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Chapter 1

CONCEPTS OF THE AFTERLIFE

Reincarnation and resurrection are both philosophical conceptions of the afterlife, but with apparent contradictions. In general, reincarnation is the broad notion of rebirth, whether the transmigration of conscious souls, as in Hinduism, or the transmigration of fruits of actions (*karma*) taken up by a different, yet related personality, as in Buddhism. Many traditions of ancient Europe, such as Pythagoreanism and Manichaeism, include concepts of reincarnation.¹ Resurrection is also not a concept exclusive to the Abrahamic religions, as it also exists in Zoroastrianism² as well as in ancient Egyptian cosmologies.³ This chapter introduces those different concepts of the afterlife, as they were not foreign to the audience of the Qur'an, though the specifics of their nature have varied across cultures. After introducing these concepts, a section introduces the methodology used in the book in its attempt to focus on the passages of death and resurrection in the Qur'an that are possibly intended to be metaphorical or spiritual or, possibly, effectively have dual meaning.

Reincarnation

The origins of reincarnation are difficult to discern. The notion had some prominence in Indic culture, ancient Greece⁴ and even among Celtic Druids.⁵ Its attestation among Amerindians and the Inuit led Mircea Eliade and Antonia Mills to argue that such beliefs might also have existed in the shamanic principles of hunter-gatherer tribes.⁶ When invoked, ancestors' spirits may sometimes possess the body of the shaman.⁷ Such early beliefs might have been the kernel from which the belief in metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls, evolved.

Reincarnation comprises a diversity of beliefs. In ancient Greece, Pythagoras believed in the immortality of the soul⁸ and in metempsychosis.⁹ Both concepts are prevalent in India, leading some scholars to argue that Pythagorean beliefs might have roots there.¹⁰ Although the ancient Egyptians also believed in the immortality of the soul, the nature of the afterlife and resurrection in Egyptian culture appear to be distinct from the Pythagorean view.

Reincarnation in India underwent a great transformation with the rise of Buddhism. Buddhist teachings do not include the immortality of the soul.

Buddhism denies the existence of a soul or a self in a living being; accordingly, reincarnation does not take the form of metempsychosis, in which a soul is reborn, but in the form of metamorphosis.¹¹ This was a break from the Hindu understanding of an *ātman* (soul), a term that can be traced back to the Rīgveda in the second millennium BCE by the Indo-European tribes that lived in Northern India.¹²

Buddhism teaches non-self (*anattā* or *anātman*), as can be seen in the Nikāya Suttas.¹³ In Buddhism, a soul does not migrate to be reborn in another body since there is no concept of an immortal soul.¹⁴ An important tenet of Buddhism is the concept of impermanence (*anicca* or *anitya*), according to which nothing is immortal.¹⁵ Although the concept of impermanence also exists in Hinduism in that everything is constantly changing,¹⁶ the difference is mainly on the existence of a soul (*ātman*).¹⁷ In Buddhism, a soul does not exist.¹⁸ When it comes to paths to liberation (*nirvāna* in Buddhism or *moksha* in Hinduism), does the distinction really matter?¹⁹ Is a monk seeking liberation selfish? Buddhist tradition shows that Gautama Buddha tried to teach only what is necessary for liberation. Many Buddhist monks, in some traditions, do not even seek to achieve liberation; rather, the aim is to become a *bodhisattva*, one who wants to become enlightened for the sake of others and not oneself, and who therefore delays *nirvāna* out of compassion for all beings.²⁰

Whether or not the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) is a way to teach selflessness,²¹ it led to an evolution of the concept of reincarnation – there no longer being a soul to leave a body and be reborn.²² It was for this reason that some Buddhists prefer the term 'rebirth' over 'reincarnation'.²³

Concepts of reincarnation can be seen in Kabbalah and in orthodox Hasidic Judaism;²⁴ in some Muslim schools of thought, such as the Druze (branching from the Isma'īlīs);²⁵ and among some Christian Gnostics of the past.²⁶ The various concepts of reincarnation within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam continuously evolved throughout history.²⁷ Jane Smith writes:

Metempsychosis [*tanāsukh*] and incarnation of spirits in other bodies [*ḥulūl*] have been upheld by some individuals and some schools in the history of Islam. The doctrine of metempsychosis came originally to Islam from India and gained credence in a number of schools of thought considered outside the orthodox fold. Some persons associated with the Mu'tazila held that God's justice necessitates another opportunity for those whose good and bad deeds are equal and who thus merit neither the Fire nor the Garden. Many of the Shī'a, such as the Ismā'īliya, Bāṭiniya [*sic*] and others, applied the doctrine of metempsychosis both to the Imam and to individual believers. Most Sufis, like most orthodox Muslims, have rejected transmigration, although a few accept it as a means of achieving spiritual perfection.²⁸

Despite resurrection being a fundamental theme in the Qur'an, several early Muslim schools of thought accepted reincarnation.²⁹ Even later Muslim groups, such as Yoruba Muslims, do accept reincarnation; in the Yoruba tradition,

reincarnation is believed to occur within the family,³⁰ as is true of many shamanistic belief systems.³¹ Reincarnation's acceptance among Yoruba Muslims suggests that they might have simply been influenced by shamanistic indigenous beliefs that predate Islam in the region. The Druze concept of reincarnation, as another example, is strictly within the faith. That is, a person who is born into a Druze family would not reincarnate as a non-Druze after death.³² The concept of reincarnation in Islamic thought may have come from the East – in India, as Smith and Haddad state,³³ but it may also have originated with Muslim interaction with the treatises of Greek philosophers, especially among the Druze, many of whom held Pythagoras in high esteem.³⁴ Delving into various Muslim schools of thought that believed in reincarnation, Patricia Crone found they were from not only esoteric but also exoteric schools.³⁵ She suggests that influence from followers of the Persian Mazdak (d. 528 CE)³⁶ – who, though a Zoroastrian, believed in reincarnation³⁷ – made its way into Muslim thought.³⁸ While Zoroastrianism espouses a belief in resurrection, it has been suggested that Manichaean influence might have gradually imposed itself during Late Antiquity, including the notion of reincarnation,³⁹ even though their beliefs and tenets diverged in other aspects.

Although the Qur'an appears to have emerged within a milieu of resurrection surrounded by Judaism, Christianity and even Zoroastrianism, some pre-Islamic Arabs might have believed in some sort of reincarnation called 'the return' (*al-raj'ah*), in which a person returns to this life after physical death.⁴⁰ Some Muslim exegetes even interpret the following Qur'anic passages as the *raj'ah* that some pre-Islamic Arabs believed in:⁴¹

There is nothing but our life in this world: we die and we live, and we will not be resurrected.

Qur'an 23:37

They say, 'There is nothing but our life in this world. We die and we live, and none destroys us except time [*al-dahr*].' But they have no knowledge thereof. They are but deluded.⁴²

Qur'an 45:24

However, we have no details of the nature of this *raj'ah* or whether, indeed, some pre-Islamic Arabs believed in it. Perhaps it was influenced by Greek, Gnostic, or even Manichaean doctrines of metempsychosis. It could also have been only speculations by some Qur'anic exegetes many centuries after the emergence of the Qur'an to make sense of some of its passages that might point to some people asking for a *raj'ah* (return) to this life (e.g. Qur'an 23:99). Patricia Crone did suggest the possibility of various views on an afterlife existing within the Qur'anic milieu. She argued that the Qur'an particularly engages with those who denied or doubted the reality of it.⁴³ When commenting on the word order of 'we die and we live', she does, however, assume that the nonbelievers are using a biblical formula, in which God is shown to have the power to bring forth death and life in that order

(e.g. Deut. 32:39, 1 Sam. 2:6, 2 Kgs. 5:7).⁴⁴ It is likely that the Qur'an is aware of some biblical formulae, but Crone suggests that the nonbelievers, in this case, are also fully aware of the Bible or more so parabiblical literature, and, therefore, know the biblical formula.⁴⁵ She is convinced that the Qur'anic nonbelievers (*mushrikūn*) have some Judaeo-Christian roots.⁴⁶

Some later Muslim communities, such as some Shī'ī schools of thought, do believe in the *raj'ah* (return) of their *imāms*, meaning they will return to this life to lead their followers.⁴⁷ This kind of return to this life may not be strange within the early Islamic milieu, as resurrection in some Jewish thought is the return of the righteous to this life during the Messianic Age.⁴⁸ These conceptions of a select group who would return to life was part of Near Eastern beliefs, as will be discussed in the next section. Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1057) is known to have denied resurrection, and some think he might have subscribed to the *raj'ah*.⁴⁹

Some traditional Muslim scholars interpret the *dahr* (time) in Qur'an 45:24 – 'We die and we live, and none destroys us except time (*al-dahr*)' – as a form of reincarnation.⁵⁰ Some scholars hold that some pre-Islamic Arabs believed in this form of reincarnation, and think that it perhaps had Persian influence from Zurvanism, whose name in Middle Persian, *zurvān*, actually means time.⁵¹ After all, *Zurvān*, who is the god of time, is also the god of life and death.⁵² Aida Gasimova argued of Zurvanite influence on pre-Islamic Arabian doctrines,⁵³ which makes the connection between *Zurvān* with the concept of *dahr* a possibility,⁵⁴ even though W. Montgomery Watt hesitated to assert such relationship.⁵⁵ In pre-Islamic Arabian poetry, *dahr* is presented fatalistically.⁵⁶

Acknowledging Manichaeism, Mazdakism within Zoroastrianism, and other traditions, Patricia Crone states, 'Reincarnation of the soul and periodic incarnation of the deity were ideas with a wide diffusion in the pre-Islamic Near East, and the concept of the moon as a carrier of souls is likely to have been widely diffused too.'⁵⁷ Within the Islamic milieu of the Near East, reincarnation was not a foreign concept. Moreover, if Hinduism, which has a highly developed concept of reincarnation,⁵⁸ emerged from a religion of some Indo-European tribes⁵⁹ that migrated to India from Iran or other places within the Eurasian steppes,⁶⁰ then the Indian branch may not necessarily be the prime influencer of transmigration of souls among the ancient Greeks or other places like Persia. These traditions might have shared a similar heritage for such belief,⁶¹ or this belief could have emerged in these cultures independently.

One should not assume, as Margaret Smith suggests, that the concept of reincarnation has only entered Muslim thought directly from India, or perhaps to a lesser extent from Greek philosophy on the transmigration of souls,⁶² but that such concepts were known to pre-Islamic Arabs through the Persians, within the Qur'anic milieu. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that all Muslim schools of thought that have espoused the doctrine of reincarnation of some sort throughout history have all taken it from either pre-Islamic Arab concepts or Persian; indeed, perhaps some were influenced by other cultures, such as Greek or Indian.⁶³

Resurrection

Although the concept of resurrection is found today in religions as varied as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam, in the ancient Near East it especially took the form of dying-and-rising deities.⁶⁴ In ancient Mesopotamia, the deity Tammuz dies and is resurrected;⁶⁵ in ancient Egypt, Osiris goes through a similar cycle.⁶⁶ These early concepts of resurrection seem to have evolved into later cultures within the ancient Near East.⁶⁷ Although reincarnation in its various forms was a major belief in diverse ancient Greek traditions, the idea of resurrection was also familiar, especially in the sense of mortals killed only to be resurrected as gods, such as Asclepius, Achilles and Memnon.⁶⁸

As reincarnation may have risen from the shamanistic beliefs of hunter-gatherer societies,⁶⁹ resurrection may have risen among farming societies.⁷⁰ Agricultural communities see the seasons change and understand the dynamic mechanisms of cultivation: plants sprout, give fruit, are harvested and wither away. This, they understood, was an ongoing cycle. After trees shed all their leaves and appear as if dead, they will spring to life again. Therefore, it would make sense to imagine that the same occurs with people: they die only to be raised again.⁷¹ One might thus imagine that the Neolithic Revolution, the long transition period when hunter-gatherer culture changed into agricultural settlements,⁷² planted the first seeds for the resurrection of the dead as a concept. Erich Isaac hypothesized that death-and-resurrection myths were first introduced in this period,⁷³ but Brian Spooner suggests that the reason might have been the high mortality rate in populated settlements during the Neolithic Revolution, occurring due to infectious diseases and a lack of sanitation. As a result, humans developed greater curiosity about and searched for the meaning of death and afterlife;⁷⁴ this may also have functioned as a psychosocial tool for grieving.⁷⁵ In any case, it seems natural for people who understand the cycle of agriculture to see an analogue in human life and death.⁷⁶

Ancient Egyptian culture was very much dependent on the Nile for its crops.⁷⁷ Because of the rise of agriculture, the sun became the centrepiece of human society. The sun was very important for identifying the seasons,⁷⁸ upon which holy days and feasts relied (and along with them came the birth of calendars).⁷⁹ Even the cycle of the sun itself, which rises and sets only to rise again the next day, is analogous to death and resurrection.⁸⁰ In ancient Egypt, the Sun-god, Ra, grew to great prominence.⁸¹ Ra travels on a boat through the sky, and when the sun sets every evening on the horizon (*Akhet*), he travels into the underworld (*Duat*).⁸² Ronald A. Wells argues that the concept of an hour, as a measurement of a length of time, is linked to the rising of star patterns in the underworld in ancient Egypt.⁸³

The concept of resurrection appears to have evolved later in human history than reincarnation did and is likely to have gained prominence with the invention of agriculture. Nonetheless, the main difference between early and later resurrection myths concerns who dies and who comes back to life. In many ancient societies, it is typically a dying-and-rising god, whereas the concept of a universal resurrection of the dead appears to be a later development.⁸⁴ In ancient Egypt, rules and rituals were needed to ensure that the dead would survive the journey in the underworld

and rise back to life.⁸⁵ Without such rituals, the dead might have no chance of living again.

Whether early Israelites believed in the resurrection of the dead or not is difficult to discern.⁸⁶ The early books of the Hebrew Bible do not delve much into ideas about the afterlife. Alan Segal suggests that the reason the Israelites did not emphasize the afterlife is because they wanted to distinguish themselves from the pagans, who did;⁸⁷ in the case of the Qur'an, the motivation appears to be reversed. By the time of the Gospels' composition, the Israelites apparently did not agree on the resurrection of the dead, and there were possible debates among the Sadducees and the Pharisees on this issue.⁸⁸ It is possible that the concepts of resurrection spilled into Israelite culture during the Babylonian exile, when Zoroastrian ideas were popular.⁸⁹ Mary Boyce identifies Zoroastrian influence on Isa. 25:8 and 26:19 that would shape the concept of Jewish resurrection.⁹⁰

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

Isa. 26:19

If these passages in Isaiah were shaped by Zoroastrian beliefs on resurrection, it would mean that such influence entered Israelite thought even prior to the Babylonian exile or the Maccabean Revolt.⁹¹ Nonetheless, Boyce makes clear that the Israelites did not simply borrow Zoroastrian concepts but reinterpreted and reconciled them with traditional Jewish beliefs. Yet she claims that the Israelite elite did not accept these concepts, and perhaps that is the reason why the priests, and eventually the Sadducees, denied resurrection.⁹² It must, however, be noted that not much is understood and known regarding the Sadducees, and recent biblical scholars attempt to tread carefully through our understanding of their practice and beliefs. Beyond that, it has also been argued that the dualistic nature of the Qumran community's Dead Sea Scrolls is evidence of the Zoroastrian influence on Judaism.⁹³

Depictions of resurrection can be found in the books of Ezekiel (e.g. Ezek. 37:1–14) and Daniel (e.g. Dan. 12:1–13), which themselves may have certain Zoroastrian connections.⁹⁴ However, the Samaritans also believe in resurrection, though they do not accept any books of the Hebrew Bible besides the books of Moses, and therefore may not have been influenced by exilic and postexilic Jewish books; nonetheless, a scholarly debate exists with some suggesting that the doctrine of resurrection among Samaritans remains relatively late.⁹⁵ Some evidence from early rabbinic and early Christian texts suggest that Samaritans did not always hold this belief.⁹⁶ On the other hand, there is a possibility that the concept of resurrection did exist during the pre-exilic period.⁹⁷ After all, some Semitic tribes may have even been influenced by ancient Egyptian cultures,⁹⁸ who did have concepts of resurrection; it would be possible for the Israelites to have understood and perhaps accepted this notion without any Zoroastrian influence during the Babylonian exile.⁹⁹

Jon Levenson, in *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, argues that the Israelites already had the concept of a realm of the dead, which the Hebrew Bible calls Sheol,¹⁰⁰ even prior to the Babylonian exile.¹⁰¹ However, he claims that the Hebrew Bible is uninterested in the concept of an afterlife.¹⁰²

Christopher Hays argues that First Isaiah¹⁰³ and Job seem to show awareness of Egyptian concepts of the afterlife.¹⁰⁴ The ancient Egyptian culture was known to the Canaanites, at least around the fourteenth century BCE.¹⁰⁵ During that time, the Amarna letters, which were diplomatic messages between Canaanite and Egyptian rulers, were written, suggesting that there was contact at least as far back between the eastern and western sides of Sinai.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, it would not be unusual for the ancient Israelites to have known about Egyptian culture,¹⁰⁷ religion and traditions, including the concept of resurrection.¹⁰⁸ The interaction between the ancient Israelites and the Egyptians appears to have taken place at the turn of the early first millennium BCE as well,¹⁰⁹ which could have further brought in the concept of resurrection in the minds of the ancient Israelites.

The ancient Canaanites did have beliefs of dying-and-rising gods.¹¹⁰ The Canaanites might have themselves influenced ancient Israelite beliefs on resurrection, as suggested by some scholars.¹¹¹ However, others find it unlikely.¹¹² Most importantly, resurrection was reserved for a select few, a concept that is somewhat echoed in Judaism that only the righteous will be resurrected and will have a share in the Messianic age.¹¹³ Because Canaanite and other Mesopotamian cults also held that most people will never be resurrected, except for a few,¹¹⁴ some scholars have argued a non-Zoroastrian influence in Jewish eschatology.¹¹⁵ Although concepts of resurrection exist in ancient Egyptian, Zoroastrian and Canaanite thoughts, some early scholars argue that the Jewish origin of this concept may stem from the Greek metempsychosis, which gradually changed.¹¹⁶ No strong evidence necessarily suggests this, and in fact David Russell argues that foreign influence on Jewish concepts of the afterlife is drastically overstated and that the concept arose within the Israelite community's conviction of their special relationship with God that would survive death.¹¹⁷

During the Second Temple period, Israelite eschatology started to develop further.¹¹⁸ The development of the doctrine of resurrection in Judaism has drawn significant interest, and at the turn of the last century one of the few who probed this was Arthur Marmorstein.¹¹⁹ But the research on the topic has long since developed in the field, given newer textual and archaeological discoveries. In a comprehensive review, Harry Sysling has shown how the *targumim*¹²⁰ interpreted the resurrection of the dead in its own ambiguities or evidence of its physicality.¹²¹ Expounding further, Casey Elledge proposes three existing concepts on death and the afterlife: (1) bodily resurrection with no specificity on the condition of the human soul; (2) belief in immortality of the soul without bodily resurrection; and (3) belief in bodily resurrection and immortality of the soul.¹²² Jason von Ehrenkrook adds a fourth concept that existed at the time, which is the complete rejection of any sort of afterlife.¹²³

The rabbinic tradition seems to have been an evolved great-grandchild of Second Temple Judaism.¹²⁴ The Mishnah recounts a saying by R. Pinhas b. Yair

that the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead, which comes through Elijah:

R. Pinhas b. Yair says, 'Heedfulness leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to cleanness, cleanness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to holiness, holiness leads to modesty, modesty leads to the fear of sin, the fear of sin leads to piety, piety leads to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead, and the resurrection of the dead comes through Elijah, blessed be his memory, Amen.'¹²⁵

Further developing from the Mishnah, the Talmud recounts a debate among the rabbis on who is resurrected, suggesting that only the righteous will be resurrected, while the wicked would never have life, citing Jer. 51:39.¹²⁶ Denying the resurrection of the dead is a sin.¹²⁷ Yet there is evidence from Jewish inscriptions that proves that such a faith of an afterlife was not a universal view.¹²⁸ The Mishnah recounts a tradition that all Israelites will have a share in *'olam ha-ba* (the world to come) except for a person who says the resurrection of the dead is a teaching that does not derive from the Torah, a person who says the Torah does not come from Heaven, and an Epicurean.¹²⁹ Here, it is interesting that this tradition in the Mishnah abhors not only those who do not believe in resurrection but also those who deny that resurrection is in the Torah.¹³⁰ According to some rabbinic traditions in the Babylonian Talmud, Deut. 32:39 implies resurrection of the dead, which states that God causes death and life, and causes wounds and heals.¹³¹ Another tradition to argue for resurrection suggested in the Babylonian Talmud is based on Num. 18:28, which describes giving the heave-offering¹³² to Aaron, Moses's priest brother.¹³³ Aaron died before ever entering the land of Israel, so it is interpreted in the Talmud as Aaron being destined to live once more and the Israelites giving him heave-offering.¹³⁴ Another tradition by R. Simai recounted in the Babylonian Talmud suggests that a covenant was made between God and the patriarchs to give them the land of Canaan (i.e. Exod. 6:4), a promise whose fulfilment requires that the patriarchs be resurrected.¹³⁵ According to the Babylonian Talmud, R. Eliezer b. R. Yosé also uses the following passage to argue for resurrection: 'such a person [soul/*nepeš*] shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt' (Num. 15:31).¹³⁶ However, this specific passage talks of the *nepeš*, which may involve a point of debate about whether it is the soul with or without a body. Rabbinic traditions in the Babylonian Talmud further explain how the dead will rise and that the body and soul will be judged together.¹³⁷

Several traditions in the Talmud talk of the resurrection of the dead and overcoming death,¹³⁸ and provide references from the Hebrew Bible suggesting resurrection (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:6).¹³⁹ Commenting on Prov. 30:15–16, a tradition attributed to R. Yoshiya in the Babylonian Talmud compares a barren womb to a grave and relating it to resurrection:

'What is the connection between the grave and the womb?'

'It is to tell you, just as the womb receives and gives forth, so Sheol receives and gives forth.'

‘And that moreover yields an argument a fortiori: If the womb receives in secret but gives forth with loud cries. Sheol, which receives with loud cries [of mourning] surely should give forth [the dead] with great noise indeed!’

‘On the basis of that argument there is an answer to those who say that, on the basis of the teachings of the Torah in particular, there is no basis for expecting the resurrection of the dead.’¹⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible generally emphasizes procreation as a norm for allowing one to become immortal by keeping one’s name alive through descendants, as in other Near Eastern traditions, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹⁴¹ Accordingly, the rabbis may not have fully conveyed the intention of the authors of Proverbs. Jacob L. Wright states:

The rabbis of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods are even more deliberate in their repudiation of heroic death. Thus, they did not transmit 1 Maccabees, with its statist ideals of noble death.¹⁴²

Apart from the Pentateuch, some other parts of the Hebrew Bible speak of what happens after death: ‘and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath [spirit/*rûah*] returns to God who gave it’ (Qoh. 12:7).¹⁴³ Also, Ezek. 37:1–14 explains that dry bones are given life when God gives them the spirit (*rûah*) of life. In it, God promises that He will open the graves of the Israelites and bring them to their land. The rabbis cite this passage in their Talmudic deliberations about resurrection.¹⁴⁴ Ezek. 37:11 makes it explicit that the symbolism refers to the whole house of Israel.¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, even the Talmud portrays the debate on whether this is a metaphor or literal with many theological repercussions:¹⁴⁶ these passages have been understood as a symbolic return of the Israelites from exile,¹⁴⁷ an interpretation also espoused by the Qumran community.¹⁴⁸ During the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt, this passage continued to be ambiguous in terms of what the community understood – whether they thought it expressed a literal resurrection of those who died for the cause or the resurrection of the cause itself.¹⁴⁹

The Dura-Europos synagogue paintings of the Ezekiel panel date to the third century CE, and even there it is difficult to assert whether the paintings depict the prophet’s vision as the restoration of the nation of Israel or as the Talmudic understanding of the resurrection of the righteous during the Messianic age.¹⁵⁰ Regardless, the Talmud narrates the debate and concludes that Ezekiel’s vision is to be interpreted not only metaphorically but also literally.¹⁵¹

According to a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, Ps. 116:9 is also a reference to the resurrection of the dead.¹⁵² Another tradition in the Babylonian Talmud suggests that God has three keys that are not handed over to the hand of an agent: the key to rain, the key to childbirth, and the key to the resurrection of the dead.¹⁵³ A different tradition suggests that Job denied the resurrection of the dead, according to Job 7:9.¹⁵⁴ The rabbis in the Talmud not only take it for granted that the resurrection of the dead will occur but also discuss other things about the world-to-come.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps, in the rabbinic tradition, it had been important to interpret the Hebrew Bible to foster the idea of the resurrection of the dead. For example, when Jon Levenson suggests that the concept of an afterlife existed even during pre-Second Temple Judaism,¹⁵⁶ this in no way suggests that the concept of an afterlife was necessarily a belief in the resurrection of the body.

The Jews at the time of Christ, which included the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were divided between different schools of thought.¹⁵⁷ According to Acts 23:8, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. Benedict Viviano and Justin Taylor state that Acts 23:8 should be translated as, 'the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection either as an angel [i.e. in the form of an angel] or as a spirit [i.e. in the form of a spirit], but the Pharisees acknowledge them both.'¹⁵⁸ However, evidence from the Synoptic Gospels, as well as the writings of Josephus, suggest that the Sadducees did not generally believe in the resurrection of the dead (i.e. Mt. 22:23–33, Mk. 12:18–27, Lk. 20:27–38).¹⁵⁹ Jesus's answer to the Sadducees in the Synoptic Gospels concerning levirate marriage is an argument not necessarily for resurrection but for the existence of an afterlife. If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are physically resurrected, in which sphere or realm are they resurrected? John Kilgallen argued that, at least in the Lukan account, Jesus's response does not necessarily suggest the patriarchs being currently alive.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, in the Matthean and Lukan accounts, Jesus justifies his response that in heaven people will become like angels. If the Sadducees did not believe in angels, then they might have had a different reaction to Jesus's response. In the Markan account, this particular justification is omitted, suggesting the possibility of a stronger allusion to the Pentateuch.¹⁶¹ Adelbert Denaux argues that Jesus's answer to the Sadducees in the Synoptics is evidence of Jesus arguing in favour of a general resurrection.¹⁶² Humbly, we might disagree, since the Pharisees did not necessarily believe in a universal resurrection¹⁶³ yet seemed satisfied with Jesus's answer.¹⁶⁴

Bradley Trick argues that for God to fulfil his covenant to the patriarchs by giving them the land of Canaan implies resurrection, as death would mean that the covenant would cease, just as marriage ceases with death.¹⁶⁵ He proposes that the death of the body does not mean that the patriarchs have actually died and the covenant with God is therefore annulled, but rather that they would be alive in an interim state before their bodily resurrection.¹⁶⁶

The Pharisees may not have believed in a universal resurrection of all the dead, but in the resurrection of the righteous.¹⁶⁷ Evil-doers are not understood to be resurrected into eternal damnation and are instead annihilated.¹⁶⁸ It remains unclear whether pre-Christian Judaism defined resurrection to be the rising of the same dead body or the rising of the dead in a different body.¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Draper states that, in rabbinic and early Christian exegesis, resurrection is a reward for those who suffered, such as martyrs.¹⁷⁰ He circumnavigates his argument based on the citation of Zech. 14:5 in the *Didache*:¹⁷¹ since it is a reward, it is not shared with anyone but the righteous and especially martyrs.¹⁷²

James H. Charlesworth divides resurrection by authors of early Israelite and Christian texts into different categories: (1) resurrecting a nation (e.g. Ezekiel 37);

(2) raising a group from disenfranchisement; (3) raising of the individual from social disenfranchisement; (4) raising of the individual from personal embarrassment; (5) raising of the individual from the sickbed to health (e.g. Mk. 5:21–43); (6) raising of the individual from inactivity to do God's will; (7) raising of the individual from despondency due to consciousness of sin; (8) raising of the individual from ignorance to divinely revealed knowledge; (9) raising of the individual from meaninglessness in this world to a realising eschatology (i.e. experiencing the End Time in the present); (10) Both-And, where the author may intentionally collapse any distinction between the present age and the future age; (11) raising of Christ from Sheol; (12) raising an apocalypticist into heaven; (13) a spiritual rising up or awakening of an individual (14) raising of the individual from death to mortal life (e.g. Lazarus in John 11); (15) raising of the individual from death to eternal life; and (16) intentional ambiguity (i.e. the author intentionally not asserting what happens in the future).¹⁷³

In that light, Outi Lehtipuu ardently argues that even the term resurrection in many Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman texts are hopelessly ambiguous, which may even shed light to how it would not be surprising in its ambiguity in the Qur'an:

resurrection is an ambiguous category in ancient Jewish, Christian, and other Greco-Roman sources. It is not possible to restrict its meaning only to expressing bodily resurrection. Because of the prevalence of the Greek words that are used to denote resurrection, resurrection terminology is hopelessly ambiguous. It is not always obvious whether a word is used for the revival of a dead body without the idea of immortality or whether it means overcoming death permanently, either acquiring a new life after death or as a spiritual process during earthly life ... Resurrection was never a simple, clearly defined symbol, but, from the beginning, it was interpreted in various ways.¹⁷⁴

Alan Segal suggests that perhaps the Israelites adopted the concept of the immortality of the soul from the Greeks and from the Persians (i.e. Zoroastrians) the concept of resurrection,¹⁷⁵ as some rabbinic literature shows evidence of a conjoined belief.¹⁷⁶ Crone has also pointed to the Zoroastrian belief in resurrection and its possible influence in pre-Islamic Arabia at the time of Muḥammad.¹⁷⁷ In that case, one might also infer that the Qur'an was perhaps not solely under a Judaeo-Christian sphere of influence and understood Zoroastrian doctrines only as mediated through Judaeo-Christian beliefs and literature but could have had first-hand knowledge of Zoroastrian sources. The Qur'an appears, at least once, explicit in its awareness of Zoroastrianism or some form thereof (i.e. Qur'an 22:17).¹⁷⁸ Resurrection being a known concept in pre-Islamic Arabia is even attested in the Qur'an, emphasizing that the Qur'an is not bringing a concept that is foreign to its audience, even when the audience is made up of neither Jews nor Christians; Patricia Crone even made a note of that in an article published posthumously.¹⁷⁹ The following passage demonstrates that the Qur'an's audience is aware of resurrection and believe in God.

⁷⁹He it is Who created you on the earth, and unto Him shall you be gathered.

⁸⁰And He it is Who gives life and causes death, and unto Him belongs the variation of the night and the day. Will you not, then, understand? ⁸¹Nay, but they say the like of that which was said by those of old. ⁸²They say, 'What, when we have died and are dust and bones, are we to be resurrected?' ⁸³We and our fathers were certainly warned of this before. These are nothing but stories [*asāṭīr*]¹⁸⁰ of those of old.' ⁸⁴Say, 'Whose is the earth and whosoever is upon it, if you know?'

⁸⁵They will say, 'God's.' Say, 'Will you not, then, take heed?'

Qur'an 23:79–85

The logical question the passage poses is that since the audience believes in God, who owns the earth and those upon it, then in what sense would they be surprised if God is capable of resurrecting the dead? Additionally, the Qur'an uses the term *asāṭīr* for stories; often a neglected fact, the term implies that those stories are written down and not simply oral traditions.¹⁸¹ The root *s-ṭ-r* is even used by the Qur'an to define writing: 'Nūn. By the pen and that which they inscribe [*yasturūn*]' (Qur'an 68:1).

Crone writes, 'three positions are described in the Qur'ān: belief in the resurrection, scepticism about it, and outright denial of it.'¹⁸² She assumes the possibility that the audience of the Qur'an might actually have some biblical background. Regardless, the Qur'an does suggest that the message it is bringing them, even when the audience is assumed to be pre-Islamic Arabs (neither Jews nor Christians), is not new and is not something of which their forefathers were unaware (e.g. Qur'an 23:68, 46:17).¹⁸³

With various concepts of an afterlife or lack thereof in Near Eastern cultures, it would be important to understand how and what the Qur'an refers to in its passages about death and resurrection. The next chapters focus on some Semitic terms that denote life and death. Then, a closer reading will analyse the Qur'anic passages on resurrection, while comparing them with biblical, extrabiblical, and rabbinic literature. The comparisons are made to understand the possible subtexts alluded to by the Qur'an and to shed light on the Qur'anic interpretation of some of the passages on death and resurrection.

Methodology

The method used in the analysis and arguments of this book is an intra- and inter-textual analysis of the Qur'an within itself and biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature. In recent scholarship, this method has been used by various scholars, such as Reuven Firestone,¹⁸⁴ John Reeves,¹⁸⁵ Nicolai Sinai,¹⁸⁶ Gabriel Reynolds,¹⁸⁷ Emran El-Badawi,¹⁸⁸ Holger Zellentin¹⁸⁹ and many others. Obviously, this trend has existed even longer than that list suggests; however, some earlier Western scholarship was more polemical in their approach than the more recent scholarship on the matter.¹⁹⁰

The Qur'an and biblical literature enjoy an intertextual relationship. In Reuven Firestone's words, the Qur'an 'contains so many parallels with the Hebrew Bible

and New Testament that it could not possibly exist without its scriptural predecessors as subtexts. The Qur'an itself recognizes this in its extremely referential nature.¹⁹¹ The intra- and inter-textual approach employed in this book mirrors that of the hermeneutical method demonstrated in my previous book *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible*.¹⁹² Accordingly, Arabic terms of the Qur'an are compared to identify how their definitions are attested in other Semitic languages with the possible use of wordplay.

Like *Qur'anic Hermeneutics*, this book attempts to transcend any agenda. It is neither attempting to suggest, for example, that physical resurrection in the sense of bones leaving their graves literally exists in the Qur'an in a clear, uncontested description nor is the goal to frame such a notion as completely alien to the Qur'an. It only suggests that *some* verses in the Qur'an that have traditionally been viewed as clear examples of literal resurrection are perhaps not quite so, when sufficiently intertextualized with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature.

Some believers of certain religious traditions feel threatened by epistemic humility. However, Katherine Dormandy has demonstrated that epistemic humility serves religious beliefs more than dogmatic beliefs for the very simple reason that when counterevidence is received by a dogmatic believer, their whole worldview may be shattered.¹⁹³ She argues that even if someone holds a *dogmatic-but-true* belief, they would still be under the sin of epistemic vices like intellectual arrogance:

We cannot deny that it [epistemic humility] comes with epistemic risks, but the epistemic gains that it promises, including religious truth, understanding, and epistemic agency, are better than any gains there may be eschewing it. Moreover, eschewing epistemic humility poses a far greater epistemic risk to her religious beliefs than the dogmatic-but-true believer seems to realize.¹⁹⁴

Since Dormandy considers that if *dogmatic-but-true* belief gives birth to an epistemic vice of intellectual arrogance, epistemic humility, in contrast, is a virtue.¹⁹⁵ She even argues,

... it [religious disagreement] can promote the improvement of religious belief systems by delivering outside criticism, additional evidence, epistemic alternatives, and counterinstances to one's biases. Far from being otiose or distracting when your religious belief system is largely accurate already, religious disagreement can help safeguard it against creeping inaccuracy and promote new insights.¹⁹⁶

Therefore, as much as possible – and forgive any lapses – the method used attempts to maintain epistemic humility by being as objective as possible without necessarily strongly contradicting existing scholarship. For example, while I do not disagree with much current research, such as that by Gabriel Reynolds¹⁹⁷ and Emran El-Badawi,¹⁹⁸ who have argued the close contact between the Qur'an and the Syriac traditions, I think that, in at least some parts, the Qur'an is still aware of and engaging with other traditions, including perhaps the Greek New Testament. I

have argued that the Qur'an is probably aware of the Gospel of John and possibly attempts to interpret the Gospel's Christology based on its Greek text.¹⁹⁹ Even within the Syriac tradition, the Qur'an is possibly aware of traditions beyond just the Peshitta, such as Tatian's rendition of the Gospels.²⁰⁰ Accordingly, though the Qur'an is aware of the Syriac traditions, it might also be aware of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, or at least in certain hybrid texts. Thus, the engagement of the Qur'an lies not exclusively with the Syriac traditions, and the philological method used in this book reflects that.

Additionally, considerable intratextuality and intertextuality are analysed from within the Qur'an and between the Qur'an and the biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions. The intra- and inter-connectedness in the text are similar to those outlined by Michael Fishbane on inner-biblical exegesis, in his *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.²⁰¹ As Fishbane demonstrates, parallelism in vocabulary, phraseology, theme, motif and other linguistic and formulaic markers may provide good cases for candidacy towards intertextual allusions. Within Qur'anic studies, a method similar to that of Fishbane, defined as intertextual polysemy, has also been used to demonstrate how points of intertextuality may be determined to identify inner-Qur'anic and Qur'anic-biblical allusions.²⁰² As to the use of rabbinic literature, ever more scholarly work suggests that parts of the Qur'an are very well aware of rabbinic tradition,²⁰³ and the findings in this book continue to demonstrate and validate this concept even further.

Much research in Qur'anic studies today discusses the composition of the Qur'an within its Late Antique context. While the earlier Orientalist approach was to show the influence of either Jewish or Christian traditions on the Qur'an, that was much too simplistic and awkwardly biased.²⁰⁴ However, scholarship in the past few decades has come to appreciate the intricate relationship between the Qur'an and the traditions around it, preferring to call it engagement instead of influence.²⁰⁵ Regardless of the nomenclature or definitions one prefers to use, there is no doubt that many parts of the Qur'an appear to be aware of many of these traditions. As Michael Graves puts it, the reception history of the Qur'an is not very different from the New Testament, which did not necessarily always directly receive the traditions from the Hebrew Bible, but through a transmission process that elaborated on earlier traditions.²⁰⁶ Many of the examples made in this book directly reflect the Qur'anic engagement with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions, especially when analysing the Qur'anic passages that appear to allude to these literature while discussing the theme of resurrection.

This book begins to look into the terminologies used by the Qur'an on life and death, comparing it with the Near Eastern and biblical traditions. It then looks into the concepts of death and life, doing the same comparison with those traditions. It later engages with the Qur'anic texts that appear to portray vividly and undoubtedly physical resurrection and how these portrayals are compared with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions. The examples analysed in detail include (1) the man in the desolate town who dies and is later resurrected (i.e. Qur'an 2:259); (2) Abraham's ritual with the birds, which God asks him to perform as a sign of

resurrection (i.e. Qur'an 2:260); (3) the portrayal of people leaving their graves; and (4) the red/yellow cow, which depicts bringing the dead back to life (i.e. Qur'an 2:67–73).

When dealing with biblical texts, scholars have looked into various textual studies that discuss dating, authorship, composition, redaction and so forth. However, since this study looks into the possible relationship between the Qur'an and biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions, it is looking into the traditions that perhaps existed in Late Antiquity with which the Qur'an is possibly alluding to or drawing its arguments or engagements. For example, while scholars divide the Book of Zechariah, of which chapters 9–14 are considered apocalyptic and composed later than the beginning of the book,²⁰⁷ during Late Antiquity, the book was already taken as a whole by the community. As the Qur'an is part of the reception history of the biblical traditions within Late Antiquity, this study would not delve into details of these biblical texts and their composition or authorship much earlier during Antiquity: it would be irrelevant to how the Qur'an might have viewed such traditions, except where it may be necessary to note such authorship and composition. For example, when dealing with some rabbinic literature, such questions may become important as some of that literature could be late *midrash* (rabbinic commentaries), which will be an issue, especially when dealing with the red cow ritual in Chapter 9.

Consequently, even when looking at *midrash* works and their interpretations of biblical literature, it is not to suggest that this is what the Hebrew Bible specifically meant by it, but at least, it outlines a reception community with an interpretation that perhaps existed in the Qur'anic milieu. For example, when this book looks into the interpretations in *Genesis Rabbah*, it is not necessarily suggesting that this is what the Hebrew Bible specifically means, but that some of these interpretations might have been available as oral or written traditions that were circulating among the Jewish community in the Qur'anic milieu.

Notably, the limitations of this study must be made explicit.²⁰⁸ Accordingly, this book will attempt to avoid making assertions and keep its hypotheses in the realm of possibility. There is no way, at least not yet, to go back into history and explicitly manage to ask what the authorial intent is of any piece of literature. Moreover, even with a living author, it is difficult to explicitly understand their intent on the meaning of their narrative, whether oral or literary. Narratives are an art, and like any art, sometimes an author might purposely even allow the listener or reader to develop an independent aesthetical reception, a concept that Wolfgang Iser has argued.²⁰⁹ Therefore, to pinpoint an exact interpretation of any narrative is not possible. Understanding the humility that comes from dealing with unknowns and uncertainties, one should accept as a natural limitation that no interpretation can be absolute.²¹⁰

The Qur'an is part of the reception history of biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature. As part of this reception history, it is not entirely evident how and why the Qur'an re-articulates some of that literature. For example, even though the earliest intentions of Ezekiel 37 point to the resurrection of a nation and not some eschatological resurrection of bones literally leaving their graves, it does not

assume that some later traditions which received Ezekiel 37 did not interpret it in such a way, as well. Therefore, even if we connect some Qur'anic narratives about resurrection with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic subtexts that do not necessarily discuss resurrection in a literal sense of bones leaving their graves, it would be difficult to recognize whether the Qur'an is more committed perhaps to the earliest intentions of those texts/traditions or if it is repurposing them.

Timothy Beal argues that reception history of the Bible carries with it such limitations and for that reason he suggests that one needs to shift more towards the cultural history of scriptures.²¹¹ In this he is inspired by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Qur'anic scholar, who wanted to introduce the cultural studies applied in the reception of the Qur'an into biblical studies.²¹² Since there is no way to know anything definitively – apart from knowing that we do not know, as Socrates put it, according to Plato – the best way to avoid limitations and to maintain intellectual humility is by suggesting possibilities, not closing off avenues of thought by overconfident assertions.