



Writ and Wisdom: The Qur'an's Moral Narrative

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Author's Note

This article has been abridged from the first chapter of [*The Qur'an and the Just Society*](#) (Edinburgh University Press, 2018) by Ramon Harvey, now available in paperback. It presents the historical narrative told within the Qur'an at the widest possible scale, charting the soul's journey from the primordial covenant through worldly life to the Hereafter. Along the way, key religious and moral concepts are explored to provide a guide to the Qur'an's ethical vocabulary.

Introduction

In God's wisdom all things begin and so shall they end. This is the idea that animates this reflection upon the story that the Qur'an tells from the primordial beginning of human existence to its infinite future. Unlike the Bible, in which the historical unfolding of God's covenant with humanity is traced through the linear order of the text, the Qur'an's moral narrative must be reconstructed from passages dispersed throughout its pages. In one sense this reflects more general principles of Qur'anic structure; in another, it accords with the attention it pays to the metaphysical patterns of the wider human condition, rather than the history of particular peoples. God's wisdom is the constant that informs His creation of the world, just as it underlies both His justice and mercy in the Hereafter.

By turning to this wide canvas and sketching the Qur'an's story of the spiritual journey undertaken by individuals and societies, it is possible to articulate the relationship between key concepts within its world view. The narrative to follow passes through four distinct stages and is divided into sections accordingly: primordial covenant (*mīthāq*), natural disposition (*fiṭrah*), prophecy (*nubuwwah*), and eschatology (*ākhirah*).

I. Primordial covenant

In the Qur'an, human history is only ethically meaningful due to the possession of moral responsibility. This is appropriately portrayed in Q. 33:72 by a powerful vignette in which vast natural elements cower at the offer of the Trust (*al-amānah*), “We offered the Trust (*al-amāna*) to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to bear it and feared it (*fa-abayna an yaḥmilnāhā wa-ashfaqna minhā*). Humanity bore it—it has always been hasty and foolish.”

The verse's impact is heightened by the personification of the heavens, earth, and mountains with the plural feminine verbs *abayna* and *ashfaqna*, usually reserved for intelligent beings. The Trust can be interpreted as symbolic of the moral responsibility accepted by humanity, enabling it to freely enter into a covenant with God. Human souls then promise their Lord (*rabb*) that they shall recognize Him and render their lives to His worship, which is the ultimate purpose of their existence. This idea is mentioned in Q. 51:56, “I created jinn and humankind only to worship Me.”

The Qur'anic covenant has a reciprocal structure. Human beings are obliged to fulfill their commitments and, in turn, it is inconceivable that God, as *al-ḥakīm*, will break His promise to them (Q. 13:31). The worldly life furnishes the arena of their testing, as mentioned in Q. 67:2, “He is the one who has created death and life to test which of you is best in deeds (*li-yabluwakum ayyukum aḥsanu 'amalan*).” When they return to Him they are promised just recompense for the manner in which they lived their lives based both on the internal state of their hearts (Q. 26:89) and the actions of their limbs (Q. 24:24).

However, as mentioned in Q. 6:54, “Your Lord has taken it upon Himself to be merciful.” Thus God's justice is balanced with His mercy (*raḥmah*), a defining attribute. The same can be said of the human level, in which a person's quality of justice (*ʿadl*) is transcended by his or her spiritual excellence (*iḥsān*).

In the Christian Bible, the Old and New Testaments are named after an English archaism for a covenant, the idea being that an ancient covenant with the

patriarchs, such as Abraham in Genesis 17, and renewed with the Israelites, was superseded—or strengthened—by a new one for the community of Christ. The Qur'an presents instead a primordial covenant with all of humanity in Q. 7:172-173:

[Prophet], when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves (*'alā anfusihi*), He said, "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied, "Yes we bear witness." This is so you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this," or, "It was our forefathers who, before us, ascribed partners to God, and we are only the descendants who came after them: will you destroy us because of the deeds of those who invented falsehood?"

These verses evoke a primordial time in which humanity collectively entered into a covenantal relationship with God, thereby affirming their obligations to Him. Stylistically, Q. 7:172 brings the reader directly into the scene in which the covenant is affirmed, making the Qur'an's audience privy to the act. The call to testify and its response can be taken as an indication that the natural disposition of the human being is to incline towards belief in God. The rationale given for this witnessing is to establish a proof to be used on the Day of Resurrection should human beings deny their responsibilities as servants entirely, or blame their forebears for their disbelief. The covenant is thus the freely made confirmation of a pre-existing relationship between Lord and servant, in which humankind is not only made cognizant of the fundamental moral implications of its existence but confirms accountability to its Creator. Here enters the central concept of *dīn* (religion), the living of one's life as a transaction of the debt (*dayn*) of one's own existence, accounted for by God on *yawm al-dīn* (The Day of Reckoning).

In the primordial stage of history, the creation of each life-to-be is recorded as a debt owed to God. The worldly existence that follows is for humans to spend their lives in worship of their Creator, fulfilling various 'debt obligations' that are placed upon them by divine Writ. The eventual Day of Reckoning shows either a profitable or loss-making transaction to be carried into eternity.

The narrative of Adam in the Qur'an prefigures that of his descendants, mapping for them the moral territory of their own lives by introducing the ideas of stewardship, obligation, transgression, and repentance. Q. 2:30 records a conversation between God and His angels, in which He is quoted as saying, "Indeed I am placing upon the earth a steward (*innī jā 'ilun fī al-arḍi khalīfah*).” In the same verse, the angels reply, “How can You put someone there who will cause damage (*yufsidu fīhā*) and bloodshed (*yasfiku al-dimā*’), when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?” In response, God says, “I know what you do not.”

There is considerable discussion in both early exegetical literature and modern academic studies about the meaning of *khalīfah* in this passage, with the following main possibilities suggested: successor, deputy, substitute, cultivator, and ruler. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 422/1031) provides an insightful analysis of the term *khilāfah* as representation of another, either for one who is absent, one who has died, one who is incapacitated, or to honor the representative. As the first three meanings cannot be applied to God, the final meaning of an honored representative, or steward, best fits the context of the act of creation in Q. 2:30.

This provokes two questions: what is the meaning of God's steward? And why would the angels attribute corruption and bloodshed to such an honoured figure? It is evident from both the initial statement and the angelic response that the word *khalīfa* is not meant to apply only to Adam, but to include his descendants, the Adamic creation. This concision accords with Arabic usage, in which the named patriarch of a tribe, or clan group, can be used to indicate descendants. As verses 2:31–3 show, human beings are given a special status due to an ability to gain knowledge of things within creation:

He taught Adam all of the names. Then he presented all things to the angels, saying, “Tell me their names if you are truthful.” They said, “Glory be to You, we know nothing save what you have taught us. You truly are the Omniscient, the Wise.” He said, “O Adam, inform them of their names.” When he had informed them of their names, He said, “Did I not tell you that

I know the hidden of the heavens and the earth, and that I know all you reveal and conceal?”

Teaching Adam names may symbolize humanity's ability to form moral evaluations, as well as authority over the creation and the power to cultivate the earth for His sake. Conversely, the reference to corruption and bloodshed perhaps alludes towards the capacity of humans for free will and the potential that they will reject this role. The angels are surprised that God would entrust such responsibility to a being unable to wield power with complete justice, in contrast to their own absolute obedience. The answer ‘I know things you do not’ could thus refer to the superiority of flawed, but nonetheless free, humanity over its perfectly obedient, yet volitionless angelic counterpart. It is also possible this indicates the help that God will send by way of the prophets and their followers to bring guidance and establish justice.

Both these positive and negative elements of the human being are given further resonance in the remainder of this passage. Q. 2:34 mentions the order to the angels to prostrate in honor of Adam and the refusal of the Devil, Iblis, who was included in the command. Q. 2:35 provides the initial ‘debt obligation’ upon the first two human beings, “O Adam, live with your wife in the garden and eat from it in comfort as you like, but do not approach this tree, as then you will become wrongdoers.” It is the failure of the couple to abide by the prohibition that leads to their descent into the world in Q. 2:36.

In Q. 20:120, the Devil whispers, “O Adam, shall I lead you to the Tree of Immortality (*shajarat al-khuld*) and a kingdom that will never age?” Thus, it is evident that despite the pleasant nature of the garden, Adam knew that he would eventually die and face his reckoning. The attraction of the tree is that it seemingly offers a shortcut to Paradise without death. As the Devil says in Q. 7:20, “Your Lord only forbade you from this tree lest you become angels or immortals.” Moreover, the fact that God previously informed the angels that he was placing a steward upon the earth points to His prior knowledge of the outcome of this test. It also provides human beings with the basic pattern of obligation, transgression, and repentance. After his mistake, Adam “received some words from his Lord” (Q.

2:37), which are often associated with the prayer for forgiveness in Q. 7:23, “Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, if you do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will be lost.” Q. 2:37 goes on to mention, “He accepted his repentance: He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful (*al-tawwāb al-rahīm*).” Finally, when God tells Adam and his wife to enter into the worldly realm, He gives them a divine promise of guidance, an allusion to the future dispensation of revelation. He also informs them where the human story will end, in either a permanent return to paradisaical existence or the torture of Hell (Q. 2:38-39).

II. Natural disposition

The Adamic narrative leads to human beings entering into the world, but what is the moral status of this new home and of people born within it? The picture that the Qur'an paints appears to be one in which the natural world has an essential morality with which human beings are expected to interact. As an arena designed for the testing responsibilities of *dīn* and stewardship, it is appropriate that creation itself comes with a built-in moral setting, an idea encapsulated in the Qur'an by the Scale (*al-mīzān*). In Q. 55:7-12:

He has raised up the sky. He has set the Scale so that you may not exceed in the Scale: set up the weighing scale with justice and do not fall short in the Scale. He set down the Earth for His creatures, with its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain, its fragrant plants.

Here, God's setting of the Scale is revealed to be for the purpose of testing the ability of humans (and jinns) to live according to it. Placing the *mīzān* between the description of the heaven, or sky (*al-samā'*), and the earth with its flora and fauna implies it is natural and applicable universally throughout the created order. The command “set up the weighing scale with justice (*wa-aqīmū al-wazna bil-qist*)” utilizes a familiar metaphor for the just society. A human level of action is envisaged that mirrors the divine with the steward to measure out earthly justice according to the standard set by God. This description also alludes to the theme of moral freedom, as the command to weigh with justice assumes the possibility that

its addressees will not. This underscores a difference with animals that are placed besides vegetative life as the recipients, not the agents, of moral choices.

As human beings are also part of the created order, it stands to reason that they would reflect the setting of the Scale. Within the Qur'an, this is expressed by the concept of *fiṭrah* (natural disposition) in Q. 30:30:

[Prophet] stand yourself up devoutly for the religion – the natural disposition God instilled in humanity (*fā-aqim wajhaka lil-dīni ḥanīfan fiṭrata allāhi allatī faṭara al-nāsa ‘alayhā*); there is no altering God's creation—that is the upright religion, though most people do not realize it. Q. 30:30 can be read as Qur'anic support for the notion that human beings inherently aim to obtain faith and morality. This would be a consequence of their receipt of the Trust in Q. 33:72 and the reason that no dissension is recorded among human souls in Q. 7:172, the verse of the primordial covenant, to which it is often linked in exegetical literature.

This reading of *fiṭrah* as an active inclination of human beings towards recognition of God and worshipping Him is contrasted with their propensity for temptation by the Devil and beguilement by the pleasures of the world. Although this can lead to the corruption of this initially innocent state, there is no concept of original sin in the Qur'anic worldview. Just as the narrative of Adam's fall contains within it his forgiveness and redemption, the life of each human being starts from the same point as Adam in returning to the state of *fiṭrah* and being tested as he was. If it is granted that there is an objective moral setting to the world, the epistemological question of whether this is knowable before the arrival of revelation still remains. First, it is important to distinguish what can be known from what typically is known in any given society. The Qur'an castigates a great swathe of humanity as astray from the truth, for instance in Q. 6:116, "If you obeyed most of those on earth, they would lead you away from the path of God. They follow nothing but speculation; they are merely guessing."

Proceeding from the above interpretation of the primordial covenant and the Scale, it would seem most coherent to understand the Qur'an as affirming that basic

norms of morality are rationally knowable to a human actor in the state of *fiṭrah*. However, the question is finely balanced with interpretations that challenge this assumption. An illustrative contested verse is Q. 17:15, “We never punish a people until we send a messenger (*wa-mā kunnā mu‘adhdhibīna ḥattā nab‘atha rasūlan*),” which can be understood as either a radical stance that human moral obligation is predicated on the revealed messages brought by the prophets, or a statement about God’s practice of sending a warner before destroying a community, as commonly narrated in the Qur’an.

The difficulty with the use of verses such as Q. 17:15 to uphold the former idea is arguably that to do so they must be dislocated from their textual context to serve an argument that originates from theological, not Qur’anic, concerns. Q. 17:4-7 presents a brief history of the warnings and punishments inflicted on the Children of Israel, while the verse after Q. 17:15 begins, “When we decide to destroy a town.” Thus, the meaning of the verse is seemingly descriptive, not prescriptive: God’s practice in dealing with past nations has been to provide warners to each community before they are destroyed. As Q. 17:17 goes on to declare, “How many generations We have destroyed since Noah! Your Lord knows and observes the sins of His servants well enough.”

III. Prophecy

The Qur’an presents God as intimately aware of human frailties: the heart under constant threat from the whisperings of the Devil, the temptations of worldly life, and its own selfish promptings. He does not leave humanity alone to become steeped in corruption, but rather sends prophets with guidance (*hudā*). This is in harmony with the *fiṭrah* that it encounters and yet is able to supplement it, so as to assist humankind in overcoming its weaknesses to confirm its covenantal agreement to believe in and worship God.

The Qur’an mentions in a number of places that humanity in general was once a single community (*ummah wāḥidah*). In Q. 10:19, “Humanity was a single

community, then they split”; in Q. 2:213, “Humanity was a single community, then God sent prophets as bearers of good tidings and warnings, revealing for them the Writ with truth, so that they could judge between the people in that which they differed.” In other verses, such as Q. 16:93, 32:8, and 5:48, which presumably refer to a later stage of history, it is said that God could have kept the people within a single community, but that divine wisdom prevailed in allowing divergence between them.

An aspect of this wisdom is explained in Q. 49:13, “O humankind, We have created you from male and female and have made you peoples and tribes so that you may come to know one another. Certainly, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you.” This verse can be read as a definitive rejection of any kind of ethnic supremacy. The creation of diverse nations makes possible the universal experience of encounter with those who differ greatly in culture yet share the same fundamental humanity. Making the criterion of measure *taqwá* ensures that material circumstance plays no part in the eventual eschatological success of moral actors.

As well as a general category for all of humanity, the word *ummah* can refer to a particular prophetic community, such as in Q. 7:159, “There is a group among the community of Moses who guide with the truth, and who act justly according to it (*wa-min qawmi mūsā ummatun yahdūna bil-ḥaqqi wa-bihi ya’dilūn*).” *Millah* seems to be a specific term for the same idea and is especially associated with the legacy of the Prophet Abraham, as in Q. 16:123, “Then we inspired you to follow the community (*millah*) of Abraham devotedly; he was not a pagan.” The Qur’an also has an idea of brotherhood. At the level of humanity as a whole, Q. 4:1 states, “People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide.” For the community of believers specifically, it emerges in Q. 49:10, “Truly the believers are brothers, so reconcile between your brothers. Be mindful of God; perhaps you will receive mercy.”

As a *millah* is formed around a prophet, such a community receives a particular dispensation of God's *sharī'ah*. This concept of a divine law and moral code for humanity has an implicit scriptural basis, as well as the explicit statement in Q.45:18, "Now We have set you [Muhammad] on a clear religious path (*sharī'atin min al-amr*), so follow it." The word *sharī'ah* in Arabic is derived from the path that leads to a watering hole, symbolically conveying the way to what is most vital in life. It should be noted that in the Arabic lexicon of the Qur'an there is no clear distinction between the equivalents of 'law' and 'morality,' the two seamlessly blending in the term *sharī'ah*.

Numerous Qur'anic descriptions of the prophets and messengers highlight their role as bringers of glad tidings and warnings, referring respectively to the promise of Paradise and the threat of Hell. The general Qur'anic pattern is to describe each messenger of God as having been sent to his people with the repeated refrain, "O my people (*yā-qawmī*).” Uniquely, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is sent to the totality of humanity and jinn, as mentioned in Q. 21:107 and 46:29–31. In Q. 2:151, more detail is given about the purpose of sending the Prophet Muhammad to the inhabitants of Arabia:

We have sent among you a messenger of your own to recite Our signs (*āyātīnā*) to you, purify you (*yuzakkīkum*) and teach you the Writ (*al-kitāb*), the Wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*), and[other] things you did not know.

The word *āyāt* can be used for signs, revelations, proofs, or Qur'anic verses. For this discourse about the Prophet, these ideas dovetail insofar as the verses of the Qur'an are presented as inimitable and therefore proof of its divine origin. The term thus connotes the means by which the Prophet establishes his authenticity as speaking for the divine and engendering faith in his community, without which he cannot proceed in his mission. Next, *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification) is mentioned, as it is only on the basis of interior change, for good or ill, that one ensures success or failure in the world and Hereafter. This can be associated with the higher level of spiritual excellence known as *iḥsān*: a going beyond the basic requirements of one's obligations to develop one's virtues.

Turning to the phrase *al-kitāb wal-ḥikmah*, I propose that a consistent reading can be developed by understanding the pair of terms, in general, as referring respectively to the revealed obligations conveyed by messengers and their wise purposes, a position that also finds support in the analysis of al-Farāhī. This interpretation avoids the charge that can be leveled at the gloss of the phrase as the Qur'an and Sunna by al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) that it does not account for the full range of its scriptural usage.

Of course, just as the possibility of understanding the word *kitāb* to refer to the Law does not prevent it meaning the totality of the revelation, reading *ḥikmah* as the rationale of divine laws does not eliminate from the Qur'an wisdom not associated with rule-following. Such material is prominent in the many Qur'anic stories and parables. As mentioned in Q. 54:4–5, “Truly, warning tales that should have restrained them have come down to them—far-reaching wisdom (*ḥikmatun bālighah*)—but these warnings do not help.”

If the *kitāb* and *ḥikmah* brought by messengers within the Qur'anic worldview are understood as the divine Writ and its wise purposes, it becomes important to relate this to the wider life of the people. The key verse that allows this broader conception is Q. 57:25, “We sent Our messengers with proofs (*al-bayyināt*), the Writ (*al-kitāb*) and the Scale (*al-mīzān*), so that people could uphold justice (*li-yaqūma al-nāsu bil-qisṭ*).”

This is a particularly important verse as it draws together the various threads discussed hitherto, and acts as a point of departure for the presentation of the theme of societal justice. Here the messengers are given three elements: proofs to establish their credentials, similar to the term *āyāt* discussed above; the Writ, obligations of revealed Law; and the Scale, insight into the measure of morality, or natural law, set within the creation. This mirrors Q. 42:17, “It is God who has revealed the Writ with truth and the Scale.” These elements are provided for a very particular reason, empowering humanity to establish justice (*qisṭ*). The term *qisṭ* is one of the two Arabic words in the Qur'anic vocabulary that most closely

correspond to 'justice' in English. The other one is *'adl*. Based on a study of their linguistic and scriptural meanings, it can be suggested that these two terms have different connotations beyond the general meaning of justice: *'adl* an internal quality of equity, *qist* a justice established concretely within the social sphere.

This understanding of *qist*, combined with the previous discussions of *mīzān* and *hikmah*, makes possible the following definition: societal justice is the condition of society realized by the Wisdom of God's Writ, which matches the scale of moral value. Such a just society is the highest moral aspiration of human civilization as a collective activity, manifesting within it all other praiseworthy values, such as mercy, goodness, and piety. For each person, their *dīn* consists of attempting to fulfill human stewardship of the earth and a successful resolution in the Hereafter. As al-Attas points out, the concept of *dīn* necessitates the establishment of a cosmopolis on the earth with certain general features. These include "the natural tendency of man to form societies and obey laws and seek just government."¹

Implicitly, then, the Qur'anic discourse posits the just society as built upon natural law foundations. In the Qur'an, this pattern is embodied in the person of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who lives at the culminating point in sacred history, receiving the final revealed code in the cycle of reform and corruption. Thus, in Q. 33:40 he is described as *khātam al-nabīyīn* (the Seal of the Prophets), which matches the statement in Q. 3:81 that God took a pledge from the prophets confirming his authority over them. This is mirrored in several verses that state the community of believers are to act as witnesses for other communities, in both the world and the Hereafter, with the Messenger as a witness for them. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is thus envisaged within the Qur'an as the delegate of divine authority and the final successor to all prophets—the *khalīfah* of God *par excellence*. However, the very fact that the Qur'an is addressed to the Prophet ﷺ, rather than about him, means that exegetes have often found evidence for the foregoing in subtleties of expressions, rather than unequivocal statements. Al-Alūsī (d. 1270/1854) analyzes Q. 2:30, "When your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I am

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), 44.

placing upon the earth a *khalīfah* (*idh qāla rabbuka lil-malā'ikati innī jā'ilun fī al-arḍi khalīfatan*).” He argues that turning the address directly to the Prophet highlights that he has the greatest portion of the stewardship mentioned. The Qur'an pictures the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, like the Prophet Abraham before him, as the exemplar of conduct to be followed, “The Messenger of God is an excellent model (*uswatun ḥasanatun*) for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often” (Q. 33:21). This excellence is in the higher purposes for which human beings have been created, both proximate, establishing societal justice as God's stewards, and ultimate, making a successful return to Him in the Hereafter.

The personal narrative of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is also relevant here. The following phrase is repeated twice in the Qur'an in Q. 9:33 and 61:9:

He is the one who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, in order to reveal to him the religion, all of it, despite the dislike of the pagans (*huwa alladhī arsala rasūlahu bil-hudā wa-dīni al-ḥaqqi li-yuẓhirahu 'alā al-dīni kullihī wa-law kariha al-mushrikūn*).

A nearly identical phrase occurs in Q. 48:28, but replaces “despite the dislike of the pagans” with “and God suffices as a witness (*wa-kafā billāhi shahīdan*).” This verse can be read as indicating that the divine revelation will be completed despite the enmity of those who oppose the Prophet, an interpretation attributed to the Companion Ibn 'Abbās.

In contrast to this, one strand of classical exegesis, widespread in modern translations of the Qur'an, understands *li-yuẓhirahu 'alā al-dīni kullihī* as ‘to make it dominant over all other religions.’ However, this view does not fit well with the linguistic construction of the verse in two respects. First, the word *dīn* here is singular not plural. Second, when the Qur'an uses the expression *aẓhara/yuẓhiru x 'alā y* it does not refer to dominance, but rather to making something known. Examples are Q. 66:3, which refers to God revealing something secret to the Prophet connected with his wives, and Q. 72:26, which states that God does not

reveal the unseen to anyone (the exception of His chosen messengers is given in the next verse).

A further point is that both Q. 9:33 and 61:9 follow verses mentioning God “perfecting His light.” This can be understood in the sense of successive revelations to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ illuminating his knowledge of God’s Writ. The process was declared complete during the Prophet’s only pilgrimage in 10/632, when he recited the famous words of Q. 5:3, “Today I have completed your religion (*dīn*) for you, perfected My favor upon you and am pleased with devotion (or: Islam) as religion for you (*raḍītu lakum al-islāma dīnan*).”

IV. Eschatology

The final stage of the spiritual journey according to the Qur’an, like the first one, takes place in a realm beyond natural human knowledge and concerns all that comes after death, including the grave itself, resurrection in bodily form, the terrifying Day of Judgment, and the final residence in Paradise or Hell.

Upon dying, the human being is confronted with the opening of a reality that was hitherto hidden from sight. With this comes an awareness of one’s moral responsibility and the return to God for judgment, as mentioned in Q. 50:19, “The trance of death will bring the Truth with it: ‘This is what you tried to escape.’”

Al-Ghazālī writes:

Upon death there stand revealed before him certain things which were never disclosed to him in life, in the way that things may be revealed to a man who is awake which were concealed from him during his slumber, for ‘people are asleep, and when they die they awake.’²

² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. T. J. Winter (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 124–5; cf. Qur’an 50:22.

The logical corollary to moral obligation is the existence of corresponding consequences, either reward or sanction, and this is what the eschatological arena provides. A person's truthfulness to their covenant, the acknowledgment of God's Lordship, is the most fundamental duty and God examines it along with fidelity to His messengers, outward conduct, acts of worship, and inner purity of heart. Based on these, He sends the human being to the ultimate fate of either Paradise or Hell. It is axiomatic within the Qur'an that God is absolutely just in carrying out His judgment. As mentioned in Q. 10:54, "They will be judged justly and not wronged (*quḍīya baynahum bil-qisṭi wa-hum lā yuẓlamūn*)."

This concept of perfect divine justice is predicated on the idea that God establishes judgment that takes into account every piece of evidence, and does not wrong a single soul:

We will set up scales of justice (*al-mawāzīna al-qisṭ*) for the Day of Resurrection so that no one can be wronged in the least (*fā-lā tuẓlamu nafsun shay'an*), and if there should be even the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it out. We take excellent account (Q. 21:47).

In this verse, the scales of justice in the Hereafter parallel the Scale set up to measure moral value within the worldly life. The description of God as one who does not wrong His servants is also an important linguistic habit of the Qur'an in discussing His justice. The implication is that there are certain minimum and maximum standards to operate in the dispensation of justice in the Hereafter: neither reduction in one's good deeds, nor increase in recompense for one's bad deeds.

Furthermore, after establishing this on the basis of His wisdom, God also reserves the right to increase greatly the reward for deeds, recognized through such verses as Q. 2:261, "God gives multiple increase to whoever He wishes: He is limitless and all-knowing"; as well as to forgive transgressions. The remission of major sins is mentioned in Q. 4:48, "God does not forgive the joining of partners with Him: anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who joins

partners with God has committed a tremendous sin.” However, even *shirk* can be forgiven through sincere repentance before death, as mentioned in Q. 4:110, while bad deeds done in a state of disbelief can be forgiven or changed by God into good deeds following faith, as in Q. 25:70.

Thus, an implicit theology can be detected in the Qur'an's dual promise regarding God's absence of injustice and presence of mercy. Rather than these two elements being arbitrary manifestations of His will, such that any punishment would be just and any reward merciful, they reflect the deeper mystery of His wisdom. God's mercy is absolute, but human beings come to it on His terms.

This discussion has shown that reading the Qur'an's story of the human condition holistically can furnish us with key aspects of its moral theology that are lost when considering verses in isolation. The leitmotif of this narrative is God's wisdom to create life as a debt owed and ultimately repaid as a test of morality. Although this notion of wisdom makes human life purposeful and intelligible, there remains an element of ineffability in its application as a quality to characterize the divine. Within the created world, it is represented by the Scale, read here as a Qur'anic analog to the natural law. This interpretation, combined with the Qur'an's general discourse and the specific notion of *fiṭra*, leads to the knowability of at least basic ethical norms before the descent of revelation. The justice that the Qur'an calls upon its audience to establish, then, is predicated on realizing the wisdom of God's revealed Law such that it builds upon His natural law.