

The Qur'ānic Netherworld in Light of Some Eschatological and Cosmological Concepts from Late Antiquity¹

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Eschatological expectations doubtlessly represent a central point of Qur'ānic theology. The belief that at the end of time God will raise the dead, judge their deeds and redistribute rewards and punishments, represents one of the doctrines the Qur'ān most often exhorts its audience to accept. As in the case of many religious texts from Late Antiquity, the Qur'ānic theological agenda constantly deals with the fate of humanity after the resurrection and Judgement. At the same time, differently from most of these works, Qur'ānic eschatology is little concerned with the moment which separates death from the final events. In fact, the Qur'ān is very elusive on the question of the interim fate of the dead and contains few references which may be taken as addressing this theological problem. As it often happens, what is not found in the Qur'ān does occur in Qur'ānic exegesis. However, for a methodological choice, this presentation will have little concern with *mufasssirūns'* views about the destiny of the dead while waiting for the final Judgement. I will, instead, investigate the Qur'ānic imagery of the interim state 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. To refer to the interim abode of the dead I will adopt the definition of Netherworld, in order to distinguish it from Hell, which connotes the place of final punishment. The presentation will be divided into two parts, the first dealing with eschatology and the second with cosmology.

[1] The *locus classicus* for the question of the Qur'ānic Netherworld is at vv. 99-100 of *sūrat al-mu'minūn*, which state:

“Till, when death comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, return me; haply I shall do righteousness in that I forsook.' Nay, it is but a word he speaks; and there; behind them, is a barrier until the day that they shall be raised up” [Trans. Arberry].

Muslim *mufasssirūn* considerably speculated on the meaning of these two verses, and particularly on the term *barzah*, that describes the barrier said to stand behind the dead until the day of resurrection. This term is differently explained as the space between the worlds of the living and the dead, or as the lapse of time between death and resurrection (e.g., Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XII, 150). Moreover, the concept of *barzah* came to be frequently associated with the copious Muslim traditions about the punishment in the grave (e.g., Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr*, V, 38-9). On the basis of Qur'ānic evidence only, one may infer that the Qur'ān conceives the place beyond the *barzah* as a kind of detention where the dead reside until the day of resurrection. Furthermore, the case of the sinner praying to God to return in order to act righteously (cf. Q 32:12) suggests that the Qur'ān considers the souls of the dead to be already recognized in the Netherworld as sinners or righteous. In other words, it seems that in Qur'ānic eschatology the dead pass through a sort of preliminary judgement, which precedes the Final Judgement.

This scenario parallels most of Late Antique descriptions of the Netherworld. In fact, alongside the differences in details, the picture of the interim abode of the dead provided by most authors from Late Antiquity describes the souls of the dead as waiting for their resurrection in a physical place, usually described as a kind of detention located underground.² Greek authors mostly refer to this place with the NT definition of Hades (ᾍδης), while Syriac writers usually adopt the term Sheol

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2 For example, Tertullian describes the Netherworld as “an enormous subterranean space” (*De Anima*, 55), an image which is recalled also by Ephrem in several passages of his *Nisibene Hymns* (e.g., 36:11-14; 37:9-11; 50:10ff.; 63:20f.).

(šywl), which in the OT designates the realm of death (שְׁאוֹל). Such location was considered to be an interim abode where all the dead, independently of their behaviour during the life-time, waited for the final Judgement.³ However, at the same time, it was commonly accepted that the dead were recognized as sinners or righteous already in the interim state.

Many authors, such as Tertullian (*De Anima*, 55-58), Hippolytus (*Ad. Grecos*, I), and Cyprian (*Ep.* 55:20), considered the dead to receive a preliminary reward or punishment. In some passages, the Qur'ān apparently conceives a similar idea, as it seems that some sinners are in the fire even before the Judgement (e.g., Q 40:46-49, 71:25). Finally, it might be observed that the Qur'ānic imagery of the Netherworld appears to be strongly influenced by Syriac theology. In fact, in the works of the Syriac writers Aphrahat (Ex. 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*) as well as in those attributed to Isaac of Antioch (ed. Bedjan, 90:13; 276:15; 366:10; 368:5; 369:4; 724:4), the state of the dead in the Netherworld is described as a kind of sleep, the resurrection as a waking and the final punishment of sinners as a second death. Such imagery is paralleled by those verses in which the Qur'ān refers to the waking from sleep as a metaphor of resurrection (e.g., Q 2:259, 36:52, 18:9-26, 23:112-114), and to the second death as the final punishment of sinners (e.g., Q 37:58-59, 40:11, 35, 56).

Thus, it seems that the scenario described in Q 23:99-100 follows the Late Antique imagery of the Netherworld in its broad outlines. However, the closest relationship between the former and the latter is to be sought in the idea expressed at v. 100 about the impossibility of returning from the realm of death to remedy the sins accomplished during one's lifetime. We find a parallelism to this idea in the apocalyptic work known as *4 Ezra*, probably composed during 1st c. CE. According to its anonymous author(s), until the day of Judgement the souls of sinners are condemned to be subject to seven different torments. Among these, the second listed is particularly interesting for this study since it is concerned with sinners' consciousness of their inability to return to act righteously (VII, 80-82). Here we can glimpse a similarity with the sinner of the Qur'ān who is not allowed to go back to the world of the living to remedy his sins. A quite similar concept occurs in a famous parable found in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 16:19-31), in which the post-mortem destinies of a rich and a poor man are presented as reversing their terrestrial conditions. In fact, while the rich man will await the final Judgement in torment, the poor man will sit at the side of Abraham, near a source of fresh water. At the end of the parable, the rich begs Abraham to send the poor to warn his family, so that they will not also come into that place of torment. However, Abraham rejects the supplication saying that if his family does not believe even the prophets then they will not believe the dead (Lk 16:27-31). The dynamic described in the Lukan parable seems to be recalled by the Qur'ānic passage discussed here: in both cases a sinner asks to return to the world, or that another dead returns in his place, in order to act righteously or to prevent another from acting impiously. In both cases the request is denied. The parallel is still more close when considering a homily that Narsai wrote around the story found in the parable. In fact, the Syriac poet adds the following words to Abraham's negative answer to send the poor back to the rich's family:

“A strong barrier (*syg rb'*) rises in front of the faces of the dead * and none among them can break it because of its solidity. * Insurmountable is the bulwark (*šwr'*) which death built up in front of the faces of the dead, * why do you ask for something whose accomplishment is impossible to be allowed?”.

It might be observed that the term *šūrā*, “bulwark”, that Narsai uses in this passage, also occurs in another allusion to the Lukan parable found in a hymn by Ephrem. In fact, Ephrem describes the barrier beyond which sinners are confined as a “bulwark of water” (*šwr' d-my*; *Nis. Hymns*, 10:12). Furthermore, the idea of the Netherworld as surrounded by bulwarks also occurs in a homily by Jacob of Sarug, who defines Sheol as “high-walled” (*rmt šwr'*. *On the Veil of Moses Face*, 350).

3 See for example: Tertullian, *De Anima*, 55; Aphrahat, *Demonstrationes*, 8:22; 20; Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* (see references above); Isaac of Antioch (ed. Bedjan, 366:3; 368:5; 369:4).

Narsai's reference to a barrier that prevents the dead from returning to the world marks a quite precise correspondence with the Qur'ānic *barzah*. Of course, with this I do not mean that Narsai's homily represents a source for the Qur'ānic passage, but rather, in its brief discussion on the interim state the Qur'ān follows some theological trends widespread during Late Antiquity. From this perspective, it might be observed that the Lukan parable seems to be alluded to in another Qur'ānic passage. In fact, the unfulfilled request of being granted water (Lk 16:24-26), that the rich addresses to the poor, seems to be recalled in Q 7:50 that describes a similar situation, in which sinners ask the righteous in vain for water. Moreover, the *hiḡāb* that in this same Qur'ānic passage is said to lie between sinners and righteous can be compared to the great chasm that Abraham says to separate the rich from the poor (Lk 16:27). The Lukan parable exercised a lasting influence on the Christian imagery of the Netherworld and it is quoted by almost every Late Antique author who wrote about the afterlife. Thus, it would not be surprising if, as many texts from Late Antiquity, the Qur'ān also included some elements of the parable in the elaboration of its eschatological discussion.

[2] With this I arrive at the second part of my presentation concerning the Qur'ānic relationship with the Late Antique cosmological imagery of the Netherworld. Alongside Q 23:99-100, the term *barzah* occurs in two other Qur'ānic passages (25:53, 55:19), where it designates a barrier between the two cosmic seas of sweet and salt water. *Mufasssirūn* usually do not relate the two diverse meanings of the term to one another, and separately explain the verses in which the term *barzah* occurs. However, as I will show, the twofold meaning of the word is consistent with some concepts of Late Antique "eschatological cosmology".

Related to the cosmological notion of *barzah* is that of *hiḡr mahḡūr*, "ban forbidden". In fact, Q 25:53 indicates the "ban forbidden" to divide in turn – as the *barzah* – the two cosmic seas. Moreover, vv. 21-22 of the same *sūrat* state that "ban forbidden!" are the words the angels say while barring the sinners the way to Paradise. Therefore, as well as the *barzah*, the *hiḡr mahḡūr* seems to have the twofold function of cosmological and eschatological partition. It might be observed that while the two seas are said to be separated by these partitions, the Qur'ān states that they also meet somewhere. This place is called *maḡma' al-baḡrayn*, the "junction of the two seas", and it is where the well known episode of the encounter between Moses and an Servant of God takes place (Q 18:60-65). As I have argued in a recent work, the notion of *maḡma' al-baḡrayn* indicates the place where the mountain of Paradise was thought to be located. A good example to support this view is represented by the Qur'ānic account of a fish that escaped through a tunnel in the sea in this place. The cryptic idea of a tunnel in the sea represents a precise allusion to a cosmological concept about the course of the rivers of Paradise (Gen. 2:10-14). In fact, the paradisiacal rivers were thought to reach the inhabited part of the world by flowing through tunnels under the sea. From this perspective, the Qur'ānic sentence "and it took its way in the sea as in a tunnel" (*fa-ttaḡaḡa sabīlahu fī 'l-baḡr saraban*), marks an almost full correspondence with Ephraem's words "as it were down a water pipe" (*'yk d-mn qtryn*), through which the Syriac author describes the entry of the rivers in the sea surrounding Paradise, or, still more strikingly, with Narsai's statement that the course of the paradisiacal rivers is "like a tunnel in the sea" (*yk silwn' b-ym*).

Therefore, it seems that the zones related to the two cosmic seas occupy a central place within the Qur'ānic "eschatological cosmology". But where should these two seas be located within the Qur'ānic image of the shape of the Universe? The Qur'ān cryptic descriptions about the two seas generated diverse explanations by Muslim commentators, most of which are not totally plausible. Heidi Toelle and Angelika Neuwirth convincingly argue that the Qur'ānic sweet and salt oceans 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).

Therefore, the *barzah* should be considered as a barrier marking the border between the terrestrial and celestial seas and thus imagined as located at the edges of the world, where in Late Antique cosmological imagery heaven and Earth, and the respective terrestrial and celestial oceans, were thought to intersect. Actually, it is important to remark that such location coincides with the place where the realm of death is located in the important intertestamentary work known as *I Enoch* (17:5-6; cf. 22), and in the Jewish and Christian apocalypses of *Paul* (31) of *Zephaniah* (4:3) and of *Abraham* (rec. A 11:1-4; rec. B 10:1-11:10). In fact, the protagonists of these works are said to be led to the places where souls rest before Judgement, which are found at the edges of the world near the point where heaven and Earth meet.

The Qur’ānic scenario about the *barzah* and the two seas it divides appears to be consistent with this cosmology of the Netherworld. As in the above apocalypses, the Qur’ān seems to refer to a place located at the edges of the world, near the intersection between heaven and Earth, where the post-mortem abode of the dead is located. Moreover, it is worth focusing on the possible particular relation between the place beyond the *barzah* and the cosmic body of salt water found below the firmament. This terrestrial sea is easily identifiable with the ocean that, according to the Biblical cosmology, surrounds and underlies the Earth. In fact, in another homily Narsai addresses it by its Biblical name of Tehom (תְּהוֹם : *thwm'*; *Hom. On Creation*, 3:325). It is important to observe that in several passages of the OT, Tehom is related to the Netherworld (e.g., Jon. 2:6; Ez. 26:19). The Book of Job clearly describes Sheol, the realm of death, as lying beneath the subterranean ocean upon which the Earth disk floats (26:5; 38:16-17). In the Book of Psalms, Tehom is described as the abyss from which the dead can be raised by God (71:20; cf. Wis. Sol. 16:13), an idea repeated in more vivid terms in a hymn found among the scrolls of Qumrān (1Qh^a XI). The concept linking the terrestrial ocean to the Netherworld is still more striking when examining the Greek term ἄβυσσος, that the LXX uses to translate the Hebrew *tehôm*, and that in the NT came to designate the interim abode of the dead (Rev. 9:1, 20:1, 3). In Romans 10:6-7, Paul sets the descent into the abyss in opposition to the ascent to heaven. It might be observed that the Peshitta translates Paul's words εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον, “into the abyss”, as *lathūmā da-šyūl*, literally: “in the Tehom [i.e. the abyss] of Sheol”. The adding of the words *da-šyūl*, “of Sheol”, clearly points out that according to the Peshitta, the abyss Paul refers to is doubtlessly connected to the realm of death. Therefore, in light of these observations, it is extremely meaningful that in the Qur’ān the *barzah* lying behind the dead until their resurrection also represents the border for the terrestrial ocean, which in Biblical literature is constantly associated with the realm of death.

To summarize, it seems that the few Qur’ānic allusions to the interim state of the dead are consistent with the Late Antique imagery about the Netherworld, from both eschatological and cosmological perspectives. At the same time, the Qur’ān totally opposes the theological trends of Late Antique eschatology, where the discussion about the Netherworld occupies a central place. Syriac Christianity confers a special importance to this topic, and the interim abode of the dead is often described with much more details than the place of the final punishment (the Gehenna). On the contrary, the Qur’ān demonstrates little interest in the question of the moment separating death from the final events, and concentrates most of its eschatological discourse around the places of final punishment or reward, Paradise and Hell. How to explain the Qur’ān counter-current tendencies on this point? The answer to this question is probably to be sought in the historical context in which it was first recited, and thus in the theological expectations that it was intended to fulfil. Sources contemporaneous to the very same period assumed for the predication of Muḥammad demonstrate a widespread proliferation of apocalyptic sentiments among the population of the Middle East, as a consequence of the bloody conflict between the Byzantine and the Sassanid empires. The sack of Jerusalem in 614 seemed to confirm the prophecy found in the Gospel of Luke, according to which the end of the world would have been preceded by the siege of the holy city (Lk 21:25). At the same time the devastating invasions of nomad populations passed in

Anatolia through the Caucasus, had been identified with the final sortie of the eschatological peoples of Gog and Magog, retained to have been confined until that moment beyond the mythical barrier built up by Alexander. Western scholars have suggested that Muḥammad was convinced that the end of the world was very close. According to Paul Casanova, this was the reason for the Prophet's failure to designate a successor. Such views appear to be quite speculative, because of the uncertain historical value of the reports in the traditional biography of Muḥammad. However, in light of the above traced historical context, it seems plausible that the audience to which the Qur'ān was first recited had a particular interest in eschatology and the final events. In this case, it would not be surprising if the Qur'ān had more interest in elaborating an eschatological discourse centred around the places of final reward or punishment, than to discuss the brief lapse of time which was thought to separate the dead from their resurrection and judgement.