



The Divine Wisdom in Allowing Evil to Exist: Perspectives from Ibn al-Qayyim

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Abstract

The existence of evil in this world has long provided a dilemma for theologians, whether Muslim or not. This article will discuss the theodicy put forth by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. It is based on the Qur’ān, Sunnah, and knowledge of the Predecessors and represents one of the most elaborate and comprehensive theodicies in the Islamic tradition.

Who was Ibn al-Qayyim?

Abū ‘Abd Allāh Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr b. Ayyūb b. Sa’d al-Zur‘ī al-Dimashqī, better known as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, was born outside of Damascus, Syria in 691 H/1292 CE.¹ Ibn al-Qayyim was one of the most important scholars of the late-Ḥanbalī school, along with figures like Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn al-Qayyim’s name is inevitably attached to that of his famous teacher Taqī al-Dīn b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm b. Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE). Although Ibn al-Qayyim had other teachers—such as Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hindī and ‘Imād al-Dīn Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Wāṣiṭī—he dedicated himself almost exclusively to Ibn Taymiyya, after meeting him at the age of twenty-one until the latter’s death.

It was only after Ibn Taymiyya’s passing that Ibn al-Qayyim became a prolific author on a multitude of subjects. Ibn al-Qayyim’s writings² spanned more than twenty years. His foremost goal was to explain and establish the primacy of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, that God’s Will is concordant with His Wisdom, and the congruity of reason and revelation. Moreover, he sought to repudiate those groups that denied God’s Wisdom. Ibn al-Qayyim was also committed to refuting what he considered to be extremes in Sufī mysticism, such as monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*),

¹ For biographical details, see Tallal Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Knowledge* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2016), pp. ix–xvi.

² Bakr Abū Zayd calculates Ibn al-Qayyim’s works to be ninety-eight, of which thirty are extant. See Bakr Abū Zayd, *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya: ḥayātuḥu āthāruḥu mawāriduhu* (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āṣima, 1995), pp. 200–309.

antinomianism (*suqūt al-taklīf*), as well as the notion that mystical unveiling (*kashf*) could result in knowledge that rivals revelation.³

The theodicy of Ibn al-Qayyim

Ibn al-Qayyim's theodicy was advanced, in large part, in his two books: *Cure for Those Ailed by Questions Concerning Divine Decree, Predestination, Wisdom and Causality* (*Shifā' al-'alīl fī masā'il al-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar wa'l-ḥikma wa'l-ta'līl*) and *Key to the Blissful Abode: Proclamation of the Sovereignty of Knowledge and Will* (*Miftāḥ dār al-sa'āda wa-manshūr wilāyat al-'ilm wa'l-irāda*).⁴ The relevant sections of these two works have been translated in *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*.⁵

Ibn al-Qayyim begins by listing twenty-six wisdoms behind God's creating humanity and making them reside on earth. Ibn al-Qayyim treats the lapse of Adam and Eve not as a catastrophe but rather argues that there are many wise purposes associated with humankind being sent down to this earth. Ibn al-Qayyim also maintains that humanity was given in exchange something better than the Garden: God's covenant, guidance,⁶ and religious knowledge.

He then rejects any attribution of evilness to the Holy Lord, whether in regards to His Names (*asmā'*), Attributes (*ṣifāt*) or Actions (*af'āl*). Ibn al-Qayyim differentiates between God's acts (*af'ālihi*) and what He enacts (*maf'ūlātihi*) or

³ Ibn al-Qayyim refutes these three extremes in depth in his magnum opus, *Madārij al-sālikīn*, as well as *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn*.

⁴ *Miftāḥ dār al-sa'āda* is considered to be a middle work, while *Shifā' al-'alīl* is a late one, according to the division of Ibn al-Qayyim's oeuvre into early, middle and late by Holtzman. See Livnat Holtzman, 'Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah,' in Joseph E. Lowery and Devin Stewart (eds), *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography II: 1350–1850* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), pp. 202–203.

⁵ Tallal Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2017), pp. 3–18.

⁶ Ibn al-Qayyim states: "Although God made Adam descend from the Garden, and subjected him and his offspring to many types of trials and tribulations, He gave them something greater than that which He denied them—this being His covenant that He promised them. He informed them that whoever holds on to [that covenant] will attain His pleasure and be honored in [Paradise]. God (Exalted is He) stated after removing [Adam] from it: *We said: Go down, all of you, from hence; but verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance; and whoso followeth My guidance, there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.* Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa'āda wa-manshūr wilāyat al-'ilm wa'l-irāda*, (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2015), pp. 87–88.

ontologically wills: “God’s actions themselves (Glory be to Him) are not divided [into beloved or not] since all of His actions are beloved and pleasing to Him. Therefore, one must differentiate between His actions and what He enacts. His actions are all pure good, just, advantageous and wise—there is no evil within them from any aspect whatsoever. As for what He enacts, it is subject to division [into good or not].”⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim thus affirms God’s Holiness, Omniscience, Omnipotence, Praiseworthiness, Beneficence, and Justice.

He maintains that one of the greatest reasons for the Almighty Lord creating both good and evil in this world is to manifest His Names, Attributes, and Actions in a manner concordant with His Wisdom: “If the effects of His Names and Attributes cannot become manifest, except by [creating] opposing [entities], then His wisdom deems it to be inevitable that He bring them into existence. Had they not been created, then His Attributes would not have become manifest, and this is implausible.”⁸

Of note, Ibn al-Qayyim mentions in *Tarīq al-hijratayn*: “Due to [God’s] love of His Names and Attributes, He commanded His servants to carry out the consequences and requisites [of that love]. Thus, He commanded them to be just, benevolent, pious, to pardon [others], magnanimous, patient, forgiving, merciful, truthful, knowledgeable, thankful, forbearing, perseverant, and to stand firm. And since God (Glorious is He) loves His Names and Attributes, the most beloved of His creatures to Him is the one who is characterized by those characteristics, which He loves.”⁹

Next, Ibn al-Qayyim moves on to affirm that what exists is either itself purely good, or preponderantly good, or indirectly leads to greater good: “God (Glory be to Him) has left out some things, which may have resulted in wise purposes had He created them, either because of the absence of His love for their existence, or because their existence would have prevented the existence of something more beloved to Him or led to its lapse. In these cases, His wisdom in not creating those

⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Tarīq al-hijratayn wa bāb al-sa’adatayn*, ed. Muḥammad Ajmal al-Iṣlāhī, (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 2008), pp. 274-275.

entities preponderates over His wisdom in creating them... Consequently, God's creating and commanding are based upon attaining what is purely advantageous or what is preponderantly so, and allowing the lesser [good] to lapse; hence preventing what is purely harmful or what is preponderantly so."¹⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, like Ibn Taymiyya, states: "God does create things that He hates, but He does this only for the sake of a wise purpose that He loves... Ibn Taymiyya [and Ibn al-Qayyim thus] subordinate God's Will to God's love."¹¹ Thus one may think of God's Will following what He loves, whereby His Will is concordant with His Wisdom.

Ibn al-Qayyim goes on to state that evil can be considered as (1) privation—principally ignorance and injustice, (2) anything disassociated from the Holy Lord,¹² (3) the perpetration of what the Holy Lord has prohibited, or (4) the abandonment of what He has commanded.¹³ Ibn al-Qayyim then begins to reconcile the existence of evil by stating: "Although the existence [of a particular good] may be better than its non-existence, its existence [in all situations] may result in forgoing (*fawāt*) something that is more beloved to God. Likewise, although the non-existence of something evil may be preferable to its existence [in one aspect] it may be that its existence is a means or a cause that leads [indirectly] to something more beloved to Him."¹⁴

Within his theodicy, Ibn al-Qayyim also includes many of God's Wisdoms in permitting the existence of Satan, who is the "basis and root [element] of all [wickedness]"¹⁵ in Chapter Seven. For instance, he writes: "The creation of Iblīs and his army has [indirectly] led to the establishment of [waging battle and striving in His path] and their consequences,"¹⁶ and "Had those who were faithful and righteous been the overwhelming majority, then the possibility of waging battle [in

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

¹¹ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 73. See also Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, Chapter Ten.

¹² See Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 24-27.

¹³ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

His path]—which is one of the most eminent types of worship—would have eluded us.”¹⁷ Thus, Ibn al-Qayyim begins to provide a justification for gratuitous evils.

Ibn al-Qayyim also emphasizes in his *Madārij al-sālikīn*: “Whoever worships God by striving against His enemy has attained a great share of [the characteristic of] being truly faithful. The greater the servant’s love and loyal support for his Lord, as well as his enmity towards His enemy, the greater his participation in striving...This form of servitude [to God] is only realized by a few. Whoever has tasted its sweetness will lament the time he spent beforehand [in heedlessness of it].”¹⁸ He also states in *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn*: “Complete servitude cannot occur except through true love. True love itself cannot be manifested unless the lover sacrifices all that he [or she] possesses of wealth, ruling position, or power for the sake of the Beloved and to gain proximity to Him. And the highest degree of love is manifested by sacrificing one’s life for His sake.”¹⁹

Ibn al-Qayyim adds that those who follow the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ “carry out [the Prophet’s message] by [spreading] knowledge, [performing good] actions, guiding and advising people, being patient, and striving [for His sake]. These are the truly faithful ones (*ṣiddīqūn*)—they are the best of the Prophet’s followers and their leader and imam is Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (may God be pleased with him).”²⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim also repeats the following *ḥadīth* in *Miftāḥ dār al-sa‘āda* to illustrate that point: “This knowledge [inherited from the Prophet] will be conveyed by the successors [of this Community] who are upright and trustworthy (*‘udūl*). They will repudiate the distortions of the extremists (*taḥrīf al-ghālīn*), those who attempt to break up [the religion] by negating [its precepts] (*intiḥāl al-mubṭilīn*), and the misinterpretations of those who are ignorant (*ta’wīl al-jāhilīn*).”²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1996), vol. I, p. 241.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn*, p. 254.

²⁰ Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Knowledge*, p. 73.

²¹ Bayhaqī (*Sunan*) 20,911; Ibn ‘Adī, vol. I, p. 211; Haythamī 601; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (*Sharaf*), pp. 47-52; Tammām 899; al-Muttaqī al-Hindī 28,918; *Bidāya*, vol. X, p. 337. It is ‘authentic’ according to Albānī (*Mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ* 248).

Suffering as a bridge to greater good

The existence of suffering or evil, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, may also indirectly result in the reformation of society or prepare it for some subsequent good. Thus, the existence of evil may indirectly lead to types of greater goods in response to those evils, and these types, which are beloved to God, would not have otherwise been possible. Ibn al-Qayyim also emphasizes that the higher levels of Paradise can only be reached by “traversing a bridge of hardships and tribulations.”²² Finally, whilst the Holy Lord is angry with Satan, the devils and the disbelievers, Ibn al-Qayyim maintains that God’s pleasure with His prophets and saints is comparatively greater.²³

Ibn al-Qayyim also discusses thirty wise purposes and secrets associated with allowing believers to incur sins. These include: leading to the believer (1) repenting, which is pleasing to God; (2) recognizing his need for God’s protection and help; (3) supplicating; (4) becoming more humble; (5) avoiding arrogance and pride; (6) discounting his own good deeds; (7) carrying more good deeds in order to make amends for his sins and to become closer to the Holy Lord after feeling distant due to his sin; (8) being kind and gentle with others when they make mistakes due to recognition that he has sinned and erred himself; (9) focusing on improving himself thus making him avoid blaming or criticizing others; (10) recognizing that salvation from the Hellfire will only occur if God forgives and has mercy on him; (11) allowing him to allot the occurrence of any hardship as a recompense for his own sins and errors; and (12) appreciating God’s blessing upon him to a greater degree since he recognizes himself to be inadequate, among others listed by Ibn al-Qayyim.²⁴

The existence of free will and hardships may enable believers to worship the Holy Lord by their free choice, truly love Him, and carry out His commandments in a wide variety of manners for His sake. The believers will then be returned to

²² Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, p. 261.

²³ Ibid., p. 137.

²⁴ See Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, Chapter Fifteen, pp. 239-257 for all thirty wisdoms that Ibn al-Qayyim lists.

Paradise in a more perfect state and will be rewarded accordingly, having performed the necessary good deeds and crossed the bridge of trials and tribulations. By experiencing the hardships of this world first, they will appreciate the eternal bliss of Paradise to a far greater degree.²⁵

Finally, Ibn al-Qayyim emphasizes that “We should recognize that everything that He has commanded [and created] encompasses far-reaching wisdoms. As for the detailed secrets of these wise purposes, they are not attainable for all of humanity. Rather, God provides insight to those whom He wishes of His creation to what He wills.”²⁶

Ibn Al-Qayyim considers this to be the best possible world from only some aspects

Eric Ormsby investigated Ghazālī’s dictum that this is the best possible world. Ghazālī specifically said: “There is not in possibility anything whatever more excellent, more perfect, and more complete than [this world]. For if there were and He had withheld it, having power to create it but not deigning to do so, this would be miserliness contrary to the divine generosity and injustice contrary to the divine justice. But if He were not able, it would be incapability contrary to divinity.”²⁷ Ormsby then went on to discuss the various positions held by some subsequent scholars of Islam.²⁸ In the pro-camp, Ormsby lists Ibn ‘Arabī²⁹ (d. 638 H/1240 CE),

²⁵ See Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 3 and 18.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

²⁷ Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī’s “Best of All Possible Worlds”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 39. For the Arabic, see *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2010), vol. IV, pp. 319–320. This dictum is within Book 35, which is titled ‘His Oneness and Reliance upon Him’ (*al-tawḥīd wa’l-tawakkul*).

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 92–134.

²⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī’s thoughts were pervaded by monism. It is for this reason that Ibn ‘Arabī states: “there cannot be a world more wonderful than the present world (*laysa fī ‘l-imkān abda ‘min hādha al-‘ālam*), for it is in the image of the Merciful... We are His external form, while His Ipseity is the spirit which governs the form.” See Binyamin Abrahamov, *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of ‘The Bezels of Wisdom,’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 133. Thus although Ibn ‘Arabī’s conclusion is the same, it is based on completely different reasoning than Ghazālī.

Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756 H/1355 CE), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 H/1505 CE) and Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205 H/1791 CE), among others. Suyūṭī wrote *Tashyīd al-arkān fī laysa fī 'l-imkān abda ' mimma kān* in support of Ghazālī's dictum.³⁰ Prominent scholars in the contra-camp include Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d. 543 H/1148 CE), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 H/1200 CE) and Ibrāhīm b. ʿUmar Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī (d. 885 H/1480 CE).

Ormsby did mention Ibn al-Qayyim's name within the list of disputants; however, his position on the dictum was not elaborated upon.³¹ To be sure, Ibn al-Qayyim does not comment directly on it; nonetheless, we may infer his stance from a few passages. First, Ibn al-Qayyim never disagrees with Ghazālī in name, but rather only references Ghazālī when he agrees with him. This is the likely reason that Ibn al-Qayyim, unlike Ibn Taymiyya, did not directly comment on Ghazālī's dictum.

Ibn al-Qayyim uses the word 'dazzling/wonderful' (*badīʿa*) fifteen times in *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom* only in reference to God's Wisdom (*ḥikmatuhu al-badīʿa*).³² He never utilizes the word *badīʿa* to describe this world. Third, Ibn al-Qayyim argues that God's Wisdom—which is an Attribute of His for He is the Most Wise—as well as His Actions are dazzling, whereas that which He enacts, i.e., this world and what it contains, may be divided into aspects that are wonderful or not: "God (Glory be to Him) created three abodes: one that is purely dedicated to bliss, pleasure, delight, and joy; one that is purely dedicated to pain, suffering, calamities, and evils; and one that is mixed having both good and evil, bliss and wretchedness, pleasure and pain."³³

Fourth, Ibn al-Qayyim mentions (while repudiating the Muʿtazilī claim that God is obligated to act in a manner that is beneficial and most advantageous (*al-ṣalāḥ*

³⁰ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tashyīd al-arkān fī laysa fī 'l-imkān abda ' mimma kān*. This is included as an appendix in *Iḥyāʾ*, vol. V, pp. 369–394.

³¹ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, p. 109.

³² For instance, he affirms "the complete nature of His dazzling wisdom and overwhelming omnipotence" and that the creation of "opposites is in order to manifest His dazzling wisdom, vanquishing power, accomplished will, and perfect and complete sovereignty." See Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 97 and 101, respectively.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

wa'l-aṣḥāḥ)) that, in fact, higher degrees of benefit or advantage can always be postulated.³⁴ For instance, with regard to Paradise, God's "Wisdom dictated that He would create and structure Paradise with progressively higher levels, some on top of others, and that He would populate Adam and his offspring [who are believers] within it according to their deeds."³⁵ God (Glorious is He) therefore could have created an even better Paradise—having all believers occupy an equivalent superior rank whereby they could enjoy the same bliss—but even in that case, the level of bliss within that rank could be extended to a higher degree. Therefore, characterizing this world or even Paradise as being the 'best' is only congruent in some aspects—neither can be generally deemed as such. Ibn al-Qayyim thus maintains that God (Exalted is He) has, in reality, structured both this world and Paradise in accordance with His Divine Wisdom.

In summary, characterizing existence, i.e., what God has enacted or willed, as being wonderful is ambiguous, for there is much suffering, evil, and disbelief in this world. Ibn al-Qayyim avoids all that by maintaining that it is God's Wisdom that is dazzling/wonderful. It seems that the best way to reconcile Ghazālī's dictum and Ibn al-Qayyim's position is to state, "What is good in this world is more wonderful than if good existed alone, and God has many dazzling wisdoms in mixing good and evil herein."

Ibn al-Qayyim's exposition of the duration of Hellfire

Ibn al-Qayyim also discusses at length whether the punishment of Hellfire will eventually end for the disbelievers. Ibn al-Qayyim (as well as Ibn Taymiyya) maintained that many of the Predecessors held that opinion. This represents Ibn al-Qayyim's opinion in *Shifā' al-'alīl*. That said, by the time Ibn al-Qayyim writes *al-Ṣawā'iq al-mursala* he puts forth universal salvation. The essence of Ibn al-Qayyim's argument is that: (1) God's mercy encompasses everything; and (2)

³⁴ See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa'āda*, (Mecca: Dār 'Ālim al-Fawā'id, 2015), pp. 991–999.

³⁵ Zeni (tr.), *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil*, p. 15.

since all of humanity possesses an innately good disposition, after the disbelievers are punished in Hellfire—no matter how long—only their innate disposition will remain, and hence they will be ultimately saved.

Ibn al-Qayyim ultimately abandoned a position of universal salvation, most likely due to Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī writing his letter *al-I‘tibār bi-baqā’ al-janna wa’l-nār*.³⁶ In *Zād al-ma‘ād*, considered to be Ibn al-Qayyim’s last work,³⁷ he states: “Since those who worship others [besides God] have a nature and essence which is wicked, they will never be purified through [the punishment of] Hellfire... For this reason, God (Exalted is He) has prohibited those who have worshipped others from entering Paradise.”³⁸ This, however, does not indicate that Ibn al-Qayyim abandoned his position that the punishment of the disbelievers will end. The punishment of a disbeliever in Hellfire may end in light of God’s mercy, some interpretations of verse 107 of Sūrat Hūd,³⁹ as well as other arguments, and God knows best.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ibn al-Qayyim’s theodicy addresses many aspects by which the existence of evil (even gratuitous types) can be reconciled with God’s wise purposes in the creation of this world. Although further work needs to be done, Ibn al-Qayyim provides a theodicy useful to Muslims today since it is rigorously based on revelation and congruent with reason, as well as one, in the estimation of this writer, that is of the most comprehensive of those proposed by Muslim theologians to date.

³⁶ For Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s arguments, see his *al-I‘tibār bi-baqā’ al-janna wa’l-nār* in *al-Durra al-maḍīyya fī’l-radd ‘alā Ibn Taymiyya* (Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Taraqqī, 1928). Also see Jon Hoover, ‘Against Islamic Universalism,’ in Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (eds), *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 397–399.

³⁷ *Zād al-ma‘ād* was written after both *Shifā’ al-‘ālīl* and *al-Ṣawā‘iq al-mursala*, and was likely his last work; see Holtzman, ‘Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah,’ p. 217.

³⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-ma‘ād fī ḥadī khayr al-‘ibād* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1994), vol. I, p. 68.

³⁹ Q.XI.107: *Abiding there so long as the heavens and the earth endure save for that which thy Lord willeth. Thy Lord is doer of what He will.*