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Chapter 9

THE RED COW AND BRINGING BACK THE DEAD

Amid the vivid portrayals of resurrection in the Qur'an, another, subtler depiction of bringing back the dead illuminates the theme. It is the ritual of the red cow, in which the Qur'an alludes to a biblical rite that the Qur'an describes for its ability to bring back the dead.

The biblical account of the ritual of the red cow is a paradox par excellence.¹ Its absurdity has perplexed Jewish communities throughout history. The ritual is for purification, where those defiled by a dead corpse would be purified. However, the priests and everyone who performs the ritual, themselves being pure, become defiled in the process. The same water that defiled the pure is also used to purify the defiled. While the defilement occurs because of a corpse, another corpse (the sacrificed red cow) reinstates purity. Therefore, if the Qur'an suggests that the Israelites asked Moses if he is mocking them, could they truly be blamed? 'And when Moses said to his people, "God commands you to slaughter a cow [*baqarah*]," they said, "Do you take us in mockery?" He said, "I seek refuge in God from being among the ignorant"' (Qur'an 2:67).

Accordingly, this chapter looks closely into how the Qur'an understands this ritual paradox, especially in the context of resurrection. The Qur'an frequently uses antithesis as a rhetorical style, including something and its opposite arising from one another. For example, God brings out the dead from the living and the living from the dead (e.g. Qur'an 6:95, 10:31, 30:19). Other examples include bringing the night from the day and the day from the night (e.g. Qur'an 22:61, 31:29, 35:13, 57:6) and God is described in the same verse as severe in punishment but yet most merciful (e.g. Qur'an 5:98). In Arabic rhetoric, this is known as *muqābalah* or *ṭibāq* (antithesis). It appears that much of the logic and reasoning used by Jewish communities has been highly influenced by Greek philosophy, especially in Hellenistic Judaism,² after which much rabbinic literature was styled. The same may be said for the flourishing field of Qur'anic rhetorical studies.³ Classical Muslims also used Greek philosophy in their theological discourses.⁴ Of course, that does not mean that Jewish philosophy is Greek, but that the Hellenistic influence has played a role in reshaping Jewish philosophy throughout history; the Talmudic context has become an amalgamation of both.⁵ Nonetheless, Jewish logic and rationale maintained its distinction from Greek logic,⁶ but traces do appear and, as Rivka Ulmer describes it, 'This influence may have been so significant that

the phenomenon of evolving rabbinic Judaism found its distinctive expression only after it had come into contact with Hellenistic culture.⁷

The reason that the influence of Greek logic might have been a problem for understanding apparent paradoxes, whether in the Bible, like the ritual of the red cow, or in the Qur'an, is that when and where a particular ritual was created, Greek logic played no role. Hence, the apparent paradoxes surface when applying Hellenistic methods. There is a possibility that a different kind of logic existed in the Near East, in which these paradoxes would make rational sense. For example, Indian and Buddhist logic contain a concept known as the *catuskoṭi*, granting a statement four possibilities: it can be true, it can be false, it can be true and false simultaneously, or it can be neither true nor false concurrently⁸ – and, in some variants of this logic in Buddhism, another possibility is none of the above.⁹ The Chinese logic of uniting the opposites, as found in Taoism, is also another philosophical alternative.¹⁰ The assumption cannot be that early Judaism or Qur'anic philosophy during the time of Muḥammad used these specific types of oriental philosophies, but Near Eastern logic could easily have been very different from Hellenistic. Greek logic would not have been and should not be the default logic either tradition had used. Actually, Ernest Horton Jr. has pointed out how Qoheleth's use of opposites and their union is distinct in its logic, being neither Greek nor Far Eastern.¹¹ Consequently, the apparent paradox in these texts might not have been paradoxical at all in the philosophical logic and reasoning initially intended and applied.

The description of the red cow

The Qur'anic narrative of the cow appears to have similarities to the red cow in Numbers 19 and the cow whose neck is broken (i.e. Deuteronomy 21). This, however, should not be too surprising, as *Midrash Tanḥuma* also discusses both together, along with the red cow's relationship to the golden calf, which the Qur'an discusses before the cow narrative.¹²

While the red cow ritual is biblically described to purify a person from being contaminated by a dead corpse, the Qur'anic narrative situates it with some kind of resurrection, 'We said, "Strike him with part of it [presumably the cow]." Thus does God give life to the dead and show you His signs, that haply you may understand' (Qur'an 2:73).

In Deut. 21:1–9, the term *'eglā* is used for the atonement of an unsolved murder, a narrative possibly referenced in the Qur'an by some interpretations. Deuteronomy's narrative is mainly a ritual for the atonement of an unsolved murder,¹³ while the Qur'an's narrative appears to be somewhat unspecific, and the cow with a specific colour may not necessarily be confused with the one required for murder:

⁶⁷ And when Moses said to his people, 'God commands you to slaughter a cow [*baqarah*]', they said, 'Do you take us in mockery?' He said, 'I seek refuge in God from being among the ignorant.' ⁶⁸ They said, 'Call upon your Lord for us, that He

may clarify for us what she is.' He said, 'He says she is a cow [*baqarah*] neither old nor young,¹⁴ middling between them: so do what you are commanded.' ⁶⁹They said, 'Call upon your Lord for us, that He may clarify for us what her colour is.' He said, 'He says she is a yellow cow [*baqarah*]. Bright is her colour, pleasing the onlookers.' ⁷⁰They said, 'Pray for us to your Lord, that He may clarify for us what she is. Cows [*al-baqar*] are much alike to us, and if God will we will surely be guided.' ⁷¹He said, 'He says she is a cow [*baqarah*] not broken to plow the earth or to water the tillage, sound and without blemish.' They said, 'Now you have brought *al-haqq*.' So they slaughtered her, but they almost did not. ⁷²And when you slew a soul and cast the blame upon one another regarding it – and God is the discloser of what you were concealing – ⁷³We said, 'Strike him with part of it.' Thus does God give life to the dead and show you His signs, that haply you may understand.
 Qur'an 2:67–73

Although Deuteronomy's narrative typically uses 'eglâ for the cow upon first description, it elsewhere uses the term 'eglat *bāqār*, while the Qur'an uses only *baqarah*. Its root, *b-q-r*, has various meanings, including: to investigate or to seek,¹⁵ which is also attested in Ezekiel:

As a shepherd¹⁶ seeks out [*baqqārat*] his flock¹⁷ when he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out [*ābaqqēr*] my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.
 Ezek. 34:12

From the same root, the meaning to inquire or to meditate is also attested in other parts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Lev. 13:36, 27:33; Ps. 27:4; 2 Kgs. 16:15). The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT) suggests that this root is distinct from the root that means cattle or herd.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the Arabic root *b-q-r* also has instances where it means 'to investigate' and 'to seek', such as with knowledge.¹⁹ This meaning gives the fifth Shī'ī *imām* his nickname al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (the knowledgeable).²⁰ The Arabic term also means 'to dig deep',²¹ which perhaps evolved into 'to investigate'. Furthermore, the meaning of cattle or herd, not necessarily specific to a cow, is also used in Hebrew, Aramaic²² and Arabic.²³ Although Deut. 21:1–9 speaks of a cow to be sacrificed as atonement for an unsolved murder, another cow of a specific red colour is found in the purification laws in Numbers 19.

The descriptions of the cow in Numbers' purification laws and in Deuteronomy's unsolved murder are similar enough to put them in conversation but different enough to note. Numbers adds the colour of the cow as 'ādummâ (red), while the Qur'an uses the term *ṣafrā*. Although the term *ṣafrā* is typically understood as yellow, it is not necessarily so. The Arabic term *ṣafrā* is somewhat ambiguous, as it could also mean black.²⁴ Nonetheless, the colour of gold and saffron is also described as *ṣafrā*,²⁵ which can be yellowish or reddish for saffron – keep in mind that the etymology of saffron is related to that of the colour, *ṣafrā*. The term *ṣāpār* in Aramaic is also the early morning light,²⁶ which would be reddish-yellow.

Therefore, the colour descriptions of the cow in Numbers and the Qur'an should not necessarily be seen as distinct from one another.²⁷

In Saadia Gaon's (d. 942 CE) Arabic translation of the Bible, he uses the Qur'anic term *ṣafrā* in his translation of the red cow's colour. Assuming that Saadia should have been able to distinguish between the yellow and red colours in Arabic, David Freidenreich considers his biblical translation to have been influenced by the Qur'anic narrative.²⁸ Freidenreich quotes Joseph Qafih's argument that Saadia understood the word *ṣafrā* as the yellowish-brown colour of cows that occurs naturally, as a blood-like red colour is unnatural, and Saadia assumes the commands can only be for naturally occurring things.²⁹ Freidenreich argues that Saadia's choice of the Arabic term is due to how Muslims understood this term in the Qur'an, putting it on the spectrum between yellowness and blackness, and that the intended meaning that Saadia understood is black,³⁰ although I find it very unlikely, as it would go against the Mishnaic requirement that if it has as many as two black hairs, it would be rendered unfit.³¹ I think it is more likely that Saadia might have understood *ṣafrā* as brown, instead. If Freidenreich argues that the Arabic terms for yellow and red should be distinct, then the same can be said for yellow and black. The Qur'an uses the root *ḥ-m-r* to mean red only in one verse (i.e. Qur'an 35:27), but the root *ṣ-f-r* appears several times, and is mostly not typically understood as only purely yellow, but also brownish, as it describes dead plants (e.g. Qur'an 39:21, 57:20). Therefore, the Arabic root *ṣ-f-r* indeed describes a variation of colours within the yellowness and blackness spectrum, including reddish and brownish.

There was no distinct word for brown in the earliest Arabic literature, and the Arabic term later used derives from Ethiopic (*bun*), as a reference to the colour of coffee.³² Accordingly, I feel that the argument over how different the Qur'anic *ṣafrā* is from the biblical reddish when it comes to the red cow is unnecessary, even though Abraham Geiger (d. 1874 CE) considered it a Qur'anic error.³³ In fact, the Hebrew *'ādummā* shares the same root as the term for earth, which is also brownish. Table 9.1 summarizes the cow descriptions among the texts.

The cow of Numbers 19 is used for purification purposes,³⁴ in situations outlined as follows: after touching a dead *nepeš*, for anyone inside a tent where a person dies, for every uncovered vessel, for anyone in the open field who touches a person killed by a sword or touches a dead person, a human bone, or a grave. The purification appears to be highly connected with the dead. The topic of Deuteronomy 21 is atonement for an unsolved murder, which is also evidently related to death.³⁵

The cow needs to be without defect or blemish, according to both the Books of Numbers and Qur'anic narratives. This specificity might mean that such a cow is acceptable for sacrifice (e.g. Lev. 22:20–25),³⁶ a practice that appears to have been generally closely followed for sacrificial animals.³⁷ However, some Qumran scrolls and rabbinic discourses suggest that a controversy existed during the Second Temple period over whether the red cow was to be considered a sacrifice.³⁸ The implication is that if it were not considered a sacrifice, laypeople would be able to take part in the ritual.³⁹

Table 9.1 Descriptions of the cow

Numbers	Deuteronomy	Qur'an
red		reddish / yellow
cow (<i>ha-pārā</i>)	cow (‘ <i>eglat bāqār</i> – female calf of the cattle)	cow (<i>baqarah</i>)
without defect / without blemish		without defect / without blemish
never yoked	never yoked / never worked	never ploughed / never irrigated
		not old
		not young
	valley with running water, neither ploughed nor sown	

Only at the end of the Qur’anic narrative does it address the issue of murder, which possibly contextualizes it with Deuteronomy. However, the Qur’anic verse immediately after the cow narrative describes rocks that gush forth water (i.e. Qur’an 2:74), which Numbers 20 also describes immediately after the description of the red cow ritual. Some scholars believe that the Qur’an appears to link both Numbers’ and Deuteronomy’s narratives together and are aware of both.⁴⁰ However, the Qur’an also appears to portray some kind of discussion between Moses and his people on the cow’s description, which appears in neither Numbers 19 nor Deuteronomy 21.

According to the Qur’an’s formulation of the narrative, Moses tells his people that God commanded them to kill a cow. They are not amused by such a request and think that Moses is making fun of them. He responds that this is not at all his intention. His people appear to continue to ask questions to specify the attributes of the cow. Once satisfied, they tell him, ‘Now you have brought *al-ḥaqq*’ (Qur’an 2:71) and slaughter the cow. The Qur’an continues to narrate that they were about not to slaughter it, perhaps even because of the rarity of performing this ritual.

I argue that the term *al-ḥaqq* in Qur’an 2:71 should not necessarily be understood as ‘truth’, which is how it is typically rendered. A cognate to the Hebrew *ḥuqqā* or the plural *ḥuqqīm*, *al-ḥaqq* should be understood here as a statute, much as it perhaps is in the *Qiblah* passages within the same Qur’anic chapter.⁴¹ Numbers 19 calls the red cow a statute (*ḥuqqā*) three times (i.e. Num. 19:2, 19:10, 19:21), and rabbinic law also makes inferences based on its designation as a statue (*ḥuqqā*). For example, on the debate whether the ritual of the red cow needs to be done by the High Priest in future generations after Eleazar the priest in Num. 19:3, the hermeneutical marker in the Babylonian Talmud is ‘*ḥoqā ḥoqā*’: the use of ‘statute’ in Num. 19:2 and ‘statute’ in Lev. 16:34, suggesting that as the service of Yom Kippur is performed by the High Priest, so is the red cow ritual.⁴² The Talmudic hermeneutics used here to derive this is the concept of ‘*gezerah shawah*’ (equal or

similar rule),⁴³ which uses analogical reasoning that parallels the concept of '*qiyās*' in Islamic jurisprudence.

Therefore, as it is with the *Qiblah* passages, the term *al-ḥaqq* in the Qur'an pertaining to the cow in question is more likely to mean a statute instead of truth, moving in parallel with the term used for the red cow in Numbers and the Talmud, such that it would resonate with the Jewish Qur'anic audience. The Qur'an shows that the Israelites felt that they are being mocked. When it says that you (Moses) have now come with *al-ḥaqq*, it is very likely that the Qur'an is using the rabbinic interpretation of this term pertaining to the red cow, which simply means that you (Moses) have now come with a suprarational command, which human rationality does not understand, but which is followed because it is divinely ordained.

The description of the cow in the Qur'an is not much different from that found in Numbers and Deuteronomy. However, the Qur'an appears to show that the Israelites were trying to get very detailed descriptions of the cow, which Moses did not initially provide. The Mishnah devotes a whole tractate with the rabbis describing the ritual of the red cow and the majority of the rules, which are extremely stringent and not fully mentioned in Numbers.⁴⁴ As if the detailed rules described by the rabbis in the Mishnah were not enough, the Tosefta continues with rabbis explaining these Mishnaic rules.⁴⁵ Due to the rarity of this red cow, especially since having as many as two black hairs, would render it unfit, the Mishnah writes that the ritual involving a red cow had been performed only nine times at most – first by Moses, next by Ezra, and either five or seven times after Ezra.⁴⁶

Is it possible that the Qur'an is arguing about the stringent rabbinic rulings regarding the red cow ritual that is not specifically mentioned in Numbers? There is some evidence in its narrative that suggests the Qur'an's possible awareness of the rabbinic rulings concerning the red cow. Neither Numbers nor Deuteronomy gives any detail concerning the age of the cow. Numbers uses the term *pārā* for the cow, while Deuteronomy uses *'eglā* and *bāqār*. The age of this heifer or cow is difficult to determine since the terms used to refer to it include almost all ages. However, the Qur'an appears to add the description that the cow should be neither too young nor too old, but somewhere in between. Though the description of the cow's age cannot be determined in either Numbers or Deuteronomy, the first Mishnaic rule concerning the red cow features a debate among the rabbis over the suitable age of the cow: the issue being whether it should be not less than a year old, not less than two years old, or as old as five years.⁴⁷ While they quibble, R. Yehoshua suggests three years of age, but uses the unusual term *shelashit*. When asked as to his meaning, he responds that he simply received the tradition as such without explanation,⁴⁸ as the rationale behind the red cow ritual is also transmitted through tradition without any real reasoning.⁴⁹ The usage of numbers has been argued to be a rhetorical device used in ancient Near Eastern, biblical and rabbinic literature,⁵⁰ but its usage in the Mishnah about the age of the red cow might have been an editing device, which is rarely used in the Hebrew Bible.⁵¹

Additionally, since the Mishnah describes how rabbis disqualified a cow that has as much as two hairs that are not red, Qur'an 2:69 uses the phrase 'He said, "He says she is a yellow cow [*baqarah*]. Bright is her colour, pleasing [*tasurru*] the

onlookers.” The term *tasurru* is understood to mean pleasing. Nonetheless, the root *s-r-r* or *š-r-r* has various meanings. Among the meanings this term in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Ethiopic is ‘to ascertain’, ‘to authenticate’ and ‘to establish firmly’.⁵² The Sumerian *sír-* also has the same meaning.⁵³ With such a definition found in a wide range of geographical locations surrounding Arabia in all directions, it would not be surprising if it were also understood in Arabia. The Qur’an’s use of the term should not be unexpected because it is understood by the rabbinic Jewish community – much as *ḥaqq* is possibly used for statute instead of truth in the cow passage. Thus, the colour of the cow being *tasurru al-nāzirīn* is more likely to mean ascertained or authenticated by the onlookers. This would align with the rule in the Mishnah that the cow should have no more than one hair of a different colour to qualify for the ritual. To ascertain or to authenticate the colour with such a stringent ruling appears in neither Numbers nor Deuteronomy but it does appear in the Mishnah, Tosefta and the Talmuds. Accordingly, the Qur’an, just like the *Qiblah* passages,⁵⁴ is fully aware of such rulings from rabbinic literature, and not only from the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁵

Many of the rules on the red cow in the Mishnah were incorporated within the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. Since the text about the rules of the red cow does not include any discussion by later rabbis (Amoraim) between the third and sixth centuries CE, it has been suggested that the rituals of the red cow were no longer performed during that period.⁵⁶ This is natural, since the rituals required priestly functions, which were suspended after the destruction of the Second Temple.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the Babylonian Talmud refers to the red cow in many other discussions, which means that although the ritual was no longer performed, it still came up in the minds of the Amoraim rabbis, scattered throughout various Talmudic tractates.⁵⁸ It appears that rabbinic thought during the time of the Qur’an continued to keep the ritual of the red cow in mind, requiring the Qur’an to engage with it even though it was no longer performed. It has been suggested that the Amoraim rabbis continued to bring up the red cow in their discussions in the Talmud because it was an ambiguous puzzle.⁵⁹ Since the Talmudic rabbis are fond of logical deliberations on jurisprudence, the red cow paradox makes a wonderful intellectual exercise to discuss.

The red cow paradox

The ritual concerning the red cow seems to be one of the the most bizarre to Jewish communities, as many *midrashim* attest. The source of its absurdity lies in the irrationality of purifying someone who has been defiled due to contact with a dead corpse by sprinkling them with the ashes of a red cow (itself a dead corpse) mixed with living (running) waters. The absurdity does not stop there: the priests and everyone involved in the process of preparing the red cow ritual are themselves defiled in the ritual. In other words, to prepare the purification material, pure individuals will be defiled so that defiled individuals can become pure. The same water that purifies the defiled is what defiles the pure.

Many scholars have attempted to explain the paradox. Suggesting that the key to unlocking the mystery is the fact that it is a sin offering (*ḥaṭṭā't*) (i.e. Num. 19:9).⁶⁰ Jacob Milgrom and other recent scholars located the ritual's roots in pre-Israelite rites to purify from corpse contamination.⁶¹ As a purifying rite, the pre-Israelite ritual absorbs the contamination of what it attempts to purify.⁶² Albert Baumgarten identifies this as the main flaw in Milgrom's analysis:⁶³ purification offerings are contaminated *after* they have been used in the purification process, while the red cow's ritual contaminates those involved in it even *before* it is used in the purification process.⁶⁴

Consequently, Baumgarten argues for a different hypothesis, in that those who are involved in the preparation of the red cow become overly sanctified and need to return to normalcy.⁶⁵ One pillar of support Baumgarten marshals is that the High Priest needs to bathe before entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, and he needs to do so again after completing the sacred ritual and leaving his garments aside (i.e. Lev. 16:23–24).⁶⁶ Baumgarten explains that as the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and performs the ritual, he becomes overly sanctified and, therefore, cannot return to normalcy and face the people in that state. Baumgarten cites Ezek. 44:19, which states that the priests need to take off their garments after serving in the Holy of Holies so as not to transmit sacredness to (*yēqaddēšū*) the laity.⁶⁷ While the analogy to the Day of Atonement ritual may work, it is a major flaw to assume the same occurs in the ritual of the red cow, for a very simple reason: the text of Numbers 19 is very explicit that those involved in the ritual become impure (*ṭamē'*). Neither Leviticus nor Ezekiel use this description for a priest after entering the Holy of Holies. Ezekiel is explicit that they are sanctified, using the root *q-d-š*, and not impure. Accordingly, Numbers 19 would not use the term that everyone involved in the red cow's ritual would become impure simply to mean that one has become overly sanctified. Therefore, while Baumgarten is justified to find Milgrom's explanation flawed, his own explanation is equally problematic.

Other interpretations have been floated: William Gilder suggests that perhaps the red cow ritual conveys a symbolic meaning instead of the effectiveness of its actual act, but that this symbolic meaning itself is absent from the text;⁶⁸ Dominic Rudman argues that the ritual has a weak polluting agent purifying a greater impurity,⁶⁹ but that still does not solve the paradox.

Numbers (Bamidbar) Rabbah, a *midrash* dated sometime in the eleventh or twelfth century CE – but from a portion essentially identical to *Midrash Tanḥuma*, dated around the eighth century – states the following concerning the rabbinic commentary on Numbers 19 about the red cow concerning how the pure come out of the impure and calling it a statute (*ḥuqqat*) attempting to make sense of the ritual:

This is the statute [*ḥuqqat*] – As it is said verse (Job 14:4): Who gave (brought forth) purity to one who is impure?, such as Abraham from Terah, Hezekiah from Aḥaz, etc., Israel from the nations of the world, the world to come from this world. . . . There we learned (Parah 4:4): those who occupy themselves with the Parah from beginning to end, impurify their clothes, but it makes clothes Pure.

God said: I carved a law (into the fabric of creation), a decree I made, you have no ability to transgress (override) My law!

This is the statute [*huqqat*] of the Torah – (Ps. 12:6) The sayings of God are pure (i.e. they purify). . . . as it is said: And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, This is the ordinance [*huqqat*] of the Torah:

. . . The Holy One blessed be he said to Moses: ‘to you I will reveal the reason for the red cow, but for others it will be a decree [*huqqat*] (without reason),’ . . .

A gentile asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, ‘These rituals you do, they seem like witchcraft! You bring a heifer, burn it, crush it up, and take its ashes. [If] one of you is impure by the dead [the highest type impurity], two or three drops are sprinkled on him, and you declare him pure?!’ He said to him, ‘Has a restless spirit ever entered you?’ He said to him, ‘No!’ ‘Have you ever seen a man where a restless spirit entered him?’ He said to him, ‘Yes!’ [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai] said to him, ‘And what did you do for him?’ He said to him, ‘We brought roots and made them smoke beneath him, and pour water and it flees.’ He said to him, ‘Your ears should hear what leaves from your mouth! The same thing is true for this spirit, the spirit of impurity, as it is written, (Zech. 13:2) ‘Even the prophets and the spirit of impurity will I remove from the land.’ They sprinkle upon him purifying waters, and it [the spirit of impurity] flees.’ After he left, our rabbi’s students said, ‘You pushed him off with a reed. What will you say to us?’ He said to them, ‘By your lives, a dead person doesn’t make things impure, and the water doesn’t make things pure. Rather, God said, “I have instated a statute, I have decreed a decree [*huqqat haqaqti gezera gazarti*], and you have no permission to transgress what I decreed,” as it says “This is a statute [*huqqat*] of the Torah.”⁷⁰

The Qur’anic narrative of the cow speaks of hitting the parts of the cow against itself and it is thus that God resurrects the dead. Although the narrative of the red cow in Numbers or the cow whose neck is broken in Deuteronomy is an issue of impurity due to death or atoning for an unsolved murder, it does not specifically raise the topic of resurrection. In the aforementioned *midrash*, however, a question from Job 14:4 arises: ‘who gave purity to the impure?’ Then the *midrash* gives examples of Abraham (pure) coming out of Terah (impure), Hezekiah (pure) from Ahaz (impure), Israel (pure) from the nations of the world (impure), and the world to come (pure) from this world (impure). The *midrash* is more specific about how the pure emerges from the impure. This is further exemplified in *Numbers Rabbah* 19:4, which in turn is also elaborated upon by the rabbis in *Qoheleth Rabbah* 8:1.5:

R. Mana of Shaab in Galilee said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: In connection with every law which the Holy One, blessed be He, communicated to Moses, He expounded to him its uncleanness and purification; but when he reached the chapter, Speak unto the priests (Lev. 21), he [Moses] spoke before Him, ‘Lord of the universe, if these [the priests] are defiled wherewith do they regain their state of purity?’ He gave no answer, and at that time the face of Moses changed. When,

however, He reached the chapter of the Red Heifer, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, 'Moses, when I made to you the statement "Speak unto the priests," and you asked Me, "If they are defiled wherewith do they regain their purity?" I gave you no answer. This is their method of purification, "And for the unclean they shall take of the ashes of the burning of the purification from sin (Num. 19:7)."' He [Moses] spoke before Him, 'Lord of the universe, is this purification [i.e. Moses asked of the Lord the very question that kept puzzling the rabbis through the generations – how can ashes, themselves defiling, remove the defilement caused by contact with the dead]?' And the Holy One, blessed be He, replied, 'Moses, it is a statute (*ḥoq*), and I have made a decree, and nobody can fathom my decree.'⁷¹

Noticeably, it is as though God brings the pure out of the impure. The Qur'anic narrative, which is not explicit about how the pure comes out of the impure, perhaps instead uses the metaphor of the living coming out of the dead, where the pure is symbolic of the living and the impure symbolic of the dead (as itself is the cause of impurity in Numbers 19). This symbolism is explicit in Qur'an 91:7–10, where a pure soul (*zakiyyah*) is contrasted with a buried soul: 'by the soul and the One Who fashioned it' and inspired it as to what makes it iniquitous or reverent! 'Indeed, he prospers who purifies it [*zakkāhā*].¹⁰ And indeed he fails who buries it [*dassāhā*]'⁷² (Qur'an 91:7–10). Therefore, the pure vis-à-vis impure imagery of the red cow ritual midrash parallels how the Qur'an sometimes contrasts purity with death instead.

Additionally, in one of the Qur'anic accounts of the golden calf, the consequence of *al-sāmirī's* involvement was a dictum against him by Moses saying 'In the life [*al-ḥayāt*]'⁷³ it shall be yours to say, "Touch not" (Qur'an 20:97). Michael Pregill convincingly argued that *al-sāmirī* is an epithet of Aaron,⁷⁴ and that the Qur'an is alluding to priestly purity when using the phrase 'touch not'. If that is the case, then here also we would see how the Qur'an is using 'life' as a symbol for 'purity', for when this verse says 'in the life', it would be alluding to purity. In other words, it is as if the Qur'an is saying, 'in purity, you are to so say, "Touch not"'.⁷⁵ Noteworthy, the Qur'an recalls an account of the golden calf not very long before the cow narrative further attesting to the possible understanding that the cow ritual is not intending to bring the life back from the dead literally, but as bringing the pure out of the impure.

Given the context, the Qur'anic narrative concerning the cow perhaps is not literally about the physical resurrection of the dead, but a metaphor for how those who are spiritually alive come out of those who are spiritually dead. Note also that the aforementioned *midrash* relates the rabbinic understanding of the term *ḥoq* – as a suprarational decree that is not understood by human reason – with the Qur'anic use of *al-ḥaqq* in the cow narrative, as discussed earlier. The Qur'an seems to be aware of its rabbinic interpretation and for that reason show that the Israelites ultimately tell Moses after his description of the cow that he has brought them *al-ḥaqq*, because his explanation of God's commandment makes no rational sense.

The Qur'anic narrative of the cow is further connected with the red cow of Numbers 19 because immediately after the narrative, the Qur'an discusses the rock that brings forth water, which is itself mentioned in Numbers 20.

Then your hearts hardened thereafter, being like stones or harder still. For indeed among stones are those from which streams gush forth, and indeed among them are those that split and water issues from them, and indeed among them are those that crash down from the fear of God. And God is not heedless of what you do.

Qur'an 2:74

This Qur'anic passage that comes immediately after the cow's narrative seems to engage with the waters of Meribah, immediately after the red cow's narrative in Numbers:

⁷and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸"Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." ⁹And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. ¹⁰Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' ¹¹And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank.

Num. 20:7–11

Numbers Rabbah provides the following commentary on this narrative, which is echoed in the Qur'an's accusation of the Israelite stubbornness when discussing the rock that gushes with water:

They began to say 'Moses knows the statute [*ḥoq*] of the rock. If he asks, it will bring forth water.' So Moses was uncertain – 'If I listen to them I nullify the words of the Allpresent, and the Holy One (Job 5:13) "takes the wise in their craftiness."' But Moses had been careful for 40 years not to get angry at them, because he was terrified of the oath the Holy One swore: 'Not one of these men will see [the land]. . . ' They said to him: 'Here is a rock; just as you want to bring forth water from another rock, bring it forth from this one.' He shouted at them 'Hear now, you rebels [*ha-morîm*]!' 'Rebels [*ha-morîm shyṭîn*]' has many meanings: (1) 'stubborn ones' [*ha-morîm sarbānîm*] (2) 'fools' – in the sea villages they call fools '*morîm*.' (3) 'those who teach their teachers.' (4) 'archers' (In I Sam 30:3 the word '*morîm*' is used to mean 'archers.') . . . Even so, Moses only used the rock that the Holy One told him [to use].⁷⁶

This *midrash* essentially provides several meanings for the term *mōrîm*, one of which is *sarbānîm*, meaning disobediently stubborn. When the Qur'anic passage explains that their hearts were like stone or harder still, it appears also to understand *mōrîm* in the Numbers narrative as stubborn. This might suggest that the Qur'an is aware of some *midrashic* traditions that were later compiled in *Numbers Rabbah*.

Ali Aghaei argues that the Qur'anic narrative might be engaging with the Haftarah reading on the Parashat of the Sabbath of Parah,⁷⁷ which includes a reading from Ezek. 36:16–36(38).⁷⁸ That passage in Ezekiel discusses how God would purify the Israelites, who had been scattered. God would replace their hearts of stone with a heart of flesh (i.e. Ezek. 36:26), which perhaps is the accusation in Qur'an 2:74: that their hearts are as hard as stone or even harder. Ezek. 36:33–38 shows how God will bring back to life the desolate cities, which has echoes in Qur'an 2:259, as discussed earlier; however, what is more significant on the issue of resurrection is that these passages in Ezekiel immediately precede the resurrection imagery of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Since this image of resurrection is understood metaphorically, then the same may be said about the Qur'an, in which its narrative of the cow is related to bringing the dead back to life. The purification of Israel in Ezekiel 36–37 depicts their resurrection by reviving desolate cities and bringing the exile back. Perhaps the Qur'an is not even specifically talking about God's ability to return the exiled Israelites historically, but is also addressing the Jewish Diaspora and, thus, in conversation with Jewish liturgy.

Qoheleth Rabbah, a haggadic commentary to the book of Qoheleth dated between the sixth and eighth centuries CE,⁷⁹ fits well into the period of the Qur'anic composition. According to *Qoheleth Rabbah*, King Solomon has the wisdom to understand the various statutes of the Torah, but even after seeking more wisdom, he could not comprehend the red cow ritual.⁸⁰ The author of *Qoheleth Rabbah* appears to be saying that even though Solomon was a wiser man than Moses, even he was unable to understand the logic of the red cow ritual. *Midrash Tanḥuma* shares this assessment: 'Solomon said, "All this I have stood, and I have questioned a red cow, and I have asked and searched, and I have said wisdom, and it is far from me."⁸¹ The paradox of the red cow ritual seems to have been completely incomprehensible, as seen by the Jewish attitudes at least at the time of the *midrash*. Alfred Edersheim stated, 'Without some deeper symbolical meaning attaching to them, the peculiarities of the sin-offering of the red heifer would indeed be well-nigh unintelligible.'⁸²

It is perhaps such an attitude that the Qur'an is engaging with when stating that the Jews felt they were being mocked by Moses:

And when Moses said to his people, 'God commands you to slaughter a cow [*baqarah*]', they said, 'Do you take us in mockery?' He said, 'I seek refuge in God from being among the ignorant.'

Qur'an 2:67

The Qur'an appears to affirm that this *ḥaqq* is not meant as a mockery just because it appears to make no sense. The Qur'an justifies this statute and gives a reason behind it, 'Thus does God give life to the dead and show you His signs, that haply you may understand' (Qur'an 2:73). The purpose of this puzzle, according to the Qur'an, is that God wants to show how the living indeed come out of the dead, or perhaps in the Jewish understanding, the pure come out of the impure.

The notion of God bringing the living out of the dead is reiterated in several passages in the Qur'an. Some of these appear to have inner-Qur'anic allusions to one another. For example,

³And among humankind are those who dispute concerning God, without knowledge, and follow every rebellious satan [*shayṭānin marīd*], ⁴for whom it is decreed that, should anyone take him as a protector, he will cause him to go astray and guide him unto the punishment of the Blaze. ⁵O humankind! If you are in doubt [*rayb*] concerning the Resurrection, [remember] We created you from dust, then from a drop, then from a blood clot, then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed, that We may make clear for you. And We cause what We will to remain in the wombs for a term appointed. Then We bring you forth as an infant, then that you may reach maturity. And some are taken in death, and some are consigned to the most abject life, so that after having known they may know nothing. And you see the earth desiccated, but when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and produces every delightful kind. ⁶That is because God is *al-ḥaqq*,⁸³ and because He gives life to the dead, and because He is Powerful over all things,⁷ and because the Hour is coming, in which there is no doubt [*lā rayb*], and because God will resurrect whosoever is in the graves. ⁸And among humankind are those who dispute concerning God without knowledge, without guidance, and without an illuminating Book.

Qur'an 22:3–8

There are five points of intertextuality between these passages and those about the red cow. The first point concerns those who dispute God without knowledge, recalling the Israelites in the waters of Meribah, according to Numbers 20. The second point is the Qur'anic passage calling anyone who disputes God without knowledge a rebellious satan (*shayṭānin marīd*) or, in *Numbers Rabbah*, *ha-morim shyṭin*. The third point is the Qur'anic use – twice in the preceding passage – of the term *rayb*, which is also used in Num. 20:3 in the narrative of the waters gushing out of the rock in Meribah and is, in fact, the reason the place is called Meribah, according to Num. 20:13. The fourth point is the use of the term *ḥaqq* in Qur'an 22:6, which the red cow of Numbers 19 and its Jewish commentary also frequently use, and which is also used in the narrative of the cow in Qur'an 2:71. The fifth point of intertextuality is the passage's concern with resurrecting the dead, just as the narrative of the cow in the Qur'an. With these five intertextualities, it seems that the passage above is an inner-Qur'anic allusion to the cow narrative in the Qur'an. Accordingly, the resurrection of the dead in these passages might also be metaphorical, meaning to bring forth the pure from the impure.

Another passage in the Qur'an that also discusses the resurrection of the dead also appears to have an inner-Qur'anic allusion with the cow narrative and the waters of Meribah:

¹⁴They will call unto them, 'Were we not with you?' They reply, 'Indeed! But you tempted yourselves, bided your time, and doubted [*irtabtum*]; and false hopes

deluded you till the Command of God came, and the Deluder deluded you concerning God.¹⁵ So this day no ransom shall be taken from you, or from those who disbelieved.' Your refuge shall be the Fire; it shall be your master. What an evil journey's end! ¹⁶Has not the time come for those who believe for their hearts to be humbled to the remembrance of God and *al-ḥaqq*⁸⁴ that has come down, and to be not like those who were given the Book aforetime? But the span of time was too long for them, such that their hearts hardened and many of them are iniquitous.¹⁷ Know that God revives the earth after its death. We have indeed made the signs clear for you, that haply you may understand.

Qur'an 57:14–17

The consequence of such inner-Qur'anic allusion is that if the resurrection in the cow narrative is understood metaphorically, then this passage, which is typically understood eschatologically, might also be metaphorical. The first point of intertextuality is the use of the term *irtabtum* from the root *rayb* used in Qur'an 22:5 and 22:7 and used in Numbers 20, as discussed earlier. The second point is the above passage's discussion of a ransom, which can be understood as a sacrifice. The sacrifice of the red cow seems a likely interpretation, especially when placed within the context of the remaining intertextualities. The third point is the use of the term *ḥaqq*, as used in the Qur'anic narrative of the cow and the red cow of Numbers 19 and its commentary. The fourth point is the hardening of hearts like those of the People of the Book, which appears to be an inner-Qur'anic allusion to Qur'an 2:74's narration of the waters of Meribah. The resurrection of the dead, as also seen in the Qur'anic narrative of the cow (i.e. Qur'an 2:73) is the fifth point of intertextuality, and the sixth is the statement '*qad bayyannā lakum al-āyāt la'allakum ta'qilūn* [We have indeed made the signs clear for you, that haply you may understand]' (Qur'an 57:17), which parallels '*wa-yurikum āyātihi la'allakum ta'qilūn* [and show you His signs, that haply you may understand]' (Qur'an 2:73). Given these six points of intertextuality, it seems likely that the resurrection of the dead in Qur'an 57:14–17 is metaphorical, moving in parallel with the passages discussed earlier.

The red cow as an allusion to the golden calf

Some rabbinic traditions link the red cow ritual with the golden calf narrative.⁸⁵ The Qur'anic narrative of the reddish/yellowish cow is preceded by that narrative as well (i.e. Qur'an 2:51–54). According to the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that the Israelites were supposed to have everlasting life, because they accepted the Torah and the angel of death would have no authority over them.⁸⁶ However, the Israelites were re-subjected to mortality because of the sin of the golden calf.⁸⁷

According to Rashi, the reason the red cow ritual was entrusted to Eleazar instead of his father, Aaron, is due to the latter's role in the golden calf; Aaron essentially became unworthy of performing a role.⁸⁸ Rashi interprets the three types of yarn – cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet – in the ritual to symbolize the

3,000 men who fell by the edge of the sword due to the golden calf.⁸⁹ He also explains symbolically, the cedar is lofty while the hyssop is lowly, so that a person who prides themselves on a high position is a sinner, so to receive atonement they need to make themselves as lowly as the hyssop and the worm (in Hebrew, a play on words with scarlet yarn).⁹⁰ Rashi also states that, as the golden calf made everyone who took part in it impure, so are those who take part in the ritual of the red cow made impure.⁹¹ Because the Israelites became morally blemished and defective because of the golden calf, the unblemished and without defect red cow would be the cause for their atonement – to regain their perfection.⁹² Additionally, the red cow symbolizes the mother of the golden calf, which takes away the sin caused by its child.⁹³ While Rashi is a medieval commentator, he drew from various prior sources.⁹⁴ After all, the relationship between the red cow and the golden calf appears in *Midrash Tanhuma*, which states, ‘Let a heifer come and atone for the incident of the [golden] calf.’⁹⁵ While *Midrash Tanhuma* and Rashi are post-Qur’anic, the relationship between the red cow and the golden calf have traces to earlier traditions of the Amoraic period (around third through fifth century CE).⁹⁶

David Wright argues that Num. 31:19–24 is connected to the red cow ritual in Numbers 19.⁹⁷ However, one noteworthy difference in Num. 31:23 is that anything that can go through (withstand) fire, such as gold, needs to be placed first into the fire and then into the water to be purified. If Num. 31:19–24 is connected with the red cow of Numbers 19, as David Wright argues,⁹⁸ then it might connect to the golden calf, which also went through fire before being mixed with water and given to the Israelites to drink, as some sort of atonement or, arguably, purification. The golden calf was melted in fire, smashed into fine dust, mixed with streaming water (something that is also necessary with the red cow), and then the Israelites were made to drink it (i.e. Exod. 32:20). All of these features link the golden calf with the red cow ritual in rabbinic literature.

In the scenario of drinking the golden calf, Philippe Guillaume writes, ‘What the Israelites drank and why is entirely unexplained.’⁹⁹ Though not itself a paradox, it still is a puzzle in its own right. While the Levites only killed 3,000 of the guilty Israelites, Moses apparently had everyone drink the calf, and Exod. 32:3 explicitly states that all the people were, in fact, guilty of bringing gold to Aaron for the golden calf. Guillaume suggests that perhaps drinking the calf allowed the Levites to determine who was guilty of the sin and who was not, as it is apparent that not everyone was necessarily guilty, especially if the Levites killed only 3,000 and spared the rest.¹⁰⁰ Otherwise, Guillaume remarks that if the Levites were the only ones not guilty, they would have killed all other non-Levites, but that did not happen.¹⁰¹ Other scholars, such as Christopher Begg, also argued alongside Guillaume that drinking the calf separated the guilty from the nongUILTY.¹⁰² While Begg and Guillaume make solid observations about the golden calf narrative, Mark O’Brien is correct that there still is no evidence that the real purpose for everyone to drink the calf was to expose the guilty.¹⁰³ O’Brien emphasizes that everyone was guilty, especially in light of Exod. 32:3.¹⁰⁴ Essentially, even after the Levites kill the 3,000 people, Moses addresses the people the next day that they were sinful and says that he will ask God to atone for their sin (i.e. Exod. 32:30).

This suggests that there were still sinful people in his audience. As Moses asks God to forgive the sin of the people, the narrative itself remains inconclusive on whether God has forgiven them or not, because God states that He will blot from His book (the book of life as addressed in Chapter 5) anyone who has sinned against Him (i.e. Exod. 32:33–34). The narrative even continues with God then smiting the Israelites because they made the calf (i.e. Exod. 33:35).

All this suggests that even after the Levites killed the 3,000, the sinners were still among those who remained. Perhaps everyone was indeed guilty, which would make Begg and Guillaume's suggestion that drinking the calf was to expose the sinners for the Levites to kill unlikely. The Levitical killing also appears in the Qur'anic narrative of the golden calf with the specific command by Moses to the Israelites: 'kill yourselves [*f-aqtulū anfusakum*]' (Qur'an 2:54).

After discussing the golden calf and the red cow narratives, the Qur'an returns to the golden calf again. Qur'an 2:92–93 states that the golden calf was drunk by the Israelites due to their sinfulness, but it is ambiguous in the sense that it states that they drank the calf into their hearts instead of into their bellies. Accordingly, it is unknown whether the Qur'an understands the Exodus narrative as something literal or symbolic. While Exodus is not explicit on the reason why the Israelites were given the golden calf to drink, it appears that the Qur'an understands the reason is due to their sin; something understood implicitly in Exodus.

Immediately after the first Qur'anic narrative on the golden calf and the Levitical killing, the Israelites tell Moses that they will only believe in him if they see God plainly (i.e. Qur'an 2:55). As a response, a great cry (*ṣā'iqah*) seizes them. Qur'an 2:56 implies that the cry had killed them and God had resurrected them after it. This very specific narrative in the Qur'an is ambiguous in terms of what it corresponds to in the biblical or rabbinic tradition. Actually, Exod. 33:18–23 shows Moses asking to see God's glory while interceding for the Israelites after the golden calf incident. The Qur'an brings up this narrative in Qur'an 7:143, where Moses is taken by a loud cry (*ṣa'iqā*) and is then awakened from it. Traditional exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī have read this Moses narrative as implying his death and resurrection.¹⁰⁵ Yet, it appears al-Ṭabarī may somehow have had some knowledge of Jewish tradition, in which he explicitly mentions the Torah, as he states that God informs Moses that nobody sees him and survives,¹⁰⁶ an allusion to Exod. 33:20.

Yet the Qur'anic narrative of Moses asking to see God in Qur'an 7:143 differs somewhat from Exod. 33:18–23. In the Qur'anic narrative, God asks Moses to watch a mountain; when God descends and the mountain remains in its place, Moses will be able to see God. However, when God descends, the mountain is crushed, implying that Moses will not be able to see God – and in fact, Moses is overcome by a great cry and then repents. This implies that Moses had sinned, unless one understands *tubtu ilayk* ('I repent to you') simply by its etymology connoting that Moses is returning to God (perhaps in will, in mind, etc) instead of necessarily a repentance from sin.

To understand the mystery of the red cow, one must first understand the connotations attached to the golden calf.¹⁰⁷ To explain why a golden calf was chosen by the Israelites as an object of worship, Stephen Newman¹⁰⁸ looks to an

ancient Egyptian link in the worship of the goddess Hathor (something other scholars also consider).¹⁰⁹ Although this hypothesis is not necessarily fully convincing, it still is interesting to note. Since Hathor was associated in ancient Egypt with life and reproduction, Newman suggests it to be a possible reason why a red cow would have the power to purify those who were in contact with the dead.¹¹⁰

Rabbi Moshe ha-Darshan explains that the rite of burning the Red Heifer was a re-enactment of the destruction of the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. Thus, it would also be a symbolic destruction of the cow-goddess Hathor which the Golden Calf represented. This explains why a red cow was needed for the ritual. The association with cleansing from impurity as a result of contact with a dead body is understood, in light of the midrash in TB Avodah Zarah 22b, to mean that the Israelites attained a state of immortality at Mount Sinai, but lost it due to the sin of the Golden Calf. Purification from death thus involves rejection of the Golden Calf, demonstrated by the ashes of the Red Heifer. This is especially powerful considering that Hathor was associated in Egypt with life and reproduction. Seen in this light, the Red Heifer ritual is a total rejection of Egyptian idolatry and its symbols. The ritual includes burning a crimson thread (Num. 19:6), which may likewise be a negation of the magic scarlet ribbon worn by the cow-goddess that was thought capable of binding evil spirits.¹¹¹

So while the red cow represents idolatry, according to biblical (e.g. Gen. 35:2) and Mishnaic accounts,¹¹² those who are in contact with idols become impure.¹¹³ Accordingly, Newman states, 'The impurity contracted by dealing with the Red Heifer is therefore associated with the idolatry that it represented.'¹¹⁴ Yet Hathor also had a role in assisting the dead into their journey to the afterlife:¹¹⁵ she also passes between the realms of the living and the dead,¹¹⁶ perhaps also associating the red cow with death and resurrection.

Although the golden calf narrative is in Exodus and the ritual of the red cow is in Numbers, the Qur'an does contextualize both into a single narrative on the history of the Israelites saved from Egypt (i.e. Qur'an 2:49–74). While an intertextual analysis is not fully conclusive, it might be possible that the Qur'an is perhaps aware of some Jewish traditions that link the red cow ritual with the golden calf. Since the Qur'an describes the colour of the red cow with *ṣafrā*, which as described can be reddish or yellowish, it might itself be an allusion to the colour presumed by the Qur'an for the golden calf. Though I find the most convincing alternative is that the Qur'anic colour and that of Numbers 19 simply denote a brownish cow, it does not preclude the Qur'an's use of polysemy and wordplay.

Consider the following: (1) some Jewish traditions make a connection between the golden calf and the red cow; (2) some rabbinic traditions understand that the Israelites were given immortality due to their experience at Sinai, but were resubjected to death due to the golden calf; and (3) the red cow is undoing the sin of the golden calf. From these premises, one might deduce that the red cow purifies the Israelites from the realm of the dead so that they may partake in the realm of

the living. Perhaps this deduction means the Qur'an is associating the red cow narrative with death and resurrection, similar to Parashat Parah's reading of Ezek. 36:16–38, which itself is contextualized with death and resurrection found in Ezekiel 37.

Conclusion

The cow narrative in Qur'an 2:67–73 has elements that include the red cow's account in Numbers 19 and Deut. 21:1–9, as well as in rabbinic literature, especially about the cow's age and the description of her needing to be satisfactory of uniform colour. It is, therefore, without doubt that the Qur'an is aware of Jewish tradition and literature about the red cow. The main difference is that the Qur'an places it in the context of resurrection, while the biblical and rabbinic literature do not always do so – at least not directly.

Yet this context should not be surprising. The narratives of the man in the desolate town (i.e. Qur'an 2:259) and Abraham and the birds (i.e. Qur'an 2:260) are, in fact, in the same chapter as the cow narrative in the Qur'an (i.e. Qur'an 2:67–74). While there are debates on structures of Qur'anic chapters using literary theories, such as ring composition theory, we can remain agnostic about them and the fine lines that divide them. Such structural analyses offer the possibility that those narratives are linked not only thematically but also structurally. For example, Raymond Farrin has analysed the structure of Sūrah al-Baqarah (Chapter of the Cow) and developed a ring structure for its style and theme.¹¹⁷ The narrative of the cow Farrin places as section C of the chapter, which constitutes Qur'an 2:40–103. Farrin argues that this section addresses primarily the Children of Israel, which coheres the main theme of this section. However, he categorizes Qur'an 2:254–284 as section B', arguing that it mainly addresses believers to remind them of God's knowledge and power paralleling section B (i.e. Qur'an 2:21–39), which discusses the narrative of God creating Adam and Eve. However, I would think that starting section B' at Qur'an 2:254 might be too early for this section. If Qur'an 2:259–260 alludes to the exile and the covenant, then it might be part of section C', paralleling the address to the Israelites in section C, where the cow narrative is placed. According to Farrin, section C (i.e. Qur'an 2:40–103) addresses the Children of Israel and discusses Moses as a lawgiver, while C' (i.e. Qur'an 2:178–253) discusses laws given to the new community. It might be possible that section C' includes the material at least up to Qur'an 2:260, where its audience is reminded of the relationship with the Israelite exile and covenant.

Using a different approach, Richard Bell had earlier connected Qur'an 2:258–260 with Qur'an 2:243 due to discussing death and resurrection.¹¹⁸ With such a thematic approach, it might be possible to connect the three together: the narratives of the cow, the man in the desolate town, and Abraham and the birds. Although the Qur'an puts them in the context of death and resurrection while their biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic accounts do not, it has been shown that the Qur'an understands death and resurrection in those narratives metaphorically, especially

with Abraham having children and with his children returning to the land promised. Therefore, it would not be surprising for death and resurrection in the cow narrative also to be understood metaphorically – especially with their possible connection to Ezek. 36:16–38 through Parashat Parah, which discusses the return of Israelite exiles or Diaspora and contextualizes the resurrection scene of Ezekiel 37.

According to both the Bible and the rabbinic tradition, ‘death’ is the chief source of *tum’ah* (impurity).¹¹⁹ Jacob Milgrom states:

The bodily impurities enumerated in the Torah focus on four phenomena: death, blood, semen, and scale-disease. Their common denominator is death. Vaginal blood and semen represent the forces of life; their loss – death. In the case of scale-disease, this symbolism is made explicit: Aaron prays for his stricken sister, ‘Let her not be like a corpse’ (Num. 12:12). Furthermore, scale-disease is powerful enough to contaminate by overhang, and it is no accident that it shares this feature with the corpse (Num. 19:14). The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of all biblically impure skin diseases, symbolizes the death process as much as the loss of blood and semen.¹²⁰

Milgrom continues,

Of all the diachronic changes that occur in the development of Israel’s impurity laws, this clearly is the most significant: the total severance of impurity from the demonic and its reinterpretation as a symbolic system reminding Israel of its imperative to cleave to life and reject death.¹²¹

The Qur’an might understand resurrection in the cow narrative as purification from *tum’ah* or death. Yet this death does not necessarily have to be physical. As the rabbis in the Talmud state, the Israelites became immortal for accepting the Torah but lost this immortality due to the sin of the golden calf. Thus, perhaps the Qur’an even understands this as spiritual death, in which the red cow is undoing the sin of the golden calf that caused such spiritual death.

Many scholars have had different approaches in understanding biblical and rabbinic impurity laws, some emphasizing death and others sin (itself associated with spiritual death). Still others approach it from a hygienic perspective emphasizing the sacredness of the Temple. Vered Noam states:

From Philo of Alexandria to contemporary scholars, a multitude of approaches to understanding the formative concept of purity and impurity in biblical writings have been proposed, with the numerous explanations reflecting the prevailing circumstances, the accepted norms, and the sentiments of their authors no less than they do the world of the Bible. These approaches can be classified according to their underlying perception of impurity. . . . Some of them derive from the naturalistic perception of impurity as an entity, explaining it variously as a reflection of demonic worlds, an expression of death with all that

it entails, or a “side effect” of transition states and human crises. A second approach, meanwhile, proposes a symbolic interpretation that views ritual impurity as a reflection of moral values of sin and expiation. And yet a third approach, at the opposite end of the spectrum, represents an absolute reduction of biblical impurity, interpreting it instrumentally as a system that lacks actual existence or inner content but that serves certain social needs, whether religious or secular, such as hygiene, aesthetics, reinforcing the sacredness of the Temple or the distinctiveness of the Jewish people, strengthening the status of the priesthood, or disputing pagan concepts of holiness.¹²²

In short, in the narrative of the cow the Qur'an is consistent with its other narratives that have been discussed thus far, in which the concepts of death and resurrection are metaphorical.