CHAPTER 11

Delights in Paradise: A Comparative Survey of Heavenly Food and Drink in the Quran

Ailin Qian*

* The author would like to express her gratitude to Professors Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson for their insightful suggestions and critical reading of an earlier version of this article. She would also like to thank the following: Drs. Hilary Smith and Carla Nappi, who provided her with important information relating to Chinese medicine; Mr. Christian Mauder, who patiently assisted her during the editing and proofreading of this article; and last but not least, the anonymous reviewer, who offered significant comments and detailed suggestions.

inna laka allā tajūʿa fīhā wa-lā taʿrā
wa-annaka lā taẓmaʿu fīhā wa-lā taḍḥā

There is therein (enough provision)
For thee not to go hungry,
Nor to go naked
Nor to suffer from thirst,
Nor from the sun’s heat
Q 20:118–9

1 Introduction

Images of food and drink² are inseparable from man’s vision of the next world. For example, in the Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag (the Pahlavi Divina Commedia), the hero was given food, wine, and a narcotic (mang) before his journey to heaven and hell.³ While food and drink can be the ladder to the hereafter, in many other cases it is seen as the reward for the dwellers of heaven. For example, The Larger
Sutra on Amitāyus informs us that in the Buddha-land various foods and drinks of “a hundred flavors” will appear spontaneously according to one's wishes.4

As for the Quran, details about exquisite delights in paradise are almost exclusively provided in Meccan Suras. The variety and eternal availability of the heavenly food and drink, as well as the subtle links between them and mundane enjoyments must have aroused enthusiasm among early Muslims. This paper aims to analyze those charming images of paradisal delights by discussing their names, content, consumers, and even containers, in the hope that we may highlight their functions in Islamic eschatology and their representations in secular life.

2 The Aromatic Reward

Sura al-Insān (Q 76) contains one of the most detailed descriptions of the heavenly delights in the Quran.5 The righteous (al-abrār) are promised “a garden and (garments of) silk.” They shall recline on raised thrones, enjoying the shade of trees and bunches of fruit. Their servants are immortal youths as charming as “scattered pearls.” “Vessels of silver and goblets of crystal” will be passed round, and the blessed shall drink of a cup mixed with fountain water and exotic spices such as camphor (kāfūr) and ginger (zanjabīl). Sura 76 clearly demonstrates that these enjoyments are the reward (jazāʾ) of the righteous for “they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive,” and they did not desire thanks from those they helped. In the aforementioned Ardā Wirāz Nāmag, the hero saw thirsty and hungry souls of “those wicked whose food and clothing, in the world, were consumed by themselves, and not given by them to the good and worthy.”6 The two scriptures, in this example one commanding right and the other forbidding wrong, make it clear that enjoyments of this world and the next are closely related. Worldly wealth should be a key, not a barrier, to heavenly happiness.

Sura al-Wāqiʿa (Q 56) also confirms that those nearest to God (al-muqarrabūn) will have “rest and fragrance (rayḥān) and a garden of bliss.” Why do these names of aromatics appear in the Quranic descriptions of heaven? Does the Quran use them to differentiate rewards in the afterlife from mundane good things (al-ṭayyibāt) that are allowed (uḥilla) to the believers?7 Do perfumed

---

4 Inagaki and Stewart (trans.), Pure Land Sutras 263.
6 Haug and West (trans.), Arda Viraf 198.
7 For a short discussion of food in the Quran, see van Gelder, Of dishes 22–3.