So far, we have established that the Medinan Jews followed Talmudic custom and law. In addition to custom and law, Islamic sources ascribe to the Jews of Medina several religious beliefs. As discussed in the previous chapter, the religious beliefs of the Medinan Jews usually are revealed through their dispute with Muḥammad and his Companions and only after comparing the Islamic texts to the relevant Jewish texts. As we shall see, the results tend to confirm the thesis that they were Talmudic Jews in this regard.

1. *The Afterlife and the Belief that All Jews Have a Portion in the Hereafter*

When discussing the belief in the afterlife among the Jews of Medina, it is necessary to begin by examining the beliefs of the prominent Jewish sects that existed before the seventh century CE. According to Josephus, the Pharisees believed in the afterlife. This belief does not specifically appear in the Bible, although it is implied in various verses such as Dan. 12:2. The position of the Talmudic sages was in accordance with that of the Pharisees. This belief is discussed to a great extent in the Talmud. The Sadducees, in contrast, denied the afterlife precisely because it is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible. Josephus describes it in the following way:

Of the two first-named schools, the Pharisees, who are considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws, and hold the position of the leading haeresis (sect), attribute everything to Fate and to God; they hold that to act rightly or otherwise, rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action Fate cooperates. Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment. The Sadducees, the second of the orders, do away with Fate altogether, and remove God beyond, not merely the commission, but the very sight, of evil. They maintain that man has the free choice of good or evil, and that it rests with each man’s will whether he follows the one or the other. As for the persistence of the soul after death, penalties in underworld, and rewards, they will have none of them.1

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Q. 2:94, which refers to the Jews, states, “Say: If the abode of the hereafter with Allāh is especially for you to the exclusion of the people, then invoke death if you are truthful.” This verse indicates that, like the Talmudic sages, the Medinan Jews believed in the afterlife. In addition, Q. 2:94 appears to be a polemical response to the position recorded in BT, Sanhedrin: “All Israel has a portion in the Hereafter” (kol Israel yesh lahem ḥeleq la-ʿōlam ha-bā).²

Further opposition to the above-mentioned Talmudic belief appears in another Qurʾānic verse. Q. 3:77 states:

Those who take a small price for the covenant of Allāh and their own oaths—they have no portion in the Hereafter (lā khalāqa lahum fīʾl-ākhira), and Allāh will not speak to them, nor will He look upon them on the day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them, and for them is a painful chastisement.

The Qurʾān commentators express several opinions regarding the identity of those to whom Q. 3:77 refers. The most common opinion among them is that the verse refers to the Jews of Medina.³ The words “they have no portion in the Hereafter” seem to be a clear rejection of the Talmudic perception according to which “All Israel has a portion in the Hereafter.” Moreover, there is a bilingual pun in this verse. The Arabic words khalāqa lahum are reminiscent of the Hebrew words lahem ḥeleq in the Talmud. The Islamic opposition to the above-mentioned Jewish perception suggests that the Medinan Jews held this Talmudic perception and thus also believed in the afterlife.

2. Reward and Punishment

One of the consequences of a belief in the afterlife is often a concomitant belief in divine reward and punishment. Here too, it is necessary to begin by examining the beliefs of the prominent Jewish sects that existed before the seventh century CE. According to Josephus, the Pharisees believed in God’s reward and punishment, while the Sadducees rejected it.⁴

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² BT, Sanhedrin, 90a.
⁴ War II, VIII: 14 (II, 162–166).