

THE INDIVIDUAL'S EXPERIENCE AS IT APPLIES TO THE  
COMMUNITY<sup>1</sup>: AN EXAMINATION OF SIX DREAM  
NARRATIONS DEALING WITH  
THE ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

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The compendium of dreams I have collected through the years contains thousands of figures that are mentioned mostly by name and bear personal features. These dream narrations often describe personal relationships and deal with daily private occurrences, and the notion of privacy is most evident in those that are depicted in detail. Despite their triviality, the message never remains within the boundaries of the personal framework. Casual and personal as the stories may be, one cannot ignore their intrinsic value as a means of conveying the spirit of the community on the one hand, and of establishing this very communal spirit on the other.

From a literary viewpoint, these dreams follow basic patterns: Some are short, others are longer, but all deliver information considered to be the ultimate truth.<sup>2</sup> One such group of dreams deals with mutual promises made between friends as to the delivery of information from the other world. Each of the six tales I have been able to trace knows to tell about two friends who contemplate about death and reach an agreement, according to which the first to die will appear in his friend's dream to tell him about his recent experience. Five of the six tales are adduced in *K. al-Manām* by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894)<sup>3</sup> with parallels in other sources, most of which are later than Ibn Abī al-Dunyā.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to think about anything more intimate than these stories; on the one hand they appear to expose the deepest fear of death and the

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this paper (with different illustrations) was presented at the seminar «Individual Piety and Society» in Istanbul, July 1998, within the general framework of the project «Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World», sponsored by the *European Science Foundation* (ESF).

<sup>2</sup> The idea that anyone who has died may appear in a dream and supply sound guidance is ascribed to Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/728), and runs as follows: «Whatever the deceased tells you in sleep is truth (*ḥaqq*), for he stays in the world of truth» (*dār al-ḥaqq: Itḥāf al-sāda* 10/431; *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* 2/220). For the process of constructing the reliability of dreams in classical Islamic literature, see «Literal dreams», Part I, 283-292.

<sup>3</sup> *al-Manām* Nos. 21, 23=162, 25, 39, 42.

<sup>4</sup> See the references to each one of the tales below.

unknown, and on the other they refer to trivial daily events relevant only to the individuals involved. According to one tale,<sup>5</sup> such agreements were a common occurrence (*kalima maqbūla*) in Islamic society and could therefore be analyzed as a psychological, philosophical, or theological phenomenon. However, this study presents a socio-ethical examination and focuses on the correlation between private scenes vis-à-vis the communal practices. Through an analysis of these personal tales I will show how the understanding of death and the next world<sup>6</sup> in nascent Islam was reflected through, and at the same time nourished by, these personal stories and their like.

#### ILLUSTRATION I<sup>7</sup>

حدثنا أبو بكر نا إسحاق بن إسماعيل نا جرير عن يحيى بن سعيد عن سعيد بن المسيب قال: التقى عبد لله بن سلام وسلمان الفارسي فقال أحدهما للآخر: إن متّ قبلي فالقني فأخبرني ما لقيت من ربك، وإن أنا متّ قبلك لقيتك فأخبرتك. فقال

<sup>5</sup> *al-Manām* No. 23.

<sup>6</sup> The subject has been studied in a variety of works, dealing mainly with Koranic thought. Following are a few examples arranged in chronological order: Bevan, A. A., «The beliefs of early Mohammedans respecting a future existence», *The Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1904), 20-36; Galloway, D., «The resurrection and judgement in the Qur'ān», *M.W.* 12 (1922), 348-372; Kaufmann Kohler, *Heaven and Hell in comparative religion* (New York, 1923); Eklund, R., *Life between death and resurrection according to Islam* (Uppsala, 1941); O'Shaughnessy, T., *Muhammad's thoughts on death, a Thematic Study of the Qur'anic Data* (Leiden, 1969); Şoubhī al-Şāliḥ, *La vie future selon le Coran* (Paris, 1971); Smith, J. I. and Haddad, Y. Y., «Women in the afterlife: the Islamic view as seen from the Qur'ān and tradition», *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43 (1975), 39-50; Welch, A. T., «Death and dying in the Qur'ān», in *Religious encounters with death* (Pennsylvania State U. Press, 1977); Seale, M. S., «An Arab's Concern with life after death», in *Qur'ān and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue* (London, 1978), 90-98; Smith, J. I., «Reflections of aspects of immortality in Islam», *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1979), 85-98; Smith, J. I., «Concourse between the living and the dead in Islamic eschatological literature», *History of Religions* 19 (1980), 224-236; Smith, J. I. and Haddad, Y. Y., *The Islamic Understanding of Death* (Albany: State U. of New York Press, 1981); Kinberg, L., «Interaction between this world and the afterworld in early Islamic tradition», *Oriens* (1986), 285-308; Bowker, J., *The Meaning of Death* (Cambridge, 1991), Chapter 4: Islam, pp. 102-128; Chittick, W. C., «'Your sight today is piercing': The Muslim understanding of death and afterlife», in H. Obayashi (ed.), *Death and afterlife: perspectives of world religions* (New York, 1992), 125-139; Abdel-Hallem, M. A. S., «Life and beyond in the Qur'ān», in D. Cohn-Sherbok and C. Lewis (eds.), *Beyond death: theological and philosophical reflections on life after death* (Basingstoke, 1995), 66-79.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Manām* No. 21. Cf. *Ahwāl al-Qubūr* No. 422; *al-Ba'th wa-an-nushūr* No. 229; *Bushrā al-Ka'ib* No. 153; *al-Ḥawī lil-Fatāwī* 2/173; *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* 1/205; *Itḥāf al-Sāda* 10/240, 387; *al-Rūḥ* 34; *Şifāt al-Şafwa* 1/225; *Sharḥ al-Şudūr* 314; *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* 4/93; *al-Tawakkul* No. 13; *al-Zuhd wa-al-Raqā'iq* Nos. 428, 429.

أحدهما للآخر: وهل يلقي الأموات الأحياء؟ قال: نعم، أرواحهم في الجنة تذهب حيث شاءت. قال: فمات فلان فلقيه في المنام فقال: توكل وأبشر فلم أر مثل التوكل قط، توكل وأبشر فلم أر مثل التوكل قط.

'Abd Allāh b. Salām and Salmān al-Fārisī met. One said to the other: «If you die before I do, come to meet me and tell me what you encountered from your Lord, and if I die before you, I will come and tell you». In reply one asked the other: «Can the dead meet the living?», and he answered: «Yes, their spirits in Paradise wander wherever they want». Then one of the two died. He appeared in his friend's dream and said: «Trust in God and rejoice; I have not seen anything [as good] as the trust in God (=tawakkul)».

Two known figures are mentioned here, 'Abd Allāh b. Salām (d. 43/663),<sup>8</sup> and Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 33-37/653-657).<sup>9</sup> In our tale, they promise one another to return after their death and to describe the next world. No details are supplied as to who initiated the agreement, nor is it specified who died first, although this can be figured out from different versions of the same story.<sup>10</sup> We may assume that these details were not considered significant enough to be mentioned. The story rather focuses on other issues: It establishes the idea of a possible interaction between the two worlds, while declaring that the dead can move from one place to another. It also touches on the topic of the evaluation of deeds and the performance of duties on this earth, as it relates to compensation in the next world. Both issues, central as they are, are adduced as components of a private conversation. Their general edifying nature however, is distinct: both can be applied to the community as counsel to any pious Muslim who wonders about the way Divine Providence operates.

The issue of a possible interaction between the two worlds, which presumes an ongoing communication between the dead and the living, is well elaborated in classical Islamic literature. In one of my previous studies<sup>11</sup> I showed that the elements of Islamic understanding of the dead and the next world are delivered through three kinds of anecdotes: (1) tales of people who came back to life after some clinical death and described their experiences;<sup>12</sup> (2) tales of people who

<sup>8</sup> See *EI*<sup>2</sup> 1/52.

<sup>9</sup> See *EI*<sup>1</sup> 4/116-117.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa* 1/255 and *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* 4/93, where Salmān is mentioned as the initiator of the agreement and as the first one to die.

<sup>11</sup> «Interaction».

<sup>12</sup> See a collection of anecdotes in *Man 'āshā ba'da al-mawt*.

stayed in the vicinity of a graveyard and encountered the dead, either inside their graves or near by, in forms that indicate the taste of death;<sup>13</sup> (3) tales of people who appeared in dreams after passing away and described their new abode.<sup>14</sup> The three groups consist of individual tales narrated in a popular language and style. As such, they make the contact between the two worlds tangible and help the living to adjust to the absence of their beloved. These features fit our dream perfectly: a profound idea, such as the state of the spirits in the next world, is simplified and actualized to an extent that people can accept it and apparently understand it as a reasonable fact of life.

The last part of the dream presents *tawakkul* as the best of all deeds. Although delivered as personal advice, as one item in a dialogue held between two individuals, its communal value is conspicuous. It may be compared to other narrations of dreams, frequently adduced in edifying sources, that deal with practical ethics and provide moral counsel.<sup>15</sup> Most dreams of this kind follow a basic pattern: In a dream a person sees someone who has already died. The dreamer asks the deceased what God has done with him, and in return gets an answer, usually direct and concise, describing the position he has attained in Heaven and the deed, or deeds, that enabled him to reach this position. Each answer may be used as a piece of advice on what is considered to be a remunerating deed, and be applied to daily life. In combining all these dreams together, we get general guidance for the pious Muslim to follow. Although more detailed and more complex, our dream can be considered as a representative element of the material that builds the ethical code: through a private dialogue held between two individuals a message is delivered to be applied and embraced by the community. The conversation thus crosses the borders of personal advice and becomes public; the carriers of the dialogue lose their peculiarities and turn into models to be followed and imitated.

#### ILLUSTRATION II<sup>16</sup>

حدثنا أبو بكر دثني محمد نا عبید الله بن محمد نا حماد بن سلمة عن ثابت عن شهر  
ابن حوشب أن صعب بن جثامة وعوف بن مالك كانا متواخين. قال صعب لعوف: أي

<sup>13</sup> See the variety of descriptions in *al-Qubūr*.

<sup>14</sup> The most comprehensive collection of dreams is *al-Manām*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *al-Manām*, and the relevant chapters in *al-Iḥyā'*, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, *Ṣīfat al-Ṣafwa*, and more.

<sup>16</sup> *al-Manām* No. 25. Cf. *Ahwāl al-Qubūr* No. 318; *Ithāf al-Sāda* 10/445; *al-Iṣāba* 3/427; *al-Maghāzī* 3/921; *al-Rūḥ* 22; *Sharḥ al-Ṣudūr* 359; *al-Zuhd wa-al-Raqā'iq* No. 286.

أخي، أينما مات قبل صاحبه فليتراياً له. قال: أويكون ذلك؟ قال: نعم. قال: فمات صعب فرآه عوف فيما يراه النائم كأنه أراه، قال: فقلت: أي أخي، ما فعل بكم؟ قال: غفر لنا بعد المشائب. قال: ورأيت لمعة سوداء في عنقه فقلت: أي أخي، ما هذا؟ قال: عشرة دنانير استسلفتها من فلان اليهودي فهي في قرن فأعطوها إياه واعلم أي أخي أنه لم يحدث في أهلي حدث بعدي [٢٩٨] إلا قد لحق بي أجره حتى هرة لنا ماتت منذ أيام. واعلم أن بيني تموت إلى ستة أيام فاستوصوا بها معروفًا. قال: فلما أصبحت قلت: إن في هذا لمعلمًا فأتيت أهله فقالوا: مرحبًا مرحبًا بعوف، يا عوف أهكذا تصنعون بتركة إخوانكم لم تقربنا منذ مات صعب. قال: فاعتلت [لـ]ي بما يعتل به الناس. قال: فنظرت إلى القرن فأنزلته فأنزلت ما فيه فنذرت الصرة التي فيها الدنانير فبعثت إلى اليهودي فجاء فقلت: هل كان لك على صعب شيء؟ قال: رحم الله صعبًا، كان من خيار أصحاب محمد، هي له. قلت: لتخبرني، قال: نعم، أسلفته عشرة دنانير فنبتتها إليه فقال: هي والله بأعيانها. قال: فقلت: هذه واحدة. قال: قلت: هل حدث فيكم حدث بـ[عـ]د موته؟ قالوا: نعم، حدث فينا كذا، حدث فينا كذا. فقلت: أذكروا. قالوا: نعم، هرة ماتت لنا منذ أيام. قلت: هاتان ثنتان. قلت: أين ابنة أخي؟ فقالوا: تلعب. فأتيت بها فمسستها فإذا هي محمومة. قلت: إستوصوا بها خيرًا. قال: فماتت بعد ستة أيام.

Şa'b b. Juthāma (date of death unknown)<sup>17</sup> and 'Awf b. Mālik (d. 73/692)<sup>18</sup> were very close. One day Şa'b suggests that whoever dies first will appear in the dream of his friend. To that 'Awf asks if a thing like that can happen, and Şa'b reassures him that it can. Şa'b then dies and after a while he appears in 'Awf's dream. In reply to 'Awf's question, Şa'b tells that God has forgiven him, but not before exposing him to some hardships. Then 'Awf sees a black mark on Şa'b's neck and discovers that it is due to 10 *dinārs* Şa'b borrowed while alive and did not return before his death. Şa'b directs 'Awf to the location of the money and asks him to return it for him. Şa'b then continues and tells 'Awf that he is

<sup>17</sup> See his biography in *Tahdhīb* 4/421.

<sup>18</sup> See his biography in *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* 2/484, and the bibliographical references there.

familiar with everything that is happening in his own family. He thus knows to tell about a cat that died and also to foresee the death of his daughter within six days. At this point the dream comes to an end and 'Awf goes to visit Şa'b's family. First, he finds the money exactly where Şa'b said it was and pays off the moneylender. Secondly, he checks with the family about the cat and finds out that it has indeed died. Finally, he asks about the girl, and finds out that she has high fever. She dies after six days.

The interaction between the two worlds presents itself in this compound anecdote in a most sensible way. The conversation between the two friends flows naturally, as if both were alive. The details mentioned by the deceased create an atmosphere of daily affairs, casual, personal and private. However, each of the items mentioned by the deceased can be taken out of its narrow framework and applied to the whole community.

Two main issues are brought up in this narration: (a) Debts left unpaid: Şa'b's personal case should be examined in light of the belief expressed in a variety of *ḥadīth* sayings that state that if a person dies before he has had the chance to settle his debts, he will be reminded of it upon his reckoning.<sup>19</sup> The importance of paying such debts is conveyed through prophetic sayings, in which the Prophet makes a commitment to pay the debts of people who died.<sup>20</sup> Both aspects, the punishment inflicted upon those who died without paying their debts, as well as the duty imposed on the living to discharge the dead of their debts, are presented in our tale and take the form of a personal favor with which the deceased addresses his living friend. In other words, through a tale about two individuals, a judicial question is examined.<sup>21</sup> As a private case it could penetrate the hearts more easily and be applied to similar situations in which people had to pay debts left by their relatives. The private conversation thus, turns to be one of public interest. This and more: there is no doubt that the black mark on Şa'b's neck, although associated with the infliction of a specific figure, had its effect on other members of the community that were anxious about the fate of their relatives that passed away. It is very likely that such anxiety encouraged people to pay debts that were left unpaid. Following this line, we may say that the description of a situation of this kind in such a tangible way as offered in our dream, could add vitality and concreteness to the

<sup>19</sup> See the different variations of the *ḥadīth*: *man māta wa-'alayhi dayn* in *Mawsū'a* 8/561.

<sup>20</sup> See the different variations of the *ḥadīth*: *Anā awlā bi-al-mu'minin min anfusihim fa-man tuwuffīya wa-'alayhi dayn fa'alayya qaḍā'uhu* in *Mawsū'a* 2/515, 8/213.

<sup>21</sup> For the way the issue is treated in judicial literature, see *al-Nihāya fī mujarrad al-fiqh*, 308-310 (*Bāb qaḍā' al-dīm 'an al-mayyit*).

Prophet's words, as well as to any judicial text, and in so doing supply reasoning and stimulate performance.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of the living carrying out the duties of the Dead emanates from the Islamic perception according to which the dead know the value of the deeds fulfilled on earth, but are incapable of performing them. The living, on the other hand, are able to carry out duties but are not aware of their significance. It thus happens that the living benefit from the wisdom of the dead. At the same time, they help the dead to relieve their anguish in the other world by performing duties they did not complete while still alive. The opposing abilities of the living and the dead pass on throughout personal narrations of dreams, where they play on the roots *'m.l* to express the competence of the living to perform and the root *'l.m* to express the competence of the Dead to know.<sup>23</sup>

(b) The second part continues the idea by demonstrating how far the knowledge of the dead can reach: *Ṣa'b*'s information about the dead cat, as well as that of the dying girl, present the dead as having insight into the future and a grasp of the present. The dead's acquaintance with the activities of the living is illustrated in a variety of dream narrations. Sometimes these stories change their focus and show how the dead are affected by the deeds of the living. Such is the story about the wicked son who repented after his father died, but after a while reverted to corrupt ways. His father appears in his dream declaring that the good deeds of the son fill him with joy, whereas the evil ones humiliate him before the dead around him. The boy repents again and becomes ascetic.<sup>24</sup> This brings us back to the story about *Ṣa'b* and *'Awf*: *Ṣa'b* asks *'Awf* to pay the debt with the hope that this act will mitigate his sorrow (the black mark on his neck). He uses his information about the world of the living to give *'Awf* all the details needed for the performance of the act. *'Awf*'s actions the next morning show the eagerness, perhaps the obligation, to fulfill the dead's requests, and the verification of the details leaves no doubt as to the accuracy of the information that originated in the other world. The interdependence of the living and the dead, their symbiotic relationships, the mutual effect each group has on the other, all these would have remained abstract and vague, were it not for the clear descriptions and the unequivocal arguments to support them. The simplification needed for the popularization of ideas may explain the recourse of early Islam to tangible materials of the kind presented here.

<sup>22</sup> The debatable issue of dreams deciding in judicial matters will be discussed separately in a future article.

<sup>23</sup> *al-Manām* No. 89: *na'lamu wa-lā na'malu wa-ta'malūna wa-lā ta'lamūna*. See also *al-Manām* Nos. 17, 307.

<sup>24</sup> *al-Manām* No. 17.

ILLUSTRATION III<sup>25</sup>

حدثنا أبو بكر دثني محمد بن الحسين نا هشام بن عبيد الله الرازي نا بقية بن الوليد عن صفوان بن عمرو عن عبد الرحمن بن جبير بن نفيير الحضرمي وشريح بن عبيد عن عبد الله بن عبد الثمالي أنه لَمَّا [حض]ره الموت دخل عليه غضيف بن الحارث الثمالي وهو يجود بنفسه فقال: يا أبا الحجاج إن قدرت أن تأتينا بعد الموت فتخبرنا بما ترى فافعل. قال: وكانت كلمة مقبولة في أهل الفقه. [قال: فم]كث زماناً لا يراه ثم أتاه في منامه فقال له: أليس قد مت؟ قال: بلى. قال: فكيف حالكم؟ قال: [تجاوز] ربنا عنا الذنوب فلم يهلك منا إلا الأحرار. قلت: وما الأحرار؟ قال: الذين يشار إليهم بالأصابع في الشر.

Ghuḍayf b. al-Hārith al-Thumālī (d. around the year 80/699)<sup>26</sup> comes to visit ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Thumālī (date of death unknown)<sup>27</sup> on his death bed, and asks him to come to visit after he dies to tell about his experience. The transmitter notes that this was a common thing to say among the jurists. Time passes and ‘Abd Allāh does not appear in Ghuḍayf’s dream. However, after a while he does appear, and when Ghuḍayf sees him he addresses him with the question: «Have you not died?» Upon receiving a positive answer, he asks as to his condition. To that he gets the following answer: «God has disregarded our sins and did not destroy any of us, except the *ahrāḍ*». To Ghuḍayf’s question, ‘Abd Allāh explains that the *ahrāḍ* are «those toward whom people aim a finger, meaning bad».

The question «have you not died» is common in descriptions of meetings between the living and the dead (see illustration VI below). It reflects the surprise of the dreamer to realize that the appearance of the deceased has not changed, and that he still looks as he looked while alive. The fact that this question is repeated frequently, to the extent that it can be considered one of the formulae used in dreams, takes out its personal flavor. So does the answer «indeed» (*balā*), attached most often to the question. The usage of such a

<sup>25</sup> *al-Manām* No. 23. Cf. *al-Fā’iq* 1/276; *Gharīb al-ḥadīth* 1/205; *Itḥāf al-Sāda* 10/432; *al-Manām* No. 162; *al-Nihāya* 1/368; *al-Rūḥ* 35; *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* 7/415; *Sharḥ al-Ṣudūr* 365.

<sup>26</sup> See his biography in *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’* 3/453, and the bibliographical references there.

<sup>27</sup> He is known also as ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Ā’idh al-Thumālī. See his biography under both names in *al-Jarḥ wa-al-ta’dil* 2(2)/102, 122.



laconic answer gives the impression that the process under discussion is nothing but an ordinary one. With such a way of expression, the individual features disappear, or at least lose their significance. At the same time, the naive question and its apparent casual answer, contribute to the clarification of the idea about the uninterrupted transference from the present world into the next: death is merely a passage from one abode to another; the dwellers of the new abode are not different from those of the previous one; the dead who left the present world are the living of the next; they continue with their activities, uninterrupted, and keep their previous appearance. Consequently, when the dead come to meet the living in their dreams, they are recognized immediately, and sometimes even create confusion as to their actual death. Such plastic descriptions and clear cut messages, enabled the establishment of this perception as a popular belief, and facilitated its adoption by the community.

A lesson that is not less important is the one given in the second part of the dream. This part deals with 'Abd Allāh's fate on an individual level, but also touches on the general idea of compensation at the communal level. 'Abd Allāh tells that he met a merciful God who forgives human sins. He further explains that despite God's surrounding compassion, His grace is not bestowed on everyone. Certain people will never be rewarded; heavenly favor will never be endowed on those who go astray. To define these people 'Abd Allāh uses the term *aḥrād*. At this point 'Abd Allāh's personal experience turns into an admonition addressed to the whole community.

#### ILLUSTRATION IV<sup>28</sup>

حدثنا أبو بكر دثني محمد دثني أحمد بن سهل الأردني نا محمد بن الحسين عن هشام بن حسان عن جميل بن مرة قال: كان مورك العجلي لي أخاً وصديقاً فقلت له ذات يوم: أين مات قبل صاحبه فليأت صاحبه فليخبره بالذي صار إليه. قال: فمات مورك فرأت أهلي في منامها كأن موركاً أتاها كما كان يأتي وقرع الباب كما كان يقرع. قالت: ففقت ففتحت له كما كنت أفتح وقلت: أدخل أبا المعتمر، الآن يأتي أخوك جميل. قال: فقال: كيف أدخل وقد ذقت الموت؟ إنما جئت لأعلم جميلاً ما صنع الله بي، أعلمه أنه قد جعلني في المقربين.

<sup>28</sup> *al-Manām* No. 39. Cf. *al-Rūḥ* 36.

Jamīl b. Murra (date of death unknown)<sup>29</sup> and Muwarraq al-'Ijlī (d. 101/719-108/726)<sup>30</sup> were close friends. One day Jamīl suggests that the one who dies first should return to tell his friend what happened to him. Muwarraq dies and Jamīl's wife has a dream. She sees Muwarraq coming as he used to come while alive, knocking on the door as he used to knock. She then gets up and opens the door as she used to do. She greets him and invites him in, reassuring him that Jamīl will be home soon. To that Muwarraq says: «How am I going to enter after having passed away? I merely came to tell Jamīl what God has done with me; tell him that He put me among the *muqarrabīn*».<sup>31</sup>

The idea of continuity is presented here in the most straightforward way possible: not only has the appearance of the deceased not changed with his death, but also his manners and customs have remained untouched. However, when invited to enter, he states that despite his worldly look and casual behavior, he no longer belongs among the living and for this reason he cannot accept a worldly invitation. This is an interesting way to present the confusion the living may feel about the departure of close friends. Very similar are the narrations that tell about living persons who see deceased friends in dreams and greet them but receive no answer. In such a tale, a dreamer wonders why he does not get an answer, and receives the following reply: «I am dead, how am I going to answer your greetings?».<sup>32</sup>

Muwarraq goes on to explain that he has only come to fulfil his promise to Jamīl and to tell him of his experience in the other world. Assuming that both friends maintained more or less the same level of piety, the degree of the *muqarrabīn* in Paradise, to which Muwarraq was elevated, can serve as good tidings for Jamīl.

It is hard to imagine a situation more casual and more personal than the one presented here. However, the edifying nature of the dialogue and its communal significance cannot be overlooked; moreover, it rather seems that the general has a bigger role in this tale than the particular: through a narrow scope of words and actions some of the central elements of the Islamic understanding of death are being established: the on-going contacts with the dead, the feeling that the dead can be trusted as promise-fulfillers, and above all, the idea of good

<sup>29</sup> See his biography in *Tahdhīb* 2/115.

<sup>30</sup> See his biography in *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* 4/353, and the bibliographical references there.

<sup>31</sup> Those who stay so close to God that they can see and hear Him (Qurṭubī 17/232 to Q:56/88: «Then, if he be of those brought nigh the Throne (*muqarrabīn*), there shall be repose and ease, and a Garden of Delight». Translation, Arberry 2/257).

<sup>32</sup> *al-Manām* No. 30.

fate awaiting the pious believers in the next world. The meeting between Jamīl's wife and Muwarraq functions, therefore, as a simplification of cryptic, inconceivable thoughts. In its simplified form, the assimilation of the idea among the believers is likely to be smoother.

ILLUSTRATION V<sup>33</sup>

حدثنا أبو بكر دثني محمد بن الحسين نا عمار بن عثمان الحلبي نا حصين بن القاسم [٣٠٢] الوزان قال: قال عبد الواحد بن زيد لحوشب: يا أبا بشر، إن قدمت على ربك قبلنا فقدرت على أن تأتينا فتخبرنا بما صرت إليه، فافعل. قال: إن قدرت على ذلك. قال: فمات حوشب في الطاعون قبل عبد الواحد بزمن طويل. قال عبد الواحد: فلبثت زماناً لا أراه ثم رأيت في منامي فقلت له: أبا بشر، ألم تعدنا أن تأتينا؟ قال: بلى، فإنما استرحت الآن. قلت: فكيف حالكم؟ قال: نجونا بعفو الله. قال: قلت: فالحسن؟ قال: ذاك في عليين يرانا ولا نراه. قال: قلت: فما الذي تأمرنا به؟ قال: عليكم بمجالس الذكر وحسن الظن بمولاي وكفى بهما خيراً.

'Abd al-Wāhid b. Zayd (d. 176-9/792-5)<sup>34</sup> turned to Ḥawshab (date of death unknown)<sup>35</sup> saying: «If you precede me to God and if you can come and tell us about your experience, do so». Ḥawshab promises to come. He dies in the plague long before his friend. 'Abd al-Wāhid keeps waiting for Ḥawshab to appear in his dream, and when finally his wish comes true, and Ḥawshab reveals himself, he addresses him with the question: «Did you not promise to come?», «Yes», said Ḥawshab, «but I was relieved only now». Ḥawshab tells that they were saved thanks to God's forgiveness. Then 'Abd al-Wāhid asks about Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī, d. 110/728), and finds out that the latter is staying in the *'ilīyyīn*.<sup>36</sup> He is so elevated that no one can see him; he however, has the ability to see the other dwellers of Paradise.<sup>37</sup> 'Abd al-Wāhid's final question is: «What would you order us to do?» To that he receives the following answer: «You have to stay

<sup>33</sup> *al-Manām* No. 42. Cf. *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* 6/199; *Husn al-zann bi-llāh* No. 8.

<sup>34</sup> See his biography in *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* 7/178, and the bibliographical references there.

<sup>35</sup> See his biography in *Tahdhīb* 3/66.

<sup>36</sup> The seventh Heaven, or a tablet of green chrysolite hanging from the Throne (Qurṭubī 19/262 to Q: 83/18: «No indeed; the book of the pious is in Illiyun; and what shall teach thee what is Illiyun? A book inscribed, witnessed by those brought nigh»). Translation, Arberry 2/329).

<sup>37</sup> The examination of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in dreams will take us beyond the scope of the present paper.

in assemblies where God is mentioned, and you have to hope for the best from God. These two are enough».

‘Abd al-Wāḥid who stayed alive long after his friend died, waited to see him in a dream. Being anxious to see a beloved friend that passed away is one of the prominent motifs treated in the examination of the relationship between the dead and the living. Aside from the longing for the deceased, which comes as a result of the time one must wait until the deceased appears in the dream, special attention is given to the reasons that keep the deceased distant. It is never because he has forgotten his promise; it is rather due to the tribulation he has to pass before he is released. In illustration II, Ṣa‘b b. Juthāma tells of being exposed to some hardships. Here Ḥawshab makes an excuse for not showing himself and tells that a long time passed until he was relieved. His friendly way of addressing ‘Abd al-Wāḥid and his explanations can be taken out of their personal context and understood as referring to the general process. In so doing the private experience of Ḥawshab turns to be the examination of the term *barzakh*, the intermediate state between this world and the world to come. The term is mentioned three times in the Koran<sup>38</sup> with nothing to indicate its nature. Details about the *barzakh* are adduced in Koran exegesis, *ḥadīth* literature, theological works and several special works, or chapters, dedicated to the issue of death and life after death.<sup>39</sup> The major part of the material that treats the issue of the *barzakh* consists of popular tales, mainly dreams, presented as personal experiences. Through private-intimate details, these tales (among which is the present one) create an actualization of the idea, enable a certain feeling of familiarity with the issue, and consequently mitigate the fears and discomfort associated with it.

In the last part of our story the deceased is asked for direct guidance. Questions such as «what would you order us to do»? or «what is the best of all deeds»? are frequently repeated in dialogues held between the living and the dead.<sup>40</sup> These questions are based on the assumption that the dead have the

<sup>38</sup> Q: 23/100, 25/53, 55/20.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *al-Budūr al-sāfira fī umūr al-ākhirā*, *Bushrā al-Ka‘ib*; *Daqā‘iq al-akhbār fī dhikr al-janna wa-al-nār*, *al-Durra al-fākhira fī kashf ‘ulūm al-ākhirā*, *al-Durar al-ḥisān fī al-ba‘th wa-na‘im al-jinān*, *al-Rūḥ*, *Sharḥ al-Ṣudūr*, *al-Tadhkira fī aḥwāl al-mawtā*. See also the relevant chapters in *al-Iḥyā’*, and the equivalent chapters to *Iḥyā’* in *Ithāf al-Sāda*. See also «Interaction»; *EI*<sup>2</sup> 1/1071-2; Eklund, especially p. 81 and chapter v; *The Islamic understanding of death*, especially pp. 7-8, 183, 193; Burckhardt, T., «Concerning the *barzakh*», *Studies in Comparative Religion* 13 (1979), 24-30; Ashraf b. ‘Abd al-Maqṣūd, *al-Ḥayāt al-Barzakhiyya* (Cairo, 1988); Sayyid Mujtaba Musawi Lari, «Man’s situation in the intermediate realm (*Barzakh*)», *al-Tawḥīd* 10 (1992-3), 135-149.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example *al-Manām* Nos. 26, 72, 73, 83, 101, 102, 170, 182, 185, 210, 220, 309.

answers. They are blessed with special insight, which enables them to understand the value of each duty and to arrange them according to the rewards bestowed upon their performers. Such questions never appear in a row; they are asked one at a time, usually one per dream. As such, each question bears personal features and is accompanied by an *ad hoc* answer. Nevertheless, due to the edifying nature of the answer, it should be taken beyond its circumstantial meaning and be analyzed in the light of the other answers offered in the same manner as one item in a wide compendium, addressed to the entire community. Putting the message in the mouth of an individual who comes from the next world seems to be an efficient means to gain the trust of the believers of the community, and have them embrace the message as the recommended way of conduct.

#### ILLUSTRATION VI<sup>41</sup>

حدثنا أبو سعيد الماليني أبا أحمد بن عدي ثنا أحمد بن الحسين الكوفي ثنا محمد ابن يحيى الجحدري قال: قال ابن الأجلح قال أبي لسلمة بن كهيل: إن مت قبلي فقدرت أن تأتني في نومي فتخبرني بما رأيت فافعل. فمات سلمة قبل الأجلح فقال لي [أبي]: يا بني علمت أن سلمة أتاني في (منام) فقلت أليس قدمت؟ قال: إن الله عز وجل قد أحياني. قال: قلت كيف وجدت ربك؟ قال: رحيماً يا أبا حجية. قال: إيش رأيت أفضل الأعمال التي يتقرب بها العباد؟ قال: ما رأيت عندهم أشرف من صلاة الليل. قلت: كيف وجدت الأمر؟ قال: سهلاً ولكن لا تتكلموا).

Ajlaḥ (Abū Ḥujayya, d. 145/762)<sup>42</sup> asked Salama b. Kuhayl (d. 121-2/738-9)<sup>43</sup> to come and visit him after he dies. Salama dies before Ajlaḥ and, as promised, comes back in Ajlaḥ's dream. Ajlaḥ receives his dead friend with the question: «Have you not died»? To that Salama answers that God has revived him. To Ajlaḥ's question how Salama found God, the answer is «compassionate» (*raḥīm*), and to Ajlaḥ's inquiry about the best of all deeds which draws the believers closer to their Lord, Salama answers: «The night

<sup>41</sup> *Shu'ab al-Īmān* 3/173 (No. 3257). Cf. *al-Kāmil fī al-Ḍu'afā'* 1/427; *Mukhtaṣar ta'rikh Dimashq* 10/94; *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl* 2/278, *al-Manām* No. 73 (without the agreement preceding the dream).

<sup>42</sup> See his biography in *Tahdhīb* 1/189.

<sup>43</sup> See his biography in *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* 5/298, and the bibliographical references there.

prayer». The last question is about death, and Salama's answer is: «Light, but do not rely on it».

The present dialogue consists of four questions, two of which discuss ideas mentioned in some of the earlier illustrations (God the compassionate and the preferable deed). The other two will be examined in the following:

- (1) The question «have you not died» also appears in illustration III, but, whereas the answer there is laconic, here, although also very short, it illuminates a central issue. Nowhere else in the illustrations adduced heretofore do we get an explanation as to whether the dead are dead that look alive, or living that have just moved to another world, or yet dead that have been revived and have come back to life in a different abode. The latter can be implied from Salama's words, who explains that God has revived him. Nothing more is said, no emphasis is put, and yet these few words convey a profound idea. Ajlah, surprised as he may be to see his friend with the appearance of a living person, understands now how it can happen: God revives the dead.

Short answers ascribed to the dead can be defined as one of the most characteristic features of dream narrations in general, among which are the tales that deal with mutual agreements of the kind presented here. As mentioned above, the foremost goal of these personal anecdotes is to simplify matters of paramount concern, deliver them to the community and have them molded into inclusive perceptions. As shown, these anecdotes focus on daily affairs, where the individual tells his personal story, with which any listener can identify and naturally adopt its implications. To gain authenticity and reliability, these stories may get into small details. These details, however, concern only the living's part; the words of the dead are minimal, keeping in mind the intention of delivering the idea in a most elementary and simple way. Thus, for the sake of clarity, loaded arguments or wandering thoughts are never put in the mouth of the dead. As seen in all the illustrations above, the deceased always gives a straightforward answer; he always knows the truth and never hesitates. He relies on his personal experience and therefore his words cannot be doubted. By using these means, each personal anecdote appears to hold the ultimate truth, and as such its message can be taken beyond its personal meaning and be incorporated into the communal system. Accordingly, these anecdotes, and dreams in general, lose their significance as personal events that actually took place, and become depersonalized forms that provide general guidance.

- (2) The last question with which Salama is faced deals with the nature of death. Strangely enough, none of the anecdotes presented so far include such a question in their dialogues. However, this is a common question that is presented in various dreams.<sup>44</sup> The answers are of two kinds: the process of death is easy; death is a long and tedious process that comes to a happy ending due to God's mercy.<sup>45</sup> This polarity should be understood in light of the edifying element underlying this question. When checking the variety of answers given to this question against the history of the deceased, the direct proportion between the nature of death and the piety of the informer becomes obvious. Our illustration presents an unusual answer; it consists of two parts; one direct, and the other reserved: the direct and encouraging part states the lightness of death; the second part does not contradict it, but warns against taking the lightness of death for granted. In his answer, Salama actually means the following: «My personal death was light; however, each one of you should watch his step. Do not deduce from my experience; each one prepares his fate with his own hands. Of course, if you follow my steps and behave piously as I did, you will be able to enjoy the same consequences». What can be more convincing than such personal advice? Yet, how can one not see the general outlook conveyed through these words?

#### CONCLUSIONS

The six illustrations examined above follow one basic pattern. Other narrations of dreams follow other patterns, and as a matter of fact, it is hard to find a dream narration that does not fit into some pattern. Patterns, by definition, provide frameworks into which certain ideas can be molded. Accordingly, if a single pattern consists of a series of fixed formulae, and the change is attained by minor modifications, such as exchange of names or instructions, we may presume that the individuals mentioned in the story are treated as symbols, rather than as historical figures. When the symbol changes, the message delivered changes as well.

The fact that we come across a variety of dream narrations based on one literary form, should draw our attention to the historical value of these stories.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, *al-Manām* Nos. 29, 34, 54.

<sup>45</sup> See the words ascribed to 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Sulaymān (*al-Manām* No. 54): «As to death, do not ask about the intensity of its tortures and sorrow; but God's mercy erased every one of our sins, and we received it only due to His favor».

This can be explained in two apparently opposing ways. On the one hand, it is most obvious that we deal here with literary descriptions, rather than with documentation of real events. On the other hand, we must not forget that dreams were formed to answer certain needs, and as such should be regarded as the reflection of the environment in which they were created. In other words, in spite of the usage of historical figures as symbols, and in spite of the presentation of various events as literary scenes, dreams should be considered authentic sources since they deliver the authentic spirit of the period in which they were formed. These features re-emphasize the tendency to convey messages through patterns and archetypes disguised as private events conducted by individuals.

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#### ABSTRACT

The present article treats the Islamic understanding of death through the examination of six dream narrations. Classical Islam gave special emphasis to dreams, a fact that may explain the central role dreams played in the deciphering of the enigma of death and dying: Through narrations of dreams that deal with day to day events, related in a most unsophisticated way, major questions concerning the process of dying and the nature of the afterworld are examined. Although each dream refers to an individual case and the answers supplied by the deceased are presented as drawn from private experiences, the message is directed to the whole community. While focusing on the edifying nature of the messages delivered, this article shows how the private anecdotes turned into a

means of conveying the spirit of the community and, at the same time, establishing the communal spirit.

#### RESUMEN

El artículo versa sobre la manera islámica de comprender la muerte a partir del análisis de la narración de seis sueños. El Islam clásico concedía especial importancia a los sueños, que desempeñan un papel esencial en el desciframiento del enigma de la muerte y del morir, a partir de narraciones de sueños que tratan de sucesos cotidianos descritos de una manera sencilla, se traslucen cuestiones de la mayor importancia acerca del proceso de la muerte y del más allá. Aunque cada sueño se refiere a un caso individual, el mensaje se dirige a toda la comunidad. Este artículo trata la naturaleza edificante de los mensajes transmitidos por estas narraciones y al mismo tiempo muestra cómo de anécdotas privadas se hace un medio para transmitir el espíritu de la comunidad y establecer o definir al mismo tiempo ese espíritu comunitario.