

Question 43: al-Khidr's actions in the Qur'an

Question: Regarding verse 80 of Surah al-Kahf, where Khidr (ع) explains his reason for killing the young boy– in view of the Divine principle of not recording evil deeds or punishing people for them before they have taken place, some questions arise...

1. Although Allah (awj) knew that this youth would commit evil deeds in the future, why wasn't he granted respite (in accordance with the Divine method) until he could witness his own evil deeds in the future? Is this not predeterminism?
2. Was that youth favored with Divine grace because of his believing parents, and since he died before performing those evil deeds, will he no longer be punished?
3. Or since Allah (awj) knew that he would disobey Him in the future, will he be punished in the hereafter?

In view of the explanations that emerge from Qur`anic commentaries, traditions, and the context of the verses, the incident of killing that teenage boy (ghulam) was not a chance event or as a result of a conflict; rather, Khidr (ع) proceeded to kill him without any preliminary exchange of words. So there is no possibility of there being any mental inclination or anger involved in this event, and the questioner's mind comes to accept the fact that though there were no provoking or inciting factors involved, without doubt the killing had wisdom and special reason behind it. It did not follow from base desires. The action was undertaken by someone about whom the Qur`an says,

“One of Our servants whom We granted mercy from Ourselves and whom we granted knowledge from Ourselves”¹

one of Our servants whose hearts' vessel We filled with Our exclusive mercy and whom We taught from Our select knowledge.

So we can be certain that personal desire was not involved. But in terms of its emotional wisdom and how it can be believed that such a person would undertake to kill a young man, an answer is required, which is presented as follows.

It is understood from some traditions that when Prophet Musa (ﷺ) saw this scene, he was profoundly shocked, and because he saw the killing as unjustified based on its outward appearance, he turned to Khidr (ﷺ) and said, “Did you kill an innocent person who wasn’t worthy of death? What you have done is unacceptable and abhorrent.”

At this point, Khidr (ﷺ) briefly explains his reason for what he did “The Divine will and wisdom are superior to all things, and the unsophisticated intellect of human beings cannot comprehend the finer points of Allah’s (awj) affairs and His will. Thus, human intellects have no authority over His will; rather, His will holds sway over human intellects. So don’t just rely on your reasoning and its superficial understanding, and for now patiently bear whatever I do...”²

Looking carefully into this tradition, we conclude that:

1. Every thing has an outer aspect and an inner reality. If something has a good and innocent-looking outer form but underneath is evil and sinful, it is not possible to simply rely on laws pertaining to the outer aspect.
2. Sometimes Allah (awj) decides, on the basis of some overriding good, to act beyond the limits of apparent recompense and desires to apply the [laws of the] inner dimension, along with its reward or punishment.
3. The killing of the young man was entirely dependent on Allah’s (awj) command; Khidr (ﷺ) did not perform this deed without a Divine command, but was merely executing His will.³

Here the question presents itself as to whether by killing that youth, Allah (awj) has punished him before any crime has been committed on his part. The points below can help us answer this question.

1. If a person is born to Muslim parents and then denies his or her faith after attaining maturity, the rules of an “apostate from nature” (*murtadd fitri*) will apply to him or her. If that person is a man, he will be worthy of death. It has come in several traditions: “[Though the Qur`an clearly states that] the parents of that young man were believers, their son was an disbeliever, to the extent that there was no hope of his heart opening up to the truth, and the seal of obstinacy and rejection of faith had been placed on it.”⁴

So while it is true that his apparent conduct in playing with his friends did not reveal his disbelief (just as Musa (ﷺ), relying on this outward state, thought him innocent), the reality of his heart and beliefs proved his disbelief (as demonstrated in the Divine knowledge and its revelation to Khidr (ﷺ)). As a result, his being killed was merely a result of his choosing to be an apostate, which carries the consequence in this world of termination of physical life.

2. Allah (awj) knew that the continuation of the young man’s life would lead to nothing but more spiritual and material loss for him because he would mislead his believing parents, break apart family ties, and deprive them of the worldly and otherworldly blessings of faith for the family and for society. Thus, since

the good in his life up until that point had come to an end, Allah (awj) determined to terminate his life and put in place the means of taking his life—just as a person takes care of things as long as their good outweighs their harm, but then no longer takes an interest in them when that is not the case.

In this instance, though the soul was seized by the angel Jibra`il and his servants, Allah (awj) wished for the apparent executor of His will (ending the life of that young man) to be one of His chosen and merciful servants who had knowledge of His special sciences, namely Khidr (ع).

In other words, his action was based on Allah's (awj) creational and legislative will with respect to the death of that young man, and in this respect his death was like all other deaths that are caused by accidents or other causes (with the difference that an accidental killing is not in accordance with Allah's (awj) legislative will and He has not commanded it to take place; but the killing under discussion and all natural deaths take place in accordance with Allah's (awj) permission and indication both legislatively and creationally [i.e. natural causality].

Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع) solving this problem, says, "...Khidr's concern was for events not to take such a turn that he would be prevented from carrying out what he was commanded, such that he would remain deprived of the reward of carrying out Allah's will, that is, ending the life of that young man (the beginning and end of which are both in accordance with Divine grace and the greater good, not in accordance with what the human being deserves)—especially since carrying out this command was a source of mercy for the parents of that youth (since as the Qur'an clearly says, Khidr (ع) knew that in place of that son Allah would give them a child who would be pure and a source of unity for the family. In addition, the coming to pass of this Divine will allowed Khidr (ع) to be able to reveal Divine secrets and explain hidden truths to Musa (ع)."

It is worthy of note that "When Khidr (ع) began explaining his reasons, he said, 'In any case, we feared that the young man would later become rebellious and lead his parents towards disbelief.'" That is, in explaining the process of performing this action, he doesn't make mention of his own will at all and instead uses the plural verb "we feared" to show that as executor of Divine will he did not act alone, but Divine assistance and the intermediaries of His court were with him—with the difference that fear cannot be attributed to Allah (awj), but Khidr (ع) and others are subject to fear.⁵ (The issuance and execution of the command is shared, while the fear of failure in fully executing the Divine command is exclusive to Khidr (ع)).

Why is it that though Allah (awj) knew that the young man would fall into disobedience in the future, He gave him no respite (in accordance with the Divine Way) and did not allow him to witness his own evil deeds in the future? Isn't this predeterminism?

It is clear from the preceding explanation that:

1. Life itself is a Divine blessing; no one has an entitlement to it. From this perspective the issue of demanding a continuation of life doesn't arise, let alone for one to ask for a reason for its non-

continuation.

2. Allah (awj) had willed for that young man's life to be ended in accordance with His wisdom and the greater good.

But in answer to this question it is possible to bring up other aspects of this issue as well:

1. The youth was culpable in two respects: he was an "apostate from nature"; and he had the ability to destroy the foundation of his parents' faith. Allah (awj) observed that he didn't use the respite He had given to reform himself and make amends or abandon unbelief and apostasy. Therefore, He carried out the command of killing him.⁶

2. If the young man were to remain alive, he would put into practice his intention (of leading others to disbelief), and in this case greater harm and damage would result. Thus, to prevent those future consequences, the command to end the life of such a being was issued. In addition, it can be gleaned from the apparent sense of the verse that this son was not as obedient and beneficial as he ought to be and in that short time after attaining maturity had already committed sins and misdeeds. In this way, he worked to lead his parents astray.

3. As verse 81 of Surah al-Kahf indicates, Allah (awj) had decreed to reward the parents of that young man for their faith by granting them a model child. From this it can be understood that not only would his remaining alive result in his parents' going astray and him not receiving the punishment of his apostasy, it would also prevent another good from reaching them. This point is clearly explained in the traditions: "Allah had willed to give them in place of that son a daughter who would bear a son in whose line would be numerous prophets, one after the other, such that seventy prophets would descend from that one daughter."⁷

Thus, another result of not granting respite to that young man was for that line of prophets to come into being.

It goes without saying that it is the Divine Way (sunnah) for the parents of prophets to be believers. So if the son remained alive and pulled his parents towards unbelief, it would contradict this Divine principle. This is why the question doesn't arise as to why it wasn't possible for both the son to live and the line of prophets to come into being.

Was the young man availed of Divine grace on account of his parents and, since he died before committing those evil deeds, was he no longer subject to punishment? Or, since Allah (awj) knew that he would disobey Him in the future, will he be punished?

In view of the preceding explanation and following points, it can be deduced that this putting to death was a source of mercy for all involved: the young man who was killed, Khidr (ع) who killed him, and the parents of the young man.

a. The good that came to young man as a result of being put to death:

1. He received punishment in this world for his apostasy, which may lessen his punishment in the hereafter.
2. If he remained alive, he would make his parents unbelievers and would be responsible for the sin of their apostasy and unbelief.
3. Creedal disbelief leads to decadence and sinful behavior. Thus, his death in youth forever sealed his scroll of evil deeds, and on the Day of Judgment he will not be punished for all the sins he would have committed had he lived longer.
4. He wasn't capable of fulfilling his duties towards his parents, and the pain he would thus cause his parents itself would increase his burden of sins and his parents' aversion to him.

b. The good that came to his parents:

1. Their faith remained unharmed.
2. To resist such a son wouldn't lead anywhere, and their parental love and emotions would soften their hearts towards him and weaken their faith. Thus, they were also saved from the tension and unease that would result from his remaining alive.
3. Their patience and contentment with Allah's (awj) will were tested, and they were able to be successful in this test.
4. In place of an immoral and rebellious son, they were granted a pure, devoted, and blessed daughter.
5. They were blessed with becoming the progenitors of seventy prophets, whose reward and forgiveness they benefited from.
6. Their memory was eternally recorded in the everlasting revelation of the Qur'an, and they became an example for others.

c. The benefit that came to his killer:

1. He was granted the ability to carry out a Divine decree (Divine will).
2. He was the cause of blessings for a Muslim family.
3. He was able to teach some of the secrets of revelation and unseen realities to Musa (ع).

Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع) describes these blessings in these words: "Allah knew that if he stayed alive, the young man would lead his parents to disbelief and he would become a source of corruption and hardship for all. Thus Khidr (ع) was commanded to finish his life so that as a result all of

them (the killer, the killed, and his parents) would attain honor and Divine grace.”⁸

Answer

1. Surat al-Kahf (18), Verse 65:

﴿ فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِنْ لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا ﴾

2. ‘Ilal al-Sharayi’, vol. 1, pg. 60-61:

فَانطَلَقَا حَتَّى إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَامًا فَقَتَلَهُ الْخَضِرُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ فَعَضِبَ مُوسَى وَأَخَذَ بِتَلَابِيهِ وَقَالَ لَهُ : أَقْتَلْتَ نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا نُكْرًا ، قَالَ لَهُ الْخَضِرُ إِنَّ الْعُقُولَ لَا تَحْكُمُ عَلَى أَمْرِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى ذَكَرَهُ بَلْ أَمَرَ اللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ عَلَيْهَا ، فَسَلِّمْ لِمَا تَرَى مِنِّي وَاصْبِرْ عَلَيْهِ

3. Tafsir Nur al-Thaqalayn, vol. 3, pg. 283-284

4. ‘Ilal al-Sharayi’, vol. 1, pg. 61:

...وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ، فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنِينَ وَطَبِيعَ كَافِرًا...

5. ‘Ilal al-Sharayi’, vol. 1, pg. 61:

فَاشْتَرَكَ بِالْأَنَابِيَّةِ بِقَوْلِهِ : ﴿ فَخَشِينَا أَنْ يَرَهَقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبَدِّلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِنْهُ زَكَاءً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا ﴾ وَإِنَّمَا اشْتَرَكَ فِي الْإِنَابَةِ لِأَنَّهُ خَشِيَ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَخْشَى لِأَنَّهُ لَا يَفُوتُهُ شَيْءٌ وَلَا يَمْتَنِعُ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ أَرَادَهُ ، وَإِنَّمَا خَشِيَ الْخَضِرُ ، مِنْ أَنْ يُحَالَ بَيْنَهُ وَبَيْنَ مَا أَمَرَ فِيهِ فَلَا يَدْرِكُ ثَوَابَ الْإِمْضَاءِ فِيهِ ، وَوَقَعَ فِي نَفْسِهِ أَنْ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى ذَكَرَهُ جَعَلَهُ سَبَبًا لِرَحْمَةِ أَبِي الْغُلَامِ فَعَمِلَ فِيهِ وَسَطَ الْأَمْرِ مِنَ الْبَشَرِيَّةِ.

6. This has only been put forth as a possibility by some analysts and it is not necessarily the correct.

7. Tafsir Nur al-Thaqalayn, vol. 3, pg. 286, no. 170-173:

أَبَدِلَهُمَا اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ مَكَانَ الْإِبْنِ إِبْنَةً، فَوُلِدَ مِنْهَا سَبْعُونَ نَبِيًّا.

8. Tafsir Safi, vol. 3, pg. 256:

في الْعِلَلِ عَنِ الصَّادِقِ (ع): عَلِمَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ إِنْ بَقِيَ كَفَرَ أَبَوَاهُ وَأَفْتَتْنَا بِهِ وَضَلَّ بِإِضْرَالِهِ فَأَمَرَنِي اللَّهُ بِقَتْلِهِ وَأَرَادَ بِذَلِكَ نَقْلَهُمْ إِلَى مَحَلِّ كَرَامَتِهِ فِي الْعَاقِبَةِ.

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