Resurrection Prefigured in This World

We are witnesses to a ceaseless process of motion and change in the world; everywhere we see impressive scenes of the renewal of life. If we step into the garden in winter, we are confronted with a realm of lifelessness that can be compared, perhaps, to the silent and motionless cemetery where the dead rest. It remains silent and mournful, without the least sign of greenery, vegetation or freshness, until the arrival of spring produces anew the conditions of life and the trees resume their growth and activity.

Conditions change all of a sudden once the breeze of life begins to blow over the dead. The soil comes back to life and begins acting anew. On the naked and withered forms of dry, leafless trees new boughs begin to stretch forth, and the earth that had seemingly lost all property of life becomes submerged in fresh flowers and foliage. A pleasing and happy scene takes the place of the cold, dry and spiritless atmosphere of winter.

Such scenes of death and renewal which take place before our eyes every year remain unnoticed by many people. They pass them by with indifference, without their curiosity being aroused and without learning any lesson or making any deduction from this instructive phenomenon.

The power of observation in man needs to grow and develop, just like his capacity for clear thought. It can serve as the source for his understanding of complex matters, but man's tendency to disregard objective realities in his daily life greatly increases his alienation from the truths that surround him and renders barren his mental activity.

Careful observation of the changes and transformations that occur in created phenomena and an analysis of the principles of which such changes are based, whether simple or complex, not only helps man to understand the world but also enables him to evaluate his own accomplishments and benefit more from them more fully.

There are many scholars who when confronted with these scenes of death and renewal are led by their intelligence to connect them with the life and death of man; it is as if the concept of resurrection takes on form before the eye of their intellect.

However, we should not imagine that it is only learned scholars who have the capacity to observe and classify objective facts, linking them together in order to reach a conclusion. Despite the varying degrees of knowledge and awareness that men have, the path of reflection and thought lies open for everyone. In proportion to his intellectual capacities, everyone can learn a useful lesson from observing the occurrences and phenomena that surround him.

If dry soil and the naked trees which temporarily suspended their activity because of unsuitable circumstances so that no sign of life was visible in them now abound again in freshness and vitality because of the effect of natural factors such as the generous rainfall, why should we regard the law of the alternation of life and death as being restricted to the vegetable realm? Is there are any reason for denying man a similar resurrection or proclaiming it impossible?

Plants are in fact the best witnesses to the inter-relation of life and death. Within their apparently dead and lifeless seeds are living cells that lie sleeping and sometimes remain healthy and capable of being sown even after thousands of years. After the seeds are planted, the cells awaken to life through the activity of warmth and moisture and begin to grow; flowers, bushes, and grasses begin to emerge from the womb of the earth.

After their deaths, men are buried in that same womb and are even transformed into earth. Then, when the spring of resurrection arrives and conditions are ripe for the renewal of life, the particles of their bodies begin to stir and they grow forth, just like plants from the seed.

It is true that the generative activity of the earth only apparently ceases with the onset of winter because of natural causes; there is no real death or complete cessation of life. But what is certain that a stagnation takes place, a cessation of vital activity. We must remember, moreover, that when life was first created the whole planet was empty of living beings, only when the environment became favorable did the first spark of life leap forth from the earth.

Life, a Mysterious Truth

Life is indeed a mysterious truth. It may be preserved, sleeping and motionless, in dry genes and atoms for thousands of years, and then, as soon as the environmental conditions become favorable, emerge from the atoms and cells that have become dust and begin growing. There is no scientific reason for rejecting such a hypothesis.

Researchers have discovered life in viruses that cannot be seen even with the aid of electronic microscopes that enlarge objects millions of times; despite their invisibility even to such sophisticated devices, they have the capacity of life, motion and reproduction.

Although man is able to investigate life in such infinitesimally small worlds, he can never exhaust all forms of life. He has not yet been able to establish the exact dimensions of the genes and the chromosomes by means of which he has inherited the attributes and characteristics of his parents and ancestors. Despite this, life emerges from precisely these relatively low organisms that border on the atom.

If life can take up residence within such invisible particles, safe from all hostile forces, in such a way that no type of change is able to expel it from its refuge and destroy it, what reason is

there to think that it could not be preserved over a drawn-out period in the cells of the human body that have been turned into earth? Or, to use another comparison, why should those cells not come back to life like insects that sleep through the winter? In short, is there any obstacle at all to life ultimately re-emerging from death?

The Qur'an, which encompasses in its gaze the whole vast and moving arena of life and death, compares man's restoration to life with the resurrection of the plants: "Thus We bring back to life the dead earth, and the coming back to life of the dead on the day of resurrection shall be similar." (50:11)

Or, in another verse: "God brings you forth from the ground like the plants and He will then cause you to return to the earth. Then He will bring you forth once again from the earth" (71:17-18).

In these verses, God provides those who do not believe in the hereafter with proofs taken from the sensory and material life of the world (in which, of course, they do believe) in order to demonstrate to them the reality of a future life. He answers the unbelievers with clear evidence taken from the miraculous book of nature. Nonetheless, foolish and obstinate people disregard the instructive phenomena that surround them and close the windows of their heart on the truth.

Let us listen again to the summons of the Qur'an: "Look at the dry, barren earth and see how life emerges in it when We send rain Upon it. Plants spring forth of every type. This is all indication that God speaks the truth and will revive the dead; certainly He is capable of all things" (22:5).

When the rain pours down and water penetrates the depths of the soil, the air that is concentrated there is pushed downward, causing a ferment within the soil.

When the roots of plants grow within the soil they appropriate part of the soil and their volume increases several times over, so that the earth itself swells and expands considerably through the growth of the plants it contains.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, said: "I am astonished by the one who denies resurrection in the hereafter although he cannot fail to see it in this world." (Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 493)

The Imam expresses in these words his amazement at those negligent ones who are indifferent to phenomena that are fraught with meaning. Possessing an effectiveness that extends across time, the Noble Qur'an should be used as a key to unlock the mysteries of the universe.

When discussing the creation of the fetus it again draws man's attention to resurrection in the

following words: "O mankind, if you doubt the day of resurrection and the ability of God to restore life to the dead, know that We have created you from dust, then from a drop of sperm, then from coagulated blood,
and then from a lump of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, demonstrating Our power through all of these stages. We appoint a certain time for what lies in the womb, and then We bring you forth from the womb in the shape of an infant, so that you may live and grow to maturity. Some of you die during this process and others of you reach old age and the time of weakness and impotence even to the extent of losing your understanding" (22:4).
"Man must reflect on the materials from which he was created. He was created from a drop of gushing sperm that issues from between the loins and the ribs. God Who is thus able to create man from this insignificant liquid is without doubt capable of reviving him after his death" (89:5-8).
In connection with the resurrection of decomposed bodies, the Qur'an discusses the question of motion and change. It points out that just as God Almighty, at the beginning of creation, fashioned man out of particles of clay and then set him on the earth, in accordance with precise laws of His own devising, He will also restore man's bodily frame in its precise, original form, in accordance with another set of carefully planned changes.
For He is all-knowing and well aware of all forms of creation and origination. He knows the course of development on which the decayed body and bones of man must be placed in order for them to recapture their original form. Like all divine acts, this too will take place in accordance with universal norms.
If re-creation is impossible, we must dismiss as impossible not only resurrection and the hereafter but also the initial creation of man through the transformation of particles of dust into his physical form.
We know that man is nurtured by means of various food stuffs; the compressed essences of earthly substances fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products have a primary role in assuring his physical needs.
It can be said then that the drop of sperm which passes through various stages of development ultimately takes on the form of a man is itself a form of the earth that has undergone change; it results in a newborn infant which possesses a special rank and loftiness among all the phenomena of creation, by virtue of the pure qualities that are inherent in it.
If we reflect on the transformation of lifeless clay first into a drop of sperm and then into a human being, this will clarify for us the question of resurrection and the restoration of life to the dead.

The verses just cited draw the attention of man in the first place to the beginning of creation and the material out of which his being was fashioned so that he might reflect on the stages he traversed before becoming a fully formed human being. They then raise the question of whether so powerful a planner and designer could be incapable of gathering together the scattered particles of man's physical being in order to fashion them into a new form and inhale in it anew the spirit of life.

The Qur'an has recourse here to a rational analogy: if an individual or group of individuals is able to perform a certain deed, it follows that they are capable of performing another deed of the same type or even one better than it.

Here, however, we are not dealing with a greater or more complex task. The argument relates rather to one that is simpler and more straightforward: after the collapse of the compounds of which the body is made up, God wishes to re-create man out of existing materials. We thus come to understand clearly the truth of these divine words: "We created you from earth and We will return you to earth, and then bring you forth again from earth." (20:55).

The Development of the Fetus

The consecutive developments that the fetus undergoes in its own world, its passage through a remarkable series of transitional stages as it pushes forward, is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the whole of the created world.

Man is completely unable to affect its passage through these various stages, which takes place under the control of forces internal to the body and is able at all times to surmount all obstacles successfully.

The cells of the fetus resemble each other during various stages of growth and no sign can be found in the mass of cells of man's different limbs. The circumstances under which abrupt changes take place in identical cells permitting the formation of the limbs of the body is entirely unknown. After reposing for a time in a temporary resting place, the intermingled cells separate from each other and each of them makes its way to the limb for which it is destined.

The form of the fetus is composed of these cells and it gradually begins to take shape. Then God's power inhales the spirit of life into this inanimate form, enabling a precious entity to emerge on to the plain of existence. Alexis Carrel, the celebrated French thinker, writes as follows concerning the miracle that the cells of the fetus represent: "We know that human body is first formed out of a single cell. As the fetus develops, this single cell is transformed into two cells, each of which is then divided into two other cells. This process of division continues until the fetus has completed its growth.

"Although the structure of the fetus becomes progressively more complex with each instant of its growth, it retains the simplicity of function that marked its original seed. Even when they have become a countless mass, in proportion to the growth of the limbs, the cells retain the memory of their original unity, and they know in advance the functions they are to assume in the total scheme of the body.

"The construction of each limb takes place in accordance with a particular method, in the most remarkable way. The materials that are represented by the cells are not put together like the building materials needed to construct a house, and in fact we cannot speak here of a `construction' taking place, in the strict sense of the word. It is true that just as a house is fashioned of bricks, the body is built out of cells. But in order for the two procedures to be comparable, we have to suppose a house built from a single brick.

The brick in question would have to be capable of yielding numerous additional bricks, through the use of river water, mineral salts, and gases found in the air. Further, it would have to place those bricks one on top of the other and build walls without the benefit of an architect's plan or the presence of a builder. Then it would have to change the bricks into glass for the windows, plaster for the ceiling, coal for the heater, and water for the bathroom and kitchen.

"In short, the construction of a single limb resembles a fairy tale of the type told to children."

(Insan Maujud-i Nashinakhte, p. 102-103)

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It is truly remarkable that the All-Powerful Creator fashions the symmetrical and well-proportioned form of man out of a single cell that appears in the womb. That form contains, moreover, numerous organs and capacities that operate independently and continuously from the moment of their formation in the womb until death.

This being the case, cannot God restore to their original state the particles that have become scattered by death but have nonetheless a single origin of which they are merely the changed form?

Can the one who reflects on the remarkable creation of the fetus persist in regarding the restoration of life to the dead as impossible? Does the resurrection of the dead represent something loftier and more difficult? In order to grasp the truth, we must not assess things in a limited, defective fashion. We must reflect instead on the miraculous realities that preside over the universe.

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In the animal kingdom the replacement of defective organs and limbs recurs constantly. Certain reptiles, for example, are able to reconstruct a limb or part of a limb when they lose it.

There is a kind of worm which can be cut up into numerous pieces, and then each piece becomes a complete worm. Although man is incapable of this kind of repair work, we should not regard it as impossible that given the right conditions and a suitable environment, the whole body of man should grow anew from a single particle, just like a tree growing from a branch that has been grafted on another tree.

This is demonstrated by the fact that in the favorable environment provided by the womb a human being is fashioned from a single cell. To put it differently, in the same way that the seed of a flower holds within the secrets of all flowers and in the environment that is suitable for its growth develops into a beautiful rosebush which scatters its perfume, so too a single cell can preserve in itself all the characteristics of a fully developed human being and re-create them in a suitable environment.

Someone asked Imam al-Sadiq, upon whom be peace.

"Does a corpse decay?"

He answered: "Yes, to such a degree that not a single trace remains of the flesh or the bones. The only thing that does not decay is the earth out of which it was created. It moves about freely in the tomb until it is created anew, as it was the first time." (al Kafi III p. 251) What the Imam meant by free motion in the tomb was probably the activity of the atoms of the body, for electrons revolve constantly around their central core. After the cells die and the body rots in the grave, the atoms that once composed the body persist and are preserved in an unending circular motion.

Once again the Glorious Qur'an sets forth, in the clearest possible way, the limitless power of God and invites the deniers of the truth to reflect on the nature of their own existence. The Qur'an regards the question of resurrection as perfectly comprehensible for those who examine all things in the light of intelligence. It proclaims: "Does man imagine that he has been left to his own devices? Was he not a drop of sperm that was then changed into a clot of blood and then created in his present form, as a male or female infant? Cannot so wise and powerful a Creator restore life to him after his death?" (75:36-40).

Miraculous Dimensions of Existence

A profound scientific examination of the totality of the world and the numerous miracles that are enclosed within its horizons is capable once combined with faith in the boundlessness of God's power of convincing man fully of the principle of resurrection and of setting his mind entirely at rest.

This is particularly the case when we also take into consideration the limits that have been

placed on man's knowledge and awareness. If we try to comprehend all the various dimensions of existence, the relative paucity and inadequacy of man's knowledge becomes fully apparent. Scientists themselves know full well that the achievements of science, for all the progress that has been made, will never be able to provide answers for all questions.

Man's limited powers of observation and thought become even more unequal to the task of perceiving reality when his spirit is sunk in the mire of obstinacy.

We know how varied are the forms of life that are to be found on this small planet of ours, which in itself counts as nothing once measured against the dizzying dimensions of the whole universe, but the particularities of many of those forms of life are unknown to us. This is in itself a reason why those who reject the possibility of resurrection should not deny it with such ignorant obstinacy; at the very least they should approach the topic in a more cautious and less categorical manner.

Careful observation of the realities that exist all around us can acquaint us in some measure with the amazing power of the Creator, permitting us to understand, for example, that resurrection and the restoration of life to the dead is not more difficult or significant than the original creation of the world with all its complicated mechanisms that function in complete harmony with each other. It is thus that matters will be seen by those who have open minds.

The Qur'an says: "The creation of the heavens and the earth, together with the various species of animals that are scattered across its surface, is one of the tokens and signs of God's power. He is capable of gathering them all together whenever He wishes and desires, and His power fully suffices to bring about resurrection" (42:29).

"The unbelievers swear oaths that God will never bring back to life one who has died, but resurrection is the firm promise of God. However, the majority of mankind are unaware" (16:38).

"The unbelievers imagined that they would never be resurrected O Messenger, say to them: I swear by my God that you will certainly be resurrected and be made aware of the consequences of your deeds" (64:7).

"Is God who created the heavens and the earth in this fashion without becoming weakened or tired unable to resurrect the dead? Certainly God has the power to do all things" (46:33).

In short, the One Who with the hand of His power created the total scheme of being with all the miracles it contains, Who has caused His eternal and inviolable justice prevail over all things, whether great or small, and Who has bestowed life on a part of His creation such a One is definitely able to restore life to the dead. Such restoration of life will certainly be easier than the first creation of the entire universe, for any intelligent person will grant that it is far simpler to

reassemble the scattered components of a single being than it is to summon the whole of creation into existence.

Is it more difficult to assemble a piece of machinery or to make it? There can be no doubt that it must be easier for the maker or inventor of a piece of machinery to disassemble its parts and then put them back together again.

This leads us to the observation that God as the Creator is the inventor of man. First He created him out of a handful of earth and then He gave life to successive generations of men by means of a single cell. Without doubt He will not face any obstacle when He wishes to gather the scattered particles of man's being and join them together again.

Just as God transforms an invisible cell by means of a well-ordered plan into billions of cells, and then into bones, skin and flesh, thereby bringing into existence a perfect human form, He is also able to repeat this process by causing the atoms that have undergone change to grow again and receive life anew.

All that impinges on our awareness in the creation of an individual is that one person is born of another, but God is aware of all aspects of creation.

Thus the Qur'an declares: "He has knowledge of every kind of creation" (36:79).

For He has the infinite power that was required to create the first living being out of a handful of earth, without any process of birth taking place.

In analyzing these truths, the Qur'an proclaims: "Have you not perceived that you were first a drop of sperm? Was it you who created that drop of sperm in the form of a human child or was it Us ? We have decreed death for all Our creation. If We wished, We could destroy all of you and replace you with a new creation, or raise you up in a way of which you are now unaware. You are aware of the first creation; why do you pay no heed to the second creation?" (56:57-62).

Mention is made in these verses of the divine will that has caused man to pass through various stages of growth before attaining his full development. It is stressed that all of these stages take place in accordance with God's wishes and without man being able to intervene in the slightest. It is He Who brings us into this world, moves us through it, and then removes us from it, without either consulting us or seeking the assistance of anyone.

The limitless will and power that man is compelled to obey through all the stages of his growth and development is certainly able to repeat the whole process.

The Qur'an declares clearly: "He is God Who began creation and then restores it to its original form after death and dispersal. This restoring is quite easy for Him" (30:27).

The Qur'an reminds men that they should reflect with care on the manner in which their life

began and on the powerful hand that conveyed them from their first lowly state to their present high station.

Man's progress from being a drop of sperm to becoming a being of value takes place only through the will and command of God Almighty, for there were epochs in which not even the name of man existed.

The Qur'an says: "Did not a time pass over man when he was a thing unmentioned? We created him out of a mingled drop of sperm and We gave him the power of sight and hearing" (76:1-2).

The existence of man is inexplicable without the existence of an originator, a creator. He has not been cast into the world as the product of a series of unconscious factors, but rather for a certain purpose: to traverse the stages of the path leading to perfection, by means of his own choice and devotion, and to attain his true and absolute object of worship. It was the grace of the wise Creator that caused the rays of the spirit to shine on lowly and worthless matter in order for the form of man to come into being, to enter the world, and finally to return toward Him. So God is the beginning and origin of man and also his purpose and destination.

All our being and aspiration is Your gift; all our existence is of Your making.

You displayed to non-being the pleasure of being; and made non-being enamored of Yourself.

.We existed not and we made no demand; Your generosity heard what we left unsaid