



TREASURES OF THE QUR'ĀN SERIES

*Key to* ***Al-Kahf***

*Challenging Materialism & Godlessness*

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# Transliteration Table

## *Consonants. Arabic*

initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء ' َ	د d	ض ḍ	ك k
ب b	ذ dh	ط ṭ	ل l
ت t	ر r	ظ ḏ	م m
ث th	ز z	ع ʿ	ن n
ج j	س s	غ gh	ه h
ح ḥ	ش sh	ف f	و w
خ kh	ص ṣ	ق q	ي y

## *Vowels, diphthongs, etc.*

Short:      َ a    ِ i    ُ u

long:        َـ a    ِـ u    ِـ i

diphthongs:      ِـ aw

                    ِـ ay

# Foreword

IT WAS DURING the 1980s when Brother Khurram Murad (may Allah rest his soul in peace) presented a seminar paper entitled ‘A Study of *al-Kahf* in Relation to Our Times’ at the Islamic Foundation, then based at 223 London Road, Leicester. In this he attempted to present the Qur’ān as a living reality, which even after fourteen hundred years is still relevant. He explained at length that although the Qur’ān was revealed at a certain point in time and naturally reflects its own historical setting and the then state of man’s social and technological progression, nonetheless we have, by now, traversed a long distance and considerable technological and social changes have taken place in human society. New modes in human understanding, expression and action have emerged. Moreover, many people cannot be expected to absorb the idioms and metaphors of the Arabic language, so essential to exploring the depths of the Qur’ān. Yet its guidance, by its own claim, has an eternal relevance for all people, being the Word of Eternal God.

Brother Khurram maintained that to uphold the truth of this claim, it must be possible for us to receive, understand and experience the Qur’ān, as its first recipients did, at least in some measure and to some degree. We are all granted the inherent capacity to receive God’s Grace in all its fullness, richness and joy. In other words, despite the historicity of its revelation, because of the eternity of its message, the Qur’ān should be capable of being as much a part of our lives now as it was to its first recipients. In this respect, it still has the same urgent bearing upon our age and radiates the same deep relevance to our concerns and experiences.

Yet how is this possible? To put it very forthrightly, only if we approach the Qur’ān as if it was being *revealed, now and today*, translating each word of it in terms of our contemporary setting and bringing it to bear upon our

own realities by breaking through the barriers of time, culture and change. What has changed is not the essence of man, which is permanent, but only his externalities – the forms, the modes, the degrees, and the technologies. Even man’s physical form has remained the same for more than two million years, whereas his history of only 2000 years ago is hard to separate from mythology. The pagans of Makkah may be no more; nor the Jews of Yathrib; nor the Christians of Najrān; nor even the ‘faithfuls’ and ‘hypocrites’ of the community at Madīnah, but the same characters breathe all around us. We are human beings exactly as the first recipients were, though we may find it extremely difficult to grapple with the very deep implications of this very simple truth, but it is only because of our own inner psychic inhibitions. Once we realize these truths, the Qur’ān may reveal to us, as it did to them; make partners of us, just as it did them. And only then, instead of being a mere revered fossil or a source of magic-like blessing, will the Qur’ān become a living force, impinging, stirring, moving and guiding us to deeper and higher achievements, just as it did before.

To be able to do so, we need a suitable methodology. The goal may seem formidable, but the results will be rewarding. And it need not prove so difficult a task in view of Allah’s assurance, at least to the extent of that part of the Qur’ān that relates to *tadhkīr* (reminder):

*“We have made the Qur’ān easy for ‘dhikr’ (as a reminder). Is there, then, any who will take heed?”* (al-Qamar 54: 17)

On this basis, Brother Khurram suggested some general principles for the purpose of studying the Qur’ān:

1. There is an overall framework of Islam pertaining to its spirit, temper, concepts, codes and systems as determined by the Qur’ān and the Prophet (peace be upon him) that we should always stay within.
2. Those Qur’ānic verses and sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which pertain to any particular part of the Qur’ān should be

brought to bear to the maximum possible extent on the understanding of that part. For this purpose, guidance from the Qur'ān can be divided into two broad categories:

- i. *Tadhkīr* (reminder), which includes the imparting of understanding and generating responsiveness to truth; purifying – inwardly and outwardly, intellectually and spiritually, rationally and emotionally. This has reference to *tilāwah* (recitation) and *tazkiyah* (self purification).
  - ii. *Tahkīm* (commands): mainly seeking codes and laws, systems and institutions. This has reference to the *ta'līm* (teaching) of *kitāb* (scripture). In his view, one can take more liberty with the first category by translating it into new contexts without any grave risks to the overall framework of Islam.
3. Interpretation should not be stretched to include innovation and no meanings should be attributed that cannot be construed to have originally been intended.
  4. No part or word should be torn away from its textual or historical context in translating and understanding it.
  5. Language is mostly symbolic of human experiences and situations, which also shapes the mould and form of ideas and expressions. As situations and experiences change, it should be possible to translate the same language into a new context, without losing any of the narration's original purpose.
  6. Before any contextual or symbolic translation, the particular part should first be placed and understood in its original setting. Only then can the relationship with contemporary ideas, systems and other cultural, social and technological phenomena be established.
  7. It may be possible to employ alternate terminology to elucidate the real intent and import of the Qur'ān, but only so long as the bearings with the original are clearly maintained and understood.

8. Specifics may be transformed into generalities to facilitate their transposition and application to new perspectives and, in a similar manner, generalities may be rendered into specifics.

In brief, the methodology would imply that we stay within the established framework, yet discover new dimensions of meaning and experience by looking at our times through the Qur'ān, and translating its meaning into contemporary contexts of man's socio-technological progression and his cultural milieu.

The reason why Brother Khurram chose *al-Kahf* was simply because he felt that this *sūrah* has a more obvious and easily comprehensible bearing on us, especially in view of some *aḥādīth* of the Prophet. He devoted a considerable part of his paper to the phenomenon of Dajjāl (the Antichrist) as described in many *aḥādīth* that show the similarities and characteristics of our age with that of Dajjāl. Brother Khurram was not alone in taking this view. There have been at least two other eminent scholars of the Subcontinent who have taken a similar view in their study of *Sūrah al-Kahf*. In this respect, Brother Khurram expressed his debt of gratitude to one of them, namely Mawlānā Manāẓir Aḥsan Gilānī (1892-1956), whose book *Tadhkīr be Sūrat-i-al-Kahf* inspired him and set him on the trail of what *al-Kahf* contains. The other work was penned by an equally versatile scholar, Mawlānā Abul Hasan 'Alī Nadwī (1914-1999). His book, *Ma'rka'-i-Īmān-o-Māddīyat* (A Battle between Faith and Materialism), also studies *Sūrah al-Kahf* in the light of *Ḥadīth* literature, ancient history, modern scientific advancements as well as current affairs. Both these works contend that the present materialistic and secular civilization is very similar to that of the age of Dajjāl as described in many *aḥādīth*. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) advised us to recite *Sūrah al-Kahf* in order to counteract and neutralize the deceptions perpetrated by Dajjāl and, thus, save us from his *fitnah* (trial), we should, therefore, devote our special efforts to understand this *sūrah* and implement the antidote provided therein; to save us from the onslaught of our present materialistic and secular civilization.

With due respect to our very learned scholars, I have deliberately omitted the study of *aḥādīth* about Dajjāl as this distracts our attention from *al-Kahf* 's central message; a brief note on the *Phenomenon of Dajjāl* is added as an Appendix. Instead, I have concentrated on the message that the Qur'ān expounds from the various episodes narrated in this *sūrah*. There are many books available on the phenomenon of Dajjāl and one can access them to gain precise information and interpretations of various *aḥādīth* about him, his deceptions and manipulations.\* Some *aḥādīth* about the merit of *al-Kahf* quoted below in the Introduction mention Dajjāl in this context. Possibly one of the reasons why Brother Khurram did not publish his study may be that he himself was somewhat diffident about the inclusion of the phenomenon of Dajjāl in it. It may also have been that he simply did not have enough time to complete and revise his paper. Hence, I have edited the typescript left by Brother Khurram and tried to complete those sections which he could not include in his paper, perhaps because of a lack of time in presenting the whole *sūrah* in one session. I have managed to trace the sources of most of the quotations cited by Brother Khurram but for a couple of quotations I could not trace their sources. The major part of the study presented here is by Brother Khurram Murad except Chapter One, Chapter Two Sections V to VIII, Chapter Three and part of Chapter Four. Of course, I cannot match the eloquence and sheer depth of knowledge which one finds in Brother Khurram's writings and, as such, one may easily discern a patch of coarse cloth on a dress of brocade.

I consider myself fortunate to be able to have the benefit of receiving guidance and help from my learned friends and colleagues. Professor Syed Salman Nadvi, Professor Abdur Raheem Kidwai and Dr. Abdullah Sahin meticulously read the entire manuscript and offered many valuable comments. I am most grateful to them and also to Professor Seif Tag El Din and Mawlana Iqbal Ahmad Azami for their constructive suggestions to improve the work. My thanks are due to Dr. Susanne Thackray for editing the book and her very encouraging comments. I am also very grateful to Dr. Manazir Ahsan, the Director General of the Islamic Foundation, for checking the diacritical marks as well as for publishing this book. Not least,

I thank Brother Naiem Qaddoura for typesetting the manuscript, Brother Nasir Cadir for the cover design and the staff of Kube Publishing for undertaking the production.

I am grateful to Allah, *subḥānahū wa Ta‘ālā*, that I have been enabled to complete this very satisfying and pleasant task and bring out an important work left by our very dear Brother Khurram. I hope and pray that this study will lead the way for in-depth study of the Qur’ān, especially by our younger generations. All the shortcomings and errors are, of course, mine, as Brother Khurram was so meticulous in presenting his views.

Finally, I pray to Allah that He in His gracious Mercy may accept this humble effort and forgive my mistakes and shortcomings and grant me *tawfīq* (Divine help) for *aml* (actions) which gain His Pleasure. (*Āmīn*)

Leicester

**Abdur Rashid Siddiqui**

21st Shawwal 1430 H

10th October 2009

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\* One such book which I found useful is *Fitnah-i-Dajjāl Qur’ān aur Ḥadīth kī Roshnī Main (The trial of Dajjāl in the light of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth)* by Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, Lahore: Bait al-‘Ulum, 2005.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Usually the period of revelation of the Madīnan *sūrahs* (chapters) can be ascertained by references to the historical events referred to therein. Then there are also reliable traditions which give the period of revelation not only of *sūrahs* but sometimes of the individual verses as well. The *sūrahs* which were revealed during the Prophet's stay in Makkah present problems as his life was not recorded in great detail during this period. According to many *muffasirūn* (commentators), the Prophet's Makkan life can be divided into four major periods. According to Sayyid Mawdūdī, the first period commenced with the conferring of Prophethood on him, which lasted for about three years. During this period the Prophet (peace be upon him) conveyed the message to his close friends and relatives. In the second period lasting two years, the Prophet (peace be upon him) faced a campaign of abuse and false propaganda and organized opposition. The third period (the sixth year of his Prophethood) saw the start of persecution and fierce opposition. This covers four years of violent hostility. The final three years of the Prophet's stay in Makkah is the fourth period. This was a time of great hardship and suffering.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE PLACEMENT OF *AL-KAHF*

*Sūrah al-Kahf* belongs to the third period of the Makkan life of the Prophet (peace be upon him). During this period, the struggle was very intense. The *sūrah* was revealed when the Muslims were facing severe persecution. It is during this period that the Quraysh sought the help of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book) to frame some questions for the Prophet (peace be upon him) so as to test the authenticity of the revelations he received. Three questions were put to the Prophet (peace be upon him); two of them,

relating to the story of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* and Dhū al-Qarnayn, were answered in this *sūrah*. The third, about *al-Rūḥ*, (soul, revelation), was dealt with in the preceding *sūrah*, *Sūrah al-Isrā'*.

*Sūrah al-Kahf* occupies an exact central position in the Qur'ān, covering as it does half of *Juz'* (part) 15 and some part of *Juz'* 16. It covers four historical events and two parables. In between there are three outstanding passages, one at the *sūrah's* beginning, one right in the middle and finally the concluding *ruku'*. Their purpose was to provide guidance to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Muslims during this very difficult time in Makkah. The *sūrah* highlights the following:

1. Clear declaration of basic beliefs: *Tawḥīd* (Oneness of Allah), *Risālah* (Prophethood) and *Ākhirah* (the Hereafter) by purging faith of all alien concepts.
2. A warning to the unbelievers that the punishment from God is imminent unless they respond to the call of the Prophet (peace be upon him).
3. Guidance to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the believers to remain patient as in the end, they will succeed.
4. The Christians are obliquely mentioned here but they are more directly addressed in the following *Sūrah Maryam*.

### **A COMPARISON OF *AL-KAHF* AND *AL-ISRĀ'***

*Sūrah al-Kahf* follows *Sūrah al-Isrā'* with which it is very closely related. According to Mawlānā Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1904-1997) almost every *sūrah* has a twin. All *sūrahs* are arranged in pairs. Like partners, not only are there similarities between them but they also complement each other. If there are gaps in one *sūrah*, the other fills it. If something is hidden in one, the other manifests it. They shine like the sun and moon. In long *sūrahs* we see these features in *al-Baqarah* and *Āl 'Imrān*; in short *sūrahs* we can observe them in the last two *sūrahs*, numbers 113 and 114, which are collectively called *al-Mu'awwidhatayn* (the two *sūrahs* in which Allah's refuge from evil is sought). The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to recite them in pairs, for

example *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* in one *rukū'* and *al-Insān* in another, and similarly *Sūrahs al-Şaff* and *al-Jumu'ah* and *Sūrahs al-A'lā* and *al-Ghāshiyah*.

According to Mawlānā Işlāhī, there are some exceptions about this pairing of *sūrahs*, for example *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* has no partner, being in itself, the Introduction to the whole Qur'ān. Incidentally, one of the names of *al-Fātiḥah* is *al-Kāfiyah* indicating that it is self-sufficient and does not need pairing. In some cases, a later *sūrah* is the continuation of the preceding *sūrah* or its appendix. For example *Sūrah al-Tawbah* is the continuation of *Sūrah al-Anfāl* and the same relationship exists between *Sūrahs al-Mu'minūn* and *al-Nūr*. There are other examples as well.<sup>2</sup>

According to Dr. Israr Ahmad, the relationship between *al-Isrā'* and *al-Kahf* is very close. Both are equal in length. *Al-Isrā'* has 111 verses while *al-Kahf* has 110. *Al-Isrā'* begins with the *Subḥān Allah* (Glory be to Allah) and *al-Kahf* starts with *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* (Praise be to Allah). Both these expressions of praise complement each other, as it is narrated in a *ḥadīth* that *Subḥān Allah* and *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* fill up the whole of the balance (*mīzān*), or, fill up the whole (universe) that lies between the Heavens and the earth. (Muslim)

There is a similarity in their endings as well. The last two verses of both *sūrahs* start with the word *qul* (say). Thus, there are four *quls* and their meanings are truly great. The penultimate verse of *al-Isrā'* mentions *al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* (the Most Beautiful Names of Allah) and that of *al-Kahf* alludes to *Kalamāt Rabbī* (the Words of my Lord). The last verse of *al-Isrā'* prohibits committing *shirk* (associating anyone or anything with Allah), thus lowering His status, whereas *al-Kahf's* last verse forbids raising anyone to Allah's status. The last two words of *al-Isrā'* are *Kabbirhu Takbīrā* (so Glorify Him in a manner worthy of His Glory). Hence, *al-Kahf* starts with *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* (Praise be to Allah) and this phrase is the most worthy expression of Allah's Glory as they are the first words of *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah*.

There are several topics which are repeated in both *sūrahs* but in a different manner. The story of the Prophet Ādam (peace be upon him) and

Satan is narrated in the sixth *rukū‘* of both *sūrahs* (*al-Isrā‘* verses 61-65 and *al-Kahf* verses 50-53). There is mention of the presentation to human beings of the deeds they have performed during their lives on the Day of Judgement (*al-Isrā‘* verses 13-14 and *al-Kahf* verse 49). *Taṣrīf al-Āyāt* (the explanation or expounding of the Qur’ān) is mentioned in *al-Isrā‘* verses 41 and 89 and in *al-Kahf* verse 54. In both *sūrahs* the mission of the prophets is explained as “to proclaim good news and to warn” (*al-Isrā‘* verse 105 and *al-Kahf* verse 56). However, it should be mentioned that these are recurrent ideas occurring throughout the Qur’ān and not only in these two *sūrahs*.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF *AL-KAHF***

There are many *aḥādīth* which encourage memorization and recitation of *Sūrah al-Kahf* as a safeguard against the tribulation of Dajjāl (the Antichrist). It is narrated by Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī: “Whosoever reads *Sūrah al-Kahf* as it was revealed and then if Dajjāl appears he will not be able to overcome that person.” (Hākim)

Its recitation on Friday is recommended by the Prophet (peace be upon him). He is reported to have said: “He who reads the whole of it on Fridays will be safe from Dajjāl.” It is narrated by Abū Dardā’ that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “One who holds on to the first ten verses of *al-Kahf* will be safe from Dajjāl.” (Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Nasā’ī and Tirmidhī) In another *ḥadīth* it is said that one who holds on to the last ten verses from *al-Kahf* will be safe from Dajjāl. (Aḥmad) Yet another *ḥadīth* mentions that one who holds on to ten verses of *al-Kahf* will be safe from Dajjāl. (Nasā’ī) In many *aḥādīth* the same theme is repeated with some variation. For example, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said that “he who reads the last ten verses” or that “one who survives to see [Dajjāl] should recite over him the opening verses of *al-Kahf*” or that “whoever is tried by his [Dajjāl’s] fire should seek help from Allah and read the opening verses of *al-Kahf*, and the [fire] will be made cool and safe. (Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Aḥmad and Tirmidhī)

It is pertinent to note in these *aḥādīth* that *Sūrah al-Kahf* is linked with Dajjāl and it is cited as an antidote from his tricks and persecution (*fitnah*).

### **THE STRUCTURE OF *AL-KAHF***

*Sūrah al-Kahf* is located in the middle of the Qur'ān and contains 110 verses, all of which were revealed in Makkah. To gain a general overview of its contents, it can be divided into eight broad sections:

Section I: Introduction (verses 1-8): These verses deal with some fundamentally important and vital themes such as about revelation itself, its value and emphasis, and on the grave consequences of the doctrine of attributing a son to God, hence thereby containing a warning to the Christians. Furthermore, the Prophet is advised not to be depressed and worried if people ignore the Qur'ānic message.

Section II: *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (verses 9-26): This section narrates the story of *Aṣḥāb Kahf* (the People of the Cave). This was in response to the question raised by the Quraysh. It shows the commitment of a group of young believers to the Lordship of One God Alone and how 'time' became a relative phenomenon in their struggle.

Section III: Guidance to the Prophet (peace be upon him) (verses 27-31): The guidance to the Prophet is to continue his task of conveying the Qur'ān to his people. This is one of the responsibilities of the Prophet (see *al-Jumu'ah* 62: 2; *Āl 'Imrān* 3: 164, and *al-Baqarah* 2: 129 and 151). This section also lays down a strategy for facing a difficult situation, one which believers might have to face in the future as well.

Section IV: Two parables (verses 32-49): Verses 32-44 narrate the parable of a rich person who possesses two fully productive gardens and of a pauper. This highlights the two opposite characters in this context. Verses 45-49: expose the reality of this worldly life in relation to the Hereafter in the form of a parable.

Section V: The story of the Prophet Ādam (peace be upon him) and Satan (verses 50-59): The purpose behind relating this story is to emphasize the true position of man in the world and his relationship with his Lord.

Section VI: The Prophet Mūsā and Khidr (peace be upon them) (verses 60-82): Verses 60-82 tell the story of the journey that the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) undertook in search of knowledge about the purpose and meanings behind many events taking place in the world. These episodes illustrate that reality is not confined to that which is perceived outwardly by human beings through their faculties of seeing, hearing and thinking.

Section VII: Dhū al-Qarnayn (verses 83-101): Verses 83-98 tell the story of Dhū al-Qarnayn and his various campaigns of world domination.

Section VIII: Conclusion (verses 102-110): Verses 102-110 at the end again deal with the same basic themes of *Tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God) and *Ākhirah* (the Day of Judgement) which were discussed earlier in this *sūrah*.

In the following pages we will try to take up the *sūrah*'s major themes and deal with its contents in a general way so as to expose these themes further. We will also dwell upon a few directly relevant verses a little longer so as to provide a more in-depth study.

## Chapter 2

# Study of *Sūrah al-Kahf*

### Section I: Introduction (verses 1-8)

#### *All Praise be to Allah*

*Al-ḥamdu-lillāh!* *Al-Kahf* opens with these two simple words meaning ‘Praise be to Allah’. Yet in just these two words whole worlds of meaning are contained; indeed, their depth, inclusiveness, awareness and intensity of confession have no parallel. They also contain a whole creed – a creed which not only communicates the reality of God to man with beautiful comprehensiveness but which also determines the entire configuration of their mutual relationship. That is why these are the very words with which the Qur’ān itself opens, and one feels little wonder that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said that: *Subḥān Allah* and *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* fill up the whole of the balance (*mīzān*), or, fill up the whole (Universe) that lies between the Heavens and the earth. (Muslim) Commentators note that whenever *Subḥān Allah* is used it refers to the perfection and supreme power of Allah, as in the beginning of *Sūrah al-Isrā’*, while when *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* is used it connotes a favour and blessing that Allah bestows on human beings, just as He does by sending us the Book of Guidance. No other words at the start of *al-Kahf* could be more potent and effective in facing atheism and materialism. Let us see how.

The existence of God has rarely been denied by man, not even in this avowedly secular age. But it is His ‘presence’<sup>3</sup> as the Sole Lord, Sustainer, Provider and Ruler, at every moment and of every being, which has usually been disputed by ascribing to others the powers and attributes which are exclusively His. The secularist of our age has, however, tried to resolve the dispute by an outright denial of His ‘presence’. His existence or otherwise

is of no concern to him, because nothing in this world, or in history or in our lives has happened or is happening because of Him; nor any phenomenon, whatsoever, need be explained in terms of Him, and nor does anything need to be referred to Him for guidance. It is another matter that in the process of denial he had to invent other deities to fill the very positions he refused to acknowledge to God.

In pursuit of his frantic desire to edge out God and become independent of Him, in the frenzy of his hostility to religion, and in defence of the entrenched secular mood of his era, secular man is prepared to go to any length to tolerate any irrationality in the very name of rationalism, to accept any dogma and believe in any myth in the name of scientific truth and to invent any false deity. It all started with the claim of rationalism, positivism and the supremacy of scientific methodology. The sight of an apple falling from a tree proved to be so spectacular and meaningful an event that it outwrote God from the day-to-day running of the cosmos. If the 'fall of an apple' could be so devastating, then the 'fall of Ādam' had little chance of holding its ground. So the discovery of a few fossils, some similarities here and variations there, and a little evidence of survival and extinction provided enough of revelation to invent a whole mythology of evolution, which was eagerly grabbed up by an impatient world, and out went God, not only from the process of creation, but from history as well. Obviously, no intellectual qualms were felt in accepting the two self-contradictory explanations of mechanism and evolution. Once God was not needed for running the cosmos or for creation, He surely could not have a place in guiding human affairs. So the foundations of secularism were 'firmly' laid. But the edifice was still needed. Realities denied leave vacuums which, in their own strange ways, need filling. In this way, scientific method and positivism replaced the 'scripture' demanding blind dogmatic faith; God as Lord (*Rabb*) was replaced by technology, to provide and sustain us; as kings (*mulūk*) were made by people, to give laws and to rule, as was god (*ilah*) made by the nation, to demand worship and loyalty. So, a new trinity replaced the old one. Or one might say that material and worldly objectives

have taken the place of *Ilah*. Well, there always has been a difference of opinion as to the third member of the trinity.

*Al-ḥamdu-lillāh* is enough to demolish the entire foundations and edifice of atheism. All literally includes everything. Every phenomenon in and around us, every moment, arouses nothing but wonder, admiration, praise and adoration – or *ḥamd*. The purpose, the order, the harmony, the variation, the ever-continuing creation, the support, the providence, the sustenance, do not but point in one direction only – a Supreme Being or God.

God is not the creation of human need or imagination or a product of social evolutionary process. He did not create and then rested; He did not wind up the clock of the Universe and then retire. Without His ‘presence’, the Universe would not run; it is not a self-propelled machine. Creation and variation are two important themes, which the Qur’ān repeatedly stresses. Mechanism can repeat, can reproduce, but it cannot vary, cannot create. At every moment, creation must continue for the world to run; nay, to survive. But variation cannot emanate from nothing; nor can it continue creation.

And it would be the height of irrationality to believe that creation could be the result of a long interplay of the blind forces of chance and necessity, of natural selection and survival value, of adaptability and immutability, or of the demigod of the double-helix DNA. How paradoxical indeed if modern man finds it difficult to believe in the ‘presence’ of a Purposeful, Merciful hand behind creation, but is ready to place his blind faith in ‘chance alone, pure chance, absolutely free, but blind, as the source of every innovation, of all creation’; or in the ‘clumsy mechanism, crude technology and irrational processes of natural selection and gene-mutation’ to create such amazing products as the human mind, his language, his emotions such as love and pain, his social organization, his history and indeed ‘life’ its very self. Can a molecule, through its innate immutability, aided by selection, invent such a being as man? Never has man been prepared to owe so much to so little. Never could he bring himself to explain everything in terms of nothing.

But everything cannot be ‘because of’ or ‘from’ nothing. Life can emanate only from the ‘living’ alone. Signs and proofs are literally strewn everywhere. In whatever the eye sees or the ear hears, it finds God, the Living and the Present. *Al-ḥamdu-lillāh*, in two words, destroys the entire irrational secularism of the modern age. It makes man feel the reality of God as something living in himself, nearer than his jugular vein. It makes man be a witness to the ‘presence’ of God in everything around him, a witness that evokes intense adoration and praise. Let man fall upon his knees and let his intellect and soul cry in their utter awareness of themselves and the world around: All Praise be to God.

Arguments are no more necessary than for proving the presence of the sun in broad daylight. The very word *ḥamd* itself includes a host of arguments we need not delve into here.

But remember, *ḥamd* is not a mere declaration of an intellectual or spiritual creed. Instead, *ḥamd* actually means ‘thankful praise’. It is thus an expression of deep personal consciousness, of gratitude to God, which not only overpowers the intellect and stirs the soul, but also lights up the pathways of day-to-day living. Other than *ḥamd*, which single word could so deeply and pervasively express the whole God–man relationship; and that, too, with such inclusive reciprocity. Reciprocity is a very profound dimension of *al-ḥamd*: the initiation is divine – His providence, mercy and care; the response is human – his praise, gratitude and remembrance.

It gives your whole life a meaning and a purpose; a past, a present, a future. The past is no more a dark abyss; the present is no more a purposeless episode; the future is no more a total end to such a valuable and productive life. You deny *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* and you are stuck with an aimless life set down in a desert of meaninglessness.

### ***For He has guided and guided perfectly***

As we look at the worlds, inner and outer, our self begins to pulsate with intense praise and gratitude to the Unknown Being whose providence is so manifest everywhere. But Who is He, and how can we know Him to the ‘fullness’ of ‘our limited’ human comprehension? More urgently, has He

also shown us the light to enable us to live by Him, for Him, unto Him? Yes, indeed. The very beginning of *al-Kahf* invites us to magnify our praise to Him, for the specific act of having guided us.

*All Praise be to Allah Who has revealed to His servant the Book devoid of all crookedness. (Verse 1)*

Few have ever been able to shut themselves away from the cry of their soul and intellect in awareness of His existence and providence. But most have usually denied that He should be concerned with how we live, behave ourselves or shape our destiny. This denial has reached new heights in the current secular mood. If the footprints of God cannot be discerned anywhere in and on the world, why should man need Him in living his day-to-day life? The human intellect is supreme; the scientific method suffices as guide. Many who would recognize God are prepared to do so only to the extent of experiencing Him, that too in a ‘personal’ way; a God who waits until man is cornered or breaks down, but of no earthly use in the meantime. Such a god is not the God whose ‘presence’ evokes the unbounded adoration of praise, proclaimed in *ḥamd*. That is why the very first verse of *al-Kahf* places praise of God in the context of His revealed guidance and, thus, successfully repudiates secularism, both in its concept and in its practical implication. Not only that, as we ponder more, further important concepts related to divine guidance emerge.

First, it is emphasized that what He has revealed to ‘guide’ man are His words in the form of a ‘book’ which embodies His will. He did not reveal Himself; nor did He become ‘flesh’; nor did He leave His revelation to the vagaries of individual inner ‘experiences’ or ‘history’ or ‘nature’. Nature, history and a ‘godly’ man are three important mediums that reflect Him and lead to Him; but they cannot serve the purpose of ‘revelation’ that man needs.

Secondly, it is made clear that the ‘book’ [the spoken words] is the only suitable form of revelation for guiding man in the totality of his life. It is the language and the power to communicate through it which, more than

anything else, is the foundation of man's intellectual and moral dimensions. This theme is beautifully illustrated in the beginnings of *Sūrahs al-'Alaq* and *al-Raḥmān*.<sup>4</sup> Words can penetrate the innermost depths and regulate the outward expanse – thus transforming the whole of man. They can also endure, providing permanence. Furthermore, they have the scope for flexibility.

Thirdly, it is stressed that revelation has not been made through a divine medium. Paradoxically, man has usually, either refused to accept that God 'may' or 'does' communicate His will to a man like himself, or made a god of such a man. The sufferings caused by both of these extreme positions are a matter of historical record. It is not therefore a mere coincidence, or for no important reason, that *al-Kahf*, not only in the very opening verse stresses that the one who has been entrusted with the revelation is no more than a mere servant of His, and praises God for this<sup>5</sup> but also closes with an emphatic, categorical declaration of the humanity of the recipient from his own lips.

*Say: I am no more than a human being like you; one to whom revelation is made: 'Your Lord is the One and only God.'* (verse 110)

To realize the wisdom behind this in relation to our own age, one has only to go back a little in time and see for oneself how the present secular materialist culture has evolved out of a doctrine claiming that God became 'flesh' to reveal Himself; not to guide man, but to 'redeem' him and 'atone' for him.

Fourthly, that the divine guidance or the Qur'ān has two important characteristics – one, it has no 'crookedness' in it; and two, it is 'straight'. Unfortunately, both English words completely fail to convey the meanings held in the original Arabic words. To have some idea, the first characteristic implies the perfect balance, the proportion, the symmetry, the uniformity and the integrated wholeness of the Qur'ān. No part of it is at variance with another. None of its content is irrational or unreasonable. It gives a way of life which is balanced and an integrated whole. And the second signifies not

only its own absolute intrinsic rightness, but also its capacity to straighten out and put right every facet of man's life, to safeguard it and to keep watch over it. No human code can possess these qualities.

## **Section II: *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (the People of the Cave) (verses 9-26)**

We may now be keen to find out in what respects and numerous ways God's will and power rule man in relation to his 'tomorrow'; how 'meaning' in the long run belongs to an 'event' presently not understandable. This is the major theme of the story of the 'People of the Cave' narrated at the beginning of *al-Kahf* (verses 9-26), and from which the *sūrah* takes its name. The same note, in more of its rich and varied aspects, is struck in the story of the Prophet Mūsā's journey (peace be upon him).

Some young believers make a commitment to faith in One God as their only Lord. This commitment is not confined to the deeper reaches of their souls only; instead, they stand up for their faith and struggle to shape the surrounding culture in line with their own values:

*They were a party of young men who had faith in their Lord... they stood up and proclaimed: "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and earth. We shall call upon no other god beside Him... These men, our own people have taken others as gods beside Him... and now that you have disassociated yourselves from them and from whatever they worship besides Allah, go and seek refuge in the cave..."* (verses 13-16)

They face an oppressive, dominant, secular culture which is out either to assimilate or eliminate them:

*If they should come upon us, they will stone us to death or force us to revert to their faith.* (verse 20)

To meet the challenge they take to a 'cave', away from the hubbub of civilized life; not to escape and withdraw, but to 'involve' in a manner as to

deserve the grace and mercy of their Lord in straightening out the currents of time for their cause:

*When those youths sought refuge in the cave and said: "Our Lord! Grant us mercy from Yourself and provide us rectitude in our affairs."*  
(verse 10)

Taking a literal interpretation, time virtually stopped for them, as it stops for every man every day; only the duration stretched to longer than normal, and this stoppage was a purposeful and meaningful event. It stopped in one sense, but flowed in another. Because, in defiance of any mechanical interpretation of history, the hostile culture around them yielded to the faith these youth stood for, so that people may know that,

*Allah's promise is true, and that there is absolutely no doubt that the Hour will come to pass.* (verse 21)

The story is narrated in two installments; first, a prologue in four verses (9-12); then the whole story. Few have pondered over the significance of this style. The prologue is a brief statement of the whole import of this episode, which closes by emphasizing the story's major theme:

*[We] roused them so that We might see which of the two parties could best tell the length of their stay.* (verse 12)

The reality of time man may never comprehend; what he knows is only its quantitative measure. But this universe is not a machine; nor is man's history a mechanical evolutionary phenomenon. Tomorrow of physical time may always be twenty-four hours away, but the 'tomorrow' of man's destiny is not a mere quantitative event. In the flow of historical processes, ages may shrink into moments; and moments may stretch into ages. Life may yield to death rather unexpectedly; the dead may come to life even after long periods of slumber. It is true of all existence – physical, intellectual, spiritual. This historical dimension of time shows a Purposive,

Wise, Guiding Hand in control, which intervenes in Its own ways to create events and set the course of time in a way very different from that dictated by mechanical, material or biological laws.

It is an event which, in literal terms, we may not perhaps see happening again in our times. But it has aspects of its own which keep coming to life again and again. And they are not so strange either. “Were [they] *one of Our wondrous signs?*” (verse 9) No. How many ideas, faiths, cultures, nations, and societies do we see surviving or perishing in the same manner. Furthermore, ‘cave’, as a symbol of living without, yet within a secular material culture, and being able to influence the current of time, has a meaning all of its own, to which we shall return later.

Meanwhile, as we finish pondering over the wonderful story of the cave, we are inescapably led to join the Qur’ān in confessing,

*He knows all that is hidden in the heavens and in the earth. How well He sees; How well He hears! The creatures have no other guardian than Him; He allows no one to share His authority.* (verse 26)

### ***His Will alone is Sovereign (verses 23-24)***

To recognize God’s ‘presence’ in our everyday world itself may not lead man to submit to His sovereignty (or divine guidance) in the totality of his life unless he also comes to believe that it is His will and purposeful hand that is in sovereign control of history. Because history is not understood to be under God’s control, He has no place in the conduct of man’s affair – this is one basic theme which runs throughout secular materialist thought and practice. It is the evolutionary process, organic and social – an interplay of material, blind and irrational forces – which shapes and determines man’s destiny. If any rationality or purposefulness has entered the historical process, it is man’s own.

It is within such a perspective that one finds out why *al-Kahf* repeatedly stresses that it is *only* God’s purposive and merciful Will that controls, directs and prevails in events throughout all time, in what is happening today and what shall happen tomorrow. This is the predominant theme that

is unfolded throughout the *sūrah* in its full sweep and impact and in many of its varied aspects. There are two verses at the end of the parable of the gardens which put forth the whole idea very succinctly:

*Whatever Allah wills shall come to pass, for there is no power save with Allah. (Verse 39)*

*All power of protection rests with Allah, the True One. (Verse 44)*

But the most telling and profound, yet precise, statement is contained in verses 23-24:

*And never say about anything: "I shall certainly do this tomorrow" unless Allah should will it. And should you forget (and make such a statement), remember your Lord....*

The instruction looks very commonplace and the context is apparently very mundane – just, that always say: *Inshā' Allah*. But in meaning and implication, this verse contains within itself the depth of an ocean and the expanse of the cosmos. We can only admire the Qur'ān's beautiful style that can translate such fundamental themes in so relevant contexts and integrate them in man's everyday thought and practice. The statement sounds very simple, but indeed if you do not forget to say *Insha' Allah*, fully knowing what lies behind it, you can never fall prey to disbelief and materialism. It means that every moment you are conscious of God's all-pervasive and encompassing sovereignty to the extent that you realize that even your very ordinary intentions and plans for the next moment will not materialize unless God so wills.

Yesterday may be peeped through to some extent, but tomorrow is definitely unseen; and both are incapable of being reconstructed or tested through any scientific method. How, then, can both be measured or explained in terms of man's own will and power or chance and necessity or material forces or inorganic molecules? As to man's mastery, tomorrow is

beyond even his anticipation and knowledge and, therefore, way beyond his control. Conjectures and forecasts cannot imply domination.

Which of the forces that shapes history – cosmic, societal or personal – is of your making or under your power? Your own heartbeat?

*Why, then, when the soul leaps up to the throat, while you are helplessly watching, that he is on the verge of his death, at that moment We are closer to him than you, although you do not see (Us). If you are not subject to anyone's authority, why are you not able to bring them back to life, if you are truthful? (al-Wāqī'ah 56: 83-87)*

Or, your senses, the hearing, the seeing, the founts of your supreme intellect?

*Say: "What do you think? If Allah should take away your hearing and your sight, and seal your hearts – who is a god, other than Allah, who could restore them to you?" (al-An'ām 6: 46)*

Or, your genes, your DNA molecules, inert and lifeless, to whom you ascribe as amazing a being as man?

*Did you ever consider the sperm that you emit? Do you create a child out of it?, Or are We its creators? (al-Wāqī'ah 56: 58-59)*

Or, the fuels that keep the giant wheels of your industry moving?

*Did you consider the fire which you kindle? Did you make its tree grow? Or was it We Who made it grow? (al-Wāqī'ah 56: 71-72)*

Or, the heavens and earth, the whole universe?

*Or is it they who created the heavens and the earth? (al-Ṭūr 52: 36)*

Or, the very time, the transition from today to tomorrow, the change of day and night – which you can neither elongate nor shorten, nor has any

evolutionary process even been able to do so:

*Say: "Did you consider: If Allah were to make the night perpetual over you till the Day of Judgement, is there a god other than Allah who can bring forth light for you? Do you not hear?" Say: "Did you consider: If Allah were to make the day perpetual over you, until the Day of Judgement, is there a god other than Allah who brings in the night for you to repose in it? Will you not see?" (al-Qaṣaṣ 28: 71-72)*

### **Section III: Guidance to the Prophet (peace be upon him) (verses 27-31)**

#### ***The Qur'ānic Strategy***

*Al-Kahf*, as we have seen, does not work like a magic wand to help us overcome the challenge of a materialistic civilization. Instead, it convincingly deals with all the basic issues involved in the realm of intellect and spirit and provides us with an alternate framework of ideas, values, faith and behaviour. But does it also illumine a 'way' and a 'strategy' for us to follow in facing this challenge? To answer this very important question, we now turn to verses 27-29, coming immediately after the story of the cave. In these verses, in my view, the Qur'ān directs us to a comprehensive and effective strategy to meet the situation. It consists of three components, which broadly are:

- i. Complete submission to the Book revealed by God – or the Divine Revelation.
- ii. A brotherhood of those who live together in constant remembrance and dependence of God and who eschew those who live in neglect of Him – or the Divine Company.
- iii. A declaration of the Truth given by God, irrespective of odds – or the Divine Call.

We shall now discuss each of these separately:

## ***The Book of God***

If there is any one single phenomenon that can be identified as being mainly responsible for the emergence of the secular materialist cultural complex of our age, it is the displacement of divine guidance by the scientific method as the source of man's knowledge and guidance. Everything else just followed. The first part of the strategy, as outlined in *al-Kahf*, is therefore based on this relationship of ours with divine guidance, the Book of God:

*Recite to them from the Book of your Lord what has been revealed to you. (Verse 27)*

'Recitation' is a very poor equivalent of *tilāwah* and fails to convey its full meaning and import. The word *tilāwah* means to 'follow'. This would naturally include reading, but reading with attention, care and understanding. The tongue, the mind and the deeper reaches of the heart and soul must all participate to their fullest in this act. It also implies living by the Qur'ān and up to it. And, lastly, it would include the teaching and the propagation. All these meanings are found in the Qur'ān itself and in the lexicon, to which a detailed reference is not possible here.

What is desired is to commit our entire personality and life to the Qur'ān as the only enduring, unchanging source of guidance and refuge, like the womb of a mother or her lap is to a child. We, therefore, should reorient and restructure our entire thought and behaviour on the foundations of divine revelation, submitting to it as the only valid and true source of guidance in the affairs of life.

Divine guidance *is* relevant in every age. To grasp its importance in our times, we should read the verse which then unfolds those characteristics of the Book which make it especially relevant to us.

## ***Change and permanence***

*None may alter His words (and were you to make any change in His words) you will find no refuge from Him. (Verse 27)*

There is none to change it. The full import of this little phrase will dawn upon us if we only realize what dimensions ‘change’ has assumed in our age; what havoc it has wrought upon man and society. ‘Change’ in fact signifies the whole temper of our era.

Change as a phenomenon has always been operative in human history. It has, amongst others, been responsible for reforms and progress. But in our age, once the moorings were lost with God and His guidance and a faith in social evolution and man’s inevitable progress was acquired, absolutely nothing has escaped the process of change. Change has become a virtue in its own merit. Faith, values, norms and ethics have been and are being continuously altered, eroded and replaced by new ones. What is true today may be false tomorrow. The result is that for both man and society there remain no fixed poles from which to take bearings. All old familiar landmarks have been erased; all props have been removed; society has become anomic. Man lives knowing not where he is. Every tomorrow brings with it the pressures of learning to live with new physical realities, acquiring new rules and norms and coping with new situations for which no precedents exist. He is forced to make an amazing number of choices every day in ever-expanding domains – ranging from faith and values to the size and style of his toe and heel.

And with what devastating results? Bewilderment and confusion; vacuum and aimlessness; extensive personal breakdowns; severe stresses and strains of everyday living – even the joys and riches of a contented and secure living have been snatched away from man. He has no past – having either changed for the better or having become a prerogative of ‘chance and necessity’. He has no present – being at the mercy of blind technology. He has no future – everything would change; and change in what direction, he knows not. There is a complete disconnection, disintegration, dislocation.

As we visualize the modern man being tossed around by the waves of change in the vast sea of life, with darkness engulfing him all around, with no lighthouse to direct him to the shore, we grasp the significance of what *al-Kahf* says about the divine Book; it changes not and is eternally valid – and our mind flashes to another very appropriate parable from the Qur’ān:

*Or its similitude is that depths of darkness upon an abysmal sea, covered by a wave, above which is another wave, above which is clouds, creating darkness piled one upon another; when he puts forth his hand, he would scarcely see it. He to whom Allah assigns no light, he will have no light. (al-Nūr 24: 40)*

And because the Book changes not, being the word of Him, the Eternal, it links us to the only enduring sanctuary that we can find through these waves of darkness and change – He Himself, our only Lord and God.

It may be worthwhile if we go back here for a moment to the story of the cave. The group of young men there believed in One God and His guidance and stood resolutely firm by their commitment to their Lord. In consequence, they were rewarded with a special blessing:

*And [We] strengthened their hearts when they stood up and proclaimed: “Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and earth. We call upon no god, beside Him.” (Verse 14)*

*Rabṭ al-Qalb* (strengthened their hearts) has a much richer meaning in our context than mere ‘strengthening’. What is ‘heart’ – not a piece of flesh or a mere centre of our emotions and affection. In Qur’ānic terminology, heart usually embraces in effect everything that goes to comprise what we call a person – the centre of life, the determining principles of all our activities and aspirations. In this sense, the verse can be translated as, ‘we integrated their personalities’. Instead of disconnection, isolation, confusion, fracture, doubt, skepticism and disharmony, their entire self, inward and outward, is integrated into a wholesome existence. This is the reward of a positive faith in One God, which makes one stand up.

### ***The Divine Company***

The words ‘divine company’ may sound startling; let me clarify that no incarnational meanings are intended. But to be able to stand up firmly in total commitment to God Alone, as our only Lord, requires more than a ‘Book’. It requires a culture; a culture embodying the belief in One God and

His guidance as its ruling spirit. To generate culture, a group life is required. Thus, the urge to live in commitment to the Lord, by His guidance, both needs and creates divine company. Engulfed in a sea of hostile, godless culture, the second basic element of the strategy is to hold together in living a life in constant remembrance and total dependence of God; every moment of it. Such a life may rightly be called ‘divine’ in the sense of the *ḥadīth*: “When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his feet with which he walks.” (Bukhārī)

*Bind yourself firmly with those who call upon their Lord, morning and evening, seeking only His pleasure. (Verse 28)*

We may here only briefly allude to some of the rich meanings contained in these few words.

A culture is born as soon as one man joins another in creating ‘life’ in life. Man has the power to foster and influence a culture; but at the same time he is also shaped and moulded by his culture, of which he becomes an image – a dynamic interaction. Every culture has a set of values and norms, which determine its soul and weave its fabric. Group life is crucial, not only in moulding a man, but also in reinforcing him.

We have noticed that the denial of God, man’s ‘autonomy’ and the present life as the goal of life are the basic values of Western culture. In this verse of *al-Kahf*, we are exhorted to ‘bind’ ourselves [engender group and culture] with those who: one, call upon their Lord, in full trust and total dependence, and, two, who seek only His favour and attention as the sole goal in their lives. These two then are not only the desirable characteristics of our group members, but also the two poles of our culture.

Relationship with God may be expressed in many ways. *Yad’ūn* (call upon) and *ya’būdun* (worship) are used by the Qur’ān almost interchangeably. But both have some distinctive sense of their own. ‘To call upon Him alone’ would be more directly expressive of the awareness of our utter dependence and unbounded trust in Him and His infinite mercy, grace,

providence and care for us. More importantly, it also has a more urgent sense of direct, immediate, warm and almost face-to-face reciprocity, as clearly explained at two places in the Qur'ān:

*I am quite near; I hear and answer the call of the caller whenever he calls Me, (al-Baqarah 2: 186).*

*Your Lord has said, "Call upon Me, and I shall answer you," (Ghāfir 40: 60).*

This reciprocity is similar in nature to that of *al-ḥamd*, but the initiation is now human. Thus *al-ḥamd* evokes *duā'*, and the man calls upon his Lord. Both are woven by the same threads of awareness. In fact, if *al-ḥamd* demolishes one side of secular culture, *duā'* destroys the other; but both provide a real alternate framework.

His favour they seek; His pleasure they covet; His attention they look to. This seeking imparts meaning and purpose to the group life and to its culture. Apparently, this is an individual act. But the yearning in the deeper reaches of the soul and the longing in the heart pour out to give a sense of direction to the outward manifestations of life and determine its texture.

Compare the possibilities in a social life based on these values with the one shaped by totally material and secular values. In fact, the other one can only be a conglomerate of individuals working selfishly for momentary pleasures; and not a cohesive integrated fellowship.

Both 'seeking the pleasure' and 'calling upon' would entail a remembrance of God – but a remembrance which would permeate the whole personality – inward and outward. God is not a historical and intellectual phenomenon. He is with you wherever you are.

So much for the values that link man and his culture with God! What about the dimensions of inter-relations? The key to an understanding of this aspect is hidden in one word – *iṣbir*. Again it would be futile to search for a proper English equivalent. *Ṣabr* is a very comprehensive word having a wide variety of positive and negative connotations. Basically, it means to

bind and restrain. It also implies staying firm and steadfast obeying the commands of Allah while facing difficulties in this way but not giving up. In the context used here, it is very significant. It points to the hazards and dangers that disrupt relations between one person and another and between a person and his culture. It stresses cohesiveness, which is the source of strength for a culture. It warns against deviation and nonconformity. It wants an ‘inter’ and ‘intra’ relation which should possess firmness, resilience, tenacity, resolute will and perseverance. Whatever are the odds and stresses, calumnies and confusions of suspicions and frustrations, unfulfilled hopes and expectations, disappointments or even harms, we must abide unwearied, neither lagging nor abandoning.

There is a wholly negative aspect too, which the same verse explains in its next words:

*And do not let your eyes turn away from them. Do you seek the pomp and glitter of the world? (Verse 28)*

A model is before us – a model which seeks the pleasure of Allah as the purpose of its existence and depends entirely upon Him every moment. This is the model for us to follow as an individual, as a culture. But once the yearning and seeking are directed to the plenty and luxury of the present life, to the temptations of better standards of living as the goals of life, the divine company is also disrupted. Then, one is, consciously or unconsciously, led to emulate another model, a model which the Qur’ān characterizes in three totally different ways, and exhorts us to avoid it:

*Do not follow him [1] whose ‘heart’ We have caused to be heedless of Our remembrances, [2] and who follows his desires, and [3] whose attitude is of excess. (Verse 28)*

There could not be a more graphic portrayal of a modern man – a product of this secular era.

First, the name of God may be on his lips; but there is a barrier erected inside. His whole ‘person’ is devoid of the consciousness of God’s

‘presence’. His frame of reference is in no way tied to Him.

We should only recapitulate on what ‘heart’ means in the Qur’ān and the meaning in our context becomes clear.

Secondly, his entire life is devoted to the pursuit of his own desires, in the transitory moments of living on this earth.

These two characteristics we have discussed before; the third needs more attention here. Man’s entire affairs swing like a pendulum, from one node to another, from one extreme to another. We have only to look at how man has been groping in the dark, to feel the truth of this Qur’ānic statement. In every aspect of his life, everything that he does, every solution that he tries only helps man in swinging from one excess to another. The golden mean seems to have escaped his reach.

It is this model of man, whose every dimension must be fully perceived and then eschewed, so as to develop the right type of man and culture.

### ***The call to Divine Truth***

Let us not be led into misunderstanding that the strategy presented in *al-Kahf* is based on withdrawal and isolation or on renunciation and monasticism. No! The commitment to divine guidance and to the divine company must lead to a commitment to call to the ‘Divine truth’ or to *da‘wah*:

*And proclaim; “This is the Truth from your Lord. Now let him who will, believe; and let him who will, disbelieve.” (Verse 29)*

*Da‘wah* is the third element of the strategy, which, instead of fostering a culture in isolation, plunges it into the course of history to summon mankind to God. It inspires the believer to ‘go forth’ and to ‘look outward’ with a burning sense of mission and vocation to make the word of God burn in every man’s heart.

This call to the divine truth is to be made irrespective of any hope as to the chances of its being accepted or not and in the face of all opposition. This statement also points to the possibilities of frustration and despair. It

also hints at the life of struggle and striving, of effort and exertion, of toil and sweat. But such is the road to triumph and domination.

#### **Section IV: Two parables (verses 32-49)**

##### ***Parable 1: A rich man and a pauper (verses 32-44)***

Verses 32-44 narrate the parable of a rich person, who possesses two fully productive gardens, and a pauper. This highlights the two opposite characters in this context.

The parable describes two men, or rather two characters, who epitomize two sets of values and cultures. Through the dialogue and the contrast between the two, the foundations of secular materialist culture and their hollowness stand exposed:

*Propound a parable to them. There were two men, to one of them We bestowed two vineyards surrounding them with date-palms, and putting between them a field of crops. (Verse 32)*

One man possesses two (an alternate solution always up the sleeve?) gardens of grapes (industrial complexes) which have been developed to become so productive that on the one hand even the hedging is of datepalms (yielding full economic benefit) and, on the other, even the space in between is being cropped; in other words everything is being used to its maximum capability:

*Both vineyards yielded abundant produce without failure and We caused a stream to flow in their midst. (Verse 33)*

The whole system is so planned and purpose-built (due to superior technology) that the gardens never fall back in production (some sort of rate of growth is always assured). Nothing goes to waste; everything is unimaginably efficient, innovative and productive. Water (natural resources, raw materials and energy) is so abundant and readily accessible as if a river

flows in between the gardens, guaranteeing security, stability and a bright future.

*And he had other [abundant] wealth. (Verse 34)*

And he had more besides industrial economy – innumerable other sources of earning and profit and every sort of wealth and luxury.

Could there be a better description of the economic paradise of plenty, comfort and luxury, capable of self-sustaining growth, created by modern man? So far, nothing seems wrong. But the owner has also been (mis)led into developing a system of ideals and values, which permeate his thoughts and actions and openly show in his dialogue:

*“I have greater wealth than you and I am stronger than you in numbers.” (Verse 34)*

The measure of a successful life is wealth and power. In this regard, people should compete and excel in things like standard of living, economic strength, productivity, income, growth, GNP, armaments and other things of a similar nature. (Pride in numbers of children has become obsolete in this age of birth control; yet a reliable labour force is still needed to run the wheels of industry.) These, then, must be the focal points of human endeavours, of which we can all be proud!

*Then he entered his vineyard, and said, wronging himself. (Verse 35)*

‘Wronging himself’ means he is intoxicated with an erroneous concept of himself (the man) as he looks at the civilization and the economy he has established, as if it were the result of his own endeavour and knowledge only. He is the master of nature and his own destiny. ‘Entry’ here would signify domination, control and use.

*“I do not believe that this will ever perish nor do I believe that the Hour of Resurrection will ever come to pass.” (Verses 35-36)*

The majestic edifice of technology and production is not here to collapse. There is full faith in man's ingenuity and skill to find a solution to every problem. Whatever the prophets of doom may say, the end of the civilization that we have so arduously built is nowhere in sight.

*“And even if I am returned to my Lord, I shall find a better place than this.”(Verse 36)*

Maybe there are pitfalls and hazards, but a bright future always awaits man. Progress is inevitable. He is going to ascend higher and higher and reach new pinnacles of glory than his technology reaches now.

These then are the attitudes of mind and conduct which characterize the culture of the owner of the ‘gardens’. Is it difficult to find the same ‘owner’ living around us today?

Now what we should notice is that this man does not in any way deny ‘God’; in fact, he makes an oblique reference to His existence. Nor does he indulge in any idolatry nor does he associate anyone with ‘God’ (*shirk*). But still, and this is what strikes us as the most provoking feature of the whole parable, the Qur’ān, through the voice of the other culture, whose perception finds no difficulty in finding out what the owner stands for, says:

*“Do you deny Him Who created you out of dust, then out of a drop of sperm, and then fashioned you into a complete man? As for myself, Allah alone is my Lord, and I associate none with my Lord in His Divinity.” (Verses 37-38)*

The ‘owner’ himself, after he sees his paradise crumbling under the weight of the forces of nature, cries out aloud, as he wrings his hands in dismay on all that he had ‘invested’ to make what he was proud of:

*“Would I had not associated anyone with My Lord in His Divinity.”  
(Verse 42)*

This is the modern *shirk* and *kufir*. It siezes man and he hardly recognizes it – making a god of himself.

But how foolish of man to ascribe everything that he has built up to his own knowledge, skill, will and power. He has made none of what he himself possesses – his senses, his intellect, and his faculties to know, reason, and communicate. Nor is he capable of making any of the natural resources without which his technology would be useless. Just imagine, if only the oil wells dry up, the giant wheels of his so ‘secure’ and so ‘grand’ a technological civilization would grind to a catastrophic halt. A mere fluctuation in the exchange rate wipes out huge chunks of his wealth. And then the threats to his own arsenal of destruction or his perversions to ecology and nature! How insecure and beyond his own control is this economic paradise of his and of which he is so proud and boastful:

*“[It may well be that my Lord will] send a calamity upon your vineyard from the heavens and it will be reduced to barren waste or its water may sink deep underground and you will not be able to seek it out.”* (Verses 40-41)

Indeed, the only right way for man, while he dominates the world, is to remain alive to:

*Whatever Allah wills shall come to pass, there is no power save with Allah!* (Verse 39)

### ***Parable 2: The worldly life (verses 45-49)***

Verses 45-49 expose the reality of this worldly life in relation to the Hereafter in the form of a parable.

Once the concept of man and the view of his history both exclude God and explain everything in terms of an inter-play of material forces, only the things material and worldly can be real for man. A material outlook has no place for any view of the continuity of life beyond death, or for the pursuit of any goals other than these worldly ones, or for any value-oriented approach to life. Instead, man’s whole perspective becomes ‘a purely

secular proposition and a wholly worldly affair'. In the eyes of a humanist historian, '[the] good life must be the most complete and perfect satisfaction of human desires here on earth'

Man's endeavours and energies are, therefore, directed towards such goals or 'gods' as a better quality of life, higher living standards, greater comforts, progress and similar pursuits – of which man is proud; the great gains and advances of the technological era. It is precisely this man whose image is captured in these two simple verses of *al-Kahf*:

*Say: "Shall We tell you who are the greatest losers in respect of their works? It will be those whose efforts went astray in the life of the world and who believe nevertheless that they are doing good." (Verses 103-104)*

Life is only a few moments long. If "the actual instance of living is the end-in-itself",<sup>6</sup> there could be no tragedy greater for man in this humanist era than to invest all he has – energies, resources, even his soul, heart and mind – to pursue and build what has no enduring meaningful continuity in sight. From birth till death, he works like a slave for pleasures which slip away as he reaches them; as the time flees. How wasteful! (efficiently and productively). What weight do all his achievements carry? After forsaking the reality of God and meeting Him, then none. None whatsoever!

*Those are the ones that disbelieve in the message of their Lord and in meeting Him. Hence, all their deeds have come to naught, and We shall assign to them no weight on the Day of Resurrection. (Verse 105)*

And what is the reality of life 'here on earth' and all that it has to offer, which is being claimed as the end-in-itself. *Al-Kahf* again explains this in a very telling and penetrating parable:

*Propound to them the parable of the present life: it is like the vegetation of the earth which flourishes luxuriantly when mingled with water that We send down from the sky, but after that the same*

*vegetation turned into stubble which the winds blew about. Allah alone has power over all things. (Verse 45)*

The life in this world is not illusory; but it is fleeting, transient and finite. Just as spring yields to autumn, so does the vigour of life turn to the decay of old and the majesty of civilization revert to the dust of the earth. Just as man sows the seed, not to have the pleasure of seeing luxuriant growth, but to reap the harvest, so should a man grow the crop of life to enjoy the harvest of good deeds. Just as apart from the grain, the straw has neither weight nor value, so, apart from good deeds, the beauties of life have no weight. And whosoever invests all his 'life' for the sake of the 'present' only is running after a mirage, which will disappear as he reaches the end of the road, and he will only wring his hands in dismay (just as the 'owner' of the gardens did). Or in the words of another beautiful parable from the Qur'ān:

*As for those who deny the Truth, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty man supposes to be water, until he comes to it only to find that it was nothing; instead he finds Allah with him, and He paid his account in full; and Allah is swift in settling accounts. (al-Nūr 24: 39)*

## **Section V: The story of the Prophet Ādam (peace be upon him) and Satan (verses 50-59)**

The story of the refusal of Satan to bow down before the Prophet Ādam (peace be upon him) is narrated in many places in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is not a book of history recounting events for the sake of a record. Instead, the Qur'ān only relates those sections of an event that are appropriate in the context in which they are narrated. There are certain features of this story which are only narrated here. Hence, we should concentrate on those elements only. It is the only place in the Qur'ān where Satan is identified from among the species of *jinn* and that he is not alone but has offspring as well. It is worth noting that Satan, despite being a *jinn*, by his sheer

devotion, was elevated to the company of angels. Yet he lost his high status and admirable qualities because of his arrogance and insistence on his own distorted logic and prejudiced opinion. The lesson for man is that if he disregards Allah's commands, then, just having human features does not make him human for he could enter Satan's and his family's fraternity.

In other places in the Qur'ān where this story is narrated, Satan's emphasis has been on the inferiority of the Prophet Ādam (peace be upon him) as compared with his own superiority:

*Allah said: "What prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you to do so?" He said: "I am better than he. You created me from fire and him you created from clay." (al-A 'rāf 7: 12)*

In *Sūrah al-Kahf* the only comment is that Satan "*disobeyed the command of his Lord*" (Verse 50). Thus, disregarding the teachings of the messengers who brought the divine guidance and not implementing them in one's life is, in practical terms, following Satan's path. It is worth noting that pride was the common denominator for both Satan and the owner of the vineyard; in each, it led to their downfall.

In the context of this *sūrah* being revealed, the purpose of relating this story was to remind us that Satan is man's arch enemy, right from the time of his creation. Hence, Allah's specific injunction is: "*Do not follow the footsteps of Satan for he is your open enemy*" (*al-Baqarah* 2: 208). This is man's folly, and especially of the Quraysh who used to worship the *jinns* as well and make sacrifices in their names. Here, all are reminded that Satan is one of the *jinns* who transgressed Allah's command and declared his enmity to the human race. Yet the Quraysh, turning away from God and from His message brought by His Messenger, are unwittingly trapped by Satan's tricks.

In our modern age, no one worships Satan (except a fringe of satanic cults), yet by disregarding the guidance from God and the attitude of arrogance in man's self-sufficiency is tantamount to following the path of Satan. Hence there is a warning for those who follow the satanic path that

they “*shall see the Fire and know that they are bound to fall into it, and will find no escape from it.*” (Verse 53)

To safeguard humanity from the temptations and tricks of Satan, God sent Messengers to give good tidings and to warn. The Qur’ān, the Book of Guidance “*explains matters to people in diverse ways, using all manner of parables*” and advancing all kinds of evidence to illuminate the truth, yet it seems people are waiting to be siezed by God’s punishment. (Verses 54-56). But verse 58 explains that God is Merciful: “*Had He wished to take them to task for their doings, He would have hastened in sending His scourge upon them.*”

## **Section VI: The Prophet *Mūsā* and *Khidr* (peace be upon them) (verses 60-82)**

### ***Meanings in History***

How well He sees! How well He hears! Indeed! But, then, there must be meaning and purpose behind each event in history. Is it there? It is not an easy question to answer. Every event that happens on the personal, societal or cosmic plane may not be explainable or comprehensible to man within the framework of an All-Wise, All-Good God, operating in history as Sovereign. This difficulty, which may also be labelled as the ‘problem of evil’, leads many to either completely denying God or at least denying Him any role in history. They fall back upon blind material forces as those being in deterministic control of history. Even many sincere believers are also perplexed and perturbed by this question.

The Prophet *Mūsā* (peace be upon him) might have been facing a similar predicament as he watched hundreds of thousands of his people groaning under the yoke of Pharaoh’s oppression and tyranny, and with Pharaoh refusing to bow down before the Truth after each turn of events. The complexities of the situation were very frustrating indeed. So, he set out on a journey to seek ‘knowledge’ and gain ‘insight’ into the meanings that may exist behind incomprehensible events in a Good God’s world – in other words, seeking the ‘why’ of an ostensibly limitless history, unfolding

itself without any finite end or purpose in sight, discernable within the frameworks of man's own limited and short-range view of desirable purposes, priorities and 'rules of the game'. As we follow him through his search, in verses 60-82 of *al-Kahf*, we pick up a few answers of our own, which may serve us well in this age when secularism and godlessness seem to have the upper hand.

Briefly, the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) accompanies a 'servant of Allah' who takes him on a journey through three historical events.<sup>7</sup> Firstly, they travel on a boat and his companion makes a 'hole' in the 'boat', obviously placing every passenger at 'risk' of being 'drowned'. Next, they meet a 'boy' whom his companion puts to death without any 'justification', apparently to the great suffering of his parents. And lastly, they enter a 'town' where people are so 'evil' that they refuse to even 'feed' them, but his companion restores and 'rebuilds' a crumbling wall that he finds in the town, without 'asking' for any 'reward'.

The basic condition agreed to by the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) before the start of the journey was that he would bear with patience everything that he saw and could not comprehend, but without question. But the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) could not refrain from raising objections; the journey, therefore, ends as it should have with the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) having learned some lessons. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is reported as having said: "May Allah have mercy on Mūsā, we wish he had remained patient then we would have learnt more about other events [and gained more insight]." (Bukhārī)

The meaning and purpose behind each event is now explained. The 'hole' in the 'boat' belonging to the 'poor' was to save them from losing it to a 'tyrant', whose dominion lay beyond and was siezing every boat by force. The 'boy' was made to 'die' because he was going to 'grow up' into an evil being, ultimately causing greater suffering to his 'righteous' parents than his death would have done; and, moreover, God intended to compensate them with a better alternative. The 'wall' in the 'town' of the 'evil', which was 'rebuilt' without any compensation, had a 'treasure' beneath it, which God wanted to keep 'hidden', and therefore safe, so that

later, its rightful owners, the orphaned children of a 'righteous man' would be able to take it out and use it.

Each of these three events has a deeper and more general meaning of its own in its application to many situations that we encounter in everyday life or over a longer period of time in history. Every word may also carry a symbolic meaning of its own. Even some clues to a possible strategy may be deduced from them. But we cannot go into these aspects in detail here. What we are more concerned with are some general lessons.

1. History is not governed by laws similar to those of the physical world. For a crop: once the seed, the soil, the climate, the inputs and the period of the growth are all known quantities, the outcome, within man's short-range view of time, is explainable, understandable, and, to some degree, even predictable. In history, the laws are moral – and hence the 'nature' and 'potency' of 'seeds', the 'fertility' of the soil, the effectiveness of inputs and, more than any other thing which puzzles man, the length of the 'cropping' period are not only immeasurable quantities, but also vary so considerably that they are hard to predict.
2. The setbacks and the losses suffered by those who live by their faith in God, and the ascendancy and gains of those who deny Him, may be temporary or even illusory; and, certainly, are not a pointer to the final outcome.
3. The reference to the 'righteous' parents, made twice, is very meaningful in pointing to the 'long-term' yields of the seeds of righteous deeds sown at any one time.
4. Every event that happens may not be explainable or comprehensible to us. But the One Who governs this universe is in control of all events and guides them for the benefit of the righteous.
5. What is not comprehensible is not necessarily meaningless. What looks 'evil' now may yield 'good' in the long run.
6. The only wise course in view of man's limited view and history's long process is to bear every event with patience, but stand firm by

the truth. However, ascertaining the truth is not an easy process and one has to analyze each situation and actively pursue the path that one thinks is right. Thus, one is not required to accept everything with passivity.

7. Above all, one should not assume that one has a monopoly of knowledge, no matter how eminent one may be. There are those who excel them. As mentioned in *Sūrah Yūsuf*:

*We exalt whomsoever We will over others by several degrees. (12: 76)*

### **Section VII: Dhū al-Qarnayn (verses 83-101)**

A perennial question which agitates the minds of ordinary people is how a just ruler dominating a vast empire should act? What is the role model for a ‘super power’ which instead of exploiting and oppressing weak and vulnerable nations tries to alleviate their problems and be a generous and benevolent force of goodness for humanity? Verses 83-98 tell the story of Dhū al-Qarnayn and his various campaigns for world domination.

It is not necessary for our purpose to try to identify the exact person in an historical context or to apply all the details which the Qur’ān has given about him. We have enough information about his character as well as about the resources available to him. As the Qur’ān states:

*We granted him power in the land and endowed him with all kinds of resources. (Verse 84)*

Using all his power and resources, Dhū al-Qarnayn embarked upon three different campaigns towards the East and the West, till he reached the end of habitation in each direction. His third campaign was towards “a place between the two mountains” where he encountered a nation that was constantly being harassed by a violent and unruly tribe from the other side of the mountain. In all his campaigns, Dhū al-Qarnayn demonstrated the

utmost sagacity and wisdom and dealt with all the problems he faced with justice and equity.

In his first expedition to the farthest limit in the West, when he assumed authority over a turbulent and unruly people, he had the choice of either severely chastising all or of ignoring and overlooking the injustices and so continue maintaining his domination. It would have been an easy option for him to appoint some ‘dictator’ or proxy, corrupt leader so as to maintain his hold. However, he chose the better course of action and, as described in verses 87-88:

*He said: “We will chastise him who does wrong, whereafter he will be returned to his Lord and He will chastise him grievously. But as for him who believes and acts righteously, his will be a goodly reward and we shall enjoin upon him only mild commands.”*

This should be the duty of a government: to keep law and order in society, to punish the guilty and protect the innocent, but all the while remembering that yet a greater punishment awaits for them in the Hereafter. Only Allah can dispense true and final justice.

Dhū al-Qarnayn in his second expedition reached the farthest limit in the East, which marked the end of the civilized world. There he encountered a nation of primitive people who did not have the skill even to pitch tents and thus were exposed to the vagaries of weather. He left them alone and did not try to interfere in their affairs or to ‘modernize’ them. Nor on the pretext of ‘educating’ them, destroy their culture and way of life. His government’s policy already stated earlier was to punish the evil-doers or help those who need his assistance as mentioned below in his last encounter.

In his final campaign, Dhū al-Qarnayn reached a place ‘between the two mountain-barriers’, where he found people with whom it was difficult to communicate. They must have realized that Dhū al-Qarnayn had power and resources as well as being pious and God-fearing and, thus, could help save them from the raids of neighbouring wild tribes (namely Gog and Magog)

by building a barrier. They offered to pay him in return for his erecting a strong barrier. Being a generous and just ruler and following his declared policy of resisting all evil and corruption on earth, he agreed to help them build this formidable barrier between the two mountains using natural resources and the native population's own manpower. This last gesture was to raise their self-esteem such that they too were also involved in this important task. His 'aid' was not attached with any 'strings', thereby perpetuating his influence and exploiting the resources of a vulnerable nation.

Yet after accomplishing such a great feat, Dhü al-Qarnayn was neither proud nor conceited; rather, he remembered Allah and thanked Him and acknowledged His mercy. He reminded others and himself that "*yet when the time of my Lord's promise shall come, He will level the rampart with the ground.*" (Verse 98)

The story of Dhü al-Qarnayn provides several important principles for good governance and the responsibility of those who are in power. First, it should be realized that the power is given by Allah and is not acquired by one's own talents. Secondly, Allah, Who can give power, can also take away power from whomsoever. Human history has witnessed several such devastating upheavals. Thirdly, the magnanimity of a ruler demands that he should not impose undue taxes. In his third expedition, Dhü al-Qarnayn declined to accept the payment which people were willing to give for constructing their barrier. Fourthly, the ruler should always govern with justice and treat his subjects with kindness. Finally, even after acquiring all the material resources and conquering and extending his empire to the farthest corners of the earth, Dhü al-Qarnayn did not forget the bounties of his Lord nor did he become oblivious to the *Ākhirah* (Hereafter).

### **Section VIII: Conclusion (verses 102-110)**

As with the *sūrah*'s start, its ending is a reminder about belief in *Tawhīd* and *Ākhirah*. It is in one's own interests to adhere to firm belief and to model one's life according to these doctrines, otherwise failure to do so will inevitably result in one's doom.

This universe is so vast and unimaginable for man to comprehend. As compared with the infinite knowledge of the Creator, man's limitation is explained by giving a simple analogy:

*Say: "If the sea were to become ink to record the Words of my Lord, indeed it would be all used up before the Words of my Lord are exhausted, and it would be the same even if We were to bring an equal amount of ink. "* (Verse 109)

The same analogy is repeated in a different way in *Sūrah Luqmān*:

*If all the trees on earth become pens, and the sea replenished by seven more seas were to supply them with ink, the Words of Allah would not be exhausted.* (31: 27)

This claim may sound like hyperbole or an exaggeration. However, if one reflects that even things that man can see are so vast and beyond his power to catalogue then how can one record the mysteries of the universe and things unseen. The Words of Allah stand for His power and wisdom that are reflected in wondrous manifestations all around us.

With man's limited capabilities, no one can fathom Allah's power and knowledge. So what is the way to attain *falāḥ* (salvation)? How can one find the right path to succeed? Even the Prophet was also a man! But the distinguishing feature which he possessed was *wahy* (revelation) from Allah. *Wahy* is the guiding light to lead mankind to its salvation. Thus the *surah* ends with this message:

*Whoever looks forward to meet his Lord, let him do righteous works, and let him associate none with worship of his Lord.* (Verse 110)

## Chapter 3

### Lessons from *Sūrah al-Kahf*

#### TRIALS AND THEIR PURPOSE

It is important to note that *al-Kahf* reflects on a central Qur'ānic concept whereby life is a continuous stream of trials in order to see whether human beings will respond ethically towards the problems they face in their lives.

Thus, life in this world does not run smooth. Everyone faces trials, tribulations or problems of one sort or the other. The purpose behind the universe's creation, as well as of life and death, according to the Qur'ān is the trial of human beings. In this way, Allah establishes who is best in their deeds, (*al-Mulk* 67: 1 and *Hūd* 11: 7). Verse 7 is very significant in this respect:

*Surely We made all that is on the earth an embellishment for it in order to test people as to who of them is better in conduct.*

These trials can take many forms and each human being, as well as nations is tried in different ways: life, death, knowledge, wealth and leadership. Believers have to face these trials in order to testify to their faith:

*Do people think that they will be let go merely by saying: "We believe", and they will not be tested, for We indeed tested those who went before them? Allah will certainly ascertain those who spoke the truth and those who lied. (al-'Ankabūt 29: 2-3)*

*Sūrah al-Kahf* deals with these trials and provides guidance to believers.

#### THE TRIAL OF FAITH

Even a cursory study of the lives of the prophets and those who accepted their message shows that they had to face many hardships and trials by the ruling elites of their times. The same was the fate of *Aṣḥāb Kahf* (the people of the cave) when they decided to stand up and proclaim: “*Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We shall call upon no other god beside Him.*” They fully realized that this bold proclamation would not be tolerated by their own people and, thus, that they would have to seek refuge in a cave. By Allah’s mercy they were put to sleep for over three hundred years and when they awoke they found that their former oppressive regime had been replaced by one led by believers. To successfully overcome the trials and hardship one faces while trying to live by one’s faith is to:

*Keep yourself content with those who call upon their Lord, morning and evening, seeking His pleasure, and let your eyes pass beyond them. Do you seek the pomp and glitter of the world? Do not follow him whose heart We have caused to be heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desires, and whose attitude is of excess. (Verse 28)*

## **THE TRIAL OF WEALTH**

In this world there are some who are rich while others face the hardship of poverty. Often, those who are affluent think that the wealth they have acquired results from their own efforts. They think that all their material and human resources will be with them forever and that they will always live in such luxury and comfort. Yet, the parable of the two men, one rich and the other poor, illustrates the fallacy of such an assumption. The one on whom flourishing gardens, orchards and great wealth was bestowed found that his transitory affluence was wiped out by a natural calamity; thereafter, he was left with a barren wasteland. Then, he began to wring his hands in sorrow at the loss of what he had spent on it and proclaim that he should have accepted that, indeed, there is no power save Allah and that no one is associated with Him in His divinity.

For those who lack resources, the guidance for the pauper is to remain content and hope that Allah will provide him with a better life either in this

world or in the Hereafter. One should always remember that:

*Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of the world. But the deeds of lasting righteousness are the best in the sight of your Lord in reward. And far better a source of hope. (Verse 46)*

## **THE TRIAL OF KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge is one of Allah's choicest blessings that He has endowed on human beings. In this, man even surpassed the angels as illustrated in the story about the creation of the Prophet Ādam (*al-Baqarah* 2: 30-33). However, among human beings there are variations as to the degree of knowledge given by Allah. Even the noble Messenger, the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) when he assumed that he had comprehensive knowledge was directed by Allah to meet:

*“one of Our servants upon whom We have bestowed Our Mercy, and to whom We have imparted a special knowledge from Ourselves” (Verse 65).*

This encounter between the Prophet Mūsā and Khidr required great patience. A basic human weakness is that man is “*impatient by nature*” (*al-Ma‘ārij* 70: 19). Thus, even a great Messenger of Allah, Mūsā (peace be upon him), could not remain patient despite having repeatedly promised to so be. One has to be patient at all times for it is only with steadfastness and patience that one can acquire knowledge. However, in mitigation of the Prophet Mūsā's lapse it could be said he could no longer tolerate the gross violations of the Sharī‘ah he witnessed and this even though he had been forewarned: “*How can you patiently bear with something you cannot encompass in your knowledge?*” (Verse 68)

Khidr finally enlightened the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) about the secrets that lay behind many actions that human beings do not comprehend and have no means of knowing. Thus, one should always pray: “*Lord! Increase me in knowledge*” (*Tā Hā* 20: 114). After acquiring knowledge, one should be humble and thank Allah for this bounty. One

should hope that just as Allah has promised: *“If you give thanks, I will certainly grant you more.”* (Ibrāhīm 14: 7) one will definitely be endowed with knowledge and wisdom.

### **THE TRIAL OF POWER**

It is said that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, the story of Dhū al-Qarnayn illustrates that if one truly believes that one’s capabilities are given by Allah and that one has to return and be accountable to Him on the Day of Judgement, then one’s life pattern will be governed by mercy, generosity and sincerity.

Dhū al-Qarnayn was endowed with immense power and prestige and, thus, managed to conquer a vast territory, yet he did not oppress those he conquered nor did he raise taxes to meet the expenses of the constructive works he carried out. After building the rampart that Gog and Magog could not scale, Dhū al-Qarnayn in all his humility said:

*“This is a mercy from my Lord: but when the time of my Lord’s promise shall come, He will level the rampart with the ground. My Lord’s promise always comes true.”*(Verse 98)

## Chapter 4

### The relevance of *al-Kahf* in our own time

#### THE CULTURE OF OUR AGE

In order to relate *al-Kahf* to our own age, it is only appropriate that we take a brief view of the spirit, the ideas, the creeds and modes of man's thought and action that dominate the age we live in. The culture of our era has been and is being shaped by Western civilization – a civilization seeded by a Graeco-Roman heritage; born out of the womb of Hellenized Christianity; built upon the crumbling walls and the fallen towers of St. Augustine's *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*,<sup>8</sup> a Church claiming divinity, and being nurtured by man's intoxicating sense of ever-increasing mastery over nature through his scientific and technological prowess. It is really not difficult to explore the depths and sweeps of the broad contours of this civilization.

1. God has no place in man's life, except maybe as a problem, or as Nietzsche said, 'God is dead'.<sup>9</sup> This denial of God is the ruling spirit of our age. It may not exactly be a denial of His existence, but nevertheless it is a denial, total and effective, made by excluding Him completely from every matter of real concern to man or in other words, secularism. His name may be on people's lips, edifices<sup>10</sup> may exist to commemorate Him, but He has no business either 'meddling' in the cosmos, in history, or in man's affairs.
2. Man has come of age as an autonomous being. He can take charge of nature, of himself, of his life, of his own destiny; he is the master. He himself is the focus, the centre of all his thoughts, attentions, energies and endeavours. His welfare and comfort are his only concerns; that, too in this world only. To put it simply: 'man is the measure of all things,'<sup>11</sup> he is at the apex and climax of evolutionary

process; or, in short, he is his own God and Lord. This is the crux of humanism. The scientific method alone is enough to provide man with reliable guidance in all spheres of his existence. He can order his life on the basis of objective, factual knowledge without any recourse to anything sacred or extra-human.

3. Technology is omnipotent; there is hardly anything which it cannot or would not accomplish. Man already dominates the world through his technology and has achieved unprecedented and ever-growing control over the powers of nature, which has sunk from 'the status of master to that of servant'.
4. Nothing is permanent, sacred or enduring; not even faith values and moral standards. Change, rapid and total, at an ever-accelerating pace, is the virtuous road to progress. Everything must bow down before this avalanche of change, of which the primary motor is [a blind] technology.
5. The progress of human society is inevitable – a linear phenomenon. To be new is to be good. Technological progress is synonymous with cultural progress.

Having seen these characteristics of our age we should look back to the meaning and import of *al-Kahf* as we have discussed above. The very first verse, by starting with *al-ḥamdu-lillāh* (thankful praise be to Allah), demolishes the materialistic view of human beings' self-sufficiency. The existence of God and His revelation to guide humanity is asserted. This, then, is the death-knell for secularism.

Time, which is so elusive, and not in man's control and its ever-fleeting speed cannot be restrained, yet it is God Who is the real Time-Lord. It is He Who controls it and can intervene to alter the physical laws of nature, as illustrated by the story of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*.

Again, nothing happens in this universe except by Allah's Will. Man, despite his scientific and technological advancement, thinks he can dominate the world but, in fact, he is always vulnerable to unforeseen events, things that he cannot control. A little quiver of the earth destroys

mighty edifices so carefully constructed, a strong gust of wind causes havoc all round, a little more rain than usual floods entire cities, a false indication of depression creates panic in the stock market. How utterly man is incapable of managing his affairs!

All claims of change and progress are mere illusions. They divert our attention from the fact that basic human needs and man's nature have not changed. Man is still dependent upon divine guidance to manage his affairs in this world.

The last message in *al-Kahf* as well reiterates *Tawhīd* and *Ākhirah*. In between, there are narrations of four historical events and two parables. All draw upon the inadequacy of human knowledge and man's utter dependence on the Supreme Being.

One can see how important it is that one should often recite and ponder over the message given in this *sūrah*. Only with firm belief can one overcome the encroaching materialistic and secular forces of evil.

## **THE CAVE OF OUR AGE**

May we again revert to the story of the cave? The possibilities of its understanding in our age are really inexhaustible. That the cave symbolized the strategy which those young men adopted in the challenge of their age has already been explained. They were under threat of assimilation or annihilation. They believed in One God only. They formed a group and stayed together. They did not have a passive faith. Instead, they boldly stood up and declared their commitment to their Lord. They took to a cave, not to escape, but to seek God's mercy and blessings in settling their affairs to their advantage. And the tide of time turned in their favour. Can we, too, have a 'cave' like this in our own age?

The strategy outlined above leads us to what we would like to call that 'cave' of our own age. Yet we can no more withdraw to physical caves, even if they once did. In any case, we are the followers of *Ṣāhib al-Madīnah* (peace be upon him) and not *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*. But the Qur'ān, the Brotherhood and the *da'wah* are the three dimensions of a state of being, which can very well symbolize the cave *al-Kahf* speaks of. This would

enable us to live ‘without’ and ‘beyond’, while still staying ‘within’ a godless culture. It would also give us the opportunity to change it.

Once we turn away from all false ‘gods’ of our age and take to the ‘cave’ in the above sense, will we experience the same increase in our understanding and guidance as they were granted (*‘and We increased them in guidance’*); the same integration of personality, life and time as they were granted (*‘and We tied their hearts’*), the same hopes and possibilities as they aspired to:

*And now that you have dissociated yourselves from them and from whatever they worship besides Allah, go and seek refuge in the cave. Your Lord will extend His mercy to you and provide for you the means for the disposal of your affairs. (Verse 16)*

## **CONCLUSION**

As we conclude the study of *al-Kahf*, we seek forgiveness from God for any errors of judgement, understanding and interpretation that we might have committed. We are sure we have not been able to do justice to the bottomless ocean of wisdom contained in *al-Kahf*, but if this study, even to some small degree, inspires us to approach the Qur’ān as a living document, and if it leads us, even for a moment, to feel the Qur’ān as if it is being revealed *today*, our labour will be more than rewarded. There is no end to understanding what the Qur’an has to offer and we may only join Iqbal in saying:

A hundred new worlds lie in its verses;  
Whole centuries are captured in its moments.

In all humility and awe before the Words of my Lord, we would like to close this study on the same note as *al-Kahf* closes, because there can be no closing more appropriate and meaningful:

*Say: “If the sea were to become ink to record the Words of my Lord, indeed the sea would be all used up before the Words of my Lord are*

*exhausted, and it would be the same even if We were to bring an equal amount of ink. ” Say (O Muḥammad): “I am no more than a human being like you; one to whom revelation is made: ‘Your Lord is the One and Only God.’ Hence, whoever looks forward to meet his Lord, let him do righteous works, and let him associate none with the worship of his Lord.”*

## Appendix

### THE PHENOMENON OF *DAJJĀL*

The word Dajjāl is derived from ‘*djl*’ which means to deceive, to cheat or to dupe. Hence Dajjāl means swindler, deceiver or cheat. There is no mention of Dajjāl in the Qur’ān but he is extensively mentioned in *Hadīth* literature. Usually *aḥādīth* about Dajjāl are to be found in *Kitāb al-Fitan* (Chapter on Trials) in *al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Sittah* and other collected works. There are a large number of *aḥādīth* narrated by at least sixty Companions including three Rightly Guided Caliphs. In some of them Dajjāl is referred to as al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl (the Antichrist). This correlates with Christian belief that the arrival of the Antichrist was to precede the Second Advent. There are references about him in the Epistles of St. John (I, ii, 18, 22); II Thessalonians ii, 1-12; and Revelation xiii. His emergence, then, in some way relates to Christian apocalyptic legends.

### THE EMERGENCE OF *DAJJĀL*

The time-scale for the appearance of Dajjāl is far from clear. Some *aḥādīth* indicate that his advent was expected by the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his own time. One of his contemporaries, Ibn Ṣayyād, was even under suspicion as being Dajjāl.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when one of his Companions, Tamīm Dārī, narrated an incident encountering a strange person on one of the islands of the Mediterranean or Arabian Sea, and who claimed that he was Dajjāl, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not contradict him, but just said that he thought he would appear from the East.<sup>13</sup> However, there are a large number of *aḥādīth* that indicate his appearance will occur nearer the Last Day. He will appear from the East and first invite people to righteousness and, after gaining strength, proclaim his prophethood and then divinity.<sup>14</sup> He will stay in the world for forty days, but one of his days will be equal to a year.<sup>15</sup>

## **DAJJĀL'S CHARACTERISTICS**

Innumerable authentic *aḥādīth* refer to Dajjāl in considerable detail as an apocalyptic event of terrible importance. They warn of him as “the greatest tribulation since the creation of Ādam till the Last Hour”;<sup>16</sup> as a danger of which “there has been no prophet who did not warn his people; even Noah so warned;”<sup>17</sup> and an evil from which “every Muslim should seek refuge with God in his prayers as the Prophet used to seek.”<sup>18</sup>

To understand fully this phenomenon called Dajjāl and realize why the Prophet warned so seriously against it, one will have to sift through the whole mass of *aḥādīth* narrated in this connection. However, we can briefly try to obtain a general view of his broad characteristics by a perusal of the *aḥādīth* in this regard.

1. His most outstanding feature will be his denial of God, so obvious that it will be as if “the three letters *kfr*, or the word *kāfir* [unbeliever], are written on his forehead,”<sup>19</sup> “between his two eyes” which every Muslim or “every believer in God would be able to read, whether he can read or not.”<sup>20</sup>
2. His right eye will be blind, while his left eye will shine like green glass.<sup>21</sup>
3. He will be short-statured and ugly with curly hair. He will be blind in one eye while the other will be just flat.<sup>22</sup>
4. He will have unprecedented, seemingly total mastery over the forces of nature. Distances will melt before him as he moves “like a cloud carried by the wind” and “rides a white ass, each of whose ears will be thirty yards long and whose one step could cover one day and one night’s journey.”<sup>23</sup> “The earth will be”, literally, “rolled up for him” and “the sea will be ankle deep for him.”<sup>24</sup> He will even have the power to “jump between the heavens and the earth.” His voice “will be heard in the East and the West.” He will possess miraculous healing powers; even some semblance of power over life and death.<sup>25</sup> Immense natural resources will be at his command as a result of his vast powers. A piece of empty barren wilderness will

“bring forth all its treasures” at his command. “The waters of the earth and all its treasures will be at his service.” “He will command the sky and it will rain, he will command the earth and it will grow crops.”<sup>26</sup> He will also create for himself a life of economic plenty; “with him will be mountains of bread and streams of water.”<sup>27</sup>

5. He will proclaim a new religion whose central doctrine, after the denial of God, will be a new faith – a faith in “his own godhood”, in his “supreme and immense power over nature”, and his “inevitable march towards a greater destiny, a brighter future.”<sup>28</sup>
6. His impact will be deep, swift and widespread. “He will emerge from the East and subjugate and dominate the earth.”<sup>29</sup> He will win over a large number of followers, if not through faith in his new creed, then at least by shaking the old through skepticism and doubt. “By Allah, one will come to him, thinking he has faith, but will soon become his follower because of the doubts he will raise in him.”<sup>30</sup> Everything will change; cultures will crumble and be assimilated; systems will become topsy-turvy. “Women will imitate men and men will imitate woman.” His influence will go deep into people’s homes, so much so that a “man will return to his mother, his daughter, his sister and his aunt and tie them fast lest they go out to Dajjal and follow his way of life”.<sup>31</sup>
7. He will have both a ‘paradise’ and a ‘hell’ with him.<sup>32</sup> Those who follow him will enjoy the plenty of life; those who do not, will be denied the same. “People will be in difficulty, except one who follows him.”<sup>33</sup> “Him he will feed but make an unbeliever of him, and whoever will refuse, he will deprive him and stop from him.”<sup>34</sup> Many will go over to his side, knowing that his is the wrong way, saying: “we follow him knowing his is *kāfir*, only so that we may eat from his food and feed our cattle from his trees.”<sup>35</sup>

## ***DAJJĀL’S DEATH***

During this period of tribulation, the Prophet ‘Isā (peace be upon him) will descend in Damascus.<sup>36</sup> After completing *Fajr* Prayer, he will ask to open

the city's gate where Dajjāl, accompanied by his followers, will encounter him. But, as soon as the Prophet 'Isā (peace be upon him), sees him, Dajjāl will start to melt and he will try to run away. The Prophet 'Isā, however, will overtake him and will kill Dajjāl near the gate of Ludd, Palestine.<sup>37</sup>

Those *aḥādīth* that refer to Dajjāl's elimination, after the advent of the Prophet 'Isā (peace be upon him), significantly also mention the elimination of the "cross" and the "pig" which, more than anything else, symbolize the two important features of Christianity as introduced after the Prophet 'Isā (peace be upon him); first, the central Christological doctrines of Sonhood, crucifixion, redemption, resurrection and kingdom; and second, "emancipation from the divine law".<sup>38</sup>

### **SAFEGUARDING AGAINST *DAJJĀL***

Looking at the treachery and trials which Dajjāl is predicted to perpetrate, *Sūrah al-Kahf* provides the most effective antidote: One has to remain firm in *Īmān* (faith) by constantly calling upon God and keeping the company of the pious people. (verse 28) Knowing the reality of life and not be tempted by the glitter of this world. (verse 45) Remaining patient and be humble in acquiring knowledge (verse 69) and finally doing good deeds with sincerity and looking forward to meeting God. (verse 110)

It is for this reason that the Prophet (peace be upon him) has asked us to recite this *sūrah* at least once a week on Fridays.

## Further Reading

For those who want to study the entirety of *Sūrah al-Kahf* in detail, the following readings are suggested. As few commentaries of the Qur'ān are available in English, works in Arabic and Urdu are also included.

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1. Sayyid Abul A 'lā Mawdūdī: *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān*, Vol. II, pp. 211-213.
  2. Abdur Rashid Siddiqui: *Key to Āl 'Imrān: Resurgence of the Ummah*, pp. 2-3. Markfield, Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2002.
  3. 'Presence' will be used throughout in the sense defined here.
  4. See *Sūrah* 96: 1-5 and *Sūrah* 55: 1-4.
  5. Significantly, the verse just before, i.e. the last verse of the preceding *sūrah* has the same theme: 'Allpraise be to God who has not taken any son,' (*al-Isrā'* 17: 111).
  6. John Dewey (1859-1952), an American philosopher and exponent of pragmatism. His philosophy stressed the instrumental function of ideas and judgement in problem solving.
  7. According to authentic traditions, this person was called Khidr. (Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān*, Vol. V, p. 122.)
  8. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was one of the most influential Christian theologians. *The City of God*, (consisting of 22 books) was written to restore the confidence of his fellow Christians, who had been badly shaken by the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410.
  9. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher who produced many unconventional works expressing a repudiation of Christian and liberal ethics. Nietzsche does not want God's death to pass unnoticed. He shouts from the house tops: this is a watershed in human history: "We have killed God. But is the greatness of this deed not too great for us? There was never a greater deed – and those born after us belong, because of this deed, to a higher kind of history, than history has been up till now." *Thus Spake Zarathustra* p. 66.
  10. Again, to quote Nietzsche, "What are churches, if not tombs and the funeral places of God?" Ibid.
  11. A saying attributed to Protagoras (c.490-c.420 BCE), a Greek philosopher. It is usually interpreted to mean that the individual human being, rather than a god or an unchanging moral law, is the ultimate source of value. He was a Sophist philosopher whose many works are lost and most information about him comes from Plato's *Dialogues*.
  12. Muslim.
  13. Muslim.
  14. Ṭabarānī.
  15. Muslim.
  16. Ibid.
  17. Abū Dāwūd and Tirmidhī.
  18. Bukhārī, Muslim and Nasā'ī.
  19. Bukhārī and Muslim.
  20. Ṭabarānī.
  21. Ahmad.
  22. Abū Dāwūd.
  23. Bayhaqī.

24. Muslim.
25. Tirmidhī.
26. Ibn Mājah.
27. Bukhārī and Muslim.
28. Ibn Mājah.
29. Ṭabarānī.
30. Abū Dāwūd.
31. Aḥmad.
32. Bukhārī and Muslim.
33. Muslim.
34. Ibid.
35. Naʿīm ibn Ḥammād: *Kitāb al-Fitan*, p. 326 as quoted from Ibn Abī Shaybah.
36. Muslim.
37. Muslim and Ibn Mājah.
38. Abū Dāwūd.