

Hell Fire and Paradise Water: Qur'an's Views of the Underworld in Light of its Late Antique Context¹

Tommaso Tesei

The present paper is concerned with the Qur'anic views of the underworld, which will be discussed in light of the cultural context of Late Antiquity. To this purpose, I will focus on the two terms of *ḥufra* and *sarab*, which reciprocally occur in Q 3:103, *ḥufra*, and in Q 18:61, *sarab*. According to Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon*, *ḥufra* means "a hollow, cavity, pit in the ground". As for *sarab*, it is explained as "a subterranean excavation" or more simply as "a tunnel". Therefore, if not synonyms, *ḥufra* and *sarab* belong to the same semantic field and refer to what is underground. However, as I will show, the Qur'an uses these two semantically similar terms to provide quite different views of the underworld. Before going into detail, I should specify that for a methodological choice, the present paper will have little concern with *mufasssirūns'* commentaries about the verses which will be referred to. I will rather investigate the Qur'anic imagery of the underworld in light of some eschatological and cosmological concepts from Late Antiquity. In fact, my aim is not to analyse how the Qur'ān was received after being recognized as Muslim scripture, but rather to study it in relation to the cultural context in which it was originally recited.

The term *ḥufra* occurs near the end of verse 103 of *sūrat āl-ʿImrān*, where the Qur'an states: "You were upon the brink of a pit of Fire, and He delivered you from it; even so God makes clear to you His signs; so haply you will be guided". With this words, the Qur'an aims to show God's ability to save men from damnation through the manifestation of his signs. The words *ʿalā šafā ḥufrat al-nār*, "upon the brink of a pit of Fire", are the first point of interest of this study. The expression *ʿalā šafā*, "upon the brink", confers the idea of the imminent falling and thus strengthens the negative connotation of the whole sentence. The same expression occurs once again in Q 9:109, with quite the same negative connotation: "he who founded his building upon the brink of a crumbling bank that has tumbled with him into the fire of Gehenna". The allusion to the fall into the Gehenna is implicit also in Q 3:103, as the "pit of fire" is doubtlessly related to the place of final punishment. In fact, within the Qur'anic eschatological discourse, *al-nār* is the most common expression to define Hell.

The image of the pit as a way leading down to Hell is not particular to Qur'anic imagery. On the contrary it occurs several times in the OT, where the terms *bôr* (בּוֹר) and *šahaṭ* (שְׁחַת), both meaning "pit", designate the path leading to Sheol, the realm of death (e.g., Ps. 16:10, 30:3, 88:4; Prov. 1:2; Ezk. 31:16). The idiom *yôrê dē-bôr* (יִרְדֵי בּוֹר), "those who go down to the pit", is a common one to designate the descent to Sheol (Ps. 28:1, 143:7; Prov. 1:12; Isa. 38:18; Ezk. 31:14,16, 32:18,24-25,29-30. Cf. the passages where *šahaṭ* replaces *bôr*: Ps. 30:10, 55:24; Ezk. 28:8). At the same time those of *bôr tahtîyôṭ* (בּוֹר תַּחַת־יְוֹת) : Ps. 88:7; Lam. 3:55), "the lowest pit", and *šahaṭ b'li* (שְׁחַת בְּלִי : Isa. 38:17), "the pit of destruction", are used in reference to the Netherworld. In Isa. 14:15, "the depths of the pit" (רִבְתֵי־בְּקוֹר) represent the place where the Day Star is brought down after its failed attempt to scale the mountain of God. A similar tradition is reported in the intertestamentary work known as *I Enoch*, where the patriarch is led to the edges of the Earth where he sees a great pit of fire where the angels who rebelled to God are detained (18:11-19:1). Ps. 55:24 similarly presents the pit as a place of punishment, as the petitioner expresses the wish that God cast the wicked "into the lowest pit" (לְבִאֵר שְׁחַת / εἰς φρέαρ διαφθορᾶς). It might be observed that in the Targum, the expression "lowest pit" is replaced by that of "deepest Gehenna" (גְּהֵנָה עִמְיָקָה), the place of final punishment of sinners. In the *Midrash Tellim* the "lowest pit" is similarly explained as a reference to Gehenna. Ps. 40:2 presents the contrary situation, where the psalmist states that God drew him up from the "desolate pit" (מְבוֹר שְׁאוֹן / ἐκ λάκκου ταλαιπωρίας). Worth remarking are the words the *Midrash Tellim* uses to explain this verse: "I was already on the way that leads to Gehenna, which is called the tumultuous pit and the miry clay, but I prayed and waited for the reward of my worship, and won it, for the Holy One, blessed be He, did not suffer me to sink into Gehenna". Here we can

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glimpse some parallelisms with the theological discourse of Q 3:103, where God saves the righteous from undertaking the wrong path, the pit of fire leading to Gehenna. Very similar concepts to those expressed by the psalmist occur in an hymn found among the scrolls of Qumrân, whose author thanks God “because you saved my life from the pit (תַּהוֹמָה) and from the Sheol of Abaddon” (1Qh^a XI=3, 19). The relationship between the image of the pit and punishment is a main theme also in the NT, especially in the Book of Revelation. According to Rev. 9:1-4, the opening of the “bottomless pit” (φρέατος τῆς ἀβύσσου / Pesh: *b’r-hw d-thwm*’), described as “a great furnace”, is said to precede the end of the World. Quite similar concepts are referred to in apocalyptic literature. In *4 Ezra* (7:36), retained to have been composed during 1st c. CE, the place of final torment is described as “the pit of torment” (*lacus tormenti*) and as “the furnace of Gehenna” (*clibanus gehennae*). In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the apostle sees deep pits where sinners are punished with fire torments. Such imagery strongly influenced the Late Antique vision of Gehenna and more generally of the Netherworld, where the motif of the pit often occurs. The Syriac author Aphrahat uses the metaphor of the rising up from the pit to describe Enoch’s obtention of immortality (*Dem.* IV, 18). In his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem also refers to the pit as a metaphor of Hell (52:22), an image which he refers to also in his *Hymns on Paradise* (6:20; 13:9), *Hymns on the Nativity* (6:6) and *Hymns against Julian* (3:7). In a homily on the Lukan parable of the rich and the poor man (Lk 16:19-31), Narsai similarly describes the place of torment as “the pit of Sheol” (*hmt’ d-šywl*). In his *Homily on Psalm* (33:12), Grigory of Nazianzus describes Hell as “a dip pit, impenetrable darkness; fire without brightness, which has the power to burn but is deprived of light”.

Therefore, it seems that the Qur’anic allusion to a pit of fire leading to the place of punishment is part of a more extended view, largely widespread within the eschatological imagery of Middle Eastern people. The metaphor of the pit leading down to Hell should be in turn related to a more general concept about the link between afterlife and underworld. In both Old and New Testaments, the Netherworld (Sheol/Hades) is constantly described as a subterranean world. At the same time, by the Graeco-Roman period, Extra-Biblical literature associated underworld with Gehenna. These views doubtlessly played a central role in the elaboration of the Late Antique collective imagination about the Netherworld. In many works of Greek and Latin authors as Tertullian (*De Anima*, 55-58), Hippolytus (*Ad. Grecos*, I), and Cyprian (*Ep.* 55:20), as well as in those of their Syriac contemporaries Aphrahat (*Dem.* 8:22; 22:17, 24; cf 6:6), Ephrem (*Nis. Hymns*, 38, 43:14; *Hymns on Par.*, 8:11, 10:14; *Letter to Polibius*, 4, 19), Narsai (*Hom.* 39) and Jacob of Sarug (*Letter to Stephen Bar Sudaili*), the Netherworld is described as a sort of subterranean detention, where the dead wait for the final resurrection and Judgement. At the same time, Gehenna was retained in turn to be located in the depths of the Earth (e.g. BT, *Tamīd* 32b). According to a Jewish tradition found in the *Bava Batra* (*Nezikin*, 3, 84a), the sun, on setting in the evening, passed underground through Gehenna from which it took its own fire. The Qur’an apparently shares this imagery of the underworld. In fact, while not explicitly mentioned, the Qur’anic term *ġahannam* points in this direction. Moreover, it might be observed that, alongside the already explored references in Q 3:103 and 9:109, the motif of the fall into the deep of Gehenna is referred to in Q 104:4. According to this verse, wicked will be plunged into the *hāwīyya*, a term that is differently translated as “pit” or “abyss”, but which is commonly accepted to refer to the depths of the Earth.

Therefore, the Qur’anic image of the underworld so far emerged appears to be marked by a strong negative connotation, and to be characterized by its relationship with Hell and with its main element: the fire. However, this negative view cannot be extended to the whole Qur’an. In fact, other passages suggest a positive connotation of the subterranean world, which is not related to Hell and its fire, but to Paradise and its life-giving water. With this I arrive to the second part of my paper and to the term *sarab*. *Sarab* occurs as an accusative of circumstance, *saraban*, within a narrative concerning Moses’ journey to the “the junction of the two seas” (*maġma‘ al-baḥrayn*). The Qur’ān states that Moses is able to reach this place after hearing the account of a fish which “took its way in the sea as in a tunnel”, *fa-ttaḥaḍa sabīlahu fī ‘l-baḥr saraban*. The cryptic idea of a kind of subterranean excavation in the sea has engendered diverse explanations by both modern interpreters and Muslim commentators. To solve this conceptual problem, the *mufasssirūn* usually

supposed a kind of miraculous event or divine intervention which provoked the solidification of the sea or the blocking of its running. Cristoph Luxenberg has recently proposed a spelling mistake to be at the base of the reading of سربا (*saraban*) which, according to him, should rather be read as شريآ, *šaryā*, a Syriac participle adjective meaning “freely”. Hereafter, I propose my own interpretation of *saraban* on the basis of the study of the subtext of the Qur’ānic passage in question. As I will argue, with *saraban* is meant a very specific idea concerning the course of the rivers which according to Gen. 2:10-14 flow out from Eden and that were thought to travel under the sea to reach the inhabited part of the world.

Taken by itself the curious episode of the fish’s escape told at v. 61 is difficult to interpret. However, as it is known, the dynamic acquires more sense if examined in light of a legend concerning Alexander’s journey to the Land of the Blessed, during which the hero fails to bathe in the water of life. In particular, the fish’s escape narrative as told in the Qur’ān represents an allusion to the reviving of a salt fish after Alexander’s cook washes it in the water of life. Western scholars almost unanimously consider this legend to be the subtext of the Qur’ānic account. Several sources from Late Antiquity show that the motif of the water of life was often paralleled with that of the paradisiacal rivers (e.g., Philostorgius, *Church History*, III, 10; *Syriac Alexander Song*, ed. G. J. Reinink, 44-47, cf. Rev. 22:1; *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori*, ed. E. W. Brooks, 64, cf. Lev. 14:51-53, 15:12-14, 2K. 5:10-14). Thus in a Jewish version of the Alexander legend, found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Tamīd* 32a-32b), Alexander is said to reach the Garden of Eden by following the watercourse in which he washed the salt-fish. This Talmudic version of the Alexander legend reflects the simple idea that the earthly Paradise could be reached by following the course of the four rivers. In fact, sources certify that during Late Antiquity it was a widespread idea that Paradise was a physical place situated across the ocean encircling the Earth (e.g., Ephraem, *Hymns on Paradise*, II, 6; the *Cave of Treasures*, rec. II, 3.15; Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, II, 24; *Syriac Alexander Legend*). In accordance with this concept, it was generally assumed that the rivers flowing out from Paradise passed *under the Ocean* to reach the inhabited part of the world. This idea goes back at least to Ephraem, according to whom the rivers enter the sea surrounding Paradise “as it were down a water pipe (‘*yk d-mn qtryn*’) and after passing through the ground beneath the sea they reach this earth” (*Commentary on Genesis*, II, 6). The same idea of a river which flows out from Paradise and travels underground beneath the Ocean is expressed by Philostorgius (*Church History*, III, 10), Severian of Gabala (*Homilies on Creation and Fall*, V), Epiphanius of Salamis (*Ancoratus*, 58:1-8) and Augustine (*Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 7:14; cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, I, 12). In the same way, Cosmas Indicopleustes considers the four rivers to reach the inhabited world by following a subterranean course under the Ocean (*Christian Topography*, II, 81). In his *Homilies on Creation* (I, 395-6), the Syriac theologian and poet Narsai (d. 502 CE) refers to a very similar concept about the course of the rivers from Paradise, which – he states - is “like a tunnel in the sea” (*w-’yk silwn’ b-ym*’).

The idea of a tunnel or a subterranean passage under the sea expressed in Q 18:61 appears less cryptic when considering the above cosmological concepts from Late Antiquity. On the one hand, we have the identification of the water of life with the rivers of Paradise, a motif that had already been introduced in the framework of the Alexander legend, as its Talmudic version certifies. On the other hand, several authors from Late Antiquity report that these rivers were thought to travel underground beneath the sea in their course from Paradise to the inhabited part of the world. On these grounds, it seems likely that the Qur’ānic expression *saraban* is meant to describe the subterranean passage under the sea, which the fish takes once resurrected by the miraculous water of the paradisiacal rivers. This interpretation is consistent with the cosmological concepts alluded to in the Qur’anic passage where *saraban* is found. In particular, I refer to the Qur’ānic notion of *mağma’ al-baḥrayn*, “the junction of the two seas”, which in Q 18:61 describes the place where the fish is said to have miraculously escaped through a tunnel. Heidi Toelle and Angelika Neuwirth convincingly argue that these two seas should be taken as describing the two bodies of water which, in the Biblical cosmological imagery, were retained to be located above and below the firmament (cf. Gen. 1:6-8). This view can be strengthened by quoting a passage of an homily by Narsai, who

in his poetic description about the creation of the firmament states: “Oh balance which divided the great water cistern and gathered it *in two seas (tryn ymmyn)*, in the heaven and in the deep” (*Hom. on Creation*, 1:54). As Toelle correctly observes, within the Qur’ānic cosmological imagery, the heavenly ocean represents the source of all the fresh waters of the Earth, including the rivers. From this perspective, one may imagine the *mağma’ al-baḥrayn* as the place at the edges of the world where the heavenly and terrestrial oceans met, and from where the fresh waters reached the Earth passing through an underground course, alluded to by the expression *saraban*. In his discussion about the third day of creation, the anonymous author of the *Cave of Treasures* provides us with a description about how the scenario of the subterranean course of fresh waters was imagined during Late Antiquity: “Waters massed in the seas, beneath, inside and above the Earth. And God made inside the Earth, underneath, passages (*m’brt’*), veins (*šryñ’*), currents (*rht’*), torrents (*nhl’*) and cracks (*nqb’*) for the circulation of the waters [...] Now, in its low part, the Earth is like a sponge traversed by the water, and it is in this way because it is set and laid on the water” (rec. I, 1:14-16. Cf. Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 38).

The vision of the subterranean world which emerges from this Qur’anic passage is strikingly different from that expressed in Q 3:103 concerning the pit of fire. In fact, the reference to the subterranean world as the place through which Paradise water flows, is quite opposite to its description as the site where Hell fire is found. How to interpret this dichotomous view? This apparently contradictory scenario is consistent with the Late Antique cultural concept about the underworld, which was simultaneously credited with the twofold connotation of place of death and fertility. In fact, if on the one hand, the world from below was associated with both Hades and Gehenna, on the other hand, it was retained to be the site from which fresh living waters poured out. It is worth remarking that both Augustine and Ephrem – that one may take as representing both Western and Eastern points of view – simultaneously relate the underworld to the realm of death and to the subterranean course of the rivers of Paradise. The attribution to the subterranean world of such diverse connotations is not the consequence of a view developed during Late Antiquity, but going back to more ancient times. Babylonian sources already certify a similar confusion between the realm of death and the Apsû, the ocean believed to lie behind the Earth and to provide it with fresh water. The OT attests a similar twofold view about Tehom, the sea that in Biblical cosmology surrounds and underlies the Earth. In fact, if several Biblical passages describe Tehom as source of the rivers (...), elsewhere Tehom is related to the Netherworld (Jon. 2:6; Ez. 26:19; Job 26:5; 38:16-17; Ps. 71:20; cf. Wis. Sol. 16:13). It is worth noting that the Greek term ἄβυσσος, which the LXX uses to translate the Hebrew *tehôm*, in the NT came to designate the abode of the dead (Rev. 9:1, 20:1, 3).

As it often happens, cultural concepts are reflected in myths and legends. Therefore, it is not surprising that the waters of the subterranean world are often credited with extraordinary properties. A well known example is that of Achilles' invulnerability, that he acquires after dipping into the waters of the infernal river Styx. However, the most notable case is that found in the Syriac version of the Alexander legend of the water of life, to which the Qur'anic passage discussed above is related, and which was composed at the very same time of the period assumed for the predication of Muḥammad (i.e., between 630 and 635). As Reinink correctly argues, the Land of Darkness in which Alexander seeks the water of life represents the Netherworld. In fact the term *hmt* which designates the dark land should be related to that of *hmn* which denotes the realm of death. To conclude, the Qur'anic view of the subterranean world reflects the imagery of the cultural context in which it was first recited. The consideration of the knowledge, the beliefs and more generally of the collective imagination of Muḥammad's contemporaries is of capital importance to reconstruct the point of view of the Qur’ānic audience and thus to understand how the Qur’ān meant to be understood.