

The Pilgrim Meets the Preserved Tablet

(Here, Fikrat comes to the “Heavenly Tablet” known as Lawh Mahfuz to seek her guidance. The Tablet contains a record of all that God has created and decreed. After he’s rebuffed in his request to learn from her, Fikrat returns to his master, the Sufi pir.)

- 2098 Our Pilgrim sought to take the *Tablet Lawh* as guide.
But, quillishly, she shook her head and turned to write.
- He called to Tablet, “Aye! By sweet and honeyed scent!
Could I compare what’s writ on you to someone else?”
- 2100 For, worthy, you preserve the secrets-hid in words!
And, pregnant, you so bear the meanings found in verse!
- O you who paints eternal books with wisdom’s words,
Collecting both the art of deed and study’s craft!
- The ornament of essence! God has rendered you
to bear the secrets kept in signs for all of time.
- What went, what goes, what will, so here and after here:
it’s found in you, the shades and colors, one and all.
- O wisdom bearer: sweetly speak, recite, and read!
And why not read? This script so fine is yours to share.
- 2105 A sea surrounds and drowns with secrets plentiful—
Permit this broken wretch to dive into your sea.
- Unfurl the scroll, reveal the Tablet’s lines to me,
or like a pen, ground low in grief, I’ll lose my head.”
- Upon this speech, so Tablet cried: “Get up! Arise!
You soak my brow with such confusing pleas.
- As but a child am I, upset and unaware!
A scroll still bound is by my side. It lies unread.
- Each line of ink I write records the fear I feel,
for fear of my instructor is what moves my pen.
- 2110 At every beat, my heart I hold with envy filled.
With each new tear, I wash away the ink I spill.
- When others look upon a scroll with space to write,
’tis life they see, but ’tis a stele of death for me.

A hundred worlds' abundant wisdom God records.
Is there a wonder why He trades worn page for new?

So always I recite the book composed by God,
and I recite these lines divine from tablet's page.

And even still my face they scratch with pens and quills,
Enraged I turn away, my brow a scrawl of ink.

2115 They seize and censure letters writ upon my bones.
They scrape their fingers cross the words tattooed on flesh.

Bewilderly, I roam, no corpse nor soul my own
until a line arrives to scribe my self to me.

And you, akin to one enthroned, do want return
to writing lines on schoolboy tablets? Ha! Be off!

Though many lines of ink encloak this body mine,
In my divan, there is not one faint trace of love.

Now leave! Behold my pain and grab your coat and go!
Now cease this brutish line you dare request from me.”

2020 So back the Pilgrim went to face his grieving *pir*,
and he explained his goal and state with purest soul.

The teacher said, “It was the *Lawh Mahfuz* of God
you saw, the Maker's seal, the knower all of knowns.

She keeps the maps of secrets found across these worlds.
From Him reflects the signs of sacred *Lawh Mahfuz*.

The stamp of tragedy, fortuity's own seal—
This all exists without external cause on *Lawh*.

From Tablet, works come forth beyond causality.
Fortuity and tragedy emerge alike.

Then Fikrat's master told these stories:

2125 When snow fell on the desert, Dhu al-Nun went into the wild.* There he saw a magian
who knew nothing of the true faith.† He was dashing through the desert's snow with a

* Dhu al-Nun al-Misri is revered by Sufis as an Egyptian ascetic who died circa 796 C.E.

† The term “magian” refers to a Zoroastrian priest who would be in Islamic traditions as firmly outside true religion.

pouch of millet hanging around his neck, and everywhere he ran, he reached into his pouch and scattered seeds.

Dhu al-Nun called out to him, “Hey vagabond! Why are scattering seeds at dawn on a day like this?”

The magian replied, “The world is blanketed by the snow, and so the birds cannot find their feed. I cast these seeds for the birds in hope that, due to this good deed, God may show me some mercy.”

Dhu al-Nun said, “Are you nuts? Why would God accept a wretch like you?”

The magian responded, “I don’t know about *accept*, but God will see it, won’t He?”

“He might.”

“That’s enough for me!”

A year later, Dhu al-Nun made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon this *hajj*, his eyes fell upon that same magian circumambulating the Ka’ba like a true lover. The magian saw him and called, “Hey Dhu al-Nun! Why did you say those pompous things? You said that God would not accept me, see me, love me, or admit me. And yet He gave me knowledge of the Path, He gave me a soul and a conscious heart as well. He invited me into His home and He deemed me a bewildered one upon His Path. So check it out! I am in the House of God like a friendly, welcomed neighbor.”

Hearing these words, Dhu al-Nun was shocked. He said, “O God! You’re selling much too cheap! After forty years, this magian casts a handful of seeds and You exchange Your friendship for this? Mere seeds are the price for an enemy like him?”

A voice spoke in his inner heart, “When He beckons someone or casts them away, there is no external motivation. His beckoning is its own cause; His casting away is its own cause.”

2144 *There is no cause for all that comes from God’s command
His acts envelop, each and all, both great and small.*

2145 Once there was a joyous madman wearing the habit of a dervish. He said, “What all these people experience and lose and suffer—there’s always a cause. But I’m the fortunate one who has come from the causeless realm. He has brought me upon this path according to no external reason, and now He has delivered me to the fortune of madness. Alas! There is no path to my secret as the others know nothing of my madness!”

2149 *The one who falls into the causelessness of God
is one who falls into the pure eternal bliss.*

*The daily happenings and witnessings she meets:
she counts as boon, the noble warp and woof of life.*

2151 Once there was a man with mania in his eyes whose name was Happy. God made this name his curse. If a fire consumed a friend of his, Happy did not grieve but stayed happy. After his house was wrecked and his child was buried next to his wife, still Happy stayed happy. He even cried out, “Nice work, God!” He had seen the principles of existence, and so this happy speech came easily to him.

2156 *Mad Happy is your cue: behold with ease what is
And was and what yet comes—or suffer sorrow’s curse.*

*And if the sky should tear and heavens fall to earth,
Amidst that cataclysm, seek mad Happy’s joy.*

2158 A madman once strolled through Baghdad and smiled when he saw a shop for glass. He picked up some stones, and he spent the next hour breaking the thousands of glass wares in the shop. The shattering of glass clamored throughout the street. The merchant who ran this glass shop then returned and saw the madman roaring in laughter, and the merchant was seized by bilious anger. Someone yelled to the man, “Hey pyscho! Why did you do this? You’ve ruined this man and cast his livelihood to the wind. You’ve made him a dervish! Ruined and beggared!”

The madman responded, “I am crazy, stubbornly so, and this clamor brings me joy! I practice my trade when I am happy—my work is not found in gain or loss.”

2166 *So many domes and porticos adorn our mosques—
But who could know the truth from babbling vanities?*

*The truth of work and trade and livelihood lies where?
There is no path nor road to such a secret truth.*

*In truth! There is not one aware who knows the truth,
and all will die with empty palms that grasped in vain.*

2169 Once, Ma’shuq of Tus was passing through the perfume market in a daydream.* A perfumer there had blended amber and musk to make a scent sweeter than heaven. Its scent caught Ma’shuq’s attention, and he bought it from the perfumer. With perfume in hand, the Lover then saw in front of him a sick and shitting donkey, and Ma’shuq rubbed the perfume in the filth under the ass’s lifted tail.

A passerby asked Ma’shuq about the secret meaning of this event, and he said, “The created beings of this world know as much of God as this cadaverous donkey knows of sweet perfume.”

* Muhammad Ma’shuq of Tus was a mystic in the region of Khurasan who lived from the end of the tenth century (C.E) to the beginning of the eleventh century.

2175 *If not a single branch, alive and green, connects
your essential tree with the ordinary root*

*Then you remain alone and severed, hewn from all.
Your fate: to be a branch full shorn from life's own source.*

*If you still draw the breath of life, then bind yourself
to life's true branch. At death, you're stuck and bound to naught.*

*You cannot act if bound and tied when death descends,
So act in time, tis here that you must work.*

*You say you want to be entwined with God at death,
Then cut all threads to life and braid yourself to Him!*

*You say you want a life forever free of death.
I'm glad! Your work is clear: to die as you still live!*

*At Heaven's door, you will be asked of works you've done—
but will a life of naught but sloth be shown entrée?*

*Though wounds inflict your flesh, still you ignore their tend.
A broken body now will be a corpse come next.*

2183 Once there was a *majnun* with a mirror in his hand who waited outside a mosque as the people finished their Friday prayers.* As they walked out, he held up his mirror to their faces. After a number of people had passed by his mirror, he threw down the mirror in anger. Some people sought to soothe him by returning his mirror to him. When the few gathered around the *majnun* had become a full crowd, he became agitated again and tossed his mirror onto the street. This happened again and again. Sometimes he whipped the mirror around, sometimes he waved back and forth, sometimes he tossed it high, and sometimes he placed it on the ground. Finally, after all the people had left, the value of his actions became clear. He said, "I need that these people see their faces just once! And yet not one person—not one!—saw his reflection and was revolted by his face and beard!"

2194 *If you don't spare a breath to eye yourself in truth,
then how, do tell, will you resolve to look to God?*

*Distracted souls will drown abuzz in work and world
Anxiety for loss and gain but squanders life.*

* A *majnun* is someone possessed by the *jinn* and made mad. Majnun is also the name of one of Islamic literature's most famous lovers who was like someone possessed due to his love for Layla. Thus, a *majnun* is often someone who is mad from love and passion.

*Will you still gather stuff when death's grim rale is heard?
Will you still spend and hoard when heaven falls to earth?*

*So seek! Each day and by so many ways, go seek!
Go seek the soul's sweet taste and seek religion's light.*

*The devil misses not a chance to lay his snares,
Your follicles and pores are nests for satan's spawn.*

*In truth's pursuit, you must so topple habit's reign.
Tis thy own self the devil shows to tempt and lure.*

2200 Once, as damned Iblis was prostrating, Jesus, the son of Mary, saw him and asked,
“Why would you do this?”*

Iblis responded, “Over my long life, I’ve become accustomed to prostration more than anyone. So here I am again! It’s my habit to do it now—and, if it’s all about prostrations in the end, well, I can do that!”

Jesus admonished him, “O fallen one! You know nothing, and you have taken the road of folly. Know this and know it well: there is not a single *habit* that is worthy of God’s court. You are not dealing with truth when you are acting out of habit.”

2206 *Iblis abides and haunts this world from end to end.
The world's his vault, and so you're thieving damned Iblis!*

*A hapless thief should even know what punishment
and pain awaits the one who steals of satan's stuff!*

*Imagine markets left alone by damned Iblis:
When freed of him, they'd grind and halt so quit by all.*

*These contracts, sales, and loans belong to him at end,
This world is his bazaar, and business is his trade.*

*The breath the market draws is drawn in his cursed lungs:
Iblis, the market master, lord of worldly work!*

2211 Solomon said to God one day, “O God! Bring Iblis to me as part of my lot. He’ll be under my command like all the other demons, with broken wings and a head bowed at my door.”

God responded to Solomon, “As long you do not intercede on his behalf, I’ll turn him over to your rule.”

* Iblis is the name of the angel cast out of Heaven for his refusal to bow to Adam at God’s command. He is often called *al-shaytan* and associated with the figure of Satan.

So Iblis came under the command of Solomon, and—*what a marvel!*—he was like the dust gathering at the door as the wind blows.

Solomon was a king who had reign from the earth's soil to heaven's Throne, but he still did the daily work of weaving baskets to earn his daily bread so that he might know the measure of his realm. One day, soon after Iblis came under Solomon's command, the king sent a servant to sell one of his woven baskets in the market. No matter how much he went around and tried to sell Solomon's basket, he found no buyers. Solomon grew hungry, and he wove another basket—finer than the last—that his servant could sell it for food. The servant went to market and worked until the night to sell the two baskets but to no avail. There was no market for these baskets and no buyer to spare Solomon the weakness of his growing hunger. Solomon began to suffer, and his pure soul was sapped of its power.

God Most High said to him, "Why are you so disturbed? Why has living become so difficult and why can you not escape this weakness?"

Solomon replied, "I need bread, o Powerful!"

God said, "Then eat bread! What's wrong with you?"

"O Lord! Don't you see? I don't have any bread."

"Sell these baskets and buy some!"

"I've sent my baskets to the market many times but there are no buyers."

"Of course you're not going to sell a basket! You've made the market-master your slave Without a doubt, just as Satan became your prisoner, worldly work has ceased. When filthy Iblis is locked up, how could you think that buying and selling in the market could continue?"

2231 *The cursed Iblis abides and haunts this lowly world,
His right and wrong defined by filthy buy and sell.*

The Pilgrim Meets the Pen

(Here, Fikrat comes to the "Pen" known as Qalam to seek his guidance. The Pen is the one who records all of God's revelations. After Fikrat is rebuffed in his request to learn from Pen, Fikrat returns to his master, the Sufi pir.)

2232 So then our Pilgrim came upon Qalam the Pen
And Pilgrim dipped his head, so bowed as quill in ink.

He said, “To you I’ve come, o scribe of secrets all!
O master who assays and scores both speech and deed.

In truth you are the string tied taut on Power’s bow,
Which shot the sura known as Nūn so too Qalam.*

2235 Through you does God instruct and teach what we knew not
And from thy script God wrote for us the Finest Form

From mysteries of non-existence you were made
the first to teach of secret sempiternity.

Your tongue can fashion flesh as heart and rind as pith!
And o your walk, your graceful stride that scatters jewels!

At times tis water’s gold or pearl which you inscribe.
At times tis rubied gems or sugar you bestrew.

Not sugar’s sweetness—no! Tis verdant life you give.
Your inky depths of dark enwell the fons vitae.

2240 Your kingship dawns in full, so scribed in stately font.
You calligraph the world with heaven’s graceful script.

In truth, no lies, in plain, no metaphor nor game:
O Scribe of Strange who fills the pages of the heart!

Behold my pain, unlatch the door to vast Unseens,
Please nod your head, say yes: enword the Mystery.”

At Pilgrim’s speech, the soul of Pen did tangle twist.
Enraged, so cleft by bladed tongue, he gave reply:

What secrets here do you suppose are mine at end?
I do my work, you see, with split and severed head.

2245 Though water be aglow, a shimmer flow and pure,
What use is there for water’s light with no canal?

I serve as hollow aqueduct for water’s way
But far am I from flowing luminosity.

You’ll find no sight of me but with a banded waist,
A head abow and yearning to complete my task.

* The 68th sura of the Qur’an is known both as *surat al-qalam* (Sura of the Pen) and *surat an-nun* (Sura of the Letter Nūn).

As tongue becomes a pen, so I begin my path.
I start as one baptiz'd and dipped in waters black.

A mote is all I keep of secrets swept through me.
At end, I'm left with just this head, so shorn and split.

2250 Please hear my plaintive explanation clutch the heart.
Believe the crack and cry you hear in my sad state.

Now join and take the path of the bewilder'd ones,
Or cross me off your list and quit this place. Away!"

The Pilgrim sought his pir of word and deed to tell of Pen,
Describing all his states that the imam may know.

His master spoke, "The way of Power goes through Pen,
Potential's way—the way of doling "is" or "not."

When atom binds to atom, Pen so knows and marks.
With nib he writes, records, and notes of being's bonds.

2255 Our atoms rest and keep until the ink of Pen
adorns a page to spin and twirl these molecules.

When Pen is called to go and fly across the page,
His movements set the world's affairs aspark and straight.

He bows his head in choice and keeps it low at work,
Not quitting duty's task for breath or ease from pain.

Through pain he breaks to reach the pleased depth of light
That drowns and hollows Pen until he's dried. *Jaffa!**

The one who works in full and toils true and hard,
At end, she'll go to find her work is good and fine.

2260 So follow Pen's straight way as you begin your path,
Pursue direct and true the goal that's found in work.

Then Fikrat's master told this story:

* This is a reference to the Arabic expression *qad jaffa al-qalam* which means: "The pen has run dry!" It is an expression of the finality of God's decrees and similar to an expression such as, "It is written."

2261 Dhu al-Nun had a disciple who was fine in the eyes of the mystics and lovers alike.* In the presence of Dhu al-Nun, this fair disciple observed forty days of fast and retreat—and he did this forty times over. So, too, he completed forty pilgrimages to Mecca. For forty years, he drowned in the mystery and stood watch over the chambers of his heart. During these forty years, the disciple did not speak a single word nor sleep a single night.

One day, the disciple came to Dhu al-Nun in pain. In his frailty, he laid his head upon the earth and said, “No matter what you’ve asked, I’ve done it. But here I am, veiled, just as I was on my first day. Not a single door has opened in my breast. Not one grace has shined upon my face. Not a single line from God has reached my name. And not one message from Him has alit upon my heart. What am I to do? How much must I reject of the world? How much must I burn and writhe? What am I to do? And don’t take this as a complaint—I’m merely telling a story of bad luck. I can’t have my heart ripped out, true, but why I have not had a single moment of tasting the divine? You are the doctor of misery: prescribe a cure for this blood-scourged lover!”

When Dhu al-Nun heard the confession of the bewildered disciple, he said, “Tonight, quit your prayers and eat bread until you are full. Sleep all night long so a message may come out this ease. God is looking at you violently and meeting you roughly as you have not found a path to His gentleness. Every person has a different route to take, some by foot and some by head.”

When the disciple heard these words, he left. He was thirsty and hungry, so he ate and drank fully. He slept fully, and in his sleep he had a dream of Muhammad. How strange it is to see the Sun at night! Muhammad said to him, “Your Lord greets you. There is a message for you, o eminent one: ‘For all the suffering you resolved to bear, who could do Us any harm? I have a gift for you, a souvenir to remind you that I will grant all that you want. As you have walked the path of pain for forty years, I grant you fortune here. In return for your service, I open all the mines of treasure for you, and I grant you alms, a robe, and honor. Give Our greetings to Dhu al-Nun and say to him:

‘Hey half-baked preacher! You who possess deception and lies, you who has lost purity and gained hypocrisy—have you been making lovers fear us and take a road that leads far from us? You’re acting like a highway-robbing ghost! How many broken souls have had their work spoiled by you? If I don’t punish you with a hundred scandals, I’m not the Lord. Oh, how arrogant you’ve been! When are you going to stop robbing the roads and leaders the lovers into loss?’”

When Dhu al-Nun heard this message, he became so overjoyed that he was freed from both worlds for eternity.

2292 *The one who acts by his own call and his resolve
Is one who grasps what all he seeks and does not stall.*

* Dhu al-Nun al-Misri is revered by Sufis as an Egyptian ascetic who died circa 796 C.E.

*Whatever you desire, be it cooked or raw,
You need to want it well and true and see it through.*

*The one who fully works her work in fullest full
Is one who hits her mark and gains her goal at end.*

- 2295 There was an inveterate thief in Baghdad who stole so much that the caliph finally executed him. Shibli the Sufi passed by the gallows and saw the dead thief, bound and hanged upside down.* Tears welled in Shibli's eyes, and then he cried out and ran to the gallows.

A questioner asked Shibli what the secret reason for his mourning was, and Shibli replied, "This man was perfect in thieving. He thieved so thoroughly and completely that he gave his own soul to the gibbet. The one who pursues his task fully is the one who wagers his soul and safety for his work. Though this thief was an ignorant brute, he was perfect at his calling. I bend my turbaned head at his feet in honor of the thoroughness of his work. When I saw that these blood-stained gallows had become his place, joyously I ran to kiss his feet. In his work, he was a true man and not some suffering half-man like me. His manliness possessed the strength of an army, and he did not compromise it like I have. His soul was a worthy and flowing river not like my trembling soul."

- 2308 *If prince or pauper, either rich or poor, your craft
and work demand that you devote yourself in full.*

*Before a mote of good repute adorns your name,
complete and whole your work must be in all its forms.*

- 2310 *For even wicked work, when done in full and true,
will earn for you a share of sweet salvation's bliss.*

- 2311 There was once a forger who was captured by the king who ordered that the forger's hand be cut off along the road. The forger was wearing the cloak of a dervish, and he had at least a mote of wisdom, so he said, "First bring me to my home, and I'll show you all the goods that I have there."

When the guards took him to his house, he removed his cloak and returned to king fully naked. As he stood in the nude before the king, the forger said, "Now do the work that must be done. All that I, a forger, have is now in hand—a counterfeit heart and nothing else."

The king said to him, "Why did you lie about having possessions at home?"

"So that I might not be a fraud in religion as well. I feared my capture and persecution, so I hid my vice in the clothes of fine and faultless saints. But I can't have my shame and my scorn heaped upon their heads, so I removed the dervish cloak in case others saw me

* Shibli

here. Let me be dishonored in front of your guards, but I must guard my dishonor from those saints. If I were to give them a bad reputation based on my actions—well, that would be sheer disbelief! And even I do not desire that!”

The king was overjoyed by the rectitude of the young forger and forgave him his crimes.

2324 *How could you want to be half-baked and incomplete?
To be not good, not wicked, neither rich nor wretch?*

2325 *So act the part of Pen, and bind your self to love,
and split thy tongue for secrets found in eros' name.*

*Without the drive of love to charge and spark your work—
An ass you'll be! A wild donkey freed from rein!*

Endnotes

(These example endnotes would appear in the back of the book and accessible by verse number and wording.)

2099: “Aye! By sweet and honeyed scent!” — Compare to Qur’an 56.89: “Rest and fragrant scent, a sweet garden!”

2108: “A scroll still bound is by my side. It lies unready.” — In premodern schooling, students often had to learn writing and penmanship by practicing on their tablets until they reached perfection. Here, the Tablet, compares himself to children who are not able to learn the writings on their tablets and thus cannot move onto the next lesson.

2111: “’tis life they see, but ’tis a stele of death for me.” — In addition to “tablet,” *Lawḥ* is also a term used for “tombstone” in Persian.

2114: “Enraged I turn away, my brow a scrawl of ink.” — ‘Attar is using the term *khaṭ* to connote both rage and line of ink.

2121: “The teacher said, ‘It was the *Lawḥ Mahfuz* of God / you saw, the Maker’s seal, the knower of all knowns.’” — Compare to Qur’an 85.22: “Upon the *lawḥ maḥūz* (inscribed tablet).”

2023: “This all exists without external cause on *Lawḥ*.” — According to common Sufi cosmologies of the premodern period, God’s actions do not follow the laws of causality. There is no “cause” to God’s actions. This is true of God’s very existence. As God is the “necessary being” (*wājib al-wujūd*) and the “first cause,” God’s existence has no prior cause or motivation.

2125: “When snow fell on the desert, Dhu al-Nun went into the wild.” — Compare this story to ‘Attar’s prose version in *Memorial of God’s Friends*.

2180: “You say you want a life forever free of death. / I’m glad! Your work is clear: to die as you still live!” — Compare to the *hadith* of the prophet Muhammad in which he says, “Die before you die!”

2212: “Solomon said to God one day, ‘O God! Bring Iblis to me as part of my lot. He’ll be under my command like all the other demons.’” — Compare to Qur’an 27:17: “And the hosts were mustered to Solomon: jinn, men, and birds, all duly disposed.”