Barzakh: The Period Between Death and the Day of Resurrection

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Barzakh" literally means 'barrier'. In the Qur'an, it has been used for the period between death and the Day of Resurrection.

"And behind them is the Barzakh (barrier) till the Day they will be Resurrected". (Qur'an, 23:100).

Our 6th Imam (A) has said that "We will intercede on your behalf on the Day of Judgement; but by Allah, I am worried about you for the period when you would be in Barzakh".

Imam (A) has referred in this Hadith to the fact that the sinning believers will get their punishment during this period, as will be explained later on.

It appears from many traditions that the soul maintains some emotional attachment with the body even after death…….at least till the body is buried. That is why it is forbidden to roughly handle the dead-body "because it pains the Soul". When a child gets hurt while playing and, let us say, his leg is wounded, the parents feel more pain in their hearts than the child might be feeling in his leg. In the same way, as the soul has been with the body for some time, it gives it pain to see that body mis-handled.

After the questioning in the grave (as will be explained in the next chapter), the Soul of a believer is sent to Wadis-Salaam (The Valley of Peace), and that of an un-behever to wadi Barhut (The Valley of Barhut). The Valley of Peace is said to be in Najaf, where the Souls of the Believers remain in peace waiting for the Day of Resurrection; and the Valley of Barhut is said to be in Yemen, where the souls of hypocrites and unbelievers remain in turmoil, afraid of the approaching Day of Resurrection.

The above information is based upon traditions. There is nothing to make us believe that these Ahadith are not to be taken literally. If Allah keeps a soul in a place (i.e., a Body) before death. He can keep that very soul in another place after death too. Some modern scholars have tried to interpret these words metaphorically. They say that the Valley of Peace means 'Peace' and the Valley of Barhut means 'Turmoil'; and according to them, the Ahadith mean that the souls of the believers remain in peace and those of others remain in turmoil.

During past centuries, Muslim scholars have repeatedly tried to interpret so many Ayats and Ahadith metaphorically, just because the literal meanings were not palatable to the tastes of their times. Subsequent discoveries showed that it was the literal meaning which was correct.

Therefore, one cannot find any justification for this latest attempt which denies the literal meanings and explanations of these two Valleys. The correct view and attitude is to believe what we have been told by the Holy Prophet (S) and Imams (A) because they are our guides in these matters, and it will not do to insert our views in between.

Questioning in the Grave

The questioning in the grave is one of the “Dharuriyyat-e-Deen”. (Those things which are commonly believed by all Muslims) and if some one rejects this belief he will not remain a Muslim. Shaykh as-Saduq (r.a..) has written: “And it is our belief that the Questioning in the grave is 'Haqq' (Truth, Fact); whoever would answer the questions correctly, would get comfort and mercy in his grave and the Garden of Bliss in the Akherat; and whoever would not answer correctly, for him would be the fare of boiling water in his grave and Hell in the next world”

According to traditions, after one has been buried and those who had come to bury him go away, two angels come into his grave. One is called Munkar, the other Nakir. The soul is caused to re-enter the body for questioning. Then the “dead person”' is asked: Who is thy Rabb (Lord and Sustainer)? Who is thy Prophet? What is thy religion? What is thy Book? What is thy Quibla? Who are thy Imams?

It appears from some traditions that questioning of the grave contains questions about prayers, Zakah, Hajj, fast and the Love of Ahlul-Bait (A).

If he is a believer and answers correctly, the angels tell him to sleep peacefully; and a door is opened into his grave from the Paradise; he sees his place in the Paradise; then his soul is taken out from the body and is placed in neighbourhood of the 14 Masoomen (sinless persons) i.e., the prophet, his daughter and the 12 Imams (A)

According to some traditions, the names of the angels who come to question a believer are 'Mubashshir' and 'Bashir' (one who brings good tidings)

The Holy Prophet told Hadhrat Ali (A) “O Ali, verily those who love you will be glad in three places: at the time of death, because you will be there visiting them: and at the questioning in the grave as you will be there teaching them (the correct replies); and at the time of coming before Allah, and you will be there introducing them”

This Hadith, and many others, show that Imam (or Imams) A. S come into the grave also.

If he is not a believer, and does not answer correctly, then the angels punish him with a club, a door is opened from the Hell into his grave. Thereafter, his soul is transferred to Wadi Barhut.

Here it must be mentioned that this questioning in the grave is only for a perfect believer or a confirmed unbeliever. (Its reason will be explained later on). It is not for common people; nor is

it for children, mad persons or those whose religious beliefs (or disbeliefs) were not based on understanding and conviction (he was a Muslim or Christian just because he happened to be born of Muslim or Christian parents)

Also, if 'Talqin' has been recited on the grave, the dead-body is not questioned. Talqin means 'To Teach'. In Talqin, the dead-body is taught the correct answers to the questions which are to be asked. According to Ahadith, if Talqin is recited, the angels tell each other to return because “the Talqin is his proof (of faith)”.

Question: How can a dead-body hear Talqin! Talqin is recited in Arabic language. How can a non-Arab dead-body understand it?

Answer: So long as the soul is in this body, it requires ears to hear, and eyes to see. But as soon as it is free from the shackles of the body, it hears, sees and feels independently, without needing any of the organs. Therefore, we should not be surprised at how a 'dead-body' can hear our sound and Talqin. So far as understanding the Talqin in a 'foreign language' is concerned, the same principle applies here. While in this body, the soul understands through the mind. But when it becomes free, it understands independently. When it understands with the help of the brain, it is bound to this or that language. When it understands on its own, it needs no particular language. All languages are equal for it.

Furthermore, according tp traditions, the language of Akhirah is Arabic; and as soon as one dies, he at once understands this language.

Also, according to traditions, dead body which carries a stick from the lote-tree on either side, is exempted from punishment and questioning in the grave.

Zurarah (r.a.) asked Imam Muhammad Baqir (A) why the two green branches (of lote-tree) are put with the dead-body (in the shroud). Imam (A) said: “So long as the branch is green, the dead-body is not punished nor is the account of deeds and beliefs taken.” Then he said: “And the punishment starts on the first day, within the first hour, as soon as people go back after burying their dead. And it is for this reason that the two branches have been prescribed. (As the punishment and questioning is deferred in the first hour because the branches are green) there will be no punishment or accounting even after they become dry, if Allah so wishes (as the time of punishment has passed.)”

The Squeeze in the Grave

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (A) has said: “Whoever is subject to the questioning in the grave, is also squeezed by the grave therein; and the one who is exempted from questioning, is exempted from the squeeze also.”

For some believers this squeeze will be like two friends embracing each other. But for some other believers, whose sins had not been washed away by the agony of death, this will be severe enough to fracture the ribs.

This squeezing is not dependent upon the corpse being buried in the earth. In the words of Imam (A) the Lord of the earth is also the Lord of the atmosphere. And the corpse would be squeezed, if it deserved it, no matter in what condition or place it happens to be.

Now, we will refer to the funeral of Bibi Fatima Bint Asad during the Prophet's time.

When Bibi Fatima Bint Asad (wife of Hadhrat Abu Talib and mother of Hadhrat Ali A) died, the Holy Prophet (S) was very much grieved.

“Verily, the Messenger of Allah gave Kafan (shroud) to Fatima Bint Asad (mother of the Leader of the Faithful) in his own robe, when the women finished washing her. And he carried her bier on his shoulder, and he remained under her bier till he brought it to her grave”.

(The Holy Prophet (S) “remained under her bier” means that he carried her bier on his shoulder. In East Africa, a peculiar custom has been adopted: the son of the dead person remains “under the bier” literally; instead of carrying the bier or helping others carrying it, he places himself between those who are actually carrying the bier, and inconveniences them.)

“Then the Holy Prophet (S) put her bier near the grave, and entered the grave and lay in it. Then he stood up and took the body on his hands and laid it into the grave. Then he put his face near hers whispering to her for a long time, telling her “your son, your son”. Then he come out, filled the grave and shaped it properly. Then he inclined towards the grave, and people heard him saying: 'There is no god but Allah. O Allah, I am giving her to thee in trust'. Then he returned.

The Muslims said: 'O Messenger of Allah, today we have seen you doing such things as you had never done before!'

The Prophet said: 'Today I lost the righteousness of Abu Talib: Verily, she was so (kind to me) that whenever she had any good thing, she gave it to me, instead of using it for herself or her own children. And I said once that on the Day of Judgement people would be assembled naked. She said: “Oh, the'shame!” Therefore, I assured her that Allah would resurrect her with clothes. And I described the squeeze of the grave, and she said: “Oh, the weakness!” So, I guaranteed to her that Allah would save her from it. It was for this reason that I gave her shroud from my own robe, and I lay down in her grave And I knelt near her to teach her (the answers of) what she was being asked.

And, verily, she was asked about her Lord, and she said, “Allah is my Lord”; and about her Prophet, and she answered, “Muhammad (S)”. Then she was asked about her Wali and Imam, and she was perplexed and hesitated a little; so I told her “Your son, your son”. And she replied,

“My child is my Imam”. Then the two angels went away and said, “We have no authority upon you, sleep as a bride sleeps (with no worry at all)” Then she died again (i.e., her soul was taken out of her body again).

This Hadith shows the love of the Holy Prophet towards Abu Talib and Fatima Bint Asad, and their love towards him; it also shows the prestige of the Prophet, that he could exempt Fatima Bint Asad from the common plight of the Day of Judgement and the grave; and shows the benefit (and origin) ofTalqin; proves that the questioning in, and the squeeze of, grave are the facts which were explained and described by the Holy Prophet (S) himself.

The Prophet (S) also said: One who dies on the eve of Friday or on Friday, is free from punishment in the grave.

Imam Jaf'ar as-Sadiq (A) has said: A believer dying between Thursday noon and Friday noon is protected by Allah from the squeeze in the grave.

Three Groups in Barzakh

The question of reward and punishment in Barzakh is very complicated. Allah decides every thing according to His own plan, which, of course, is based upon mercy and justice -justice for all and mercy for the believers. Obviously, every case is dealt with on its own merit. Therefore, it is very difficult to lay down any hard and fast rule. Still, what appears from the traditions of the Masumeen (A) may be summed up as follows: Different types of people get different types of treatment after death and before the Day of Resurrection.

First: there are true believers, perfect in their faith and virtuous in their deeds. They lived a blameless life, and if there was some mistake or sin (because 'to err is human') their worldly troubles (illness, poverty, death of near and dear ones, troublesome neighbours or tyrant spouse etc.) and/ or agony at the time of death were sufficient to be counted as its retribution and atonement.

Allah knows that they deserve reward. Still, the Day of Judgement has not arrived, and they cannot be sent to the Paradise straight away. By the rule of the Law, they should be left without any reward till they are resurrected; but the Mercy of Allah decrees that they should not be left in abeyance. Therefore, they are questioned about their beliefs, and on giving correct answers, they enter a state of Bliss, which gives them the satisfaction of knowing that their future is assured: They find pleasure and happiness in their grave, and wait eagerly for the Day of Resurrection.

Second: the confirmed unbelievers and hypocrites, whose lives are devoid of any good deed. Or if there was any good deed, the worldly blessings (health, wealth, good family and friends,

prestige and power etc. etc.) and /or the ease at the time of death were sufficient rewards. Allah knows that their place is Jahannam (Hell); but He will not send them there before the Day of Judgement. So, to give them a fore-taste of their punishment, they are questioned about their beliefs, and when they do not give correct answers, their graves are turned into punishment cells. And they wish the Qiyamat would not come at all.

Here it shoud be mentioned that the reward or punishment of Barzakh is different from that of Paradise or Hell. The reward or punishment of Barzakh is for the soul only. It is for this reason that we do not see anyone being rewarded or punished in the grave. In the traditions of Masumeen (A), it has been compared to happy dreams or nightmares. The person who is dreaming is going through all the tortures in the dreams; but the man sitting besides him does not realize what is going on. Likewise, the joys of dream are not known to others at all.

But again it is not a strict rule. Some exceptions have been observed whereas the dead-body was found enjoying some rewards, (a heavenly rose put near his nose, for example) or undergoing some torture (a scorpion stinging at the toe, for instance). But these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

The third Group is of those who are neither perfect believers nor confirmed unbelievers. The children, the lunatics, those who because of one reason or another were not in a position to differentiate between the right and the wrong path, those who were so far from Islamic environment that they were not aware of the truth of Islam, those who did not know about Islam but at the same time were not enemies of Islam, those whose religious beliefs were not based upon logical understanding but they just followed what their families were following; even those non-believers who love the Holy Prophet (S) and his Ahlul-Bait, without knowing that they were the True Guides sent by Allah: all such people come under this group.

Such people will not be subject to the questioning and squeeze of grave. They will be left in a state like deep slumber; and Allah will decide about them on the Day of Judgement. Till then, there is neither reward nor punishment for them.

After these three main groups, there still remains a group in between, which must be described here to complete the picture. This group is of those believers who had committed so many sins that could not be wiped out by worldly troubles and agony of death. Now, if Allah decides that such a believer should come on the Day of Judgement clean from all blemishes and free from all sins, then He may put him under punishment during the Barzakh period. And it is this punishment which has been referred to in the Hadith of Imam Jafer Sadiq (A) which was mentioned earlier: “We will intercede on your behalf on the Day of Judgement; but, by Allah, I am worried about you whilst you would be in Barzakh.”

On the other hand, if Allah decides to leave his case in suspense till Qiyamat, then it will fall under 3rd group.

Anyhow, all these things depend upon the justice and mercy of Allah. We have not been told enough to know all the details about all the groups.

It is about the first and second groups (as well as the last mentioned believers who will be punished in Barzakh) that the Holy Prophet (S) has said: “When one dies his Qiyamat starts!” In this sense the Barzakh is called “Qiyamat-e-Sughra” (the lesser Qiyamat)

The reader is now advised to read again the traditions given in lesson 17; so that he may understand many references which might have remained a mystery at first.

Salman Farsi talks with a Dead Person

It seems proper to give here a short account of the conversation which Salman, the Persian, had had with a dead person. It is a lengthy tradition, but of great benefit.

Asbagh bin Nubata (r.a.) was a trusted companion of Ameerul Mumeneen Ali (AS). He went to see Salman Farsi (r.a.) who had settled in Madain. Asbagh (r.a.) says: “I found him very sick, near his death. He told me: 'O Asbagh, the Messenger of Allah had informed me that, at the time of my death, a dead person would talk to me. Now, put me on a wooden plank and take me to the graveyard. On reaching the grave-yard, Salman faced towards Quibla and in a loud voice saluted the dead. Nobody replied. After saluting them several times without getting any reply, Salman said: “O Inhabitants of these graves, I am Salman, a slave of the Messenger of Allah. The Prophet had told me that at the time of my death a dead person would converse with me. Now, if that time has arrived, then, for the sake of Allah and His Messenger, please talk to me”.

Suddenly someone responded to his Salaam, and said: “O people who build and plant, and ultimately the buildings turn into ruins and gardens decay; ask me what you want,, I will reply”.

Salman (r.a.) asked: “Are you from the people of Paradise or of Hell?” The dead man said that he was from the people of Paradise.

Salman requested him to describe how he died and what agonies he had to undergo at that time. He replied: “O Salman, please do not ask this. By Allah, if someone had snipped my flesh (by scissors) in little bits and removed the flesh from the bones, it would have been easier than the agony of death. O Salman, I always did good deeds in your world, always prayed on time, used to recite the Qur'an, was good to my parents, lived on lawful earnings. Then I fell ill and my life came to its end. At that time, a very tall person, with a frightening countenance, stood in the air before me. He pointed to my eyes and they lost their sight; to my ears and they became

deaf; to my tongue and it lost its speech. I asked him who he was and why he was doing it to me. He said: I am the angel of death; your life has ended in this world. You have to go from here to another world'.

Then two persons came to me, one of them sat on my right, the other on the left. They informed me that they were the two angels who had written all my deeds in the worldly life. One, whose name was 'Raqueeb' gave my record of good deeds, on reading which I was much pleased. Then the other angel, whose name was 'Ateed', gave me the other record, a complete record of my sins; and on reading that I was very sad.

Then the Angel of Death came nearer and removed my soul through my nose, and I have not forgotten its agony yet. Seeing me dead, my relatives and family members started crying. The Angel of Death said: “Why are you crying? I have not done any injustice that you are complaining of. When his life came to end, I removed his soul on the command of Allah. And I will come to you so many times.”

Then another Angel took my soul and I was brought to heaven where I was asked about my deeds, viz. prayers, fasts, Zakat, Khums, Hajj, Jihad, recitation of the Qur'an, obedience to the parents etc. Likewise, I was asked whether I had murdered any one, or taken some one's property without any right, or been unjust to other people and such things.

Then that same Angel brought my soul back to earth. At that time the person who wanted to wash my body (Ghassal) removed my clothes and started the ritual washing (Ghusl). My soul cried out: “O servant of Allah, have mercy On this weak and broken body. By Allah, all its veins, whence I have come out, have been broken; and its limbs are like they have been minced”. My soul was imploring him in such a touching way that if the Ghassal were to hear it, he would have left washing the dead bodies altogether.

Then they covered me with Kafan (shroud), gave me Hunut, prayed upon me. When they laid me in the grave, I was so much frightened that words cannot describe it.

When they closed my grave, my soul entered my body again. An Angel, Munabbih (One who awakens, reminds) by name, came to me and made me sit. He ordered me to write down all the deeds which I had done in the world. I said that I did not remember. He said: 'I will go on reminding, you go on writing'. I said: 'Where is the paper?' He said: “This Kafan of yours will do for paper'. I said: 'Where can I find a pen?' He said: 'Your finger will be your pen'. I asked about the ink and was told that my saliva will work like ink.

When I had written all my deeds, the Angel put my writing around my neck like a band, it is as Allah says in the Qur'an: “And the bird (i.e., deed done by one) of every man have We bound about his neck, and We shall produce unto him, on the Day of Resurrection, a book (in which

his actions will be recorded) which he will find open, (it will be said to him) read thy book; thine own self will be a sufficient reckoner against thee." (Qur'an, 17:13-14).

(In other traditions, the name of the angel, who comes in the grave and guides in writing the deeds of the Mayyit, is given as "Ruman")

Then an angel, very frightening, Munkar by name, came to me with a fiery club, and asked me: "Who is your Lord? Who are your Prophet and Imams? What is your religion?" I was so afraid that I became totally confused; my limbs were trembling; I could not understand what to reply. In that confusion, the Mercy of Allah supported me, and my heart became tranquil, and I replied; "Allah (His Power is Great) is my Lord; and Muhammad is my Prophet, and Ali bin Abi Talib is my Imam and Islam is my religion; and the Qur'an is my Book and the Kaaba is my Quibla".

Then another Angel, who is called Nakir, interrogated me in the same manner about my beliefs. By Grace of Allah, I replied his questions also and said: "I bear witness that there is no god except Allah, and that Muhammad is His Messenger, and that Ali and his sinless progeny are the proofs of Allah, and that Paradise is Haqq (a Fact, Truth) and the Fire (of Hell) is true, and Sirat (Path) is true, and the Balance (of deeds) is true and the Questioning of Munkar and Nakir in the grave is true, and Resurrection is true, and raising (of dead) is true, and flying of the books (in which deeds of a person are recorded) is true, and that the Hour (Day of Judgement) is sure to come, there is no doubt in it, and that Allah will raise all the dead who are in the grave".

Hearing these true answers, the angels said to me: "Sleep as a bride sleeps" (without any worry); they opened a door of Paradise towards my head, and the breeze of Paradise came to me, and my grave (which previously looked like a prison) become a vast place extending beyond my vision, and the whole place became a garden.

O Salman, a man must remember his Lord at all times, and must spend his life in His obedience, because death is a sure thing and every one will have to face all those things which I have told you."

Asbagh (r.a.) said: "When the voice stopped, Salman (r.a.) told me to take him back home, there he lay on the ground and looking towards heavens prayed to Allah, and left this world".

A Few Short Notes

1. Those who are martyred in the Way of Allah remain alive for ever. (The Prophets and Imams are superior than the martyrs; and as such, they are also alive). About the martyrs Allah says in the Qur'an: "And think not those who are slain in the way of Allah, to be dead; nay! Alive they

are with their Lord; are being sustained, rejoicing for those who have not yet joined them from behind them, that no fear shall come to them nor shall they grieve. They rejoice in the grace from Allah and (His) bounty, and in the fact that Allah does not (allow) the reward of the believers to be lost." (Qur'an, 3:169-171).

2. The souls of the believers always look forward for the gifts from their near and dear ones, and especially so on Fridays and Friday eve. This gift may be in the form of prayers, alms, and other good deeds done on their behalf; one may also perform any Sunnat deed and pray to Allah to give its Thawab (Reward) to one's dead.

3. The souls are sometimes allowed to visit their relatives who are alive. So far as the believers are concerned, there is no doubt about their visit. According to many Ahadith, even that believer who has the lowest rank is allowed to visit his relatives once every Friday. Those above him in rank may be allowed more frequently.

According to some Ahadith, even some unbelievers are allowed to visit their relatives so that their sorrow and grief may increase by seeing those relatives in disbelief and sin and realizing that they also would be punished in Akherat if they persisted in rejecting Islam and Iman.

4. It must be mentioned here that the souls of the unbelievers remain in punishment and are not free to do any mischief to any one. Therefore, the idea of some people that this or that person became a ghost after his death is sheer superstition. There is no basis to accept such beliefs, prevalent in Hinduism.

Of course, there are Jinns, and among them, according to the Qur 'an, there are some evil ones also. But it does not mean that the evil Jinns have no other interest except teasing the East African residents of Indian origin. It is really surprising to listen to such lamentations that 'I have chronic headache, and so and so (a Sheikh, or Amil, or sorcerer) has said that a very evil Jinn (Kalkail, Dardail or some such name) is upon me.'

The belief in magic or sorcery is prevalent in Africa, and the East African Shias also have some Hindu background (as they have originated from India), and unfortunately, the people who came to guide them in religious matters from Iran (and lately from India) found this ready belief in ghosts (and evil Jinn) conducive to their material gains. The result is that if, for example, there is a dispute between a husband and wife, each party tries to obtain the most effective 'Hirz" to subjugate the other party. (Incidentally, it would be the most expensive also Neither of them would think of amending oneself to win the heart of the spouse. The result, of course, is Divorce.

Of course, there are many 'Hirz' taught by our Imams, which may be seen in Biharu'l-anwar and many of them are 'Sahih' (Correct). But the writers of 'Hirz' today do not confine themselves to

those correctly narrated Ahadith; and what is more despicable is their selling their 'Hirz' and turning it into a merchandise. Who has ever heard that spiritual benefits could be sold and bought?

Before we go further, it is advisable to mention some Ayats of the Qur'an with their interpretations.

5. “Until, when death overtakes any of them, he says, 'O Lord; cause me to return (to life), so that I may do that which is right which I had neglected.' By no means. Verily these are (mere) words which he speaks (he will not change his ways) and behind them there is a bar (partition) until the day they shall be resurrected” (Qur'an, 23:99-100).

This Ayat describes the sorrow, shame and grief of the unbelievers, when they face death. At that time they desire to be returned to life, so that they may amend the ways of their lives and become virtuous. Of course, such wish will not be granted to them. But by telling the believers what the unbelievers would ardently wish, Allah reminds the believers not to waste the opportunity of doing good, lest we also should wish like that at the approach of death.

6. “Allah shall confirm them who believe, by the steadfast word (of faith) in this life and the next one; but Allah shall leave the wicked into error; and Allah does what He pleases” (Qur'an, 14:27)

It means that Allah keeps the believers steadfast in their faith in this life by the Creed of the Unity of Allah, and will keep them firmly on the path of Paradise in Qiyamat by the same Creed. But according to the interpretation of our Imams (A) , the word 'next world' in this Ayat refers to the grave. Accordingly, this Ayat refers to questioning in the grave. It says that Allah will keep the believers steadfast in the grave because of their Creed. This help from Allah needs no further explanation because we have seen how Allah by His Grace, exempts them from questioning if the Talqin has been recited for them, or if they have died on Friday or Friday eve. Even when they are questioned, Allah sends Hadhrat Ali (A) to help them at that time. In this way their faith is confirmed.

As for others, Allah leaves them in their error in the grave, because they rejected the divine guidance in this life.

7. “They (the unbelievers) shall say (on the Day of Resurrection). 'O Lord, thou hast given us death twice, and thou hast twice given us life; and we confess our sins; is there, therefore, any way to get forth (from retribution)?” (Qur'an, 40:11)

According to many traditions, two deaths and two lives mean death in this world, then resurrection in the grave for questioning, then death in the grave after questioning, then resurrection on the Day of Reckoning.

.According to others, it refers to Raj'at (Return), which is briefly mentioned in ch. 36