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A Review of the Narrative Paradigms and Moral Trials in Surah Al-Kahf

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Abstract: Surah Al-Kahf (Chapter 18 of the Qur'an) represents one of the most structurally coherent and morally rich chapters in the Qur'anic text. The Surah presents a sequence of narratives that collectively convey essential ethical and spiritual lessons concerning human trials and divine wisdom. These narratives include the story of the Companions of the Cave, the parable of the two garden owners, the journey of Prophet Moses with al-Khidr, and the story of Dhul-Qarnayn. This review article examines the narrative paradigms embedded in these stories and the moral trials they represent. Drawing on classical Qur'anic exegesis and contemporary Qur'anic studies, the paper explores how these narratives illustrate four fundamental tests faced by humanity: faith, wealth, knowledge, and power. The review also highlights the literary and thematic coherence of Surah Al-Kahf and demonstrates how Qur'anic storytelling functions as a pedagogical tool for moral instruction. Through a synthesis of scholarly interpretations, this study argues that Surah Al-Kahf constructs a unified moral framework that guides believers toward humility, patience, and reliance on divine wisdom.

Keywords: Qur'anic narratives, Surah Al-Kahf, moral trials (fitan), thematic coherence, Islamic exegesis (tafsir).



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1. Introduction

Narrative discourse constitutes a central stylistic and pedagogical feature of the Qur'an. Through stories of past communities, prophets, and individuals, the Qur'an conveys moral instruction, theological insight, and guidance for human conduct. Scholars of Qur'anic studies have emphasized that these narratives serve not merely as historical accounts but as moral paradigms designed to shape ethical awareness and spiritual reflection [1].

Among the chapters of the Qur'an, Surah Al-Kahf holds particular significance due to its narrative richness and thematic coherence. The Surah consists of 110 verses and was revealed during the early Meccan period, a time when the emerging Muslim community faced ideological challenges and persecution. According to classical Islamic scholarship, the Surah was revealed partly in response to questions posed to the Prophet Muhammad regarding historical and theological matters [2].

Surah Al-Kahf contains four major narratives: the Companions of the Cave, the story of the two garden owners, the encounter between Moses and al-Khidr, and the journey of Dhul-Qarnayn. These narratives appear diverse in their characters and settings; however, many scholars argue that

they are united by a common thematic framework involving different forms of human trials [3]. Each story presents a moral challenge related to faith, material wealth, intellectual knowledge, or political power.

This review paper examines the narrative paradigms and moral trials embedded in Surah Al-Kahf by synthesizing interpretations from classical and modern scholars. The aim is to demonstrate how the Surah employs narrative structures to convey ethical guidance and spiritual lessons relevant to both historical and contemporary contexts.

2. Literature Review

The narratives of Surah Al-Kahf have received significant attention in Qur'anic exegesis and modern Islamic scholarship. Classical tafsir literature provides detailed interpretations of the Surah's themes and stories, while contemporary studies often focus on literary and thematic analysis.

Classical exegetes such as Ibn Kathir, Al-Tabari, and Al-Alusi examined the Surah through traditional methods that combine linguistic analysis, prophetic traditions, and historical context. In his well-known commentary *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Ibn Kathir emphasizes the spiritual lessons embedded in the narratives, particularly the themes of divine protection, humility, and moral responsibility [2].

Similarly, the Iraqi scholar Mahmud al-Alusi in *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* provides a comprehensive discussion of the Surah's symbolic meanings and theological implications. His work is considered one of the most extensive Qur'anic commentaries, spanning thirty volumes and integrating linguistic, theological, and philosophical interpretations [4].

Modern scholars have also explored the narrative structure of Surah Al-Kahf from literary and thematic perspectives. For example, Qutb [3] argues that the Surah revolves around the concept of trial (*fitnah*), illustrating how believers are tested in different aspects of life. According to this interpretation, the Surah's stories represent four major trials: the trial of faith, wealth, knowledge, and power [3].

Furthermore, Haleem [1] highlights the Qur'an's use of storytelling as a rhetorical device that encourages reflection and moral reasoning. From this perspective, Surah Al-Kahf can be understood as a carefully structured narrative discourse that integrates multiple stories into a coherent moral framework [1]. Recent academic studies have also affirmed this structural coherence, noting that the four narratives are harmonized with the Surah's broader theological objectives, particularly in their presentation of monotheism (*tawhīd*) and resurrection (*ma'ād*) [5].

Together, these studies indicate that Surah Al-Kahf functions as both a theological text and a sophisticated literary narrative designed to guide human behavior and belief.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative nature of research that is descriptive-analytical, based upon textual analysis and extracting themes from Qur'anic narratives. This study is based on the close reading of Surah Al-Kahf to collate its central narrative units and moral trials of faith, wealth, knowledge, and power. Each story is approached with a dual methodology combining classical Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) and modern scholarly readings to maintain both traditional accuracy and contemporary analytical significance. Narrowly tailored classical sources — people embedded in the time of the actual narrative— including Ibn Kathir and Al-Tabari ground the narrative, although works found much outside the classical Islamic paradigm— in both literary and thematic tone— were more common. Additionally, thematic coding is then used to identify the major themes and then the same are linked to the four main trials as discussed in the Surah. Comparative analysis is used as well to explore how diverse scholars read similar scripts and reflexively articulate differences in their teaching purpose. Secondly, it looks at the structural continuity of the Surah, how the order of the stories contributes to a cohesive thematic structure. This methodological strategy takes the study from basic description to interpretation, showing how storytelling in the Qur'an is used for the purpose of moral didacticism. This study forms a holistic perception of this Surah on

the narrative structures and their moral significance for human experience by combining exegetical insights along with the literary analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

Narrative Paradigms in Surah Al-Kahf

4.1 The Story of the Companions of the Cave: The Trial of Faith

The narrative of the Companions of the Cave (Ashab al-Kahf) appears in verses 9–26 of the Surah. The story describes a group of young believers who fled persecution from a tyrannical ruler in order to preserve their faith. Seeking refuge in a cave, they were miraculously placed in a state of sleep by God for an extended period, awakening to find that the society which once oppressed them had since become believing.

Allah introduces the story as a sign: “Do you think that the People of the Cave and the Inscription were a wonder among Our signs?” (Qur'an 18:9). The narrative details their supplication upon entering the cave: “Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance” (Qur'an 18:10). Classical commentators interpret this story as a powerful example of steadfast faith and divine protection. According to Ibn Kathir[2], the youths’ decision to abandon their society in order to maintain their belief demonstrates the importance of prioritizing faith over worldly security (vol. 5, p. 142).

The narrative structure emphasizes themes of trust in God and the transience of worldly power. The miraculous preservation of the youths serves as a sign of divine authority over time and life itself. Scholars note that the story also highlights the concept of resurrection and the certainty of the afterlife, reinforcing key theological principles in Islamic belief. This narrative paradigm illustrates the trial of faith, where believers must choose between societal pressure and their religious convictions [6].

4.2 The Parable of the Two Gardens: The Trial of Wealth

The second narrative in Surah Al-Kahf presents the story of two men (verses 32–44), one of whom possesses vast wealth and flourishing gardens while the other remains modest in his resources. The wealthy man becomes arrogant and denies the possibility of divine judgment, attributing his success solely to his own efforts. Allah describes his garden: “And We produced for him fruit, so he said to his companion while he was conversing with him, 'I am greater than you in wealth and mightier in [numbers of] men'” (Qur'an 18:34). He further declares, “I do not think that this will ever perish. And I do not think the Hour will occur. And even if I should be returned to my Lord, I will surely find better than this as a return” (Qur'an 18:35-36).

In contrast, his companion reminds him: “But as for me, He is Allah, my Lord, and I do not associate with my Lord anyone. And why did you, when you entered your garden, not say, 'Ma sha'a Allah, la quwwata illa billah'? If you see me less than you in wealth and children, it may be that my Lord will give me [something] better than your garden” (Qur'an 18:38-40). Eventually, the gardens are destroyed, illustrating the fleeting nature of material wealth.

Qutb[3] interprets this narrative as a warning against materialism and excessive attachment to worldly possessions. The story emphasizes that wealth is not inherently negative; rather, the moral problem arises when wealth leads to arrogance and forgetfulness of God [7]. This narrative paradigm illustrates the moral trial of prosperity and the ethical responsibility that accompanies material blessings.

4.3 Moses and Al-Khidr: The Trial of Knowledge

The third narrative (verses 60–82) recounts the journey of Prophet Moses with the mysterious figure known as al-Khidr. The account begins when Moses declares publicly that he is the most knowledgeable person, after which Allah instructs him to journey to the junction of the two seas to meet one with greater knowledge of certain divine matters.

During this journey, Moses witnesses several actions that appear morally questionable. Al-Khidr scuttles a boat, kills a young boy, and repairs a wall in a town that refused them hospitality. Moses repeatedly questions these actions, failing to exercise the patience he had pledged. After they part ways, al-Khidr explains the hidden wisdom: the boat was saved from seizure by a tyrant, the boy would have oppressed his parents, and the wall concealed a treasure belonging to orphans that would be revealed when they matured.

Scholars interpret this narrative as a lesson in humility and the limitations of human knowledge. According to Haleem [1], the story demonstrates that divine wisdom may transcend human logic and perception. Allah's statement in the Qur'an reinforces this: "And you cannot have patience for what you do not encompass in knowledge" (Qur'an 18:68). The narrative thus illustrates the trial of knowledge, reminding individuals that intellectual ability should be accompanied by humility and recognition of the limits of human understanding.

4.4 Dhul-Qarnayn: The Trial of Power

The final narrative in Surah Al-Kahf (verses 83–98) tells the story of Dhul-Qarnayn, a righteous and powerful ruler who travels across vast regions and establishes justice among different communities. Unlike many rulers who misuse their authority, Dhul-Qarnayn employs his power to protect vulnerable populations and serve Allah.

The Qur'an describes his methodology: "Indeed We established him upon the earth, and We gave him to everything a way. So, he followed a way" (Qur'an 18:84-85). When he encounters a community suffering from the depredations of Gog and Magog (Yajuj and Majuj), he demonstrates leadership by consulting them and using his resources to construct a protective barrier, saying, "That in which my Lord has established me is better [than what you offer], but assist me with strength; I will make between you and them a dam" (Qur'an 18:95).

Classical exegetes emphasize that Dhul-Qarnayn acknowledges that his power ultimately comes from God. His humility and sense of responsibility serve as a model for ethical leadership [2]. The narrative thus represents the trial of power, demonstrating that authority must be exercised with justice, humility, and accountability to the divine.

Thematic Coherence of the Surah

Despite the diversity of its narratives, Surah Al-Kahf exhibits remarkable thematic coherence. Scholars have argued that the Surah organizes its stories around the concept of human trials. The four narratives collectively illustrate tests in four major aspects of life:

1. Faith: represented by the Companions of the Cave, who preserved their belief despite persecution.
2. Wealth: represented by the story of the two gardens, warning against attachment to material possessions
3. Knowledge: represented by Moses and al-Khidr, teaching humility before divine wisdom.
4. Power: represented by Dhul-Qarnayn, demonstrating righteous authority.

This thematic structure demonstrates the Qur'an's holistic understanding of human experience. Every individual encounters challenges related to belief, material resources, intellectual understanding, and authority [6]. Through these narratives, the Surah encourages believers to respond to such trials with humility, patience, and reliance on divine guidance.

The Surah also connects these trials to eschatological themes. The Friday recitation of Surah Al-Kahf is strongly emphasized in prophetic tradition as a means of protection from the trials of the Dajjal (Antichrist), who will test humanity with these exact four trials: faith, wealth, knowledge, and power [8]. This connection underscores the Surah's function as a spiritual preparation for moral challenges extending to the end of time.

5. Discussion

From a literary perspective, Surah Al-Kahf represents an exemplary model of Qur'anic storytelling. The Surah combines dialogue, symbolism, and episodic narrative structure to create a coherent moral discourse. Each narrative employs specific rhetorical devices to enhance its impact. For instance, the story of the Companions of the Cave uses detailed spatial descriptions and precise time references to create verisimilitude, while the Moses-Khidr narrative employs suspense and gradual revelation to engage the reader [9].

One of the distinctive features of the Surah is its use of contrasting characters. For example, the faithful youths contrast with the tyrannical ruler, the humble companion contrasts with the arrogant wealthy man, and the patient al-Khidr contrasts with Moses' initial impatience. These contrasts highlight moral choices and reinforce ethical lessons. Additionally, the Surah integrates narrative with theological reflection. Rather than presenting abstract moral principles, it illustrates them through vivid stories that engage the reader's imagination and moral reasoning [3].

This narrative strategy aligns with broader Qur'anic methods of instruction, where storytelling serves as a means of guiding human behavior and belief. The Surah's structure also demonstrates what contemporary scholars term "ring composition" or thematic parallelism, where the opening and closing sections correspond to each other while the central narratives illuminate core themes [10][11][12][13][14][15].

6. Conclusion

Surah Al-Kahf stands as one of the most compelling examples of narrative discourse in the Qur'an. Through four interconnected stories, the Surah illustrates fundamental moral trials faced by humanity: faith, wealth, knowledge, and power. The narratives of the Companions of the Cave, the two garden owners, Moses and al-Khidr, and Dhul-Qarnayn collectively construct a moral framework that emphasizes humility, patience, and trust in divine wisdom.

By integrating theological insight with narrative artistry, Surah Al-Kahf demonstrates the Qur'an's unique ability to convey profound ethical lessons through storytelling. The Surah continues to offer guidance and inspiration for readers seeking to navigate the challenges of faith and morality in an ever-changing world. Its weekly recitation by Muslims worldwide serves as a continual reminder of these enduring moral principles and the ultimate triumph of divine wisdom over human limitation.

Future research may further explore the Surah through interdisciplinary approaches, including narrative theory, discourse analysis, and comparative religious studies, particularly examining its relationship to biblical and extra-biblical traditions while maintaining focus on its unique Qur'anic coherence.

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