

Deeming themselves paragons of piety and devotion to God and true "heirs" of His prophet (see prophets and Prophethood; Muhammad), representatives of the early [proto-] Sufi movements viewed such verses as referring primarily, if not exclusively, to them. With the emergence of mystical cosmology metaphysics, which provided justification for the mystical experiences of the Sufis, they put the Qur'an to new, creative uses. Thus, in the famous "light verse" (Q 24:35) God's persona is cast in the imagery of a sublime, majestic and unfathomable light, which renders it eminently conducive to gnostic elaboration on the theme of light (q.v.) and darkness (q.v.) and the eternal struggle between spirit (q.v.) and matter.

According to early Sufi exegetes, God guides whomsoever he wishes with His light (see error; astray; freedom and predestination) but has predilection for a special category of pious, God-fearing individuals (see fear) who devote themselves completely to worshipping Him. In return, God assures them of salvation (q.v.) in the hereafter (Q2:38, 262, 264; 3:170; etc.; see eschatology). As to those "who prefer the present life over the world (q.v.) to come," "a terrible chastisement" awaits them (Q 14:3; cf. 2:86; see reward and punishment). From the beginning, Muslim ascetics and mystics identified themselves with God's "protégés" (awliya') mentioned in Q 10:62 (cf. Q 8:34; 45:19; see clients and clientage; friends and friendship). With time Sufi exegetes came to portray them as God's elect "friends" and confidants who are able to intercede on behalf of the ordinary believers and guide them aright (see intercession; saints).

In Sufi lore such "friends of God" were identified with authoritative Sufi masters, both living and deceased. In Q 7:172, which figures prominently in early Sufi discourses, the relations between God and His creatures are placed in a cosmic framework, as a primordial covenant (q.v.; mithaq) between them. During this crucial event the human race presented itself before God in the form of disembodied souls (q.v.) to bear witness to the absolute sovereignty (q.v.) of their Lord (q.v.) at His request (see witnessing and testifying). Once in possession of sinful and restive bodies (see sin, major and minor), however, most humans have forgotten their promise of faithfulness and devotion to God and therefore have to be constantly reminded of it by divine messengers (messenger) and prophets. The goal of the true Sufi is to return to the state of pristine devotion and faithfulness

of the day of the covenant by minimizing the corruptive drives of his body and his lower soul- one that "commands evil" (ammara bi-l-su' , Q 12:53; see Good and evil).

If successful, the mystic can transform his lower, restive self into a soul "at peace" (al-nafs al-mutma'inna, Q 89:27) that is incapable of disobeying its lord (see disobedience). this can only be achieved through the self-imposed strictures of ascetic life, pious meditation and the remembrance (q.v.) of God (dhikr) as explicitly enjoined in Q 8:45, 18:24 and 33:41 (see also reflection and deliberation). Finally, on the level of personal experience, verses describing the visionary experiences of the prophet Muhammad (namely, Q 17:1 and Q 53:1-18; see visions) provided a fruitful ground for mystical elaboration and attempts by mystically minded Muslims to, as it were, recapture the rapture" of the founder of Islam, all the more so because the Qur'an and the Sunna (q.v.) repeatedly enjoin the believers to imitate him meticulously.

While all of these verses resonated well with the aspirations of early Muslim ascetics and mystics, there were also those that did not, in that they prescribed moderation in worship, enjoyment of family (q.v.) life and fulfillment of social responsibilities, while at the same time discouraging the "excesses" of Christian-style monasticism (Q 4"3-4, 25-8, 127; 9:31; 57:27; see Christians and Christianity; monasticism and monks; abstinence).