Notes and Comments

THE LIVING GOD AND LIVING WITH GOD
IN THE QUR'ĀN

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Living consists fundamentally in a self-determination in act — an independence of operation found in its perfection only in God. Besides this basic sense, "to live" has several other associated meanings in the Hebrew Bible. Examples would be (1) to have life, "Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years" (Gn 5:3); (2) to come back to life from death or sickness, "Thy dead shall live" (Is 26:19) and "Shall I live (i.e., recover) from this sickness?" (2 Kgs 8:8); (3) to survive or continue in life. "He will pray for you, and you shall live" (Gn 20:7); and (4) to prosper, "Long live the king" (1 Sm 10:24).

All life derives from God; He does not have life; He is life, just as He is knowledge, love, and power. He is the source of life and energy in all living beings, the absolute Lord of life and death (Num 27:16), "the living God, enduring for eternity" (Dn 6:26). This last title, so common in the Hebrew Bible, occurs in several passages of the Qur'ān, all of which would date, according to Richard Bell, from the late Meccan or the Medinan Periods¹ when Jewish influence on early Islam was strongest. An example of this kind of passage would be the following:

1. Muhammad promulgated the Qur'ān over a period of about twenty years. Since its present arrangement of chapters (suras) is not chronological, Muslim scholars and Occidental Orientalists have proposed various orderings. Régis Blachère (Le Coran: traduction selon un essai de regroupement des sourates, 2 vols. [Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947-51]) adopts, with a few exceptions, the sequence of Theodor Nöldeke (Geschichte des Qurāns, 2nd ed., 3 vols. [Leipzig: Dieterich'sche, 1909-38]) — three Meccan Periods, running from 612 to 622, and one Medinan from 622 to 632. Many, however, regard Richard Bell's method (The Qur'ān Translated, with a Critical Arrangement of the Surahs, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: Clark, 1937-39]) of dating groups of verses rather than suras as more in accord with the way the Qur'ān originated. (The Qur'ān is here cited according to the numbering of the standard Egyptian edition, Flügel's, where it differs, being put after the diagonal.)
2. 255/256. (1) God! there is no deity besides Him, the Living One, the One Enduring for eternity. (2) Slumber does not seize Him nor sleep. (3) To Him belong whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on earth. (4) Who is there who will intercede with Him except with His permission? (5) He knows what is before them and what is behind them. (6) They do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He wills. (7) His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth. (8) Conserving them both does not tire Him. (9) He is the Sublime, the Magnificent One.

Some Islamists think that this verse, called the Throne Verse by Muslims and highly reverenced by them, is the Arabic rendering of a Christian or Jewish hymn. Certainly, in its present setting in the Qur'an it has no connection with anything that precedes or follows it, but is simply inserted into Sura 2. Of its nine short sentences the first has a parallel in Dn 6:26 where the Syriac version uses the same radicals as the Arabic, *al-ḥaiyū l-qaiyūm*, the Living One, the One Enduring for eternity. Approximate equivalents of the second, third, fifth, seventh and eighth occur in Is 40:28 and 66:1. God is called by the titles of the ninth sentence, the Sublime and the Magnificent, in Pss 47:9, 93:4, and often elsewhere. Aphraates, the Syriac Christian writer (d. 345), has a short passage similar to the sixth and seventh of the nine:

Wishing to comprehend You, we find ourselves unable; wishing to compare You to something else, we discover nothing similar . . . . Heaven is Your throne, but it cannot sustain You.

Most of these expressions are in common use throughout the Hebrew Bible and in the Jewish literature connected with it, as well as in Syriac Christian writings whose authors, like Aphraates, were acquainted with rabbinic exegesis.


The titles, "the Living One," "the One Enduring for eternity," occur twice elsewhere in the Qurʾān, once again in a passage declaring God’s unicity (3. 2/1) and a second time in a Judgment scene (20. 111/110) whose context in verses 109f/108f repeats several of the phrases of 2. 255/256. "The Living One" alone appears twice more — once in 40. 65/67 (also an affirmation of God’s unicity) and again in 25. 58/60. In this latter passage the title introduces an encomium of God’s enduring and active presence in the world with a biblical nuance\(^5\) of "Avenging One." This last notion would be implied in the mention of God’s knowledge of the sins of mankind.

25. 58/60. Rely upon the Living One Who does not die and celebrate His praise. He has sufficient knowledge of the sins of His servants. He created the heavens and the earth and what is between them both in six days. Then He sat down on the throne, the Merciful One. Ask one who knows about Him.

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Living (ḥāiy) is also used in the Qurʾān of created life in the sense of continuing in life or surviving. In a sura of the Second Meccan Period, probably revised in Medina, Jesus is made to describe his prophetic role in the following words:

19. 31/32. . . . He (God, . . . has charged me with Prayer and Alms-giving as long as I go on living.

In another passage those who died in the Battle of Badr in February 624 are compared with those who survived. God’s intervention arranged the lot of both.

8. 42/44. (God decreed) that whoever died might die by a clear sign (of God’s intervention) and that whoever lived might live by a clear sign (of God’s intervention).

Those also who die fighting unbelievers in order to propagate Islam and whom Muslims regard as martyrs are not to be thought of as dead. They are "living with their Lord," even though those who survive may not be aware of this. The first statement of this belief was probably made to console the friends of those killed in the victory won at Badr in February 624.

\(^5\) E.g., Heb 10: 31 and Mt 26: 63.
2. 154/149. Do not call dead those killed in the way of God. No! (They are) living, but you do not realize it.

The same is true of the Muslim “martyrs” killed in the defeat suffered at Uḥud a year later, even though their death resulted from their greed for plunder and their disobedience.⁶

3. 169/163. Do not count dead those killed in the way of God. No! (They are) living with their Lord, blessed with His bounty.

Like many other Qur’ānic teachings, that which describes deceased believers, especially martyrs, as alive before God is familiar to the Syrian Christian writers who strongly influenced the environment in which Islam arose. In his Treatise on the Martyrs the Nestorian theologian Mar Ishai, Muhammad’s contemporary, wrote:

The true martyrs. . . . gathered by their blood that glorious inheritance, . . . a sojourn of honor in Paradise. They were thought to be dead, but they are in life with God.⁷

Three centuries previously the Syrian monk Aphraates had spoken of the living sinner as dead and the dead saint as living: “The sinner, though alive, is dead to God, and the just, though dead, lives to God, for his death is a sleep.”⁸ Regarding deceased believers as living with their Lord was a belief well established both in Syriac Christianity and also in late Post-exilic Judaism as the Wisdom of Solomon testifies.

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God. . . . In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died. . . . but . . . their hope is full of immortality (Wis 3:1-4).

Three texts occurring in Meccan suras oppose living to dead in slightly wider meanings. A passage speaking of the marvels of creation uses “living” figuratively to signify productive as opposed to barren or dead land.⁹

8. Aphraates, Demonstratio 8, De resurrectione mortuorum, nn. 17-18 (Patrologia Syriaca, Pars Prima, 1, 394).
9. This is Bell’s interpretation (The Qur’ān, 627, n.) which is supported by the context. Ṭabari prefers to apply it to mankind in a literal sense.
77. 26ff. Have We not made the earth a place which contains *living* and
dead (tracts) and put lofty mountains in it and given you sweet water
to drink?

A second text applies living also to persons in a figurative sense:

16. 20f/20ff. Those (idols which) they invoke besides God create nothing
but they themselves are created. They (who invoke them) are dead,
not *living*, and they do not know when they will be resurrected.

"Not living" is better taken with the idolaters who do not live the
life of faith in the Hereafter (v. 23). Otherwise wooden or stone
idols would be described in verses 20 and 21 as not knowing when
they would be resurrected.\(^{10}\)

The third of these three passages explicitly refers "living" to the
life of faith, as the Muslim commentator, Tabari, explains.\(^{11}\)

35. 18-22/19-21. You (Muhammad) will warn only those who fear their
Lord in the unseen. . . . The *living* and the dead are not equal. God
makes to hear whomever He wishes.

Fearing God, even though He is unseen, requires an act of faith.
For this reason the Muslim commentators\(^{12}\) understand the
"living" as believing Muslims and the dead as unbelievers. The
sentence immediately following confirms this interpretation:
"God makes to hear whomever He wishes," that is, He motivates
people to believe by warning them through His messengers, the
prophets.

The linking of faith to life and disbelief to death in these verses
would seem to be purely metaphorical. Islamic theology has no
notion of anything like a new life in man brought about by a
divine indwelling. Christian theological problems like the person's
free acceptance of God's self-communication in grace can never
arise from anything said in the Qur'ān.

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   *ad loc.* Baidāwī, *Anwār at-tanzīl*, and *Tafsīr al-Jalā'īn* give the same interpretation.
12. Tabārī and Baidāwī, *ad loc.*