

The chronicles of Dhu'l Qarnayn

1.0 Introduction

In the Holy Qur'ān, Allāh mentions the story of Dhu'l Qarnayn and his travels. We are informed that he was a man of Allāh, who had been given immense power and might. The sixteen verses from Sūrah al-Kahf explain what he did with this God-given power.

The story is mentioned in Sūrah al-Kahf, meaning 'the cave'. A cave by nature cannot be appreciated merely from the outside. It has to be explored and ventured. The stories from Sūrah al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave, Mūsā & Khizr, the story of the two gardens and Dhu'l Qarnayn) certainly are stories that need to be analysed, explored and understood from deep within.

2.0 Background to the Surah (*Asbāb al-Nuzul*)

Quraysh sent al-Nadr ibn al-Hārith and Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'īt to al-Madīnah in order to learn more about Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) from the Jewish rabbis residing there. They told them to ask Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) about three things. The rabbis said that if he could give the answer to the questions, then this would indicate he is a true messenger of Allāh. The questions were (i) about a group of young men and their strange and wondrous tale (ii) about a man who travelled a great deal, east and west (iii) about the *Rūh*. Confidently, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) told the Qurayshīs that he will tell them tomorrow, knowing that Jibrīl would send the revelation from Allāh. However, he did not say *Insha Allāh*. As a result, it was fifteen days before the revelation came (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 113).

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was saddened by the delay in revelation. The Sūrah itself explained that a person should not talk about any future event, except by adding *Insha Allāh* (verse 23-4).

However, the episode showed clearly that the Qur'ān is the word of Allāh, and that it was not written by Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). If it was, then there would be no need to delay the answers, not least because it gave an opportunity to the enemies to talk negatively about him. For those who try to find shortcomings in the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) by using this episode (he forgot, he is merely a man and so on), we remind them the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) sometimes made deliberate mistakes, in order to teach the Ummah. In his own words,

I do not forget but I am made to forget.

In other report (*al-Shifā*, 343), he said:

Certainly I forget or I am made to forget so that it becomes a Sunna.

Sūrah al-Kahf answered the questions put to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). In considerable detail, the chapter highlighted the story of the As'hāb al-Kahf and Dhūl-Qarnayn. However, with regards to the *Rūh*, Allāh stated that man had not been given extensive knowledge on this.

3.0 What do we know about Dhu'l Qarnayn?

Dhu'l Qarnayn was a king of Persian descent that had been given great power by Allāh. He was not a prophet but a servant of Allāh (*al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 504). We are informed that he had power and dominion over the east and west. All countries, nations and kings submitted to him. He had superior might in terms on men, machinery and equipment. It is said that only four men had ever ruled the entire world at one time; Sulaymān (peace be upon him), Dhu'l Qarnayn, Nīm'rūd, and Nebuchadnezzar (Bukhtnasr) (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 33, *al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 507).

3.1 His title - why 'one of the two horns'?

Dhu'l Qarnayn means 'one of two horns' and was the *title* given to him in the Qur'ān. The scholars have given different explanations behind this title:

- *One explanation behind the name is that he reached the two 'horns' of the sun, east and west, where it rises and where it sets (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 204).
- *Some say he platted his hair and had two plats (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 32).
- *Some say it is because he became the king of the two superpowers of the day; Persia and Rome (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 33).

3.2 His name and identity

As for his actual name, there are many opinions:

- *Abd Allāh ibn al-Dahak ibn Ma'd, according to Ibn Abbas (*al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 505).
- *Marzaban
- *Harmas
- *Hardis (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 31).
- *Alexander the Great (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 31).

3.3. Is Dhu'l Qarnayn Alexander the Great?

There are many observers who believe that the Dhu'l Qarnayn mentioned in the Qur'ān is in fact Alexander the Great (born 356 BC).

Alexander the Great was the student of Aristotle. Alexander's father was Philip II of Macedon, who was assassinated in 336. Alexander inherited his powerful yet volatile kingdom. He dealt with troubles closer to home first and strengthened his control over Macedonian power in Greece.

In a short span of time, Alexander the Great led his army to victories over the Persian Empire – Asia, Syria, Egypt and beyond and was crowned 'King of Persia' by the age of twenty-five. Over the next eight years, his reign expanded, creating an empire that stretched three continents and covered over two million square miles. He died in Babylon in 323 BC.

Is Dhu'l Qarnayn Alexander the Great? One thing for sure is that this is not a new question; Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) wrote about this. Both conquered land and so this gives the opinion weight. However, most Muslim experts suggest there is no correlation. Hāfiz Ibn Kathīr is adamant they are two separate individuals (*al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 506)

- a. Alexander the Great was Greek whereas Dhu'l Qarnayn was Persian.
- b. Dhu'l Qarnayn was a Muslim, a believer in Allāh and the Last Day. Alexander worshipped idols.
- c. Like the Qur'ān mentions, Dhu'l Qarnayn showed mercy and compassion in his decisions and dealings. Alexander the Great on the other hand was known to have killed his own family members (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 51).

3.4 Is Dhu'l Qarnayn Cyrus the Great?

Other experts suggest that Dhu'l Qarnayn was Cyrus the Great (or Cyrus II) (born 590-580 BC). He was a conqueror who founded the Archaemenian Empire, centred in Persia. In the Bible, he is the liberator of the Jews, who were captive in Babylonia. He came from a long line of ruling chiefs. History testifies that he travelled extensively, conquering lands in extraordinary size. He was tolerant, wise and forgiving.

Allāma Abu'l Kalām Azād is the main advocate that Dhu'l Qarnayn was Cyrus the Great. In *Ziā al-Qur'ān*, Pīr Muhammad Karam Shāh cites his argument in considerable detail (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: pp.46-51).

3.5 Evaluation

Much has been said about the identity of Dhu'l Qarnayn, other than the possibility of Alexander the Great and Cyrus II. Unfortunately, very little is confirmed. There is difference too regarding when he lived. The Jews must have known Dhu'l Qarnayn because they asked about him. Some say he lived before Isa by three hundred years (*Sha'rāwī*, 71). Others say he was from the time of Ibrahim (peace be upon him), and did Tawāf around the Ka'ba with him (*Sha'rāwī*, 71). Another opinion is that Dhu'l Qarnayn was the result of a dream seen by Danyāl (peace be upon him). He dreamt that a man would appear from Banū Isrā'īl, who would bring victory and freedom to his people (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 47). Imām al-Qurtubī writes that Dhu'l Qarnayn had a guardian angel always

overlooking him, the same angel who will fold the earth nearer the end of time (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 32).

In short, one must not allow the exact identity of Dhu'l Qarnayn to distract us from his message. If the actual figure was so important, then Allāh certainly would have given us more detail about his name, his whereabouts and his travels. By leaving it unclear, Allāh is telling us his story is more important than his name, era and location (*Sha'rāwī*, 72). What we need to know about him is mentioned clearly in the Qur'ān.

And the first description of him is that he was a man that Allāh had given him power and responsibility in the kingdom and power. Importantly, he did not see this as the end but the means. He used this power and might in the path of Allāh.

4.0 His travels to the west

The Qur'ān informs us that Dhu'l Qarnayn travelled to the west, or the place of the setting of the sun. There, he found the spring of *hami'a*, which comes from the word for 'mud'. Imām al-Qurtubī suggests that the word can also mean 'hot' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 33). When Allāh states in the Qur'ān 'he found it setting in a muddy spring' it means that it seemed like the sun was setting into the spring. When you see a sunset on the sea, it seems the sun is setting into the sea (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 206). Pīr Muhammad Karam Shāh has suggested this may have been the Black Sea (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III, 50).

There he found a nation and Allāh gave him a choice regarding them. If he wanted to, he could kill the men and keep the children and women as captives, or – if he wanted to – he could set them all free (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 206). These people had tried to steal Dhu'l Qarnayn's power and prestige and were now at his mercy.

He gave an answer based on taqwa - if they committed oppression then he would punish them, after which Allāh too would inflict a punishment on them in the hereafter. However, if they believed and performed good actions, then for them would be a gracious outcome. His response was based on justice and fairness, the hallmark of all good leaders.

What we learn

- i. The hereafter should be a sufficient deterrent. At the very least, the believer should take comfort in the fact the oppressor will soon meet his Lord.
- ii. Wrongdoers should be given a chance to repent.
- iii. When it comes to certain crimes, Allāh waits for the punishment for the criminal in the next world. Then there are certain punishments that are given immediately; oppression to people is one of them. Disobedience to parents is another (*al-Targhīb*, 480). Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

Allāh – if He wishes – can delay the punishment of all sins until the Day of Judgement except for disobedience to parents. For Allāh will certainly quicken the punishment for the perpetrator in this world before death.

5.0 His travels to the east

Dhu'l Qarnayn's travels continued. Every time he passed a nation, he called people to Allāh. We are informed he then reached the east, to a community that had no shelter from the sun. They had no buildings or trees that could provide them with shade. It was a very primitive place with no town there (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 37). Qatāda comments:

It was mentioned to us that they were in a land where nothing grew, so when the sun rose they would go into tunnels until it had passed its zenith, then they would come out to go about their daily lives and earn themselves a living (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 208).

Imam Sha'rāwī offers a different perspective. He suggests that the place in question could be the very northern or southern parts of the earth, where day lasts six months and night lasts six months (*Sha'rāwī*, 87).

What we learn

i. Dhu'l Qarnayn was sent to all types of people, in all parts of the world. A true leader knows their subjects, wherever they may be.

6.0 The land of Yājūj & Mājūj

From the east of the earth, Dhu'l Qarnayn then traveled to a place between two mountains, with a valley in between. It is here that Yājūj & Mājūj resided. Here he found a community that barely understood a word, perhaps because they were such an isolated nation (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 210). The people requested Dhu'l Qarnayn to build a wall as a barrier between them and Yājūj & Mājūj, who were causing havoc and destruction on their lives. They were willing to pay him handsomely for his duties, after collecting money from amongst themselves. In reply, Dhu'l Qarnayn replied 'That in which my Lord has established is better for me', namely that he did not require a payment. He then agreed to build it, but with their help and assistance.

Dhu'l Qarnayn asked for blocks of irons (some opinions suggest sheets of iron (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1228, *Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 53). It was said that each block weighed one qintar, equivalent to 256kgs (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 211). He filled the valley with these blocks until it reached the top of the mountain. Then, he lit a fire until it was burning hot, and then copper was added over it (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 211). When it was complete, Dhu'l Qarnayn explained that Yājūj and Mājūj would not be able to scale it, dig or penetrate through it. However, he also informed the people that even this wall will not be sufficient to stop the decree of Allāh, nearer the Day of Judgement. Then, Yājūj and Mājūj will finally escape from therein and cause havoc on earth. The Prophet (peace and blessings

of Allāh be upon him) explained that in his lifetime, a small hole appeared (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 212).

What we learn

- i. The king or state is responsible for providing security to their subjects. The community asked Dhu'l Qarnayn for security from Yājūj and Mājūj.
- ii. Manpower is greater than money. Dhu'l Qarnayn was offered money for his services. He asked for manpower instead.
- iii. Teach people to fish, don't just give them the fishes. Dhu'l Qarnayn made them help with the wall, so they value it more. They made him do it, so later, if there is a defect, they could correct it. It gave them confidence to defend themselves.

6.1 Who are Yājūj & Mājūj?

Much has been said about this topic area. Some depictions suggest they have beastly like features, though Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that 'Yājūj & Mājūj are from the children of Adam' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1228). Ibn Kathīr writes that Yājūj and Mājūj have links with the Turks, and that is where the name comes from (*tark* means to leave, these people left Yājūj and Mājūj behind the barrier, *al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 511). We know they are agents of destruction.

At this moment in time, they are hidden behind the wall constructed by Dhu'l Qarnayn. Closer to the end of time, they will escape and cause havoc on earth. Their appearance is one of the major signs of the Day of Judgement.

This opinion (the majority one) suggests that Yājūj & Mājūj are yet to appear, as they form the final, major signs of the Day of Judgement. Others have suggested that they have already escaped. Sayyid Qutb writes that: 'It could be that Allāh's promise has already materialized and that they are now on earth causing havoc and destruction, and attacking the Islamic world' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1229).

6.2 Where is the wall?

Regarding its exact location, there is no mention of this in the Qur'ān & Sunna explicitly. Having said this, it does not mean the wall is invisible. There are reports from the Prophet's time of Companions who affirmed they had seen the wall (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 42). One man said to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), 'I have seen the barrier (of Yājūj and Mājūj). And it resembled the likes of a decorated gown.' The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) remarked, 'Indeed you did see it' (*The Beginning of the End*, 314). In another report, the Companion described it as a 'decorated gown, partly black and partly red' (Ibid, 315). In the time of al-Khalīfa al-Wāsiq (around 232 AH) a group was sent to the barrier, in the north east of the earth (Ibid. 315).

Pīrẓāda Imdād Hussain suggests that finding this wall may not be so easy; thousands of years have passed and so the iron wall may be covered now in mud and dust, and the mountains and area does not have to be a massive one; it could well be a very small place on Allāh's vast earth (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1228).

Some have suggested the wall in question is the Great Wall of China (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 49-50). When Ibn Batūta travelled to China then he too was intrigued to know whether this was the wall, but he found no evidence to suggest so. The Great Wall is – according to one survey – 13,171 miles long. The wall mentioned in the Qur'ān is like a dam between two mountains.

Others suggest somewhere in Central Asia, between Armenia and Azerbaijan (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 37), perhaps in the Caucasus mountain range. Allama Ghulām Rasūl Sa'idī writes that the barrier is the Daryal Gorge, located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea (*The Beginning of the End*, 318). Wherever it was, the clues from the Qur'ān suggest it was a remote place with no or little outside world contact. This is because they could not communicate well.

What is undisputed is the importance of the wall, wherever it is. Hāfiz Ibn Kathīr writes:

There is no building on earth more grand and more beneficial for mankind in their worldly affairs than this wall (*al-Bidāya wa'l Nihāya*, I: 513)

7.0 Concluding remarks

a. Lessons from the Qur'ān are timeless. Imām al-Sha'rāwī writes that though clearly this event took place with specific persons and at a specific time, the exact details of the places and persons have been left unclear deliberately. This is so we can take lesson and heed from it in general.

*The Companions of the Cave is a lesson for all those faithful people who find themselves persecuted by the powerful and tyrannical. When one finds himself in such a situation, the first thing they should do is seek the mercy of Allāh and pray to him. When they entered the cave, the first thing they did is to invoke the mercy of Allāh and leave their matters in His hands.

*The story of Mūsā and Khizr is a story of how to seek knowledge and more importantly, companionship, from your senior. It teaches us everything has an outer and inner.

*The story of Dhu'l Qarnayn is a blueprint for success for anyone who is blessed with power, authority and might. Dhu'l Qarnayn was a *mumakkin*, meaning someone given power. Allāh through the story of Dhu'l Qarnayn teaches us that men of power take *and* give. They cannot take alone (*Sha'rāwī*, 69).

b. Dhu'l Qarnayn did not wait for Yājūj and Mājūj to fight them head on. That is not the job of the leader. He instead took preventative measures to make sure they don't oppress in the first place (*Sha'rāwī*, 91).

c. To a large extent, we consider money, fame and power as the end result. They are not. They are the *means* by which we can achieve with greater things. Dhu'l Qarnayn had power and might but his story teaches us what to do with such heavy responsibilities. He helped the oppressed. He inspired them to work. He planned for the people coming after him. Kingdom is not the goal per se. It is a means to an end, namely implementing the law of Allāh on His land. Nimrud was given kingdom but he used it in the wrong way (*Sha'rāwī*, 69).

8.0 Appendix: Dhu'l Qarnayn in the Qur'ān (Surah al-Kahf)

And they ask you (O Muhammad) about Dhu'l Qarnayn. Say: 'I shall recite his story to you' (83).

Indeed We gave him authority in the land and bestowed him the means of everything (84).

He therefore pursued a way (85).

To the extent that he reached the setting place of the sun, he found it setting in a muddy spring, and found a nation there; We said: 'O Dhu'l Qarnayn! Either punish them or choose kindness for them' (86).

He said: 'Regarding one who has done injustice, we shall soon punish him – he will then be brought back to his Lord, Who will punish him severely (87).

'And regarding the one who believed and did good deeds – so his reward his goodness; and we shall soon give him an easy command' (88).

He again then pursued a way (89).

To the extent that when he reached the rising place of the sun, he found it rising upon a nation for which We had not kept any shelter from it (90).

So it is; and Our knowledge encompasses all that he possessed (91).

He again pursued a purpose (92).

Until, when he came between two mountains, he found them a nation that did not appear to understand any speech (93).

They said: 'O Dhu'l Qarnayn! Indeed Yājūj & Mājūj are spreading chaos in the land – so shall we assign for you a consideration upon the condition that you set up a wall between us and them? (94)

He said: 'That which my Lord has given me control over is better, therefore help me with strength [and] I shall set up a barrier between you and them' (95).

'Give me blocks of irons.' Until when he raised a wall equal to the edge of the mountains, he said, 'blow'; to the extent that he made it ablaze. He said: 'Bring me molten copper to pour upon it' (96).

Therefore Yājūj & Mājūj were neither able to surmount it, nor could they pierce it (97).

Dhu'l Qarnayn said: 'This is the mercy of my Lord; then when the promise of my Lord arrives, He will blow it to bits; and my Lord's promise is true' (98).

And on that day We shall release them in groups surging like waves one after another, and the Trumpet will be blown – so We shall gather them altogether' (99).

9.0 Bibliography

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