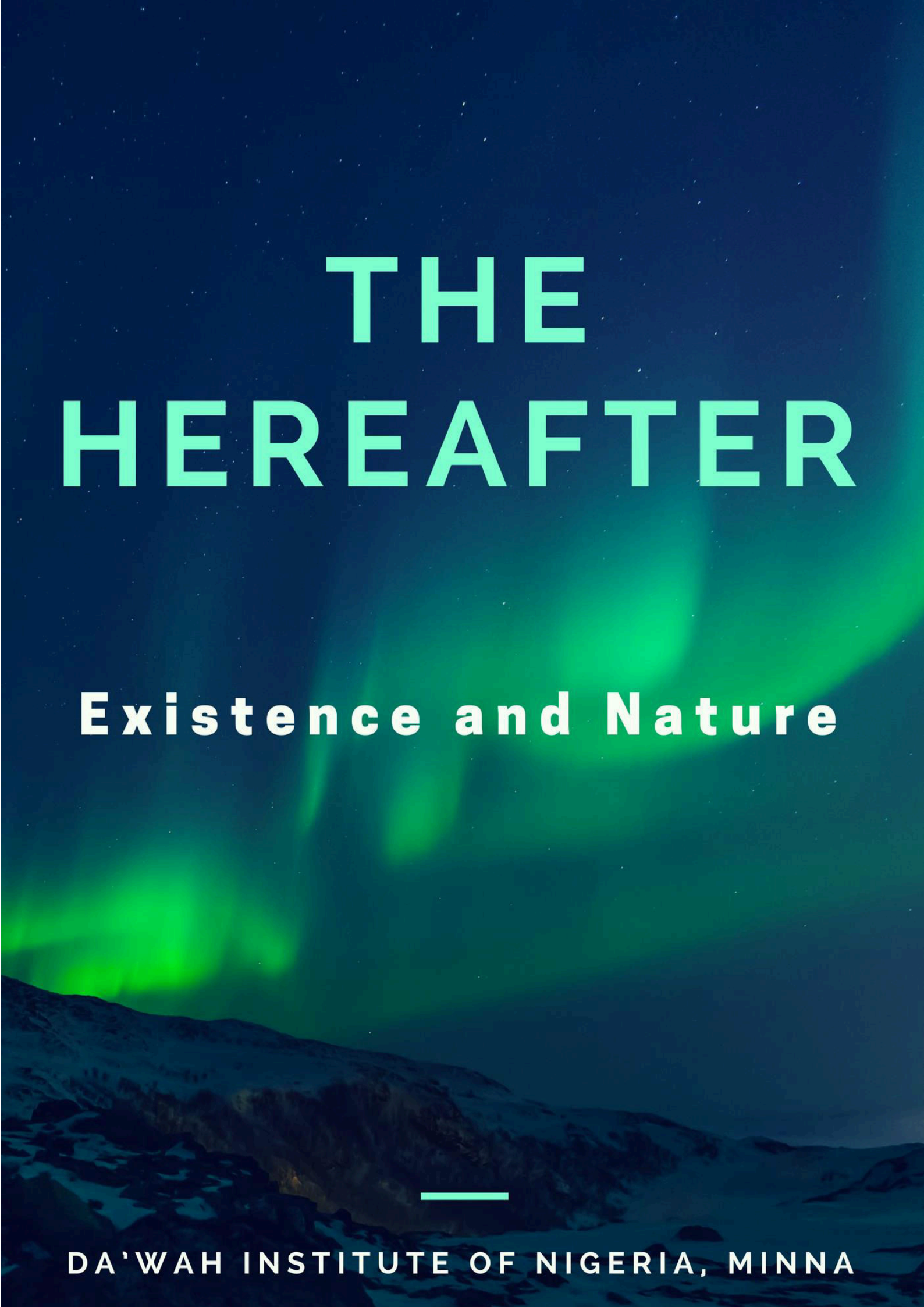


THE HEREAFTER

Existence and Nature

DA'WAH INSTITUTE OF NIGERIA, MINNA

THE HEREAFTER – EXISTENCE AND NATURE

What happens to human beings after they die? This has been one question that has generated a lot of debate among men, be they of a religious persuasion or atheists who deny the existence of a supreme being (God). While it is true that as yet there is no instrument to determine whether or not life continuous after death, (though there are convincing enough reasons to believe it does), and that science in particular cannot deny or confirm the existence of the hereafter, the belief in the existence of the hereafter is far from being an illogical or irrational one. The answer for example to the question of whether or not there is a life after death is beyond the realm of science. Therefore any statement such as 'there is no life after death' is unscientific.

The Hereafter as a Reality from Confirmed & Authenticated Revelation.

The reality of the existence of the hereafter for a Muslim is unequivocal. At the same time, skepticism about life after death was a theme well dealt with in the Qur'an. But why the Qur'an? Because the Qur'an is revelation from Allah and only through revelation can the reality and actuality of the hereafter be understood as an article of faith built upon the correctness and certainty ensured by the Qur'an been right and accurate in all other things, as even science will testify. As a book of evidence, the Qur'an has remained unfaulted and infallible on all issues that science can so far verify, and this makes it all the more certain that it is correct on the fact of existence of the hereafter. Some verses, which speak of the hereafter in response of the sceptics of old, clearly indicate not just the possibility of the hereafter, but also indicate the rationality and logic behind it. Responding to the skeptics the Qur'an says:

And they say: what! When we shall have become bones and decayed particles, shall we then be raised up a new creation? Day! Become stones or Iron or some creature of those which are hard to receive life in your minds! Yet shall ye be raised up! Then they will say; who will cause us to return? Say: He who created you first… Q16: 49-51.

And the verse:
"And he hath coined for Us a similitude, and hath forgotten the fact of his creation saying: who will revive these bones when they have rotted away? Say: He will revive them who produced them at first for He is knower of every creation" Q36: 78-79,
Also the verse:
"And is not He who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like of them? Aye! That He is! for He is the All wise creator" Q36:81.
Thus we see that as an authenticated revelation, the Qur'an confirms the reality of the hereafter.

The Hereafter as a Logical Consequence of a just and Merciful Creator.

On another level belief in the hereafter or life after death is a logical and rational consequence of our belief in the existence of a God who is just and will ensure justice to all and is at the same time merciful. We are told in the Qur'an that Allah never does the least injustice to any of his creatures, we are also told that this world's existence is

a test for mankind to see who excels the other in virtue and God-consciousness (*taqwa*), and that the only place where perfect justice (and mercy) will truly be done is in the hereafter (Qur'an 67:2)[1]. Since this world is not perfect and not paradise, God's justice must be established some where and the Qur'an which is an authenticated revelation makes it clear that such justice as eludes man here will be done in the hereafter by He who is the Best of judges. Therefore that Allah is just makes it necessary for the hereafter to exist so that His justice may be fulfilled.

The Hereafter as Logical Consequence of the Existence of Purpose in Life.

If life has a purpose, such a purpose must necessarily be fulfilled or unfulfilled, used or abused, righteous or unrighteous etc. There should be as a matter of necessity on assessment of that purpose after that life is over. The only rational avenue through which that life will be evaluated is the hereafter where the necessary consequences of rewards of actions and or inactions will be made. If however it so argued that life has no purpose, there would in effect be no difference between a virtuous life and a vicious one, suicide and/or murder will be a morally neutral activity, the very concept of morality will be meaningless as there will be no gains or minuses in either adopting it or not adopting it outside of their public and social benefit. In effect there will be no notion of accountability and or responsibility, as those notions will themselves become meaningless.

Nature of the Hereafter

Regarding the nature of the hereafter, there has existed varying notions, understanding and interpretations. What however is unambiguous and clear is that the hereafter at every level is an individual experience, everyone bearing his/her own responsibility for their faith and actions, individually regardless of gender, race or religion. It is in fact mentioned in the Qur'an that men, women, father, mother, brothers, children will have enough concerns of their own to make them heedless of others.

"On the day when a man flees from his brother, and his mother and his father, and his wife and his children, every man that day will have concerns enough to make him heedless of others" Q80: 34-37.

And also the verse:
"Now have you come unto us solitary as We did create you at first" Q6: 94.

Since thus, it is every soul that would taste of death, and which would render its own accounts for its deeds, the only criteria for who is better is based on ones God consciousness (taqwa). Thus men and women will both earn that for which they have worked without Allah doing the least injustice to anyone.[2]

[1] "He who has created death and life, so that He might put you to a test (and thus show which of you is best in conduct, and (make you realize that) He alone is almighty, truly forgiving" (Q67:2)

[2] "If any do deeds of righteousness be they male or female and have faith, they will enter paradise, and not the least injustice will be done to them" (Q4:124)

Since men and women are equal before God[3], the question now arises as to why some conceive of the Muslim Paradise in particular as seemingly male in character or just for men. The discussion below seeks to clarify some of these notions.

THE NATURE OF PARADISE

Some non-Muslims critics of Islam allege that the description of paradise in the Qur'an and the ahadith give the impression that paradise is a place of material pleasures (especially for men) rather than spiritual fulfillment. These critics are quick to point out that the various descriptions of paradise such as passages of the Qur'an which talk about gardens underneath which rivers flow, fruits and food, and in general the notion that one shall have whatever one desires in paradise, are merely material and devoid of any spiritual content. Some further allege that the Muslim paradise is a Male paradise with no place for women. This arises from the interpretation of certain words in some Qur'anic verses as specifically referring to women as reward for men, and the seeming absence of reference to the particular reward for women. We will explain some of these allegations shortly.

Regarding the first criticism, it is important to note that whatever the Qur'an says concerning paradise in specific terms, is aimed at describing to man, what his mental capacities can easily grasp, and many of these descriptions are necessarily allegorical. The evidence for this can be found in verses of the Qur'an such as, Q13:35, which say:

> ***The parable of the paradise promised to those who are conscious of God {is that of a garden} through which running water flows {but, unlike an earthly garden,} its fruits will be everlasting, and {so will be} its shade.***

And the verse:

> ***{And can} the parable of the paradise which the God-conscious are promised- {a paradise} wherein there are rivers of water which time does not corrupt, and rivers of milk the taste whereof never alters, and rivers of wine delightful to those who drink it, and rivers of honey of all impurities cleansed, and the enjoyment of all the fruits {of their good deeds} and of forgiveness from their Sustainer – can this {parable of paradise} be likened unto {the parable of recompense of} such as are to abide in the fire and be given waters of burning despair…?***

Therefore, only Allah alone knows the reality of what obtains in paradise, as the verse of the Qur'an says:

> ***And no one can imagine what blissful delights, as yet hidden, await them as a reward for all that they did. Q32:17.***

Concerning this verse, Muhammad Asad says in his commentary that the expression "what is kept hidden" which is the literal translation of the verse, "clearly alludes to the unknowable". Therefore, any descriptions are allegorical and not factual. In fact, the Prophet is reported to have said in a hadith on the verse that:

[3] Q3:195, 4:124, 16:97, 40:40, etc. See also Q8:4, 8:74, 11:11, 13:6, 22:50, 24:26, etc.

> ***"Allah says I have readied for My righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, and no ear has ever heard, and no heart has ever conceived" {Bukhari and Muslim, Related on the authority of Abu Huraira}.***

Hence part from what we know for sure of those who will enter the paradise is what the verse says:

> ***And verily, those who have attained faith and do righteous deeds- it is they, they who are the best of all creatures. Their reward await them with God, gardens of perpetual bliss, through which running water flows, therein to abide beyond the count of time, well pleased is God with them, and well pleased are they with Him…Q78:6-7.***

Are the pleasures of Paradise not biased towards the needs of men?

Briefly, the Qur'an and Sunnah as quoted earlier, refer to paradise as a reward for both males and females. Most of statements in the Qur'an and Hadith describing the rewards and pleasures of paradise (or the punishments of hell) are directed to both men and women. Some, however are directed more to men and others to women.

Regarding some of those terms that are specifically mentioned in the Qur'an such as the *Azwaj*, *Hur ayn* and the *Atrab*, it is necessary however to make the following clarification so that these verses are not misinterpreted to refer to a male-biased paradise. It should be borne in mind that while these terms could refer to women, they could also refer to men! They are therefore not terms that are necessarily gender specific.

"Women impure for men impure, and men impure are for women impure; and women of purity are for men of purity, and men of purity are for women of purity: these are not affected by what people say: for them is forgiveness and a provision honorable" (Q24:26)

a) "Azwaj"

The word means or refers to a pair of either male or female, or both, and we can find support for this in many verses of the Qur'an where for example Allah says:

> ***And assemble those who did wrong, together with their Azwaj and whatever they used to worship. Q37v22.***

According to Asad, almost all of the earliest authorities – including 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 'Abd Allah ibn Abbas, Qatadah, Mujahid, As Suddi, Said ibn Jubayr, Al-Hassan al-Basri, etc., - the expression *azwaj* denotes here "people resembling one another (in their disposition)", or "people of the same kind" or "of the same ilk".

Also: ***"…and fashioned out of the two sexes (zawjain), the male (adh-dhakar) and the female (al-untha)?" (Q75:39)***

Behold those who are destined for paradise shall today have whatever they do, in happiness shall they and their spouses (azwaj) on couches recline. Q36:55-56.

O you who have attained to faith in our messages and have surrendered your own selves onto Us, enter paradise you and your spouses (Azwaj), with happiness blest! Q43v69-70.

And O our sustainer, bring them into the gardens of perpetual bliss…together with the righteous from among their forebears, and their spouses (Azwaj) and their offspring…Q40v8. see also Q13v23.

From all the verses above, one can clearly see that Azwaj refers to spouses, which is a pair, and Zawj being the singular refers to a pair or a companion and the companionship is based on faith and the nature of ones deeds and actions. Thus, a companion and or spouse can be anyone with whom one shares the same qualities. Thus, the Qur'an does not explicitly or even implicitly say that Azwaj refers to females exclusively as some have concluded. Rather Azwaj is a term that can refer to both genders.

b) <u>Hur ayn</u>

Concerning the 'Hur ayn' as mentioned is the Qur'an and ahadith, we find that some scholars have chosen to translate Hur ayn as 'dark eyed houris (damsels)' (Malik) or 'fair ones with wide lovely eyes, (Pickthall) amongst other translations. Others however, have chosen to render the translation of Hur ayn as 'companions' pure' or 'pure beings'. This based on the understanding that the word Hur is the plural both of 'ahwar' (masc) and 'hawra' (fem), both of which denote or describes a person distinguished by 'hawar', a word primariliy denoting "intense whiteness of the eyeballs and lustrous black iris".(see Asad commentary on Q56v22). Asad goes on to say, that in more general terms, 'hawar' simply means 'whiteness' and when used as a moral qualification, indicates 'purity' a rendering to which Tabari, Razi and Ibn Kathir concur (ibid). The word Hur ayn therefore is approximate to pure beings or companion pure as rendered above.
Regarding the feminine connotation, which the word has acquired, scholars such as Al-Hassan al-Basri understood it to mean no more than the "righteous among the women of humankind" as does Muhammad Ali in his book, The Religion of Islam, pg. 297 relying on the verse of the Qur'an, which says:

And (with them will be their) spouses, raised high, for behold We shall have brought them into being in a life renewed, having resurrected them as virgins…Q56:34-36.

Regarding this, it is also related that an old woman came to the Prophet when he was sitting with his companions and asked him if she would go to paradise, the Prophet remarked that there would be no old women in paradise, she was about to turn away,

rather sorrowfully, when the Prophet comforted her with the words that all women shall be made to grow into a new growth, so that there shall be no old women in paradise, and the recited the verse above. (See Muhammad Ali, ibid. pg 298, see also Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, commentary on Q56v34-36).

c) Atraba

Another description in the Qur'an regarding the nature of the inhabitants of paradise and what it pertains regarding the "atrab". This description is found in verses of the Qur'an such as, Q38.52, 78.33 and 56.37.Asad and Yusuf Ali render 'atrab' as primarily denoting 'persons of equal age'. Importantly also, it means "person equal in equality" i.e. well matched (of persons equal in the attainment of the excellence of righteousness), whether they are men or women. For other possible renderings of the verse, see Asad's commentary.

What should also be noted regarding the companions of paradise is that there is the specific mention of youthful boys, as 'ghilman', (Q52:24) or 'wildan' as in verses 56.17 and 76.19 who as Muhammad Ali (ibid) describes them are emblems of purity just as are the descriptions of Hur and the like dealt with earlier. Asad renders term 'wildan' as a "symbolic allusion to the imperishable quality of eternal youthfulness as it were of all the experiences in the state described as paradise".

Overall, what should be borne in mind is that all descriptions of the Qur'an regarding paradise refer equally to men and women who believe work righteous deeds without the least injustice done by God to any. Hence, the claim that the Muslim's paradise is for men is without foundation and in fact antithetical to the spirit and message of Islam for as Allah says:

> ***As for anyone who be it man or woman who does righteous deeds, and is a believer withal, him shall We most certainly cause to live a good life, and most certainly shall We grant unto such as these their reward in accordance with the best that they ever did. Q16:97***