

Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy bin Yaqzan* (Epilogue)

Trans. by M. A. Khalidi (2011)

(This text is the epilogue to the translation of *Hayy bin Yaqzan* in M. A. Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.)

At that point, it happened that Hayy met Asal, and his story with Asal will be related in what follows, God willing.

It was said that on an island near the one on which Hayy bin Yaqzan was born, according to one of the two versions describing his origins, had arrived one of the true religions. This religion had been acquired from one of the ancient prophets, God's praises be upon them. It was a religion that imitated all real existents by means of similitudes that formed impressions of those things, fixing their descriptions in people's souls, as is the custom when addressing the multitude. As that religion was spreading on the island, increasing in strength and prominence, the king embraced it and made the people adopt it.

There had grown up on that island two young men of virtue and with a desire to do good, one of whom was named Asal and the other Salaman. They adopted the religion and accepted it in the best manner, and took it upon themselves to adhere to all its laws, and to be devoted to all its deeds, and they did so together as friends.

Sometimes the two of them would study the expressions of the religious law describing God Almighty and His angels, as well as the descriptions of the afterlife, reward, and punishment. Asal delved more into the esoteric [meaning], was more prone to seek spiritual meanings, and keener to interpret. But his friend Salaman was more apt to preserve the exoteric [meaning], was further from interpretation, and less liable to construe and reflect. Both were alike in their outward actions, in disciplining their souls, and in struggling against passion. There were some statements in the religious law that called for isolation and solitude, indicating that this is what success and salvation consisted in; while other statements called for socializing and associating with the community. Asal adhered to the call for isolation and gave more credence to those statements, since his nature inclined him to prolonged reflection, seeking lessons, and searching for meanings. And he best achieved what he hoped for in that respect through solitude. Meanwhile, Salaman was more prone to associate with the community and gave more credence to those statements, since his nature rendered him reluctant to reflect and interpret. For him, associating with

the community was what repelled the devil, removed conflicting opinions, and expelled the promptings of demons. Their difference of opinion on this matter was the reason for their separation.

Asal had heard of the island on which it was mentioned that Hayy bin Yaqzan had originated. He had learned of its fertility, conveniences, and mild weather, and heard that solitude could be achieved there. So he decided to travel there and to isolate himself from people for the rest of his life. He collected whatever money he had; he used some of it to hire a boat that would carry him to the island and he distributed the rest to the needy. He bade farewell to his friend Salaman and embarked on the sea. The sailors transported him to that island, deposited him on the shore, and left.

Asal remained on the island worshipping God Almighty, magnifying Him, sanctifying Him, and reflecting on His most beautiful names and lofty attributes. There was no interruption or disturbance in his thoughts. If he needed nourishment, he would partake of the fruits or bounty of the island to satisfy his hunger. He remained in that state for a time, in the utmost bliss and in greatest closeness and proximity to his Lord. Every day he would experience His kindness, excellent gifts, and bounty in enabling him to obtain his wishes and nourishment, which confirmed his belief in Him and made him more certain of it.

During that time, Hayy bin Yaqzan was profoundly preoccupied with his lofty stations. He would leave his cave only once a week to take what nourishment he could. That is why Asal did not come across him at first, for he would walk around the regions of the island and explore its parts, without seeing a human or observing any trace of one. That increased his proximity [to God] and gladdened his soul, since he was resolved to seek the greatest isolation and solitude. But once, it happened that Hayy had emerged to seek nourishment at the same time that Asal happened to be in the same spot. Each caught sight of the other.

Asal had no doubt that Hayy was one of the isolated worshippers, who had come to that island seeking isolation from other people, as he himself had done. He feared that if he went up to him and introduced himself, he would be the cause of ruining his state, and would become an obstacle between him and his goal. However, Hayy did not know what Asal was, for he did not have the form of any of the animals that he had examined. Asal was wearing a black cloak of hair and wool, which Hayy thought was his natural covering, so he stood in wonder, observing him closely.

Asal began to flee from Hayy, to avoid distracting him from his state, but Hayy managed to follow his trail, since it was in his nature to seek the reality of things. When Hayy saw that Asal had intensified his efforts to flee, Hayy slowed down and hid himself, and Asal thought that he had lost him and that he had put a distance between them. Asal began to pray and recite, supplicate and lament, prostrate himself and grieve, to the point that he was distracted from everything else. Then, Hayy bin Yaqzan began to approach him gradually, without Asal noticing, until he was close enough to hear his recitation and praise and to observe his prostration and crying. He heard a pleasant voice and regular sounds, the likes of which he had never heard before from any type of animal. He observed his shape and outline and found that he was of the same form as him. He discovered that the cloak that he was wearing was not a natural covering but an acquired covering like his own. When he noticed the goodness of his humility, prostration, and crying, he had no doubt that he was one of the essences [selves] that knew the Truth. He was drawn to him, he desired to know how it was with him, and why he was crying and prostrating. He edged closer to him until Asal felt his presence and ran off. But Hayy bin Yaqzan followed him until he caught up with him, since God had given him intellectual and bodily strength and ability, and he held him in his grip and would not let him go.

When Asal looked at him, covered as he was with furry animal hides, with hair so long that it covered most of his body, and saw that he was quick-witted and strong-bodied, he grew very fearful. He began to plead with him, attempting to speak to him in words that Hayy bin Yaqzan did not understand and could not decipher. But Hayy discerned in Asal signs of distress, so he began to assuage him with sounds that he had learned from some of the animals. He stroked his head, patted him on the neck, and mollified him. He expressed joy and gladness towards him until Asal calmed down and realized that Hayy did not mean him any harm. Long before, Asal had learned many languages and mastered them, due to his love for the science of interpretation, so he began to speak to Hayy bin Yaqzan and to ask him about himself in every language he knew, trying to make himself understood, but he was unable to do so. Meanwhile, Hayy bin Yaqzan was amazed at what he was hearing, without knowing what it was, but sensing that it showed joy and acceptance. Thus, each of them was left wondering at the other.

Asal still had some of the provisions he had brought with him from the inhabited island. He brought some to Hayy bin Yaqzan, who did not know what they were, since he had never seen such things before. Asal ate some and signaled him to eat. Hayy bin Yaqzan

reflected on the conditions that he had placed upon himself concerning nourishment. He did not know the origin of the thing that was being offered to him. He did not know what it was and whether it was permissible to eat it or not, so he refrained from eating. But Asal continued to urge him and plead with him. Hayy bin Yaqzan had taken a liking to Asal and he was concerned that if he continued to decline he would alienate him, so he took some of the food and ate it.

Once he tried it and found it tasty, he realized that he had been wrong to renege on his promise to adhere to the conditions of nourishment. He regretted his action and wanted to separate from Asal and return to his previous state by seeking to return to the lofty station. But he could not attain the vision quickly, so he decided to remain with Asal in the sensory realm to determine the reality of his situation, so that there would not remain in his soul a longing for him, and he could return afterwards to his station without any distraction. So he stayed in the company of Asal. Meanwhile, when Asal saw that Hayy did not speak, he felt sure that no harm could come to his faith from him. Thus, he hoped that he could teach him language, science, and religion, so that he would gain a great reward and favor from God. He began to teach him language first, by pointing to particular existents and uttering their names, repeating them and urging him to utter the words. Hayy would make an utterance accompanied by pointing. In this way, he taught him all words, training him gradually, until he managed to speak in a short period of time. Having done so, Asal began to ask him about his situation and how he came to be on that island. Hayy bin Yaqzan informed him that he did not know his own origin, nor did he know his father or mother, apart from the deer that had raised him. He described his whole situation and how he ascended in knowledge until he arrived at the rank of attainment.

Asal heard Hayy's description of these truths and the essences that are distinct from the sensory world, which cognize the essence of the Almighty Truth. When he heard his description of that Almighty Truth, with His excellent attributes, and when he described what he could of his vision at the point of attainment, including the pleasures of the attainers and the pains of the benighted ones, Asal had no doubt that all the things that had been mentioned in his religious law concerning God Almighty, His angels, His books, His messengers, the last day, His paradise and hellfire, were similitudes of those that Hayy bin Yaqzan had seen in his vision. The eye of his heart was opened, his heart was fired up, and the rational and the traditional came to coincide for him. The methods of interpretation became more accessible, all the difficulties of religious law were unraveled, locked doors

were opened, and mysteries were revealed. He became one of “those with understanding” [Qur’an 12:111]. At that point, he gazed upon Hayy bin Yaqzan with awe and admiration, and he confirmed that he was one of those who have proximity to God, “who need have no fear, nor shall they suffer” [Qur’an 2:38]. He put himself at his service, emulated him, and took guidance from him with regard to the inconsistent practices in the religious law that he had learned in his religious community.

Hayy bin Yaqzan began to probe Asal’s condition and situation, and Asal began to describe his island, the people living there, their history before the arrival of the religion, and their current condition after the arrival of the religion. He recounted everything in the religious law concerning the divine realm, paradise and hellfire, resurrection and the afterlife, the day of judgment, the balance and the path. Hayy bin Yaqzan understood it all and found nothing there that conflicted with the contents of his vision in the lofty station.

He recognized that whoever had described it and transmitted it was honest in his description, truthful in his statement, and was a messenger from the Lord. He believed in him, trusted him, and attested to his message.

Then Hayy began to ask Asal about the acts of worship that [the messenger] had prescribed. Asal described prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, and other outward actions. Hayy accepted them, committed himself to them, and began to perform them, since he thought they were correct and he trusted the messenger. However, there remained two things that he wondered about in his soul and whose wisdom he did not comprehend. First, why did this messenger resort to similitudes when describing the divine realm to people? Why did he refrain from being open about it, thus exposing people to gross errors of embodiment and leading them to attribute things to the Truth of which He is free and unencumbered? And why did he do the same for reward and punishment? Second, why did he restrict himself to these religious duties and acts of worship? Why did he allow the acquisition of wealth and excessive consumption of food, thus exposing people to becoming preoccupied with wrongdoing and becoming distracted from right? His own opinion was that no one should partake of anything beyond what was needed to support life. As for wealth, it meant nothing to him. He took notice of the judgments in the religious law concerning wealth, such as almsgiving of various kinds, trade, interest, penalties, and fines. He was puzzled by it all and found it redundant. He said: “If people only understood matters in reality, they would have avoided all these futilities, flocked to the truth, and have

done without all that. There would have been no wealth in private hands, so no need to pay alms on it, or to cut off hands for stealing it, or to die for taking it openly.”

What misled him in thinking this was [his view] that people are intelligent by nature, with piercing minds, and resolute souls. He did not realize the extent to which they are obtuse, deficient, uninformed, and weak-willed; they are “like cattle, indeed yet further astray” [Qur’an 25:45].

He had a growing sense of sympathy towards people and he yearned for being the source of their salvation, so he formed the intention to connect with them to clarify the truth to them and reveal it before them. He conferred with his friend Asal about this, and asked him whether there was any means of reaching them. Asal informed him about their deficient intelligence and their turning away from matters having to do with God. But Hayy did not manage to comprehend it and his soul remained committed to that hope. Asal himself was eager that God would enable him to enlighten a group of his acquaintances who were seekers and were closer to salvation than others. Thus, he encouraged him in his opinion and they decided to remain on the shore at all times, day and night, that God might provide a means of crossing the sea.

They remained committed to that goal and beseeched God Almighty with prayers that He might provide the right way to proceed. By the command of God Almighty a ship had strayed from its course and had been driven by wind and the force of the waves towards the shore of the island. When it neared land the people on board saw the two men on the shore, so they went up to them. Asal spoke to them and asked them to carry them on board. They agreed to that and brought them on board the ship. God sent them a good wind that carried the ship in the shortest time to the island that they had hoped for.

They disembarked on the island, entered the city, and Asal was reunited with his friends. He informed them about Hayy bin Yaqzan’s situation and they flocked to him, made a great deal of him, made his acquaintance, admired him, and praised him. Asal let him know that this group was closer to understanding and intelligence than other people, and that if he was unable to teach them then he would surely be unable to teach the multitude.

The leader of the island and its most senior member was none other than Salaman, Asal’s friend who believed that one ought to remain with the community and proscribed isolation. Hayy bin Yaqzan proceeded to teach them and to transmit the secrets of wisdom to them. But no sooner did he rise slightly above the level of the exoteric and began to describe things that went contrary to their former understanding, than they began to feel

uneasy towards him and sense repugnance in their souls to what he was telling them. They felt an inner revulsion even though they were outwardly accepting, in deference to the fact that he was a stranger and out of regard for their friend Asal.

Hayy bin Yaqzan continued to converse gently with them night and day, disclosing the truth to them covertly and overtly, but it only made them more averse and disdainful, even though they were lovers of goodness and seekers of truth. However, due to their lack of native intelligence, they did not seek truth by the proper means, nor did they acquire it according to the manner in which it is justified, nor did they gain access to it in the right way, nor did they want to know it according to the method of its masters. He despaired of reforming them and he lost all hope of improving them due to their lack of acceptance.

After that, he perused all classes of people and found that every group was content with what they had [cf. Qur'an 23:53], that they idolized their passions [cf. Qur'an 25:45] and worshipped their desires. They outdid themselves in possessing the debris of the world and were absorbed with acquisition until they reached their graves [cf. Qur'an 102:1-2]. Advice was ineffectual with them and good counsel powerless. Dialogue only made them more tenacious. They had no way to gain wisdom and no chance to obtain it, for they were wallowing in ignorance, their hearts were encased with what they had acquired, and God had sealed up their hearts, hearing, and vision with a shroud. "Terrible punishment awaits them" [Qur'an 83:14].

He saw that they had entered the tunnel of punishment, that the veils of darkness had descended upon them, and that all of them, with a few exceptions, took from their religion only what was worldly. They spurned the good deeds, however light and easy, and sold them for a cheap price [cf. Qur'an 3:184]. Trade and commerce diverted them from mention of God and they had no fear of the day on which hearts and vision would be overturned [cf. Qur'an 24:37]. It became evident to him and was absolutely confirmed that it was impossible to address them openly and it was futile to enjoin them to perform actions over and above those that they had been assigned. [He also realized] that it was the lot of most of the multitude to benefit from religious law only in their worldly life, so as to live a righteous life and not to exceed what was their own. He among them who gains the prize of happiness in the afterlife is the rare exception, namely someone who would like to plow the afterlife and seek it out keenly, for he is a believer [cf. Qur'an 3:184].

As for those who are unjust and prefer the worldly life, hell will be their haven [Qur'an 79:37-39]. What exhaustion could be greater and what misery more overpowering

than that of one who, if you peruse his deeds from the moment he wakes up until the time that he returns to sleep, is absorbed entirely in the achievement of a goal relating to the base sensory things, whether it is the acquisition of wealth, the attainment of pleasure, the fulfillment of desire, the abatement of anger, the achievement of prestige, a deed from the religious law to show off as an ornament, or the saving of his own neck. All of these are shadows upon shadows in a vast ocean [cf. Qur'an 24:40], and "there are none of you but shall come to it, a decree destined by your Lord" [Qur'an 19:72].

When he understood the conditions of humans and that most of them are on the level of irrational animals, he knew that the whole of wisdom, enlightenment, and success were contained in what was spoken of by the messengers and mentioned in the religious law. Nothing else was possible and no more could be expected. To each his own and to each person his due, in accordance with "the path that God created for those who have gone before, and you will never find a change in the path of God" [Qur'an 48:23].

So he addressed Salaman and his friends, apologizing for what he had discussed with them and dissociating himself from it. He informed them that he had come around to their opinion and was enlightened as they had been. He counseled them to adhere to the limits of religious law and outward action as they had been doing. He told them not to dabble in what did not concern them and to have faith in [the literal meaning of] ambiguous verses and accept them, while avoiding innovation and whim. He advised them to take as their models their good predecessors and to set aside novelty. He charged them with avoiding the course that the majority of the multitude had taken in neglecting the religious law and embracing the worldly life, warning them especially of that. He and his friend Asal knew that this group of willing but deficient people can only find salvation by that route. If they try to rise above it to the outskirts of pure vision their own state will become disrupted and they will be unable to attain the rank of the happy ones; their goal will be perturbed, upset, and impaired. However, if they continue on their course until reaching their certain demise, they will be rewarded with security and will be among the righteous. "As for the surpassing, the truly surpassing, they are the nearest [to God]" [Qur'an 56:10-11].

Hayy and Asal bid them farewell and separated from them. They waited for the right occasion to return to their island and God Almighty bestowed upon them a passage to the island. Hayy bin Yaqzan sought his lofty station in the same way that he had before and he managed to attain it. Asal followed his example and drew close to him, or nearly so. They worshipped God on that island until they met their certain end.

That, may God assist us both by inspiring us, is the tale of Hayy bin Yaqzan, Asal, and Salaman. It contains an account not to be found in any other book or to be heard in any ordinary discourse. It consists of safeguarded knowledge that is only accepted by those with cognizance of God and is unknown to those who are deluded about God. We have taken a course contrary to our good predecessors who guarded it jealously and were reluctant to disclose it. But what made it easier for us to divulge and unveil this secret is the appearance in these times of corrupting opinions uttered by the would-be philosophizers of our era. They revealed their opinions, which spread abroad and caused widespread damage. We were concerned about the weak ones who turned their backs on the emulation of the prophets, God's prayers be upon them, and attempted to imitate the ignorant and foolish. They thought that the opinions of the latter were the ones that are closely guarded from those who are not fit to receive them, which only made them more fervent and enthusiastic about them. We saw fit to give them a brief glimpse of the most secret of secrets so as to show them the need for justification and to divert them from that course. Yet, the secrets that we have consigned to these few pages have been covered by a thin veil and sheer curtain, which will be easily drawn aside for those who are fit but will appear opaque to those who are not capable of penetrating it so that they will not go beyond it. I ask my fellows who are privy to these words to accept my excuse if I have been too lenient in exposing it and too liberal in confirming it. I have only done so because I have climbed peaks that the eye cannot reach and I have wanted my discourse to be accessible so as to encourage and sway others to embark on that road. I ask God for indulgence and forgiveness, to endow us with pure cognizance of Him, for He is munificent and generous. Greetings, brother, whom I have a duty to help, and the mercy and blessings of God.