

# Lawh-i Mahfuz and the reality of timelessness: Our lives are composed of a single moment

**A day with your Lord is equivalent to a thousand years in the way you count.** (Surat al-Hajj, 47)

What we call time is actually a way of comparing one moment with another. For example, if we strike an object, it makes a certain sound. If we strike the same object again a bit later, it will make a similar sound. You probably think that there's an interval between the first and the second sound—an interval called "time." However, when you hear that second sound, the first one is only a record in your brain and an item in your memory. By comparing the sound you recall with the moment you hear it again, you form the concept of time. Without making this comparison, you would have no concept of time.



In the same way, a person who enters a room and sees someone sitting in an armchair in that room makes a comparison. The moments of seeing the person in the armchair, opening the door and walking into the center of the room are only data in his mind. The concept of time arises when he compares the sight of person in the armchair with these "previous" data.

## **The Formation of the Concept of Time**

Today, it is scientifically accepted that time is a concept born of our habit of arranging the changes and movements of objects in a definite serial progression. Were it not for the human memory, the brain could not make such interpretations, and the concept of time would not arise. In his book *The Possible and the Actual*, Francois Jacob, a Nobel Prize winner in Genetics, refers to the importance of the concept of being invariably formed with reference to an organized series:

Films played backwards make it possible for us to imagine a world in which time flows backwards. A world in which milk separates itself from the coffee and jumps out of the cup to reach the milk-pan; a world in which light rays are emitted from the walls to be collected in a trap (gravity center) instead of gushing out from a light source; a world in which a stone slopes to the palm of a man by the astonishing cooperation of innumerable drops of water which enable the stone to jump out of water. Yet, in such a world in which time has such opposite features, the processes of our brain and the way our memory compiles information, would similarly be functioning backwards. The same is true for the past and future and the world will appear to us exactly as it currently appears.

Because our brains are accustomed to arranging things in a certain series, we assume that the world operates as Jacob describes—and that time always flows forward. However, this is a decision the brain makes—"from inside," as it were—and is therefore totally relative. Indeed, we can never know how time flows, or even if it flows at all. This is because time is not an absolute, "outside" reality, but just a

subjective concept. You may, for example, think you have fallen asleep in your armchair for merely a moment, when your watch tells you that hours have passed.

## **The General Theory of Relativity**

The idea that time is a concept was substantiated by the noted physicist, Albert Einstein, in his book *General Theory of Relativity*. Lincoln Barnett, in his book *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, writes these words:

The subjectivity of time is best explained in Einstein's own words. "The experiences of an individual," he says, "appear to us arranged in a series of events; in this series the single events which we remember appear to be ordered according to the criterion of 'earlier' and 'later'. There exists, therefore, for the individual, an I-time, or subjective time. This in itself is not measurable. I can, indeed, associate numbers with the events, in such a way that a greater number is associated with the later event than with an earlier one."

Einstein himself pointed out (as quoted in Barnett's book): "Space and time are forms of intuition, which can no more be divorced from consciousness than can our concepts of colour, shape, or size." According to the *General Theory of Relativity*, time is not absolute; apart from the series of events according to which we measure it, it has no independent existence. Since time is based on perception, it depends entirely on the perceiver and is therefore relative.

The speed at which time flows differs according to the references we use to measure it, because there is no natural clock in the human body to indicate precisely how fast time passes. As Lincoln Barnett wrote: "Just as there is no such thing as colour without an eye to discern it, so an instant or an hour or a day is nothing without an event to mark it."

## **The Relativity of Time in the Qur'an**

The relativity of time is plainly experienced in dreams. Although what we see in our dreams seems to last for hours, in fact, it only lasts for a few minutes, and even a few seconds.

The conclusion to which we are led by the findings of modern science is that time is not an absolute fact as supposed by materialists, but only a relative perception. What is most interesting is that this fact, undiscovered until the 20th century by science, was revealed to mankind in the Qur'an fourteen centuries ago. There are various references in the Qur'an to the relativity of time.

It is possible to see in many verses of the Qur'an the scientifically proven fact that time is a psychological perception dependent on events, setting, and conditions. For instance, a person's entire life is a very short time, as we are informed in the Qur'an:

**On the Day when He will call you, you will answer His Call with words of His Praise and Obedience, and you will think that you have stayed in this world but a little while!** (Surat al-Isra': 52)

**And on the Day when He shall gather them together, it will seem to them as if they had not tarried on Earth longer than an hour of a day: they will recognize each other.** (Surah Yunus: 45)

Some verses indicate that people perceive time differently and that sometimes people can perceive a very short period as a very lengthy one. The following conversation of people held during their judgment in the hereafter is a good example of this:

**He will say: "What number of years did you stay on Earth?" They will say: "We stayed a day or part of a day, but ask those who keep account." He will say: "Brief indeed was your sojourn, if you had only known!"** (Surat al-Mu'minun: 112-114)

In some other verses. Allah states that time may flow at different paces in different settings:

**. . . Truly, a day in the sight of your Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning.** (Surat al-Hajj: 47)

**The angels and the spirit ascend to Him in a day the measure of which is like fifty thousand years.** (Surat al-Ma'arij: 4)

**He rules all affairs from the heavens to the Earth: in the end all will ascend to Him in a single day, the measure of which is a thousand years by your reckoning.** (Surat as-Sajda: 5)

These verses are clear expressions of the relativity of time. That this finding, which was only recently understood by scientists in the 20th century, was communicated to man 1,400 years ago in the Qur'an is an indication of the revelation of the Qur'an by Allah, Who encompasses the whole of time and space.

### **The Relativity of Time Explains the Reality of Fate**

As we see from the account of the relativity of time and the verses that refer to it, time is not a concrete concept, but one that varies depending on perceptions. For example, a space of time conceived by us as millions of years long is one moment in Allah's sight. A period of 50 thousand years for us is only a day for Gabriel and the angels.

This reality is very important for an understanding of the idea of fate. Fate is the idea that Allah created every single event, past, present, and future in "a single moment." This means that every event, from the creation of the universe until doomsday, has already occurred and ended in Allah's sight. A significant number of people cannot grasp the reality of fate. They cannot understand how Allah can know events that have not yet happened, or how past and future events have already happened in Allah's sight. From our point of view, things that have not happened are events which have not occurred. This is because we live our lives in relation to the time that Allah has created, and we could not know anything without the information in our memories. Because we dwell in the testing place of this world, Allah has not given us memories of the things we call "future" events. Consequently, we cannot know what the future holds.

But Allah is not bound to time or space; it is He who has already created all these things from nothing. For this reason, past, present and future are all the same to Allah. From His point of view, everything has already occurred; He does not need to wait to see the result of an action. The beginning and the end of an event are both experienced in His sight in a single moment. For example, Allah already knew what kind of end awaited Pharaoh even before sending Moses to him, even before Moses was born and even before Egypt became a kingdom; and all these events including the end of Pharaoh were experienced in a single moment in the sight of Allah. Besides, for Allah there is no such thing as remembering the past; past and future are always present to Allah; everything exists in the same moment.



## A Sign in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, there are certain indications that in Allah's sight, there is no past or future and that, for Him, time is a single moment. Events that lie in the future for us are related in the Qur'an as if they were long past. This is because Allah has already created the past and the future as one single moment. For this reason, he speaks of a future event as if it had already come to an end. But because we cannot perceive it, we think of it as lying in the future. For example, in the verses that describe the account human beings will give to Allah in the Hereafter, this is related as an event that is long over:

**And the trumpet is blown, and all who are in the heavens and all who are in the Earth swoon away, save him whom Allah willeth. Then it is blown a second time, and behold them standing waiting! And the Earth shineth with the light of her Lord, and the Book is set up, and the prophets and the witnesses are brought, and it is judged between them with truth, and they are not wronged . . . And those who do not believe are driven unto Hell in troops . . . And those who keep their duty to their Lord are driven unto the Garden in troops . . . .** (Surat az-Zumar, 68-73)

Some other verses on this subject are:

**And every soul came, along with it a driver and a witness.** (Surat al-Qaf, 21)

**And the heaven is cloven asunder, so that on that day it is frail.** (Surat al-Haqqa, 16)

**And because they were patient and constant, He rewarded them with a Garden and [garments of] silk. Reclining in the [Garden] on raised thrones, they saw there neither the sun's [excessive heat] nor excessive cold.** (Surat al-Insan, 12-13)

**And Hell is placed in full view for [all] to see.** (Surat an-Naziat, 36)

**But on this Day the believers laugh at the unbelievers.** (Surat al-Mutaffifin, 34)

**And the Sinful saw the fire and apprehended that they have to fall therein: no means did they find to turn away therefrom.** (Surat al-Kahf, 53)

As you can see, occurrences that are going to take place after our deaths (from our point of view) are related as already experienced and past events in the Qur'an. Allah is not bound by the relative time frame that we are confined in. Allah has willed these things in timelessness: people have already performed them and all these events have been lived through and ended. It is imparted in the verse below that every event, be it big or small, is within the knowledge of Allah and recorded in a book:

**In whatever business thou may be, and whatever portion you may be reciting from the Qur'an, and whatever deed you [mankind] may be doing, We are witnesses thereof when you are deeply engrossed therein. Nor is hidden from your Lord [so much as] the weight of an atom on the**

**Earth or in heaven. And not the least and not the greatest of these things but are recorded in a clear record.** (Surah Yunus, 61)

When a person who submits to Allah realizes that he is ill, he puts all his trust in Allah knowing that this ailment is his fate. His knowledge that Allah has created the illness as his destiny enables him to realize that it will turn out for the good. And knowing that he will get better if it is in his future to recover, he will be swift to see a doctor, watch his diet and take some medicine. But he never forgets that despite his going to a doctor, effecting the treatment and taking his prescription, whether or not he will recover are all in Allah's hands. He knows that all these events are in Allah's memory and were prepared for him even before he was born.

In the Qur'an, Allah tells us that everything that happens to a person is written in a book before it happens:

**Nothing occurs, either in the Earth or in yourselves, without its being in a Book before We make it happen. That is something easy for Allah. That is so that you will not be grieved about the things that pass you by or exult about the things that come to you. Allah does not love any vain or boastful man.** (Surat al-Hadid: 22-23)

### **The Important of Submitting to Fate**

This fact—that the past and the future are already created and exist and have happened in Allah's sight—reveals to us a very important truth: Everyone is absolutely ruled by fate. And just as we cannot alter our past, we cannot change our future. Like your past, your future has already happened. Everything that will happen to you in the future—what you will eat, when and where you will eat it, who you will speak to, how much money you will make, the illnesses you will suffer from, how, when and where you will die—all that is determined and unalterable. These things already exist in Allah's sight and in His memories. But this information is not present in your memory.

For this reason, anyone who is saddened and upset by things that have happened to him and gets angry worrying about the future is worrying in vain. Because the future that he fears and frets about has already happened. No matter what anyone does, he cannot change this fact.

At this point, we must also state that we must avoid a wrong understanding of fate. Some people believe that whatever lies in their fate is preordained, that it will happen regardless, and there's nothing they can do about it. But such an attitude leads to a distorted idea of fate. It is true, everything that happens to us is determined in our fate. Before anything happens to us, it has already happened in Allah's sight and all the details are kept in Allah's sight in a book entitled Lawh-i Mahfuz. But Allah gives to all of us the impression that we can change things that happen and that we do act according to our own choices.

For example, when a person feels thirsty, he does not wait to see if it is in his fate to drink water. Rather, he simply gets up, takes a glass of water and drinks it. Doing this, he feels that he is acting according to his own will and desire. In reality, both the glass and how much water he will drink are determined in his fate. But throughout his life, he has the sense that everything he does is by his own free will.

There is a difference between the person who submits to Allah and the fate He has created for him and the person who does not. The one who submits knows that everything he does is according to Allah's will; he knows this, despite his sense that

he is doing these things himself. The ignorant individual mistakenly believes that he does everything through his own power and his own intelligence.

A person who believes in fate never sinks into desperation in the face of adversity. On the contrary, his trust in Allah only increases, and he feels contentment in his submission to Him. Allah has determined beforehand everything that happens to us; therefore, He has commanded (Surat al-Hadid: 23) that we not be saddened by adversity and that we not be unmindful of the blessings He gives us. . . . Allah's command is a pre-ordained decree. (Surat al-Ahzab: 38)

## **A Journey in Time**

Scientific research into the nature of time agrees with statements in the Qur'an. One of these points of agreement is that time is a concept formed by our perceptions. Given the fact that Allah gives us all our perceptions, it is certainly possible—with His permission—for a person to perceive forward and backward in time.

To understand this idea more easily, imagine time as a film strip. If we imagine the film running backwards, the actors would appear travel from their future into their past. Or we cut a frame or two from the end to near the beginning of the picture, a character in the film would experience a moment in the future. So, in our world, our perception of time is no different. If He wills, Allah may reorder our perceptions, and we could travel into the past or the future.

This very possibility is mentioned in many verses of the Qur'an: We are told that a person chosen by Allah could live in a different dimension. For example, the Qur'an tells us that Allah kept a community of believers called the Companions of the Cave in a deep sleep for more than three centuries. When He woke them up, they had no idea how long they had slept and believed that only a very short period of time had elapsed:

**Then We draw [[a veil]] over their ears, for a number of years, in the Cave, [so that they heard not]. Then We raised them up that We might know which of the two parties would best calculate the time that they had tarried.** (Surat al-Kahf, 11-12)

**Such [being their state], we raised them up [from sleep], that they might question each other. Said one of them, "How long have you stayed [here].....?" They said, "We have stayed [perhaps] a day, or part of a day." [At length,] they [all] said, "Allah [alone] knows best how long you have stayed here....."** (Surat al-Kahf, 19)

As we see from these verses, the time before the Companions of the Cave fell asleep and the moment when they woke up were vastly different.

Allah tells us of a similar situation. In verse 259 of Surat al-Baqara, we hear of a man visiting a deserted city. Allah left this man dead for a hundred years and later resurrected him. But the man thought he has been there for a day or less. And within the space of that century, the man's food did not spoil and his donkey still remained in the same place. There are the relevant verses:

**Or [take] the similitude of one who passed by a hamlet, all in ruins to its roofs. He said: "Oh! how shall Allah bring it [ever] to life, after [this] its death?" but Allah caused him to die for a hundred years, then raised him up [again]. He said: "How long did you tarry [thus]?" He said: [Perhaps] a day or part of a day." He said: "Nay, you have tarried thus a hundred years; but look at your food and your drink; they show no signs of age;**

**and look at your donkey: And that We may make of you a sign unto the people, Look further at the bones, how We bring them together and clothe them with flesh.” When this was shown clearly to him, he said: “I know that Allah has power over all things.”** (Surat al-Baqara, 259)

Allah tells us that He told this story as a lesson. From these verses we can see that Allah controls the passage of time, as He did the sleep of the Companions of the Cave, and, at His will, time can move forward or backward.



**1)** Many verses of the Qur’an make statements that have been confirmed by modern science: for example, that time is a psychological perception, experienced differently according to the event, its location and the conditions that determine it.

**2)** Fate is the concept that Allah created every past and future event in “a single moment.” This means that, in Allah’s sight, everything from the moment of creation to the end of the world has already happened and come to an end. Human beings lead their lives in relation to the time that Allah has created and, apart from the information in their memories, they cannot know anything.

**3)** In this world of testing, Allah has not put any future events into our memories. We do not and cannot know what the future holds for us.

**4)** Allah is independent of time and place. Indeed, He created them both from nothing. For this reason, past, present and future have all already happened and are as one vision in His sight.

**5)** If we think of our life as a filmstrip, we observe and experience it as if we were viewing a videocassette, with no possibility to speed up the tape. But Allah sees the whole film all at once, at the same moment. It is He who created it and determined its every detail. Just as we are able to see the beginning, middle and end of a all at once, so Allah encompasses in one moment—from beginning to end—all the years to which we are subject and which we experience. However, human beings live out these events in sequence, and only when the time has come for them to witness the fate that Allah has created for them.

This is the way it is for the destiny of everyone in the world. The life of everyone who has ever been—and whoever will be—created, in this world and the next, is present in the sight of Allah in all its details. The destinies of all living things—planets and animals, plants and objects—are written together with the fates of billions of human beings in Allah's eternal memory. They will remain written without being lost or diminished.

The reality of fate is one of the manifestations of Allah's eternal greatness, power and might. This is why He is called “the Preserver” (al-Hafiz).

**6)** The Qur’an tells us that everything a person does is written, word for word, in Allah’s sight. What the people of Paradise will experience is reported as events that have already happened. The true life of Paradise will be ours; but what the people in Paradise experience—what they talk about, and the feasts they enjoy—exist at this very moment in Allah’s memory. Before we were born, the future of human beings in

this world and the Hereafter has happened in a moment in Allah's sight; and it all remains in His memory:

**Everything they did is in the Books. Everything is recorded, big or small. The heedful are amid Gardens and Rivers, on seats of honor in the presence of a Competent Sovereign.** (Surat al-Qamar, 52-55)

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