


## The Relativity of the Rate of the Passage of Time Across Realms of Existence: A Qur’anic Inquiry

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article type:</b> Research Article</p> <p><b>Article history:</b>  <b>Received</b> 04 April 2024  <b>Received in revised from</b> 20 May 2024  <b>Accepted</b> 01 November 2024  <b>Published</b> online 28 January 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>            Relativity of time; The Holy Qur’an; Barzakh; Companions of the Cave; Prophet Ezra</p>	<p>The relativity of the passage of time, in its general sense, refers to the idea that the temporal interval between two events may differ from two distinct perspectives in an objective and ontological—not merely psychological—manner. The aim of this article is to address the question of whether the Qur’anic verses indicate such a relativity of time. To this end, three groups of Qur’anic verses are examined: the first includes verses that refer to prolonged sleep or death and subsequent return to life (the story of the Companions of the Cave and the story of the Prophet Ezra); the second group refers to the perception of the intermediate realm (Barzakh) as being extremely short by those resurrected on the Day of Judgment; and the third group mentions a “day” equal to (fifty) thousand years. The findings of this study suggest that although these verses do not explicitly state the relativity of time, taken together they provide cumulative evidence in favor of the idea that the rhythm of temporal passage in higher realms differs from that of the natural world. This view also harmonizes with certain insights derived from Islamic philosophy and wisdom. Furthermore, if one moves beyond the technical and mathematical details, Einstein’s theory of relativity similarly points to the relativity of time. This convergence is not a matter of mathematical correspondence but rather a philosophical and ontological resonance, since both perspectives lead to a metaphysical picture of time in which it is neither uniform, rigid, nor absolute.</p>
<p><b>Cite this article:</b> Manouchehri Kousha, H. (2025). The Relativity of the Rate of the Passage of Time Across Realms of Existence: A Qur’anic Inquiry. <i>Journal of Contemporary Studies on Religion and Science</i>, 1(1), 13-28.</p>	
<p> <b>Publisher:</b> Research Institute of Science and Strategic Evolution</p>	

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## Introduction and Conceptual Clarification

The passage of time is among the most fundamental and, simultaneously, the most profound features of the world in which we live. Events in the universe unfold in a temporal sequence that we classify into three categories: those that have already occurred (past events), those that are yet to occur (future events), and those that are presently taking place (present events). Another observable property of time is its continual flow our constant progression through it. In other words, events that once belonged to the category of the “future” gradually enter the “present” and then pass into the “past.” It appears that a kind of dynamic transformation is inherent in the very fabric of time a phenomenon we refer to as the *passage of time*.

We also conceive of the intervals between temporal events as possessing duration. For instance, when we say, “This class lasted ninety minutes,” we mean that there was a ninety-minute interval between its beginning and end. Our ordinary intuition suggests that such duration is absolute. When we assert that a class lasted ninety minutes, we typically regard this as an objective fact, independent of any particular observer. It seems irrelevant whether Ali or Hasan measures the interval both, we assume, will obtain the same result. Of course, Ali may have felt fatigued and perceived the class as lasting 180 minutes, while Hasan, who found the lecture engaging, may have felt that it passed in only thirty. Yet this is merely a psychological difference. Even in that case, Ali’s wristwatch would have advanced exactly as much as Hasan’s.

Our intuition also tells us that even if an observer were aboard a supersonic jet or a spacecraft traveling between planets, their watch would still record precisely the same ninety minutes. This assumption constitutes what we call the absoluteness of time. However, if the measured duration between two events varies depending on the observer, the phenomenon is described as the relativity of time.

Thus, when we speak of the relativity of time, we do not mean to deny the existence or reality of time, nor to suggest that its passage is illusory or purely mental. Rather, by the relativity of time we mean that “the temporal interval between two events may differ when measured from the perspectives of distinct observers.”

As noted above, our everyday human intuition tends to regard time as absolute rather than relative. Yet this intuition has been decisively challenged by modern physics. In Einstein’s theory of relativity, time is demonstrably relative. According to this theory, if two individuals are in motion relative to one another, the duration each measure between the same two events will not be identical. Moreover, if two observers are situated in different gravitational fields one on the surface of the Sun, the other on Earth they will measure time differently.

Consider the following thought experiment: Ali bids farewell to Hasan and departs in a spacecraft. They agree to count the revolutions of their wristwatch hands until they reunite. After several years spent traveling through space at high velocity or residing near the Sun, Ali returns to Earth. Upon meeting again, they discover that Ali’s watch has advanced far less than Hasan’s.

Ali may be astonished to find that Hasan has grown old while he himself has remained comparatively young. In reality, the time interval between their two encounters has been much shorter from Ali's frame of reference than from Hasan's. Crucially, this discrepancy is not a matter of subjective perception: Hasan's heart has quite literally beaten more times, his body has genuinely aged, and he has objectively lived longer than Ali.

### **1. Statement of the Problem**

The nature of time together with issues such as its relativity and directionality remains one of the most challenging and intellectually stimulating topics of contemporary inquiry, explored extensively from both scientific and philosophical standpoints. While scientific and philosophical approaches have each contributed valuable insights, they also face significant limitations and unresolved challenges. From an Islamic perspective, however, the Qur'an, as the revealed Word of God grounded in His absolute knowledge, may provide a unique source of guidance in this regard. Since God is conceived as a transcendent being beyond time and the very Creator of time itself, the Qur'an offers, at least in principle, the possibility of a deeper understanding of the fundamental nature of time than can be attained through human reason alone.

When examining the Qur'anic verses, it becomes evident that the flow of time and the division of events into the categories of "past," "present," and "future" although not explicitly discussed are clearly presupposed in Qur'anic discourse and in its accounts of temporal processes. However, regarding the absoluteness of time, the matter is less clear. Certain Qur'anic verses, at least at first glance, seem to evoke the notion of temporal relativity. Thus, the central question of this article is whether the Qur'an provides support for the idea of relativity of time or, conversely, for the absoluteness of time.

It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this study is not to compare or reconcile Einstein's theory of relativity in modern physics with religious texts. This is because the theory consists of mathematical equations and technical details that belong exclusively to the domain of modern science, and naturally, one cannot expect such equations or technical specifics to appear in the literal wording of the Qur'an. Nor is our objective here to determine whether the Qur'an explicitly refers to the effects of velocity or gravitational intensity on the measurement of time intervals from the perspective of different observers. Rather, the scope of our comparative inquiry is restricted to the general proposition articulated earlier in our definition of the relativity of time, namely: "the temporal interval between two events, from the perspective of two different observers (in an objective and real sense, not merely psychological), may vary." Accordingly, whenever the term "relativity of time" is used throughout this article, it refers exclusively to this general concept, not to the specific formulation presented in Einstein's theory of relativity.

## 2. Significance of the Study

The question of the nature of time has been posed for thousands of years, and even today the philosophy of time remains a vast field of inquiry, with leading philosophers and physicists around the world continuing to develop theories about it. Within this field, a wide range of fundamental issues are discussed, including whether time is real or illusory, the very essence of temporal passage, its ontological foundations, and its relation to physical concepts such as the geometric structure of spacetime in general relativity, entropy, and the second law of thermodynamics. Although these questions may appear independent at first sight, they are in fact deeply interwoven, such that the answer to one significantly shapes the answer to others.<sup>1</sup>

This study represents an attempt to employ Qur'anic insights as a significant epistemological resource in addressing these foundational questions that modern physics has also taken up with great seriousness. Thus, the present work may be situated within the broader scope of interdisciplinary research that bridges the fields of Qur'anic studies and science. Furthermore, the results of this study bear implications for other intra-religious discussions as well for example, questions concerning the temporality of the realms after death and the nature of bodily resurrection issues that can be pursued in future research.

## 3. Qur'anic Verses and the Relativity of Time

In the Qur'an, we encounter certain verses that, at least on the surface, appear closely related to the concept of the relativity of time. With closer attention, these verses may be categorized into several groups, each of which will be examined separately.

### 3.1 Awakening from Prolonged Sleep or Temporary Death

The Qur'an recounts the story of the Companions of the Cave (Aṣḥāb al-Kahf) and that of the Prophet Ezra (ʿUzayr). What these narratives share in common is that individuals, after remaining in a state of sleep or death for about a hundred or three hundred years, awaken with no sense of having experienced such an extended passage of time. This feature renders both accounts significant for a discussion of the relativity of time.

#### 3.1.1 The Sleep of the Companions of the Cave

In Sūrat al-Kahf, God narrates the story of a small group of monotheistic youths who, having risen against the idolatry of their people, sought refuge in a cave to escape persecution and death. God caused them to sleep in that cave for 309 years, preserving them all the while. Upon awakening from this extraordinary slumber, they assumed they had only slept for a day or part of a day, though by earthly reckoning centuries had passed. The question arises: does this story imply a relativity of time?

In ordinary human experience, we rarely perceive the passage of time during nightly sleep, and when we do awaken, our estimation of the duration typically depends on external indicators

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Callender, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

such as clocks or the position of the sun. Sometimes after a long sleep we feel as though we had only just lain down moments earlier. From this perspective, the perception of the Companions of the Cave, after nearly three centuries of sleep, that they had slept no more than a day, might be interpreted as an extension of this familiar experience.

However, the Qur'an places remarkable emphasis on the disagreement among the youths regarding the length of their slumber highlighting this as a central theme of the story. God mentions in both verses 12 and 19 that the very purpose of their awakening was to make them dispute about the duration of their stay, thus revealing who among them could most accurately assess it:

«فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَىٰ آذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا (١١) ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْصَىٰ لِمَا لَبِثُوا أَمَدًا (١٢) ... وَكَذَٰلِكَ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِيَتَسَاءَلُوا بَيْنَهُمْ قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ قَالُوا رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ... (١٩) ... وَ لَبِثُوا فِي كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِينَ وَازْدَادُوا تِسْعًا (٢٥)» (كهف)

“So We cast a cover of sleep over their ears within the Cave for a number of years. Then We raised them up, that We might know which of the two parties best calculated the time they had tarried. ... And thus, We awakened them so that they might question one another. One of them said, ‘How long have you remained here?’ They said, ‘We have remained a day or part of a day.’ They said, ‘Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried.’ ... And they remained in their cave three hundred years, and they added nine”.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in verse 21, God explicitly identifies this episode as a sign of the Resurrection, suggesting that their experience of sleep and subsequent revival parallels the human experience of death and resurrection on the Day of Judgment.

From one perspective, then, the story seems to be linked with the notion of the relativity of temporal passage across different realms. The Qur'an states in another place (Q 39:42) that sleep involves a partial “taking of the soul,” akin to death. Accordingly, the sleep of the Companions of the Cave may be seen as a transition of their souls into another realm where the passage of time flows at a slower rhythm.

Yet some may argue that even though sleep involves a partial suspension of the soul, the connection between soul and body is not fully severed. From this standpoint, the inability to perceive the passage of time in sleep may simply be explained by lowered levels of brain consciousness. Thus, the fact that the Companions of the Cave were unaware of the 309 years

<sup>1</sup> Q 18:11–12, 18:19, 18:25

that elapsed could be interpreted in this light. However, the Qur'an also presents another story this time involving actual death and revival namely the story of the Prophet Ezra.

### 3.1.2 The Story of Prophet Ezra ('Uzayr)

In Sūrat al-Baqara, the Qur'an narrates the remarkable account of the Prophet Ezra:

«أَوْ كَالَّذِي مَرَّ عَلَى قَرْيَةٍ وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا قَالَ أَنَّى يُحْيِي هَذِهِ اللَّهُ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا فَأَمَاتَهُ اللَّهُ مِائَةَ عَامٍ ثُمَّ بَعَثَهُ قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتَ قَالَ لَبِثْتُ يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ قَالَ بَلْ لَبِثْتَ مِائَةً...»  
(بقره: ٢٥٩)

“Or [consider him] who passed by a township that had fallen into ruin. He said, ‘How will God bring this to life after its death?’ So, God caused him to die for a hundred years, then revived him. He said, ‘How long have you remained?’ He said, ‘I have remained a day or part of a day.’ He said, ‘No, rather you have remained a hundred years...’”<sup>1</sup>

Notably, the very first question posed to Ezra upon his revival was: “How long have you remained?” demonstrating once again the emphasis placed on the perception of elapsed time. Like the Companions of the Cave, Ezra believed he had been absent only for a day, when in fact a full century had passed. This suggests that in the post-mortem realm, human beings may experience the passage of time at a significantly slower rhythm. As will be seen later, several other Qur'anic verses corroborate this interpretation.

### 3.2 The Perception of Barzakh as Brief by Those Resurrected on the Day of Judgment

In Sūrat Ṭā Hā, the Qur'an describes how, on the Day of Resurrection, the guilty will dispute among themselves about the length of time they have remained. Some will estimate it as ten days, while others will claim it was only one:

«يَوْمَ يَنْفَخُ فِي الصُّورِ وَنَحْشُرُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ يَوْمَئِذٍ زُرْقًا (١٠٢) يَتَخَفَتُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا عَشْرًا (١٠٣) نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذْ يَقُولُ أَمْثَلُهُمْ طَرِيقَةً إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا يَوْمًا (١٠٤)» (طه-  
١٠٢ تا ١٠٤)

“On the Day when the Trumpet is blown, we shall gather the sinners that Day, blue-eyed. They will murmur among themselves, ‘You have remained no more than ten [days].’ We know best what they will say, when the most perceptive among them will declare, ‘You have remained no more than a day’”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (Q 2:259).

<sup>2</sup> (Q 20:102–104).

Similarly, in Sūrat al-Mu'minūn, God states that those who denied His signs will be asked about the length of their stay, to which they will reply that it was only a day or part of a day, disclaiming any certainty about the matter:

«قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ (١١٢) قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ فَسْئَلِ الْعَادِينَ (١١٣) قَالَ إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا لَوْ أَنْتُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ (١١٤)» (المؤمنون-١١٢ تا ١١٤)

“He will say, ‘How many years did you remain on earth?’ They will say, ‘We remained a day or part of a day; ask those who count.’ He will say, ‘You remained only a little, if only you had known’”<sup>1</sup>

In Sūrat al-Rūm, the Qur'an likewise narrates that, on the Day of Resurrection, the guilty will swear that they tarried no more than an hour, while the people of knowledge and faith will correct them:

«وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُقْسِمُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ مَا لَبِثُوا غَيْرَ سَاعَةٍ كَذَلِكَ كَانُوا يُؤْفَكُونَ (٥٥) وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ أَوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَالْإِيمَانَ لَقَدْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْبَعْثِ فَهَذَا يَوْمُ الْبَعْثِ وَ لَأَكْتُمُكُمْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ (٥٦)» (الروم- ٥٥ و ٥٦)

“On the Day when the Hour is established, the guilty will swear that they tarried no more than an hour. Thus, were they deluded [in the world]. But those endowed with knowledge and faith will say, ‘You tarried, according to the decree of God, until the Day of Resurrection, and this is the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know’”<sup>2</sup>.

Here, God deems their oaths—that they remained no more than an hour—as distortions of truth, just as they were previously deceived in the worldly life. Their denial stems from their refusal to accept that the long-anticipated Day of Resurrection has indeed come; instead, they insist that only an hour has passed and that they are still in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Other verses—such as Q 10:45, 17:52, 46:35, and 79:46—recount similar scenes. Taken together, at least seven surahs of the Qur'an portray the resurrected as believing that only a very brief period (ranging from an hour to ten days) had elapsed before the Day of Resurrection.

Scholars differ as to whether these verses refer to the duration of life in the worldly realm or to the intermediate state (Barzakh)—or to both. Some exegetes distinguish between the verses, attributing some to worldly life and others to Barzakh. Others—such as ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī

<sup>1</sup> (Q 23:112–114).

<sup>2</sup> (Q 30:55–56)

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān [Al-Mīzān in the Exegesis of the Qur’an]*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A‘lamī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1990). P. 205- 206

and ‘Allāmah Ṭehrānī—interpret all of them as references to Barzakh<sup>1</sup>. In particular, the verses of Sūrat al-Rūm, where the people of knowledge declare, “You remained until the Day of Resurrection,” provide strong textual support that the reference is indeed to Barzakh.<sup>2</sup>

The central question, however, remains: Why do the inhabitants of the Resurrection perceive the duration of Barzakh as so brief? Exegetes have offered several possibilities:

1. When faced with the eternity of the Hereafter, they find the duration of Barzakh negligible in comparison, regardless of how long it was<sup>3</sup>

2. Human beings always perceive the past as shorter than it truly was—for example, an old man may say of his childhood, “It feels like only yesterday”<sup>4</sup>

3. The overwhelming grandeur and terrors of the Resurrection may cause them to forget the long duration of Barzakh<sup>5</sup>

4. Numerous hadiths liken the state of human beings in Barzakh to that of sleep. Accordingly, they may have been in a dream-like state, unaware of the passing years, and upon awakening on the Day of Resurrection, they perceive it as only a short time.<sup>6</sup>

While each of these interpretations offers insight, they also leave unresolved questions. For example, regarding the first two, why do the resurrected specifically estimate their stay as a day or a few days—an extraordinarily short span compared not only to Barzakh but even to their worldly lives? Their insistence, underscored by oaths and disputes among themselves, suggests more than a mere metaphor. The third interpretation—that they simply “forgot”—is also problematic, since God, fully aware of this alleged forgetfulness, deliberately asks them the question. Why would divine wisdom emphasize such forgetfulness unless a deeper truth were intended?

The fourth interpretation, drawing from the analogy with sleep, avoids some of these difficulties, yet still does not provide a fully satisfactory explanation. For us, unfamiliar with the

<sup>1</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān*, p. 71 & Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad Ṭabarānī, *Al-Tafṣīr al-Kabīr: Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (Irbid, Jordan: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfī, 2008). P. 261-264.

<sup>2</sup> Nāṣir Makārem Shīrāzī, with collaborators, *Tafṣīr-e Nemūneh [An Exemplar Exegesis]* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1992). P. 483.

<sup>3</sup> Maḥmūd Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl [Al-Kashshāf]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987). P. 487.; Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān*, p.72.; Maḥmūd Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm wa-al-Sab‘ al-Mathānī [The Spirit of Meanings]* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1995). P. 59. Nāṣir Makārem Shīrāzī, with collaborators, *Tafṣīr-e Nemūneh [An Exemplar Exegesis]* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1992). vol. 12, p. 155; vol. 13, p. 298).

<sup>4</sup> Abd al-Ḥusayn Ṭayyib Iṣfahānī, *Aṭyab al-Bayān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān [The Finest Elucidation in Qur’anic Exegesis]* (Tehran: Nashr-e Eslām, 1990). P. 406

<sup>5</sup> Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad Ṭabarānī, *Al-Tafṣīr al-Kabīr: Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (Irbid, Jordan: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfī, 2008). P. 390, Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar Fakhr al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafṣīr al-Kabīr (Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb) [The Great Commentary]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999). P.99

<sup>6</sup> Faḍl ibn Ḥasan Ṭabrisī, *Tafṣīr Jawāmi‘ al-Jawāmi‘ [Jāmi‘ al-Jawāmi‘]* (Qom: Markaz-i Mudīriyyat-i Ḥawza-yi ‘Ilmiyya-yi Qom, 1991). P. 48; Nāṣir Makārem Shīrāzī, with collaborators, *Tafṣīr-e Nemūneh [An Exemplar Exegesis]* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1992)., p.303

realities of Barzakh, the analogy to sleep may be a pedagogical device—helping us comprehend why the resurrected perceive Barzakh as only a few days. But it does not conclusively answer the fundamental question: Why does Barzakh itself appear so brief? Neurological explanations of time perception during sleep are inadequate here, since they cannot account for the post-mortem state. Nor can the matter be reduced to psychology, for sinners experiencing torment in Barzakh should, by psychological reckoning, perceive it as longer, not shorter.

Thus, a more compelling interpretation is that in Barzakh—and, more broadly, in realms characterized by greater immateriality—the passage of time is objectively slower than in the material world.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, from the perspective of earthly time, the interval between death and resurrection is lengthy, but for the inhabitants of Barzakh it is far shorter. This aligns precisely with our definition of temporal relativity: the same interval—death to resurrection—appears long from the vantage point of this world but short from that of Barzakh.

### 3.3 A Day Equal to (Fifty) Thousand Years

In three Qur’anic passages, reference is made to a “day” whose length is compared to a thousand—or fifty thousand—years.

١- «وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالْعَذَابِ وَلَنْ يُخْلِفَ اللَّهُ وَعْدَهُ وَإِنَّ يَوْمًا عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ» (الحج- ٤٧)

1. “And they ask you to hasten the punishment; but God will never fail in His promise. Indeed, a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of what you count.<sup>2</sup>”

٢- «تَعْرُجُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ» (المعارج-٤)

2. “The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day, the measure of which is fifty thousand years<sup>3</sup>”.

٣- «يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ يَعْرُجُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ» (السجده- ٥)

3. “He directs the affair from the heaven to the earth; then it ascends to Him in a day whose measure is a thousand years of what you count<sup>4</sup>”.

<sup>1</sup> Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad Ṭabarānī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr: Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (Irbid, Jordan: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfī, 2008). P. 256. Morteżā Raḍawī, “Naqd-hā-ye ‘Allāmeḥ Ṭabāṭabā’ī bar ‘Allāmeḥ Majlisī” [“Al-‘Allāmeḥ Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s Critiques of al-‘Allāmeḥ Majlisī”], *Binesh-e No* (online, 2010), accessed at <http://www.binesheno.com/Files/books.php>. P. 113

<sup>2</sup> (Q 22:47).

<sup>3</sup> (Q 70:4)

<sup>4</sup> (Q 32:5)

At first glance, these verses seem to suggest that in higher realms, time flows differently from that of the earthly domain—so much so that a single “day” there corresponds to a thousand or fifty thousand years here. If so, time would appear to be relative, depending on one’s frame of reference. Yet careful reflection on these verses and their exegetical traditions is needed to evaluate this preliminary impression.

Two subtle differences among these verses deserve attention. First, in Q 22:47, the *kāf al-tashbīh* (“as”) is employed—indicating a simile: a day with God is like a thousand years by human reckoning. In contrast, Q 32:5 and Q 70:4 use the expression “its measure is” (*kāna miqdāruhu*), which appears to assign an actual quantified duration. Second, in Q 22:47 and Q 32:5 the phrase “of what you count” (*mimmā ta‘uddūn*) is added, stressing the contrast with human timekeeping, whereas no such qualification appears in Q 70:4.

Regarding Q 22:47, exegetes have generally offered three interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

1) The verse emphasizes that to God, who is transcendent and forbearing, there is no difference between one day and a thousand years; thus, He is in no haste to punish the unbelievers.

2) A single day of divine punishment in the Hereafter is so severe that it is equivalent to a thousand years of worldly torment—or, subjectively, it feels that way to those who suffer it.

3) The duration of a day in the Hereafter is genuinely equivalent to a thousand years of worldly reckoning.

While the second and third interpretations link the verse to the Hereafter, ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī argues that such readings are inconsistent with the surrounding context, which speaks of punishment descending in this world; hence, he rejects them.<sup>2</sup> In any case, none of these interpretations straightforwardly support temporal relativity as defined earlier, since they involve either divine transcendence, intensity of punishment, or comparison of two distinct spans of time (a heavenly day versus a worldly day), rather than the same interval measured differently by distinct observers.

In Q 70:4, the verse speaks of the angels and the Spirit ascending to God in a day “whose measure is fifty thousand years.” Most exegetes understand this “day” as the Day of Resurrection. If so, the verse highlights the extraordinary length of that day, but this does not pertain to relativity of time.

In Q 32:5, however, the subject is the descent and ascent of God’s “command.” Exegetes differ on the meaning of *amr* (“command”): some interpret it as the affairs of creation under

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<sup>1</sup> Ṭabrisī, *Tafsīr Jawāmi‘ al-Jawāmi‘*. p. 142- 143; Maḥmūd Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl [Al-Kashshāf]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987). vol. 3, p. 163

<sup>2</sup> Ṭāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. vol. 14, p. 389-390

divine governance<sup>1</sup>; others as divine command or revelation descending to earth, with human deeds ascending in return.<sup>2</sup> As for the thousand-year measure, interpretations include:

- 1) The angels traverse in a single day a distance that would normally take a thousand years.<sup>3</sup>
- 2) The angels bring down divine decrees once every thousand years<sup>4</sup>
- 3) The phrase is metaphorical, denoting the durability and majesty of divine sovereignty<sup>5</sup>
- 4) The descent and ascent themselves literally take a thousand years<sup>6</sup>
- 5) The reference is to the Day of Resurrection, or one of its stages.<sup>7</sup>

The first three interpretations, however, appear strained, requiring figurative readings of the text particularly the third, which conflicts with the explicit phrase “its measure is” (*kāna miqdāruhu*). The fourth view also seems problematic in light of the qualifier “of what you count” (*mimmā ta’uddūn*); had the verse intended merely to convey an extended duration, this phrase would have been unnecessary. Thus, the fifth interpretation prevalent among exegetes appears more consistent. Yet even this does not directly imply relativity of time.

At this juncture, one may argue that pre-modern commentators could hardly be expected to recognize the concept of temporal relativity, which emerged only with Einstein’s theory in the twentieth century. Accordingly, it is worth asking whether these verses can bear a new interpretation consistent with temporal relativity while remaining faithful to their language and context. In what follows, we shall attempt to offer such an interpretation.

Concerning the verse “The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day whose measure is fifty thousand years” (Q 70:4), given the context of the surrounding verses, it is difficult to prefer any interpretation other than that which takes the verse as referring to the Day of Resurrection.

As for the verse “They urge you to hasten the punishment, but God will never fail His promise; and indeed, a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of what you count” (Q 22:47), it may, on the basis of the relativity of time, be understood to mean that a unit of time is, from God’s perspective, one day, but from the perspective of human beings, a thousand years.

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<sup>1</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. vol. 16, p. 248

<sup>2</sup> Maḥmūd Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl* [*Al-Kashshāf*], 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987). p. 507- 508.; ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* [*Exegesis of al-Qummī*], 2 vols. (Qom: Dār al-Kitāb, 1984)., p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Ṭabrisī, *Tafsīr Jawāmi’ al-Jawāmi’*. p. 510; Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*. vol. 3, p. 508

<sup>4</sup> Ṭabrisī, *Tafsīr Jawāmi’ al-Jawāmi’*, vol. 8, p. 510;

<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar Fakhr al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr (Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb)* [*The Great Commentary*], 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999). vol. 25, pp. 140–141

<sup>6</sup> Nāṣir Makārem Shīrāzī, with collaborators, *Tafsīr-e Nemūneh* [*An Exemplar Exegesis*] (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1992); vol. 17, p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> Ṭabrisī, *Tafsīr Jawāmi’ al-Jawāmi’*, vol. 8, p. 510; Maḥmūd Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl* [*Al-Kashshāf*], 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987). vol. 3, p. 508; Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. vol. 16, p. 247-249;

Maḥmūd Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl* [*Al-Kashshāf*], 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987)

However, such a meaning entails regarding God as temporal and subject to time, and also presupposes that God is a kind of observer comparable to human observers whereas God is exalted and transcendent beyond such relations. It is, however, possible to take the phrase “with your Lord” (‘inda rabbik) as referring to higher realms, as in other verses of the Qur’an, such as “And there is not a thing but that with Us are its treasures, and We send it down only in a known measure” (Q 15:21), or “To Him belongs whoever is in the heavens and the earth, and those who are with Him are not too proud to worship Him, nor do they weary” (Q 21:19). This possibility will be addressed later.

With respect to the verse “He directs the affair from the heaven to the earth; then it ascends to Him in a day whose measure is a thousand years of what you count” (Q 32:5), it seems that one may draw another interpretation that bears some closeness to the concept of the relativity of time. ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī, in his commentary on this verse, writes: “[Its meaning] is that this [ascent] takes place in a framework such that, if it were to be matched against what we count on earth as the time of events and the measure of their movements, it would correspond to a thousand years of what we count. For it is certain that the time measured by what we count nights, days, months, and years does not extend beyond the earthly realm [and is specific to this world].”<sup>1</sup> He then continues by stating that this verse admits of multiple possibilities: that the ascent (‘urūj) refers to the general ascent of events to God, or that it refers specifically to the Resurrection. He considers the interpretation as referring to the Resurrection to be closer to the apparent meaning. He also adds that if by “heaven” (samā’) is meant the realm of nearness and presence in which time does not enter, then the meaning of the verse would be that the realization of this ascent in that non-temporal framework, if mapped onto earthly events, would correspond to a thousand year.<sup>2</sup>

Yet one may take into account the possibility that what is meant by the ascent is the general ascent of events to God, not the Day of Resurrection; and, at the same time, as the apparent sense of the verse indicates, this ascent takes place in a framework in which a kind of temporality does exist. In that case, the result would be that in the higher realms, too, there is a kind of temporal passage, but one that is far slower than in our earthly realm—such that if a thousand years pass on earth, in that realm only the equivalent of one day passes. These realms may be understood as the supernatural heavens that are the abode of the angels. For if we place the phrase “He directs the affair from the heaven to the earth” alongside other Qur’anic verses—such as “So He completed them as seven heavens in two days, and He revealed in each heaven its command...” (Q 41:12), “It is God who created seven heavens, and of the earth the like of them; His command descends among them...” (Q 65:12), and “And indeed We created above you seven paths...” (Q 23:17)—the result is that the governance of earthly affairs descends from the heavenly origin, being transmitted successively through each of the seven heavens down to

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<sup>1</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān*. vol. 16, p. 248

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the one beneath it, by means of the angels, until it reaches the earth. Thus, the heavens serve as the channels and pathways of the descent of God's command.<sup>1</sup>

From the fact that immediately after "He directs the affair from the heaven to the earth" it is stated "then it ascends to Him", one may infer that this ascent likewise occurs within the same framework in which the descent of the command took place—namely, the seven supernatural heavens.

Accordingly, one may also interpret the expression in Q 22:47 as indicating that in some of the heavenly realms ('inda rabbik), time flows more slowly, so that a thousand earthly years are like one day in those realms. This interpretation is also consistent with the spirit of the first interpretation of that verse—that a thousand years for God is not long and does not differ from one day.

Therefore, the verses in *Sūrat al-Ḥajj* (22:47) and *Sūrat al-Sajda* (32:5) may be interpreted through the lens of temporal relativity, whereas the verse in *Sūrat al-Ma'ārij* (70:4)—which refers specifically to the immense duration of the Day of Resurrection—cannot. A noteworthy feature of the verses in *al-Ḥajj* and *al-Sajda* is the inclusion of the phrase "of what you count" (*mimmā ta'uddūn*). This qualification suggests that these verses engage in a comparison of a single temporal span from two distinct perspectives: the same interval as perceived from the higher realms versus that same interval as measured within the earthly domain (*mimmā ta'uddūn*). By contrast, in *Sūrat al-Ma'ārij*, where no such comparison is intended and the relativity of time is not the subject, no similar qualifier appears.

This raises an important question: if this interpretation is accepted, does it amount to the relativity of time as previously defined? It would appear so. The temporal interval between two successive descents of the angels corresponds, in the higher realms, to a single "day," whereas from the perspective of earthly beings it equals a thousand years. Clearly, what is meant by a "day" in the higher realm cannot be the interval between two successive sunrises, nor a period of twenty-four hours, since such measures belong exclusively to the physical framework of the terrestrial world. Rather, it refers to a span in which the experience of temporal passage within the higher realms occurs to the same degree as the passage of one day in the physical world—or, perhaps more precisely, to an essential and intrinsic characteristic rooted in the *substantial motion* (*ḥarakat al-jawhariyya*) that underlies both realms.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our aim in this article was to answer the question of whether the verses of the Qur'an indicate in favor of the relativity of time or not. The definition of the relativity of time that we adopted here was that "the temporal interval between two events may differ when viewed from the standpoint of two different observers (in an objective and real, not psychological, manner)."

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<sup>1</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. vol. 17, p. 558

This definition is in harmony with Einstein's theory of relativity, in the sense that in that theory the relativity of time, as defined above, holds. Nevertheless, this definition is much more general, since, for example, it also includes observers in supernatural realms.

In this article, we examined three groups of verses: the first group comprised verses that narrated prolonged sleep or temporary death and a return to the world; the second group consisted of verses stating that the period of Barzakh was, in the view of those resurrected on the Day of Judgment, very short; and the third group included verses that spoke of a day equal to (fifty) thousand years.

We saw that for the third group there are appropriate interpretations that do not entail relativity in time, yet at the same time one can offer another interpretation of some of them that would indicate a kind of relativity in time. The verses of the first group especially the verse concerning the story of 'Uzayr (peace be upon him) had, to some extent, a clearer indication of the relativity of time. As for the verses of the second group, although there are interpretations that do not indicate the relativity of time, as discussed in detail, these interpretations face ambiguities and problems and are not fully convincing.

However, another interpretation proposed by some researchers, such as 'Allāmah Ṭehrānī who interpret these verses by appealing to the relativity of time not only interprets them well and makes them intelligible, but, in light of this interpretation, one can also attain a more coherent and clearer understanding of the totality of the verses in all three groups. Specifically, on the basis of this interpretation, and given that "the Qur'an interprets itself," one can also give greater weight to a relativity-based interpretation of some verses in the third group. This interpretation is also in harmony with the insights that arise from Islamic philosophy and wisdom. For it is stated there as well that the higher we ascend through the realms, the greater the immateriality from matter becomes, and the passage of time is perceived more slowly<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, it can be said that although the Noble Qur'an does not explicitly speak about the "relativity of time," through careful reflection and contemplation on the details of certain teachings and narratives contained within it, one can infer the relativity of time in a general sense. In fact, by pointing to a difference in the rhythm of the passage of time in higher realms as compared with our world, God guides us toward the conceptual framework of "the relativity of time." Likewise, Einstein's theory of relativity also restrains us from viewing time as absolute and emphasizes the "relativity of time."

Therefore, if we move beyond the level of theoretical details, models, and mathematics, it can be said that this set of Qur'anic verses and Einstein's theory of relativity both lead to a single concept, namely the relativity of time in its general sense. This consonance is worthy of consideration not in terms of mathematical correspondence, but from philosophical and

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<sup>1</sup> Sayyid Muḥammad-Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Ṭehrānī, *Ma'ād-shenāsī [Eschatology]*, 14th ed. (Mashhad: 'Allāmeḥ Ṭabāṭabā'ī Institute, 2009).

ontological aspects, for both, metaphysically, lead to a picture of the nature of time in which time is not a single, rigid, and absolute entity.

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