

Revisiting Islamic Eschatology: The Knowledge of “The Hour” and Its Imminence in The Qur’an

Zeki Saritoprak, *John Carroll University*

“The knowledge of it belongs to your Lord.” (Qur’an 72:43)

Since the beginning of the millennium, interest in eschatology has become popular. Many people thought that the beginning of the new millennium would show some signs of the end. In fact, even some films have been produced predicting that 2012 will be the end of history. The idea of eschatology can be found in any religion and in any community of human beings. As for Muslim communities and traditions, the idea of eschatology is deeply rooted in the very essence of Islam. Needless to say, belief in the afterlife is one of the six articles of faith and since Prophet Muhammad is the last prophet and the Qur’an is the last revelation of God according to the Islamic teaching, the holy book of Islam naturally gives great importance to the concept of eschatology. In this paper I shall address the Islamic understanding of the final moment, “the Hour”, and the knowledge of it based on the main source of Islam, the Qur’an. To my knowledge, in western scholarship, there are not many sources that address Islamic eschatology from a Qur’anic perspective. The Qur’an speaks of death and life after death as well as the concept of paradise and hell. To elaborate on all of these themes would be beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, this paper makes no claim to exhaust the Islamic understanding of eschatology.

Although the Qur’an is not a full-fledged book of eschatology, nearly every page of the Qur’an contains a reference to the end of this worldly life and the beginning of the eternal one. One can draw lines between various Qur’anic verses and find the following scenario presented by the holy book: Human beings are on a journey from the realm of spirits; from there they come to the womb of their mothers; then they spent time in the womb of their mothers and are shaped perfect with the divine design; after

spending a period of time, they come to this world and then after spending a certain period of time on this earth, they die; after this they will face the consequences of their actions in this world, either reward of paradise or punishment of hell. Both abodes according to Islamic theological principle are eternal. The judge that makes the final decision is God. The prophets and saints have the right to intercede and ask God for forgiveness of the members of their communities, but they absolutely cannot judge. The Qur'an speaks of this in various chapters, and in fact, even some chapters are named after the event of the afterlife such as Qur'anic chapters 44, 56, 59, 69, 75, 78, 81, 82, 84, 88, 99, and 101.

The Qur'anic narrative provides various names for both this world and the world to come. This world, in the Qur'anic narrative, is "the first" or *al-Ula* and the world to come is the "the last" or *al-Akhira* (Qur'an 53:25).¹ The overall picture of the Qur'anic eschatological narrative is that people are given this life on earth to prepare for the afterlife. That is why it has been narrated as a statement of wisdom by many Muslim scholars that, "This world is the cropland of the afterlife."² That is to say, people's actions are similar to seed on earth, and the harvest will be seen later, in the afterlife. Being one of the six articles of faith in Islam, the belief in the hereafter and the topics related to it, such as paradise, hell, and more have occupied one third of the content of the holy book of Islam. Since this world is a place where people prepare for the afterlife, the world is important.

Accordingly, the owner of both worlds is God and both worlds are important in the sight of God although the real life is the life of hereafter. The Qur'an records that God has put human beings, as the most sophisticated creatures of God and the superiors of the entire realm of creation, on this planet to be tested. Those who pass the test will gain eternal bliss and those who fail in the test will gain eternal damnation. Both eternal bliss and damnation are based on divine judgment, not the judgment of human beings. According to Islamic eschatology, both groups of people will be thoroughly satisfied with the divine judgment in the afterlife, God is *al-'Adl* or the Most Just. The Qur'an clearly states that God does not wrong anyone (Qur'an

1. Unless otherwise expressed, all Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet are my own translations.

2. Zayn al-Din 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Munawi, vol. 1 of *Sharh al-Jami' al-Saghir*, (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imam al-Shafi'i, 1988), 639.

10:44, 18:49). In the afterlife, there will be no feeling of being wronged, because people will see the justice of God completely. The general Islamic theological principle is that believers will be in paradise and non-believers will be in hell. Despite this general principle, the Islamic teaching says only God knows who will gain eternal bliss and who will gain eternal damnation. One can speak of general principles, but as far as the individual is concerned, one cannot determine the final destination of a particular person. Therefore individuals do not make judgments about the position of other individuals in the afterlife. As an Islamic theological principle one cannot determine his or her final stage in the afterlife. One can be very pious and at the last moments of their life go astray and become a vicious person. And the opposite is also true. A vicious person can become a good person towards the end of his or her life. So there is no guarantee that one continues in the same pattern until the end of their life, thus for the Muslim a balance of fear of loss and hope of gain continues until the end of life.

Death is considered the first and major door to the realm of eternity. Every human being, as an individual, will taste death as the Qur'an states (Qur'an 3:185; 21:35; 29:57). Additionally there is also the death of the world, which the Qur'an describes as "when this earth will be replaced with another earth" (Qur'an 14:48). This event also marks the end of human history on earth, and is the beginning of the realm of the afterlife. The Qur'anic verses speak of this horrific event, but remind the reader that the occurrence of the Hour is under divine control and with divine purpose. The Qur'an pictures the event as follows: planets are crashing into each other, stars are falling, seas are burning, and mountains are moving like pieces of cotton (101:1-11). Both God's majesty and His compassion are dominant; this is because He is building a better world, as if He were the owner of a house, who demolishes it in order to build a palace instead. Hence, such an act of demolition is not perceived as meaningless destruction. This is a destruction that does not bring hopelessness to the human spirit; instead it gives trust in the power, justice and compassion of the divine according to Qur'anic teaching. To replace this house of the world with the house of the afterlife, for God, is as easy as replacing one room with another. The Qur'an once again states that the creation of all humanity and their resurrection is as easy as the death and resurrection of one person (Qur'an 31:28). What we can see in the Qur'anic description of the occurrence of the final day is physical, cosmic, and universal, as well as purposeful.

The Qur'an speaks of the darkness when the Final Hour comes, "When the sun is darkened, when the stars are thrown down, when the mountains shall be set moving, when the pregnant camels shall be neglected, when the savage beasts shall be mustered, when the seas shall be set boiling ... then shall a soul know what it has produced" (Qur'an 81:1–14). Furthermore, the Qur'an speaks of the clash of celestial bodies, which will create cosmic disharmony. "When the heaven is split asunder, when the planets are scattered, when the seas are poured forth, and the graves are overturned, a soul will know what it has sent before and what left behind. O man! What has made you careless concerning your Lord, the Bountiful" (Qur'an 82:1–6).

The Qur'anic invitation for the people of Mecca to believe in the afterlife was the most difficult thing to believe. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad, the recipient of the holy Qur'an, was persistent in his adherence to the belief in the afterlife. For this reason, belief in the afterlife or its promise and threat (*Wa'd* and *Wa'id*) is among the most important elements of Islamic theology. The Holy Book of Islam, due to its eschatological nature of being the final revelation of God, contains extensively the eloquent message of the afterlife which has been stated briefly in pre-Islamic scriptures. To indicate the awe and shock of the Day or the Hour, the Qur'an states,

O mankind! Fear your Lord. Lo! The earthquake of the Final Hour is a tremendous thing. On the Day when you behold it, every nursing mother will forget her nursing and every pregnant one will be delivered of her burden, and you will see mankind as drunken, yet they will not be drunken, but the chastisement of God is severe (Qur'an 22:1–2).

In the Qur'an, this specific "Hour" takes on a variety of expressions, including "The Day of Judgment" (1:3),³ the "Day of Resurrection" (3:77),⁴ "The Big Day" (6:15),⁵ "The Final Day" (2:232),⁶ the "Day the coming of

3. The concordance of the Qur'an records approximately 400 verses directly related to the concept of *al-Yawm* (the Day) in relation to the afterlife (see Şaban Kurt, ed., *A Modern Concordance of the Holy Qur'an* (Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 2009), 1228–1232).

4. For more on this see the following Qur'anic verses: 3:185, 3:194, 4:87, 4:109, 4:141, 4:159, 5:14, 5:36, 5:64, 7:32, 7:167, 7:172, 10:60, 10:93, 11:60, 11:98.

5. See also the following Qur'anic verses: 10:15, 11:3, 39:14.

6. Also see these verses: 2:264, 3:114, 4:38, 4:39, 4:59, 4:136, 4:162, 5:69, 6:12, 9:18, 9:19, 9:29, 9:44, 9:45, 9:99.

which is certain” or “the day which is beyond any doubt” (3:9, 3:30), and the “Great News” (78:2). One of the most common terms in this regard is the Qur’anic term “the Hour.”⁷ Both terms, the Hour and the Day, are used allegorically. As one commentator on the Qur’an says, “the day is normally from dawn to sunset. However, here, it is allegorically used to indicate the beginning stage of the resurrection until all people dwell in their eternal abode.”⁸

The afterlife is always mentioned in contrast to this worldly life. This life is transient, whereas the coming life is eternal. Sooner or later, there will be an end, a final day, or a Final Hour of this worldly life. Throughout history people have attempted to discern the exact date of this end. From an Islamic perspective, the knowledge of the final day belongs to God only. As the Qur’an narrates, the curiosity of the people of Arabia was evident when they were asking the Prophet about the time of the Final Hour. The Qur’an reminds the reader that only God knows the exact time of the Final Hour, and the duty of the Prophet was to warn people about the certainty of its coming so that they are prepared,

O Muhammad, they ask you: “when will the Final Hour come.” You have no knowledge of it. The knowledge of it belongs to your Lord. Your duty is to warn those who are fearful of it. When they behold it they will think that they have spent on earth only one evening or one morning (79:42–46).

In Islamic theological discourse knowledge of the Hour is the first of the five themes that are known only to God.⁹ The Qur’an, by putting the knowledge of the Hour among the first of these themes suggests that there

7. “The Hour” or *al-Sa’a*, is mentioned in the following verses: 6:31, 40; 7:34, 187; 12:107; 15:85; 16:61, 77; 18:21; 20:15; 21:49; 22:1, 7, 55; 25:11; 30:12, 14, 55; 31:34; 33:63; 34:3, 30; 40:46, 59; 41:47, 50; 42:17–18; 43:61, 66, 85; 45:27, 32; 47:18; 54:1, 46; 79:42.

8. Abu ‘Abdillah Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Qurtubi, vol. 1 of *al-Jami’ li Ahkam al-Qur’an*, ed. Hisham Samir al-Bukhari, (Riyadh: Dar ‘Alam al-Kutub, 2003), 143.

9. Five themes are: 1. The knowledge of the Hour, that is to say, only God knows when the Final Hour will occur; 2. the exact time of rain, the knowledge of this also belongs to God, the current meteorological predictions do not violate this since predictions are based on the already emerged indications of rain, and prior to those signs there can be no certainty about the time of the event of rain; 3. only God knows what is in the wombs, that is to say, the characteristics and features of the fetus and what he or she will do in their life on earth are only known to God; 4. no soul knows what it will earn tomorrow; 5. no soul knows in what land it will die (see Qur’an, 31:34).

is no way for human beings to determine the exact time of the Final Hour. Theologically speaking, the secrecy of the Final Hour that is known only to God contributes to people's preparation for the afterlife. Therefore, from an Islamic theological perspective, divine wisdom can be perceived in such secrecy. The Qur'an states:

O mankind! Keep your duty to your Lord ... Surely the promise of God is true. Therefore, let not this worldly life deceive you. Let not the deceiver [Satan] deceive you about God. (31:33–34).

The Imminence of the Hour

Although the time of the Hour is among the five unknown themes in Islam, there is no doubt about its certainty and its imminence. The Qur'an speaks of the imminence of the Final Hour and the signs that indicate its coming. Referring to those who deny the afterlife the verse states, "They wait only for the Hour to come suddenly. In fact, its signs have come" (Qur'an 47:18). In another verse, the Qur'an states, "The Hour is near" (Qur'an 54:1). These verses similarly echo the message of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15).¹⁰ With regard to the Final Hour, Muslim theologians did not find a contradiction between it being unknown and near.

The imminence of the Hour poses a problem, both for the Holy Scripture of Islam and for Jesus' statement cited above. More than two thousand years have passed since Jesus' prophecy and over 1400 years have passed since the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad, but the expected Final Hour has yet to come. Considering this criticism against the prediction of scripture, Muslim theologians have discussed this question. Instead of viewing Jesus and the Qur'an as being incorrect in their prediction, a contemporary Muslim theologian, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960), has an interpretive approach. He argues that the imminence of the Final Hour stated in the Qur'an, which is also true for Jesus' statement, should be understood in the context of our planet's age. If the earth is several billion years old, several thousand years is considered a short span of time in comparison to the age of the planet. Therefore, the Qur'anic understanding of nearness is to be compared to the

10. *New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, 1995).

age of the planet and not to the age of individual human beings. The passing of such a period of time does not invalidate the Qur'anic revelation on the nearness of the Hour.¹¹

The Qur'an is clear about the coming of the Hour; over a hundred sayings of the Prophet are dedicated to the subject of the Final Hour and its signs that mark its nearness. Even some chapters of the most prominent collections of Hadith or the sayings of the Prophet, such as *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* have been named after eschatological themes. For example, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, known as the most reliable anthology on the sayings of the Prophet, contains an entire section on "*Fitan*," or trials that will occur before the Hour. *Sahih Muslim*, another prominent anthology of the sayings of the Prophet, contains several major chapters on subjects such as "The Description of Resurrection, Paradise and Hell," "The Description of Paradise and its People," and "The Signs of the Final Hour."¹² Later scholars and theologians have written voluminous works on the afterlife, its signs and the description of paradise and its divine bounties.¹³

It should be noted that the Prophet, like the Qur'an, in many cases, spoke in symbolic and allegorical language to describe possible upcoming events. In order to understand the meaning of the prophetic sayings about the themes related to afterlife and its signs, one should look deeply into the grammatical details as well as the allegorical meaning of the Arabic language that is used by the Prophet. Commentators on the sayings of the Prophet have found specific terminologies and methods to interpret these kinds of textual references in the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, prophetic statements that are considered allegorical *and* ambiguous are not to be taken literally. Many of the Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet related to eschatological events are considered to be among these kinds of statements. It is evident that literal meanings in some cases entail logical impossibilities. The Qur'an itself points to this distinctive character of the divine revelation:

11. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Sözler*, (Izmir: Işık Yayinlari, 2002), 446–447.

12. Some popular books have been compiled of those sayings of the Prophet about the portents of the afterlife. For example 'Abdullah Hajjaj, in his book *'Alamat al-Qiyama al-Kubra min Bi'that al-Nabi Hatta Nuzul 'Isa* [*The Big Signs of the Day of Judgment from the Coming of the Prophet to the Descent of Jesus*] (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1987), has put together many sayings of the Prophet on the subject.

13. For examples, see al-Hafiz Abu Nu'aym al-Asbahani, *Sifat al-Jannah* [the description of paradise]. Ed. Ali Rida 'Abdullah. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'mun li al-Turath, 1988).

It is God who has revealed upon you [Muhammad] the book [the Qur'an], some of which are clear revelations which are the core of the Book, and some of which are allegorical.... None knows its explanation except Allah, and those who are of deep knowledge, who say 'we believe in it; it is all from our Lord.'" (Qur'an 3:7).

Life is a Test

These ambiguous statements about the Hour are *necessarily* ambiguous, because they confront each individual's life as a question and a task. This problem of ambiguity relates to one of the Qur'anic principles that "life is a test". Human beings are accountable for their actions in this world which is illustrated by the following verse: "Exalted is the One in whose hand is the sovereignty. He is powerful over all things. It is He who has created life and death, that He may test you, which of you is best in conduct, and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving" (Qur'an 67:1–2). In order to have a fair test, some divine revelations about the future must be ambiguous to a certain extent, so that the successful and those who fail can be justly distinguished. Although there have been Muslim theologians who took all of the prophetic sayings literally, it can be argued that methodologically speaking, such literalism goes against some principles of Islamic theology, particularly when the concept of the afterlife is concerned. For example, with regard to eschatological signs, the Prophet spoke of the descent of Jesus (*Nuzul 'Isa*) as one of the signs of the Hour. If it is taken literally, it would mean that Jesus, as a human being, would come down directly from the sky to the earth and such an event could be witnessed by everyone. Islamic theology entails that such an evident event of the return of Jesus would go against the principle of free will. That is to say, Jesus' coming in such a manner would compel people to believe in him, which would leave no space for the exercise of their free will. When Prophet Muhammad declared the divine message there was no sign on his forehead indicating he was a messenger of God. Despite this major principle of Islamic theology, today popular books in circulation in the streets of Cairo, Jakarta, Riyadh and many other places are mostly trumpeting this literalist approach in a remarkably inflammatory way.

A good number of Muslim theologians have found this literalism, particularly on the descent of Jesus, problematic and in fact incompatible with the teaching of the Qur'an, although one can speak of a common

belief among Muslims that Jesus will descend because the Prophet of Islam stated he would do so. However, there is no consensus on the manner of his descent. There has been no agreement that Jesus will come down from the sky in the form of a human being. Accordingly, the encompassing Qur'anic principle of "life being a test" once again reminds us even if the sayings of the Prophet are sound and reliable, those sayings should not be understood literally.

As indicated above, the Qur'an makes clear that the knowledge of the Final Hour belongs to God and the signs that indicate its imminence are not excluded phenomena from this principle of test. The life of the Prophet is an example. When the Prophet Muhammad came, with the exception of some miracles, there was nothing extraordinary. That is why Abu Bakr, the first caliph and the closest friend of the Prophet, believed in him strongly and became among his first companions, while Abu Jahl, one of his contemporaries and stern opponents, refused to accept him. According to Islamic theology, this was a test—Abu Bakr passed the test, while Abu Jahl failed. Both exercised their free will; the former used his in the right direction and the latter in the wrong direction.

At this juncture, a question comes to mind: why does the Qur'an not mention specifically in a clear cut way the exact time of the Hour or the end of human history, which is the most important event of human destiny? What wisdom can be found in such concealment? Muslim theologians have interestingly responded that when the Qur'an speaks of the Final Hour, it purposely does not mention the time of its occurrence so that people will always feel that they have to be ready for it at all times. If the divine revelation has announced the exact time of the Final Hour, an earlier audience of scriptures will feel less concerned while the later audience would spend their life in fear due to its imminence. By this concealment the Holy Scripture makes sure that all people, throughout history, are equally concerned about the Hour.

Furthermore, the reason behind such ambiguity is that knowledge of the exact time of the Hour is not among the essential pillars of Islam and articles of faith. Therefore, it can be argued that the allegorical language of Islamic religious texts, both the Hadith and Qur'an, with regard to future events gives greater room for interpretation as well as for the exercise of free will, which is the foundation for belief in Islamic theology. In Islam, there can be no accountability without free will. That is why if someone is

forced to a belief that belief is not accepted. Since in such a case one has no chance to exercise his or her free will. Similarly an insane individual is not accountable, because of the lack of reason which is the foundation of human free will. Theologically speaking, there is wisdom in such ambiguity and that is to keep believers awake and active in their religious life. Such ambiguity can be seen in other Islamic themes. For example “the night of power” or what the Qur’an calls “*Laylat al-Qadr*” is stated in the Qur’an, with a chapter named after it, but it is an unspecified night which can be any night of the year. According to many references on the merit of this night, the Qur’an declares that if one catches this night and performs prayers throughout this night it is worth one thousand months (Qur’an 98:1–5). The prophet gives some hints about it by some recommendations: “search for it in the last ten days of the month of Ramadan,” the Prophet says.¹⁴ Therefore, taking this prophetic recommendation, devout Muslims voluntarily spiritually revive their nights with prayer in the expectation that they might catch “the night of power.”

Another example is a moment on Fridays, the most blessed day of the week in Islam. The Prophet speaks of an undefined “moment” on every Friday in which if one catches the moment they will have an immediate response from God to their prayer. The exact time of this moment again is not given. Although all days are blessed in Islam, Friday has a special place as far as prayer and spiritual endeavors are concerned. The Prophet, by not giving the exact precious “moment” of Friday, encourages believers to dedicate their Fridays, both day and night, to prayer. Even dedication to them is not enough. In order to catch this “moment” one should ask for the grace of God and pray constantly.

Considering the above-mentioned Islamic theological principles, one can argue that the eschatological events are presented in the main Islamic sources by and large in allegorical language so that believers can exercise their free will by accepting or rejecting the divine message. Life is a test and people are required to exercise their free will in order to pass or fail this test. The righteous through the great promise of God will receive paradise as reward, while the wrongdoer will receive punishment for his or her wrong action. Hence many Qur’anic verses, which can be categorized as references for didactic eschatology, came to be understood as referring to

14. Al-Bukhari, *al-Sahih*, *Laylat al-Qadr*, 3.

the threat of punishment and the promise of reward in the afterlife. The aim of these verses is to help people pass this life test, which is of paramount importance. The Qur'an is clear that once God promises, God never breaks His promise:

“[O Muhammad] say to people: ‘Surely I am a clear warner for you. So those who believe and do good deeds, for them is forgiveness and generous provision. While those who strive to thwart Our signs, such are the companions of the Fire’ (Qur’an 22: 47–51).

Life in this world is given as a preparation for the life to come. The Qur'an is highly emphatic on this aspect of life which is also considered an important source of meditation for the mystical tradition of Islam. The Qur'an complains that people love this world and often forget or abandon the afterlife: “Nay! You love the fleeting life (the present worldly life) and you abandon the Hereafter. On that day some faces will be radiant, looking up toward their Lord and some faces on that day will be despondent, knowing that a crushing calamity is about to be inflicted on them” (Qur’an 75:20–25). Related verses generally start with “the likeness of this present life... ” (e.g. see Qur’an 10:24), indicating the importance of the afterlife and reminding people of such an important test. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi makes the analogy of wealth, saying that if people have such wealth equivalent to the amount of the wealthiest countries in the world, if they are aware of the importance of this test, they will spend all their wealth with no hesitation in order to pass this test.¹⁵ That is because the result of passing this test is eternal bliss. Such an achievement will result in happiness that will continue for billions and billions of years which is not comparable to this short worldly life.

15. During World War II, many people out of curiosity were abandoning their prayer to listen to the news about the war. Nursi, unlike these people, was focusing on his writings and encouraging his students to focus on their preparation for the afterlife and not news of the war on which they could not have any effect, neither positively or negatively. Nursi was telling his students that passing or failing “the test” was a problem that every individual human being faces. Passing this test is the most important event of human life. That is because the events in question were related to the transient worldly life, while passing or failing this test is related to the eternal life. See Nursi, *Şualar*, in *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayinlari, 2004), 952–53.

In conclusion, the Qur'an presents eschatology as one of the essential elements of Islamic faith. In almost every page of the Qur'an, one can find a reference to the idea of hereafter. Being the last revelation of God on earth, according to Islamic theology, one of the missions of the Qur'an is to provide people with thorough information about the concept. By emphasizing its imminence, the Qur'an invites people to be prepared for the life to come. Even if the death of the world is very far away, the death of each individuals is not so far away. Being reminded about the imminence of the Hour is also a sharp warning on the importance and priority of the afterlife over this life. The Qur'an purposefully does not mention the exact time of the Final Hour due to its own principle of "life as a test" to help people exercise their free will. Since belief in the afterlife is one of the major articles of faith in Islam and the sine qua non of faith in general, the denial of the afterlife is also a great offence and strongly condemned in the Qur'an: "Those who believe not in the Hereafter are in chastisement and far error" (Qur'an 34:8).