Galadari, Abdulla. "Conclusion: Death and Resurrection in the Qur#an." *Metaphors of Death and Resurrection in the Qur#an: An Intertextual Approach with Biblical and Rabbinic Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 147–150. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350244559.ch-010>>.

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Chapter 10

CONCLUSION: DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an's principal and most prominent theme is the Day of Resurrection, and it has typically been assumed that the phenomenon involves physical bodily resurrection. Presuming that outlook, it would seem that the Qur'an is, indeed, very explicit about bodily resurrection, especially as some passages depict it very vividly. However, close analysis shows that many Qur'anic passages explicitly discussing resurrection are perhaps mainly metaphorical. Many of the most intense depictions of bodily resurrection in the Qur'an are rearticulations of biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions that do not demonstrate physical resurrection in the sense of dead bones leaving their graves. They are, however, physical in the sense of restoring a nation, rebuilding the Temple, or even having physical children. Therefore, one can deduce that many Qur'anic passages about resurrection are metaphorical such that even the physical aspects do not take on the imagery of dead bodies rising from graves.

Since the Qur'an numerous identifies resurrection in a very metaphorical manner, it was essential to understand the concepts of life and death in the Qur'an. These also frequently take on metaphorical layers: there are believers, who are portrayed to be spiritually alive, and there are nonbelievers, who are explicitly described to be spiritually dead. Additionally, the vast majority of the terms that the Qur'an uses to designate nonbelievers have a common denominator in their semantic range dealing with issues about death. In other words, the Qur'an is describing zombies. The zombies of the Qur'an are those who are spiritually dead but appear to be physically alive; they walk, talk and interact physically, but they are dead souls encapsulated in physical bodies, which is nothing other than tombs for their souls.

With so much metaphor at play, there is little doubt that some concepts of life, death and resurrection that are described by the Qur'an may be understood spiritually. This brings to light some Sufi literature, such as that of Ibn 'Arabī, which explicitly interprets the Qur'an in a very spiritual manner, especially on these exact topics of life, death, and resurrection. Throughout history, much of that literature was considered esoteric (*bāṭinī*), and the interpreters sometimes leapt to conclusions when the exoteric meanings appeared more physical than spiritual. However, as is shown in the many examples, the Qur'an explicitly speaks of

zombies, those who are spiritually dead. Moreover, the biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic narratives in their context intertextualized with the Qur'an have nothing to do with physical resurrection in the sense of dead bodies leaving their graves. Accordingly, one might infer that the motive behind the Qur'anic rearticulation seems instead to be its emphasis on a metaphorical understanding of death and resurrection, as well.

The grand question that arises is why Muslims, early in their history, almost always interpreted these passages as referring to physical, not metaphorical or spiritual, resurrection. Why were Muslims very early in their history convinced of the superiority of their Temple, the Ka'bah, taking it to be the real and true focal point for prayer? I have argued in an earlier work that once we intertextualize the *Qiblah* passages with its biblical and rabbinic literature, it becomes clearer that this is not the Qur'an's main argument.¹ Similarly, when much Sufi literature, like that of Ibn 'Arabī, had incessantly argued how *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* is symbolic of the heart, which many have considered to be an esoteric (*bāṭinī*) interpretation, it was also found that the Qur'an makes that point philologically, which is further validated with its intertextuality.² This might suggest that some of those esoteric interpretations may not necessarily be considered without valid linguistic support through intertextuality, and therefore, perhaps should not ineludibly be considered heretical by some traditionalists.

The scenario regarding resurrection seems very similar. Why did Muslims in the early years of their history not interpret the Qur'an more in line with its possible biblical and rabbinic subtext or oral tradition? One most likely reason, but perhaps not the only reason, is that Muslims very early in their history did not engage thoroughly with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature. Their reasons for not doing so could be many: they were perhaps unaware of that literature or they intentionally did not want to deal with it to show the superiority of their Prophet and his scripture, which they wanted to keep independent from their competition. Reuven Firestone had argued that Muslims used reactive theology early in their history in order to distinguish themselves from other religious communities, perhaps motivated by religious competitiveness.³

However, Muslim traditions that appeared to be more esoteric (*bāṭinī*) in their interpretations and viewed by other mainstream Muslims as heretical are not necessarily as esoteric as one assumes. That being the case, much dialogue is possible between various traditions, because a systematic methodology can be established in which the views of various groups may be tested, and intertextual polysemy might provide for a way to such a systematic approach.

Physical resurrection of the kind where people leave their graves does not appear to be the main depiction in the Qur'an. Those passages that appear very explicitly literal (e.g. Qur'an 2:259–260) are perhaps metaphorical, as their intertextualities with biblical literature suggest. Even the Qur'anic portrayal of emergence from the tombs (*ajdāth*) is likely metaphorical, as has been shown.

The Qur'an appears to talk about two deaths and two lives, that of the *nafs* (which might be a disembodied soul) and that of the body. In most cases, the Qur'an is highlighting a metaphorical death. Each kind of death apparently has its

resurrection. The body is resurrected perhaps in the same way it was created the first time. This might suggest that it undergoes rebirth or that the rebirth is itself a metaphor for spiritual birth. The resurrection of the *nafs* is perhaps more mystical. Qur'an 6:122 appears to point to resurrection not after the body's death, but while the body is alive, thus referring to the resurrected as still walking among people.

According to the Qur'an, nonbelievers have a dead *nafs*. Even though they appear to be physically alive, they are zombies with a living body but a dead *nafs*. The Qur'an is mostly concerned with the resurrection of the *nafs*, as it seeks to win the faith of nonbelievers.

A word of caution is imperative. If the Qur'an describes zombies with a dead *nafs* entombed in a physical body, then its resurrection could still be demonstrated in a physical sense, as emerging from that physical tomb. As soon as the *nafs* becomes alive, it is alive within the physical body, and not somewhere necessarily in a different, nonphysical realm, which is exemplified in the following Qur'anic passage:

Is he who was dead, and to whom We give life, making for him a light by which to walk among humankind, like unto one who is in darkness from which he does not emerge? Thus for the disbelievers, what they used to do was made to seem fair unto them.

Qur'an 6:122

The other possibility of resurrection is re-creation. The Qur'an frequently describes resurrection as analogous to re-creation, which might or might not suggest reincarnation. It might even suggest a spiritual and nonphysical birth. If the resurrection of the physical body implies rebirth, then it may counter the statements that those in hell cannot ask to be returned to this life (*dunyā*). However, if some Qur'anic verses are suggesting that this life (*dunyā*) is itself hell, then those who do not believe and do not do good deeds will remain there, and perhaps the Qur'an is implying that they cannot change their history or past deeds.

Later Muslims seem to have argued in favour of a bodily resurrection in many of these passages in the same way that Rabbinic Judaism reinterpreted some depictions of resurrection in the Hebrew Bible. The Muslim eschatology of later generations might have been influenced by the folk eschatology of the communities surrounding them.

Though the Qur'anic eschatology seems different from its interpretation by the later Muslim community, it would be premature to confine it to any certain idea. Perhaps we still do not understand exactly what the Qur'an is trying to portray, or perhaps the Qur'an wants to be intentionally obscure. The Qur'an demands that its audience ponder its meanings. This book is a simple and humble attempt to do so. As an old Muslim adage says, 'And God knows best'.

Many of the hermeneutics of the Qur'anic passages – such as the man in the desolate town, Abraham and the birds, and the case of the red/yellow (brown) cow – show considerable intertextuality between the Qur'anic text and its biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature, more so than actually found in traditional

Muslim commentaries. To further understand how the Qur'an engages with such literature, more research must be done, continuing the intertextual approach. Since the method of intertextual polysemy allows us to understand better these relationships and selective Qur'anic uses of terminologies, more research on this method is also essential for understanding better the message that the Qur'an conveys.

Some of the audience of the Qur'an appears to be well-informed about some biblical and extrabiblical traditions, including rabbinic traditions and Jewish liturgy. This illustrates the kind of communities the Qur'an was engaging with in its early formation. With recent scholarship, it is becoming clearer that the Jewish audience of the Qur'an are rabbinic, who had access to the text of the Torah, who had probably performed rabbinic Jewish liturgy, including the daily *Shema* recitations and *'Amidah*, who possibly read the weekly Torah portions Parashat and Haftarah, who had known rabbinic traditions from the Mishnah and the Talmud, and who also had known extrabiblical traditions and *midrashim* (rabbinic interpretations). They might have had direct access to other books of the Hebrew Bible or traditions that stemmed from them. After all, rabbinic literature often refer to passages from other books of the Hebrew Bible. It would, therefore, not be unusual if different books of the Hebrew Bible were accessible to the Jewish community at the time of the Qur'an in one form or another (directly or indirectly).

The Qur'an's main theme is resurrection but, as has been argued, in many of the most vivid portrayals, that phenomenon appears to be metaphorical or spiritual. No reading of a text as mysterious as the Qur'an can be fixed, but when we take pains to dissect the material, we may see it afresh and realize that our old interpretations were introduced not by the text or its history but by our own assumptions. Ultimately, the conclusion remains yours to make, as this is only a humble attempt, as some form of *ijtihad* to use an Islamic concept, to unravel some meanings behind the mysterious text of the Qur'an.