Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

The Witnessing and Recording of Deeds

Tawus Raja

Abstract

The Qur'an describes the Day of Resurrection as a *mashhad*, which means a place, time, or stage of witnessing (11:103, 19:37). It is by essence when the truth and hidden realities are disclosed (10:30, 86:9, 100:10). This is a central quality of that Day, by which the Qur'an has sworn (85:3). Whereas one's book of deeds is his own soul (17:13-14), witnesses are external beings that have encompassed one's deeds. Therefore, witnesses will complement the records of deeds as they both relate to the process of judgement of individuals in the Hereafter.

Testimony

Witnessing (*shah□dah*) has two stages that are interrelated: 1. observing a scene; 2. testifying and disclosing what one has observed. A witness in a court should have been present at the scene and observed it directly so that he can attest to it. In other words, the second stage hinges on the first, and the first stage is a prelude to the second. Therefore, the testimonies of witnesses on the Day of Judgement will be according to their degree of knowledge, presence, and comprehension of what they bear witness to.

It should thus be clear that the primary witness is God Himself. He is a witness over all His creatures and He will bear witness on the Day of Judgement according to His infinite knowledge (41:53, 3:81, 3:98, 10:29, 10:46, 22:17, 58:6). God suffices as a witness, as stated in many verses in the Qur'an. Yet, the Qur'an names several other witnesses that will testify on the Day of Resurrection. These should be interpreted as the means, manifestations and reflections of God's act of witnessing, because their knowledge, even their whole existence, is only a reflection of God's. Otherwise,

"He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden, and He has knowledge of all things" (57:3).

Examples from the Qur'an

The following is a list of some of the witnesses on the Day of Judgement according to the Qur'an:

(1) One's self. This is when the disbelievers behold the truth and realize that they have no excuse; they will bear witness against themselves (6:130, 7:37).

(2) One's limbs and organs, such as one's hands, legs, skin and even one's tongue (24:24, 36:65, 41:20–22). The witnessing of one's body against the individual shows that one's reality is different from the body. It is also consistent with the Qur'anic principle that "To Allah belong the hosts of the heavens and the earth" (48:4, 48:7). One's limbs and organs belong to God and are obedient to His command.[1]

(3) Angels (43:86, 50:21, 78:38). There are many verses that talk about 'Our' knowledge and observance of what you do, which include the angels as God's instruments.

(4) Prophets. Each prophet will be a witness to his nation (3:81, 4:41, 16:89). The Qur'an also names two specific prophets as witnesses over their nations: Prophets Jesus (4:159, 5:117) and Muhammad (2:143, 22:78, 33:45, 48:8, 73:15).

(5) Saints, martyrs, believers, and righteous people from every nation (2:143, 3:140, 4:69, 16:84, 22:78, 28:75, 57:19). Even though the Qur'an does not use the word *shahīd* (witness) to refer to martyrs (which are rather referred to as 'those who are slain in the way of God'), it does consider the martyrs to be alive (2:154, 3:169). For this reason, the martyrs may also have some supervision over the acts of those who remain after them (3:170), and thus may bear witness to what they did on the Day of Judgement. This is confirmed by many narrations that use the term *shahīd* for a martyr. It is also noteworthy that the Greek word 'martus' means both martyr and witness. This is perhaps because one who bears witness to a truth should be willing to give his life for it,[2] or alternatively because giving one's life for a certain cause is the highest testimony showing one's conviction about its truth. It is along these lines that Qatādah and al-Suddī have interpreted 'witnesses' in verse 39:69 as 'martyrs in the way of God'.[3]

(6) The earth and the heavens, or more generally, the time and space in which one has committed good or evil deeds (84:1–5, 99:1–5). There are also some verses that talk about witnesses in general, which could be any of the above groups (11:18, 40:51).

The testimony of the witnesses will leave no room for the faithless to deny their error:

***"The day We shall raise a witness from every nation, then the faithless will not be permitted* [*to speak*]*, nor will they be asked to propitiate* [*Allah*]*"* (*16:84*).**

Witnesses are those who have realized God's ultimate unity (3:18), and that is why their testimony will show that the polytheists followed their 'idols' (in the most general sense) in vanity:

We shall draw from every nation a witness and say, 'Produce your evidence.' Then they will know that all reality belongs to Allah and what they used to fabricate will forsake them" (***28:75***).

Based on the above, testimony on the Day of Judgement is the disclosure of some act, belief, or trait through the means and instruments that had some existential presence, observation, and comprehension of that reality in this world. That is why witnesses are beings who have some existential breadth, encompassment, or elevation that allows them to embrace lower levels of being. They also should have cognition and consciousness for witnessing to be applicable to them. This is certainly true about God, His Messenger, and certain believers who have realized a high level of faith:

And say, 'Go on working: Allah will see your conduct, and His Apostle and the faithful [***as well***]***, and you will be returned to the Knower of the sensible and the Unseen, and He will inform you concerning what you used to do*** (***9:105***).

The record of deeds

According to the Qur'an there are guardian angels assigned to each individual, who record the person's thoughts, acts, and speeches:

"Indeed Our messengers write down what you plot" (***10:21***)***;***

"Do they suppose that We do not hear their secret thoughts and their secret talks? Yes indeed! And with them are Our messengers, writing down" (***43:80***)***;***

"there is a guard [***or 'watcher'***] ***over every soul"*** (***86:4***)***;***

"Indeed, there are over you watchers, noble writers, who know whatever you do" (***82:10-12***)***;***

"When the twin recorders record [***his deeds***]***, seated on the right hand and on the left: he says no word but that there is a ready observer beside him"*** (***50:17-18***).

Angels are immaterial beings by whom God conducts the affairs of the universe. They are the means by which God carries out His will and decree. They are the channels through which Absolute Existence manifests, shines, and descends to limited and determined entities. It thus follows that the recording of deeds is an existential reality, not a merely conventional or symbolic act of formalism, like a bureaucratic procedure.

The soul as a depository

The Qur'an describes this in the following verses:

We have attached every person's omen to his neck, and We shall bring it out for him on the Day of Resurrection as a wide-open book that he will encounter. 'Read your book! Today your soul

suffices as your own reckoner.' (***17:13–14***).

These verses show that one's 'book' is not separable from him, but is latent in him throughout his life. In other words, one's deeds are not written on a tablet or paper, but they are written in one's self. Anything that a person intends, thinks, says, or does has an impact on his soul – existentially – and these impacts are the letters of one's book that are inscribed in his 'record'. Hence, one's record of deeds is one's self, comprising all the existential realizations acquired through one's life.

On the Day of Judgement, as people are detached and disentangled from external connections, their spiritual realizations that were hidden from themselves and others will become evident (10:30, 86:9, 100:10). This will manifest in the form of one's record of deeds being given to him from the right side if the person is felicitous (17:71, 60:19, 84:7), or from behind and left if the person is wretched (69:25, 84:10). Right and left here symbolize auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, respectively, as we can infer by comparing verses 56:8–9, 56:27 and 56:41.

Some examples and illustrations may help us better relate to the idea of preservation of anything that we do in this universe: (1) Our mental and physical acts are fingerprints that we leave in the universe. We might be ignorant of them, but they are there, and one day they will be revealed and we will be held accountable for them. (2) Whatever we do is imprinted in us like the circles that mark the age of a tree. We just have to look inside and we will find the impacts of all our acts within.

(3) Think of any intention, act, or speech that you have as a wave or energy created in the world. You might lose track of it and it might change forms, but it will never die out. It is preserved according to the law of conservation of energy. Of course, these are only physical examples to approximate a much more profound, fundamental, and immaterial reality to our limited understandings. Otherwise, the preservation of deeds is not limited to the realm of matter and nature. In fact, the primary 'energy' in the context of religion that determines one's salvation or damnation is his spiritual disposition and realization, sometimes referred to as *niyyah* (intention), as the Prophet said, *"Acts are only by intentions."*[4] The same act by two individuals can have two completely opposite religious values due to their intentions, even though their acts are exactly the same outwardly.[56]

Other books in the Qur'an

Another Qur'anic term for the book of deeds is *im□m*, as seen in this verse:

"Indeed it is We who revive the dead and write what they have sent ahead and their effects [***which they left behind***]***, and We have figured everything in a manifest Imam"*** (***36:12***).

What is meant here is clarified by matching it with the verse:

"We have figured everything in a Book" (***78:29***).

Another similar usage is found in this verse:

"The day We shall summon every group of people with their imm, then whoever is given his book in his right hand – they will read it, and they will not be wronged so much as a single date-thread" (***17:71***).

Matching the first and second parts of the verse shows that *imm* in the first part corresponds to book in the second. There are a few explanations for why the book of deeds is called an *imm* (lit. leader):

(1) It is a record of everything that one has sent ahead (*amm*) for his eternal life.

(2) It will lead the people (as their *imm*: leader) on the Day of Resurrection to their eternal abodes.

(3) Everyone's deeds were recorded beforehand (*amm*) according to God's eternal knowledge.

This is the apparent meaning of *imm* in these verses, but it does not deny other layers of meaning that may have evidence from the Qur'an and/or hadith.

The Qur'an also talks about collective books of deeds, which belong to groups and societies as a whole:

"Every nation will be summoned to its book: 'Today you will be requited for what you used to do. This is Our book, which speaks truly against you. Indeed, We used to record what you used to do'" (***45:28-29***).

This apparently refers to the social and collectives acts, impacts, and realizations of the people. At a more general level, the pious and the vicious will each have a record which would include their rewards and punishments (83:7-9, 83:18-21). Then there is an even more comprehensive book that comprises the acts and record of everyone:

"With Us is a book that speaks the truth, and they will not be wronged" (***23:62***).

Overall, we must realize that anything small or big that we do is being recorded:

"Everything they have done is in the books, and everything big and small, is committed to writing" (***54:52-53***).

Then one day we will be shown our deeds and will be questioned about them.

"The Book will be set up. Then you will see the guilty apprehensive of what is in it. They will say, 'Woe to us! What a book is this! It omits nothing, big or small, without enumerating it.' They will find present whatever they had done, and your Lord does not wrong anyone" (***18:47-49***).

Other verses that talk about the recording of deeds are 3:181, 9:120-121 and 19:71.

Earth, water, fire and air / With us are unaware / But

with God they're aware.

We, on the other hand, are aware of all, / Except for the Truth and His message and call.

'What is this life?' they've complained and said, / 'With the creatures you're alive / But with God you're dead.'[7]

Wait for the sun of Resurrection to rise / Then you'll see the world move and arise.

'Indeed we hear, see and rejoice, / But since you're strangers / You can't hear our voice.'

You can't see the spirit as long as you rush / Toward the body and plunge into slush?
Drop dead objects and incline to the soul / Then you'll hear the universe chant and extol.[8]

Summary

A central aspect of the belief in afterlife is responsibility for one's beliefs and actions in this world. The Qur'an inculcates this sense of responsibility by reminding us that we are being watched by our guardian angels, our organs, and all beings surrounding us, and that all our deeds are being recorded. The fact that a being serves as a witness shows that it is alive, conscious, and present. Our soul is the tablet that bears the trace of our beliefs and actions in a real and existential way.

1. Jav□d□ □mul□, audio lectures on tafs□r of S□rah al-Isr□', lecture 41.
2. Adams, "Good News for Everyone," commentary on the Book of Acts, available at www.easyenglish.info [1].
3. □abar□, 24/23. □l□s□, 12/286.
4. A□mad, 1:25. Bukh□r□, 1:2, 3:119 and 7:231. Muslim, 6:48. A□s□'□, 'Aw□l□ al-La'□l□, 2:11.
5. Tasn□m, 13/707-709.
6. For more on this, refer to 'The Core of Action: Sincerity of Intention' by the same author, published in Message of Thaqalayn, vol. 17, no. 11, pp. 35-46.
7. R□m□, Mathnaw□, vol. 2, lines 2378-2379 and 2381.
8. R□m□, Mathnaw□, vol. 3, lines 1009 and 1019-1021.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-17-no-3-autumn-2016/witnessing-and-recording-deeds-tawus-raja/witnessing-and#comment-0

Links
[1] http://www.easyenglish.info