

IN THE BEGINNING:
ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON COSMOLOGICAL ORIGINS

Muzaffar Iqbal

How did the cosmos come into existence? When? Is there an end to this beginning? Cosmology, the science which studies the creation of the cosmos, can be divided into several categories. Philosophical reflection on the origins created a tradition of philosophical cosmology. Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and a host of other philosophers have left detailed accounts of their opinions about the creation of the cosmos. Most of this philosophical cosmology was translated into Arabic, leading to the emergence of an Islamic philosophical cosmology which started to move away from the Greek tradition in the eleventh century; this move achieved a definitive character in the form of *Hikmah* (Wisdom tradition) in the thirteenth century. This tradition remains alive in contemporary Islamic thought. Before the emergence of the Islamic philosophical cosmology, however, there existed another cosmological tradition, the “Sacred Cosmology”, based on the Qur’anic descriptions of creation and on the sayings of the Prophet. Based on the earliest sources, this paper, the first installment from a chapter of a work in progress, explores three aspects of this Sacred Cosmology: those dealing with the Guarded Tablet and the Pen; the Throne and the Footstool; and the Heavens and the Earth.

Keywords: Cosmology; sacred cosmology; the Beginning and the End; the Guarded Tablet and the Pen; the Throne and Footstool; creation theme in the Qur’ān.

“In the Beginning” is the first chapter of a work in progress, *In the Beginning: Islamic Perspectives on Origins*. The first part of this book explores various aspects of cosmological origins, the second that of biological origins. Muzaffar Iqbal is the President of Center for Islam and Science, Canada; Email: Muzaffar@cis-ca.org.

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To speak of the Beginning at such a late hour, when the signs of the End are so rapidly manifesting, may seem pointless, but this would only be the case if we were to forget that we have been advised to plant the tree in hand even if we see the Hour coming. This Prophetic counsel does not merely indicate the limits of a believer's deeds in a legislative sense, it also points toward one of the two qualities of *īmān* (faith) which are its adornments—*rajāʿ*² (hope) and *khawf* (fear). Yet, to speak of the Beginning at this time of the temporal cycle, when the cosmos has become so old and humanity so forgetful of the true meaning of existence, has its own peculiar dictates—especially in the presence of the reigning scientism which will not admit any truth unless it can be tested in a laboratory, even though most of what now passes as cosmology is mere speculation. These speculations have, of late, gained currency to such an extent that one only need say words like “Big Bang” and every half-literate person would respond with we believe and we obey (*samiʿnā wa aṭaʿnā*), without asking for proof; such is the power of the scientism that has permeated every sphere of public and private life. It is this approach to all things—even things which fall outside the purview of science—that makes it difficult for anything else to gain audience, even though this “something” be rooted in the most sacred sources.

The Beginning is beyond the purview of science—at least the science of our day—yet it is a “moment” (if one can call it that) which has received a great deal of attention recently not only by the scientific community but also from the general public, as scores of books being published on the subject indicate. These works attempt to construct a scientific scenario for the Beginning—the time beyond the reach of science, when nothing had yet come into existence, not even time.

When nothing had yet come into existence, there was the One, the First (*al-Awwal*), whose transcendence can only be defined *via negativa*, by erasing from the mind any impurity foreign to the idea of pure divinity (*alūhiyya*). It is through an intense and systematic weeding out of every description, adjective (*ṣifḥah*), and image (*ṣūra*) suspected of directing our understanding (*maʿrifā*) or imagination (*wahm*) to a created object (*shayʿ*) other than God that we can arrive at the Qurʾānic conception of the Creator: He is not like anything,¹ neither engendering nor engendered.² All that

1. *ash-Shūrā*: 11: *Laysa kamithlihī shayʿun* (Nothing is like unto Him).

2. *Ṣūra* of Sincerity (*Ikhḥlās*) of the Qurʾān contains, in a highly condensed form, this definition *via negativa*: Say: He is Allah, the One; Allah—the

God has us know positively about Himself is His singular Uniqueness, His extreme remoteness from everything else.

As He is The First (*al-Awwal*), He created everything that exists, that has ever existed; as He is the Last (*al-Ākhir*), everything perishes except Him.³ When He desired to create, He simply said, “Be” (*kun*), and it was.⁴ This, and many other Qur’ānic verses on the origins, are not only a natural point of departure for Islamic perspectives on cosmology, they also provide a methodology to construct a coherent view of Islamic perspectives on cosmology. This exploration begins with the Qur’ānic data, especially the so-called “cosmic verses” of the Qur’ān. It then examines how these were understood by the Prophet and his Companions. This leads us to the exploration of early tradition of sacred cosmology which came into existence through reflection on these Qur’ānic verses and the sayings of the Prophet and his Companions. This is followed by an account of the subsequent developments in Islamic tradition which produced many philosophical cosmological schemes. Some of these were conceived under the influence of Greek thought, which was translated into Arabic between the eighth and the eleventh centuries. In later centuries, as Islamic philosophy moved away from Greek thought toward a more spiritual, illuminating *Ḥikmah* (Wisdom) tradition, a different kind of cosmology came into existence. This tradition looked at existence as so many manifestations

Everlasting (al-ṣamad); neither engendering nor engendered; and none is His equal.

3. *ar-Raḥmān*: *Everyone perishes except the face of Thy Lord.* Another path to understanding the meanings of Allah’s being the First and the Last is provided by the Prophetic supplication: “O Allah, Sustainer of the seven heavens, the Lord of the Great Throne, Our Sustainer and Sustainer of everything, the Sender of Tawrah and Injil, the Splitter of seeds and pits, there is no deity except Thee, I seek refuge in Thee from the evil of everything, for in Thy hand is their forelock, Thou art the First, for there was nothing before You; Thou art the Last, for there is nothing after You; And Thou art the Manifest, for there is nothing above You; and Thou art the Hidden, for there is nothing behind You; free us from our debts and deliver us from poverty”. Quoted from Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Azīm, taḥqīq Sāmī bin Muḥammad Salāma*, 8 vols. (Riyāḍ: Dār Ṭayyaba li’l nashr wa’l tawzī’, 3rd edition, 1425/2004), vol. 8, 6-7 (hereafter *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*), who cites from Muslim 2713; also in *Musnad* of Abū Ya’lā (Vol. 8, 210) on the authority of ‘Ā’isha, who notes that the Prophet used to say this supplication before sleeping.

4. *Yā Sīr*: 82.

of Divine Names. Though differentiable from one another, all of these cosmologies retain a central core derived from the basic Qurʾānic data on the Beginning and the End.

Thus, a systematic exposition of Islamic cosmology can be conceived as consisting of four distinct parts:

1. Sacred Cosmology
2. Philosophical Cosmologies
3. Illuminationist Cosmology
4. Islamic perspectives on modern cosmology

Sacred Cosmology

The Qurʾān refers to God as the Creator (*al-khāliq*) in the absolute sense. That is to say He brings into existence what was non-existent. In addition to *al-Khāliq*, the Qurʾān contains several other Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) directly referring to Allah's creative power. Some of these Names (*asmāʾ*) are *al-Bārīʾ* (the One Who differentiates), *al-Muṣawwir* (the Giver of Form), *al-Mubdiʾ* (The Beginner), *al-Badīʿ* (The Originator), and *al-Fāṭir* (the Splitter). Reflected in verbal forms, the act of creation is often described in the Qurʾān through certain key verbs which are full of movement. These include *khalāqa* (to create), *faṭara* (to split asunder), *anṣaʾa* (to originate), *abdaʾa* (to produced first), *jaʿala* (to bring forth), and *wadaʿa* (to put).

The creation theme of the Qurʾān, let us note, is not limited to the creation of the physical world. In fact, the physical world exists below worlds upon worlds of cosmic orders of another. Populated by angels, who traverse the vast realms of the cosmos in times not measurable in human terms, this unknowable cosmos has Allah's Throne (*ʿarsh*) and His footstool (*kursī*). In addition, there are other non-physical things such as time (which is of many kinds) which were also created by the Creator. Then there is light and darkness; there creation is sometimes mentioned in the same manner as the creation of the heavens and the earth: *Praise and thanks be to the One who created the heavens and the earth and [who] created light and darkness.*⁵

The act of creation is often described by the Qurʾān with verbs such

5. *al-Anʿām*: 1.

as *banā* (to built), *rafāʿa* (to raise), *daḥāhā* (to spread out), *awsaʿa* (to make wide); *fataqa* (to tear apart), and *sawwā* (to perfectly finish something). The first thing to note is that these verbs are not static or immobile; they are pregnant with force and movement. Second, this rather incomplete list of verbs yields different meaning mental associations and conceptual frameworks—all to assist us to ponder the unfathomable reality of creation, which lies beyond the realm of human conceptions. To raise (*rafāʿa*) already implies the presence of something to be raised, as does the verb *faṭara*—which Ibn ʿAbbās said he did not understand until he heard two Bedouins disputing the ownership of a well and one of them said “it belongs to me, because I was the one who tore it apart (*faṭartuhā*), I began it (*badaʿtuhā*).” Likewise, Ibn ʿAbbās said, *Fāṭiriʿs-Samāwāti waʿl-Arḍ* means *Badiʿiʿs-Samāwāti waʿl-Arḍ*.⁶

All Qurʾānic descriptions, it must be noted, remain within the framework of Qurʾān’s own specific teachings about creation: that the creation is for a purpose and for a fixed duration (*al-ajal al-musammā*), the precise knowledge of the end of this duration remains unknown to all save the One who has appointed this term for existence and its termination. The end of existence is to take place at this pre-determined Hour (*as-sāʿah*), which no one can hasten or delay; no one has knowledge about it, not even Prophets: *And they ask you about the sāʿah, when will it come*, the Qurʾān states regarding the insistence of certain leaders of the Quraysh who wanted this information as a “proof” for the Prophethood of Prophet Muḥammad, *say: its knowledge is with my Lord*.⁷ And when the limit would have been reached, *no one will be able to delay the Hour*.⁸

With regard to creation, we are told that there are signs (*āyāt*) in creation. These signs direct our attention to something beyond themselves. It is this “beyond-the-signs” Being, to Whom everything belongs,⁹ Who remains the constant point of reference in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾānic cre-

6. See *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 6, 532. He cites al-Bayhaqī, *Fī Shuʿab al-Īmān*, number 1682.

7. *al-Aʿrāf*: 187.

8. *Yūnus*: 49; *an-Naḥl*: 61.

9. *To Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth (Lillāhi mā fiʿs-samāwāti waʿl-arḍ...)* is a phrase that is repeated in the Qurʾān several times. This refrain serves to constantly remind an attentive reader of the Qurʾān that, ultimately, the Owner of all that exists is the One who created it in the first place. See *at-Tawbah*: 116; *Yūnus*: 66; *al-Māʿidah*: 18; and numerous other references.

ation theme encompasses everything—from a soaring eagle flying over the Himalayas to the tiniest ant crawling on a barren mountain in the burning plains of Arabia, and from numerous creatures living under tons of snow in the Arctic ocean to various species of bees constructing their hexagonal beehives in diverse climes and regions. But before the Himalayas and the plains of Arabia and the Arctic Ocean can be differentiated into nameable places, we must return to the initial act of creation, which customarily begins with an account of the Throne (*‘arsh*) and the Footstool (*kursī*), before describing the creation of the heavens and the earth.

The Throne and the Footstool

Sacred cosmology has paid a great deal of attention to the Throne (*‘arsh*) of Allah, mentioned twenty-six times in the Qur’ān,¹⁰ and to His Footstool (*kursī*), mentioned only once in the “greatest *āyah* of the Qur’ān”,¹¹ *āyatu’l-kursī*—the verse of the Footstool:¹² *Allah—there is no deity save Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent, the Self-Existing; neither slumber overtakes Him, nor sleep. His is all that is in the heavens and earth. Who is there to intercede with Him, save by His leave? He knows all that is before them and that is behind them, whereas they cannot know anything of His knowledge, save what*

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10. Out of some thirty-one instances of its occurrence in the Qur’ān, the word *‘arsh* refers specifically to Allah’s *‘arsh* twenty-six times; once it is used for the throne of Prophet Yūsuf (*Yūsuf*: 100); the other four instances mention the throne of the Queen of Sheba in *an-Naml*: 23, 38, 41, and 42.
11. “The Greatest *āyah* of the Qur’ān”, *afḍal’l-āyah fī kitāb Allah*: Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal narrates in his *musnad*: “‘Abd al-Razzāq narrated to us, Sufyān narrated to us, from Sa‘īd al-Jarīrī, from Abī al-Saalīl, from ‘Abd Allāh bin Riyāh, from his father—who is Ibn Ka‘b—verily the Messenger of Allah, upon whom be peace, asked: ‘which *āyah* of the Qur’ān is the greatest?’ [Ibn Ka‘b] said: ‘Allah and His Messenger know best.’ The Prophet asked this again, and yet again, and then said: *‘āyatu’l-kursī*, [and the Prophet added]: ‘may Allah bless your knowledge, O Abā al-Mandhir, by the One in Whose Hand is my soul, it has tongue and lips, it praises the King, near the foot of the Throne.’ *Musnad Aḥmad*, Vol. 5, 141; also in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Muslim*, 810, where it is reported from another chain of narrators without the last oath.
12. *al-Baqarah*: 255. Specifically referring to Allah’s *kursī*, this word appears only once in the Qur’ān; a second usage (*Ṣād*: 34) refers to the *kursī* of Sulaymān.

*He wills. His Footstool (kursī) overspreads the heavens and the earth, and their protection wearies Him not. And He alone is truly exalted.*¹³

The Qurʾān does not mention anything about the creation of the Throne or the Footstool; rather, they are already present when the creation theme appears. We are told that Allah *created the heavens and the earth in six days and His Throne was on water...*¹⁴ Other verses referring to the Throne, tell us that Allah is seated on His Throne in Majesty (7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4); that He is the Lord of the Great Throne, *Rabb ul-ʿarshil-ʿaẓīm* (9:29, 21:22, 23:86, 27:26, 43:82). In addition to “Great” (*Aẓīm*), the Qurʾān uses two other descriptors (*ṣiffāt*) for the Throne: Noble (*al-Karīm*) and Glorious (*al-Majīd*). These descriptors are also two of the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of Allah, and they have been used for the Qurʾān itself. The first occurrence of the Noble Throne is in a verse of surpassing beauty, overflowing with majesty and grandeur: *Allah is sublimely Exalted, [He is] the Sovereign, the Truth, there is no deity save Him, the Lord of the Noble Throne;*¹⁵ the second occurs in the flow of a context relevant to our discussion here and is preceded by two of Allah’s Most Beautiful Names (*al-Ghafūr, al-Wadūd*): *He is the One Who creates in the first instance and to Whom is the return. He is All-Forgiving, Full of love [for His creation], the [owner] of the Glorious Throne.*¹⁶

In another verse, we are given a closer description of the Throne. This verse occurs in a beautiful passage which graphically depicts the journey of the God-conscious toward Paradise:

Those who remained conscious of their Lord will be taken toward Jannah in groups (zumara) until they will arrive in its proximity, when its gates will be opened and its guardians will say to them, ‘peace be upon you, well have you done; enter, then, herein to abide forever’. And they will say: ‘All

13. The two Most Beautiful Names of Allah appearing in this verse, *al-Hayy, al-Qayyūm*, render a translator’s job impossible. There are simply no equivalents in English. For the sake of brevity, most translators use superlatives with descriptive nouns (Ever-Living, the Self-Existing), yet such translations fail to convey the meaning of the original. *Al-Qayyūm*, sometimes translated as Self-Existing, sometimes as Self-Subsisting, is the One who needs no other being for existing in any sense whatsoever; *al-Hayy*, translated here as the Ever-Living, denotes the One Who knows of no state comparable to “not living”.

14. *Hūd*: 7.

15. *al-Muʾminūn*: 116.

16. *al-Burūj*: 13-15.

*praise and thanks to Allah, who fulfilled His promise to us, and made us the inheritors of Jannah, wherein we may dwell as we please.’ And how excellent a reward it is for those who do righteous deeds.*¹⁷

After this comes the description of the Throne: *And thou shall see angels surrounding the Throne, extolling their Lord’s glory and praise. And a just judgment will have been passed on people and it will be said: ‘All praise is due to Allah, the Sustainer of the worlds.’*¹⁸

This is the nearest we are taken to the Throne in the Qurʾān. Jalāl al-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (849/1445-911/1505) quotes a ḥadīth on the authority of ash-Shaʿbī

that the Messenger of Allah, upon whom be Allah’s peace and blessings, said: “The Throne is of a red hyacinth (*yaqūṭah Ḥamarāʾ*). One of the angels looked at it and its magnitude. Then Allah revealed to him: ‘Verily, I have placed in you the power of seventy thousand angels, each having seventy thousand winds, so fly!’—And the angel flew with the power given to him and the wings, just as Allah wanted him to fly. He stopped, looked at his place, and he had not budged at all.”¹⁹

The early cosmographical tradition seems to understand both the Throne and the Footstool being located in the farthest reaches of the cosmos and enveloped by light (*Nūr*). “Below Allah,” we are told in a ḥadīth, on the authority of Sahl bin Saʿd, “there are 70,000 veils of light and darkness. No one has heard anything about the beauty of those veils

17. *az-Zumar*: 73.

18. *Ibid.*

19. As-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Kitāb al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya fīl-Hayʾa as-Sunniyya (The Radiant Cosmography in the Cosmography of Tradition)*. A critical Arabic edition with translation and commentary by Anton M. Heinen (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1982), 2; hereafter *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*. This edition is based on nine of approximately sixty extant manuscripts—an indication of the popularity of the work through several centuries. As-Suyūṭī’s book is a concise summary of the sacred cosmology as handed down to him through generations of narrators. “This is a book on cosmography (*fīl-ʿilm al-hayʾa*),” he informs us in a short introduction, “which I have compiled from the traditions (*minl-āthār*) and old narrations. It was my goal that those with intelligence might rejoice and those with eyes may take heed. I gave it the title: “The Radiant Cosmography (*al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*) in cosmography of tradition (*fīl-hayʾa as-sunniyya*), see *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 1.

but that his soul departed.²⁰ In another tradition it is said that “between the Throne and the angels are seventy thousand veils of light.”²¹ Abū al-Shaykh²² relates a ḥadīth, on the authority of Zurāra b. Abī Aufī, that the Prophet asked Jibrīl whether he had seen his Lord. Jibrīl shuddered and said, “as it is, between me and Him there are seventy veils of light. If I ever came close to the one nearest to me, I would get burnt.”²³ Ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have said: “The heavens and the earth, in relation to the abysses beyond them—where there is no heaven and no earth—are like a tent in relation to a desert. What would that tent amount to for someone on this earth?”²⁴

The Footstool is said to be under Allah’s Throne.²⁵ The Prophet is reported to have said to Abū Dharr, “O Abā Dharr, the seven heavens in comparison to the Footstool are like a little circle drawn in an expansive desert. And the excess (*faḍl*) of the Throne over the Footstool is like the excess of the expansive desert over that little circle.”²⁶

“The Footstool is the place for two feet,” another Ḥadīth tells us, “and the Throne is such that no one can fathom its measure.”²⁷ Based on the Qur’ānic descriptions and the sayings of the Prophet, the cosmos was conceived by the early Muslim scholars as a hierarchical structure with the Throne at the highest limit and the Footstool below it.

The Guarded Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) and the Pen (*al-Qalam*)

Sacred cosmology conceived the Guarded Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) and the Pen (*al-Qalam*) as integral parts of the creation theme. The Qur’ān refers to itself as being recorded and preserved on the Guarded Tablet.²⁸

20. *al-Hay’ā as-Saniyya*, 5

21. Ibid.

22. Abū al-Shaykh is the immediate source of As-Suyūṭī’s work.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh, through the intermediary of as-Suddī, quotes the saying of Abū Mālik that the Footstool is under the Throne. *al-Hay’ā as-Saniyya*, 2.

26. *al-Hay’ā as-Saniyya*, 3.

27. Reported by al-Firyābī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn al-Munḍir, al-Ṭabarānī, and al-Ḥākim (in his *al-Mustadrak*), authenticated in accordance with the criteria set by the two shaykhs [al-Bukhārī and al-Muslim], from Ibn ‘Abbās. *al-Hay’ā as-Saniyya*, 4.

28. *Nay, but this is the Glorious Qur’ān, [preserved] in the Guarded Tablet,*

The Pen has been mentioned in the very first revelation which began the descent of the Qurʾān: *Read in the name of Thy Sustainer, who has created, created Man out of a germ-cell. Read, for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful, who taught with Pen; taught insān what he knew not.*²⁹

It has been narrated on the authority of Anas, who said that the Messenger of Allah said, “Allah has a Tablet, its one side is made of red hyacinth (*yāqūlah ḥamarāʾ*), the other of green smaragd (*dhumurrdah khaḍrāʾ*). His Pen is light; with it He creates; with it He provides provisions [to creation], with it He gives life; with it He [causes creation to] die, with it He honors and with it He debases; and with it He does what He wishes—every day and night.”³⁰ In another tradition, we are told on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās that “Allah’s Messenger said: “God created a Tablet from a white pearl (*durra bayḍāʾ*), the two sides of which are made of a green chrysolite (*zubar jadda khaḍrāʾ*), and the writing on it is of light. Every day He looks at it 360 times. And He gives life and takes it, He creates and gives the means of subsistence, and He does whatever He desires.”³¹

These condensed formulations were to become the focus of successive generations of Muslims who attempted to understand mystical, legal, moral, and physical dimensions of the traditions about the Tablet and the Pen. In fact, the Islamic tradition conceives the Tablet and the Pen as being the ultimate records of all that was to come to pass by way of existence, may that be of beings or events. The number of a ḥadīth which mention the Tablet and the Pen are not numerous, but their transmission through some of the closest Companions of the Prophet have granted

al-Burūj: 22. That the Qurʾān has been preserved and cannot be corrupted is a central doctrine of Islam. This has been confirmed as there has been no corruption of the text of the Qurʾān over the last fourteen hundred years. Speaking in the first person, Allah states in the Qurʾān: *Behold, it is We Ourselves who have sent down from on high this remembrance, and behold, it is We who shall truly guard it (al-Ḥijr: 9)*. In *al-Wāqʿah*: 8 the Qurʾān speaks of itself as being *the Noble Qurʾān, [preserved] in a well-guarded Book (kitābim-maknūn)*.

29. *al-ʿAlaq*: 1-5. If the Arabic word *insān* is accepted as an English word derived from Arabic to the extent that, like so many other words of Arabic origin which do not need italicizing anymore, it will resolve the issue of gender equality while referring to human beings, for *insān* is neither masculine nor feminine.

30. Reported by Abū al-Shaykh, from Mālik bin Dīnār, from Anas, *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 6.

31. The chain of this ḥadīth includes al-Ḍaḥḥāk, *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 7.

them the foundational position in the making of Sacred Cosmology. A ḥadīth mentioned by Abī al-Dunyā in his *Makārim al-Akhlāq*, Abū al-Shaykh in his *Kitāb al-ʿAzama*, and al-Bayhaqī in his *Kitāb Shuʿab al-Īmān* tell us on the authority of Anas that “the Messenger of Allah said: “Allah has a Tablet made of a green chrysolite under His Throne. On it He has written: Verily, I am Allah; there is no deity save Me. I am Merciful, and I am asked for Mercy. I brought into existence creatures [numbering] some 300 and a few tens (*biḍʿa ʿashra wa thalāthmiya*), who so ever from the creation comes witnessing that there is no god except Allah, will enter Jannah.”³²

In fact, the Pen was the first thing created by God, for Abū Yaʿlā cites a sound tradition from Ibn ʿAbbās stating that “the Messenger of Allah said: ‘the first thing which Allah the Most High created was the Pen. And He commanded it to write everything.’”³³ A variation of this ḥadīth, cited by al-Ṭabarānī with a sound chain states, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, states, “Allah’s Messenger said: ‘When Allah created the Pen, He said to it: ‘Write!’—And it kept moving with [this command, recording] whatever was to come into existence until the Last Day.’”³⁴ Yet another tradition, this time on the authority of Ibn ʿUmr, tells us that “the Messenger of Allah said: ‘Indeed, as the first thing Allah—the Most High—created, He created the Pen. It is of light, extending over a distance of 500 years. Then He gave it His Command, and it kept moving with whatever comes into being until the Day of Resurrection. So, accept as true whatever comes to you from Allah through His power.’”³⁵

Another ḥadīth going back to Abū Saʿīd al-Khuḍrī, one of the *Aṣḥāb aṣ-Ṣuffā* (the people of the Bench), found in both the *Kitāb az-Zama* of Abū al-Shaykh and *Kitāb Shuʿab al-Īmān* of al-Bayhaqī, states that “the Messenger of Allah said, ‘there is a Tablet in front of Allah; on it are 315 codes of Law (*sharīʿah*). The Most Merciful (*ar-Raḥmān*) says: ‘By My Might and Glory, none of My servants will come to Me, denying neither of these, that I shall not enter him into Paradise’”.³⁶

These traditions not only situate the entire scheme of creation in the Divine realm, they also provide us a means to reflect on numerous questions arising out of our limited human conceptions of time and destiny,

32. *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 6.

33. Another similar ḥadīth, once again cited on sound authority. *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 7.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

for we are told in another tradition that “pens have been lifted”, implying that events have a different temporal order when we are contemplating cosmological origins. We will have more to say on these when we discuss creation of time.

Qur’ānic Description of the Creation of the Heavens and the Earth

As-Samā’, the Arabic for the sky, and its derivatives are one of the most common Qur’ānic words. Generally translated as “heavens”, *as-Samā’* refers to the unfathomable vast space “above” the Earth—that is above when viewed from the Planet itself. With the advancements in technology, space travel has rendered much of the directional aspect of the spatial structure of the cosmos rather difficult for common understanding; what appears to be the “sky” to us on earth, may not be so when viewed from another planet. Yet, from the perspective of the residents of Earth, spatial coordinates remain firmly established. And the statement that the heaven is vaulted over the earth like a dome makes perfect sense, as far as the view from below is concerned. As regard the view from above, the heavens and the Earth are said to be encompassed by the Footstool. Since the Qur’ān addresses humanity and its claim is that it guides humanity toward a Straight Path, it has a spatial frame of reference, which is both physical as well as non-physical. Some things are above others; there is a crooked path and there is a Straight Path. There are layers upon layers of light and darkness, both physical as well as spiritual. Allah Himself is said to be the *Light of the heavens and the Earth*, in the celebrated Verse of Light, upon which scores of Muslim scholars wrote commentaries, as we shall see later. We are also told that *Allah is the Protector of those who believe, taking them out of darkness into the light—whereas those who are bent upon denying the Truth, their helpers are the evil forces which take them out of light into the darkness.*³⁷

The Qur’ān describes the creation of the heavens and the Earth in its own characteristic manner—sometimes in specific terms, sometimes generally, sometimes merely in a passing manner, at others in detail. One of more detailed descriptions is as follows:

Verily, your Sustainer is Allah, who has created the heavens and the earth in six days, who then mounted His Throne. He covers the day with the night, which is in swift pursuit. And [He created] the sun and the moon and the stars subservient to His command. Hallowed is Allah, the

37. *al-Baqarah*: 257.

*Sustainer of the worlds.*³⁸

In the order of the Qurʾān, the first reference to the creation of the heavens occurs in *al-Baqarah*, just before the first mention of the creation of the first man, Adam:³⁹

*O humankind, worship your Sustainer, Who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you might remain conscious of Him, Who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy, and has sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits for you sustenance; do not, then, claim others as His rivals, when you know [that He is One].*⁴⁰

Seven verses later, we are told that *He is the One Who has created for you all that is on earth, He then turned His attention toward the sky and fashioned it into seven heavens; and He has full knowledge of everything.*⁴¹

This *fashioning of the sky into seven heavens*, which is sometimes claimed to be a later feature of Islamic cosmology *a la* Ptolemy, is, in fact, deeply embedded in the Qurʾān and the sacred cosmology based on the traditions of the Prophet. These seven heavens are layered, one upon another, all in perfect harmony, in synchronization with each other, and the rest of the cosmos; there is no flaw in this.

*[Hallowed] be He who has created seven heavens, layer upon layer; no fault will thou see in the creation of the Most Merciful. Turn thy vision [upon it]; canst thou see any flaw? Yet, turn thy vision [upon it] once again and yet again; [and every time] thy vision will fall back upon thee, dazzled and truly defeated.*⁴²

In another verse, the Qurʾān asks rhetorically: *Have you not seen how*

38. *al-Aʿrāf*: 54.

39. It is important to keep in mind that the order of the Qurʾānic revelation is different from the order in which the “Book between two covers” has been presented to humanity. It is generally agreed that the *mushaf* (lit. a collection of sheets, here meaning sheets of parchment containing the Qurʾān, that is, a compiled copy of the Qurʾān) was arranged in its present order by the command of its Sender during the life of the Prophet. For a detailed study of this, and many other primary aspects of the Qurʾānic text, see al-Azami, M. M., *The History of the Qurʾānic Text; from Revelation to Compilation* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003).

40. *al-Baqarah*: 21-22.

41. *al-Baqarah*: 29.

42. *al-Mulk*: 3-4.

*Allah has created the seven heavens, layer upon layer, and has set up within them the moon as light and the sun as a lamp?*⁴³

What is meant by this layering of the heavens, with the lowest of the seven heavens having been adorned by stars?⁴⁴ This layered space definitely refers to the physical structure of the cosmos, but is not limited to it, for there are unfathomable worlds in these seven heavens which were made from steam or smoke (*dukhān*).⁴⁵ Each of these heavens is separated from each other by a distance of 500 years, we are informed in a sound tradition. “We were with the Prophet,” al-ʿAbbās bin ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib narrates,

when he asked: ‘Do you know what is the distance between heaven and earth?’ We answered: ‘Allah and His Messenger know best.’ He said: ‘Between them there is a distance of 500 years; and from every heaven to another heaven there is a distance of 500 years. The diameter of every heaven is 500 years. Above the seventh heaven there is a sea, the distance from its surface to its greatest depth is as much as the [distance] between the heaven and the earth. Then, above that, there are eight mountain goats (*awʿāl*); the distance between their knees (*rukba-hunma*) and their hoofs (*azlāfa-hunma*) is like the distance between the heaven and the earth. Still above this, there is the Throne; the distance between its lowest and uppermost part is like the distance between the heavens and the earth. Above that, there is Allah, the Praised and Exalted.’⁴⁶

Of course, modern readers would ask what it all means. What units are being used for the measurements? And what does it mean to have eight mountain goats (*awʿāl*) in the heavens? Such folklore! These questions are natural at such a late hour in the history of humanity, when the traditional understanding of the cosmos has become obscure; even the vocabulary used in these traditions is difficult for the contemporary reader, so much

43. *Nūḥ*; 15.

44. *And, indeed, We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with lamps...* (*al-Mulk*: 5); also *aṣ-Saffāt*: 6: *Behold, We have adorned the skies nearest the earth with the beauty of stars.*

45. *Fuṣṣilat*: 11.

46. Reported by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in his *Musnad*, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī—who declared it to be *ḥasan*—Ibn Mājah, Ibn Abī ʿĀṣamm in his *Sunna*, Abū Yaʿlā, Ibn Khuzayma, al-Ṭabarānī, al-Ḥākim—who classified it as *ṣaḥīḥ*—and Abū al-Shaykh. *al-Hayʾa as-Saniyya*, 8.

so that words such as *awṣāl* (translated here as “mountain goats”) seem to have lost their comprehensiveness. The mountain goats mentioned in this tradition are, of course, not the goats grazing on a certain mountain. It is well known that Capricorn, the zodiacal constellation between Sagittarius and Aquarius, is identical with the Arabian mountain goat. The constellation of Capricorn, with two stars of Aquarius before it, resembles a throne with a footstool in front of it.⁴⁷

The distances mentioned in the tradition should likewise be understood within the context of the tradition. The cosmic distances mentioned in the tradition give an indication of the enormous distances between the heavens but are, however, not arbitrary numbers. They belong to a cosmic system in which the physical cosmos is seamlessly linked to the spiritual; the latter being the mother engendering the physical cosmos. Under the influence of modern science, it is generally assumed that the “primitive people of the past”, having no tools to measure such enormous distances, invented numbers, but this view assumes that there is only one way of acquisition of knowledge—the way of modern science.

Further, it assumes that all human beings, including the Prophets of God, gain their knowledge from the ordinary sense data. Both of these assumptions are untenable in view of the special nature of Prophetic function. The Prophets of God were human beings, but they were human beings of a different order. Their sources of knowledge were not limited to what other human beings have been granted. For us, the cosmic dimensions mentioned in the above tradition may remain obscure, yet there can be little doubt that they describe the features of the cosmos in which the Sun and the Moon—indeed all planets, stars, and constellations—traverse their appointed course, in perfect harmony and balance with each other, displaying a cosmos filled with immense beauty and order. The number “500 years” mentioned in the tradition is connected with an entire system of reckoning time according to the movement of the celestial objects.

The stations or mansions (*manzila*, pl. *manāzil*)⁴⁸ of the Moon, numbering 28, are distinguishable even by the naked eye. There are 28 *manāzil*

47. For this connection see Heinen’s commentary on *al-Hay’ā as-Saniyya*, 91-2.

48. The word *manzil* from the root *n-z-l*, expresses the idea of halting, a temporary stay. It has different usages in different contexts. In astronomy, it may refer to the mansions of the Moon; in Šūfī literature, it is the stage in the spiritual journey; in everyday language, it is a place noun.

(halting places) of the Moon, each corresponding to one night during its 28-day revolution in a lunar cycle. On each of these 28 nights, the Moon halts near a star or group of stars. Each of these mansions was known in Arabic with its own name.⁴⁹ The Qurʾān specifies that Allah has determined the *manāzil* of the Moon so that humanity might compute time:

*He is the One Who has made the sun a radiant (diyāʿ) and the Moon a light (nūr), and has determined for it halting places (manāzil) so that you might know how to compute the years and measure [time]. None of this has Allah created without truth.*⁵⁰

Of course, in addition to the purely physical stations of the Moon, the course of the planets and stars is full of signs:

*And they have a sign in the night; We withdraw from it the day, and lo! They are in darkness. And the sun traverses [its course] to the point of its rest—that is laid down by the decree of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. And the moon—for which We have determined stations (manāzil) till it becomes like an old date-stalk, dried up and curved (al-ʿurjūn); neither the sun can overtake the moon, nor can the night can overtake the day; each float in their own orbit.*⁵¹

Yet, speaking of the purely physical aspect of the movement of the Moon, its 28 stations were used to divide the solar zodiac into 28 equal parts of approximately 12° 50'; thus the 28 *anwāʿ* (identified with the 28 *manāzil* of the moon) are determined by 28 stars or constellations constituting 14 pairs. The twenty-second *manzil* is called *saʿd al-dhābiḥ* (later latinized as Capricorni, identified with the mountain goat, the tenth sign of the modern zodiac). These details may provide clues to the discerning readers about the cosmic dimensions determined by 28 steps of 500 years.

In common usage, the seven heavens have retained a certain degree of acceptability, but the concept of seven earths has become totally foreign to the earth-bound dwellers of our planet. Yet, even a cursory understanding of the cosmic symmetry is enough to realize that the seven heavens

49. "A complete list of the 28 mansions is reported by ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb (d. 238/852), on the authority of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795)." Kunitzsch, P., "Al-Manāzil" in Bosworth, C.E. *et al*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 374-6.

50. *Yūnus*: 5.

51. *Yā Sīn*: 37-40. *ʿUrjūn*: the raceme of the date-palm, when it becomes old and dry, it curves like the crescent.

would have seven corresponding earths. The Qurʾānic reference to the creation of seven earths has always remained a central aspect of sacred cosmology.

*Allah is He who has created seven heavens and, like them, of the earth. Through all of them flows down His command, so that you might come to know that Allah has power over everything and that Allah encompasses all things with His knowledge.*⁵²

Commenting on this verse, Ibn Kathīr (700/1300-774/1372) quotes a ḥadīth on the authority of ʿĀ'isha, “found in the compilations of the two Shaykhs”, in his Tafsīr: “Whoever oppressed another on earth, even to the measure of a [single] forearm, will be shackled by the measure of seven earths”. Bukhārī has a variant of this hadith, on the authority of Ibn ʿUmar, in which the Prophet is reported to have said that this oppressor will be “buried under” (*khusifa*) the seven earths.⁵³

Ibn Kathīr also quotes these, with full chains of narration, etymology of words, and their meaning in the chapter on the creation of earth in his celebrated history, *Bidāya wa nihāya*.⁵⁴

It is noteworthy that Ibn Kathīr felt the need to refute those who “have taken this [number] to mean the seven *aqālīm*”, for “they have spent their energies in meaningless pursuit, have drowned in the disputation, and gone against the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth.”⁵⁵



So far, we have explored three facets of the Sacred Cosmology: the Guarded Tablet and the Pen; the Throne and the Footstool; and the Heavens and the Earth. The Qurʾānic creation theme contains several other elements. These include the creation of mountains, oceans, heavenly objects (such as the Sun and the Moon, and the stars), the night and the

52. *aṭ-Ṭalāq*: 12.

53. “The two Shaykhs” is an honorific reference to al-Bukhārī and al-Muslim. *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 8, 156, who cites Bukhārī 2453 and Muslim 1612. The variant is to be found in Bukhārī 5454.

54. See Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya wa nihāya*, Vol. 1, 16, “What has been said regarding the seven earths”.

55. *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 8, 156.

day, time, water, winds, clouds, rain, and oceans. Furthermore there are descriptions of certain physical phenomena such as floods, thunder, and lightening. All of these became themes for the Sacred Cosmology, which had its own peculiar way of ordering material. Invariably it began with Qur'ānic data, then approached the Prophetic traditions, then reflections by the Companions and by those who followed them. The close affinity of this methodology to that used in other branches of early Islamic tradition such as Ḥadīth, *tārīkh* (history), *ʿilm al-rijāl* (science of biography), is noteworthy.

(To be continued)