee of the meaning of that which thou couldst not bear patiently: As for the ship, it belonged to indigent people who worked the sea. I desired to damage it, for just beyond them was a king who was seizing every ship by force. And as for the young boy, his parents were believers and we feared that he would make them suffer much through rebellion and disbelief.
So we desired that their Lord give them in exchange one who is better than him in purity, and nearer to mercy. And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and beneath it was a treasure belonging to them. Their father was righteous, and thy Lord desired that they should reach their maturity and extract their treasure, as a mercy from thy Lord. And I did not do this upon my own command. This is the meaning of that which thou couldst not bear patiently.” And they question thee about Dhu’l-Qarnayn. Say, “I shall recite unto you a remembrance of him.” Truly We established him in the land, and gave him the means to all things. So he followed a means, till when he reached the place of the setting sun, he found it setting in a murky spring, and there he found a people. We said, “O Dhu’l-Qarnayn! Thou mayest punish, or thou mayest treat them well.” He said, “As for the one who has done wrong, we shall punish him. Then he shall be brought back to his Lord, whereupon He will punish him with a terrible punishment. But as for the one who believes and works righteousness, he shall have a reward, that which is most beautiful, and we shall speak unto him that which is easy from our command.” Then he followed a means, till he reached the place of the rising sun. He found it rising over a people for whom We had not made any shelter from it. Thus [it was], and We encompassed that which lay before him in awareness. Then he followed a means, till he reached the place between the two mountain barriers. He found beyond them a people who could scarcely comprehend speech.
said, “O Dhu’l-Qarnayn! Truly Gog and Magog are workers of corruption in the land. Shall we assign thee a tribute, that thou mightest set a barrier between them and us?” He said, “That wherewith my Lord has established me is better; so aid me with strength. I shall set a rampart between you and them. Bring me pieces of iron.” Then, when he had leveled the two cliffs, he said, “Blow!” till when he had made it fire, he said, “Bring me molten copper to pour over it.” Thus they were not able to surmount it, nor could they pierce it. He said, “This is a mercy from my Lord. And when the Promise of my Lord comes, He will crumble it to dust. And the Promise of my Lord is true.” And We shall leave them, on that Day, to surge against one another like waves. And the trumpet shall be blown, and We shall gather them together. And We shall present Hell, on that Day, as an array before the disbelievers, those whose eyes were veiled from the remembrance of Me, and could not hear. Do those who disbelieve reckon that they may take My servants as protectors apart from Me? Truly We have prepared Hell as a welcome for the disbelievers! Say, “Shall I inform you who are the greatest losers in respect to their deeds? Those whose efforts go astray in the life of this world, while they reckon that they are virtuous in their works.” They are those who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord, and in the meeting with Him. Thus their deeds have come to naught, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall assign them no weight. That is their recompense—Hell—for having disbelieved and for having taken My signs and My
messengers in mockery. Those who believe and perform righteous deeds, theirs shall be the Gardens of Paradise as a welcome. Abiding therein, they seek not any change therefrom. Say, “If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it.” Say, “I am only a human being like you. It is revealed unto me that your God is one God. So whosoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him perform righteous deeds and make no one a partner unto his Lord in worship.”

Commentary

Praise be to God, Who sent down the Book unto His servant, and placed no crookedness therein,

1 Praise be to God for sending down the Book—that is, the Quran—described by some as God’s greatest gift to humanity, since it brings them from darkness into light (IK). His servant refers to the Prophet. That God has placed no crookedness in the Quran (see also 39:28) is widely understood to mean that it contains no contradictions or discrepancies (Ṭs, Z); see 4:82: Do they not contemplate the Quran? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found much discrepancy therein. This phrase is also understood to mean that the Quran contains no corruption or falsehood (R, Ṭs) and that it remains continuously beneficial (Ṭs) as it guides people toward the straight path (IK); for the Quranic concept of the “straight path,” see 1:6c.

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upright, that He may warn of a great might coming from His Presence and give glad tidings unto the believers who perform righteous deeds that theirs shall be a beautiful
reward,

rende wherein they shall remain forever,

2–3 Upright translates qayyim, which is used elsewhere in the Quran to describe religion (6:161; 9:36; 12:40; 30:30, 43; 98:5), but here describes the Book sent down (v. 1); see also 17:9: Truly this Quran guides toward that which is most upright. That God made the Quran upright, or “straight,” emphasizes that there is no crookedness in it (v. 1; Z) and that it is balanced and harmonious (Ts), and not susceptible to corruption (Ts). Qayyim can also mean to be a custodian of something or someone, and some thus interpret it to mean that the Quran is a custodian of earlier scriptures, a confirmer of them, and a witness to their truth (Ts, Z), while also, according to some, removing falsehoods in them and abrogating some of their laws (Ts). The Quran can also be understood as a “custodian” of people’s welfare (R, Z) and of religious affairs (R, Ts). According to al-Rāzī, the Quran is described as qayyim, because it is both perfect in itself and something that perfects something else. The Muʿtazilite theologian al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that vv. 1–3 support the Muʿtazilite view that the Quran is created rather than eternal or uncreated, as the Ashʿarites claimed, because the descriptions of the Quran in these verses point to a created object: it was sent down, which implies change and there can be no change in the eternal, and it was made straight or upright and “made” with no crookedness therein, both of which suggest something that God made or created (R). This Book was sent down as a means by which the Prophet could both warn and give glad tidings—the twin vocations of all messengers and prophets; see 2:213: Mankind was one community; then God sent the prophets as bearers of glad tidings and as warners. See also 2:119; 6:48; 4:165; 7:188; 11:2; 17:105; 18:56; 25:56; 33:45; 34:28; 48:8. The beautiful reward refers to the paradisal Garden (Ts, Z).

and that He may warn those who say, “God has taken a child.”

They have no knowledge thereof, nor do their fathers. A monstrous word it is that issues from their mouths. They speak naught but a lie.
“To take a child” is a Quranic idiom meaning to assume special paternal responsibility for a child, to recognize a child, to take the child to oneself or into one’s care. This wording choice criticizes not just the belief that God could somehow “beget” a child, but the idea that He would single any individual human being out for that special relationship (even through adoption, for example). The Quran repeatedly rejects the notion that God has offspring of any kind, whether it be the idolatrous Makkan belief that the angels were God’s daughters or various claims made by or attributed to Jews or Christians. See 6:100c as well as 2:116; 4:171; 5:18; 10:68; 16:57; 19:35, 88; 21:26; 25:2; 39:4; 43:81. Given that this is a Makkan sūrah, however, these verses are likely referring to the idolatrous belief regarding the angels (IK). Those who make such claims have no knowledge thereof, nor do their fathers, meaning that their claim derives not from knowledge, but from gross ignorance and blindly following the belief of their ancestors without exercising independent thought (Țs, Z). In the Quran, blindly following one’s forefathers rather than using one’s intelligence to discern the truth of the messages brought by the prophets is presented and criticized as a common human tendency; see 2:170; 5:104; 7:70–71; 21:53–54; 37:68–72; 43:23–24. That the claim that God has offspring is called monstrous (also in 17:40) expresses the moral gravity of this claim (Țs) as well as the shock and surprise that such a claim should elicit (Z). That the claim issues from their mouths emphasizes that it is something completely fabricated for which they have no valid source (IK).

Yet perhaps thou wouldst destroy thyself with grief for their sake, should they believe not in this account.

Cf. 26:3, which contains a nearly identical statement. To destroy thyself with grief could also mean “to expend thyself in grief” (R), that is, to utterly exhaust oneself with concern and sadness on account of those who believe not in this account, that is, the Quran (Țs). The Prophet is frequently presented in the Quran as being distraught by the failure of the Makkans to accept the message he had brought them as well as by their repeated requests for miraculous signs as proof of his prophethood. Several verses seem to console the Prophet about this matter, as in 6:33: We know well that what they say grieves thee. Yet it is not thee that they deny. Rather, it is the signs of God that the wrongdoers reject; see also 3:176; 5:41; 35:8.
Surely We made whatsoever is on the earth an adornment for it, that We may try them as to which of them is most virtuous in deed.

And surely We shall make whatsoever is upon it a barren plain!

The earth is “adorned” by the various phenomena found upon it or in it, including its flora and fauna and its precious gold and metals (R). Adornment may also refer to humanity, which al-Rāzī considers to be the noblest of creatures on the earth. According to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, the “adornment” of the earth is a means by which God tries human beings with regard to their ability to maintain an attitude of detachment and asceticism toward the world (Iḥyā’ ʿulūm al-dīn [Beirut, 2005], 5:340). That God shall make whatsoever is upon it, that is, the earth, a barren plain indicates that none of its adornments will endure forever, but will come to end and return to God (IK); see 55:26: All upon it (the earth) passes away.

Dost thou reckon that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription are a marvel among Our signs?

This verse introduces the story of the Companions of the Cave (aṣḥāb al-kahf), from which the sūrah derives its name. This account was revealed to the Prophet in response to a challenge issued by the Quraysh. The Prophet was reportedly unfamiliar with this story and waited for a long period of time to receive revelation about it so that he could relate it to the skeptical Makkans. See the introduction to this sūrah for a fuller account.

The story of the Companions of the Cave is also known in Christian tradition as the “Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.” The Quranic and Christian accounts are very similar, both in the religious significance of the story as a proof of God’s power of resurrection (cf. v. 21) and in the smaller details of the narrative. Following upon the admonition to the Prophet that he need not destroy himself with sadness over those who disbelieve (v. 6), the story is perhaps meant to suggest that, just as God saved this small group of believers during a time of persecution, so too would He deliver the Prophet and his followers (Ṭs). Moreover, the story of the youths of the cave who fled all earthly goods and benefits to preserve their faith (Ṭs), suggesting
a kind of voluntary death to the world, is particularly salient after the reference to the adornment of the earth as a trial for human beings (v. 7). Because the Companions of the Cave are not considered prophets, but simply very pious and pure youths, and because they are miraculously delivered and protected by God through their long sleep, shaded from the normal light of the sun, the story is adduced by some as evidence of the possibility that miracles (karāmāt) of a lesser kind than prophetic miracles (muʿjizāt) may be bestowed by God upon His sincere friends (awliyāʾ, or “saints”). See al-Rāzī’s commentary on v. 11 and al-Qushayrī’s commentary on v. 17.

The question to the Prophet, “Dost thou reckon that the account of the Companions of the Cave is a marvel among Our signs?” is meant to suggest that there are other “signs” that are even more wondrous in nature, such as God’s creation of the heavens and the earth (IK, R, Ṭ, Ṭs). If the story of the companions is understood as an example of a nonprophetic miracle (karāmah), then the rhetorical question can be meant to suggest that the natural order of the world is itself a greater wonder and miracle than the occasional alteration of its regularity through miracles.

Cave translates al-kahf, which is said to designate more specifically a very spacious cave situated in a mountain (R, Ṭs, Z). The Inscription translates al-raqīm, a word that derives from a root meaning “to write.” Many commentators indicate that al-raqīm here refers to an inscription made on a leaden tablet placed at the entrance of the cave or an inscription carved into the mountain near the cave detailing the story and fate of the Companions of the Cave (Q, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z), although some have suggested that al-raqīm in this passage refers to a book containing the laws and teachings of Christianity (Q), as the companions were Christians fearing persecution for their religion (see 18:10c). Alternately, some have suggested that al-raqīm refers to the name of the valley, the mountain, or the region in which the cave was located (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z), which some say was in the area between northwest Arabia and southern Palestine (Ṭ, Ṭs, Z), although other locations in present-day Turkey (Ephesus) or Jordan (near Amman) have also been suggested. Still others report that it is the name of the building built to commemorate the cave (IK), the name of the leader of the companions (ST), or the name of their dog (Z; see 18:18c).

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10 When the youths took refuge in the cave, they said, “Our Lord! Grant us mercy from Thy Presence, and make us incline to sound judgment concerning our affair.”
The youths—that is, the Companions of the Cave—took refuge in the cave, fleeing to God for the sake of their religion (IK, Ġs), seeking refuge from a king named Daqyānūs (Th, Ġs) or Daqyūs (Q), which may be an Arabization of Decius, the name of the king in the Christian account, who was attempting to force his subjects to worship idols (Ġs). Al-Ṭabrisī also mentions the possibility, as suggested in some Christian sources, that it was a Zoroastrian king trying to force his Christian subjects to follow his religion (Ġs). Some report that the youths, who may have been among the king’s courtiers (Ġs) or the sons of local noble families (Q), lived in Ephesus and were believers hiding their faith out of fear of persecution (Th, Ġs). Others indicate that they were Christians attempting to maintain the beliefs and practices of Christianity at a time of great religious corruption, oppressive kings, and a turn toward idolatry (Th).

According to some reports, the king eventually learned that the youths had sought refuge in a cave. He thus had the entrance to the cave sealed, thinking that they would die of hunger and thirst (Th). The youths prayed for a mercy from Thy Presence—that is, from God’s storehouse of Mercy (R, Z)—and sound judgment concerning their affair, expressing their hope that God would grant them guidance and knowledge, provision, patience in their trial, security from their enemies, and eventual deliverance (R, Ġs, Z). They prayed that the end of their affair would be sound and rightly guided, as in the prayer of the Prophet reported in a ḥadīth, “O God, make virtuous the ends of all our affairs” (IK). According to some, they were praying that God would eventually grant them a safe exit from the cave (Ġs).

The cave is the place where the youths withdrew from the world, having despaired of its kindness, and sought the protection of God alone (Aj). From a mystical perspective, the cave represents the heart. According to some reports, the youths spent their time in the cave praying and praising God and devoting themselves fully to Him (Th). Thus for some, their plea for mercy was a plea for God to preserve them in or through the remembrance of Him (ST). Insofar as one who is fully engaged in the remembrance or invocation of God can be said to be outside the experience of ordinary time, the extended life of the youths of the cave can be seen as symbolic of this experience.

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So We placed [a veil] over their ears in the cave for a number of years.

God placed [a veil] over their ears, literally, “struck them upon the ears,” meaning that He made them incapable of hearing sounds that could awaken them (R, Z) or that He put them into a very deep slumber (IK, Th, Ġs). A number of years
may refer to a long or short period of time (Z): v. 25 gives the number of years as 309, but the Companions of the Cave experienced this long amount of time as but a day or part of a day (v. 19). The description here indicates that the companions did not die, but remained in a deep sleep (Țs).

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12 Then We raised them up again, that We might know which of the two parties had best calculated how long they had tarried.

12 Raised them means awakened them from their sleep (R, Țs). God raised them so that He might know which of the two parties had best calculated the time they were asleep. This statement seems to call into question God’s foreknowledge of events, since it indicates He had to raise the youths in order to know. However, the Quran frequently uses such language, and it might be understood to mean that, although God might test people in order to know something, He already has the answer prior to the accomplishment of the test (see 2:143c; 47:31c). The two parties who differed over the length of time they had remained in the cave may refer to two groups among the companions themselves (see v. 19; R, Țs); the companions and the kings who reigned over the city (R); or all those who differed regarding this matter (IK).

Al-Râzî notes that the Sufis understand this verse to be proof that, besides the evidentiary miracles (mu’jizât) that God gives only to the prophets in support of their prophetic mission and as evidence of their prophethood, other kinds of miracles (karâmât) can be bestowed on those who have attained exceptional nearness to God, that is, the “saints” or “friends of God” (awliyā’ Allâh). These two kinds of miracles are clearly distinguished in Islamic texts.

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13 We recount their story unto thee in truth. Verily they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance.

14 And We fortified their hearts. When they arose, they said, “Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth.
We shall call upon no god apart from Him, for then we would have certainly uttered an outrage.

In v. 13, the Quran emphasizes the young age of the Companions of the Cave, and some commentators observe that it is often the youth of a community who are most likely to respond to the messages of the prophets, while the elders of the community are more entrenched in their false religious practices (IK); for example, it was the younger members of the Quraysh who were more likely to follow the Prophet. The Quran also juxtaposes the faith of the youthful Abraham against the idolatry of his father and the leaders of his people (see 21:60); see also 7:60, 66, 75, 88, 90, 103; 11:27, 38; 23:24, 33; 34:34; 43:23, where it is the “notables” or “leaders” (presumably elders) of various communities who reject the call of the prophets sent to them. The word for youths (fatiyyah) is related to the word used in the classical tradition to denote spiritual chivalry (futuwwah), which is based upon faith (Q, Ṭs). Futuwwah (or jawānmardī in Persian) is characterized by being virtuous and generous, refraining from what is forbidden and from harming others, never complaining about one’s situation (Q), being true to one’s word, avoiding all hypocrisy, and cutting oneself off from all (worldly) attachments (Su). Later this term became associated with guilds in which these virtues were cultivated.

Although already believers, the youths were increased . . . in guidance, meaning their faith was increased (Q) or they were given greater understanding and discernment of the truth through faith (ST) as well as the patience to endure separation from their people (Ṭ). The Quran mentions in several verses that God increases the tendencies already manifested by human beings: if the diseased of heart do not turn to God, their disease is increased (2:10); and for those who believe, their faith is increased (e.g., 48:4). Regarding guidance in particular, see 19:76: God increases in guidance those who are rightly guided; and 47:17: But those who are rightly guided, He increases them in guidance. God also fortified their hearts, strengthening them in patience and faith (R, Ṭ, Z) and also certitude (Qu). When they arose refers to the youths’ open defiance of the tyrant king Daqyānūs and his demand that they worship his false deities (R, Ṭ, Z) and to their declaration that their Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, while the false deities of Daqyānūs are nothing more than the subjects of the one Lord (Ṭ). According to another report, the youths secretly harbored their belief in one God independently of one other. When the group happened to meet by chance outside the city on one occasion, the eldest of them confessed to his belief in one God (IK, R) and, finding the others in agreement, they collectively uttered the proclamation about their Lord in v. 14, either there and then (R) or after they had returned to the court of the king (IK).
These, our people, have taken gods apart from Him. Why do they not bring a clear authority concerning them? For who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God?

Clear authority means a clear proof or indication that such deities are worthy of worship; for some this verse supports the important Islamic principle that religious worship must be based upon intellectual proof and should not derive solely from blind imitation (taqlīd) of the practices of others (R, Ṭs, Z). The rhetorical question, Who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God? in this case, by ascribing partners to Him, is repeated in several verses; see 6:21c; 7:37; 10:17; 11:18; 29:68; 61:7c.

And when you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship save God, then take refuge in the cave. Your Lord will spread forth something of His Mercy for you, and make you incline to ease in your affair.”

These are the words of Tamlīkhā (or Yamlīkhā, Iamblichus) the reported chief of the youths (Ṭs). He instructs them to take refuge in the cave, to hide themselves from the disbelievers. Many see this event as analogous to the Prophet and Abū Bakr’s seeking refuge in a cave during their migration (hijrah) to Madinah as they sought to elude the pursuing Makkans (see 9:40 and commentary; IK). In both cases the cave, which is a symbol of the interior “space” of the heart, offers miraculous sanctuary and refuge from the world and its evils. Tamlīkhā’s promise that God will make you incline to ease in your affair suggests a response to the youths’ supplication to God in v. 10 that He make them incline to sound judgment in their affair.

Thou wouldst have seen the sun when it rose, slanting
away from their cave to the right; and when it set, turning away from them to the left, while they were in an open space within it. That is among the signs of God. Whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whomsoever He leads astray, thou wilt find no protector to lead him aright.

17 This verse is addressed to the Prophet, according to al-Ṭabarī, although others consider it to be addressed to an unspecified interlocutor (Q, R). The sun slanted away from their cave to the right as it rose and turned away from them to the left when it set; despite the different phrases, these movements can be understood as parallel to one another (Ṭ). That they were in an open space within it is understood to mean that the cave was spacious with a broad opening that allowed fresh air and cool breezes to reach the youths as they slept within it (IK, JJ, Z); the slanting of the sun away from the cave meant that they did not suffer from the heat of direct sunlight, but remained comfortably in the shade (Ṭ, Th, Z). In the Quran, shade is one of God’s blessings in this world (2:57; 25:45–46) and especially in the Hereafter (e.g., 4:57; 13:35; 36:56). See also 16:81, where both shade and places of refuge in the mountains are mentioned among God’s blessings.

In several verses, it is said that God both guides and leads astray; for the meaning of this idea and the respective fates of those involved, see 7:178c; 17:97c.

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18 Thou wouldst have thought them awake, though they were asleep. And We turned them to the right and to the left, with their dog stretching forth his paws at the threshold. Hadst thou come upon them, thou wouldst have turned away in flight and been filled with terror on their account.

18 The youths in the cave are described as asleep (see 18:11c), but also as seeming to be awake, perhaps because they slept with their eyes open or because of their turning, which some suggested occurred once or twice a year (R, Z). This may indicate that they were in an intermediate state between ordinary waking and
sleeping. Sleeping and waking can also serve as metaphors for life and death—as in the well-known ḥadīth, “Man is asleep, and when he dies he awakens,” where ordinary awareness is associated with sleep and death with full awakening—and can symbolize death and resurrection, as in 6:60: *He it is Who takes your souls by night, and He knows what you commit by day. Then by day He resurrects you, that a term appointed may be fulfilled.* Sleep can therefore represent the finite space and time of earthly life, situated between the eternity that precedes and follows it, but also the finite period of death in the grave that one experiences between one’s earthly death and the universal resurrection.

Thus sleep is associated with the *barzakh,* the intermediate realm between two opposites: when one is sleeping, one is still alive, but one’s soul has been “taken” by God (6:60), so that it is a kind of “minor death,” after which waking is like a resurrection; see the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.” In this sense, the story of the Companions of the Cave can be read not only as a proof of God’s power of resurrection, but also as an allegory for the barzakh, or intermediate realm between individual death and universal resurrection. From a Sufi perspective, the turning of the youths in their sleep can also represent their alternation between the states of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and the subsistence (*baqāʾ*) in God (Su).

In their sleep, God caused them to turn *to the right and to the left* in order to prevent them from being covered and eventually consumed by the earth (Ṭ). According to some commentators the dog served as their hunting animal (Th); regarding the permissibility of using dogs for hunting, see 5:4c. Some report that the youths happened to come upon the dog as they were fleeing from the king (Q, Th). They initially tried to chase him off, fearing that he would give away their location, but the dog was miraculously given the ability to speak (Q, Th) and said to the youths, “I love the lovers of God; so sleep while I keep watch” (Q, R, Th). Some report that he was a sheepdog belonging to a shepherd whom they had met on the way, both of whom followed the youths (R). Others do not consider this to be a dog at all, but rather suggest that the word for “dog,” *kalb,* was actually the name of another individual who accompanied the youths, according to some their cook (Ṭ) and according to others their dog keeper (reading *kālib* rather than *kalb*; Z), in which case the word rendered *paws* in the translation would be “arms.” Threshold translates *waṣīd,* which can also refer to the door or entrance to the cave or to the earth or dust in front of it (Ṭ).

Addressing the Prophet, the verse indicates that had he himself come upon the youths in the cave in their miraculous sleep, he would have fled in fear of them, because, according to some, God had cloaked them in a fearsome appearance to prevent anyone from touching or disturbing them while they slept (Ṭ, Z).

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And in this way We raised them up again, that they might question one another. One of them said, “How long have you tarried?” They said, “We have tarried a day or part of a day.” They said, “Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried. So send one of you with this money of yours into the city, and let him observe which of them has the purest food and bring you some provision therefrom. Let him be discreet and make no one aware of you.

Verily, if they come to know of you, they will stone you, or make you revert to their creed, and then you will never prosper.”

And in this way We caused them to be discovered, that they might know that God’s Promise is true, and that there is no doubt about the Hour. When they were disputing among themselves about their affair, they said, “Erect a building over them; their Lord knows them best.” Those who prevailed over their affair said, “We shall build a place of worship over them.”

19-21 It is reported that the youths awoke after their cave was discovered by a shepherd looking for a place to shelter his flock from the rain. When he cleared the entrance of the cave, the youths awoke (Ṭ). Unaware of how long they had slept, they reckoned they had tarried a day or part of a day. Some say they estimated they had passed a day, since they entered the cave in the morning and awoke at sunset (IK, T, Z); only upon seeing the length of their hair and nails did they say, Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried (R, Z). However, their estimation of having tarried a day is identical to that made by a man who had doubted the resurrection, was put to sleep by God, and was then awakened after a hundred years in 2:259. Similarly, on the Last Day, the Quran says that people will reckon that they had tarried but a short while before their resurrection (see 10:45; 17:52; 20:104; 23:112–13; 30:55; 46:35; 79:46). That the reactions of the youths
upon awakening are described as similar to the reactions of those resurrected from the dead indicates the close symbolic connection of this story to death, resurrection, and the intermediate state, or barzakh, between them; see the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.”

One of the youths is designated to take some money, referring to a silver dirham bearing the imprint of the oppressive king of their own time, and to enter the city in order to purchase food; but he was to do this discreetly, because they feared they would be discovered and persecuted. However, the dirham gives him away, for the people were amazed to see the old coin. They informed the youth that centuries had passed. They were now ruled by a righteous king, Tīdhusīs (Theodocius; Ṭ), during whose reign the people had been disputing among themselves about their affair, that is, about whether the body was resurrected along with the spirit or the spirit alone was raised. The king believed in bodily resurrection and prayed to God for a sign to convince his people. When he learned of the story of the youths of the cave, he announced it as a sign that resurrection is both a bodily and spiritual reality and, guided by the youth, led a delegation of the people to the cave. When the youth entered the cave where his companions were, however, he was instantly returned to his deep sleep, as were his companions. The king and the townsfolk later entered and found them in a state of bodily perfection, without any sign of decomposition (Ṭ).

There are varying versions of this account in the commentaries; some indicate that the youth talked briefly with the king and the townspeople, bidding them well, then returned to their state of sleep, and finally died. Some report that the townsfolk later found in the cave the tablets bearing the inscription (v. 9) that told the names of the youth and their story (Ṭ). In this way, God is said to have caused the youths to be discovered by the king and his people so that they might know that God’s Promise is true and so that they would not have doubt regarding the Hour, or the Resurrection on that Day, for one who can raise sleepers unaltered after many centuries can certainly raise the dead (Ṭ). Later some of the townsfolk suggested that they erect a building over them, but others decided it better to erect a place of worship (masjid) at the site. According to al-Ṭabarī, they erected a building that later become a place of prayer. Some consider the disputing among the townspeople to refer to their disagreement about how to memorialize the site of the cave, in which the disbelievers argued for a building and the believers for a place of prayer (JJ, R), or to their disagreement regarding the state of the youth, whether they were dead or sleeping, the time they spent in the cave, or their number (see v. 22). When they could not solve their disagreements, they said, Their Lord knows them best.
They say, “[They were] three, and the fourth was their dog.” And they say, “Five, and the sixth was their dog”—guessing at the unseen. And they say, “Seven, and the eighth was their dog.” Say, “My Lord knows best their number; none know them save a few.” So dispute not concerning them, save with clear argument, nor consult any of them about them.

22 This verse discourages further debate and discussion about the number of youths, as all such debate amounts to guessing at the unseen, a vain endeavor, for as the Quran says in 6:59: And with Him are the keys of the Unseen. None knows them but He. With regard to the youths, however, it is said that none know them save a few. Some identify the “few” here as the People of the Book (Ṭ). So dispute not concerning them, save with clear argument is addressed to the Prophet and instructs him not to debate with them about the matter, but rather to let the parts of the story that had been revealed to him in this Quranic account suffice (Ṭ). The verse adds nor consult any of them about them, meaning that he should not question the People of the Book further about this matter (Ṭ).

23 And say not of anything, “Surely, I shall do it tomorrow.”

24 Save that God wills. And remember thy Lord when thou dost forget, and say, “It may be that my Lord will guide me nearer than this to rectitude.”

23–24 These verses are addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, reminding him that he should never make a promise regarding what he might do tomorrow, meaning the future in general (Z), without acknowledging that its fulfillment depends upon the Will of God. In context, it pertains to the Prophet’s initial promise to the Makkans that he would respond to their queries about the youths of the cave the following day, assuming he would receive revelation from God before that time about how to answer their questions; he did not receive revelation for fifteen days according to some, leading the Makkans to doubt his ability to answer
their questions and ultimately to doubt his prophethood (Ṭ). Some commentators suggest that the verse can be read as an instruction to the Prophet to acknowledge verbally God’s Will in all such matters by adding the conditional clause, “if God wills” (in shāʾ Allāh) to any promise of future action (R, Z). It is thus a regular Muslim practice to utter this formula whenever one is speaking of what one expects to accomplish or hopes will come to pass in the future. This practice serves as a constant reminder that nothing happens outside the Will of God and acknowledges that the future is firmly in His Hands.

V. 24 further instructs the Prophet, and by extension all people, to remember thy Lord again if he were to forget to mention the dependency of all future action on God’s Will. The Quranic injunction here, to respond to forgetfulness of God not with bitter regret, but simply with renewed recollection and correction of one’s state of soul and mind, is similar to the injunction in 6:68: And when thou seest those who engage in vain discussion about Our signs, turn away from them till they engage in other discourse. And if Satan should cause thee to forget, then once thou hast remembered, sit not in the company of wrongdoing people. According to some, it is best if one realizes one’s error in forgetting to acknowledge the role of God’s Will and corrects oneself while still in the same place and situation in which one made the original statement (JJ, Z). Others assert than one can utter the formula even much later (Ṭ, Z), although one may still be liable for offering expiation for an unfulfilled oath (Ṭ); regarding the importance of keeping oaths, see commentary on 16:91–92; regarding expiation for broken oaths, see 5:89c. It may be that my Lord will guide me nearer than this to rectitude may be understood to be the content of the remembrance one makes upon realizing one has forgotten to acknowledge God’s Will in a matter (Z), or it may be the Prophet’s prayer that he would be given even greater signs and proofs of his prophethood than that of his having been informed by God about the youths of the cave (Bḍ, JJ, Z).

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25 And they tarried in their cave three hundred years, plus nine more.

26 Say, “God knows best how long they tarried. Unto Him belongs the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. How well He sees, how well He hears! They have no protector apart from Him, and He makes no one a partner unto Him in His Judgment.”
25–26 The statement that the youths remained in the cave for 309 years is said by some to be God’s informing the Prophet of the number of years the People of the Book say they remained in the cave (Ṭ, Z); however, it may not be the actual number of years, as suggested by the statement that follows it, God knows best how long they tarried (v. 26). Others claim that this figure represents the actual number of years the youths slept in the cave (Ṭ), and God knows best refers to the amount of time they remained in the cave after their death, which occurred shortly after their waking and being discovered (see 18:19–21c; Ṭ). Still others suggest that the figure of 309 years represents the actual number of years in the cave and settled an existing dispute about the matter, hence God knows best how long they tarried (Z).

Some commentators also note that the number of years is referred to as three hundred years, plus nine more, because 300 years represents the amount of time they slept in the cave according to the solar calendar, and another 9 years would have to be added if this same period of time were reckoned according to the lunar calendar, which was followed by the Prophet and the Arabs (IK, JJ, Q).

The Unseen belongs to God alone (10:20, 11:123; 16:77) and God alone knows the unseen, as in 6:59: And with Him are the keys of the Unseen. None knows them but He; and He knows what is on land and sea; no leaf falls but that He knows it, nor any seed in the dark recesses of the earth, nor anything moist or dry, but that it is inscribed in a clear Book (see also 23:92; 27:65; 72:26). How well He sees, how well He hears is an exclamation indicating that none sees or hears like or better than God (IK, Q), who is the Hearing, the Seeing, and regarding whom it is said, Sight comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all sight (6:103). They—that is, either the youths of the cave (R) or those who disputed about their affair (R)—have no protector but God (see also, e.g., 6:70; 11:20; 29:22; 33:18; 42:32; 46:32). That He has no partner . . . in His judgment, means that His Judgment is final and that there is no appeal to or revision of it (IK); or in this context specifically, it may mean that His statement about the youths of the cave and the length of time they slept is the final judgment on the matter (R).

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27 Recite that which has been revealed unto thee from the Book of thy Lord. None alters His Words. And thou wilt find no refuge apart from Him.

27 The Makkans, who were displeased by the Quran revealed to the Prophet used to ask him to bring a different Quran or to alter it to be more to their liking (see 10:15). The present verse is a response to such requests (Z), instructing the Prophet to recite that which has been revealed to Him (see also 29:45) and
reminding him that *none alters His Words* (see also 6:115; 10:64). Only God can alter His revelations, replacing one with another (see 16:101 and commentary).

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28 Make thy soul patient with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face. Turn not thine eyes away from them, desiring the adornment of the life of this world, nor obeying one whose heart We have made heedless of the remembrance of Us and who follows his caprice and whose affair exceeds the bounds.

28 This verse relates to the time when some prominent Makkans indicated that they were willing to sit and listen to the Prophet’s teachings, but they wanted the Prophet’s poorer followers to leave, so that they would not have to associate with those of low social standing (Ṭ, W), a story discussed in detail in the commentary on 6:52: *And driveth not away those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face. Naught of their reckoning falls upon thee and naught of thy reckoning falls upon them, such that thou mightest drive them away and thus become one of the wrongdoers*. Here, as in 6:52, the Prophet is instructed to remain steadfast with his sincere followers who call upon their Lord—that is, by invoking Him, praising and glorifying Him, supplicating Him, and performing their prayers (Ṭ).

That they call upon Him *morning and evening* may mean that they do so at these times specifically or that they do so constantly; the injunction to praise, glorify, or invoke God *morning and evening* is also found in 33:42; 48:9; 76:25. They call upon him *desiring His Face*, that is, seeking to please God and earn His Reward rather than earthly rewards or benefits (Ṭ); cf. 2:272; 13:22; 30:38–39; 76:9; 92:18–20. From a mystical perspective this phrase, on the highest level, can refer to seeking a vision of God. The Prophet is instructed not to *turn his eyes away from them, desiring the adornment of the life of this world*, that is, not to look past them toward other potential followers who may be wealthier or more influential (Ṭ; for a similar situation, see 80:1c) or prefer to sit with the wealthy and prominent rather than the lowly, who are pious and sincere (Ṭ). Later, the Prophet was reported to have said concerning this latter group: “Praise be to God, Who did not let me die before commanding my soul to be patient with some men among my community” (IK, Ṭ, W). The *one whose heart We have made heedless* refers to the Makkans who wished the Prophet to drive away his poorer followers (Ṭ). That their *affair*
exceeds the bounds means that they are prodigal, wasteful, and negligent, putting their own petty desires before the truth.

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29 And say, “It is the truth from your Lord! So whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.” Verily We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose canopies will encompass them. And if they plead for relief, they will be showered with water like molten lead that will scald faces—an evil drink indeed, and how evil a resting place!

29 This verse is also said to have been revealed in connection with the incident described in v. 28. Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve is meant as a warning. The implication of this statement is that the Prophet’s duty is only to declare the truth; he is not responsible for determining who will accept the truth and who will reject it. This is a matter that lies ultimately with God (Q, R) or, from the human point of view, with the individual, who must choose whether to follow the truth or turn away from it (Z). That this verse is meant as a warning rather than a license is indicated by the lines in the second half of the verse, which recount the horrors of Hell that have been prepared for the wrongdoers.

The Fire is described as taking the form of canopies that encompass them; that is, the Fire will surround them from all sides, from above and below; see also 29:55; 39:16. Water like molten lead is one of several terrible liquids that will torment the denizens of Hell. Either such liquids are poured upon those in Hell, or they are made to drink them; see 6:70; 10:4; 22:19; 37:67; 38:57; 40:72; 44:48; 47:15; 56:42, 54, 93; 78:25; 88:5 as well as 44:43–46: Truly the tree of Zaqqūm is the food of the sinner, like molten lead boiling in their bellies, like the boiling of boiling liquid. In the present verse, the water like molten lead is both showered on those in Hell and made an evil drink for them. Some describe the image here as a wall of water poured down into Hell, and when those in Hell seek to drink from it to seek relief, the heat of the water burns their faces (Z). The evil drinks of Hell—both boiling and freezing cold—are meant to contrast with the exceedingly pleasant drinks of the Garden (see 47:15). That this water will scald faces is consistent with other verses indicating that punishment in the Hereafter is either meted out or manifested upon “faces”—faces being symbolic here of persons as a

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30 As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds, surely We neglect not the reward of one who is virtuous in deed.

Believing and performing righteous deeds are frequently mentioned together as the twin bases of success in this world as far as it affects life in the Hereafter; see, e.g., 2:25; 3:57; 4:57; 5:69; 7:42; 17:9. See also 98:7: *Truly those who believe and perform righteous deeds, they are the best of creation.* For *We neglect not the reward of the virtuous,* cf. 9:120; 11:115; 12:56, 89; the same is said for the *believers* (3:171) and the *workers of righteousness* (7:170). Belief, submission through the performance of righteous deeds, and virtue represent the three basic components of religion—īmān, islām, and iḥsān—according to the well-known ḥadīth of Gabriel, in which īmān is associated with fundamentals of belief; islām with the five pillars, or essential practices (bearing witness to God’s Oneness, performing the prayer, paying the alms, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and performing the ḥajj); and iḥsān with virtue.

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31 For such as these, theirs shall be the Gardens of Eden with rivers running below. Therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and shall wear green garments of fine silk and rich brocade, reclining upon couches. Blessed indeed is the reward, and how beautiful a resting place!

The believers described in v. 30 will be rewarded with the Gardens of Eden (also described as such in 9:72; 13:23; 16:31; 19:61; 20:76; 35:33; 38:50; 40:8; 98:8). The description of paradisal Gardens as having *rivers running below* them is found in more than two dozen verses throughout the Quran; for a discussion of this image, see 2:25c. This verse also describes the joys of the Garden as including what appear to be, at least on a literal level, a set of material or sensual
pleasures, including bracelets of gold (or of silver in 76:21) and green garments of fine silk; see also 22:23; 35:33; 76:21, where these are also mentioned together as well as 44:53, which mentions only silk garments. These sensual descriptions are considered by many commentators to be symbolic, however, and not to be taken literally. The garments are described as green, because, according to some, this color is the most pleasing to the eye (Q), and in 55:76 those in Paradise recline on green cushions. Al-Rāzī speculates that the green silken garments represent what they have earned with their deeds, while the bracelets represent an additional bounty from God (R). According to a ḥadīth, the extent of one’s ornaments in the Garden reflects the degree to which one has purified oneself through ablutions in earthly life (Q). The inhabitants of Paradise are also said to be reclining upon couches (see also 15:47; 36:56; 37:44; 52:20; 56:15; 76:13; 83:23, 35; 88:13), which are described by some as curtained or canopied (IK, Q, R, Ṭ) and bejeweled (Q). Gold jewelry, fine silk garments, and raised couches would all have signified immense luxury, particularly in the context of Arabian desert life, where rough woolen garments and sitting on the ground would have been the norm, and some commentators indicate that these images are meant to suggest that those in Paradise will be like kings, finely ornamented and seated upon thrones (Q, Z). If interpreted in a literal fashion, these paradisal pleasures may seem worldly and materialistic in nature; indeed, in 43:35 gold ornaments and couches are described as the enjoyment of the life of this world. At the same time, gold and silk are considered noble in nature; they are also luxuries forbidden for Muslim men, according to several aḥādīth, and thus are goods that only women are permitted to enjoy in earthly life. Although the prohibition against men wearing gold and silk was not as central or important as the prohibition against consuming intoxicating beverages (see 5:90), there is an analogy between such beverages and gold and silk in that, at least for men, they were pleasures present but forbidden in this world, to be enjoyed only in the Hereafter. In Sufi interpretations, the various luxuries of the Garden as described in the Quran are understood to be symbols of the spiritual joys of witnessing God in all His Majesty and Beauty and of the intimacy, love, and union with God that the righteous will experience there (Qu, Su).

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32 Set forth for them the parable of two men: For one of them We made two gardens of grapevines, and surrounded them with date palms, and placed crops between them.

33 Both gardens brought forth their produce and failed not
in the least, and We made a stream gush forth in their midst.

32–33 The parable of the two men told in vv. 32–44 follows the discussion of the prominent and wealthy Makkans’ aversion to sitting with those of the Prophet’s followers whom they considered below their social status. It warns that those who are ungrateful for the worldly blessings that God has granted them and make them a source of personal pride are liable to think that these blessings are impervious to change and to be devastated when they are lost; cf. 2:264–66; 68:17–32; 34:15–16. That this parable is aimed most immediately at the Makkans is suggested by the fact that the gardens as described in this parable are similar to those the Makkans challenged the Prophet to bring forth as a condition of their believing in him in 17:90–91: And they say, “We shall not believe in thee till thou makest a spring gush forth for us from the earth, or till thou hast a garden of date palms and grapevines, and thou makest streams gush forth in the midst of it.” Gardens of grapevines and date palms are emblematic in the Quran of worldly prosperity but also Divine Beneficence; see 6:99, 141; 23:19; 36:34.

Some reports say that the two men were brothers—either two Israelites or two brothers among the Makhzūm clan in Makkah—one of whom was a believer and the other a disbeliever (R, Z); the disbelieving brother invested all of his inheritance in worldly goods, while the believing brother gave his away in charity (Z). Some commentators suggest that these two brothers are the same two debating resurrection in 37:51–60 (R, Z). That the two gardens failed not in the least could be translated more literally to mean that the gardens “did him no wrong,” since they produced fruit regularly. This contrasts with the description of the garden owner as wronging himself with his pride and worldly illusions in v. 35.

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34 And he had [abundant] fruit and said unto his companion as he conversed with him, “I am greater than you in wealth and stronger in men.”

34 The man with the two gardens had [abundant] fruit, which may refer to the fruit of the gardens, although thamar, here rendered “fruit,” also means “profit,” and may refer to great wealth of various kinds, including gold and silver (R, T, Z). The wealthier man also boasts that he is stronger in men, meaning in children, especially sons, as well as aides and servants (Z). Wealth and children are mentioned together in the Quran as signifiers of worldly status (see v. 46), although
the Quran warns that these blessings are not necessarily signs of Divine Favor (9:55, 85; 23:55–56) and cannot protect one against Divine Punishment (3:10, 116; 9:69; 26:88), despite the claims of some disbelievers who rejected prophetic warnings of destruction, saying: *We are greater in wealth and children, and we shall not be punished* (34:35).

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35 And he entered his garden, wronging himself, and said, “I think not that this will ever perish.

36 Nor do I think that the Hour is imminent. And if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find something better than this in the Hereafter.”

35–36 The description of disbelief and sin as acts of “wronging oneself” is found throughout the Quran (e.g., 3:117; 10:44). Here, the wealthy man “wrongs himself” through pride and his refusal to acknowledge that his provision comes from God (Z). The abundance of his gardens deludes the man in this parable into thinking that they will never perish, though *all things perish, save His Face* (28:88; cf. 55:26). This delusion points to the moral error of “excessive hope in worldly things” (*ṭūl al-amal*; Z), which entails being heedless of the impermanence of all created things and of one’s own mortality. See 104:3, where it is said that some who amass great wealth suppose that their *wealth makes* them *immortal*. The wealthy man in this parable does not think that the *Hour is imminent*, and commentators understand this and his conditional statement *if I am brought back to my Lord* to indicate his overall doubt in the Hereafter or his own resurrection (T). Despite this uncertainty, he is confident that if he is indeed resurrected, he will *find something better than this*—that is, better than his abundant gardens—in the *Hereafter*. This is because he believes that his wealth and good fortune belong to him on the basis of his own personal merit, and since he assumes that this merit transcends death, he expects to enjoy wealth and children in the Hereafter as well (R); see also 19:77: *Hast thou not considered the one who disbelieves in Our signs, and says, “I shall be given wealth and children”*; and 19:77–78c.

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37 His companion said unto him as he conversed with him,
“Do you disbelieve in the One Who created you from dust, then from a drop, then fashioned you as a man?

But He is God, my Lord, and I ascribe none as partner unto my Lord.

37–38 That human beings are made from dust (cf. 3:59; 30:20) and created from a drop (cf. 16:4; 23:13–14; 36:77; 75:37; 76:2; 80:19) is understood as an indication of human beings’ lowliness, especially in relation to God. Elsewhere, human beings’ origination from dust and then from a drop represents two stages in human development (22:5; 35:11; 40:67). Fashioned you as a man refers to God’s having further shaped him as a mature individual (Z), endowed with intelligence and religious responsibility (taklīf; R). The believer continues his address to the disbeliever, saying, I ascribe none as partner unto my Lord; that is, he realizes that all poverty and wealth comes from God (Q, R) and so is grateful in times of plenty and patient in times of adversity (R).

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39 When you entered your garden, why did you not say, ‘[This is] as God wills. There is no strength save in God.’ If you see that I am less than you in wealth and children,

it may be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, and unleash against it a reckoning from the sky, so that it becomes a flattened plain.

Or its water may sink deep, so that you cannot seek after it.”

39–41 As God wills (mā shāʾ Allāh), a very common phrase in everyday Muslim speech, indicates a recognition that nothing happens outside of God’s Will; see 7:188, where the Prophet is told to say, I have no power over what benefit or harm may come to me, save as God wills (see also 10:49). There is no strength save in God (lā quwwata illā bi’Llāh) acknowledges that no individual can
accomplish anything without the Help of God (R). According to Ibn Kathīr, this verse is the source of the Muslim religious custom of saying, whenever one is pleased by some good fortune, *mā shāʾ Allāh* (“as God wills”) and *lā quwwata illā biʼLlāh* (“there is no strength, save in God”), although the latter phrase is also uttered commonly in situations where one feels helpless in the face of distress or difficulty. According to a ḥadīth, the Prophet identified the latter phrase, or the related formula *lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā biʼLlāh* (“there is no power and no strength, save in God”), both used regularly in Muslim discourse, as among the “treasures of the Garden” (IK).

In v. 40, the believer’s words continue, as he challenges the boasts of the disbeliever, and expresses his hope that God may well *give him something better* than the gardens of the disbeliever, either in this world or in the Hereafter (Aj, R); see 4:77; 7:169; 12:57; 16:30, where the *Hereafter* is said to be *better* for the *reverent* than this world. The believer’s expression of hope for his own future is followed by a warning to the disbeliever that God may *unleash* against his gardens a *reckoning from the sky*, that is, a punishment from above (IK, R, Ṭ). Some commentators interpret *reckoning from the sky* here as thunderbolts (*ṣawāʾiq*; Bd, R, Z), suggesting a torrential storm or rain that will wash away his trees and crops and render his gardens a *flattened plain*, that is, as nothing but bare and barren earth (IK). The thunderbolt is mentioned elsewhere in the Quran as an agent of Divine Punishment and destruction or as a demonstration of Divine Power; see 4:153; 13:13; 14:13, 17; 51:44. See also vv. 7–8, which state that despite the many “adornments” God has made for the earth, it will eventually be rendered a *barren plain*; see also 20:106.

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42 And his fruit was encompassed. So he began to wring his hands on account of what he had spent on it while it lay in waste upon its trellises, saying, “Would that I had not ascribed anyone as partner unto my Lord!”

43 And he had no party to help him apart from God; nor could he help himself.

44 There, protection belongs to God, the Real. He is best in reward and best in requital.
42–44 His fruit was encompassed—that is, by ruin—meaning either that he lost all his wealth or that his garden was destroyed unexpectedly as his believing brother had warned him in vv. 40–41 (IK, JJ). Upon seeing this he began to wring his hands as a gesture of remorse and regret (IK, R). Despite the disbeliever’s earlier boasts that he was stronger in men than his brother (v. 34), in this state of ruin he finds himself without any party to help him apart from God, as he is helpless by himself (see also 28:81).

Some commentators note that vv. 43–44 can be punctuated differently to read, “And he had no party to help him apart from God, nor could he help himself there. Protection belongs to God,” so that “there” is an adverb describing the disbeliever’s helplessness rather than the state in which “protection belongs to God” (IK). Protection translates walāyah, and it belongs to God alone, ultimately, since God is the Walī, “Protector” (from the same root), particularly for the believers (see 2:257; 3:68; 5:55 and commentary). The Quran asserts often that there is no protector other than God (2:107, 120; 4:123, 173; 6:70).

Walāyah here can also be read as wilāyah, in which case it would mean “authority belongs to God” (IK). The two terms, walāyah and wilāyah, are written identically in an unvoweled Arabic text, and scholars differ over which pronunciation was intended in this verse (IK, Ṭ). Although the meaning of the two terms can overlap in ordinary usage, walāyah designates primarily a state of closeness, nearness, friendship, attachment, and protection. Wilāyah more commonly denotes a kind of authority that comes from one’s relationship to a higher authority—in political usage it may denote the authority of a local or provincial governor who has been appointed by the caliph or some other central authority; in mystical discourse, it refers to the state of Sufi saints who have acquired spiritual authority by virtue of their closeness to God, and thus have the power to initiate others into the mystical path.

The Real translates al-ḥaqq, which could also be rendered “the True” or “the Truth.” The Real or “the True” (al-Ḥaqq) is considered one of the ninety-nine Divine Names and is particularly favored as a reference to God in philosophical and mystical writings. Alternately, some suggest that al-ḥaqq in this verse can be read as an adjective describing protection, so that the verse could be rendered, “true protection belongs to God” (Bd).

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Set forth for them a parable of the life of this world: [It is] like water We send down from the sky. Then it mixes with the vegetation of the earth. Then it becomes chaff,
scattered by the winds. And God is capable of all things.

45 This parable recapitulates the moral lessons of the longer parable in vv. 32–44, namely, that the life of this world is dependent on Divine Beneficence, here in the form of water sent down from the sky. For a while life flourishes, as God’s Power and Mercy allow vegetation to come forth; but He then allows it to become chaff, that is, lifeless matter scattered by the winds. This imagery evokes the gardens of the disbeliever in the earlier parable, which flourish seemingly without end through God’s Provision, but then come to an abrupt end as a flat and barren plain. For similar parables, see also 39:21; 57:20.

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46 Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world, but that which endures—righteous deeds—are better in reward with thy Lord, and better [as a source of] hope.

46 Wealth and children are the adornment of this world, because they are considered a source of status and security. However, the Quran makes it clear that these blessings are not necessarily indications of Divine Favor, that they cannot protect one from punishment in this world or the next (see 18:34c; 17:6c), and that like all other “adornments” in this world, they will ultimately pass away (see 18:7–8c). By contrast, righteous deeds “endure” in that they bring lasting reward in the Hereafter; see also 19:76: And that which endures—righteous deeds—are better in reward with thy Lord, and better in return.

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47 On the Day We will set the mountains in motion, and you will see the earth an open plain. And We will gather them, and leave not one of them behind.

47 The mountains are referenced in several verses as a source of stability and support for the earth (see 16:19; 21:31; 31:30; and also 78:7, where they are described as stakes, in the sense of supports for a tent). Yet on the Last Day, or at the apocalypse, the mountains are described as being set . . . in motion (see also 27:88; 52:10; 78:20; 81:3); some understand this to mean that they will be removed from the earth (T, Z) or rendered nonexistent (R), or that they will be lifted from it
and pass through the air like clouds (27:88; Q). Elsewhere, they are described as scattered (20:105; 77:10); pulverized to powder (56:5); ground up (69:14); like heaps of shifting sand (73:14); and as carded wool (70:9; 101:5) on the Last Day. With the mountains removed or leveled, the earth will then become an open plain with nothing to obstruct one’s vision. Some say that it will be an open plain, because all trees and vegetation as well as all human constructions will be removed from it (Q, R, T). Open translates bārizah, which comes from a root meaning “to come into clear view,” or “to emerge,” and some suggest that the reference here is to the emergence of the dead from their graves for the final gathering and judgment (R).

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48 They shall be arrayed before thy Lord in ranks. “Indeed, you have come unto Us as We created you the first time. Nay, but you claimed that We would never appoint a tryst for you.”

48 On the Day of Judgment, people will be arrayed . . . in ranks before God; commentators describe these ranks or rows as similar to those formed for prayer (Q) or around the Ka’bah in Makkah (R). Each rank or row is said to be occupied by a particular religious community (Q). This phrase may also be translated “arrayed . . . in a row,” that is, in a single line so that all are visible to one another (R).

On this Day people will come to God as He created them the first time, indicating that just as He created and gave life to people initially, so too does He have the power to give them new life on the Day of Resurrection. This is a repeated argument against those who believed in God as Creator, but denied His power to resurrect, as in 17:51: Then they will say, “Who will bring us back?” Say, “He Who originated you the first time”; see also 36:79; 41:21. That people will come to God on this Day as He created them the first time could also mean they come to Him in the same state as that in which He initially created them, that is, alone, bare, and without any worldly support (Q, Z), as in 6:94: And [God will say], “Now you have come unto Us alone, just as We created you the first time, and you have left behind that which We had bestowed upon you; see also 19:80. This verse is a response to those who, like the prominent Makkans, considered themselves superior to those who did not enjoy the same wealth and social standing, indicating that all such worldly distinctions will be absent on that Day (R). The tryst refers to the time when the Resurrection and Gathering of which the prophets warned will
And the Book will be set down. Then thou wilt see the guilty fearful of what is in it. And they will say, “Oh, woe unto us! What a book this is! It leaves out nothing, small or great, save that it has taken account thereof.” And they find present [therein] whatsoever they did. And thy Lord wrongs no one.

The Book here refers not to the Quran or sacred scripture in general, but to the record of deeds done in life that all will receive on the Day of Judgment. That this book serves as a comprehensive witness to human deeds is also mentioned in 10:61; 34:3–4; 36:12; 45:29–30. Elsewhere this book is described as being written by noble guardians, understood to mean angels (82:10–12), and fastened as an omen upon the neck of every human being (17:13). It is given to some in their right hand, which portends a favorable judgment, and to some in their left, which portends punishment (69:18–25; 84:7–11); see also 83:7–9, 18–20.

The guilty express regret for having squandered their lives (IK) and are fearful of the book that leaves out nothing, and in which they find all of their deeds, good and bad, small and great recorded. They fear both punishment from God and disgrace in the eyes of other people (R), for the book now openly reveals those evil deeds that may have been hidden from others during earthly life. That the Lord wrongs no one in the process of judgment is mentioned throughout the Quran, for the punishment meted out to individuals on this Day will be only for what their own hands have sent forth (3:182; 8:51; 22:10), that is, the deeds they freely chose to commit. Furthermore, a ḥadīth states that God will place no one in either the Garden or the Fire until all accounts between human beings are fairly settled, and all that is due to the people headed for the Fire, even from those destined for the Garden, has been rendered and vice versa (IK). Reading this verse together with v. 47 makes clear the point that human beings have no escape from judgment for their actions, for God will leave not one of them behind (v. 47) on the Day of Resurrection, and there they will confront a record of their deeds that leaves out nothing, a point emphasized by the use of the same verb, ghādara, to mean “leave behind” or “leave out.”
When We said unto the angels, “Prostrate before Adam,” they prostrated, save Iblīs. He was of the jinn and he deviated from the command of his Lord. Will you then take him and his progeny as protectors apart from Me, though they are an enemy unto you? How evil an exchange for the wrongdoers!

The reference to the command given to the angels and Iblīs to prostrate before Adam is part of the fuller account of the creation and fall of Adam found elsewhere in the Quran; see 2:30–39; 7:11–25; 15:28–43; 17:61–65; 20:115–24; 38:71–85 (see also commentary on 2:35–37; 7:19–25). The account is briefly referenced here as a further admonition to the wealthy and proud Makkans, reminding them that Iblīs’s refusal to prostrate before Adam was based similarly on pride and a false sense of superiority to Adam (R). That all the angels prostrated, save Iblīs, suggests that Iblīs himself was among the angels, although immediately after this statement Iblīs is identified as of the jinn. This has given rise to a debate among Islamic scholars as to whether Iblīs should be classified as an angel or a jinn; see 2:30c. Some say the fact that Iblīs is identified as a jinn immediately after the reference to his failure to prostrate before Adam in this verse is an explanation of that act; that is, if he were an angel, he would have bowed, since angels are protected against any disobedience toward God (see 21:27), but because Iblīs was a jinn, he refused to do so and thus deviated from the command of his Lord (Z). Others hold that he was indeed an angel, perhaps the head of the angels, but after his disobedience he was transformed from an angel into a satan (Satan is the name used to refer to him after his disobedience) and thus into a jinn (Z). His progeny refers to the evil jinn and the satans mentioned elsewhere in the Quran who, like him, seek to lead human beings astray. That some people take Satan or his minions as protectors apart from God—meaning that they obey them instead of God (Z)—is also mentioned in 7:30: Some He has rightly guided, and some are deserving of error. Truly they took satans as their protectors apart from God and deem them rightly guided (cf. 4:119). They are the enemies of human beings, like Satan himself, who is repeatedly described as a manifest enemy (see, e.g., 2:208; 6:142; 7:22; 12:5; 17:53; 28:15). The evil exchange is the exchange of God’s true protection (see 18:42–44c) for the illusory “protection” of Satan (see 14:22c).

I did not make them witnesses to the creation of the
heavens and the earth, nor to their own creation. And I take not those who lead astray as a support.

51 That God did not make the satans witnesses to the creation of the heavens and the earth indicates that, since the satans were not partners with God in creation, it is illogical to consider them as partners with God in being worshipped (Z); cf. 10:28; 13:16. That they were not witness even to their own creation emphasizes that they are themselves mere creatures (R).

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52 On the Day when He says, “Call those whom you claimed as My partners,” they will call upon them, but they will not respond to them, and We will place a gulf between them.

52 This is one of several verses according to which on the Day of Judgment God will challenge those who ascribed partners to Him in earthly life to call upon their “partners” (see, e.g., 6:22; 16:27; 28:62) to intercede for them or to help them (R), but only as a means of rebuke, for those partners will abandon them, dissociate from them, or be unable to help them in any way (e.g., 6:94; 10:28; 16:86; 28:63). The gulf (mawbiq) between them may refer to a place of destruction (IK, Q, R, Ṭ) or a valley of Hell into which those who ascribed partners to God will be cast (IK, Q, R, Ṭ). Others suggest that mawbiq may refer here to the enmity that will manifest itself between the idolaters and the partners they ascribed to God on the Day of Judgment (R, Ṭ, Z). Still others interpret the gulf between them as referring to the vast intermediate expanse (barzakh) in the Hereafter between those who considered the angels to be partners to God (as did the Makkan idolaters) and the angels themselves, for the former will be in the depths of Hell and the latter in the highest reaches of the celestial realm (R, Z).

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53 The guilty will see the Fire, and know they shall fall into it, but they will find no means of escape therefrom.

53 That the guilty know they shall fall into it means that they are certain that
it is their destiny (R, Z). Know here translates ṣanānū, which can also mean merely to think or suppose something to be the case. Al-Rāzī therefore suggests that the verse may also mean that the guilty see the Fire while it is still far away; yet they think that it is near because of the intensity with which they can hear its raging and roaring (25:12), and they fear that they will fall into it at that moment. In either case, they cannot escape; that is, they have no means of changing their course, since they are being driven forward by the angels (R); see 37:1–3c; 50:21c. See also 19:86, where the guilty are driven into Hell as a thirsty herd; and 39:71, where the disbelievers are driven unto Hell in throngs; as well as 41:19.

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54 And indeed We have employed every kind of parable for mankind in this Quran. And man is the most contentious of beings.

54 For the statement that the Quran contains every kind of parable for mankind—that is, for the moral and religious instruction of human beings—see 17:89c; 30:58; 39:27. Human beings are contentious, vainly opposing and arguing against the prophets and messengers sent to them (T) on the basis of false ideas (Bd); see v. 56, and also 16:4, where human beings are described as a manifest adversary, and the commentary.

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55 And naught prevents men from believing when guidance comes unto them, and from seeking forgiveness of their Lord, save that [they await] the wont of those of old to come upon them, or the punishment to come upon them face-to-face.

55 People wait for the wont of those of old to come upon them; that is, they wait to see if the same worldly destruction that befell earlier peoples will be visited upon them as well (Z); cf. 16:33; 43:86; 47:18. Elsewhere, the Quran suggests that similar destruction may well be imminent, for God does not change His way of dealing with disbelievers; see 35:43: So do they await aught but the wont of those of old? Thou shalt find no alteration in the wont of God, and thou
shall find no change in the wont of God. The punishment that may come upon them face-to-face likely refers to punishment in the Hereafter (Z). Face-to-face translates qubulan, which may also mean “suddenly” (Ṭ), as this is the manner in which Divine Punishment is often said to come upon people (see, e.g., 6:44; 7:95; 26:202). It is also possible to read this word with alternate voweling as qabalan, meaning “in the future” (Z).

And We send not the messengers, save as bearers of glad tidings and as warners. And those who disbelieve dispute falsely in order to refute the truth thereby. They take My signs and that whereof they were warned in mockery.

And who does greater wrong than one who has been reminded of the signs of his Lord, then turns away from them and forgets that which his hands have sent forth? Surely We have placed coverings over their hearts, such that they understand it not, and in their ears a deafness. Even if thou callest them to guidance, they will never be rightly guided.

The rhetorical question beginning Who does greater wrong than is
repeated throughout the Quran, often in relation to those who deny God’s signs; see 32:22, where the identical question is posed, as well as 6:21; 7:37; 10:17; 29:68; 39:32. Regarding God’s placing coverings over their hearts . . . and in their ears a deafness, see commentary on the identical statement in 6:25, and on a similar statement in 2:7. Those who are spiritually “covered” or “deaf” are impervious to the guidance offered by God’s signs; thus, even if they are called to guidance, it will have no effect. See also 2:6: Truly it is the same for the disbelievers whether thou warnest them or warnest them not; they do not believe.

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And thy Lord is Forgiving, Possessed of Mercy. Were He to take them to task for that which they have earned, He would have hastened the punishment for them. Nay, but theirs is a tryst, beyond which they shall find no refuge.

58 Similar warnings about God’s ability to take the disbelievers to task for that which they have earned are found in 16:61 and 35:45, although in those verses the warning is that if God were to do so, He would not leave a single creature upon the earth; see 35:45c. In the present verse, God does not take the disbelievers to task immediately, because He is Forgiving and Possessed of Mercy. Rather, He leaves them be until their tryst, referring to the appointed time for their death or destruction, in order to give them time to repent and mend their ways. According to some, this verse is understood to be a warning to the disbelievers in Makkah specifically, whom God did not punish immediately despite their extreme enmity toward the Prophet (R, Z). The tryst appointed for their destruction may refer either to their coming to judgment on the Day of Resurrection (R) or to the Battle of Badr (2/624; R, Z), during which many Makkans, including several prominent opponents of the Prophet, were killed. Beyond or after this tryst has arrived, they shall find no refuge or means of deliverance from God’s Punishment (R, Z).

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And those towns, We destroyed them for the wrong they did, and We set a tryst for their destruction.

59 The Quran refers repeatedly to the destruction of whole towns as a result
of their disbelief and wrongdoing. All such references are found in Makkan sūrahs and it is widely understood that these were intended as warnings for the Quraysh of Makkah; see 6:131; 7:96; 11:100–102; 28:59; 46:26–27. That God has set a tryst for their destruction means that He has appointed a specific time, known only to Him, for their punishment, and it cannot be advanced or delayed; see 34:30, where the Prophet is instructed to warn the Makkans, saying, Yours shall be the tryst of a Day that you cannot delay by a single hour, nor advance.

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And when Moses said unto his servant, "I shall continue on till I reach the junction of the two seas, even if I journey for a long time."

60–82 These verses contain the account of Moses and the mysterious "servant" he meets at the junction of the two seas (v. 60). This is the only account of Moses in the Quran that does not also have some reference in the Biblical text. The mysterious servant is not named in the Quran, but is identified by all commentators and by a hadīth of the Prophet as Khiḍr (or al-Khaḍir, the “Green One”). Khiḍr is considered widely to be a prophet who lives well beyond the ordinary span of a human lifetime and is indeed associated with eternal life or with what lies beyond or between the realms of life and death. This association with perpetual life and the contrast between Moses as the bringer of Divine exoteric law and Khiḍr as the possessor of an esoteric knowledge from God’s Presence (v. 65) are the bases of the story’s metaphysical and mystical richness and have made it the subject of much interpretation and elaboration in Islamic literature. In Sufism, Khiḍr is considered the prophet of initiation into Divine mysteries as well as a special spiritual guide from whom many, including the famous Sufi metaphysician Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), claimed to have received initiation.

With the other two major accounts in this sūrah—that of the youths of the cave in vv. 9–26 and that of Dhu’l-Qarnayn in vv. 83–98—this story shares the theme of intermediate realms: between life and death, between exoteric and esoteric knowledge, between the two seas, between the two mountain barriers (v. 93) lying between the eastern and western extremes reached by Dhu’l-Qarnayn.

The story of Moses and Khiḍr recounted in these verses has been read in many different ways. It provides one of the most dramatic demonstrations of God’s power over life, death, and resurrection, a theme also found in the earlier account of the youths of the cave. But this story is also understood to be a symbolic account of the difference between formal and exoteric knowledge based upon revealed scripture or reason, on the one hand, and esoteric knowledge that comes directly
from God, on the other; it is also a symbolic account of spiritual mastery and discipleship and of the different levels of the human soul and its spiritual training. Finally, the story indicates that God’s Will is mysteriously operating through all events and actions and attests to the existence of a hidden interpretation (ta’wil) of what one witnesses and experiences in this world—an interpretation known only to a few, like Khiḍr, who have been given this knowledge directly by God Himself. This knowledge may transcend the understanding of even a great prophet like Moses, who in this story represents the exoteric, or outward, dimension of religion.

Moses’ servant is widely identified as Joshua (Q, R, Ṭ, Z). Servant translates fatā, which can also mean simply a youth or a young man. In a ḥadīth, the Prophet instructed people to refer to their slaves or servants as my “young man” (fatā) or my “young woman” (fatāt; Q, R, Z) rather than as “my slave” or “my servant”; in this case, the term refers to the fact that the younger Joshua followed Moses, served him, and gained knowledge from him (Z). The relationship between Moses and Joshua is one in which Moses is the master and Joshua the disciple, and it is Moses who sets the goals and parameters for their journey, saying I shall continue . . . even if I journey for a long time. Eventually, when Moses meets Khiḍr, Moses will become the disciple to the master, Khiḍr, while Khiḍr himself is a servant only to God (see v. 65, where Khiḍr is described as a servant from among Our servants).

Moses is seeking the junction of the two seas (majmaʾ al-bahrayn). In the Quran, the two seas are understood in the most literal sense to refer to the freshwater of rivers and the saltwater of the seas (25:53). The Quran mentions the point where the two meet as the site of an impenetrable “barrier” (barzakh or ḥājiz) set between them, in which the two types of water mingle, but neither transgresses beyond that into the other (cf. 25:53; 27:61; 55:19–20). Several commentators suggest possible locations for the junction of the two seas mentioned in this verse, although these suggestions tend to be vague or geographically impossible, such as the meeting point of the Persian sea (perhaps the Persian Gulf) and the Roman sea (likely a reference to the Mediterranean) or in Tangiers (R, Ṭ, Z). The geographical location, however, is ultimately immaterial to the story. Rather, Moses seeks this junction, because he was told that at this location he would meet one more knowledgeable than himself (Z). It is reported in a ḥadīth that Moses was once questioned by his people as to who was most knowledgeable, and he replied that he was. God was displeased by this, since Moses did not acknowledge Him as the source of all knowledge and therefore as the most knowledgeable, and He responded (through Gabriel) by telling Moses that there was a servant of God whose knowledge exceeded Moses’ own and that Moses would find this servant at the junction of the two seas (IK, Q, Z; for different versions of this story, see R).

Some commentators suggest that the two seas here refer to Moses and Khiḍr
themselves as representatives of two “seas of knowledge” (R, Z). To the extent that this story is a symbolic narrative about knowledge, the two seas represent two kinds of knowledge. The freshwater rivers, with their linear and directional nature, symbolize rational thought and knowledge of the Divine Law that leads to salvation or to God, while the saltwater sea, with its vastness, unpredictable currents, and fathomless depth, symbolizes deep inner knowledge and the infinite and all-encompassing nature of Divine Knowledge, or the Divine Itself, which human beings cannot “penetrate” with linear or logical forms of knowing, just as the freshwater of the rivers cannot penetrate the barrier between the two seas. The two seas thus serve as a symbol of the different kinds of Divine Knowledge possessed by Moses and Khîḍr—Moses represents Divine Knowledge as manifested in Divine Law, and Khîḍr represents Divine Knowledge in direct and immediate form, the acquisition of which is the goal of the mystical path (see 18:65c). If this verse is read as an allegory for the nature of the soul, then the two seas can refer to the world of the spirit and the world of bodies (K), with the human soul representing the junction, or the meeting point, of these two realms.

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Then when they reached the junction of the two, they forgot their fish, and it made its way to the sea, burrowing away.

Although Moses and his servant, Joshua, knew that they were seeking the junction of the two seas, the story suggests that they did not recognize this junction when they reached it and that it is at this point that they forgot their fish. They also lost their fish at this junction when it came back to life and made its way to the sea. The fact that the fish was revived in that place is an indication of Khîḍr’s presence there (Qu), insofar as Khîḍr represents life that transcends the limits of time—in both his “greening” effect upon his surroundings (see 18:65c) and his apparent agelessness.

It is reported that at one point in their journey, Moses and Joshua settled down to sleep by a rock near a spring referred to as the “spring of life” (IK, Q, Z), not knowing that this was indeed the junction between the two seas that they had been seeking. The fish they were carrying in a basket was said to have been a salted and preserved fish, and Moses and Joshua had already eaten from it (Q, Th, Z). Nonetheless, at this point the salted and partially eaten fish came in contact with the water from the spring and miraculously sprang back to life. The fish contacted the water either when Moses or Joshua accidentally splashed the fish with some water as they were making their ablutions for prayer (Q, R, Z) or when water from the
stream, coming from the “spring of life,” flowed near the basket, reaching and reanimating the fish inside and eventually overturning the basket, allowing the fish to escape to the sea (Q). The fish is also described as burrowing away, making itself a tunnel to the sea. Although one might expect that such a tunnel to the sea would be filled with water flowing from the sea toward the opening of the tunnel, the commentators report that the water from the sea was miraculously held back from the tunnel, allowing the fish to travel through it to the sea (JJ, Q).

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Then when they had passed beyond, he said to his servant, “Bring us our meal. We have certainly met with weariness on this journey of ours.”

62 Despite the miracle of the fish—unknown to Moses, and witnessed but forgotten by Joshua (see v. 63)—Moses and Joshua passed beyond that place to continue their journey. That Moses and Joshua “miss” the junction or do not recognize it for what it is can be explained by understanding that this junction represents a barzakh, a liminal place between two worlds or realms, which itself has no space or extension. Having left the junction and the spring of life, Moses began to experience hunger and weariness (K, Z); Moses thus asked his servant, Joshua, to bring them their meal, meaning the fish. Some suggest that God induced Moses’ hunger in order to remind him of the fish (Ts) and so facilitate his return to the junction of the two seas.

If this story is read as a symbolic narrative for the soul in its journey away from God into worldly existence and then its journey back to God, one can say that while at the junction of the two seas, Moses was sustained like a child in the mother’s womb, having no need to eat or struggle, and experiencing no hunger or weariness; but his passing beyond this point symbolizes the soul being born into worldly existence and its separation from its source of nourishment, and Moses, like the soul, is thus wearied by the new difficulties and needs that this birth entails (K).

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He said, “Didst thou see? When we took refuge at the rock, indeed I forgot the fish—and naught made me neglect to mention it, save Satan—and it made its way to the sea in a wondrous manner!”

63
He said, “That is what we were seeking!” So they turned back, retracing their steps.

63–64 When asked for the fish, Joshua remembered having witnessed its miraculous escape to the sea. Didst thou see? is not meant as a question, for Joshua knew that Moses had not witnessed the loss of the fish; rather, this is Joshua’s way of introducing the marvelous account to Moses (Ṭs).

Commentators note that Joshua, like Moses, knew that they were seeking the junction of the two seas—according to some reports, he even knew that losing their fish was to be a sign that they had reached their destination (JJ, R)—yet he fell asleep after witnessing the fish’s escape and forgot the matter upon awakening. Joshua attempted to excuse his oversight by claiming it was Satan who had caused him to neglect to mention the matter of the fish to Moses (Q). But now, as Joshua recounts the matter of the fish to Moses, he marvels at it.

When Moses learned what had happened to the fish, he exclaimed, That is what we were seeking! as he immediately realized—or according to some accounts was apprised beforehand (R, Ṭ)—that the place where the fish was lost to the sea was precisely where he would meet the servant of God more knowledgeable than himself (see 18:60c). Moses thus knew that they must return to that place, so they turned back, retracing their steps. If the story is read as a symbolic narrative for the journey of the soul, Moses retracing his steps represents the spiritual journey back to God, reversing the “fall” into worldly existence and separation from God—a return to the first fitrah (see 30:30c), or primordial nature, in which the human being was created (K).

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There they found a servant from among Our servants whom We had granted a mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence.

65 The servant from among Our servants is identified by all commentators as Khidr on the basis of abādith (IK, Q). He was said to have been given the name Khidr (or al-Khādir, “the Green One”) because wherever he prayed or stood, everything around him became green (Q, R, Th), that is, renewed with life; and in Islamic art forms, such as Persian miniatures, Khidr is always portrayed as wearing green.

Khidr is widely considered a prophet (Q, R), although some say that he was just a righteous servant of God or an angel (Q). Commentators put forward several
arguments in support of Khiḍr’s being a prophet, however, including that he was given direct and unmediated knowledge from God, which is the mark of prophethood (R), and that Moses followed him and sought knowledge from him, suggesting that, at least in some ways, Khiḍr was superior to Moses, and none can be superior to a prophet save another prophet (Q, R). Moreover, in v. 82, Khiḍr states that the various acts that he performs, which are shocking to Moses, are not acts that he did upon his own command, indicating that he did them upon God’s Command, another mark of prophethood, as in 21:27: *They precede Him not in speech, and they act according to His Command*. Finally, some commentators observe that the inner meaning of acts and events known by Khiḍr (see vv. 78–82) can only be known through Divine revelation, such as is received by the prophets alone (Q).

According to one report, when they returned to the junction of the two seas, Moses found Khiḍr seated or lying on a green carpet upon the water and enshrouded in his robe, and Moses offered him greetings of peace (Q). Various accounts report that Khiḍr removed the part of the robe covering his face and asked, “Is there peace in your land? Who are you?” after which Moses introduced himself (Q, Th); in another account, Khiḍr immediately recognized Moses and greeted him as the “prophet of the Children of Israel” (Q). Some consider Khiḍr to have been alive at the time of the legendary Persian hero and king Afarīdūn (Faraydūn), and at the beginning of the time of Dhu’l-Qarnayn (whose story follows immediately upon this one), as well as during the time of Moses (Z). Khiḍr remains an important figure in Islamic thought, particularly among Sufi practitioners, some of whom consider him to be an eternal and mysterious mystical master who still guides or even initiates certain people into the Sufi path through dreams and visions.

In the present verse, Khiḍr is said to have been granted a mercy from God, which many understand as a reference to prophethood (Q, R, Z) or to a kind of spiritual perfection that allows him to remain completely unencumbered by base matter (K), bestowing upon him perpetual life. He has also been taught knowledge from Our Presence (ʿilm min ladunnā), which is widely understood to mean knowledge of the Unseen, which lies only with God (JJ, Q, Z). It is an esoteric knowledge of the inner realities of things and of universal truths revealed directly to him (K, Q) without the intermediary of a human teacher (K, R, Su)—acquired through Divine inspiration rather than through human effort (Qu). Invoking the Arabic terminology in this verse, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī and other Sufis often refer to the knowledge that can be acquired only through Divine “unveiling” (ʿilm al-mukāshafah) as “knowledge from God’s Presence” (ʿilm ladunī; R), and the Baghdādī Sufi master Junayd (d. 297/910) referred to Khiḍr’s knowledge as the “unveiling of lights from the recesses of the Unseen” (Su). The description of Khiḍr receiving both “a mercy from God” and “knowledge from His Presence” echoes the
supplication of the youths of the cave in v. 10, where they pray to God seeking mercy from Thy Presence.

Khîdhr told Moses that God had given him knowledge that He had not given to Moses, but also that Moses had also been given knowledge that God had not given to him (i.e., Khîdhr; see IK, R, Z on 18:60); hence the reference to Moses and Khîdhr as representing “two seas” of knowledge (see 18:60c). The Sufi commentator al-Sulamî says in his commentary on 18:66 that although Moses was more knowledgeable than Khîdhr in what Moses had taken from God, Khîdhr was more knowledgeable in other ways; and although Moses “subsisted” in the truth, Khîdhr was annihilated in it, referring to the two spiritual stations that Sufis describe as “subsistence in God” (baqâʾ) and annihilation in God (fanâʾ). Yet for all of the knowledge between them, Khîdhr is reported to have said to Moses, as he watched a sparrow by the water: “My knowledge or your knowledge, compared with the Knowledge of God, is naught but the small amount of water the sparrow takes in its beak” (IK, Th).

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66 Moses said unto him, “Shall I follow thee, that thou mightest teach me some of that which thou hast been taught of sound judgment?”

66 Upon encountering Khîdhr, Moses immediately asks, Shall I follow thee, that thou mightest teach me? which reveals Moses’ genuine quest for inner knowledge for its own sake, his lack of pride, and his willingness to humble himself before one more knowledgeable than himself despite his own status as a prophet (R). In light of the previous account of the youths of the cave, in which the Jews told the Makkans that they could determine whether Muhammad was a legitimate prophet by testing his knowledge of the youths and their story, al-Râzî observes in his commentary on 18:60 that the account of Moses and Khîdhr makes it clear that even great prophets, such as Moses, do not possess all knowledge, for above every possessor of knowledge is a knower (12:76). Moses therefore demonstrates the proper attitude one should have when encountering those who know more than oneself, namely, an attitude of humility and a sincere desire to learn from them. Moses’ attitude and behavior also serve as a moral rebuke to the idolatrous Makkans, whose arrogance and rejection of the revelation brought by the Prophet contrast sharply with Moses’ humility and sincerity upon encountering Khîdhr. Moses requests specifically to be taught some of that which Khîdhr had been taught of sound judgment; in v. 10, the youths of the cave also pray to God to grant them sound judgment in their affairs.
He said, “Truly thou wilt not be able to bear patiently with me.

And how canst thou bear patiently that which thou dost not encompass in awareness?”

Khidr’s response, Thou wilt not be able to bear patiently with me, is not merely a protest, but a statement of truth and a foreshadowing of Moses and Khidr’s parting in v. 78. Moses cannot bear patiently with Khidr, because Moses has been sent as a prophet of the Divine Law, while Khidr has been entrusted with some acts that seem outwardly to be contrary to that Law, but possess an inner significance. Knowing this, Khidr warns that both he and Moses have been entrusted with a particular, but distinct or even apparently contradictory spiritual vocation, and that Moses therefore cannot be his companion (IK, Ts), at least not for very long. Like the water of the two seas that briefly comingle at the junction, or barzakh, between them, Moses and Khidr can travel together for a short period of time, but ultimately each must go his separate way so that the one prophet does not compromise the mission of the other. Khidr asks, How canst thou bear patiently that which thou dost not encompass in awareness? for, according to other verses, what one encompasses of Divine Knowledge is a matter of God’s Will and choosing, as in 2:255: And they encompass nothing of His Knowledge, save what He wills. In this narrative, Moses has only been taught what is just and righteous with regard to the outward and apparent reality of things, and he has no knowledge of the Unseen—a knowledge that has been granted to Khidr (K). Moses, unlike Khidr, is bound by time and the limits of the material body, which according to some Sufi commentators, is what veiled him from knowledge of the unseen realities and spiritual truths that had been granted to Khidr (K), who in his agelessness appears free of the body’s encumbrance and decay.

He said, “Thou wilt find me patient, if God wills, and I shall not disobey thee in any matter.”

He said, “If thou wouldst follow me, then question me
not about anything, till I make mention of it to thee.”

69–70 Moses affirms, *Thou wilt find me patient*, because of the strength of Moses’ preparedness to receive this knowledge and the sincerity of his seeking (K), but he adds the qualification *if God wills*, acknowledging that all future events depend on God’s Will (Q, Ṭs). See vv. 23–24, where the Prophet Muhammad is advised never to promise anything in the future without acknowledging God’s Will in the matter. Khidr instructs Moses, as a condition of allowing Moses to follow him, *Question me not about anything, till I make mention of it*. Al-Qushayrī observes that Khidr’s request indicates the proper etiquette that a student should demonstrate toward a teacher or a disciple toward a master (Qu). Having placed his trust in Khidr as his guide, it is for Moses only to follow his teacher’s path; it is not for him to seek out spiritual truths until the teacher has determined that the time has come for them (K, R). Khidr’s words also suggest the etiquette of a teacher or master toward a disciple: the master assumes the responsibility for taking into account the needs and capabilities of the student for a particular teaching (R).

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71 So they went on till, when they had embarked upon a ship, he made a hole therein. He said, “Didst thou make a hole in it in order to drown its people? Thou hast done a monstrous thing!”

71 Moses and Khidr boarded a ship whose owner reportedly recognized Khidr as a prophet and therefore allowed them to ride without charge (IK, Th, Z). Khidr then made a hole in the ship, nearly sinking it, which outraged Moses. If this account is interpreted as a symbolic narrative for the journey of the soul, the ship may then symbolize the body, which carries individuals across the sea of material existence and allows them to perform acts of worship; Khidr’s breaking the ship can thus represent the manner in which the hold of the body upon the soul may be “broken” through spiritual exercises and asceticism (K).

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72 He said, “Did I not say unto thee that thou wouldst not be able to bear patiently with me?”
He said, “Take me not to task for having forgotten, nor make me suffer much hardship on account of what I have done.”

72–73 Khidr reminded Moses of his warning that Moses would not be able to bear patiently with him, which is a warning that one’s resolve must be stronger if one is to follow such a path (K). Moses’ asking not to be taken to task for having forgotten his promise not to question Khidr recalls 2:286, where the believers pray, Our Lord, take us not to task if we forget or err!

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So they went on till they met a young boy, and he slew him. He said, “Didst thou slay a pure soul who had slain no other soul? Thou hast certainly done a terrible thing!”

74 Journeying farther, Moses and Khidr encountered a young boy whom Khidr killed, reportedly by striking him in the head with a stone (IK). Moses was outraged that Khidr would slay a pure soul, that is, a young, innocent boy who had slain no other soul or even committed a major sin (IK). Such a slaying is completely contrary to the Divine Law brought by Moses; see 5:32, We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul—unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth—it is as though he slew mankind all together. Moses considered this act to be worse than what Khidr had done before (IK). From a mystical perspective, the slain boy represents the soul that inclines toward evil and is “slain” when one overcomes the anger and other negative passions within oneself (K).

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He said, “Did I not say unto thee that thou wouldst not be able to bear patiently with me?”

He said, “If I question thee concerning aught after this, then keep my company no more. Thou hast attained sufficient excuse from me.”
Khiḍr repeated his warning about Moses’ inability to be patient, and Moses was again contrite. His statement *If I question thee . . . after this, then keep my company no more*, like Khiḍr’s warning, also anticipates the ultimate parting of ways between Moses and Khiḍr in v. 78. *Thou hast attained sufficient excuse from me* is Moses’ acknowledgment that he has already given Khiḍr sufficient justification to leave his company, since Moses had twice violated Khiḍr’s demand that he not ask questions.

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So they went on till they came upon the people of a town and sought food from them. But they refused to show them any hospitality. Then they found therein a wall that was about to fall down; so he set it up straight. He said, “Hadst thou willed, thou couldst have taken a wage for it.”

The people of the town, which some speculate may have been Antioch or Eilat (R), *refused to show them any hospitality*. As they were leaving, Khiḍr stopped to repair a wall that was leaning. Moses had promised to ask no further questions, but his statement *Hadst thou willed, thou couldst have taken a reward for it* contains an implicit question about why Khiḍr sought no compensation for the good deed he had done for a town that had shown them no kindness. Moses’ protest here led Khiḍr to declare their final parting (in v. 78). Commentators read a moral lesson into Moses’ protest and Khiḍr’s reaction, namely, that doing a good deed and then seeking worldly reward for it nullifies the spiritual merit of the good deed (Su). Spiritual virtue and perfection come from God and should be sought for their own sake, not for the sake of worldly reward (K). Some commentators also suggest that Moses’ protest here was the last straw, because although Moses’ earlier protests concerned the welfare of others (those on the ship, the young boy), his protest in this case arose from his own hunger and desire (Qu).

According to the interpretation of this account as a symbolic narrative for the journey of the soul, if the ship broken by Khiḍr represents the body “broken” by spiritual exercises and asceticism, and the slain boy represents the lower soul inclined to evil, which is slain by overcoming the passions, then the repaired wall symbolizes the “soul at peace” (*al-nafs al-muṭma’innah*; see 89:27c), which can be restored through the perfecting of character and virtue once the bodily passions and the lower soul have been subdued (K).

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He said, “This is the parting between thee and me. I shall inform thee of the meaning of that which thou couldst not bear patiently:

As suggested from the beginning of this account, the parting between Moses and Khîdr is inevitable, for when Moses did not prove to be patient enough to refrain from questioning Khîdr’s actions, as Khîdr predicted, Khîdr no longer had the patience to keep company with Moses (Qu). The junction between these “two seas of knowledge” (see 18:60c), like the junction between the two physical seas, can only be a temporary meeting. Despite the brief intermingling of Moses, as representative of exoteric law and prophet of the Divine Word revealed in time, and Khîdr, as representative of esoteric and timeless truth, the two prophets must carry out their vocations separately from one another—like the two seas, whose distinct natures as salty and fresh must remain separated, though they mingle at the barzakh. Yet al-Qushayrî states that although Moses desired to remain with Khîdr and continue to learn from him, Khîdr preferred to leave Moses’ company, preferring solitude with God to the company of created beings.

Before their parting, however, Khîdr offered to inform Moses of the meaning (ta‘wîl), or hidden wisdom, of his actions (R), which Moses could not bear patiently. Ta‘wîl is translated both here and in 3:7 simply as “interpretation,” but in later Islamic tradition this term is often used to refer to the inner or esoteric meaning of Quranic verses and aḥādīth—a usage of the term that seems to be supported by the statement in 3:7 that the ta‘wîl of certain Quranic verses is known only to God (see 3:7c). If ta‘wîl is understood here to signify inner or esoteric meaning, then Khîdr’s use of this term suggests that there is a hidden or esoteric meaning to all phenomena and events as well as to what God has revealed in sacred scriptures—a meaning that is known only to God and those who, like Khîdr, have been given knowledge from God’s Presence (v. 65). Although this verse marks the parting between Khîdr and Moses, Khîdr’s ability to share the ta‘wîl of his actions with Moses indicates that Moses’ soul had been purified and strengthened enough for the reception of the spiritual meaning and the encounter with the Unseen that had been veiled from Moses up to this point and about which he was forbidden to ask (K).

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As for the ship, it belonged to indigent people who worked the sea. I desired to damage it, for just beyond them
was a king who was seizing every ship by force.

79 Khîḍr explained that his act of damaging the ship was actually a means of saving it, for a tyrannical king was seizing all sound vessels, and Khîḍr’s damage to the ship made it undesirable for the king and ultimately saved it for its owners. The moral lesson here may be that when forced to choose between two harmful things, one should choose the least harmful, for damaging the ship resulted in a lesser harm to its owners than having it seized from them permanently (R). Following the interpretation of this account as a symbolic narrative for the soul’s journey, al-Kāshānī suggests that Khîḍr’s damaging the ship symbolizes the “breaking” of the body through spiritual exercise and asceticism in order to prevent the body from being “seized” by the lower soul inclined to evil (K). That Khîḍr’s seemingly destructive act is ultimately a salvific one draws parallels with the casting of the infant Moses into the water in a basket—an act that may have seemed likely to result in his death, but one that is ultimately the means of his deliverance from Pharaoh’s tyrannical order to “seize” and kill every male Israelite child.

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And as for the young boy, his parents were believers and we feared that he would make them suffer much through rebellion and disbelief.

So we desired that their Lord give them in exchange one who is better than him in purity, and nearer to mercy.

80–81 In these verses the slaying of the young boy is explained as a means of sparing his parents grief and distress over the rebellion and disbelief he would exhibit later in life. However, given that the boy is described as still very young, his parents would not yet have witnessed rebellion and disbelief from him and thus could only have considered his death a tragedy, not knowing what future difficulties God had spared them. Thus in connection with these verses, Ibn Kathîr quotes the hadîth, “God does not decree anything for a believer, save that it is better for him” (IK). Moses’ objection to Khîḍr’s slaying of the boy is based upon the religious law that forbids the killing of innocents, whereas Khîḍr’s explanation indicates that the slaying was commanded as an act of wisdom and ultimately of mercy on the part of the Omniscient God. The story also serves as a narrative demonstration of the difference between God’s Will for human beings as discerned through the
prescriptive commands found in Sacred Law and revelation and His ultimate Will or Decree, which transcends human understanding. It thus serves as a source of meditation on the different levels of God’s Will and the relationship between Divine Will and human justice.

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(82) And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and beneath it was a treasure belonging to them. Their father was righteous, and thy Lord desired that they should reach their maturity and extract their treasure, as a mercy from thy Lord. And I did not do this upon my own command. This is the meaning of that which thou couldst not bear patiently.”

82 Khiḍr explained that the wall was about to fall in a place where the inherited treasure belonging to two orphans boys was buried. By repairing and straightening the wall, Khiḍr made it possible for the boys to access their treasure when they grew up. Although the treasure beneath the wall would seem to refer to wealth of some kind, commentators suggest that it might refer to some form of knowledge (IK, R) that had been hidden or “buried” for the boys to discover later, when they were capable of understanding it. This interpretation seems especially likely given the earlier mention of the hidden interpretation (taʾwīl) of Khiḍr’s actions, which, like the buried treasure, was obscured from Moses’ outward vision. Reading the story as an analogy for the soul, al-Kāshānī suggests that the repaired wall symbolizes the “soul at peace” (al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinnah; 89:27; see also 18:77c), which can be “repaired” once the baser elements of the soul have been subdued. The treasure buried beneath the wall refers to spiritual knowledge (maʿrifah) buried within the heart, which can only be accessed once the soul has been rendered “at peace” and once intellectual faculties reach their maturity (K) and are free from the temptations of the body and the lower soul.

Khiḍr affirms that he did not act upon his own command, indicating that he was acting upon the Command or Will of God, which remains inscrutable to the human mind, even the mind of a prophet like Moses, without an explanation of the hidden meaning (taʾwīl) of phenomena, such as Khiḍr provides here. Reading the reference to Khiḍr’s taʾwīl of his actions in conjunction with the reference in 3:7 to a taʾwīl, or interpretation of revelation, known only to God and those firm in knowledge indicates that whatever one encounters, either in scripture or in the
world, contains a meaning that is known only to God and perhaps to a very few of His “servants,” such as Khīḍr. That Khīḍr’s acts are done according to God’s Command, as Khīḍr suggests here, indicates further that the Will of God is manifest on one level in Divine Law (i.e., in His prescriptive commands for human beings), but on another level in all that He brings into being, including events and acts that on their surface seem to contradict the Divine Will as manifest in the Law.

Al-Rāzī comments that the judgments of the prophets are necessarily based upon the outward aspect of phenomena and events, citing the ḥadīth of the Prophet: “We judge according to the outward; and God is responsible for the inward [or secrets, sarāʾīr]”; by contrast, Khīḍr’s judgments were based upon the true purposes of the phenomena and events. Yet after Moses had perfected the state of knowledge of the sharīʿah—that is, the Divine Law, as applied to outward phenomena—God sent him to Khīḍr in order to teach him knowledge on a more perfect, inward level. This indicates, for al-Rāzī, that the proper trajectory for religious knowledge is for people to move from a mastery of the science of sharīʿah, or Divine Law, which orders and judges according to the outward aspect of phenomena, to the science of the inward, which apprises one of the true realities of things (ḥaqāʾiq al-umūr; R).

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83 And they question thee about Dhuʿl-Qarnayn. Say, “I shall recite unto you a remembrance of him.”

83    The story of Dhuʿl-Qarnayn, “the man whose travels encompassed the east and the west,” is one of the matters about which the Makkans questioned the Prophet on the advice of some Jewish scholars, whose counsel the Makkans had sought in trying to determine the truth of Muhammad’s prophethood; see the introduction to this sūrah. According to one report, some of the People of the Book came to the Prophet directly to ask him about Dhuʿl-Qarnayn (Ṭ).

A ḥadīth identifies Dhuʿl-Qarnayn as a youth from Rūm (i.e., from the western lands) who built the Egyptian city of Alexandria (Ṭ, Ṭs), in other words, the Greek Alexander son of Philip (R), widely known as Alexander the Great. Although he is most widely identified with Alexander in traditional Muslim commentaries, some Islamic scholars of the modern period have identified him with the ancient Persian king Cyrus the Great (Ṭb). According to a ḥadīth, Dhuʿl-Qarnayn was visited by an angel who ascended with him through the sky until he could see the whole of the earth and the fathomless sea that surrounds the world (Q, Ṭ). Some consider him to be simply a righteous servant of God to whom God granted sovereignty over the world along with knowledge and wisdom (R, Z). Others suggest that he was a
prophet (R, Ṭs, Z) or an angel (R, Z). He is described as one who loved God and whom God loved (Ṭ, Ṭs). The clouds, and even light and darkness themselves, were said to have been placed at his service, so that if he traveled by night, a guiding light would illuminate the path before him, while darkness would protect him from behind (R, Z).

Much speculation and legend surrounds the meaning of his name or title, Dhu’l-Qarnayn (lit. “he of the two horns”). Some suggest that he had on his head what appeared to be two horns (R, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z); after calling people to the One God, he was struck in the right horn and killed, but then resurrected by God; then he was struck in the left horn, died (Ṭ), and, according to some, was resurrected again (R, Z). Other accounts say this name refers to his being the king of both Rūm and Persia (Ṭ, Z); or according to a ḥadīth, it refers to his journeys, which are said to have circled around both “horns” of the earth—the east and the west (R, Ṭs, Z). Some report that he had a dream in which he drew near to the sun until he seized in his grasp the eastern and western horns of it, and after that the people referred to him as Dhu’l-Qarnayn (R, Ṭs). Still others mention that the two sides of his head were made of copper (R, Ṭ, Z), or that he wore a headdress or helmet with two horns at the side (R, Z). Finally, some suggest that it was simply a title he was given as a way of indicating his bravery and fearlessness (R, Z). Some suggest that his name means that he lived for two centuries (qarnayn; Ṭs), although this is inconsistent with the historical Alexander, who died quite young.

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84 Truly We established him in the land, and gave him the means to all things.

That God established Dhu’l-Qarnayn in the land means that He made the land smooth and easy for him (Ṭ, Ṭs), so that he could journey through it and bring it under his control with ease. God is also said to have given him the means to all things, which most understand to mean a knowledge of all things (Ṭ, Ṭs) as well as the power and the tools with which to acquire all that he desired (R, Ṭs, Z).

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85 So he followed a means,

86 till when he reached the place of the setting sun, he
found it setting in a murky spring, and there he found a people. We said, “O Dhu’l-Qarnayn! Thou mayest punish, or thou mayest treat them well.”

85–86 Dhu’l-Qarnayn followed a means; that is, he journeyed along a path or a route (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs) between east and west (Ṭ), following landmarks and various stopping points (Ṭ). Since God gave Dhu’l-Qarnayn the means to all things (v. 84), al-Rāzī says that when he desired something, he would follow these means to attain it (R). That he found the sun setting in a murky spring is not understood literally by most commentators, but is rather thought to describe how the setting sun would appear to the human eye (IK, JJ, Ṭs): the westernmost point of the land known to Dhu’l-Qarnayn (if understood as referring to Alexander) was bordered by the ocean (IK, R), and as the sun set, it would appear to set into the distant reaches of the ocean, which would appear dark in the distance.

At this westernmost point, he found a people, according to legend, residing in a city of twelve thousand gates (IK, R). The context of the verse suggests that Dhu’l-Qarnayn found this people living in a state of disbelief (kufr) or idolatry (shirk; R, Ṭs). Thus God gave him the choice to either punish them, that is, slay them for their persistence in idolatry (R, Ṭs, Z), or treat them well, literally “take [a way of] kindness regarding them” (tattakhidha fihim ḥusnan). This is understood to mean that he should call them to islām—that is, to submission to and worship of the One God—and should seek to guide them (Z), or that he should be generous and forgiving toward them (R). Dhu’l-Qarnayn chose to call them to islām, indicating that those who rejected his call would be punished (v. 87), while those who believed would receive a most beautiful reward (v. 88). That God spoke to him and instructed him directly in this way suggests that he received a form of Divine revelation (waḥy), which supports the idea that he was a prophet (R, Ṭs), although others understand God’s instructions to him as having been communicated through inspiration (ilhām; Ṭs).

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He said, “As for the one who has done wrong, we shall punish him. Then he shall be brought back to his Lord, whereupon He will punish him with a terrible punishment.

87 The one who has done wrong, in this context, refers to those who ascribed partners unto God (Ṭs) and persisted in disbelief (R) after having been called to
monotheistic belief by Dhu’l-Qarnayn (IK). *We shall punish him* refers to their being slain in this life as punishment for their disbelief (R, Ṭs), and the *terrible punishment* mentioned later in the verse refers to the disbelievers’ punishment in the Hereafter (Ṭs).

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But as for the one who believes and works righteousness, he shall have a reward, that which is most beautiful, and we shall speak unto him that which is easy from our command.”

The one who believes and work righteousness refers to those who do so after Dhu’l-Qarnayn calls the people to monotheistic worship (IK). Both faith and good deeds are requirements for entry into the paradisal Garden, as is repeated in dozens of verses (e.g., 2:25; 3:57; 4:57; 5:9; 7:42; 19:60; 28:80; 34:37). *Have a reward, that which is most beautiful* may mean that the reward itself is *that which is most beautiful* (R); see, for example, 3:148; 4:95; 10:26; 13:18; 18:2, where the reward of the believers and the virtuous is described as beautiful. Some also suggest that it may mean “have a reward [for the deed] which is most beautiful” (R, Z); this “most beautiful” deed may refer to the utterance of the testimony of God’s Oneness (shahādah; Z) or to “believing and working righteousness” (R). That Dhu’l-Qarnayn will speak unto them *that which is easy from our command* may mean that he will only impose the requirements of mandatory charity and land tax (zakāh and kharāj) to a degree and in a manner that is easy for them to fulfill (R, Z); or it may simply mean that he will treat them with kindness (IK).

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Then he followed a means,

till he reached the place of the rising sun. He found it rising over a people for whom We had not made any shelter from it.

For *followed a means*, that is, a path, see 18:85–86c. When Dhu’l-Qarnayn came to the *place of the rising sun*, that is, the easternmost point of human
civilization, he found a people for whom We had not made any shelter from it, that
is, from the sun. Commentators report that this people lived in a land with neither
mountains nor trees for natural shade, nor buildings or other structures for shelter
from the sun (T). Some suggested that the land could not sustain buildings (JJ, Z) or
that these people had no knowledge of how to build structures (Ts). When the sun
was on the ascendant, they sought refuge from its rays by either going into the water
or burrowing in tunnels underground (T, Z); after the sun reached its highest point
and began to set, they would emerge again (T, Z). Some say that Dhu’l-Qarnayn
was given the same Divine mandate regarding this people as he was given for those
in the region of the setting sun (v. 86; Ts).

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Thus [it was], and We encompassed that which lay before him in awareness.

91 That God had full awareness of that which lay before Dhu’l-Qarnayn may
be understood to mean that He had knowledge of these strange people whom Dhu’l-
Qarnayn encountered (T). That which lay before him can also be taken to mean
“that which was with him,” in which case God had knowledge of the armies, tools,
and other means that Dhu’l-Qarnayn possessed (IK, Ts, Z).

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Then he followed a means,

92–93 For followed a means, that is, a path, see 18:85–86c. The two
mountain barriers are most widely reported by commentators to refer to the
mountains of Armenia and Azerbaijan, which formed a “barrier” to lands and
peoples lying farther north (R, T). In a place between the two mountain barriers,
that is, in an opening between the mountains (T), he found a people dwelling on the
near (or southern) side of the mountains. They could scarcely comprehend speech,
meaning that they spoke a language they alone could understand and they could
understand no other (Ts) or that they could only understand others with great

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difficulty or by means of gestures (R). Yet they spoke to Dhu’l-Qarnayn, and he understood them, perhaps, some suggested, because God gave him a special ability to understand their language, as He had given Solomon knowledge of the language of the birds (27:16; Ṭs), or because there was a translator (Ṭs).

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They said, “O Dhu’l-Qarnayn! Truly Gog and Magog are workers of corruption in the land. Shall we assign thee a tribute, that thou mightest set a barrier between them and us?”

Gog and Magog translate Ya’jūj and Ma’jūj, also called Yājūj (or Ājūj) and Mājūj elsewhere in Arabic literature (R, Ṭ). Commentators report that Gog and Magog are the offspring of Noah’s son Japheth (IK, Ṭs, Z); see Genesis 10:2, where Magog is listed as one of Japheth’s sons. Some have speculated that Gog and Magog were the ancestors or distant relatives of the Turks (IK, R, Ṭs, Z) or possibly the Daylamites (who hailed from regions to the north of Iran; R, Z), although such speculations seem to be based upon the rather fearsome reputation these two peoples had as warriors for medieval Muslims. Some suggest that Ya’jūj or Ājūj may derive from ta’ajjuj, meaning to ignite a fire, and Ma’jūj from mawj, referring to the waves of the sea (R)—both of which may be destructive forces. Gog and Magog are also mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament as forces of destruction: in Ezekiel 38:2, the prophet Ezekiel is told to prophesy against Gog, of the land of Magog, who would attack Israel; and in Revelation 20:8, Gog and Magog refer to the nations that Satan will rouse to fight with him in the end times.

A hadīth describes Gog and Magog as huge in size (Ṭs), although other speculative reports describe them variously as very small in stature or very large (R), with the claws and teeth of wild beasts (R); each male among them was said to beget a thousand offspring, all of whom bear arms and eat from every manner of beast on the earth (Ṭs). They are described as workers of corruption, a term used throughout the Quran to indicate spiritual corruption as well as violent and wicked behavior on the earth, see 2:11–12c; 5:33c. That Gog and Magog were workers of corruption is said to mean that they used to devour people (R, Ṭ) as well as all the food and resources of the land (R, Ṭs, Z), and that the people had suffered much torment and slaughter from them (Ṭs, Z). The people of this region thus offered Dhu’l-Qarnayn a tribute, that is, some form of payment for setting up the barrier between themselves and Gog and Magog (Ṭs).
According to another interpretation, this verse refers to Gog and Magog working corruption on earth at a later point, near the time of the approach of the Hour (Ṭ, Ṭs), and their appearance is mentioned in conjunction with eschatological events as described in the Hadīth and other Islamic sources. Esoterically or symbolically, Gog and Magog may be identified with the various negative and destructive developments in the human psyche and religious culture that Islamic tradition foretells as coming about near the end times, when the traditional barriers against such tendencies have been weakened or broken. See also 21:96–97, which refers to the future destruction Gog and Magog will wreak at this time: Till the time when Gog and Magog are unleashed, and they rush down from every hill, and the true promise draws nigh.

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95 He said, “That wherewith my Lord has established me is better; so aid me with strength. I shall set a rampart between you and them.

Dhu’l-Qarnayn responded, That wherewith my Lord has established me is better, indicating that God had given him such great wealth and expanse of land that he had no need of what they could offer him (R, Ṭs) and that he would provide this service simply for the sake of righteousness and doing good (IK). Al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathīr note that the response is similar to that of Solomon in 27:36 when given gifts by the Queen of Sheba: Do you offer me wealth? What God has given me is better than what He has given you. Dhu’l-Qarnayn did, however, ask the people to aid him with strength, meaning to provide him with able-bodied men and the tools and materials to assist him in making the barrier (IK, R, Ṭs).

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96 Bring me pieces of iron.” Then, when he had leveled the two cliffs, he said, “Blow!” till when he had made it fire, he said, “Bring me molten copper to pour over it.”

97 Thus they were not able to surmount it, nor could they pierce it.
Dhu’l-Qarnayn leveled the two cliffs by filling in the gap between them with the pieces, or ingots, of iron (JJ, Ṭs). With the command Blow! he ordered them to blow fire on iron pieces now filling the mountain opening until the heap of iron was itself intensely hot or flaming (JJ, Ṭs). He then poured molten copper, or alternately molten brass or iron, over the burning iron barrier to fill in the holes between the iron pieces (JJ, Ṭs) and form a solid wall (Ṭs), which Gog and Magog were unable to surmount from above or breach from below (Ṭs).

Although most commentators locate these mountains and the opening between them in the regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan, some say the two mountains were located near where the Roman (Mediterranean) sea meets the (Atlantic) ocean (Ṭs).

He said, “This is a mercy from my Lord. And when the Promise of my Lord comes, He will crumble it to dust. And the Promise of my Lord is true.”

Dhu’l-Qarnayn declared that this barrier he had constructed, or else the ability to construct it (R), was a mercy from his Lord to hold back the terrors of Gog and Magog from the people. He also said that when the Promise of the Lord comes—that is, with the onset of the events of the Hour, only after Jesus has killed the Antichrist, according to some (Ṭs), and as the time of Resurrection draws near (R)—God would crumble the barrier to dust and level it to the ground (Ṭs). This is similar to the Quranic descriptions of God’s destruction of the mountains in general with the coming of the Hour; see 20:105; 56:5; 69:14; 70:9; 73:14; 77:10; 78:20; 81:3; 101:5. Some connect this story to the figure of Khiḍr (see 18:65c), indicating that Khiḍr and Elisha (al-Yasa‘; see 6:86; 38:48) meet every night at this mountain barrier to prevent Gog and Magog from getting out (Ṭs). That the Promise of God is true is repeated in several verses; see 4:122; 10:4, 55; 18:21; 28:13; 30:60; 31:33; 35:5; 40:77.

And We shall leave them, on that Day, to surge against one another like waves. And the trumpet shall be blown, and We shall gather them together.

On that Day means on the Last Day, before the Resurrection but after the
slaying of the Antichrist (IK). Those who are left to \textit{surge against one another} are either Gog and Magog and human beings, whose lives and property they are overtaking (IK), or human beings and jinn, who come against one another at this time (Aj, IK). Some say that these forces \textit{surge against one another} will not, however, be able to enter Makkah, Madinah, or Jerusalem (Aj). At this time, \textit{the trumpet shall be blown}, heralding the onset of the Day of Resurrection. The trumpet is said to be blown by Seraphiel (Isrāfīl) or one of the other archangels (IK); for other references to the trumpet as a herald of the Resurrection and in some cases as the sound that will rouse the dead from their graves, see 20:102; 23:101; 27:87; 36:51; 39:68; 50:20; 69:13; 74:8; 78:18; see also 39:68c.

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\textbf{100} And We shall present Hell, on that Day, as an array before the disbelievers,

\textit{On that Day, God will present Hell . . . as an array for the disbelievers}, so that they can see it and hear its raging and groaning (Aj), even before they enter it.

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\textbf{101} those whose eyes were veiled from the remembrance of Me, and could not hear.

\textit{Those whose eyes were veiled . . . and could not hear} refers to those who were spiritually blind and deaf in life, making them impervious to the revealed messages of the prophets and to the Oneness of God. Similar references to the veiling of eyes and the failure to hear as metaphors for spiritual blindness and deafness are found in several verses; see 2:7c; 6:25c.

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\textbf{102} Do those who disbelieve reckon that they may take My servants as protectors apart from Me? Truly We have prepared Hell as a welcome for the disbelievers!

\textit{The Quran states that people have no helpers apart from God (see, e.g.,}
42:46) and repeatedly warns those who would vainly seek protectors other than Him (7:3; 13:16; 42:9), such as idols (2:257) or Satan and his minions (7:30; 18:50). See 29:41: The parable of those who take protectors apart from God is that of the spider that makes a house. Truly the frailest of houses is the spider’s house, if they but knew. That Hell is described as a welcome (nuzul, implying an offering of hospitality) may be considered a somewhat ironic usage, similar to those verses in which the disbelievers are given glad tidings of a painful punishment (31:7; 45:8) or the Fire of Hell is described as a refuge for them (24:57). Hell and its punishments are also described as a welcome in 56:52–56; 56:92–94. Cf. v. 107, where the Garden is analogously described as a welcome for those who believe and perform righteous deeds.

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Say, “Shall I inform you who are the greatest losers in respect to their deeds?

Those whose efforts go astray in the life of this world, while they reckon that they are virtuous in their works.”

They are those who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord, and in the meeting with Him. Thus their deeds have come to naught, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall assign them no weight.

103–5 Those who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord, and in the meeting with Him (v. 105) are described in this passage as the greatest losers, because their efforts in this world are in vain; see also 7:147: As for those who deny Our signs and the meeting of the Hereafter, their deeds have come to naught. Such people reckon that they are virtuous in their works, for as mentioned in several verses the deeds of the disbelievers and wrongdoers seem fair to them (see 6:108c). But their deeds have come to naught, because they are disbelievers, and deeds without faith are assigned no weight (cf. 2:217; 3:21–22; 5:5, 53; 6:88; 9:17; 33:19; 39:65; 47:9–10, 32). In 25:23, it is said that the deeds of those who are guilty of denying their prophets will be as scattered dust.

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That is their recompense—Hell—for having disbelieved and for having taken My signs and My messengers in mockery.

106 Hell is the recompense for those who mock God’s signs and messengers by denying them and belittling their warnings; cf. v. 56, in which the disbelievers mock the truth, as well as 2:231; 5:57; 45:9, 35, which mention those who mock God’s signs or warnings.

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Those who believe and perform righteous deeds, theirs shall be the Gardens of Paradise as a welcome.

Abiding therein, they seek not any change therefrom.

107–8 Just as Hell is a “welcome” for the disbelievers, the Garden is a welcome for those who believe and perform righteous deeds; see also 3:198; 32:19; 41:31–32.

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Say, “If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it.”

109 The Words of my Lord may be a reference to God’s Knowledge and Wisdom (ST, Z) or to the many spiritual meanings and benefits of the Quran and other Divine Revelation (Ţs), rather than to the literal words of the Quran itself. It may also be a reference to His capacity to create and to command whatever He wills (Ţs), for God creates by the “Word,” as in 2:117: When He decrees a thing, He only says to it, “Be!” and it is (see also 3:47; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:82; 40:68), and as in 4:171, where Jesus’ miraculous creation is described as God’s Word having been committed to, or cast upon, Mary. In the context of discussions of the Garden and Hell in vv. 102–8, some have suggested that the Words of my
Lord here refers to the rewards promised and punishments threatened in the Hereafter (Ṭs) or the generous words God will speak to the people of the Garden in the Hereafter (Aj). All of these are described here as more inexhaustible than the sea itself, for as vast as the sea is, it is still finite, while the Words of God are infinite (Aj, R) and eternal (ST). See also commentary on 31:27: *And if all the trees on earth were pens, and if the sea and seven more added to it [were ink], the Words of God would not be exhausted. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.*

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**Say, “I am only a human being like you. It is revealed unto me that your God is one God. So whosoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him perform righteous deeds and make no one a partner unto his Lord in worship.”**

110 In several verses, the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets assert that they are only a human being delivering a message from God (see, e.g., 14:11; 17:93; 41:6). However, it is the merely human nature of prophets itself that causes some people to doubt them; see 6:91; 11:27; 14:10; 21:3; 23:24; 23:47; 26:154, 186; 36:15; 54:24; 64:6; 74:25. Whosoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, and thus believes, should perform righteous deeds and should ascribe no partners to God; that is, they must avoid the unforgivable sin of shirk, or idolatry (see 4:48c). As believers are, by definition, not committers of shirk in its outward sense, Ibn ʿAjîbah cites in connection with this verse a hadîth that warns the believers to be wary of the “minor shirk.” When asked what “minor shirk” meant, the Prophet responded that it referred to hypocrisy or religious ostentation (riyāʾ).