

Write a creative response to a myth of your choice, accompanied by a short critical commentary.

At the Edge of the World

For many months I had travelled west on my ship, beyond the lands where merchants traded. I had overcome valleys where no man had walked before and seas that no man had seen. As the days grew shorter, the air changed. The wind carried the scent of salt. My companions grew silent. Even the birds that had followed us disappeared, as no man nor animal was willing to venture any farther. Then, one evening, I reached the westernmost place of the world. Before me stretched a dark spring unlike any I had seen. Its waters were thick and black, bubbling as though the earth itself breathed beneath them. Steam drifted across its surface, and the sky glowed crimson with the dying light of the day. I stood at its edge. The great sun descended slowly until it rested upon the spring. The blazing disc touched the murky waters, and for a moment the whole spring burned with gold. It seemed to me that the sun had entered the spring itself. My men fell to their knees. Some shielded their faces. Others whispered prayers, believing they had witnessed the end of creation. I could not speak. Never had I imagined that the journey would bring me to the very place where day surrendered to night. Nearby lived a people unlike any I had encountered. Their homes stood upon the rocky ground beside the spring, and they watched us without fear. They had seen this wonder every evening of their lives, yet none claimed to understand it. To them it was simply the order established since the beginning of time. An elder approached me. "You have travelled far," he said. "Many come seeking the place where the sun rests yet none have arrived." I asked him, "Does the sun truly descend into these waters?" We only know what our eyes have always shown us.

The myth I will be choosing will be the myth of the place where the sun sets in Islam and I will be providing evidence for my claim that this is not to be taken. Quran 18:86 until when he reached the point of sunset, he found it setting into a murky spring, and found a people near it. We said, "O Dhul-Qarnain, either punish them or adopt good behavior with them." The verse describes Dhul-Qarnayn reaching the "place of sunset" (maghrib al-shams) and finding (wajadahā) the sun setting into a murky/muddy spring ('ayn ḥami'ah), with people nearby. The modern interpretation is that this is just from Dhul-Qarnayn's point of view they take the word (wajadahā) (he found it) and most twist the translation to 'it appeared to him' that the sun was setting in a murky spring. However, I will show you where I believe Muhammad actually got this myth from, and why it was never meant to be taken as a hypothetical or metaphorical statement.

The clearest and most direct source for this story is the Alexander Romance (also known as the Legend of Alexander the Great) a very popular legendary biography that was widely circulated in the Middle East during the 6th and 7th centuries. In these legends, Alexander the Great (who is called Dhul-Qarnayn "the two-horned one" in the Quran) travels to the ends of the earth. He reaches the place where the sun sets and finds it setting in a muddy or dark spring. This motif appears in Syriac, Greek, and Persian versions of the Alexander legends, all of which were well-known in Arabia at the time of Muhammad. Scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke and Tommaso Tesei have pointed out that this chapter of the Quran (Surah Al-Kahf) was revealed around 615 CE. The striking similarities between the Quranic story and the Alexander Romance legends that were circulating in the region at that exact time strongly suggest that Muhammad was drawing from these pre-existing myths. This would have been a retelling of popular legends that were already familiar to the people of 7th-century Arabia.

Early Muslim scholars who lived much closer to the time of Muhammad had no problem taking this verse literally. Al-Baghawi, Ibn Kathir, Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Al-Jalalayn all explained that the sun literally sets in a "hami'ah" meaning (muddy/black) or (hamiah) without an alif (the letter A) meaning hot as there is

2 different Qira'at (versions or recitations of the quran) for this verse. They didn't say 'it appeared to him' they accepted the plain meaning of the text. Not only this but throughout the hadith (Muhameds life) this seems to be a massive question that people want to know from the Prophet. This is further supported by multiple hadiths (books of teachings and sayings of Muhamed) . In Sunan Abi Dawud, Abu Dharr narrates that while riding behind the Prophet (ﷺ) as the sun was setting, Muhammad was asked where the sun sets. He replied that it sets in a spring of warm water (hamiyah). In the books Sahih al-Bukhari and Jami' at-Tirmidhi, similar narrations show the Prophet explaining that the sun goes and asks permission to prostrate, and one day it will rise from the west. These hadiths show that the question of where the sun sets was a major topic of discussion in 7th-century Arabia. Muhammad's answer aligned with the popular myth of his time, the Alexander Romance legend rather than providing any new or divinely accurate knowledge.

From a scientific point of view, this verse is clearly wrong. The sun does not set in a spring, ocean, or any body of water. This description in Quran 18:86 perfectly matches a 7th-century flat-earth cosmology the common belief at the time that the Earth was flat as seen in Quran 88:20 where the word "sutihat" is used for "spread out", and the sun physically traveled across the sky each day, rising from one place and setting into a literal body of water or spring at the edge of the world every night. Muhammad's answer to questions about where the sun sets (as seen in multiple hadiths) reflects this ancient understanding rather than any divine, timeless knowledge.

In conclusion, the story of the sun setting in a murky spring in Quran 18:86 is not a divine revelation of unknown knowledge. It is a clear retelling of popular legends particularly the Alexander Romance that were widely circulated in 7th-century Arabia. Early Muslim scholars understood the verse literally. Classical tafsirs accepted that the sun physically set in a body of water and now the cover up is to say it is metaphorical. Multiple hadiths show that the question of where the sun sets was a common topic, and Muhammad's answers reflected the scientific understanding of his time. From a scientific perspective, the description is simply wrong. The Earth is not flat, and the sun does not set into a spring or ocean or have a setting place.

References

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