

The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia

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account (1 Kings 19: 19-2; Kings 13: 20) in which Elisha repeats and improves upon the miracles of Elijah. Unlike the chronology of the biblical account where he is placed approximately 150 years after David, Muslim exegesis puts Elisha immediately before Samuel and the first kings of Israel.

Further reading

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see: Idris

ESCHATOLOGY

The concept of the hereafter in the Islamic tradition

The Qur'anic term for eschatology is *al-akhirah* (the afterlife) or *ahwal al-akhirah* (situations related to the afterlife) as represented in the manuals of Islamic theology. The Qur'an clearly states that *al-akhirah* (the afterlife) is better for you than *al-'ula* (the world). Belief in the afterlife constitutes one of the six articles of faith in Islam. The Qur'an teaches that the life of this world as well as the life of every individual will come to an end. For human beings, the life after death starts as soon as they die. The existence of the afterlife is necessary.

God's beautiful names require such an existence. Only God knows the time of the universal death of the world. The Prophet mentions some warnings: the signs of the Hour indicate the closeness of the final Day of Judgement.

Al-akhirah

The subject of the afterlife constitutes one of the three branches of Islamic theology. One quarter of the Qur'an is dedicated to its existence and details. As one of the articles of faith, all Muslims have to believe in it. The Qur'an also uses the term *al-yawm al-akhir* or the Final Day to describe the life to come. Muslim theologians employ the term *ahwal al-akhirah* to designate those things related to the hereafter, such as the existence of the afterlife, the time of its occurrence, the signs of its nearness, death and resurrection, the reckoning, the reward and punishment in the afterlife and the final abodes.

The Qur'an uses the term *al-akhirah* or the Day of Judgement in opposition to *al-'ula* or this world. The word is used in the Qur'an with its masculine form *al-akhir* and the feminine *al-akhirah* over 100 times. The Holy Book employs some other terms for the afterlife such as *qiyama* (resurrection), *al-sa'a* (the Hour), *al-naba'* *al-'azim* (the Great News) and *al-yawm al-din* (the Day of Judgement).

According to the teachings of the Qur'an, this life is transient; the real life is the life to come. Life on earth is believed to be a gift from God and has to be spent properly, following God's way. The Prophet uses the parable of a farm, saying: 'this worldly life is the farm of the afterlife', that is, one would sow the seeds to harvest in the hereafter. The Prophet's duty is to warn people about this inevitable and imminent event. The Holy Book speaks of various stages of the afterlife. Based on some

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Qur'anic references and the body of *hadith*, one can arguably conclude the following scenario as far as the afterlife is concerned.

God will bring the order of this world to an end through a mighty earthquake. The celestial bodies will clash into one another. The planet earth, the home of human beings, will be destroyed. As a result, every living creature will die. As a gift from God, the people of faith will die naturally before this extremely horrific event. The people of disbelief will see the event, then die. After a certain period of time the archangel Seraphiel, one of the four archangels in Islam, will blow into a trumpet. As a result, all people will be resurrected both bodily and spiritually. God is the Judge on this day of resurrection. He will ask people about their deeds in their worldly life. To show God's utmost justice scales will measure the bad and the good deeds of people. If good deeds outweigh bad deeds, the person will be among the people of paradise; if the reverse is the case, the person will be among the people of hell. The measurement is not based on quantity but on the quality of deeds. Therefore, sincerity, honesty, seeking the pleasure of God while doing good deeds, play a vital role in the measurement process. Subsequently, both groups will stay in their final abode forever.

Existence of the afterlife

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that one of the most striking aspects of the Qur'anic revelation to Meccan society, the first addressee of the Qur'an, was its emphasis on the hereafter. One can see this in the Prophet's debate with Meccan idol worshippers, as outlined in some Qur'anic verses dealing with the existence of the afterlife. The Qur'an narrates the story of a prominent figure

in Mecca who comes to the Prophet and challenges him by saying, 'Who can resurrect these rotten bones?' God asks Muhammad to reply that the One who created them first will resurrect them (36.79). For God, it is not difficult to bring about the afterlife, since he creates examples of resurrection every spring: 'Now, look at results of Allah's mercy, how He resurrects the earth [in the spring] after it is dead [in winter]. The One [who] makes this, surely will resurrect the dead in the same way. With Him every thing is possible' (30.50); 'You were dead and He resurrected you. He will make you dead again and resurrect you again. All of you will return to Him' (2.28).

Muslim theologians have different approaches in arguing for the existence of the afterlife. Although Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE) says that the concept of resurrection and afterlife cannot be understood by reason, a number of theologians have attempted to prove the existence of the afterlife. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210 CE) in his monumental work on the interpretation of the Qur'an says that the existence of the afterlife can be proven through both textual and rational arguments. Through reason one can conclude that the human body is not eternal, but transient, and the world in which we live suggests that the existence of the afterlife is possible. Al-Razi refers to the Qur'anic references for his textual arguments.

Some recent theologians such as Said Nursi (d. 1960 CE) also argue that the concept of the afterlife can be demonstrated through reason. In *The Treatise of Resurrection*, he refers to various names of God and through each he argues for the existence and necessity of the afterlife. For instance, one of the names referred to in the treatise is *al-'Adl* (the Just). According to his argument one can evidently see a supreme balance,

justice and order in this universe as well as a quick response to the needs of every creature. Logically, it would not be possible for such a dominant justice that responds to the need of the smallest creatures to ignore the paramount need of humanity for eternal life. Although physically human beings are small creatures, yet their duties, their mental capacity of construction and destruction, are virtually unlimited. Accordingly, there must be a supreme court to reward and punish the good and bad deeds of such an important and intelligent creature. It is evident that this world is not a place wherein the application of justice among humans is thoroughly practiced. As a matter of fact, the reverse seems to be applicable. The oppressed dies still oppressed while the oppressor dies as an oppressor, without any fulfilment of justice. The manifest balance and order in the universe demonstrates that there must be a place where the oppressed receives some reward and the oppressor receives punishment. Therefore, the existence of the afterlife, which includes *janna* and *jahannam* (paradise and hell), is inevitable.

With regards to the existence of the afterlife, references have been made to some other names of God, for example, *al-Jawad* (the Most Generous) whose reflections are seen in the innumerable bounties bestowed upon creatures in the world. Through an infinite generosity, God made the face of the earth an exhibition for his beautiful creatures, the moon and the sun as two lamps for their benefit. He has filled the face of the earth with a variety of delicious foods, and made the fruitful trees full of food for us. Such generosity evidently necessitates the existence of eternal guests to show them the everlasting sources of these temporary bounties.

Referring to a group of materialists who deny the existence of the afterlife,

the Holy Book says: 'It is God who gives life and death. He will gather you on the Day of Judgement about which there is no doubt' (45.26). The statement of 'no doubt' seems to be emphasized twice on the same page. To bring the afterlife is the promise of God, who is powerful over everything and who never breaks his promise. Referring to God's power with regard to the resurrection of all human beings, the verse indicates that the creation and resurrection of all human beings are as easy as the resurrection of one human being (31.28). In fact, the verse refers to God's command 'Be!' Since creation and resurrection take place as a result of God's command, the proliferation in numbers of objects does not make any difference. Qur'anic logic in arguing for the existence of an afterlife seems to be based on the necessity of the afterlife and the power of God. It is based on the idea that there is no reason why the most powerful being in existence would not create an afterlife and resurrect all human beings.

Death

Human experience of death, an inevitable part of human destiny, constitutes the first stage of the hereafter. Accordingly, death is believed to be a door to the realm of the afterlife, which according to Islamic tradition starts with the grave. The Qur'an teaches that everyone with no exception will taste death. The Prophet describes the life of the grave as the first station of the afterlife. Islamic teaching depicts life as a test and death as the end of the test. Therefore, when death comes, the chances to return to this worldly life are exhausted. Muslims call the life of the grave *barzakh*, a term that corresponds to the period one spends in the grave until the time of the final Hour. The Qur'an refers to death as a gift from God, because if there were

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no death, then life, especially that of the sick and old, would be miserable and even unbearable.

Every soul eventually tastes death. The Prophet, using allegorical language, says that people are asleep, that they wake up when they die; that is to say that with death real life starts and the eye sees the reality of everything. God has appointed a time for both types of death, yet no one knows the exact time with certainty. When the time comes, there will be no delay, not even for a second. Therefore, the Qur'an asks people to be prepared for the next life. In the *sura al-Hashr* (the Resurrection) the Holy Book of Islam asks people not to forget their meeting with God: 'O believers! Be respectful to your Lord. Every soul should look at what it has prepared for tomorrow ... Do not be like those who have forgotten Allah' (59.18-19)

The second event is the death of the world, in other words, the end of human civilization. Muslim theologians consider our planet to be like a living creature, appointed to serve humans and other creatures for a certain period of time. Since it lives, consequently it will die. One can hardly imagine the horrendous death of such a sizeable creature. Through a quick examination of the Qur'an, one can find many *suras* named after this great event of the final Hour. It is an event through which God will bring human civilization to an end and create a new world where another dimension of life takes place. Thirteen Qur'anic *suras* are directly related to the afterlife and its preparations:

- sura* 22 (*al-Sa'a* or the Hour, the same chapter has been named also *al-Hajj* or the Pilgrimage);
- sura* 44 (*al-Dukhan* or Smoke);
- sura* 45 (*al-Jasiya* or the Kneeling);
- sura* 56 (*al-Waqi'a* or the Imminent Occurrence);

- sura* 59 (*al-Hashr* or Gathering);
- sura* 69 (*al-Haqqa* or the Reality);
- sura* 75 (*al-Qiyama* or the Resurrection);
- sura* 78 (*al-Naba'* or the Great News);
- sura* 81 (*al-Takwir* or the Darkened Sun);
- sura* 82 (*al-Infitar* or the Shattering);
- sura* 84 (*al-Inshiqaq* or the Sundering);
- sura* 88 (*al-Ghashiya* or the Overwhelming Event);
- sura* 101 (*al-Qari'a* or the Imminent Hour Striking).

Some of the above-mentioned *suras* indicate the closeness of the event and warn people to be prepared for the imminent day. For instance, the first verses of the *sura* 22, which deal with the mighty earthquake and the situations of people on that day, represent this style of divine address:

O People! Be respectful to your Lord. The earthquake of the Hour is a mighty thing. It is a day when you see a horrified nursing mother throw her baby away, every pregnant being drops her fetus, and you will see the people drunk. In fact they are not drunk, but the chastisement of God is severe. (22.1-2)

One of the most descriptive *suras* of the Qur'an on the afterlife is *sura* 78, the Great News. In the beginning emphasis is placed on the bounties and the power of Allah. For instance, it is God who has made the earth as a cradle for human beings, the mountains as supports to protect the balance of the earth, he has created humans male and female, has made the night a time for resting and the day a time for living. Towards the end of the chapter a comparison between the transgressors (*al-taghin*) and the righteous (*al-muttaqin*) takes place. The first will receive a great chastisement; the latter will receive a great reward.

The Day of Judgement

After the death of the world, God will resurrect all people. As indicated above the resurrection of one person and of all humanity are the same before the power of God. The Holy Book of Islam, the body of *hadith* and the works of Muslim theologians have focused on the details of this day. In his depiction of the gathering for the Day of Judgement, the Prophet speaks of an extremely high temperature as a result of which many will almost be drowned in their sweat. People will desperately ask for intercession by the prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad). Due to their ablution before the five daily prayers in worldly life, the Prophet will easily recognize the members of his community. On this day, divine justice will be completely fulfilled. The Qur'an speaks of a book (*kitab*) in which there would be a record of every action, bad and good. Therefore, people would not be able to deny their deeds done in this worldly life.

The Holy Book divides people on this terrible day into two groups; those who receive their book through their right hands are the people of paradise. They will find what the Lord has prepared for them from his eternal treasures. The second group comprises those who receive their book through their left hands; they will be taken to the eternal abode of punishment that is Hell. The Prophet gives hope to some in this group, indicating that anyone who has faith, even as small as a seed of mustard, will not stay in hell forever. Instead, after finishing the period of punishment they will be taken to paradise. To illustrate the life of paradise, various Qur'anic verses provide details of pleasures that God will give to this group of people. The pleasures of this world compared to the pleasures of paradise seem

to be nothing but a shadow of the real pleasures. The highest pleasure in paradise is to see God (*ru'yatulla*). Describing the life of paradise in a comparative way, a recent Muslim theologian states that a thousand years of happiness in this worldly life cannot be compared to an hour of the life of paradise; similarly a thousand years of the life of paradise cannot be compared to an hour of seeing the beauty of God. According to the teachings of Islam, these two places are the final destinations of the human being.

The Signs of the Hour

Yet the question of *when* remains. According to the Qur'an, the knowledge of the time of the final Hour belongs only to God. It can be any time and will be as fast as the twinkling of an eye (*lamh al-basar*). The Prophet lists a number of events that will take place before the coming of the final Hour and Muslim theologians have developed special sections in their books on the '*alamat al-sa'a*' (the Signs of the Hour). The body of *hadith* and Islamic theology contain a rich literature on the details of the events that signal the Hour. Although there are Qur'anic verses which hint at such signs, Muslim scholars consider the body of *hadith* as the main reference point in the Islamic tradition. Based on the sayings of the Prophet, they have categorized the events before the Hour into two groups. The first group of events are called *small signs* and relate to the decrease of spirituality and the spread of all kinds of corruption on the earth. The *hadith* speaks of the decrease of knowledge, the spread of adultery and fornication in public places, etc.

The second group of events, called the *major signs* of the Hour, comprises ten signs according to the *hadith* of Huzayfa

bin Asid, a prominent companion of the Prophet. The Prophet points out that before the coming of the Hour, the following signs will emerge to signal its imminence:

1. the emergence of the Anti-Christ (*al-Dajjal*);
2. the spread of smoke (*al-dukhan*);
3. the emergence of a beast (*dabbat al-ardh*);
4. the rise of the sun from the west (*tulu' al-shams min al-maghrib*);
5. the descent of Jesus (*nuzul 'Isa*);
6. the emergence of Gog and Magog (*Ya'juj wa Ma'juj*);
7. the disappearance of three lands in the East, the West and the Arabian peninsula;
8. the emergence of a fire from the south to gather people in the place of the final gathering (*al-hashr*).

It should be noted that the list provided in this *hadith* does not imply that these signs will occur consecutively. Five of them signal that the time of the Hour is extremely close: the emergence of Anti-Christ, the descent of Jesus, the emergence of a beast, the emergence of Gog and Magog, and finally the rise of the sun from the west. Muslim theologians argue that when the final sign, the rise of the sun from the west, occurs, God will not accept repentance any more, because the time of the Hour has already arrived.

Some theologians think this language should not be interpreted literally, while others insist on the literal truth of every word in the Qur'an and the *hadith*. A third group is more balanced with respect to the Signs of the Hour. They accept the authenticity of the sayings of the Prophet on this subject, although they also accept the existence of some fabricated *hadith* on this matter. This group asserts that the words of the Prophet

should not be taken literally, otherwise it would lead to confusion. The use of allegorical language constitutes a great part of the Prophet's sayings; accordingly, the Prophet's mention of these events should also be understood metaphorically. For instance, when the Prophet speaks of the descent of Jesus, one should understand that it is the strength of spirituality, which is symbolized by Jesus, that is meant. One should not expect a man descending from the sky physically. Such a literalist idea would not match God's actions in the world of nature. Furthermore, according to these scholars of Islamic tradition, Jesus will descend in the form of an angel, and angels can ascend and descend at any time without our knowledge and even without being visible.

The majority of Muslims believe in the Signs of the Hour, without questioning the exact way of their occurrence. They affirm that since the Prophet has stated this on many occasions, it will happen.

Further reading

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See also: 'adl; akhira; arguments and the Qur'an; Dajjal; repentance; shafa'a; zuhd
ZEKI SARITOPRAK

EZRA

see: 'Uzayr