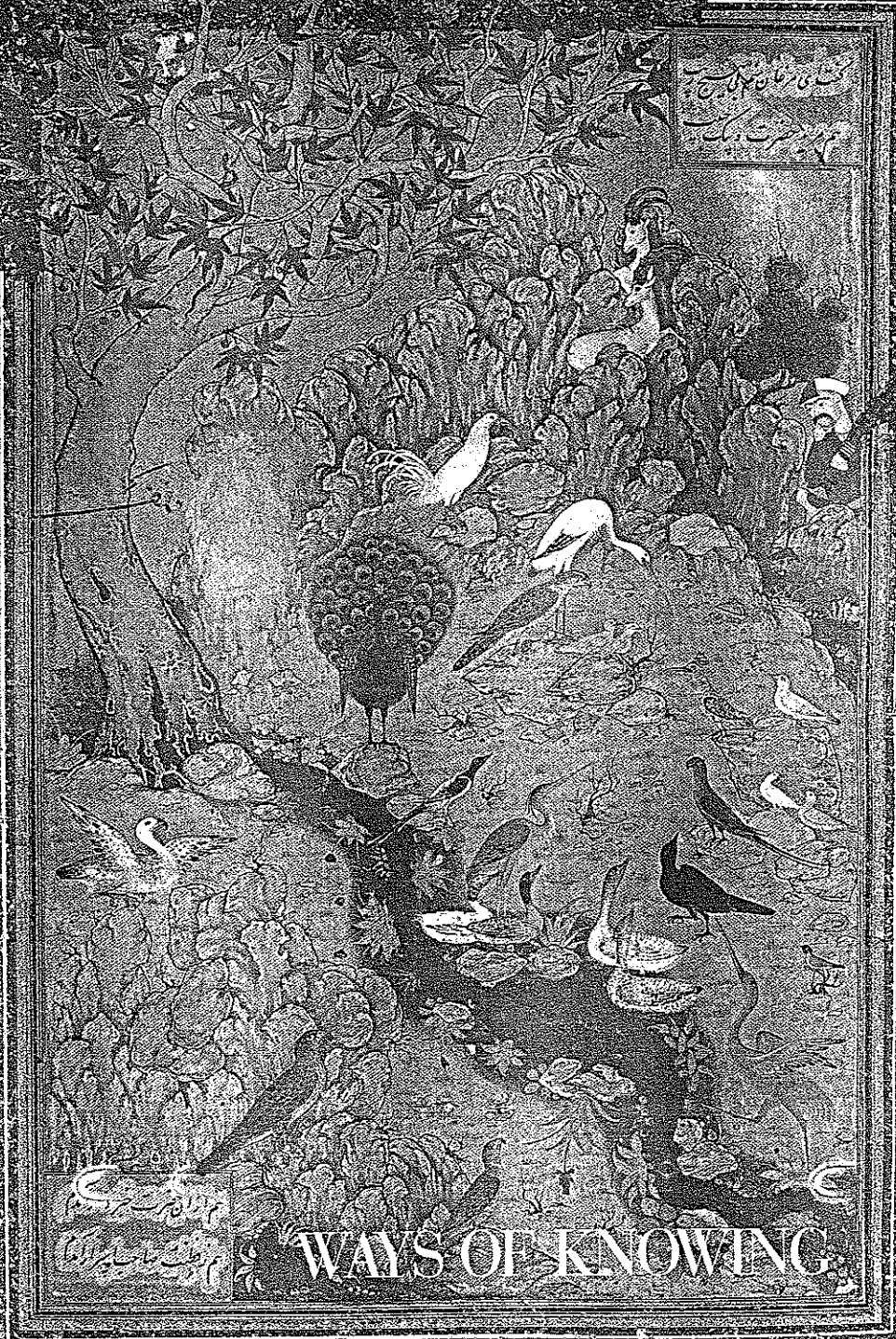


SPRING 1997

PARABOLA

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God produced the wind, the earth, the fire, and blood, and by these he announces his secret.

He took clay and kneaded it with water, and after forty mornings placed therein the spirit which vivified the body.

God gave it intelligence so that it might have discernment of things.

When he saw that intelligence had discernment, he gave it knowledge, so that it might weigh and ponder.

—*The Conference of the Birds*
Farid ud-Din Attar

PARABOLA



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E P I C Y C L E

The Hour of Death

Islamic

THE PROPHET LUQMAN WAS VERY WISE, VERY WISE INDEED. His learning was so profound that he was able to accomplish almost anything. He spent all his time perfecting his knowledge until only one thing eluded him: the knowledge of his time of death. He knew that this information was the privilege of God, but nonetheless he was convinced that he could discover a method, a reasoning, that would allow him to learn the hour of his death.

One day, Luqman decided to withdraw into his modest home, shut out the world, and apply himself assiduously to determining that hour. He put aside this obsession only for his devotions and meals. Several years later he finally emerged from his house, smiling. Those who saw him reported that it was the smile of a man who knew something and was keeping it to himself. Had they but known what he knew: the time of his own death.

On the morning of the day he was to die, Luqman made his way to a nearby cave and waited for the angel of death. The angel went to Luqman's home and, finding him absent, took human form to inquire as to his whereabouts. A small boy, following Luqman's instructions, told him that the Prophet had gone to such-and-such a cave. The angel thanked the lad and walked toward the cave.

When he reached its mouth, he called out Luqman's name. Prophets were always greeted by the angel of death before he took their life. It was the minimum courtesy due one of God's elect.

"Welcome," replied a voice from deep within the cave.

The angel stepped inside and at first saw nothing. Then, quite suddenly, he saw Luqman. More precisely, he saw one hundred Luqmans. He was baffled.

"I am commanded to take your life, O Luqman," he said, "please show yourself."

"I am here," replied the figures, "Come get me."

"Indeed," said the angel, "but which one are you?"

"That," said all the Luqmans, not a little gleefully, "is for me to know and for you to find out."

The angel was very put out by this. He turned and headed straight for the Seventh Heaven, where he explained to the Creator that he had visited Luqman as requested, and had found not one but one hundred Luqmans. "I did not know how to proceed, which life to take," he said.

"Return to the cave," replied the Creator, "and enter without greeting. When you are before the hundred Luqmans, greet them. Only one will reply. Before he completes the greeting, take his life."

The angel returned, entered the cave, and stood before the hundred Luqmans.

"Peace on you, Luqman," said the angel.

"And on you, Angel of . . .," one of the figures began to reply. But he was unable to finish his phrase: the angel immediately took his life.

Shortly thereafter, Luqman and the angel appeared before God.

"I don't understand something, Lord," said the angel, "Only You know the time of anyone's death. Even I discover it only when You tell me. How did Luqman know his hour of death?"

It was Luqman who answered. "I didn't know, my friend. Had I known, I would not be here. What my learning revealed was the time of your *first* arrival. Everything that happened between then and your *second* arrival was unknown to me."

Only God has knowledge of the Hour.

He it is Who sends rain, Who knows what is in the mothers' wombs.

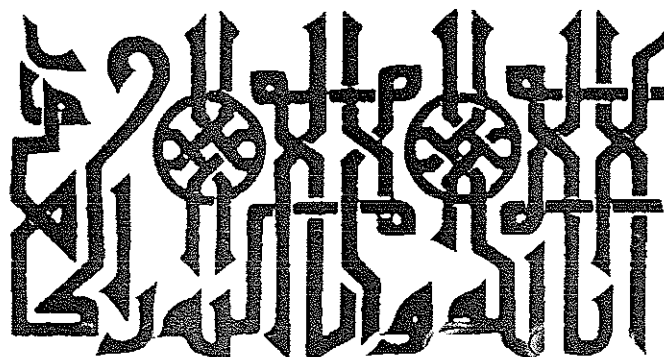
No man knows what he will do tomorrow,

No man knows in what land he'll die.

God is the Knower, the Knowing. (Luqman, 31: 34)

Sometimes, the sufi might say, there's really no way of knowing.

—Retold by Shawkat M. Toorawa



"Verily we belong to God and to him do we return . . ."