The Nature of the Qur'anic Paradise

It is plausible that the idea of a utopian heavenly garden as a reward for believers was born in the desert. An oasis with shade, trees, fruits, and rivers is a powerful counter-notion to the desert with its merciless sun, its almost perpetual drought, its sandstorms, and its life-threatening infertility. Paradise is also a place where human survival does not depend on labor like agriculture. This garden of paradise, a limitless oasis, was the first abode of mankind. It is paradise lost, the luxurious garden of innocence as created by God, a place without pain, disease, sin, or death. When Adam and his wife—the latter nameless in the Qur’an—are evicted from this paradise, human history begins. This garden is the shared paradise of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mythology. Then there is a second paradise. This other paradise is the land that is fairer than day, promised to the believer in the hereafter according to Christian and Muslim eschatology, but not according to classical Jewish eschatology. It shares many characteristics with paradise lost, but is not identical to it.

The Qur’anic eschatological paradise as the negation of a miserable reality is described in more detail than the parallel notion in Christianity. It is true that according to Revelation 22:2 the world to come is full of trees and water, its trees bearing fruit every month. But the Qur’anic paradise is altogether the life that man on the Arabian Peninsula did not have in the seventh century. It is, however, not only the projection of a counter-reality. It also serves as a powerful motif in the rhetorical strategy of a prophetical eschatological narrative, and aims at convincing the listener to believe in what is so alluringly described. The vivid details of the narratives of paradise and of hell support the idea that the Qur’anic revelation depicted eschatology as something imminent and close by, not something destined to
happen in an unforeseeably distant future. The Qur’anic narratives of paradise and hell are linked to two basic topics of the earliest messages of the Prophet: the message of the bodily resurrection of the dead and the message of the approaching Day of Judgment with its apocalyptic catastrophes. The Prophet as a nadhir warns of hell as the consequence of disbelief, while the Prophet as a bashir brings good tidings and announces paradise as a reward for the believers.

The following remarks concentrate on this Qur’anic narrative of paradise and largely disregard later Muslim theology and legends. Whereas the Qur’an tells us few details about the lost pre-historical garden of Adam’s paradise, the eschatological paradise is presented in vivid and sensual detail. This garden is above all a place and a space. It is somewhere above, in the sky, in a part of heaven. In Qur’anic language, the word for “sky” and “heaven” is the same (samā’, samawāt). God is spatially located above mankind. When he reveals his commands to mankind, he sends the Qur’anic revelation down. The usual Arabic name for “paradise” is al-janna (“the garden,” plural: al-jannāt). This word occurs in the Qur’an also as the designation of a man-made garden. Twice we find another name: firdaws, a word of Iranian origin, which is also the root of Greek paradeisos and of Aramaic pardaisā and was taken over from Greek by most European languages as paradise, paradis, Paradies, etc.

How does the Qur’an describe the eschatological paradise? There is a wealth of detailed information and imagery. The space of paradise is very large—“as wide as the heavens and the earth” (Q 3:133; 57:21). The climate in paradise is mild and temperate; paradise has gates and is guarded by angels (Q 39:73), etc. On the other hand, God, who is the central actor in the Last Judgment and dominates the narrative of the Day of Judgment, hardly ever appears in the descriptions of paradise. He has prepared paradise for the believers, but only plays a marginal role in the Qur’anic passages describing paradise.

The utopian character of this eschatological counter-reality is clear. The hereafter promises the gratification and happiness that man is for the most part deprived of in his natural environment and in society. Both nature and society constantly endanger his physical survival. In the real world of the Arabian Peninsula of the seventh century CE,

---

1. Cf. Hasson, “Last Judgement,” 138. According to Q 16:77, the Judgment is “like the twinkling of the eye, or even nearer.”
2. Saleh, Vie future; Horovitz, “Paradies”; Smith/Haddad, Islamic Understanding; Afsaruddin, “Garden.” Al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric,” is also an important contribution.