

Question 20: Heaven and Hell

Question: Do heaven and hell exist at present or will they be created later?

Brief Answer

According to the Qur`an and ahadith, heaven and hell exist at present. However, they will become fully apparent and represented only in the Hereafter at which time each person, according to his actions, beliefs, and ethical behaviour, will be led to his eternal abode.

Nevertheless, prior to the Hereafter, both heaven and hell can reveal themselves either as visions in this temporal world or as manifestations in purgatory (*barzakh*), serving in both cases as reward or punishment for the one who sees them. There is little difference of opinion among the scholars up to this point. However, there are other aspects of heaven and hell that require more explanation. In particular:

1. What is the relationship between a person's beliefs, actions, and thoughts and his station in the Hereafter?
2. What justification is there for the existence of heaven and hell?
3. What different types of heaven and hell exist?

In brief, the paradise in which Adam and Eve (ع) resided and from which they were sent down to Earth; the heaven or hell of one's actions which envelops a person; and the heaven and hell of purgatory are all simply manifestations of the ultimate, eternal heaven and hell. Additionally, whether a person's eternal abode is heaven or hell depends on his own choices and actions in this world.

Detailed Answer

Belief in heaven and hell as the eternal abode in which a person will remain after the Day of Judgment, and belief in the details of how heaven and hell are created and then perfected, comprise a part of what is known as "belief in the unseen" (*al-iman bil ghayb*). As such, the only means for attaining knowledge

of these things is revelation.

At the same time, until heaven and hell are witnessed first hand in the Hereafter, they do not cease to be part of the unseen world. Therefore all the doubts and questions associated with the unseen apply to the details of heaven and hell as well. However, these doubts and questions are not such that they prevent one from attaining surety of the basic existence of such things.

Among these questions is the question at hand about whether or not heaven and hell exist at present. If they do exist, where are they located? In what state are they? Is heaven simply fallow land that man must cultivate? Is it incompletely built requiring man to complete its construction? Is it complete, and man simply enters it in the Hereafter? Will heaven and hell be created in the Hereafter itself?

To answer these questions, we must first tackle two essential issues:

1. What is the relationship between man's actions in this temporal world with his situation in the Hereafter?
2. What types of heaven and hell exist?

Several rationalizations have been offered to explain the relationship between a person's worldly actions and his punishment or reward in the Hereafter:

1. Punishments and rewards are arbitrarily apportioned in the Hereafter for particular actions, intentions, and thoughts just as certain forms of capital punishment or monetary penalties are apportioned as retribution in this world. Based on this explanation, the relationship between actions and recompense is arbitrary, not intrinsic.
2. Retribution in the next world follows the special theory of relativity. In particular, the energy a person expends in this world for any given action is converted to matter in the Hereafter, thereby causing him pleasure or pain.
3. Human actions possess an exoteric and esoteric aspect. In this world, most people can see only the exoteric aspect. However, in purgatory to some extent, and in the Hereafter, to the full extent, the esoteric side of these actions will manifest themselves. It is the manifestation of this esoteric aspect of one's actions that causes him pain or pleasure in the Hereafter.
4. A person's actions and thoughts issue from the exoteric faculties of his mind and bodily limbs. In addition, these actions affect his esoteric spirit, though he may be quite unaware of any such effect. In this world, most people perceive the exoteric aspects in themselves and in others. Similarly, in the afterlife, the esoteric aspects will become apparent for all to see. A person will appear in the form that he gave himself in this world through his good and bad actions. It is this form that causes his pain or pleasure.

The first two opinions do not conform to the verses and ahadith related to this topic. The other two explanations do accord with some of the verses and ahadith, but they cannot explain all aspects of purgatory and the Hereafter.

With respect to the second question about the different kinds of heaven and hell, the following opinions have been presented:

1. Allah's (awj) threats, warnings, promises, and glad tidings concerning heaven and hell are simply means of keeping human beings in line. It is not necessary that heaven and hell actually exist. The mere fact that people do good out of their desire for paradise and refrain from bad out of fear of hell, is in itself a virtual paradise.
2. Paradise is another word for a classless, utopian, Islamic society. Hell on the other hand is a capitalistic society. Therefore, those seeking heaven should work to establish the ideal proletarian state, so that they can avoid the hell of capitalism.
3. Paradise is actually a planet in our universe that will be discovered when the technology of space travel advances sufficiently. We shall then be able to colonize "paradise" and escape from the "hell" of earth.
4. Heaven is tantamount to the attainment of positive attributes and hell is the attainment of evil attributes.

These four explanations are materialist in nature, and are at odds with the Qur`an and ahadith, and contradict the philosophy and rationale behind sending prophets and revealing books. The heaven and hell described in the Qur`an will only appear after death on the Day of Judgment, and are eternal abodes, not evanescent and fleeting.

1. The paradise in which Adam and Eve (ع) resided after being created, and from which they subsequently descended to earth, was in reality a part of this temporal, material world. If this were not the case, they would not have been expelled from it, and its form would have been determined by their prior actions.

Manifestations of the esoteric reality of human actions are sometimes witnessed by gnostics even before death, and by pure believers and extreme disbelievers after death, in their graves. Such manifestations will be a source of pleasure or pain for these people prior to Judgment Day. Because these manifestations of heaven and hell are witnessed before Judgment day, they are in reality part of the temporal world. They envelop every person and are perceptible to saints or in the realm of dreams. This view of heaven and hell accords with the third and fourth opinions mentioned above concerning the interplay between actions and retribution.

2. The Qur`an and ahadith indicate that the heaven and hell of the Hereafter exist at present. Certain

parts of these two realities were shown to the Prophet (ص) during his Mi'raj (ascension).

Every person has two places reserved for him: one in paradise and one in hell. If he leaves this world with faith and good deeds, he will occupy his place in heaven. If not, he will be cast into his place in hell. The particularities of his reward or punishment are determined by his actions in this world.

In an authentic narration from Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع), it is said: "Not a person has been created except that a place has been created for him in paradise and hell. When the righteous enter paradise and the people of hell enter hell, a voice will command the people of paradise to gaze toward hell. They will look therein and see their own places in hell.

It will say, "This is the where you would be if you had sinned against your Lord." At witnessing this, they will become so elated that if it were possible to die in paradise, they would die of happiness for being spared such punishment. Then a voice will command the people of hell to gaze at paradise and see their places therein. It will say, "If you had obeyed your Lord, you would have experienced such pleasures."

At witnessing this, they will be so distressed, that if it were possible to die in hell, they would die of sadness. Then the places in paradise that had been reserved for the people who are in hell will be given to the inhabitants of heaven, and the places in hell that has been reserved for the people of heaven will be given to the residents of hell. This is the meaning of the verse in which Allah says of the people of heaven,

"It is they who will be the inheritors, who shall inherit paradise, and will remain therein forever."¹
and 2

In conclusion, the particular heaven or hell that is to be man's eternal abode exists at present and is perfected by one's thoughts, beliefs, and actions. However, no one other than the Prophet (ص) has seen these eternal abodes. That paradise in which Adam and Eve (ع) lived, and the heaven and hell that can be seen before death in dreams and visions, and during death and after death in the grave are simply manifestations of those eternal abodes.

1. Surat al-Mu'minun (23), Verse 10-11:

﴿ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْوَارِثُونَ الَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْفِرْدَوْسَ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴾

2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 8, pg. 125, 287:

أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (ع) قَالَ: مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ خَلْقًا إِلَّا جَعَلَ لَهُ فِي الْجَنَّةِ مَنْزِلًا وَ فِي النَّارِ مَنْزِلًا، فَإِذَا سُكِنَ أَهْلُ الْجَنَّةِ الْجَنَّةَ وَأَهْلُ النَّارِ النَّارَ نَادَى مُنَادٍ: يَا أَهْلَ الْجَنَّةِ أَشْرَفُوا، فَيُشْرَفُونَ عَلَى النَّارِ وَتُرْفَعُ لَهُمْ مَنَازِلُهُمْ فِي النَّارِ ثُمَّ يُقَالُ لَهُمْ: هَذِهِ مَنَازِلُكُمْ الَّتِي لَوْ عَصَيْبْتُمْ رَبَّكُمْ دَخَلْتُمُوهَا. قَالَ: فَلَوْ أَنَّ أَحَدًا مَاتَ فَرِحًا لَمَاتَ أَهْلُ الْجَنَّةِ فِي ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ فَرِحًا لَمَا صُرِفَ عَنْهُمْ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ، ثُمَّ يُنَادُونَ: يَا مَعْشَرَ أَهْلِ النَّارِ إِرْفَعُوا رُؤُوسَكُمْ فَانظُرُوا إِلَى مَنَازِلِكُمْ فِي الْجَنَّةِ فَيَرْفَعُونَ رُؤُوسَهُمْ فَيَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى مَنَازِلِهِمْ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَمَا فِيهَا مِنَ النَّعِيمِ، فَيُقَالُ لَهُمْ: هَذِهِ مَنَازِلُكُمْ الَّتِي لَوْ أَطَعْتُمْ رَبَّكُمْ دَخَلْتُمُوهَا. قَالَ: فَلَوْ أَنَّ أَحَدًا مَاتَ حُزْنًا لَمَاتَ أَهْلُ النَّارِ ﴿ ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمَ حُزْنًا، فَيُورِثُ هُوَلاءِ مَنَازِلَ هُوَلاءِ، وَهُوَلاءِ مَنَازِلَ هُوَلاءِ، وَذَلِكَ قَوْلُ اللَّهِ عَزَّوَجَلَّ: ﴿ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْوَارِثُونَ الَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْفِرْدَوْسَ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴾

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