CHAPTER 8

Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Quran

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It is often popularly assumed today that martyrdom, especially in the military sense, is fundamental to the Islamic worldview and therefore it must be a well-developed concept in the Quran, Islam’s foundational text. But a firm acquaintance with the Quran reveals that martyrdom is at best an inchoate concept within it, not encapsulated by any single, specific term. The term shahīd used almost exclusively in later literature to refer to a martyr, military or otherwise, does not occur in the Quran in this sense. In the Quran shahīd, and its cognate shāhid, refer to a legal witness or eyewitness, and it is used for both God and humans in appropriate contexts (for example, Q 3:98; 6:19; 41:53). Quranic phrases commonly understood to refer to the military martyr include man qutila fī sabīl Allāh/alladhīna qutilū fī sabīl Allāh (“those who are slain in the path of God”) (cf. Q 2:154; 3:169)\(^1\) and variations thereof. These phrases are therefore not without ambiguity and do not clearly refer to the military martyr, although the Quranic contexts for a number of verses employing these phrases suggest it, as does the exegetical literature.

In order to retrieve some of the earliest meanings assigned to being “slain in the path of God,” this chapter focuses on a discussion, first, of two critical Quranic verses (Q 2:154 and 3:169) which employ this expression or a variant thereof – based on a survey of their exegeses by some of the most important Quran commentators through time. This is followed by a discussion of two verses (Q 3:157–8) which refer to the moral excellences of both those who die naturally and those who are slain in the path of God. A diachronic survey of the exegeses of these critical verses allows us to assess how military martyrdom in particular was read into these specific Quranic verses and construed by leading exegetes over time as a meritorious act of religiosity and piety, reflective of the greater moral excellence of the brave warrior.

In this essay we are primarily looking at Sunni works – first, because of the constraints of length, and second, because of the fact that martyrdom acquired certain connotations exclusive to the Shi’i tradition and requires separate

\(^1\) All translations of Quranic verses are mine.
treatment. The principal Sunni exegetical works consulted here are the early commentary composed during the Umayyad period by Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767);² the early but hard-to-date exegesis titled Tanwīr al-miqbās, purportedly containing the exegesis of the famous Companion ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbās (d. ca. 68/687–8);³ the early ʿAbbasid tafsīr of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827);⁴ the acclaimed commentaries of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)⁵ and al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076)⁶ from the height of the ʿAbbasid period; the commentaries of the Muʿtazī exegete al-Zamakhsharī (d. ca. 538/1144);⁷ the rationalist Ashʿarī exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) from the Saljuq period; and of the Andalusian exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272)⁸ in the seventh/thirteenth century, corresponding to the early Mamluk period in the Islamic East. This selection allows us to obtain representative samplings of views from a variety of exegetical perspectives and historical eras in the pre-modern period.

1 Exegeses of Quran 2:154 and 3:169

Quran 2:154 states: “Do not say regarding those who are slain in the path of God that they are dead; rather they are alive but you are not aware.” Quran 3:169 states: “Do not consider as dead those who are slain in the path of God; rather they are alive and well-provided for in the presence of their Lord.”

With regard to Quran 2:154, the early Umayyad exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān says that it was revealed concerning the fourteen Muslims who were slain at the battle of Badr (2/624), eight from among the anṣār (Medinan Helpers) and six from among the muhājirūn (Meccan Emigrants). He then proceeds to list them all. According to Muqātil, the revelation of this verse served to inform the believers that those who were slain in the path of God were not dead but alive, reaping their reward in paradise in the presence of God. The souls of the martyrs (al-shuhadāʾ) resided near the lote-tree closest to the throne of God (sidrat al-muntahā)⁹.

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² For whom see Sezgin, Geschichte i, 36–7; Plessner, Mukātil b. Sulaymān.
³ For a discussion of the dating of this work, see Rippin, Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās 38–83; Motzki, Dating 147–63.
⁴ For whom, see Motzki, ‘ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī.
⁵ See, for example, Bosworth, al-Ṭabarī.
⁶ See, for example, Sellheim, al-Wāḥidī.
⁷ See, for example, Versteegh, al-Zamakhsharī.
⁸ See, for example, Arnaldez, al-Ḳurṭubī.
⁹ Muqātil, Tafsīr i, 151.