SAMPLE

Dhul-Qarnayn: The Just King

Dhul-Qarnayn in the Quran

Aira Aurora

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This free sample contains the Introduction and Chapter 1. The complete book contains the full contents above.

Introduction

Dhul-Qarnayn is one of the most enigmatic figures in the Quran. His name means "the one of the two horns" or "the one of the two epochs," and he appears in a single passage of the Quran — Surah Al-Kahf, verses 83 to 98. In these sixteen verses, the Quran describes three journeys that Dhul-Qarnayn made: to the westernmost point of the earth, to the easternmost point, and to a place between two mountains where he built a barrier against the destructive tribes of Gog and Magog.

The story of Dhul-Qarnayn is told in response to a question — the Quran says the people asked the Prophet Muhammad about Dhul-Qarnayn, and Allah instructed him to recite the story (18:83). The story is one of four narratives in Surah Al-Kahf — the companions of the cave, the owner of the two gardens, Musa and Khidr, and Dhul-Qarnayn. Each narrative teaches a different lesson about the relationship between the believer and the world. Dhul-Qarnayn's lesson is about power — the proper use of power, the limits of power, and the divine source of all power.

This book is the sixth in The Honored Ones sub-series. The first five books explored Maryam (purity and trust), Asiya (faith under tyranny), Hajar (perseverance and effort), Bilqis (guided leadership), and Luqman (wisdom). This book explores Dhul-Qarnayn — the model of just kingship. Dhul-Qarnayn is the Quran's portrait of a powerful ruler who used his power justly, who acknowledged the source of his power, and who built something that protected people from harm. His story is the Quran's most detailed narrative about a non-prophet king who governed with justice and faith.

The story of Dhul-Qarnayn is told in only sixteen verses, but it contains a complete philosophy of power. It teaches that power comes from Allah, that it must be used with justice, that it should serve the weak, that it should build and protect, and that all of its achievements are temporary before the eternal promise of the Last Day. The king who traveled to the ends of the earth and built a barrier of iron and copper is the Quran's answer to the question: what should the powerful do with their power?

The answer — use it justly, serve with it, build with it, and know its limits — is as relevant today as it was when the Quran was revealed. Every person who has any form of power — political, economic, social, personal — can find in Dhul-Qarnayn a model of the responsible use of that power. And every person who lives in a world built by barriers — physical, social, moral — can find in his story a reminder that the barriers are valuable but temporary, and that the eternal belongs to Allah alone.

Dhul-Qarnayn's story is also the Quran's teaching about the nature of civilization and its limits. The barrier that Dhul-Qarnayn built — the great wall against Gog and Magog — is a symbol of human achievement: the ability to build, to protect, to create safety. But the barrier is also temporary. The Quran says the barrier will hold "until, when [the promise of] my Lord comes, He will level it to the ground" (18:98). The achievements of civilization are real and valuable, but they are not eternal. The eternal belongs to Allah alone.

Chapter 1: Dhul-Qarnayn in the Quran — The Mysterious King

The Quran introduces Dhul-Qarnayn with a single verse: "And they ask you about Dhul-Qarnayn. Say: I will recite to you a mention of him" (18:83). This introduction is unusual — it frames the story as a response to a question, suggesting that the audience already knew of Dhul-Qarnayn and wanted to know more.

The Name

The name Dhul-Qarnayn is a title, not a personal name. Dhul means "possessor of" or "owner of." Qarnayn is the dual form of qarn, which means "horn" but also "epoch," "peak," or "generation." The name has been interpreted in multiple ways: "the one with two horns," "the one of two epochs," "the one of two peaks," or "the one who reached the two extremities" (east and west). The ambiguity of the name is part of the mystery of the figure.

The interpretation "the one of two horns" has led some to connect Dhul-Qarnayn with Alexander the Great, whose coins depicted him with ram's horns. The interpretation "the one of two epochs" suggests a ruler who spanned two eras. The interpretation "the one who reached the two extremities" refers to his journeys to the east and west. The Quran does not define the name, leaving it to the reader's understanding.

The Question of Identity

The identity of Dhul-Qarnayn has been one of the most debated questions in Islamic scholarship. The main candidates are:

1. Alexander the Great — suggested by some early scholars because of the two-horn imagery on his coins and his journeys to the east and west. However, Alexander was a polytheist who claimed divine status, while the Quran portrays Dhul-Qarnayn as a monotheist who acknowledges Allah.

2. Cyrus the Great — suggested by some modern scholars because Cyrus was a monotheistic ruler who is called "God's shepherd" and "God's anointed" in the Bible (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1). Cyrus was a Persian king who ruled a vast empire and was known for his just treatment of conquered peoples.

3. An unidentified righteous king — some scholars hold that Dhul-Qarnayn cannot be definitively identified with any historical figure and that the Quran intentionally leaves his identity ambiguous to focus on the lessons of his story

rather than on his biography.

The Quran itself does not identify Dhul-Qarnayn. The silence is consistent with the Quran's treatment of other figures — Luqman, the believer of Pharaoh's household, the companion of Musa — whose biographical details are less important than their spiritual significance. The Quran's focus is not on who Dhul-Qarnayn was but on what he did: how he used his power, how he treated the people he encountered, and how he acknowledged the source of his authority.

The Question of the People

The Quran introduces the story with: "And they ask you about Dhul-Qarnayn" (18:83). The framing — a question from the people — is significant. It suggests that Dhul-Qarnayn was a figure known to the audience, at least by name. The question is not "who is Dhul-Qarnayn?" but "tell us about him." The people want to know more, and Allah provides the answer through the Prophet.

The framing also connects the story to the broader theme of Surah Al-Kahf: the surah is about the relationship between faith and the world, and the questions it answers are questions about how the believer should live in a world that is hostile to faith. The companions of the cave withdrew from the world. The owner of the two gardens was absorbed by the world. Musa and Khidr learned about the unseen wisdom behind the world. And Dhul-Qarnayn engaged with the world — using its resources, traveling its paths, and building within it. The four narratives offer four responses to the challenge of the world: withdrawal, absorption, humility, and engagement. Dhul-Qarnayn represents engagement — the active, constructive, just use of the world's resources for the protection of the weak and the containment of chaos.

The Context in Surah Al-Kahf

Surah Al-Kahf is structured around four narratives, each teaching a lesson about the relationship between faith and the world:

1. The companions of the cave (18:9-26) — faith under persecution; the believer's withdrawal from a hostile world. 2. The owner of the two gardens (18:32-44) — wealth and its transience; the believer's attitude toward prosperity. 3. Musa and Khidr (18:60-82) — knowledge and its limits; the believer's humility before the unseen wisdom of Allah. 4. Dhul-Qarnayn

(18:83-98) — power and its proper use; the believer's exercise of authority with justice and faith.

Dhul-Qarnayn's story is the culminating narrative — the last and longest of the four. It brings the surah's themes to a climax by addressing the most

comprehensive question: how should the believer relate to power? The first three narratives address withdrawal, wealth, and knowledge. The fourth addresses power — the ability to shape the world, to protect or destroy, to build or ruin. And the Quran's answer, through Dhul-Qarnayn, is that power is a trust from Allah, to be used with justice, for the protection of the weak, with the acknowledgment that all power is temporary and all achievement is provisional.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aira Aurora is an independent researcher and writer specializing in Quranic studies. Her work focuses on close reading of the Quranic text, exploring its themes, narratives, and moral framework with attention to both the original Arabic and the broader human context.

The NurOne master series is her primary project -- a multi-sub-series exploration of the Quran covering prophets, people, places, events, lessons, commands, signs, the unseen, the hereafter, and everyday life. Each book is a close reading of the Quranic verses on a specific topic, presented in clear, accessible language.

Her work is published under the pen name Aira Aurora.

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