

TEACHING & LEARNING – Islamic Texts

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Translation of the Qur'an adapted from Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali

Themes of the Texts

The first five ayat of Surah al-‘Alaq (The Clot) made up the first revelation that the Prophet Muhammad received directly from the Archangel Gabriel, whilst he was engaged in his regular pre-Islamic practice of meditation in the Cave of Hira at the top of the Mountain of Light a few miles outside Mecca. It is these five *ayat* that are relevant to the theme, although the rest of the surah is provided for context, and to give an idea of the flow of short surahs.

Surah al-Kahf (The Cave) is traditionally recited on Fridays; memorising and reciting it was said by the Prophet to protect one from the inevitable tests of faith brought by the Anti-Christ. The story of Moses and the unnamed saint (named in Hadith as Khidr or Khadir^a) is the third of four major stories in the surah. The other three stories are: the (Seven) Sleepers in the Cave^b, the two farmers with their orchards, and that of the Two-Horned One, a just king who undertakes three epic journeys and variously understood to be King Cyrus of Persia or Alexander the Great, amongst other explanations.

In a Scriptural Reasoning session, it is an option that someone tells the story of Moses and Khidr in paraphrase, rather than reading the lengthy passage, although the latter is of course a rewarding experience. Time constraints and the nature of the audience will probably help to decide which way to proceed.

Points to Consider

1. What is the impact of the teaching that God taught mankind via the Pen?
2. What is the impact of the teaching that God taught mankind everything?
3. What kind of a person is Khidr?
4. What lessons do we learn from the three incidents involving Khidr and Moses?
5. What is the nature of the knowledge possessed by Moses and Khidr?
6. What is the nature of the teaching and learning taking place here?

^a Both these versions of his name mean “green.” In one authentic hadith, Khidr is said to have acquired that name after he sat on a barren piece of land which immediately turned green with foliage due to the life-giving blessings of his person.

^b A story also found in Christian sources.

Text 1: Surah al-‘Alaq (Chapter: The Clot, 96:1-19)

In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

1. Recite! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-
2. Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:
3. Recite! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,-
4. He Who taught (the use of) the pen,-
5. Taught man that which he knew not.
6. Day, but man doth transgress all bounds,
7. In that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient.
8. Verily, to thy Lord is the return (of all).
9. Seest thou one who forbids-
10. A votary when he (turns) to pray?
11. Seest thou if he is on (the road of) Guidance?-
12. Or enjoins Righteousness?
13. Seest thou if he denies (Truth) and turns away?
14. Knoweth he not that Allah doth see?
15. Let him beware! If he desist not, We will drag him by the forelock,-
16. A lying, sinful forelock!
17. Then, let him call (for help) to his council (of comrades):
18. We will call on the angels of punishment (to deal with him)!
19. Nay, heed him not: But bow down in adoration, and bring thyself the closer (to Allah)!

Text 2: *Surah al-Kahf* (Chapter: The Cave, 18:60-82)

60. Behold, Moses said to his attendant, “I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travel.”

61. But when they reached the Junction, they forgot (about) their Fish, which took its course through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel.

62. When they had passed on (some distance), Moses said to his attendant: “Bring us our lunch; truly we have suffered much fatigue at this (stage of) our journey.”

63. He replied: “Did you see (what happened) when we took shelter at the rock? I did indeed forget (about) the Fish: none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it: it took its course through the sea in a marvellous way!”

64. Moses said: “That was what we were seeking after.” So they went back on their footsteps, following (the path they had come).

65. So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence.

66. Moses said to him: “May I follow you, on the basis that you teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which you have been taught?”

67. (The other) said: “Verily, you will not be able to have patience with me!”

68. “And how can you have patience about things about which your understanding is not complete?”

69. Moses said: “You will find me, if Allah so wills, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey you in anything.”

70. The other said: “If then you would follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to you concerning it.”

71. So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: “Have you scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing have you done!”

72. He answered: “Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?”

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

74. Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young man, he killed him. Moses said: “Have you killed an innocent person who had killed no-one? Truly a foul (unheard of) thing have you done!”

75. He answered: “Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?”

76. (Moses) said: “If ever I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company: then you would have received (full) excuse from my side.”

77. Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight. (Moses) said: “If you had wished, surely you could have taken some payment for it!”

78. He answered: “This is the parting between me and you: now will I tell you the interpretation of (those things) over which you were utterly unable to hold patience.

79. “As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in poverty: they worked on the water: I only wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.

80. “As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man).

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

82. “As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: So your Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure - a mercy (and favour) from your Lord. I did not do it of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which you were unable to hold patience.”

Commentary

The Clot, 4: God taught us through the use of the Pen, which gives its name to another surah (no. 68) that begins, “N. – By the Pen, and what they write!” Writing has helped us as human beings to preserve the knowledge and collective memory of different cultures and civilisations from antiquity until the present. A modern interpretation of “The Pen” would include the printing press, the keyboard and magnetic or laser-based memory-writing devices, the ubiquitous technology that has transformed our world and needs to be embraced as a gift from God to be used for goodness and not evil.

The Clot, 5: All human knowledge ultimately comes from God, who is the source of all knowledge. In particular, God-given knowledge reaches us through both nature and nurture, both revelation and reason, both tradition and logic, both theology and philosophy. This assertion is controversial, of course, but seems to me to be the only tenable one. One way of expressing the mystic goal, that is the inner goal behind all major world religions, is that Knower, Knowledge and the Known become (and are) One. The apparent clash between different forms of knowledge explains much, perhaps all, of human controversies, conflicts that can only ultimately be resolved by a true intellectual and experiential contact with Unity.

The Cave, 65-66: Khidr was taught by God directly from His own Presence. Hence the interpretation of the truth that Moses wished to learn from him as higher truth. But Moses is one of the Five Great Messengers of the Qur’an that do not include Khidr, so this may seem problematic. The general Sunni view here is that Khidr is also a Prophet of God, and that each of Moses and Khidr have knowledge from God that the other does not possess. Khidr tells Moses about the diversity of their knowledge in an authentic hadith transmitted in this regard; further in that account, a bird lands on the edge of their boat and dips its beak in the water, upon which Khidr remarks to Moses that “my knowledge and your knowledge compared to God’s knowledge is like the water taken by this bird out of the ocean.” An extreme, heretical Sufi view is that Khidr is a Saint but not a Prophet, and that this story illustrates that a mystic who understands higher truths is allowed to violate Prophetic law, just as Khidr violates Mosaic Law.

Another Sufi view is that Khidr is still alive, much like Elias or Ilyas. The perpetual life of Khidr and/or Ilyas is controversial, and rejected outright by many Sunnis on the basis that neither of them came to meet and supported the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and it would have been their duty to do so had they been alive at his time. But to this day, many Sufi teachers claim to meet Khidr in a dream or waking state; there is a contemporary Sufi leader from Pakistan, who has centres and thousands of followers in the UK, Europe and America, who once claimed that he met Khidr on the banks of river Chenab near Lahore (where his headquarters are based), just as Moses met Khidr on the banks of another river or sea thousands of years ago!^c

The Cave, 67-68: The latter verse is the Qur’anic basis for the common Arabic proverb, “Whoever is ignorant of something, opposes it,” (*man jahila shay’an ‘adahu*) or as we

^c I have heard an audio tape of the public discourse where this claim is made.

might say in English, “Ignorance breeds opposition.” This saying is also well-known in Latin.

Note the key form of teaching and learning here, i.e. by journeying to seek knowledge, accompanying the teacher and by waiting for the teacher to speak rather than asking too many questions. According to the same hadith quoted earlier, the background to this story is that one of the Israelites asked Moses, “Is there anyone on this earth more knowledgeable than you?” Moses replied, “No.” God then inspired Moses to undertake this journey in order to increase his knowledge. The teacher-disciple journey is common to all religious traditions, and is in serious danger of collapse in the modern world with the increase of internet-based “virtual learning environments,” websites etc., to the extent that we now even have purely virtual classrooms and universities! A key point that many caught in this technology-driven bandwagon forget is that no virtual environment can even approach the transmission of outer and inner knowledge that occurs with respectful and reverential companionship.

The Cave, 71-82: Apart from the interesting moral lessons and justifications given by Khidr for his three apparently-outrageous actions, there is a subtle choice of words that are related by theologians to the problem of free will and Divine predestination. In explaining the three incidents, Khidr refers to his own will, “our will” (Khidr and God), and God’s will respectively. This may refer to the stages via which human understanding develops through spiritual progress to begin to comprehend predestination, “God’s mysterious secret in His Creation,” according to Islamic tradition.

In his *Bezels of Wisdom*^d, a deep spiritual commentary on the Stories of the Prophets in the Qur’an, Ibn Arabi quotes from earlier Sufi masters that the three incidents reflected earlier ones in Moses’ own life, and hence provided another way for him to reflect and learn. The vulnerable boat was a reminder of Moses’ basket carrying him as a baby in the river; Moses’ protestation at the young man’s killing reminded him of his own accidental killing of an Egyptian; Khidr’s generous repairing of the wall without reward echoed Moses’ own selfless effort in drawing water for the young maidens of Midian. The Prophet Muhammad remarked about this story, “May God have mercy on Moses. Had he shown more patience with Khidr, God would have taught us more through their story!” Ibn Arabi quotes a Sufi who said that had Moses persevered, there were a thousand incidents from his own life that would have been reflected in his encounter with Khidr. The idea is that this is an aspect of Reality that every one of us experiences.

The final point worth stating is that Moses meets Khidr is akin to “Wahhabi meets Sufi”: rather than the polarised hatred that is the usual case in contemporary Muslim discourse, there should be a mutual process of journey and discovery. Moses initially attacks what he does not understand, but accepts the truth with humility once it is patiently explained to him. Note that Moses remains the leader and Lawgiver, while Khidr remains the individual wandering mystic!

^d The famous (or notorious) *Fusus al-Hikam*. The best English translation I have seen of this difficult text is by Ralph J. Austin.