

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS

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### **ABSTRACT**

Life after death is as mysterious as it is frightening. This paper is an overview of the beliefs of the three Abrahamic faiths, namely: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, about death and what comes after it. There are many similarities between these traditions but there are quite a few differences also. This is with regards to what has been mentioned in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Mostly however, we find that Islam offers details that are not found in the earlier traditions and hence no comparison can be made. The dearth of information about the afterlife in the Jewish and Christian teachings has led to many scholars coming up with hypotheses and speculations about what to expect after death. Islam, on the other hand, gives us all the details about what will transpire and this is, after everything is said and done, the greatest difference between the three religious traditions

**Keywords:** Death, Hereafter, Afterlife, Resurrection, Day of Judgment, Judaism, Christianity, Islam

### **INTRODUCTION**

Death is an undeniable and inescapable reality. But what happens to human beings when they die falls in the realm of the unknown and unfathomable. All the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have scriptures that describe life after death. They

speak of the promise of God to judge the human beings on a final Judgment Day. Subsequently, they will be rewarded or punished according to God's justice. God promises the righteous eternal life after death, in a heavenly paradise. Also, those who do evil will be punished in Hell.

In this paper we will compare the beliefs of these three monotheistic faiths to see how similar and dissimilar their teachings are about death and the afterlife. It should be noted that this study is not meant to be exhaustive by any means. Rather, it consists of an overview of the similar and unique beliefs of each tradition. It should further be noted that we will not be looking at the smaller sects of each tradition but will instead concentrate on the majority who represent the tradition. This should be taken into account when reading the final conclusions.

The issues discussed in this paper are:

- a) The Experience of Death: Here we see how the three religions perceive death, how it comes and how painful or painless the experience of death is.
- b) Life after Death: What a person undergoes after he or she dies, how they are buried and what happens to them immediately after their bodies are covered up by the earth.
- c) Resurrection: What Judaism, Christianity and Islam say about human beings being brought back to life after they have been dead for hundreds of years.
- d) The Day of Judgment: How we will be brought in front of God and made to account for our deeds and misdeeds.
- e) Paradise: Its description, who will be granted entry and where it is.
- f) Hell: How long will sinners suffer in Hell, who will be put in it and what it is like.

Our respected teacher Dr. Muḥammad Husayn Bahrāmī (may Allāh prolong his life) suggested this as a topic for research and we concur with his sentiments that it is important for us to work towards a broader understanding of how Islamic teachings about the afterlife compare to those of the Judaic and Christian traditions. As such we have embarked on this exercise, not as a conclusive research but rather, as a first step which will be followed by more detailed work, God-willing.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH

In the Jewish tradition, death is considered an integral part of the experience of life, leading from the antechamber of this life into the next. The time of transition of the soul from its physical body to its journey towards the next world is considered to be a time of great sacredness, for if man is created in the image of God, then the form that once contained that soul is now relieved of its task, and the godly soul begins its return to its divine source.<sup>1</sup>

Before death comes, it is considered to be of great merit to recite the *Viddui*, the confessional, with the dying. If it is possible for the dying person to recite the *Viddui* on his own, he should do so. If it is not possible, then one close to him should recite the confessional on his behalf, seeking forgiveness for his sins and asking for healing, even at this extreme time, but accepting the divine decree whatever it may be.<sup>2</sup>

Just before death and immediately after it, the body should be placed with feet facing the door<sup>3</sup> and with a candle placed at the head of the deceased. This time is also one for family and friends to offer prayers, asking forgiveness of the deceased for any wrongs they may have caused him during his life. In the presence of the deceased, only the highest degree of respect may be exhibited. It is forbidden to eat, drink, or smoke in their presence, and only positive thoughts and recollections may be shared concerning them.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish tradition requires that all Jews must be buried in a plain, white shroud made of muslin, cotton, or linen, for at death all stand equal before God. It is also taught that at a time when a person stands before his Maker, he should do so in simplicity and dignity.<sup>5</sup>

In the Jewish tradition, death is understood as the separation of the eternal, spiritual soul from the material body, the two of which were joined together at the time of conception. While the physical body returns to the ground of matter from which it originated, the

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<sup>1</sup> Note the similarity of this with Q2:156 (*Indeed we are Allāh's and indeed we will return to Him*)

<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the Islāmic practice of making the person on his death bed pronounce the Shahādah and recite verses of the Qur'ān

<sup>3</sup> Notice the similarity with the Islāmic injunction to turn the person such that his feet face the Qibla.

<sup>4</sup> In Islam too, we are commanded to speak only good about the deceased and to show respect in the graveyard.

<sup>5</sup> The simple white shroud is what Muslims call 'kafan'.

eternal soul begins its journey of transition from this world to the next, as it tends to its task of elevation, refinement, and transformation. In fact, all of the Jewish customs regarding death and dying, as outlined above, serve to assist the soul in its metaphysical adventure in the World to Come. For example, at the time of the *Yarzeit*, the anniversary of the death, Jews not only remember the departed, but also seek to elevate the soul to a higher level through the performance of good deeds, such as the giving of charity and the learning of Torah. The specific statement is made to the family, “May the soul of the departed experience an elevation.”

As for the pangs of death, we find that the Talmud describes death as something quite painless: “Rava said to Rav Nachman, ‘Show yourself to me in a dream after you die.’ He showed himself to Rava. Rava asked him, ‘Was death painful?’ Rav Nahman replied, ‘It was as painless as lifting a hair from a cup of milk’. But were the Holy One, blessed be He, to say to me, ‘You may return to that world where you were before,’ I would not wish to do it, the fear of death is too great.”<sup>6</sup> It has also been compared to sleeping in one’s shoes: “Anyone who wants to get a taste of death should put on shoes and sleep in them.”<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of Christian faith, “Death is the end of man’s earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny.”<sup>8</sup> The manner of a person’s existence, at the center of which is a commitment to a life of faith in Christ, predisposes that person and those around him or her to death as the gateway to eternal life in God. Thus, everything connected with the bodily death of a person has the character of an affirmation of the faith of the person and of the community.

Christians, like Muslims, regard the remembrance of death and preparation for it as something very important. One of the classics of European early modern spirituality is *The Preparation for Death* (*Apparecchio alla Morte*) of Saint Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori, published in 1758. St. Alfonso’s rhetoric on the state of the soul of a sinner at the time of death has tremendous force and fully reflects the rich Augustinian heritage of theology,

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<sup>6</sup> Talmud, Moed Katan 28a

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Yoma 78b

<sup>8</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd. ed. Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000, paragraph 1013.

psychology, and preaching. St. Alfonso gives us a portrait of a despicable person who all along has not been trying to seek the good and has not only been weak many times, but even malicious; this is a person who did everything to avoid goodness and to justify evil acts. It is the habitual sinner, therefore, who is depicted and not the frail soul, perhaps aware of the gifts of grace and eager for good, but unable to carry out all his or her responsibilities perfectly.

St. Alfonso's description of the dying person's encounter both with memory and friends may be imagined to have contributed to the reluctance a family sometimes shows in inviting a priest to come to help the dying person because he says that everything will seem like a "thorn" to him at that time, even the crucifix. So, to diminish his presumed pain, the family even hides the fatal diagnosis from the poor dying person, who is left feeling even more abandoned and terrified of what he may already have learned by intuition. St. Alfonso also says that the anguish the sinner experiences is not felt by the just (though many saints experienced other kinds of anguish in the time before death).<sup>9</sup> Of course, this does not conform to the 'pain of death' that Jesus himself is said to have suffered:

*Jesus suffered the pain of death, but God made him free. He raised him from death. There was no way for death to hold him.*<sup>10</sup>

Though many Christian scholars have emphasized the importance of respecting the dead, there is no explicit verse in the Bible that suggests that only good things should be spoken about those who have passed away. In fact, the Bible says:

*For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing;  
they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.*

*Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished;  
never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See S. Alfonso M. De' Liguori, *Apparecchio alla Morte* (Verona, Italy: Libreria Salesiana Editrice, 1912), 51-80.

<sup>10</sup> The Holy Bible, Acts 2:24

<sup>11</sup> The Holy Bible, Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 (New International Version)

Despite the claim that Christ's body was put in a shroud and then placed in a tomb as was the practice in those days (something similar is seen in the story of Lazarus in the Bible), Christians today bury their dead in coffins and caskets. It is not a requirement for them to shroud their dead.

In Islam, there are explicit references in the Holy Qur'ān that state that human beings are from God and will return to Him.<sup>12</sup> In addition, aside from the verses that speak about death, we have numerous narrations that encourage us to remember death as much as possible. For example, the following tradition from Imam al-Sādiq ('a) tells us the benefits of remembering death:

ذِكْرُ الْمَوْتِ يُمِيتُ الشَّهَوَاتِ فِي النَّفْسِ، وَيَقْلَعُ مَنَابِتَ الْغَفْلَةِ، وَيُقَوِّي الْقَلْبَ بِمَوَاعِدِ اللَّهِ، وَيُرِقُّ الطَّبَعِ،  
وَيَكْسِرُ أَعْلَامَ الْهَوَى وَيُطْفِئُ نَارَ الْحِرْصِ، وَيُحَقِّرُ الدُّنْيَا؛

*Remembering death kills off the lustful desires of the soul, uproots the weeds of negligence, strengthens the heart through the promises of God, fills one with compassion, breaks the banners of vain desire, extinguishes the flame of greed and makes this world seem insignificant.*<sup>13</sup>

As for the question of how painful death is, there are a number of traditions such as the following one, which state that death is a painful experience.

Imam 'Alī ('a) has said:

إِنَّ لِلْمَوْتِ لَغَمْرَاتٍ هِيَ أَفْظَعُ مِنْ أَنْ تُسْتَغْرَقَ بِصِفَةٍ، أَوْ تَعْتَدَلَ عَلَى عُقُولِ أَهْلِ الدُّنْيَا

*Indeed death has pangs that are more difficult than words can describe or that minds of people can comprehend.*<sup>14</sup>

It should be noted however, that some traditions state that death is much easier for a believer than for a non-believer.

<sup>12</sup> For example Q 2:156

<sup>13</sup> Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 6, p. 133

<sup>14</sup> Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 221

Muslim jurists are in unanimous agreement that the dying person should recite the *Shahadah* or the testimony of faith and his body should be positioned such that his feet face the Qibla. Furthermore, Muslims bury their dead in plain shrouds and have been instructed not to speak ill of the dead.

### **LIFE AFTER DEATH**

Judaism has always maintained a belief in an afterlife, but the forms which this belief has assumed and the modes in which it has been expressed have varied greatly and differed from period to period. Jewish texts speak of a complex process of post-death interaction between the body and the soul. According to these sources, while death results from the separation of the soul from the body, the soul nonetheless remains close to the body for a time even after the separation.

Not only does the soul remain in the vicinity of the body immediately after death, but it also travels back and forth between the grave and its former home, aware of all that takes place there: For seven days the soul goes back and forth—from his house to his grave and from his grave to his house—mourning for the body. This corroborates that the scriptures: “His flesh shall suffer pain for him, and his soul shall mourn for it”<sup>15</sup> and it grieves to behold the sadness in the house.

There is clear evidence in the Judeo-Christian scriptures of belief in existence after death. The Old Testament indicates in several places that the righteous will be reunited with their loved ones after death, while the wicked will be excluded from this reunion. One of the stories mentioned in the Torah in the book of Samuel:

Samuel, the prophet, had died and all Israel lamented for him.<sup>16</sup> During this time, King Saul had banished all the witches, mediums, and spiritualists from the land of Israel.<sup>17</sup> At that time, however, the Philistines gathered their army to fight against Saul and Israel,

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<sup>15</sup> Job XIV, 22

<sup>16</sup> I Samuel 28:3

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

so Saul prepared to repel their invasion, but when he saw the huge army of the Philistines, he was terrified, and his heart trembled greatly.<sup>18</sup> Dismayed, Saul went to the high priest and inquired of the Lord, what fate lay in store for him, but the Lord did not answer. “And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim or by the prophets” (verse 6) God had already forsaken Saul, and the time had come for his punishment.

Desperate, and anxious, Saul did the unthinkable – “Then Saul said to his servants, ‘Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.’ And his servants said to him, ‘In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at Endor’” (verse 7). “So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, ‘Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.’ Then the woman said to him, ‘Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?’ And Saul swore to her by the Lord, saying, ‘As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing’” (verses 8-10). “Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ And he said, ‘Bring up Samuel for me’” (verse 11). When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!’

“And the king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What did you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.’ So he said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.’ And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down” (I Samuel 28:12-14).

Aside from this story, there is little in the way of details about the afterlife mentioned in the Torah or the Bible. Unlike the Islamic traditions which give vivid details about how the soul is tormented in the middle-realm (*Barzakh*) or how questioning takes place in the grave etc. the Judeo-Christian sources are surprisingly lacking of any such accounts.

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<sup>18</sup> I Samuel 28:4-5

One of the many traditions that refer to the questioning in the grave is from the sixth Imam ('a) and reads:

يَجِيءُ الْمَلَكَانِ مُنْكَرٌ وَنَكِيرٌ إِلَى الْمَيِّتِ حِينَ يُدْفَنُ أَصْوَاتُهُمَا كَالرَّعْدِ الْقَاصِفِ وَ أَبْصَارُهُمَا  
كَالْبُرْقِ الْخَاطِفِ... فَيَسْأَلَانِ الْمَيِّتَ مَنْ رَبُّكَ وَ مَا دِينُكَ قَالَ فَإِذَا كَانَ مُؤْمِنًا قَالَ اللَّهُ رَبِّي وَ  
دِينِي الْإِسْلَامُ...

*The two angels Munkar and Nakir come to the dead person after he is buried. Their voices are like thunder and their eyes are like lightening... they ask the dead person: who is your Lord and what is your religion? If the person was a believer he will answer: Allah is my Lord and my religion is Islam...*<sup>19</sup>

One important question that scholars have debated on is whether one will get to meet and be re-united with his loved ones who had passed away before him when he dies. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is something that has been accepted and is widely believed to be the case. Muslim scholars have also discussed this matter but due to lack of any explicit evidence, there is no unanimous agreement that one will necessarily meet his loved one's when he dies.

## RESURRECTION

There are numerous references in the Torah and the Bible that speak of noteworthy people being 'gathered to their people.'<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Genesis 25:8 (Abraham), 25:17 (Ishmael), 35:29 (Isaac), 49:33 (Jacob), Deuteronomy 32:50 (Moses and Aaron) II Kings 22:20 (King Josiah) etc. This gathering is described as a separate event from the physical death of the body or the burial and hence it implicitly refers to the resurrection of human beings after death. Additionally, the Hebrew Bible speaks of certain sins that are punishable by the sinner being "cut off from his people."<sup>21</sup> This punishment is referred

<sup>19</sup> Al-Kāfī, vol. 3, p. 236

<sup>20</sup> This is similar to the Qur'ānic verses that speak of each community being resurrected with their Prophet (like Q4:41)

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Genesis 17:14 and Exodus 31:14

to as *Kareit* which literally means ‘cutting off’ but is usually translated as “spiritual excision”, and it means that the soul loses its portion in the Hereafter.

There is also some explicit mention of resurrection in the Jewish scriptures. For example, the book of Daniel, written around the second century B.C., clearly states that “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the Earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the second blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer, which is recited three times daily, contains several references to the Jewish concept of *tehiyat hametim* (resurrection of the dead). It should be noted, however, that the Jewish reform movement, which apparently rejects this belief, has rewritten this blessing and removed the phrase referring to resurrection accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

When the messiah comes to initiate the perfect world of peace and prosperity, the righteous dead will be brought back to life and given the opportunity to experience the perfected world that their righteousness helped to create.<sup>24</sup> The wicked dead will not be resurrected. The Jewish messiah is a leader anointed by God, physically descended from the Davidic line, who will rule the united tribes of Israel<sup>25</sup> and herald the Messianic Age of global peace also known as the World to Come.<sup>26</sup>

There are some mystical Jewish schools of thought that believe resurrection is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing process. The souls of the righteous are reborn in to continue the ongoing process of *tikkun olam* or mending of the world. Some sources indicate that reincarnation is a routine process, while others indicate that it only occurs in unusual circumstances, where the soul left unfinished business behind. Belief in reincarnation is also one way to explain the traditional Jewish belief that every Jewish soul in history was present at Sinai and agreed to the covenant with God. Another explanation is that the soul exists before the body, so these unborn souls were present in some form at Sinai. From time to time in Jewish history, there had been an insistent belief that their prophets were reborn. Reincarnation was part of the Jewish dogmas, being taught under the name

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel 12:2

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia: Jewish Eschatology ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_eschatology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_eschatology))

<sup>24</sup> Something akin to the Shi'i belief in *raj'ah*

<sup>25</sup> Exodus 30:22-25

<sup>26</sup> Excerpt from: <https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Messiah.html>

of 'resurrection'. In the Talmud, *gilgul neshamot* (reincarnation) is constantly mentioned. According to this view, people who commit extraordinary sins are given an opportunity to return to life in order to set things right. More particularly, they are reincarnated in circumstances similar to those of their previous incarnation. Thus, Moses and Jethro, for example, were supposed to be the *gilgulim* (reincarnations) of Cain and Abel.<sup>27</sup>

Christians believe that all human beings will rise from the dead to face final judgment. The resurrection of Christ is, for them, an important precursor to the resurrection of all believers and their immortality. According to the New Testament, not only has Jesus been raised but he also becomes the agent of the resurrection of all human beings. With his ascension to heaven, Jesus gained the title "Risen Lord," and assumed the role of the judge of all humanity in the Last Judgment after the general resurrection of the dead that will come at the end of time.<sup>28</sup>

Christian authors argued against the Jewish beliefs that they will inhabit the earth after the resurrection; they will be rewarded with temporal goods; they will live this way eternally with the Messiah, who is to arrive for the first time in history and bring the Jews back to the Promised Land; they will begin to worship God once again in the Temple, which will be rebuilt by the Messiah; they will resume the same offices they executed when they were alive; the Gentiles will be subjugated. These beliefs are problematic because according to medieval Christian writers, Jews are never to return to the Promised Land because they have "betrayed their God and killed his son."<sup>29</sup>

In Islam, there is nothing vague about the belief in resurrection. In fact, the Qur'ān recounts how different Prophets tried to convince the people of their time that God would eventually raise them after they died and they would have to give account for their actions. The arguments and doubts of the unbelievers have been mentioned and answered in numerous verses (for example, Q36:78). There are even cases where Prophets themselves asked God to show them how he would resurrect the dead after

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<sup>27</sup> Excerpt from: <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/origen05.html>

<sup>28</sup> The Resurrection of Jesus and Human Beings in Medieval Christian and Jewish Theology and Polemical Literature, Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations, University of St. Thomas, vol.4 (2009), p.3

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 9

their bodies had turned to dust, and God shows them by bringing some animals back to life in front of their eyes.<sup>30</sup>

In the aḥādīth, we have further references to the resurrection of the dead. In one narration from Luqmān, the wise, we find that he told his son:

يَا بُنَيَّ كَمَا تَنَامُ كَذَلِكَ تَمُوتُ وَكَمَا تَسْتَيْقِظُ كَذَلِكَ تَبْعَثُ

*My son, just as you sleep, you will [one day] die, and just as you wake up, you will one day be resurrected.*<sup>31</sup>

Therefore we find that in Islam, there is no room for doubt or any difference of opinion regarding the reality of resurrection after death. The only question that is discussed among scholars, and especially the Muslim philosophers, is whether the resurrection will be a physical one or a metaphysical one and whether the body we will have is the same one we had on earth or its likeness. Addressing these questions is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

## ACCOUNTING AND JUDGMENT

In Jewish teachings, when a man dies his soul leaves his body, but for the first 12 months it retains a temporary relationship to it, coming and going until the body has disintegrated.<sup>32</sup> Thus the prophet Samuel could be raised from the dead within the first year of his demise. This year remains a purgatorial period for the soul, or according to another view only for the wicked soul, after which the righteous go to paradise, Gan Eden, and the wicked to hell, Geihinnom. The Torah emphasizes immediate, concrete, physical rewards and punishments rather than abstract future ones. See, for example, Leviticus 26:3-9: “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase,

<sup>30</sup> See the story of Abraham and the birds in Q2:260; Uzayr and the donkey in Q2:259

<sup>31</sup> Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 13, p. 421

<sup>32</sup> The Jewish Law (vol. 12), Edited by Bernerd S. Jackson, p. 101

and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you.”<sup>33</sup>

The Talmud states that all Israel has a share in the Hereafter (Olam Ha-Ba). However, not all “shares” are equal. A particularly righteous person will have a greater share in the Olam Ha-Ba than the average person. In addition, a person can lose his share through wicked actions.<sup>34</sup> There are many statements in the Talmud that a particular mitzvah will guarantee a person a place in the Olam Ha-Ba, or that a particular sin will lose a person's share in the Olam Ha-Ba, but these are generally regarded as hyperbole,<sup>35</sup> excessive expressions of approval or disapproval.

One of the questions that is often asked is: Do gentiles (non-Jews) have a place in Olam Ha-Ba? Although there are a few statements to the contrary in the Talmud, the predominant view of Judaism is that the righteous of all nations have a share in the Olam Ha-Ba. Statements to the contrary were not based on the notion that membership in Judaism was required to get into Olam Ha-Ba, but were grounded in the observation that non-Jews were not righteous people. If you consider the behavior of the surrounding peoples at the time that the Talmud was written, you can understand the rabbis' attitudes.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A similar message can be seen in the Qur'ān in Q7:96 and other similar verses. However, Islam puts more emphasis on reward in the Hereafter than worldly reward.

<sup>34</sup> Shmuel Waldman, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, pp. 99-100

<sup>35</sup> Such hyperboles can be found in most religious traditions. In the Shi'i tradition, we have numerous narrations that state that every Shi'a is guaranteed a place in Paradise. Of course, these traditions have been explained by scholars to refer to true, practicing Shi'as.

<sup>36</sup> Excerpt from: [www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm)

Out of the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism is the only one that does not believe in a day of judgment in the traditional sense. In Judaism, the Day of Judgment happens every year on Rosh Hashanah (a day which is also known as Yom HaDin, Judgment Day), when God sits in His heavenly court and judges all the people of the world. He decides what will happen to them in the coming year. Whether they will live or die, be poor or rich, sick or healthy etc.<sup>37</sup>

Christianity generally teaches that everyone will be made to account on Judgment Day. Jesus is reported to have declared that nothing escapes the Eye of God and even words that are uttered carelessly will be brought to account.<sup>38</sup> Many Christians have the incorrect belief that they will not be made answerable for their actions because they have been “saved”. However, scholars state that this just means that one is spared the wrath of God and divine condemnation, it does not mean that there is no accountability or divine scrutiny.<sup>39</sup>

There are many verses in the Bible that speak about the Judgment Day. Some verses explicitly state that people will be rewarded or punished because of their deeds.<sup>40</sup> The Catholics believe that one can avoid punishment and divine wrath by confessing his or her sins in this world. That is why they emphasize the importance of going to confession and admitting their misdeeds to priests so that they get cleansed of their wrongdoings before leaving this world. However, due to the misuse of the private information that priests gained about individuals in their congregation, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther created the protestant movement from which evolved the Protestant sect of Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

Details about the Day of Judgment and giving account for one’s deeds are found more in Islam than in any other religious tradition. In Islamic eschatology, details about the signs of the Day of Reckoning (*ashrāṭ al-sā‘ah*) are discussed in detail and some scholars have

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<sup>37</sup> Yaffa Ganz, *Rosh Hashanah*, p. 7

<sup>38</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Discovering the God Who Is: His Character and Being. His Power and Personality*, p. 75

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76

<sup>40</sup> See Matthew 16:27 for example

<sup>41</sup> Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, p. 79

listed up to fifty signs from the Qur'ān and ḥadīth.<sup>42</sup> And about the day itself, there are many verses that speak of how long it will be (Q70:4), how the accounting will be done, and how the people will behave towards one another on that day (Q80:34-40). One verse states:

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لِهَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

*The Book will be set up. Then you will see the guilty apprehensive of what is in it. They will say, "Woe to us! What a book is this! It omits nothing, big or small, without enumerating it." They will find present whatever they had done, and your Lord does not wrong anyone.*<sup>43</sup>

This verse describes how shocked people will be when they are shown their book of deeds on the Day of Judgment, especially when they see how detailed it is and how nothing, not even the smallest action, has been left out.

There are also hundreds of narrations that refer to the Day of Judgment. One narration from Imām al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ('a) states:

لا يَأْمَنُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِلَّا مَنْ خَافَ اللَّهَ فِي الدُّنْيَا

*None will be secure on the Day of Judgment except the one who fears God in this world.*<sup>44</sup>

Thus we find that out of the three Abrahamic faiths, there is no dearth of information on the Day of Reckoning in Islamic teachings.

## PARADISE

<sup>42</sup> Dr. Suhaib Hasan, 50 Signs of the Day of Judgment, <http://www.islamicfinder.org/articles/article.php?id=75&lang=english>

<sup>43</sup> Q18:49

<sup>44</sup> Manāqib Āl 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ('a), vol. 4, p. 69

The place of spiritual reward for the righteous is often referred to in Hebrew as Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden). This is not the same place where Adam and Eve were; it is a place of spiritual perfection.<sup>45</sup> Specific descriptions of it vary widely from one source to another. One source says that the peace that one feels when one experiences Shabbat properly is merely one-sixtieth of the pleasure of the afterlife. Other sources compare the bliss of the afterlife to the joy of sex or the warmth of a sunny day. Ultimately, though, the living can no more understand the nature of this place than the blind can understand color.<sup>46</sup>

The *Midrash Agada* gives a detailed description of paradise. Dimensions of the chambers, etc., are given; and the particulars contained are graphically stated in various forms of legendary narratives. These accounts are supposed to have been communicated by the very few individuals who, it is claimed, visited Paradise while alive. The *Haggadah* credits nine mortals with entrance to heaven while alive: Enoch, Eliezer Abraham's servant, Serah the daughter of Asher, Bithiah the daughter of Pharaoh, Hiram King of Tyre, Elijah, Messiah, Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, and Jabez b. Judah. One of these accounts is credited to Enoch; it reads as follows:

“The Gan ‘Eden at the east measures 800,000 years (at ten miles per day or 3,650 miles per year). There are five chambers for various classes of the righteous. The first is built of cedar, with a ceiling of transparent crystal. This is the habitation of non-Jews who become true and devoted converts to Judaism... The second is built of cedar, with a ceiling of fine silver. This is the habitation of the penitents... The third chamber is built of silver and gold, ornamented with pearls. It is very spacious, and contains the best of heaven and of earth, with spices, fragrance, and sweet odors. In the center of this chamber stands the Tree of Life, 500 years high. Under its shadow rest Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the tribes, those of the Egyptian exodus and those who died in the wilderness, headed by Moses and Aaron... The Tree of Life is like a ladder on which the souls of the righteous may ascend and descend... The souls on entering paradise are bathed in the 248 rivulets of balsam and attar. The fourth chamber is made of olive-

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<sup>45</sup> This is the same view held by the great philosopher exegete ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabāī in his *Tafsīr al-Mizān*

<sup>46</sup> Excerpt from: <http://www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm>

wood and is inhabited by those who have suffered for the sake of their religion. Olives typify bitterness in taste and brilliancy in light [olive-oil], symbolizing persecution and its reward. The fifth chamber is built of precious stones, gold, and silver, surrounded by myrrh and aloes. There are couches of gold and silver and fine drapery. In the center are a canopy made of the cedars of Lebanon, in the style of the Tabernacle, with posts and vessels of silver; and a settee of Lebanon wood with pillars of silver and a seat of gold, the covering thereof of purple.”<sup>47</sup>

During early Christianity, there existed various discussions within which terms such as ‘paradise’, ‘kingdom of heaven’, ‘bosom of Abraham’, and ‘place of refreshment’ were used to refer to the abode of eternal bliss. In Scripture, paradise could as easily refer to a celestial interim location as it could to the terrestrial Garden of Eden, and as frequently merge with heaven as it could be distinguished from it. Several of these senses of paradise survived into the early Middle Ages to enter new contexts and develop fresh applications.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly though, there is little in the way of details and descriptions about Paradise that Christianity has to offer.

Another dimension that Christianity adds to the concept of Paradise is the claim that people can share in heaven even while they are still on earth. After his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ assumed the place at the right hand of God the Father. Because Jesus, a being both human and divine, occupies this focal position in heaven, heaven is conceivable and accessible to Christians. Their relationship with Christ becomes the way to heaven where God sits. In Christian terms, solidarity and love of others makes it possible to experience heaven while still on earth.<sup>49</sup>

The Glorious Qur’ān describes Paradise in numerous verses. Some of its descriptions are very detailed and give a clear picture of what life in the abode of eternal bliss will be like. One such verse is in Surah Muḥammad, verse 15:

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<sup>47</sup> Excerpt from The Jewish Encyclopedia: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11900-paradise>

<sup>48</sup> Ananya Jahanara Kabir, Paradise, Death, and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature, p. 5

<sup>49</sup> Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience, p. 556

مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وَعَدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ فِيهَا أَنْهَارٌ مِنْ مَاءٍ غَيْرِ آسِنٍ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ لَبَنٍ لَمْ يَتَغَيَّرْ طَعْمُهُ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ خَمْرٍ لَذَّةٍ لِلشَّارِبِينَ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ عَسَلٍ مُصَفًّى وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ

*A description of the paradise promised to the God wary: therein are streams of unstaling water, and streams of milk unchanging in flavour, and streams of wine delicious to the drinkers, and streams of purified honey; there will be for them every kind of fruit in it, and forgiveness from their Lord.]*

Aside from verses like these, there are many narrations in the Islamic ḥadith corpus that speak about Paradise in detail. One famous narration is that of the ascension of the Prophet (ﷺ) or the *Miʿrāj* which can be found both in the Sunnī and Shiʿī sources. Additionally, there are many traditions that describe the unending and unceasing bliss and joy that believers experience in Paradise. For example, one tradition attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (ʿa) states:

لذاتها لا تملُّ ومجتمعها لا يتفرَّقُ وسكانها قد جاؤوا الرحمنَ وقامَ بينَ أيديهمُ الغلمانُ بصِحافٍ من الذهبِ فيها الفاكهةُ والريحانُ

*Its pleasures do not make one weary, its gatherings do not separate, its inhabitants have become the neighbors of the All-Merciful, servant boys stand amongst them with golden trays in which there are fruits and sweet basil.<sup>50</sup>*

Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam includes a second condition for entry into paradise, namely: the performance of good deeds. It is not enough to believe and to proclaim faith in the tenets of Islam. One also needs to be a practicing Muslim who complies with all the injunctions and commandments that have been revealed through the Noble Prophet (ﷺ).

## HELL

<sup>50</sup> Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, *al-Amāli*, vol. 1, p. 61

In Judaic literature, the word used to refer to Hell is Gehinnom.<sup>51</sup> The term Gehinnom is derived from a place outside ancient Jerusalem known as the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, one of the two principal valleys surrounding the Old City. Jews believe that the period of time spent in Gehinnom never exceeds 12 months, after which the sinful Jew ascends to take his place on Olam Ha-Ba. Only the utterly wicked do not ascend at the end of this period. Sources differ on what happens to these individuals at the end of those 12 months: some say that the wicked soul is utterly destroyed and ceases to exist while others say that the soul continues to exist in a state of endless remorse.<sup>52</sup>

Early Judaism had no concept of Hell,<sup>53</sup> though the concept of an afterlife was introduced during the Hellenic period, apparently from neighboring Hellenistic religions. It occurs for example in Book of Daniel thus: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.”<sup>54</sup> Judaism does not have a specific doctrine about the afterlife, but it does have a tradition of a place termed Gehenna (the place of punishment). Gehenna is not believed to be Hell, but is considered a sort of purgatory where one is judged based his deeds, or rather, where one becomes completely cognizant of his own shortcomings. The mystical Kabbalah tradition explains it by giving the analogy of a ‘waiting room’ for the souls. Jewish mythology states that Gehenna, was one of the seven things created before the Creation, but for a long time it was nothing more than a great void. Then, at the time that God separated Himself from Adam and ascended on high, God lit the fires of Gehenna, and made them alternate with periods where everything is covered by ice.<sup>55</sup>

According to Jewish teachings, Hell is not entirely physical; rather, it can be compared to a very intense feeling of shame. People are ashamed of their misdeeds and this constitutes suffering which makes up for the bad deeds. This is not meant to refer to

<sup>51</sup> Gehinnom is mentioned in the writings of the Prophet Jeremiah: *And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of ... Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart* (7:31)

<sup>52</sup> This belief has been referred to in the Qur’ān (Q2:80) thus:

وَقَالُوا لَنْ نَمَسَّنَا النَّارُ إِلَّا أَيَّامًا مَعْدُودَةً قُلْ أَتَّخَذْتُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَهْدًا فَلَنْ يُخْلِفَ اللَّهُ عَهْدَهُ أَمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

<sup>53</sup> William Sutherland, *God is Love*, p. 57

<sup>54</sup> Daniel 12:2

<sup>55</sup> Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*, p. 232

some point in the future, but to the very present moment. Being out of alignment with God's will is itself a punishment according to the Torah.<sup>56</sup>

The focus of Christianity is on eternal life, not punishment after death. Christians hold that by his divine sacrifice, Christ made it possible for humanity to imitate his resurrection through the reunion of the soul with a body made spiritual, forming a renewed person who will enjoy eternal bliss in the kingdom of God.<sup>57</sup> As such, the authors of the Christian Bible considered three possibilities: The first possibility is 'mere' death. Those who fall short could simply remain in their graves, decompose, and pass into nothingness. That would be natural or simple death, or what the New Testament calls destruction. Those left out of the resurrection would not know eternal life or inherit the kingdom of God, but they would not be aware of their loss either.

A second view holds that simple death does not suffice: justice demands retribution. Those who reject the Christian message will also be resurrected, but then they will be sent to a fate separate from, and worse than, that of the blessed. The damned will suffer 'wrath' or 'evil', either temporarily or unendingly in eternal damnation. Other Christians proposed a third possibility: universal salvation - for surely God would eventually draw all to himself, even if after punishment.<sup>58</sup>

In the Bible, Hell has been described in different ways, ranging from: A place of outer darkness,<sup>59</sup> to a place of torments,<sup>60</sup> a place of sorrows,<sup>61</sup> a place of everlasting destruction,<sup>62</sup> a place where men are tormented with fire and brimstone,<sup>63</sup> a place where

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<sup>56</sup> Excerpt from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hell#Judaism>. Interestingly, no reference can be found for this statement. However, something akin to this can be found in the teaching of Muslim mystics. In the Qur'ān there are numerous verses that speak of regret and remorse expressed by the evildoers in the Hereafter (see for example: Q25:27, Q69:25 and Q78:40)

<sup>57</sup> John 3:16; I Corinthians 15:44

<sup>58</sup> Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, pp. 206-207

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 22:13

<sup>60</sup> Luke 16:23

<sup>61</sup> 2 Samuel 22:6

<sup>62</sup> II Thessalonians 1:9

<sup>63</sup> Revelation 21:8



بَالُ الْأَبْعَدِ قَدْ آذَانَا عَلَى مَا بَنَا مِنَ الْأَذَى فَيَقُولُ إِنَّ الْأَبْعَدَ كَانَ يُحَاكِي فَيَنْظُرُ إِلَى كُلِّ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ فَيُسْنِدُهَا  
وَيُحَاكِي بِهَا ثُمَّ يُقَالُ لِلَّذِي كَانَ يَأْكُلُ لَحْمَهُ مَا بَالُ الْأَبْعَدِ قَدْ آذَانَا عَلَى مَا بَنَا مِنَ الْأَذَى فَيَقُولُ إِنَّ الْأَبْعَدَ  
كَانَ يَأْكُلُ لُحُومَ النَّاسِ بِالْغَيْبَةِ وَ يَمْشِي بِالنَّمِيمَةِ.<sup>71</sup>

There are numerous similar narrations in both Shi'i and Sunni sources. As such, it is evident that Islam has the most to offer in terms of descriptions of Hell.

## SUMMARY

The following chart represents a summary of the most salient features of each Abrahamic faith in relation to belief in the Afterlife:

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Belief that death means a return to God	✓	✓	✓
Emphasis on remembering and preparing for death		✓	✓
Recitation of testimony of faith on death bed	✓		✓
Turning the dying person in a specific direction	✓		✓
Speaking only good about the dead	✓		✓
Burial in a plain white shroud	✓		✓
Death is painful (especially for the sinful)		✓	✓
A link between the body and soul after death	✓		✓
Being re-united with loved ones after death	✓	✓	
Belief in resurrection after death	✓	✓	✓
Belief in 'raj'ah' of the righteous in this world	✓		✓

<sup>71</sup> Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 8, p. 281

Belief in a Day of Judgment after resurrection		✓	✓
Detailed description of Paradise in scripture	✓		✓
Belief is sufficient for entry into Paradise	✓	✓	
Remorse and regret is one of the torments of Hell	✓		✓
Detailed descriptions of Hell given in scripture		✓	✓

## CONCLUSION

After examining the teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam about life after death, we see that these three monotheistic traditions have more in common than in what they differ. This is to be expected since they all come from the same divine source. The cause of differences can be attributed to later influences and subsequent changes that were made to the early scriptures of the Jews and Christians. Theories and hypotheses about the afterlife in these traditions abound, but every scholar who has presented theories about life after death has done so based purely on speculation, for indeed there is very little in Judeo-Christian scripture about the details of life after death.

In Islam, on the other hand, there are numerous accounts and details that are mentioned, not only in the traditions of the Noble Prophet (ﷺ) and his progeny (‘a), but also in the Glorious Qur’ān. In fact, after looking at what the other traditions have to offer in the way of details about what a human being undergoes in the grave, when he is resurrected, on Judgment Day, in Paradise and Hell, it is quite evident that Islam has more details about all of these in its teachings than any of the other traditions. This is the greatest difference between Islamic teachings about the afterlife and those of the other traditions.

Learning about the afterlife from scripture and from the traditions of divinely appointed messengers is the only way to access knowledge about the unseen realm as nobody who dies is able to return to the world and inform its inhabitants about what he or she experienced. And even if, perchance, this were to happen, there is no way to know whether what every individual experiences will be the same or not. The only way, therefore, that we can learn about life after death is by referring to religious teachings. Islam is the richest in these teachings and gives us a very clear picture about what to expect when we die.

Though this paper only looks at the general concepts, it is hoped that this work will be expounded upon further to include more detailed discussions of each tradition as well as the difference of opinions within each tradition.

Our success is only from Allāh.

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