

# 1 The Natural Environment

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

A Parable; A Theocentric Framework; The Work of Creation; The Works of Creation; Nature as Muslim; Angels and *Jinn*; Humanity's Place in Creation

The Qur'an has much to say about the natural world, but it does not espouse an environmental ethos in the modern sense of that term. For example, it doesn't speak of global warming or the dangers posed by limitless consumption and irresponsible exploitation of the Earth's resources. The Arabic word most commonly used today to refer to conservation and preservation of the environment (*ḥimāya*) is not found in the Qur'an, nor is the term that refers to the environment itself (*bī'a*). These are modern concerns that have emerged only in relatively recent times, and so it is not surprising that we find no evidence of them in Islam's sacred text.

Despite the lack of explicit terminology that might resonate with a modern-day conservationist or someone who is concerned about environmental issues, the Qur'an nonetheless contains many passages that such a person could endorse and affirm. This is so because the Qur'an repeatedly stresses a theme that is at the heart of the modern environmental movement—human beings must have a proper relationship with and respect for creation and the world around them. The Qur'an has a unique understanding of the reasons why this is an essential component of human


existence, and it is one that many people of other faiths can accept and embrace because it resonates with their own beliefs.

## A Parable

(Q 18:32-43; 36:13-29; 2:17; 7:176; 14:24-26; 29:41; 62:5)

The Qur'anic perspective is uniquely articulated in an interesting parable found in 18:32-43 describing two men and the different ways they relate to the natural world. "Tell them a parable about two men. We made for one of them two gardens of grapevines that were surrounded by date palm trees, and We put farmland in between them. Each of the gardens brought forth produce without fail. We made a stream flow through them, and so the man had plenty of fruit. One day he was speaking with his companion and said, 'I have more wealth than you and a stronger backing among people,' and He entered his garden. Then he wronged himself by saying, 'I do not think that this will ever disappear or that the final hour will ever arrive. And even if I were to be brought back to my Lord, I would certainly find something there better than this.' His companion responded, 'Do you not believe in the one who created you out of dust, from a drop of fluid, and formed you into a man? As for me, He is God, my Lord, and I do not

associate anything with my Lord. You should have entered your garden and said, "Whatever God wills! All power resides in God." Even though you consider me to be less than you in wealth and children, my Lord might provide me with something better than your garden and send a thunderbolt from the sky on your garden so that it becomes a bare hillside. Or perhaps its water might sink so far into the ground that you will not be able to find it.' And so it happened that his fruit was ruined, and he began to wring his hands over how much it had cost him. As it withered on its trellises he said, 'Woe is me! I should not have associated anything with my Lord!' He had no one to help him but God, and he could not help himself."



*The Arabic word the Qur'an uses for a parable is mathal, but it does not always refer to a comparison between two things, as is normally understood by the English term. Extended narrative parables in the Qur'an like that discussed here include one about a city that rejects the messengers sent to it (36:13-29). Among the elements of creation that are used for parabolic purposes in briefer passages are fire (2:17), a dog (7:176), trees (14:24-26), spider webs (29:41), and donkeys (62:5).*

associate anything with my Lord. You should have entered your garden and said, "Whatever God wills! All power resides in God." Even though you consider me to be less than you in wealth and children, my Lord might provide me with something better than your garden and send a thunderbolt from the sky on your garden so that it becomes a bare hillside. Or perhaps its water might sink so far into the ground that you will not be able to find it.' And so it happened that his fruit was ruined, and he began to wring his hands over how much it had cost him. As it withered on its trellises he said, 'Woe is me! I should not have associated anything with my Lord!' He had no one to help him but God, and he could not help himself."

The parable neatly illustrates and summarizes some of the Qur'an's essential teachings about creation and humanity's place in it. The men personify two different ways of relating to the natural environment. The first man, with the two gardens, is materially prosperous and successful, but he does not understand the reason for his prosperity or its fleeting nature. He boasts to his friend of his superior status while forgetting where his good fortune comes from. In the first few verses of the parable, we are told that God is responsible for all that the man has, but he is oblivious to the source of his success. He wrongly assumes that his gardens will last forever and that he is the supreme authority over them. He goes so far as to say that he does not believe he will ever die, and in the unlikely event that he were to pass away his situation would be even better than it is now. This is someone who sees himself as the center of the universe, unchanging and forever in charge. In the end, everything falls down around him and he is a broken, defeated person.

Not so the second man. He may not enjoy the material prosperity of his friend, but he possesses something of greater value—an awareness of God's role as the source of all that exists—which allows him to have a completely different relationship with the world. He boasts about God, not himself. This man is not in charge but in debt. He recognizes that all he has comes from God and is subject to change.

Both men understand the first one's problem in theological terms—he has set up a partner with God. In other words, he is guilty of the sin of *shirk*, or association, the one offense the Qur'an says will not be forgiven. The parable does not tell us specifically what he has associated with God, but the most logical conclusion is that it is himself. By ignoring God's involvement as the source of his success and setting himself up as the authority, the man has usurped the deity's role.

This is seen most obviously in his claim that his gardens will last forever and that he will not perish. Only God has control over life and death, as the man learns at the end of the parable. But it is also seen in his distorted sense of the relationship he has with the rest of creation. Despite what he thinks, he does not have the authority to control the created world and bend it to his will. Such power is reserved only for God. In the Qur'an, an important dimension of the nature of God is that this is the God of nature. The man in the parable serves as a reminder of what can happen when people forget this.

## A Theocentric Framework

(Q 2:29; 14:32-34; 16:10-17; 43:9-14; 45:12-13)

Certain passages in the Qur'an could be interpreted as placing humanity in a position of superiority vis-à-vis the rest of creation. They appear to suggest that other elements of the created order are here for our pleasure and use, and we are to dominate and control them. "It is He who created for you everything on the earth, and then turned to the sky and fashioned the seven heavens. He knows all things" (2:29). On its own, this verse can give the impression that everything that has been created is for humanity's benefit and enjoyment and we can do with it as we like. But when read in context, it is apparent that this verse is primarily about God, not us. It is preceded by a section that highlights God's power and control over all that exists, particularly humanity. In fact, then, 2:29 is meant to put us in our place as beings that are dependent on God, and it does not privilege us above the rest of creation.

This is usually the point behind the passages in the Qur'an that speak about our unique role as human beings—they are actually theocentric texts meant to underscore God's total authority over the world. This becomes clear in those sections that enumerate and describe the various elements of creation. "God created the heavens and earth, and He sent down water from the sky to bring forth produce to sustain you. He made the ships that sail the sea subservient to you by His command, and he also made the rivers subservient to you. He has made the sun and the moon subservient to you in their predictable paths. He has made the night and day subservient to you, and He has given you something of everything you have asked of Him. You could never keep track of all that God has done for you. Truly, humanity is unjust and ungrateful" (14:32-34; cf. 16:10-17; 43:9-14; 45:12-13). As the last section suggests, any special status humanity enjoys that allows it to benefit from the rest of creation is due solely to the favor and largesse of God. This is part of the theocentric framework that shapes much of the Qur'an's treatment of creation and humanity's place in it.

### God's Traits

(Q 7:180a; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24)

Various traits and qualities have been identified with God throughout the history of Islam. The most well-known collection of these is the list known as the "ninety-nine names of God," each of which describes some component of the divine essence. In the early centuries of the

Islamic era, Muslims debated the merits of assigning these traits to God, but it was eventually decided that it is permissible to invoke God by these

Several Qur'an passages that describe God as having the most beautiful names were influential in the development of the Muslim belief that the deity has ninety-nine names. "God's are the most beautiful names, so call on Him by them" (7:180a; cf. 17:110; 20:8; 59:24).



names as long as they are properly understood. They do not call into question God's unity by fragmenting it into parts. Rather, the divine names use language and images that allow people to gain some insight, in however imperfect a way, into what must ultimately remain a mystery for them—the nature of God. Some of

these qualities have been important in shaping Muslim understanding of the natural environment.

#### GOD'S UNITY

(Q 2:163; 5:73; 9:31; 18:110; 112; 6:19; 16:51; 17:111; 21:108; 37:4; 41:6)

The first of the divine names was just alluded to—God's unity (*tawḥīd*). The oneness of God is a theme found frequently in the Qur'an. At the core of the message that the Prophet Muhammad brought to his contemporaries was a call to shun polytheism and embrace worship of the only God. "The One" is one of the ninety-nine names of God, and it has its basis in the Qur'an (2:163; 5:73; 9:31; 18:110).

Among the many passages that speak of God's unity one of the most celebrated is chapter 112, already mentioned as frequently found adorning mosques, monuments, and other works of art. It is a very brief *sūra* that stresses the oneness of God while containing an implicit critique of Christian belief in the Trinity, which makes Jesus divine. "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He has begotten no one, nor was He begotten. He has no equal'" (cf. 6:19; 16:51; 17:111; 21:108; 37:4; 41:6).

#### GOD AS CREATOR

(Q 6:102; 13:16; 23:14; 39:62; 40:62; 59:24; 10:34; 27:64; 29:19; 85:13; 54:24)

Another set of titles identifies God's role as creator. The first is *al-khāliq* ("The Creator"), which comes from an Arabic root that is commonly used in the Qur'an to describe God's creative activity. "That is God, your Lord. There is no God but He, the Creator of everything, so worship Him. He has authority over everything" (6:102; cf. 13:16; 23:14; 39:62; 40:62; 59:24).

A second title is "The One who Originates" (*al-mubdi'*). This term is not found in the Qur'an, but words from its root appear many times in reference to God's work as a creator. For example, 10:34 points out how

inferior the gods of unbelievers are because they are incapable of creating. “Say, ‘Can any of your partners (associated with God) originate creation, and then repeat it again?’ Say, ‘It is God who originates creation and then repeats it again. How are you deceived?’” (cf. 27:64; 29:19; 85:13).

A third name for God worth mentioning is *al-muṣawwir*, “The Fashioner,” found in 54:24 at the end of a list of more than a dozen titles that describe God. This term comes from an Arabic root that sometimes refers to artistic activity like shaping and sculpting.

These two aspects of the divine nature—God’s unity and creative capacity—work in tandem to help shape the Qur’an’s view of humanity and the rest of the natural world. There is no division within God and no separation between God and what God creates. Everything is dependent upon God for its existence and so, in a certain sense, all of creation is imbued with God’s presence. That may explain why, in a well-known *ḥadīth* attributed to him, the Prophet Muhammad said, “The whole earth is a mosque that is a place to worship.” It is also why some scholars have said that *tawḥīd*, or unity, is the starting point for an Islamic understanding of the environment. If all is created by God, and God is one, it follows that there is a unity and connectedness within creation.



*The letters d, s, t, and z are sometimes written with a dot underneath them when transliterating Arabic. This is done to distinguish them from other Arabic letters that have a similar sound but are not identical.*

#### GOD AS ENVIRONMENT

(Q 3:120; 2:19; 4:108; 8:47; 11:92; 41:54; 85:20; 4:126)

The connectedness of creation is captured well in another title given to God in the Qur’an, albeit one that is not found in the established list of the ninety-nine names. In eight places, God is described as *muḥīṭ*, which is commonly translated as “surrounding” or “encompassing.” In most cases, it is used to describe the fate of evildoers who think they can hide from God and not suffer the consequences that await them. They are warned that God will surround them and hold them accountable. “If something good happens to you it upsets them, but they are glad when something bad happens to you. If you persevere and stay aware of God, their scheming will not harm you at all. God surrounds all that they do” (3:120; cf. 2:19; 4:108; 8:47; 11:92; 41:54; 85:20).

The other reference to *muḥīṭ* is different in that it describes how God encompasses all that exists. “All that is in the heavens and on the earth belongs to God. God surrounds everything” (4:126). This text—which envisions God as “The Surrounding” or “The Encircler”—has sometimes been

interpreted as a description of God as the environment in which all of creation exists and survives. There is no linguistic or theological reason why such a suggestion should be rejected, and so this verse may be one of the Qur'an's most poignant statements about creation's dependence on its creator.

The theocentric qur'anic view that has been summarized here has significant implications for how humans should understand their place in the world and relate to the rest of the environment. Before addressing that issue, however, it is necessary to consider how the Qur'an presents the origin of the world and what the text has to say about the nonhuman components of creation.

## The Work of Creation

(Q 7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 57:4; 2:255; 41:9-12; 22:47; 46:33; 50:38; 40:68; 2:117; 16:40; 36:82; 3:47; 3:59; 19:35; 3:42-47; 19:16-21)

Like Genesis 1 in the Bible, the Qur'an holds that God created the heavens and the earth in six days (7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 57:4). Most

of these texts go on to say that God then took a seat on a throne that extends over all creation (2:255). Unlike the biblical tradition, the Qur'an does not identify what was created on each of the six days, but 41:9-12 makes a distinction

*References to God's throne (ʿarsh) are not infrequent in the Qur'an and are often ways of speaking about the deity's authority or dominion. Throughout the history of interpretation they have played a role in debates related to divine transcendence/immanence and the use of anthropomorphisms to describe God.*



between the first four days, when the earth was formed, and the next two days, during which the heavens were created.

According to 22:47, a day for God is like one thousand years for humans, and this has led some commentators to say that we should not adopt a literal interpretation of the six-day period of creation. In another difference from its biblical counterpart, which has God rest on the seventh day, the Qur'an states that the deity was not tired after the work of creation (46:33; 50:38).

Some texts have been cited to argue that God creates from nothing—a doctrine known as *creatio ex nihilo*—but there is actually little support for this in the Qur'an. A number of times, it is stated that God simply has to speak in order to create something. “He brings to life and causes death.

When He decrees something, He says, ‘Be,’ and it is” (40:68; cf. 2:117; 16:40; 36:82). This expression is most famously seen in the case of the conception of Jesus, which the Qur’an teaches was realized without a human father. When Mary doubts the angel’s message that she will bear a child, he responds, “Thus God creates what He wishes. When He has decreed something, He says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is” (3:47b; cf. 3:59; 19:35).



*The Qur’an mentions Jesus’ virginal conception in two passages (3:42-47; 19:16-21), but it does not share the Christian belief that Jesus was divine.*

Such passages are not examples of *creatio ex nihilo*, despite what some commentators have claimed. In each case, as in 40:68 above, there is already some “thing” or matter to which God is speaking, and so it is better to think of this as a transformation or reordering rather than calling something into being out of nothing. That is the case with Jesus, since in 3:59 he is compared to Adam, who was created from dust. “Before God, the example of Jesus is like that of Adam. He created him from dust and then said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was.” It is therefore inaccurate to claim that the Qur’an requires that divine creative activity be understood as *ex nihilo*. The opposite is the case—many of the elements of creation mentioned below come from preexisting material or matter.

## The Works of Creation

(Q 39:62a; 40:62; 1:2)

The Qur’an leaves no doubt that everything that exists is the work of God. “God is the creator of everything” (39:62a; cf. 40:62). It does not offer a detailed inventory of creation in a single passage, but throughout the text there are frequent reminders of God’s creative activity. The word commonly used in the Qur’an to describe the totality of creation—like the English terms *universe* and *cosmos*—is *‘ālamīn*. This is the plural form of the word for “world,” and it appears almost seventy-five times in the Qur’an. Depending on the context, it can refer either to all of creation or to humanity specifically. It is found in the second verse of the first chapter of the Qur’an, known as *al-fātiḥa* (“The Opening”). “Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds” (1:2).



## The Heavens and the Earth

(Q 46:3; 2:117; 6:101; 12:101; 13:16; 21:56; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11; 64:3; 91:5-6; 21:16-17; 38:27; 40:64; 2:22; 21:30; 41:9-12)

A phrase that conveys this same sense is the merism “the heavens and the earth,” usually used in a way that includes everything that exists between the two. There are many references in the Qur’an to God’s being the creator of the heavens and the earth (*al-samāwāt wa al-ard*), including one in 46:3 that explicitly mentions the other elements of creation: “We created the heavens and earth and everything between them in truth and for a set time, but the unbelievers disregard the warning given to them” (cf. 2:117; 6:101; 12:101; 13:16; 21:56; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11; 64:3; 91:5-6). The opening words of this verse, not cited here, state that creation was not a random occurrence and that God had a reason for bringing things into existence (cf. 21:16-17; 38:27). In other words, creation is a structured system with meaning and significance. This is one reason why *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or the unity of creation, is an important concept in Islam—in the Qur’anic worldview, everything works together to achieve a common purpose.

In the Qur’an’s cosmology, the sky is understood to be a type of dome or roof that covers the earth: “God has made the earth a dwelling place for you and the heavens as a canopy. He formed you well, and has provided you with good things. That is God your Lord, so blessed be God, the Lord of the worlds” (40:64; cf. 2:22). This is similar to the biblical understanding of the sky as expressed in Genesis 1.

But according to one text, things were not always this way. Heaven and earth were originally one entity that was split apart by God, resulting in the world as we know it. “Do the unbelievers not know that the heavens and the earth had been joined together and that We split them apart, and that We made every living thing from water? Do they not believe?” (21:30). This text indicates that heaven and earth were created at the same time, but other passages point in the direction of a two-step process, with earth created before heaven. This appears to be the case in 41:9-12, where the earth is created in the first two days and the heavens are brought about in days five and six.

### THE SEVEN HEAVENS

(Q 67:3; 71:15; 2:29; 17:44; 23:17, 86; 78:12; 41:12; 67:5; 15:17; 37:6-10; 65:12)

In a few places, the Qur’an speaks of God creating seven heavens, one above the other (67:3; 71:15). “It is He who created for you everything on the earth, and then turned to the sky and fashioned the seven heavens. He knows all things” (2:29; cf. 17:44; 23:17, 86; 78:12). There is an allusion

to the sun and other heavenly bodies in 41:12, which describes the level nearest the earth as illuminated and protected. The nature of this protection is explained in other texts that add the detail that some of the heavenly bodies, probably a reference to meteors, act as weapons that are hurled from the heavens at demons and other enemies of humanity. “We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and We have made them for stoning devils. We have prepared for them the punishment of hellfire” (67:5; cf. 15:17; 37:6-10). Heaven is commonly identified as the location of paradise in Islamic thought, a topic to be discussed in a later chapter. The text is somewhat ambiguous, but 65:12 appears to have a curious reference to God also creating seven earths in addition to seven heavens.

#### MUHAMMAD’S NIGHT JOURNEY

(Q 17:1; 53:1-18)

The references in the Qur’an to seven heavens relate to a well-known tradition about Muhammad that is not explicitly referred to in the text but is frequently treated in the *hadīth* and other Islamic sources. According to the account, one night the Prophet was miraculously transported on a winged beast from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascended through the seven levels of heaven. Along the way, he met important prophetic figures from the past like Moses, Jesus, and Abraham, until he eventually found himself before the throne of God at the highest level. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is built on the site that is venerated as the place from which Muhammad’s heavenly journey began.

According to most commentators, this episode in the Prophet’s life, known as the ascension (*mi’rāj*), is indirectly referred to in the Qur’an in 17:1. “Glory be to Him who made His servant journey by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship, whose precincts We have blessed, in order to show him Our signs. He is the One who hears, the One who sees.” The identity of the traveler is not stated,



FIGURE 11 Image from the seventeenth century of the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad.

but throughout history Muslim exegesis has considered this to be a reference to Muhammad. The “sacred place of worship” is held to be the sacred space in Mecca near the Ka`ba, while the “furthest place of worship” is considered to be an allusion to Jerusalem. The signs he is shown are the seven heavens and the prophets he meets in them.

Many scholars think that two originally separate sources lie behind this tradition, one having to do with a journey Muhammad made from Mecca to Jerusalem, and another that had him experience a trip through the seven heavens. At a certain point in time, they were joined together, and perhaps 17:1 was influential in bringing about that process despite the fact that it does not mention Muhammad or his ascension.

Also commonly associated with the *mi`rāj* is 53:1-18, which speaks of a vision that Muhammad had and shares with 17:1 a reference to God’s signs. “I swear by the star when it sets! Your companion [Muhammad] has not strayed, nor is he deceived, nor does he speak from his own desire. It

*The association with Jerusalem in 17:1 is seen in the fact that the name of Al-Aqsa mosque, which is near the Dome of the Rock, is taken from the Arabic word for “furthest” in the verse. There is no reference to a winged beast in 17:1, but Islam has a long-standing tradition that such an animal, named Buraq, was Muhammad’s mode of transportation during his night journey.*



[the Qur’an] is nothing but a revelation that is revealed. It was taught to him by one with great power and tremendous strength, who was standing on the highest part of the horizon. Then he descended and came near until he was no more than two bow-lengths away and revealed to His servant what He revealed. The heart did not falsify what he saw. Will you argue with him over what he observed? He saw him descend again near the lote

tree that serves as a border, near the garden of rest, when the tree was covered in what covers it. He never looked away, nor did he gaze too intently, and he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.” Here, too, there is nothing in the text that explicitly ties it to Muhammad’s ascension, and there has been some debate about this among scholars. Some prefer to divide the passage in two, saying that only the second part of it describes that event while the first part is in reference to the beginning of the Qur’an’s revelation to Muhammad.

The development of the account of Muhammad’s night journey and ascension was undoubtedly a long and complex process, and the attempt to link it to the Qur’an says much about Muslim attitudes toward the text and its authority. Like no other source, it has the power to legitimate traditions that have no clear scriptural support and to resolve issues about which there is controversy and debate within the community. In this case,

it is interesting to see how that influence can also sometimes work in the opposite direction. The extraqur'anic tradition about the Prophet's journey and what he saw helps to fill in the gaps in the Qur'an regarding what is found in the various levels of heaven.

### Light and Darkness

(Q 10:67; 39:5; 40:61; 6:1; 5:15; 42:52; 64:8; 5:46; 6:91; 14:5; 33:43; 2:257; 57:9; 67:11; 24:35-36)

The Qur'an considers God's creation of light and darkness to be one of the primary reasons why people should reject worship of other gods. "Praise be to God who created the heavens and the earth and made darkness and light; still, those who disbelieve in their Lord turn away" (6:1). It is in the alternation of day and night that people are most aware of the difference between light and dark, and the Qur'an reminds its readers that God is responsible for that daily change. Each portion of the day has its own purpose and reason, and all is part of the divine plan—daytime is for seeing, and nighttime is for resting (10:67; 39:5; 40:61).

In addition to their literal meanings, light and darkness are sometimes used metaphorically in the Qur'an. Light (*nūr*) can be used in reference to the guidance God provides through the Qur'an (5:15; 42:52; 64:8) or previous scriptures like the Torah and Gospel. "In their footsteps We sent Jesus, son of Mary, to confirm the Torah that had come before him. We gave him the Gospel as a guidance, light, and confirmation of the Torah that had come before him. It is a guide and instruction for the pious" (5:46; cf. 6:91). Light also sometimes describes the proper way to live and behave (14:5; 33:43).

Similarly, darkness (*ẓulumāt*) can be used to describe the opposite state of unbelief, as seen in 2:257: "God is the protector of believers, and He brings them out of darkness and into light. But the protectors of disbelievers are false gods who take them from light into darkness. They are the inhabitants of the fire who will remain there forever" (cf. 57:9; 67:11).



*The Light Verse: "God is the light of heaven and earth. God's light is like a niche in which is a lamp. The lamp is inside a glass like a shining star with oil from a blessed olive tree from neither the east nor the west. The oil practically gives light even when it is not lit—light upon light. God guides to the light whomever He will. God gives such examples for people and knows everything" (24:35).*

The most celebrated mention of light in the Qur'an is found in 24:35-36, in a chapter whose title is "The Light," which is also one of God's

ninety-nine names. The “light verse,” as it is known, is a remarkable composition that celebrates God as the light of creation that draws people to its glow and guidance. Rich in similes and metaphors, it is well-known among Muslims as a passage that offers a unique and memorable meditation on the divine nature. It is also very popular within the mystical tradition of Islam known as Sufism, whose advocates often make use of the image of light and darkness to explore the relationship between the individual and God.

### Sun, Moon, and Stars

(Q 7:54b; 13:2; 31:29; 35:13; 39:5)

Heavenly bodies are mentioned frequently in the Qur’an. As elements of creation, they all come under God’s authority and are dependent upon their creator. “The sun, moon, and stars are subservient to His command. Do not creation and authority belong to Him? Blessed be God, Lord of the worlds” (7:54b; cf. 13:2; 31:29; 35:13; 39:5). The important position the sun, moon, and stars hold in the Qur’an’s cosmology is seen in the fact that all three are the names of chapters in the text—91, 54, and 53 respectively, although the last one refers to a particular star.



FIGURE 12 *An astrolabe from the thirteenth century.*

### SUN

(Q 6:78–79; 18:17; 36:38; 21:33; 36:40; 75:9; 20:130)

The sun (*al-shams*) is mentioned thirty-three times in the Qur’an, and the text reflects the geocentric view of the universe that was typical of the prescientific world. Common human experience and observation by the naked eye suggested that the sun journeys across the sky throughout the course of the day, and the Qur’an gives evidence of this “fact.” When

Abraham rejects worship of the sun, he does so because it is not fixed in the sky. “When he saw the sun rising he said, ‘This is my Lord! This is the greatest.’ But when it set he said, ‘My people, I reject what you associate with God. I turn as an upright person toward Him who fashioned the heavens and the earth. I am not an idolater’” (6:78-79; cf. 18:17; 36:38). In the verses prior to these, Abraham refutes worship of the moon and stars for the same reason. Elsewhere in the Qur’an, it is noted that the sun and moon each has its own orbit (21:33; 36:40), but one of the signs of the end time will be that they will be brought together in a cosmic collision (75:9).

The five daily prayer times in Islam are based on the location of the sun in the sky. Because those locations needed to be determined precisely, Muslims played a central role in the rise and development of astronomy and related sciences. The astrolabe and other aids were invented by Muslims and later passed on to other peoples, who benefited from them for their own purposes. The five prayer times were not fixed until after Muhammad’s lifetime, but already in the Qur’an we see that the sun’s position should be consulted to guide Muslims regarding when they are to pray: “So be patient with what they are saying. Glorify and praise your Lord before the rising of the sun and its setting. Praise Him throughout the night and at the beginning and end of each day, and perhaps you will find favor” (20:130).



*The Muslim prayer times: dawn (fajr), noon (zuhr), afternoon (‘aṣr), sunset (maghrib), and evening (‘ishā’).*

#### MOON

(Q 22:18; 41:37; 2:189a; 2:185; 75:8; 54:1; 2:189)

Like the sun and the rest of creation, the moon (*al-qamar*) also submits to God’s authority. In a striking image, 22:18 refers to the moon and all things prostrating before God, using the same Arabic root (*sajada*) that is commonly employed to describe what Muslims do during prayer. “Do you (Muhammad) not know that everything in the heavens and earth prostrates [*yasjudu*] before God—the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the animals? Many people do as well, but many others deserve the punishment they receive. The one disgraced by God will not be honored by another. God does what He wishes.”

Texts like this are a reaction to the tendency among Arabs of the pre-Islamic period, along with most other cultures of antiquity, to divinize nature and associate deities with various parts of the created world. This verse highlights the error of that practice by showing nature in a position of submission and inferiority toward a supreme being greater than itself. Because of its theocentric worldview, which holds there is only one God,

the Qur'an criticizes and condemns the divinization of the natural world as an example of *shirk*, or association: "Among his signs are the night, the day, the sun, and the moon. Do not bow down to the sun or the moon. Bow down to God who created them, if it is truly Him that you worship" (41:37).

The Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, with each month beginning when the new moon is first sighted. There are references in the text to the moon's being a source of light, but the Qur'an acknowledges that the moon's primary role is to assist in measuring time. "They ask you (Muhammad) about the crescent moons. Say, 'They mark the times appointed for people and for the pilgrimage'" (2:189a). The month of pilgrimage is the twelfth one in the Islamic calendar, and its name is derived from the annual ritual.

*The only month mentioned by name in the Qur'an is Ramadan, the ninth of the year, in which Muslims fast during daylight hours (2:185).*



There is a single reference to a lunar eclipse in the Qur'an, listed among the signs that will indicate the end of the world (75:8). It comes just before the reference to the sun and moon being "brought together" that was mentioned above, a verse that might be describing either a lunar eclipse or a physical joining of the sun and moon, perhaps in a violent collision.

Another cosmological sign is described in chapter 54, titled "The Moon," which begins, "The hour approaches, and the moon is split in two." Commentators disagree over whether this verse is recounting something that has already happened or an event that will accompany the end times. Some believe the verse is referring to the tensions among the Quraysh, the dominant tribe of Mecca, when Muhammad began to preach his monotheistic message. The moon was the symbol of the Quraysh, and its rending in the verse might represent the division that resulted within the tribe when some chose to follow Muhammad and embrace Islam while others refused to do so.

The crescent moon is universally recognized as a symbol of Islam, perhaps its most distinctive icon. But it is found only one time (in its plural form) in the Qur'an, in 2:189, a passage cited above that discusses the moon's role in measuring time. In pre-Islamic poetry, the moon, especially in its crescent form, was frequently mentioned and celebrated. Within the first few decades of Islam, it was used as a symbol of the faith, and its continued association with it is seen in the fact that it appears on the flags of many Muslim countries today, usually with the star.

## STARS

(Q 53:49; 15:16; 25:61; 85:1; 6:97; 7:54; 16:12, 22; 22:18; 52:49; 53:1; 55:6)

The Arabs of antiquity had names for the planets and for hundreds of stars, but only one star is identified by name in the Qur'an. In reference to God, it is said in 53:49 that "He is the Lord of *al-shi'rā*." This is the name for Sirius, the brightest star in the sky and part of the constellation Canis Major. That star was worshiped by many Arabs in the pre-Islamic era, and this verse continues the familiar pattern of challenging such practices by identifying God as the Lord of the star many took to be divine.

No constellation is named specifically in the Qur'an, but the text mentions them in a number of places. Here, too, they are placed in a position of inferiority in relationship to God, their creator, upon whom they are dependent for their existence. "We have set constellations up in the sky and made it beautiful for all to see" (15:16; cf. 25:61; 85:1). The Arabic term for constellations is *burūj*, which is the name of chapter 85 in the Qur'an. During Muhammad's lifetime, the Arabs were aware of some of the constellations, but it was only after they came in contact with Greek astronomy centuries later that they learned of the existence of all twelve signs of the zodiac, which can be observed with the naked eye.

The most commonly used Arabic word in the Qur'an for "star" is *najm* (pl. *nujūm*), which is found thirteen times. As with passages that discuss the sun and moon, the majority of those occurrences are in creation texts that highlight God's role in bringing the stars into existence. "It is He who made the stars, so that they can guide you when the land and the sea are dark. We have made the signs clear for those who know" (6:97; cf. 7:54; 16:12, 22; 22:18; 52:49; 53:1; 55:6). This verse recognizes the utilitarian value of stars in that they can provide light for humans, but once again the key point is found in the first part of the verse, which identifies the divine source that brought the stars into existence.

## OATHS

(Q 91:1-8; 53:1; 74:32-4; 84:16-18; 85:1; 86:1; 89:1-4; 92:1-3; 93:1-2; 52:1-6; 51:1-4; 77:1-6; 95:1-2; 95:3; 100:1-5)

A final aspect to consider is how heavenly bodies function in oaths in the Qur'an. An oath is a solemn statement that normally entails invoking God's name or that of some object, person, or place in order to add force to what one is saying. The Qur'an has many such statements, particularly within its earliest chapters, and a number of them invoke the sun, moon, and stars. Calling upon objects other than God for such a purpose might seem strange, especially since the Qur'an consistently affirms God's authority over all creation. But such passages probably reflect the



context out of which the text emerged and to which it initially responded. Swearing by the created world was a common practice among Arabs of the pre-Islamic period, and some scholars see the presence of oaths in the Qur'an as an adaptation of contemporary Arab forms of expression.

The opening of chapter 91 contains a remarkable string of seven such oaths in a litany identifying many of the elements of the created world. "By the sun in its brightness, and by the moon as it follows it. By the day as it manifests the sun, and by the night as it hides it. By the sky as it is built, and by the earth as it is spread out. By the soul and its fashioning, as He placed into it its wickedness and its piety!" (91:1-8; cf. 53:1; 74:32-34; 84:16-18; 85:1; 86:1; 89:1-4; 92:1-3; 93:1-2). A similar passage is found in 52:1-6, which contains an eclectic list of things that can be invoked in an oath, including Mount Sinai, the written text, a house (perhaps the Ka'ba, in Mecca), the sky, and the ocean. Among the other things associated with oaths in the Qur'an are the wind (51:1-4; 77:1-6), fig and olive (95:1-2), Mecca (95:3), and horses (100:1-5).

### Water

(Q 4:102; 7:84; 25:40; 26:173; 27:58; 56:68; 6:99; 2:22, 164; 7:57; 8:11; 15:22; 20:53; 22:63; 27:60; 41:39; 78:14; 26:134; 36:34; 39:21; 79:31; 16:15; 13:13; 14:32; 27:61; 10:22; 17:66-67; 31:31; 6:59; 16:14; 35:12; 55:22; 25:53; 27:61; 35:12; 18:109; 31:27; 11:25-49; 11:40; 11:44; 2:49-50; 26:63; 44:24; 7:134-40; 10:90-92; 26:146-59; 25:49; 54:23-32; 91:11-15)

Water is mentioned in a variety of different contexts in the Qur'an. The Arabic word for water is *mā'*, and it is found more than sixty times in the text. In many of those passages, it is used in reference to rain, described as "water from the heavens/sky." The Arabic word commonly used today for rain (*maṭar*) appears only seven times in the Qur'an, usually in descriptions of punishment from God upon evildoers (4:102; 7:84; 25:40; 26:173[2x]; 27:58[2x]). When rain as "water from the sky" is mentioned, it normally has the positive sense of a sign meant to remind people of God's care for and protection of humanity. "Have you considered the water that you drink? Did you send it down from the clouds, or did We? If We had wished, We could have made it salty. Why are you not thankful?" (56:68).

The Qur'an calls attention to the fact that water is necessary for the survival of all living things, not just human beings. Rainfall is the first of a series of events that ultimately lead to the fruit and other vegetation that are pleasing to the eye and stomach, and God is involved in each step of the process. "It is He who sends down water from the sky, and with it We produce all kinds of vegetation. We bring forth greenery from which we then bring forth piled-up grains. From the palm trees are clusters of dates

hanging low. There are gardens of grapes, olives, and pomegranates, similar yet different. Watch as the fruits form and ripen. In this are signs for those who believe” (6:99). The last sentence points out that, in addition to the physical benefits it provides, rain is essential for one’s spiritual well-being because it is a reminder of humanity’s dependence upon God. This is reinforced throughout the Qur’an because most of the verses that speak of rain identify its divine origin (cf. 2:22, 164; 7:57; 8:11; 15:22; 20:53; 22:63; 27:60; 41:39; 78:14). In the same way, the few texts that refer to springs and similar water sources all consider them to be gifts from God (26:134; 36:34; 39:21; 79:31).

Large bodies of water are prominent in the Qur’an, and passages that mention them often treat some of the same themes. God is the one responsible for rivers, which serve as a form of transportation for those who navigate upon them. “He placed firm mountains on the earth so it does not shake under you, and rivers and paths so that you may make your way” (16:15; cf. 13:13; 14:32; 27:61).

A similar thing is said about the sea (10:22; 17:66-67; 31:31), and some of these texts speak of it as a dangerous place where storms can threaten ship and crew. God’s superiority over humanity and nature is manifested in God’s ability to see into the ocean’s depths and penetrate other mysteries of the natural world. “He has keys to what is hidden—no one knows them but Him. He knows everything on the land and in the sea. A leaf does not fall without His knowledge, and there is no grain in the recesses of the earth, fresh or withered, that is not found in a clear record” (6:59).

Other passages speak of the ocean as a resource whose products humans may take advantage of as long as they do so responsibly by acknowledging God as the one who makes this possible. One text alludes to extracting pearls and other precious objects from the sea. “He subjects the sea to you so that you may eat from it and bring out of it jewelry to wear. You see ships cutting through it so that you may seek His bounty and give thanks” (16:14; cf. 35:12; 55:22). In several places, the Qur’an calls attention to the difference between salt water and fresh water, and acknowledges God as the creator of both and the one who keeps them separate (25:53; 27:61; 35:12).

The Qur’an contains an interesting use of the word “sea” (*baḥr*) to describe the inexhaustibility of God’s word. “Say (Muhammad), ‘If the ocean were ink for [writing] the words of my Lord, it would be used up before my Lord’s words were exhausted’—even if We brought forth another ocean like it” (18:109; cf. 31:27). This verse conveys the ancient understanding of the vastness of the ocean and, indirectly, has a bearing on the topic under discussion. The idea of the ocean being used to do

God's bidding, but not being up to the task, hints at the gulf between creation and creator that is explicitly stated elsewhere in the Qur'an.

Divine authority over creation is clearly seen in those passages that describe God's manipulation of the forces of nature, especially water. Two examples of this are the Qur'an's account of the flood during Noah's time and the scene depicting the Israelites' exodus from Egypt as they fled Pharaoh's troops.

The story of the flood is told in 11:25-49. It is briefer than the three-chapter account in Genesis, and it contains some elements not found in the biblical book, but the general outline of the story is the same in the two texts. They both agree that God has supreme power over nature, and this is seen in the Qur'an in two ways. To initiate the flood, God simply utters a command, and water begins flowing out from the earth (11:40). A literal reading of the Arabic describes an oven or furnace erupting or boiling over, but the intent of this unusual phrase is clear—as soon as God speaks, nature immediately obeys, and water spreads over the earth's surface. Similarly, God directs an order at creation to bring the flood to an end. "It was said, 'Earth, swallow up your water, and sky, hold back [your rain].' Then the water subsided, and the command was fulfilled" (11:44). Both verses contain the word "command," highlighting God's superiority over the created world.

The exodus story, like the flood, is mentioned in several different places in the Qur'an. These texts lack the narrative detail and dramatic tension of the account in the Bible, but they still underscore God's involvement

*The entirety of chapter 71, which carries the title "Noah," is taken up with a description of his life and prophetic career. Other passages that treat the exodus story can be seen in 7:134-40 and 10:90-92.*



in rescuing the Israelites from their enemies by controlling the forces of nature. "Remember when We rescued you from Pharaoh's people, who subjected you to great hardship, killing your sons and letting your women live. That was a great trial from your

Lord. And (remember) when We parted the sea for you, rescuing you and drowning Pharaoh's people as you watched" (2:49-50; cf. 26:63; 44:24). Passages like these offer visible demonstrations of the "signs" the Qur'an repeatedly says that water and other elements of creation should be for humanity.

Another passage that speaks of water conveys a message that is very much in line with modern views on the environment and would be heartily endorsed by those who insist humanity must have a proper respect for the rest of creation. It calls for fair distribution of water among all, humans and animals alike.

It is set in the context of a story about the unfaithful people of Thamūd, an ancient Arab tribe. They are punished when they fail to heed the message of their prophet, Ṣāliḥ, and they ignore the obligation to care for an animal placed in their charge. It begins with Ṣāliḥ addressing the people of Thamūd, who have a distorted understanding of the environment and their place within it: “Do you think you will be left secure in what you have here—with gardens, springs, fields, palm trees heavy with fruit—while skillfully carving your houses from the mountainside? Fear God and obey me. Do not obey the wasteful ones who spread corruption in the land instead of improving it.’ They said, ‘You are bewitched! You are nothing but a human being like us. Give us a sign, if what you are saying is the truth.’ He said, ‘This she-camel should have her turn to drink at a specified time and so should you. Do not mistreat her, or you will receive a great punishment.’ But they hamstrung her, and then regretted what they had done. The punishment came upon them—there is truly a sign in this, though most of them do not believe. Indeed, only Your Lord alone is the mighty One, the merciful One” (26:146-59; cf. 11:61-8).



*Besides Ṣāliḥ, two additional otherwise-unknown Arabian prophets from the pre-Islamic era are mentioned in the Qur’an. Hūd was sent to the people of ‘Ād (7:65-72; 26:123-40), and Shu‘aib to the people of Madyan (11:84-95; 26:176-91). In all three cases, the prophet’s message to embrace monotheism went unheeded and the people were punished. In this way, the texts reflect the common prophetic paradigm in the Qur’an that was experienced by Muhammad.*

## Animals

(Q 16:68-69; 29:41-43; 24:45; 35:27-28; 40:79-80; 6:142; 16:5-8; 23:21-22; 3:14; 2:57, 172; 7:160; 23:51; 16:80; 5:2, 95; 5:96; 16:14; 137:139-48; 21:87-88; 37:139-48; 11:6; 11:56; 36:71-73; 6:37-38; 38:17b-19; 34:10; 24:41; 22:18; 16:48-50; 27:16-28; 3:48-49; 5:110)

Six chapters in the Qur’an have titles associated with animals: The Cow (2); Livestock (6); The Bee (16); The Ant (27); The Spider (29); and The Elephant (105). The titles of chapters 79 and 100 might be references to horses, but their precise meanings are ambiguous. In addition, animals are mentioned fairly frequently in the text, with more than two hundred passages making reference to one or more types of creatures, including birds, fish, reptiles, and insects.

Despite their fairly strong presence in the text, however, the Qur’an does not contain very much detailed information about the animals it mentions. The two most common Arabic words in the text for animals

FIGURE 13 *Depiction of running animals.*

are *'an'ām* (sing. *na'am*), which is used thirty-three times to describe cattle or livestock, and *dābba*, which is found eighteen times and can refer to any nonhuman living creature. These are both general terms that include more than one kind of animal, and they and other zoological vocabulary in the Qur'an tend to remain on that level of generality by rarely discussing things like specific forms of animal behavior.

Exceptions to this are seen with two of the six animals mentioned above that serve as chapter titles. Some of the bee's traits and habits are discussed in 16:68-69: "And your Lord instructed the bee, saying, 'Build your hives in mountains, trees, and what people build. Then eat every kind of fruit and humbly follow the ways of your Lord.' From within them comes a drink of different colors that heals people. That is truly a sign for those who think." Following the pattern that has been seen with other elements of the created world, the bee is a sign for humans. It follows God's instructions, and the result is honey, which benefits people. An interesting aspect of this passage is that the verb (*awḥā*) that describes God's speaking

FIGURE 14 *Depiction of rabbits, snakes, and turtles.*

to the bee is used elsewhere in the Qur'an in reference to the revelation God gives to humanity. In more than seventy occurrences of the verb in the Qur'an, this is one of only a handful that does not refer to revelation directed toward humanity, and it is the only one in which the recipient of the message is not a human or an angelic being.

The other animal whose habits are described in uncharacteristic detail is the spider, but here the example is a negative one. The spider's capacity to weave a web is compared to unbelievers who depend upon something other than God to sustain them. In both cases, the result is a flimsy structure that lacks strength and is easily destroyed. Here, too, the spider's actions are a sign for people, but in this case it is a reminder of what not to do: "People who take protectors other than God are like the spider making itself a house. The spider's is the flimsiest of all houses, if only they knew. God knows what things they call upon beside Him—He is the mighty One, the wise One. These are the comparisons We make for people, but only those who know understand them" (29:41-43).

The clearest distinction the Qur'an makes among land animals is based on their mode of locomotion—it distinguishes among those that crawl on their bellies, those that move on two legs, and those that get around on four legs (24:45). The colorful array of shades and tones found among the animals is further evidence of the diversity that God has introduced into the world. "Do you (Muhammad) not see how God sends water down from the sky and that We bring forth with it fruits of varied colors? In the mountains there are streaks of white and red in various colors, while others are jet black. There are also various colors among humans, wild animals, and livestock. It is only the knowledgeable ones among His servants who fear God. Truly, God is mighty and forgiving" (35:27-28).

According to the Qur'an, livestock and other animals serve a variety of functions for people, including providing warmth and food, carrying loads, and being a form of transportation: "God has made livestock for you, some for you to ride upon and some for you to eat. They provide other benefits for you as well—with them you can fulfill any need you have in your hearts, and, like ships, they carry you." (40:79-80; cf. 6:142; 16:5-8; 23:21-22). People may take advantage of such benefits, but they should not become so focused on animals and other things in their day-to-day lives that they lose sight of their transitory and temporary nature. "The love of attractive things is hard to resist. Women, children, heaps of great fortunes of gold and silver, well-marked horses, cattle, and farmland—all these may be the pleasures of this life, but with God is the best final abode" (3:14).

People are permitted to eat animals, provided they consume only what is lawful, a category sometimes referred to as “good things” (2:57, 172; 7:160; 23:51). The Qur’an contains some basic dietary regulations, but it does not present a comprehensive system that covers every aspect of what is permissible to eat and how animals are to be slaughtered. Details

*Jonah is mentioned by name five times in the Qur’an, and the account of his life there is similar to the one found in the Bible. Chapter 10 of the Qur’an bears his name, and the fullest version of Jonah’s story is found in 37:139-48.*



on such matters were eventually worked out in Islamic law through study of the *ḥadīth* and other extra-qur’anic sources. Animal products like furs and skins can be used by people (16:80), and hunting is permitted in the Qur’an except when

one is in a state of consecration as, for instance, during the pilgrimage ritual (5:2, 95). Fishing, on the other hand, is permissible at any time (5:96; 16:14). There are only a few references to aquatic creatures in the Qur’an, with one of the most well-known being its account of Jonah’s being swallowed by a great fish (137:139-48; cf. 21:87-88).

As with the other elements of creation, God both cares for and has supreme power over all animals: “There is not a creature on earth whose sustenance does not depend on God. He knows where it resides and where it will end up—it is all found in a clear record” (11:6; cf. 11:56). They, like everything else that exists, are manifestations of God’s presence and concern for all of creation.

For this reason, animals are referred to as “signs” in the Qur’an. According to the text, humans are literally surrounded by divine signs

*According to the Qur’an, King Solomon had the ability to communicate with animals. Conversations he had with birds and ants are mentioned in 27:16-28.*

*One of the miracles of Jesus found in the Qur’an describes how he made a bird-shaped form out of clay and breathed into it, making it a real bird (3:48-49; 5:110). This tradition has things in common with a similar one found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, an extracanonical Christian writing.*



wherever they look, even in their encounters with the animal world. The purpose of these signs is to elicit a response—many of the texts that speak of animals as signs go on to remind people that they must be thankful. “Do they not see that, among the things

Our hands made, We created the livestock they own? We made them obedient so that some can be used for riding, and others for food, some for another advantage, or for drink. Are they not thankful?” (36:71-73).

One text that speaks of animals as signs is particularly striking because it states that animals are on an equal footing with humans since they both share something basic that has been instilled in them by God. “They say, ‘Has no sign been sent down to him [Muhammad] from his Lord?’ Say, ‘God is certainly capable of sending down a sign,’ though most of them do not know. All creatures that live on the earth and fly with their wings are, like you, communities. We have left out nothing from the book—then they will be gathered to their Lord” (6:37-38).

According to this passage, animals are like humans in that they form communities or groups that band them together. The Arabic term used here is *umma*, a word that has special significance in Islam because it refers to the worldwide community of Muslims. Something that people tend to miss—a sign they ignore—is that there is a communal dimension to the animal world that is analogous to what humanity experiences. All creatures, human and animal alike, are designed to live in communities until they die and return to the source of their existence. This neglected “sign” is an important component of the Qur’an’s view of how humans should interact with other inhabitants of the natural environment.

In some texts, the animal community sets an example for the human *umma* on how to live in accordance with the divine will. The birds join with the mountains and King David to sing God’s praises. “Remember Our servant David, a man of great power who always turned [to God]. We compelled the mountains to join him in singing praise at sunset and sunrise. The birds also gathered together and turned in praise” (38:17b-19; cf. 34:10). Another passage describes the flight of birds as a form of prayer that is known to God, as are all the unique ways every part of creation acknowledges its creator (24:41).

The Qur’an sometimes speaks of animals and the rest of creation submitting to God. In a verse discussed earlier in this chapter, a distinction is made between the nonhuman parts of creation, including animals, which all prostrate before God, and humans, not all of whom do so. “Do you (Muhammad) not know that everything in the heavens and earth prostrates before God—the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the animals? Many people do as well, but many others deserve the punishment they receive. The one disgraced by God will not be honored by another. God does what He wishes.” (22:18; cf. 16:48-50). The underlying message is that humans can learn much from animals and other parts of creation about how to submit.



## Nature as Muslim

A key point that emerges from this overview of the created world as it is conceived in the Qur'an is that nature is semiotic. Everything that exists—heavens, earth, light, darkness, sun, moon, stars, water, animals—is a sign that points beyond itself. Furthermore, it all points in the same direction—toward God. Time and again, the Qur'an repeats the theocentric message that everything was created by God and is controlled by God. Most of nature accepts that situation and does not try to rebel or deny God's authority. Only humanity attempts to wrestle control from God and assert its independence. Nowhere in the Qur'an does it say nature disobeys God's will. That is humanity's doing, and for this reason people must read the signs of creation to learn what true submission is.

Its complete conformance to the divine will has led some scholars to suggest that nature is Muslim. They and others refer to Islam as the religion of nature because the act of submission that is central to the faith is something that nature does naturally. The passages in the Qur'an that speak of creation submitting to God, using words etymologically related to “Muslim” and “Islam,” support this idea. Humans are capable of submitting to God's will, and when they do so they are Muslims. But nature can do only God's bidding and nothing else. In this way, it serves as an example for humanity to emulate and strive for.

## Angels and Jinn

The Qur'an's cosmology also includes other beings that, while not human, are capable of interacting with humanity. These beings are not part of the physical environment people inhabit as normally conceived, and so they are less relevant for this chapter. But they deserve some brief consideration because they are frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, and they continue to play an important role in Islam. The two main categories of these beings are angels and jinn.

### Angels

(Q 35:1; 6:30-34; 7:11; 15:29-30; 2:28-39; 7:10-25; 2:97-98; 66:4; 19:16-26; 6:9; 3:42-51; 32:11; 6:93; 13:23; 6:66; 43:77; 69:17; 89:22)

The Arabic term for an angel is *malak*, a word found thirteen times in the Qur'an. Most angels in the text remain unnamed, but some, like Gabriel and Michael, are identified by name. The primary distinction among them is the number of wings they possess. “Praise be to God, the

Creator of the heavens and earth, who made angels messengers with two, three, four [sets of] wings. He adds to creation as He wishes. God has power over everything” (35:1). This difference in the number of wings is often understood to be a reference to the various functions and responsibilities that angels have. The verse indicates that angels in the Qur’an, like their counterparts in the Bible, are primarily messengers. They often function this way in the text, but they also appear in a number of contexts in which their role as heralds is not to the fore.

The Qur’an teaches that angels were with God when humanity was first created. According to 6:30-34, the angels balk at God’s plan to create humans because of the problems that will result, but God shows a special preference for humanity. After creating Adam, God tells him the names of things but does not share this information with the angels. God then asks for the names, and only Adam is able to recite them. When God then commands the angels to bow down before Adam, all but one do so, indicating humanity’s superiority over the angels (cf. 7:11; 15:29-30).



*The Qur’an’s most detailed accounts of the creation of humanity are found in 2:28-39 and 7:10-25.*

The messenger function of angels is found in a number of places in the Qur’an. The most prominent example is Gabriel, who is mentioned three times in the text and is responsible for communicating to Muhammad the revelation that constitutes the Qur’an. One passage, in which he is named twice, identifies him as the agent of revelation and acknowledges the high regard in which angels are held. “Say (Muhammad), ‘Who is an enemy of Gabriel? By God’s leave he brought it [the Qur’an] down to your heart verifying the previous books as a guide and good news for the faithful. Who is an enemy of God, His angels, His messengers, Gabriel, and Michael? God is truly an enemy of the unbelievers’” (2:97-98; cf. 66:4). This is the only explicit reference to Michael in the Qur’an, but both he and Gabriel are mentioned in other Islamic literature, where they sometimes play prominent roles in key events of Muhammad’s life like his night journey to Jerusalem and trip through the seven heavens.

Another scene in which angels play a prominent role as messengers in the Qur’an is when Mary is told she is pregnant and will give birth to Jesus. This story is told in two different places, and the angelic role is slightly different in each. In 3:42-51, a group of angels appears to her to announce that she will bear a child, and they then go on to explain some of the things Jesus will teach and do after he is born. Just prior to this, the angels appear to Zechariah to inform him that he and his wife will also have a son—John, known as the Baptist in Christianity—despite their advanced age.

The story has a somewhat different form in chapter 19, where the angels are now a single figure—God’s spirit in the form of a human being.

*Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the entire Qur’an, and chapter 19 is named after her.*



He is never described as an angel, but he refers to himself as a “messenger” (*rasūl*). The message he delivers is similar to what Mary is told in chap-

ter 3, and so most commentators understand him to be an angel like those found in the earlier chapter (19:16-26). Supporting this interpretation is a reference in 6:9 to angels appearing in human form.

A third context in which angels are found in the Qur’an is in references to death and the end time. There is an angel of death, who is responsible for delivering each person to God for judgment. “Say, ‘The angel of death who is in charge of you will summon you, and then you will be returned to your Lord’” (32:11). Angels will taunt unbelievers, who are punished in the afterlife (6:93), and they will attend to those who are rewarded in paradise (13:23). They stand guard over hell (6:66), and the one who is primarily charged with that task is named *Mālik* (43:77). At the end time, eight angels will hold up God’s throne (69:17), and row upon row of angelic beings will be present for the cataclysmic events that will occur then (89:22).

### *Jinn*

(Q 68:51; 15:6; 37:35-36; 44:14; 52:29; 68:2; 81:22; 6:10; 7:179; 15:27; 55:15; 51:56-58; 6:112, 128; 41:29; 32:13; 11:119; 46:29-31; 18:50a; 2:34; 7:11; 15:31-32; 17:61; 20:116; 38:73-74; 2:30-39; 7:11-25; 20:116-23; 55:33)

Another group of supernatural beings is the *jinn*, from which the English word *genie* comes. *Jinn* are mentioned approximately twenty-five times in the Qur’an, and belief in them among the Arabs predated Islam. They were invisible creatures, sometimes associated with animals or other parts of the natural world, who interacted with humans and influenced their lives in both positive and negative ways. Many of the references to them in the Qur’an are found in the phrase “*jinn* and humans” (or vice versa), showing the close connection between their two spheres of existence even though people are incapable of seeing the *jinn*.

It was believed that *jinn* could possess people and cause them to act erratically, and the word describing an insane or possessed person (*majnūn*) comes from the same Arabic root as *jinn*. Evidence of this belief is found in the Qur’an in a number of places when the people of Mecca believe Muhammad to be insane and possessed by *jinn* because of the message he is preaching: “The unbelievers nearly trip you up with their looks

when they hear the Qur'an. They say, 'He is truly mad [*majnūn*]!'" (68:51; cf. 15:6; 37:35-36; 44:14; 52:29; 68:2; 81:22).

According to the Qur'an, the *jinn* were created by God from fire (6:10; 7:179; 15:27; 55:15), and their main purpose is to acknowledge their creator: "I created *jinn* and humanity only to worship Me. I do not want them to provide for Me or to feed Me. God is the One who provides, the Lord of power, the strong One" (51:56-58). This text reflects the Qur'an's tendency to put the *jinn* in a subordinate position to God in a way that limits the power and abilities they had in the pre-Islamic period. Nonetheless, they are capable of leading people to ruin (6:112, 128; 41:29), and will themselves experience eternal punishment. "If We had wished, We would have given every soul its proper guidance. But My words are true—I will surely fill Hell with *jinn* and people together" (32:13; cf. 11:119).

However, the *jinn* can also guide people in the proper way and remind them to follow God's will. The first fifteen verses of chapter 72, which has the title "The *Jinn*," urge Muhammad to tell his people about a group of *jinn* who hear the Qur'an and immediately express their belief in it. They go on to profess their faith in some of the basic tenets of Islam while acknowledging that not all of their fellow *jinn* have been as receptive to the message of the Qur'an and will consequently suffer in hell for their lack of faith.

This is clearly meant to be a warning to Muhammad's audience to not follow the way of the unbelieving *jinn*. A similar message is conveyed in an abbreviated form in 46:29-31: "We sent a group of *jinn* to you (Muhammad) to listen to the Qur'an. When they were there they said to one another, 'Be quiet!' When it was over they warned their fellow *jinn*. They said, 'Oh our people, we have been listening to a revelation sent down after Moses that validates what came before it and gives guidance to the truth and the straight path. Oh our people, respond to the one who summons you in God's name and believe in Him! He will forgive your sins and will protect you from a painful punishment.'"

The only one of the *jinn* named in the Qur'an is Iblīs, the one mentioned earlier who refused God's command to prostrate before Adam. "When We said to the angels, 'Bow down before Adam,' they all bowed down except Iblīs. He was one of the *jinn*, and he disobeyed his Lord's command" (18:50a). Iblīs is mentioned eleven times in the Qur'an, and his name derives from the Greek term describing the personification of evil (*diabolos*), from which the English "devil" comes. This is the only time he is identified as one of the *jinn*, as the other references to the scene with Adam simply identify him as an angel (2:34; 7:11; 15:31-32; 17:61; 20:116; 38:73-74).

This has led to much discussion by commentators as to whether Iblīs was an angel or one of the *jinn*, without any clear agreement on the mat-

ter. He eventually became associated with the figure of Satan in later Islamic thought. The qur'anic basis for this identification is found in those passages (2:30-39; 7:11-25; 20:116-23) describing human creation and the garden story that see a shift in the name of Adam's antagonist from Iblīs to Satan (*shayṭān*). Some have suggested that his name was changed as a result of his disobedience of God's command to bow down.



As already noted, in its presentation of the *jinn*, the Qur'an describes them in a way that is consistent with how it views all other elements of the created order. They are creatures who are completely dependent upon God for their existence, and they can do nothing but submit themselves to the divine will. In this way, the *jinn* reinforce the theocentric view of creation that permeates the entire Qur'an, and they are a sign of God's supreme power. "Oh company of *jinn* and humanity, if you are able to pass through all the regions of heaven and earth, then pass through. But you cannot pass through without [Our] authority" (55:33).

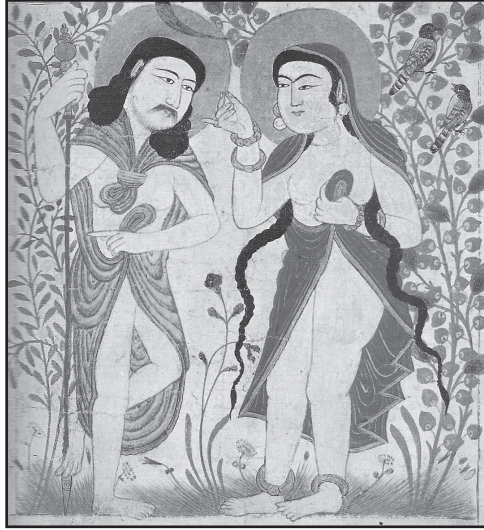
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## Humanity's Place in Creation

(Q 18:37; 35:11; 40:67; 30:20; 3:59; 23:12; 6:2; 7:12, 61; 32:7; 38:71, 76; 55:14; 15:26; 28:33; 22:5; 23:12; 16:4; 36:77; 53:45-46; 76:2; 80:18-19; 24:45; 25:54; 77:20-22; 86:5-7; 24:43-44; 25:47-50; 26:7; 31:10; 18:7; 6:165; 11:7; 71:15-20; 16:12, 65-69, 79; 20:53-54; 25:61-62; 30:30; 30:41; 2:30; 6:165; 27:62; 35:39; 10:24)

The Qur'an's description of human creation has much in common with that found in Genesis 2 in the Bible—God formed Adam and Eve (who is unnamed in the Qur'an) from the earth. The material that is used to create them is identified in several different ways. In some texts, it is referred to as *turāb*, Arabic for "dust" or "soil": "Among His signs is that He created you from dust, and then you became humans who are scattered about" (30:20; cf. 3:59; 18:37; 35:11; 40:67). Elsewhere, humans are created from *ṭīn*, or clay: "We created humanity from a portion of clay" (23:12; cf. 6:2; 7:12, 61; 32:7; 38:71, 76). In still other texts, it is described as dry clay, or *ṣaṣal*: "He created humanity out of clay, like pottery" (55:14; cf. 15:26; 28:33). The imagery of the last verse is similar to Genesis 2:7, where the Hebrew verb used to describe Adam's creation can refer to the work of a potter.

FIGURE 15 *Adam and Eve.*

Some passages list a sequence of stages of growth that appear to describe the development of the fetus in the womb. “Oh humanity, if you are in doubt regarding the resurrection, [know that] We created you from dust, then a drop of fluid, then a clot, then a lump of flesh, both formed and formless, in order to make it clear to you. We cause what We wish to remain in the womb for a set period, then We bring you out as infants and you attain maturity” (22:5a; cf. 23:12ff). The “drop of fluid” mentioned here is a reference to semen, which is referred to in other passages in the Qur’an (16:4; 36:77; 53:45-46; 76:2; 80:18-19). Elsewhere, the creative material is simply referred to as “water” (*mā’*), which could be another way of referring to semen (24:45; 25:54; 77:20-2; 86:5-7).

All these passages agree that humanity comes from the earth and has an intimate relationship with the rest of creation. The Qur’an sometimes portrays this relationship as a dependent one. As already noted, humans depend on other parts of creation for light, warmth, sustenance, transportation, and other necessities of existence. But the Qur’an also encourages people to admire creation and to learn from it. Humans are dependent upon the rest of the world like a student is dependent upon his or her teacher.

Earth is full of many marvelous things that teach lessons to humanity (24:43-44; 25:47-50; 26:7; 31:10). Sometimes these lessons take the form of a test: “We have made everything on the earth an adornment so that We might test them to learn which of them do best” (18:7; cf. 6:165; 11:7). In

these passages, creation is a test in the sense that it is a vehicle through which people can demonstrate that they have heard and understood the message of the Qur'an as it pertains to humanity's place in the larger scheme of things.

What do humans learn when they observe the world around them? Because the universe is full of signs that point to God, the main lesson they learn is that creation is theocentric. Wherever one looks, one should be reminded of God's presence and authority over everything that exists. What makes it possible for people to learn that lesson is the thing that sets us apart from all other living beings—our capacity to think and reason. The Qur'an urges us not to observe the world but also to study it, reflect on it, ponder it. Such reflection will inevitably lead us back to God as the source and creator. "Have you not seen how God created the seven levels of heaven, and made the moon a light within them and the sun a lamp? God made you grow forth from the earth like a plant—He will return you to it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth wide so that you may walk along broad spacious paths" (71:15-20; 16:12, 65-69, 79; 20:53-54; 25:61-62).

The Qur'an teaches that humans must conform to the laws of nature; they cannot change or replace them. When they act as they should, they submit to God's will as revealed to them in the world they are a part of. A term used to describe this condition of submission is *fiṭra*, which is found only in 30:30 and refers to the original state of humanity. "Set your (Muhammad) face toward religion devoted to the pure faith, the natural state (*fiṭra*) with which God endowed humanity. God's creation cannot be changed. This is the true religion, but most people do not know it." The prohibition against altering creation is at the heart of the Qur'an's view of the natural environment. It is God's creation, not humanity's. To modify or somehow interfere with creation is to usurp God's role and to set oneself up in God's place. Consequently, those who abuse and harm the environment are guilty of the unforgivable sin of *shirk*, or associating themselves with God.

As noted at the outset, as an ancient text, the Qur'an does not refer to modern environmental concerns like pollution and global warming. Nonetheless, it acknowledges that humans must have a proper relationship with the environment, and it reminds them of the consequences if they fail to do so. Sometimes these passages have a modern ring to them even if, in keeping with its aims as a religious text, the Qur'an interprets such abuses in strictly theological terms. "Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of people's actions. He will have them taste some of the results of what they have done so that they might turn back" (30:41).

The Qur'an recognizes the enormous responsibility humans bear in relation to the rest of creation. In several places, they are described with terms that come from the Arabic root *kh-l-f*, which can refer to an act of succession, as when someone takes another's place. According to one of the creation accounts, humans were created for the purpose of being God's successors on earth (2:30). The exact nature of that role is not spelled out in the text, but the use of the Arabic word in other contexts indicates that the one who takes another's place should function with the objectives and desires of the predecessor in mind.

*The word "caliph" (khalīfa) comes from the Arabic root kh-l-f and is used as a title to designate one who succeeds the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community.*

This means that humans, in their capacity as God's successors on earth, must treat the natural environment with the respect and dignity God intended it to have according to the Qur'an. In other words, they should be good stewards of the signs of God. "God made you successors [*khalā'if*] on the earth and has put some of you above others in rank to test you through what He has given you. Your Lord is quick to punish, but He is truly forgiving and merciful" (6:165; cf. 27:62; 35:39).

This chapter ends as it began, with a parable that succinctly summarizes the Qur'an's theocentric view of the natural environment. In 10:24, the Qur'an offers a simile for "the life of this world." It describes an earth in which all the elements of creation function in harmony and peace until the humans begin to think they are in charge and try to dominate things. It is a reminder that only God has authority over the works of creation, and it closes with a call for humanity to reflect on the world they are but a part of: "The life of this world is like this—the water We send down from the sky irrigates the earth's vegetation, from which humans and animals eat. Just when the earth is in its most colorful and beautiful state, its people think they have control over it. Then our command comes to pass, by night or by day, and We cut it down as if it had not been flourishing the day before. In this way We explain the signs for a people who reflect."

### key TERMS }

*mathal*; *shirk*; *tawhīd*; *muḥīṭ*; *al-fātiḥa*; *waḥdat al-wujūd*; *mi'rāj*; *astrolabe*; *umma*; *jinn*; *Iblīs*; *shayṭān*; *fiṭra*



### QUESTIONS for discussion }

1. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Qur'an's theocentric view of the natural world?
2. Can the Qur'an provide the framework for a coherent system of ecological ethics?
3. How is the Qur'an's understanding of the natural world similar to that found in the Bible or other sacred texts? How is it different?
4. What is your reaction to the idea that nature is Muslim?

### further READING }

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