

Background article: Beliefs, Life after death

Life after death

Islam believes that all human beings who follow God's guidance by treading the path, the Shari'a, that has been laid out for them, are capable of living an ethical life. There is nothing flawed in the human make-up and God does not limit salvation to 'an elect', but it is open to all. This life is not all there is. It is only a testing ground and preparation for the life hereafter. This is the true and abiding abode of human beings. Every human being who becomes truly the servant of God in all things can rely upon the mercy of God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:286]. This life is a test that prepares us for death, which is inevitable [Q. 28:88; 3:185]. Death is the point of transition to the afterlife, or *akhira*.

Every human being has two angels (*Kiraman* and *Katibin*) assigned to them to record their good and bad deeds throughout their lives [Q. 82:10-12]. It is a mercy from God that good deeds are written down as soon as the intention is formulated, whilst bad deeds are not written until after the act has been performed, thus the intention to carry out a bad deed does not in itself incur a penalty. These records will be brought out on the Day of Judgement. When we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do to affect our records of good or bad deeds – except for three things that we can leave behind us. Upright children full of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) can be an on-going credit to us after we die. If we do something for education, as a teacher, or through writing a book, or contributing to a library, the knowledge goes on spreading long after we are dead. Finally, we can establish a charitable trust (*waqf*) to go on doing good for later generations.

As soon as human beings are buried and the mourners have filled in the grave and left, the angels of the interrogation, Munkar and Nakir, appear. They ask the dead person: Who is your Lord? What religion did you follow? and Who was your prophet? This is followed by a foretaste of the joys of heaven or the torments of hell. If heaven, the grave expands, becomes light and airy and is filled with the sweet scents of heaven. If hell, the grave contracts, becomes dark and cold, and is filled with the stench of hell.

Life in the grave, or *barzakh*, is understood in Islam as a timeless state in another dimension, in which one awaits the resurrection [Q. 23:100]. Some Muslims believe that they can perform pious acts in the name of the person who has died and thus assist them during their time in *barzakh*. The state of *barzakh* is difficult fully to understand. After death one enters into another realm that lies beyond our powers to describe. On the one hand, it is real and is to be feared, or awaited, but on the other hand, Muslims know that if one digs up a dead body some time later, the process of decay will have taken place.

Our human language and knowledge break down when we try to describe what happens beyond death. One way of glimpsing this is to recall the *mi'raj* or night journey and ascent to heaven of Muhammad. Muhammad was taken from Makka to

Jerusalem and from there ascended to heaven where he had an audience with God. All this took place in a single instant. Yet the tradition tells us that on the way to Jerusalem, Muhammad passed the grave of Moses and saw Moses there in prayer. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Muhammad was greeted by all the earlier prophets, including Moses, and he led them in prayer. After his initial audience with God, Muhammad met Moses in heaven and held conversation with him. That is three meetings with Moses in three quite different contexts all in a single instant. In this way we can see that something that happens after death can be both 'real' and beyond our earthly comprehension.

The End of Time

Before the end of the world, there will be a period of time known as the End of Time. Nobody knows how long this will last, but at the start, the Rightly-Guided One, *al-Mahdi*, will appear to begin a rule of justice on the earth. For the Shi'a, *al-Mahdi* is identified as the returned Twelfth Imam, who is currently in occultation. As far as the Sunnis are concerned, the identity of *al-Mahdi* is unknown as he has yet to be born and identified. Over time, many have falsely claimed to be the *Mahdi* as a way of rallying Muslims to their cause. One example would be the Mahdi of Sudan (d. 1885), who fought the British for independence.

Jesus will also return to the earth at this time to resume his one and only earthly life and, with *al-Mahdi*, to lead the great battle of good against evil. The forces of evil will be led by the Great Impostor – *al-Dajjal*. Jesus and *al-Mahdi* will lead all true believers in this battle and will be victorious over *al-Dajjal* and the evil he represents. They will then rule the world for a period of time in complete obedience to the will of God, that is, in the state of *islam*. During this time Jesus will be able to do all those things that were not possible during the first part of his earthly life. At the end of this time, Jesus will die and will be buried alongside Muhammad in Madina, where his grave-space awaits him. This will be the signal for the end of the world.

At the end of the world, all humans and other creatures that are then alive will die. Tradition has it that this will be followed by a bleak period of unknown duration. Then will come the sign for the general resurrection. The angel Israfil will sound the trumpet to signal the resurrection. All will rise from their graves and be clothed in 'new bodies' [Q. 56:60-61]. Every single person will stand alone before God as judge and be held to account for their actions [Q. 23:99-101; 35:18]. This will be the final judgement.

The Final Judgement

On that day, no-one will be held responsible for the sins of another, blame cannot be offloaded and merit cannot be transferred to anyone else [Q. 82:19]. There will be no place to hide anything. Everything will be known by God and must be acknowledged. The records kept by the recording angels will be produced and each person will be weighed in the balance of God's justice [Q. 84:7-12]. The tradition is that every good

deed will count ten times more than every bad deed. This is a clear indication that God's wrath is overcome and justice is tempered by mercy. This can be seen by two Hadith:

When God decreed the creation, he pledged himself by writing in his book, which is with him: my mercy shall overwhelm my wrath.

Almighty God has said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon me and ask of me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face me, giving me no partner, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it.

The prophets too will be present at the judgement and will appear before God to testify as witnesses. God, as an act of mercy, will invite the prophets to plead on behalf of their followers. Muhammad will be invited to intercede for Muslims; indeed most Muslims believe that he can intercede for them with God now, before the Day of Judgement. Some believe that many holy people, e.g., the Imams and the Friends of God (*waliullah*), may have a share in intercession, with God's permission. Once the actions of each person are weighed in the balance, they will be sent to heaven or hell. There is no third option.

The Qur'an tells us that heaven and hell are beyond our earthly capacity to understand [Q. 32:17]. Heaven is most often referred to as The Garden, or *al-Jannah*, in which we will be in the presence of God. The Qur'an uses images of heaven that are not only spiritual: joy and peace, gardens with running streams, food without labour, wonderful companions, and "whatever souls desire" [Q. 88:2-16; 36:57]. Some scholars have interpreted these images as figurative rather than literal, basing this on a Hadith that speaks of heaven as a state that no human eye has ever seen or human ear heard, and which has not been imagined by the human heart. Heaven is as difficult for us to imagine as it must be for a caterpillar to imagine the life of a butterfly.

Hell has many descriptions and names in the Qur'an. The most commonly used are terms of fire, e.g., *al-Nar*. The common theme is of unimaginable torment and loss.

The question was asked by some: Is hell eternal? Some scholars have argued on the basis of some verses in the Qur'an that there may be some who are sent there 'only for a time' to be purged from their sins, after which the mercy of God will admit them into heaven [Q. 11:106-108]. However the Qur'an states explicitly that those who die unrepentant of *shirk*, or maintaining that God shares divinity with any being or thing, will never be forgiven [Q. 4:48].