147071 - The story of Moosa (peace be upon him) with al-Khadr

the question

I want to know the story of Moosa (peace be upon him) with the man who took him to the ship, and their story with the boy. I heard that this man was an angel or one of the jinn (I am not sure).

Detailed answer

If you want to know the story of Moosa with al-Khadr (peace be upon them both), then you have to read the verses in Soorat al-Kahf that tell of this story, and also the lengthy hadeeth narrated by Imam al-Bukhaari (no. 3401) and Imam Muslim (no. 2380), which the scholars have commented on and explained in detail.

In order to present the story simply and make it easier to talk about it and explain its incidents and what we learn from them, we will quote these verses from Soorat al-Kahf bit by bit, then we will follow each portion with the similar part from the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (may Allah be pleased with him) in which the story is also told in full. Then after that we will explain some of the meanings of this portion along with tafseer (commentary) from al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer and al-'Allaamah as-Sa'di (may Allah have mercy on them both).

The story begins when Moosa (peace be upon him) addressed the Children of Israel, and one of them asked him who was the most knowledgeable of people. Moosa (peace be upon him) thought – because he was a Messenger of the Lord of the Worlds – that he was the most knowledgeable of all people on earth, so he answered that question by saying: "I am." But it would have been better for him (peace be upon him) to say: "Allah knows best," because the knowledge of the Messengers and Prophets cannot encompass all things; encompassing all knowledge is one of the attributes of Allah alone, may He be glorified and exalted, Who has no partner. So Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, wanted to show Moosa (peace be upon him) that there was one of His slaves who was more knowledgeable than him. Hence He instructed him to travel to a certain place, where he would meet that knowledgeable slave of His.

It was narrated from Ubayy ibn Ka'b (may Allah be pleased with him) that he heard the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) say:

"Moosa stood up to address the Children of Israel, and he was asked: Which of the people is most knowledgeable? He said: I am. Allah rebuked him because he did not refer knowledge to Him. So Allah revealed to him: "There is a slave of Mine at the junction of the two seas who is more knowledgeable than you."

So Moosa (peace be upon him) decided to go to the junction of the two seas, in order to meet this slave of Allah who was more knowledgeable than Moosa (peace be upon him). There are many opinions concerning the location of "the junction of the two seas", but there is no reliable evidence to support any of them.

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And (remember) when Moosa (Moses) said to his boy-servant: 'I will not give up (travelling) until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travelling.'"

[al-Kahf 18:60].

Al-'Allaamah as-Sa'di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Here Allah, may He be exalted, tells us about His Prophet Moosa (peace be upon him) and his eagerness to do good and seek knowledge. He said to his servant-boy – who stayed with him at home and when he was travelling, and whose name was Yoosha' ibn Noon, and Allah made him a Prophet after that – : "I will not give up (travelling) until I reach the junction of the two seas" that is, I shall continue travelling, even if it is lengthy and difficult for me, until I reach the junction of the two seas; that is the place where it was revealed to me: There you will find one of the knowledgeable slaves of Allah, who has knowledge that you do not have.

"or (until) I spend years and years in travelling" that is, or until I cover a great distance. What is meant is that longing and yearning made Moosa say these words to his servant-boy. This was determination on his part, hence he went ahead with his plan. End quote.

Tayseer al-Kareem ar-Rahmaan, p. 481

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, revealed to Moosa a sign by which he would recognise the place where that slave was.

In the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka'b it says:

"Moosa said: 'O Lord, how can I find him?' He said: 'Take with you a fish and put it in a basket, then where you lose the fish, he will be there.' So he took a fish and put it in a basket, then he set out, and his servant-boy Yoosha' ibn Noon set out with him. Then when they came to the rock, they lay down and slept, and the fish stirred in the basket, then it escaped from it and fell into the sea, 'and it took its way through the sea as in a tunnel' [al-Kahf 18:61]…"

According to another report narrated by al-Bukhaari, "At the base of the rock there was a spring called al-Hayaat (life); nothing was touched by its water but it came to life. The fish was touched by the water of that spring, so it began to move and escaped from the basket into the sea.

Concerning that, Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, said: "But when they reached the junction of the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way through the sea as in a tunnel" [al-Kahf 18:60].

Al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"and it took its way through the sea as in a tunnel" means: like a tunnel underground.

Ibn Jurayj said: Ibn 'Abbaas said: Its tracks became like rock.

Al-'Awfi said, narrating from Ibn 'Abbaas: The fish did not touch any part of the sea but it dried up until it became rock. End quote.

Tafseer al-Qur'an al-'Azeem, 5/174

After that, Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, said (interpretation of the meaning):

"So when they had passed further on (beyond that fixed place), Moosa (Moses) said to his boy-servant: 'Bring us our morning meal; truly, we have suffered much fatigue in this, our journey.'

He said: ‘Do you remember when we betook ourselves to the rock? I indeed forgot the fish, none but Shaytaan (Satan) made me forget to remember it. It took its course into the sea in a strange (way)!’

(Moosa (Moses)) said: ‘That is what we have been seeking.’ So they went back retracing their footsteps”

[al-Kahf 18:62-63].

Al-‘Allaamah as-Sa‘di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“That is what we have been seeking” i.e., looking for

“So they went back retracing their footsteps” i.e., they went back, retracing their footsteps, to the place where they had forgotten the fish.

Tayseer al-Kareem ar-Rahmaan, p. 481

In the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka‘b (may Allah be pleased with him) it says:

“When he woke up, his companion forgot to tell him about the fish, so they continued on their way for the rest of that day and the following night. The next morning, Moosa said to his servant boy: ‘Bring us our morning meal; truly, we have suffered much fatigue in this, our journey.’ Moosa did not feel any fatigue until they had passed the place that Allah had instructed him to find. His servant-boy said to him: ‘Do you remember when we betook ourselves to the rock? I indeed forgot the fish, none but Shaytaan (Satan) made me forget to remember it. It took its course into the sea in a strange (way)!’ So for the fish it was a tunnel, and for Moosa and his servant-boy was something strange. Then Moosa said: “‘That is what we have been seeking.’ So they went back retracing their footsteps.” They went back, retracing their footsteps, until they came to the rock.

Al-‘Allaamah as-Sa‘di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This was one of the signs. The commentators said: That fish was something that they took as provision (for the journey), but when they reached that place, it was touched by some of the sea

water, and it slipped away, by Allah's leave, into the sea, and joined other creatures as a living creature. End quote.

Tayseer al-Kareem ar-Rahmaan, p. 481

There Moosa met al-Khadr, and there was a conversation between them, in which Moosa asked to accompany al-Khadr so that he could learn from him; this was great humility on his part (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"Then they found one of Our slaves, unto whom We had bestowed mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from Us.

Moosa (Moses) said to him (Khadr): 'May I follow you so that you teach me something of that knowledge (guidance and true path) which you have been taught (by Allah)?'

He (Khadr) said: 'Verily! You will not be able to have patience with me!

'And how can you have patience about a thing which you know not?'

Moosa (Moses) said: 'If Allah will, you will find me patient, and I will not disobey you in aught.'

He (Khadr) said: 'Then, if you follow me, ask me not about anything till I myself mention it to you.'"

[al-Kahf 18:65-70].

Al-Khadr was one of the sons of Adam (i.e., human) but, as al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar said, there was a difference of opinion concerning his name, the name of his father and his lineage; whether he was a Prophet; and how long he lived. End quote from Fath al-Baari, 6/433

In the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (may Allah be pleased with him) it says:

"There they saw a man covered with a garment. Moosa greeted him with salaam, and al-Khadr said: 'How could there be peace (salaam) in your land?' (Moosa) said: 'I am Moosa.' Al-Khadr

said: ‘Moosa of the Children of Israel?’ He said: ‘Yes. May I follow you so that you teach me something of that knowledge (guidance and true path) which you have been taught (by Allah)?’ He said: ‘Verily! You will not be able to have patience with me, O Moosa! I have something of Allah’s knowledge which Allah has taught me and which you do not know, and you have something of Allah’s knowledge which Allah has taught you and which I do not know.’ Moosa said: ‘If Allah will, you will find me patient, and I will not disobey you in aught.’ Al-Khadr said to him: ‘Then, if you follow me, ask me not about anything till I myself mention it to you.’

The strange and wondrous journey began at that point, and Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, tells us of what happened during it of three confusing incidents, concerning which Moosa (peace be upon him) could not conceal his astonishment and keep the promise he had made to al-Khadr that he would not ask him about anything that occurred during the time he accompanied him.

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“So they both proceeded, till, when they embarked the ship, he (Khidr) scuttled it. Moosa (Moses) said: ‘Have you scuttled it in order to drown its people? Verily, you have committed a thing “Imra” (a Munkar - evil, bad, dreadful thing).’”

[al-Kahf 18:71].

In the hadeeth it says:

“Then they set out walking along the seashore. They passed by a ship and spoke to them (the crew) about taking them on as passengers. They recognized al-Khadr and took them on board at no cost. When they boarded the ship, suddenly al-Khadr pulled out one of the planks of the ship with an adze. Moosa said to him: ‘These people took us on board at no cost, and now you have deliberately scuttled their ship in order to drown its people! You have done a dreadful thing!’ al-Khadr said: ‘Did I not tell you, that you would not be able to have patience with me?’ Moosa said: ‘Call me not to account for what I forgot, and do not be hard on me on account of what I have done.’”

And the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The first time was because Moosa forgot.”

He said: “A sparrow came and sat on the edge of the boat and dipped its beak into the sea. Al-Khadr said to him (Moosa). ‘My knowledge and your knowledge, in comparison to Allah’s knowledge, is no more than the water taken from the sea by this sparrow’s beak.’”

Then came the second incident:

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Then they both proceeded, till they met a boy; he (Khadr) killed him. Moosa (Moses) said: ‘Have you killed an innocent person who had killed none? Verily, you have committed a thing “Nukra” (a great Munkar - prohibited, evil, dreadful thing)!’

(Khidr) said: ‘Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?’

(Moosa (Moses)) said: ‘If I ask you anything after this, keep me not in your company, you have received an excuse from me.’”

[al-Kahf 18:74-76].

In the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka‘b, it says:

“Then they disembarked from the ship, and whilst they were walking on the shore, al-Khadr saw a boy playing with some other boys. Al-Khadr took hold of the boy’s head and cut it off, and killed him. Moosa said to him: ‘Have you killed an innocent person who had killed none? Verily, you have committed a thing “Nukra” (a great Munkar - prohibited, evil, dreadful thing)!. Al-Khadr said to him: “Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me? He said to him: ‘This is worse than the first time!’ Moosa said: ‘If I ask you anything after this, keep me not in your company, you have received an excuse from me.’”

Then came the third incident:

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Then they both proceeded, till, when they came to the people of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused to entertain them. Then they found therein a wall about to collapse and he (Khidr) set it up straight. (Moosa (Moses)) said: ‘If you had wished, surely, you could have taken wages for it!’

(Khidr) said: ‘This is the parting between me and you, I will tell you the interpretation of (those) things over which you were unable to hold patience’”

[al-Kahf 18:77-78].

In the hadeeth of Ubayy ibn Ka‘b it says:

“They went on their way until they came to the people of a town and asked its people for food, but they refused to give them any hospitality. In that town they found a wall that was leaning and about to collapse. Al-Khadr set it up straight with his own hands and Moosa said to him: They are people to whom we came and they did not feed us or give us any hospitality. If you had wanted, you could have taken some payment for it.’ Al-Khadr said: ‘This is the parting between me and you.’”

The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Would that Moosa had been patient so that Allah could have told us more about their story.”

As for the explanation of the reasons for the actions of al-Khadr (peace be upon him) in those strange situations, al-Khadr explained them to Moosa. The Qur’an tells us about that in detail at the end of the story in Soorat al-Kahf:

“ ‘As for the ship, it belonged to Masakeen (poor people) working in the sea. So I wished to make a defective damage in it, as there was a king after them who seized every ship by force.

‘And as for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief.

‘So we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in righteousness and near to mercy.

‘And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the town; and there was under it a treasure belonging to them; and their father was a righteous man, and your Lord intended that they should attain their age of full strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. And I did it not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of those (things) over which you could not hold patience.”

[al-Kahf 18:79-82].

Anyone who would like to know more about the details of this story and what we learn from it may refer to the books of tafseer (Qur’anic exegesis) and read the commentary on Soorat al-Kahf.

See also: Fath al-Baari by al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (8/410 ff).

And Allah knows best.