

Why are we here?

[7:24-25] He said; **go down** as enemies of one another. And the **land/earth** will be your abode and sustenance for a while. He said; in **it** you will **live** and in **it** you will **die** and from **it** you will **come out**.

The purpose of our lives and our existence on earth is the most fundamental question that the human mind has struggled with since the dawn of history. It is the essential quest of all spiritual paths and religious traditions. This article examines what the Quran has to say about this question - reading the relevant Quranic passages as simple narratives, attempting to take the explicit, evident, obvious information from them. And to avoid speculative post analysis of Quranic verses to reach conclusions that contradict or diverge from the simple message we can glean from them. And accept the Quranic narrative, even when there are differences between it and the narrative that Islamic tradition has handed down to us.

The main passages that narrate how we came to be on this earth, and the purpose of our lives here are 2:30-39, 7:10-25, 20:115-127. But first let us review a few verses that establish some background on our existence before our presence on this earth.

1. As humans, we existed, and took a covenant with God, before our life here on earth ...

[7:172] And when your Lord gathered from the children of Adam, to bear witness for themselves; Am I not your Lord? They said yes indeed, we bear witness, lest you say on the Day of Resurrection; we were unaware of this.

[33:72] We indeed offered the secretariat to the skies and the land and the mountains but they turned it down and were afraid to accept it, however, the human being accepted it. Indeed, he was most unjust, ignorant.

These verses refer to events that happened before our life on the earth, where we took a covenant with God, and also accepted responsibility for the burdens we would bear in the life to come on the earth. We may not grasp the full import of these verses, but the least that we can take away from them, is that we did exist even before we came here to the earth, and that our journey to the earth was our own making. For the sake of our own salvation, we should trust God and His word, even as we do not remember the details of the events as they transpired before we came here.

2. We have experienced death once, before we entered this life.

[40:11] They say, our Lord, You have given us two deaths and two lives, we now confess our sins, is there any way out?

[2:28] How can you have no faith in God, the One who resurrected you from death, then He puts you to death, and subsequently He gives you life, then to Him you will return.

God tells us clearly in these verses that we did experience death once, before we came to this world, and the death we encounter at the end of this life, is a second death.¹ The fact that this is not what we heard taught by Islamic tradition should not be an excuse not to accept it. 2:28 is an important precursor to the passage 2:30-39, which sheds light on why God resurrected us from our first death, as we will study below.

3. Our fall from paradise.

We can read the passages in the Quran that record our transition from paradise to this earth in the **Appendix A**. The observations we can make from this reading are ...

(a) Our life on earth is a consequence of the original sin.

[2:36] But Satan caused them to slip from it, and caused them to depart the state they were in. We said, "Go down, some of you enemies of one another. And you will have residence on earth, and enjoyment for a while."

The logical connection between the sin of Adam of eating from the tree, and being sent down to the earth is very self-evident in the verse. A simple reading of the verse provides no justification for a claim that there is no connection between the two, and they have just been mentioned together sequentially for no reason whatsoever. The same is true in 7:22-24 and 20:121-123, where our eviction to the earth follows the action of eating from the tree, and God's expressed disapproval of it. They are not disconnected events, but the latter is a consequence of the former. Our life on earth is a consequence of the original sin.

The causal relationship between Adam's sin and our existence on earth is not in dispute, even from the traditional viewpoint. That is clearly the event that led to our eviction from paradise.

¹ The verses above describe the experience of the unrighteous, as they reflect back on the day of Resurrection, and how they blew their second chance too. And a reminder to those seek to reject faith in God. The Quran also teaches us that the righteous only go through the first death, and do not experience the second death, even though their departure would appear like death from our perspective (44:56, 2:154).

(b) We were all participants in the original sin.

[7:11] And indeed, We created **all of you**, then We designed **all of you**, We then said to the **angels to honor Adam**, they immediately honored him except Iblees who was not one of the honorers.

It is interesting that in 7:11, the creation and design of “all of you” (i.e., each of us) is followed by the command to the angels to honor² Adam. Essentially the word ‘Adam’ swapped for all of humanity in the latter part of the verse. Each of us (“all of you”) were created/designed before the event (7:11), and sent to the earth along with Adam after the event (2:36,38; 7:24-25; 20:123), establishing our presence during the event too, when the command to the angels to honor Adam was given. The recurring references in second person plural in the verses [e.g., اهبطوا (“go down you all”) in 2:36,38] also makes this evident. The references to Adam in these passages can therefore be understood as applying to all of humanity. Some may argue that the plural is used in a restricted reference to Adam/wife and Iblis only.³ But the context of the verses - e.g., 2:38, 7:25, 20:123-127 - which contain the instructions for all of humanity, makes it clear that the usage of plural does refer to all of humanity. Further, the fact that we live on this earth confirms it is referring to us too - Adam/wife were not the only ones consigned to live on earth.

Further, this is not even a far-fetched or ground breaking idea. Traditional commentators have also espoused it. For example,

- The Study Quran⁴ (footnote 36, p. 24) says, “The interpretation most in keeping with the Quranic text understands the addresses to be Adam and Eve and all their progeny, sometimes including Iblis and his progeny, with Adam and Eve representing humanity as a whole”.
- Muhammad Ali’s translation⁵ (footnote 52 to v. 31, p. 18) says, “Adam, therefore, though it may also be the name of a particular man stands for man generally”.

² The word اسجدوا also refers to physical prostration to God, for example during the contact prayer. Here, as an act between two creations, it takes the nuanced meaning of ‘honor’ or ‘pay respect to’.

³ Some may have difficulty accepting the idea we were also participants in the original sin, since they believe that paradise was on earth. And that after the original sin, Adam and wife simply strolled out of an earthly garden onto other earthly landscapes. In that case, we were not yet born, so they see no way for us to have been present at the time. Others may interpret the fall from paradise as the migration of a humanoid population out of an earthly garden, believing that this reconciles the Quranic account with evolution (see Appendix B). I see the pursuit of the question on whether paradise was on earth an extraneous tangent to the quest of understanding why we are here. Following the simple chronology in the narration, paradise and earth are explicitly described as separate places (e.g., 2:35 vs. 2:38, 7:19 vs. 7:24-25). The former was their dwelling place before the original sin. The latter was their new abode, after the original sin. Regardless of whether “go down” really means “go down”, this is direct evidence that they were separate places, and “the land/earth will be your abode” meant that paradise was not on this land/earth to begin with.

⁴ The Study Quran, Harper Collins Publishers, First Edition, 2015

⁵ Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha’at Islam Lahore, Inc. U.S.A., Second Revised Edition, Reprint 1995

So when we see this event, with the word 'Adam' describing "man generally" or "humanity as a whole", it makes us participants in the original sin. Another reason is that no soul bears the burden of another (6:164). If only Adam/wife were participants in the original sin, we should not have been here, since God would not make us bear the burden for what only they did.

But this does beg the question - why does God describe Adam/wife as the principal actors in the original sin, although we can infer that the description includes us and we were present when the event happened? One reason may be that Adam was here first, and fulfilled the purpose for which he was sent down - he followed God's guidance, repented to God and was forgiven by God for his transgression. And the complete circle of transgression, eviction, repentance and forgiveness are described for Adam separately. We are still here and have not yet returned to God, and Adam is described here as the example for us to follow. In any event, following God's guideline in 3:7, we should simply accept what is clear/evident, and eschew speculation on what may be ambiguous/allegorical, even if we do not have all the answers.

4. Our primary purpose in this life is to worship God.

[2:38-29] We said, **go down from here all of you. Then when you all receive guidance from Me, whoever follows My guidance has nothing to fear nor will he grieve. As for those who are unfaithful and rejected Our proofs, they are dwellers of Hell. They will abide therein eternally.**

[51:56] I did not create the jinns and the humans except to worship Me.

Now that we are here, this is the most important thing for us to remember - we are here to worship God by commemorating Him alone, and following His guidance. These will be successful ones, who spend eternity in peace with God, in the life to come. This statement of purpose elicits the question - why does God need our worship? The truth is God does not need our worship. To God belongs everything in the skies and the land, and God does not need our worship, nor our faith nor our obedience. Rather, we are in need of worshipping Him and obeying Him and being faithful to Him (35:15, 27:40, 4:131, 31:12, 47:38, 57:24, 64:6).

Summary.

In summary, putting together what we learned in the sections above, the Quran describes our existence prior to our coming to this earth. We will not remember the details, but God gives us just enough detail for us to know that we were participants in an act of disobedience against God. We made a covenant with God, to obey Him, and not to listen to satan, who is our avowed enemy. Satan is condemned to an end of misery, and misery seeks company. Satan is out to entice us towards an eternity of pain and suffering, and entrap as many of us as possible. Our act of transgression the first time, resulted in our first death, in paradise. And this life on earth is

our resurrection from the first death (2:28). It is our second chance - to seek God, to worship God, to commemorate God, to obey God, to reconnect with God, and become close to God. Those of us who blow this second chance too will rue it on the Day of Resurrection. Those who repented and followed God's guidance when it came to them, God will accept their repentance, forgive them and guide them, just like He forgave Adam. These will be the ones whom "God has blessed" (1:7), and we should constantly pray to be included among them.

Appendix A

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

[2:30-39] And when your Lord said to the angels, **I am the appointer of a substitute on the land**, they said will You appoint someone therein who will spread corruption and shed blood, while we glorify and praise You and consider You sacred? He said I have complete knowledge while you do not know. And He taught Adam all the names, afterwards, He presented them to the angels and said, inform Me of these names if you are truthful. They said, glory be to You, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, You are The All Knowing, The All Wise. He said, O Adam; inform them of their names. Once he informed them of their names, He said, did I not tell you that I fully know the secret of the vacua and matter and fully know what you declare and what you conceal. And when We said to the angels; honor Adam, they all honored him, except Iblis who refused; he turned arrogant and became a disbeliever. And We said to Adam, **dwelt in paradise**, you and your wife and eat from it whatever you desire, however, do not approach this tree, lest both of you become transgressors. However, Satan duped the two of them and caused their eviction from where they were, and We said; **go down** as enemies of one another, and **the land shall be your abode and sustenance for awhile**. Subsequently, Adam received from his Lord words by which He accepted his repentance. Indeed, He is The Acceptor of Repentance, The All Merciful. We said, **go down from here all of you**. Then when **you receive guidance from Me**, whoever follows My guidance has nothing to fear nor will he grieve. As for those who are unfaithful and rejected Our proofs, they are dwellers of Hell. They will abide therein eternally.

[7:10-25] And, We certainly **established you on the land** and provided for you therein sustenance. Indeed very few are grateful. And indeed, We **created you**, then We **designed you**, We **then** said to the angels to honor Adam, they immediately honored him except Iblees who was not one of the honorers. He said; what prevented you from honoring him when I commanded you? He said; I am better than he, You created me from fire and you created him from clay. He said; then you shall go down therefrom, for you shall never be arrogant therein, therefore, get out, for indeed you are lowly. He said; respite me until the Day of Resurrection. He said; you shall have a respite. He said; since you have enticed me, I will surely divert them from Your straight path. Then I will surely come to them from their front and their back and their right and their left; and You will find most of them ungrateful. He said; get out therefrom debased and expelled. Indeed those among them who follow you, I will surely fill Gehenna with you altogether. As for you O Adam, **you shall settle, you and your wife in Paradise**, and eat from whatever the two of you desire, however, do not approach this one tree, lest you will transgress. Thereafter, Satan duped them in order to reveal what was hidden of their bodies

and said; your Lord did not forbid you from this tree except to prevent you from becoming angels or becoming immortal. And he swore by both that indeed I am giving you good advice. He therefore caused their fall with a lie. Consequently, once both tasted the tree, their bodies became visible to them and they tried to cover themselves with the leaves of Paradise. And their Lord called upon them; did I not forbid this tree for the two of you and did I not tell you both that Satan is your most ardent enemy? They said, our Lord, we have been unjust towards our own souls and if You do not forgive us and do not have mercy upon us, we will surely end up losers. He said; **go down** as enemies of one another. And **the land will be your abode and sustenance for a while**. He said; **in it you will live** and **in it you will die** and **from it you will come out**.

[20:115-127] And indeed We made an agreement with Adam previously, he then forgot, We did not find him resolute. And when We said to the angels, honor Adam, they all did, except Iblis who refused. We then said; O Adam, indeed he is an enemy of you and your wife, **he would cause your eviction from Paradise** and you will suffer hardship. Indeed you will never suffer hunger therein nor will you ever be naked. And indeed you will never thirst therein and never suffer the heat of the sun. Then Satan enticed them saying; O Adam shall I show you the tree of eternity and everlasting kingship? Then they both ate from it, whereupon their bodies became visible to them and they tried to cover themselves with the leaves of Paradise. **And Adam disobeyed his Lord and he then became a transgressor. Then his Lord chose him, accepted his repentance and guided him.** He said the two of you **get out therefrom with the rest** as enemies of one another. Therefore, **when guidance comes to you from Me**, then whoever follows My guidance, he will never go astray nor will he suffer any hardship. And whoever rejects My reminder, he will then surely have a life of hardship, and We will summon him on the Day of Resurrection blind. He said, my Lord why did you summon me blind when I used to be a seer. He said; because when Our proofs came to you, you chose to ignore them, and you are thus ignored today. And We thus requite the one who transgresses and does not believe in the signs of his Lord. And indeed the suffering of the Hereafter is far more severe and everlasting.

In each of these passages the starting verse serves as a preface, summarizing the gist of what had happened - that God appointed humans as a substitute/successor and established us on the land/earth (2:30, 7:10). The former of these verses is in future tense, addressed to the angels before the creation of humans, and the latter is in past tense, addressed to us. And also that God made a covenant with Adam, but he forgot (20:115). The fulfillment of this event is described over the course of the remaining part of the passages, that follows in roughly chronological sequence, from the creation of humans until our eviction from paradise. These are the events that are explicitly listed in them.

1. God creates and designs all of us (including Adam). (7:11).
2. Adam demonstrates the knowledge that God taught him. (2:31-33)
3. Iblis' refusal to obey God commands to honor Adam, and God granting him respite to entice humans (2:34, 7:11-18, 20:116).
4. God asks Adam/wife to dwell in paradise. God warns Adam not to eat from a specific tree, and warns him that Satan is his most ardent enemy, heeding whom will cause his eviction from paradise. (2:35, 7:19,22, 20:117-119).

5. Satan tricks Adam/wife into breaking God's commandment and eating from the tree. (2:36, 7:20-22, 20:120-121).
6. God rebukes Adam/wife, reminds him of His warning, and commands "all of you" (including each of us) to go down to the earth. (2:36,38, 7:24-25, 20:123).
7. Adam receives words/guidance through which he repents, and God accepted his repentance. (2:37,20:122).
8. The rest of humanity is expected to follow suit - when God's guidance comes to us, we have to follow the guidance and repent to God (2:38, 20:123-127).

Appendix B: What about the theory of evolution?

The account of the creation and descent of humans to earth is often attempted to be reconciled with what we know about human origins from evolution. The traditional belief, that is mainstream to the three Abrahamic faiths, is usually that Adam was created in earthly human form, and physically brought down from paradise to earth. This runs counter to the evidence from science that modern humans evolved from humanoids who in turn evolved from ape-like species a few million years ago.

On the other hand, some of those who tried to reconcile the Quranic account with the theory of evolution, have tried to interpret the "fall" of humans from paradise as the migration of a pre-existing humanoid population out of a garden in Africa. I too seriously dabbled with idea at one time, before realizing it was futile to take the description in the Quran, and try to "fit" it with events in Africa in the past 200,000 years since the dawn of homo sapiens, or around the world since 50,000 years ago when humans migrated and settled down around the world. And the simple message conveyed through the Quran was lost, in this pursuit. The purpose of reading the Quran became seeking scientific validation for it, instead of learning what God is teaching us. So I abandoned this approach, and decided to focus on the spiritual message that the Quran is teaching us.

Now in the light of the knowledge that we were created and designed by God before the event of the original sin, we were participants in it along with Adam, we were evicted along with Adam from paradise, and we went through the first death before God brought us to life again here on this earth, I can look at evolution from a fresh perspective. And strangely enough, there is no conflict with evolution at all. God created and designed us as our souls before this life (also see 4:1, 7:189, 39:6). What we acquire when we come into this life is the body, which is only a garment or a shell for the soul, that we will leave behind when we leave this world. When God sent us (our souls) to this world, the mechanism was through fashioning our bodies in our mother's womb (39:6, 22:5, 3:6, 16:78). There is no reason why the mechanism Adam was sent would have been any different. The theory of evolution describes how the function and structure of our bodies evolved here on earth, from related organisms. This universe, and its laws, are finite and will eventually expire. The Quran contains in the guidance on how to grow our soul, to

become close to Him and look forward to spend eternity in peace with Him when we return to Him.

