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Chapter 3

TERMINOLOGIES OF DEATH

The Qur'an uses many terms for nonbelievers, such as *fujjār*, *kuffār*, *munāfiqūn* and *mujrimūn*. It also uses the verb *yulḥidūn* (usually understood as 'distort') as an action that some nonbelievers do. A brief (noncomprehensive) lexicographic inquiry aims to show that many Qur'anic terms denoting nonbelievers, evildoers, and hypocrites have a common denominator in their polysemous spectrum: they are associated with death. By using terms associated with death to refer to nonbelievers, the Qur'an appears to subtly suggest these nonbelievers are in a state of death, albeit spiritually. Having looked into the concept of life in the previous chapter, it is a natural progression to move on to the concept of death in the Qur'an.

Defining death

As already stated, there is no consensus on the definition of life; consequently, there is no consensus on the definition of death, either. For that reason, many bioethical debates revolve around attempting to define what death is – when comparing a vegetative state, brain death and the like.¹ This is even an issue with organ transplants: when an individual's brain dies, are their body's organs dead, especially if they can be transplanted into someone else's body and continue to function?² The controversy over the definition of death has touched religious communities,³ even inciting Muslim religious edicts.⁴ Contemporary Muslim scholars appear to have difficulty defining what death is no less than medical experts and biologists do. Perhaps this a clue that a precise definition in the Qur'an is vague, at best, especially in light of modern science and medicine.⁵

Presumably, humans have always been pondering what constitutes death;⁶ what has evolved in human thought is the concept of an afterlife, regardless of its nature.⁷ In some longstanding shamanistic beliefs, the spirits of the ancestors were believed to hover around and guide people through the means of a communicator – the shaman.⁸ Burial rites and funerary offerings⁹ provide some clues as to when the concept of an afterlife took hold in human societies, but they do not provide concrete evidence.¹⁰

The terminologies of death and darkness in the Qur'an is philologically set in its Near Eastern background. In ancient Egypt,¹¹ belief in an afterlife is well

attested.¹² The ancient Egyptian term for death is rooted in *mt*.¹³ After a person dies, they are judged in the court of the god Osiris, where their heart is weighed against a feather using a principle known as *ma'at*, which is truth and justice.¹⁴ If the heart of the person is heavier than the feather, they are considered unjust.¹⁵ To enjoy life with the gods in the hereafter, a person's heart must be unburdened by dishonourable qualities.¹⁶

Historically, Israelite groups were situated along the land bridge between the centres of ancient Near Eastern civilizations: ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. These two civilizations had some influence on each other,¹⁷ and therefore exerted a possible influence on the ancient Israelites, who lived along the way between them.¹⁸ Egypt periodically controlled parts of the Levant and had relations with the inhabitants there,¹⁹ putting them in direct or indirect contact with the Israelites.²⁰ Mesopotamian civilization also had a rich afterlife culture,²¹ though arguably less developed than the ancient Egyptians did.²²

Death and darkness

Resurrection being a major theme in the Qur'an makes the concept of death relevant to Qur'anic study. The root *m-w-t*, defining death, is common in many Semitic languages, such as Akkadian,²³ Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic,²⁴ Nabatean,²⁵ Canaanite,²⁶ Punic, Ethiopic, Arabic and Old South Arabic.²⁷ It also defines death in Egyptian,²⁸ as well as in many of the greater Afroasiatic languages.²⁹

The Akkadian *mātu* means to die, and it can refer to the actual death of a living creature or a metaphorical death: a tablet whose contents are rendered invalid might be said to be dead.³⁰ The Akkadian *šalālu* means to fall asleep and sometimes used to describe death.³¹ This may be compared with the now-familiar Qur'an 39:42, which shows the close relationship between sleep and death.³² The root *š-l-l* has a wide semantic field within Semitic languages: its Akkadian meaning, to sleep or to lie down, compares with the Hebrew term *š-l-l*, meaning to sink, and the Arabic term *ḍ-l-l*, meaning to disappear or to be hidden.³³ In Akkadian, *šalīlu* means not only sleeping but also covering,³⁴ similar to one meaning of the Arabic term *z-l-l*. The relationship between the Arabic *ḍ-l-l* and *z-l-l* is disputed, although they share the Akkadian and Hebrew semantic range of *š-l-l*.³⁵ The interchangeability between {/š/ or /ḍ/} and {/t/ or /z/} among Semitic languages and between their dialects, including Arabic, is very common.³⁶ Many early and medieval Arab philologists have written treatises concerning specifically the fluidity of /ḍ/ and /z/.³⁷ The free variation between /ḍ/ and /z/ is archaic in the Arabic language, even though some early Arab philologists attempted to prove a subtle distinction between roots that contain them.³⁸

In the ancient Near East, the shadow, from the root *š-l-l*, sometimes connotes blackness or darkness. The Akkadian *šillu* means shade or cover,³⁹ and it is a shared definition of the root *š-l-l* among many Semitic languages, including Ethiopic,⁴⁰ as well as in several Afroasiatic languages.⁴¹ The Hebrew Bible sometimes uses the term shadow of death (*šalmāwet*) (e.g. Ps. 23:4, 44:19, 107:10, 107:14; Job 10:21–

22). It is difficult to tell whether the term *šalmāwet* is a construct of *šēl* (shadow) and *môt* (death) or if it was simply derived from *šelem*, meaning darkness. The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT) suggests that the concept of the shadow of death in the Hebrew Bible is folk etymology.⁴² The Akkadian *šalāmu* means darkness or blackness⁴³ and is cognate to Ethiopic *šalama* and the Arabic *ṣalām*.⁴⁴ Ethiopic also has the form *šalamta* for darkness,⁴⁵ so the TDOT suggests that *šalmāwet* etymology is simply darkness.⁴⁶ David van Acker argues that the preferred etymology for *šalmāwet* is shadow of death (*šēl môt*) and not from the root *š-l-m*, but continues to hold the semantic meaning of darkness.⁴⁷ This is no different from the hypothesis proposed by D. Winston Thomas,⁴⁸ but the evidence that *šlmt* or *šlmt* exists in various Semitic languages suggests that it is more likely not a construct of two separate terms.

Besides meaning blackness or darkness, the Akkadian *šalmu* also means an image, statue, or figure⁴⁹ – a meaning also found in Hebrew.⁵⁰ It has been debated whether the meanings of blackness/darkness and an image are associated with each other in some Semitic languages;⁵¹ nonetheless, it is attested in Akkadian, where *šillu* (shadow) can also mean likeness.⁵²

The following semantic analysis of the root *z-l-m* further corroborates the findings of Johanne Christiansen, who has written an extensive analysis of its relation with darkness in the Qur'an, showing its main metaphorical use, especially in the description of the mental state of nonbelievers.⁵³ The Qur'an frequently uses the term *ẓulumāt* to mean darkness (e.g. Qur'an 2:257, 5:16), and it is usually used in opposition to light.⁵⁴ While in Arabic, the root *z-l-m* means darkness,⁵⁵ it also means unfairness or injustice.⁵⁶ In Aramaic and Ethiopic, the root *ṭ-l-m* is equivalent to the meaning of unfairness.⁵⁷

The Qur'an uses the term *ḍ-l-l* in opposition to light, connoting darkness, albeit metaphorically (e.g. Qur'an 39:22). The Qur'an also uses the term *ḍ-l-l* in opposition to *h-d-y*, which means to guide or to lead (e.g. Qur'an 2:16, 2:175, 7:30, 28:85, 34:24). Accordingly, the term *ḍ-l-l* would mean to be lost or misguided.⁵⁸ The Qur'an also sometimes brings forth the root terms *z-l-m* and *ḍ-l-l* together, suggesting that those causing darkness (*z-l-m*) lead to misguidance (*ḍ-l-l*) (e.g. Qur'an 19:38, 31:11, 71:24). Additionally, Qur'an 27:80–81 and 30:52–53 describe how those who are blind are lost (*ḍalāl*), but also that they are deaf, describing them as if they were dead (e.g. Qur'an 43:40). All these related meanings suggest the close relationship between those roots and their metaphorical uses beyond simply meaning darkness.

Evildoers (fujjār)

In Akkadian, the term *pagru* means a corpse, a body, a self or a person,⁵⁹ and its Hebrew and Aramaic cognates share the same meaning, while in Ugaritic, it means stone or altar.⁶⁰ In Akkadian, it is frequently used in curses,⁶¹ while the Qur'anic use is a denunciation. The Qur'an uses *fājir* or the plural *fujjār* to describe nonbelievers (e.g. Qur'an 38:28, 71:27, 82:14, 83:7). The Arabic meaning of the

term as immoral or sinner⁶² is also attested in Jewish Aramaic and Middle Hebrew.⁶³ The relationship between the Ugaritic and Arabic roots *p(f)-g-r* has long been studied,⁶⁴ although none have provided a fully convincing argument of the difference in semantic range. The Ethiopic meaning of *f-g-r* is to strive and to work hard.⁶⁵ While the Arabic definition may include such meaning in the sense of evil work, the Ethiopic term is used generally for any work.

The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* suggests that the root meaning is to cleave or to break, which explains why it also means daybreak and came to mean immoral or sinner, as in a breach of morality.⁶⁶ The Hebrew Bible uses the term to mean corpse, or a dead body broken off (e.g. Gen. 15:11; Num. 14:29, 14:32; Lev. 26:30; Isa. 34:3; Jer. 41:9; Ezek. 6:5; Amos 8:3).

A tradition in the biography of Muḥammad holds that when he was young he participated in a day known as *yawm al-fijār*.⁶⁷ Several wars in pre-Islamic Arabia and reported in Muslim traditions have been called *fijār*.⁶⁸ Among the different proposals for why those wars were called *fijār*, one hypothesis is that they happened during the sacred months (*ashhur al-ḥurum*) when wars were prohibited.⁶⁹ However, the reports by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) about the Second Fijār War is that it was during the Arabic month Shawwāl, which is not during a sacred month,⁷⁰ calling into question the reason behind the naming. It may be possible, however, that the war continued to the next month, Dhul-Qi'dah, which is a sacred month, and at the time a pact known as *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl* (League of the Virtuous) was signed.⁷¹ Another hypothesis behind the *fijār* naming reported by Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1232) is that it is due to killing the young during those wars,⁷² which would fix the meaning of *fijār* as those committing heinous crimes.

Qur'an 75:1–6 speaks of the Day of Resurrection and offers the imagery of bones. The Qur'an uses the verb *yafjur* for the person asking when that Day of Resurrection is. The typical understanding of this term is a person who delays repentance and brings forward evil work.⁷³ If alternatively the term *yafjur* were understood as to be a dead corpse, then the passage would show that the person asking about the Day of Resurrection desires to be a dead corpse not to be resurrected. Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) states in his *Tafsīr* that the person wants to continue in ignorance, seeking corporal and animalistic desires instead of spiritual.⁷⁴

The Qur'an sometimes contrasts the term *fujjār* with *abrār* (e.g. Qur'an 82:13–14, 83:7, 83:18);⁷⁵ the latter is typically understood as the righteous, the elect, or the pure.⁷⁶

Nonbelievers (kuffār)

One of the most common descriptions of nonbelievers in the Qur'an comes from the root *k-f-r*, 'to cover'.⁷⁷ In a wonderful and extensive linguistic analysis of *k-f-r* and its polysemous use in the Qur'an,⁷⁸ Juan Cole argues that the term *kāfir* in the Qur'an should not be understood as 'infidel' or 'nonbeliever', but rather as having a wide semantic range, from 'peasant' and 'pagan' to 'libertine', 'rebel', and 'blasphemer'. He also concludes 'that limiting the meaning of the root so severely

causes us to miss a rich set of other connotations that give us a rounder idea of the Quran's intent'.⁷⁹

A village shares the same root *k-f-r*, and a sermon during the battle of Yarmūk (15/636) attributed to 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ (d. 43/664), a companion of Muḥammad, uses it in that definition.⁸⁰ Al-Farāhidī suggests that the reason for the meaning of village is that to city dwellers, villagers are like the dead.⁸¹ Nonetheless, *Lisān al-ʿarab* also states that the meaning of village is a loanword from Syriac, as the people of the Levant use this term for village,⁸² which is an ancient meaning also attested in Akkadian.⁸³ The term *kuffār* also means farmers, and this definition is attested in the Qur'an:

Know that the life of this world is but play, diversion, ornament, mutual boasting among you, and vying for increase in property and children – the likeness of a rain whose vegetation impresses the farmers [*al-kuffār*]; then it withers such that you see it turn yellow; then it becomes chaff. And in the Hereafter there shall be severe punishment, forgiveness from God, and contentment, and the life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion.

Qur'an 57:20

The term *al-kuffār* in this passage is defined (or 'understood') as *al-zurrā* ' (farmers) by the majority of traditional exegetes, such as al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144),⁸⁴ al-Rāzī,⁸⁵ Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373),⁸⁶ and others. The reason behind this meaning is that farmers cover seeds with dust (earth) in the process of planting.⁸⁷ Al-Rāzī also explicitly states that Arabs have used the term *kāfir* for a farmer due to covering seeds into the dust.⁸⁸ The Arabs might have rarely used this term to mean village because of the rarity of farming in the desert of Arabia when compared to Aramaic-speaking people. According to al-Farāhidī, the root *k-f-r* means to cover anything, and by extension, it has been used for farming villages.⁸⁹

In *Lisān al-ʿarab*, a nonbeliever is called *kāfir* because his heart is veiled (covered) from knowing God.⁹⁰ The term *kaffārah* means to purify, atone, or forgive sins based on the definition of covering the sin. This usage is attested in Akkadian,⁹¹ Hebrew (e.g. Deut. 21:8), Aramaic⁹² and Arabic (e.g. Qur'an 5:45, 5:89, 5:95). The Qur'anic description of a nonbeliever as a *kāfir* parallels the use in Hebrew (*kôper*).⁹³ It is difficult to discern the reason behind defining *kāfir* as a nonbeliever. According to *Kitāb al-ʿayn*⁹⁴ and *Lisān al-ʿarab*,⁹⁵ a nonbeliever's heart is covered from faith; Arabic term *kafr* also means a grave, since a grave is covered with dust.⁹⁶ The meaning of grave is also attested in Ethiopic.⁹⁷

Some scholars argue that *k-p-r* and *q-b-r* are also synonymous in Nabataean denoting a tomb or burial,⁹⁸ and the relationship of those two roots in Arabic has been suggested.⁹⁹ Several scholars have suggested that the term *k-p-r* for tomb in Nabataean is possibly of Lihyanite origin,¹⁰⁰ but it seems likely due to its broad Semitic meaning of burial. The Qur'an also combines both terms *fājir* and *kaffār* into a single passage: 'Truly if You leave them, they will mislead Your servants and will beget nothing but disbelieving profligates [a corpse burial?] [*fājiran kaffārā*]' (Qur'an 71:27).

The Qur'an even provides a contrast between those who are alive and those who are *kāfirīn*, which further gives the Qur'anic understanding of its metaphoric use of the term *kuffār* for those who are spiritually dead: 'to warn whosoever is alive [*hayyan*], and so that the Word may come due for the disbelievers [*al-kāfirīn*]' (Qur'an 36:70). Unlike the root *f-j-r* in Arabic, *k-f-r* clearly holds the connotation of covering, and by extension, a grave.

Hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*)

The Qur'an uses the term *munāfiqūn* for hypocrites (e.g. Qur'an 4:61, 8:49, 9:68, 29:11, 33:1). The root *n-p-q* is found in Aramaic, where it means to go out or to give, including expenses.¹⁰¹ The Arabic cognate has a similar semantic range as the Aramaic,¹⁰² and is used by the Qur'an to mean giving out money (expenditure) (e.g. Qur'an 2:3, 2:215, 8:3, 16:75).¹⁰³ The sense of separation is also attested in Ethiopic.¹⁰⁴ Going out, giving up or separating is perhaps the root meaning of this term from which all others stem, including the Qur'anic 'hypocrites' (those who give up or leave the faith).¹⁰⁵

The root *n-f-q* also means a tunnel in the ground (e.g. Qur'an 6:35) and is used in reference to some animal holes.¹⁰⁶ The reason for this meaning is that animals that bore holes in the ground also come out (*naffaqat*) from these holes.¹⁰⁷ The term *n-f-q* can mean dead corpse,¹⁰⁸ perhaps because it is the *nafs* being given up at the point of death. A prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) uses *tanfuq* for a dying corpse,¹⁰⁹ as a contampraneous poem attributed to Labīd b. Rabi'ah al-ʿĀmrī (d. 41/661) also uses *al-nawāfiq* to mean dead corpses.¹¹⁰ In South Arabic and Ethiopic, it also means a coffin.¹¹¹

In Akkadian, the term *napāqu* is some sort of internal disease or illness or the cause of blockage to the throat or windpipe.¹¹² The Qur'an sometimes describes the hypocrites as those with sickness in their hearts (e.g. Qur'an 2:8–10, 5:52–54, 8:49, 33:12, 33:60, 47:20–34). According to Absar Ahmad, the Qur'anic concept of spiritual death is associated with the Qur'anic concept of the sealing of the heart and the concept of *fī qulūbihim maraḍ* (in their hearts a sickness) (e.g. Qur'an 2:10, 5:52, 8:49, 9:125), which is usually used for the *munāfiqūn*.¹¹³

The Qur'an defines the *munāfiqūn* as ones who *kafarū*, which, as established above, holds the meaning of buried: 'That is because they believed, and then disbelieved [*kafarū*]; so a seal was set upon their hearts such that they comprehend not' (Qur'an 63:3).

Sinners (*mujrimūn*)

The term *mujrimūn* and its morphological permutations are often used by the Qur'an to describe sinners (e.g. Qur'an 8:8, 15:58, 43:74). The root *j-r-m* means to cut off in Arabic,¹¹⁴ as it does in Hebrew and Aramaic,¹¹⁵ which has been argued by Bernice Hecker in the course of a greater Semitic etymology.¹¹⁶ The same root also

yields the meaning of bones stripped of flesh, a corpse, or a body.¹¹⁷ The Hebrew Bible uses this term in these ways (e.g. Dan. 6:24). In archaeological finds along the Levant, the inscription of the root *g-r-m* has been read as denoting ossuaries, where bones are kept.¹¹⁸

Though the term *jurm* may hold the meaning of sin in Arabic,¹¹⁹ it also stands in for an imperfection or a cut, or for an outcast – they all share the root meaning of cut off. It also means body, as attested in the pre-Islamic poem attributed to Muḥalḥal b. Rabī‘ah al-Taghlibī (d. 530).¹²⁰ The Hebrew Bible sometimes uses this root to mean strength (e.g. Gen. 49:14) as an allusion of having strong bones (bony) similar to how the root ‘*z-m*, which means bone, also contains the morphological permutation of strength (‘*azīm*).¹²¹ The Arab poet, Muzāḥim al-‘Uqaylī (d. 120/738) even specifically says ‘*al-‘izām jarīm*’ (bony body).¹²² This might further provide the relationships of the semantic fields for *g-r-m* and ‘*z-m* with the commonality in the bone definition. Like many other polysemous terms studied that are being used to denote nonbelievers by the Qur’an, the term *mujrimūn* could also hold an allusion to a dead corpse.

In Jacob’s blessing on his deathbed, Gen. 49:14 narrates him saying, ‘Issachar is a strong donkey [*ḥāmōr gārem*],’ using the root *g-r-m*. It has been suggested by Samuel Feigin that *ḥāmōr gārem* means ‘castrated ass,’¹²³ but Paul Forchheimer insists it simply means a strong donkey from the etymological root meaning bony donkey;¹²⁴ thus further relating together the roots *g-r-m* and ‘*z-m*.

The root *j-s-m* meaning body, bulky, or strong,¹²⁵ is also found in Aramaic (e.g. Dan. 3:27–28).¹²⁶ There is a possibility, as is typical in the evolution of the Semitic languages,¹²⁷ of a consonantal shift between various dialects between /*r*/ and /*s*/, *sh*/,¹²⁸ which created a similar semantic field between *j-r-m* and *j-s-m*. However, regardless of whether *j-r-m* and *j-s-m* are related, the root *j-r-m* on its own holds the meaning of body, bones, and tomb.

Incline (yulḥidūn)

The Qur’an uses the term *l-ḥ-d* to describe those who veer away (e.g. Qur’an 7:180, 16:103, 41:40). This term has no known cognates in most Semitic languages.¹²⁹ Although the root does exist in Akkadian, it is of unknown meaning.¹³⁰ For this reason, finding the root meaning is difficult. The Qur’an also uses it to mean some sort of refuge (*multaḥadā*) (i.e. Qur’an 18:27, 72:22).¹³¹

Nonetheless, one of the meanings of *l-ḥ-d* is the opening of a grave,¹³² where the dead are placed on the side (*mayl*) as they are laid to rest.¹³³ This would keep the root meaning as inclining, and perhaps the Qur’anic use of *multaḥadā* is that there is no one besides God to incline to,¹³⁴ as al-Rāzī suggests.¹³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī even suggests *maw’ilā* as a synonym to *multaḥadā*, suggesting the root meaning *mayl* (inclination).¹³⁶

The earliest attested use of *l-ḥ-d* in various pre-Islamic poetry is the meaning of one who is buried, such as in poems attributed to Ṭarafah b. al-‘Abd¹³⁷ and ‘Adī b. Zayd al-‘Ibādī (d. 588).¹³⁸ Therefore, its association with death in Arabic is evident.

Conclusion

Many of the terms the Qur'an uses to describe nonbelievers are associated with death. Although those terms are polysemous, with various meanings, the lowest common denominator they all share has to do with death. The *fujjār* are dead corpses; the *kuffār* are covered in a grave. The *mujrimūn* are corpses; the *munāfiqūn* are dead. The *yulḥidūn* are placed in graves. After all, the Qur'an does say of those who are nonbelievers that God places upon their hearts veils and upon their ears deafness, such that they do not understand (e.g. Qur'an 6:25, 17:46, 18:57, 41:5). Since nonbelievers are covered, calling them *kuffār* is natural and faithful to the root meaning of the word.

Qur'an 7:176–180 gives an interesting summary of some of the terms discussed in this chapter. Since the term *nafaq* could mean a hole in the ground or a tunnel, Qur'an 7:176 does state that the nonbeliever penetrates the earth (*akhḥad ila al-ard*), as if going through it in a hole.¹³⁹ Qur'an 7:177 continues to state that these people are the ones who darken (*yazlimūn*) their *naḥs*. Qur'an 7:178 goes on to state that whoever God guides is guided, but whoever God keeps in the dark (*yudlil*) is lost. Qur'an 7:179 continues to describe these people as those whose hearts do not understand (like the ones God covers with veils), who have eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear (as those in their graves, e.g. Qur'an 35:19–22; or those in darkness, e.g. Qur'an 6:39), and that they are like animals, but in even deeper darkness (*aḍall*). Finally, Qur'an 7:180 continues to describe them as *yulḥidūn* (those placed in a grave penetrating the earth). Accordingly, it can be seen that the Qur'an can be consistent in its description using terms describing death and darkness for nonbelievers.

As is seen in the next chapter, the Qur'an frequently describes nonbelievers as spiritually dead. Therefore, it might be possible that – consciously, through wordplay – the Qur'an uses terms associated with death, as presented in this chapter, to describe nonbelievers.