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**Qur'anic Narrative and Sufi Hermeneutics: Rūmī's  
Interpretations of Pharaoh's Character**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Amer Latif**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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in

**English**

**(Comparative Literature)**

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation examines Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's (d. 1273) hermeneutics of the Qur'an by focusing on his interpretations of the Qur'anic character of Pharaoh. Although Rūmī did not write a commentary in the traditional genre of *tafsīr* by commenting on the Qur'an in a linear verse by verse fashion, significant portions of his poetry are explicitly devoted to Qur'anic interpretation. This study proposes that poetical writings, such as Rūmī's, deserve a prominent place in the field of Qur'anic interpretation. Chapter one gives a broad overview of Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an. It shows that while Rūmī posits multiple levels of meaning within the Qur'anic text, his interpretations of Qur'anic verses are informed by a binary distinction between an outer and inner meaning. His hermeneutics, though, are non-dualistic since the outer level is encompassed by the inner. This chapter also shows that Rūmī conceives of the Qur'an as a living entity that responds to the state of the reader. The meanings disclosed through the act of reading depend on the degree to which readers have transformed their selves by following the teachings of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, according to Rūmī, is a text that reads the reader. Chapter two examines the Qur'anic characterization of Pharaoh. It argues that Qur'anic characterization of Pharaoh is primarily psychological and focuses on highlighting the motivations behind Pharaoh's actions. Since Qur'anic narration displays both sympathy and antipathy towards the proud and tyrannical Pharaoh, it thereby invites its readers to reflect on the presence of similar qualities within themselves. Chapter three examines Rūmī's interpretations

of Pharaoh's character. Rūmī interprets the Qur'anic narrative of Moses and Pharaoh through creative retelling and casts Pharaoh as the symbol of the ego. Pharaoh displays the qualities of pride, denial of truth, deception, insatiable hunger for power, and attachment to name and fame. These are the blameworthy qualities, says Rūmī, that seekers need to overcome on the path to union with God. Rūmī calls Qur'anic stories the exact depiction of the state of the human soul in each instant. His interpretations of the Qur'an are motivated by a desire to guide his readers and he does so by connecting macrocosmic narratives with the microcosmic dynamics of the soul. In conclusion, this study argues that, for Rūmī, the act of reading and understanding scripture is indissolubly linked with reading and understanding the self. Rūmī's hermeneutics can be termed as unitary where cosmology and psychology, the outer and the inner, appear as different aspects of one reality.

*For Ammī*

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.0.1	The Qur'an and its Interpretation . . . . .	3
1.0.2	Methodology for Studying Qur'anic Narratives . . . . .	8
1.0.3	Organization of the Dissertation . . . . .	10
<b>2</b>	<b>Rūmī's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1	Form and Meaning . . . . .	12
2.2	Understanding the Qur'an . . . . .	14
2.3	The Qur'an: Map of the Self . . . . .	19
2.4	The Scale for Determining the Correctness of Interpretations . . . . .	22
2.5	Levels of Meaning . . . . .	25
2.5.1	When God's Help Arrives . . . . .	27
2.5.2	Abraham's Station . . . . .	30
2.6	Conclusion: The Purpose of Interpretation . . . . .	32
<b>3</b>	<b>Pharaoh in the Qur'an</b>	<b>34</b>
3.1	Qur'anic Grand Narrative . . . . .	34
3.1.1	The Function of Pharaoh's Narrative in the Qur'an . . . . .	38
3.2	Pharaoh's Narrative in the Qur'an . . . . .	39
3.2.1	Pharaoh at Moses's Birth . . . . .	40
3.2.2	Pharaoh in the Dialogue between God and Moses . . . . .	43
3.2.3	Moses-Pharaoh Dialogues . . . . .	44
3.2.4	Pharaoh and the Sorcerers . . . . .	48
3.2.5	People Around Pharaoh . . . . .	50
3.2.6	Pharaoh's Death . . . . .	55
3.3	Qur'anic Characterization of Pharaoh . . . . .	56
3.4	Conclusion: The Complex Yet Archetypal Unbeliever . . . . .	59
<b>4</b>	<b>Pharaoh in Rūmī's Works</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1	Introduction and Overview . . . . .	61
4.2	Rūmī's Psychology: The Structure and Dynamics of the Self . . . . .	63
4.2.1	The Self as Spirit . . . . .	63
4.2.2	The Self as Microcosm: Structure and Dynamics of Power . . . . .	67
4.3	Pharaoh as Possessor of Fantasy . . . . .	77
4.4	Attributes and Qualities of the Self . . . . .	85



4.4.1	I-hood or Ego: The Primary Problem of the Self . . . . .	85
4.4.2	Survival at any Cost: The Stratagems of the Self . . . . .	88
4.4.3	The Enemy is Inside!: The Blindness of the Self . . . . .	90
4.4.4	Insatiable World-Devouring Hunger: The Self as a Form of Hell	92
4.4.5	Prestige: The Self's Attachment to Name and Fame . . . . .	94
4.5	Choice: The Burden from which Even the Mountains Shrank Away .	96
4.6	Conclusion . . . . .	102
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>105</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>108</b>

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*Wa mā tawfīqī illā billāh*

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*A Dialogue between Gabriel and Iblīs (Satan)*

Gabriel: Old friend! How is the world of color and scent?  
Iblīs: Burning and melting, aching and suffering, seeking and yearning.  
Gabriel: The heavens are filled with your talk at all times;  
Is it not possible for your torn robe to be stitched anew?  
Iblīs: Ah Gabriel! You do not know this secret;  
I was made drunk by the breaking of my cup.  
It is not possible for me to walk here now, not possible;  
How silent is this world that has no houses or streets!?  
The one from whose despair existence gets its inner heat,  
Is “*Despair!*” not better for him than “*Do not despair!*” (Q 39:53)<sup>1</sup>  
Gabriel: Because of denial you lost your high station,  
What honor now remains for angels in God’s view!  
Iblīs: It is my courage that gives humans the desire for manifestation;  
It is my temptation that shreds the robes of reason and intellect;  
It is only from the shore that you see the battle of good and evil;  
Who suffers the slaps of the storm, me or you?...  
If you ever find a private moment with God, ask Him  
“Whose blood added color to the story of Adam?”  
I prick inside God’s heart like a thorn  
You are only busy glorifying: “Allah Hū! Allah Hū! Allah Hū!”<sup>2</sup>

This poem by Muhammad Iqbāl (d. 1940) is a modern example of Qur’anic interpretation through creative retelling. Through an imagined dialogue between Gabriel and Iblīs, also called Satan after his fall, Iqbāl offers a vision of relating to God that bases itself on Qur’anic data. While Iqbāl’s portrayal of Gabriel is fully consistent

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<sup>1</sup>The Qur’an says: *Do not despair of God’s mercy; He forgives all sins* (Q 39:53). See also (Q 15:56): *And only those who have gone astray despair of God’s mercy.*

<sup>2</sup>Translated by Amer Latif from Muḥammad Iqbāl. *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl: Urdu*. Lahore: Iqbāl Academy, 1990, pp. 474-75.

with the way in which angels describe themselves in the story of Adam's creation, he resituates the pride displayed by Iblīs when he denied God's command to prostrate himself in front of Adam (Q 7:11-12; 15:31-33; 15:74-76). By examining Iblīs's self-perception of his denial, Iqbāl's imaginative portrayal of an encounter between Gabriel and Iblīs adds color to what is usually perceived as a black and white picture of Satan's role within creation. The upshot of this portrayal is that Iblīs appears as a being who relates to God through imagining that God is constantly thinking of him. Iblīs takes solace in his absence from God's presence in the knowledge that it is he who gives the entire story of creation its drama and movement. If Iblīs did not exist, there would be no need for the descendants of Adam and Eve to fight the seductive impulses and destructive temptations cast by Iblīs inside their souls. In Iqbāl's portrayal, Iblīs appears as a being fully cognizant of his importance and of his function within the cosmos.

I still remember the moment when I first heard this poem as a teenager. My intellectual universe was opened up to a whole new way of seeing Iblīs as a complex and relatable character rather than as an entirely evil abstract entity.<sup>3</sup> The poem even presents the possibility of seeing Iblīs as a servant of God who merely performs his tragic function in order for the world to be as it is. How could Iqbāl be so fearless as to impute such motives to Iblīs and to make him more knowledgeable than Gabriel, the archangel of revelation?! The answer, as I discovered many years later, is present in the Qur'anic story of Adam's creation. Iqbāl did not invent a new way of seeing Iblīs but, in fact, joined a long tradition of Muslim authors who interpret the Qur'an through the process of creative retelling. In the works of these authors, the hints and possibilities for meaning disclosed by the style of Qur'anic narration and characterization are developed imaginatively. This mode of Qur'anic interpretation through creative retelling has been as influential, if not more so, within Islamic culture as the writings that interpret the Qur'an in the more traditional genre of Qur'an commentary (*tafsīr*). It is to an investigation of this creative and poetic mode of Qur'anic interpretation in the specific instance of Rūmī's works that this dissertation is devoted.

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) is one of the most well known names in the Persianate Islamic world.<sup>4</sup> While a master of traditional Islamic sciences such as jurisprudence and Hadith, he is remembered and celebrated as a spiritual master who has left behind a vast body of work consisting of didactic poetry, lyric poems, transcripts of sermons and conversations with his students and friends. All of Rūmī's works contain a significant amount of Qur'anic interpretation. In his *Mathnawī*, a six volume didactic poem, Rūmī interprets episodes from the Qur'anic narratives of Moses and Pharaoh through creative retelling. He develops the characters of Moses, Pharaoh, Pharaoh's wife Āsiya, the sorcerers, and Pharaoh's vizier Hāmān. The

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<sup>3</sup>For an excellent study of Iblīs within Muslim writings, see Peter J. Awn. *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>The most comprehensive treatment of Rūmī's life and the reception of his teachings is by Franklin Lewis. *Rumi – Past and Present, East and West*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000.

most striking feature of Rūmī’s portrayal of these characters is the manner in which he makes them speak; the sparse descriptions of the Qur’an serve as the launching point for elaborated speeches by each of these characters. He not only expands considerably the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh, but, based on only a few Qur’anic verses, creates a moving and memorable picture of the sorcerers’ speech. But most significantly, in one instance, he shows Pharaoh, the proud denier of truth, actually accepting the truth and praying to God in the privacy of his own room. Pharaoh’s situation becomes an occasion for Rūmī to meditate upon and offer teachings on the complexity of the human condition. In this study, I examine Rūmī’s hermeneutics of the Qur’an by focusing on his creative interpretations of Pharaoh’s character as a contribution towards the field of Qur’anic interpretation.

### 1.0.1 The Qur’an and its Interpretation

It is difficult to overemphasize the influence and importance of the Qur’an within Islamic civilization. Muslims consider the Qur’an to be God’s unaltered word revealed through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad as a guidance for all humanity. The Qur’an is preserved in memory and recited daily by Muslims during ritual prayers or simply as an act of piety, in keeping with the saying of the Prophet: “The most excellent form of devotion among my people is reciting the Qur’an.”<sup>5</sup> As such, it is also the inspiration behind the development of Islamic arts such as recitation and calligraphy. Phrases from the Qur’an are commonly used by Muslims throughout their daily lives; all major events such as birth, marriage, or death are accompanied by recitation from the Qur’an.<sup>6</sup> In her study of Muslim devotions, Constance Padwick eloquently summarizes the normative Muslim view on the Qur’an:

So the book lives on among its people, stuff of their daily lives, taking for them the place of a sacrament. For to them, these are not mere letters or mere words. They are the twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God...‘It is recited by tongues, written in volumes, memorized in breasts.’<sup>7</sup>

The Qur’an is thus perceived by Muslims as a living entity; the speech of the Living God which is kept alive by Muslims in their private and social lives through memorization, recitation, liturgical use, and the writing of commentaries.

Since the inception of Islam, Muslim scholars have exerted themselves strenuously to understand and to help other Muslims understand the Qur’an. The primary motivation of such interpretive activity has been the desire to discern the relevance of the Qur’an to the lives of Muslims. Throughout Islamic history, every generation has

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<sup>5</sup>William A. Graham and Navid Kermani. “Recitation and Aesthetic Reception”. In: *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*. Ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 115–141, p. 123.

<sup>6</sup>For aspects of the Qur’an’s role in Muslim life and on its aesthetic reception, see *ibid.*, pp. 123–124.

<sup>7</sup>Constance E. Padwick. *Muslim Devotions*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1961, 1996, p. 119.

received the Qur'an within its own unique situation and has searched it for answers to the pressing concerns of its times. The verses by Iqbal, quoted at the beginning of this introduction can be seen as presenting his answer to the lack of dynamism he perceived in early twentieth century Indian Muslims. Writing from within the experience of colonization in India, Iqbal is pointing out to his readers that perhaps they have a lesson to learn from Iblīs; Indian Muslims may be perfect servants of God like Gabriel but in order to meet the challenges posed by modernity and colonization, perhaps they need more passion and pride.

Commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsīr*) is undoubtedly one of the richest genres of writing produced within Islamic societies. Voluminous commentaries have been written from the time of the prolific and influential scholar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) up to the present. Ṭabarī is widely credited for the creation of this genre in its classical form and his voluminous commentary is a compendium that brings together and preserves the efforts of earlier exegetes. Norman Calder describes the formal characteristics of writings in the *tafsīr* genre as a presence of the complete or significant portion of the text of the Qur'an in segments which is then followed by lemma and comment.<sup>8</sup> While Arabic, especially in the classical period of Islam, has been the primary language of such commentaries, commentaries have been written in almost all Islamic languages from a variety of perspectives: grammatical, philological, rhetorical, legal, theological, philosophical, and mystical, among others. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive and, depending on the interests and abilities of the exegete, are commonly combined within a single commentary.

In Western scholarship, Ignaz Goldziher's *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* was the first study that sought to present an overview of the ways in which Muslims have interpreted the Qur'an.<sup>9</sup> He categorized Qur'anic interpretation using the following scheme: The early stage of Qur'anic interpretation followed by liturgical, traditional, dogmatic, Sufi, and sectarian interpretation. Goldziher ended his study by reflecting on hermeneutical trends in modern interpretations of the Qur'an. Since the appearances of Goldziher's work, the study of *tafsīr* has drawn considerable attention and work by scholars such as Böwering, Calder, Gilliot, Lory, McAuliffe, and Andrew Rippin, among others, has added much to our understanding of Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Anthologies that bring together translated samples from a variety of Muslim exegetes have also appeared.<sup>11</sup> Works such as these have helped

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<sup>8</sup>Norman Calder. "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Adam". In: *Approaches to the Qur'ān*. Ed. by G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp. 101–140, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup>Ignaz Goldziher. *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920; For a recent English translation, see Ignaz Goldziher. *Schools of Koranic Commentators*. Trans. by Wolfgang H. Behn. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006.

<sup>10</sup>Please consult the bibliography for works on Qur'anic interpretation by these and other scholars.

<sup>11</sup>Helmut Gätje. *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*. Ed. and trans. by Alford T. Welch. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996; Mahmoud Ayoub. *The Qur'ān and its Interpreters*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.

to sketch the broad outlines of Qur’anic interpretation and have shed light on the writings of some of the most well known exegetes.

Despite all this work on Qur’an commentary, the field of *tafsīr* studies is still considered to be in a “provisional state.”<sup>12</sup> In his book on the formation of the classical tradition of commentaries, Walid Saleh argues persuasively for this position, pointing out that there is no comprehensive history of Qur’anic commentary to date in any Western language. He cites the “staggering breadth of this [*tafsīr*] literature” as the primary cause for a lack of such a comprehensive study. As most commentaries have yet to be edited and exist only in uncatalogued manuscript form, scholars can never be certain that the study of Qur’an commentary from a specific historical period is not overlooking an important text.<sup>13</sup> Basing his argument on the analysis of the Qur’an commentary by al-Tha’alabi, a prolific 11th century scholar, Saleh argues that “much of what we know about the classical period of the [*tafsīr*] genre is outdated and vague, and in many ways our assumptions are not supported by evidence.”<sup>14</sup> One of these primary assumptions that Saleh successfully refutes in his study is the view that in order “to obtain exhaustive information of the history of Muslim *tafsīr*,” it is not necessary and, perhaps even superfluous, to carefully study commentaries that are not as well known.<sup>15</sup> Saleh argues for the central and genre-defining role played by the less known Qur’an commentary by Tha’labī: A finding that forces us to reconsider the importance that scholars had hitherto assigned to the influence of the commentary by Ṭabarī.

Saleh also brings out the sociological and cultural role played by classical Qur’an commentators by showing that writing a Qur’an commentary was both a way of engaging with tradition and also addressing the needs of the audience. In his commentary, Tha’labī was able to unite diverse and at times mutually contradictory strands of “high Islamic culture, its ḥadīth, poetry, philology and *adab* [belles lettres] with the pietistic elements of the culture of the masses: the elements that came to constitute the inner religious life of ordinary Muslims.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, in his article on the dynamics of classical Qur’an commentary, Norman Calder comments on the many tasks that Qur’an commentators perform through their interpretive activity:

The process of citing authorities and providing multiple readings is in part a declaration of loyalty: it defines the tradition within which one works. It is also a means to establish the individuality or the artistry of a given *mufassir* [commentator]: the selection, presentation and organization of citations constitutes always a process that is unique to one writer. Finally,

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<sup>12</sup>Walid A. Saleh. *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035)*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, Birkeland cited in Saleh p. 3, note 8.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 223.

it is, of itself, one element in a theological message: the possibility of the community and the text to contain multiplicity while remaining one community and one text is thereby asserted.<sup>17</sup>

Seen in this light, commentators act as architects of cultural unity. They are translators who, in order to meet the needs of their contemporaries, resituate tradition into the diverse, and at times, seemingly contradictory languages of current cultural thought. Their purpose, though, is to ensure that the Qur'an remains the central authority within the community. Another important function of the commentators that Saleh highlights is the exhortatory nature of commentary.<sup>18</sup> The hermeneutical act is tied to the commentators' commitment to and understanding of the goal of the divine text they have set out to interpret. In the Qur'anic view of reality, faith is always linked to performance of wholesome deeds; the implication is that knowledge needs to be translated in to practice. Qur'anic hermeneutics and interpretation, therefore, are not simply mental operations that are performed on an aesthetic object, rather, the insights gained through the process of interpretation make demands on the lives of the interpreter and the community.<sup>19</sup>

Recent years have also seen the publication of new monographs on Sufi commentaries of the Qur'an. The studies by Annabel Keeler and Kristin Sands shed light on the manner in which Sufis have approached the Qur'an and sought to explain its meaning.<sup>20</sup> But most Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an takes place outside of the genre of *tafsīr* and has been preserved in transcripts of sermons, conversations with aspirants, lectures to students, and in collections of poetry. In approaching Sufi interpretations of the Qur'an it is therefore appropriate to see *tafsīr* as a process as well as a genre; the Arabic word *tafsīr* is used in both senses.<sup>21</sup>

One of the goals of this dissertation is to contribute to the broader field of Qur'anic interpretation through studying Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an. Rūmī did not write a Qur'an commentary in the genre of *tafsīr*, but all of Rūmī's works weave the Qur'an effortlessly into the body of the text and contain significant amounts of material in which he interprets verses from the Qur'an. In recent years, many

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<sup>17</sup>Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Adam", pp. 103-4.

<sup>18</sup>Walid A. Saleh. "Hermeneutics: al-Tha'labī". In: *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*. Ed. by Andrew Rippin. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pp. 323-37.

<sup>19</sup>For an insightful discussion of the these issues in a different but analogous situation see, Gerald L. Bruns. "Midrash and Allegory". In: *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. Pp. 625-46.

<sup>20</sup>Annabel Keeler. *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Kristin Zahra Sands. *Šūfī Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. London: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>21</sup>The English word "interpretation" works well as a translation of *tafsīr* because it is broad enough to encompass not only the technical sense of exegesis as manifested in the genre of *tafsīr*, but also the more general process through which Sufis resituate the Qur'an in varied settings.



scholars have studied the Qur'an's role and interpretation within Rūmī's works. The prevalence of Qur'anic quotations, interpretations, and allusions in Rūmī's work led Annemarie Schimmel to remark that his imagination and memory is "Koranized" and that he "live[s] and breathe[s] in the words of the revelation."<sup>22</sup> In fact such a close relationship and similarity was seen between the style and content of Rūmī's Mathnawī and the Qur'an that the Mathnawī, a six volume didactic poem, earned the honorific of being called "the Qur'an in Persian."<sup>23</sup> Ahmet Karamustafa<sup>24</sup> and Jawid Mojadeddi<sup>25</sup> have explored some of the ways in which the Mathnawī's style and content might disclose the reason why the Mathnawī earned such high praise within the Persianate Islamic tradition. In addition to the aforementioned studies of the place of the Qur'an within the Mathnawī, Fatemeh Keshavarz has examined the use and interpretation of the Qur'an in the context of Rūmī's pedagogy through studying the way in which Rūmī's discourses (Fīhi mā fīhi) display his interpretation of the Qur'an in the context of spiritual conversations and companionship.<sup>26</sup> Rūmī's Dīwān has been the focus of Nargis Virani's work and she has remarked on the skill and ease with which Rūmī is able to weave the Qur'an both explicitly and allusively into his lyric poems.<sup>27</sup> The most sustained treatment of a Qur'anic theme in Rūmī's works is the study by John Renard of Rūmī's prophetology. In this study, Renard examines the ways in which Rūmī uses Qur'anic prophets to illustrate "a vision of

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<sup>22</sup>Annemarie Schimmel. *I am Wind You are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992, p. 115; Rūmī is not unique among Sufis as an example of an author whose works are characterized by the high frequency of Qur'anic citations, interpretations, and allusions. Schimmel's statement is an appropriate description of the works composed by other Sufis as well, most notably Ibn al-'Arabī. So numerous are the Qur'anic quotations in Ibn al-'Arabī's works that a medieval Islamic scholar, Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, responds to the desire of Ibn al-'Arabī's opponents to burn his writings by remarking that those who want to do so would find themselves in a strange situation; if they leave the countless Qur'anic quotations in Ibn al-'Arabī's books that they are tossing in the flames, they end up burning the word of God. On the other hand, if they erase the passages before the burning, then the works to be burned are no longer those of Ibn al-'Arabī, so integral is the Qur'an to them. See, Michel Chodkiewicz. *An Ocean Without Shore*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>Various scholars have also called it a commentary on the Qur'an. For example see, Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Living Sufism*. London: Unwin, 1980, p. 166; Hādī Ḥā'rī. *Nukhbat al-'irfān 'an āyāt al-qur'ān wa tafsīri-hā*. Tehran: Intishārāt-i ḥaқиqat, 1373.

<sup>24</sup>I am grateful to Dr. Karamustafa for sharing a copy of this unpublished talk with me. Ahmet Karamustafa. *Speaker, Voice and Audience in the Qur'ān and the Masnavī*. Unpublished paper.

<sup>25</sup>Jawid Mojadeddi. "Rūmī". In: *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*. Ed. by Andrew Rippin. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pp. 362–72.

<sup>26</sup>Fatemeh Keshavarz. "Pregnant with God: The poetic art of mothering the sacred in Rumi's *Fīhi Ma Fīh*". In: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 22.2 (2002). Pp. 90–99.

<sup>27</sup>Nargis Virani. "I am the nightingale of the Merciful: Rumi's use of the Qur'an and Hadith". In: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 22.2 (2002). Pp. 100–111.

the relationship of the divine to the human and of a way homeward.”<sup>28</sup>

In this study, I take a thematic approach to analyzing Rūmī’s works and offer a contribution towards the larger project of studying the ways in which Rūmī interprets the Qur’an. I do so by examining his interpretations of Pharaoh’s character. Rūmī has left behind a vast body of works: His *Mathnawī* is composed of approximately 25,000 verses; the *Dīwān* contains some 40,000 verses; we possess a collection of 145 letters attributed to him; his *Fihī mā fihī* consists of approximately 250 pages of transcripts of talks given to students; and, finally, he also left behind a collection of seven sermons totalling approximately 100 pages. Given the sheer volume of his writings, a comprehensive study of the place of the Qur’an within Rūmī’s writings and of his hermeneutics of the Qur’an is a massive undertaking. But by looking at one theme throughout Rūmī’s works, this study can provide us with a good idea of the general tenor of Rūmī’s hermeneutics of the Qur’an.

One of the basic questions that arises upon encountering Rūmī’s interpretations of the Qur’anic narrative of Pharaoh is this: To what degree do these creative retellings by Rūmī harmonize with Qur’anic data? An examination of this question will throw light on the limits within which Rūmī develops Qur’anic verses. I set up the context for exploring this question by looking at Pharaoh’s narrative and his characterization in the Qur’an on its own terms. The study of Pharaoh’s characterization in the Qur’an raises some important methodological issues and I discuss them in the following section.

## 1.0.2 Methodology for Studying Qur’anic Narratives

Pharaoh is mentioned seventy-four times in the Qur’an.<sup>29</sup> The references to Pharaoh are interspersed throughout and his story is not told in chronological order.<sup>30</sup> At times, as in the case of Pharaoh’s dialogue with Moses, the Qur’an gives multiple renditions of the same episode. Retelling the same story, or referring repeatedly to an episode from a story, is a feature of Qur’anic discourse in general. Usually, there are subtle, if not marked differences in the narration of the same episode. The most immediate question, then, that confronts us in studying Pharaoh’s narrative is how to account for the multiple renderings of the same story or episode: why are some details brought out in some chapters and not in others?

According to Muslim scholars of the classical period, the use of stories in the Qur’an is dependent on the needs of the situation. In short, it is the context that determines which details of an episode the Qur’an highlights. Abdel Haleem points out that the study of the Qur’an was the impetus behind the development of many

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<sup>28</sup>John Renard. *All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 151.

<sup>29</sup>Reuven Firestone. “Pharaoh”. In: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*. Ed. by J.D. McAuliffe. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005.

<sup>30</sup>There are few stories told in a chronological sequence that comprise a whole chapter of the Qur’an, the story of Joseph, chapter 12, being an exception.

sciences such as linguistics, jurisprudence, exegesis, and rhetoric.<sup>31</sup> Among these sciences, rhetoric is of primary importance for Qur’anic exegesis. Scholars of rhetoric highlight the “concept of *maqām* (context of the situation) and its role in determining the utterance and providing the criterion for judging it.”<sup>32</sup> In a similar vein, another important concern for scholars of rhetoric is the “conformity of the utterance to the requirements of the situation” (*muṭabaqat al-kalām li-muqtaḍā’ al-ḥāl*).<sup>33</sup> In the words of the classical Muslim scholar, Al-Khaṭīb al-Qazwīnī

The context that demands the definite, generalization, advancement of part of a discourse, and inclusion (of particular words) differs from the context that demands the indefinite, specification, postponement and omission; the context of separation differs from that of joining; the situation that requires conciseness differs from that requiring expansiveness. Discourse with an intelligent person differs from discourse with an obtuse one. Each word with its companion is suited to a particular context. A high standard of beauty and acceptability of speech depends on its appropriateness to the situation and vice versa.<sup>34</sup>

We can summarize this position by saying that whether the unit of speech under consideration is a word, a sentence, or a whole episode in a story, it is the context that determines the particularities of discourse. In speaking of themes and stories that occur at more than one place in the Qur’an, Abdel Haleem observes that “the conciseness or expansion in one place or another depends on *muqtaḍā’ al-ḥāl* [the requirements of the situation], and an expanded statement in one place clarifies a concise one in another.”<sup>35</sup> The idea that one part of the Qur’an explains another has been used as a principle of correct exegesis by Muslim scholars and Abdel Haleem calls it an example of the classical notion of “intertextuality” where one part of the text depends upon another.<sup>36</sup> Of particular importance to our study of the Qur’anic narrative of Pharaoh is the opinion of Shāṭibī, a classical Muslim scholar, who notes that stories from earlier prophets appear in different versions of different length because “their purpose was to strengthen the Prophet in the face of various forms of denial and obstinacy from his opponents at different times.”<sup>37</sup> In this view, the themes that

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<sup>31</sup>M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. “Context and Internal Relationships: Keys to Quranic Exegesis”. In: *Approaches to the Qur’ān*. Ed. by G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp. 71–98, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup>Translated in *ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

are emphasized in a particular version of a Qur’anic story correspond to the situation of the Prophet.

G.R. Hawting and A.K. Shareef have observed that there is a marked preference for taking a literary critical approach to the Qur’an in recent scholarship.<sup>38</sup> In contemporary scholarship on the Qur’an, the work of Abdel Haleem, Mustansir Mir, Whitney Bodman, and Devin Stewart, among others, supports the position held by classical Muslim scholars concerning the occurrence of multiple renditions of the same story.<sup>39</sup> Whitney Bodman, in particular, has argued persuasively that all seven versions of the Iblīs story in the Qur’an are in conformity with the themes highlighted in the individual chapter in which they occur.<sup>40</sup> I have examined some versions of Pharaoh’s narrative with this question of context in mind and have found it to be consistent with the findings of the scholars cited above. As this study is focused on Rūmī’s hermeneutics, I limit myself to providing the larger context of the Qur’anic worldview as the backdrop for understanding Pharaoh’s characterization.

### 1.0.3 Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1, “Rūmī’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an” is a general exploration of Rūmī’s views on the Qur’an and its interpretation. Drawing primarily upon his discourses and the *Mathnawī*, I sketch out the ways in which Rūmī conceives of the Qur’anic text, the purpose and process of hermeneutics, and the levels of meaning present within the text.

Chapter 2, “Pharaoh in the Qur’an” is a study of the Qur’anic characterization of Pharaoh and serves as context for situating Rūmī’s interpretations of Pharaoh’s character. In the first part of this chapter I give an overview of the Qur’anic worldview through examining the ways in which the Qur’an addresses its readers by reminding them of the past and by anticipating for them the end of time. I also briefly examine the analogy that the Qur’an draws between the challenges faced by earlier prophets and the historical situation of Muhammad. This summary of Qur’anic teachings provides the context in which we explore the Qur’anic narrative of Moses and Pharaoh. I analyze separately the episodes where Pharaoh figures as a character, which prepares the ground for reflections on the Qur’anic characterization of Pharaoh.

In Chapter 3, “Pharaoh in Rūmī’s Works,” I explore in detail the exact manner in which Rūmī interprets, through creative retelling, various episodes in the Qur’anic story of Moses and Pharaoh. This chapter places Rūmī’s characterization of Pharaoh in the broader context of Rūmī’s psychology. Within this framework, Pharaoh is a symbol of the human soul and we see that Rūmī’s portrayal of Pharaoh proceeds from his desire to help seekers overcome the blameworthy character traits of which

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<sup>38</sup>G.R. Hawting and Abdel-Kader Shareef, eds. *Approaches to the Qur’ān*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. ix.

<sup>39</sup>See bibliography for studies done by these scholars.

<sup>40</sup>For a detailed examination of this issue, see Whitney S. Bodman. “The Poetics of Iblīs: Qur’anic Narrative as Theology”. PhD thesis. Harvard University, 2004.

Pharaoh is such a clear example.

I conclude by offering some general observations on the nature of characterization in the Qur'an and an evaluation of the way in which Rūmī approaches the Qur'an and interprets the Qur'anic character of Pharaoh. At this stage I review my suggestion that the study of interpretations done outside the genre of Qur'an commentaries (*tafsīr*) makes important contributions to the field of Qur'anic interpretation.

## Chapter 2

# Rūmī's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an

This chapter explores aspects of Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an. The variety of questions in the field of hermeneutics can be grouped under the following categories: Text, meaning, language, and interpretation. As Rūmī does not present his views on any of the above categories in a systematic fashion, I have brought together material from Rūmī's works that help us understand the manner in which he answers questions prompted by hermeneutical inquiry. We begin by examining the way in which Rūmī conceives of meaning and move on to explore his views on the process of understanding the Qur'an. We then proceed to study the way in which Rūmī understands the interaction between the text and the reader. An examination of Rūmī's views on the nature and levels of signification in the Qur'an lead us to the conclusion.

### 2.1 Form and Meaning

The key to understanding Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an lies in grasping his binary analytic pair of form and meaning. This distinction between form (*ṣūrah*) and meaning (*ma'nā*) is fundamental to Rūmī's teachings<sup>1</sup> and he uses this pair as a tool to analyze every existent entity including human beings and the Qur'an. The form of something is its outward appearance while its meaning is its inward and unseen reality.<sup>2</sup> The form of a human being is the body and the meaning of a human being is the soul or spirit. In the domain of language, words are the form while their denotations are the meanings.

To travel the path of religion is for Rūmī to be a seeker of meaning. The goal of the spiritual path is to move beyond appearances and form, to apprehend and join with meaning. Rūmī uses the prayer of the Prophet Muhammad, "O Lord, show

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<sup>1</sup>William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

us things as they are!”<sup>3</sup> to point out to his readers that the world as it ordinarily appears is a veil over reality. The form or body of any entity is a contingent reality and depends upon its meaning. In Rūmī's thinking, it is the meaning, the spirit of something that holds it together and gives it coherence. Meaning is therefore more lasting, more excellent and the most appropriate object of human effort:

Know that the outward form passes away, but the world of Meaning remains forever.

How long will you make love with the shape of the jug? Leave aside the jug's shape: Go seek water!

Having seen the form, you are unaware of the meaning. If you are wise, pick out the pearl from the shell.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, Rūmī says: “Pass beyond form, escape from names! Flee titles and names toward meaning!”<sup>5</sup>

Since he makes such a sharp distinction between form and meaning and clearly prefers meaning over form, it might seem that Rūmī's thinking is dualistic. But to consider Rūmī's thinking dualistic would overlook the larger context in which he addresses his readers; it is only from the human perspective of attaining felicity that form appears as an obstacle. Furthermore, it is an obstacle only if one refuses to accept that there is something beyond form. By itself, form is the portal to meaning and seekers need to cling to it so that form might lead them to its inward reality: “Seize upon the outward, even if it flies crookedly! In the end, the outward leads to the inward.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the basic questions raised within the context of Western monotheistic theology is the relationship between the one and the many, between unity and multiplicity. The Qur'an discusses these questions through the use of divine names; the One is among these *most beautiful names of God* (Q 7:180) and the witnessing of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) is the fundamental principle of Islam. One instance of the Qur'anic discussion of the relationship between unity and multiplicity at the cosmic level is the following verse: *To God belongs all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth and all things go back to Him* (Q 11:123). If everything in existence belongs to God, then it follows that the form and meaning of a thing also belong to God. It is in this light that many Muslim authors, particularly Sufis, have tended to interpret the Qur'anic verse that names God as both the Outward and the Inward: *He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward, and He has knowledge of everything* (Q 57:3). The question of a fundamental dualism within creation is therefore answered by Rūmī, and other authors, by relating both the form and the meaning of

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<sup>3</sup>Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. *Fīḥi mā fīḥi*. Ed. by B. Furūzānfar. Tehran: Amīr kabīr, 1348/1969, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. *The Mathnawī of Jalālud'dīn Rūmī*. Ed. and trans. by R.A. Nicholson. 8 vols. London: Luzac, 1925–1940, II: 1020–22; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1285; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 526; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 22.

a thing to God. Form is not an obstacle in and of itself; it only becomes a problem if humans fail to see beyond it. The whole universe is full of signs that point towards God, but to get infatuated with a sign, to continue “to make love with the jug” and not to seek water, no matter how delightful in the short term, would cause unhappiness in the long run. It is in this light that Rūmī sees form and meaning as two aspects of one reality. “Form also has tremendous importance. No, much more than importance, for it participates in the kernel. Just as nothing can be done without the kernel, so also nothing can be done without the shell...But the root is meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

In this arboreal model of existence, the goal of the religious search is the root. In the final analysis, the root of everything is God and hence the meaning of everything is God. The apparent multiplicity of the leaves and branches leads inwards towards radical unity. It is to such a place that Rūmī is calling his readers and in the case of understanding the Qur'an, it is therefore not surprising that Rūmī places more importance on the meaning than the form of the Qur'an.

## 2.2 Understanding the Qur'an

The binary scheme of form and meaning that Rūmī uses as his analytic lens to examine everything in existence has its counterpart in the realm of understanding and epistemology. Just as there are at least two levels within reality, the outer and the inner, there are two primary modes through which a person can know something: verification (*taḥqīq*) and imitation (*taqlīd*). Imitative knowledge is conventional knowledge acquired through culture and tradition and stands in contrast with the kind of knowledge whose reality is verified for oneself with absolute certainty. The existence of verified knowledge is hinted at in the first article of Muslim faith, the enunciation of the phrase “There is no god but God,” called the witnessing of God's unity. Just as witnesses in a court of law need to have some basis upon which they can give their testimony, the clear implication of naming the enunciation of faith as giving testimony or witnessing (*shahādah*) is that Muslims need to have a firm basis of knowledge on whose strength they can claim that God is indeed One.

In addition to prevalent and conventional positions concerning the structure of reality and the existence of God, a sounder basis for becoming a witness to God's unity can also be provided by rational arguments. The Qur'an repeatedly exhorts its listeners to employ their intelligence (*'aql*) in order to reflect, meditate, and ponder upon the evidence presented by the world around them. It does so with the assumption that a healthy and sound intelligence will come to the right conclusions concerning the reality and oneness of God, and of His relationship to the world. But the perspective of verification represented by Rūmī in its Sufi formulation<sup>8</sup>, while acknowledging the usefulness and importance of discursive knowledge, seeks to move beyond rational

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<sup>7</sup>Rūmī, *Fīḥi mā fīhi*, p. 19; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>See William C. Chittick. *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2007, for a detailed discussion of other forms of Islamic learning, primarily philosophy, that seek to travel the path of verification.



arguments because “the leg of those who employ reasoning is wooden: A wooden leg is very unstable.”<sup>9</sup> Rūmī contrasts the instability of knowledge attained through reasoning with the stable and sure knowledge of the verifiers attained through direct vision: “The imitator gives expression to a hundred proofs, but he speaks from discursive reasoning, not direct vision.”<sup>10</sup> In using this theory and hierarchy of knowledge Rūmī exhorts his readers to seek verification and vision by passing beyond the form of the Qur'an and to learn its meaning from its Author: “Your knowledge based on imitation and opinion has become a snare for bread, but the form of the Eye of Certainty is given by *The All-Merciful taught the Koran* (Q 55:1-2).”<sup>11</sup> A good illustration of this exhortation, and the language and imagery used in such discussions, is found in one of the discourses where Rūmī talks to his companions about Ibn Muqrī, a well-known Qur'an reciter of his own time.

This discourse follows up on a discussion between Rūmī and Ibn Muqrī concerning the meaning of the Qur'an. The reciter rejects the existence of a Qur'an other than the one in Arabic given to Muhammad. But Rūmī argues that the Qur'an, being the speech of God, existed in the times of earlier prophets such as Moses and Jesus, it was just not in Arabic. He also brings in Qur'anic evidence by citing the following verse: *Say, 'If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted'* (Q 18:109). Rūmī makes an argument based on the prima facie meaning of this verse; since it is possible to write out the whole Qur'an with ink bought for only a small amount of money, then, if we take God's words in the aforementioned verse to be true, it is impossible that the entirety of God's speech be contained in the Qur'an. The clear implication is that the Qur'an, the speech of God, has existed in different forms in different times and that the words of God have not been exhausted by these revelations. Despite such clear evidence from the Qur'an, Ibn Muqrī remains unconvinced and holds fast to his denial that the Qur'an exists in other forms. Seeing that his words are not having any effect, Rūmī leaves the reciter.

In recounting this incident to his companions, Rūmī critiques this reciter sharply. Rūmī states that Ibn Muqrī only recites the form of the Qur'an correctly and is unaware of its meaning. He recites it blindly so that when he does find a meaning, he rejects it immediately. This is harsh criticism indeed of someone who has memorized the Qur'an, knows the Arabic language well, and is most certainly aware of the apparent meanings and historical denotations of Qur'anic verses. In Muslim societies such a person is accorded respect and veneration for having committed the Qur'an to memory and consequently Rūmī's critique is sure to shock his audience. This dissonance provides an opportunity for Rūmī to say that the cause of Ibn Muqrī's denial lies in his state of knowledge which is imitative and not verified. Ibn Muqrī is like a child who has been told that a walnut is something that rolls around and

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<sup>9</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 2128; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 2470; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup>Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*. Ed. by B. Furūzānfar. Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1336–46/1957–67, Verse 7662; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 130.

makes a rattling noise. If such a child is presented walnut seeds or walnut oil he will reject it because it does not fit his idea of what a walnut looks like.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that Rūmī's discussion with Ibn Muqrī is based on rational arguments that draw upon Qur'anic teachings and the general meaning of the Qur'an as the speech of God. Nowhere does Rūmī try to appeal to some kind of mystical experience to bolster his position. In calling Ibn Muqrī a child, Rūmī is alluding to the observation that the rational faculty of children is not fully developed. In Rūmī's view, Ibn Muqrī is not even following the clear meaning of the Qur'anic verses that an intelligent person ought to think through and instead denies the existence of the Qur'an in the times that preceded Muhammad. The power of imitative and conventional knowledge is so strong that it overpowers the faculty of reason of an accomplished reciter and prevents him from carrying out the direct command of the Qur'an to use reason, to ponder and to reflect. The possibility of being able to apprehend deeper, more comprehensive meaning is stifled by the thick cloak of imitation.

Based on the presentation so far, it would seem that the opposite of imitation lies in the use of one's reason; after all Rūmī is only asking his companions to use their reason, unlike Ibn Muqrī, in making sure that they have investigated and accepted the logical conclusions and implications of Qur'anic verses. But he offers some images at this stage that clarify the relationship between reason and verification mentioned earlier; while reason is an important tool in coming to understand meaning and might be considered the first step in the quest for verification, the highest form of understanding comes from joining with the object of one's knowledge.

He gives the example of traditions associated with the Prophet's Companions who would consider great any one amongst themselves who had memorized a half or full chapter of the Qur'an. This is an interesting strategy on Rūmī's part because he is drawing upon the veneration and respect accorded to the earliest Companions and their followers. Throughout Islamic societies, there has been general agreement about the idea that the Prophet's Companions had actualized the knowledge of the Qur'an and Islam in a more perfect manner than any succeeding generation. This is because they had the benefit of the teaching presence and the grace of the living Prophet. Furthermore, their mother tongue was Arabic, they were familiar with the idiom of the Qur'an to the best possible degree since they were the original audience to whom the Qur'an was addressed, and they were possessors of prodigious memories having grown up in a society with an extremely high degree of oral literacy. Given all these factors one would assume that it would be easy enough for them to memorize the entirety of the Qur'an. Why was it that they were only able to memorize half, or at the maximum a full chapter of the Qur'an? And further, why was this seemingly easy enough task deemed great by their contemporaries, so much so that people would point, with amazement, at such Companions?

Rūmī says that the reason for the fame and veneration of these Companions was simple: They had *eaten* the portion of the Qur'an that they had memorized. In

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<sup>12</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 81.

Rūmī's mind, memorization of the Qur'an, a feat that Ibn Muqrī had performed, should not be simply an act of rote learning. If memorizing the Qur'an means eating the Qur'an, then it consists of chewing it, dissolving it with the substances secreted by one's body, and making it a part of one's being. The food we eat has effects and it leaves traces within us. For Rūmī the ideal process of reading and memorizing the Qur'an ought to be like the process of eating. It is easy enough to eat a ton of bread, says Rūmī, if one takes a bite and then spits it out.<sup>13</sup> Such is the condition of someone who recites the Qur'an without understanding its meaning. It is to this reader that the following saying applies: "There is many a reciter of the Qur'an whom the Qur'an curses."<sup>14</sup>

The process of understanding the Qur'an when seen through the image of eating brings out the effort needed to reach full apprehension, and is also helpful in clarifying the ways in which verification, realization, and actualization of the Qur'an differs from conventional and imitative understanding.<sup>15</sup> The Companions represent verified knowledge in opposition to the reciters who only rely on imitative knowledge. The Companions had combined the outer form of the Qur'an with its inner meaning. "Among the Companions there was scarcely any one that knew the Qur'an by heart, though their souls had a great desire to commit it to memory."<sup>16</sup> Their inability to memorize more than a portion of the Qur'an resulted from the fact that the meaning, the kernel of the Qur'an, had reached maturity and had filled up their insides.<sup>17</sup> The Kernel of the Qur'an is its meaning; and this meaning in the last analysis is God. Rūmī says that in the beings of these Companions, the revelation and the flashing of God's eternal Light consumed the temporal and particular Arabic Qur'an; since they had arrived at the goal and their hunger was satisfied, they no longer needed to memorize or "eat" any more of the Qur'an. Anyone of the Companions who knew a quarter of the Qur'an by heart was praised by the other Companions with the words, "Great is he among us!"<sup>18</sup> Rūmī says that this is an extremely difficult task that can be performed only by mighty spiritual kings. The purpose of the Qur'an is to lead the seeker to God and, in the case of the Prophet's Companions, a portion of the Qur'an had accomplished the task. They could therefore no longer continue to memorize the rest of the Qur'an because they had attained the end goal and were full of God's

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<sup>13</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 82; Ghazali (1:140) attributes this saying to Malik ibn Anas, the eponym of the Maliki school of Law. See William C. Chittick, ed. *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi*. Trans. by William C. Chittick. Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2004.

<sup>15</sup>This metaphor can also be seen as a gloss of such Qur'anic injunctions as: *Will you not ponder the Qur'an* (Q 4:82); *We have sent down to you a book, in it is your remembrance. Will you not use your intellect?* (Q 21:10); *We have sent down the message to you [Prophet], so that you can explain to people what was sent for them, so that they may reflect* (Q 16:44).

<sup>16</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1386-1405.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

Light. In Rūmī's Sufi perspective, since the Qur'an is a letter from the Beloved to His lovers, how could the Companions read the letter when they were sitting in the Beloved's presence; how could they continue to hold on to the staff now that their blindness was cured, how could they continue to seek a ladder after having mounted to the roofs of Heaven.<sup>19</sup>

Rūmī has another set of images and associated metaphors that not only clarifies the nature of the Qur'anic text but also helps readers comprehend the effort required to achieve a deep understanding of the Qur'an. These images depict the Qur'an as a shy bride who is being pursued by suitors desiring union with her. The suitors are the seekers after meaning whose goal is to see clearly the face of this veiled beauty. Rūmī's builds on the image provided by Sanā'ī: "The bride of the Qur'an's presence throws off its veil at the moment when it sees the kingdom of faith free of tumult."<sup>20</sup> To the student of the Qur'an, Rūmī says: "The Qur'an is like a bride. Although you pull aside her veil, she does not show you her face. That you investigate it and have no pleasure or unveiling is because it rejects your attempt to pull off its veil. It tricks you and shows itself to you as ugly, as if to say, 'I am not that beauty.' It is capable of showing any face it wants."<sup>21</sup> The meaning of the Qur'an appears here as a living entity that responds to the inner state of its seeker. This is a reader-response theory of Qur'anic interpretation where the intention and state of the reader affects the meaning disclosed or withheld by the text. The correct way to find meaning, says Rūmī, is this: "But, if you do not pull at the veil and seek its good-pleasure, give water to its sown field, do it service from afar and try to do what pleases it, without you pulling at its veil, it will show you its face."<sup>22</sup> Understanding is therefore a dynamic process in which the living meaning of the Qur'an responds to the reader based on its satisfaction with the reader's actions. The way to understand the Qur'an is to transform oneself in keeping with the teachings of the Qur'an. The meanings open up on their own, in such a case, without the seeker trying to violently interpret Qur'anic verses.

Rūmī takes the usual way of thinking that considers the reader as active and the text as receptive and turns it around such that the dynamics of interpretation and understanding are distributed across both the text and the reader. He places the power of granting access to meaning within the text but at the same time clarifies the nature of the effort that the reader needs to exert in the pursuit of finding meaning. In the context of Muslim culture, where the divinity and meaningful nature of the Qur'an is an accepted fact, Rūmī yet again uses a binary division to elucidate the manner in which Muslims interact with the Qur'an:

The Qur'an is a two-sided brocade. Although some benefit from one side

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<sup>19</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*.

<sup>20</sup>Abū al-Majd Majdūd Sanā'ī. *Dīwān*. Ed. by Mudarris Raḍawī. Tehran: Ibn Sīnā, 1341/1962, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

of it and some from the other, they are both right because God wants both groups to derive benefit. It is like a woman who has a husband and also a nursing infant: each derives a different pleasure from her, the infant from the milk in her breasts and the husband from being mated to her. People who take external pleasure from the Qur'an and "drink its milk" are "infants of the way," but those who have attained perfection have a different enjoyment and understanding of the meaning of the Qur'an.<sup>23</sup>

The goal of Sufism is to become mature and fully grown in the path of God. In making the distinction between infants and fully grown men, Rūmī is developing Qur'anic imagery concerning the life of this world: *And what is the life of this world except a game and a distraction* (Q 6:32).<sup>24</sup> One has to develop beyond childhood and reach adulthood in order to fully understand and take pleasure in the Qur'an. In Rūmī's view "all people are like children, except the one who is drunk on God. No one except the person who has attained freedom from their caprice can be called an adult."<sup>25</sup> The path to overcoming caprice and breaking the attachment to sensual appetite lies in performing the works enjoined in the scripture by "watering the sown fields of the Qur'an." It is to do the bidding of the veiled beauties of Qur'anic meaning and to "seek its good pleasure" through a partnership with it. The seekers after meaning need to feed on the light of the Qur'an until they become light itself. The bodies of such humans are transformed to spirit like the Prophet's and upon reaching this stage it is God himself who teaches the inner meanings: *The All-Merciful has taught the Qur'an* (Q 55:1).<sup>26</sup> It is only at this level that it can be said that someone has understood the Qur'an. For Rūmī, to understand the Qur'an fully, one has to become the Qur'an.

### 2.3 The Qur'an: Map of the Self

It is clear from the above discussion that, for Rūmī, the process of understanding the Qur'an is really a process of self-understanding. The Sufi maxim, "He who know his own self knows his Lord," can be expanded to say that he who knows his own self comes to know his Lord's speech, i.e. the Qur'an. Hermeneutically speaking, then, knowledge of scripture is contingent upon knowledge of the self. Ascertaining the identity and nature of the knowing subject becomes the most important quest. To his readers who seek to interpret the Qur'an and the reports (*akhbār*), such as the speech and acts of the Prophet and his Companions that are handed down from one generation to the next, Rūmī can therefore say: "Interpret your own self, not the

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<sup>23</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 165.

<sup>24</sup>See also Q 29:64; 47:36.

<sup>25</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3430.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 539.

Traditions.”<sup>27</sup>

Rūmī sees the Qur'an as full of signs (*āyāt*) that delineate the path to safety and security from the path leading to wretchedness and destruction. Above and beyond pointing out in clear language the pitfalls and traps along the way to pleasing God, the Qur'an also describes the structure of the human self in all its possibilities. The highest possible states of human beings are exemplified by the prophets: “The Qur'an is a description of the states of the prophets; The fish in the pure ocean of the Majestic God.”<sup>28</sup> On the other hand while depicting the attitudes and acts of disobedient humans, the Qur'an clarifies the nethermost possibilities of human beings: “The entire Qur'an is an explanation of the viciousness of the [lower] selves; look in to the Holy Book! Where is that eye of yours?”<sup>29</sup>

The stories of the prophets in the Qur'an, and this includes the Prophet Muhammad, not only relate historical events that took place in the past, but at the micro-cosmic level of the human self, they are the ready cash and the exact description of the readers' state in this very moment: “This story is not a story...it is the description of a state (*waṣf-e ḥāl*).”<sup>30</sup> An excellent example of the way in which Rūmī interprets Qur'anic stories of the prophets is found in the extended treatment he gives to the various episodes of the story of Moses and Pharaoh. Rūmī sees Pharaoh as representing the rebellious human self that exceeds all bounds in its obstinacy and in its quest for total power and control. He develops parts of this story to illustrate the many qualities of the lower self and contrasts it with the station of the prophets as a way to help readers to know and interpret the structure and content of their own souls:

The mention of Moses serves as a mask, but the light of Moses is your ready cash.

Moses and Pharaoh are in your own being: you must seek these two adversaries in yourself.<sup>31</sup>

For Rūmī, the many prophets mentioned in the Qur'an and, in particular, the Prophet Muhammad become the prototypes and trans-historic models for all human beings. Travel on the inner path (*sulūk*) of Sufism is seen as following in the footsteps of these Qur'anic exemplars and consists of passing through the many states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) traversed by them. Muhammad is seen to have encompassed all the states and stations of the earlier prophets. He brings together all the excellent qualities of human beings in a comprehensive fashion and is therefore the model par excellence for Muslims. Rūmī considers each verse of the Qur'an to be related to the specific states and stations experienced by the Prophet. He indicates this relationship

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<sup>27</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3744.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 1538.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 4862.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1149.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1252.

in an indirect but clear fashion in one of his discourses while talking about Shaykh Nassāj's amazing ability to explain (*tafsīr*) the Qur'an.

Shaykh Nassāj was illiterate and did not know Arabic but had the ability to explain the meaning of Qur'anic verses when they were translated for him. It is worth citing Rūmī's description of what this shaykh would do: "...He would begin the explanation (*tafsīr*) and the verification of the reality (*taḥqīq*) of that verse and would say that Muṣṭafā [Muhammad], God's prayers and blessings be upon him, was in that station when he recited that verse and the states of that station are such and such. He would explain in detail its level (*martabah*), its paths, and its ascent (*'urūj*)."<sup>32</sup> Rūmī cites this story and the shaykh's abilities with approval and without any hint of criticism. The point to note in this quotation with regards to Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an is that he considers the explanation (*tafsīr*), and the investigation or verification (*taḥqīq*) of a Qur'anic verse to mean an exposé of the states and stations of the Prophet at the moment of that specific revelation. In this approach, each Qur'anic verse is read in light of the Prophet's inner landscape at the time of its revelation. The place where the Prophet stood at that time, his station, then provides the beginning point for launching into an explanation of the various states associated with that station, the various paths within that station, the rank and level of that station in comparison to other stations, and the highest point possible within that station. This is an inner perspective on the well established historical branch of traditional Qur'anic studies called "The Occasions of Revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The purpose of this Qur'anic science is to provide reports delineating the circumstances in which specific verses of the Qur'an were revealed. Such historical information is used by exegetes to determine the context of revelation and has important implications for determining the scope of application for Qur'anic verses.

But from the Sufi perspective, corresponding to each outward occasion for revelation is an inner state and station of the Prophet. The Qur'an appears as a map of the Prophet's journey to God, his travels on the inner path (*sayr wa sulūk*). That the shaykh is illiterate implies that the inner interpretation of the Qur'an depends on achieving an understanding of reality through following the path of the Prophet and passing through all the stations and states that he passed through. In this quest, knowledge of Arabic and of the traditional Qur'anic sciences is not essential. Even though the seekers of meaning are followers and hence imitators of the Prophet, they ascertain the reality of the situation and do not simply rest with the outward or historical occasions of revelation. The pre-requisite for being a Qur'an interpreter at the inner level is to have actualized one's deepest self and to have attained union with God. Knowledge of God and of God's speech stems from knowledge of the self. And knowledge of one's self, of the individual human, is integrated into and embraced by the trans-historic reality of the Prophet Muhammad.

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<sup>32</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 110.

## 2.4 The Scale for Determining the Correctness of Interpretations

In the context of a discussion about interpretations of the Qur'an, it is only natural to ask the following question: How can seekers or readers determine that an interpretation, whether their own or someone else's, is correct and worth following? This question gains even more poignancy within Rūmī's framework of knowledge in which he contrasts imitation with verification. Rūmī's goal, as we have seen, is to spur his readers to move beyond imitation to the station of verifying for themselves the teachings of the Qur'an and the knowledge possessed by the prophets and their inheritors, the saints or Friends of God. In terms of authority, the process of verification demands the cultivation of an inner balance in whose scales the worth of an interpretation or teaching can be measured. Ultimately, the knowing self needs to become its own authority and to trust its own judgement. Rūmī cites a ḥadīth to make this point: " 'Consult your heart even if the legal scholar (*mufti*) has given you a ruling (*fatwā*). ' You have a meaning (*ma'nā*) on the inside, show the legal scholar's opinion to it so that it can choose that which suits it.'"<sup>33</sup>

Rūmī is well aware that the ḥadīth cited above, in which the Prophet is counseling people to consult their hearts, has the potential of being misinterpreted and can be misused to justify actions that are based on the caprice of the ego. A self whose "inner meaning" is ruled by its appetite and caprice rather than its reason, shaped in the light of revelation, is deemed by Rūmī to be sick and in need of the medicine administered by the Friends of God (*awliyā'*):

When a physician comes to a sick person, he makes inquiries of the "inner physician." You have a physician within, that is, your temperament which rejects and accepts. Therefore, the outer physician questions it, "such and such a thing that you ate, how was it? Was it light? Was it heavy? How was your sleep?" From what the inner physician tells him, the external physician makes his prescription. Hence the root is that inner physician, his temperament. When this physician falls ill and his temperament becomes corrupted, because of his weakness he sees things backwards and gives crooked indications. He calls sugar bitter and vinegar sweet. Therefore, he needs the outside physician to aid him so that his temperament may return to its original state. After that he shows himself to his own inner physician and takes his opinion (*fatwā*). Similarly, man has a temperament for his "inner meaning." When that falls ill, whatever his inner senses see or say is contrary [to truth]. So the Friends are the physicians who help him so that his temperament straightens out and his heart and religion gain strength.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.



In Rūmī's view there can be two negative consequences of interpreting the received knowledge of scripture and the Prophet's words. The first is that seekers can become complacent and can slacken in their observance of divine commandments. The second is that Muslims can deny important aspects of Qur'anic teachings by interpreting away the outward meaning of certain verses, meanings that do not seem to accord with their as yet unilluminated intelligence. In lines typical of his style of teaching, Rūmī admonishes some Muslims for having a complacent attitude towards their power of choice. The saying of the Prophet, "The pen has dried," is interpreted by some people to mean that their destiny is already written out and that they gain no benefit from performing acts of service to God. Rūmī interprets this ḥadīth to mean that "the Pen" has dried after writing the words, "Obedience and disobedience are not on the same level, honesty and stealing are not on the same level.... The Pen has dried after writing that *God does not let the reward of those who act beautifully be lost* (Q 9:121)." <sup>35</sup>

Rūmī's understanding of the Qur'an leads him to teach the virtue of constant struggle in the way of God. Seekers can never become complacent about their situation; they should strive to the utmost of their ability in the quest to gain closeness to God through performing prescribed actions and undertaking supererogatory acts of worship as well. To become comfortable in a state of distance from God, even though initially one had the intention of continuing to tread the path, is to be worse than animals:

When an ass falls in mire by going too fast, he moves incessantly in order to get up.

He doesn't make the place smooth to stay in: he knows that it is not where he should live.

Your senses have been less than the senses of an ass, for your heart has not recoiled from these clods of mud.

You interpret (*ta'wīl*) texts seeking reasons to stay in the mud, since you are not willing to tear your heart from it.

You say, "This is allowable for me: I am under compulsion. God in his kindness will not chastise a helpless one like me." <sup>36</sup>

Seekers should not give up in sadness at finding themselves in a difficult place but should actively seek to face that difficulty: "Move on! Do not sigh coldly in your apathy; seek pain, seek pain, pain, pain!" <sup>37</sup>

The biggest cause of false interpretations are the desires of the interpreters. Interpreters can read their desires into the Qur'an in a way that obfuscates the intention and meaning of the divine text:

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<sup>35</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 3131.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, II: 3355-3359.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 4304.

You have interpreted the virgin Word: interpret yourself, not the Book.  
 You interpret the Qu'ran according to your caprice: by you the sublime  
 meaning is degraded and perverted.<sup>38</sup>

The Arabic word for interpretation that Rūmī uses is *ta'wīl*, which derives from the noun *awwal*, meaning “first.” To interpret a word is to take it to its origin; it is to discover the intention of the author. In this light Rūmī's exhortation to “interpret yourself” means that readers need to go back to the root of their own self, the source of their own subjectivity. If the task of knowing oneself is not accomplished, readers interpret scripture and reports on the basis of desire and a limited vision of reality. Rūmī considers such interpretation despicable and gives a scathing image to show what false interpretation done from the perspective of one's own desire looks like: Such an interpreter is like a fly floating on a straw in a pool of an ass's urine, thinking itself to be the skillful captain who is navigating the vessel in an illimitable ocean!<sup>39</sup> If someone is able to apprehend the warning in this image of false interpretation, then he is not a fly and his “spirit is not analogous to his form.”<sup>40</sup>

In Rūmī's view another negative consequence of interpreting the Qur'an on the basis of opinion is that it can lead to a denial of the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. One such case concerns the following verse in the Qur'an: *The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him. There is not a single thing that does not celebrate His praise, though you do not understand their praise* (Q 17:44). The Mu'tazilites represent a group of Muslim theologians who interpret the Qur'an using reason. On the basis of the opinion formed through the exercise of their reason on the Qu'ranic text, they say:

How should visible glorification of God be the meaning intended? The  
 claim to see that glorification is an erroneous fancy.  
 No, the sight of that inanimate object causes him who sees it to glorify  
 God at the time when he regards its signification.  
 Therefore, inasmuch as it leads you to glorify God, that indication which  
 it gives you is its uttering the words of glorification.<sup>41</sup>

The Mu'tazilites interpret these verses in this manner because they do not possess the illumination and the state (*ḥāl*) of the verifiers: “Their imprisonment in the realm of sense-perception makes them strangers to the ideas of the unseen world.”<sup>42</sup>

But those who move towards the world of spirit are able to hear the glorification of inanimate objects such as the heavens, the earth, and stones.<sup>43</sup> For such people,

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<sup>38</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 1079-1081.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 1082-89.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 1090.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1024-1026.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1027-1028.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1008-1023.

the literal meaning of the Qur'an becomes a lived and verified reality.<sup>44</sup> The proper attitude, then, is that seekers should accept the literal meanings of transmitted texts, the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet, without interpretation and let their beings embrace these meanings just as the throat accepts honey and milk.

...Interpretation is a rejection of the gift, since the interpreter regards the real meaning as faulty.

The view that it is faulty arises from the weakness of his understanding... Interpret yourself, not the Traditions: Abuse your brain, not the rose-garden.<sup>45</sup>

While it might seem from the discussion above that Rūmī is completely against interpreting the Qur'an, this is not the case. Rūmī is fully aware that interpretation is an important component of coming to know the meanings God intended in the Qur'an. Furthermore, interpretation is an activity that can help the seeker on God's path. Since his ultimate concern is with helping seekers keep moving forward on this path, Rūmī offers a pragmatic criterion for determining the truth of an interpretation. This advice is aimed at those who have already regained their spiritual health by conforming themselves to the clear commands in the Qur'an, by following the example set by the Prophet, and by taking to heart the advice of the Friends of God. Having submitted their egos to the divine word, these seekers can decide, based on the following criterion, whether or not an interpretation is correct:

An interpretation is true if it makes you warm, hopeful and modest.  
And if it makes you slow, then know this truth, it is a distortion (*tabdīl*)  
and not an interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

The Qur'an has come to quicken us and to hold the hands of those who have lost hope.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.5 Levels of Meaning

While the primary distinction that Rūmī makes when discussing the Qur'an is a binary one between its form and its meaning, there are places in his works where he talks about the existence of multiple levels of meaning in the Qur'an. In the *Mathnawī* he quotes the ḥadīth: *The Qur'an has an outside and an inside, and its inside has another inside up till seven insides.*<sup>47</sup> In explaining this report from the Prophet, Rūmī says:

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<sup>44</sup>Compare what Rūmī's friend Shams has to say concerning this issue: "I talk of the speaking of inanimate things and their acts. The philosophers deny it. So what should I do with my own eyes?" Chittick, *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi*, pp. 110-111

<sup>45</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3741-3744.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, V: 3125-3127.

<sup>47</sup>Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar. *Aḥādīth wa qīṣaṣ-i mathnawī*. Ed. by Ḥusayn Dāwūdī. Tehran: Amīr kabīr, 1376/1997, p. 278.

Know that the Qur'an's words have an outside and under the outside  
 there is an inside, exceedingly powerful.  
 And beneath that inside a third inside, in which all intellects become lost.  
 The fourth inside of the Qur'an none has perceived at all, expect God the  
 peerless, the incomparable.<sup>48</sup>

There are many points worth noticing in Rūmī's explanation. First, it is significant that Rūmī does not identify the levels by names. Rather he explains the second level by listing its quality of power. The third level is explained negatively by stating that reason (*'aql*) is incapable of comprehending it and he relates the fourth level directly to God's perception. We also notice that even though the Prophetic report spoke of seven levels, Rūmī only discusses four. The mention of four levels by Rūmī calls to mind the fourfold classification of levels of meaning in the Qur'an employed in one of the earliest texts of Sufi commentary, a work attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765).<sup>49</sup> In this scheme, there are four aspects to the Qur'an, the explicit or the verbal expression, the allusive, subtleties, and realities. With each of these aspects a different class of human beings is associated. Access to the meanings of the Qur'an is determined by the level in which a person stands. Corresponding to the four aspects are the commoners, the elite, the Friends of God, and the prophets.<sup>50</sup>

Rūmī's explanation, yet again, highlights his understanding that the inward and the outward, form and meaning, are related to each other in a non-dualistic manner. There may be many levels of meaning at the inward plane, but all those levels are contained within the outward. This explanation points to another important aspect of Rūmī's writings: their nonsystematic nature. Even though he was criticized for not doing so, Rūmī himself did not present his teachings systematically. The verses that precede the ones cited above relate the criticism leveled at the Mathnawī by some of its readers for its lack of systematization. In Rūmī's representation, these critics say that

The Mathnawī, is low; it is the story of the Prophet and is an imitation;  
 There is no mention of investigation and the sublime mysteries towards  
 which the Friends of God make their steeds gallop;  
 From the stations of asceticism to the passing away, step by step up to  
 union with God,  
 No explanation or definition of every station and stage, so that by means  
 of its wings a person of heart may fly.<sup>51</sup>

Rūmī sees the Mathnawī's style and method as similar to that of the Qur'an and responds by saying that at the time of the Qur'an's revelation, the unbelievers had

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<sup>48</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 4244-4247.

<sup>49</sup>Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī*, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup>For an overview of the fourfold and other schema employed by various Sufis in their Qur'an commentaries, see chapters 2 and 3 in *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 4233-4236.

objected to it with similar criticisms: “It is only legends and tales, without any deep thought or lofty speculation; even the children understand it and all it talks about is what is allowed and what is prohibited; the meaning of its stories is plain, where is the exposition in which intellects become lost?”<sup>52</sup>

The Qur'an's evaluative point of view operates on a model of setting up binaries. When the Qur'an does detail different classes of the faithful or the unbelievers, for example, it does so in keeping with the exigencies of the discourse. It does not proceed step by step from start to finish in the manner of a systematic treatise on ethics, psychology, or philosophy. Rūmī follows the same method in presenting his teachings in the *Mathnawī*. He is concerned with laying out the basic principles of the path, the structure of the cosmos, and the structure of the self, but does not devote much space to looking at minutiae or laying out the stages of the path in the manner of systematic treatises on Sufism. He is more concerned with showing the application of basic principles in a variety of different situations.

Seen in this light, Rūmī's explanation of the seven-level ḥadīth, even while laying out his understanding of the levels of the Qur'an, appears as an instance of frustrating the expectations of readers interested in a systematic exposition of ideas. Where the reader, in keeping with the ḥadīth, would like him to explain the seven levels, Rūmī only mentions four. Where the reader would want the four levels to be related to the well known scheme of correspondences from Ja'far's commentary, Rūmī only describes the qualities of the level or the effect of the level on reason. His goal, then, is not to provide the reader with a systematic treatise on Sufism or the principles of Qur'anic interpretation, rather he wishes to only paint a picture of the situation in broad strokes. An examination of the manner in which he does interpret the Qur'an shows that he operates on a twofold level of outer and inner meaning. This twofold method corresponds to the basic tool he uses in his analysis of reality: form and meaning. It is to two such examples of his interpretations of Qur'anic verses that we now turn.

### 2.5.1 When God's Help Arrives

Rūmī's interpretations of chapter 110, *Sūrah al-Naṣr*, of the Qur'an give us an excellent example of the manner in which his method of explanation is twofold. In explaining these verses Rūmī makes a distinction between the outward and the inward levels of the Qur'an and shows the relationship between the outward historical meaning and the inward trans-historical meaning of God's speech. This short Qur'anic chapter that Rūmī explains is called “The Help”: *When God's help arrives and His victory (opening). And you see people entering God's faith in crowds, celebrate the praise of your Lord and ask His forgiveness: He is always ready to accept repentance* (Q 110:1-3). Rūmī first gives the outward meaning of these verses:

The outward oriented commentators (*mufasssīrān-i zāhir*) have explained this chapter to mean that the Prophet's aspiration was to make the world Muslim and to bring all to God's way. When he saw his own death

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<sup>52</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 4237-41.

approaching, he said, "Alas! I have not lived long enough to call the people." "Grieve not," said God, "for at the hour whereon you pass, I shall cause countries and cities, which you would conquer by armies and the sword, all of them I shall cause to become obedient and faithful. And the sign shall be that at the end of your allotted time you shall see people coming from all over in flocks to become Muslim. When you see that, know that your time for departure has come. Now extol and ask for forgiveness, for you will get there."<sup>53</sup>

In the passage above we see that commentators who are concerned with the outward level of the Qur'an connect the verses of this chapter to historical events in the life of the Prophet, such as the embrace of Islam by Bedouin tribes and his impending death. This perspective sees the Prophet as the only addressee of these specific verses. Rūmī contrasts the outer historical approach of such commentators with the inner interpretation of the verifiers (*muhāqqiqān*):

But the verifiers say that its meaning is as follows: man imagines that he can rid himself of his blameworthy qualities (*awṣāf-i dhamīmah*) by means of his own action and striving (*jihād*). When he strives much and expends his strength and tools of action and loses hope, God says to him, "You thought it would come about through your own strength and action and deeds. That is indeed a custom (*sunnah*) I have established, that is, you should expend what you possess in Our way. Only then does Our bestowal come. We say to you, 'Travel this endless road on your own weak legs.' We know that with your weak legs you will never be able to finish the way—in a hundred thousand years you would not finish even one stage of the way. But when you make the effort and come onto the road to fall down at last, unable to go another step, only then will you be embraced by God's favor. Just as children are picked up and carried while they are nursing, but when they grow older they are left to go on their own; so now you have no strength left, when you had the strength and could strive, from time to time in a state between sleep and wakefulness, We bestowed upon you a grace (*luṭf*) for you to gain strength in your quest for Us and to have hope. At this moment when you no longer have the means to continue, look upon Our grace and bestowal and favor and see how they swarm down in droves upon you. For a hundred thousand efforts you would not have seen so much as a particle of this. Now *celebrate the praise of your Lord, and ask His forgiveness* (Q 110:3). Seek forgiveness for those thoughts and realize that you were only imagining that all this could come from your own hands and feet and you did not see that it all comes from Us. Now that you have seen that it is from Us, seek forgiveness. *He is always ready to accept repentance*(Q 110:3).

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<sup>53</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 78.

In order to understand the points Rūmī makes above by presenting the perspective of the verifiers on Sūrah al-Naṣr, it will be useful to summarize some aspects of Sufi theory operating in the background of his interpretations. The goal of Sufism is to attain sanctity or closeness to God by dwelling in His presence in this world. One definition of Sufism, formulated from the perspective of character and ethics, states that the goal of Sufism is “to take on the character traits of God.”<sup>54</sup> This definition implies that the process of taking on God’s character traits proceeds by ridding oneself of blameworthy qualities. It is to the complexity of this aspect of traveling the path of Sufism that Rūmī refers when he discusses the reason seekers need to ask God’s forgiveness for the mistake of believing that they could rid themselves of blameworthy traits through their own efforts. The puzzling aspect of this issue is the apparent contradiction between God’s clear injunctions to people in the Qur’an to *be mindful of God, seek a way to Him, and strive in His way* (Q 5:35) by exerting their own efforts when in reality, from the perspective of verification, it is only God’s help that accomplishes the task. Rūmī’s interpretation points to the debate concerning the question of whether sanctity or deliverance is achieved through grace or through effort. But more importantly, in the context of a discussion of character traits, it points to the Sufi understanding of Qur’anic teachings concerning the essential quality of human beings. In this view of things the only quality that humans possess in an essential manner is their need, poverty, and total dependence on God. The only gift that humans can bring to the King who lacks nothing is their own nothingness or poverty.<sup>55</sup> Seen in this light, one stage of traveling the path of Sufism is to realize this poverty and, having realized this station, to then ask forgiveness of one’s earlier erroneous notions of being able to reach sanctity through one’s own efforts.

The discussion in Sūrah al-Naṣr revolves around the word “victory.” The Arabic word that is translated as “victory” is *faṭḥ* which also means “opening.” This word is a technical term in Sufi theory and denotes an experience or a stage of development in which realities and meanings are unveiled or opened up for the traveler. The saying of the Prophet, “Show us things as they are!” or “Show us the reality of things!” is interpreted by Sufis as a prayer for such an opening. It is at this level of reality that travelers, according to Rūmī’s interpretation, will realize the error of their initial ideas and will hasten to seek forgiveness just as God has commanded them.

Another way in which Sufis conceive of the process in which they are engaged is based on the following saying of the Prophet: “The Law (*sharī‘ah*) is my words, the Way (*ṭarīqah*) is my works, and the Truth (*ḥaqīqah*) is my inward states.”<sup>56</sup> Just as in the outer domain of works the travelers follow the example of the Prophet, on the inner journey the goal is to experience the states and stations that the Prophet passed through. This point was discussed in an earlier section in connection with the ability of the illiterate Shaykh Nassāj to relate each verse of the Qur’an with a corresponding

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<sup>54</sup>William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 283.

<sup>55</sup>Chittick, *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>56</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 10.

state and station of the Prophet. The discussion quoted above by Rūmī provides an example of the manner in which the Prophet's historical circumstances and inner states relate to the travelers' experiences on the path.

Rūmī's interpretation also shows that while reading the Qur'an, the interest of the verifiers lies in coming to know their own selves and goes beyond the scope of those commentators who are only interested in the outer historical signification of Qur'anic verses. Historically speaking, the verses of Sūrah al-Naṣr are addressed to the Prophet. But from the perspective of verification, each Muslim stands in the place of the Prophet and must realize the meanings inherent in these verses. For the verifiers, then, the addressee of the Qur'an is always the reader and the listener, even when it is clear that historically certain verses were directed only to the Prophet. Qur'anic stories, including that of the Prophet Muhammad, depict the possibilities of knowing available to each reader.

These quotations also help to clarify the logic of the manner in which Rūmī relates the outer historical signification of the Qur'an to its inner trans-historical denotation. Rūmī relates the outward acceptance of Islam by the Bedouin tribes, without the direct military intervention of the Prophet, to the inward appearance of God's gentleness, bestowal, and favor. Just as the Prophet's life was coming to a close and with it his physical ability to intervene in the affairs of the land, in a similar fashion the flocks of God's gentleness, bestowal, and favor appear only when the traveler has exhausted all power of his inner faculties and outer limbs, a state that can be likened to the death and exhaustion of the ego (*fanā'*) and its limited understanding of reality. The goal at the outer level was the Prophet's desire for the victory of Islam while at the inner level it is the desire of the seeker for closeness to God through the unveiling of realities. At the microcosmic level, outer victory is interpreted as inner opening; a victory in attaining the goal of closeness to God. In conclusion, we can observe that the method Rūmī follows is twofold in which each Qur'anic verse has an outward and an inward signification. The inward signification is related to the states and stations on the path of Sufism and does not negate the outer meaning. Sufi interpretation, in the case of Rūmī, even while emphasizing the importance of the inner meanings of the Qur'an, only builds upon the outer meaning.

### 2.5.2 Abraham's Station

We now turn to the second example of Rūmī's twofold method of Qur'anic interpretation. The verse in this case is: *We made the House a resort and a sanctuary for people, saying, "Take the station where Abraham stood as your place of prayer"* (Q 2:125). In explaining this verse Rūmī says, "The people who look at the outer meaning (*ahl-i zāhir*) say that what is intended by this 'House' is the Ka'ba because all who take refuge in the Ka'ba find security from calamities; there it is forbidden to hunt for game and there no man can be harmed. God has chosen it for Himself."<sup>57</sup> Rūmī calls this explanation in terms of the exterior world "right and good," but goes ahead to give the interpretation of this verse in the eyes of the verifiers:

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<sup>57</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 164.



But this is the outer meaning (*zāhir*) of the Qur'an. Verifiers say that the "House" is the inside of humans, by which they mean, "God, empty my interior (*bāṭin*) of the whisperings (*waswās*) of Satan and the preoccupations of the ego (*mashāgil-i nafsānī*), and purify it of melancholy and of rotten and false thoughts, so that no fear may remain in it and security be made manifest till it completely becomes the locus of your revelation (*wahy*). Let Satan and his whisperings have no way to it," just as God has placed shooting stars in the heavens to prevent the accursed devils from listening to the angels' secrets so that no one may find a way to their secrets and to keep them far from calamities. That is, "O Lord, station the guard of your favor over our interiors to keep us far from the whisperings of devils and the tricks and caprices of the ego." These are the words of the people of the inside (*ahl-i bāṭin*) and the verifiers.<sup>58</sup>

Rūmī's presentation of the verifiers' interpretations of the "House of God" shows that he continues to use the twofold division of outer and inner meaning. At the inner level he is content to mention only the human interior and makes no further distinction in terms of more subtle levels. We see how outer significations do not lose their validity but are encompassed in a wider view of the realm where Qur'anic teachings are applicable. The higher, or the deeper meaning, does not nullify the outer or the lower signification of Qur'anic verses. In fact, it is precisely the correspondence between the outer and the inner that allows verifiers to cross over from the outer to the inner signification. The macrocosm provides the starting point for charting the depths of the microcosm.

In interpreting the inner significance of this verse, Rūmī explains the principle of priority that guides his hermeneutics; the hearts of the prophets and the Friends of God are the root whereas the physical Ka'ba constructed by Abraham from stones is the branch.<sup>59</sup> The priority of the hearts of the prophets and the Friends seems to be understood by Rūmī in the sense that it was within the heart of Abraham that God first revealed himself. Abraham's heart is therefore properly considered "the first House of God" and the physical Ka'ba is secondary to it, or it is a branch growing from the root, the sanctified heart. The qualities of the Ka'ba—people are safe from calamity within it and there everyone is protected and safe—that the outer commentators clarify are only a reflection of the qualities of the original House inside the sanctified human; "If it were not for the heart, of what use would the Ka'ba be?"<sup>60</sup>

The second part of the verse under discussion in which God says, *Take the station where Abraham stood as your place of prayer*, provides further illustration of the points that have been made so far concerning Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an. "The Station of Abraham" is a location in the environs of the Ka'ba where Abraham

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<sup>58</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

is said to have offered prayer. Following Abraham's example, it is traditional during Hajj to offer two cycles of ritual prayer at that spot. This outward interpretation of "Abraham's Station" according to Rūmī is also "correct and good, by God!," but he says that in the eyes of the verifiers

The Station of Abraham is to hurl oneself into the fire like Abraham, for God's sake<sup>61</sup> thereby transporting oneself to his station, or near to it, through effort and struggle in the way of God. For he sacrificed himself for the sake of God—that is, he no longer had any concern or fear for his self. Two cycles of prayer at Abraham's Station are good, but the prayer should be such that the standing part is in this world and the bowing part in that world.<sup>62</sup>

The inner path, this explanation shows, is to follow in the footsteps of the prophets and to experience the states and stations they underwent in their own journeys to God. Abraham's title in the Islamic tradition is the "Close Friend of God" (*khalīl allāh*) and his station's quality is that those who stand within it sacrifice themselves for the sake of attaining closeness to God.

## 2.6 Conclusion: The Purpose of Interpretation

It can be said that Rūmī's purpose in interpreting the Qur'an is guidance. His interpretations of the Qur'an are aimed at the person seeking nearness to God and Rūmī sees his role as that of a realized teacher who unveils the Qur'an's inward significance for travel on the inner path. In examining his hermeneutics we see that the guidance he offers through his interpretations of the Qur'an takes many forms. As someone who has reached the station of sanctity, he guides through providing models of what correct interpretation looks like. He also guides through highlighting the fact that knowing oneself is the key to the process of Qur'anic interpretation. He clarifies the means through which a person might gain understanding of the Qur'an and in doing so he lays out the proper attitude and etiquette that the seeker needs to maintain towards the Prophet and the Qur'an. He also guides through clarifying the states and stations of Muhammad and the earlier prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who he sees as the leaders every Muslim seeker needs to follow.

His care and concern for seekers is evident throughout his works. Even when he is being extremely critical towards someone, he explains the origin of his harshness as rooted in compassion for the suffering of that person. For example, when he rebukes the Qur'an reciter Ibn Muqrī for not knowing the meaning of the Qur'an, Rūmī says that he wanted to "pull the dear friend towards meaning."<sup>63</sup> He only desires for

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<sup>61</sup>The Qur'an describes how Nimrod had Abraham thrown into a raging fire but God commanded it to not harm Abraham; *O fire, be coolness and safety for Abraham* (Q 21:69).

<sup>62</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 165.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

others that with which he has been blessed. As we have seen earlier, Rūmī sees each individual human being as a microcosm within who the stories of the Qur'an are unfolding. Inside each person a believer and an unbeliever are at war with each other. It is these people he addresses, the ones standing in the middle who are being called both by the lower as well as the higher reaches within their selves: "We are desiring and others are desiring, With whom shall fortune be? Whom shall it favor?"<sup>64</sup> Rūmī sees himself as an inheritor of the prophets, speaking from and to the luminous substance of humanness, calling people to the mercy of God.

His hermeneutics of the Qur'an encompass the whole being of the reader. Understanding the Qur'an, according to Rūmī, requires understanding the knowing subject within. The Qur'an is a living text that responds to the manner in which it is approached and, therefore, the task of interpretation involves transforming the self through living the teachings of the Qur'an. In this reader-response theory of hermeneutics, the process of reading is turned around so that the text reads the reader. The readers who started out wanting to interpret the Qur'an end up allowing their own selves to be interpreted.

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<sup>64</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 57.

# Chapter 3

## Pharaoh in the Qur'an

In this chapter I study the characterization of Pharaoh in the Qur'an. Here, characterization is taken to mean the ways in which the text provides readers with the information "necessary to reconstruct a character from the narrative."<sup>1</sup> Pharaoh appears as a major character within the larger narrative of Moses and the Israelites. I will examine the character traits with which the Qur'an qualifies Pharaoh, with the purpose of determining whether there is any development or change in these traits over the course of Pharaoh's narrative in the Qur'an. A related question that I ask in this chapter concerns the mode of Qur'anic representation: How does the Qur'an provide its readers with insight into Pharaoh's motivations?

There is an inseparable relationship between character and event. Henry James has said, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I proceed in my investigation of Pharaoh's character by looking at the individual events or episodes in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses and Pharaoh. In keeping with the principle that parts acquire meaning in light of the whole, to appreciate the larger significance of these episodes and what is revealed through them, we need to keep in mind the broader context of the Qur'an. This broader context is provided by the worldview presented in the Qur'an and, therefore, before moving to a detailed examination of the ways in which the Qur'an characterizes Pharaoh, the first section of this chapter lays out the main aspects of the Qur'anic worldview.

### 3.1 Qur'anic Grand Narrative

In addressing its audience in the present moment, the Qur'an remembers the past and anticipates the future. The Qur'an presents the past in two paradigmatic stories: The Covenant of Alast, and the story of Adam and Iblīs. The present is enunciated clearly in the Fātiḥa, the first chapter of the Qur'an, while the future is presented in

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Allan Powell. *What is Narrative Criticism?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in, *ibid.*, p. 51.

apocalyptic narratives where events at the end of time are vividly described with an emphasis on the impending Day of Judgement.

One of the terms that the Qur'an uses to refer to itself is "remembrance" (*dhikr*). Qur'anic narrative functions within the larger goal of helping its audience recall a memory that it asserts all humans share in common: The Covenant of Alast. This is the trans-temporal memory of the interaction between God and all human beings before creation: *And when your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify concerning themselves, 'Am I not your Lord? (Q 7:172).*<sup>3</sup> To this question the humans respond: *Yes indeed!* (Q 7:172). In the verse that follows, the Qur'an explains the significance for this testimony of all humans concerning themselves: *So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, 'We were not aware of this' (Q 7:172).* In the Qur'anic view of reality, this recognition of the truth of God's oneness and proper station is the deepest memory and knowledge within all humans. Muslim sources refer to this event as the Covenant of Alast and it represents the primary assumption that the Qur'an makes in discussing aspects of faith and unbelief. Since God's question to humans, before they entered into this world, revolves around their recognition of His Lordship, the innate human knowledge described by the Qur'an consists of knowing that God is One and is the only lord worthy of dedicated service.

The King and the Lord are among the central images that the Qur'an employs in depicting God. The King owns all of creation, oversees its function directly, and possesses *the most beautiful names* (Q 7:180) such as the Merciful, the Forgiving, the Just, and the Wise. From this perspective, all creatures are God's servants who owe their creation and sustenance to God. In this vision of reality, the proper human response is to acknowledge one's dependence on God through expression of one's gratitude. The importance of this attitude is reinforced by the Qur'anic use of thankfulness as an antonym for unbelief (*kufr*) (Q 2:152; 16:112-114). Faith is to witness and remember the fundamental fact of the human condition; dependence on a merciful Lord, both in word and in deed. Faith in the Qur'an is forever linked with proper and wholesome action; *those who have faith and do wholesome deeds* is a recurring phrase in the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> In light of this Qur'anic assumption, that humans have an innate knowledge of God's Oneness and Lordship, unbelief appears as a "covering up" of this knowledge and the word that the Qur'an uses as the opposite of faith is *kufr*. Etymologically speaking, the word denotes "covering something" and, in the technical language of theology, it denotes the denial of God's Oneness and the rejection of the Qur'an as God's words. Unbelief, then, is a rejection of the summons to remember the Covenant of Alast that each human being has made with God before the creation of time.

At the same time that the Qur'an calls its audience to remember the Covenant of Alast, the Qur'an also anticipates the future for its readers. It reminds people that this world will come to an end and that they will be held accountable for their actions

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<sup>3</sup>*Alast* is the Arabic for "Am I not."

<sup>4</sup>For example see, Q 2:82, 277; 3:57; 3:200; 4:57.

in front of God on the Day of Judgement. At numerous places within its discourse, the Qur'an paints a vivid picture of the end of the world:

When the sky is torn open,  
when the stars are scattered,  
when the seas burst forth,  
when graves turn inside out:  
each soul will know what it has done  
and what it has left undone. (Q 82:1-5)

In this instance, as elsewhere in the Qur'an, the presentation of things to come is followed by the pressing concern of ungrateful human attitude towards God: *O Man! What has deceived you concerning your generous Lord, who created you and shaped you and proportioned you* (Q 82:6-7). The readers are asked to reckon with the cause that is keeping them far from God, despite the generosity that God has displayed towards them by creating and shaping them. And further, the Qur'an proclaims: *Yet you still take the Judgement to be a lie!* (Q 82:9). On that Day of Judgement *the good will live in bliss, and the wicked will burn in the Fire* (Q 82:13-14). The possibilities for the future are thus broadly sketched out for the reader. The question, then, that the Qur'an poses to its readers in light of the impending Day of Judgement is this: *So where are you going? This [Qur'an] is nothing but a reminder for the worlds, for those who wish to take the straight path* (Q 81:26-28).

The central image for human life in the Qur'an is that of a path. It is developed in the first chapter of the Qur'an, The Fātiḥa, which Abdel Haleem rightly calls "the precise table of contents of the Qur'anic message."<sup>5</sup>

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!  
Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,  
the Merciful, the Compassionate,  
Master of the Day of Judgement.  
It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.  
Guide us to the straight path:  
the path of those You have blessed,  
those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray. (Q 1:1-7)

The Fātiḥa is recited daily by Muslims as part of their ritual prayers. It presents clearly and succinctly the Qur'anic view on the attitude people need to maintain towards God. It is based in the present moment and takes the form of a prayer addressed to God by the believers. But it is the revelation of the Qur'an itself that teaches believers how to relate to God; God is the primary speaker and believers are the speakers only secondarily. The context in which the Fātiḥa grounds the story of human life is that of all-encompassing mercy; both the names with which God is

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<sup>5</sup>M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 3.

initially invoked, the Merciful and the Compassionate, are derived from the root *r-h-m* from which we also have the word *rahim* or womb. This invocation, “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” comes at the beginning of each chapter of the Qur’an and implies that God’s mercy envelops and nurtures creation just as a mother carries a baby within her womb. But the prayer moves from a reminder of this mercy to another aspect of existence: God is also the Master of the Day of Judgement. Human life involves struggle and, through this prayer, believers remind themselves that they will be held responsible for their actions. Given this state of affairs, the Fātiḥa indicates that the believers recognize God as the only being worthy of service and that He alone can assist humans in their efforts to act correctly. The Fātiḥa proceeds to clarify the nature of this help: It is God who can guide people to the straight path that leads to His blessings. The straight path is contrasted with two other possibilities: the first is the path that leads people to earn God’s anger rather than His blessing; the second is the path that leads people astray from the desired goal of earning God’s blessing.

This brief analysis of the Fātiḥa shows that the Qur’an envisages human life as travel. The paths of this travel are three-fold and are defined in terms of their destinations. It is worth noting that in the case of two destinations, incurring God’s anger or wandering astray, the Qur’an does not attribute any agency to God. The implication is that people cause God’s anger to descend upon themselves through their own inappropriate actions. At other places in the Qur’an, this point is expressed even more clearly: *It was not God who wronged them; they wronged themselves* (Q 9:70; 29:40; 30:9). The identity of those who are blessed and those who incur God’s anger is clarified in various parts of the Qur’an. God’s messengers are the blessed ones and numerous examples are given of those people who, as a result of their actions, incurred God’s anger and thereby suffered a terrible punishment (Q 4:69).

The paradigmatic Qur’anic story outlining these two possibilities is that of Adam and Iblīs (Q 2:30-39; 15:26-43; 17:61-65; 38:71-85). In the Qur’an’s narration of this story, God tells the angels that He is about to create a representative on earth. The angels protest God’s plan by asking Him why He would create a being that will spread corruption and shed blood. God’s answer is that He knows what the angels do not. Once He has created Adam from clay and has blown His breath into Him, God teaches Adam all the names. He then calls the angels and asks them to tell the names of the entities in front of them. They are unable to do so and acknowledge their limitations by saying that they only know that which God has taught them. God then turns to Adam and tells him to speak the names of those entities.<sup>6</sup> Having made the angels realize their limitations, at this point God asks the angels to prostrate themselves in front of Adam. All of them do so except Iblīs, who refuses to obey God’s command. Iblīs, the Qur’an tells us, is not an angel but a Jinn; Jinns are creatures made out of the *fire of scorching winds* (Q 15:27) who like humans also possess free-will. When God asks Iblīs why he did not prostrate in front of Adam, he responds: *I am better than he; You created me from fire and him from clay* (Q 38:76). Iblīs, as presented

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<sup>6</sup>It is on the basis on this Qur’anic narrative that Adam is called the “teacher of angels” in some Muslim works.

in the Qur'an, is stuck at Adam's appearance and cannot look beyond the clay of Adam's body to the spirit of God that circulates within him or to the knowledge of the names that God has bestowed upon Adam. The Qur'an tells readers that Iblīs *refused and was arrogant (sought greatness); he was one of those who conceal the truth (kāfir)* (Q 2:34; 38:74).

The Qur'an also suggests that Iblīs's refusal is based upon jealousy since God has chosen Adam over him; speaking to God Iblīs says: *Do You see this one, the one You have honored above me?* (Q 17:62). While drawing God's attention to the grossness of Adam's form, Iblīs chooses not to look at the role his own pride and jealousy have played in his disobedience and, instead, places all the blame for his misfortune upon God: *Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except Your sincere servants* (Q 15:39-40). Iblīs's reaction at committing an act of disobedience is to persist within that state and blame God. Through his deceit, Iblīs is able to make Adam and Eve disobey God by enticing them to eat from the forbidden tree, but Adam and Eve's response to their act of disobedience is diametrically different from that of Iblīs. They say: *Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves; if You do not forgive us and have mercy, we shall certainly be lost* (Q 7:23). By contrasting Iblīs's reaction with that of Adam and Eve, the Qur'an emphasizes the need for people to turn towards God in all circumstances. Even after disobedience, the road to happiness lies in admitting one's mistakes and asking God for help. The word that the Qur'an uses for repentance, *tauba*, literally means "turning" and, in light of the imagery of life as a path presented in the Fātiḥa, repentance can be seen as the turning of humans toward God, seeking His help to walk the straight path.

### 3.1.1 The Function of Pharaoh's Narrative in the Qur'an

Keeping in mind the larger context of the Qur'anic worldview and teachings, we can now examine the role that the narrative of Moses and Pharaoh plays in the Qur'an. The Qur'an draws an analogy between the function of the Prophet Muhammad and that of Moses; Pharaoh and his people stand in the same position as the Arabs to whom the Prophet is bringing God's reminder:

Surely We have sent unto you a Messenger as a witness over you, even as We sent to Pharaoh a Messenger, but Pharaoh rebelled against the Messenger, so We seized him remorselessly. If therefore you disbelieve, how will you guard yourselves against a day that shall make the children grey-headed? (Q 73:15-16)

Qur'anic evidence makes it clear that the Prophet was encountering considerable resistance from the Arabs towards his message. The Arabs ridiculed him, explained Muhammad's revelations as a case of possession, and considered the Qur'an as nothing but poetry. The Qur'an devotes many of its verses to refute this charge and to elucidate the difference between sorcery and truth, poetry and revelation. The story of Moses and Pharaoh, therefore, serves an important function by showing the Arabs



the difference between the human device of sorcery and the divinely bestowed signs given to Moses.

There is another sign in Moses: We sent him to Pharaoh with a clear authority, but he turned his back with his court, saying, ‘A sorcerer, or a man possessed!’ So We seized him and his hosts, and We cast them into the sea, and he was to blame. (Q 51:38)

The Qur’an warns the Prophet’s audience frequently of the consequences of denying the signs revealed in the Qur’an. Stories of earlier prophets and their communities are cited as a reminder: *The warnings came also to Pharaoh’s folk. They cried lies to Our signs, all of them, so We seized them with the seizing of One mighty and omnipotent* (Q 54:41). The Qur’an asks its audience to fully reflect on the fate of those earlier nations who had persisted in their denial: *Now do you see any remnant of them? Pharaoh likewise, and those before him, and the Subverted Cities—they committed error, and they rebelled against the Messenger of their Lord, and He seized them with a Surpassing grip* (Q 69:9). In light of these verses, the function of Qur’anic storytelling becomes clear: Stories in the Qur’an are teaching devices meant to illustrate the consequences of persistent denial of God’s message and the persecution of God’s messengers and those who believe. With this Qur’anic background, we are now in a position to begin a more detailed examination of Pharaoh’s characterization within the Qur’an.

## 3.2 Pharaoh’s Narrative in the Qur’an

From the perspective of narrative chronology, the first mention of Pharaoh in the Qur’an occurs within the presentation of circumstances surrounding Moses’s birth. Pharaoh then recedes into the background while the Qur’an relates aspects of Moses’s life. Moses grows up in Pharaoh’s household but upon reaching adulthood kills an Egyptian and flees to Midian, fearing for his life. In Midian he marries, raises a family, and works as a shepherd. It is while living this life that he is entrusted with the responsibility of being God’s messenger to Pharaoh. To aid him in this difficult task, God gives Moses the support of his brother Aaron and two miraculous signs: his staff can turn into a snake and his hand turns white when he puts it inside his shirt.

Once Moses returns to Egypt, Pharaoh reappears in the Qur’an. The Qur’an relates versions of an initial dialogue in which Moses asks Pharaoh to accept God’s message, to free the Children of Israel from slavery, and to let them leave Egypt with Moses. In order to prove that he truly is God’s chosen messenger, Moses shows Pharaoh the miraculous signs God has given him. Pharaoh rejects Moses’s message and accuses Moses of being a mere sorcerer who, motivated only by a desire for power, wants to kick the Egyptians out of their land. To prove the falseness of Moses’s claim, Pharaoh challenges him to a contest with his own sorcerers. The Qur’an relates versions of this contest in which Moses’s staff-serpent swallows the sorcerers’ snakes. This event effects a conversion and convinces the sorcerers to publicly declare their

faith in God. The dramatic shift in the stance of the sorcerers before and after the contest forms an important part of Pharaoh's narrative since it delineates in further detail the motivations underlying Pharaoh's denial.

Between the time when Moses arrives back in Egypt and dialogues with Pharaoh for the first time and between the coming of plagues because of Pharaoh's obstinate refusal, the Qur'an narrates a few episodes that depict Pharaoh's consultation with his council. One member of this council, Hāmān, who possesses the rank of being extremely close to Pharaoh, is singled out by name. In this context the Qur'an makes two references to a tower that Pharaoh orders Hāmān to build so that Pharaoh may ascend to the heavens and prove Moses wrong. The council overwhelmingly supports Pharaoh's position but there are two characters within Pharaoh's inner circle who are at odds with his denial of God's message. The first character is that of Pharaoh's wife who prays directly to God seeking deliverance from Pharaoh. The second character is an unnamed believer who discourses at length with Pharaoh and his council. The unnamed believer functions as an archetype for the correct response to God's message. His clear and sensible line of argumentation serves to highlight the obstinacy and egocentrism underlying Pharaoh and his council's denial.

The next episode in Pharaoh's narrative depicts the chase, with his armies, that he gives the Israelites. This episode culminates in descriptions of Pharaoh's punishment in this world as death by drowning. We now turn to an examination of these individual episodes within the Qur'anic narrative of Pharaoh.

### 3.2.1 Pharaoh at Moses's Birth

There is only one reference to Pharaoh in relation to Moses's birth. This occurs at the beginning of chapter 28, The Story. After the customary opening formula, "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate," the chapter reads: *These are the signs of the Clear Book. We will recite to you some of the news of Moses and Pharaoh with the truth, for a people who have faith* (Q 28:2-3). In these introductory verses, the Qur'an clarifies the purpose of the story as well as the requirements for understanding it. It sets the stage for the proper way in which the readers should understand this story. The words translated as "with the truth" emphasize that this is no ordinary story meant for diversion or entertainment. Rather, its truth is to be experienced by listening to it with faith; the attitude of the listeners will determine whether they are able to benefit from this story.

These verses also establish the narrative point of view: God, as narrator, directly addresses the reader. God is therefore the speaker and the reader is properly a listener or addressee. After this introduction, the text moves on to the story: *Pharaoh was high in the land and divided its inhabitants into groups; one group he oppressed, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women—he was one of those who work corruption* (Q 28:3). In just one verse, the Qur'an briskly paints an unforgiving portrait of Pharaoh. The text develops the image of height and elevation with which Pharaoh is qualified. Whatever is high looms over its surroundings; the shadow cast by Pharaoh's eminence as king is felt acutely in the lives of the inhabitants of the land. Rather than being an ideal king who unifies people, he divides his people. Next, the reader

confronts Pharaoh's cruelty; to kill the children and spare the mothers shows a disregard for human life and for the suffering endured by their families. Or, alternatively Pharaoh is completely aware of his actions and is spreading his fear among the Israelites by his pre-meditated acts of terror. In describing Pharaoh's tyranny, the text uses the imperfect form of the verb that denotes an ongoing state of affairs. Pharaoh's cruelty, the Qur'an implies, was not limited to a one time slaughter of infant boys, rather the text suggests that it was an activity spread out over time.

Dividing the people through cruelty and oppression places Pharaoh in the broad category of those who work and spread corruption (*fasād*). This is one of those blameworthy qualities that the Qur'an contrasts with praiseworthy qualities such as acting beautifully (*ihsān*) and in a wholesome manner (*iṣlāḥ*). All the prophets in the Qur'an are included in the general category of those who act beautifully and later in the narrative this same adjective is used to describe Moses when he has grown up: *And when Moses reached full maturity and manhood, We gave him wisdom and knowledge; this is how We reward those who do the beautiful* (Q 28:14).

But why does Pharaoh undertake such divisive and cruel actions? The next few verses answer this question in a general fashion by contrasting Pharaoh's motivations with those of God's: *But We wished to favor those who were oppressed in that land, and to make them leaders, and to make them the inheritors, and to establish them in the land and through them show Pharaoh, Hāmān, and their armies the very thing they feared* (Q 28:5-6). It appears that Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites in general, and his killing of infant Israelite boys in particular, is related to his fear of losing leadership and power to the Israelites. The fear of losing their land to the Israelites is what seems to have brought together the king, the high office holders, and their armies. While in earlier verses only Pharaoh was mentioned, in this verse we see that the Qur'an puts the blame on all of the officials and soldiers of Pharaoh's kingdom. This does not allow Pharaoh's armies the defence that they were only following orders; actions are judged to be test of intentions in this case. The text assumes that the reader is familiar with the end of this story in which Pharaoh and his armies drown while chasing Moses and the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt. The text therefore provides justification for the drowning of Pharaoh along with his armies. What was motivating the armies, the Qur'an suggests, was not simply Pharaoh's command but also their belief that Pharaoh's fear was well-founded and therefore demanded their supportive action; even prior to their drowning death, Pharaoh's armies had shown this willingness by murdering the infants.

From the fear experienced by Pharaoh and his council, the text moves to the fear experienced by the ones oppressed; those who are feared by Pharaoh. The reader is presented with Moses's mother who is facing the heartrending possibility of her son's death at the hands of Pharaoh's army: *We inspired Moses's mother, saying, 'Suckle him, and then, when you fear for his safety, put him in the river: do not be afraid, and do not grieve, for We shall return him to you and make him a messenger'* (Q 28:7). Fear is a recurring theme within the narrative of Moses and Pharaoh. Later in the narrative, we see Moses afraid of Pharaoh's retribution and afraid of his staff when it turns into a serpent. Fear and grief are terms paired often in the Qur'an. Characters fear things that might happen, possibilities towards which they do not

incline. They grieve for what they have at present but might lose in the future. In the Qur'anic view of things, the only path available to a person that leads to a state free of fear and grief is to take God as one's Protector by accepting and acting upon His guidance: *Is it not that the friends of God, no fear alights upon them and neither do they grieve?* (Q 10:62).

In the next verse the text depicts the unfolding of God's plan. In a manner characteristic of Qur'anic narration, the reader is taken to the moment at which Moses is picked up from the waters of the Nile by Pharaoh's family. The actions of Moses's mother are considered to have been accomplished in keeping with God's inspiration: *Pharaoh's household picked him up—later to become an enemy and a source of grief for them: Pharaoh, Hāmān, and their armies were wrongdoers* (Q 28:8). Once again the Qur'an reminds the reader that what they are seeing is the competition of two wills: God's plan is pitted against Pharaoh's designs. It is to be expected from the context sketched in preceding verses that Pharaoh would have the infant Moses killed. But Pharaoh's wife intervenes to spare Moses's life: *Pharaoh's wife said, 'Here is a joy to behold for me and for you! Do not kill him: he may be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' They did not realize what they were doing* (Q 28:9). In describing this scene, the Qur'an does not mention Pharaoh's response to his wife's petition. But even in the absence of explicit speech attributed to Pharaoh, he is present and looms over the scene. The reader is not given a direct insight into Pharaoh's thinking at this stage but his wife's petition points out an irony: a man who is killing the sons of his slaves might himself desire a son, even if adopted. It is this hope within Pharaoh that allows Moses to find the safest possible haven in Egypt. The reader becomes aware of a further irony in the way in which God's plan is going to work: Pharaoh nurtures and raises his nemesis under his very protection.

The text continues to develop the theme of God's power in making his plans come to pass. The verses that follow Moses's discovery by Pharaoh's family emphasize the wondrous fashion in which God works and the truth of God's promises:

The next day, Moses's mother felt a void in her heart—if We had not strengthened it to make her one of those who believe, she would have revealed everything about him—and she said to his sister, 'Follow him.' So she watched him from a distance, without them knowing. We had ordained that he would refuse to feed from wet nurses. His sister approached them and said, 'Shall I tell you about a household which could bring him up for you and take good care of him?' We restored him to his mother and in this way, so that she might be comforted, not grieve, and know that God's promise is true, though most of them do not know. (Q 28:7-13)

This episode weaves together many themes, the primary one being that God's will comes to pass and that God's promise is true. Human machinations and devices cannot avert that which God desires. There is tremendous irony in the fact that Pharaoh ends up nurturing his enemy under his own protection. Only a few characters are named, but most of these characters are operating on the basis of fear and hope, grounded in their own estimation of the way things are. Even after Moses's mother

has acted upon God's inspiration, she still needs strengthening from God. The entire human situation is described as one revolving around hopes of desires fulfilled and fears of catastrophes unfolding.

### 3.2.2 Pharaoh in the Dialogue between God and Moses

Moses grows up in Pharaoh's household and is granted wisdom and knowledge by God (Q 28:14). One day while walking in the city he sees an Egyptian fighting with an Israelite. The Israelite asks him for help and *Moses struck him [the Egyptian] with his fist and killed him* (Q 20:40; 28:15). He is extremely remorseful at his action and asks God's forgiveness: *Moses said, 'Lord, I have wronged myself. Forgive me,' so He forgave him; He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful* (Q 28:16). Moses puts the blame of the action upon himself and his prayer for forgiveness echoes the petition of Adam and Eve after their disobedient act of eating from the forbidden tree. Moses also learns a lesson from this event that he articulates in a firm resolve: *Moses said, 'My Lord, because of the blessings you have bestowed upon me, I shall never support those who do evil'* (Q 28:16-17).

Fearful of Pharaoh's punishment, Moses flees to Midian. There he marries and works as a shepherd. One night, while traveling with his family, he spies fire coming from the side of a mountain. When he reaches the fire, God speaks to him: *'Moses, I am God, the Lord of the worlds. Throw down your staff.'* *When he saw his staff moving like a snake, he fled in fear and would not return* (Q 28:30-31). But God calls out again, reassuring him, *Moses! Draw near! Do not be afraid, for you are one of those who are safe. Put your hand inside your shirt and it will come out white but unharmed...These shall be two signs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his council; they are truly wicked people* (Q 28:31-32). Moses expresses his fear of Pharaoh to God at this stage saying that he has killed one of their people and fears retribution. God assures him that he will watch over him and, in keeping with Moses's request, appoints his brother Aaron as his helper.

In a more detailed and slightly different rendition, the conversation between God and Moses is followed by a similar conversation in which God talks to both Aaron and Moses: *Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has exceeded all bounds. But speak to him gently so that perhaps he may remember, or have fear* (Q 20:43-44). But Aaron and Moses still fear Pharaoh's excessive and insolent nature. At this stage God bolsters their courage again: *'Fear not,' He said. 'Surely I will be with you, hearing and seeing'* (Q 20:46). God's message to Pharaoh is simple: to let the Children of Israel go and to stop tormenting them (Q 20:47). Moses and Aaron are also told to lay out the consequences of not acting in accordance with God's message: *Peace be upon him who follows the guidance! It has been revealed to us that Punishment shall light upon him who cries lies and turns his back* (Q 20:47-48).

In these episodes, Pharaoh is talked about in his physical absence even as his psychological presence looms large. He inspires fear in both Aaron and Moses and the text raises an important issue of God's relationship to Pharaoh and by extension to all those who exceed proper bounds. Despite the cruelty Pharaoh has displayed, the text still keeps the opportunity open for his repentance. What does it mean for

God to say “perhaps” (Q 20:44) in relation to Pharaoh’s faith? Less forgiving readers would have already condemned Pharaoh on the basis of his earlier actions. But God is still keeping the possibility open and is allowing Pharaoh more chances to remember his dependent reality, acknowledge his previous faults, and thereby to fear God’s retribution. The Qur’an has already illustrated God’s forgiveness by showing that He forgave Moses the sin of killing an Egyptian. In presenting Pharaoh’s ultimate fate as still undecided, the Qur’an is being consistent in its portrayal of God’s mercy and forgiveness. At the very least, God does not punish Pharaoh before giving him the opportunity to reflect upon the consequences of rejecting God’s guidance. Through these verses, the Qur’an sets up the stage where the reader witnesses the unfolding of the drama of Pharaoh’s response to God’s message. On the one hand the reader is presented with the almost unbelievably forgiving message of the Lord of the worlds and on the other the reader sees a most unforgiving lord of Egypt.

### 3.2.3 Moses-Pharaoh Dialogues

The next scene takes the reader directly into Pharaoh’s court; there is a jump in time and the previous scene where God speaks to Aaron and Moses is directly followed by Pharaoh’s response to their message. It is assumed that the messengers have delivered God’s message and in response

Pharaoh said, ‘Who is your Lord, Moses?’

Moses said, ‘Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation, then guided it.’

Pharaoh said, ‘And what of the former generations?’

Moses said, ‘The knowledge of them is with my Lord, in a Book; my Lord goes not astray, nor forgets—He who appointed the earth to be a cradle for you, and therein threaded roads for you, and sent down water out of heaven, and therewith We have brought forth diverse kinds of plants. Do you eat, and pasture your cattle! Surely in that are signs for men possessing reason. Out of the earth We created you, and We shall restore you into it, and bring you forth from it a second time.’

So We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he cried lies, and refused.

‘Have you come’ Pharaoh said, ‘to expel us out of our land by your sorcery? We will assuredly bring you sorcery the like of it...’ (Q 20:49-60)

Initially, Pharaoh appears interested in finding out about the God Moses claims to represent. Moses’s answers to Pharaoh’s questions put him in his place by showing Pharaoh the derivative nature of his lordship. Pharaoh cannot claim to have created everything; he only has power over killing people and that only to the degree that those people are physically present with him in the same time and place. The way in which Pharaoh phrases his next question concerning the dead raises two possibilities: Either he knows the answer to that question and is testing Moses or, he does not know the answer and is interested in knowing what happens at death. Moses’s answer hints at the possibility that in Egypt death was seen as the final end, a kind of

forgetfulness where nothing of one's earthly life was remembered. Moses contrasts such a notion with that of the Day of Judgement, the basis for which is sure knowledge and awareness on part of the Judge. Moses's answer implies that only the One who is completely knowledgeable and powerful can resurrect and call people to account. The notion of going astray that Moses mentions is another reminder to Pharaoh of his limitations; lords can go astray but not the Lord.

The subsequent speech by Moses brings up two important points. Firstly, it elaborates the qualities of the True Lord who gives life and nurtures people, but He also makes people die and then raises them up again. Secondly, there is the phenomenon, characteristic of Qur'anic discourse, where the identity of the subject changes mid-discourse. This phenomenon has been termed *iltifāt* by Muslim scholars and, in this case, Moses's words transform into God's words.<sup>7</sup> One way in which we might think about this instance of the phenomenon is by proposing that this is the Qur'an's way of reminding its listeners that this story is not meant as entertainment. The shift in the pronouns, from Moses to God, is an intrusion by the narrator meant to keep the audience from simply taking it as a story. Another purpose that is served through this intrusion is that by addressing readers directly, the text makes sure that readers feel themselves to be in Pharaoh's situation; a different way of reminding the audience that the Qur'an is addressing them just as Moses was addressing Pharaoh.

In a different version of this dialogue in the Qur'an, Pharaoh's initial response to Moses's demand is to shame him by branding him as an ungrateful person: *Pharaoh said, 'Did we not raise you among us as a child? Did you not live among us years of your life? And you did the deed you did, being one of the ungrateful!'* (Q 26:18-20). The word Pharaoh uses to call Moses an ingrate is *kāfir* which, as mentioned earlier, means "to conceal or cover something;" Pharaoh accuses Moses of concealing the debt of gratitude he owes to Pharaoh for his protection and sustenance. *Kāfir* is the same word that the Qur'an uses to refer to those who disbelieve. In the Qur'anic view of reality, since God has created and nourished everything, the proper human response ought to be one of gratitude and thanksgiving to the generous Lord. The Qur'an repeatedly reminds its readers of God's generosity towards creation and asks them to reflect on the reasons why they are not following the proper etiquette of expressing thanks: *O people what has deluded you concerning your generous Lord?* (Q 82:6). Pharaoh's personality, as shown in his criticism of Moses for lacking gratefulness, is an instance where the Qur'an portrays the irony of the human situation and clarifies the logic of its basic argument. Pharaoh is the lord of the land and is demanding the right response of gratitude from Moses while refusing to express the gratitude that is due to the Lord of all the worlds. Pharaoh represents a commonly observed qualities among humans: A selective use of proper etiquette with a preference towards one's own desires. Like Iblīs, Pharaoh is quick to blame the other but is loath to blame himself for any shortcomings in his own interaction with God.

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<sup>7</sup>For an excellent treatment of this phenomenon in the Qur'an, see M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. "Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes: 'iltifāt' and Related Features in the Qur'ān". In: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 55.3 (1992). Pp. 407–432.

Moses's response to Pharaoh's rebuke highlights a different way of dealing with the inevitable human condition of making mistakes: *Moses said, 'Indeed I did it then, being one of those that stray; so I fled from you, fearing you. But my Lord gave me wisdom and made me one of His messengers* (Q 26:20-21). Moses, like Adam and Eve and unlike Iblīs and Pharaoh, openly admits the fact that he did commit a wrong act by killing the Egyptian. But he attributes his wrong action to his state at that moment, that of being astray and having not received God's guidance. Through use of the word astray, the Qur'an brings to the reader's mind one of the three states of walking the path of life that are outlined in the Fātiḥa: those whom God has blessed, those who have incurred God's anger, and those who have gone astray. This intertextuality points to the Qur'anic teaching that people who are astray can come to the straight path through the proper attitude. This attitude, as shown in the cases of Moses and Adam and Eve, consists of turning towards God and asking forgiveness for one's mistakes. Pharaoh's state in the tripartite division of the Fātiḥa still seems to be one of those who have gone astray. He has not persisted in his rebellion to the degree that he has incurred God's anger.

Moses then turns the table on Pharaoh in this verbal duel and reminds Pharaoh of the much more serious acts that he has committed: *And is this—that you have enslaved the Children of Israel—the favor with which you reproach me?* (Q 26:22). It is worth noting that Moses only alludes to the slaughter of innocent infants by Pharaoh; explicitly, he only accuses Pharaoh of enslaving the Israelites. By speaking in allusive terms, Moses is following God's instructions in speaking softly to Pharaoh so as not to ignite his anger (Q 20:44). Pharaoh seems to take this hint and rather than defending his actions by offering an argument, shifts the focus of the discussion by pursuing a different course. He questions Moses about the nature of the God Moses claims to represent: *And what is the "Lord of the worlds"?* (Q 26:24) Moses replies: *He is the Lord of the heavens and earth and everything between them. If you would only have faith!* (Q 26:25) By implication, Moses says that God is Pharaoh's Lord as well and it is in this vein that Pharaoh retorts to those present: *Do you hear what he says?* (Q 26:26). Pharaoh's rhetorical question suggests that Moses is obviously wrong; since Pharaoh is the supreme lord of Egypt, he has no other visible lord above him.

Seeing that Pharaoh has not responded positively to his implication that God is Pharaoh's Lord, Moses makes his view explicit: *Your Lord and the Lord of your fathers, the ancients* (Q 26:27). Pharaoh continues to hold his position based on the apparent and socially accepted fact that he is the lord of Egypt and says to those around him: *Surely your Messenger who was sent to you is possessed!* (Q 26:28), that is, Moses is not working within our accepted framework. Moses now moves away from the personal way in which he has been describing God to a more universal description and says: *The Lord of the East and the West, and everything between them, if you would only use your reason!* (Q 26:29). What might this use of reason look like? One possible line of thinking that Moses's comment indicates is that Pharaoh should think over the extent of his power. Even if he thinks that he commands the entire kingdom of Egypt, can he truly say that he also has power over the rising and setting of the sun?



But Pharaoh does not engage with the challenge in Moses's answer. The only argument he employs against Moses is an appeal to his obvious status as king of Egypt. Seeing that his appeal to his worldly power and lordship is having no effect on Moses, Pharaoh resorts to threatening him: *If you take any god other than me, I will throw you into prison* (Q 26:30). But Moses continues to press his argument and pushes forward by saying: *What, even if I show you something manifest?* (Q 26:31). Pharaoh has no escape from accepting this challenge since he is in front of his people in the court and says: *Show it then, if you are telling the truth* (Q 26:31). At this point Moses shows Pharaoh the two signs with which he has been sent: *So Moses cast his staff, and behold it was a serpent manifest. And he drew forth his hand, and lo, it was white to the beholders* (Q 26:32-33) The text presents the readers with a moment in which Pharaoh has to make a decision about whether or not Moses is speaking the truth and has been sent by God. Despite the verbal arguments provided by Moses earlier that are now further supported with the two miraculous signs, Pharaoh continues to explain away this apparent truth and says *to the Council about him, 'Surely this man is a cunning sorcerer who desires to expel you from your land by his sorcery; what do you command?'* They said, *'Put him and his brother off a while...* (Q 26:36-37).

The text presents Pharaoh as a character who continues to look at the world from the perspective of his current power and the desire to not see this power wane. The arguments made by Moses do not strike him as very convincing even though Moses is pointing out to him that he does not have the power to create anything; that the rising and setting of the sun take place without his command. If he is the lord of everything then he must be able to command the sun just as he is able to command the lives of his subjects. The issue is one of authority; Pharaoh's authority is partial and he can only exercise it in a limited measure. The lack of a firm foundation for Pharaoh's self-perception is laid bare in these dialogues where he has no rejoinder to Moses's arguments other than making fun of him and threatening him with imprisonment. Pharaoh moves from ad hominem arguments to a display of power motivated by and based upon his possession of Egypt and its riches. He interprets Moses's message in light of his own concerns and thinks that Moses has come to expel the Egyptians out of their land. This is how he presents the case to his council. From the evaluative point of view of the Qur'an, the text is asking its readers to put themselves in Pharaoh's position and ask themselves about the qualities that would befit a real Lord. The mode of argumentation in this case is analogical and comparative. Just as a king rules over his kingdom, God rules over all creation, all worlds.

The Qur'an provides a slightly different but complementary explanation for Pharaoh's refusal in the following rendition of this dialogue. Pharaoh says to Moses: *I think you are bewitched* (Q 17:101). Moses responds by saying: *You know very well that only the Lord of the heavens and the earth could have sent these signs as clear proof. I think that you, Pharaoh, are accursed* (Q 17:102). In this version of the dialogue, Pharaoh appears as someone who knows that Moses speaks the truth but decides not to articulate this knowledge. The text suggests that Pharaoh's denial is deliberate and the Qur'an indicates this even more clearly in the next episode.

### 3.2.4 Pharaoh and the Sorcerers

After Pharaoh has accused Moses of being a mere sorcerer, he sets up a contest between his sorcerers and Moses in order to prove the truth of his opinion. The Qur'an depicts this contest in renditions that share the same basic structure and themes. The sorcerers appear in the Qur'an as a group that is contesting with Moses for the sake of rewards: *And the sorcerers came to Pharaoh, saying, 'We shall surely have a wage, if we should be the victors?'* Pharaoh responds: *'Yes, indeed; and you shall be among the near-stationed'* (Q 7:114; 26:42). Through use of the word "near-stationed," the Qur'an continues to highlight the central role of the image of kingship with all its associations. Proximity to the king brings up notions of access to power, albeit a power that is subordinate to and dependent upon the power of the king himself. The use of "near-stationed" also echoes references in the Qur'an to the reward on the Day of Judgement given to a select group of people who have left everyone else behind in their service to God: *The Outstrippers, the Outstrippers! They are the ones brought near* (Q 56:10-11). Through such intertextuality, Pharaoh's ability to reward people in this world is contrasted with the everlasting reward that the real King awards to those who have been His faithful servants.

Once they are assured of their reward, the sorcerers turn to Moses and say: *'Moses, will you cast, or shall we cast?'* (Q 7:115). Moses tells the sorcerers to go first: *'You cast.'* The sorcerers bring forth their magic and *put a spell upon the people's eyes, and called forth fear of them, and produced a mighty sorcery* (Q 7:116). At another place, the Qur'an depicts this scene and its effect upon Moses in these words: *He was made to imagine, by their sorcery, that their ropes and their staffs, they were sliding; and Moses conceived a fear within him* (Q 20:66-67). Through these verses, the Qur'an emphasizes the powerful nature of the sorcery that was being practiced in Egypt at that time. Such sorcery, according to the Qur'an, acts on the imaginations of the beholders; even Moses, a prophet of God, is not exempt from its effect. The power of imagination within Moses overcomes for the moment his memory of and trust in the sign of the staff-serpent that he has been given. God bolsters Moses's courage and reminds him of His divine presence and power: *We said to him, 'Fear not; surely you are the uppermost* (Q 20:68). This strengthening of Moses is followed by instructions on how to respond: *And We revealed to Moses: 'Cast your staff.'* *And lo, it forthwith swallowed up their lying invention. So the truth came to pass, and false was proved what they were doing* (Q 7:117-118).

The Qur'an describes the sorcerers' reaction thus: *So they were vanquished there, and they turned about, humbled. And the sorcerers were cast down, prostrating themselves* (Q 7:119-120). The sorcerers recognize that Moses is not performing sorcery since the results of the casting of his staff are not a trick of the mind. Rather, his staff is a miracle in which a real transformation takes place within matter; the staff actually changes into a serpent that is able to eat up other physical objects. This is another way in which the Qur'an portrays the issue at stake in the earlier discussion between Moses and Pharaoh. Pharaoh is just like the sorcerers in that his power comes primarily from his ability to scare people and affect their perception by making them imagine the consequences of his threats. He has some power over physical

entities as is shown by his ability to kill the Israelite infants and he can definitely change peoples' lives by imprisoning them or rewarding them. But all of this power, implies the Qur'an, is like an illusion compared with the power of the real King.

It is the recognition of this power, suggests the Qur'an, that humbles the sorcerers and it is on the basis of such knowledge that they immediately say: *We believe in the Lord of all worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron* (Q 7:121-122). Pharaoh's response to the sorcerers' expression of faith, while being short, is extremely illuminating in portraying his motivations to the reader. Pharaoh says to the sorcerers: *You have believed in Him before I gave you permission* (Q 7:123). Just as in his earlier dialogue with Moses he was unable to come up with a clearly articulated argument refuting Moses's description of the real Lord, in this instance as well Pharaoh does not argue against the validity of the sorcerers' faith. Pharaoh's words allow the reader to surmise that Pharaoh himself was impressed and convinced by the manner in which Moses's staff defeated the sorcerers. But the Qur'an shows him as more concerned with and incensed at the sorcerers for having expressed their faith without first asking his permission. This perceived lack of respect and etiquette towards his station angers him and prompts him to interpret the incident from the perspective of his own fears. He rejects the possibility that the ones who practice sorcery are better equipped to judge whether or not Moses's signs are also sorcery. Instead, he accuses the sorcerers of being in league with Moses and says to them: *Surely this is a device you have devised in the city that you may expel its people from it. Now you shall know! I shall assuredly cut off alternately your hands and feet, then I shall crucify you all together* (Q 7:123-124). In a different rendition, the Qur'an presents Pharaoh competing with God in his ability to punish the sorcerers and he says to them: *you shall know of a certainty which of us is more terrible in punishment, and more abiding* (Q 20:71). Yet again Pharaoh resorts to the threat of punishment as a way of demonstrating his power. No arguments, either rational or miraculous are enough to break the attachment he has to his sense of superiority. He is in competition with God, a state that the Qur'an summarizes by calling him a rebel (Q 20:24, 43; 79:17).

The sorcerers, on the other hand, have been convinced to such a degree and have been *turned about and humbled* (Q 7:119) so completely that they are unwilling to take back their profession of faith. *They said, 'Surely unto our Lord we are turning. You are taking vengeance upon us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they came to us* (Q 7:125-126). The sorcerers' response emphasizes Pharaoh's obstinacy in front of clear signs. They do not deny that Pharaoh has the power in this world to torture and kill them but despite his terrible threats they tell Pharaoh: *We will not prefer you over the clear signs that have come to us, nor over Him who originated us. Decide then what you will decide; you can only decide concerning this present life.... God is better, and more abiding* (Q 20:72-73). Within the Qur'anic worldview, where God is the only true King, it follows that only God is able to help people in matters of this world. After rebuffing Pharaoh, the sorcerers turn to God seeking His help: *Our Lord, pour out upon us patience, and gather us unto You surrendering (muslim)* (Q 7:125-126).

The manner in which the Qur'an presents the transformation in the sorcerers' character serves to highlight Pharaoh's obstinacy and pride. The sorcerers show that

the proper response to seeing one's devices defeated in front of the truth is to return to one's humble origins and abase oneself in front of God. This would be the rational response, to make peace (*islām*) by surrendering to the overwhelming power of God just like the sorcerers. The other possibility, the one exemplified by Pharaoh, is to continue to make war with the real King. Pharaoh cannot bear the blow to his sense of self caused by the sorcerers when they did not ask his permission before submitting to God. Even after he has seen the limitations of his own power, Pharaoh still wants control over his subjects' power to choose. What if the sorcerers had asked his permission first? According to the Qur'an such a response would be the opposite of what people should do when they confront the truth; none may intervene between God and his servants. It is noteworthy in this context that the Qur'an does not portray the sorcerers as submitting to Moses and Aaron, rather they only submit to God. Since the contest was between two lords, the qualification, "the Lord of Moses and Aaron," removes any doubt concerning the identity of the one to whom they were surrendering. By contrasting Pharaoh's reaction with that of the sorcerers, the Qur'an poses and answers a basic question about human psychology and motivation: What prevents people from acknowledging their mistakes publicly even though they clearly see that their earlier actions were wrong? The Qur'anic answer in a nutshell: pride. Just like Iblīs.

### 3.2.5 People Around Pharaoh

Pharaoh's pride and his refusal to submit to God's command parallels Iblīs's pride and refusal. Iblīs considers himself better than Adam and won't prostrate himself in front of him. Pharaoh considers himself too high to humble himself in front of Moses. But there is a crucial difference in the social setting of these two characters. Iblīs is a solitary character in his story with Adam whereas Pharaoh is surrounded by his ministers and courtiers. Iblīs's sense of pride has a limited sense of social history which is presented obliquely in terms of the angels' protest when God tells them about His plans for Adam's creation. One has to assume and imagine a heavenly court where conversation does take place among God, the angels, and Iblīs. But in Pharaoh's case, it is easier for the reader to imagine a human social setting.

The Qur'an portrays the social fabric around Pharaoh in various episodes. Through this portrayal, the Qur'an points towards the complexity of the situation in which Pharaoh lives and receives Moses's message. In addition to Hāmān, presumably the prime minister and head of Pharaoh's council, the Qur'an also mentions Pharaoh's wife and an unnamed believer from among those close to Pharaoh. The situation sketched out is that of a king who receives two kinds of advice from people close to him. Some of these people tell him to accept Moses's message while others seem more inclined to oppose Moses and share with Pharaoh the desire to hold power over the Israelites. Let us examine in further detail the characters that play a role in this narrative.

### Hāmān and Pharaoh's Council

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Qur'an holds Pharaoh, his council, and his armies equally responsible for refusing to accept God's message. They share with Pharaoh an attitude of contempt towards the Israelites and their refusal is based on pride; they cannot bear to acknowledge the authority of someone who hails from a people who are their servants: *'What, shall we believe two mortals like ourselves, whose people are our servants?'* So they called them [Moses and Aaron] liars (Q 23:46). In some instances the Qur'an groups Pharaoh together with the council while at other instances it places the agency of denial either within Pharaoh or within his council. Here is one instance where the Qur'an groups Pharaoh and his council together: *But when Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said, 'These are mere forged sorceries; we never heard this from our forefathers'* (Q 28:36). The council cites cultural memory and tradition as support for their refusal of and judgement on Moses's signs. After delineating the response of the group as a whole, the text focuses on Pharaoh's reaction: *Pharaoh said, 'Counselors, you have no other god that I know of except me'* (Q 28:37). The only visible god that is present is Pharaoh while Moses is speaking of an entity that is unseen with the physical eye. Pharaoh and his council work on the assumption that a god has to be visible while Moses is arguing that God is to be seen and known through the effects of His actions.

Pharaoh emphasizes this perspective further when he follows his comment concerning his visible kingship with these words addressed to his minister: *Hāmān, light me a fire to bake clay bricks, then build me a tower so that I may climb up to Moses's God: I think that he is lying* (Q 28:38). This is a sarcastic rejoinder to Moses's claim; since God, as Moses has described Him, is unseen by definition, how can Pharaoh expect to find Him up in the sky? This mocking tone and sarcasm on Pharaoh's part is depicted even more clearly at other places in the Qur'an. In one instance, the Qur'an shows Pharaoh and his council laughing at Moses when he shows them the signs (Q 43:47).

The picture that emerges is that the council and Pharaoh shared the same views and spurred each other on in denying God's message and in continuing to oppress the Israelites. In one rendition, it is the council that advises Pharaoh on how to understand Moses's mission and proposes the contest as a way to expose him: *The Council of the people of Pharaoh said, 'Surely this man is a cunning sorcerer who desires to expel you from your land; [Pharaoh said] what do you command?'* *The Council of the people of Pharaoh said, 'Put him and his brother off a while, and send among the cities summoners, to bring you every cunning sorcerer'* (Q 7:109-112). In these verses Pharaoh appears subservient to the opinions of his council. The council continues to exert pressure on Pharaoh and after the sorcerers have been defeated, it is the council that instigates Pharaoh to continue oppressing the Israelites: *The Council of people of Pharaoh said, 'Are you going to leave Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and forsake you and your gods?'* (Q 7:127). The council's words hint at the possibility that Pharaoh had restrained himself after the contest, satisfying himself with merely punishing the sorcerers. But once the council pushed him *Pharaoh replied, 'We shall slaughter their male children, sparing only the*

*females: We have complete power over them'* (Q 7:127).

### Pharaoh's Wife

In contrast to the advice of his council, the Qur'an also shows Pharaoh receiving advice from people close to him who support Moses. Pharaoh's wife, instrumental in preventing the infant Moses from being killed, is one of these characters. The Qur'an does not explicitly depict any interaction between her and Pharaoh on the subject of God's message, but the text does show her praying to God to be rid of Pharaoh. She is put forth as a model for all believers: *God has struck a similitude for the believers—the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord, build for me, close to You, a house in Paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and deliver me from the people of the evildoers'* (Q 66:11). Through these short verses, the Qur'an opens up the possibility for the reader to imagine conversations between Pharaoh and his wife in which she encourages him to accept Moses's message.

### The Unnamed Believer in Pharaoh's Household

Another character that encourages Pharaoh to accept Moses's message is an unnamed believer from within Pharaoh's household. This character personifies the qualities of justice, fairness, and courage; he does not let the fear of Pharaoh's reprisal prevent him from voicing his opinions. He appears at the moment in the narrative when Pharaoh is meeting with his council in order to decide what course of action he should take with Moses. The Qur'an shows Pharaoh in a state of extreme anger as he says to his council *'Leave me to kill Moses—let him call upon his Lord!—for I fear he may cause you to change your religion, or spread disorder in the land'* (Q 40:26). The unnamed believer responds to Pharaoh and addresses the whole council:

A secret believer from Pharaoh's family said, 'How can you kill a man for just saying, "My Lord is God?" He has brought you clear signs from your Lord—if he is a liar, on his own head be it—and if he is truthful, than at least some of what he has threatened will happen to you. God does not guide any rebellious, outrageous liar. My people, as masters in the land you have power, but who will help us against God's might if it comes upon us?' (Q 40:28)

This appeal to rationality has no effect upon Pharaoh who responds by asserting his authority and telling the believer that he knows what he is doing: *But Pharaoh said, 'I have told you what I think; I am guiding you along the right path'* (Q 40:29). The believer, though, persists in making his argument:

The believer said, 'My people, I fear your fate will be the fate of those others who opposed [their prophets]: the fate of the people of Noah, 'Ad, Thamud, and those who came after them—God never wills injustice on His creatures. My people, I fear for you on the Day you will cry out to one another, the Day you will turn tail and flee with no one to defend you

from God! Whoever God leaves to stray will have no one to guide him. Joseph came to you before with clear signs, but you never ceased to doubt the message he brought you. When he died, you said, "God will not send another messenger." (Q 40:30-34)

The believer's speech articulates the central themes of the Qur'an; that God is not unjust towards humans, it is humans who wrong themselves; that the fate of those who continue to deny God's message and practice oppression is severe punishment in this world and the last; that there is no protection from God's justice except through surrender to God's will. After laying out the reality of the situation, the believer's speech reiterates these themes in slightly different formulations; He contrasts God's guidance with Pharaoh's misguidance; He also challenges the basis of cultural memory and tradition that Pharaoh and his council are using to reject God's message. The believer puts the blame squarely on the council for deliberate neglect of Joseph's prophecy. He continues his speech, outlining the the correct vision of the way things are:

The believer said, 'My people, follow me! I will guide you to the right path. My people, the life of this world is only a brief enjoyment; it is the Hereafter that is the lasting home. Whoever does evil will be repaid with its like; whoever does good and believes, be it a man or a woman, will enter paradise and be provided for without measure. My people, why do I call you to salvation when you call me to the Fire? You call me to disbelieve in God and to associate with Him things of which I have no knowledge; I call you to the Mighty, the Forgiving One. There is no doubt that what you call me to serve is not fit to be invoked either in this world or the Hereafter: Our return is to God alone, it will be the rebels who will inhabit the Fire. [One Day] you will remember what I am saying to you now, so I commit my case to God: God is well aware of His servants.' So God saved him from the harm they planned. (Q 40:38-45)

These long speeches by the believer make clear that both Pharaoh and his council were reminded very clearly, time and again, of the way things truly are. These speeches are also a summary of Qur'anic teachings concerning reality and contain the entire narrative of human existence from the Qur'an's perspective. The effect of the way in which the Qur'an presents the details of deliberations within Pharaoh's council serves to clearly sketch the character of Pharaoh and his council in the readers' minds. In this presentation the Qur'an argues that their denial, despite such clear warnings, leaves them no grounds for pleading innocence. The speeches by the believer ask readers to reflect anew on the qualities and motives that can prevent people from acknowledging and acting on the truth. These qualities are highlighted in Qur'anic verses that follow the believer's speech: *As for those who, with no authority to do so, dispute God's messages, there is nothing in their hearts but a thirst for a greatness they will never attain* (Q 40:56). The kind of greatness that Pharaoh seeks, says the Qur'an, only belongs to God and is not the portion of any mortal.

Pharaoh's sense of his own greatness comes from his possessions: *My people, is the Kingdom of Egypt not mine? And these rivers that flow at my feet, are they not mine? Do you not see?* (Q 43:51). This pride at owning the kingdom of Egypt makes him look at Moses with contempt. In a speech to his people, he says: *Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can scarcely express himself? Why has he not been given any gold bracelets? Why have no angels come to accompany him?* (Q 43:52-53). Pharaoh looks at appearances and bases his argument on that which people can see with their physical eyes: *In this way he made his people unsteady and they obeyed him—they were a perverse people* (Q 43:54).

### Pharaoh's People

As we saw in the previous section, Pharaoh's people allowed themselves to be convinced by him and all but a few of them supported him: *So none believed in Moses, save a seed of his people, for fear of Pharaoh and their Council, that they would persecute them* (Q 10:83). Other than this small group of Egyptians, The Qur'an portrays Pharaoh's people as being fickle in their promises and as obstinate in refusing God's message as Pharaoh himself. These qualities come to light in the events surrounding the plagues that God sends down as warnings. The Qur'an criticizes the actions of Pharaoh's people during this period because they ascribed all good to themselves and blamed Moses for everything that went wrong:

We inflicted years of drought and crop failure on Pharaoh's people, so that they might take heed, then, when something good came their way, they said, 'This is our due!'. When something bad came, they ascribed it to the evil omen of Moses and those with him, but their 'evil omen' was really from God, though most of them did not realize it. (Q 7:130-31)

They hardened themselves against any change in attitude that might be caused by experiencing difficulty and told Moses: *We will not believe in you, no matter what signs you produce to cast a spell on us* (Q 7:132). As a result of their stubbornness in the face of the drought, God sends the plagues upon them: *And so We let loose on them the flood, locusts, lice, frogs, blood—all clear signs* (Q 7:133). Despite their refusal to believe because *they were arrogant, wicked people*, in order to get their way they would promise Moses that they would believe if the plague was removed: *Whenever a plague struck them, they would say, 'Moses, pray to your Lord for us by virtue of the promise He has made to you: if you relieve us of the plague, we will believe you and let the Children of Israel go with you'* (Q 7:134). But they would break the promise and not believe once the plague had been lifted. The Qur'an says that God punished them because of these actions: *because they rejected Our signs and paid them no heed, We exacted a retribution from them: We drowned them in the sea... and destroyed what Pharaoh and his people were making and what they were building* (Q 7:136).

The willingness of Pharaoh's people to assist him in hunting down the Children of Israel is also sketched out clearly in the Qur'an. When Moses flees Egypt with



the Israelites, Pharaoh decides to pursue them: *Pharaoh sent messengers into the cities, proclaiming, 'These people are a puny band—they have enraged us—and we are a large army, on the alert'* (Q 26:53-59). As attested by the event of their drowning, they responded positively to this call to arms and pursued the Israelites with Pharaoh. Their contempt for the Israelites, their mocking of Moses, and their continual breaking of promises earns them not only God's anger and the punishment of death by drowning, but in a striking metaphor the Qur'an says that no one mourned their destruction: *Neither Heaven nor earth wept for them, nor were they respited* (Q 44:29).

### 3.2.6 Pharaoh's Death

The reader can only guess at the length of time over which Moses's ministry and Pharaoh's refusal lasted since the Qur'an does not give a precise time period. When he sees the way in which Pharaoh's people continually break their promises to believe in God, Moses prays to God: *Our Lord, You have given to Pharaoh and his Council adornment and possessions in this present life. Our Lord, let them go astray from Your way; Our Lord, obliterate their possessions, and harden their hearts so that they do not believe, till they see the painful punishment* (Q 10:88). God responds: *Your prayer is answered; so go you straight, and follow not the way of those that know not* (Q 10:89). Once Moses and the Israelites flee Egypt, Pharaoh follows them with his armies *rebelliously and aggressively till, when the drowning overtook him, he said, 'I believe that there is no god but He in whom the children of Israel believe; I am of those that surrender (muslim)'* (Q 10:90) God addresses him: *What, now!? Whereas before you did rebel, being of those that did corruption. So today We shall deliver you with your body, that you may be a sign to those after you. Surely many men are heedless of Our signs* (Q 10:91-92).

Moses's prayer to God for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is said with the assumption that enunciation of faith at the moment of seeing the punishment is of no use. Moses has lost all hope of Pharaoh's conversion, having exhausted all that he could do in order to bring the promise of salvation to those who, by most worldly standards, should have already been paying for their heinous crimes of killing infants. That the prayer comes at this moment and that it ensues from a human actor is the Qur'an's way of showing what the reader has already been told earlier in the same chapter: *They were not men to believe in what they had called lies before. So We seal the hearts of the transgressors* (Q 10:74). It is the people themselves who have hardened their hearts against God's message and it is through this action of their own making that God has sealed their hearts. The narrative of Moses and Pharaoh, in this instance, illustrates this dynamic and the underlying cause of the sealing of hearts: Pride and hubris.

God's mercy and forgiveness might still have given the tyrants more time but they choose to follow the Israelites *rebelliously and aggressively* (Q 10:90). It is during this rebellious act that Pharaoh meets his earthly end through drowning. But at the moment of his drowning he enunciates his faith in God and, just like the sorcerers, makes sure that there is no ambiguity in his articulation; he is indeed surrendering to

the God in whom Moses and the Israelites have faith. The text does not present God denying the veracity of Pharaoh's faith; rather, He addresses Pharaoh directly in a rhetorical question that seems to acknowledge the truth of Pharaoh's assertion. There then follows an ambiguous sentence in which God tells Pharaoh that He will save his body (literally: save him *through* or *in* his body) so that he may become a sign for those after him. The ambiguity of this phrasing has given rise to a fierce debate within Islamic theological and exegetical writings. A minority group of scholars, among them Ibn al-'Arabi, have argued that Pharaoh's faith was true and that it will save him in the next world.<sup>8</sup> The majority of Muslim scholars, though, argue that Pharaoh's enunciation of faith at the moment of drowning did not benefit him and as proof they cite the following representative verses in which the Qur'an sets forth God's custom in such circumstances: *when they [the mocking deniers] saw Our punishment, they said, 'We believe in God alone; we reject any partner we ascribed to Him,' but believing after seeing Our punishment did not benefit them at all—this has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures—there and then the disbelievers were lost*(Q 40: 84-85).

### 3.3 Qur'anic Characterization of Pharaoh

The analysis of Pharaoh's narrative in the Qur'an has prepared us to reflect upon Qur'anic characterization in general and the Qur'an's portrayal of Pharaoh in particular. The primary techniques, according to literary critics, that an author uses to reveal character are "showing" and "telling." The reader is sometimes explicitly told that a character is "wise," or "just;" in this case, the reliability of the narrator determines whether the readers will accept such characterization as valid or not. In the technique of showing, on the other hand, the author presents the readers with statements that are made by the characters concerning themselves or by showing the actions of the characters in various circumstances. Mark Powell observes that "the technique of showing is less precise than that of telling but is usually more interesting."<sup>9</sup> He adds that showing makes the readers work harder by compelling them to compare and evaluate different kinds of evidence.<sup>10</sup> This is the kind of work that I have attempted by analyzing the episodes that make up the Qur'anic narrative of Moses and Pharaoh. What, then, are the features of Qur'anic narration and characterization? How does the form in which the Qur'an tells stories shape the meaning?

From the literary perspective, we see that the Qur'an usually tells its readers the point of a passage through direct address. But this telling is balanced with showing

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<sup>8</sup>See, Eric Ormsby. "The Faith of Pharaoh: A Disputed Question in Islamic Theology". In: *Studia Islamica* (2004). Pp. 5–28; Carl W. Ernst. "Controversies Over Ibn Al-'Arabi's *Fuṣuṣ*: The Faith of Pharaoh". In: *Islamic Culture* 59.3 (1985). Pp. 259–266; Alexander D. Knysh. *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

<sup>9</sup>Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

and, as we have seen in the case of the narrative of Moses and Pharaoh, there are numerous representations of how those past events unfolded. Before relating events from a story, the Qur'an tells the reader how the story ultimately ends. By doing this, it presents readers with the context in which to view the events and to form opinions about the characters involved. The primary mode of characterization in the Qur'an, other than telling the readers the exact qualities of a character, is through dialogue. There is a noticeable absence of physical description; the text has nothing to say about Pharaoh's age, height, or color; the reader has no way of knowing how big of a serpent the staff changed into; nor is there any physical description of Pharaoh's court. In this respect Qur'anic narrative technique is similar to that used in the Hebrew Bible. In a seminal essay, where he compares the modes of representation in the *Odyssey* with that in *Genesis*, Eric Auerbach has suggested that the effect of biblical narrative style, with its omission of physical detail, is that it foregrounds the psychological aspects of the characters.<sup>11</sup>

Auerbach's observation about biblical narrative technique applies to the Qur'an as well, which, through eschewing physical detail and relying mostly on dialogue, gives no explicit encouragement to the reader to imagine Moses and Pharaoh in a specific location. In some ways such representations abstract the character from their physicality and the reader is made to confront an encounter between two psyches. In doing so, the Qur'an encourages a psychological reading of events that emphasizes the motivations and forces behind the actions of various characters. The sparsity of physical detail has another important consequence; a short phrase or sentence uttered by a character can signify much and can impart complexity to the character. We have seen this phenomenon most clearly in Pharaoh's angry rebuke to the sorcerers when he tells them that they had professed their faith without asking his permission first. That single sentence is the key that opens the door to understanding Pharaoh's psychology and serves as a lynch pin for harmonizing statements made by Pharaoh in other circumstances.

The Qur'an uses such short comments within dialogues or short narratives to add complexity to the characters it portrays. From one perspective, Qur'anic characterization seems dualistic; it tells readers explicitly that characters are either believers or unbelievers, in short, characters appear as types. The stated purpose of the Qur'an, as we have seen in the case of the *Fātiḥa*, is to remind its readers of the possibilities of becoming open to them. If the Qur'an were to limit itself only to static characterization—labeling characters as believers or unbelievers or as those who do beautiful deeds or those who do unwholesome deeds—it would preclude its stated purpose. Readers may find it difficult to identify with either perfect believers or perfect unbelievers. It is through portrayals in which the archetypal believers or unbelievers go against their type that the Qur'an displays a complexity of character that matches the complex and ambiguous status of its readers. A good illustration of this observation is the Qur'anic characterization of the archetype of the prophets.

The Qur'an's depiction of various prophets intimates qualities and sketches sit-

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<sup>11</sup>Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 3-23.

uations that portray them with a complexity of character with which readers can identify. The Qur'an shows the prophets as possessing the desirable qualities of faith, trust, knowledge, perception, and tenderheartedness, while at the same time showing how they can also have moments of doubt, temptation, and less than perfect etiquette. Joseph is on the verge of giving in to desire but only through the help of God does he find success in defeating temptation (Q 12:24); Abraham's heart wants to find rest by seeing how God will raise the dead: his reason, his faith needs visual proof, or he suffers from a moment of doubt and wants to still his heart (Q 2:260); Muhammad wants a rich and powerful man of Mecca to believe so badly that he turns away from the faithful blind man and is reprimanded by God for this lapse in etiquette (Q 80:1); Moses is afraid of what Pharaoh would do to him since he is on the run having killed an Egyptian; Adam and his wife give into temptation (Q 7:19-23), and Jonah is even called blameworthy prior to his repentance (Q 37:142).

Just as prophets are exemplars of desirable character traits, their adversaries model blameworthy qualities that readers need to discern and avoid within themselves. Pharaoh is an example of such blameworthy humans and the complexity with which the Qur'an characterizes God's chosen emissaries is also paralleled by the way in which it portrays Pharaoh. Although his qualities and actions are offered as clear examples of what not to do, the specific ways in which the Qur'an shows Pharaoh behaving in various episodes reveals the Qur'an's concern with bringing out the complex nature of motives and forces that shape Pharaoh's decisions. At the same time that the Qur'an adds complexity to Pharaoh's character, it forces readers to reflect upon the contrasting qualities of God's mercy and severity.

Mark Powell observes that the reader is supposed to empathize with the evaluative point of view of a reliable narrator.<sup>12</sup> The narrator in the case of the Qur'an is God, who tells Moses to speak softly with Pharaoh. The narrator has immediately asked the reader to come to terms with God's sympathy and mercy towards a person who has already committed the terrible and, by many counts, unforgivable crime of killing newborn babies. Is God's mercy so vast that it indeed is capable of forgiving Pharaoh? The answer to that question can be found in other parts of the Qur'an where God says that He has prescribed mercy upon Himself (Q 6:54) and that God can forgive any sin other than the association of another with Him (Q 4:48). If God is able to forgive such cruel acts, the reader can ask, then what about the human recipients of these acts? Are they too supposed to forgive such cruelty and injustice? Moses's response to God's command, to be the envoy who delivers to Pharaoh a possibility of forgiveness, is revealing in this respect. In the Qur'an, he does not question why God is showing such mercy towards Pharaoh; Moses too has killed and, although his action was not pre-meditated like Pharaoh's, he too is in the position of dealing with the consequences of having taken a life.

How then might readers respond to Pharaoh's characterization in the Qur'an? If they take on God's evaluative point of view at the beginning of the narrative, where God expresses the hope that Pharaoh might have faith, then they need to remain

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<sup>12</sup>Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, p. 53.

open to the possibility of Pharaoh's forgiveness and salvation. But, at the same time, the Qur'an has told readers explicitly that Pharaoh met a disastrous end as a result of his actions. The effect of knowing how Pharaoh's story ends and yet seeing the plot unfold is that the reader's attention is thereby focused towards an examination of the specific ways in which Pharaoh erred and the motives and forces within him that brought him to his ruin.

Pharaoh's primary error is his obstinate denial of his dependence on God; all of his tyrannical and cruel acts proceed from a sense of self-sufficiency. Within the context of the Qur'anic worldview, where knowledge of human dependence on God is assumed as the deepest memory within all humans, Pharaoh's narrative provides explicit and implicit answers to the following question: What makes people deny that which they know to be true? The Qur'anic answer, in the case of Pharaoh, is that the primary cause of such denial is pride. Pharaoh's angst is strongest over the public loss of his prestige and power. The fear of losing power over his subjects is compounded by the fact that the messenger sent to him is a former slave. The Qur'an shows that Pharaoh cannot bear the thought of submitting to a person of such lowly origins. Even as Pharaoh might consider and inwardly acknowledge that he is not the creator of all, his thoughts are darkened by what he perceives to be the real goal behind Moses's challenge: a desire to usurp Pharaoh's place and to take over the land of Egypt. Pharaoh's pride and desire for control appear as the underlying cause of his denial.

Pharaoh, then, as depicted in the Qur'an is a man who allows the knowledge of truth within him to be overpowered by pride and fear of perceived threats to his power; who vacillates between a mocking denial of truth and the practice of cruelty in keeping his kingdom intact; and, finally, who is stubborn in his public denial of God until he sees his end in clear sight. In short Pharaoh is the epitome of the Qur'anic conception of unbelief (*kufur*).

### **3.4 Conclusion: The Complex Yet Archetypal Unbeliever**

This study has shown that Qur'anic characterization of Pharaoh is primarily psychological. The Qur'an focuses on the motivations underlying Pharaoh's actions and on the forces within him that keep concealing his memory of the Covenant of Alast. Through techniques of showing and telling, Qur'anic narrative reveals an archetypal character who, at some level within himself, recognizes the truth of God's message. He allows his pride and ambition to cover up this knowledge and continues to commit tyrannical acts following the dictates of his vanity. But there is dramatic development in Pharaoh's character when at the moment of drowning he enunciates his pre-existing knowledge of God's unity. Since the Qur'an asks the reader to adopt God's evaluative point of view, Qur'anic narration mostly creates antipathy in the reader for Pharaoh's character through clear condemnations of his qualities and actions. Yet, God also shows concern for Pharaoh by asking Moses to speak gently with him, hop-

ing that he will respond positively to His message, arousing some sympathy in the reader for the character. The presence of sympathy and antipathy for Pharaoh in Qur'anic narrative invites its readers to reflect on qualities that can obfuscate their awareness of being dependent on God, and illustrates the Qur'anic assumption that lack of faith or unbelief is the concealment of an innate knowledge of truth that all humans possess as the deepest memory within their selves.

# Chapter 4

## Pharaoh in Rūmī's Works

### 4.1 Introduction and Overview

All of Rūmī's observations about Pharaoh grow out of the thesis that Pharaoh represents the situation of the human self in this very moment with its possibilities, challenges, and shortcomings. For Rūmī, the study of Pharaoh's character is an examination of the blameworthy qualities of the human self. Pharaoh displays the qualities of pride, arrogance, and attachment to worldly honor and position. These qualities, says Rūmī, blind the self and cause it to see everything in the world, including itself, from the distorting perspective of its own desires. In Rūmī's view, these blameworthy qualities overpower the part of the self that acknowledges the true vision of reality sent down in revelation and, as demonstrated in Pharaoh's case, lead to tyrannical and cruel use of power. Pharaoh's character is a mirror in which Rūmī asks seekers to consider the nature and dynamics of their own selves so that they may remove from themselves the blameworthy qualities of which Pharaoh is such a clear example. Rūmī teaches that unless seekers can see clearly the ways in which they display these qualities, they cannot overcome the obstacles keeping them far from the true happiness that lies in earning God's pleasure.

Because Pharaoh exhibits blameworthy qualities, such as pride, to such an extreme degree as to claim divinity, seekers can find it difficult to see their own qualities reflected in Pharaoh's words and deeds. This seems to be the reason why Rūmī attempts to portray Pharaoh in a manner that would make his readers identify and sympathize with his character. Rūmī was by no means the first author who saw Pharaoh as a symbol of the self; Sufi teachers prior to Rūmī also recognized the difficulty ordinary readers of the Qur'an might have in seeing Pharaoh as a reflection of their own selves. Sayings attributed to these early Sufis lay out the manner in which Pharaoh's character ought to be approached by seekers. Qaṣṣār (d. 271 A.H.) says, "If someone thinks that his self (*nafs*) is more excellent than Pharaoh's self, then he has manifested pride (*kibr*)."<sup>1</sup> Sam'ānī (d. 534 A.H.) takes Qaṣṣār's analysis one step further by stating that "the consensus of the people of the path (*ahl-i ṭarīqat*)

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<sup>1</sup>Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī. *al-Risāla al-qushayrīyya fī 'Ilm al-taṣawwuf*. Ed. by Hānī al-Ḥājj. al-Maktaba al-tawfīqiyya, n.d. P. 85.

is that whoever sees himself as greater than Pharaoh is worse than him.”<sup>2</sup> Rūmī's contemporary, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), makes explicit the link between considering oneself better than Pharaoh and the fundamental principle of Sufism, “He who knows his own self, knows his Lord.” He paraphrases Qaṣṣār as saying: “The one who sees his self as better than Pharaoh's self does not know,”<sup>3</sup> that is, he does not know his own self and hence does not know his Lord. Rūmī's task, therefore, is to persuade his readers that Pharaoh represents nothing other than their own tendencies and qualities.

As mentioned in “Chapter 1,” Rūmī approaches this task through an act of imaginative interpretation. He creatively renders episodes from Qur’anic narratives of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, and develops the characters of Moses, Pharaoh, Pharaoh's wife Āsiya, the magicians, and Pharaoh's minister Hāmān. Rūmī expands the sparse descriptions and dialogues of the Qur’an into long speeches by each character. In this elaboration, he depicts not only Pharaoh's blameworthy qualities, but also his desire to accept Moses's message. In Rūmī's depiction, Pharaoh's desire to submit clashes with his pride which, based on an attachment to the worldly renown of being a god, cannot bear losing face in front of his people. Rūmī paints a moving portrayal of this inner conflict and the reader imagines Pharaoh in the privacy of his bedchamber as he struggles to comprehend the reasons why he cannot bring himself to surrender to God publicly. It is through this nuanced character development that Rūmī tries to convince readers that the story of Moses and Pharaoh is “the ready cash”<sup>4</sup> of their own state and that “what was within Pharaoh is the same as what is within your own soul.”<sup>5</sup>

Rūmī uses Pharaoh in his writings in both narrative and thematic modes. While discussing and developing a theme, such as the self's blindness to the real source of danger, Rūmī cites episodes from Pharaoh's story as an example. In the thematic mode, such appearances of Pharaoh in Rūmī's discourse are allusive where whole episodes or certain qualities displayed by Pharaoh's are called to the reader's attention. From the narrative perspective, Rūmī develops episodes from the story of Moses and Pharaoh at length in two books of the *Mathnawī*. In book III of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī narrates events surrounding the conception and birth of Moses.<sup>6</sup> Here, he also narrates a version of the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh,<sup>7</sup> and the story of the sorcerers who, while initially allied with Pharaoh, ultimately realize the truth of

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<sup>2</sup>Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Sam‘ānī. *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā’ al-malak al-fattāḥ*. Ed. by Najīb Māyil Ḥarawī. Tehran: Shirkat-i intashārāt-i ‘Ilmī wa farhangī, 1368/1989, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup>Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī. *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. 4 vols. Beirut: Dār ṣādir, n.d. I: 527.

<sup>4</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1252.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 971.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 840-970.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1067-1110.



Moses's message and defy Pharaoh by expressing their faith in God.<sup>8</sup> The second instance is a lengthy treatment in book IV of the events that take place when Moses returns to Egypt as God's messenger.<sup>9</sup> This rendition develops extensively the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh and depicts the struggle within Pharaoh as he considers whether or not to accept the teachings Moses has brought.<sup>10</sup> In this rendition, Rūmī describes the plagues visited upon the Egyptians as a result of Pharaoh's denial of God's message and the qualities Pharaoh displays in those circumstances. In all these instances, Rūmī's goal in interpreting Pharaoh's character is to guide his readers; he wants them to learn from Pharaoh's mistakes and choose a course of action that leads to salvation rather than to punishment. We now turn to a more detailed exploration of the topics and themes that emerge out of examining Rūmī's treatment of Pharaoh's character.

## 4.2 Rūmī's Psychology: The Structure and Dynamics of the Self

Why does Rūmī consider Pharaoh a good representation of every human self? The answer to this question lies in grasping Rūmī's understanding of the self. The first part of this section, therefore, gives an overview of Rūmī's psychology by examining the terms he uses to refer to the self. I then examine the way in which Rūmī conceives of the self as a microcosm or an inner polity. This viewpoint clarifies exactly how and why Rūmī considers Pharaoh a paradigmatic example of the state of the self in every moment.

### 4.2.1 The Self as Spirit

Rūmī uses various terms to refer to the interior dimension of the human being. In "Chapter 2" we observed that Rūmī employs the categories of form and meaning to analyze every existent entity. When Rūmī examines the human being, he casts the

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<sup>8</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1157-1258.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 1240-63; 2301-2778.

<sup>10</sup>Rūmī's narrations of these episodes follow the general outlines of Kisā'ī and Tha'alabī. See, Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, p. 67; Both Kisā'ī and Tha'alabī compiled stories of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an and ḥadīth. Their writings belong to the genre of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Stories of the Prophets. These authors seek to fill in the lacunae left in the Qur'anic narratives concerning various prophets. For this purpose they rely upon various sources such as ḥadīth and oral traditions. A marked characteristic of the stories in the *qiṣaṣ* genre is their chronological arrangement; not only do they proceed from the earliest to the latest prophets at the global level of the whole book, they also structure episodes and events narrated or alluded to in the Qur'an concerning each prophet into a chronological sequence from birth to death. See, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad Al-Tha'alabī. *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* or "Lives of the Prophets". Trans. and annot. by W.M. Brinner. Leiden: Brill, 2002; Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh Al-Kisā'ī. *Tales of the Prophets*. Trans. by W.M. Thackston. Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc. Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997.

binary of form and meaning into the pairs of body and spirit (*rūḥ*), or body and soul (*jān*). The Arabic term *rūḥ* translated here as “spirit” and the Persian term *jān* translated here as “soul” designate the principle that animates the human body. Although Rūmī uses these terms synonymously, it is the Arabic term *rūḥ* or spirit that most clearly ties his teachings on the human self to the Qur’an.

*Rūḥ* is a Qur’anic term that God ascribes to Himself. Addressing the angels before the creation of Adam, God says: *When I have shaped him and have breathed into him from My spirit (rūḥī), fall down prostrating to him* (Q 15:29). Thus it is God’s breath that moves within the human body, giving it life and self-awareness. *Rūḥ* is related to the Arabic word for wind (*rīḥ*) and the basic verbal form of the same root has the meaning of “going” as one of its denotations. These meanings help bring out the dynamic nature of *rūḥ*; in its definite nominalization, “the spirit” (*al-rūḥ*) appears as a dynamic reality that circulates within the cosmos by descending from and ascending back to God: *To Him the angels and the spirit climb up in a day whose measure is fifty thousand years* (Q 70:4). The descent of spirit is the inspiration and revelations God bestows upon His servants: *...the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit from Him* (Q 58:22), and *He casts the spirit from His command upon whomever He will of His servants, that He may warn of the Day of Meeting* (Q 40:15).<sup>11</sup>

The Qur’an designates the locus of revelation and inspiration within the human being, using the Prophet’s case, to be the heart: *Truly, this Qur’an has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds; the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down upon your heart* (Q 26:194). The Islamic tradition understands the Trustworthy Spirit as the angel Gabriel who is also identified as the “Sanctified Spirit” (*rūḥ al-quḍus*) that God sent upon Jesus and Mary (Q 2:253; 5:110). The spirit is, therefore, also an angelic reality. In addition to all of the above mentioned meanings, the Qur’an also associates spirit with the comfort (*rawḥ*) God gives to the faithful in times of need;<sup>12</sup> Jacob tells his sons: *Do not despair of God’s comfort. For no one despairs of God’s comfort except the people who do not have faith* (Q 12:87). From the perspective of revelation and inspiration, the Qur’an’s use of the term spirit can be summarized as follows: God is the possessor and creator of spirit who sends down spirit (revelation and inspiration) through the spirit (Gabriel) upon spirit (the human self).

The Qur’anic teachings on the human self provided a rich source of reflection and meditation for Muslim scholars. By the 6th century of Islam, the time in which Rūmī lived, there were well established classificatory schema for discussing psychology. Many Sufis analyzed the spirit using classifications that used Qur’anic terms but were also partly indebted to the philosophical tradition that followed Aristotle. Rūmī’s classification and analysis of the spirit can be seen as interpretations of Qur’anic passages and also show the influence of the philosophical discussions of the self. Rūmī

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<sup>11</sup>The phrase “the spirit from His command” is glossed as “revelations with His teachings” by Haleem in Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation*.

<sup>12</sup>Since the Arabic word for comfort or refreshment (*rawḥ*) is written in exactly the same fashion as the word for spirit.

divides spirit into four levels. The first level is that of the animal spirit which comes into existence when God blows his breath into the human body. At times Rūmī refers to the animal spirit as the natural, fiery, or airy spirit.<sup>13</sup> The second level is that of the human spirit, the third level is that of the angelic spirit or the spirit of Gabriel, and fourth level is that of the Muhammadan spirit, also called the spirit of the saints or Friends of God (*awliyā'*).<sup>14</sup> In addition to these four levels, Rūmī sometimes refers to a fifth level of spirit when he calls God the Spirit of the spirit.<sup>15</sup> God as the Creator is above all levels of spirit and stands beyond and yet connected to the world, in analogy with the relationship between breath and the one breathing it: "You are insight's Insight and reality's Reality! You are the Light of the light of the mysteries, the Spirit of the spirit of the spirit!"<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned above, the animal spirit comes into existence when God blows his spirit into the human body. Since this modality of spirit is dependent on the body, it ceases to exist with the body's death. In keeping with its relationship with bodies, characterized by their dispersive and multiple aspects, the "animal spirit is also qualified by multiplicity and dispersion."<sup>17</sup> Higher levels of spirit, such as the angelic spirit or the spirit of the Friends, are characterized by unity and coherence and, therefore, are considered greater than the animal spirit.<sup>18</sup> A substantial portion of Rūmī's teachings is geared towards helping his readers recognize the different levels of spirit and the qualities each level possesses:

Besides the understanding and spirit (*jān*)<sup>19</sup> which is in the ox and the  
 ass, Man has another intelligence and spirit;  
 Again, in the Friend of God, the owner of that divine breath, there is a  
 spirit other than the human spirit and intelligence.  
 The animal spirit does not possess oneness: Seek not this oneness from  
 the airy spirit...

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<sup>13</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Rūmī uses similar expressions to refer to God, for example, the Water of the water (III: 1247), the Life of life (IV: 798), the Soul of the soul (III: 1275), the Love of love (III: 4698), the Intellect of intellect (III: 2529-34), and the Light of light (VI: 1092). In one instance Rūmī uses light six times in the following expression: The Light of the light of the light of the light of the light of light (VI: 2153). Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. *Mathnawī*. Ed. and comm., with an introd., by Muhammad Isti'lāmī. 2nd ed. 7 vols. Tehran: Intishārāt-i sukhan, 1379.

<sup>16</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dāwān-i kabīr*, verse no. 27041; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 3326-33.

<sup>19</sup>This is an instance where Rūmī uses the words for spirit (*rūḥ*) and the Persian word for life and soul (*jān*) synonymously. For a further discussion of the relationship between these two terms see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 30-31.

Make your spirit to be united speedily with the holy spirits of the Travelers...

The animal spirit is alive by nutriment; however good or bad its state may be, it dies all the same.<sup>20</sup>

Rūmī views the next three levels of spirit—the human, the angelic, and the Muhammadan—as different aspects of one reality. The qualities of the human spirit, that which set it apart from the animal spirit, are its self-awareness and discernment. For Rūmī, these qualities manifest themselves most clearly in articulated human speech. The qualities of self-awareness and discernment inherent in the human spirit are found in their most developed states within the saints or Friends of God.<sup>21</sup> At this level of development, the dispersive aspects of the body cease to control the spirit which becomes clear and regains its original purity, thereby coming close to God. Spirit at this level can then be properly called the sanctified spirit. While from one perspective the sanctified spirit is the congener of angels, from another perspective it is higher than them and it is the presence of this quality of spirit that the angels recognized by bowing down in front of Adam:

Experience shows that spirit is nothing but awareness. Whoever has greater awareness has a greater spirit.

Our spirit is greater than the animal spirit. Why? Because it has more awareness.

Then the angel's spirit is greater than ours, for he transcends the rational senses.

Then the spirit of God's Friends, the Possessors of Hearts, is even greater. Leave aside your astonishment!

That is why the angels prostrated themselves before Adam: his spirit was greater than their existence.

After all, it would not have been proper to command a superior being to prostrate himself to an inferior one.

How could God's Justice and Kindness allow a rose to prostrate itself before a thorn?

When the spirit becomes greater and passes beyond all bounds, the spirits of all things become obedient to it.<sup>22</sup>

This examination shows that in categorizing spirit into levels, Rūmī is adopting a standard interpretive strategy in relation to the Qur'an's reference to spirit in a number of somewhat different meanings. Rūmī explains these levels further and draws particular attention to the qualities possessed by different modalities of spirit. The

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<sup>20</sup>See Rūmī's explanation of the saying, "Truly, the faithful are brothers and the knowers (*'ulamā'*) are as one self (*nafs*)." Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 406 ff.

<sup>21</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>22</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 3326-33; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 31-32.

characteristic feature of this model is that even as Rūmī makes distinctions among various levels, at the same time, he shows the continuity across these spiritual levels of existence and the beings customarily associated with each level. This continuity across levels of spirit informs Rūmī's thinking in general and he has in mind the idea that the human soul contains within itself, as a possibility, all levels of spirit.

Rūmī's teaching about the spirit, that it is one reality differentiated into different levels and modalities, helps us understand why, at times he criticizes certain levels of spirit while, at other moments he praises those same levels viewing them as a manifestation of God's spirit. A good example is his discussion of the state of the bodies of God's Friends. "The body in fact is only the outward manifestation of the spirit within the world. This is why Rūmī can talk about the body's becoming spirit: The body of the saints becomes reintegrated into its spiritual source."<sup>23</sup>

So the saints have not said this lightly: The bodies of the purified ones  
become untainted, exactly like the spirit.  
Their words, their psyche, their outward form—all become absolute spirit  
without trace.<sup>24</sup>

In this vein, Rūmī recognizes the overwhelming nature of God's mercy and His presence within the cosmos as spirit. The body is nothing other than God's spirit and Rūmī, therefore, prays for his body as well: "You will not find anything deader than my body. Give it life with the Light of Your Essence! Let it become all spirit—this body of mine that sacrifices its life for You!"<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.2.2 The Self as Microcosm: Structure and Dynamics of Power

Now that we have seen the way in which Rūmī conceives of the spirit, its origin, its levels, and its movement within creation, we proceed to a more detailed exploration of Rūmī's analysis of the human spirit. Rūmī refers to the human spirit as self in keeping with Qur'anic usage. When he uses the unqualified word for self (*nafs*), he usually has in mind the animal spirit with its attachment to appetite, and its proneness to diversion and becoming embroiled in multiplicity. The Qur'an refers to this level of the self as "the self that incites to evil" (*nafs-i ammāra*) (Q 12:53). Because of the negative qualities that Rūmī ascribes to it, I will be translating it as ego. Just like spirit, the self (*nafs*) also has many levels some of which correspond to the various levels of spirit. In addition to the level of the ego, the animal spirit or "the self that incites to evil" mentioned above, the Qur'an refers to at least two other levels: "The blaming self" is the self that criticizes itself for its shortcomings (*nafs-i lawwāma*) (Q

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<sup>23</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 2000-01; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, verse no. 19229; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 30.

75:2), and the “the peaceful self” is the self at peace with God (*nafs-i muṭma'inna*) (Q 89:27). Within Sufi discourse, progress along the inner path is seen as a gradual transformation of the ego from the level of the self commanding to evil, to the level of the blaming self, and leading ultimately to the level of the self at peace, satisfied with and satisfying to God (Q 89:27).

The animal spirit that arises when God blows His Spirit into the human body partakes of the unity of spirit and seeks to rejoin its Source. At the same time, it partakes of the body's qualities of appetite, sensuality, and multiplicity; qualities that pull it towards the world. The human being, as long as the animal spirit has not been tamed, is in strife where its spiritual and material aspects struggle for dominance. In analyzing the dynamics of this inner struggle, like other Sufis, Rūmī views the self as a polity or microcosm, and names the various actors within the self's inner dynamics in analogy with outer kingly political structures.<sup>26</sup> The self, thus, has its king, its minister, and a population of subjects. He identifies the king as the heart, the minister as the intellect, and the population as the many thoughts, sciences, and knowledges present within the self. Pharaoh's story, therefore, presents Rūmī with an ideal occasion where he can outline, examine, and communicate to his readers the structure and dynamics of their own selves so that they may attain ultimate happiness by making peace (*islām*) prevail in their insides. We begin our examination by first looking at some of the images Rūmī uses to describe the situation of the self.

### The War Within

Rūmī uses a wide range of images to depict the relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of the self. These images demonstrate the associations he makes between various creatures and their predominant qualities. For example, “The situation of man is as if they brought an angel's wing and attached it to an ass's tail, so that perhaps that ass, through the radiance and companionship of the angel, may itself become an angel.”<sup>27</sup> Angels are spiritual beings made of light and, as we have seen in the previous section, they are associated with spirit in the Qur'an. In a static hierarchy of creatures, angels are close to God and are therefore an appropriate symbol for the self's spiritual aspect. An ass on the other hand is the bestial or appetitive aspect of the self, only interested in satisfying the needs of its body, always looking downwards towards the pleasure of its food. Another favorite image of Rūmī's for depicting this relationship is that of Jesus, who is called “the spirit of God” in the Islamic tradition, riding on his donkey:

You have abandoned Jesus and nurtured his ass. This is why, like an ass,  
you must remain outside the curtain...

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<sup>26</sup>For examples of other authors who treat the self in this way, see Sachiko Murata. *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

<sup>27</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 107.

Have mercy on Jesus, not the ass! Let not your animal nature rule over your intellect...

Your base intellect has acquired the disposition of asses. Its thought is this: "How shall I find the fodder?"<sup>28</sup>

The intellect (*'aql*) is the manifestation of spirit within the self in terms of its qualities of discernment and awareness.<sup>29</sup> By following the path of religion, the intellect gains control over the appetitive aspects of the self: "If the braying of your ass-self were to diminish, the call of your intellect would be your messiah"<sup>30</sup> but "The appetitive self is blind and deaf to God."<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, while discussing the nature of religious prescription, Rūmī describes the situation of human beings by dividing creatures into three kinds: angels, animals, and humans. He identifies the angels as "sheer intellect" who are obedient by nature, serve God faithfully, and whose very food is the remembrance of God. They are not charged with obedience since they are so by nature and do not possess any appetite. In their case, talk of appetite, disobedience, or struggling to obey God does not make sense since they can do nothing other than be wholly obedient and far from appetite. The second kind of creatures are animals who are wholly appetite, who do not possess any intellect and, therefore, God does not charge them with any prescription.<sup>32</sup> The third kind of creature is...

Poor man, who is compounded of intellect and appetite. He is half angel and half beast; half snake and half fish. His fish pulls him toward water, and his snake pulls him toward dry land. He is engaged in strife and war. "He whose intellect dominates his appetite is higher than the angels, and he whose appetite dominates his intellect is lower than the beasts."

Now some men have followed the intellect to such an extent that they have become totally angels and sheer light. They are the prophets and the Friends of God.... In some men appetite has dominated their intellects, so that they have totally assumed the properties of animals.

And some men have remained struggling. They are that group who feel inside themselves a suffering, a pain, a distress, a longing. They are not satisfied with their lives. These are the believers. The Friends of God are waiting to bring the believers into their own houses and make them

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<sup>28</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 1850-57.

<sup>29</sup> *'aql* is an important Qur'anic term where it is used as that power or faculty within humans that allows them access to true knowledge.

<sup>30</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, Verse. 34042; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 235.

<sup>32</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 77.

like themselves. And the satans are also waiting to drag them down to themselves to the *lowest of the low* (Q 95:5).<sup>33</sup>

Once again we see Rūmī analyzing entities in terms of a binary scheme. Intellect and sensuality have contrary aims and goals; the primary constituents of the self move in opposite directions giving rise to a perpetual inner struggle. There are many Qur'anic verses that enjoin struggle (*jihād*) for God's sake. For example: *You who have faith, be aware of God, and seek ways to get closer to Him, and struggle in His way, so that you may prosper* (Q 5:35). Rūmī considers struggling and fighting in the path of God, enjoined by the Qur'an, as engaging in this "greater *jihād*" inside oneself in order to establish peace. The self is the locus of a war and Rūmī reads Qur'anic verses referring to believers and unbelievers in terms of intellect (believer) and appetite (unbeliever), for example: "*One of you is an unbeliever and one of you a believer* (Q 14:2)—In your one existence these two persons are warring."<sup>34</sup> This is another instance where Rūmī develops the image of the self as a polity that has within itself its believers and unbelievers, kings and ministers, lords and vassals.

From the passion of man and woman, blood boiled and became sperm.  
 Those two drops erected a tent in midair.  
 Then the army of the human individual came from the world of the spirit:  
 the intellect the minister, the heart the king.  
 After a time, the heart remembered the city of the spirit. The whole army  
 returned and entered the world of Everlastingness.<sup>35</sup>

When the single human being is seen as a multitude, an army, a kingdom, we enter the realm of politics and power relations. It is to an examination of Rūmī's politics of the self that we now turn.

### The Kingdom of the Heart

In the inner realm of the self, the heart is king. The heart is an extremely important concept in Rūmī's teachings. Building on Qur'anic usage, Rūmī sees the heart as the innermost reality of the human being and as the place where God can be contemplated.<sup>36</sup> The Qur'an describes the heart as the organ of awareness and understanding<sup>37</sup> and attributes any deficiency in human understanding as originating from a deficiency in the heart.<sup>38</sup> As has been mentioned earlier, it is the heart that

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<sup>33</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, pp. 77-78, Rūmī develops here the Qur'anic example of referring to people who are deaf to revelation as animals.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, Verse. 8797-99; Translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, Verse. 6887.

<sup>37</sup>*They have hearts but do not understand with them* (Q 7:179).

<sup>38</sup>*It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts* (Q 22:46).



is the locus of revelation in human beings. But some hearts are sick<sup>39</sup> and it is for such people that the prophets and saints act as doctors who nurse their hearts back to a wholesome state in which they can assent to the truth of revelation and find true happiness. In most individuals the heart is covered over by rust: *No indeed; but what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts* (Q 83:14). This Qur'anic usage provides Rūmī with one of his most common images for describing the process and purpose of religious practice; to clear the rust of heedlessness by polishing the mirror of the heart so that God can be seen within. In appreciating this image one needs to keep in mind that mirrors used to be made of iron.

Once the mirror of your heart becomes pure and clear, you will see pictures  
from beyond the domain of water and clay.  
Not only pictures but also the Painter, not only the carpet of good fortune,  
but also the Carpet-spreader.<sup>40</sup>

Those who have succeeded in polishing the mirrors of their hearts are the prophets and the Friends of God who can therefore be called the "Possessors of the Heart." These individuals are the verifiers who dwell in the presence of God at their inmost level. Their hearts are the real Ka'ba, the house where God dwells as related in a divine report by Muhammad: "My heavens and My earth do not embrace Me but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me."<sup>41</sup> Compared to the hearts of these servants of God, the heart, or the center of awareness of most people resides at the level of the selfish desires of the animal spirit or the ego.<sup>42</sup> The spirit or heart at the level of the ego is nothing but a pale reflection, or a fragment of the real heart. The goal of religion in Rūmī's view is to reconnect the fragment with the whole and to seek the origin of the light that constitutes the heart.

In order to describe the heart at the level of the ego, Rūmī uses the image of water present within mud. This metaphor gives insight into Rūmī's anthropology and psychology. It also provides insight into his insistence that revelation is necessary for attaining happiness and his teachings on the limitations of the discursive or partial intellect, and hence, his critique of philosophy. If people dominated by the ego were to claim that they too have a heart it would be akin to muddy water claiming that it too is water. Rūmī acknowledges that such muddy water, from the perspective of its essential nature, is indeed water, but he adds that it is not the pure and clean water with which one is required to perform ritual ablutions. "Though it is water, it is vanquished by clay," and hence it is improper to call it water.<sup>43</sup> The way for

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<sup>39</sup>*There is a disease in their hearts*(Q 2:10).

<sup>40</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 72-73.

<sup>41</sup>Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa qīṣaṣ-i mathnawī*, p. 113; In another ḥadīth, the Prophet says, "The heart is the house of the Lord." See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa qīṣaṣ-i mathnawī*, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 2247.

this muddy water to regain purity is for it to join with the clear and pure ocean. If the water continues to be obstinate and exclaims, "I am water, why should I seek help?" then it will remain stuck within the dross and darkness of clay.<sup>44</sup> The hearts of the prophets and the Friends of God, "the Possessors of the Heart," are free of any impurities since they have washed themselves clean by joining with the ocean. Since they have burnished the rust from the faces of their mirrors, they have become the true standards for the proper description of the heart. Therefore, "the heart is nothing but that Ocean of Light."<sup>45</sup> The goal, then, is to seek the Heart and join with it. When this happens, the muddy water becomes the clean and clear ocean, the reflection of light becomes the Ocean of Light, the fragment becomes a mountain, and the partial becomes the whole.

The things that keep the partial heart, the animal spirit, the ego, mired in the world are appetite and love of position and power:

Do you really allow that this object fascinated by milk and honey can be  
a heart?....  
Does the heart fall in love with property and position and submit itself to  
this black water and clay,  
Or to fantasies, worshipping them in darkness for the sake of empty talk?<sup>46</sup>

The heart is caught in a tug of war in which God, the source of its awareness, is pulling it towards Himself. God provides encouragement through sending the prophets and His Friends as reminders of the heart's original nature, but the appetitive aspects of the self are pulling the heart towards the world. When the self is seen as a kingdom, the heart is the king whose minister is the intellect. The heart, like the king, is one who controls the functions of the body:

All the five senses are passing according to the will and command of the  
heart, like the spool in the hand of the weaver.  
All the five senses are moving and sweeping along in whatever direction  
the heart indicates to them.  
Hand and foot are plainly under command of the heart, like the staff in  
the hand of Moses.<sup>47</sup>

But the heart can be deceived and lower functions and powers of the self can take control of the kingdom usurping the correct order of power. Rūmī uses the story of Solomon's exile from his wondrous kingdom to highlight the dangers that the heart faces from powers that ideally should be subject to its authority. In the verses cited below, Solomon's seal refers to the ring of power that allowed him to rule over all

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<sup>44</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 2263.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2269.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 2264-68.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 3566-70.

creatures in the world; even the wind was subject to his authority. But Solomon lost this ring and had to endure the hardship of poverty and exile when a demon, while subject to Solomon's authority like every other creature, stole the ring through deceit and took over the throne of the rightful king.<sup>48</sup> Although Solomon eventually gets his ring back and with it his kingdom, the story serves to highlight the dangerous consequences when the heart can no longer control its subjects.

Surely the heart has gotten the seal of Solomon, so that it has pulled the reins of the five senses.

O heart, since you are a Solomon in empire, cast your seal-ring upon peri and demon.

If in this kingdom you are free from deceit, the three demons will not take the seal out of your hand;

After that, your name will conquer the world: The two worlds will be ruled by you like the body.

And if the demon take the seal off your hand, your kingdom is past, your fortune is dead.<sup>49</sup>

The three demons that Rūmī mentions in the verses above are deception, appetite, and pursuit of power. In this verse Rūmī is alluding to a verse from Sanā'ī who names the three demons as such.<sup>50</sup> The heart is "a Solomon in empire," ruling over its inner and outer powers. But "when Solomon leaves the palace, the demon takes over as king: When patience and intellect depart, your self becomes 'the soul that incites to evil.'"<sup>51</sup> When the inner king, the heart, is overcome by the demons or qualities of deception, appetite, and the pursuit of power, those who are undeserving gain control of the kingdom of the self, justice disappears and tyranny becomes the law of the land.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>For the sources of this story, see Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar. *Ma'ākhidh-i qaṣaṣ wa tamthīlāt-i mathnawī*. Tehran: Amīr kabīr, 1362/1983, p. 137; For a discussion and interpretation of how Rūmī develops this story, see Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb. *Bahr dar kūzah: naqd wa tafsīr wa tamthīlāt-i mathnawī*. Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī, 1384, p. 79.

<sup>49</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3575-81.

<sup>50</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, Commentary on I: 3592-3597.

<sup>51</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, Verse 5798.

<sup>52</sup>Rūmī has a perfect precedent in Ghazali (d. 1111) who develops the analogy of the body as a kingdom that the heart governs with its various powers, inner and outer. See translations of this passage in Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, pp. 242-43.

Rūmī associates these blameworthy qualities with the inner sense (*ḥiss bāṭin*)<sup>53</sup> or power of fantasy (*wahm*).<sup>54</sup> “*Wahm* is a faculty that humans share with animals. It provides an immediate, but sometimes mistaken, awareness of the non-sensory state of a sensory thing. Neither the senses nor imagination can grasp this state, whether the thing is present or absent. For example, fantasy alerts us to the fact that qualities such as enmity, truthfulness, rapaciousness, and kindness may be present in a person or an animal.”<sup>55</sup> The encyclopedist Tahānawī, quoting Avicenna says that “*wahm* is the power that perceives particular meanings that exist in sensible objects, like the power which judges that the wolf is to be avoided and the child is to be loved.”<sup>56</sup> Rūmī uses *wahm* synonymously with the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*) and in keeping with his binary mode of analysis, contrasts both with the intellect. Fantasy *wahm*, as is clear from the above discussion, is the inner sense closest to the intellect because it provides the self with the ability to make certain judgements. Tahānawī goes on to say that “the most powerful thing present in humans is the power of fantasy for it can overpower intellect (*‘aql*) and reflection (*fikr*).”<sup>57</sup> Fantasy arises from the lower or material aspects of the self and, consequently, its judgements are colored by appearances. It is a common experience that one finds one’s initial judgements to be false upon finding out more about the situation at hand; for example, a person by his appearance might look like a beggar, but is in fact the king in disguise walking the streets to learn the situation of his subjects. The immediacy of the judgement that proceeds from fantasy, as is clear from the example of the wolf and the child above, can overpower the intellect which has the ability to deliberate further, and at the highest level to know the reality of things. By overpowering the intellect with the immediacy of its judgements, fantasy binds the self to the world of phenomenon and appearance.

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<sup>53</sup>In the context of investigating perception (*idrāk*), Muslim thinkers have categorized the inner senses in a variety of ways. For a discussion of the different ways in which Muslim Philosophers have categorized these inner senses see, H.A. Wolfson. “The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosphic Texts”. In: *Harvard Theological Review* 28.2 (Apr. 1935). Pp. 69–133; For an overview of the psychological frameworks proposed by influential Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes, see Deborah L. Black. “Psychology: soul and intellect”. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. Ed. by P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor. Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. 308–26; The categorization that reflects Rūmī’s view of the inner senses or powers of perception is the one given by Isti‘lāmī in his commentary on the Mathnawī. According to this scheme, the inner powers are: the common sense (*ḥiss mushtarak*), imagination (*khayāl*), fantasy (*wahm*), memory (*dhākir*), and intellect (*‘aql*). Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, See commentary on I: 3591-3588.

<sup>54</sup>Among scholars of Islamic thought there is no consensus on how to translate *wahm*. It has been variously translated as “supposition,” “fancy,” “instinct,” “conception,” “apprehension,” “imagination,” “estimation,” and as “prehension.”

<sup>55</sup>Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, p. 273.

<sup>56</sup>Muhammad ‘Alī Tahānawī. *Mawsū‘a kashshāf istilāḥāt al-fanūn wa al-‘Ulūm*. Ed. by Rafiq al ‘Ajam. 2 vols. Beirut: Maktaba Lubnān, 1996, p. 1808.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1809.

The qualities of fantasy help us in understanding the reasons why Rūmī is critical of philosophy. When Rūmī critiques philosophy, he has in mind the connections between the partial or discursive intellect and fantasy. For Rūmī, fantasy is related to philosophy because it is concerned with the phenomenal world. The direction of the philosophical quest is from the observable phenomenon towards the realm of abstracted meaning. But the presence of fantasy makes this enterprise fraught with difficulties since the discursive or partial intellect is fundamentally attached to the realm of appearances. A healthy discursive reason can lead a person to the threshold of the king but ultimately the partial intellect is in need of the universal intellect to become whole. In terms of Rūmī's imagery, the murky water in mud needs the ocean in order to become pure itself and hence be able to see with clarity the treasures hidden within itself. Philosophy seen in this light is the murky water's attempt to cleanse itself of its impurities by itself. This metaphor brings out both the continuity between the partial intellect and the source of intelligence, and the impossibility of the efforts made by the partial intellect at self-purification through exclusive reliance on its own limited resources. It is the limited sense of self, the ego, that then appears as the fundamental problem of Sufism. The knowledge that arises from fantasy revolves around the limited and independent sense of self that only sees the world from the perspective of its selfish interests. Compared to the knowledge and sight bestowed by the universal intellect, the partial intellect in the guise of fantasy only increases doubt and provides opinion rather than certitude. In this mode, Rūmī uses *wahm* as synonymous with surmise (*ẓann*) and speculation (*gumān*), modes of knowing that fall short of the certain and verified knowledge found through following the path of religion.

If you want your wretchedness to vanish, try to make your “wisdom” leave  
you,  
That wisdom which is born of your lower nature and your imagination,  
devoid of the effusion of the Almighty's Light.  
The wisdom of this world increases opinion and doubt, the wisdom of  
religion soars beyond the heavens.<sup>58</sup>

Even in matters of religion there is a tremendous difference between the perception gained through fantasy or the partial intellect and the one attained through the universal intellect. The partial intellect is confined in its workings and even if it assents to the truth of revelation it does so in a limited manner. As has been explained in “Chapter 2” on Rūmī's hermeneutics, partial intellect seeks to interpret away the verses in the Qur'an that do not accord with its sense of reality. For example, the partial intellect considers the glorification of God by inanimate objects to be metaphorical only, and it considers the details of paradise as states that will unfold only after death. For the clearly seeing eye, which is the partial intellect that has become transformed by joining with the universal intellect, or the murky water that

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<sup>58</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 3201-03; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 128.

has become clear and pure by joining with the Ocean, such “unreasonable” or wondrous verses of revelation have become a lived reality: “To fantasy the descriptions of paradise are only a joyful announcement of the future, but intellect says, ‘What announcement? It is my cash in hand.’”<sup>59</sup>

Rūmī compares the process of polishing the mirror of the heart, or of purifying the self, to the effort needed to churn butter from milk: “The animal spirit and the partial intellect and fantasy (*wahm*) and imagination (*khayāl*) can be compared to milk, while the spirit of revelation, which is everlasting, is hidden in this milk, like the butter.”<sup>60</sup> This quote underlines the unitary model that lies at the basis of the many binary distinctions Rūmī consistently makes in using opposing pairs to communicate the structure of the self. We have already seen this mode operating in other contexts such as form and meaning, the partial intellect and the universal intellect. Thus even though the parts are related to the whole, they can monopolize the self to such a degree that the heart, under the influence of advisors inclined towards the world of appearances, becomes a prisoner in its own kingdom. The remedy in this situation comes from God, the King who can liberate the imprisoned heart by aiding it with the armies of His mercy and generosity. This is the basic teaching that Rūmī has to impart to his readers; that they should recognize their need for God’s assistance and implore Him to aid them in overcoming the oppression of fantasy and all that follows upon it. After imploring God to illuminate his spirit, Rūmī says: “Deliver it [the spirit] from imagination, fantasy, and opinion; deliver it from the well and the tyranny of the rope.”<sup>61</sup>

Elsewhere, Rūmī says,

Your intellect is the minister and is overcome by caprice: in your being it  
is a brigand on the way to God...  
The king is just like the spirit, and the minister like the intellect: the  
corrupt intellect makes the spirit move [from its place]...  
Do not take the partial intellect as your minister: make the Universal  
intellect your minister O king.  
Do not make caprice your minister, else your pure spirit will cease from  
prayer,  
For this caprice is full of greed and sees only the immediate present, but  
the intellect takes thought for the Day of Judgement.  
The two eyes of the intellect are fixed on the end of things: it endures the  
pain of the thorn for the sake of that Rose.<sup>62</sup>

Pharaoh, who represents the heart in the inner kingdom, received advice from two people, Moses and his minister Hāmān. The primary reason, says Rūmī, that Pharaoh

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<sup>59</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 3270.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 3031.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 2789.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 1246-61.

lost his kingdom was that he acted on the advice given by his minister Hāmān who only gave thought to matters of this world and did not keep the Day of Judgement in mind.<sup>63</sup>

### 4.3 Pharaoh as Possessor of Fantasy

As is clear from the foregoing discussion, Rūmī considers true dominion to be a king in one's self; it is to rule the kingdom of the body with all its inner powers subject to one's control. True kingship does not come about through the possession of treasuries and armies but through self-possession.<sup>64</sup> To be in possession of one's self is for the heart to be under the sway of the universal intellect so that it controls the powers of imagination, fantasy, and all the thoughts born from these powers. Pharaoh is an example of a self who is a mighty king from the worldly and material perspective, but from the perspective of true kingship he is a slave to his fantasy. The reason for Pharaoh's predicament is that he allowed his fantasy to overpower his intellect. Rūmī calls Pharaoh's situation an illness and the heading to this story about Pharaoh states: "How Pharaoh also became ill because of fantasy, as a result of the reverence of the people."<sup>65</sup>

The people's prostrating themselves—women, children, and men—smote  
the heart of Pharaoh and made him ill.

Everyone's calling him lord and king made him so tattered from a fantasy  
That he dared to claim divinity: he became a dragon and would never be  
sated.

Fantasy and opinion are the bane of the partial intellect, because its  
dwelling-place is in the darkness.

If there be a path half a meter wide on the ground, a man will walk safely  
without imagining;

But if you walk on the top of a high wall, you will stagger even if its width  
is two meters;

No, through your heart trembling with fantasy you will be almost falling.

Consider well and understand the fear that is due to fantasy.<sup>66</sup>

Rūmī uses the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh as an opportunity to contrast the qualities of fantasy and partial intellect with those of the whole/universal

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<sup>63</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1249-55.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, II: 3209.

<sup>65</sup>Rūmī follows this analysis of the cause for Pharaoh's illness by relating a story in which students make their teacher fall ill through the power of suggestion. They tell the teacher that he was displaying signs of not being well and the teacher's imagination and fantasy do the rest of the work. See *ibid.*, III: 1546-1609.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1555-61.

intellect. He says: “fantasy is the counterfeit of intellect and is its contender. It resembles intellect but it is not intellect.”<sup>67</sup> The dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh is an example of the contention between intellect and fantasy in which Moses is the possessor of intellect and Pharaoh the possessor of fantasy.<sup>68</sup>

Intellect is the contrary of appetite, O brave man; do not call intellect  
that which is attached to appetite.  
That which is a beggar of appetite, call it fantasy; fantasy is the counterfeit  
of the sterling gold of intellect.  
Without a touchstone, fantasy and intellect are not clearly distinguished;  
quickly bring both to the touchstone.  
The Qur'an and the state of the prophets is this touchstone; they, like a  
touchstone, say to the counterfeit coin, “Come,  
That by contact with me you may see yourself, that you are not worthy  
of my higher and lower states.”  
Fantasy belongs to Pharaoh, who burns the world, intellect to Moses, who  
brightens the spirit.<sup>69</sup>

The dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh is a clear depiction of the manner in which Moses (intellect) interacts with Pharaoh (heart overcome by fantasy). The second part of Pharaoh's narrative, as Rūmī develops it, is a dialogue between Pharaoh and his wife Āsiya whom the Qur'an presents as a model for all believers and who becomes a revered figure in Islamic culture for her sanctity. She reiterates all that Moses has said to Pharaoh. But above and beyond Moses and Āsiya's counsel, Pharaoh seeks out the advice of his minister Hāmān, the voice of fantasy that seeks to prevent Pharaoh, the heart, from accepting Moses's (intellect) message. It is to the lure of fantasy that Pharaoh ultimately succumbs and rejects all that Moses offers him as a recompense for doing the right thing. In the rest of this section, I detail the manner in which Rūmī depicts this course of events.

When Moses appears in front of Pharaoh with God's message, Pharaoh questions him and asks Moses to declare his pedigree. This is an obvious ploy to make Moses admit not only his low social origins of belonging to a group of people who are in slavery to the Egyptians, but also to make Moses acknowledge the personal debt he owes to Pharaoh for raising him up in the royal household. Moses answers that the ultimate relation (*nisbat*) of all humans is dust (*khāk*) and that the name of the prophets is “the lowest of God's servants.” In this dialogue, Pharaoh keeps on focusing on the outward: Moses's low social status as a slave of Pharaoh, his crime of killing an Egyptian, his fleeing the consequences of that action, his ungratefulness to Pharaoh for bringing him up in his household (*nān wa namak*), his audacity and vileness in trying to make Pharaoh look bad by denying his divinity in the gathering

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<sup>67</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2301.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2302 ff.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2301-07.



of all his people and courtiers (*hashr*). In relating such an extensive version of the Qur'anic dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh, Rūmī highlights the irony in this situation. All of the things that Pharaoh is accusing Moses of can be reduced to an accusation of possessing an ungrateful and base character. Pharaoh's accusations are a mirror image of the list of rebellious and ungrateful actions that Pharaoh himself has engaged in towards the True King.

In response to Pharaoh's query concerning his pedigree, Moses initially tries to focus on the inner realities of all things that Pharaoh has mentioned; how he is a slave, but of God; how he killed but not through premeditation; how he is actually Pharaoh's well-wisher in the real sense of the term because he is keeping the ephemeral reality of this world in mind; how it is better to be more mindful of the embarrassment at the gathering of the resurrection (*hashr*) in the presence of the real King. Moses challenges Pharaoh's claim to divinity by reminding him that the real King is the creator of everything while Pharaoh cannot even create the features on Moses's face. Pharaoh is calling Moses a rebel but the real rebel is Pharaoh standing up to God by claiming divinity. Rūmī's point in this whole discussion is what is called in Confucian terms "the rectification of names" in light of the relationship between the outer and the inner aspects of reality. What outwardly seems like submission and slavery is in fact freedom; what seems like destruction is construction; what seems like dispersal is a gathering-together; and finally, what seems like giving up desire is the attainment of one's desire.

The dialogue continues and Moses says to Pharaoh that the correct way for him to repay the debt of Pharaoh's sustenance is that he should free Pharaoh from the net of slavery to his base desires in which Pharaoh is presently caught. True gratitude is to bring one's patron to salvation. Outwardly the net that looks like death to the fish only makes it fit for being served on the true King's table. In death lies freedom and release—the death Pharaoh fears is that of the limited ego but not of individuality or of life. The fear of death arises because the ego is identified with an historical, socially constructed, and hence limited sense of self.

Rūmī continues to expand upon the causes of Pharaoh's condition through Moses's speech: "Enough! You have made yourself the slave of caprice, you have made a worm into a dragon."<sup>70</sup> In this analysis, agency lies with Pharaoh. While he calls himself lord and king, he has made himself the slave of caprice and appetite. By serving his caprice and appetite, by eating the stuff of this world, the worm of his ego has become a dragon, spitting fire and burning the world in its hunger for control and domination. Moses is the doctor who has brought the cure for Pharaoh's illness, but here like is needed to treat like. Therefore the staff of Moses turns into a dragon and the breath of Moses counters the breath of the dragon of Pharaoh's ego.

At this stage of the dialogue, after Moses has answered all of Pharaoh's initial questions convincingly and Pharaoh has been unsuccessful in shaming Moses into silence, Pharaoh uses a different approach. Pharaoh now accuses Moses of being a magician who is scaring people with his trick of turning his staff into a dragon.

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<sup>70</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2356.

Pharaoh also, ironically, blames Moses for dividing the once unified people of Egypt into two factions. Here Rūmī dwells on the importance of perspective in coloring one's perception. Those hung up on the tree of the world see everything in worldly terms. Rūmī paints a vivid picture of the state of Pharaoh's soul: Pharaoh's spirit is like dry strips of meat hanging on the nails of his natural constitution. The spirit in this state is unable to distance itself from the body's influence and remains at the level of the animal spirit pivoting around the sharp points of sensual desires. It is because of ego-centeredness that he misinterprets the signs sent by God, for, as Moses reminds Pharaoh, God had sent him visions and dreams as a warning to mend his ways. Instead of paying heed to these warnings, Pharaoh increased his violence and deliberately ignored them.

He, by His power was showing forth the visions that should come to pass  
in the end,  
In order that you may lessen that injustice and wickedness: you were  
seeing them and becoming more wicked  
He was showing you hideous forms in dreams: you were shrinking back  
from them, but they were your own form...  
At one time you were seeing your clothes burnt; at another time your  
mouth and eye stitched up;  
Now a beast thirsting after your blood; now your head in the teeth of a  
wild beast...  
I have told you a little, O you who will not accept my warning: from a  
little you may know that I am acquainted with the whole.  
You were making yourself blind and dead, that you might not think of  
these dreams and visions.  
How long will you flee? Look, the blindness of your scheming perception  
is in front of you.<sup>71</sup>

At this point in his imaginative narration, Rūmī stresses the all-encompassing nature of God's mercy. He highlights the fact that despite all the violence and obstinacy shown by Pharaoh, God still calls him to repent and stands ready to forgive by accepting his remorse. Even a person such as Pharaoh is still being called to enter paradise through the door of repentance that remains open till the Resurrection.<sup>72</sup> Moses makes Pharaoh an offer, "Come, accept from me one thing, put it to practice, and then take four things from me as recompense."<sup>73</sup> He tries to convince Pharaoh by appealing to the desires of his ego. Pharaoh is interested and asks Moses to tell him about that one thing.

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<sup>71</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2487-2502.

<sup>72</sup>This is a paraphrase of the following *ḥadīth*: "Paradise has eight doors. Seven of its doors are closed at times but its eighth door, the Door of Repentance, is open and will remain open till the sun rises from the west (the resurrection)." See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa qīṣaṣ-i mathnawī*, pp. 393-4.

<sup>73</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2509.

“That one thing,” said Moses, “is that you should say publicly that there is no god but the Maker,  
The Creator of the heavenly spheres and of the stars on high and of man and devil and genie and bird,  
The Creator of sea and plain and mountain and desert: His sovereignty is without limit and He without like.”<sup>74</sup>

There follows a remarkable admission by Pharaoh of his desire to submit and find peace.

Pharaoh said, “O Moses, what are those four things that you will give me in return? Declare and bring them before me,  
That perhaps, by the favor of that goodly promise, the torture of my unbelief may be lessened.  
Perhaps the lock of my hundred tons’ weight of unbelief may be opened by those fair and desirable promises.  
Perhaps, by the effect of the river of honey, this poison of hatred may be turned into honey in my body:  
Or by the reflection of the river of that pure milk, my imprisoned intelligence may be nourished for a moment....  
Perhaps the reflection of Paradise and its four rivers will, with God’s help, make my spirit a seeker of the Friend.  
In the same way that the reflection of Hell has turned me into fire and steeped me in the wrath of God.  
At one moment, from the reflection of the snake of Hell I drip poison, like a snake, on those who shall dwell in Paradise;...  
From the reflection of the intense cold winds of Hell (*zamharīr*) I am as the Zamharīr; or from the reflection of the flames of Hell (*sa‘īr*) I am as the Sa‘īr.  
I am now the Hell of the poor and oppressed: woe to those whom I suddenly find subject to me!<sup>75</sup>

This dialogue is the second occasion in the *Mathnawī* where Rūmī portrays the anguish Pharaoh feels at his own state. There is a part of him capable of remorse that desires to be tranquil and is acutely aware of the terrible acts that he has committed.<sup>76</sup> In this instance Pharaoh is earnestly seeking a way to overcome the obstacles he carries within. The intellect within Pharaoh knows that his ego will need to come on board

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<sup>74</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2511-13.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2514-27.

<sup>76</sup>It is important to note here that Rūmī’s position on the question of Pharaoh’s voicing of faith at the moment of his drowning is contained in earlier verses (IV: 2288-2300) where Rūmī argues that the promise made by the fool and his contrition at the moment of seizure (*giriftārī*) is faithless because it is induced by pain and not the light of reason. Rūmī says that such contrition and voicing of faith is like the false dawn which does not last.

if Pharaoh is to voice his recognition of God's unity. It also knows that the way to do so would be to initially satisfy the ego's desires. Moses's approach in this case is a demonstration of just and skillful means. Rūmī cites the Prophet's hadith "speak to people in the measure of their intelligence" as the principle underlying Moses's strategy. Rūmī outlines the ultimate outcome of this approach that appeals to the ego's desire as a way of putting the self on the right track. One way of interpreting what Rūmī is saying here is that once people voice their faith publicly, they then put themselves under a higher authority. If Pharaoh were to publicly acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of God, then he would have overcome one of the biggest hurdles between him and God: his attachment to being a god.

Moses proceeds to lay out the four promises to Pharaoh. The first is the promise of constant health for his body. The second is the promise of a very long life in which death will be loath to attack him and, when he does die, he will die as someone who looks forward to death because he can see the treasure hidden within the form of death. At this point Moses goes into a detailed explanation of the divine *ḥadīth* "I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known." Pharaoh is so eager to hear the other promises that he says, "Enough O Moses! Tell me the third promise for my heart is distraught from the agitation of wanting to hear it."<sup>77</sup> The third promise is that of a two-fold empire, worldly and spiritual, free of any enemy or adversary. This empire will be greater than the one Pharaoh now possesses because his current empire exists when he is at war with God whereas that empire would exist when he is at peace with God. Moses asks Pharaoh to just imagine what a great empire God would give him in his state of being faithful when He has already bestowed upon Pharaoh the Kingdom of Egypt while he is concealing the truth. Impatient, Pharaoh asks again, "O Moses, what is the fourth promise? Quickly declare it for my patience is gone and my desire surges greatly."<sup>78</sup> The fourth promise is that of perpetual youth, with black hair and pink cheeks till the day he dies.

At this stage, Pharaoh's heart inclines towards Moses's message. But he delays assenting to it and does not proclaim it publicly. Instead he tells Moses that even though Moses has "done well and spoken well," he needs some time to take counsel with his good friend.<sup>79</sup> He takes counsel with two people, his minister Hāmān and his wife Āsiya.<sup>80</sup> In the next version of the inner struggle between fantasy and intellect, Āsiya represents the voice of intellect and Hāmān that of fantasy and the ego. Pharaoh, who represents the heart in the interior domain, is now faced with the choice of listening to two opposing voices. First he goes to his wife and relates to her Moses's words. Āsiya counsels Pharaoh, "offer up your soul to this," and urges him on to such a degree that she weeps. She reprimands him and is incredulous that

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<sup>77</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2563.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2573.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2596.

<sup>80</sup>Āsiya is reported to have been an Israelite and a believer in the oneness of God. She, along with Mary, are singled out as women who attained the station of spiritual perfection.

Pharaoh did not say yes immediately upon hearing such a generous offer. She says that Pharaoh is like a drop of water afraid of wind and earth, afraid that it would pass away by those means. Pharaoh needs to give himself up to the ocean and become secure from wind and earth. When that happens:

The drop's outward aspect has disappeared in the ocean, but its essence is inviolate, permanent and goodly.  
 Quick, O drop, give yourself up without misgivings, that in recompense for the drop you may gain the Ocean.  
 Quick, O drop, bestow upon yourself this honor, and in the hands of the Ocean become safe from destruction.  
 Whom indeed should be fortunate like this? An Ocean is wooing a drop!  
 God, God—quick, sell and buy! Give a drop, and take the Ocean full of pearls.  
 God, God—do not delay, for these words of Moses come from the Ocean of Grace.<sup>81</sup>

Pharaoh replies that he needs to consult Hāmān, for the counsel of a minister is essential for a king. Āsiya pleads with Pharaoh not to tell Hāmān for he does not know the worth of prophets. But “kingly pride left no room in Pharaoh for listening to admonition, so that he wrenched his heart away from the bonds of admonition.”<sup>82</sup> In Rūmī's view, the deeper cause of Pharaoh's turning away from his wife towards his minister Hāmān was the congenity between them. Congenity, for Rūmī, is the principle that “Like attracts like,” and this attraction is the force that makes each kind seek to return to its own kind.<sup>83</sup> Pharaoh's attraction towards Hāmān, therefore, dampened the force of Āsiya's admonition:

The root of congenity pulled him in such a way that those words of advice seemed cold to him.  
 Genus flies towards genus with a hundred wings and sunders bonds on account of the image of its congener.<sup>84</sup>

Pharaoh had made Hāmān his minister at a time when he was practicing tyranny, oppression, and injustice. At that time Pharaoh was concerned with perpetuating his worldly kingdom at any cost and his heart was ruled by the unbridled desires of his ego. It therefore follows that Hāmān too was inclined towards those policies and worked from within the ego. When Pharaoh told Hāmān what Moses had offered, Hāmān jumped up and started tearing up his shirt. He cried loudly and uttered sobs throwing his turban to the ground and said to Pharaoh:

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<sup>81</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2618-23.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2652.

<sup>83</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2656.

How dare he say those vain words so impudently to the King's face?  
 You have subjected the whole world; You are the possessor of fortune, all  
 of your affairs are in excellent order;  
 From all parts of the East and the West, without opposition, kings bring  
 tributes to you.  
 Kings are rubbing their lips joyfully on the dust of your threshold, O  
 mighty emperor.  
 When the rebel's horse sees our horse, it turns and flees immediately.  
 Till now you have been served and worshipped by the whole world: now  
 you will become the meanest of slaves?  
 To go into a hundred fires is better than this, that a lord should become  
 a servant of a slave (Moses).  
 No, kill me first, O king of China, let my eye not behold this in the king.  
 O emperor, behead me first, let my eye not behold this humiliation.  
 Truly never has there been—and never may there be!—such a thing as  
 this, that the earth should become the sky, and the sky become the  
 earth;  
 That our slaves should become our fellow-servants, and that those who  
 fear us should become those who wound our heart.<sup>85</sup>

Next, Rūmī moves on to discourse on the poisonous nature of pride, arrogance (*takabbur*) and egoism (*mā wa manī*). Safety, Rūmī says, lies in lowness, poverty, and emptiness. Hāmān caused Pharaoh's pride to swell up so that he rejected Moses's offer. Rūmī calls Hāmān the brigand who waylaid Pharaoh such that "the morsel of fortune had reached Pharaoh's mouth, when Hāmān suddenly cut his throat." In conclusion, Rūmī prays that may no king have such a companion.<sup>86</sup>

To summarize: Rūmī sees the self as a polity governed by the heart. In the ideal circumstance, the companion and minister for the heart should be the intellect, but fantasy can overpower the intellect and advise the heart in a way that keeps it deluded and stuck in the desires of the material world. In this microcosmic model, Pharaoh represents the heart that is overcome by fantasy and imagination. For Rūmī, the historical narratives of the Qur'an depict the exact situation of the self in this very moment:

The mention of Moses has become a chain on thoughts: "These are stories  
 that happened long ago."  
 The mention of Moses serves for a mask, but the Light of Moses is your  
 ready cash, O good man.  
 Moses and Pharaoh are in your being: you must seek these two adversaries  
 within yourself.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 2725-35.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 2771-2.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 1251-54.

## 4.4 Attributes and Qualities of the Self

We have seen that Rūmī treats Pharaoh as a symbol for elucidating the structure and dynamics of the human self. The self as a microcosmic kingdom is in the midst of a battle where the inner powers of intellect and fantasy are vying for control of the heart. But Rūmī also uses Pharaoh's character to portray the blameworthy character traits of the animal soul, also called the soul that incites to evil. The primary qualities associated with Pharaoh's character are the most detrimental qualities of the ego (*nafs*). In his representation of Pharaoh, Rūmī largely follows the discussions of the ego's qualities that have been elucidated by Sufis before him. For example, Abū Ṭālib Makkī (d. 996 CE) says that the ego is afflicted with four different qualities: "1. An affliction through preoccupation with lordly attributes like greatness, power over others, love of praise and fame, and self-sufficiency; 2. An affliction with such qualities of satans as deception, ruse, envy, and suspicion; 3. An affliction with natural things such as love of food, drink, and sex; 4. And, despite all of these qualities, it claims to possess the attributes of servitude such as fear, modesty, and humility."<sup>88</sup> In this section we turn to a more detailed exploration of the blameworthy qualities of prideful self-divinization, deception, insatiable hunger, and the attachment to name and fame that Pharaoh displays in Rūmī's rendition of his character.

### 4.4.1 I-hood or Ego: The Primary Problem of the Self

Rūmī links Pharaoh's claim of lordship and independence to the primary problem of human beings; their sense of self or ego, expressed by the pronoun "I." To this quality he gives the name "I-hood" and uses it in the sense of egoism and self-centeredness. While all negative qualities of the self, such as deception, deviousness, and the attachment to name and fame, arise from the existence of the "I," pride is the primary way in which the ego manifests itself: "The mother of all idols is the idol of your self, because the outer idol is a snake while this idol is a dragon."<sup>89</sup> Etymologically speaking, the word pride (*kibr*, *takabbur*) is derived from the root for bigness. Pride arises from having an overly large regard for oneself such that everything and everyone else seems small. The closer one is to one's ego, the smaller everything else appears. If this sense of self is reflected back in the opinion of others, then the ego is convinced of the truth of its own estimation. As in the case of Pharaoh, his sense of lordship was confirmed by his acquiescing subjects who did not provide any dissenting or critical feedback that would force Pharaoh to correct his egregious self-estimations. For Pharaoh, outside criticism arrived in the form of Moses who tried to bring to the surface the truths that Pharaoh's ego, with the complicity of his subjects, had repressed.

The basic truth that Moses called Pharaoh to acknowledge publicly was the enun-

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<sup>88</sup>Abū Ṭālib al Makkī. *Qūt al-qulūb*. Ed. by Sa'īd Nafīs Makārim. 2 vols. Beirut: Dār ṣādir, 1996, I: 177.

<sup>89</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 772.

ciation of God's Divinity and Lordship. But to do so, Pharaoh's ego had to endure the pain of seeing its entire world crumble, founded as it was on a false sense of independence. Moses asked Pharaoh to admit that he was not the creator of the heavens and the earth and that he could not even create the features, much less the body, of a human being. Despite his clear and undeniable inability to rival God's creative power, and despite being promised a magnificent kingdom, long life, health, and youth, Pharaoh's pride could not allow him to submit to a mere slave and, thereby to lose face in front of his subjects who had been worshipping him till then. The ego, the "I," or a sense of an independent self therefore appears as the root of Pharaoh's ill fortune.

Rūmī acknowledges that there is no escape from the "I." Existence demands a separation between subject and object, agent and recipient; duality is an inescapable reality. But according to Rūmī, there are two diametrically opposed ways in which one can experience one's subjectivity. It can be experienced as separate from God and by extension from the rest of creation, in the form of an unconnected monad, or it can be experienced as completely submerged in and identified with God so that the hard shell of the ego dissolves such that duality remains but is engulfed by an over-arching unity.

A Pharaoh said "I am the Real" and became low; a Ḥallāj said "I am the Real" and was saved.

That "I" has God's curse following it and this "I" has God's mercy, O passionate lover!

Because Pharaoh was a black stone and this one a ruby; that one was an enemy of Light and this one a lover of Light.

This "I," O foolish man, was He in the secret heart, through unification (*ittiḥād*) with the light, not through incarnation.<sup>90</sup>

Manṣūr Ḥallāj (d. 922) is a famous Sufi who was put on the gallows for not recanting from his ecstatic statement "I am the Real." His enunciation of "I," says Rūmī, while blasphemous from the outer religious perspective, is in fact light since Ḥallāj was speaking from the state of union with God. But Pharaoh's "I," his saying *I am your highest lord* (Q 79:24), while apparently true from a worldly perspective, as he is in fact the highest lord of his people, is darkness.

For Rūmī, the basic premise of Islam—that there is no god but God—means that at the level of human subjectivity, there is no "I" other than God's "I;" no self other than God's Self. The goal of religion seen from the Sufi perspective is self-knowledge and the concomitant of this knowledge is that one comes to know God only through and after knowing one's self (*nafs*): *He who knows his self knows his lord*. Expressed in terms of dependence and independence, while human subjectivity is real at its own level, the goal is to see how its source and origin lies in God's subjectivity. It is to place oneself and all of reality under the principle of God's unity (*tawḥīd*). That is why Rūmī regards Ḥallāj's statement, "I am the Real," so highly. Ḥallāj's

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<sup>90</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 2035-38.



limited sense of self is completely effaced and nothing remains in him but the divine subject. To realize one's dependence on God is to see that one's usual sense of self is illusory. Rūmī sees Pharaoh covering up and denying this truth about himself and hence dwelling in an incomplete and illusory understanding of his own reality.

Rūmī uses one of the episodes from the Qur'anic story of Moses and Pharaoh to highlight the two diametrically opposite ways in which a human self can experience its own subjectivity. After Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge God's sovereignty and accuses Moses of being a sorcerer who was scaring people with his staff-dragon, he calls for a contest between his sorcerers and Moses. During this contest, Moses's staff-dragon swallows the sorcerers' snakes. At this moment, the magicians voice their faith in the God of Moses. Despite Pharaoh's threat of cutting off their hands and feet and of crucifying them, the sorcerers persist in declaring their faith and say, "*There is no harm, for we are returning to our Lord*" (Q 26:50). Rūmī expands on and develops this statement in the *Mathnawī*. In his creative retelling, the sorcerers reproach Pharaoh in verses that are worth quoting because, on the tongue of the sorcerers, Rūmī puts forward a clear description of what is needed to escape from the animal soul that incites to evil, the ego, or the "I":

The sorcerers said: 'Pharaoh's punishment is no harm to us: God's gentleness prevails over the severity of all others.

If you come to know our secret, O misleader, you will see that you are delivering us from pain, O you whose heart is blind....

God's bounty has given us a Pharaohship, but not a perishable one like your Pharaohship and kingdom.

Raise your head and see a kingdom, alive and glorious, O you who are deluded by Egypt and the Nile....

Come, renounce Egypt, O Pharaoh: there are a hundred Egypts within the Egypt of the spirit.

You keep saying to the common people, "I am a Lord," while unaware of the essence of both these names.

How should a Lord be trembling for that which is lorded over? How should the knower of "I" be in the bonds of body and spirit?

Look! We are the "I" freed from the "I"; from the "I" that is full of affliction and trouble.<sup>91</sup>

In Rūmī's rendition, the sorcerers go on to describe the state of their hearts at beholding the Divine Subject. Through this speech Rūmī advises his readers that the way to find this eternal I-hood is to die to one's false sense of self-independence:

The heart was dumbfounded by the eternal I-hood: this I-hood became insipid and shameful.

The spirit was made glad by that I-hood without "I" and sprang away from the I-hood of this world.

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<sup>91</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 4120-40.

Since it is free of "I," it has now become "I": blessings on the "I" without affliction....

You seek Him but He does not seek you: when you die, the object of your seeking will become your seeker.

You are alive, how should the washer of corpses wash you? You are seeking, how should that which you seek go in search of you.<sup>92</sup>

At this stage Rūmī the narrator stops speaking through the character of the sorcerers and bursts into a passionate prayer that reels from the dizzying recognition that in calling on God he himself has claimed an "I" separate from that of God's real "I."

Forgive, O you in whose coffer is forgiveness and by whom all precedents of mercy are preceded.

Who am I that I should say 'forgive,' O you who are the sovereign and essence of the command *Be*?

Who am I that I should exist beside thee, O you whose robe all "I"s have clutched?<sup>93</sup>

In the final analysis, as Rūmī's petition demonstrates, there is a fundamental duality at the level of subjectivity that can never be overcome. Even though there is an intimate relationship between the human "I" and the divine "I," expressed in the above verses through the idea of all selves "clutching" God's "I," the difference between creator and creature always subsists at some level. In Rūmī's analysis, when Ḥallāj said, "I am the Real," God was the Subject of that sentence. The candle of Ḥallāj's ego was virtually non-existent in the light of the Self's sun. But in the case of the sorcerers' speech and Rūmī's petition, we encounter a situation where the ego is aware of its own limitations and its claim to existence but, through the use of intellect, sees that it is nothing compared to the Divine Self. This is the normative model of relating to God that Rūmī offers to his readers. Pharaoh on the other hand is an example of the situation where the ego represses the knowledge of its derivative and dependent existence. This repression, in Rūmī's view, is the root cause of all blameworthy character traits.

#### 4.4.2 Survival at any Cost: The Stratagems of the Self

Pharaoh's story is one of the many occasions where Rūmī dwells on the stratagems (*ḥiyāl*) employed by the prideful ego to preserve the illusion of its sovereignty. The ego wants to survive at any cost and since it sees itself as lordly and self-sufficient, its first impulse is to get its way through use of force and a display of power. In book III of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī develops this theme in detail when he narrates the strategies

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<sup>92</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 38-43.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, V: 4149-52.

that Pharaoh employs to prevent Moses's birth.<sup>94</sup> Unable to prevent Moses from being born, Pharaoh resorts to the cruel practice of killing all newly born Israelite boys. Later, when Moses returns to Egypt and calls on Pharaoh to submit, Pharaoh interrogates him in a way calculated to diminish Moses's self-worth by trying to make him admit that he is being ungrateful towards Pharaoh and hence trying to shame him into silence.

But the use of oppressive force and clever arguments is not the extent of the ego's contrivances. When the ego is unable to get its way through displaying the qualities of tyranny and oppression, it resorts to the strategy of displaying false and calculated meekness. When facing the clear prospect of extinction it even shows humility and submissiveness by asking for a respite. Rūmī brings out this point by commenting on Pharaoh's actions during the plagues. The ego (*nafs*), like Pharaoh, lays its head before Moses, supplicating and asking for forgiveness but when it is freed from want, it later rebels.<sup>95</sup> Rūmī depicts this scene as follows:

When that grievous command of God proceeded step by step, the whole  
Nile was turned into blood from end to end,  
Till at last Pharaoh came in person to Moses, humbly entreating him, his  
tall figure bent double,  
And said, "O sovereign, do not do as we did: we have not the face to offer  
excuses.  
I will become obedient to your command with every bit of my self; I am  
accustomed to be held in honor: do not deal harshly with me.  
Quick, move your lips in mercy, O trusted one, that your prayer may shut  
this fiery mouth of Divine anger."<sup>96</sup>

Moses knows that Pharaoh is being deceptive but upon God's command he removes the plagues. When greenery and grains appear, people start to eat their fill and when their hunger is satisfied they forget their former sighs and lamentations. Pharaoh waxes insolent again and does not submit to God thereby breaking the promise he had made to Moses. Rūmī uses this episode to highlight the ego's qualities of deception. It never wants to lose its power through submission and, when in need, it only makes a show of submitting. But as soon as the ego finds its desire, it rebels once more: "When the donkey has cast off his load, he kicks."<sup>97</sup>

For Rūmī, this process shows the baseness of the ego. It does not possess the nobility to keep its promises (*bī 'ahd*); always looking to its own gain it uses everything in its power to prolong its life. From this perspective, the ego appears as duplicitous and hypocritical. Giving it the benefit of doubt, one can say that it even convinces

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<sup>94</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 840-945.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 3621.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 3590-94.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 3626.

itself that it is actually submitting but this is only superficial and it reverts to its sense of independence at the next possible moment. The ego only looks at the present circumstance rather than the end of affairs; it does not keep its promises, is low, is extremely clever and knows the minutiae, and since it is king in its inner domain, it wants the world to last forever.<sup>98</sup>

### 4.4.3 The Enemy is Inside!: The Blindness of the Self

The self or ego that displays the quality of pride becomes blind to its own faults. It lays blames on outside entities but does not look within to its own blameworthy qualities. Rūmī uses Pharaoh as an example to develop the idea expressed in one of the Prophet's sayings: "The worst of your enemies is your self (*nafs*) which is between your two sides."<sup>99</sup> Rūmī paraphrases this *ḥadīth* thus: "Worse than all men in fraud and spite is the man of *nafs* lying in wait within."<sup>100</sup> In verses where he shows two characters debate the superiority of trusting in God (*tawwakul*) versus exerting one's efforts (*jahd*), Rūmī speaks about the need for the ego to recognize that its worst enemy lies within:

There is no work better than trust in God: what, indeed, is dearer to God than submission?

Often people flee from affliction only to fall into affliction; often do they recoil from the snake only to meet the dragon.

Man devised something, and his device was a snare: that which he thought to be life was actually the drainer of his blood.

He locked the door while the enemy was in the house: the plot of Pharaoh was a story of this sort.

That vengeful man slew hundreds of thousands of babes, while the one he was searching after was in his own house.

Since in our eyesight there is much defect, go, let your own sight pass away in the sight of the Friend.

His sight for ours—what a goodly recompense! In His sight you will find the whole object of your desire.<sup>101</sup>

Elsewhere, Rūmī returns to this topic while pointing out the futility of trying to avert what God has decreed. Pharaoh colored his hands with the blood of thousands of Israelite infants trying to avert the fate he had to endure from Moses's hand. But all of it was to no avail:

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<sup>98</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1643-95.

<sup>99</sup>Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa qīṣaṣ-i mathnawī*, p.41.

<sup>100</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 906.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 918-23.

Had he seen the workshop of the Everlasting God, he would have ceased  
to move hand or foot in plotting.  
Moses lay safe within his house, while outside he was killing infants in  
vain,  
Even as the companion of the ego who pampers his body and suspects  
someone else of a bitter hatred towards him,  
Saying, "this one is a foe, and that one is envious and an enemy," in truth  
his envier and enemy is that body of his.  
He is like Pharaoh, and his body is his Moses: he keeps running outside,  
asking, "Where is my enemy?"  
His ego is luxuriating in the house, which is his body, while he gnaws his  
hand in rancor against someone else.<sup>102</sup>

This ego, of which Pharaoh is such a clear example, displays blindness, not only to God's workings, but also to the real good. In doing so, the ego behaves like a donkey who, in front of the water of life, rather than putting his head down to drink just puts its hooves inside:

Take heed! do not wish the dog of your ego alive, for it is the enemy of  
your spirit since long ago.  
Dust be on the head of the bones that hinder this dog from hunting the  
spirit!  
If you are not a dog, how are you in love with bones? Why are you in  
love with blood, like a leech?  
What sort of eye is it that has no sight, and gets nothing but disgrace  
from the tests to which it is put?  
Opinions are sometimes erroneous, but what sort of opinion is this that  
is blind to the right road?  
O eye, you lament for others: sit down awhile and weep for yourself!<sup>103</sup>

The pride and subsequent blindness of the self gives rise to further blameworthy qualities. One of the problems of the ego that Rūmī highlights is its habit of laying blame on people outside and not looking within to see its own motivations and its inner attitudes that might be leading to its sense of unfulfillment. This stage of laying blame on itself is considered a stage in the development of the self. The stage where the self comes to understand its own role, its deficiencies and shortcomings is known as the *nafs al-lawwāmah*, the blaming self. Until one reaches this stage of looking within and reprimanding oneself, no further development towards purification is possible: "Never does he go round about himself and say, 'I have acted crookedly, like the idolater in turning away from the true religion.'" <sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 770-5.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, II: 474-80.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, IV: 1896.

In short, Pharaoh is the perfect example of the self's quality of blindness that prevents it from looking within to discover the real source of danger. Pharaoh was killing the Israelite boys while his enemy lived safely under his own protection, nourished from his own resources. Because the situation of all humans who are at the level of the animal soul is exactly like that of Pharaoh's, Rūmī addresses his readers as Pharaoh and tells them that like Pharaoh:

You also are bad to others outside, while you have become happy with  
the grievous ego within.

It, itself, is your enemy, yet you are giving it candy while outside you are  
accusing everyone.

You, you are like Pharaoh, blind and blind-hearted: happy with your  
enemy and disgracing the innocent.

How long, O Pharaoh, will you slay the innocent and pamper your body  
for whose countless sins many fines are due?<sup>105</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Insatiable World-Devouring Hunger: The Self as a Form of Hell

The gist of Rūmī's teachings on the animal aspect of the self can be stated as follows: The animal soul or ego is concerned with and serves only its appetites. Using qualitative thinking, Rūmī makes correspondences between entities that seemingly exist at different levels. The stomach and the desires it gives rise to are at their root qualified by hunger and heat. These are also the qualities of Hell as described in the Qur'an. Concerning Hell's insatiable hunger as displayed on the Day of Judgement, the Qur'an says: *We will say to Hell, "Are you full?" and it will reply, "Are there no more?"* (Q 50:30). In the microcosm, it is the stomach therefore, that is the congener of the macrocosmic Hell.

Rūmī says that the ego is Hell. Echoing Qur'anic descriptions of Hell, he personifies the ego as a dragon that is not appeased by all the food in the world.<sup>106</sup> Pharaoh has made the worm of his ego into a dragon by making it serve his appetites. His ego has grown so large that it is burning up the world through its insatiable hunger. On the other hand, Moses's dragon is completely under his command through the grace of God.

Rūmī relates the story of a snake catcher who found a huge dead snake up on snowy mountains. He brought the snake back to Baghdad in order to make some money by showing it to people. But the snake was only frozen and had not died. When the sun of Baghdad cast its heat upon the snake, it woke up from its hibernation, devoured many people, and caused a stampede that killed many more. Rūmī goes on to explain how this is an apt analogy for the state of the self in most people:

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<sup>105</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1915-19.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 1375-89.

Your ego is a dragon, it is not dead, it is frozen because of grief and lack of means.

If it were to find Pharaoh's means...At that moment it would set up the foundation of Pharaohness and waylay a hundred Moses and Aaron.

That dragon, under stress of poverty is a little worm, but a gnat is made a falcon by power and riches.

Keep the dragon in the snow of separation from its desires; beware, do not carry it into the sun of Iraq.

So long as that dragon of yours remains frozen, things are well; you are a mouthful for it when it gains release.

Mortify it and become safe from death; have no mercy: it is not one of them that deserves favors.<sup>107</sup>

The challenge is for people to recognize that their situation is not different than Pharaoh's. All of Rūmī's interpretations concerning Pharaoh center around this teaching:

That which was in Pharaoh, the same is in you, but your dragon is confined in the pit.

Alas, all this concerning Pharaoh is what passes in you: you would rather fasten it on Pharaoh.

If the same is said of you, you are bitterly offended; and if it is told of another, it seems to you a fable.

What ruin is worked in you by the accursed ego! This familiar one casts you exceedingly far from God.

Your fire has not Pharaoh's fuel; otherwise, it is one that throws flames like Pharaoh.<sup>108</sup>

The insatiable fiery hunger of the dragon-self is only put out and brought under control by the light of faith. Just as the body gets strengthened by gross nourishment, the spirit is nourished by the food of light. Rūmī makes this point while relating the story of a man who accepted faith at the hands of the Prophet and whose huge appetite diminished immediately.

The greed and fantasy of unbelief was overthrown: the dragon was satisfied with the food of an ant.

The beggar-like greediness of unbelief departed from him: the sweet food of faith made him stout and strong.<sup>109</sup>

Consumption is the way in which the ego tries to ward off the reality of death. Rather than turning inward to find the root of its existence, the ego turns outward

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<sup>107</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1053-60.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 971-75.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, V: 283-4.

and defines itself in terms of material and tangible objects. It seeks privilege, but forgets that, “privilege is prestige, and prestige in its fundamental nature, as in the etymology of the word, means deception and enchantment.”<sup>110</sup> Rūmī’s teachings on the human self posit that the right path to happiness and satisfaction does not lie in seeking immortality through worldly possessions; that path leads to enchantment, delusion, and wretchedness. Rather, the path to immortality and an existence free of the fear of death, paradoxically, lies in seeking to die willingly rather than fleeing from death. This death is a spiritual one in which the orientation of the self shifts from defining itself in terms of the world to defining itself in relation to its Source. Only then does the hell of insatiable world-devouring hunger cool down and become transformed into the gardens of Paradise in this very existence.

#### 4.4.5 Prestige: The Self’s Attachment to Name and Fame

One of the other qualities of the self that Rūmī discusses through the character of Pharaoh is the self’s attachment to its worldly position and honor: its prestige. In one version of Pharaoh’s dialogue with Moses, Pharaoh says that the people of the world have purchased him and have bought his words. “Is the entire world wrong?” he asks Moses.<sup>111</sup> In this way Rūmī indicates the degree to which Pharaoh is dependent on the acceptance of his people as a way of justifying his policies and of determining his sense of self-worth. Pharaoh’s understanding of himself is based not on the workings of the healthy intellect that would assent to the truth and pay no heed to people’s erroneous opinions. Rather, he defines himself on the basis of what people think of him. Pharaoh does not want to lose the esteem and reverence that comes from being worshipped as a god. As we have seen in previous sections, Rūmī depicts Pharaoh as possessing the desire to submit. But his pride and his attachment to his reputation (*nāmūs*) prevent him from professing faith in God publicly. Out of the public eye, though, “Pharaoh conversed in solitude with God, praying that He would not destroy his reputation.”<sup>112</sup> Rūmī calls pride and reputation chains that prevent people from submitting and, in doing so, he provides an interpretation of those Qur’anic verses that describe the chains and barriers God has put on the unbelievers:

God has made reputation a hundred ton weight of iron: oh, many a one  
is bound in the unseen chain!  
Pride and denial have barred the way of repentance in such a manner that  
the sinner cannot even utter a sigh.  
God said, “*We have put on their necks shackles chin high, so that their  
heads are forced up*”(Q 36:9): those shackles are not put on us from  
outside.

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<sup>110</sup>Norman O. Brown. *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*. New York: Viking, 1959, p. 252; Cited in Ernest Becker. *Escape from Evil*. New York: The Free Press, 1975, p. 50.

<sup>111</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1083.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 2446.



“*And We have set barriers before them and behind them, blocking their vision so they cannot see*” (Q 36:10): the old sinner is not seeing the barrier in front and behind....

Oh, many are the unbelievers that have a passionate longing for the Religion: their only chain is reputation and pride and this and that object of desire.

The chain is hidden, but it's worse than iron: the iron chain can be broken by the axe....

If a man is stung by a wasp, he extracts the wasp's sting from his body, But since the stinging wound is from your self-existence, the pain continues with violence and the anguish is not relieved.<sup>113</sup>

Rūmī gives another poignant example, from the life of the Prophet, of the harm done to the self by its attachment to reputation. The Prophet's uncle Abū Ṭālib raised him lovingly after his parents' death and even after the Prophet started preaching and made enemies of his townsfolk, his uncle stood by him and protected him against the wrath of the Meccan Arabs. But despite the Prophet's yearning and pleading, Abū Ṭālib never publicly accepted Islam. This is the context for the following discussion about the harm of reputation. These verses by Rūmī could easily be read as the thoughts that were going through Pharaoh's mind as he vacillated between his desire to submit or to protect his reputation:

Hundreds of heart and souls are in love with the Maker, but the evil eye or the evil ear has hindered them.

One, indeed, is Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle: to him the revilement of the Arabs seemed terrible,

For he thought, “What will the Arabs say of me? They will say, ‘At the bidding of his nephew he has changed the custom on which we rely.’”

The Prophet said to him, “O uncle, pronounce once the profession of faith, that I may plead with God for you.”

Abū Ṭālib said, “But it will spread abroad by hearsay: Every secret that passes beyond the two who share it becomes common talk.

I shall remain a laughing-stock on the tongues of these Arabs; because of this I shall become despicable in their sight.”

But if the predestined grace had been granted to him, how should this faint-heartedness have existed together with God's pull?<sup>114</sup>

The last verse in the quote above brings us to the question that lies at the heart of Rūmī's teachings and of his characterizations of figures, such as Pharaoh, from Qur'anic and other historical narratives. Rūmī follows Qur'anic teachings by ascribing ultimate agency of all acts to God and it is from this perspective that he can say that the Prophet's uncle was not predestined for grace. But just like the Qur'anic

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<sup>113</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3240-50.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 193-99.

discourse, he is also careful to point out that all humans possess the power to choose their actions. It is to an examination of this tension between choice and determinism that we now turn.

## 4.5 Choice: The Burden from which Even the Mountains Shrank Away

We are now in a position to examine in further detail the central concern that informs Rūmī's teachings in general, and Rūmī's characterization of Pharaoh in particular. Rūmī characterizes Pharaoh in order to point out to his readers the primary blameworthy qualities of their own selves. But all of the ways in which Rūmī develops Pharaoh's character lead towards a single goal: Rūmī guides his readers by making them realize that Pharaoh, just like them, had the power of choice but exercised it in a fashion that went against the better impulses of his own intellect. He interprets the Trust in the following Qur'anic verse as the power of choice: *We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it—Surely he puts things out of place and is foolish* (Q 33:72).<sup>115</sup> This interpretation is offered after a discourse on “the rotten reputations that prevent the tasting of faith and point to the weakness of sincerity and are robbers in the way of thousands of fools.”<sup>116</sup> Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle, did not utter the witnessing of faith out of fear of what his peers would say of him; he feared their ridicule for letting go of his ancestral religion at the behest of his nephew. This is Rūmī's gloss of the foolishness attributed to humans in the Qur'anic verse cited above. To be afraid of the opinion of other humans but not to be afraid of God's opinion results in putting things out of place (*zulm*) while wisdom is defined as putting things in their proper place.

In a post-act analysis, Rūmī attributes Abū Ṭālib's hesitancy to accept faith to the fact that he did not have predestined gentleness from God, “otherwise how could such bad-heartedness have existed together with God's attraction.”<sup>117</sup> This is the point at which Rūmī ponders the cause of this situation. Abū Ṭālib's situation was that he was being pulled in two directions by the pillory of choice. Even the heaven, says Rūmī, refused this burden and cried out for help against this ambush by the power of choice. As humans consider which course of action is best for them, this indecision (*taraddud*) is like a war in the heart where the fear of failure and the hope of success are always in conflict with each other, advancing and retreating.<sup>118</sup> Rūmī offers a prayer and seeks refuge in God from the temptation of choice and from

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<sup>115</sup>In translating *zulm* as “putting things out of place,” I am following the suggestion by Abdel Haleem. See, Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*.

<sup>116</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawí*, VI: 183.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 199.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 185-211.

the temptations of those things that minister to choice because “human nature is addicted to seeking the power of choice and those causes that increase this power.”<sup>119</sup> The desire for health while being sick, says Rūmī, comes out a desire to have more choice because sickness decreases the ability to exercise choice. Similarly, the quest for high office also arises out of a desire to have more power of choice.<sup>120</sup>

Rūmī continues his prayer for refuge against the pillory of choice by likening himself to a camel saddled with the burden of choice. He prays to God that just as God has given him indecision, similarly let God take the indecision away. Sometimes one side of the load is heavier and sometimes the other and this keeps on tilting his choice in one or the other direction. He wants God to take away this “ill-balanced load” so that he may view the gardens of the righteous. It is because people want to escape in sleep from the burden of choice and responsibility that comes from selfhood, says Rūmī, that they seek to divert themselves or lose themselves in work or intoxicants. But the path to relief lies neither in intoxicants nor in seeking more power of choice; the path lies in seeking pain and nothingness. It is in becoming nothing that humans realize their servitude, that they are completely dependent on God. Nothingness is the way into the chamber of the Majestic King. “The religion and creed of lovers is nothingness.”<sup>121</sup> At the stage where the ego passes away (*fanā'*) and becomes nothing, the human self becomes like a dead body in the water; all its movements are from the water. The correct way to overcome the pain caused by the burden of choice, in Rūmī's opinion, is to efface one's selfhood through the wine of love for God and not through the wine made from grapes. True love erases differences and the lover desires nothing other than what the beloved commands. A true trustee, therefore, is one who is an absolute servant and a true lover of the real King.

It is the theme of the power to choose that emerges as the issue underlying Rūmī's interpretations of Pharaoh's character. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Rūmī's challenge in using Pharaoh as a symbol for the self is to convince his readers that their situation is indeed no different than Pharaoh's. Rūmī approaches this task by expanding those episodes and events of Pharaoh's story where he was faced with the “pillory of choice.” At two instances, particularly, he paints a nuanced and moving portrait of the struggle taking place within Pharaoh between his pride and his desire to submit. Rūmī depicts Pharaoh pulled in opposite directions by the good words spoken by Moses, who represents the promptings of intellect, and by the advice given by Hāmān who represents fantasy and the chains of pride and prestige.

How many a time did Pharaoh soften and become submissive when he  
was told that Word from Moses!...

Whenever he took counsel with Hāmān, who was his minister and whose  
nature it was to hate,

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<sup>119</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, VI: 210.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 210.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, VI: 210-230.

Then Hāmān would say, "Until now you have been the king: will you become, through Moses's deception, the slave to a wearer of rags?" Those words of Hāmān would come like a stone thrown from a catapult and shatter his glass house. All that Moses of sweet words built up in a hundred days, Hāmān would destroy in one moment.<sup>122</sup>

This is one level of analysis where Pharaoh clearly has the power to choose his response. This level holds true to everyday experience where people take responsibility for their actions. And it is at this level that the commands and prohibitions enunciated in the Qur'an make sense. Those who do beautiful deeds find their reward in the next world and those who act corruptly find their punishment: *On that Day, people will come forward in groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done an atom's-weight of good will see it, and whoever has done an atom's-weight of evil will see it* (Q 99:6-8). In addition to the implicit assertion of choice and free-will through commanding and prohibiting people from assuming certain qualities and actions, the Qur'an explicitly states in a number of verses that humans are free to choose the path they walk. For example: *Surely, We have guided man to the path, so let him be grateful or ungrateful* (Q 76:3); *And We have shown him the two paths* (Q 90:10); *Say, "Now the truth has come from your Lord. So, let whosoever will have faith, and let whosoever will deny the truth"* (Q 18:29). But this is not the end of the discussion about the power of choice, because, within the monotheistic framework of the Qur'an, there are also verses that clearly state that all actions are completely determined by God. For example, the Qur'an states: *So, God misguides whomever He will, and He guides whomever He will, He is the Almighty, the All Wise* (Q 14:4); *They would not have faith unless God so willed* (Q 6:111). There are also places in the Qur'an where both of these perspectives appear right next to each other: *This Qur'an is nothing but a reminder to all beings, for whomever of you who wants to take the straight path; but you shall not will it, unless God wills, the Lord of all beings* (Q 81:27-29).

Rūmī's answer to the question of whether humans are free to choose their actions or whether they are compelled by God's determination of their acts is that humans are both free and compelled.<sup>123</sup> He argues for the existence of human choice and free will based on everyday experience:

Without doubt we possess a certain free will. You cannot deny the plain evidence of the senses.

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<sup>122</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1240-45.

<sup>123</sup>Rūmī's position on the issue of choice and determinism is the one most commonly accepted within Islamic societies. This attitude is captured well by the following story attributed to 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, the fourth caliph, and a person known for his wisdom: "It is related that someone asked Ali about determinism and choice. Ali asked the questioner to raise up one of his legs. The man immediately raised one of his legs up at which point Ali asked the man to raise his other leg up as well. The man said it was impossible to do so. Ali said, 'the raising of the first leg is choice and not being able to raise the second leg is determinism.'" This story is cited by Dr. Waḥīd 'Ishrat in the introduction to a compilation of essays by Indo-Pakistani scholars on the topic of choice and determinism. See, Waḥīd 'Ishrat, ed. *Jabr wa Qadr*. Lahore: Sang-i mil, 2007.

No one ever says to a stone, "Come!" No one ever expects faithfulness from a clod of earth.

No one says to a man, "Hey you, fly!" Nor will he say, "Come, oh blind man, look at me!"

God said, *Nothing intolerable is laid upon the blind* (Q 24:61)—how could the Lord who gives relief impose the intolerable?

No one says to a stone, "You came late," or to a stick, "Why did you beat me?"

Does anyone make such inquiries of a person under compulsion? Does anyone beat a person who has an excuse?

Commands, prohibitions, wrath, bestowal of honor, and rebuke concern only those who possess free will, oh pure friend!<sup>124</sup>

Rūmī also argues for the existence of choice based on the fact that God created humans upon His own form and that humans possess the spirit of God within themselves. Since God *does what He will* (Q 11:107), humans must possess this attribute of God to a certain extent:

God's Free Will has given existence to our free will: His Free Will is like a rider hidden beneath the dust.

His Free Will creates our free will, His commands are founded upon a free will within us.<sup>125</sup>

But Rūmī, like other Sufis, also pays attention to and develops the logical implications of the Qur'anic verse, *God created you and what you do* (Q 37:96). God appears as the sole agent from the perspective of this Qur'anic verse and in this light Rūmī uses Pharaoh's character to paint a tragic picture of the human situation. In this case, Rūmī links the discussion of determinism with an investigation of the related issue of theodicy. From this perspective God is the creator of both good and evil and is the cause for both the good and evil human actions. In his rendition of Moses's ministry to Pharaoh, Rūmī depicts the struggle inside Pharaoh going on for a long period of time. We start where Rūmī depicts how Pharaoh prays to God in the dark of the night in solitude:

Moses and Pharaoh were servants of Reality, though outwardly the former keeps the way while the latter has lost the way.

In the daytime Moses was crying out to God; at midnight Pharaoh would start to weep,

Saying, "What is this shackle, O God, on my neck? Were it not for this shackle, who would say 'I am I'?"

By that with which You have illumined Moses, by that You have made me to be darkened;

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<sup>124</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 2967-73; Translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 115-16.

<sup>125</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V: 3087-88; Translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 114.

By that whereby You have made Moses's face like the moon, You have made the moon of my soul to be black-faced...  
 Moses and I are fellow-servants of Yours, but Your axe is chopping the green branches in Your forest;...  
 I entreat You by the truth of the might that belongs to Your axe, graciously make these crooked actions straight."  
 Once more Pharaoh said to himself, "How amazing! Am I not occupied the whole night in crying 'O our Lord'?"  
 In secret I am growing humble and harmonious: when I reach Moses, what becomes of me?  
 Are not my heart and body under His control, at one moment he makes me a kernel, at another moment a rind?  
 I become green when He says, "Be a planted field"; I become yellow when He says, "Be ugly..."<sup>126</sup>

At this stage, Rūmī cuts short Pharaoh's poignant monologue and inserts his own voice into the narrative; he begins a discourse on the relationship between human actions and God being the sole agent of all acts. This is informed by an investigation of the mystery of opposition within the phenomenal realm:

How, indeed, is the action of God other than this?  
 Before the bat of his decree, "*Be*"— *and it is!* (Q 36:82) we are running like balls in space and beyond.  
 Since colorlessness became captive of color, a Moses came into conflict with Moses.  
 When you attain the colorlessness which you possessed, Moses and Pharaoh are at peace.<sup>127</sup>

An analysis of why it is that Pharaoh does not submit involves an examination of how multiplicity arises from unity. From the one root that is God (colorlessness) arise multiple qualities (colors) in the phenomenal world. The wondrous part of this situation, says Rūmī, is how a branch can fight with its own root. Oil is obtained from plants that have absorbed water in order to grow, but oil does not mix with water. Similarly, the rose and the thorn arise from the same root but are in war with each other. But perhaps, says Rūmī, this is not a real fight, it is an artifice just like the fake fighting among the donkey sellers in order to raise the prices of the donkeys. Or perhaps it is neither a war, nor a play, but is just perplexity, a mystery.<sup>128</sup> The classic Sufi answer is based on a meditation on the implications of the following divine *hadīth*: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures that I

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<sup>126</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 2447-64.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 2465-68.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, I: 2466-74.

might be known.”<sup>129</sup> The show that is phenomenal manifestation must go on since it is demanded by God's infinity and His desire to be known. Every possibility must manifest itself and the sustenance of the world depends on the existence of contraries. God as the King needs the existence of both gentleness and severity (robes of honor and prisons, battles and banquets) in order to manifest His attributes of gentleness and severity.

From this perspective, existence is a “topsy-turvy game,” a case of “reversed horseshoes.” Things are not as they appear: It seems that Pharaoh is rejecting Moses, but since Moses is connected to God who is the root of the cosmos, in reality the denial of Pharaoh comes from Moses's denial. The rejection of Pharaoh by God is primary in this case and the rejection of Moses and God by Pharaoh is secondary. This is another instance of analysis where Rūmī prioritizes meaning over form. And it is in light of this principle of priority that Rūmī depicts Moses talking to God about Pharaoh's insincere repentance at seeing the plagues:

Moses said, “O Lord, he is deceiving me; he is deceiving Your deceiver!<sup>130</sup>  
Should I listen to him or should I deceive him as well, so that this puller  
of the branch may recognize the root?  
For the root of every deception and scheming is with us: whatever is in  
the earth, its root is from Heaven.<sup>131</sup>

From this perspective, the human situation is a tragic one where everyone is destined to live out a script in the crafting of which they have no choice. Rūmī addresses his readers to say, “You do not know to which of the two groups you belong, so strive to find out what you are.”<sup>132</sup> Pharaoh's inability to submit publicly, therefore, presents him as a tragic figure who is discovering that he belongs to the group of the wretched and not to the group who is blessed. But Rūmī's overall analysis contradicts this very logical and tragic picture of human existence. The power of human choice, says Rūmī, never goes away. Even if humans are able to logically see that their inability to follow the right course is coming about as a result of God's planning, at that very moment they still have the choice of how to respond to that knowledge and their situation. In order to make this point, Rūmī returns to the paradigmatic story of the Qur'an, the story of Adam and Iblīs (Satan), in which both Adam and Satan disobey God. He contrasts Satan's response with that of Adam's in order to highlight the fact that some amount of choice always exists for humans, no matter how enormous the sin they might have committed.

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<sup>129</sup>Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa qiṣaṣ-i mathnawī*, p. 120.

<sup>130</sup>In these verses Rūmī is explaining those Qur'anic verses in which God calls Himself “the best of deceivers.” For example: *They plotted deception and God plotted deception; and He is the best of deceivers* (Q 3:54); *Say, God is faster at deception* (Q 10:21).

<sup>131</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 3595-97.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, III: 3082.

Satan said, "Because you have led me astray" (Q 15:39); the base devil hid his own act.

Adam said, "We have wronged ourselves" (Q 7:23); like us, he too was not unheedful of God's action.

From respect he concealed God's act in his sinning; by casting the sin upon himself he was blessed.

After his repentance, God said to him, "O Adam, did I not create in you that crime and those tribulations?"

Was it not my measuring out (*taqdīr*) and decree (*qadā*)? Why did you conceal it at the time of excusing yourself?"

Adam said, "I was afraid not to observe due respect." God said, "I too have observed it towards you"<sup>133</sup>

This quote encapsulates Rūmī's teachings on the question of choice and compulsion. Satan *chooses* to blame God while hiding the part he himself played in disobeying God. In contrast, even while being aware that God as the creator of everything can be partially held responsible for his action, Adam *chooses* to be respectful by laying the blame entirely on himself for his disobedience. Adam's example shows that even though one can logically argue that ultimately everything is determined by God, humans still have the power to respond in a beautiful or ungrateful fashion. In this light, Pharaoh makes the choice to think that he cannot do the right thing upon realizing that he is unable to submit in public. He chooses to think that God has destined him to be a rebel even though the gate of repentance leading into paradise is always open. If "Pharaoh had relied on God, then God would have strengthened all the pillars of his kingdom. God would have made it prosperous and given it a good name, just like the kingdom of David and Solomon."<sup>134</sup> In the final analysis, Rūmī tells his readers, they are as free as Pharaoh was to choose between turning towards God or turning away from Him.

## 4.6 Conclusion

From the perspective of characterology, in addition to portraying the qualities of historical figures, Rūmī traces these qualities to the basic constituents of the human self in terms of its ontological tendencies. In examining people's character, Rūmī analyzes qualities in terms of the substance (spirit and body) from which humans are created. For Rūmī, character (*akhlāq* or *khulq*) is linked with creation (*khalq*). He does not simply delineate characters through depicting their actions and the qualities displayed therein, but he also offers an analysis of motives that seeks to trace the origin of those qualities. Characterization, for Rūmī, consists of ascertaining the deepest possible motives or causes of human actions. He undertakes this characterization with

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<sup>133</sup>Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 1488-93.

<sup>134</sup>Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. *Maktūbāt-i mawlānā jalāl al-dīn rūmī*. Ed. by Tawfīq H. Subḥānī. Tehran: Markaz-i nashr-i dānishgāhī, 1371, p. 106.



a specific goal in mind: Guidance. Characterization, in Rūmī's works, is meant as a teaching so that readers may take stock of their own situation in order to understand the deepest causes of blameworthy character traits in order to eliminate them.

Rūmī's creative and imaginative development of episodes from the Qur'ānic story of Moses and Pharaoh shows him to be an omniscient narrator. He knows how the story ends and is therefore both within and outside of time as his readers are experiencing it. As far as Rūmī is concerned, he is a *muḥaqqiq*, someone who has verified and has seen "things as they are" and, therefore, his narrative/interpretive stance is identical with his actual lived reality. According to his descriptions of the state of verifiers and Friends of God, Rūmī considers himself "the child of the moment;" born ever anew, aware of the constant annihilation and creation of the cosmos, and one who lives in that full moment where the past and the future are present simultaneously. He seems to speak from within the apocalyptic reality of time described in the following Qur'ānic verse: *To God belong the secrets of the heavens and the earth, and the matter of the Hour is as the twinkling of an eye, or it is nearer still* (Q 16:77). It is from this perspective that the stories Rūmī tells, even though they look like stories, are not fictions but in fact are realities. Just as the Qur'an, within its own evaluative frame and even though it might sound like poetry, is in fact a statement of the way things are.

The method Rūmī employs in interpreting Qur'anic stories is to first differentiate and delineate the story through creative retelling and to then gather it together by inserting himself as the omniscient narrator who tells the reader what the story means to them in this very instant. This examination of Rūmī's interpretations of the Qur'anic narrative of Moses and Pharaoh shows that Rūmī takes narratives that took years to unfold on the outside level and maps them onto the present singular moment. Rūmī also uses composite characters that utilize all the imagery familiar to his audience. Stories of the prophets and their qualities are important to him in as much as they can shed light on the state of the individual in the present.

Rūmī looks at the Qur'anic text from the perspective of the basic goal of human life: Ultimate happiness. He focuses on the illnesses of the human heart and sketches out the possible remedies for these illnesses provided by religion. In this light he directs the reader's attention to their inside reality and tells them that their worst enemy lies within themselves, is exceedingly crafty, is willing to go to any lengths to preserve its false autonomy and power, is exceedingly difficult to control without exerting much effort, and that the idol of their own selves is the mother of all other idols. Rūmī considers one of the main purposes of revelation, and that of its mature interpreters, to act as reminders and as teachers who give keys and directions through which readers are able to connect elements of stories on the outside with the processes unfolding in their inside. They provide a vocabulary through which a person comes to understand their inner life and to make informed choices.

Rūmī uses the story of Pharaoh as an opportunity to show the two diametric poles of human possibilities. While the Qur'an only hints at the manner in which Pharaoh's personality is complex, Rūmī expends considerable effort in bringing out the ambiguous and vacillating states of Pharaoh's inward situation, thereby pointing at the non-determined state of human beings. From the adjectives used by Rūmī to

refer to Pharaoh (e. g. black-faced, black-hearted, rebel, denier etc.) it appears that he is convinced that Pharaoh died in a state of unbelief and is destined for the fire of Hell. But he also intimates that:

One cannot deny God's favor to Pharaoh completely. It is possible that God favored him secretly, causing him to be rejected for a good purpose. For a king is both wrathful and gentle, he has robes of honor and prisons. "The people of the Heart" do not deny God's favor to Pharaoh completely, but "the people of the outer (*zāhir*)" consider him to have been rejected completely. And that is proper since the outward needs to be maintained.<sup>135</sup>

Another instance in his works might be used to argue that it is possible that Pharaoh's voicing of faith upon seeing his impending death was authentic and that God, after all, might have saved him in the end.

When the moment of his drowning arrived, he said "I am the least of the servants." Unbelief became faith and vision when affliction showed its face.

Don't be pained by the body, come in to the depths of His Nile, so that the body like Pharaoh may be purified of denial.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the existence of these instances where Rūmī seems to draw a distinction between the outward and inward end of Pharaoh, it is not on the final outcome of Pharaoh's fate that Rūmī focuses. Rather he is concerned with the qualities within Pharaoh that prevented him from submitting much earlier. The importance of showing the struggle within Pharaoh's soul is so that the reader at present, the one whose final fate is not yet clear, might take heed and not manifest Pharaoh's qualities nor make the choices that Pharaoh made.

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<sup>135</sup>Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 176.

<sup>136</sup>Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, Verse: 9296-97.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

This study has sought to identify the salient features of Rūmī's hermeneutics of the Qur'an. For Rūmī, the act of reading and understanding scripture is indissolubly linked with reading and understanding the self. It can be said that Rūmī's approach to the task of interpretation is based on the following Qur'anic verse: *We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and within their own selves until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth* (Q 41:53). Since the Qur'an also refers to its verses as signs, it thereby presents its readers with three systems of signs: natural signs, signs within the soul, and signs of the Qur'anic revelation. These three sign-systems have sometimes been called "the three books" within the Islamic intellectual tradition. In the Qur'anic vision of a world where everything is a sign, one is prompted to ask the question: What is the correspondence between the outer signs and those within?

This is one of the questions that Rūmī answers through his interpretations of the Qur'an. In his role as an interpreter, Rūmī is a translator who resituates signs from one system of meaning into another; from the language of social history into the language of the inner domain. Rūmī inherits pre-existing languages that describe both outer and inner structures of the human world including languages of narrative and psychology. Rūmī asserts that the outside and the inside realities that humans experience relate to one another and provide distinct vocabularies that parallel one another. For the outer city, there is an inner city; for the outer king there is an inner king; for the outer prophet there is an inner prophet; and for the outer long dead Pharaoh there is a live Pharaoh within everyone. As such, he is simply mapping the clear signs (*ẓāhir*) of scripture onto the more opaque signs (*bāṭin*) within the soul.

By basing his worldview on the fundamental Qur'anic principle of God's oneness, Rūmī arrives at a hermeneutics that is unitary. In Rūmī's hermeneutics there are no distinctions between psychology and cosmology or, between theory and practice. The assumption that reality is one gives rise to a hermeneutics that, in order to be adequate to its object of inquiry, is also unitary. An important consequence of such hermeneutics is that it eschews dualism. Form and meaning, the outward and the inward, appear as different aspects of one reality; outer significations do not lose their validity but are encompassed within inner significations. The inner meaning does not nullify the outer signification of Qur'anic verses. In fact, it is precisely the correspondence between the two that allows readers to cross over from the outward

to the inward. The signs in scripture and the signs in the horizons provide the inescapable starting point for charting the depths of the self.

One of the primary ways in which Rūmī talks about the structure and dynamics of the self is through his interpretations of Qur’anic stories. Through retelling stories of the prophets and their adversaries, he delineates both the praiseworthy qualities that seekers need to emulate and the blameworthy qualities that they need to avoid. Based on this study, we can say that Rūmī’s depictions of characters are harmonious with Qur’anic data. For example, he is not simply inventing the possibility that Pharaoh knew the truth of Moses’s message. It is based on references present within the Qur’an itself that suggest Pharaoh’s deliberate concealment of his knowledge of the truth. Just as the Qur’an emphasizes the character traits that lead Pharaoh to his ruin, Rūmī also emphasizes those character traits. Rūmī’s portrayal of Pharaoh as praying to God within the privacy of his own room builds upon and highlights for the reader the destructive effects of pride and attachment to worldly reputation. He makes explicit that which is hinted at in the Qur’an: That Pharaoh did not acknowledge the truth because he was afraid of what his subjects would say. Rūmī’s interpretations of the Qur’anic character of Pharaoh, while creative, dramatic, and more extended, show a continuity with the Qur’anic intent. Imaginative retellings, in Rūmī’s case, function in service of illustrating and making comprehensible for the reader the structure and dynamics of their own selves.

An important aspect of Rūmī’s interpretive strategy is to emphasize that Qur’anic stories depict precisely the inner state of the human souls at this very moment. In doing this, he focuses the reader’s attention on the present. Although his teachings are encompassed by the grand Qur’anic narrative of the past, present, and the future, Rūmī’s concern is to alert people to the fact that they must choose to act now in ways that can benefit them. Rūmī’s interpretive activity is motivated by a desire to guide others and he builds on the Qur’anic teachings concerning God’s mercy by pointing out to his readers that the door of forgiveness is never closed. Humans must never despair of God’s mercy and should choose to turn towards God rather than away from Him if they are to find real happiness.

I will end by making two suggestions for the field of Qur’anic interpretation based on this study. The first of these concerns the usefulness of narrative as a tool for comparative studies in Qur’anic interpretation. A narrative is a holistic structure, with a beginning, middle, and end, and therefore it serves as a useful tool for grasping meanings of things as a whole. The narrative of Moses and Pharaoh is recounted in many iterations in the Qur’an, and since it parallels the situation of the Prophet, it is a useful theme along which to conduct a diachronic study of Qur’anic interpretation. Such a study can also allow us to bring together works from different genres such as traditional Qur’an commentaries, poetry, and sermons.

In this regard I would like to re-emphasize the suggestion I made in the introduction, that the field of Qur’anic interpretation needs to be construed in a broader fashion. *Tafsīr* should be seen both as genre and as process and, regarded in this fashion, studies of Qur’anic interpretation done outside the *tafsīr* genre provide insightful contributions to the field of Qur’anic interpretation and the study of the Qur’an’s role and influence within Islamic civilization. Here, it needs to be remembered that

over the course of Islamic history, by and large, the majority of Muslims have been non-Arabs. Even as most Muslims learn to read the Arabic script and are able to recite parts of the Qur'an, their exposure to its teachings occurs primarily through preachers and those scholars who speak and write in their own language. Poetry is one of the most cultivated and valued arts within Islamic cultures and the popularity of Rūmī's works throughout the Persianate Muslim world and even in the contemporary West shows that poetic interpretations of the Qur'an reach a wider audience than traditional Qur'an commentaries. The study of poetic and creative writings, therefore, deserves a prominent place in the field of Qur'anic interpretation.

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