

Chapter 4 – Nature

The Qur'ānic cosmogony is minimal. Of the metaphysics of creation the Qur'ān simply says that the world and whatever God decided to create in it came into existence by His sheer command: "Be" (2.al-Baqarah:117; 3.Āli 'Imrān:47, 59; 6.al-An'ām:73; 16.an-Nahl:40; 19.Maryam:35; 36.Yā Seen:82; 40.Ghāfir:68). God is, therefore, the absolute possessor of the universe and its unquestioned commander, just as He is its merciful sustainer. Because of His unconditional mastery, when God wished to bring the heavens and the earth into existence, He said to them: "Come hither, voluntarily or involuntarily" (41.Fuṣṣilat:11). And so it is that, as we shall see shortly in more detail, all nature obeys God by an "automatic volition" except for man, who has opportunity equally for obedience or disobedience.

This is why the Qur'ān regards the whole universe as "Muslim," because everything therein (except man, who may or may not *become* "Muslim") has "surrendered itself to God's will" (3.Āli 'Imrān:83), and everything glorifies God (57.al-Hadeed:1; 59.al-Hashr:1; 61.aṣ-Ṣaff:1; also 17.al-Isrā':44; 24.an-Nūr:41, etc.). The only hint in the Qur'ān about the "unfolding" of the universe is; "Did the disbelievers not see [i.e., know] that the heavens and the earth [i.e., all space] were one undifferentiated mass [*ratq*] and then We unfolded them?" (21.al-Anbiyā':30). The entire process of creation is said to have taken "six days" (7.al-A'rāf:54; 10.Yūnus:3; 11.Hūd:7; 25.al-Furqān:59), after which God established Himself on the "Throne" (7.al-A'rāf:54; 10.Yūnus:3, etc.).

From His throne God manages the affairs of the world; He sends down commands through angels and the Spirit, and these ascend back to Him with reports. The Qur'ān speaks often of this double movement (32.as-Sajdah:5; 70.al-Ma'ārij:4; 34.Saba':2; 57.al-Hadeed:4; cf. 97.al-Qadr:4). Time, for the Qur'ān, is certainly relative and depends on the type of experience and status of being of the subject. In 32.as-Sajdah:5 we are told that one day of the ascension of angels equals one thousand years of "earthly" time, while in 70.al-Ma'ārij:4 the span given equals fifty thousand years of the time of ordinary experience¹. It is often said (e.g., 2.al-Baqarah:259; 17.al-Isrā':52; 20.Ṭā Hā:104; and 23.al-Mu'minūn:112-114) that on the Day of Resurrection sinners will think that their time in this world, or the time until the Resurrection, lasted but a few days. And some people, awakened after sleep lasting several years or even several centuries (as in the case of the "young men of the cave" in *sura* 18.al-Kahf), thought their sleep had lasted only "for an hour" or "for a day or part of a day." However these difficult passages are to be interpreted, the figures of one thousand or fifty thousand years of ordinary time being equal to one day "there" are surely not to be taken literally.

But if the Qur'ān has little to say about cosmogony, it makes frequent and repeated statements about nature and natural phenomena, though these statements

¹ Theodor Nöldeke (*Geschichte des Qorāns*, revised by Friedrich Schwally [Leipzig, 1909]. Part 1:106) and Régis Blachère (*Le Coran [Paris, 1966]*, p. 614) think 70.al-Ma'ārij:4 is a later insertion. Nöldeke even says this verse "actually looks like a gloss." If these scholars are saying that this verse was inserted by later Muslims, they are definitely wrong. Richard Bell (*The Qur'ān* [Edinburgh, 1937], p. 604) says: "Vv. 4, 5 are an insertion designed to obviate the difficulty of the delay in the coming of the event, referring to the "punishment about to fall" mentioned in verse 1, and promised, according to Bell, in 52.aṭ-Ṭūr:7-8. Bell's view is based on the assumption (which I consider false) that verse 1 refers to a terrestrial punishment promised to the Meccans rather than the punishment of hellfire, which is clearly referred to in verses 15-18. There is thus no convincing evidence that verse 4 is a later insertion.

invariably relate nature to God or to man, or to both. Often they portray God's unlimited power and majesty and invite man to believe in Him, or depict His infinite mercy and require man to be grateful to Him. In both cases, nature's magnitude and utility for man, as well as the stability and regularity of natural phenomena, are stressed. If you sow seeds and nurture the saplings, you can expect to reap the harvest; otherwise not. If you build a ship and place it on the sea, and the winds are favorable, you may anticipate profitable trade; otherwise not. The working of natural causes, therefore, is inevitable and undeniable.

Besides natural causation, however, there is another, more ultimate causation, bestowing upon natural processes in their entirety a significance and an intelligibility that natural processes viewed in themselves do not yield. This higher causation is not a duplicate of, nor is it in addition to, natural causation. It works within it, or rather is identical with it—when viewed at a different level and invested with the proper meaning. As we shall see presently, the Qur'ān uses both natural causation language and divine causation or religious language, in different contexts and clearly with different purposes in view.

The most fundamental disparity between God and His creation is that, whereas God is infinite and absolute, every creature is finite. All things have potentialities, but no amount of potentiality may allow what is finite to transcend its finitude and pass into infinity. This is what the Qur'ān means when it says that everything except God is "measured out" (*qadar* or *qadr*, *taqdir*, etc.), and is hence *dependent upon* God, and that whenever a creature claims complete self-sufficiency or independence (*istighnā'*, *istikbār*), it thus claims infinitude and a share in divinity (*shirk*). When God creates anything, He places within it its powers or laws of behavior, called in the Qur'ān "guidance," "command," or "measure" whereby it fits into the rest of the universe: "He gave everything its creation and then guided [it]" (20.Ṭā Hā:50); "He who created [things] and [created them] well, and who measured [them] out and thus guided [them]" (87.al-A'lā:2-3); "Lo, to Him belong both creation and commanding" (7.al-A'rāf:54); and, "Indeed, We have created everything with a measure" (54.al-Qamar:49; cf. 15.al-Hijr:21). If things should break their laws and violate their measure, there would be not an ordered universe, but chaos. The Qur'ān speaks frequently of the perfect order in the universe as proof not only of God's existence but also of His unity (21.al-Anbiyā':22; cf. also the moving passage at 27.an-Naml:60-64).

It should be noted that this "measuring" has a strong holistic bias in terms of patterns, dispositions, and trends. Nor is the resulting total performance conceived of in terms of particular events and acts. It is, therefore, *not* a theory of predetermination, although it does mean a kind of "holistic determinism." This is clear from the references where "measured" does not mean "predetermined" but "finite" or "limited." The following passage must be understood in the same light:

And the sun moves [along its course] to its resting place—that is the measuring [or determination] of the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing. And for the moon We have appointed certain stations, until it returns like an old curved stick. It is not for the sun to overtake the moon, nor for the night to overstrip the day, each coursing in its own orbit. (36.Yā Seen:38-40)

This *qadar* or "measure" also operates at the holistic level in the sphere of human moral actions, which by definition are free. Judgment in history, for instance,

concerns the total performance of a people; in the Last Judgment, it is primarily the total performance of individuals that comes under review. The difference between nature and man is that in the case of man the particular moral actions take place by free choice.

Nature is in fact so well-knit and works with such regularity that it is the prime miracle of God, cited untiringly in the Qur'ān. No being short of God could have built this vast and stable edifice:

He who created seven heavens one on top of another—you shall not find in the creation of the Merciful any dislocation. Look again—do you see any gap? Look again and again—your sight will return to you frustrated [in the attempt to find any discontinuity or irregularity] and fatigued. (67.al-Mulk:3-4)

And you see the mountains and think them solid [and stationary] but they are fleeting like clouds—the creation of God who has well-completed [the creation of] everything. (27.an-Naml:88)

References to phenomena like the regularity of the day following the night and the night following the day, the rainy season when the earth is quickened following the dry season when it had been parched and dead, are strewn through the pages of the Qur'ān.

This gigantic machine, the universe, with all its causal processes, is the prime "sign" (*āya*) or proof of its Maker. Who else but an infinitely powerful, merciful, and purposeful Being could have brought into existence something with dimensions so vast and an order and design so complex and minute? Yet, man, the Qur'ān complains recurrently, is ordinarily apt to "forget" God so long as "natural" causes work for him; it is only when natural causes fail him that he "discovers" God. What superficiality and short-sightedness! A man in dire thirst in a desert is desperately searching for water and, taking a mirage to be water, runs after it. When he gets to the point where he thought there was water, he finds no water—indeed, nothing—but in that moment of utter disillusionment he "finds" God (24.an-Nūr:39). The situation is cited as a parable for unbelievers who deem their life-record to be full of weighty and consequential deeds; these deeds, in the final analysis, will turn out to be no more than a mirage. Again, when people sail in a ship and the waters are calm and the winds favorable, they forget in their revelry that there is God. But suddenly a storm overtakes them and angry waves whipped up by strong winds encircle them, so that they think there is no escape. In that moment of utter helplessness, they cry out to God in all sincerity. After deliverance by God, they once again become rebellious and do negative deeds (10.Yūnus:22 ff.; cf. 29.al-'Ankabūt:65 ff.).

People belittle or ignore or even rebel against God, because they view the processes of nature as having self-sufficient causes, normally regarded by them as ultimate. They do not realize that the universe is a sign pointing to something "beyond" itself, something without which the universe, with all its natural causes, would be and could be nothing.

The first problem is that people do not take the ordered universe to be a sign or a miracle at all, but rather look for the interruption or suppression of natural processes in order to find miracles of God. Secondly, and far more importantly, the universe as a sign vanishes into nothing when "put beside" God, for beside God nothing at all has any inherent warrant to exist. That the earth supports people and does not sink, and the heavens holding this immense space do not shred is itself a miracle (34.Saba':9; 50.Qāf:6 ff.; 51.adh-Dhāriyāt:47 ff.; also 13.ar-Ra'd:2 ff. and all verses that speak of

the heavens and the earth having been firmly built and well-knit). Indeed, there could have been just empty nothingness instead of this plenitude of being, pure inanity instead of this richness of existence, *but for the primordial act of God's mercy*. This plenitude of natural being is therefore itself "supernaturally" miraculous and the greatest of all miracles "for those who sincerely ponder and surrender their ears to listen." Mercy is as ultimate an attribute of God as power, and is in a definite sense synonymous with creation. While nature therefore is *autonomous* in the sense that it works by its own innate laws, it is certainly not *autocratic*, for it does not contain its own ultimacy or final rationale as an integral part of its being.

Nature with its incomprehensible vastness and regularity should serve as God's sign for humans, since none but an infinite and unique Being could have created it. This may be called a "natural sign." If, however, some or even most people are not persuaded by the normal workings of nature, God is capable of diverting, suppressing, or temporarily suspending the efficacy of natural causes. Such portents as floods, hurricanes, violent earthquakes, or torrential rains falling where there is normally little or no rain, are unusually distinctive signs, coming often at some point when a people is irretrievably on a wicked course of action. That is why, when the Meccans repeatedly demanded such fateful "signs" from the Prophet, the Qur'ān told them not to "anticipate" them, for when they come the people upon whom they are visited shall no longer have any respite (21.al-Anbiyā':40; 32.as-Sajdah:29; 6.al-An'ām:8, etc.). Such signs are not contrary to the course of nature but are prodigies that may be called "portent signs" or "historical signs."

Other signs are apparently *against* the course of nature, as when fire became cool and safe for Abraham when he was thrown into it to be burnt, or when Moses' rod turned into a serpent. These may be called "supranatural miracles." Such signs are miracles par excellence, manifested at the hands of a Messenger of God to support the truth of the Messenger's claim and teaching. The Qur'ān is emphatic that no prophet can work miracles without divine permission and active help: "It is not up to a Messenger to produce a sign unless it be by God's permission" (40.Ghāfir:78). Thus, all Jesus' miracles are said to have been produced "by God's permission" (3.Āli 'Imrān:49, etc.). This is not just a defense of Muhammad (PBUH) when he appeared to be unable to produce this kind of miracle. The basic reason for this statement in the Qur'ān is that, since people mistakenly attribute the occurrence of natural events to their natural causes alone without recognizing the presence of God in them, when a "supranatural miracle" occurs, it must be such that there is no doubt that it is authored by God.

Before proceeding further with our account of natural and supranatural signs or miracles, we will do well to keep two important points in mind. First, although a "sign" in the religious sense points beyond itself to its Author, and the transition is in this sense rational or at least reasonable, it is nevertheless not equivalent to rational proof. In order to determine the meaning of a sign, one must have, in addition to reason, a certain disposition, i.e., the capacity for faith. This is why for many naturalists the universe is not a sign pointing beyond itself, but is the ultimate reality ("We die and we live and we die only through [the natural process of] Time"—45.al-Jāthiyah:24). The Qur'ān, indeed, insists throughout that to read the signs correctly and to understand the Qur'ān requires a mental-cum-spiritual attitude so that one may "really hear, really see, and really understand." For that matter, the signs do not become subjective for the Qur'ān because many do not "see" them, any more than the sun becomes subjective because animals habituated to darkness cannot see it.

The second important point is that although many people have confused signs, particularly supranatural or revelational signs (or verses of the Qur'ān), with magic or sorcery, the two are not the same; the first is real, the latter illusory. The former has a permanence after being efficacious which the latter does not except in its psychological dimension. Magic is therefore evil, because it conceals and distorts reality; while a sign shows reality in its full plenitude. When opposing Moses, Pharaoh's magicians only "beguiled the sights of men" (7.al-A'rāf:116); "Lo, their ropes and sticks created the impression upon him [Moses], due to their magic, that they were moving" (20.Ṭā Hā:66). Magic is a kind of trickery (20.Ṭā Hā:64, 69) and requires some training and expertise (7.al-A'rāf:109, 112; 10.Yūnus:79; etc.). But, with all its unreality, magic does have a psychological effect which is real, as for example when the two angels Hārūt and Mārūt (2.al-Baqarah:102) are said to have taught people magic whereby they separated husbands from their wives—this effect, of course, being "with the permission of God."

The Meccans (and sometimes the Madinan Jews) had asked the Prophet to produce miracles like those of earlier prophets, in order to vindicate his claim. The Qur'ān gives several types of responses. The workings of nature from the heavens to the earth, various phenomena on land and sea, the human mind itself—in fact, all natural phenomena—are pointed to as genuine signs. This claim appears to rest on the assumption, or rather seeks to prove, that the same God who created nature and displayed His wisdom therein so clearly has also revealed the verses (*āyāt*, also meaning "signs") of the Qur'ān.

This would be evident, if only the opponents would ponder on both nature and God seriously and sincerely. Just as no one but God could have created nature, so no one but God could have produced the Qur'ān. The opponents of the Prophet are sometimes challenged to "produce even a single *sura* of the Qur'ān," and the conviction is expressed that they would not be able to do so even with their combined endeavor and with help from other sources (2.al-Baqarah:23; 10.Yūnus:38; 11.Hūd:13; 17.al-Isrā':88; 52.aṭ-Ṭūr:34 ff.). Just as nature represents the inexhaustible "words" or *logoi* of God, so does the Qur'ān (18.al-Kahf:109 ff.), for, like nature, the Qur'ān flows through the mind of the Prophet *with God's permission*, and if God should so will, He could close down the flow of the revelation from the Prophet's heart (42.ash-Shūrā:24; etc.).

The parallel (or even the identity) between the revelation of the Qur'ān and the creation of the universe has been pointed out by several medieval Muslim authors who have noted the numerous passages in which the revelation of the Qur'ān and the creation of nature are coupled. Of course, both are also mentioned often in other contexts—e.g., the revelation of the Qur'ān in relation to the revelation of earlier scriptures. The point made, I think correctly, is that the Qur'ān and nature are mentioned together so often not fortuitously but because of an intimate connection between the two, as seen, for example, in 3.Āli 'Imrān:108 ff., where after a brief reference to what will happen to the wicked and the good on the Last Day, the Qur'ān says: "These are God's signs that We recite to you in truth And to God belongs whatever is in the heavens and in the earth."

Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night are signs for people of wisdom—those who remember [or mention, i.e., by reciting the Qur'ān] standing and sitting and lying on their sides, and who ponder over the creation of the heavens and the earth [exclaiming]: Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain! (3.Āli 'Imrān:190 ff.)

These are the verses of the Book. That which has been sent down to you from your Lord is the Truth; yet most people do not believe. It is God who has raised the heavens without any pillars that you can see; then He established Himself on the Throne and subdued the sun and the moon—each running to a designated term (13.ar-Ra'd:1 ff.; and cf. such other passages as 10.Yūnus:1-3; 12.Yūsuf:102-105; and 20.Ṭā Hā:1-6).

The verses of the Qur'ān are *āyāt* or "signs" because they come from the same God who created the universe. But the Qur'ān refers to its verses as *tabyīn al-āyāt*, "the clarification of the signs [of God]," or speaks of "bringing them home" to the mind, as "We bring home the *āyāt* [*muṣarrif al-āyāt*]" (6.al-An'ām:65), or "We detail the *āyāt* [*faṣṣalna'l-āyāt*]" (e.g., in 6.al-An'ām:97-98). Often we read: "We explain [or clarify] to them the *āyāt* [that are already there] [*bayyannā'l-āyāt*, or *nubayyin'l-āyāt*]," as in 2.al-Baqarah:118, 219, 266; 3.Āli 'Imrān:118; 5.al-Mā'idah:75. When the term *āyāt* refers to verses of the Qur'ān, these *āyāt* are usually said to be "recited" (*natlūhā*, or *tutlā*, etc.); they are often said to be "clear *āyāt* [*āyāt bayyināt*]." This latter expression is applied to signs other than the Qur'ānic verses only three times, once in reference to a "portent sign," i.e., the destruction of the people of Lot (29.al-'Ankabūt:35), and twice in reference to historical or supranatural signs involving Moses and the Jews (2.al-Baqarah:211; 17.al-Isrā':101); it seems never to be applied to nature, presumably because natural signs lie buried beneath natural causation until the Qur'ānic verses resurrect them and clarify them as signs of God.

Thus (although the point should not be over-stressed), whereas natural miracles are, in this sense, weak for most of mankind and in the Qur'ān are usually called simply *āyāt*, the historical (portent) miracles, the supranatural miracles, and much more patently the revelation, are called *āyāt bayyināt* or simply *bayyināt*: "clear, manifest, and indubitable signs."

Most people are so obdurate, however, that even these "indubitable signs" are not sufficient to convert them, although they should be much more convincing than the natural *āyāt*. The *bayyina* is most effective as a sign, of course, for those who witnessed it originally and directly (e.g., the prophets), and their firm conviction clearly and once and for all sets them apart from the disbelievers (6.al-An'ām:57; 8.al-Anfāl:42; and specially 11.Hūd:17, 28, 63, 88). The Qur'ān asks: "Is one who has a clear proof (*bayyina*) from His Lord like him whose evil deeds [merely] appear attractive to him?" (47.Muḥammad:14). A *bayyina* thus clearly distinguishes the truth of the one to whom it is given from the falsehood of his opponent, even though this falsehood seems to be the truth to the disbelievers. What falsely appears to be the truth will disappear, but a *bayyina* never will. Also, whereas an *āya* is either perceived or *not* perceived, a *bayyina* is either perceived or *misperceived* and misidentified either as sorcery or some other form of trickery; but it cannot simply be denied. In 98.al-Bayyinah:1-4 the Prophet himself, together with the Qur'ān, is termed a *bayyina*. This short *sura*, called "al-Bayyinah," also expresses the view, repeated elsewhere in the Qur'ān, that religious dissensions and sects are caused by *bayyināt*, when people, who cannot deny them, differ widely as to their exact nature, source, and meaning.

A term even stronger than *bayyina* is *burhān*, which means "a demonstrative proof" and contains a factor of compelling rationality. It is close to *bayyina* and like it is confined to portents, supranatural miracles, and revelation and reason, or rather, reason-in-revelation; but whereas *bayyina* is clear or manifest and, in this sense, passively irresistible, *burhān* is rationally and psychologically compelling. The

Qur'ān itself is termed *burhān* (4.an-Nisā':174). In 2.al-Baqarah:111; 21.al-Anbiyā':24; 23.al-Mu'minūn:117; 27.an-Naml:64; and 28.al-Qaṣaṣ:75, the term apparently means a convincing (rational) account being asked from disbelievers and polytheists in defense of their religious stand. A highly interesting use of *burhān* is in 12.Yūsuf:24, where Joseph is depicted as having desisted from unlawful sexual intercourse with the Egyptian lady and finally resisted her powerful charms after the mutual sexual fascination of both had turned into excitement, "because he [Joseph] saw a *burhān* from his Lord." *Burhān* is, therefore, a kind of rational (and not just "logical") proof capable of controlling and diverting the course of extremely powerful instincts.

But the strongest type of *āyā* or "sign," also close to *burhān* in its usage, is *sulṭān*, literally meaning "authority" or "power" but used in the Qur'ān for a kind of sign or proof that might be described as a "knock-down proof." While a *bayyina* is clear and irresistible to an open and unprejudiced mind, and a *burhān*'s demonstrative power might overcome some prejudices, a sultan has a power that is psychologically almost coercive, in that it might cause those who were fairly determined in their rejection of the truth to accept it anyway. It must be emphasized that the differences among all these terms appear to be largely of quantity or degree of persuasive power.

Sulṭān is perhaps best translated as "that which overwhelms without leaving any real alternative." The root in its second form as used in the Qur'ān means "to cause someone to overwhelm or overpower someone else by physical force" (4.an-Nisā':90; 59.al-Ḥaṣhr:6), and this power is attributed to God. In his commentary on 55.ar-Raḥmān:33 ("O species of jinn and men! If you [think you] are able to penetrate the corners of the heavens and the earth, then [go and] penetrate—you shall not [be able to] penetrate except on the basis of a *sulṭān* [i.e., the authority or power rooted in knowledge]"), al-Ṭabarī says that the original meaning of *sulṭān* is "a clear proof or argument [*bayyina*, *ḥujja*]" but that it also comes to mean "physical possession or coercive power [*mulk*, *milk*]," since this latter type of force also comes to constitute some sort of "clear proof."²

While it is correct to say that *sulṭān* in 55.ar-Raḥmān:33 means clear proof or argument rooted in sure knowledge, in the general usage of the Qur'ān, the inference seems to be the other way around. The term certainly can mean physical, overwhelming power, as al-Ṭabarī himself also admits. Satan will reply to those who, on the Last Day, will accuse him of misleading them in this world: "I had no power [*sulṭān*] over you; I only invited you [to evil] and you accepted my invitation" (14.Ibrāheem:22) A similar conversation will take place on the Last Day between those who were weak in this world and those strong and rich ones whom the former will accuse of having led them astray (37.aṣ-Ṣāffāt:27-30). All these uses of the term *sulṭān* seem to mean or directly imply sheer physical power. This meaning must be logically prior, since it can easily be understood how overwhelming physical power can be changed into overwhelming rational or spiritual power, rather than vice versa.

In most other Qur'ānic contexts, however, *sulṭān* does mean a powerful, even overwhelmingly powerful, proof, reason, or sign (miracle). It can take the form of a supernatural miracle (23.al-Mu'minūn:45), or a revelation that can be recited or read (37.aṣ-Ṣāffāt:156 ff.). It can also mean a reason justifying a punitive course of action: "Whosoever is killed [without reason, we have given his next of kin the authority [or justification] [to retaliate]" (17.al-Isrā':33); and, "Do you want [by your wrongdoing]

² Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-qur'ān* (Cairo, 1321 A.H./1903-4 A.D.), 27.an-Naml:71.

to give God a clear justification against you?" (6.al-An‘ām:81). Or, a strong reason is given in defense against punitive action, as when Solomon said about the hoopoe: "I shall punish him severely or I shall slaughter him, unless he brings me some clear [or overwhelming] justification [for being absent]" (27.ash-Shu‘arā’:21).

Although we often find in the Qur’ān that *sulṭān* was either demanded of the prophets or was given to them, and we have seen that the Qur’ān itself is described as *sulṭān* on several occasions, the more common usage appears when prophets are portrayed as accusing their opponents of "worshipping besides God that for which God has sent down no authority [*sulṭān*]," or when it is said that what they worshipped besides God "were mere names given by them [to their deities] without God having sent down any authority for them" (3.Āli ‘Imrān:151; 6.al-An‘ām:81; 7.al-A‘rāf:33, 71; 12.Yūsuf:40; 53.an-Najm:23). W. Montgomery Watt,³ following Richard Bell,⁴ has interpreted the statement in 53.an-Najm:23 that certain pagan deities are "mere names" given to the deities by their worshippers, to mean that the Qur’ān is asserting that what the pagans worshipped actually did not exist. Watt and Bell claim that this was the final position of the Qur’ān regarding the pagan deities, after it had earlier adopted the view that what the Meccans worshipped as deities were really angels—a view held to be exemplified by 53.an-Najm:27.

This interpretation seems to me to be a capital mistake, apparently concocted to bolster Bell's theory of incessant revision of the Qur’ān by the Prophet—albeit "under divine guidance." Nowhere does the Qur’ān suggest that the pagan deities were nothing but mere names. What the Qur’ān is obviously saying to the pagans—not only through Muhammad (PBUH) but also through Abraham, Joseph, and others—is that when the pagans called various objects deities, they were *merely calling names* without any substance of truth or justification. That pagan deities, far from being just *nothing*, were in fact real objects—either human or otherwise—is brought out clearly in several parts of the Qur’ān, e.g., when Joseph says to his prison companions:

O my two prison companions! Are *several* Lords better or one all-powerful God? You worship besides Him only names you yourselves and your forefathers have given [i.e., names as deities are unreal but names as objects are real], and for which [i.e., the deity-names] God has revealed no authority [*sulṭān*]. (12.Yūsuf:39 ff.)

To resume our account of the demands of Muḥammad's (PBUH) opponents for "signs" or miracles: the Qur’ān's usual response is to point out the complexity, the regularity, and the order of nature itself, and to emphasize that the universe and all that is in it could not have brought themselves into existence. Nor were they created in sport, but with a serious purpose (3.Āli ‘Imrān:191; 38.Ṣād:27). This answer appears on the surface to be aimed not so much at vindicating the truth of Muḥammad's (PBUH) message, as at proving God's almighty power and purposefulness. In view of the relationship between the "verses" (*āyāt*) of the Qur’ān and the "signs" (*āyāt*) of nature, however, the Qur’ānic response involving nature becomes directly relevant to the truth of the Qur’ān itself.

There is also evidence to show that the Qur’ān claims that certain "historical" or "portent" signs support the truth of the Prophet's message. We read: "These people [the Meccans] say: Why does he [the Prophet] not bring a sign from his Lord? Has

³ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), p. 104, and *Companion to the Qur’ān* (London, 1967), p. 245.

⁴ *The Qur’ān*, p. 541.

there not come to them the clear proof contained in the earlier Books?" (20.Ṭā Hā:133); and, "Indeed, it is in the Books of the men of old. Is it not a sign for them that the learned ones of the Children of Israel recognize it [the Qur'ān]?" (26.ash-Shu'arā':196 ff.).

A clear portent-type sign is mentioned in 13.ar-Ra'd:31: "The disbelievers continue to be afflicted [with misfortune] because of what they do, or it alights near their door—until God's promise is [eventually] fulfilled." The idea here is that the misfortunes (famines, battles, etc.) of the Meccans are a foretaste of what is to come later as divine chastisement. Al-Ṭabarī tells us, from numerous authorities, that the verse points specifically to the misfortunes suffered by the Meccans as a result of Muslim attacks on their caravans, resulting in the surrender of Mecca to Islam.⁵ According to this interpretation, in its prediction this verse parallels 30.ar-Rūm:1-6, which refers to a victory of Persia over Byzantium while predicting (e.g., in the statement, "It is a promise of God") a reversal of the fortunes of war.

But what the Meccans and Jews specifically demanded from Muḥammad (PBUH) were *supranatural* miracles like those of earlier prophets. They demanded, for example, that an angel should be sent down to him, that he should become very rich suddenly or come to possess huge orchards, that he should bring down the heavens or ascend to heaven and bring back a book they could recite, etc. (6.al-An'ām:8, 50; 11.Hūd:31; 25.al-Furqān:7; etc.; cf. also 17.al-Isrā':90 ff.). The Qur'ān replies that angels would be sent down to them if those to whom the message is being brought were angels; that Muḥammad (PBUH) has never claimed to be a master of treasures but only a Messenger of God; that God could, if He wished, bring about these things at the hands of a prophet, but that a prophet cannot do these things on his own (6.al-An'ām:9, 37, 111; 17.al-Isrā':95; 7.al-A'rāf:188; 11.Hūd:12). But there are also other answers: that previous nations had been shown miracles at the hands of *their* prophets exactly as they had demanded them, but the people still rejected the prophets; that if Muḥammad (PBUH) were to bring a thousand miracles to the Meccans or to the Jews, it still would do them no good; that if Muḥammad (PBUH) were to bring down a book from the heavens *in concreto* so the people could touch it, they still would not accept him (3.Āli 'Imrān:183 ff.; 6.al-An'ām:7; etc.). Indeed, 17.al-Isrā':59 states categorically: "And nothing has prevented Us from sending miracles [*āyāt*] except that earlier peoples disbelieved in them." The Jews had asked Moses to perform much greater miracles than they were demanding from Muḥammad (PBUH), for they asked Moses to show God to them physically (4.an-Nisā':153).

One reason Muḥammad (PBUH) did not have miracles of the older supranatural type is that they were out of date. Still, the Prophet was uneasy that supranatural miracles were not available to him. On this the Qur'ān comments rather sharply:

We know, indeed, that what they say grieves you [O Muḥammad], but the wicked ones are not just rejecting you; they are rejecting the signs [*āyāt*] of God. Messengers before you have been repudiated [by their peoples], but they bore with patience their repudiation and their persecution until Our succor came to them. . . . If their rejection [of your message] weighs heavily upon you, then, if you can, seek out a hole into the earth or [climb up] to the heavens by a ladder and bring them a miracle [*āya*]! If God had so willed, He would have united all people on [this] Guidance—so do not be among the ignorant ones. (6.al-An'ām:33-35)

⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *op. cit.*, 13.ar-Ra'd:89-91.

The concepts of the regularity and autonomy of nature on the one hand and of the non-ultimacy of nature on the other do not appear in the Qur'ān exclusively, or even perhaps most importantly, in connection with the doctrine of miracles, but for two other purposes. The argument of the non-ultimacy of nature is often employed to prove the destructibility of nature and the possibility of its eventual re-creation for the purpose of the final accountability of, and judgment upon, man. Those to whom the stability of natural phenomena seems to afford a snug haven from accepting total moral responsibility and final judgment must know that the God whose great sign this universe is can create other forms of existence and life as well. The dawning of the consciousness that this life is only one of an infinite number of possible forms of life that God is capable of creating should be a potent factor, even for the dullest minds, in removal of the veil of nature that separates man from God. Indeed, the myriad forms of life in this universe betoken a Being of infinite power and wisdom. If God could create this universe and all that is in it, then He can replace it with another level of existence where people will be judged according to their deeds in this life and assigned their true destinies.

The Qur'ān also portrays vividly in several *suras* (e.g., 81.at-Takwīr and 99.az-Zalzalah) the chaos that will occur at the end of time when God suspends the laws of nature He established at the time of creation. Before God's power, which is exercised in the cause of justice and mercy, nothing whatever can stand. The entire earth shall be in His grasp on the Last Day and the immense magnitude of the heavenly space "shall be wrapped up" in His right hand (39.az-Zumar:67). Has God been so fatigued with this first creation that He cannot create another (50.Qāf:15)? Destruction is not for the sake of destruction alone, but to bring about a rearrangement of physical and moral elements and factors, a new level of creation.

Similarly, the argument involving the regularity of nature is very often employed to prove the utility of nature for man. Nature exists for man to exploit for his own ends, while the end of man himself is nothing else but to serve God, to be grateful to Him, and to worship Him alone. The utility, serviceability, and exploitability of nature by man are spoken of in numerous verses:

It is He who has created all that is in the earth for you [or: has created what is in the earth for all of you], (2.al-Baqarah:29)

Do you not see that God has made subservient to you what is in the heavens and the earth? (31.Luqmān:20)

God it is Who has subjected to you the sea that ships may sail therein by His command, that you may earn of God's bounty [through trade] and that you may be grateful. And He has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, coming from Him; therein are signs for people who reflect. (45.al-Jāthiyah:12 ff.; cf. also 14.Ibrāheem:32 ff.; 16.an-Nāhl:12-14; 22.al-Ḥajj:65; 29.al-'Ankabūt:61; 31.Luqmān:29; 35.Fāṭir:13; 39.az-Zumar:5; 43.az-Zukhruf:12 ff.)

Though all such verses portray God's power, their primary intent is to show God's use of His power for the betterment of man. Man is invited to use this opportunity for the good and not to "corrupt the earth [*fasād fil-ard*]," a phrase often repeated in the Qur'ān. The creation of the universe was a serious affair, not a sport or a triviality: "And We have not created the heavens and the earth and what is therein purposelessly—that is the view of those who reject [God] or who are ungrateful" (38.Ṣād:27; cf. 3.Āli 'Imrān:191). Nature is the grand handiwork of the Almighty, but

it does not exist just to show off His might and power. It is to serve man by meeting his vital needs.

The purpose of man's creation is that he do good in the world, not substitute himself for God and think that he can make and unmake the moral law at his own convenience and for his own selfish and narrow ends. This is the difference between physical laws and the moral law—the one is to be used and put to service; the other must be obeyed and served. For God says: "Do you think, then, that We created you in sport and that you shall not be returned to Us [charged with responsibility]?" (23.al-Mu'minūn:115).