

Divine Stewards of the Earth: Spiritual Ecology in the Qur'anic Narratives of Prophets

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the portrayal of Prophets in the Qur'an as exemplars of environmental stewardship within the framework of spiritual ecology. It aims to unveil the enduring relevance of prophetic narratives and demonstrate how ancient wisdom can be effectively applied to contemporary environmental challenges. The study elucidates the relationship between the Beautiful Names of God and human responsibility towards the Earth, highlighting how embodying these Divine Names in fulfilling humanity's role as vicegerents can guide sustainable practices, advance social justice, and promote unity within communities.

The analysis of the story of Prophet Nūḥ underscores themes such as Divine guidance, adaptation to catastrophic changes, and preservation of biodiversity. In the narrative of Prophet Hūd, there is a stark warning against the neglect of stewardship and the consequences of hubris and technological misuse. The account of Prophet Ṣāliḥ and the miraculous she-camel includes teachings on sustainable resource management and respecting all living beings. Advice from Prophet Yūsuf on resource management showcases the necessity of strategic planning and sustainable consumption during times of abundance to prepare for future scarcity. Prophet Dāwūd exemplifies ethical leadership and a harmonious relationship with nature,

while Prophet Sulaymān's judicious use of natural forces and resources demonstrates a holistic approach to environmental management.

By learning from prophetic models presented in the Qur'an, humankind can cultivate a deeper appreciation of its role as caretakers of the Earth, guiding it towards a sustainable future that harmonises spiritual values with environmental responsibility.

KEYWORDS: stewards, vicegerents, spiritual ecology, environmental stewardship, Qur'anic narratives, Prophets

Spiritual ecology and environmental stewardship

For the purposes of this paper, spiritual ecology is defined as an approach that merges spiritual insights and practices with environmental stewardship grounded in the teachings of the Qur'an and *Ḥadīth*. It emphasises the deep connection between the natural world and human spirituality, advocating for a role that centres on the guardianship and thoughtful care of the Earth. This approach calls for a harmonious relationship between spirituality and the environment, urging humans to act as protectors of the natural world, guided by the principles and wisdom found in Islamic teachings.

Environmental stewardship is the responsible care and management of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices to ensure its health and preservation for future generations. It involves taking proactive steps to protect and nurture the planet, ensuring its resources and beauty remain intact for those yet to come. This includes implementing renewable energy sources, practising sustainable agriculture, reforestation projects, promoting biodiversity, reducing waste, and encouraging recycling.

The integrated ethos of spiritual ecology in Q 2:28-31

Verses 28 to 31 of Sūrat al-Baqara present us with a deeply integrated ethos of spiritual ecology. They outline a comprehensive framework that links beliefs with environmental stewardship.

Firstly, in verse 28, we are reminded of the miracle of life given by God, setting a foundation for understanding our existence and purpose:

﴿كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَكُنْتُمْ أَمْوَاتًا فَأَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ﴾

How can you deny God when you were lifeless and He gave you life, then He will cause you to die, then bring you back to life, and then you will be returned to Him?¹

Verse 29 then explains that the creation of the Earth and heavens is for human benefit:

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ أَسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

He is the One Who created everything on the Earth for you. Then He turned to the heaven, fashioning it into seven heavens. It is He Who is knowledgeable about everything.²

Humans are encouraged to utilise God's creation for both material and spiritual gain. Materially, the natural world provides us with vital resources that facilitate and enhance our living conditions. This includes building materials such as wood, metals, and minerals, energy sources such as the sun, wind, water, and fossil fuels, and a diverse array of foods from plants and animals, vital for nutrition and agriculture. Additionally, nature provides us with fibres for clothing and scenic

¹ Q 2:28.

² Q 2:29.

spaces such as forests, beaches, and parks, which contribute to our mental and physical well-being. The variety and beauty of nature also serve as cultural and artistic inspiration, enriching our lives.

Spiritually, nature acts as a profound testament to God's creative power and sovereignty. Engaging with the natural world allows us to enrich our understanding of God, witnessing His wisdom and creativity manifest in the world around us. Reflecting on nature's order and beauty can bring us closer to God, fostering a sense of connection and gratitude for the bounty He has provided. It encourages humility, reminding us of our dependence on God for all things.

Then, in verse 30, we are told about our role as God's vicegerents and representatives (*khalīfa*) on Earth:

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً﴾

[Remember, O Prophet] when your Lord said to the angels, 'Surely, I am appointing a vicegerent on the Earth.'³

Being designated as God's vicegerents on Earth places humanity in a position of trust and responsibility. This role encompasses the duty to maintain the balance and harmony of the natural world. The term '*khalīfa*' implies that humans are stewards who must act in accordance with Divine Will, embodying justice, mercy, and sustainability in their interactions with the environment. This stewardship extends beyond mere conservation; it includes proactive efforts to nurture and restore the Earth, reflecting the Divine Names of the Creator.

Finally, in verse 31, we are told that the foundation of this Divine vicegerency is rooted in the knowledge and manifestation of God's Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*):⁴

³Q 2:30.

⁴Through linguistic analysis, cross-referencing with other Qur'anic verses, and citing relevant *ḥadīth*, Jawādī Āmulī presents several arguments to explain the following: 1) why the appointment of a vicegerent in verse 30 of Sūrat al-Baqara is applicable to all of humanity and not solely to Prophet Ādam; 2) why the entity being represented (*al-mustakhlaf 'anh*) is God; and 3) why the

﴿وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا﴾

He taught Adam the Names, all of them.⁵

This series of verses links faith to environmental stewardship. It starts by depicting life and death cycles as expressions of God's power, setting the context for our existence and purpose. The text then highlights the creation of the Earth and heavens for human benefit, emphasising our duty for responsible management. Being designated as God's vicegerents on Earth places further emphasis on our role in protecting and sustainably managing the environment. Finally, the teaching of the Divine Names reveals that our stewardship is grounded in understanding and embodying God's attributes. The verses present a rich, integrated ethos of spiritual ecology that weaves together belief, knowledge, and responsibility. They offer a framework that encourages Muslims to view environmental stewardship not just as a moral obligation but as an integral aspect of their faith, rooted in understanding and manifesting the Divine Will in every aspect of their lives.

Environmental stewardship and the Beautiful Names

To illustrate the relationship between the Beautiful Names of God and human responsibility towards the Earth, examples of actions that reflect these Divine Names will be presented.

As stewards, humans are tasked with embodying Divine Names such as al-Muhaymin (the Guardian, the Protector), al-Mu'īd (the Restorer, the Reinstater), al-Ḥafīz (the Preserver, The Protector), and al-Muqṣit (The Equitable, The Just). While certain actions resonate with all four names, each name also has a unique focus and emphasis.

For example, al-Muhaymin emphasises the role of humans as overseers, safeguards, and protectors of the Earth. This name focuses

'Names' referred to in verse 31 are God's Beautiful Names, which only human beings have the capacity to fully manifest within themselves. (ʿAbdullāh Jawādī Āmulī, *Tafsīr-i tasnūm* (Markaz-i nashr-i Isrā': 1380 Sh./2001), 3:39-63, 3:168-79.

⁵ Q 2:31

on actions such as tracking ecosystem health to protect against degradation and advocating for laws that safeguard natural habitats. Al-Mu'īd focuses on the restoration and renewal of the natural world. It emphasises actions such as engaging in reforestation, rehabilitating damaged natural habitats, and participating in conservation efforts to recover populations of threatened species. Al-Ḥafīz centres on the preservation of the natural world from loss and harm. This Divine Name has a focus on actions such as promoting recycling, composting, and reducing single-use materials, and advocates for renewable energy sources to reduce environmental impact. Al-Muqsiṭ highlights fairness, justice, and equity in environmental stewardship. It emphasises actions such as ensuring equitable access to essential natural resources and working to reduce environmental inequalities affecting disadvantaged communities.

By aligning their actions with these Divine Names, humans can fulfil their role as stewards of the Earth, ensuring its protection, restoration, preservation, and equitable use for the benefit of all creation. In doing so, they honour the sacred trust bestowed upon them and contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

The timeless relevance of prophetic narratives

Examining the stories of past Prophets to uncover Qur'anic insights on ethical environmental stewardship might prompt the question: How are these stories relevant to us in the 21st century? It might be argued that the ancient contexts and circumstances of these stories are too far removed from our modern technological and societal advancements to offer practical guidance.

In response, the relevance of the stories of past Prophets in addressing contemporary issues like environmental stewardship lies not in the specific contexts or technologies of their times but in the universal ethical principles they embody. The Qur'an presents these Prophets as exemplars of virtues such as responsibility, humility, and

stewardship – qualities that are indispensable for addressing modern environmental challenges. By interpreting these stories through the lens of ethical environmental stewardship, we can extract timeless principles that transcend historical and technological changes. These principles can inspire modern initiatives and policies that are not only technologically appropriate but also ethically grounded, thereby bridging the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary practice.

The Qur'an emphasises the enduring value of these narratives:

﴿لَقَدْ كَانَ فِي قَصَصِهِمْ عِبْرَةٌ لِأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

There is certainly a moral in their [the Prophets'] stories for those possessed of intellect.⁶

This verse highlights the Qur'an's intention that the stories of the Prophets are not mere historical accounts but are rich with moral and ethical lessons intended for reflection and application by those with understanding.⁷ The term 'those possessed of intellect' signifies individuals who are capable of deep thought and discernment, suggesting that the stories of the Prophets require thoughtful contemplation to uncover their profound ethical teachings. In the context of environmental stewardship, this means that by reflecting on the virtues demonstrated by the Prophets, one can derive ethical guidelines that are highly relevant to contemporary environmental issues.

Moreover, the Qur'an conveys that all Prophets shared a united message, inviting humanity to worship the one true God:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ﴾

⁶ Q 12:111.

⁷ The Holy Prophet (s) was also instructed to recount the stories of previous Prophets, highlighting their significance and the lessons they convey. This directive is mentioned in several verses: Q 19:41, 19:51, 19:54, 19:56, 38:17, 38:41, 38:45, 38:48, 46:21.

We never sent a messenger before you [O Prophet] without revealing to him, ‘There is no deity but Me, so worship Me [alone].’⁸

This shared message emphasises the consistency and continuity of Divine guidance throughout human history. The Prophets, though sent to different communities and at different times, all called people towards the same core principles and values. Furthermore, in the following verses, the Qur’an illustrates the fate of communities that denied their Prophets:

﴿وَلَقَدْ كَذَّبَ أَصْحَابُ الْحِجْرِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ﴾

Indeed, the people of Ḥijr rejected the messengers.⁹

﴿كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ﴾

The Thamūd rejected the messengers.¹⁰

﴿كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍ الْمُرْسَلِينَ﴾

The people of Lūṭ rejected the messengers.¹¹

Although these communities were each sent one Prophet, their denial is portrayed as a rejection of all messengers. This is because the message brought by any single Prophet is part of a continuum of Divine guidance. Therefore, the rejection of one Prophet equates to the rejection of the entire lineage of Prophethood and the unified message they brought from God.¹² This interconnectedness of the prophetic messages reinforces the notion that the principles of stewardship, ethical conduct, and spiritual ecology are not isolated teachings but

⁸ Q 21:25.

⁹ Q 15:80.

¹⁰ Q 26:141.

¹¹ Q 26:160.

¹² Jawādī Āmulī, *Tafsīr-i tasnīm*, 39:41.

part of a comprehensive, Divinely ordained framework.

Prophet Nūḥ and the preservation of life

Turning to the Qur'anic stories of the Prophets for lessons on environmental stewardship, the first narrative that will be examined is that of Prophet Nūḥ and the Ark. Prophet Nūḥ spread the message of monotheism for 950 years, sincerely and steadfastly inviting people to worship God. Despite his efforts, only approximately 80 individuals accepted his call. At the age of 1,800, God commanded him to build an ark, marking the first instance of a human constructing a vessel designed to float on water:¹³

﴿وَأَصْنَعِ الْفُلْكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَوَحْيِنَا﴾

‘Build the Ark under Our gaze and with Our guidance.’¹⁴

The phrase ‘under Our gaze and with Our guidance’ means under God’s supervision and with His support and revelatory teaching.¹⁵ Every aspect of the Ark’s construction, including its dimensions, the type of wood used, and the quality of its craftsmanship, was directed by God.

This verse offers important lessons on environmental stewardship:

1. **Guidance in environmental efforts:** The building of the Ark under Divine guidance symbolises how environmental actions should be undertaken with a sense of Divine purpose and direction. It suggests that efforts to protect and preserve the environment should align with Divine principles and wisdom.
2. **Dependence on Divine Will:** The success of any endeavour depends on Divine help and support. The statement ‘under Our

¹³ Rizwan Arastu, *God's Emissaries: Adam to Jesus* (Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaeya: 2014), 101.

¹⁴ Q 11:37.

¹⁵ Muhammed Husayn Tabataba'i, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Mu'assasat al-a'lamī lil-muṭbū'āt: 1390/1970), 10:223; Nāsir Makārim Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-i nimūni* (Dār al-kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1371 Sh./1992), 9:90.

gaze and with Our guidance' highlights that while human efforts are essential, their ultimate success hinges on God's will and support. This teaches humility and recognition of the Divine in any effort to care for the planet.

3. **Preparation and responsiveness:** The command to build the Ark before the flood highlights the importance of being ready and reacting effectively to environmental warnings. It illustrates the need for proactive measures and timely actions to address impending environmental crises.

Further, God instructed Prophet Nūḥ:

﴿فَأَسْلُكُ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجَيْنِ آثْنَيْنِ وَأَهْلَكَ﴾

'... take on board a pair [one male and one female] of every species along with your family.'¹⁶

4. **Preservation of biodiversity:** The instruction to save a pair of every species by boarding them on the Ark underscores the importance of biodiversity and the human role in its preservation. Every species has intrinsic value, and humans are responsible for protecting them from extinction.

In another place, we are told:

﴿وَقَالَ أَرْكَبُوا فِيهَا بِسْمِ اللَّهِ مَجْرَاهَا وَمُرْسَاهَا﴾

He [Prophet Nūḥ] said, 'Board it! In the Name of God, it will sail and anchor.'¹⁷

This verse imparts significant insights into environmental stewardship:

1. **Spiritual mindset:** Prophet Nūḥ wished to start and end the voyage with the name of God, acknowledging that all actions and outcomes are under Divine governance. This approach

¹⁶ Q 23:27.

¹⁷ Q 11:41.

emphasises the importance of a spiritual mindset, where environmental efforts are not merely physical acts but also spiritual practices.

2. **Stewardship under Divine governance:** Prophet Nūḥ's words serve as a reminder that humans do not control nature but are merely stewards acting under God's governance. This promotes a humble approach to environmental management, emphasising our role as caretakers rather than rulers.

Moreover, the Qur'an states:

﴿قِيلَ يَا نُوحُ اهْبِطْ بِسَلَامٍ مِنَّا وَبَرَكَاتٍ عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰ أُمَّمٍ مِّمَّنْ مَعَكَ﴾

It was said, 'O Nūḥ! Disembark with peace from Us and blessings upon you and upon the nations [to come] from those with you [i.e. the descendants of Prophet Nūḥ's followers].'¹⁸

This verse imparts a number of instructive lessons:

1. **Peace and blessings promised to Prophet Nūḥ and his followers:** God assured Prophet Nūḥ and his followers of peace and blessings as they fulfilled their duties to Him. Crucially, the term 'nations' (*umam*), the plural of *ummah*, and the phrase 'from those with you', indicate that this promise extends to the descendants of those original followers. Therefore, God's blessings and peace are not limited to Prophet Nūḥ and his immediate companions but extend to all future believers who have the same values. By aligning ourselves as true followers of Prophet Nūḥ and acting as God's faithful stewards on Earth, we too can receive God's peace and blessings.
2. **Survival through cooperation:** The Ark symbolises survival through cooperation and collective effort. Just as Prophet Nūḥ's followers helped him build the Ark, today's environmental challenges can be overcome when communities work together.

¹⁸ Q 11:48.

This collective action not only helps tackle immediate issues but also strengthens community bonds and fosters a shared sense of responsibility and purpose among individuals.

3. **Resilience and adaptation:** Prophet Nūḥ's story exemplifies fortitude and the ability to adjust to catastrophic changes. It teaches that adapting to environmental changes and being resilient when faced with climate emergencies are crucial for survival. By embracing this adaptability, communities can develop strategies that mitigate the impact of environmental disturbances.

Prophet Hūd and the 'Ād: lessons from Iram's fall

The 'Ād were descendants of a great-great-grandson of Prophet Nūḥ. God gave them countless blessings, granting them immense physical stature and strength as well as a land of unmatched fertility and lushness. In the area referred to by the Qur'an as Aḥqāf, a region of winding, sandstone mountains in Yemen, the 'Ād constructed a city of extraordinary splendour named Iram, the City of Pillars. This city is referred to in the Qur'an:

﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِعَادٍ﴾ ﴿إِرَامَ ذَاتِ الْعِمَادِ﴾ ﴿الَّتِي لَمْ يُخْلَقْ مِثْلُهَا فِي﴾
الْبِلَادِ﴿

Did you [O Prophet] not see how your Lord dealt with the 'Ād, [the people] of Iram, [the City] of Pillars, whose like has never been matched in any land?¹⁹

Despite their technological and engineering prowess and the many blessings bestowed upon them by God, the 'Ād fell into religious and moral decline, turning to idol worship and perpetrating injustices. Prophet Hūd, the first Arabic-speaking prophet and a respected member of the community, urged the 'Ād to abandon their idolatry and

¹⁹ Q 89:6-8.

warned them of Divine wrath if they continued in their ways. However, his warnings were met with violent rejection from the 'Ād's leaders. In the end, God sent a powerful storm that raged for eight days, destroying Iram and annihilating those who refused to listen to Prophet Hūd.²⁰

The story of the 'Ād serves as a powerful warning from God. It illustrates the consequences of failing to appreciate blessings as gifts from Him and neglecting the role of His vicegerents on Earth. It also emphasises the importance of using technology wisely and in a manner that pleases God. This Divine warning and the subsequent repercussions of the 'Ād's actions are stated in the following verse:

﴿أَلَا إِنَّ عَادًا كَفَرُوا رَبَّهُمْ أَلَا بُعْدًا لِعَادٍ قَوْمِ هُودٍ﴾

Let it be known! Surely, the 'Ād rejected their Lord. Let it be known!

The 'Ād, the people of Hūd, are forever outcast [from God's mercy].²¹

The story of the 'Ād people, detailing their rise to power, rejection of Prophet Hūd, and eventual downfall, provides vital lessons on environmental stewardship:

1. **Gratitude and humility:** The 'Ād's downfall began when they took their Divine gifts for granted and drifted into extravagance, arrogance, and idolatry. This underscores the importance of recognising blessings as gifts from God to be used with gratitude and humility. By appreciating what we have as Divine gifts, we can foster contentment and embrace a more modest way of life.
2. **Sustainable use of resources:** The 'Ād's construction of Iram involved carving out enormous monolithic pillars as tall as the mountains from which they were hewn. These pillars were then moved to Iram and used as foundations for large homes, showcasing sophisticated transportation and construction skills but also suggesting potential overexploitation of natural resources. Their story serves as a cautionary tale

²⁰ Arastu, *God's Emissaries*, 126-7.

²¹ Q 11:60.

against unsustainable resource use, reminding us to find a balance between our needs and ambitions and the health and preservation of the environment.

3. **Technology and moral responsibility:** The tale of the ‘Ād serves as a reminder that technological advancement should be coupled with moral responsibility. It should aim to serve the well-being of all creation rather than merely to display human dominance or achieve material gains. This principle urges us to consider the broader impacts of our technological pursuits on the environment and society.

Prophet Ṣāliḥ and the Thamūd: lessons from the city of Ḥijr

Prophet Ṣāliḥ belonged to the Thamūd, who were also descendants of Prophet Nūḥ. The Thamūd settled in an area close to modern-day Tabuk in Saudi Arabia. In this region, they established a magnificent city named Ḥijr. They skilfully carved their homes into the sandstone mountains and built grand palaces in the valleys using the excavated stone. Ḥijr was surrounded by natural beauty, with plentiful water from springs supporting the cultivation of crops, lush gardens, and date orchards that produced exceptional fruits. Despite the many blessings from God, the Thamūd turned to idol worship.²²

God chose Prophet Ṣāliḥ to guide the Thamūd. The following verse talks about Prophet Ṣāliḥ being sent to the Thamūd and his Divine message to them:

﴿وَالِي تَمُودَ أَخَاهُمْ صَالِحًا قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ هُوَ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا فَاسْتَغْفِرُوهُ ثُمَّ تَوْبُوا إِلَيْهِ إِنَّ رَبِّي قَرِيبٌ مُجِيبٌ﴾

And to the Thamūd [We sent] their brother Ṣāliḥ. He said, ‘O my people, worship God. You have no deity other than Him. It was

²² Arastu, *God's Emissaries*, 131-2.

He Who produced you from the earth, and [it is He Who] wants you to make it prosper. So, seek His forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance. Surely, my Lord is Ever-Near, Ever-Responsive [to prayers].²³

The term '*ista'marakum*' uses a verb form that often indicates a request or desire for an action to be carried out. This has been interpreted to mean that God desires humanity to make the Earth prosper by stewarding it properly.²⁴ He wants us to actively engage in its preservation, use its resources wisely, and ensure its sustainability for future generations.

Furthermore, Prophet Ṣāliḥ's message to seek God's forgiveness and repent is significant. His words here emphasise the importance of faith, forgiveness, and repentance in fulfilling one's duties towards the Earth. His message aligns spiritual obligations with the physical act of stewardship.

After years of unsuccessfully urging his people to abandon idol worship, Prophet Ṣāliḥ proposed a challenge to prove the power of God. First, he addressed their idols, but the idols did not respond. The Thamūd then requested a miraculous sign: for a she-camel to emerge from the mountain. Prophet Ṣāliḥ prayed to God to make this happen, and God answered his prayers. Prophet Ṣāliḥ described the she-camel as a sign of God for them:

﴿وَيَا قَوْمِ هَذِهِ نَاقَةُ اللَّهِ لَكُمْ آيَةٌ فَذَرُوهَا تَأْكُلْ فِي أَرْضِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوءٍ
فَيَأْخُذْكُمْ عَذَابٌ قَرِيبٌ﴾

O my people, this she-camel of God is a sign for you. So leave her to graze [freely] on God's Earth and do not harm her, or a swift punishment will take you!²⁵

On alternate days, the she-camel would miraculously drink all of the

²³ Q 11:61.

²⁴ Jawādī Āmulī, *Tafsīr-i tasnīm*, 39:37-45.

²⁵ Q 11:64.

available water. Afterwards, she would allow the Thamūd to milk her, and her milk would be enough for everyone. The following day, the she-camel would refrain from drinking any water, permitting the Thamūd to draw water freely for themselves and their livestock. This arrangement was a test of the willingness of the Thamūd to change their ways and follow God's command. However, they struggled with this change and killed the she-camel. In the end, the Thamūd were destroyed by an earthquake and a blast sent by God as punishment for their wrongdoings.

As with the story of the 'Ād, God uses the story of the Thamūd to caution against taking blessings for granted and neglecting the duty as God's stewards on Earth. In similar words to how He condemns the 'Ād, He says the following about the Thamūd:

﴿أَلَا إِنَّ تَمُودًا كَفَرُوا رَبَّهُمْ أَلَا بُعْدًا لِتَمُودَ﴾

Let it be known! Surely, the Thamūd rejected their Lord. Let it be known! The Thamūd are forever outcast [from God's mercy].²⁶

This story highlights several key points relevant to environmental stewardship:

1. **Sustainable resource sharing management:** The command to allow the she-camel to graze freely and drink the water underscores the importance of respecting and sharing environmental resources. The narrative teaches that the Earth's resources are not solely for human consumption but are meant to be shared with all creatures in a sustainable manner. The miraculous occurrence of the she-camel drinking all the water on one day and providing enough milk for everyone symbolises the lesson that, with wise management, natural resources can sustain human communities while also meeting the needs of other living beings.
2. **Interdependence of life:** The relationship between the camel and the Thamūd highlights the interconnectedness of all living

²⁶ Q 11:68.

things and their environment. The story illustrates that humans and animals depend on the same resources and need each other to survive. It serves as a reminder that the well-being of one species is often linked to the well-being of others, promoting a holistic view of environmental stewardship.

3. **Obedience to Divine commands:** The Thamūd were tested by a Divine command, just as modern societies face the challenge of adhering to principles that ensure the well-being of the planet. This aspect of the story emphasises the importance of following guidelines and ethical standards that protect the environment, even when it requires changing long-standing behaviours.
4. **Respect for all forms of life:** The story emphasises the importance of treating all living beings with respect and kindness. The she-camel was not merely a resource but a sign from God, endowed with rights. This respect extends to recognising the intrinsic value of all creatures and the need to protect their welfare as part of our ethical and spiritual duties. Imam al-Bāqir is reported to have said, 'Indeed, God, Blessed and Exalted is He, loves the cooling of a hot liver. Whoever quenches the thirst of a hot liver, be it of an animal or other [living being], God will shade him on the day when there is no shade but His.'²⁷
5. **Resistance to change and its implications:** The Thamūd's decision to kill the she-camel demonstrates the dangers of resisting necessary changes to meet environmental needs. Their unwillingness to adapt led to their destruction, serving as a cautionary tale about the consequences of ignoring or defying sustainable practices. This point highlights the importance of embracing change to avoid detrimental impacts on the environment and society.

²⁷ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi* (Dār al-ḥadīth: 1429/2008), 7:354.

Prophet Yūsuf and strategic resource management in Egypt

Prophet Yūsuf faced numerous trials before rising to a position of influence in Egypt. After being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, he eventually found favour in the household of an Egyptian official. However, he was falsely accused and imprisoned. While in prison, his ability to interpret dreams brought him to the attention of the king. Summoned from prison to explain a dream that foretold seven years of abundance followed by seven years of severe famine, he advised the king on how to manage resources during the years of plenty to prepare for the years of scarcity:

﴿قَالَ تَزْرَعُونَ سَبْعَ سِنِينَ دَأْبًا فَمَا حَصَدْتُمْ فَذَرُوهُ فِي سُنْبُلِهِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ﴾

﴿ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ سَبْعٌ شِدَادٌ يَأْكُلْنَ مَا قَدَّمْتُمْ لَهُنَّ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَحْصِنُونَ﴾

He [Prophet Yūsuf] said, ‘You will sow [grain] for seven consecutive years. Then whatever you harvest, leave in its ear [so that it does not perish], except a little that you eat. Then after that will come seven hard years, which will consume whatever you have set aside for them, except a little that you preserve.’²⁸

These verses offer valuable insights into environmental stewardship:

1. **Strategic planning:** Prophet Yūsuf advised storing surplus grain during the years of plenty to prepare for the years of scarcity. This highlights the importance of strategic planning and foresight in anticipating future environmental challenges and preparing for them in advance.
2. **Sustainable practices:** By advocating for the storage of surplus grain, Prophet Yūsuf implemented a sustainable practice that ensured the well-being of the population during times of famine. This teaches the importance of sustainable resource

²⁸ Q 12:47-8.

management and avoiding waste.

3. **Adaptation to environmental changes:** The story of Prophet Yūsuf exemplifies the ability to adapt to significant environmental changes, such as the transition from years of abundance to years of famine. This emphasises the importance of being adaptable and resilient in the face of environmental challenges. For instance, modern climate requires societies to adapt to shifting weather patterns, rising sea levels, and the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires. The Qur’anic narrative of Prophet Yūsuf highlights the need to develop flexible and adaptive strategies to cope with these changes.

Prophet Dāwūd and harmony with nature

Prophet Dāwūd’s recitation of the Psalms (Zabūr) was so beautiful that the mountains and birds would glorify God along with him, highlighting his profound connection with the Divine and the natural world. This aspect of his life is described in several verses of the Qur’an:

﴿فَفَهَّمْنَاهَا سُلَيْمَانَ وَكُلًّا آتَيْنَا حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا وَسَخَّرْنَا مَعَ دَاوُودَ الْجِبَالَ يُسَبِّحْنَ
وَالطَّيْرَ وَكُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ﴾

We made Sulaymān understand and granted both of them [Prophets Sulaymān and Dāwūd] sound judgement and knowledge. We made subservient the mountains and the birds to sing [Our] glory along with Dāwūd. It is We Who did [all these things].²⁹

﴿وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا دَاوُودَ مِنَّا فَضْلًا يَا جِبَالُ أَوِّبِي مَعَهُ وَالطَّيْرَ﴾

We truly granted Dāwūd a favour from Us. [We said,], ‘O mountains,

²⁹ Q 21:79.

echo his hymns! And the birds as well.³⁰

﴿إِنَّا سَخَّرْنَا الْجِبَالَ مَعَهُ يُسَبِّحْنَ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِشْرَاقِ﴾ ﴿وَالطَّيْرَ مَحْشُورَةً كُلٌّ لَهُ
أَوَّابٌ﴾

Indeed, We made the mountains subservient to sing [Our] glory along with him at eventide and sunrise. And the birds [too], in flocks, all turn to Him [in chorus with Prophet Dāwūd, glorifying Him].³¹

In the context of environmental stewardship, these verses illustrate several important points:

1. **Harmony with nature:** The verses highlight the harmonious relationship between Prophet Dāwūd and the natural world, where even the mountains and birds are described as participating in the glorification of God. This imagery underscores the strong bond between humans and nature, suggesting that our actions should foster balance and harmony with the environment.
2. **Reflection on nature's glorification:** Reflecting on how mountains and birds glorify God encourages a more mindful and responsible approach to the environment. This reflection deepens our awe and reverence for God's magnificence, enhancing our understanding of God's Oneness (*tawhīd*). It highlights how every element in nature acknowledges, celebrates, and glorifies its single Creator and Sustainer, promoting a sense of sacred duty to protect and preserve the natural world.
3. **Inclusivity in environmental conservation:** The involvement of both the inanimate (mountains) and animate (birds) aspects of nature in the act of glorification shows that environmental stewardship encompasses all elements of the Earth. This

³⁰ Q 34:10.

³¹ Q 38:18-19.

inclusivity reminds us that every part of the environment, regardless of its perceived importance, plays a vital role in the overall health and balance of the ecosystem.

4. **The role of knowledge and wisdom:** The verses mention that both Prophet Sulaymān and Prophet Dāwūd were granted sound judgement and knowledge. These qualities were instrumental in their interaction with the natural world, highlighting the importance of acquiring knowledge and wisdom to understand and solve environmental challenges. This suggests that effective environmental stewardship requires not only spiritual insight but also practical knowledge and sound judgement to make informed decisions.

God granted Prophet Dāwūd the ability to manipulate iron easily without the need for intense heat or heavy labour. This Divine gift enabled him to craft chain mail for protection in warfare:

﴿وَأَلْنَا لَهُ الْحَدِيدَ﴾ ﴿أَنْ أَعْمَلَ سَابِغَاتٍ وَقَدِّرَ فِي السَّرْدِ وَاعْمَلُوا صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ﴾

And We softened iron for him, [saying,] ‘Make coats of mail, measure the links well, and do righteous deeds. Indeed, I see everything you do.’³²

﴿وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ صَنْعَةَ لَبُوسٍ لَكُمْ لِتُحْصِنَكُمْ مِنْ بَأْسِكُمْ فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ شَاكِرُونَ﴾

And We taught him how to make garments [coats of mail] for you to protect you in your battles. Then will you be grateful?³³

These verses offer insightful guidance on environmental stewardship:

1. **Preservation through supernatural abilities:** The verses highlight that Prophet Dāwūd was granted the miraculous

³² Q 34:10-11.

³³ Q 21:80.

ability to soften iron to make armour for protecting lives rather than creating weapons.³⁴ This indicates a Divine preference for preservation over destruction, underscoring the importance of using one's abilities and resources to safeguard life.

2. **Ethical leadership and peaceful stewardship:** Prophet Dāwūd exemplified ethical stewardship. Despite his extraordinary abilities, he focused on protection, spiritual growth, and communal well-being rather than military conquest. His example teaches the value of using power and resources ethically, promoting peace and protecting the community.

Prophet Sulaymān and the responsible use of natural forces and resources

God granted Prophet Sulaymān the ability to understand the language of birds and other creatures. His kingdom was vast and powerful, with an army composed not only of humans but also birds and jinn. The jinn would dive into the seas to retrieve hidden treasures and perform various tasks for him. Additionally, Prophet Sulaymān had control over the wind and was blessed with a fountain of molten copper.

Despite these immense blessings, Prophet Sulaymān led a life devoted to serving God. Beneath his royal attire, he wore coarse clothing made from goat hair and palm fronds, which he crafted himself. He would serve his guests fine food while opting for simpler meals for himself and his family, and he preferred the company of the poor over the wealthy.³⁵ His humility and dedication to God were evident in his everyday actions and choices.

The accounts of Prophet Sulaymān's control over the wind provides profound insights into environmental stewardship and the responsible use of natural forces as guided by Divine wisdom. This is illustrated

³⁴ Jawādī Āmulī, *Tafsīr-i mawḍūʿī-yi Qurʾān-i karīm: Sīri-yi payāambarān dar Qurʾān* (Markaz-i nashr-i Isrāʾ: 1379 Sh./2000), 287.

³⁵ Arastu, *God's Emissaries*, 512.

through several verses in the Qur'an:

﴿وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ عَاصِفَةً تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا وَكُنَّا بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَالِمِينَ﴾

[We harnessed] the stormy wind for Sulaymān, blowing at his command to the land We blessed. It is We Who know everything.³⁶

﴿فَسَخَّرْنَا لَهُ الرِّيحَ تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ رُخَاءً حَيْثُ أَصَابَ﴾

So We made the wind subservient for him, blowing gently at his command to wherever he pleased.³⁷

﴿وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ غُدُوها شَهْرٌ وَرَوْاحُها شَهْرٌ﴾

[We made subservient] the wind for Sulaymān: its morning course was a month's journey and so was its afternoon course.³⁸

These verses provide valuable lessons for contemporary environmental stewardship:

1. **Sustainable use of natural forces:** By using the wind for travel, Prophet Sulaymān demonstrated how natural forces can be harnessed sustainably and efficiently. This showcases the potential for humans to utilise nature in a way that does not cause harm or depletion, serving as an early model for harnessing renewable energy. It illustrates the benefits of using wind power, a clean and sustainable resource, thereby reducing reliance on non-renewable and polluting energy sources.

³⁶ Q 21:81.

³⁷ Q 38:36.

³⁸ Q 34:12. This means the wind would enable him to sail distances in a day that would normally take two months. He would travel the equivalent of one month's distance in the morning and the equivalent of one month's distance in the afternoon.

2. **Divine stewardship:** The phrase ‘It is We Who know everything’ in Q 21:81 underscores the concept of Divine vicegerency over natural resources. It emphasises that ultimate knowledge and governance belong to God and that using natural resources should be guided by an acute awareness of His omniscience and lordship.

Like his father Prophet Dāwūd, Prophet Sulaymān was taught the language of birds:

﴿وَوَرِّثَ سُلَيْمَانُ دَاوُودَ وَقَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ عَلَّمْنَا مِنْطِقَ الطَّيْرِ﴾

Sulaymān succeeded Dāwūd. He [Prophet Sulaymān] said, ‘O people, we have been taught the language of birds.’³⁹

One of the most endearing Qur’anic stories is that of Prophet Sulaymān and the ant. As Prophet Sulaymān set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca with a vast army, he came to a valley inhabited by ants. Fearing Prophet Sulaymān’s forces would accidentally crush them, one ant warned her colony to take cover in their mounds. Prophet Sulaymān overheard the ant’s words, felt grateful for his Divine gift of understanding the language of creatures, and appreciated the ant’s concern for the safety of her colony. Filled with a sense of gratitude, he smiled joyously in response to her words and made a prayer:

﴿فَتَبَسَّمَ ضَاحِكًا مِنْ قَوْلِهَا وَقَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ وَعَلَى وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا تَرْضَاهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِي بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِي عِبَادِكَ الصَّالِحِينَ﴾

So Sulaymān smiled joyously in response to her words. He prayed, ‘My Lord! Inspire me to be grateful for the blessings You have bestowed on me and my parents, and [inspire me] to do good deeds that please You. Admit me, by Your mercy, into [the ranks of] Your righteous servants.’⁴⁰

³⁹ Q 27:16.

⁴⁰ Q 27:19.

He then changed the course of his army to ensure the ants were not harmed.

This incident teaches several essential lessons relevant to environmental stewardship:

1. **The importance of understanding the natural world:** The ability of Prophet Sulaymān to understand the language of the ants highlights the significance of being attuned to the natural world. This understanding fosters a meaningful connection with the environment and promotes a sense of responsibility towards its preservation and care.
2. **Respect for all life forms:** Prophet Sulaymān's amused and gentle response to the ant's concern illustrates a sincere respect for even the smallest creatures. This teaches that environmental stewardship involves recognising the value of every creature and taking steps to ensure their safety and well-being.
3. **Consideration and compassion in action:** Prophet Sulaymān's decision to redirect his army to avoid harming the ants demonstrates practical compassion and consideration for the well-being of other beings. It serves as a reminder that true leadership involves empathy and proactive measures to protect even the smallest and seemingly insignificant creatures.
4. **Gratitude for nature's gifts:** By expressing gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon him and his parents, Prophet Sulaymān acknowledged the natural world and its creatures as Divine blessings. This highlights the importance of being thankful for nature's gifts, fostering a sense of appreciation and responsibility.
5. **Leadership and environmental responsibility:** As a leader, Prophet Sulaymān set a powerful example by prioritising the protection of the environment over the convenience of his journey. This suggests that leadership at all levels has a critical role in advancing environmental stewardship. His actions show

that responsible leaders should consider the environmental impact of their decisions and strive to protect natural resources.

6. **Awareness and mindfulness:** The story also reflects the importance of being aware and mindful of our surroundings and the impact of our actions. Prophet Sulaymān's sensitivity to the ant's plight teaches us to pay attention to the effects our actions have on the environment and other living beings, encouraging a culture of mindfulness and respect.
7. **Spiritual insights from the natural world:** This incident led Prophet Sulaymān to reflect on the blessings God had bestowed upon him and pray for the ability to be grateful for these gifts, perform deeds pleasing to God, and be admitted among His righteous servants. The story highlights the profound connection between spiritual growth and the natural world, demonstrating that by observing and respecting nature, we can cultivate an enhanced understanding of God's wisdom and mercy.

In Sūrat Sabā', God tells us He caused a fountain of molten copper to flow for Prophet Sulaymān:

﴿وَأَسْلَمْنَا لَهُ عَيْنَ الْقَظْرِ﴾

We caused a fountain of molten copper to flow for him.⁴¹

This verse provides significant guidance on environmental stewardship:

1. **Responsible resource management:** Prophet Sulaymān's utilisation of a fountain of molten copper and advanced metallurgical techniques highlights the importance of using natural resources wisely. It teaches the need to balance technological progress with environmental protection, ensuring that resource use does not lead to depletion or harm.
2. **Divine provision:** The fact that God caused the fountain of molten

⁴¹ Q 34:12.

copper to flow for Prophet Sulaymān underscores the concept that God provides His devoted servants with extraordinary natural resources for their sustenance and development. Of course, these gifts come with a significant responsibility: to express gratitude to God and to use the resources in ways that align with His will.

In the next verse, God tells us about the accomplishments under Prophet Sulaymān's leadership and how he fulfilled the comprehensive needs of his people:

﴿يَعْمَلُونَ لَهُ مَا يَشَاءُ مِنْ مَحَارِبَ وَتَمَاثِيلَ وَجِفَانٍ كَالْجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٍ رَاسِيَاتٍ
اعْمَلُوا آلَ دَاوُودَ شُكْرًا وَقَلِيلٌ مِنْ عِبَادِيَ الشَّكُورُ﴾

They [the jinn under Prophet Sulaymān's command] made for him whatever he wanted: sanctuaries, sculptures [of trees and the like], basins the size of small pools [for communal eating], and cauldrons [for large-scale cooking] fixed in the earth. [We said,] 'Work, O family of Dāwūd, in thankfulness, though few of My servants are thankful.'⁴²

These accomplishments address various aspects of community life and environmental stewardship:

1. **Spiritual well-being:** By building places of worship (*maḥārīb*), Prophet Sulaymān met the spiritual needs of his people. These sanctuaries would have provided areas for prayer, learning about faith, and fostering a sense of community and spiritual growth.
2. **Artistic expression and environmental awareness:** The sculptures made by the jinn under Prophet Sulaymān's command were not statues of men and women but of trees and similar natural forms. This is supported by a *ḥadīth* from *al-Kāfi*, where al-Faḍl Abī al-'Abbās reports, 'I asked Abū Ja'far [Imam al-Bāqir] about the words of God, Mighty and Majestic is He, "They [the

⁴² Q 34:13.

jinn] made for him whatever he wanted: sanctuaries, sculptures, [and] basins the size of small pools.” He replied, “These are not statues of men and women but statues of trees and the like.”⁴³ This suggests that art was encouraged within religious guidelines and indicates an appreciation for the natural world.

3. **Cultural enrichment:** The places of worship, sculptures, and communal dining areas point to a rich cultural background. These elements would have helped build a strong sense of identity and community, fostering unity and cultural pride among the people. By integrating art and communal spaces, Prophet Sulaymān enhanced the cultural fabric of his society.
4. **Food stewardship:** The large basins and cauldrons for communal eating and cooking illustrate Prophet Sulaymān’s attention to addressing the physical and social needs of his people. By enabling the preparation and sharing of meals on a grand scale, he would have ensured that the nutritional needs of the community were met. Moreover, these communal meals would have fostered social cohesion, allowing for resource sharing and ensuring the well-being of all community members. This approach to food stewardship highlights the importance of using resources effectively to support community health and unity.
5. **Gratitude and community work:** The verse emphasises gratitude through action: ‘Work, O family of Dāwūd, in thankfulness’. This instruction teaches that gratitude is not only expressed through words or prayers but also through actions that benefit the community as well. By linking the work of Prophet Sulaymān’s followers with thankfulness, the verse underscores that caring for others is a way of showing appreciation for Divine blessings. The concluding part, ‘though few of My servants are thankful’, further highlights that such active gratitude is exceptional and highly valued by God.

⁴³ al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 13:102.

6. **Strong leadership:** All these activities were conducted under Prophet Sulaymān's exemplary leadership. With a clear vision, he effectively communicated his goals to his followers and assigned tasks according to the abilities of each individual. His leadership not only ensured the successful completion of these responsibilities but also fostered a strong sense of community and environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

The Qur'an articulates the dual role of the natural world in Sūrat al-Kahf:

﴿إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَهَا لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا﴾

Indeed, We have made whatever is on the Earth an adornment for it, to test [people] as to which of them is best in deeds.⁴⁴

This verse highlights that the intrinsic beauty and bounties of the Earth serve not only for human enjoyment but also as a Divine test of our gratitude and patience. In the trial of gratitude, when individuals are blessed with beauty and abundance, they are tested on their capacity to recognise these blessings as gifts from God, express gratitude for them, and utilise them responsibly in accordance with His commands. Conversely, the trial of patience emerges during times of hardship or loss, challenging individuals to maintain their faith and trust in God, endure difficulties with perseverance, and continue engaging in good deeds without succumbing to despair.⁴⁵

The actions of Prophets Nūḥ, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Yūsuf, Dāwūd, and Sulaymān exemplify success in these Divine tests. By maintaining ethical conduct, appreciating and preserving the natural world, and acting justly and wisely across different situations, these Prophets provide compelling

⁴⁴ Q 18:7.

⁴⁵ Jawādī Āmulī, *Islām wa muḥīt-i zīst* (Markaz-i nashr-i Isrā: 1388 Sh./2009), 217-24.

models for understanding and implementing environmental stewardship grounded in spiritual ecology. Their stories emphasise the importance of ethical environmental management, respectful use of resources, resilience in ecological challenges, and fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. By embodying the roles of Divine vicegerents on Earth, these Prophets showed how individuals can draw upon spiritual values to foster sustainable practices, enhance social justice, and build community cohesion.

In contrast, the actions of the ‘Ād and Thamūd illustrate the consequences of failing these tests. Blessed with prosperity and power, these nations exhibited ingratitude and arrogance, misusing their resources and neglecting the guidance of their prophets. Their downfall, precipitated by their failure to heed Divine warnings, serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of such negligence.

Collectively, these narratives and teachings from the Qur’an offer a profound contribution to contemporary environmental ethics, advocating for the integration of spiritual consciousness in the pursuit of ecological balance and harmony. Embracing the models of prophetic stewardship provides humanity with the insight and foresight needed to navigate the environmental crises of our time, charting a path towards a more sustainable and equitable world for future generations.

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