

CHAPTER TWO

THE QUR'ANIC ACCOUNT OF CREATION: A RESPONSE TO DAVID WILKINSON

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In the latter field, Prof Altaie focuses particularly on the methodology and arguments of the traditional Islamic approach, known as Kalam, in dealing with issues of contemporary debate. This is evidenced in his reactions below, to Dr Wilkinson's talk, where readers will perhaps be struck as much by the difference of flavour between the approaches of the Muslim and the Christian writer as by their differences of substance, appreciable though these are.

Prof Altaie's main focus in this chapter is on the cosmological outlook of the Qur'an – a topic on which he has further things to say in his second contribution to this volume (Chapter 8). However, he closes the present paper with some comments on the Qur'anic view of environmental matters, with Christian and Jewish readers will more readily feel at home; this theme is taken up at greater length by Dr Izzi Dien in Chapter 12.

The question of creation was one of the prime topics considered early on by the Abrahamic faiths. The first two verses of Genesis talk about the creation of the Earth and the Heavens and state that both emerged from water. The Qur'an considers the same topic in a more or less similar way, but with some differences in the details. A reasonable interpretation of these similarities is to think that both the Bible and the Qur'an stem originally from the same source, despite claims that both were infected by

the popular myths of the host communities within which they were revealed. One major difference between the Old Testament and the Qur'an lies in the degree of authentication which they respectively enjoy. The Old Testament is a 'library' much older than the single-source Qur'an, which was dictated by the Prophet Mohammad. For this reason Muslims think that the Qur'an is more authentic, and therefore more reliable than the Old Testament.

Creation is mentioned in the Qur'an in numerous verses, and in them, as in the Old Testament, we notice that the intention is to draw humankind's attention to the order and perfection of creation, the greatness of the creator and his oneness. The goal is to get to know that behind this creation there exists a God who wants us to know him.

In response to David Wilkinson I will discuss the views that can be construed from the Qur'an about creation, development, and the fate of the universe in particular.

The Heavens

The Qur'an talks about the Earth and Heavens in numerous verses, 310 in total. Generally, the term "Heaven" is used to describe the vast space above the Earth extending to infinity. The term "Heaven" (singular) is used 120 times and the term "Heavens" (plural) 190 times.

The Qur'anic description of the Heaven and Heavens appears, at first glance, somewhat vague. This is mainly caused by the many confusing facets to the usage of these words. In a number of verses the Qur'an speaks of *seven* stacked heavens one above another, for example:

It is He who has created seven heavens, one above the other. You can see no flaw in the creation of the Beneficent God. Look again. Can you see faults? (67:03).¹

From another set of verses we understand that the heaven is a well-guarded roof. For instance: "And We have made the heaven a guarded canopy and (yet) they turn aside from its portents." (21:32) The Qur'an clearly points to the well structured heaven and indicates that it is built: "What! Are ye the more difficult to create or is it the heaven which Allah hath constructed?" (79:27) This might indicate an influence of the naive view of the public at the time when the Qur'an was revealed, but a close look at other related verses shows that this is not the case.

As Dr Wilkinson says, the scriptures are an extremely rich and diverse source of thinking about creation and most of us read them selectively from our own point of view. However, it should be stressed that the

reading should be comprehensive enough to cover all the related texts. This is necessary in order to achieve an accurate overview of the topics concerned.

In an extensive recent study of the terms “Heaven” and “Heavens” in the Qur'an, it is shown that the Qur'an did not describe the heavens as they were previously understood by the Greeks². As is the case with many other terms, “Heaven” and “Heavens” are contextual and the correct meanings cannot be realized unless the context in which the terms are stated is fully considered.

I can identify three major meanings for the term “Heaven”:

1. The Earth's atmosphere
2. Our arm of our galaxy
3. The whole universe.

Of the seven, the first is the lowest or nearby Heaven (*Sama' al-Dunya*) and the rest are the upper or high heavens. The *lowest Heaven* is cited three times and it is always mentioned in conjunction with the planets: “We have adorned the lowest heaven with adorning planets”. (37:006)

This verse is important to refute the claim that the seven heavens referred to in the Qur'an are the seven heavenly spheres of the planets suggested by the early Greeks. The five historically recognized planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) along with the Moon and the Sun were actually well known to the Arabs long before the revelation of the Qur'an. Being in contact with the Greeks and the Romans through Syria, those Arabs had certainly understood these celestial objects to be stacked in the concentric spheres of Aristotle or the later more sophisticated model of Ptolemy. So, when the Qur'an describes these planets as some coronation of the *lower* Heaven in particular, it would be inadequate to conclude that the seven Heavens meant by the Qur'an are those spheres of Aristotle. Rather, they are: “A revelation from Him Who created the Earth and the upper high heavens.” (20:04)

The lower heaven is the one containing the air and the clouds. In this sense it is what we call “the sky” from which the Qur'an tells us that rain comes. But the lower heaven is more than that since it includes the planets and the stars.

Another allusion to it is as “The heaven of the Zodiacal Signs”. (85:001). This suggests that the lower heaven is meant to be the Earth's atmosphere plus at least the solar system and the nearby collection of the stars, including the constellations which are in fact situated within the spiral arm of the Milky Way to which we belong. But this interpretation of the verses should not limit the scope of the Heaven to the Galaxy, for many other verses point to a wider scope. For example, speaking about

“extending the Heaven”, as it happens to be in another verse would point to an even larger space. This point will be further discussed below.

There remains the dilemma of there being a total of seven Heavens. This is a problem that I find irresolvable within the scope of our contemporary astronomical knowledge. If one assumes that the Qur’an has a human source, one will ascribe this uncertainty to its author’s lack of knowledge. But then the question will arise why this term has been repeated 190 times unless it was fully meaningful to the author? If Mohammad was the author of the Qur’an, and if he was not properly informed about this term, he would surely not have repeated the term so many times. For this reason I would rather suggest that the more realistic view assumes that the Qur’an is actually authored by God. The difficulty lies in the fact that no reasonable model is available which fits this term. Therefore, I would consider this term, the “seven Heavens”, to be radically obscure. However, such a consideration will by no means affect our interpretations of the other Qur’anic verses considered in this paper.

Creation of the universe

Sometime the Qur’an is understood to indicate that Heaven was originally created out of nothing, since the word “create” in Arabic would normally be taken to mean “find out of nothing”. Nevertheless, this suggestion is controversial.³

In 29 verses mention of the Heavens is coupled with that of Earth, with the term Heavens preceding the term Earth, a point that the early commentators on the Qur’an took to indicate the temporal order of creation.

Behold! in the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, and the alternation of Night and Day, there are indeed Signs for men of understanding. (3:190)

We also read:

Praise be to Allah, Who created the Heavens and the Earth, and made the Darkness and the Light. Yet those who reject Faith hold (others) as equal with their Guardian-Lord. (2:190).

However, conjoining two more verses we find that the seven Heavens were made out of an original one which was in the state of smoke:

It is He who created everything on earth for you. Then, directing His order towards the Heaven, He turned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things. (2: 29)

And:

He established His dominance over the sky, which (for that time) was like smoke. Then He told the heavens and the earth, "Take your shape either willingly or by force" They said, "willingly we obey". He formed the seven heavens in two days and revealed to each one its task. He decked the sky above the earth with torches and protected it from (intruders). Such is the design of the Majestic and All-knowing God. (41:11-12)

The 'smoke' that is mentioned in this verse might be presumed to mean a hot gas or mixture of hot gases. (The word 'gas' itself does not exist in the original Arabic).

The verse may be understood to indicate that the seven Heavens were structured after the creation of the original heaven and the Earth. Some authors⁴ claim that the Qur'an states that the Earth was created before the heavens, but this is a misinterpretation of the Arabic. In fact even early commentators of the Qur'an have denounced such a flawed understanding and have pointed out that the verse does not necessarily stipulate temporal ordering of creation⁵. Nowhere in the Qur'an is there any explicit indication that Earth was created *before* heaven. On the contrary, the repeated references to heaven and the heavens, prior to any mention of the Earth would appear to indicate that it was heaven which was created first. The Qur'an also clearly states that the heavens and the Earth were both attached (joined) together but was later detached.

Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the Earth were joined together (as one unit of Creation), before We clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? (21:30)

This verse may well be compared with the description given in Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. Now the Earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep. God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters. God said, "Let there be an expanse in the middle of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters."

God made the expanse, and divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse "sky." There was evening and there was morning, a second day.

God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear;" and it was so. God called the dry land "Earth," and the gathering together of the waters he called "seas." God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1: 1-10)

It might seem that the Qur'an is telling the same story as the Old Testament, since the Qur'an has indicated the union between the Heavens and the Earth. However, we have to look through the whole context of creation of the Heavens and remember that the Qur'an has indicated a hot origin for the Heavens as these were generated from a single Heaven which was in a state of smoke (41:11-12). Here I have to stress again the fact that smoke in Arabic is a hot gas emanating from fire and perhaps containing dust.

The Old Testament's story of creating the Heavens and Earth might have been influenced by the earlier Babylonian literature which tells us that in the beginning there were only vast waters out of which Earth and Heaven originated. Moreover, the Qur'an properly tells that all living creatures were made from water.

Development of the universe

The Qur'an affirms that God created the heaven with power and he is extending it. We read: "We constructed the sky with our hands, and we will continue to expand it." (51:047)

The "extension" was understood by early commentaries on the Qur'an as being an extension of the sides of the heavens.⁶ Thus the Qur'an talks about an "extension" of the initially-constructed heaven. From the exact Arabic wording we understand that the extension is meant to take place through adding more construction from within, in addition to extending space. This would mean that there is a continuous creation of matter and energy within the universe. The alternative word will entail expanding the construction which already exists not by adding more construction from within, but by increasing the separations between the constituents of the heaven. However, these alternatives are not yet observationally testable by modern cosmology despite the fact that both alternatives are theoretically possible. The dominant contemporary view is that the universe is expanding not extending, in the sense implied above.

The fate of the universe

Two verses of the Qur'an explicitly state that the heavens will ultimately collapse into a state similar to the initial one.

The day when We roll up heaven like the rolling up of the scroll of writings. As We began the first creation, We shall reproduce it. A promise (binding) on Us. We shall bring it about. (21:104)

This verse points to the end phase of the universe. It may be taken to indicate a cyclic universe. Combined with the verse talking earlier about expansion it gives us the picture that the universe once created goes on to grow larger and larger until the time comes when it gets folded up to a final phase by which it reverts to a state similar to that in which it started. This may be taken to indicate a sort of cyclic universe. The strange thing is that the verse describes the collapse of the universe as if it is a sheet of flat paper which will be rolled up onto itself. In this sense the universe may end up in a big crunch, a reverse state to the big bang. This suggestion of rolling up the universe like rolling a sheet of paper is new to the scientific concepts of cosmology. Recent observations of the cosmic microwave background indicate that the spatial section of the universe is flat⁷. According to the prevailing theory of cosmic structure represented by the Friedmann models, such a universe should not experience any final collapse phase but instead will go on expanding for ever. The idea that a flat universe may collapse provoked us to investigate this possibility. The results of research work done under my supervision confirm such a possibility with the condition that the universe be driven by a time-dependent cosmological constant. The results also show that such a universe would be cyclic.⁸

No just value have they made of Allah, such as is due to Him: on the Day of Judgment the whole of the Earth will be but His handful, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand: Glory to Him! High is He above the Partners they attribute to Him!" (39:67)

The fate of the Sun

The Qur'an states the final fate of the Sun too. The Sun is said to experience major collapse for its final fate. We read: "When the Sun is folded up (made to collapse)." (81:01). During this time the heaven will exhibit bizarre appearance; it will turn red (55:37), the stars will look fuzzy (81:02) and oceans will catch fire (81:06). Such a description can be easily accommodated within the scope of contemporary astrophysical expectation for the fate of the Sun. According to the standard model in astrophysics⁹ the Sun which is a main sequence star now will continue burning for another 5 billion years after which it will undergo a short-time collapse as the main hydrogen fuel will be exhausted. This collapse will

raise the temperature and the pressure inside the core of the Sun. Consequently helium nuclei will fuse in an explosive behaviour which will cause the Sun to become a *Red-Giant*. This Giant will fill up the sky as seen from the Earth. Then in a few thousands of years this giant will collapse into a small hot and faint object called a *White Dwarf*. However, the fate of the Sun is not causally connected with the fate of the universe, though once the Sun goes to its final fate no life will be maintained on earth. Even if the universe were to continue for a long time after life on Earth ceased to exist, there would be no human beings to observe it.

Environment

The environmental policy adopted by the Qur'an is maintained by what I call the principle of "least need". That is to consume as little as is needed to survive, and consequently to pollute as little as possible. This is a general policy that the Qur'an continuously preaches. This may be summarized by the verse

Use the provisions bestowed upon you by GOD to seek the abode of the Hereafter, without neglecting your share in this world. Be charitable, as GOD has been charitable towards you. Do not keep on corrupting the earth. GOD does not love the corruptors. (28:077).

Similar verses are repeated several times in the Qur'an.

However, I do not see that it is true to say, as in Dr Wilkinson's quoting of Lynn White, that "We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence but to serve man..." Is it inescapable that we must spoil nature and spread around pollution if nature is to serve us? To have nature devoted to our service does not necessarily mean that we shall spoil it. The Qur'an was perhaps clearer on this matter; spoiling the environment is done by the acts of people who only care about their needs and selfish luxuries.

Disasters (Corruption) have spread throughout the land and sea, because of what the people have committed. He thus lets them taste the consequences of some of their works, which they may return (to the right works). (30: 41)

Obviously the taste of some of "their deeds" is what we get out of the hurricanes, typhoons, and repeated tsunamis.

In several verses in the Qur'an, God insistently asks people not to do mischief (corruption) on Earth:

And do not corrupt the earth, after it has been set in order (7: 56)

And O my people! Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due: commit not evil in the land with intent to do mischief (11:85).

Obviously mischief when stated in a general context may mean committing moral sins but when it comes in the context of practicing life it means destroying the beautiful creation of God. In this context also verses 7:056, 11:85 of the Qur'an are clearly asking people to refrain from spoiling the environment and to preserve nature.

Summarizing, I would say that much similarity is found between the Bible and the Qur'an in respect to creation because both stem from the same source. The differences may be attributed to the understanding of the authors or the commentators on the Bible.

Notes and References

1. For English renderings of the verses of the Qur'an I have mainly used the famous translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. I have also used the translation of M. M. Khan and M. T. Al-Hilali titled "*Interpretation of the meaning of the Noble Qur'an*" published by Al-Birr Foundation, U.K. (1996).
2. M.B. Altaie and M. Al-Zubi, *The meaning of heaven and the heavens in the Qur'an*, to be published (2007).
3. H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Harvard: University Press, 1976) pp. 359-372.
4. R. Carrier, *Cosmology and the Koran: A Response to Muslim Fundamentalists* (2001), http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/islam.html
5. For example: see the commentary of al-Qurtobi, *Al-Jammi' Li Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Beirut : Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, 1985) 17, p. 52.
6. Ibn Katheer, *Tafseer al-Qur'an al-Adheem*, Rushd bookshop publishers, 2nd edn. (2003) p. 1395.
7. C.L. Bennett et al., "First year WAMP observations: Preliminary maps and basic results", *Astrophysical Journal* 148 (2003) p. 1.
8. M. Daradka, *A collapsing Flat Universe*, M.Sc. thesis, Yarmouk University (2007).
9. A. C. Phillips, *The Physics of Stars*, 2nd edn (New York: John Wiley, 1999).