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Chapter 2

TERMINOLOGIES OF LIFE

To explore the Qur'an's death and resurrection, it is imperative to ascertain the Qur'anic concept of the *nafs*, or self. Is the *nafs* a disembodied soul or a monistic self (i.e. individual: literally an indivisible persona), in which the soul and body are indistinct? The Qur'an was born out of the Near East and its initial audience comprised direct members of that context; *nafs* evolved with ancient Near Eastern societies before its appearance in the Qur'an in Late Antiquity. One of the largest bodies of literature available from ancient Semites comes from the ancient Israelites, a starting point for defining both *nafs* and 'life' in the ancient Near East. In a book that seeks to understand the concept of death in the Qur'an, then there is no escape from trying to define its concept of life.

Monism/dualism of the soul debate

Due to the rising scholarly debate on bioethics, when Mohammad Rakesh and S.M.R. Ayati looked into the possible understanding of the *nafs* from the Qur'an and its relationship to the so-called mind-body problem and what a soul or personhood means,¹ they concluded that death constitutes the loss of personhood, which is consciousness or mind that is located in the physical brain. The mind-body problem, which exists of course outside Islam and the Qur'an, prompts several theological questions on whether a disembodied soul exists, and if it does, what relationship it has with the body.² In the world of cognitive science of religion, what the soul is and how it is related to the mind is unknown.³ From a scientific perspective, we do not know the nature of the soul and if it even exists.⁴ While science appears to be closing down the gap between the mind and the brain, and with it the concept of a dualistic soul,⁵ some scholars and theologians have attempted to discredit that science,⁶ while others attempt to harmonize their theology with such science.⁷

The definition of *life* similarly enjoys no consensus across various disciplines. Whether it is definable is even up for debate,⁸ as Edouard Machery concludes:

Life definitionists have too often been careless: They have constantly mixed folk intuitions with scientific considerations. However, they have to decide whether

the notion of life at stake is the folk concept of life or a scientific concept. In the first case, there is little hope of finding a definition of life since, like most folk concepts, the folk concept of life is not a definition, and it is unlikely to yield a set of intuitive judgments about what is alive that can be captured by a definition non-arbitrarily. In the second case, life can perhaps be defined. However, because the study of life spreads over several disciplines, life definitionists are likely to end up with several, intensionally and extensionally different definitions of life without having any means to choose between them. Defining life is then likely to be pointless.⁹

This issue becomes interesting because some scholars have argued that the *nafs* (lit.: breath), according to some ancient Semitic sources, including parts of the Hebrew Bible, is just the life force in the body and not necessarily a disembodied soul. Further exploration shows that the ancient Semites were able to comprehend a dualistic nature of the soul and body, yet it still raises a bedrock question: if the *nafs* is, at least sometimes, understood as a life force in the body as some form of a materialistic monistic view, what exactly is the definition of such a life force, if we cannot even define what life is. The definition of life is unknown and, perhaps, as Machery suggests, pointless.¹⁰ However, without a definition of *life*, can we even define *death*?

There always had been various views about the relationship of the *nafs* and the body in the ancient Near East that varied between a monistic view, which takes the *nafs* as a holistic self of body and soul, and a dualistic view that there is an incorporeal entity – the soul, which is distinct from the body.¹¹ Although most scholars of ancient Israel claim that the Israelites did not have a dualistic understanding, Richard Steiner and others have argued otherwise.¹² John Cooper even argues that the Hebrew Bible is not only implicit or vaguely points to such a direction, but explicitly forwards the notion when stating, ‘and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath [spirit/*rûah*] returns to God who gave it’ (Qoh. 12:7).¹³

Nonetheless, some traditional biblical scholars caution that the purpose behind this verse is not to provide a theological understanding of the afterlife but simply to confirm the existence of one,¹⁴ and some insist that it is not necessarily describing a dualistic nature of human beings.¹⁵ According to Howard Bream, this passage is open-ended, providing no definitive answer as to the concept of an afterlife or resurrection.¹⁶ Whether or not the passage ignores the existence of an afterlife and simply suggests that a person might be annihilated,¹⁷ it would be untenable to argue that this verse states the necessary existence of an afterlife or the immortality of the soul.¹⁸ If anything, it seems to negate some sort of physical and bodily resurrection.¹⁹ It is closer to a portrayal of the dualistic nature of a human person than the portrayal of the existence of an afterlife. One might even argue that this passage speaks of the spirit (*rûah*) and not the soul/self (*nepeš*), which may or may not be distinct.²⁰

There is no consensus among biblical scholars on the soul-body debate where, one side of the spectrum holds a monistic understanding and the other favours a

dualistic nature. This has been especially the case since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which the *nepeš* is sometimes seen holistically,²¹ but at times distinctively dualistically²² – arguably due to Qumran having been associated with a postexilic community.²³

The medieval Muslim philosophers, Mu‘tazilis and Ash‘arīs, debated the soul-body question, especially whether the soul is a rational entity or just a life force.²⁴ Ayman Shihadeh, a scholar of Muslim philosophy, shows that throughout medieval times, there was no real consensus, and even while al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) stood against many philosophical attitudes,²⁵ he and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) were influenced by philosophers and had accepted a dual nature of the soul-body problem. Nonetheless, it did not stop the debate amongst Muslim philosophers lasting to the time of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and beyond.

As a comparison, most of the Qur’anic usage for heart(s) (*qalb* or *albāb*) is metaphorical. Scholarly attempts to unravel a physical sense have been admittedly unsuccessful.²⁶ Since there is no debate that the usage of ‘heart’ terms in the Qur’an are typically understood figuratively, it would not be surprising if the *nafs*, even were it as corporeal as the heart, did not hold a metaphorical meaning.

It should not be surprising if we cannot pinpoint the exact definition of *nafs* or life according to the communities of the Near East during Late Antiquity or the medieval period. Since even in modern times there is no consensus and defining it might be futile, perhaps the same can be said of attempts to do so historically. Evidence points to different positions on the matter because even historically, it was unlikely there was any one consensus.

Life

Gen. 1:20 uses *nepeš ḥayyā* (living breath/soul?), which is typically understood to refer to creatures or animals.²⁷ Analysing these two terms, *nepeš* and *ḥayyā*, closely, we may approach what Genesis is trying to convey. Sometimes *nepeš* is used to mean life, but it is clear from the passage that it is not always so. Using the adjective *ḥayyā* with *nepeš* implies that a *nepeš* may exist without being alive (*ḥay*) – in other words, that there can be a dead *nepeš*, which the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Lev. 21:11) does attest to,²⁸ as does the Talmud.²⁹

The root *ḥ-y-h*, or *ḥ-y-y*, appears in Western Semitic but not Eastern Semitic; it also exists in some other Western Afroasiatic languages.³⁰ The Ugaritic cognate has its root in *ḥ-w-y*,³¹ which would not be strange within weak verb roots, where the *waw* and *yod* are sometimes transposed. Akkadian uses the term *balātu* for ‘life’, which is etymologically related to the root *p-l-ṭ* in Hebrew and Aramaic.³² There seems to be no cognate for the root *b-l-ṭ* in Arabic, as most likely the definition of *b-l-ṭ* in Arabic that means a hard surface³³ is a loanword from the Latin *palatium*, meaning palace,³⁴ or from the Greek *platys*, meaning flat and broad,³⁵ which is in turn from the Proto-Indian-European (PIE) root *plat*, meaning to spread out, to flatten or an expanse,³⁶ which evolved into ‘place’ in English. There is some evidence of an early use of the root *b-l-ṭ* in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry dated to the sixth century, if one would accept their

authenticity,³⁷ but the root *b-l-d* is possibly earlier³⁸ and is used in the Qur'an to mean 'land' (e.g. Qur'an 16:7, 90:1–2).³⁹ The Arabic root *b-l-d* does not appear to have a cognate in other Western Semitic languages.

The Arabic term *'umur* can mean life or lifespan⁴⁰ (e.g. Qur'an 2:96, 10:16, 16:70, 21:44, 22:5, 26:18, 28:45, 35:11, 35:37, 36:68), while, from the same root, *'amara*, *ma'mar*,⁴¹ or *ma'murah* means a place where people live⁴² (e.g. Qur'an 9:17–18, 11:61, 30:9). Similarly, in Arabic, the term *hayy*, which means living, is also used to mean a place where people live,⁴³ and used accordingly in pre-Islamic poetry.⁴⁴ The common denominator between those roots is life.

In Western Semitic, such as Ugaritic, the term used to mean life is also *hyh*, while the term *blmt*, which is from *bl mt* (without death), is an allusion to immortality, as used in 2 Aqhat 6:26–29.⁴⁵ In an earlier passage of the same Ugaritic text, the term *npš* is used with *hy* to also note a relationship between the two terms.⁴⁶ Phoenician and Punic languages also use the term *hym* to mean life.⁴⁷ This suggests that the root *h-y-y* for life is well attested in Western Semitic languages sharing the same semantic range.

The Qur'an specifically uses the root *h-y-y* in opposition to *m-w-t*, which means death (e.g. Qur'an 2:154, 3:169, 16:21, 35:22, 77:26). The term *hayy* in the Qur'an seems to be very specific to life, and it is distinct from the term *nafs*, since the Qur'an notes that the *nafs* could be dead (e.g. Qur'an 3:185, 29:57, 31:34).⁴⁸ Therefore, *h-y-y* may be viewed as very specifically meaning life, unlike *nafs*, which can be described as an entity that can die.

The nature of the nepeš among the ancient Semites

The root *h-y-h* in Gen. 1:30, which portrays animals (*kol hayyat ha'āreš*) as living (*hayyā*) *nepeš*, operates similarly in Gen. 1:20. In the description of the formation of man in Gen. 2:7, God blew into the man's nostrils the breath of life (*nišmat hayyim*) and the man became (*yēhî*) a living soul/self (*nepeš hayyā*). With life modifying both breath and self, a closer analysis of *něšāmā* and *nepeš* is necessary to better recognize their distinction with life (*h-y-h*).

The term *něšāmā* means breath or wind,⁴⁹ giving it meanings similar to *nepeš*⁵⁰ and *rûaḥ*.⁵¹ In the Hebrew Bible, *něšāmā* seems to be used solely to refer to something coming out of God (e.g. Gen. 2:7, 7:22; Job 4:9, 32:8, 33:4, 37:10). Usually, though not necessarily always, it gives life to living creatures (e.g. Gen. 7:22; Deut. 20:16; Job 27:3; Isa. 2:22; Prov. 20:27; Dan. 5:23, 10:17).⁵² In some contexts, *nišmat rûaḥ* denotes a blast of a wrathful breath (e.g. 2 Sam. 22:16, and repeated in Ps. 18:15).⁵³ Thus, *něšāmā* appears to be breath from God, which sometimes gives life to a creature, making it alive.⁵⁴ While this term has an Arabic cognate (*n-s-m*), the Qur'an does not use it.

Nepeš appears to have an overlapping connotation, and it is important to look at it closely. Gen. 1:20–21 states that God made swarms of living *nepeš* in the waters, and in verse 24, the same were created on land. Gen. 2:7 relates that after *nišmat hayyim* was blown into man, the man became a living *nepeš*. This brings us

to different interpretations – that *nišmat ḥayyīm* transformed to *nepeš ḥayyâ* or that *nišmat ḥayyīm* is itself *nepeš ḥayyâ*, making *nišmat* and *nepeš* synonymous.⁵⁵ Al-Farāhīdī (d. 170/786) has considered the Arabic usage of *nasam*, although not used by the Qur'an, to be synonymous with *nafas*,⁵⁶ although there is evidence from poetry contemporary to the Qur'an that show a distinction between those two terms.⁵⁷

In ancient Egypt, the concept of life and its transfiguration in death are multifaceted. A person is made of the *ka*⁵⁸ and the *ba*.⁵⁹ The *ka* is energy,⁶⁰ and the *ba* is the embodiment of power sometimes referred to as the soul⁶¹ – personality and all the characteristics that make an individual unique. The *ba* survives after death; though it is considered physical, it is distinct from the body (*khat*). At the time of death, the *ka* leaves the body.⁶² After funerary rites, the dead person transforms into the *akh*, when the *ba* and *ka* are reunited.⁶³ If the reunification transforms into the *akh*, and the *ba* is considered corporeal, then it is perhaps possible to imagine the *akh* as a resurrected body, but one that it is distinct from the original body (*khat*). Even though ancient Egyptian understanding of the composition of human beings is distinct, it is not completely alien: parts of it are comparable to other ancient Near Eastern cultures, especially when it comes to the life force that animates the body.⁶⁴

In Akkadian, *napishtu* and *napshu* mean life, person, self or breath.⁶⁵ As familiar as that may now sound, their use in Akkadian as person or self is less common than it is in Western Semitic: the term more frequently used for self in Akkadian is *ramānu*.⁶⁶ The Old Akkadian term *ramanu*, meaning self,⁶⁷ does not seem to have a cognate in Western Semitic. Because living creatures breathe, *napshu* may have received the connotation of self over time. Nonetheless, even though there are different terms for breath or life force of the self in Akkadian, there is a distinct word for the soul of the dead, which is *eṭemmu*,⁶⁸ although it may have sometimes been used for an embodied soul. In the Akkadian *Epic of Atrahasis*,⁶⁹ the *eṭemmu* (human soul)⁷⁰ comes from the god's flesh, while the human *ṭēmu* (intellect)⁷¹ is from the *damu* (blood)⁷² of the god.⁷³ Considering these philological relationships and distinctions, ancient Semites do seem to have been aware of some sort of dualist nature of humans (body and soul); the unique term for a disembodied soul can be traced as far back as Sumerian and Old Akkadian writings.⁷⁴

Scholars of Semitic languages, Jonas Greenfield and Richard Steiner suggest that the Hebrew *nepeš* may be compared to the semantic range of the Akkadian *eṭemmu*,⁷⁵ as even in Akkadian, the difference between *napishtu* and *eṭemmu*, though once thought to be the difference between an embodied or disembodied soul after death⁷⁶ may not necessarily be the case.⁷⁷

The Qur'an uses the root *ṭ-m-m*, which is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur'an, as a possible reference to the Day of Resurrection (i.e. Qur'an 79:34). It is of obscure meaning. The Arabic lexicographer, al-Farāhīdī, states that in Arabic the root could mean to bury in the soil.⁷⁸ He also states that the Arabs used to say, 'They brought with *al-ṭimm* and *al-rimm*', which means they brought a 'great issue'.⁷⁹ However, they are unlikely to be related to the Akkadian *eṭemmu* or *ramānu*.

The root *n-f-s* is shared among the greater Afroasiatic languages to mean breath or soul.⁸⁰ The Akkadian term *napishtu* can also mean throat, from its use for breathing;⁸¹ however, it also means abundant or carded wool.⁸² The term *nepeshtu* or *nepeshu* also means performance, construction or ritual, which is an execution of something.⁸³ The term can also mean tools or utensils, especially those used in ritual.⁸⁴ The term *nepishu* also means a package of gold or silver.⁸⁵ As a comparison, in Arabic the term *nafis* means something desired, of great value or rare, especially money.⁸⁶ The use of *nepeš* to mean desire and appetite is also found in Ugaritic,⁸⁷ Hebrew and Aramaic.⁸⁸ The etymology of this meaning may be due to people competing for or craving (*yatanāfasūn*) it;⁸⁹ the semantic definition for competition or craving is used in Qur'an 83:26. The etymology of competition (*munāfasah*) might be due to people competing with exertion and therefore breathing (*yatanaffasūn*) heavily. The term *tanaffas* can also mean to be relieved in Arabic,⁹⁰ with Hebrew (e.g. Exod. 31:17), Aramaic and Ethiopic cognates as well.⁹¹

In Gen. 2:7, it is not clear whether *nepeš* is the same as the *nišmat*. Later rabbis, according to *Genesis Rabbah*, considered *nepeš*, *nišmat* and *rûaḥ* to be all analogous to life.⁹² Gen. 2:7 says that God formed man from dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Then, the man became a living *nepeš*. The question here is what was made alive – the body, which is from dust, or the *nepeš* itself? The rabbis interpreted this passage, according to *Genesis Rabbah*, to mean that when God breathed into the man's nostrils, the man was infused with a soul (*nepeš*).⁹³ In an attempt to understand the soul in light of biology and psychology in the turn of the twentieth century, H. Wheeler Robinson in *The Christian Doctrine of Man* argues that the Hebrews considered personality (or soul) as part of an animated body, unlike the Greek dualist approach to the soul and the body, which were held in distinction from each other;⁹⁴ an understanding still held by some scholars.⁹⁵ Similarly, by the mid-twentieth century, Ludwig Köhler suggests that Gen. 2:7 does not denote that a person has a vital self, but *is* a vital self.⁹⁶ However, the man being made of dust (the body) does not necessarily mean it is a *nepeš*. It can be interpreted to mean that the *nepeš* came into being (*hayyâ*) only after *nišmat ḥayyîm* was blown into the man (dust).⁹⁷

Arguing that both dualistic and monistic natures of *nepeš* are compatible,⁹⁸ Ed Noort looks into the ancient Near Eastern context of Gen. 2:7. He considers its non-priestly and pre-exilic background, which would correspond neither to Ezekiel 37 (which depicts a form of resurrection) nor to the wisdom text of Qoh. 12:7 (which depicts the dead body returns to the dust of the earth and the spirit returns to God) during the Hellenistic period. Accordingly, Noort feels that Gen. 2:7 does not contain a premise for the dualistic nature of humans, nor does he think the latter examples necessarily imply as much. Yet he reasons that Gen. 2:7 still discerns the human body from the life force that animates it. Nonetheless, Noort acknowledges that during the Hellenistic period, various communities understood Gen. 2:7 in a dualistic manner and such understanding continued throughout Late Antiquity, though a non-dualistic understanding of Gen. 2:7 also continued as well.⁹⁹

Ancient Hebrews may have considered the *nepeš* to be the breath of a living creature. At the time of death, this breath (*nepeš*) leaves the body.¹⁰⁰ When the Hebrew Bible speaks of the spirit (*rûah*), the receiving community did not necessarily equate it with the soul (*nepeš*).¹⁰¹ To some, a person does not have to die for his spirit (*rûah*) to go into someone else, and this is especially the case with Moses and the seventy elders of Israel: God takes part of the spirit in Moses and places it on the seventy (i.e. Num. 11:17). The two also remain distinct when Elisha requests a double portion of Elijah's spirit (i.e. 2 Kgs. 2:9).¹⁰² This seems to suggest strongly that the Hebrew definition of spirit (*rûah*) was usually different from self or soul (*nepeš*), at least to some of the author-editors of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰³

The Hebrew Bible uses *nepeš* in various contexts to mean soul, living being, life, person, desire, appetite, emotion and passion.¹⁰⁴ In a survey of various biblical dictionaries, Nancey Murphy locates translations for *nepeš* ranging from 'soul' to 'self'.¹⁰⁵ However, looking at the term from a semantic perspective does not always provide us with enough evidence of what it might have meant to the ancient Hebrews, since language evolves through different times and geographic locations. Hans Walter Wolff suggests that the root meaning of *nepeš* may have originated from the Proto-Semitic (PSem) root *peš*, related onomatopoeically to the hissing sound of breath.¹⁰⁶ The same root also exists in Sumerian, and possibly Proto-Sumerian, meaning breath.¹⁰⁷ Gerald Schroeder suggests that the *nepeš* in the creation story of Genesis is a clue that suggests some sort of spiritual creation of the soul and not the body.¹⁰⁸

It is difficult to discern with any certainty in the Hebrew Bible whether *nepeš* is an immortal soul that survives after bodily death or if it ceases to exist with the death of the body, especially since the type of literature and the period spans a large swathe of time and diverse reception communities. We may derive some clues that the *nepeš* may be delivered from death (e.g. Josh. 2:13; Ps. 33:19, 56:13). However, is the *nepeš* in these instances a matter of a dead soul going into life, or is it a dead body granted life (i.e. the resurrection of the body)? Ps. 56:13 seems to suggest a spiritual death. The psalmist is not necessarily talking of God delivering his body from death but, perhaps, his soul. However, Num. 6:6 prohibits those who vow a separation (dedication) to God to go near a dead *nepeš* – the term is in most instances understood as 'body'. The Septuagint translates *nepeš* mainly as *psychē* (soul), even in Num. 6:6. This leads us to the conclusion that the translators of the Septuagint seem to have understood *nepeš* as the soul.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the Masoretic text of Ezek. 44:25, which speaks of not going near a dead body, uses the term *'ādām*, which might infer a physical body. However, the Septuagint still translates this as *psychē*, implying the soul (*nepeš*). Overall, the Septuagint is not always consistent when using *psychē*, when compared with the Masoretic. Thus, it is difficult to understand whether the *nepeš* in Num. 6:6 is to be understood as 'soul' or 'body', at least to the translators of the Septuagint and what the original Hebrew term used from the translated text. Nonetheless, it seems that Ezek. 44:25 is the only instance where the Greek *psychē* is used for a corpse (dead *'ādām*).¹¹⁰ Perhaps its use in this passage could have had a different Hebrew term from the translated

text (*nepeš* instead of *'ādām* as in Lev. 21:1),¹¹¹ an error, or an interpretation by the translator(s) of this passage.¹¹²

Steiner suggests that the Hebrew *nepeš* is similar to the Sam'alian¹¹³ *n-b-š*.¹¹⁴ The transformation of the *pe* to *bet* may be found in various Northwestern Semitic inscriptions, including Sam'alian.¹¹⁵ Some scholars have suggested that *n-b-š* and *n-p-š* were indistinguishable in the local dialects, and are both pronounced as *napš*.¹¹⁶ If *n-b-š* is equivalent to the Akkadian *eṭemmu*, in that it is perhaps a disembodied soul, and *n-b-š* is equivalent to *n-p-š*, Steiner suggests that this should mean that a *nepeš* could also contain the meaning of a disembodied soul (the Akkadian *eṭemmu*).¹¹⁷

The root *n-f-s* can also mean a funerary monument in Northwestern Semitic, Phoenician, Syriac Aramaic and South Arabian. In Nabatean, it can even distinctly mean a tomb, which assumes that it is not necessarily life in itself.¹¹⁸ In ancient Mesopotamian texts, there are two words used to mean a wind-like entity that exists in living bodies and survives death: *zaqīqu* (a dream soul)¹¹⁹ and an *eṭemmu*.¹²⁰ Both souls depart a dead body and go to the netherworld, where they were expected to receive funerary rites and sacrifice from the living,¹²¹ which is not too different from ancient Egyptian concepts.¹²² Steiner considers these concepts of the soul to be common in the ancient Near East and believes that if there is any Hittite influence, the Hittite traditions are themselves derived from Syro-Mesopotamian.¹²³ Steiner even uses Qur'an 39:42 to describe the concept of *naḥs* as a soul that departs a body in his argument that such a concept of '*nepeš*' would have existed in the ancient Near East with the term having a semantic capacity inherited from the speakers of P Sem.¹²⁴

If the ancient Hebrews considered *nepeš* the holistic entire being,¹²⁵ the physical and the animated living body, then one might consider the psalmists of Ps. 56:13 or 116:8–9, for example, to be referring to a metaphoric spiritual death, when talking of delivering the soul (*nepeš*) from death,¹²⁶ which is what Augustine (d. 430 CE) had also suggested:

For I was what? Dead. Through myself I was dead: through You I am what? Alive. Therefore 'in me, O God, are Your vows, which I will render of praise to You.' Behold I love my God: no one doth tear Him from me: that which to Him I may give, no one doth tear front me, because in the heart it is shut up. With reason is said with that former confidence, 'What should man do unto me?'¹²⁷

Since the psalmists use the death of the *nepeš* as a metaphor for spiritual death,¹²⁸ which Michael Fishbane argues is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible,¹²⁹ then perhaps the ancient Hebrews had two definitions for *nepeš*. One would imply a holistic view of the physical body and the life force that embodies it, and the other would mean the soul within the body. The latter can be seen in Jonah 4:3 when the titular prophet asks God to take his *nepeš*, as it is better for him to die. It seems unlikely that Jonah asked his holistic self (body and soul) to be taken by God,¹³⁰ it is more likely he meant the living force in that body (assuming the soul was separate).

Looking at further clues of what *nepeš* means brings us to the following passage in Deuteronomy:

Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life [*nepeš*], and you shall not eat the life [*nepeš*] with the flesh.¹³¹

Deut. 12:23

Here we see that the *nepeš* is the life force, defined by the blood itself, which is similar to its portrayal in Lev. 17:11. Indeed, in Arabic the term *nifās* is used to mean blood, especially after childbirth or menstrual blood,¹³² which might be due to this type of blood specifically related to making life. If the blood is understood to be physical, then the *nepeš* is being described as a physical force of life – another example of the ancient Hebrews holding two possible definitions for *nepeš*.

According to James Barr, *nepeš* in Gen. 2:7 might hold a dualistic nature, in which man is made of two substances, the physical flesh and a disembodied soul or breath.¹³³ First, Gen. 2:7 states that God created man from the dust of the ground – but the physical body made of dust is not called *nepeš*.¹³⁴ Second, it states that God breathed into this dust the breath of life. Only when the breath of life is breathed into the dust does the man become a living *nepeš*.¹³⁵ In the context of this passage, the term *nepeš* does not denote a non-living body;¹³⁶ it can mean either the soul or, holistically, the living body.¹³⁷ Gen. 2:7 seems to describe *nepeš* as living (*ḥayyâ*), as opposed to dead. The verse is perhaps casting the *nepeš* that way because there could, by contrast, be a dead *nepeš*, as has been established. Roger Uitti says as much too, but interprets a dead *nepeš* not as spiritual death but complete annihilation.¹³⁸

When Gen. 2:17 warns of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the statement that the consequence will be certain death has prompted much scholarly debate as to the nature of that death, with some suggesting that it does not imply the death of the body but more precisely that of the *nepeš*.¹³⁹ Later in history, this is how Philo (d. 50 CE) understood it:

¹⁰⁵ Accordingly God says, 'In the day in which ye eat of it ye shall die the death.' And yet, though they have eaten of it, they not only do not die, but they even beget children, and are the causes of life to other beings besides themselves. What, then, are we to say? Surely that death is of two kinds; the one being the death of the man, the other the peculiar death of the soul – now the death of the man is the separation of his soul from his body, but the death of the soul is the destruction of virtue and the admission of vice; ¹⁰⁶and consequently God calls that not merely 'to die,' but 'to die the death'; showing that he is speaking not of common death, but of that peculiar and especial death which is the death of the soul, buried in its passions and in all kinds of evil. And we may almost say that one kind of death is opposed to the other kind. For the one is the separation of what was previously existing in combination, namely, of body and soul. But this other death, on the contrary, is a combination of them both, the inferior one, the body, having the predominance, and the superior one, the soul, being made

subject to it.¹⁰⁷ When, therefore, God says, 'to die the death,' you must remark that he is speaking of that death which is inflicted as punishment, and not of that which exists by the original ordinance of nature. The natural death is that one by which the soul is separated from the body. But the one which is inflicted as a punishment, is when the soul dies according to the life of virtue, and lives only according to the life of vice.¹⁴⁰

The living *nepeš* of Gen. 2:7 is perhaps what would die, according to verse 17. As Steiner points out, when Gen. 35:18 narrates Rachel's death, it states that her *nepeš* was departing, as an allusion to her death.¹⁴¹ It seems that Gen. 35:18 is referring not to Rachel's body and soul departing, but rather to the life force within her body,¹⁴² possibly something like the soul, which supports the dualistic notion of body and soul. When Elijah raises the widow's son in 1 Kgs. 17:21–22, he stretches his hand over the boy's body and supplicates God asking that his *nepeš* will come into him again. Indeed, his *nepeš* does come, giving him life. Steiner emphasizes that *nepeš* is not life, because life is not a spatial entity that can enter or leave a body.¹⁴³ This further indicates that the ancient Israelites were able to conceptualize a dualistic notion of body and soul.

The early Christians also seem to have conceptualized a sort of a disembodied soul, although there are scholars who have argued otherwise.¹⁴⁴ Some Christian theologians assume that the departed soul is embodied with a body in heaven (as opposed to an earthly body) at the time of death to conform to the biblical concept of having no such thing as an intermediate state after death.¹⁴⁵

Paul states, 'I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows' (2 Cor. 12:2).¹⁴⁶ In this passage, Paul appears to be unsure whether a bodily assumption to heaven had occurred, or one without the body.¹⁴⁷ He grants equal possibility to either. In Walter Schmithals' view, Paul might have had Gnostic opponents with whom he is showing an affinity by proposing a possible disembodied journey.¹⁴⁸ However, this is not necessarily the case.¹⁴⁹ Jewish traditions at the time of Paul do point to both types of assumption as a possibility. According to some Jewish traditions, Enoch and Elijah appear to have been assumed into heaven corporeally.¹⁵⁰ Other Jewish traditions also appear to include a spiritual assumption into heaven as a possibility, where the soul departs the body and enters (or 'is assumed') into heaven. For example, Philo states that when Moses went up to Sinai, his soul left his body: 'To such strains it is said that Moses was listening, when, having laid aside his body, for forty days and as many nights he touched neither bread nor water at all.'¹⁵¹ Therefore, it would not be unusual for Paul to think that either a bodily or spiritual assumption into heaven was possible. That his audience would be able to entertain the prospect of either does not necessarily mean that Paul was appealing to a certain group, though such a hypothesis also cannot be rejected. Some scholars, such as Jörg Baumgarten, have attempted to push the idea that ancient Israelites would not have been able to fathom a disembodied soul.¹⁵² While one cannot be too sure about the earliest Israelite accounts, at least during the time of Paul the Jews were able to conceptualize

a disembodied soul, for even Josephus (d. c. 100 CE) also writes of the immortality of the soul and its disembodiment.¹⁵³

Overall, it is apparent that from the ancient times and through Late Antiquity in the Near East, Semites have been able to have different understandings of the *nafs*, sometimes even simultaneously. While the concept of dualism possibly evolved over time amongst the ancient Semites, it still does not mean that a dualistic concept was foreign to them from the very beginning. The purpose behind this analysis is to understand what possible context existed in the Qur'anic milieu during Late Antiquity, both monistic and dualistic natures of humans pervaded the Near East, perhaps even simultaneously within the same communities.

Nafs in the Qur'an

The Islamic tradition harbours a belief in an intermediate state between death and resurrection.¹⁵⁴ During the intermediate state, the *nafs* (soul) exists, although disembodied, as argued by prominent traditional Muslim scholars such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064).¹⁵⁵ The disembodied *nafs* was therefore not foreign to traditional and medieval Muslim scholars, including Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350).¹⁵⁶ During the resurrection of the dead, it is assumed that the *nafs* is re-embodied. Yet even in many Muslim traditions, when people are resurrected, they do not necessarily take on their original bodies. Some prophetic traditions suggest that people are resurrected in the form of Adam (sixty cubits tall and thirty-three years of age);¹⁵⁷ according to other traditions, people are resurrected in the beauty of Joseph.¹⁵⁸

If traditionally the bodies of resurrected people are different from their original bodies, this suggests some form of re-creation, and not pure resurrection as one might infer from the usual understanding of the same earthly body and bones are resurrected and leave their graves. This would also suggest that the *nafs* is a disembodied soul that would be re-embodied into a different physical body (or frame) in the form of Adam, according to some traditions.

Perhaps one of the main differences between the concepts of resurrection and reincarnation is this question of same or different body.¹⁵⁹ However, if some Muslim traditions hint that on the Day of Resurrection, the bodies are different, then it may have more affinity with some form of re-creation than the same bodies leaving their graves, although alternate traditions do assume that as well.

Lisān al-ʿarab states that *nafs* is spirit (*rūḥ*), but also states that there is a difference between them that is not within the lexicon's scope to discuss.¹⁶⁰ The Qur'an, on the other hand, appears to distinguish between the two. Take Qur'an 17:85, for example: 'They ask you about the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*). Say, "The Spirit [*al-rūḥ*] is from the Command [*amr*] of my Lord, and you have not been given knowledge, except a little.'" Since people were asking about the Spirit, the implication is that they do not know what it is; however, when discussing *nafs*, the Qur'an apparently assumes its audience will understand what it is. Jane Smith writes, 'It is a matter of general agreement that *nafs* and *rūḥ* are each used in different ways in the

Qur'an, and that these usages can be classified and quite clearly distinguished from each other. Nonetheless from early on the terms came to be used more or less interchangeably by Muslim scholars.¹⁶¹ Medieval Muslim scholars were swamped with contradictions concerning *rūḥ* (spirit),¹⁶² and the reason behind their inconsistencies is that they have used the term interchangeably with *nafs*, even though the Qur'an clearly distinguishes between the two.

Al-Ghazālī states that the *nafs* is the origin of everything corrupt in human behaviour,¹⁶³ while the *rūḥ* is godly.¹⁶⁴ Modern scholars, such as 'Abdulkarīm Yūnus al-Khaṭīb (d. 1390/1970), also discuss the debates concerning *nafs* and *rūḥ*, showing their distinct features in the Qur'an.¹⁶⁵ Aḥmad Shawqī Ibrāhīm argues that *nafs* and *rūḥ* are two different things according to the Qur'an, where the *rūḥ* is blown into the body, but not the *nafs*.¹⁶⁶ According to his reading of the Qur'an, it is not the body that dies but the *nafs*.¹⁶⁷

Typically, what is understood from the reference to killing a *nafs* in the Qur'an is killing a person, but did that mean a human, a soul or some other form of life force? To begin the investigation, take Qur'an 5:32, which alludes to a tradition found in the Mishnah and Talmud that killing a *nafs* is like killing all people.¹⁶⁸ The Qur'an, like the Talmud, refers to Cain and Abel's story when making this moral equivalence. The Talmud states that by killing his innocent brother, Cain has killed not only Abel but also an entire people because he has, in effect, killed an entire potential line of descent.¹⁶⁹ The Talmud expands this by repeating Gen. 4:10: 'The bloods of your brother cry', where 'bloods' refers to the descendants.¹⁷⁰ By killing the body, blood comes out and with it the soul, but the Talmud explains bloods metaphorically, extending even to those who were not yet physical beings. Accordingly, should the Hebrew term *nepeš*, cognate to the Arabic *nafs*, be understood as 'soul' or as the physical person and his blood?

Although Alan Segal suggests that the *nafs* in Arabic is the self and not necessarily the soul,¹⁷¹ this self personification does not necessarily need a body, according to the Qur'an. Perhaps it is even consciousness. The Qur'an appears to state that even God has a *nafs* (e.g. Qur'an 20:41, 5:116), but it is unknown whether the Qur'an means it literally or simply using anthropomorphic descriptions for God. The concept of God having a *nafs* is not unique to the Qur'an. The disembodiment of the *nepeš* may also be seen in the Hebrew Bible's insinuation that God has one (e.g. Lev. 26:11, 26:30; 1 Sam. 2:35; Job 23:13; Isa. 1:14, 42:1; Jer. 31:14; Amos 6:8),¹⁷² as well.¹⁷³ The question remains: where the Qur'an explicitly discusses its death and resurrection (e.g. Qur'an 3:185, 21:35, 29:57), is the *nafs* necessarily physical?

Gavin Picken arrived at five meanings in the Qur'an for *nafs*: (1) signifying the soul (e.g. Qur'an 6:93); (2) signifying the human being (e.g. Qur'an 31:28); (3) signifying the human being's power of understanding (e.g. Qur'an 27:14); (4) signifying the heart (e.g. Qur'an 7:205, 12:77); and (5) signifying the inclination to good and evil (e.g. Qur'an 50:16, 75:2, 79:37–41).¹⁷⁴ Picken suggests that the Qur'an provides certain faculties to the *nafs*:¹⁷⁵ it has desires (*hawa*) (e.g. Qur'an 79:40–41), appetites (*shahwah*) (e.g. Qur'an 21:102) and needs (*hājah*) (e.g. Qur'an 12:68).¹⁷⁶ The *nafs* also experiences hardship (*mashaqqah*) (e.g. Qur'an 16:7).¹⁷⁷

The *nafs* can also endure patiently (*ṣabr*) (e.g. Qur'an 18:28).¹⁷⁸ The *nafs* has the qualities of miserliness (*shuḥḥ*) (e.g. Qur'an 4:128), envy (*ḥasad*) (e.g. Quran 2:109), fear (*khawf*) (e.g. Qur'an 20:67–68), anxiety (*ḍiḡ*) (e.g. Qur'an 9:118), distress (*ḥaraj*) (e.g. Qur'an 4:65), pride (*kibr*) (e.g. Qur'an 25:21) and grief (*ḥasrah*) (e.g. Qur'an 35:8, 39:56).¹⁷⁹ The *nafs* also has certain other cognitive characteristics, such as being affected by eloquent speech (e.g. Qur'an 4:63), the ability to comprehend (*idrāk*) (e.g. Qur'an 31:34) in contrast to conjecture (*ẓann*) (e.g. Qur'an 3:154)¹⁸⁰ and the ability to conceal feelings (e.g. Qur'an 2:284), and take responsibility (e.g. Qur'an 2:286, 14:51).¹⁸¹

According to the Qur'an, the *nafs* is associated with three distinct attributes: (1) inclining to evil (*ammāratun bil-sū'*) (e.g. Qur'an 12:53), enticing (*sawwalat*) (e.g. Qur'an 12:18, 20:96), subjecting (*ṭawwa'at*) (e.g. Qur'an 5:30) and tempting (*tuwaswis*) (e.g. Qur'an 50:16); (2) self-reproaching (*lawwāmah*) (e.g. Qur'an 75:1–2);¹⁸² and (3) tranquil (*muṭma'innah*) (e.g. Qur'an 89:27–30).¹⁸³

The philosopher that he was, al-Rāzī felt the need to clarify that the *nafs* is self (*al-dhāt*) and that physical objects (*jamādāt*) also have a *nafs* but do not die.¹⁸⁴ Philosophers suggest that death is certain in this physical life and that the soul (*nafs*) is different from the body (*badan*),¹⁸⁵ but, al-Rāzī states, they do not consider the death of the soul (*nafs*), because when the Qur'an says, 'every soul tastes death', the meaning is that the soul (*nafs*) needs to be alive to taste death.¹⁸⁶ The soul tastes the death of the body but itself continues to survive.¹⁸⁷ It has been suggested that al-Rāzī endorses a materialistic doctrine of the soul (*nafs*).¹⁸⁸ However, suggesting that the Qur'an does not also state that the *nafs* dies might contradict the following:

⁴¹Truly We have sent down unto you the Book for humankind in truth. Whosoever is rightly guided, it is for the sake of his own soul. And whosoever goes astray only goes astray to the detriment thereof. And you are not a guardian over them. ⁴²God takes the souls [*al-anfus*] at the moment of their death, and those who die not, during their sleep. He withholds those for whom He has decreed death, and sends forth the others till a term appointed. Truly in that are signs for a people who reflect.

Qur'an 39:41–42

Truly with God lies knowledge of the Hour, and He sends down the rain and knows what lies in wombs. And no soul [*nafs*] knows what it will earn on the morrow, and no soul [*nafs*] knows in what land it will die. Truly God is Knowing, Aware.

Qur'an 31:34

These passages seem to suggest the death of the *nafs*. Perhaps connecting Qur'an 39:41–42 with a preceding passage, 'Surely you are dead and surely they are dead' (Qur'an 39:30),¹⁸⁹ might suggest that they are perhaps an allusion to death and eternal life. Qur'an 39:42 goes on to state that the *nafs* also sleeps; al-Ṭabari (d. 310/923) and al-Rāzī suggest that the passage refers to souls taken away from

their sleeping bodies and later return to them.¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, al-Rāzī does suggest that the soul's death or sleep in this passage is perhaps an allusion to a person being 'spiritually' dead. He suggests that God is the source of guidance and misguidance, where a guided *nafs* is like life and a waking state, while a misguided *nafs* is like death and a sleeping state.¹⁹¹ This interpretation is an attempt to contextualize the passage, since the preceding passages refer to guidance and misguidance (e.g. Qur'an 39:36–37, 39:41). Al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153), nonetheless, does not interpret death in Qur'an 39:42 as the death of the soul but of its body.¹⁹² Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), a Sufi, interprets this passage as the death of the soul by taking its spirit,¹⁹³ suggesting the soul has a spirit, further suggesting the multifaceted meaning of this passage by various exegetes from different schools of thought.

In Muslim traditions, an intermediate state between death and resurrection exists.¹⁹⁴ During the intermediate state (known as *barzakh*), the *nafs* exists, yet is probably disembodied.¹⁹⁵ During the resurrection of the dead, it is assumed that the *nafs* is re-embodied.

Conclusion

As in the Hebrew Bible, the concept of the *nafs* in the Qur'an has a range of conceptual definitions, including the soul, self, and person (individual). The *nafs* can be disembodied and it can be dead. There is evidence from the Qur'an to suggest that the *nafs* can, but will not necessarily, denote a physical self, which is also supported by ancient Semites' use of this term. However, defining *nafs* definitively is like drawing water from a mirage. Pre-Islamic Arabs defined *qalb* or *lubb* as the physical heart, but they also defined it metaphorically, as it is also most frequently used in the Qur'an. Therefore, even if the *nafs* is physical, it would not mean that the Qur'an may not use it metaphorically. I am not arguing that the Qur'an adopts either a monistic or a dualistic nature of the mind-body paradigm, as it is inconclusive. Evidence from both the Near Eastern context of the Qur'anic milieu during Late Antiquity as well as the understanding of post-Qur'anic traditional Muslim literature suggests that there was never a consensus on defining the *nafs*. For that reason, it is important to investigate the concept of death and resurrection in the Qur'an itself. Is resurrection physical in the sense of people coming out of their graves? Could it refer to a soul that is re-embodied or re-created with a different body, or does it carry a metaphorical or even spiritual sense?