Post Scriptum: “What Has Been Sent Down to You and What Was Sent Down before You”

Only in loss do we begin to see clearly the real or illusory value of what we have. Often, what is lost cannot be found. This is in fact a gain, for what cannot be found again is not real. The experience of loss shapes our consciousness and what we once had and have lost alters in our minds. The dead cannot return to life nor any past instant be recovered, whether in our present or in ourselves as though from that past. Only by facing this, do we integrate the dead and past, which pass finally into memory, their presence in the remembering mind such that their very incompleteness stands warrant for their meaning in memory to those recalling them.

The most widespread story of humanity’s destiny connects tensions in soul and world with a mythical beginning in paradise. Most people take this for a symbolic or actual location and time in the past, a mythical place that represents ultimate sublimity, the state of original integrity, free of tension between the principle and its manifestations. In this state, the inviolable tree signifies our closeness to God and our difference from Him.

Adam’s decision to pass beyond most beautiful sublimity, to go higher, forfeited that original state. He was asked to will no opposition to the will of the principle. This became for him a tension he couldn’t withstand, a challenge to break free he could not resist. And so humankind forfeited its sublimity and sank to the lowest of the low. Nothing in existence is originally so gloriously sublime; nothing can fall so low. This span from extreme height to extreme depth determines the potential of the self.

The fall does not mean the self has passed beyond His wrath or His mercy. We alone are subject to His wrath, for we alone betray and break a trust freely accepted. Everything else surrenders irrevocably to find peace in His will. God is absolutely close and absolutely remote and we are closest to Him in sublimity, when we manifest His most beautiful attributes through our humility and generosity, and furthest from Him in the depths, when His attributes in us are obscured. Our bond with our Creator, however, is never actually broken.

Wrath and mercy are opposites, but His mercy always surpasses His wrath.¹ No depth, no exposure to His wrath is beyond His mercy, for there is no absolute wrath, no absolute darkness, no eternal punishment. To lose paradise is to re-awaken to it. In the depths, our sublimity punctured, ugliness and cruelty

¹ See Muslim, 4:1437.
remind us of what we have lost and of the potential for new losses. We see the arc of our fall. What was close is remote, what was remote close, deep in the darkness of the unknown depths. The lost bliss of our origin takes on new significance in consciousness informed by the reality of the depths and the memory of sublimity.

In the depths, aware of our loss, we turn towards the condition we mourn inwardly. Suffering mixed with mercy, bitterness with delight, pain with enjoyment, darkness with light remind us that earthly life is at the boundary between two opposing possibilities – ascent and return or further descent. These extremes are symbolically denoted by heaven and hell, with between them the upright path of self-differentiation. They are symbolic, as both heaven and hell are relations to the One. Neither is a principle, but a potential of the self. Our new condition after the loss of paradise entails two possibilities – to find and regain what we lost or to lose even more and sink still deeper into the mire.

We face two signs – the vastnesses of the earth and its myriad paths and the vault of the heavens to which the only path is straight and steep. Our psyche is where each path starts, beginning and converging in the inner self. Heaven and hell, sky and earth, lie at their ends.

Two signs represent this distinction in our humanity: the Ka’ba on the floor of the valley of Becca and the Rock atop Mount Sion in Jerusalem. The Ka’ba and the Rock symbolize the split of the self between the depths and supreme sublimity. Neither is significant in itself, inert matter that symbolizes receptive, yielding stability as beginning or end. Things flow from above to below, to the valley floor; everything begins at the summit of the rock to meet at a single point on the valley floor.

The Ka’ba was erected at that point on that infertile desert valley floor. It is clearly the work of human hands, a manifestation of will acting out of knowledge. It stands as clear evidence of humankind to all who see it. All such buildings in this world are made by our hands.

We forfeited paradise for knowingly reaching after the explicitly forbidden, willing action without knowledge. Our use of free will was without visible consequence, but reaching for the forbidden produces an altered state in the self, manifest as a new position in space and time, as descent to the lowest of the low. Taking the Ka’ba as central to His promise signifies and confesses that ascending the arc of return requires action out of knowledge.

The Rock atop Mount Sion symbolizes creation’s perfection and independence from our action. Our origin lay in the perfection of the Garden, where everything is beautiful and complete, the work of His hand alone. We see the