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INTRODUCTION

Considering all the themes that scholars have explored in combination with the Qur'an – Jesus in the Qur'an, women in the Qur'an, and so forth – the subject of death in the Qur'an has anchored relatively few modern studies.¹ It is a curious ratio because eschatology and the concept of the Day of Resurrection together constitute a major theme in the Qur'an,² and perhaps the theme to which the text is most devoted.³

If the major Qur'anic discourse is on death and resurrection, then by Socratic definition, it is a book of philosophy. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (d. 1860 CE) said,

Death is the real inspiring genius or Musagetes of philosophy, and for this reason Socrates defined philosophy as θανάτου μελέτη [*thanatou meletē*]. Indeed, without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing.⁴

Commenting on Schopenhauer's statement, R. Raj Singh understands from this that, 'Death is described here as not just one among many concerns and issues of philosophy but as *the* business of philosophy.'⁵ Some will debate around the edges, but theology and philosophy are closely intertwined. Ingolf U. Dalferth has sketched their relationships in this way:

Theology is not philosophy, and philosophy is not a substitute for religious convictions. But whereas religion can exist without philosophy, and philosophy without religion, theology cannot exist without recourse to each of the other two.⁶

Plato (d. 347 BCE) narrates that Socrates (d. 399 BCE) defined philosophy as '*meletē thanatou*' (rehearsal for death).⁷ The theological arguments of the Qur'an concentrate greatly on the topic of death and resurrection. Thus, one needs to understand what the Qur'anic philosophy about death and resurrection is.

One of the scholarly works on death in the Qur'an in the last century is Thomas O'Shaughnessy's *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death: A Thematic Study of the Qur'anic Data*.⁸ O'Shaughnessy sifts through possible Syriac sources for the concept of death in the Qur'an.⁹ He asserts that the Qur'an adopts in many

instances a biblical view of death, although the earliest references to death in the Qur'an, according to the chronological order he adopts, are metaphoric:

The subject of death occupies a place of growing frequency and importance in the Qur'an as one passes from the Meccan to the Medinan period. Its earlier occurrences are more often in figures of speech, but these gradually yield to a greater preoccupation with the reality as Muḥammad advances in years. Even a casual paging through the Qur'an will show to what extent it reflects the many-faceted Biblical view of death, more evidently as set forth in the Old Testament but as closer inspection will reveal, also as propounded in the figurative language of the New.¹⁰

One of the great scholarly books written on the topic of death in Islam is *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*,¹¹ in which Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad study how the topic evolved throughout history and through various teachings and theological schools in Muslim traditions. This study, in contrast, does not solely focus on the Muslim tradition, and when it does refer to tradition, it generally uses it as a comparative tool through a critical lens. The aim of this book is to look at the principles of death, life and resurrection in the Qur'an. The intention is not to completely ignore the Muslim tradition but to investigate the definition of death in the Qur'an and any possible subtexts that the Qur'an adopts. The reason for such an approach is simple: investigating the Qur'anic concept; it is not necessarily because Muslim tradition has been viewed by many scholars with a sceptical eye in adequately interpreting the Qur'an, and *sometimes* with good reason; John Wansbrough,¹² Patricia Crone, Michael Cook,¹³ Fred Donner,¹⁴ and Gabriel Reynolds¹⁵ have been among the many who point out such inadequacy.¹⁶ However, it is in an attempt to read the Qur'an for what it is without completely ignoring some of the insights that may also be found from the Muslim tradition, which allows us to appreciate the plethora of interpretations that also already exist within it. In other words, it is an attempt to do some form of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) in Qur'anic hermeneutics and not simply an imitation of it (*taqlīd al-ijtihād*).¹⁷

Indeed, there are numerous legends in circulation, many of which have been drawn on to fill lacunae in Qur'anic interpretation by traditional exegetes. For example, traditional exegetes have misrepresented and to some extent misinterpreted the *Qiblah* passages in the Qur'an by asserting that they are arguing with Jews and Christians about the prophethood of Muḥammad or the superiority of the Ka'bah, when it seems highly likely that the passages are instead alluding to the *Shema* in Deuteronomy and its rabbinic commentary.¹⁸ This sometimes calls into question the reliability of Muslim tradition in the interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁹ Thus, this book treads carefully when comparing Muslim tradition with the Qur'anic text, but still appreciates the diverse and insightful understandings already found from within the tradition.

Patricia Crone is a scholar who has, more recently, discussed resurrection in the Qur'an.²⁰ She mainly focused on the nonbelievers' attitudes towards the Qur'anic concept, yet, like most scholars, took the Qur'anic understanding of bodily

resurrection for granted.²¹ She divides the nonbelievers into a spectrum of attitudes, those unconcerned about the resurrection (perhaps because some believe they will be saved) and those who doubt or deny it.²² Crone identifies Qur'anic passages about those who doubt resurrection using such terms as *rayb* (e.g. Qur'an 22:5), *shakk* (e.g. Qur'an 34:21) or *ẓann* (e.g. Qur'an 28:39).²³

While Crone upholds that the Qur'an does not much discuss other forms of an afterlife or their nature, she particularly endorses the notion that the Qur'an argues for bodily resurrection:

In short, the unbelievers in the Meccan suras are depicted now as believing in the resurrection without paying much attention to it, now as doubting it, and now as denying it outright, rejecting the very idea of life after death. 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.²⁴

She implies two main things: that the Qur'an did not engage with people who believed in different forms of an afterlife, and that it advocates bodily resurrection. However, as is discussed in the first chapter of this book, pre-Islamic Arabia made space for various views of an afterlife, and it is conceivable that Muḥammad might have known many of these views. If the Qur'an did not engage with them, either for or against, it may actually be very telling: the Qur'anic portrayal of what is seemingly a bodily resurrection may not be as literal as one would expect.

Yet one cannot discuss death and resurrection in the Qur'an without also discussing the *nafs*.²⁵ The meaning of this term, whether in the Qur'an or the Bible, has always daunted scholars of the Near East: is it the soul, an embodied self, or an ethereal spirit? It is said that the concept of a disembodied soul comes from ancient Greek philosophy and is foreign to Semitic people. However, Richard C. Steiner has argued that this is not the case and that the Semitic people from the times of the ancient Near East, including the ancient Israelites, had an understanding of a disembodied *nepeš* even before Hellenistic interaction.²⁶ Therefore, this book closely investigates the concept of the *nafs* in the Qur'an to understand further the concept of death and life in the Qur'an.

Other issues this study introduces to readers concern reincarnation and resurrection. These two concepts appear to be distinct philosophies that existed in the ancient world. Eastern philosophies, and even ancient Greek philosophy, embraced various concepts of reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. Contrariwise, ancient Egyptians, the Semitic people, and, with the rise of Zoroastrianism, the Persian culture embraced concepts of resurrection instead. These two great philosophies, reincarnation and resurrection, existed in the Near East by the time the Qur'an was formulated. Therefore, it is imperative to understand such notions.

The traditional view, accepted by most scholars, interprets most Qur'anic passages concerning resurrection as bodily resurrection. For example, Jane Smith states, 'That resurrection at the time of judgment means a resuscitation of the physical body is an accepted reality in Islam and well attested by the Qur'an.'²⁷ While some studies on death in the Qur'an focus on physical death and resurrection, this book analyses the definition of death and resurrection in the Qur'an focusing on the metaphorical and spiritual aspects of death, especially in light of some of the intertextual relationships of some Qur'anic passages with biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic literature. It argues that the Qur'an portrays two different kinds of death and resurrection, that of the body and that of the *nafs*, which may be understood as the body's soul or life force. Therefore, there needs to be a distinction between what the Qur'an describes as the resurrection of the body and what it describes as the resurrection of the *nafs*.

Several passages in the Qur'an appear to allude to bodily resurrection, but many of those passages, including some that are very lucid in their description of resurrection, do not necessarily refer to it in a literal way. Throughout Muslim history, several Muslim philosophers and mystics have interpreted resurrection as being completely spiritual, not bodily.²⁸ Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), for example, rejected the concept of physical resurrection because of its irrationality.²⁹ In some of his works, such as *Kitāb al-najāh* and *Kitāb al-shifā'*, he does concede that it is to be accepted as a doctrine of faith disregarding reason, but in his more esoteric book on metaphysics, *Risālah fil-adwiyah al-qalbiyah*, he completely allegorizes and rejects physical resurrection.

At times, the Qur'an appears to be explicitly talking about people who are spiritually dead, who may be described as walking tombs or, in other words, zombies. Certain Muslim schools of thought have very distinct interpretations of an afterlife that mainstream Muslims consider heretical. In some Ismā'īlī discourse, the resurrection has been understood spiritually, which is the resurrection of the *nafs* (soul) enabling one to understand the esoteric meanings of divine revelation.³⁰ The *Haft bāb* by Ḥassan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātib (d. c. 1242 CE; previously attributed to Ḥassan-i Šabbāḥ) depicts the Ismā'īlī doctrine of resurrection in a spiritual manner when the esoteric understandings of the *sharī'ah* (Islamic law) become manifest.³¹

Setting prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) aside and looking mainly at the Qur'an, we can identify that physical resurrection is *not* what the Qur'an is *always* alluding to in the passages that discuss resurrection. Schools of thought with different interpretations for resurrection do not necessarily need to go out of their way to explain their standpoints.

For the purpose of this book, physical resurrection is defined as dead bodies leaving their graves. The reason this needs to be made explicit is that metaphorical resurrection can also be physical: the resurrection of a city may be metaphorical in the sense of a city being rebuilt and repopulated. Therefore, the main argument this book makes is that passages concerning resurrection in the Qur'an are *not always* physical, and when they are physical, they can still be understood metaphorically, without necessarily denoting bodies leaving their graves. However,

this argument does not imply that Islam does not teach physical resurrection.³² Some Muslim doctrines do not necessarily explicitly trace themselves to the Qur'an, such as the expectation of a Messianic figure. Therefore, even if the argument made is that the Qur'an does not *always* denote physical resurrection, I am not at all arguing that the doctrine of physical resurrection is not Islamic.

Another important finding this book tries to understand is the type of audience with whom the Qur'an is in conversation. Understanding the possible subtexts or oral traditions from biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic traditions open a door in understanding the community with whom the Qur'an engages. It appears that the Jewish community with whom the Qur'an is in dialogue is well-aware of the Torah, rabbinic literature and even Jewish liturgy. This provides us some insights to this community. When analysing Islamic sources about this possible Jewish community, Haggai Mazuz concludes that the Jews, during the earliest years of Islam, were Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews who were observant and held beliefs in accordance with the *midrash* (rabbinic interpretations).³³ While his approach was mainly through Islamic traditional sources and not necessarily the Qur'an, the findings of this book might echo some of his own: the Jewish community with whom the Qur'an is in discussion are well aware of rabbinic tradition, interpretation and liturgy.