

# The Qoranic Symbolism of Water

by

**Martin Lings**

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IN the Qoran the ideas of Mercy and water in particular rain are in a sense inseparable. With them must be included the idea of Revelation, *tanzil*, which means literally "a sending down." The Revelation and the rain are both "sent down" by the All-Merciful, and both are described throughout the Qoran as "mercy," and both are spoken of as "life-giving." So close is the connection of ideas that rain might even be said to be an integral part of the Revelation which it prolongs,[1] as it were, in order that by penetrating the material world the Divine Mercy may reach the uttermost confines of creation; and to perform the rite of ablution is to identify oneself, in the world of matter, with this wave of Mercy, and to return with it as it ebbs back towards the Principle, for purification is a return to our origins. Nor is Islam literally "submission" other than non-resistance to the pull of the current of this ebbing wave.

The Origin and End of this wave lies in the *Treasuries (khazin)* of the water which are *with Us*. [2] *The Treasuries of Mercy* are also spoken of in just the same terms; and it is clear that these Treasuries are no less than the All-Merciful Himself, *Ar-Rahman*, the Infinite Beatitude. The Qoran also speaks of its own Archetype *the Mother of the Book*, which is the Divine Omniscience, nor can this Treasury be set apart from the others, [3] for the Beatitude is One, whether it be considered in the aspect of Love (Treasuries of Mercy) or in its aspect of Knowledge (Mother of the Book); and the Treasuries of Water are both aspects, for water is a symbol of Knowledge as well as of Mercy. Al-Ghazali remarks, with regard to the verse *He sendeth down water from heaven, so that the valleys are in flood with it, each according to its capacity* (XIII, 17): "The commentaries tell us that the water is Gnosis and that the valleys are Hearts." [4]

It follows from what has been said that when the Qoran tells us that at the Creation *His Throne was upon the water* (XI, 7), it affirms implicitly two waters, one above the Throne and one beneath it, since the Tenant of the Throne is the All-Merciful with Whom are the Treasuries of Water, or rather Who constitutes Himself these Treasuries. This duality, the Waters of the Unmanifest and the waters of manifestation, [5] is the prototype of the duality, within creation, of the *two seas* which are so often mentioned in the Qoran. [6] These two seas *one sweet and fresh, the other salt and bitter* are respectively Heaven and earth which were originally *one piece*, (XXI, 30). Parallel to this, and in a sense based on it, is the Sufi symbolism of ice, for salt water and ice, both representing the untranscendent, are both "gross" albeit in different ways, when compared with fresh water. It is true that the ocean, as the vastest thing in the whole terrestrial globe, has an altogether transcendent significance. When the Qoran says: *If the sea were ink for the Words of thy Lord, the sea would be used up before the Words of thy Lord were used up* (XVIII, 109) it is saying that the symbol is not to be compared with That which it symbolizes, namely *the Mother of the Book*, the Sea which is in fact

vast enough to contain the Words of God; but by choosing the material seas rather than any other earthly thing for this demonstration, the Qoran affirms that they are, for the Infinitude of the Divine Wisdom, the symbol of symbols. But they have this symbolism in virtue of their size, apart from and as it were despite their saltness, for salt water as such is always transcended by fresh water.

The significance of a symbol varies according to whether it is considered as an independent entity or in relation to some other symbol. In relation to wine, water even fresh water may represent the untranscendent or the less transcendent, as for example when the Qoran mentions that in Paradise the elect are given wine to drink whereas the generality of the faithful drink from fountains of water. This relationship between wine and water is analogous to the relationship between the sun and the moon, for wine is in a sense "liquid fire" or "liquid light"; but fire and water, inasmuch as both are elements, are on the same plane, and it is possible to consider wine and water as equal complements. Thus in another description of Paradise, the Qoran mentions *rivers of water* and *rivers of wine* without specifying any difference of level. Here it may be said that wine, being "warm," has the "subjective" significance of Gnosis in relation to the cold objectivity of water which represents Truth, the Object of Gnosis. But when considered by itself, water has a total significance which transcends the distinction between subject and object, or which includes both subject and object, for inasmuch as it can be drunk, water is a symbol of Truth "subjectivized," that is, Gnosis; and water can indeed claim to be "the drink of drinks." In any case, whatever the drink, water is always its basis.

The following passage, the first part of which has already been quoted in connection with Gnosis, is particularly important for its illustration of the difference between the true and the false, or reality and illusion:

*He sendeth down water from heaven so that the valleys are in flood with it, each according to its measure, and the flood beareth swelling foam... thus God coineth the symbols of reality and illusion. Then as for the foam, it goeth as scum upon the banks, and as for what profiteth men, it remaineth in the earth.* In the light of this imagery of the scum which remains visible and the water which disappears we may interpret the verse: *They know only an outward appearance of this lower life.* (XXX, 7). The *outward appearance* is "the scum of illusion," where-as what escapes us in this world is the hidden "water of reality." We see here the significance of the fountain which holds such an important place in Qoranic symbolism. The bursting forth of a spring, that is, the reappearance of heaven-sent water that had become hidden, signifies the sudden unveiling of a reality which transcends "outward appearances," the drinking of which is Gnosis. But in addition to this objective-subjective symbolism, the fountain has also the purely subjective significance of the sudden opening of an eye, which is implicit in the word *ʿayn* which means both "fountain" and "eye." This subjective symbolism is in a sense the more important, because the reason why men see only "the scum of illusion" is that *their hearts are hardened*, or in other words that "the eye of the Heart" is closed, *for verily it is not the sight that is blind but the hearts that are blind* (XXII, 47); and in one highly suggestive passage the Qoran compels us to envisage the possibility of a fountain springing from the Heart:

*Then even after that your hearts grew hard so that they were like rocks; or even harder, for verily there are rocks from which rivers gush forth, and there are rocks which split asunder so that water floweth from them. (II, 74).*

The presence between the two seas of a *barrier beyond which they pass not*, means that the waters of this world are unable to overflow into the next, and that the upper waters refrain from utterly overwhelming the lower waters and allow them to exist as a seemingly separate domain without undue interference from above, at any rate *for a while* to use the Qoranic phrase which is so often repeated to denote the impermanence of this world and everything in it. "Undue" is a necessary reservation, because the upper waters by their very nature cannot altogether be kept out, any more than water to revert to the Sufi symbolism can be kept out of ice. The upper waters, being the original substance of all creation, not only surround but also penetrate this world as its secret reality to which it will eventually return. Thus although the rain, symbolizing this penetration, is only sent down *in due measure*, it is none the less a herald or portent of *the Hour*,<sup>[7]</sup> that is, the Last Day, when the barrier will be removed and the upper waters will flood this world, causing the resurrection of the dead, for they are the Waters of Life.

Until then, any presence of life in this world means that a drop of these waters has passed the barrier, but this possibility is limited. *Verily this lower life is but as water which We have sent down from the sky (X, 24)*. Life is altogether transcendent in relation to this world, where it exists merely as a fleeting loan, ready to "evaporate" back whence it came as water evaporates back to the sky. Life is a passing trespass of the Beyond on the domain of the here-below, a brief penetration of soul and body by the Spirit<sup>[8]</sup>; but the Spirit is not "at home" in this world hence the extreme precariousness of life<sup>[9]</sup> whereas it *is* at home in the Beyond: *Verily the Abode of the Hereafter, that, that is Life, did they but know (XXIX, 64)*.

If it be asked how this symbolism can be reconciled with the earth-depopulating Flood, it must be remembered that although rain-fall set the Flood in motion, the actual cataclysm is represented in the Qoran as a stormy sea. One of Noah's sons who was drowned is said to have been swept away by a wave, and agitated water is a symbol of vanity and illusion, the waves being images of accident and vicissitude, which are "unreal"<sup>[10]</sup> in relation to the water itself whose true nature they are powerless to affect. It is significant that in the Verse of Darkness (XXIV, 40) which follows close on the better known Verse of Light, the works of the infidels, having just been likened in their vanity to *a mirage in the desert which the thirsty man reckoneth to be water*, are then immediately likened to what is indeed water but has become "by accident" so remote from its true nature as to be comparable to a mirage, namely a dark storm-tossed sea. This passage may even be taken as an inexplicit description of the Flood. In any case, there is no doubt that the waves of the Flood and the waves of the Red Sea which crashed down upon the pursuers of the children of Israel represent the passionate perversity of Noah's contemporaries and of Pharaoh and his ministers. On the other hand, as regards what set the Flood in motion, the symbolism of rain is here tempered and conditioned by the number forty which signifies death <sup>[11]</sup> or a change of state. Thus the purifying aspect of water may be said to take precedence here over its life-giving aspect. The earth was to be purified for a new state just as the children of Israel were to be purified by the forty years wandering in the desert. We may compare also the

purification of Lent. The waters in question were an inseparable part of the Revelation made to Noah of a new religion, symbolized by the Ark, and as such they were waters of Mercy. But any manifestation of Mercy is bound to be terrible for those who refuse it, for it serves to gauge the extreme hardness of their hearts, while for those whose hearts are not hardened the Transcendent is always awe-inspiring, and this aspect of Mercy is expressed by the thunder which so often precedes the rain. *He it is who showeth you the lightning, a fear and a longing, and raiseth the heavy clouds. And the thunder extolleth and praiseth Him, as do the angels for awe of Him* (XIII, 12-13).

The awe-inspiring and mysterious transcendence of the upper waters, as also their life-giving aspect, is stressed in the strange and elliptical story of Moses and Al-Khidr (XVIII, 60-82). Moses says to Joshua: *I will not cease until I reach the meeting place of the two seas*. They start out, as for a long journey, but they stop for rest on a rock which is, unknown to them, the barrier that separates the two seas. Joshua sets down for a moment the provisions he has brought, which consist of a dried fish; and whether because of the extreme nearness of the Waters of Life, or because a drop of these waters actually falls on the fish, it suddenly comes to life, slips from the rock, and swims away in the sea. Moses does not notice this; and the attention of Joshua, who does notice it, is immediately distracted by Satan, so that he does not even mention it to Moses, and they set off once more. At length Moses, exhausted by the journey, suggests that they stop to eat. Joshua remembers that their food has gone, and tells Moses about the miracle of the fish, and Moses understands that the rock must have been *the meeting place of the two seas*, and they retrace their steps. When they regain the rock they find there *one of Our slaves unto whom We had given mercy from Our Mercy and knowledge from Our Knowledge*. This person is not named, but the commentaries tell us that it is Al-Khidr, the immortal Prince of the Solitary Ones (al-afrad[12]). The symbolism of his meeting with Moses is parallel to the symbolism of the meeting of the two seas. The salt sea of this world represents, like Moses, exoteric knowledge,[13] whereas the Waters of Life are personified by Al-Khidr. *Moses said unto him: May I follow thee that from what thou hast been taught thou mayst teach me right guidance. He said: Verily thou canst not be patient with me, for how shouldst thou be patient in respect of that which is beyond the compass of thine experience? He said: God willing, thou shalt find me patient, nor will I gainsay thee in aught. He said: Then if thou go with me, question me of naught until of myself I mention it to thee.*

They set out together, and Al-Khidr performs three acts of mercy in disguise, but Moses, seeing only the "scandalous" outside of these acts, is too outraged not to expostulate each time, and the third time Al-Khidr refuses to let him accompany him any further; but he explains, before they part company, the true nature of his actions. To consider this passage in any detail would be beyond the scope of our subject; but it has at least given us a glimpse of the deviousness of the exoteric path and the extreme nearness of the Waters of Life. For we are already, if only we knew it,[14] at *the meeting place of the two seas* witness the miracle of Life which is always with us, both in us and about us, but which the powers of illusion persuade us to take entirely for granted, through inadvertance or distraction.[15]

Even more elliptical is another relevant passage, the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (XXVII, 20-44). Solomon sends for the Queen in order to convert her to true religion, and while she and her retinue are on their way he says to his surrounding

assembly of men and of jinn: *Which of you will bring me her throne before they come unto me in surrender?* The throne is immediately set before him, and he gives instructions for it to be disguised. Now the Supreme Throne is below its Tenant, but by inverse analogy every earthly throne may be said to transcend the king who sits on it, as is to be seen figured in the Seal of Solomon if we take the apex of a triangle to be the tenant and its base the throne. The question of the throne is not that part of the story which is directly relevant to our theme, but it cannot be set on one side, and it serves moreover to bring out a point of general importance where symbolism is concerned, namely that a symbol which represents the transcendent may be said to open out, virtually, on to the Absolute Transcendent. The higher of *the two seas* is strictly speaking no more than the uppermost part of the created universe; but these Waters of Life, seen "from below," may be said to merge with the Treasuries of Water, that is, with the Infinite Divine Beatitude; and since there is a certain analogy between the pairs heaven-earth (the two seas) and throne-king, the throne may be said to signify not merely the mandate of Heaven but also, ultimately, the source of that mandate which is the Supreme Self; and the Self is always "disguised."

When the Queen of Sheba arrives, Solomon puts her to two tests. She fails in both, but her failure as it were dissolves all her resistance to the truth. Firstly he takes her before her throne; and now with marvellous subtlety the Qoran puts on, for the reader, a disguise which is in a sense analagous to the disguise of the throne, for it is as a veil in the text, albeit a thin one, over what is meant by the throne's identity. It is permissible to say, for example, that in such a sentence as "when asked the colour of snow, the blind man said it was black," the word "white" is disguisedly present, because it is forced into the mind. So also, when the Queen is asked: *Is thy throne like this?*, and when, failing to pierce altogether through the disguise and seeing in its undeniable familiarity only an illusion of identity, she wrongly answers: *It is as if it were it*, the right answer is forced into our minds, namely "it is it"; and these words, *huwa huwa*, (literally "he is he," for 'arsh, throne, is masculine), constitute the Arabic formula of expressing identity and above all, liturgically,[16] the Supreme Identity, the Divine Oneness. Then in explanation of why she gave the wrong answer, why she did not *say huwa huwa*, the Qoran adds, as if to give us a further key, that *she was barred from it by what she had been wont to worship apart from God*, that is, by her polytheism. In other words, it was because she took illusion (false gods) to be Reality (God) that she had taken Reality to be illusion, that is, she had failed to see Reality when it was actually there. Having demonstrated this last error for although the Qoran does not say so we must assume that Solomon tells her that the throne is in fact hers and that what she thought to be no more than a vague resemblance is indeed identity he proceeds to demonstrate the other error which is its cause, and leads her into a hall paved with glass, which looks like a pool of water. Completely deceived, she lifts up her robes to avoid wetting them as she steps on to the glass floor. We are reminded of the already mentioned verse: *As for the disbelievers, their works are as a mirage in the desert which the thirsty man reckoneth*[17] *to be water*; and it will be understood from this and the other examples given of the symbolism of water how perfect and all-embracing Solomon's demonstration was as regards the Queen's state of soul. The fact of error, already significant in itself, is infinitely aggravated by the fact that the error is, precisely, about water; and the shock of discovering that "water" was absent where she had thought it to be present was so great that it changed her whole outlook in a moment and caused her to



exclaim: *My Lord, I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon unto God, the Lord of the worlds.*

## NOTES

[1] A symbol is not a "concrete" image arbitrarily chosen by man to illustrate some "abstract" idea; it is the manifestation, in some lower mode, of the higher reality which it symbolizes and which stands in as close a relationship to it as root of tree to leaf. Thus water *is* Mercy; and it would be true to say that even without any understanding of symbolism and even without belief in the Transcendent, immersion in water has an inevitable effect upon the soul in addition to its purification of the body. In the absence of ritual intention, this effect may be altogether momentary and superficial; it is none the less visible on the face of almost any bather emerging from a lake or river or sea, however quickly it may be effaced by the resumption of "ordinary life."

[2] We have used italics throughout to indicate sentences or phrases from the Qoran.

[3] It too belongs to *Ar-Rahman* who is the Source of the Qoran: *The All-Merciful taught the Qoran* (LV, 1).

[4] *Mishkat al-Anwar*.

The differentiation here is in the varying capacities of the valleys, not in the water itself. In another passage (II, 60) *And when Moses asked for water for his people, and We said: "Strike with thy staff the rock," and there gushed forth from it twelve springs, everyone knew his drinking place*, the differentiation is also in the springs; and the last five words are quoted throughout Islamic literature to refer, beyond their literal meaning, to the fact that everyone who "drinks" from the Qoran is aware of the particular standpoint that has been providentially allotted to him whether it be that of ritual law, for example, dogmatic theology, or mysticism. Nor is this out of line with the literal meaning, if one remembers that in ancient Israel, each of the twelve tribes had its own particular function.

[5] In Genesis also the pure primordial substance of the created universe is water. "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

[6] So too in Genesis "He divided the waters."

[7] *And thou seest the earth barren, and when We send down upon it the water it thrilleth and sprouteth... that is because... the Hour is coming beyond all doubt, and because God raiseth those who are in the tombs* (XXII, 5).

[8] To speak of death as "a giving up of the ghost" is thus altogether correct; and it is because life is a presence of the Spirit, and therefore altogether transcendent, that it defies any scientific analysis.

[9] The great symbol of life is also most precarious over much of the earth's face, especially in those regions where the Qoranic Revelation was first received.

[10] Ice and waves are parallel as symbols, representing respectively the rigidity (or brittleness) and instability of this form-bound world.

[11] The Arabic letter *mim* stands for death (*mawt*), and has the numerical value of 40.

[12] These are the few exceptional individuals who are independent of any particular religion but who represent religion in its highest aspect, being, without any effort on their part but by their very nature, as it were, "throw-backs" to the primordial state of man which it is the purpose of religion to regain.

[13] The Qoran here as it were extracts from Moses one aspect only to correspond to the symbolism of the lower waters, passing over his more exalted aspects which are the theme of other passages.

[14] That is the point. We are there and yet we are not there. If we were altogether there, we would see life as the miracle that it is; this supernatural interference would no longer be claimed by nature as a purely natural phenomenon. The Shaikh Al-'Alawi tells us that the Divine mystery and miracle of life eludes us because of its extreme transcendence. It is with us, and yet at the same time it is utterly beyond us. (See Martin Lings, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 134, note 1).

The spiritual path is in one sense not so much a journey as a gradual attunement of the soul to the presence of the Spirit, a gradual reconciliation between the natural and the supernatural, between the lower waters and the upper waters, between mind and intellect, between Moses and Al-Khidr. But the soul must remain the soul, at any rate *for a while* hence the refusal of Al-Khidr to let Moses accompany him any further.

[15] Life is one, and there is only a difference of intensity between the elixir strong enough to quicken a dead fish and the less strong one which suffices to enable the living to continue to eke out *for a while*

their precarious earthly life. The short-comings of Moses and Joshua may thus be taken to represent the general obtuseness of man in his attitude towards life.

[16] See Martin Lings, "A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century," p. 114, note 2.

[17] It is significant that this same word is used also of the Queen: *She reckoned it to be a pool, and bared her legs.*