

Guided Evolution in Qur'anic Perspective: A Commentary on Surah Nūḥ 71:13–21

Close Reading of Qur'an 71:13–21 in Context

Surah Nūḥ (Chapter 71) recounts Prophet Noah's admonition to his disbelieving people. Verses 13–21 form part of Noah's speech, where he urges his audience to recognize God's majesty by reflecting on creation. He asks rhetorically: *"What is the matter with you that you do not appreciate God's greatness, although He created you in stages?"* ¹. The phrase **"created you stage by stage"** (Arabic: *khalaqakum aṭwārā*) in verse 14 immediately frames human creation as a progressive, stepwise development, inviting readers to ponder the phases through which God brought humankind into being ¹. Noah then directs attention to the **cosmic order**: *"Do you not see how God created seven heavens one above the other, and placed the moon therein as a light and the sun as a lamp?"* ¹. In verses 15–16, the Qur'an highlights a structured universe – "seven heavens in layers" – and distinguishes between the moon's reflected light and the sun's radiance, a subtle accuracy consistent with modern astronomy ².

Moving from heavens to earth, verse 17 uses a striking botanical metaphor for human origins: *"And God germinated you from the earth like a plant."* ² Noah's choice of words likens the emergence of human life to a plant sprouting from soil, suggesting an organic, gradual origin from earthly matter. This is coupled with a reminder of human destiny: *"Then He will return you into it (the earth), and bring you out again"* (71:18) ³. In context, this refers to death and resurrection – humans are nourished by the earth, return to it at death, and will be raised up again by God. Verse 19 continues, *"And God made the earth a spread for you"*, and verse 20, *"so that you may travel its broad paths."* ³. These lines portray the earth as a habitable expanse laid out for human exploration and livelihood. Thus, in Noah's preaching, the **natural world and cosmic order are presented as "signs" (āyāt)** of God's creative power and wisdom, intended to elicit humility and faith in the listener.

Finally, verse 21 transitions to Noah's complaint about his people's obstinacy: *"Noah said, 'My Lord, they have defied me, and followed those whose wealth and children only increase them in loss.'"* Here Noah laments that despite the compelling signs in creation he has pointed out, his people persisted in blind allegiance to corrupt leaders. This contextualizes the earlier verses: the vivid imagery of *creation in stages, heaven in layers, and life growing from earth* was meant to awaken his people's conscience, yet they arrogantly turned away. In sum, verses 13–21 interweave **theological exhortation with reflections on creation**, using the language of gradual creation and natural marvels to support Noah's call to acknowledge God. Noah's discourse underscores that **proper reverence (waqār)** for God arises from recognizing His creative mastery unfolding throughout the cosmos and life on earth ¹.

Classical Exegesis: "Created in Stages" and Human Origin in Tafsīr

Early and classical Qur'ānic commentators understood these verses within the framework of the established creation narrative, often emphasizing embryological and elemental origins. For example, the phrase **"He created you in stages"** (71:14) was taken to refer to the successive **phases of human development**. The

famous exegete Ibn Kathīr, along with others, explained it as the stages of an individual's creation *in utero* and life cycle: from **semen (nutfah)** to **embryo ('alaqah)** to **fetus (mudghah)**, then birth, growth, and aging ⁴. In this view, God's creative power is evident in the way each person is fashioned through **multiple stages of formation**, utterly dependent on divine will at every phase. As *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* elaborates, "He has brought you to the present stage after passing you through different stages of creation and phases of development," from separate gametes, to conception, to gestation, to childhood and maturity ⁴. This traditional interpretation highlights human weakness and God's oversight at each stage – a moral lesson against human arrogance in the face of the Creator's care ⁵.

When it comes to **"germinating you from the earth like a plant" (71:17)**, classical commentators linked this to the creation of the first human, Adam, from earthly materials. The **Tafsīr al-Jalālayn**, for instance, glosses 71:17 succinctly: *"And God has caused you to grow from the earth – for He created your father Adam from it."* ⁶. Similarly, other early authorities noted that all humans ultimately come **"from Adam, and Adam is from dust"**, connecting our origin to the soil of the earth ⁷. In this pre-modern exegetical perspective, verse 17 is not about a botanical evolution of species, but rather an affirmation that our physical constitution is drawn from earthly elements (dust/clay), as indicated in many Qur'ānic passages. It poetically compares human creation to vegetation: just as plants once did not exist until God caused them to grow from the soil, humanity too did not exist until God formed Adam from earth and gave him life ⁸. The **analogy of the plant** served to remind listeners of a time when humans were "nothing mentionable" – a Qur'ānic theme (cf. 76:1) – and thus to inspire gratitude and humility toward the Creator.

Importantly, some classical scholars went beyond the surface to ponder whether "created in stages" might hint at a broader process. **Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210)**, a renowned 12th-century theologian and commentator, offered a striking reflection. In discussing human creation, al-Rāzī wrote: *"[God] said: 'As We created you from the seeds of a different people.' For a wise person who contemplates this, he would know that the Almighty created mankind from a sperm – a sperm that did not contain his [final] form in any way."* ⁹. Here, Rāzī is commenting on the Qur'ān's comparison of human origin to coming from the "seed" of another creature (he understands "different people" metaphorically as a prior form). He emphasizes that the human being initially existed only as an unformed germ (sperm-drop) without the image of a man. While Rāzī did not articulate a theory of species evolution, his interpretation **acknowledges a transformative, stage-wise creation** – human life emerging from a prior, non-human state (the sperm bearing no human image) ¹⁰. Some contemporary scholars view such remarks as a proto-evolutionary insight in classical tafsīr ¹¹. By and large, however, mainstream medieval exegesis upheld that Adam was directly fashioned by God (from clay), and subsequent humans descended from him through reproduction. The classical focus was on **ontogeny (development of the individual)** more than phylogeny (development of species). Still, the recurring Qur'ānic idea that God created humans **"from earth"** and **"in stages"** left room for later thinkers to reconsider what those stages might entail.

Cosmology and Evolutionary Themes: Modern Scientific Correlations

Modern readers of the Qur'ān often notice that the language of Surah *Nūḥ* 71:13–20 resonates with scientific concepts of cosmic and biological development. The **"seven heavens in layers"** (sab'a samāwāt ṭibāqā) in verse 15, for example, aligns with the notion that the universe has structure and order. Classical commentators took "seven heavens" literally (as seven concentric skies or realms) ⁶, but contemporary scholars sometimes interpret this as a metaphor for the expansive, multilayered cosmos. It might allude to

the stratified nature of the universe – perhaps the atmosphere and beyond, or even multiple “levels” of existence. At minimum, the Qur’an affirms a **well-ordered universe** created by God. Notably, verse 16 distinguishes the moon’s light from the sun’s lamp-like glow, which is scientifically accurate: the sun is a self-luminous source (a lamp), while the moon shines with reflected light ². Such details, though given in pre-scientific language, are often highlighted as examples of harmony between Qur’anic descriptions and modern astronomy. They suggest that the **celestial bodies and their precise arrangements** are signs of intentional design – an idea compatible with the fine-tuning recognized in cosmology.

The imagery of **life emerging from earth’s soil** (71:17) is particularly striking when viewed through the lens of evolutionary biology. Today’s science confirms that all living organisms are composed of elements (like carbon, oxygen, nitrogen) that come from the earth, and that life likely began in earth’s primitive waters and clay. The Qur’an says *“Allah has created from water every living creature”* (24:45) ¹², an assertion in line with the scientific consensus that life on Earth originated in aqueous environments. Verse 24:45 continues: *“Among them are those that crawl on their bellies, and among them are those that walk on two legs, and among them are those that walk on four”* ¹². Interestingly, this catalog of creatures – crawling, two-legged, four-legged – mirrors a rough progression one might envision in evolution: from early crawling creatures (reptiles, insects) to later bipedal and quadrupedal animals. The verse is not a scientific chronology, but it does acknowledge a **diversity of life forms emerging from a common origin (water)** and differing in modes of locomotion ¹². In that sense, the Qur’an embraces the idea of *unity of life* (common origin) with *diversification*, which is a core concept of biology.

Returning to Surah Nūḥ, the phrase **“created you in stages” (71:14)** takes on new depth when read in light of evolutionary theory. Modern Muslim thinkers propose that these “stages” (*aṭwār*) can be seen as the long epochs of biological evolution that led to the emergence of humankind ¹³. The Qur’an elsewhere invites us: *“Travel throughout the land and observe how He began the creation”* (29:20) ¹⁴. This exhortation almost reads like a call to scientific inquiry – to examine the geological and fossil record (“travel in the land”) for clues of how life originated and developed. Notably, the verse adds, *“then Allah will produce the final creation (i.e. resurrection)”*, linking the first creation of life with the future creation of the afterlife ¹⁴. Contemporary scholars see in 29:20 a compatibility with the idea of **deep time** and an evolving creation: it acknowledges an initial origination and a successive process, all within God’s capability ¹⁴.

One detailed modern interpretation aligns Qur’an 71:14 with the **scientific timeline of evolution**. It reads the verse as an affirmation that humanity was not created in an instant but through **gradual transformation over long periods** ¹⁵. For instance, Dr. T. O. Shanavas, a Muslim physician and writer on Quran and evolution, argues that *“‘He created you in successive stages’ (71:14)... unequivocally states that the creation of humankind was not a magical ex nihilo instant event...but by a step-by-step transformation.”* ¹⁵ He interprets the Quranic “stages” as spanning from the Big Bang to the formation of Earth, from simple organisms to complex beings, up through hominid ancestors and finally modern humans ¹³. According to this view, **the Qur’an foreshadowed a tree of life**: God caused life to “sprout” from inert matter (like a plant from soil) and develop into myriad forms, with humans arising as one branch ¹⁶. The analogy in 71:17 of humans growing out of the earth “like a plant” is remarkably apt – evolutionarily, human beings *did* “sprout” from the earth in the sense that we arose from earlier life forms which themselves were born of earthly elements. As one scholar observes, *“the verse says that you are a seed planted in this earth, and it sprouted and produced”*, much as plants go through stages of growth ¹⁷.

Additionally, modern cosmology has given new meaning to Qur’anic verses on the heavens. The **“seven heavens”** might be understood symbolically as the many-layered universe or even multiple universes.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī himself mused on the plurality of worlds in the cosmos, and today some Muslims relate “seven heavens” to the concept of a multiverse or simply the expansiveness of space ¹⁸ ¹⁹ . While such interpretations remain speculative, they reflect an ongoing effort to correlate Quranic cosmology with contemporary science. What remains clear is the **Qur’an’s consistent portrayal of natural phenomena as unfolding according to divine command**. The stars, planets, earth, and living creatures each develop in accordance with laws that God has set. In Surah A’lā (87:1–3) we find a succinct statement of this principle: *“Extol the glory of your Lord the Most High, who created (everything) then proportioned it, and who ordained laws (for it) and guided it (to its destiny).”* ²⁰ . Classical commentators understood this to mean God gives each creation the form and guidance suited to its purpose. In modern terms, we might say the Qur’an here hints that **natural processes are divinely guided** – for example, the laws of physics and biology are the instruments through which God “guides” the development of the cosmos and life toward their ordained outcomes ²⁰ . This provides a theological framework in which scientific explanations (like evolution or planetary formation) are not seen as competing with God’s creative agency but rather as **unveiling the mechanisms of God’s creation** (or as the 19th-century phrase goes, “the laws of nature are the habits of God”).

It is worth noting that the **Qur’an does not detail scientific mechanisms**, but its thematic emphasis on gradual creation, common origin of life in water, and the progression of life forms is remarkably consonant with what we know from science. From a Qur’anic perspective, **nature’s development is not random or aimless**; it is a series of signs pointing to an intelligent Creator. Thus, the scientific account of a 13.8-billion-year-old universe, a 4.5-billion-year-old earth, and the slow emergence of life can be embraced by believers as the majestic unfolding of God’s plan – an extension of the very ideas expressed by Prophet Noah millennia ago when he described his people’s origin and environment. Noah’s argument gains even more force today: understanding the vast timescales and intricate processes of creation should lead us, even more, to **“appreciate God’s greatness”** ¹ and not “be too arrogant to serve Him” (71:13).

Contemporary Islamic Scholarship on Evolutionary Creation (Zia H. Shah and Others)

In recent decades, a number of Muslim scholars and thinkers have actively engaged with the theory of evolution, advocating what can be called **“guided evolution”** or theistic evolution in an Islamic context. One prominent voice is **Zia H. Shah MD**, a physician and Islamic writer who has extensively explored Quranic cosmology and evolution. As the Chief Editor of *The Muslim Times*, Dr. Zia Shah has authored *The Quran and the Biological Evolution* and numerous articles arguing that the Qur’an supports a view of gradual creation under divine guidance. He emphasizes that Islam’s God is both *Al-Zāhir* (Evident) and *Al-Bāṭin* (Hidden) ²¹ – meaning God’s action can be overt but also subtle, working behind natural laws. In the preface to his book, Shah writes that while he affirms Allah as the Creator, *“the main focus will be through what natural mechanisms or laws of nature God created the universe and all the ... species on our planet including humans. After all, the God of the Qur’an is not only Manifest but is also Hidden.”* ²¹ . This encapsulates the philosophy of guided evolution: God’s creative will is realized not always through instantaneous miracles, but through ordained natural processes that He has set in motion.

Zia Shah and likeminded scholars draw richly from the Qur’ān to support this stance. They point out, for instance, that **nowhere does the Qur’ān insist on a young Earth or a literal six 24-hour day creation** – in fact, many classical scholars interpreted the six “days” of creation as long epochs ¹³ . Shah often cites verses like 71:13–20 (the focus of our commentary) and others such as 84:19, *“you shall surely travel from*

stage to stage,” and 82:7–8, “[God] created you, then proportioned you, then fashioned you in whatever form He willed.”²² . He interprets these as alluding to the **stepwise formation of the cosmos and life**, including human life. Particularly, the notion of humans being created in stages and “in whatever form [God] willed” suggests to him that humanity’s physical form was not fixed from the outset but brought about through a series of forms willed by God – which is consonant with an evolutionary emergence of our form²³ .

In engaging the Muslim audience, Dr. Shah addresses the common reluctance to accept human evolution. He notes that by clinging to a **“spontaneous creationist story of Adam being created out of a statue of mud,”** Muslims risk **“going against a very large body of [scientific] evidence.”**²⁴ Instead, he argues, Muslims should re-examine the Qur’ānic text without preconceptions imported from medieval tradition or Biblical lore. Shah points out that many beliefs about Adam and Eve among Muslims (for example, that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, or that there were no human-like beings before Adam) are not explicitly Qur’ānic but stem from post-Qur’ānic folklore (Isrā’īliyyāt)²⁵ ²⁶ . Once these are set aside, the Qur’ān itself, he contends, is **open to an evolutionary understanding**. Indeed, he highlights that early Islamic intellectuals during the “Golden Age” had more flexible views. Shah frequently quotes **Ibn Khaldūn (14th century)**, who described a **gradual emergence of life**: “The world of creation started from the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals... The animal world then widens, its species become numerous, and, in a gradual process of creation, it finally leads to man... The higher stage of man is reached from the world of monkeys...”²⁷ ²⁸ . This remarkable passage from Ibn Khaldūn shows that the idea of a continuum in creation – what we today call evolution – was observable and noted by Muslim scholars long before Darwin. Dr. Shah uses such examples to argue that **evolutionary thinking is not inherently un-Islamic**; it can be seen as a rediscovery of insights that harmonize with an expansive Qur’ānic worldview of creation.

Zia Shah’s contributions also involve reconciling evolution with Islamic theological concepts. He stresses that accepting evolution does not diminish God’s role as Creator, but rather showcases His wisdom. For instance, Shah notes that scientific evidence points overwhelmingly to common ancestry and evolutionary processes, and thus he urges Muslims: “We can continue to embellish the best ways to show Divine Guidance in evolution, but need to completely shy away from traditional creationism.”²⁹ . By “traditional creationism” he means the insistence on direct, special creation of each species (especially humans) in a way that contradicts empirical evidence. Instead, he proposes that Allah’s guidance (hudā) can operate through natural selection and genetic mutation just as it operates through gravity in shaping stars or through weather patterns in providing rain. To illustrate this integration, Shah and others highlight Quranic terms like **Rabb** (Lord-Nurturer) – which in Arabic implies one who sustains and brings something to completion in gradual steps. God, as *Rabb al-‘ālamīn* (Lord of all worlds), nurtures the universe from its inception to its maturity, analogous to how a teacher guides a student or a gardener tends a garden over time. This theological perspective finds support in verses such as 21:30 (which hints at life coming from water) and 30:27, “He began creation, then He repeats it”, both of which underscore **a cyclical, law-governed creative process**.

Another contemporary scholar, **Dr. Khalid Nadvi**, has pointed out that when the Qur’ān states “We created man in the best of forms (*aḥsan taqwīm*), then We reduced him to the lowest of the low” (95:4–5), it can be seen as referencing humanity’s rise to an optimal form and its potential physical/spiritual decline³⁰ ³¹ . Although classical tafsīr reads this in terms of human dignity and old age, Nadvi suggests a metaphorical resonance with the idea that humans attained a pinnacle of form through God’s plan (which could include evolution), yet without divine guidance they can fall to a low state. Such interpretations remain minority, but they exemplify the rich engagement of modern Muslim scholars with scripture and science. Through works,

conferences, and writings, contemporary Islamic scholarship like Zia Shah's is constructing a narrative wherein **the Qur'an and modern science are seen as allies** in understanding the truth of human origins. This scholarship often revisits the works of earlier commentators (e.g. al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr) and reinterprets their insights under a new light, as we saw with Rāzī's sperm analogy or Ibn Khaldūn's conjectures, showing continuity in the Islamic intellectual tradition when it comes to pondering human creation.

Qur'anic Verses on Human Origins and Gradual Creation

The Qur'ān, while not a science textbook, contains numerous verses that touch on human origins, natural processes, and the continuity of life – many of which align with the concept of guided evolution. We have already examined 71:13–20 in detail. It is illuminating to survey a few other relevant āyāt (verses) and their implications:

- **Qur'an 29:20:** *"Say, 'Travel throughout the land and see how He began the creation. Then Allah will produce the next creation (final development). Indeed Allah is capable of everything.'"* ¹⁴ . This verse explicitly encourages exploration and observation of the world to discern the **origins of creation**. It implies that evidence for how life began and developed can be found by investigating the earth (something modern archaeology, paleontology, and geology indeed do). The verse then draws a parallel between the first genesis of life and the eventual resurrection (*nash'ah al-ākhirah*), implying both are acts of God within His power ³² . The pairing of *"how creation began"* with God's ability to *"produce"* a new creation suggests a process; the same divine power that gradually brought about life initially will bring about a new form of life in the Hereafter. This verse strongly supports a worldview in which **natural history is purposeful and intelligible**, reflecting divine intent.

- **Qur'an 32:7–9:** *"[God] who perfected everything which He created and began the creation of man from clay. Then He made his progeny from an extract of a humble fluid. Then He fashioned him and breathed into him of His Spirit..."*. These verses describe a two-step origin of humanity: an initial beginning "from clay" (*turāb/ṭīn*, earthly material) followed by procreation through sexual reproduction (a drop of fluid) ³³ . Classical commentators took "began creation of man from clay" to refer to Adam's direct creation, and "then made his progeny from fluid" to humanity multiplying via reproductive means ³⁴ . However, the wording is notably open-ended; it does not name Adam, and it highlights a *beginning* (*badā'a*) from inorganic matter. This could hint at what we now understand: life's building blocks were inorganic elements (clay is rich in silicates and minerals) that transitioned into organic compounds and living cells. Modern scientists even theorize clay surfaces might have catalyzed the formation of complex organic molecules (a detail intriguingly congruent with "from clay") ³⁵ . Thus, 32:7's statement that God *"began"* human creation from clay aligns with a scenario of life emerging from lifeless matter by God's design. The breathing of Spirit (32:9) can be understood theologically (instilling the soul or consciousness) and does not conflict with the idea that the physical form was prepared through natural processes. In fact, this verse could be seen as describing **ensoulment after physical formation**, which some contemporary scholars interpret as God endowing an evolved hominid with a spiritual soul to become *insān* (human in the full sense) ³⁰ . While interpretations vary, **Q.32:7–9 undeniably portrays creation as a sequence** – clay (inert matter) → drop of fluid (biological reproduction) → human form with spirit – rather than a single step, supporting the notion of *gradual divine creation*.

- **Qur'an 24:45:** *"Allah has created every living creature from water. And of them are those that move on their bellies, and those that walk on two legs, and those that walk on four. Allah creates whatever He wills."*

Indeed Allah is Most Capable of everything." ¹² . This verse was discussed earlier but bears repeating in this thematic context. It emphatically states a **universal common origin ("from water")** for every living being. Modern biology confirms that water is essential to life and that life likely originated in the earth's oceans. Moreover, all organisms require water for physiological processes, and around 70% of a cell is water. The verse then *classifies* creatures by modes of locomotion – effectively grouping species in a way reminiscent of a simple taxonomy. It does not list every type of creature (for instance, it omits those that fly or swim), but the mention of crawling, bipedal, and quadrupedal creatures covers the broad categories of land animal life known to the Arabs. Some modern interpreters see in this an implicit narrative of progression: from primitive crawlers to advanced bipeds. Whether or not evolutionary sequence was intended, the verse at least is **fully compatible with evolutionary theory**, which posits that all terrestrial vertebrates share common ancestry (with early reptiles/amphibians crawling, later mammals and birds developing four or two limbs for walking). The closing statement "Allah creates whatever He wills" reinforces that this entire panorama of life's diversity exists by God's will – a theistic affirmation that **natural diversity is a direct outcome of divine creative will**, which evolution describes in scientific terms.

- **Qur'an 95:4-5:** *"We have certainly created man in the best of forms (or stature), then We reduced him to the lowest of the low."* While at first this appears to address human moral or physical decline (and indeed classical tafsīr reads "lowest of the low" as a reference to the frailty of old age or the depths of hell for the wicked), some scholars have mused that it carries an echo of the idea that humans attained an apex in form after a long developmental journey. The phrase *"best of forms"* (aḥsan taqwīm) suggests a pinnacle of design – which could be linked to the idea that humanity's form is the result of a long refining process under God's guidance (whether that process is seen as evolutionary or as a series of divine creative acts). The subsequent "reduction to the lowest" might metaphorically correspond to humanity's fall from the initial purity (in spiritual terms) or simply the decay each human experiences. Although 95:4-5 is not a direct proof-text for evolution, it is consistent with an Islamic view that **human beings are both exalted in their God-given form and utterly dependent, ephemeral creatures**. This paradox resonates with evolution in that humans stand at the pinnacle of complexity on Earth (with remarkable intellectual and spiritual capabilities – "best of forms") yet our bodies are made of humble materials and prone to decay ("lowest of low"). An evolutionary creation viewpoint sees no conflict here: God could very well have *brought about* that "best form" through an evolutionary process, and the verse would then describe the outcome (best form) and the condition (return to dust) without detailing the method.
- **Qur'an 86:5-7:** *"So let man consider from what he was created. He was created from a fluid, ejected, emerging from between the backbone and the ribs."* This is a more specific verse about the **biological origin of each human individual** – referring to semen (and by extension the female ovum) in the act of procreation. It reminds humans that their immediate origin is not glamorous but a humble gushing fluid. While the embryological detail "between the backbone and ribs" has been interpreted in various ways (some say it refers to the loins of the male and the woman's reproductive organs deep within the body cavity ³⁶), the overarching point is clear: **every person's creation is via reproductive fluids and a series of natural steps in the womb**. This emphasis on natural causation in the formation of a human being is significant. The Qur'an could have said "Let man consider that God spoke 'Be' and he was" – but instead it points to physiological processes. If this is how God directs us to reflect on our own coming-to-be (i.e. through *material causes* under His power), then extending the same logic to the human species as a whole (through material causes under God's power, like evolution) is a consistent hermeneutical approach. In other words, verses like

86:5–7 normalize the idea that God's creative power often **operates through physical media and fluids, according to divinely set laws**. This lays a conceptual groundwork for Muslims to be more comfortable with scientific explanations of *how* God creates, provided we keep in mind the Qur'an's constant reminder: *"Allah creates whatever He wills"* ¹² and *"Allah is over all things competent"* ¹⁴ .

In summary, a range of Qur'anic verses beyond Surah *Nūḥ* reinforce a picture of **gradual, water-based, stage-by-stage creation of living beings**, with humanity taking form according to God's decree when conditions were right. The Qur'an repeatedly invites reflection on these natural signs (āyāt) as pointers to God's wisdom. When assembled, these verses form a mosaic that strongly supports the concept of guided evolution: the idea that all life, including humans, originated and diversified in a gradual process that was *willed, designed, and sustained by God*. The textual evidence thus provides a robust scriptural basis for Muslims who wish to affirm modern scientific understandings while maintaining fidelity to the Qur'ān.

Philosophical Reflections: Guided Evolution and Divine Intentionality

The concept of **"guided evolution"** is essentially a synthesis of the scientific theory of evolution with the theological principle of divine intentionality. Philosophically, it addresses a critical question: if evolution through natural selection is true, does it mean life is an undirected accident, or can it be purposefully guided by God? The Islamic answer, building on Qur'anic worldview, leans firmly toward the latter – evolution can be seen as *the method* of creation chosen by an omniscient God, and thus it is teleological (purpose-driven) rather than random or without meaning.

In Islamic theology, God (*Allah*) is understood to be absolutely sovereign, yet His mode of action can be both **direct** (immediate causation) and **indirect** (via secondary causes). The Qur'ān often describes natural phenomena in terms of God's action – for instance, Allah sends down rain, causes the sun to shine, gives life and causes death. At the same time, it acknowledges the observable causes (evaporation and condensation for rain, the sun's own properties for shining, physiological processes for life and death). This dual description is key to resolving the apparent tension between evolution and divine creation. The notion of *sunnat Allāh* (God's established way) in the Quranic context refers to the consistent patterns or laws in nature that God has set and does not change ²⁰ . One could say evolution is **one of those laws** – a biological *sunnat Allāh* – governing how life unfolds. God's intentionality is manifested in that He authored these laws and endowed nature with the capacity to self-develop within the framework of His knowledge. As the Qur'ān states, God *"determines the nature (of all that exists), and then guides it towards its fulfillment."* ²⁰ Every evolving creature, then, is moving along a path that ultimately fulfills a divine purpose, even if the immediate mechanism is mutation, selection, and genetic drift.

A philosophical reflection on guided evolution also considers the concept of **chance** in evolution. From a secular perspective, evolution includes random mutations and contingent events. But from a theistic perspective, what we call "random" is only random to us – to God, there is no chance, only complexity beyond human prediction. The late Muslim philosopher Syed Hossein Nasr put it this way: traditional Islamic thought would say that the hierarchy of life (from plants to animals to humans) was not caused by temporal evolution but by the *"descent of archetypes into the temporal order"*, yet this is not incompatible with an evolutionary scenario as the unfolding of those archetypes in time ³⁷ ³⁸ . In simpler terms, one can view species not as haphazard outcomes, but as expressions of divine creative ideas that were meant to appear when conditions allowed. Thus, **divine intentionality can be seen as operating behind the**

“curtain” of natural processes. The randomness in genetic mutation does not negate God’s governance; it may be the very tool through which He generates variety and complexity, much as a card shuffling machine introduces randomness but within the bounds set by its designer.

Moreover, the Qur’ānic portrayal of God as *Al-Ḥakīm* (All-Wise) and *Al-ʿAlīm* (All-Knowing) implies that nothing in creation is without wise purpose and knowledge. Evolution, which produces highly complex and well-adapted forms of life, can be viewed as a majestic manifestation of this wisdom. It is a **“creation through development”** model, where the end (for example, conscious, worshipful beings like humans) is achieved not by a single act ex nihilo, but by a sequence of creative acts woven into the fabric of natural history. Some Muslim thinkers liken this to an artist who could instantly paint a portrait but instead chooses to skillfully layer the paint, letting the image emerge gradually – the end result is intended from the start, but the process has its own beauty and logic. The Qur’an hints at this in that after describing stages of human creation, it proclaims, *“So blessed is Allah, the Best of creators!”* (23:14). This famous verse comes after a description of embryonic development, and by extolling God as the **“Best of creators”** (aḥsan al-khāliqīn) ³⁹, it suggests that the *process* itself is an artwork of the Divine. By extension, the long process of evolution could be seen as an even greater art, spanning eons – a “grand tapestry” authored by God, where each creature and each adaptation has its place.

The idea of guided evolution also finds resonance in Islamic conceptions of **human uniqueness and spiritual purpose**. While our bodies may have been shaped through evolutionary ancestry, Islamic theology holds that our souls (*rūḥ*) and moral consciousness are gifts from God (cf. 32:9). Thus, even if one accepts that *Homo sapiens* share common ancestors with other hominids, what makes humans truly human in the full spiritual sense is the divinely given intellect (*ʿaql*) and capacity to know God (*maʿrifah*). Guided evolution posits that when the human species was biologically and mentally ready (through an evolutionary journey), God conferred this spiritual capacity – symbolized in the Qur’an by the story of Adam receiving the breath of God’s spirit and the teaching of names (knowledge) (15:29, 2:31). This moment can be interpreted as the divine “upgrade” that made humans God’s vicegerents (*khulafāʾ*) on earth. Interestingly, the Qur’an uses the term **khalīfah** (successor) for Adam (2:30), which literally means one who comes **after another** ⁴⁰ ⁴¹. Some scholars, including modern exegetes like T. O. Shanavas, have pointed out that *khalīfah* implies Adam (and by extension humanity) “succeeded” some previous beings on Earth ⁴². Indeed, Rāzī and Ibn ‘Arabi mentioned the idea of human-like creatures existing (and perishing) before Adam ⁴³. The philosophical implication is that humanity’s appearance was part of a continuum – a new “creation” built upon a former one – underscoring again that the process was guided toward a teleological goal (the emergence of a being capable of bearing the Trust of free will and moral responsibility, cf. 33:72).

In debating guided evolution, Muslim scholars also tackle the false dichotomy that either God created everything instantly and separately *or* evolution is true and God is absent. They argue for a third way: **God created gradually**. This is not a new idea; even the classical scholar **Imam al-Ghazālī** in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* allowed that God could create through intermediary causes, as long as we affirm those causes have no autonomous power independent of God. Thus, accepting evolution does not equate to adopting an atheistic worldview. It simply means appreciating the *sunnat Allāh* in biological history. As one modern commenter succinctly put it, rejecting evolution despite overwhelming evidence can lead to a portrayal of God as a “trickster” who planted false clues ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ – an idea deeply uncomfortable theologically. Far better is to view God as **consistent and truthful in His creation**, not deceiving us with an illusion of common ancestry, but actually *bringing about* life through common ancestry. This consistency of God (“no change will you find in God’s way,” Qur’an 33:62) means empirical observations of nature are reliable revelations of His method.

Finally, guided evolution carries profound implications for the harmony of science and faith in Islam. It provides a platform where Muslims can embrace scientific discoveries in cosmology, geology, genetics, and paleontology as **deeper insights into God's creative work** rather than as threats to scriptural truth. It shifts the narrative from conflict to coherence: the Qur'ān provides the *why* and *who* of creation, while science provides the *how*. Philosopher of science Mehdi Golshani wrote that for a believer, the laws of evolution are simply God's customary way of governing life – hence studying them is a way of appreciating God's attributes (His wisdom, His patience, His grandeur over time). In an Islamic context, the theory of guided evolution upholds human dignity (since humans are willed by God, not accidents) and divine omnipotence (since evolution proceeds under God's complete knowledge and control), while also respecting the integrity of nature's processes.

In conclusion, the language and themes of Qur'ān 71:13–21, supported by many other Qur'ānic verses, **beautifully accommodate the idea of guided evolution**. The passage encourages us to reflect on how God's creative power is manifest in the layered heavens, the shining sun and moon, the flourishing of life from the earth, and the ordained life cycle of birth, death and resurrection. Rather than reading these verses as a narrow proof-text for any single scientific theory, we can see in them a grand vision of **creation as a dynamic, unfolding act of divine will**. This vision is at the heart of guided evolution: that over immense spans of time, God's guidance was at work, leading from the dust of the earth to conscious humanity, stage by stage, "like a plant" developing, as part of His wise plan. As Muslims continue to engage with modern knowledge, this perspective allows them to uphold the Qur'ān's eternal truths while embracing the exploration of "*how He originated creation*" ¹⁴ as a pathway to know and honor the Creator – fulfilling Noah's call to "*appreciate God's greatness*" by understanding His signs in the universe and within ourselves. **Glory be to God, the Best of creators!** ³⁹

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