

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 36 · Number 3 · July 2012

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

They are not all Martyrs Islam on the Topics of Dying, Death, and Salvation in the Afterlife

Christine Schirrmacher

KEYWORDS: *Instruction, sin, revelation, obedience, faith, suicide, martyrdom, sharia, mourning, judgement*

WITHIN ISLAM, THE topic of dying, death and salvation in the afterlife is a theologically meaningful and today also politically delicate topic as some Muslim groups which we brand 'Salafi' or 'Jihadi' have shaped its meaning according to their specific convictions. Theologically, the topic of death and dying is of major importance because it is closely related to the issue of forgiveness and salvation and even more to the question of whether a believer already during his lifetime on earth is entitled to be assured of his entering into paradise after death.

Although, on one hand, the Koran leaves no doubt that Islam is the only true religion superseding 'abrogated' religions like Judaism or Christianity

and correcting their perceived 'distorted' scriptures, the question whether the single believer can face death without being concerned about God's judgement upon him in the hereafter cannot be too hastily answered in the positive. Jihadi groups benefit from this 'unsolved' question in Islamic theology insofar as they promise to guarantee the martyr dying in a suicide operation acceptance by God even without being questioned by the angel of death.

The following article will explain the concept of death, martyrdom and mourning as it is expanded in the Koran, the Islamic tradition and Islamic theology and contrast it with fundamental concepts of biblical teaching.

I The Meaning of Death and Dying in Islam

The question of a religion's understanding of death and dying presup-

Christine Schirrmacher, (MA, PhD) is professor of Islamic Studies at the Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät (ETF) in Leuven/Belgium, and regularly lectures on Islam at different government institutions in Germany. She is head of the International Institute of Islamic Studies of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and a member of the Protestant Centre for World View Questions of the Protestant Church of Germany (Berlin). Travelling widely for lectures and conferences, Professor Schirrmacher has published numerous articles and books including the two volume introduction *Der Islam* (1994/2003), *The challenge of Islam—Islam between war and peace*, (2002), and *Islam and Christianity Compared* (2006).

poses the question of the meaning of human life, and within monotheistic religions, in turn, it presupposes the question of the relationship between God and mankind. From the viewpoint of the Koran and Islamic theology, this life has its basic meaning in being preparation for the life hereafter. Mankind is a creation of God and limited in his knowledge. Mankind is reliant upon the guidance of God, the eternal and almighty One, who is to be basically distinguished from mankind and is alien to man in his essence. The task of mankind is to recognize God as Creator and Judge, to submit to him and be devoted, that is to say, to be 'Muslim', to keep to his commands and to sculpt life here in view of the hereafter.

Mankind is seen in the Koran as weak (Sura 4:28) and volatile (Sura 30:36). He easily becomes fainthearted (Sura 70:19-20), is hasty (Sura 17:11), unknowing (Sura 33:72) and prone to evil (Sura 12:53). He is thus in need of instruction but not basically a sinner. Given the correct guidance, he is in the position of doing the right thing and is not as a matter of principle 'sold as a slave to sin'.¹ He indeed becomes guilty of individual sins, but he does not find himself in the situation of being separated from God. For that reason deliverance and reconciliation with God are not indispensable in order to be able to live according to God's commands.

He is, if under Islamic instruction as 'guidance' (Sura 2:97), basically in the position of living according to God's commands. Evil and the seduc-

tion of sin come upon him from outside by Satan's whisperings, but he can withstand it if he takes 'refuge' (Sura 7:200) in God. Since, according to consensus opinion within Muslim theology, every person is born a Muslim, the 'guidance' given by Islam is actually only a return to one's original destiny: a life led according to the commands of Islam is in accord with God's actions in creation.

Since Jews and Christians acknowledge God as Creator, Islam grants them the status of 'people of the Book' (Sura 3:199). That is to say, they are people who had in the past been given a revelation of God in the form of the Old and New Testaments. Still, they 'blaspheme' (Sura 5:72-75) in that they pray to Jesus as God's son and deny Mohammed the recognition of being the 'seal of the Prophets' (Sura 33:40). For that reason, at the end of the time of his pronouncements in Medina, Mohammed increasingly considered Judaism and Christianity to be forged. Islam, on the other hand, was no longer just one of the revelatory religions but rather the one true 'religion before God' (Sura 3:19) that displaces and corrects Judaism and Christianity.

As adherents of the true religion of Islam, Muslims generally assume that they will go to paradise after their death. There is, however, no personal certainty, since a personal promise of salvation for the individual believer is found neither in the Koran nor in the texts handed down as tradition. The omnipotence and absolute sovereignty of Allah, the uncreated One, as well as his basic dissimilarity to people, his creatures, prohibit people from foretelling God's actions and thereby limiting his omnipotence. This is due

¹ Compare the remarks on the Koran's conception of man in Theodor Adel Khoury, *Der Koran. Arabisch-Deutsch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), 12:446 ff.

to the fact that 'human speech can only speak humanly, that is to say, inadequately, about Him because it is location-oriented'.²

II. The Four Ways of Dying

Death unavoidably stands at the end of each human life, and the day of death has been determined by God. Four ways of enduring death are to be distinguished from each other and are viewed differently from the point of view of Islam: violent death at one's own hands (suicide); violent death at the hands of another person (accident, manslaughter, murder); violent death by self-sacrifice (the martyr's death); natural death.

1. Violent death at one's own hands (suicide)

In Islamic theology suicide is unanimously condemned. It is an independent decision to which an individual as a created being is not entitled. In the action of suicide, mankind assaults a life that he did not call into being: 'Since an individual did not create himself, not so much as a single cell within his body, the life of a person does not belong to himself.'³

Moreover, killing oneself stands for personal doubt with respect to God's care and provision. It represents cowardly avoidance of the tests which God

has intended for mankind, thus being an indication of weakness of faith. The person who commits suicide evades the test of his patience and perseverance in the here and now.

The Koran does not clearly speak about taking one's own life,⁴ but tradition unmistakably condemns it as a form of unbelief and threatens the person who commits suicide with eternal punishment.⁵ Muslim theology also unanimously condemns him who sets an end to his own life, as it is a 'pretension to a right to which mankind is not entitled' and as 'the pinnacle of spiritual and mental confusion and disintegration'.⁶ For many theologians, such as the former Sheik of al-Azhar, Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), taking one's own life carries more weight than the killing of another individual. It is a 'pathological deviation from [the law] of the inviolability of the individual'.⁷

2. Violent death at the hands of another person (accident, manslaughter, murder)

Violent death does not itself require

⁴ Sura 4:29 is possibly aimed directly against suicide: '...nor kill yourselves'.

⁵ According to Thabit bin Ad-Dahhak's tradition, for example, in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 8, Book 73, Number 73, <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/search.html> (March 2, 2009).

⁶ According to Birgit Krawietz's summary of Arabic fatwas in the 20th century, *Die Hurma. Schiarierechtlicher Schutz vor Eingriffen in die körperliche Unversehrtheit nach arabischen Fatwas des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 92.

⁷ Mahmud Shaltut, *al-qatl wa-l-intihar*, (Beirut: 1983, 415-422); quoted by Krawietz, *Die Hurma*, 94.

² Erwin Gräf, 'Notions of death within the framework of Islamic anthropology', in Johannes Schwartländer (ed.), *Der Mensch und sein Tod* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 126-145, here 129.

³ Jusuf al-Qaradawi, *Erlaubtes und Verbotenes im Islam* (München: SKD Bavaria, 1989), 277.

a separate explanation. This is due to the fact that from a theological point of view, for the victim there are no other consequences that arise than with death by natural means.

With respect to the perpetrator, it can briefly be said, however, that murder and manslaughter fall under the category of crime calling forth retaliation (Arabic *qisas*), i.e., crimes against the body and life of a person. According to the notion of the sharia, murder and manslaughter do not violate God's law but rather only human law. As a result, both offences are severely wrongful acts, but they are not capital offenses. Capital offences would call for the death penalty. According to the provisions of the sharia, what is called for is to inflict the same injury, that is, killing the guilty person. If the person who can rightfully inflict the retaliatory injury waives his right, the penalty can be converted into a payment of blood money (Arabic *diyya*) and a religious penance such as, for example, additional fasting (Sura 2:178-179). In a legal sense, only individuals who are of majority age and who are in full control of their mental faculties are guilty.

According to sharia law, retaliation (or vengeance) means inflicting the same injury or killing the murderer or the person who committed manslaughter. Insofar as a person is deliberately killed, the family of the dead individual can demand the killing of the guilty person. However, it is only the nearest male relative who is allowed to make this request, and it is he who is then allowed to conduct the killing of the guilty party under the supervision of a judge. In the process the principle of equity strictly applies: a woman for a woman, a slave for a slave. 'O ye who

believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: The free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman ...' (Sura 2:178). If equity cannot be produced, then according to the guidelines of the sharia no retaliation is allowed to be exercised.

In most countries shaped by Islam, the penalty of retaliation according to the law of the sharia is not practised, at least not through the judiciary. In an environment that has been shaped by tribal customs, blood vengeance is in part practised. However, in Iran where the sharia was reintroduced in 1979, blood vengeance has found its way into legislation: the blood price for a Muslim man is at the moment 100 faultless camels, 200 head of cattle or 1,000 muttons, 200 Yemeni robes and 1,000 Dinar or 10,000 silver dirhams.⁸ For a woman, one-half of the amount applies. As a general rule, the amount for a non-Muslim is also less.

3. Violent death by self-sacrifice (the martyr's death)

How is a martyr's death defined? Does a martyr's death occur where the believer is placed in front of the choice of renouncing his faith or dying? Or is it at the point where a believer places himself in a combat situation—without the prospect for survival—in order to offer his life for his convictions? While the Christian understanding of martyrdom relates to the former, martyrdom as it is propagated in jihadism is dominated by the latter definition.

⁸ Silvia Tellenbach, *Strafgesetze der Islamischen Republik Iran* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 96-97.

The majority of Muslim theologians would not categorize the martyrish activity of a Muslim bomber as suicide, but rather as a defence of—in particular in Palestine but also in Afghanistan and Iraq—‘oppressed’ Islam. From this perspective a suicide bomber does not conceive of himself as an individual committing suicide, where in the afterlife God’s punishment awaits him. Rather, he conceives of himself as a soldier and defender of Islam, who, like the first followers of Mohammed in Medina, is called to place his life at risk in order to end the oppression of the Muslim community (Arabic *umma*) by aggressors. Indeed it is also the case that Islam does not permit the killing of the innocent and principally makes calls for peace. According to the jihadist interpretation, however, due to the attempts of western countries to attack Islam up to the point of its destruction, the time of the peaceful propagation of Islam has been replaced by the duty of every person to fight jihad. It is only in this way that the system of justice, the sharia, can be installed over all people.

From this point of view, the martyr sacrifices himself for a higher goal. He gives his life ‘in the way of God’, which is in jihad. This justification is offered by the Koran, since several verses in the Koran connect dedication to God, and death that results from it, with paradise:

Therefore, when you meet the unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks; at length when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind (the captives) firmly ... but those who are slain in the way of Allah,—he will never let their deeds be lost. Soon will he guide them and improve their condition, and admit

them to the garden, which he has made known to them. (Sura 47:4-6)

According to the outlook taken by the Koran, the martyr only apparently dies, so for that reason one must not mourn for him:

Think not of those who are slain in Allah’s way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance from their Lord. They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: and with regard to those left behind, who have not yet joined them (in their bliss), the (martyrs) glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they (cause to) grieve. (Sura 3:169-170)

After his death, a martyr does not have to put up with the torment of questioning by the angels of death. His faith is elevated beyond each and every doubt. For that reason, according to the largely agreed upon opinion of Muslim theologians, he goes directly after his death to paradise without any prior waiting time or possible detention in hellfire. He is not subject to the otherwise ritualistic washing of the dead but is rather laid to rest in his blood-stained clothes at the location of his death (and not in a cemetery).

a) Islamic Mystics’ Yearning for Death

The motive of yearning for death is also something known from Islamic mysticism. The mystic, after he has killed off his temporal desires via asceticism, desires death, since with death his union with God and his own ‘de-becoming’ (Arabic *fana*) begins. The most famous early mystic of Islam, al-Husain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), wrote:

Kill me, oh my friends,
Since only in death is my life!

Yes, in death lies my life!
 Truly it is the highest grace,
 Extinguishing oneself to waft away,
 And I recognize it as the worst,
 To cling fast to this life.
 The soul is weary,
 To still live in decay.
 Kill me, yes, and burn me,
 Whose members wretchedly
 quiver!⁹

4. Natural Death

The most frequent form of death is of course natural death, which in the Koran as well as in tradition has been comprehensively dealt with as an issue. Death is preceded by the life that God, the Creator of all life, has given to all people. He has made mankind out of the earth (Sura 20:53-55) and from small seed (Sura 22:5). God brings people forth from the mother's womb and makes them grow. He has thought out numerous ways for mankind: '... and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age' (Sura 22:5). For everyone, however, life here on earth is a 'test', so that God can recognize (Sura 67:1-2) whether the person shows him gratefulness and honour or is unthankful and in self-aggrandizement views himself as the measure of all things. In spite of the personal responsibility of the individual, which the Koran simultaneously emphasizes, God has assigned some

to salvation and others to misery (Sura 35:8). Everything is 'written down' (Arabic *maktub*), that God is the cause of all things: *kull-u min Allah*—everything comes from God. He is the one who brings forth life and causes death (Sura 2:258). Death marks the end of the period of man's testing on earth, to whom God turns in mercy and pity.

When man is created, his time of death is appointed at the same time, too. 'So death is not itself a punishment',¹⁰ however unavoidable it may be. In the same way that God brings man into being, so he also brings about his death: 'Every soul shall have a taste of death ...' (Sura 21:35). Man cannot escape death (Sura 62:8), nor can he avoid it (Sura 4:78). People 'return' to God after their death (Sura 2:156), in order that after a time of sleeping¹¹ they will be raised up after their death (Sura 2:56) and called to judgment. After this the unbeliever is condemned to death, while the believer can go into paradise, depending upon whether his faith and actions are accepted by God.¹²

Death, then, marks the line of separation between this world and the afterlife. For the believer it is the gate to

9 From Annemarie Schimmel, *Nimm eine Rose und nenne sie Lieder* (Köln, 1987), 253, quoted in Hortense Reintjens-Anwari, 'Der Tod aus islamischer Sicht' in Constantin Barloewen (ed.), *Der Tod in den Weltkulturen und Weltreligionen* (München: Diederichs, 1996), 169-200, here 186.

10 John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105.

11 Most experts are of the opinion that the deceased rest until the trumpet is sounded for the final judgment, Pierre-Antoine Bernheim and Guy Stavrides, *Welt der Paradiese—Paradiese der Welt* (Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 1992), 222.

12 Also summarized in Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 81.

a life of joy in paradise, while for the unbeliever it is the gate to eternal torment. In a certain sense, the unbeliever is already 'dead'¹³ in this life, since he does not recognize the reality of God. He has to fear death, since with death and the subsequent judgment his final sojourn in hell fire begins. At the same time, the believer can hope for God's pity. The believer already knows here that he is committed to God: 'My life and my death, are (all) for Allah, the cherisher of the worlds' (Sura 6:162).

According to the Islamic notion, death is not the wage for sin, that is to say, the 'wages of sin'. It is the virtually logical consequence of dying and the appointment that man has with resurrection and judgment: 'death is planned into the creation.'¹⁴ The actual assignment that man has behind this world's ephemeral life and death is to recognize the reality of God, since 'from the beginning, life and death are indeed instruments of God's providence'.¹⁵

a) Death's Entry

From the very beginning, God has set the day of death of each and every person and retrieves him at that time to go into the afterlife (Sura 56:60-61). Every person knows that death will surely

befall him (Sura 21:35), but no one knows the hour of his death. If death has neared a person, then the Muslim believer should, as far as it is possible, carry out the ritualistic washing. If he becomes weaker, Koran texts might be recited, his head placed in the direction of Mecca, and the confession of faith whispered to him shortly before his death. Whispering the confession of faith ceases after the dying person has repeated it once himself. The confession of faith should be the last words uttered before death, since Mohammed is supposed to have said: 'Whoever says as his last words before death "*la ilaha illa llah*" [There is no God but God], enters the garden of paradise.'¹⁶

According to folk Islam's understanding, in the afterlife the dead individual, while he is still lying in the grave, is asked by two angels the following questions about his faith: Who is your God? Who is your prophet? What is your religion? Where do you face in prayer? Only if the individual can answer these questions and can profess belief in Islam with the confession of faith can he cross over a bridge, which in tradition is described as sharper than a sword and thinner than a hair. Unbelievers plummet from the bridge into hell and its fire.

When death occurs, the dead individual's eyes and mouth are closed while prayers are offered for his merciful reception in the afterlife. A lamentation for the dead individual is then struck up. However, many theologians

¹³ According to Jacques Waardenburg, 'Death' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), Vol. 1, S. 505-511, here 510.

¹⁴ Reintjens-Anwari, 'Der Tod aus islamischer Sicht', 169-200, here 174.

¹⁵ Jacques Waardenburg, "'Leben verlieren' oder 'Leben gewinnen' als alternative in prophetischen Religionen" in Gunther Stephenson (ed.), *Leben und Tod in den Religionen: Symbol und Wirklichkeit* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaft Buchgesellschaft, 19852), 36-60, here 47.

¹⁶ Quoted in Abdul Aziz Kamal, 'Islamisches Recht für den Alltag', 37 Fortsetzung, in *al-Islam. Zeitschrift von Muslimen in Deutschland* Nr.2/2000, 16-18, here 16.

condemn signs of excessive mourning such as the tearing of clothes or buffeting one's breast or face, since these are signs of a deficiency in one's faith.

As far as it is possible, the dead person is washed and perfumed by relatives of the same gender,¹⁷ and under certain circumstances the hands and feet are coloured with henna. Husbands are allowed to be washed by their wives. Not all theologians allow a woman to be washed by her husband, since marriage ends with the death of the wife. What this means is that the man is no longer legally married.

Refraining from washing is considered a sin. For that reason, if the washing of the corpse has been neglected and the corpse is already in the grave but not yet covered with dirt, it should be taken for a washing. Up until the time of the burial, which if possible should be on the same day as the day of death, the dead individual should not be left alone. Relatives keep watch at the side of the deceased, and under certain circumstances an imam or a mullah as well. Prayers are spoken, and lamps and perhaps incense are also burned.

The corpse is wrapped in linen cloths, which are preferably white and which are precisely specified according to composition, size, and number. The shroud can be the pilgrim's robe of the deceased, with which the individual made the pilgrimage to Mecca. These special fabrics are made by women who have gone through menopause: in this way it is ensured that the fabrics have

not been manufactured by someone in a condition of ritual uncleanness.

Basically a corpse should be prepared for burial immediately upon death. The burial should occur as soon as possible, which in the best case is the same day. By touching the corpse as well as by carrying the catafalque, a ritual uncleanness arises. This uncleanness has to be removed via a ritual washing before the involved person is allowed to touch the Koran again or carry out prayers. The funeral prayer is spoken over the corpse, which includes the petition for forgiveness for the dead individual. The family or loved ones of the individual who has passed away participate under the direction of a qadi or imam.

III The Burial

After the burial prayer, the corpse is quickly laid to rest. With a funeral cortege, which if possible should be conducted on foot and should consist of neither a horse-drawn carriage nor a motorized vehicle, the dead person is brought to the cemetery. If the deceased person is a male, prayer can be conducted for him along the way in a mosque. After that, the deceased should be interred in a burial ground that is purely Muslim or at least reserved for Muslims.

It is an honour to be one of the pallbearers. Passers-by on the street can also accompany the deceased person for a portion of the way, even if they were neither a personal acquaintance of the deceased nor related to him. According to the convictions of folk Islam, carrying the catafalque serves to have sins forgiven. This funeral procession is normally made up exclu-

¹⁷ Washing the dead supposedly originated in pre-Islamic times: M. Abdesselem an 'Mawt', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 6:910-911, here 911.

sively of men, since according to tradition women are prohibited or at least strongly frowned upon for participating in the interment. In the case where it is the interment of their husband or child, they generally remain at home. To be sure the Islamic confession of faith can be recited at the grave, but loud expressions of mourning and loud recitations from the Koran are frowned upon.

When interred, the deceased is laid on his right side with his head in the direction of Mecca. Those present fill the open grave with dirt and pray again for forgiveness for the deceased. Koran texts are recited and instruction is again given to the deceased about the confession of faith, so that the individual is able to give answers to the questions posed by the angels of death regarding his faith.

Cremation is not admissible, even where it is the desire of the deceased. The deceased should be buried unscathed, which makes the scientific use of the corpse for research and teaching purposes practically impossible.¹⁸ Placing stones or decorative elements on the grave is not allowed, and naturally the same goes for a cross.

According to the Muslim notion, the eternal rest of the deceased may not be disturbed. For that reason, Muslim graveyards are not allowed to be reused after 20 to 30 years. This conception has led to conflicts when Muslims—as today is the case with the absolute majority—are not transported to the home country for their burial but rather are buried in German cemeter-

ies. As a rule, reuse after a period of time is intended in German cemeteries. Almost everywhere in Germany, burial without a coffin, which is common in Islam, is ruled out.

With respect to subsequent expressions of sympathy and visits from friends, neighbours, and relatives, men and women traditionally remain in separate places. Men are visited by men and women by women. Women are taken care of by female neighbours and relatives. Food is brought to the family, and men read Koran texts and commemorate the deceased. Alms are also distributed.

IV Mourning

Mourning is allowed in Islam, but according to the opinion of theologians it should be composed and restrained. It should not be expressed excessively loudly and hysterically. According to Islam, black is not a colour of mourning. Basically what applies in this situation of loss is the same thing that occurs in the case of other momentous events (such as, for example, a birth), namely that neighbours and relatives offer help and support and do not leave those who mourn alone. Indeed, for the initial period of time, they assume their care.

The family to which the deceased belonged now becomes a house of mourning for three days. A widow may mourn over her husband for four months and ten days.¹⁹ After a spe-

¹⁸ Medical students in Saudi Arabia are supposed to only have corpses from abroad made available to them in their studies.

¹⁹ Also according to Marwan Ibrahim Al-Kaysi *Morals and Manners in Islam. A Guide to Islamic Adab* (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), 181.

cific period, approximately forty days after death—or again after a year has passed—a funeral banquet is held for relatives and loved ones, and in every case it involves a larger community of people. Under certain circumstances it is an event in which even the entire village participates.

1. Moharram Mourning Ritual

A special form of mourning ritual consists of Shiite Ashura memorial services in the month of Moharram, in which the violent death of the prophet grandson of al-Husain in 680 A.D. is commemorated. Ashura stands for the Shiite belief in suffering and sacrifice of a just person who died at the hands of an oppressor and brought about redemption. On Ashura al-Husain's martyrish death is observed. Al-Husain was Mohammed's grandson, Ali's son, that is, the son of the fourth caliph (successors of Mohammed) and final male descendant in the direct line of Mohammed. In 680 A.D. in the vicinity of the city of Kerbela he was defeated in battle against a Sunnite led army. Partisans of al-Husain from the city of Kufa did not assist him in the battle, but rather they allowed him to solely carry out the fight against the superior Sunnite forces, so that he hopelessly lost to his enemies. For many centuries, al-Husain's death reinforced the Shiite view that the caliphate had been wrongfully assumed by the Sunnite majority.

The Battle of Kerbela marked the demise of the long standing Shiite hope since the time of Mohammed to gain the command over the Muslim community and to take over the caliphate. The prophet grandson al-Husain, according to the Shiite notion, the innocent one—

indeed the sinless one—suffered injustice and death, so that the 'wrongful ones' were able to gain dominance. For that reason, al-Husain's death as the designated Shiite ruler is of enormous importance for the Shiite community up until the present day. This importance finds its expression in the elaborate Ashura ceremonies. When a Shiite cries for the Martyr al-Husain at the Ashura ceremonies, he is expressing preparedness to take upon himself the same martyrdom which al-Husain took upon himself.²⁰ The thought of martyrdom is for that reason very closely tied to Shiite theology.

Ashura ceremonies last for the first ten days of the month of Moharram. Plain, often black, mourning clothes, the recitation of verses which speak about al-Husain's suffering, songs of mourning, theatre performances, street processions, and self-flagellation with swords or chains, by which much blood is spilled, are all part of the ceremonies.²¹ Individuals who cut their uncovered shoulders and backs with chains do so as a sign of mourning over the martyrdom of imams and over their own wretched situation as oppressed people.²² Individuals who cut themselves with swords do so on the

²⁰ Heinz Halm, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 177.

²¹ Compare Hildegard Müller's detailed descriptions: 'Studien zum persischen Passionspiel' (Freiburg: Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, 1966).

²² According to Gustav Thaïss regarding Iran, Gustav Thaïss, 'Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The drama of Husain' in: Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972/1978), 349-366.

head and forehead, and in the course of injuring themselves fall into a frenzy and a trance. Others rhythmically hit themselves on their breasts. Through the pain and the spilling of blood al-Husain's suffering is imitated, and whoever does this receives an interest in his sacrifice and redemption. Today the performers of the passion play re-enact the scene of this wrongful murder.

The emotional presentation of the suffering, pain, mourning, and shedding of blood is thus at the centre of the Ashura ceremonies. At the climax, the actors portraying al-Husain's enemies are sometimes meant to be attacked and killed by the audience in this dramatic enactment. Even today in the course of the plays, time after time there are victims of death to lament. It is not seldom the case that in locations where there are mixed Sunnite and Shiite populations there are disturbances when in the course of the ceremonies the Shiite believers curse what to them are the first three wrongful caliphs.

At the same time the Ashura ritual is also a penance ritual, with which the believer clears away his immeasurable guilt from not having sacrificed himself together with al-Husain at Kerbela as parts of the Shiite community did not.²³ In 684 the first 'penitents' are said to have visited al-Husain's grave and sought atonement for their faithlessness in 680.²⁴ This thought has remained alive until the present day:

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, one was able to see on television how Iranian soldiers who returned home from Iraqi captivity as prisoners of war grovelled to his grave and in tears begged for forgiveness that they had not died in battle.²⁵

The shrine in Kerbela, around 100 kilometres southwest from Baghdad, is up to this day one of the most important Shiite pilgrimage sites. As is the case with Mecca and Medina, foot may not be set upon this area by non-Muslims.²⁶

Presentations of passion plays are considered commendable, but the observers as well are not passive but rather active participants in the play. As signs of mourning and despair, they throw dirt on their heads. Some tear their clothes, break out in tears, and injure themselves. They participate in al-Husain's suffering and ask for forgiveness for their own sins and those of the Shiite community. The shedding of tears for suffering individuals gives God pleasure:

Tears that are shed for them have a distinct charismatic value. They are ... a condition for the personal salvation of the Shiites. Every sinner has to have shed at least one tear for al-Husain in the course of his life. The grace which is acquired is all the greater, if the shedding of blood is combined with weeping.²⁷

23 Heinz Halm, *Der schiitische Islam. Von der Religion zur Revolution* (München: C. H. Beck, 1994), 31.

24 According to Wilfried Buchta, *Schiiten* (Kreuzlingen/München: Diederichs, 2004), 62.

25 Buchta, *Schiiten*, 32.

26 Müller, 'Studien zum persischen Passionspiel', 38.

27 Müller, 'Studien zum persischen Passionspiel', 160.

2. Mourning at the Graves of Saints and Martyrs

Other forms of mourning are expressed when visiting family members as well and shrines, where shrine visits are combined with the wish to receive a blessing of spiritual power (Arabic *baraka*), help from the respective saints, and answers to prayer for the gracious entry of deceased family members into paradise or for an end to the agonies of the deceased in hellfire. Visiting graves, for example at the time of the fast at the termination of Ramadan, is also not rejected by orthodox theologians if it is done with the goal of bringing death to one's attention.²⁸

V The Judgment

Numerous verses in the Koran as well as tradition speak of a resurrection after death and judgment. The notion that after 'calling to account' (Sura 14:51) every person has to answer for his faith and action in this life does not in all probability originate with pre-Islamic conceptions of faith. On the contrary, old Arabic poetry places the main emphasis on life in this world²⁹

and on the destiny to which mankind is helplessly handed over.³⁰ This is the case even if a certain faith in life after death had to have been known among pre-Islamic tribes.³¹

1. The Judgment: The Koran

In Islam, belief in a final judgment belongs to the most basic articles of faith. Together with the belief in God, the books, the prophets, and the angels, it is one of the five widely recognized basic foundations of faith. The Koran is very emphatic in the way that it clearly points out the final seal that comes with a person's death: he belongs either on the side of the believers, who go into paradise, or on the side of the evildoers, who are destined for hell. A decision regarding faith after one's death, and with it a warding off of eternal punishment, is no longer possible (Sura 23:99-100).

Sura 23:101-115 reports on the despair of him who will be thrown into the fire. God makes it again clear to the lost ones that they have misjudged the gravity and the meaning of faith (Sura 23:115). According to tradition, on one side of the scale is a scroll with a catalogue of the acts of the deceased recorded by angels in a book (Sura 82:10-12). On the other side is only a tiny piece of paper with the Islamic confession of faith that outweighs all of a person's sins.³²

²⁸ Thus the well known guide to correct Muslim behaviour by Marwan Ibrahim Al-Kaysi, *Morals and Manners in Islam. A Guide to Islamic Adab* (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), 171, recommends visiting graves if believers are thereby reminded of the reality of death, but believers should not participate in any un-Islamic practices, such as, for example, touching the graves in order to receive a blessing of spiritual power.

²⁹ Tilman Nagel, 'Das Leben nach dem Tod in islamischer Sicht', in Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (ed.), *Tod und Jenseits im Glauben der Völker* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), 130-144, here 131.

³⁰ According to T. Emil Homerin, 'Echoes of a thirsty owl: Death and afterlife in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry', in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 44/1985, S. 165-184, here S. 167.

³¹ According to M. Abdesslem, 'Mawt', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 6:910-911, here 910.

³² Nagel, 'Das Leben nach dem Tod in islamischer Sicht', 130-144, here 138.

The notion that thereafter all people have to cross over a very long bridge that is sharper than a sword and thinner than a hair supposedly arose in Iran.³³ Believing Muslims are able to cross over it unscathed and reach paradise. Unbelievers plummet from the bridge into hell and into a fire.³⁴ Admittedly there are a number of theologians who hold that the bridge and the scales upon which the works of man are placed, and even the torment of hell, are not to be understood literally. Rather, they are only symbols that figuratively represent the righteousness of God or man's responsibility before him.³⁵

2. The Judgment: As Tradition has It

These relatively brief statements in the Koran are extensively complemented by Islamic tradition. So it is that around the 9th century A.D. the idea developed that the dead would be asked about their confession of faith³⁶ by two dreadful angels, Munkar and Nakir.³⁷ According to the tradition, whoever is not a Muslim and cannot

say the confession will be struck by them in the grave. Also Muslims who are guilty of grave sins are punished for a while in hell fire.³⁸ Prior thereto, at the instant when a person dies, the angel of death (*malak al-mawt*) Izra'il³⁹ appears before the deceased. He is one of the four archangels⁴⁰ and takes the individual's soul (Arabic *ruh* or *nafs*).

Izra'il has his place in the fourth of seven heavens, upon which his foot rests, and the other rests upon the bridge between paradise and hell.⁴¹ He has 4,000 wings and four faces, and his body consists of eyes and tongues.⁴² Different traditions mention additional angels of death. Izra'il does not know man's time of death. However, he does know who belongs among the believers and who does not.⁴³ 'When the day of man's death approaches, Allah causes the leaf on which the man's name is written to fall from the tree below His throne. Izra'il reads the name and has to separate the person's soul from his body after 40 days.'⁴⁴

³³ Compare the explanation for the acceptance of this notion in Islam in Josef Henninger, 'Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran', *Schriftenreihe der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* X. Schöneck/Beckenried (CH), 1951, 95, note 138.

³⁴ Tilman Nagel, *Der Koran* (Einführung-Texte-Erläuterungen) (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1983), 191.

³⁵ Hermann Stieglecker, *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1962/1983), 766-768.

³⁶ Nagel, *Der Koran*, 191.

³⁷ Both names are mentioned only a few times in tradition.

³⁸ Other theologians deny the possibility of a time of questioning and punishment in the grave prior to the resurrection. Examples in Stieglecker, *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam*, 734ff.

³⁹ However, only tradition and not the Koran mentions this name.

⁴⁰ The names of the others three arch-angels are Jibril, Miha'il, and Israfil.

⁴¹ A. J. Wensinck. "Izra'il", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4:292-293, here 292.

⁴² A. J. Wensinck alludes to the similarity this description has in Jewish apocalyptic literature. "Izra'il", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4:292-293, here 292.

⁴³ A. J. Wensinck. "Izra'il", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4:292-293, here 293.

⁴⁴ A. J. Wensinck. "Izra'il", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4:292-293, here 293.

VI Intercession at the Last Judgment: The Koran and Folk Religion

The question of whether it is possible to offer intercessory prayer (Arabic *shafa'a*) for an evildoer or a sinner so that this individual is set free from hellfire is answered in a multi-layered manner. Firstly the Koran fundamentally rejects the intercession of deities (e.g., Sura 10:18). The possibility of lodging intercession for an unbeliever is also rejected (e.g., Sura 2:48+123+254). Some verses deny the possibility of offering intercession as a general principle:

Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds except the companions of the right hand, (they will be) in Gardens (of delight): they will question each other, and (ask) of the sinners: 'What led you into hell-fire?' They will say: 'We were not of those who prayed; nor were we of those who fed the indigent; but we used to talk vanities with vain talkers; and we used to deny the day of judgment until there came to us (the hour) that is certain.' Then will no intercession of (any) intercessors profit them. (Sura 74:38-48)

At the same time the Koran also mentions, however, that God himself can offer intercession: 'To Allah belongs exclusively (the right) to grant intercession: to him belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: in the end, it is to him that you shall be brought back'. (Sura 39:44) As a result, a number of theologians conclude that Muslims who have fallen into grave sins will be thrown into hell for a limited amount of time, and can later be delivered through intercession.

In folk Islam the idea has emerged that Mohammed can be an intercessor for believers. The opinion is that from the first verses of Sura 17 (an allusion to Mohammed's so-called ascension to heaven into God's presence) one can conclude that Mohammed intercedes before God. Since Mohammed resides in God's immediate presence, he has the opportunity to ask God for leniency with respect to sinners in judgment.

Already during his life, appeals for intercession were brought forward to Mohammed.⁴⁵ In folk religion, the prevailing opinion is that angels (Sura 40:7-8) or in particular esteemed men (more seldom women) in Islamic history are able to offer intercession as martyrs or saints. This is based on specific verses such as: 'And those whom they invoke besides Allah have no power of intercession; only he who bears witness to the truth, and with full knowledge.' (Sura 43:86). Many believers make pilgrimages to the graves of saints and bring sacrifices or take vows. Among the saints are, for example, the first four caliphs and the founders of the mystic orders.

So it is that in the classical written tradition the basic possibility of intercession is granted. For instance, the following is stated there: 'If a congregation of one hundred Muslim souls say the Salat (prayer) for a Muslim and ask for all his sins to be forgiven, they will surely have their prayer answered.'⁴⁶

In summary, there are several pos-

⁴⁵ Stieglecker, *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam*, 680.

⁴⁶ Quoted in A. J. Wensinck. 'Shafa'a,' in *Enzyklopädie des Islam* Vol 4 (German version), 268-270, here 269.

sible answers to give from the Koran and tradition to the question: 'Is it possible to offer intercession after a person dies?':

- Intercession for unbelievers is impossible (Sura 19:85-87).
- Intercession through other deities is impossible (Sura 10:18).
- Intercession by God is possible for believing Muslims (Sura 39:44).
- Intercession by angels is perhaps possible (Sura 21:28).
- Intercession by Mohammed is perhaps possible (tradition and folk Islam).
- Intercession by saints, martyrs, and prophets is perhaps possible (folk Islam).

VII Death in the light of Christian Scripture

Compared to Christian Scripture, there are similarities as well as differences in Islamic theology. In the Bible, death on one hand has a negative connotation as the enemy of mankind (1 Cor. 15:26). It is described as the consequence of God's wrath (Ps. 90:7;11) and a curse (Gal. 3:13) so that on earth man's heart is filled with fear because of death. The Bible openly speaks about mourning which is caused by the loss of a beloved one (Luke 8:52).

On the other hand, believers in Christ know about the second reality behind death and dying: their existence will not be extinguished but only transformed. They are assured of God's love and mercy through Jesus' intercession for them (Heb. 7:25), whereas the Muslim believer has no promise of salvation except general statements of

Allah's omnipotence and mercy—if he has done enough good deeds while on earth.

Death according to biblical teaching brings about the end of the physical life and the separation between body and soul. While the body is buried, the soul is called to the Last Judgement—here we find outward similarities to Islamic teaching which is due to Muhammad's contact and controversy with Jews and Christians on the Arab Peninsula after he started to preach Islam in 610 A.D. However, the believer in Christ does not assume that he can earn his salvation or impress his creator by good deeds; he is saved by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9) through the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Another difference between Islam and the Christian faith is the factor that the Qur'an describes man as weak (Sura 4:28) and volatile (Sura 30:36). Such weakness can be straightened out by an (Islamic) education and guidance on the right path of Islam. Biblical teaching, on the other hand, makes it clear that man is not weak, but lost and unable to do good deeds (Rom. 7:18). Therefore, according to Scripture, man cannot be educated or guided on the right path and make himself a better person, but needs salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). He is assured already in his life on earth that his sins are forgiven and God has adopted him as his child (John 1:12-13). So death, according to the biblical faith, does not mean the big question mark, but the comma—leading to life in eternity in the presence of God (Rev. 22:4).

The consequences of these differences may be diverse. It is true that church history might have seen Christians who were all too confident that

they were once and for all saved, even if sometimes only because of membership of a Christian congregation. In Islam on the other hand, people might be quite anxious and filled with fear in the face of death which strictly speaking theologically does not allow more than hope to the remaining family that

God will have mercy on the deceased. Because of this uncertainty, some Muslims may, besides by other factors, be driven into Jihadi groups, whereas Christians, if they remain true to their faith, will mourn the loss of a loved one but rejoice in the certain hope that they have entered into the presence of God.

Word Biblical Commentary

1, 2, 3 John (Revised Edition) (WBC)

Stephen S. Smalley

The letters of John, although simple in style, affirm such profound truths that interpreters throughout history have laboured to explain them. In this extensively revised edition of his commentary on the Johannine epistles Smalley updates his work by interacting with recent scholarship on the letters over the last twenty years. This revision is seamlessly woven into the commentary.

Stephen S. Smalley has retired from his position as Dean of Chester Cathedral. He is author of *John: Evangelist and Interpreter and Hope For Ever*.

978-1-41851-424-2 / 216 x 140mm / £29.99

Judges Word Biblical Commentary

Trent C. Butler

This commentary will feature the most extensive text critical notes available in any modern commentary on Judges. It will present a theological reading of the present text of the book and seek to show that current literary and source theories attributing various parts and even minute pieces of the book to a long series of editors over almost a millennium of time are not needed to explain the origin and purposes of the book. This volume of the WBC will argue for a much earlier date of the book in the reigns of Rehoboam and Jeroboam and will show how Judges is designed as a reversal of the structure and achievements of the Book of Joshua, preparing the way for the Davidic line of kings. The commentary will underline Judges' ironic presentation of its major characters as heroes and failures. The commentary will wrestle with the nature and expectations of leadership in Judges.

Trent C. Butler is Vice President of Editorial Services, Christian Board of Publication. He is a former Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschlikon, Switzerland.

978-0-8499-0207-9 / 229 x 152mm / £24.99

Paternoster, Authenticmedia Limited, 52 Presley Way, Crownhill,
Milton Keynes, MK8 0ES