



An Analytical Study of the Origin of Life from the Qur'ānic Perspective

Abdul Qadir Muhammad-Bello¹ / M.Jawad Eskandarlou² /

Ghorban-Ali Nematzadeh³



Abstract

For centuries, the discussion about the origin of life on the earth has been one of the most fundamental topics among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. It is believed by some Muslim Qur'ānic exegetes and researchers that the Qur'ān makes references to the origin of life on the earth. In view of this, the primary aim of this research is therefore to examine the Qur'ānic viewpoint on the origin of life on the earth.

In this regard, the lexical and technical meanings of some important terms have been examined. Thereafter, the Qur'ānic verses believed to have discussed the life origin and the commentaries of some prominent early and contemporary Muslim Qur'ānic exegetes on the verses were analyzed.

The methodology used in this research work is a descriptive-analytical method wherein the collected data from the written sources (such as books, articles, and so on) have been analyzed based on rational and textual pieces of evidence. Meanwhile, the findings indicate that the Qur'ān does not explicitly discuss the origin of life on the earth, rather it provides details about the creation and the origin of human beings on it.

Keywords: Emergence of life, Life on the earth, Holy Qur'ān, Early Qur'ānic Exegetes, Contemporary Qur'ānic Exegetes.

¹. Ph.D. student, Department of Quran And Orientalism, Al-Mustafa International University, Qum, Iran, salati4all@gmail.com

². Professor, Department of Quran And Orientalism, Al-Mustafa International University, Qum, Iran, mj_eskandarlo@miu.ac.ir

³. Genetics and Biotechnology Research Institute, Sari Agricultural Sciences and NaturalResources University, Tabarestan, Iran, gh.nematzadeh@gmail.com.



Introduction

The issue of the emergence of life on the earth has been one of the most fundamental questions of ontology in human history and has generally been a subject of debate between scientists and religious scholars. The Holy Qur'ān discusses the origin of life on the earth; hence it has led to various interpretations among the Qur'ānic exegetes on the topic. In light of this, some Qur'ānic exegetes and Muslim scholars believe that the Qur'ān makes an indication of the emergence of life on the earth.

Whether directly or indirectly, Some Qur'ānic exegetes and scholars, under the influence of Western scholars' thoughts, attempt to interpret and explain some Qur'ānic verses based on the viewpoint of certain experimental science. In other words, some contemporary Qur'ān exegetes try to interpret the Qur'ānic verses in this direction to show that the Qur'ān conforms to the scientific hypotheses and theories.

Therefore, in this study, it is necessary to explain and clarify the Qur'ānic viewpoint on this controversial topic (i.e., the origin of life) and likewise to respond to the academic community's need on this issue.

1. The Conceptual Framework

In this section, the literal and technical meanings of certain crucial and related terms shall be discussed. They include:

1.1. Life (*Ḥayāt*)

The definition of the term '*life*' is related to the branches of science such as biology, biochemistry, and astrobiology. However, until now, there is still no general agreement among scientists on a single definition of "life". Meanwhile, in the literal sense, the term "*Ḥayāt*" is an Arabic word that is translated into English as "life" or "lifetime" (Haim 2006, 327).

However, in technical usage, (according to Hornby) "life" is defined as "the ability to breathe, grow, reproduce, etc. which people, animals, and



plants have before they die and which objects do not have” (Hornby 2000, 683). In the same vein, the term ‘life’ according to Rāghib Iṣfahānī, is the growing or developmental force present in plants and animals or the sensory force through which the animals are considered living (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 268).

Meanwhile, from the above definitions, one may conclude that life is the condition that distinguishes living organisms (i.e., animals and plants) from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death.

1.2. Living Things

The term “living thing” is a compound word that is made up of two words: “living” and “thing”. The term ‘living’ in a literal sense means "living" or "having a life", while the term ‘thing’ means "entity", "being", "body", or "matter" (Biology-online 2019). Thus, the term “living thing” pertains to any organism or a life form that possesses or shows the characteristics of life or being alive. Meanwhile, the fundamental characteristics of life are as follows: having an organized structure; requiring energy; responding to stimuli and adapting to environmental changes, and being capable of reproduction; growth; movement; metabolism; and death.

In a nutshell, living things are organisms (whether plants or animals) that show the characteristics of being alive.

1.3. Qur’ān

There are various outlooks among lexicographers and experts on the etymology and meaning of the term ‘Qur’ān’. However, the popular opinion, particularly among Muslim scholars is that the term ‘Qur’ān’ is of Arabic origin which means ‘to read or recite’ (Qurashī 1991, 5:262; Hussayn Yūsuf 1989, 2:1267).



Thus, the Heavenly book of the holy Prophet of Allah (*Peace be upon him and his pure Household*) has been referred to as the 'Qur'ān' because it can be read out or recited.

However, in technical usage, the term 'Qur'ān' is the precise and intent Word of Allah revealed to the Prophet of Allah (*Peace be upon him and his pure Household*) and it is written and memorized (ibid). In other words, Qur'ān is a miraculous divine revelation that was revealed verbatim (without any alteration) in Arabic from Allah via the Arch-angel, Gabriel, onto the heart of the noble Prophet of Islam (*Peace be upon him and his pure Household*) once as a whole and gradually (bit by bit) over twenty-three years (Hāshimī Rafsanjānī 1993, 4:11).

2. The Qur'ānic Perspective on the Origin of Life on the Earth

In several verses of the noble Qur'ān, there are discussions about the coming to life of creatures, the different stages of life, the system involved in the creation of living creatures, and the effects of life. Interestingly, one of the important themes discussed in the Qur'ān about life is that life -just like death- is a creation of Allah (Qur'ān 67: 2.) and He is the only Being, Who gives and takes away life (See: Qur'ān 10:56; 22:66; 40:68; 44:8.).

Similarly, in other verses of the Qur'ān, human beings, as the vicegerents of Allah on the earth, are enjoined to reflect and to carry out scientific studies on the origin of life of the living creatures in general and of the human species in particular. For instance, in verse 20 of Sūra al-Ankabūt (Chapter 29) of the Qur'ān, the noble Prophet of Islam was enjoined to instruct people thus: "Say, 'Travel over the land and observe how He has originated the creation.' Then Allah will bring about the genesis of the Hereafter. Indeed, Allah has power over all things" (29:20).

The verse implicitly instructs people to travel over the globe or to carry out scientific studies on various kinds of living creatures, and study different nations with their specialties in order to see and understand how



Allah originated the creation. In an explanation of the verse, a contemporary Qur'ānic exegete, Ayatollah Makārim Shīrāzī in his commentary of the Qur'ān, says: "...Today this verse can provide scientists with a more precise and deeper meaning as it can be interpreted to mean that it enjoins them to examine the remains (in the forms of fossils or otherwise) of the first living creatures in the depths of the seas, in the mountains, in the labyrinths of the earth, so that they could find out through that some of the secrets of the origin of life on the earth, the greatness and power of Allah. And they know that He (Allah) is capable of restoring life" (Makārim Shīrāzī 1992, 16:238).

In the same vein, certain verses of the Qur'ān enjoin all mankind to ponder and reflect on the materials from which they were created. This is, in fact, the Qur'ānic approach to encourage scientific research on nature, in general, and on the origin of creation, in particular. In verse 5 of Sūra al-Ṭāriq (chapter 86) of the Qur'ān, it is said: "So let man consider from what he was created" (86:5).

Meanwhile, a question that may come to mind at this juncture is whether the Qur'ān with all its emphases on the creation makes any reference (either implicitly or explicitly) to the origin of life on the Earth.

Generally speaking, there are two major viewpoints among the Qur'ān exegetes in this regard. Some Muslim scholars believe that the Qur'ān -only in a few verses- makes references to the origin (source) of life of the living organisms on Earth. An indication they believe it to conform with the modern scientific theory on the emergence of life on Earth.

Some scholars, on the contrary, believe that the Qur'ān does not make any reference either implicitly or explicitly to the topic. Rather, they believe that the Omnipotent Allah is the ultimate source of creation. He is believed to be the only Being, Who gives life and takes it. Verses 11 and



27 of Sūra al-Rūm (chapter 30) of the Qur'ān reads thus: “Allah originates the creation, then He will bring it back, then you will be brought back to Him” (30:11).

In light of these, a corollary is that Allah is the absolute source and originator of creation.

3. Water: The Primary Source of Life

Following an interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses, some Qur'ān exegetes and researchers believe that water is the primary source of life on the earth. As such, water is considered the origin of life of every living thing on the surface of the earth. Thus, verse 30 of Sūra al-Anbīyā' (Chapter 21): “...And We made every living thing out of water...” (21:30) and verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr (Chapter 24) of the Qur'ān: “Allah created every animal from water...” (24:45) are considered undisputable evidence to establish such a fact.

3.1. The Viewpoints of the Early Qur'ān Exegetes/Experts

In the first place, it is necessary to reiterate that there is little or no trace of the application of scientific exegesis (i.e., *Tafsir al-ʿIlmī*) in most of the literal works of the early Qur'ān exegetes and researchers. However, there is an indication found in the commentaries of the Qur'ān written by some early Muslim scholars about verses 30 and 45 of Sūra al-Anbīyā' and al-Nūr, respectively.

In this regard, the prominent Shia Qur'ān exegete, Sheikh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460 AH/1067), stated in his commentary of the Qur'ān titled, *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, that water is the primary source of life of every living thing (i.e., plants and animals) on the earth. He maintains while explaining verse 30 of the Sūra al-Anbīyā': “The meaning of the statement ‘and We made every living thing out of water’ (Qur'ān 21:30) is that every living thing is made from water and this, by default, includes the trees and plants” (al-Ṭūsī 1992, 7:243).



He adds further that while explaining verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr: "...Allah Almighty informed that He is the One Who created from water everything that moves from among the animals.... But He (Allah) said "from water" because the origin of creation is water, but which turned thereafter to fire from which the Jinn were created; turned to the spirit from which the angels were created, and then turned to the clay from which Adam was created. And the evidence buttressing that water is the origin of all the animals is Allah's statement: "We made every living thing out of water" (Qur'ān 21:30) (ibid, 7:448).

Similarly, a popular Sunni Qur'ān exegete; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 A.H/ 1209) in his Qur'ānic commentary, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, holds that water is the source of life of every living thing (i.e., plants and animals). He says while explaining verse 30 of Sūra al-Anbiyah: "...If the clause "Ja'alnā" (meaning: We made) has just an object, in that sense, the verse might mean that Allah created every animal from the water just like verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr "Allah created every animal from water" (24:45) or that He created them from water simply because of their excessive dependence on or inclination to water. But if it has two objects, the meaning shall be that Allah transforms every living thing with the aid of water and they cannot do without it" (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1999, 22:138).

He stated while explaining verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr that the first source of creation on the earth is water:

...the verse is to explain the source of creation and the first source is the water..., verily, the meaning of the word 'Dābbah' used in the verse refers to those animals that move and their habitats are on the surface of the earth. [Based on this], the Angels and the Jinn are therefore excluded from it. However, since the fact that majority of animals are created from water (either that they were reproduced through seminal fluid or they could not survive without water), there is no hindrance; therefore, to use a general term in such a situation, for the majority takes the place of all... (ibid, 24:406)



3.2. The Viewpoints of the Contemporary Qur'ān Exegetes

In the contemporary period, several efforts were made by Muslim scholars and researchers to extract scientific facts from the Qur'ān or to apply them for a better understanding of its verses. These have indeed led to the compilation of several books or commentaries of the Qur'ān in this regard. Interestingly, there are more indications of the discussion about the origin of life in the works of many Qur'ān exegetes/researchers in the contemporary era.

In the course of explaining verses 30 and 45 of Sūra al-Anbiyā' and Sūra al-Nūr, respectively, some contemporary exegetes such as Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (al-Ālūsī 1994, 9: 35), Sayyid Quṭb (Sayyid Quṭb 1967, 4:2376 & 2523), al-Ṭanṭawī al-Jawharī (al-Ṭanṭawī n.d, 10:198), Allamah al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī in *Al-Mīzān* (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 14:279), Ayatollah Ma'rifat in *al-Tamhīd fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Ma'rifat 1994, 6:31-33); Ayatollah Miṣbāḥ-Yazdī in *Ma'ārif-i Qur'ān* (Miṣbāḥ-Yazdī 1373, 329) Ayatollah Makārim Shīrāzī in *Tafsīr-i-Nimūnih*, (Makārim Shīrāzī 1992, 13:396) and so on, are either of the opinions that 'water' is the primary source of life or that it is an important factor/agent for the existence and the survival of living things on the earth.

Sayyid Quṭb, a prominent Sunni exegete of the Qur'ān, in his commentary of the Qur'ān "*Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*", maintains while explaining verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr:

And this reality which is simply presented by the Qur'ān refers to the fact that every animal was created from water. It may refer to the uniformity of the basic element in the formation of all living things, which is water. And, it may mean that modern science tries to prove that life emerged from the sea and it formed in the water. Thereafter, various species were formed. ... We shall add no explanation to this indication but we rely only on the Qur'ānic truth which affirms that Allah created all living organisms from water (Sayyid Quṭb 1967, 4:2523).



Another prominent Egyptian Qur'ān exegete, al-Ṭantāwī al-Jawharī while explaining the origin of life said: "The cytoplasm or the first material of life (protoplasm) is considered the basis of biological life and it is the substance through which our bodies become alive and upon which the life of the cell depends. The first thing in any animal is the cytoplasm, then the cell. Then several cells (i.e. tissues) are generated from it. And it continues until all the body parts (i.e., organs) are formed and [the process] is completed by the formation of a living organism" (al-Ṭantāwī n.d., 12:228).

One of the outstanding Shia Qur'ān exegete; Allamah al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī in his Qur'ān exegesis, *Al-Mīzān*, while explaining verse 30 of Sūra al-Anbiyā' (Chapter 21) of the Qur'ān, says:

The statement "And We made every living thing out of water" (Qur'ān 21:30), from the apparent context of the verse, it appears that the word "made" [used in the verse] means "created", and the phrase "every living thing" is its object, and it means that water has a complete interference in the existence of living beings, just as He has brought the same subject in another verse of the Qur'ān when He said: "And Allah created every animal from water" (Qur'ān 24:45), and perhaps by implication, the verse does not imply that the creation of the angels and the like is also from water. However, the subject matter of the verse (i.e the relationship between life and water) is an issue that has been well-clarified and proven in scientific discussions (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 14:279).

Similarly, the contemporary Qur'ān exegete, Makārim Shīrāzī, points out that verse 30 of Sūra al-Anbiyā' (Chapter 21) of the Qur'ān has two common interpretations: First, it pertains to the life of all living things that, irrespective of plants and animals, depend on water (i.e., the rainfall). The second one is that living creatures are created from seminal fluid. However, the intended meaning of water mentioned in this verse refers to the seminal fluid from which living creatures are usually reproduced (Makārim Shīrāzī 1992, 13:396).



He further adds: "... interestingly, the scientists of today believe that the first gemma of life has been found in the depth of the seas, and that is why they think that life has begun by means of water.... It is also noteworthy that according to scientific research, the main part of man's body, as well as that of many animals, mostly consists of water, (about seventy percent)" (ibid).

An outstanding Shia Qur'ān exegete and a researcher on the Qur'ān, Muhammad-Hādī Ma'rifat (d. 2007) in his book "*al- Tamhīd fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*", says:

The legal texts revealed through the revelation show that water is the first thing that Allah created among the physical bodies. ...The researchers among the Qur'ān exegetes believe that the term 'water' in the verse [i.e., verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr] refers to the liquid (water) considered as the source of all creatures because it was from it that life originated and the first creature in the form of a simple animal with one cell (amoeba) emerged in it and thereafter, complex animals with many cells (over millions of cells) were formed. However, modern science has not provided an acceptable answer to the question of how the first creature found in water emerged. (Ma'rifat 1994, 6:31-33)

While giving an explanation of verse 6 of the Qur'ān 86, Ayatullah Miṣbāḥ-Yazdī says: "...The term 'water' in the usage and terminology of the Qur'ān is not restricted only to water that is comprised of hydrogen and oxygen (H₂O). It is rather an elaborate term that is also used for semen. But 'an effusing fluid' (as in Qur'ān 86: 6) is without any doubt points to the semen" (Miṣbāḥ-Yazdī 1373, 329)

A renowned scientist and the author of a book titled *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*; Maurice Bucaille, while explaining verse 30 of Sūra al-Anbīyā' says: "The phrase can equally mean that every living thing was made of water (as its essential component) or that every living thing originated in water. The two possible meanings are in accordance with



scientific data. Life is in fact of aquatic origin and water is the major component of all living cells. Without water, life is impossible” (Bucaille 2001, 166).

He added further while explaining verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr: “As we shall see later on, the word [i.e., water] may also be applied to the seminal liquid. Thus, the statements in the Qur’ān on the origins of life, whether referring to life in general, the element that gives birth to the plants in the soil, or the seed of animals, are all strictly in accordance with modern scientific data” (ibid).

Another Muslim researcher on the Qur’ān, Saeed Ḥamīdī Gholjī, in his book “*Qur’ān wa Ṭabī’at*”, says: “All scientific researches that were carried out are pointing to the fact that the first form of life (that is, the unicellular organisms) was discovered in the sea. In reality, the best hypothesis that could be given on the formation of Amino acids and proteins to produce the first unicellular organisms would only be possible if it occurred in the presence of water...” (Ḥamīdī Gholjī 2005, 28). He added further while explaining the crucial role of water in life: “Apart from the role of water in the formation of life, it is necessary to mention this point that water is a basic component of the body of every living organism on the earth. For instance, a man having a body weight of seventy kilograms has fifty litres of water in his body...” (ibid. 29).

Conclusion

Having made a thorough survey of the selected verses of the Qur’ān and studied the viewpoints of the early and the contemporary Qur’ān exegetes and experts on the origin of life or the creation of man on the earth, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Without any doubt, the life of living organisms on the earth has got a history of creation that no one knows exactly how its condition was and it has indeed remained a mystery to man. The glorious Qur’ān in some of its verses makes references to the creation of some living organisms such as



insects, reptiles, birds, animals, and human beings, but it does not provide explicit details on how life on the earth emerged. This is because the Holy Qur'ān is a Divine Book of guidance and not a science encyclopedia.

The Qur'ānic verses indicate that the human ancestor, Adam, was directly created from clay and was never created by a way of biological evolution. This shows that human being has an independent creation and he does not evolve from an animal as guessed by some scientists. Thus, by virtue of the creation of Adam from clay or dust, the origin of the entire human species is from clay or dust. According to the Qur'ānic reports, the creation of all the progeny of Adam is without any doubt from semen except Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) who was created by Allah in a miraculous way.

The verses under study (i.e., verses 30 and 45 of Chapters 21 and 24, respectively) which according to some interpretations are believed to point to the aquatic origin of life are, in fact, pointing to the significant role of water in the formation and continuity of life. Water is considered an essential component of the creation and survival of every living thing on the earth. Life without water is impossible on the earth. Thus, it is the primary source of life on the surface of the earth. According to the Qur'ānic usages, the Arabic term '*Mā*' is translated as 'water,' either referring to a liquid which falls from a cloud and is made up of hydrogen and oxygen (H₂O) or seminal fluid.

The intended meaning of the Arabic word '*Mā*' (i.e., 'water') used in verse 45 of Sūra al-Nūr (Chapter 24) could be a seminal fluid provided that the unicellular organisms are excluded. The Arabic term '*Mā*' (i.e., 'water') used concerning the creation of man is nothing but a seminal fluid. This is because every progeny of Adam (except Jesus Christ) is created from semen. This is also in agreement with contemporary scientific findings. In accordance with the Qur'ānic reports, the Almighty Allah is the primary source and origin of life on the earth. He is the Sole Creator and Initiator of every creature in the entire universe. Interestingly, no one neither from among the humans nor the Jinns has ever claimed this great responsibility.



References

- Ālūsī, Mahmūd, al-. (1994). *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur‘ān al-‘azīm wa al-ṣab‘ al-mathānī*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah.
- Biology-online. (2019). “Living thing.” Accessed July 20, 2019. https://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Living_thing (Accessed July 20, 2019).
- Bucaille, Maurice. (2001). *What is the origin of man?* (5th ed.). New Delhi: A. Naeem for Islamic Book Service.
- Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Muhammad. (1999). *Al- tafsīr al-kabīr (Maḥāṣin al-Ghayb)* (3rd ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī.
- Haim, Sulaiman. (2006). *Farhangi Jāmi‘ Fārisī-Ingilīsī [New Persian-English dictionary]* (20th ed.). Tehran: Farhang Moaser Publishers.
- Ḥamīdī Gholījī, Saeed. (2005). *Qur‘ān wa ṭabī‘at*. Qom, Ḥilm Publications
- Hāshimī Rafsanjānī, Akbar. (1993). *Barqozideh-yi Farhang-i Qur‘ān*. Qom: Būstan Kitāb.
- Hornby, A. S. (2000). *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (6th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hussayn Yūsuf, Mūsā. (1989). *Al-Ifṣāh fī fiqh al-lughah* (4th ed.). Qom: Maktab al-A‘lām al-Islāmī.
- Ma‘rifat, Muḥammad Hādī. (1994). *Al- Tamhīd fī ‘ulūm al- Qur‘ān* (2nd ed.). Qom: Mu'assasah al- Nashr al-Islāmī.
- Makarīm Shīrāzī, Nāṣir. (1992). *Tafsir-i Nimūnih* (10th ed.). Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah.
- Miṣbāh-Yazdī, Muḥammad-Taqī. (1373). *Ma‘ārif Qur‘an*. Qom: Mu'assasah Dar Rāh-i Ḥaqq.



- Qarai, Ali Quli. (2005). *The Qur'an: With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (2nd ed.). London: ICAS Press.
- Qurashī, 'Alī Akbar. (1991). *Qāmūs-i Qur'ān* (6th ed.). Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islamīyyah.
- Rāghib Iṣfahānī, Ḥusayn. (1991). *Mufradāt alfāz al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Qalam.
- Sayyid Quṭb. (2004). *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān* (53rd ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq Publisher.
- Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muhammad Husain. (1970). *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (2nd ed.). Beirut: Mu'asassat al-A'lami li al-Matbu'āt.
- Ṭanṭāwī, Jawharī, al-. (n.d.). *Al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*. Cairo: Dār al-Fikr.
- Ṭūsī, Muḥammad. (n.d.). *Al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.