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Chapter 4

DEATH

In many instances, the Qur'an invokes death metaphorically, not as a physical state but as some form of spiritual condition. The metaphor sometimes also infers spiritual resurrection, as Rakesh and Ayati argue, referring to Qur'an 6:122 and 3:169 as examples. They look into the metaphorical use of 'light and life' with 'darkness and death' for guidance and misguidance respectively.¹ They have suggested that the Qur'an seems to fit death into three categories: (1) nonhuman death, such as dead earth as a metaphor of barren land; (2) spiritual death that requires spiritual resurrection; and (3) death in a strict, physical sense, such as a dying person writing a will (i.e. Qur'an 2:180) or Jacob on his deathbed (e.g. Qur'an 2:133).² When we look at the possible definitions of death contained therein, the Qur'an appears to truly have a specific focus on spiritual death and resurrection, and not only physical.

Definition of death in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, death is discussed many times, but most instances do not explicitly mention the death of the body (*badan* or *jasad*);³ rather, they have to do with the death of the *nafs*:

Every *nafs* shall taste death, and you will indeed be paid [*tuwaffawn*] your reward in full on the Day of Resurrection. And whosoever is distanced from the Fire and made to enter the Garden has certainly triumphed. And the life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion.

Qur'an 3:185

³⁴We have not ordained perpetual life for any flesh [*bashar*] before you. So if you die, will they abide forever? ³⁵Every *nafs* shall taste death. We try you with evil and with good, as a test, and unto Us shall you be returned.⁴

Qur'an 21:34–35

Every *nafs* shall taste death. Then unto Us shall you be returned.

Qur'an 29:57

Although the Qur'an speaks about death and resurrection in these passages, textually and linguistically it refers not necessarily to the death of the body but, more precisely, to the death of the *nafs*, which, as argued in Chapter 2, might be a monistic soul/body (an individual) or dualistic. These passages are seemingly an attempt by the Qur'an to discuss immortality, which may be seen explicitly in Qur'an 21:34. There, I translate *bashar* as flesh since it appears to be meant in the physical sense, as opposed to the ambiguous nature of the *nafs*.

O'Shaughnessy states that the earliest (based on an assumed chronology) uses of death in the Qur'an are metaphorical.⁵ Nonetheless, he states that the Qur'an employs two types of death, the *first death*, which is spiritual, while a person is still physically alive, and the *second death*, which occurs after the physical death of the body:

Besides the spiritual death the disbeliever suffers even while he is physically alive, there is in the Qur'an another analogy based on the notion of death, the 'second death' of Hell by which disbelievers are deprived eternal life in the world to come. In such an analogy the state of those in Paradise would stand in relation to that of the damned in Hell somewhat as life as a state does to death.⁶

O'Shaughnessy also identifies the following three Qur'anic passages as portrayals of hell as a living death:⁷

¹²he who enters into the greatest Fire, ¹³then neither dies therein nor lives.

Qur'an 87:12–13

¹⁶Beyond him lies Hell; and he shall be given to drink of oozing pus,¹⁷ which he will gulp down, but can scarcely swallow. Death shall come upon him from every side; yet he will not die, and before him lies a grave punishment.

Qur'an 14:16–17

Verily, whosoever comes unto his Lord guilty, surely his shall be Hell, wherein he neither dies nor lives.

Qur'an 20:74

Despite his thoroughness, O'Shaughnessy appears to have missed the following passage, which also resembles the other three, in which people in hell are portrayed as non-dying:

³⁶As for those who disbelieve, theirs shall be the Fire of Hell. They will neither be done away with so as to die; nor will its punishment be lightened for them. Thus do We requite every disbeliever. ³⁷They will cry out therein, 'Our Lord! Remove us, that we may work righteousness other than that which we used to do.' 'Did We not give you long life, enough for whosoever would reflect to reflect therein? And the warner came unto you, so taste [the punishment]! The wrongdoers shall have no helpers.'

Qur'an 35:36–37

A conceivable interpretation of a non-dying person in hell is the Qur'anic supposition that the skin of those in hell will be changed every time it roasts in the fires, such that people in it continue to taste pain (i.e. Qur'an 4:56).⁸ Nonetheless, Qur'an 87:13 and 20:74 suppose that those in hell neither live nor die. What it means to neither live nor die is peculiar, as it appears to reference zombies, who may be described as neither dead (because they move) nor truly alive. It would appear here that the Qur'an is giving a clue in that life and death are not always to be taken and understood literally. There must be some figurative sense in such a statement that the Qur'an intends to convey. To make literal sense of it, al-Ṭabarī assumed that the soul reaches the throat, where it neither leaves the body nor rests in it,⁹ which therefore does assume a disembodied soul. Yet al-Ṭabarī assumes that when a soul reaches the throat, the body is in a suspended state neither dead nor alive – an assumption without attestation in the Qur'an. Alternatively, Ibn 'Arabi resorted to the idea that a person in hell never dies forever, because they never cease to exist. Nor are they alive, because they are spiritually dead.¹⁰

O'Shaughnessy categorizes death in the Qur'an into four classifications: (1) death of a land (figurative and earliest references of death in the Qur'an);¹¹ (2) mortal disbelief (spiritual death);¹² (3) bodily death in this world;¹³ and (4) death as punishment in hell, which he considers the *second death*.¹⁴ While Patricia Crone does not cite O'Shaughnessy, she accepts the possible definition of *second death* as eternal damnation, stating,

So what is the second death? This expression is not actually used in the Qur'ān, and for this reason the exegetes had trouble with it. However, it does appear in the Jewish targums, the Talmud, the Apocalypse of John, Syriac texts, a Greek work preserved only in Ethiopic, and Manichaean literature. In this literature, the 'second death' stands for eternal damnation.¹⁵

Smith and Haddad state, 'The issue of immortality of the soul was generally of less concern to orthodox Islam than the affirmation of the resurrection of the body'.¹⁶ It, thus, assumes that bodily resurrection is a major Qur'anic theme against nonbelievers. In her discussion about the nonbelievers (*mushrikūn*), Crone also assumes that the Qur'an emphasizes a bodily resurrection:

Their emphasis on the impossibility of restoring decomposed bodies could be taken to mean that some of them believed in a spiritual afterlife, but there are no polemics against this idea, nor against other forms of afterlife such as reincarnation. In so far as one can tell, the disagreement is never over the form that life after death will take, only about its reality. The choice is between bodily resurrection and no afterlife at all.¹⁷

The human attributes that the Qur'an uses to personify death have been looked into by Ferdows Agha Golzadeh and Shirin Pourebrahim¹⁸ – work that Khan Sardaraz and Roslan bin Ali have extended, depicting how the Qur'an metaphorizes death and resurrection, for instance by attributing human behaviour to them.¹⁹ Yet,

while these studies show how metaphor is used in the Qur'an to describe death and resurrection,²⁰ they do not define death and resurrection themselves as possible metaphors. It is typical for many scholars of Qur'anic studies to take the literality of death and resurrection for granted in most Qur'anic passages.

The Qur'anic contrast between light and darkness, on the other hand, is rarely taken literally. In his analysis of such metaphors, Khaled Berrada states,²¹

Moreover, in the Holy Qur'an, it is worth emphasizing, there is a recurrent metaphorical use of light to stand for faith, the truth, knowledge, conviction, peace of mind, tranquillity and blessing as opposed to darkness, which is symbolic of the opposed negative qualities: disbelief and heresy, falsehood, ignorance, hesitation, doubt, apprehension, damnation and curse.²²

Berrada's analysis moves parallel to the traditional Muslim accounts, both orthodox and Sufi, continuing:²³

In sum, light in the Qur'an stands for divine, submission to Allah's guidance, Allah's grace and bounty, spiritual progress, faith, the truth, knowledge, joy and felicity and other positive qualities. However, darkness stands for evil, contumacy and misguidance, spiritual retrogression, atheism, falsehood, ignorance, disquietude, grief and poignant doubt, damnation and other vices and negative qualities.²⁴

He even identifies how the Qur'anic contrast of light and darkness is also used as an analogy for those who see and those who are blind, which the Qur'an does not identify in a literal sense.²⁵ This is emphasized more explicitly in the following Qur'anic passage:

Have they not journeyed upon the earth, that they might have hearts by which to understand or ears by which to hear? Truly it is not the eyes that go blind, but it is hearts within breasts that go blind.

Qur'an 22:46

Because the Qur'an makes an equivalent analogy between light and darkness, seeing and blindness, and life and death, Berrada also avers that life and death are used metaphorically in various passages of the Qur'an: 'Finally, it is worth stressing that the source domain of death and its darkness is mapped unto the target domain of misguidance and ignorance'.²⁶ Not only in Qur'anic discourse but also in prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*), the contrasting themes of light and darkness are usually used in a metaphorical sense.²⁷

Since the Qur'an uses light and darkness mostly in a metaphorical sense,²⁸ and invokes sight and blindness figuratively as well, it likewise would not at all be peculiar for it to employ life and death nonliterally, especially when these contrasting pairs appear together (e.g. Qur'an 35:19–22). To create a metaphor, the Qur'an uses terms that people may be able to relate to in order to perceive

unknown issues that would otherwise be more abstract.²⁹ The difference is that scholars have usually understood light and darkness as metaphorical, while the same cannot be said for life and death, which had been mostly understood literally by early Muslim scholars. Some Sufi traditions do not share the same literalism. Sufi tradition has a concept of ego-death that stems from an alleged prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) stating, 'Die before you die.'³⁰ In Sufi tradition, the notion of Qur'anic death is sometimes also understood spiritually.³¹

If the death of the *nafs* is assumed as a metaphor describing someone who is spiritually dead, there are other examples from the Qur'an that point towards spiritual death.

²⁰And those whom they call upon apart from God create nothing, and are themselves created. ²¹[They are] dead, not living, and they are not aware of when they will be resurrected. ²²Your God is one God. And those who believe not in the Hereafter, their hearts deny and they are arrogant [*mustakbirūn*].

Qur'an 16:20–22

These verses also talk about death and resurrection, but the Qur'an describes those who invoke something other than God as truly dead, not living and in need of resurrection. They are described as being arrogant, using the same term for arrogance that the Qur'an uses to describe Satan's arrogance (e.g. Qur'an 2:34, 7:12–13, 38:73–78). Yūsuf b. Sa'īd al-Fulānī, a Sufi master in the seventeenth-century CE, left a commentary on Qur'an 16 discussing the arrogance of Satan and the relationship between arrogance and the death of the human *nafs*.³² His works can be compared with the likes of al-Ghazālī on how Satan veils a human heart through the arrogance of the *nafs*.³³ According to al-Ghazālī, the heart can commit two of the following sins, arrogance (*kibr*) and self-pride ('*izzah al-nafs*').³⁴ From the Qur'an, Munawar Anees extrapolates that arrogance leads to tyranny (*ẓulm*).³⁵

There is a debate among commentators regarding the second of the preceding verses (i.e. Qur'an 16:21), with some claiming that people who seem to be alive are actually dead.³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī refers to idols as the ones that are dead but also shows that it could be a reference to the nonbelievers.³⁷ The second part of the verse would not make sense if the idols were the ones that did not perceive that they will be resurrected. There is no concept of idols resurrecting; it is only people who are resurrected. If the second part refers to people, then there is no reason to assume that the first part refers to anything other than people as well. Although al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)³⁸ and al-Rāzī also refer to idols as those who are dead, they recognize that the second part of the verse might be referring to the nonbelievers.³⁹ Al-Rāzī also refers to a tradition by Ibn 'Abbās, who suggests that the verse refers to idols coming to life and speaking. Al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067)⁴⁰ and al-Ṭabarsī, on the other hand, suggest that it is very possible that it is the people and not necessarily the idols who are dead, which, for the reasons already given, seems more rational.⁴¹ Consequently, the ones who are dead could be understood to mean that people are spiritually dead.

Abul-Qāsim al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185) associates Qur'an 16:21 with 6:122, understanding it as a description of the spiritual death of nonbelievers.⁴² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350) also takes Qur'an 16:21 to describe the spiritual death of the nonbelievers; he emphasizes that the real life is the life of the heart and that the real age of a person is how long they lived with God in their hearts.⁴³ According to him, any time a person's heart is not with God, they are dead and their life is invalidated – or in other words, it is as though he is calling them zombies.

Sufi interpretations – such as the one transmitted by Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) in his *tafsīr*,⁴⁴ Abū 'Abdulrahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) in *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*,⁴⁵ Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) in *'Arā'is al-bayān fī ḥaqā'iq al-Qur'ān*,⁴⁶ and Ibn al-Ḥajj al-Fāsī (d. 737/1336) in his *Madkhal* – ascribe spiritual death to the meaning of this passage.⁴⁷ The Qur'an may indeed be talking about zombies – people walking the earth who think they are alive while in fact they are spiritually dead. In another verse, the Qur'an explicitly states that those who do not listen to the message are dead in their graves:

And not equal are the living and the dead. Truly God causes whomsoever He wills to hear, but you cannot cause those in graves to hear.

Qur'an 35:22⁴⁸

Some recent Salafi scholars associate this passage with Qur'an 16:21 and understand both not as contentions against the idolatry of worshipping sticks and stones, as they recognize that sticks and stones do not experience resurrection.⁴⁹ Those scholars understand this passage against the worship of saints (who died and would be resurrected), with the saints exonerating themselves from those who sought their intercession.⁵⁰ Independently arriving at the same conclusion, Patricia Crone also argued that the Qur'anic arguments in this passage against the nonbelievers are mainly impugning a practice similar to (dead) saints that developed later in some Muslim communities.⁵¹ Some of the same Salafi scholars also accept the Qur'anic metaphor of spiritual death when describing nonbelievers in this passage.⁵²

There seems to be an inner-Qur'anic allusion between Qur'an 35:22 and Qur'an 3:185, which talks about every soul tasting death. The allusion appears to be based on the verse preceding Qur'an 3:185 and one a few verses after Qur'an 35:22:

So if they deny you, they certainly did deny messengers before you, who came with clear proofs, scriptures, and the luminous Book.

Qur'an 3:184

If they deny you, those before them also denied: their messengers brought them clear proofs, scriptures, and the luminous Book.

Qur'an 35:25

This possible inner-Qur'anic allusion perhaps suggests that the living and the dead of Qur'an 35:22 might be related to every *nafs* tasting death in Qur'an 3:185.

Al-Ṭabarī states that the living and the dead in Qur'an 35:22 are a metaphor for those whose hearts are alive with belief and those whose hearts are dead with disbelief.⁵³ There is some sort of consensus among traditional Muslim scholars that Qur'an 35:22 is a metaphor, in which nonbelievers are viewed as dead. Al-Ṭabarī refers to the following passage, which also considers death and darkness as a metaphor for spiritual death, while life and light are a metaphor for spiritual life:

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

Additionally, three verses later, we have

Whomsoever God wishes to guide, He expands his breast for submission [*islām*]. And whomsoever He wishes to lead astray, He makes his breast narrow and constricted, as if he were climbing to the sky. Thus does God place defilement upon those who do not believe.

Qur'an 6:125

Since this passage discusses the guided and misguided, it might be related to Qur'an 39:41–42, which also talks about guidance and misguidance and deliberates about the death and slumber of souls. There might also be an inner-Qur'anic allusion connecting these passages, distinguishing those who are spiritually dead from those who are spiritually alive. Regarding Qur'an 6:122, al-Ṭabarī⁵⁴ and al-Rāzī suggest that life and light refer to the divine's guidance, while death and darkness refer to misguidance.⁵⁵ Al-Rāzī specifically refers to similar allusions in the Qur'an, such as the following:

[They are] dead, not living, and they are not aware of when they will be resurrected.

[Qur'an 16:21]

⁸⁰Surely you do not make the dead hear; nor do you make the deaf hear the call when they turn their backs; ⁸¹nor can you guide the blind away from their error. You can only make hear those who believe in Our signs and are submitters (*muslimūn*).

Qur'an 27:80–81, 30:52–53

⁶⁹And We have not taught him poetry; nor would it befit him. It is but a reminder and a clear Quran,⁷⁰ to warn whosoever is alive, and so that the Word may come due for the disbelievers.

Qur'an 36:69–70

Earlier scholars, such as al-Zajjāj (d. 311/925),⁵⁶ and later scholars, such as Ibn al-Ḥāj al-Fāsī,⁵⁷ have also associated Qur'an 6:122 with Qur'an 16:21 as al-Rāzī has. When associating those two passages, al-Zajjāj states in simile, 'every [person] guided is alive and every misguided is like the dead'.⁵⁸ Putting the two verses together with Qur'an 36:70, Abū 'Alī al-Fārsī (d. 377/987) wrote, 'The meaning of whoever is alive: from the believers because the nonbelievers are dead'.⁵⁹ Ibn 'Arabī interprets Qur'an 6:122 as referring to the death of the soul in its ignorance, and the soul's life in its knowledge of the truth.⁶⁰

With respect to the preceding passages in deliberations, the topic of death seems to refer to the death of the *nafs* and not necessarily the death of bodies, depending on the definition of monistic/dualistic *nafs*. In contrast, the Qur'an states that those who are killed for the sake of God are not dead but alive (i.e. Qur'an 2:154, 3:169).

And say not of those who are slain in the way of God, 'They are dead.' Nay, they are alive, but you are unaware [*tash'urūn*].

Qur'an 2:154; cf. Qur'an 3:169

This verse itself emphasizes that the Qur'an, when defining life and death, does not necessarily denote it physically. It is obviously not the dead bodies of martyrs that this passage is stating are alive. It is something that is not perceived, which seems more likely to be a reference to some soul (*nafs*) – and that is indeed the understanding of many exegetes, some of whom also suggest that the soul of a martyr is given a body in heaven (as opposed to an earthly body) in the form of a bird.⁶¹ Although Ibn 'Arabī explains this verse not of physical martyrs but spiritual martyrs who kill the ego,⁶² even if we do take the traditional understanding of this verse as a reference to physical martyrs, the part that is alive is obviously not their physical bodies.

The Qur'an distinguishes between definitions of death and life. This can be further identified in the Qur'anic intention when describing graves, as in Qur'an 35:22, which states that God causes whomever He wills to hear but that we cannot make those in graves hear. Elsewhere, it is made clear that the Qur'an may be understood only by those who are alive. Again, this alludes to those who are spiritually alive:

⁶⁹And We have not taught him poetry [*al-shi'r*]; nor would it befit him. It is but a reminder and a clear Quran,⁷⁰ to warn whosoever is alive, and so that the Word may come due for the disbelievers.

Qur'an 36:69–70

Traditional commentators, such as al-Ṭabarī, attest that this passage refers to those who are spiritually alive.⁶³ If we relate the above passages to Qur'an 35:22, we may identify that the dead and the people in the graves who cannot hear are a metaphor for people who are spiritually dead and cannot understand the message of the Qur'an, in accordance with Qur'an 36:69–70. Within the same chapter, another verse makes a claim similar to Qur'an 6:122:

³³We know well that what they say grieves you. Yet, it is not you that they deny. Rather, it is the signs of God that the wrongdoers reject. ³⁴Surely messengers were denied before you, and they bore patiently their being denied and persecuted till Our help came to them. None alters the Words of God, and there has already come unto you some tidings of the messengers. ³⁵And if their turning away is distressing to you, then seek, if you can, a tunnel into the earth, or a ladder unto the sky, that you might bring them a sign. Had God willed, He would have gathered them all to guidance – so be not among the ignorant. ³⁶Only those who hear will respond. As for the dead, God will resurrect them, and unto Him they shall be returned.

Qur'an 6:33–36

A few passages later, the Qur'an states, 'Those who deny Our signs are deaf and dumb, in darkness. Whomsoever God will, He leads astray, and whomsoever He will, He places him upon a straight path' (Qur'an 6:39). Those verses also resemble Qur'an 3:184 and Qur'an 35:25, assuring that even previous messengers were not believed. Yet the verses attempt to comfort the recipient of the Qur'an by suggesting that only those who hear will respond to the message. Echoes reverberate in Qur'an 36:70, as also noted by Ibn al-Zubayr al-Ghirmāṭī (d. 708/1308).⁶⁴ For those who are described as dead, on the other hand, Qur'an 6:36 confirms that it is God who will resurrect them, suggesting that they would not hear the message due to their state. This mirrors Qur'an 35:22, in which the messenger cannot cause those in their graves to hear, for God will make whomever God wills to hear. Those who do not adhere to the message are symbolized as dead whom God will resurrect according to Qur'an 6:36, whereas Qur'an 6:122 elaborates perhaps on how God spiritually resurrects dead people into life.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The Qur'anic usage for death is sometimes metaphorical, describing spiritual death. Through inner-Qur'anic allusions regarding death and resurrection, the Qur'an does not refer always to bodily death. Even the Qur'anic concept of every *nafs* tasting death seems not to be a matter of bodily death, according to the intratextual relationships with other passages. Nevertheless, at best, the term *nafs* remains ambiguous and cannot be used as a sole evidence to the reference of bodily death either. Therefore, some of the Sufi interpretations, such as that of Ibn 'Arabī, on the nature of spiritual death in the Qur'an are not to be understood simply as esoteric, but philological and textual analysis of the Qur'an may provide some support to that notion. If the concept of death in the Qur'an is mainly metaphorical for some sort of spiritual death, an analysis of the definition of life and resurrection in the Qur'an becomes a natural next step in the inquiry.