

Section 9: Moses' Search for Higher Knowledge

Surah Al-Kahf – Verses 60 – 61

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَى لِفَتَاهُ لَا أَبْرَحُ حَتَّى أَبْلُغَ مَجْمَعَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ أَوْ أَمْضِيَ حُقُبًا

فَلَمَّا بَلَغَا مَجْمَعَ بَيْنَهُمَا نَسِيَا حُوتَهُمَا فَاتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ سَرَبًا

60. “And (remember) when Moses said to his young companion: ‘I will not cease until I reach the Junction of the two Seas, though I go on for years.

61. “Then when they reached the Junction, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea, going away.”

The appellation ‘Moses’ has been repeated in the Qur'an for 136 times all of which means the same prophet Moses, the possessor of determination /'ulul'azm/.¹

The application of the word /fata/ in this verse, which means ‘young’ and ‘gallant’, is used in the sense of ‘lad’ and ‘page’, and it is a sign of courtesy, kindness and ‘good name’. The purpose of the Arabic word /fatah/, hear in this verse, is Joshua-ibn-Nun, who was the companion and attendant of Moses (as) in that journey.²

The verse says:

“And (remember) when Moses said to his young companion: ‘I will not cease until I reach the Junction of the two Seas, though I go on for years.”

The Arabic term /huqb/ means years and years, seventy to eighty years.

The story of Moses and Khidr (as) has been recorded in commentary books and history sources. For instance, in some Sahih-i-Bukhari, it has been narrated from Ibn-‘Abbas, from ‘Ubayy-ibn-Ka‘b that once the Prophet (S) said that one day, when Moses was orating, he was asked by one of the children of Israel that who the most learned person was.

Moses (as) said:

‘I am’.

Allah addressed Moses saying why he did not say that Allah knows best, and Khidr was more aware than Moses. Moses (as) asked where Khidr was.

Then he was addressed that Khidr was in the site of ‘Junction of the Seas’, and its sign and mystery was that he was to take a fish with him in a basket and he would go forth. The place where Moses was to meet Khidr would be indicated by the fact that the fish would disappear when he got to that place.³

The holy verse says:

“Then when they reached the Junction, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea, going away.”

Moses (as) put the fish in the basket and told his attendant that wherever he did not find the fish in the basket he would inform the matter to Moses. Moses and his attendant started to go forward as far as they reached the sea, where they stayed beside a stone to rest.

While Moses (as) was sleeping, his attendant, who was awake, saw that the fish escaped into the sea. The attendant of Moses did not awaken him from his sleep to tell him the matter, and later, when Moses woke up, he forgot to inform him of the matter either, and they both continued their way.

After one day and night that they walked, Moses said that they became tired from that travel and told his attendant to bring the food for them to eat. He informed Moses that the fish had become alive and jumped into the sea. Moses (as) said that they had to return to the same place that the fish had jumped into the water because their meeting-place was there.

Imam Baqir (as) and Imam Sadiq (a.s) both said:

“The attendant of Moses brought the salted fish by the sea to wash it. The fish moved in his hand and escaped into the sea.”⁴

Some commentators have rendered the ‘Junction of the Seas’ into the meeting of the two seas of prophethood, (Moses and Khidr). Moses, they believe, was the outward sea of knowledge, and Khidr was the inward sea of knowledge.

In view of the fact that prophets have been inerrant and do not forget, the purpose of ‘forgetting the fish’,

mentioned in the verse, is that they put the fish aside and left it. It is like the verses which attribute forgetfulness to Allah. For example, Surah Al-Jathiyah, No.45, verse 34 says:

“...Today We forsake you...”,

and Surah As-Sjdah, No.32, verse 14 says:

“...surely We forsake you...”.

Moreover, those two did not absolutely forget the fish but they had taken it with themselves, and as it was said in the above, the attendant of Moses did not want to awaken Moses and waited. Then, after his wakefulness, he forgot to tell him the event, too.

The Qur'an has repeatedly pointed to the animals as a sign, and an inspiring factor, or an informer, such as the inspiration that the crow led how Abel to be buried, the hoopoe informed of the infidelity of the people of Sheba, the event of the fish in the explanation of the meeting of these two prophets, the function of spider in the protection of the holy Prophet (S) in the Cave, and the function of the dog for 'the Companions of the Cave'.

Surah Al-Kahf – Verses 62 – 63

فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَا قَالَ لِفَتَاهُ ءَاتِنَا غَدَاءَنَا لَقَدْ لَقِينَا مِنْ سَفَرِنَا هَذَا نَصَبًا

قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَ إِذْ أَوَيْنَا إِلَى الصَّخْرَةِ فَإِنِّي نَسِيتُ الْحُوتَ وَمَا أَنَسَانِيهِ إِلَّا الشَّيْطَانُ أَنْ أَذْكُرَهُ وَاتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُ فِي الْبَحْرِ عَجَبًا

62. “Then when they had passed (the seaside), Moses said unto his young companion: ‘Bring us our morning meal. Indeed we have met from this our journey weariness’.”

63. “He said: ‘Did you see, when we took refuge on the rock? Then verily I forgot (to tell you the jump of) the fish and nothing made me forget to mention of it but the Satan; and it took its way into the sea in a marvelous manner!’”

In Arabic, the morning meal is called /qada’/, and the evening meal is called /iṣa’/.

When Moses (as) and his attendant passed on that place, the length of their travel and the fatigue of the way caused hunger to overcome them. Moses (as) remembered that they had got a food with them. Then he told his attendant to bring their food because they had got tired from their travel.

The verse says:

“Then when they had passed (the seaside), Moses said unto his young companion: ‘Bring us our morning meal. Indeed we have met from this our journey weariness’.”

At this time, the attendant of Moses (as) told him whether he remembered the time when they took refuge on the rock to rest there. In that place he forgot to inform him the event of the fish, and it was Satan that made him forget to mention it, and that the fish jumped into the sea and went away.

The verse says:

“He said: ‘Did you see, when we took refuge on the rock? Then verily I forgot (to tell you the jump of) the fish and nothing made me forget to mention of it but the Satan; and it took its way into the sea in a marvelous manner!’”

Surah Al-Kahf – Verses 64 – 65

قَالَ ذَلِكَ مَا كُنَّا نَبْغِ فَارْتَدَّا عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِمَا قَصَصًا

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا ءَاتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِمَّا لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا

64. “He (Moses) said: ‘That was what we were seeking for!’ So they returned, retracing their footsteps.”

65. “Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge from Our presence.”

In view of the fact that the subject was as a sign for Moses (as) in connection with finding that great-learned man, Moses said:

“He (Moses) said: ‘That was what we were seeking for!’ So they returned, retracing their footsteps.”

When Moses and his attendant returned to the first place they had started their way, i.e. beside the rock and near ‘the Junction of the Seas’, suddenly they found one of Allah’s servants to whom He had bestowed His mercy and whom He had taught a considerable amount of knowledge.

The verse says:

“Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge from Our presence.”

The application of the word /wajada/, in the verse, shows that they had been seeking after the knowledgeable man, and finally they found him.

And the Qur’anic phrase /‘abdan min ‘ibadina/ (one of Our servants) indicates that the highest honour of a man is that he would be a true servant of Allah, and this very rank of servitude causes man to be bestowed the mercy of the Lord and the windows of the science to be opened to his heart, (mind).

Again the Qur’anic phrase /min ladunna ‘ilma/ (We had taught him knowledge from Our presence) also denotes that the knowledge of that learned man (Khidr) was not an ordinary knowledge, but he was aware of a part of the secrets of this world and of the mysteries of the events which only Allah knows.

Imam Sadiq (as) said:

“Moses was more learned than Khidr in religious prudence, but Khidr was more aware of a branch and a mission other than that.”⁵

However the objective meaning of /‘abd/ (servant), in this verse, is Khidr (as) who was a prophet reasoned by the following evidences:

1. He who becomes the teacher of a prophet, like Moses (as), is surely a prophet.
2. Some Arabic terms, such as: /‘abdina/ (our servant), /‘abdahu/ (His servant), and /‘ibadana/ (Our servants), mentioned in the Qur’an, have often been used for divine prophets.
3. Khidr told Moses that all extra-ordinary actions that he saw from him and did not have patience with him were done by the command of Allah and he did not do any thing of his own accord. Khidr (as) said:

“...I did it not of my own accord...”⁶

4. Moses promised Khidr that he would not do anything other than he taught him, and the person whom an’Ulul-‘azm prophet absolutely obeys, is certainly inerrant and is surely a Divine prophet.
5. Intuitive knowledge is particularized to Divine prophets.

Allah said about Khidr:

“We had taught him knowledge from Our presence.”

6. Some commentators say that the term ‘mercy’ here means ‘prophethood’.

Surah Al-Kahf – Verses 66 – 67

قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَى هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَيَّ أَنْ تُعَلِّمَنِي مِمَّا عُلِّمْتَ رُشْدًا

قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا

66. “Moses said to him (Khidr): ‘Shall I follow you so that you teach me right conduct of what you have been taught?’”

67. “He said: ‘Verily you will not be able to bear with me patiently’.”

The holy Prophet of Islam (S) said:

“At the time when Moses met Khidr, in front of them a bird took a drop of water from the sea by its beak and poured it on the ground. Khidr asked Moses whether he knew the secret of the deed of that bird. It teaches us that our knowledge comparing with Allah’s knowledge is like a drop before an infinite sea.”

Moses said to (Khidr) whether he might follow him so that he would teach Moses a knowledge which causes him to grow.⁷ (Conversance of metaphysical theology causes the growth and development of man.)

The verse says:

“Moses said to him (Khidr): ‘shall I follow you so that you teach me right conduct of what you have been taught?’”

Bare knowledge is not the aim. It must be the source of growth and absorbs man to the righteous deeds and modesty, not to vanity and disputation.

After his prayers, invoking Allah (s.w.t.), the holy Prophet (S) used to recite:

“I take refuge with you from the knowledge which is of no benefit.”⁸

In answer to Moses, the knowledgeable man (Khidr) said there was no ability in Moses to be patient with him in following him and bearing his teachings. He meant such patience was difficult for Moses to bear. The reason was that Moses looked the outward of the affairs, but Khidr noted to their inward case. Therefore, bearing patience was hard for Moses (as).

Surah Al-Kahf – Verses 68 – 69

وَكَيْفَ تَصْبِرُ عَلَىٰ مَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ خُبْرًا

قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ صَابِرًا وَلَا أَعْصِي لَكَ أَمْرًا

68. “And how can you be patient about what you have not got any comprehensive knowledge?”

69. “He (Moses) said: ‘Allah willing, you shall find me patient, and I shall not disobey you in any matter’,”

Khidr continued answering Moses when he told him how he would be patient upon an action that seemed apparently wrong to him, and while he was not aware of its innate and its reality.

The verse says:

“And how can you be patient about what you have not got any comprehensive knowledge?”

It is understood from this holy phrase that the purpose is not to prove that Moses (as) was absolutely impatient. But the purpose is that since Moses was unaware of the innate of the affairs that Khidr did, he could not be patient.

Thus, this holy verse indicates that the capacity of persons, concerning information, is different. Even Moses (as) cannot bear the things Khidr does. Therefore, in giving the cultural responsibilities to individuals, competencies should be known and weaknesses must be notified of.

Then, in the next verse, Moses (as), in answer to Khidr (as), said that he would find him truly patient if it be the will of Allah, and he should not disobey him in any thing.

The verse says:

“He (Moses) said: ‘Allah willing, you shall find me patient, and I shall not disobey you in any matter’,”

Thus, it is possible that, with the help of Allah and by means of patience, the necessary growth and development can be obtained, and also we must not forget the will of Allah for what we are going to do in future, and we should say: ‘If it be the will of Allah’.

However, some of the commentators have said that the effort of Moses (as) for earning knowledge

shows that no one should refrain from earning knowledge even if he were a prophet and had reached the high standard of knowledge. Another matter is that no one must refrain from humility before the one who is more learned than him.

Moses (as) conditioned his patience to the Will of Allah, because he thought he might bear patience and in the meantime he did probable he could not be patient. Therefore, he conditioned his patience to the Will of Allah, so that if he had not been able to be patient, he would not have said a falsehood.

Surah Al-Kahf – Verse 70

قَالَ فَإِنْ اتَّبَعْتَنِي فَلَا تَسْأَلْنِي عَنْ شَيْءٍ حَتَّى أُحْدِثَ لَكَ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا

70. “He (Khidr) said: ‘If you follow me. Then do not question me of any thing until I myself speak to you about it’.”

In view of the fact that patience upon the apparently indecent events, which a person is not aware of their secrets, is not so easy to bear, once more that the learned man (Khidr) made Moses undertake his promise. He warned him that if he wished to follow him, he had to be absolutely silent and would not ask him concerning any thing until, on its time, Khidr might tell him about it.

The verse says:

“He (Khidr) said: ‘If you follow me. Then do not question me of any thing until I myself speak to you about it’.”

Moses (as) undertook this promise again and proceeded companying ‘that great Teacher’.

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1. These 'Ulul'azm prophets are Noah, Abraham, Moses, 'Isa and Muhammad who had Book and whose religion was preached by the prophets after them until the next 'Ulul'azm prophet came.
 2. Nur-uth-thaqalayn, the commentary.
 3. 'Allamah Sha'rani, in Tafsir-i-Futuh recites that the place of meeting was about Syria and Palestine.
 4. Nur-uth-Thaqalayn, the Commentary
 5. Tafsir Al-Mizan
 6. (Surah Al-Kahf, No. 18, verse 82)
 7. Growth here is the religious knowledge which guides man toward the Truth.
 8. Bihar-ul-'Anwar, vol. 86, p. 18
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<https://www.al-islam.org/enlightening-commentary-light-holy-quran-vol-9/section-9-moses-search-higher-knowledge>