

About Al-Barzakh And The Soul's Life After Death

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Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, Under Commentary of Surah 'Al-Baqara: Verses 153 – 157

“And do not speak of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead; nay, (they are) alive, but you do not perceive” (2: 154).

Some exegetes have said that when the verse says that the martyrs are alive, it actually means that their good names will continue for ever and their heroism will always be remembered with gratitude. Their argument is as follows:

“The verse is addressed to the Muslims, who already believe in Allah, His Messenger and the Day of Judgment; they are also sure of the life hereafter. They have accepted the call of truth, and have already heard a lot of verses which speak of the Resurrection. They know that a man's life does not end with death. How could they speak of the martyrs as dead? Moreover, this verse affirms only about the martyrs that they are alive; and describes it as their especial excellence vis-à-vis other believers and the unbelievers. But we know that life after death is not confined to one group, it is a general phenomenon, which covers the whole mankind. Therefore, the life mentioned here must be something special, which is reserved for those who are slain in the way of Allah – and that is their eternal name and ever-lasting fame.”

But this interpretation is unacceptable, because of the following reasons:

First: The life which they have mentioned is not real life; it is an imaginary thing, which has no relation

with reality. Such unreal and imaginary things do not deserve to be included in Divine Speech. Allah calls to reality, to truth; and says:

“And what is there after the truth but error?” (10:32).

Of course, Ibrahim (‘a) had prayed to Allah:

“And make for me a truthful tongue among the posterity” (26:84).

But what he meant by “a truthful tongue” was continuation of his true mission after him; he did not mean only that his good name be remembered and his praise be sung by coming generations.

Of course, such imaginary exegesis, such false interpretation is more in line with materialists’ thinking. They believe that soul is a material thing, life, is a development of matter; once a man dies the life comes to an end, there is nothing to continue after death; as such, there is no life hereafter. But applying that idea to sociology, they encountered a great difficulty:

The fact is that man by nature believes in continuation of life after death, his instinct tells him that there is happiness and unhappiness in the other world where he goes after death; and if he wants to enjoy happiness there, he will have to sacrifice many comforts of this life. This is especially true about great affairs and ideals which cannot be established except when their supporters and adherents are willing to die for them, to sacrifice their lives for the cause. They have to die so that others may live.

Now, the dilemma of the atheists and materialists was this: If death is the end of life, if man, after his death, is lost for ever, then why should he sacrifice his life so that others may live? Why should he deprive himself of the comforts and enjoyments which he can easily get through injustice and tyranny? Just to let others live in peace? What has he got to gain by his sacrifice? Nothing. No sensible man gives something if he is not getting something in return. Human nature rejects the concept of giving without receiving, of leaving something without getting something in exchange. It rejects the idea of dying to enable others to live, the notion of denying oneself the enjoyment of this short life so that others may enjoy it.

When the materialists realized the trouble they were in, they tried to make up this shortcoming by inventing these imaginary gains which had no existence except in their own minds. They said: A man, emancipated from fetters of superstitions and myths, must sacrifice his life for his country and for other noble goals; this sacrifice will make him immortal because his good name and widespread fame will remain alive for ever.

Likewise, he should deny himself some enjoyments of life so that others may benefit from those things. In this way, society and civilization will remain on right track and the social justice will reign supreme. And that man, because of his sacrifice, will get a noble and sublime life. Would that I knew who will enjoy that noble life when the man himself is dead, when his physical body has perished, and with it have

gone all traces of life including perceptions and feelings? Who will then feel and enjoy that “noble life”? Isn't it just a delirious raving?

Second: The last phrase of the verse, “*but you do not perceive*,” does not agree with that explanation. If that was the meaning of “life”, Allah should have said: nay, they are alive because their good name will remain for ever, and people will always sing their praises generation after generation. Obviously, such description would have proved much more satisfying and encouraging, and would have cheered them up to a greater degree than the phrase, “but you do not perceive”.

Third: A similar verse – which in a way also explains it – describes the promised life in such a way as not to allow that interpretation:

“And reckon not those who are killed in Allah’s way as dead. Nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord” (3: 169).

“Rejoicing in what Allah has given them out of His grace, and they rejoice for the sake of those who, (being left) behind them have not yet joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve” (3: 170).

“They rejoice on account of favour from Allah and (His) grace, and that Allah will not waste the reward of the believers” (3: 171).

Clearly, it is a description of a real, not imaginary, life.

Fourth: It is not difficult to accept that some Muslims, in the middle of the Prophet’s era, were unaware of the life after death. What was very clearly mentioned in the Qur’an was the Resurrection on the Day of Judgment. But so far as the life of al-Barzakh (الْبَرْزَخُ) = the period between death and the Day of Judgment) is concerned, it has been described in the Qur’an, but not so clearly as not to leave any room for ambiguity. That is why not all the Muslims are agreed on this subject – even today some of them do not accept it. (These are those who believe that soul is not immaterial; that man perishes on death; and Allah will raise him again for judging him on the Day of Judgment).

This verse, therefore, could have been revealed to affirm that the martyrs were alive in al-Barzakh. May be, there were some believers who were not aware of it, even if others knew it.

In short, the verse speaks of a real, not imaginary, life. Allah, in several places, has counted the life of an unbeliever after his death as a destruction and perdition. For example:

“...And [they] made their people to alight into the abode of perdition” (14:28).

So, it is the life of bliss that is true life, and it is only the believers who will live that life, as Allah says:

“And as for the next abode, that most surely is the life – did they but know” (29:64).

They did not know it because their senses could perceive only the material aspects of this world's life. As they did not perceive what was beyond their limited perception, they could not differentiate between extinction and life after death. They thought that there was nothing after death but extinction. That delusion, that conjecture was common to believers and unbelievers alike. That is why Allah said: ***“nay, (they are) alive, but you do not perceive,”*** that is, by your senses. The same is the import of the last phrase in the verse:

“That most surely is the life – did they but know” (29:64).

That is, with certainty, as He says in the verse:

“Nay! if you had known with a knowledge of certainty” (102:5).

“You should most certainly have seen the hell” (102:6).

The meaning of the verse, then, is as follows – and Allah knows better! And do not say about those who are slain in the way of Allah that they are dead. You should not think that they have become extinct, have perished. Of course, you generally think that death is extinction; in your language death is used as opposite of life; and this delusion is supported by your senses. But it is not correct. The martyrs are not dead, in that they are not extinct; they are alive although you do not perceive that life by your senses, by your perceptions.

This talk was addressed to the believers, although majority of them – if not all – knew that man's life continues after his death. It was done to draw their attention to a fact known to them. The aim was to cheer them up by reminding them of this reality, in order that they should not grieve, should not be perturbed, should not lose their hearts, when death faces them or their dear ones in the way of Allah.

The only thing that the relatives would be afflicted with, in such cases, is separation from their martyr for a few days, as long as they themselves are alive in this world. And this temporary separation is not a big problem – especially if compared to the pleasure of Allah, and to the bounties bestowed on the martyr, like the pleasant life and everlasting grace.

And the pleasure of Allah is the greatest bounty and bliss. In this respect, the verse is not unlike the previously explained one where Allah tells His Prophet:

“The truth is from your Lord; therefore, you should not be of the doubters” (2:147).

We know that the Prophet was the first and foremost of those who were sure of the Divine signs and communications. Yet he was told not to be of the doubters. This mode is generally used to show that the subject is so clear, so well-known and so well established that there is no room for any conflicting thought to come into mind.

The Life of al-Barzakh

This verse clearly proves that man remains alive in *al-Barzakh* (الْبَرْزَخُ = the period between one's death and the Day of Resurrection). The same is the import of the other verse on this subject:

And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord (3: 169).

Many other verses prove this reality and we shall mention some of them at the end of this essay.

A very strange interpretation has been given to this verse by some people. They say that it was revealed about the martyrs of Badr, and therefore it is reserved exclusively for those martyrs; it cannot be applied to others who are slain in the way of Allah.

A scholar has made an interesting comment on this explanation. Writing about the preceding verse, "seek assistance through patience and prayer," he prays to Allah to give him patience and forbearance to suffer such interpretations!

Would that I knew what do they mean by that explanation. On one hand, they say that man perishes after death or murder; when his body disintegrates, he becomes extinct. If so, then how could the martyrs of Badr remain alive after being slain?

Was it as a miracle? Was it because Allah had given them a distinction and excellence, which was denied to all the prophets, messengers and friends of Allah, not expecting even the Holy Prophet of Islam? If there is no life after death, then keeping them alive after their martyrdom is not a miracle – it is an impossibility.

And a miracle does not cover an impossible thing. If it is asserted that such a self-evident proposition was negated for those martyrs, then no confidence can be put in any self-evident truth – let alone other principles.

Or, do they mean that people's perceptions were mistaken about the condition of those martyrs? The martyrs were alive, were getting sustenance from their Lord, were eating, drinking and enjoying all the comforts of life – far away from the range of people's perceptions.

And what the people had seen and perceived with their senses – that the martyrs were killed, their bodies mutilated, their senses gone, and their physique disintegrated – was just a delusion, and nothing of this sort had happened in reality.

If this is what they mean, if people's senses could be so deluded – perceiving correctly in one case and wrongly in another, without any differentiating cause – then no trust can be put in any of the senses at all. Then, may be, we will perceive a non-existent as existing and an existing thing as non-existent. How

can a sensible person speak like that? It is nothing but sophistry.

However, that explanation somewhat follows the line adopted by a large group of the scholars of traditions. The latter believe that the things mentioned in the Qur'an and traditions, which are beyond our perception – like angels and souls of believers and other such things – are material and physical.

They are ethereal bodies which may enter and penetrate dense and solid bodies, appearing thus in the form of man, for example, doing all that humans do; they possess powers and properties like ours, except that they are not governed by physical laws: they do not suffer any change or alteration, nor any composition or disintegration; they are not subject to natural life and death.

When Allah wants them to appear, they manifest themselves to our senses; and when He does not want so, or wants them not to appear, they do not appear. It depends entirely on a special will of Allah; there is nothing in their senses, or in their “bodies”, to tip the scale on this side or that.

Such an idea is based on rejection of the system of cause and effect in the world. If such assertions were true, then all the intellectual realities, all the academic principles, will be null and void – not to speak of the fundamentals of religion. Even those “sublime ethereal bodies” (which are supposedly beyond the reach of cause–and–effect) will be negated.

The above description, however, proves that the verse speaks about the life of *al-Barzakh*; it is also called the world of the grave, the period between one's death and the Day of Resurrection; it is the world where the dead person is rewarded or punished until the Day of Resurrection.

Some other verses speaking about *al-Barzakh* are as follows:

There are the three verses already quoted:

“And reckon not those who are killed in Allah’s way as dead. Nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord” (3: 169).

“Rejoicing in what Allah has given them out of His grace, and they rejoice for the sake of those who, (being left) behind them have not yet joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve” (3: 170).

“They rejoice on account of favour from Allah and (His) grace, and that Allah will not waste the reward of the believers” (3: 171).

We have already shown how these verses, being similar to the one under discussion, prove the life of *al-Barzakh*. Those who think that these verses were revealed exclusively for the martyrs of Badr, should ponder on the wordings of these three, because they indicate that not only the martyrs but also other believers enjoy the life after death, and rejoice by favour and grace of Allah bestowed on them.

“Until when death overtakes one of them, he says: “Send me back, my Lord, send me back” (23:99).

“Haply I may do good in that which I have left.” By no means! it is a (mere) word that he speaks; and before them is al-Barzakh until the day they are raised” (23: 100).

It very clearly shows that there is an intermediate life between this world's and the one which they will live after the Resurrection. Further explanation will be given when we shall write about this verse, Allah willing.

“And those who do not hope for Our meeting, say: “Why have not angels been sent down upon us, or (why) do we not see our Lord?” Now certainly they are too proud of themselves and have revolted a great revolt” (25:21).

On the day when they shall see the angels;¹ there shall be no joy on that day for the guilty, and they shall say: “It is a forbidden thing totally prohibited” (25:22).

“And We shall proceed to what they have done of deeds, so We shall render them as scattered floating dust” (25:23).

“The dwellers of the garden shall on that day be in a better abiding place and a better resting place” (25:24).

“And on the day when the heaven shall burst asunder with the clouds²; and the angels shall be sent down a sending” (25:25).

“The kingdom on that day shall rightly belong to the Beneficent God, and a hard day shall it be for the unbelievers” (25:26).

It very clearly proves the life of al-Barzakh. Further details will be given in its proper place, Allah willing.

They shall say: “Our Lord! twice didst Thou give us death, and twice hast Thou given us life, so we do confess our faults; is there then a way to get out?” (40: 11).

They will say it on the Day of Resurrection. It means that by that time there would be two deaths and two lives. It can be explained only if we accept the life and death of *al-Barzakh*. Otherwise, there shall be only one death between this life and that of the Day of Resurrection. We have explained it to some extent under the verse:

How do you deny Allah and you were dead and He gave you life? Again He will cause you to die and again bring you to life; then you shall be brought back to Him (2:28).

... and the most evil punishment overtook Pharaoh's people: The Fire, they are brought before it (every) morning and evening; and on the day when the hour shall come to pass: Make Pharaoh's

people enter the severest chastisement (40:46).

It is known that the Day of Resurrection shall have no morning or evening. Clearly, the day when the hour shall come to pass, that is, the Day of Resurrection is other than the day of al-Barzakh which has the mornings and evenings.

There are many other verses which indicate, or from which we may infer, this reality. For example:

By Allah, most certainly We sent (messengers) to nations before, but the Satan made their deeds fair-seeming to them, so he is their guardian today, and they shall have a painful punishment (16:63).

The Immateriality of the Soul

The verse under discussion, as well as those quoted above, points to another more comprehensive reality and that is the immateriality of the soul. The soul is something other than matter and body; it is beyond the jurisdiction of the rules governing matter and body, or those affecting various material compounds and mixtures.

Yet, it has a special relationship with the body – keeping it alive, managing its multifarious functions and activities and enabling it to perceive and feel. Ponder on the earlier quoted verses and you will see this reality.

The verses imply that man, *per se*, is not the body; he does not die when the body dies, he does not perish when the body perishes. The body disintegrates, its parts are scattered, but the “man” continues.

Even after the death of his body, he continues to live, either in eternal bliss and everlasting felicity and grace, or in never ending misery and painful chastisement. That bliss or misery is based on his traits, trends, characteristics and actions, which he had acquired and done in this world's life – not in his bodily accomplishments or social achievements.

These themes are understood from the above-mentioned verses. Obviously, these traits are totally different from those of the body, and are diametrically opposed to worldly and material characteristics. Thus, the human soul is different from his body.

Also, the following verse points to this fact:

“Allah takes completely the souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep; then He withholds those on whom He has passed the decree of death and sends the other back till an appointed term” (39:42)

“at-Tawaffiyy” (اَلتَّوَفِّي) and “al-istifa’ (اِلِصْطِفَاءُ) both have the same meaning – to take and realize one's right fully and completely. The words used here in reference to the soul – “takes”, “withholds” and

“sends back” – clearly prove that the soul is something different from the body.

Another verse:

“And they say: ‘What! when we have become lost in the earth, shall we then indeed be in a new creation?’ Nay! they are disbelievers in the meeting of their Lord” (32: 10).

“Say: ‘The angel of death who is given charge of you shall take you completely, then to your Lord you shall be brought back’” (32: 11).

In this verse, Allah mentions one of the misgivings of those who do not believe in the Resurrection; and then tells His Messenger how to clear their doubt. They said: When we die, our body disintegrates, our limbs and organs are destroyed, nothing remains of our original form, and all our parts are scattered here and there in the earth. No one can then perceive us nor can anyone feel us. How is it possible for us, after such a total destruction, to be created a second time?

This doubt is based on a feeling of improbability. Allah shows the Messenger (S) how to remove that misgiving: ***Say: “The angel of death... be brought back.”***

There is an angel who has been given charge of you; he shall take you completely; he will not let you be lost, as you shall be under his protection, his control; what is lost in the earth is your body, not your soul or person (the reality which is referred to by the word “you”), because the angel of death shall take “you” completely.

One more verse: Allah says, mentioning the creation of man:

“Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit...” (32:9).

Read it in conjunction with the verse:

“And they ask you about the soul. Say: ‘The soul is from the command of my Lord’” (17:85).

The soul, therefore, is from the command of Allah, and that command has been explained and defined in these words:

“His command, when He intends anything is only that He says to it: ‘Be’, and it is” (36:82).

“Therefore, glory be to Him in Whose hand is the kingdom of everything...” (36:83).

The soul is from the kingdom and it is the word, “Be”. In another place, the command is further explained in these words:

“And Our command is but one, as the twinkling of an eye” (54:50).

The phrase, ***as the twinkling of an eye***, shows that the command, that is, the word “Be”, is an

instantaneous, not a gradual, being. It comes into being at once, and is not bound with the chain of time and space.

It is thus evident that the command including the soul – is different from body, is something immaterial. We know that the material things come into being gradually and are fettered with time and space. Obviously, the human soul is not a material thing and is different from the body, although it has a special relationship with the body.

There are some verses which show the nature of that relation–ship. Allah says:

“From it (the earth) We created you...” (20:55).

“He created man from dry clay like earthen vessels...” (55: 14).

“... and He began the creation of man from dust” (32:7).

“Then He made his progeny from an extract of water held in light estimation” (32:8).

“And certainly, We created man of an extract of clay” (23: 12).

“Then We made him a small life–germ in a firm resting place” (23: 13).

“Then We made the life–germ a clot, then We made the clot a lump of flesh, then We made (in) the lump of flesh bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh, then We caused it to grow into another creation; so blessed be Allah, the best of creators” (23: 14).

The verses show that man, in the beginning was but a material body, changing into various forms; then Allah made that body into another creation – a creation that has got perception and feeling; now he perceives and wills, thinks and acts according to his thoughts and ideas; he manages and manipulates the things around him as he likes.

These activities and authority are beyond the power of body and matter. Obviously, neither of these activities emanate from body and matter nor does their doer.

We may say that the soul has the same relation to the body – from which it emanates – as a fruit has to its tree, or a lamp flame has to its oil. But these similes are a bit far–fetched. How–ever, these illustrations serve to show the nature of the relation between the soul and the body – how it is attached to the body in the beginning and how that connection is severed on death.

In short, the soul, in the beginning, is the body itself, then it grows into another creation, and lastly it becomes completely independent and separate from the body on death. These facts are understood from the above–mentioned Qur'anic verses; there are many other verses which allude to and imply this reality, and one may find them on reading the Qur'an with open eyes. And Allah is the Guide.

Traditions About al-Barzakh and the Soul's Life after Death

Suwayd ibn Ghafilah narrates from the Commander of the Faithfuls ('Ali, a.s.) that he said: "Surely, when the son of Adam comes to (his) last day of this world and the first of the next, his property, his children and his actions are portrayed before him. So he turns to his property and says:

'By God! I was covetous of you (and) avaricious; so what have you (now) got for me?' (The property) says: 'Take your shroud from me'. Then he turns to his children and says: 'By God! Surely, I was your loving (father), and I was your protector; now what have you got for me?' They say: 'We shall convey you to your pit (i.e., grave) and bury you in it.'

Then he turns to his deeds and says: 'By God! I was indifferent to you, and you were distasteful to me; (now) what is with you (for me)?' So it says: 'I am your companion in your grave as well as on the Day of your gathering – until I am presented with you before your Lord.'

Then (after his death), if he is a friend of Allah, there comes to him (a visitor), the most sweet-scented of all people, of the most beautiful appearance and (wearing) the most adorned apparel, and says to him: 'Rejoice with refreshment from Allah, and flowers and the garden of bounties; you arrived a good arrival' (i.e., welcome to you).

Thereupon, he says: 'Who are you?' (The visitor) says: 'I am your good deed. Proceed from the world to the garden.' And he recognizes the one who washes his body, and earnestly appeals to his carrier (the bier-bearer) to hasten him (to the grave).

Then when he enters his grave, two angels come to him – and they are the examiners of the grave – with elegantly-dressed hairs, writing on the earth with their teeth; their voices are like roaring thunder and their eyes like streaking lightning.

They ask him: 'Who is your Lord? And who is your prophet? And what is your religion?' And he says: 'Allah is my Lord; and Muhammad is my prophet; and Islam is my religion.'

So they say: 'May Allah confirm you in what you like and are pleased with!' And this is (the meaning of) the word of Allah:

"Allah confirms those who believe with the sure word in this world's life and in the hereafter..." (14:27).

Then they make his grave spacious for him as far as his eye can see, and open for him a gate to the garden, and say to him: 'Sleep happily the sleep of a fine-looking youth.' And it is the word of Allah:

"The dwellers of the garden shall on that day be in a better abiding place and a better resting place" (25:24).

“And if he is an enemy of his Lord, then comes to him a (visitor), the ugliest of the creatures of Allah in attires and the foulest-smelling. And he tells him: 'Welcome to the entertainment of boiling water and roasting in Hell.'

And he (the dead person) recognizes the one who washes his body, and earnestly appeals to his carrier (the bier-bearer) to hold him back. And when he is buried in his grave, the examiners of the grave come to him and remove his shroud from him.

Then they ask him: 'Who is your Lord? And what is your religion? And who is your prophet? And he says: 'I do not know.' So they say to him: 'You did not know, nor were you on the right path.'

Then they hit him with an iron-rod, a hitting which frightens every creature of Allah – except the *jinn* and the men. Thereafter they open for him a door to the Hell and tell him: 'Sleep in the worst condition.'

So he is squeezed in a narrow space like a shaft in an arrow-head, until his brain comes out from between his nails and flesh; and Allah sets on him the serpents of the earth and its scorpions and insects which go on biting him until Allah will raise him from his grave – and he will long for the advent of the Hour, because of the trouble in which he finds himself.” (*at-Tafsir*, al-Qummi)

Abu Bakr al-Hadrami narrates from Abu Ja'far ('a) that he said: “No one shall be questioned in the grave except he who shall be of pure belief or of total disbelief.” I told him: “And (what about) the rest of the men?” He said: “They will be kept in oblivion.” (*Muntakhab Basa'iri 'd-darajat*)

Ibn Zubyan says: “I was with Abu 'Abdillah ('a), and he said: 'What do the people say about the souls of the believers after they die?' I said: 'They say (that the souls are placed) in the craws of green birds.' He said: 'Glory be to Allah! The believer is far more honourable near Allah than this!

When it happens (i.e., when the believer dies) there come to him the Messenger of Allah and Ali and Fatimah and Hasan and Husayn (peace be on them), and with them (come) the angels of the Mighty and Glorious Allah (who are near to him).

So, if Allah lets his tongue speak the witness of His Oneness and the prophethood of the Prophet and the (*al-walayah* الْوَلَايَةُ) = love, obedience of the *Ahlu 'l-bayt*, then the Messenger of Allah (S) and 'Ali and Fatimah and Hasan and Husayn (peace be on them) and with them the near angels become his witnesses for it.

And if his tongue is tied, Allah confers on His Prophet the knowledge of what is in his (i.e., that believer's) heart of that (belief); so he (i.e., the Prophet) becomes his witness; and then bear testimony of Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn – because of the testimony of the Prophet – on their group be the best peace from Allah! and (so do) those angels who are present with them.

When Allah takes him to Himself, He sends that soul to the garden, in a shape similar to his (worldly) shape. They eat (there) and drink. When a new-corner comes to them, he recognizes them by that

shape which they had in the world.” (*al-Amali*, ash-Shaykh at-Tusi)

Hammad ibn 'Uthman narrates from Abu 'Abdillah ('a) that he described the souls of the believers and said: “They meet each other.” I said: “They meet each other?” He said: “Yes! They ask each other and recognize each other, so that if you see one you will say, '(He is) so-and-so'.” (*al-Mahasin*)

Abu 'Abdillah ('a) said: “Verily, the believer visits his family and he sees what he likes; and what he dislikes is hidden from him. And verily the unbeliever visits his family and he sees what he dislikes; and what he likes is hidden from him.” And he said: “There are some of them who visit (their families) every Friday; and there are others who visit according to their deeds.” (*al-Kafi*)

as-Sadiq ('a) said: “Verily, the souls are, with the characteristic features of (their) bodies, in a tree of the garden; they know each other and enquire about each other. When a (new) soul comes to (those) souls, they say: 'Let it be, because it is coming from a great terrifying (experience).'

Thereafter, they ask him: 'What has happened to so-and-so? What has so-and-so done?' If the soul tells them, 'I have left him alive', they hope for his (future arrival); and if it tells them, 'He had died', they say: 'He fell down (to Hell); he perished.' ” (*al-Kafi*)

The author says: There are numerous traditions on the subject of *al-Barzakh*. We have quoted above some comprehensive ones. There is a huge lot of nearly *mutawatir* traditions describing the above-mentioned meanings. These traditions prove that the life of *al-Barzakh* is an immaterial one.

[A Philosophical Discussion on Immateriality of the Soul](#)

Is the soul immaterial? The word “soul” in this discussion means that thing which every man refers to when he says “I”. Its “immateriality” refers to the fact that it is not a material thing, it is neither divisible nor governed by time or space.

No doubt, I conceive in myself a concept which I refer to as “I”; and it is equally certain that every man has similar conception about himself. It is a conception which we are never oblivious of – as long as we are alive and conscious. It is not a limb of ours; nor is it a part of our body which we perceive by one of our senses or even through reason.

In short, it is not like our external limbs which we feel with our senses of sight or touch, etc., nor is it like our internal organs which we know by senses or experiment. Sometimes we become oblivious of one or another of those limbs or organs – or even of the whole body. But we are never oblivious of the “I”. It proves that the “I” is other than the body and its parts.

One thing more. Body and its limbs and parts as well as the faculties and characteristics found in it, are all material. One of the characteristics of matter is gradual change, dissolution and divisibility. If soul were body or a part thereof, it would have been material and subject to change and division – but it is

not so.

If a man looks at this vision of his “Self” and then compares it with that which he used to look at since the beginning of his gnosis of the “Self”, he will find that it is the same vision, the same notion, without the least change or plurality.

It is unlike his body or its parts and characteristics which all undergo continuous change, in substance and form as well as in their conditions and positions. Also, he will realize that it is a notion, simple, indivisible and non-compound, unlike the body or its parts and characteristics.

And matter and every material thing is a compound and divisible. Obviously, the soul is not body, nor is it a part of the body; it is neither a development of the body nor one of its characteristics.

Coming to matter again, it makes no difference whether we perceived it with a sense of ours or by reasoning, or did not perceive it at all – it is matter and material in any case. And matter is subject to change and divisibility. But we have seen that the vision which we call “soul” is not subject to any of the above characteristics of matter. Therefore, soul is neither matter nor material.

Also, this vision of “I” is a notion, simple and one; there is no plurality of parts therein, nor is there any extraneous item mixed with it; it is an absolute one. Every man finds it in himself that he is he and not someone else.

Therefore, this vision is a concept subsistent by itself, and distinct; it is beyond the definition of matter and is not subject to its characteristics and properties. It is *a al-jawhar* (الْجَوْهَرُ) = lit. “jewel”; technically, a thing that exists in reality and which is the bearer of the accidents), separate from matter; it has a connection with the body which makes it identifiable with the body – and it is the connection of management.

The above discourse proves our claims in this respect.

All the materialists and a group of Muslim theologians as well as the Zahiristic traditionalists do not accept the immateriality of the soul. But what they have written in support of their view stretches the credulity too far. Let us have a look at the arguments of the materialists. They say:

1. The science has nowadays advanced to a previously-undreamt-of extent in its in-depth and minute researches of natural phenomena. It has found and pin-pointed a natural and material cause for every characteristic of the body.

It has not found any psychological effect which could not be explained according to the material laws. This being the case, why should we believe in the existence of an immaterial soul?

2. The nervous system continuously conveys the perceptions to its centre (i.e., brain) with extreme rapidity. The vision thus perceived is a unified series, having a single position. The pictures formed in

mind are substituted with such rapidity that one frame is not distinguishable from another; that is, mind does not realize that the preceding frame has gone and been replaced by another.

It is this composite “one”, this illusory “unit”, which we see and call our soul, and which we refer to as “I”.

It is true that it is other than all our limbs and organs; but it does not necessarily mean that it is other than body and its characteristics. The fact is that it is a composite series which appears to be one, because of continuous and rapid substitutions – and we are never oblivious of it, because such an oblivion would result in nullity of the nervous system – in other words, death.

Also, it is true that my vision of my “I” is constant. But it is not because there is a thing which is constant and unchanged. In fact, it is only an illusion resulting from a series of constantly and rapidly changing visions.

Suppose there is a water-tank with an inlet and an outlet of the same diameter; water comes in from one side and goes out from the other, with exactly the same speed – and the tank seems always full.

Our sense perceives the water as one, constant and unchanged unit, but in reality it is neither the same water nor is it constant and unchanged. Even if there is a reflection in the water, of a man, tree or some other object, it will look as unchanged, steady and constant, but actually it is not so – it is not one, it is gradually changing with the gradual change of the water.

The same is the case of the apparent oneness, constancy and unchangeability which we see in our soul, Self or “I”.

3. The soul, for whose immateriality arguments have been offered, based on the inner vision, is in fact a composite of natural faculties and characteristics. It is the sum-total of nervous perceptions, which in their turn emanate from mutual action and reaction between external matter and nervous system. It is a composite unity, not the real one.

Comment

1. It is true that the science, based on senses and experiments, with all its minute, delicate and in-depth researches, has not come across a “soul”. Also, it is correct that it has not found any phenomenon which irresistibly led one to the soul as its cause.

But these two premises do not prove that there is not an immaterial soul – after all, we have written earlier the proofs of its existence. The natural sciences, which discuss the laws of nature and the properties of matter, are by definition limited to the researches concerning matter only, which is its subject.

The apparatus and chemicals, etc. which sciences use to conduct and complete their tests and

experiments, may throw light on matter and material affairs only. But by the same token these, sciences and their apparatus, etc. cannot pass any judgment – for or against – on metaphysical and immaterial concept and beings.

Utmost that a natural science can say is that it did not find a soul. But “not finding” is not “non-existence”. The natural sciences, by their definition, are not expected to find within their subject (i.e., within matter and its properties and characteristics) something beyond the limit of matter and physical nature.

In fact, their above-mentioned assertion emanates from a gross misunderstanding. They think that those who believed in the existence of soul, did so because they look at some biological functions of their limbs which they could not explain within the framework of their incomplete knowledge, and so they said that there was something immaterial, that is, the soul, that was the source of those functions.

But now the science has developed by leaps and bounds and has pin-pointed the natural causes of all such functions. Therefore, there is no need now to believe in the putative soul. (It is the same trend of thought which they have followed while denying the existence of the Creator.)

Obviously, it is a wrong assumption. Those who believe in the existence of soul, do not do so because of that supposed difficulty; they do not ascribe some bodily function (of known causes) to the body, and some others (of unknown causes) to the soul. Rather, they ascribe all bodily functions to the body – directly – and to the soul – indirectly, through the body. They ascribe to the soul only one function which cannot be ascribed to the body in any way – man's gnosis of Self and his vision of his person or “I”.

2. They have said that the reality seen by man as one is, in fact, a series of nervous perceptions coming to the central nervous system one after another with extreme rapidity but their oneness is only composite.

But this assertion is quite irrelevant, and it has nothing to do with the vision of the Self. We have argued on the strength of the vision of the Self; they are talking about arrival of the sensual visions from the peripheral sense-organs to the central nervous system, and its results.

Well, let us suppose, as they say, that actually there are many things, that is, perceptions which have no real oneness; and those perceptions are all material, there is nothing behind them except their own reality; and that the vision which is 'one soul' is in fact the sum-total of these numerous perceptions.

If so, then where did this “one” come from – the one which is our only vision, whose “other” has never been perceived by us? Where did this perceived oneness come from?

The talk about “composite oneness” is more like a jest than a serious proposition. A “composite one” is in reality a collection of numerous things without any oneness at all. Its oneness is imaginary, as we may say one house or one line, which is not one in fact.

What they say amounts to this: The perceptions and sensations which are pluralistic and manifold in themselves are one perception in itself.

It means that these perceptions are numerous in reality, having no oneness at all, and at the same time they are actually only one perception; there is nothing beyond these sensual perceptions to perceive them as one perception – unlike a sense or imagination which consecutively and collectively receives manifold sensory or imaginary perceptions, and perceives them as one.

They claim that those manifold perceptions are in themselves one perception – there is no other faculty beyond them which treats this collective vision as a composite one.

Also, it is not possible to say that that perceiving is done by a part of brain which perceives the pluralistic picture as “one” – because it will not remove our objection: The perception of that part of brain is itself a part of those consecutively and rapidly-perceived picture, and our objection covers that perception too.

That part of brain does not possess a separate perception-power which would deal with these perceptions – as an external sense deals with the external matters and acquires through them sensory pictures. (Ponder on this point.)

Exactly the same arguments (as we have offered above against “oneness” of the sensual perceptions) apply with equal force against firmness and indivisibility of this vision which is always changing and divisible by its very nature.

Apart from that, the premises – that these manifold, consequently (and with extreme rapidity) perceived pictures are perceived by mental vision as one – is wrong in itself. What is brain or its faculties? What is perception and the perceived picture?

All these things are material – and matter and material are in their quiddity manifold, changeable and divisible. But the gnosis of “Self” is not subject to these material defects. Is it not strange that even then they claim that there is nothing beyond matter and material?

3. They have said that the senses or the perceiving faculties become confused and consequently perceive manifold, divisible and changing things as one indivisible and unchanging thing. But this assertion is manifestly wrong.

Error or confusion is a relative – and not an absolute – effect which occurs when one thing is compared with another. For example, we perceive the celestial bodies as small bright dots.

Of course, this perception is wrong as we know from academic proofs and our other perceptions. But this error is found out when we compare our sensory perception with the reality of these perceived luminous bodies.

As far as that sensory perception itself is concerned, it is a reality – we are actually perceiving small

bright dots. And to that extent there is no question of any error or confusion.

The subject under discussion is not different from the above-given example. When our senses and faculties look at numerous divisible and changing things and perceive them as one indivisible and unchanging thing, their confusion and error is found out only when that picture is compared with the real thing existing outside.

But so far as the perceived picture found in that faculty or sense is concerned, it is undoubtedly one, unchanging and in-divisible – and such a thing cannot be material because it lacks the properties of matter and material.

In short, the above discourse shows that the argument offered by materialists on the basis of senses and experiment, only proves that they could not find the soul. The fallacy is that they have proved 'not finding' and think that it proves 'non-existence'.

Also, the picture painted by them to illustrate the vision of Self or soul – the vision that is a single, simple and unchangeable reality – is irrelevant and wrong; that picture is in accord neither with established principles of materialism nor with the actual fact.

Now, we should have a look at the definition of soul or psyche as given by the psychologists. According to them, it is the unified condition resulting from the actions and reactions of various psychological activities – like perception, will, pleasure, love, etc. – which give rise to that unified condition.

We have no-thing to say about this definition, because scholars of every branch of knowledge have right to postulate a subject for their scholarly pursuit and deliberation. And so have the psychologists.

Our concern is about the existence (or inexistence) of the soul in reality, quite independent of the assumptions of the thinkers. And it is a question within the domain of philosophy, not psychology.

There are some scholars of theology who believe that the soul is not immortal. They say: It has been established by the disciplines related to human life, like anatomy and physiology, that man's spiritual and biological characteristics emanate from live cells; those cells are the foundations of human and animal lives. Spirit or soul, therefore, is a characteristics and especial effect of those countless cells – each of which contains a life of its own.

What the man calls his soul – and to which he refers as “I” – is a composite entity made up of countless souls. We know that these life conditions and spiritual characteristics cease to exist when the life-giving germs and cells die.

In this back-ground, there is no question of a single immaterial soul or spirit which is supposed to continue even after the body dies. True that the principles of materialism, established after scientific researches, are yet unable to unravel the mysteries of life.

There-fore, we may say that the physical causes are unable to create the soul, and accordingly, it may have been brought into being by a metaphysical being. The attempt to prove the immateriality of the soul by purely rationalistic argument is unacceptable in the world of modern knowledge, which does not rely on anything other than the senses and experiments.

The author says: On meditation you will see that all the objections written against the materialists' arguments apply with equal force to this argument too. The following two objections are over and above that:

First: If the scientific research is up till now unable to unravel the mysteries of soul and realities of life, it does not necessarily mean that it cannot do so even in future; nor that these spiritual characteristics are in fact not based on material causes – although we may not know it. Therefore, the theologians' argument is no-thing but a fallacy by which they have equalized inexistence of knowledge with knowledge of inexistence.

Second: They seem to ascribe some worldly affairs – that is, the physical phenomena – to matter, and some others – that is, spiritual affairs – to a metaphysical cause, that is, the Creator. But it implies that there are two creators in the world. It is a proposition which is neither acceptable to the materialists nor the theists. And all the arguments of monotheism rebut such assumption.

There are some other objections against immateriality of soul, described in books of philosophy and theology; all of them show that the writers concerned have not pondered on the proof given by us, nor have they understood its main theme. That is why we have refrained from quoting and commenting on them here. Anyone desirous to know them should look into the books concerned. And Allah is the Guide.

1. Clearly it refers to the time when they will see the angels for the first time, that is, the time of death – as is described in many other verses.

2. Now it speaks about the Day of Resurrection.

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