

The Significance of the Word ‘Ḥayawān’

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Abstract:

This article examines the significance of the word “Ḥayawān” in Surah al-Ankabut 29:64, where the Quran contrasts this worldly existence with the eternal reality of the Hereafter. Through linguistic analysis, syntactic examination, and classical exegesis, the paper explores three primary meanings of the term: “abode”, “living being”, and “life itself” in its most dynamic sense. The study demonstrates how each meaning contributes to the Āyah’s powerful hyperbolic assertion about the true nature of existence, and explores why this specific word was chosen over its more common synonym “ḥayāt”. By examining the semantic nuances through classical Arabic lexicographical sources and comparing various scholarly translations, the research reveals the depth of Quranic eloquence and the challenges inherent in conveying its multidimensional meaning across linguistic boundaries. The analysis ultimately argues that the three meanings of “Ḥayawān” work collectively to create a comprehensive understanding of the Hereafter as the quintessence of vibrant, everlasting life, in stark contrast to the fleeting triviality of worldly existence.

Keywords:

Hereafter; translation; word choice; life; eternal

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Question

I am trying to find a good explanation and one word translation of the word “Hayawan” in ﴿وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ﴾ [Surah al-Ankabut: 64]. Could you explain the significance of the word and how to best articulate that in English?²

Answer

One of the most distinguishing features of the Quran is of course its profound phraseology. To anyone attempting to compose eloquent speech, the selection of one word over another, or over all other synonyms and near-synonyms in fact, is a matter of paramount importance, and consequently one of intentionality and purpose. Moreover, in the Arabic language, we frequently find several words for one meaning, each with its own particular nuance and connotation.³ The Quran, being in Arabic and being the speech of Allah Himself, hence also carries deep intentionality and wisdom in its choice of words. Human beings can explore a Quranic word choice through various angles of linguistic study such as etymology, morphology, semantics, lexicology, etc., however, they can never rightfully claim to have arrived at the totality of the wisdom and import behind it. With this consideration, we will attempt to present certain significant semantic nuances of the word in question.

The complete Ayah in which this word is mentioned, Ayah 64 of Surah al-Ankabut, is as follows:

﴿وَمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَهُوٌّ وَلَعِبٌ وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾

While there is some variance in the way that translators of the Quran have rendered this word, and the Ayah in general, into the English language, there is an overall congruence in the general meaning that has been conveyed through phrases such as “the true life” and “the real life”, with some adding further qualifiers in order to capture further elements of meaning. One somewhat distinctive translation in English of this Ayah is that of Shaykh Ahmad Zaki Hammad:

² Questions are reproduced verbatim and have not been edited from their original form of submission.

³ There is a complete genre of books dedicated to the explication of the various synonyms of a word in the Arabic language, i.e. for the various words for a concept, and the semantic nuances between them. See for example: *Fiqh al-Lughah* by Abū Manṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī, *al-Furūq fi al-Lughah* (also known as *al-Furūq al-Lughawiyya*) by Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī, and *Furūq al-Lughāt* by Nūr al-Dīn al-Jazā’rī.

For the life of this ‘fleeting’ world is nothing but amusement and play. But, indeed, it is the abode of the Hereafter that is, most surely, life ‘everlasting’ itself, if only they were to know ‘what awaits them there’.⁴

Another translation in English, an even more atypical one, is by Shaykh Nuh Keller:

Nor is the pathetic life of this world but a frivolity and game. And verily the final abode, it alone is the life that is vibrantly forever alive, did they but know.⁵

In order to see how these two translators, both of whom have traditional scholarly training as opposed to many others,⁶ are justified in their inclusion of these additional details, we will have to consider a few aspects of the Ayah, including its context and a few points of its syntax, along with some linguistic and exegetical aspects of the word *Hayawān* itself.

The word *Hayawān* is the predicate of the sentence it sits in, which in turn is the predicate of the larger sentence, whose subject is “*al-Dār al-Ākhira*”.⁷ This phrase, although often translated as “the abode of the Hereafter,” is technically not a genitive phrase (*iḍāfah*), but rather an adjectival phrase, i.e., the word “*al-Ākhira*” is the adjective of the word “*al-Dār*”. This leads to a nuanced change in meaning, and consequently may more accurately be understood as “the Final Abode.” This is identical to the syntax of the phrase used to refer to this mundane life in the first part of the Ayah, “*al-Hayāt al-Dunyā*.” Although this phrase is often translated in a genitive form as well, such as “the life of [this] world,” the word “*al-Dunyā*” here is also an adjective, which highlights its primary lexical meaning: ‘the lowest’, ‘the most debased’, ‘the most contemptible’, since the word *dunyā* is the feminine form of the word *adnā*, which is the superlative form of the word *danī*, which carries the meanings of ‘low’, ‘debased’, ‘contemptible’, ‘insignificant’, and the like. Thus, although it might be correct to convey the meaning of the phrase as “[this] worldly life,” perhaps the most accurate rendering is “[this] lowest life” or “this most insignificant life.” This description posits a stark contrast between the two stages of existence.

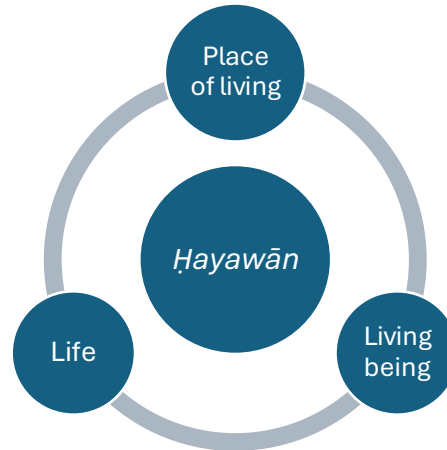
⁴ Ahmad Zaki Hammad, *The Gracious Quran* (Lisle: Lucent Interpretations, 2009), Surah al-Ankabut 29:64.

⁵ Nuh Ha-Mim Keller, *The Quran Beheld* (Edinburgh: Stanchion Press, 2022), Surah al-Ankabut 29:64.

⁶ A task as monumental as translating the Quran patently requires substantial academic qualifications, which include proficiency in not only the Arabic language but also the various Islamic sciences, and especially training in reading the highly technical works of Quranic exegesis. See Shāh Walīullāh al-Dihlawī, *Muqaddimah Dar Qawānīn Tarjumah* (which can be found in *Majmū‘ Rasā’il Shāh Walīullāh*); Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī, *Mas’alat Tarjamat al-Qur’ān*; and Sohaib Saeed, *Exegetical Qur’an Translation: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*.

⁷ Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Darwesh, *I’rāb al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa Bayānuhū*, vol. 6 (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1999), 20.

The word *ḥayawān* comes from the lexical root ḥ-y-y, from which comes the word *ḥayāt*, which means life. There are three meanings given by the classical scholars of Arabic lexicography for this word:⁸ⁱ ‘a place of living, an abode’ (*dār al-ḥayāt*), ‘living being’, and ‘life’ itself.



In the sense of ‘a place of living, an abode’ (*dār al-ḥayāt*), the predication is straightforward, and the meaning would be, “Truly, the Final Abode is the only real, everlasting one.” Exegetically, the nested predication, definiteness of the predicate, and particles of emphasis together produce the meaning of quintessence, accentuation, and exclusivity, i.e. an abode that is uniquely vibrant and everlasting in the true meaning of both words, as opposed to the one that is finite in its very nature.⁹

In the meaning of ‘living being’, the predication may be figurative and hyperbolic. That is, the Ākhira has so much life in it, and the life in it is so real, to the degree that as if it has its own life and is alive. This may be likened to the metaphor and personification in the saying in English, “Experience is the best teacher.” Of course, it is also possible that the Quran is saying this in a literal sense, not a figurative one, and that the Afterlife itself has life, ontologically, in a manner that we do not understand. This would not be farfetched at all, as Allah says explicitly in another Ayah, “*The seven heavens, the earth, and all those in them exalt Him. There is not a single thing that does not exalt Him, but you cannot understand their exaltation*” [Surah al-Isra 17:44]. For the heavens, the earth, and everything in existence to be praising and exalting Allah, there must be some type of life in them that we do not perceive or comprehend, and similarly could be the case

⁸ Abu al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī, *al-Taḥf al-Basīṭ*, vol. 17 (Riyadh: Jāmiat al-Imam Muhammad, 2009), 556-58.

⁹ Al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qurʾān* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2022), s.v. “ḥayya.”

of the Ākhira itself being alive. In both the literal and the figurative sense of the Ākhira being a living being, the contrast with this worldly life is sharp. That is, the life of this world is so limited and so insignificant that it is as if it is no life at all.

The third meaning of the word *ḥayawān* is that of ‘life’ itself, similar to the more common word *ḥayāt*, however, it signifies life in a more dynamic and robust sense. This is due to the fact that the morphological form of this word, that is, the specific form of the augmentative noun (*ism al-mubālagha*), already connotes movement and dynamism,¹⁰ which themselves are from the core components of the concept of “life” in the Arabic language.¹¹ Some other examples of words in this same morphological form are *lahabān*, which is the flaring up of a fire, and *naḥḥān*, the violent shaking of something.¹² In this sense of the word *ḥayawān*, the hyperbole is even greater, and the meaning would be that the Final Abode, *al-Dār al-Ākhira*, is so full of life, and so real is its life untainted by the possibility of death, that it is life itself.¹³

The preceding and succeeding Āyāt are discussing the disbelievers who reject the concept of life after death, and are thus engrossed in the trifling matters of this worldly life. This Ayah is thus highlighting the frivolous nature of this temporal abode, and directly contrasting it with the eternal life in the Hereafter, asserting the superiority of the latter. It is in this context of repudiation and direct ideological and theological clash — and therefore one that thoroughly warrants such emphatic language — that this word has been employed, making the hyperbolic expression decidedly fitting, and in fact far more suitable than the word *ḥayāt*.

Moreover, the Ayah can be correctly understood with each of the three meanings of this word; in fact, they can be understood together, forming perhaps the complete and collective intended meaning of this sentence. This is in fact the nature of the Quran’s diction in general, one that allows for multiple meanings that are understood as all simultaneously intended by Allah, for He is Unlimited. Imam al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1391) explicitly states this axiom:ⁱⁱ “If they [the multiple meanings of a polysemous word or sentence] are not mutually exclusive, the *muḥaqqiqūn* (authorities) hold that all meanings should be understood as intended, as that is even more eloquent

¹⁰ Mahmud b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Haqāiq al-Tanzīl*, vol. 6 (Istanbul: Dār al-Lubāb, 2021), 533.

¹¹ Al-Darwesh, *I’rāb al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa Bayānuhū*, 6:20.

¹² Sharaf al-Dīn al-Ṭibī, *Futūḥ al-Ghayb fī al-Kashf ‘an Qinā’ al-Rayb*, vol. 12 (Dubai: Jāizat Dubai al-Dawliyya li-l-Qur’ān al-Karīm, 2013), 201.

¹³ al-Wāhidī, *al-Taḥf al-Basīṭ*, 17:556-58.

and miraculous in expression.”¹⁴ Imam al-Māwardī (d. 450/1057) forwards two arguments for this,ⁱⁱⁱ “If Allah had intended only one of the multiple possible meanings, He would have included something indicative of that [i.e., since He didn’t, this indicates that He intended all of them simultaneously]. Also, if it is possible for Allah to convey both [or all] meanings, since they are not mutually exclusive, with two separate dictions, it is similarly equally possible for Him to convey them with one diction that includes all of them.”¹⁵ Meanings of Quranic words and sentences are thus posited concurrently, as long as they are not mutually exclusive, in which case one of the two is preferred over the other based on exegetical evidence.^{16iv}

In light of this, a rendering of the Āyah in English is as follows:

The most insignificant life ‘of this world’ is nothing but frivolity and play. ‘By contrast,’ the Final Abode ‘of the Afterlife’, *that* is the truly alive abode — vibrant, everlasting, if only they knew.

Searching for a one-word replacement for for any complex word in the Quranic vocabulary, including this one, is not a primary objective, and is often an unmeaningful endeavor. It is conceivably even an unattainable objective, as no one word in the English language captures these various meanings. This is in truth one of the primary challenges in translating the Quran into any other language, i.e. the challenge of finding equivalent or even proximate vocabulary in that other language. The multiplicity of meanings of just one word — let alone phrases or multiple individual words — in an Ayah is one of the main factors that contribute to its immense semantic potential and consequent exegetical diversity. In such cases of potential semantic variety, a translator of the Quran typically selects one of the meanings to present, and refrains from presenting multiple of them in order to avoid causing confusion, aside from the challenge of presenting multiple meanings in a coherent manner in written form.

From what has preceded, we may conclude that the word “*ḥayawān*” encapsulates the multifaceted reality of eternal existence in the Afterlife, as the semantic nexus of its three interconnected meanings: ‘place of living’, ‘living being’, and ‘life’ itself. The choice of this word over its more common synonym ‘*ḥayāt*’ is incisive, serving as a literary vehicle for conveying the

¹⁴ Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifā, 1990), *al-Naw’ al-Ḥādī wa’l-Arba’ūn* (Chapter 41), *Faṣl fī Ummahāt Ma’ākhidh al-Taḥsīn*, 308.

¹⁵ Ali ibn Muhammad al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘Uyūn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2012), 40.

¹⁶ Ibn ‘Ashūr, *Al-Muqaddimāt al-‘Ashr*, ed. al-Khaḍir b. Sālim al-Yāfi‘ī (Damascus: Dār al-Mi’rāj, 2023), 311–314.

Hereafter as the quintessential reality of vibrant, everlasting life. The word's hyperbolic spirit, due to its augmentative form, captures and accentuates the contrast between the transience and triviality of this world and the eternal vibrancy of the Hereafter through rhetorical antithesis by juxtaposition. Additionally, the semantic synthesis shows that the Quranic text operates on multiple semantic levels simultaneously, as classical scholars have affirmed, and this polyvalent linguistic approach allows the Quran to address the human condition in its entirety. Ultimately, this word choice exemplifies the Quran's unparalleled ability to use language as both a mirror and a window: reflecting the limitations of worldly perspective while opening onto the transcendent reality of divine wisdom. The analysis reminds us that true understanding of the Quran requires not just linguistic competence but spiritual receptivity, as the words themselves are but vessels for meanings that transcend the boundaries of human expression and comprehension.

Primary Source Excerpts

ⁱ قال الواحدي: فأما قوله تعالى: ﴿وإن الدار الآخرة لهي الحيوان﴾ فيحتمل أن يكون المعنى: وإن حياة الدار الآخرة هي الحياة؛ لأنه لا نقص فيها ولا نفاد لها، أي: فتلك الحياة هي الحياة لا التي يشوبها ما يشوب الحياة في هذه الدار، فيكون الحيوان مصدر على هذا. ويجوز أن يكون الحيوان الذي هو خلاف الموتان، وقيل للدار الآخرة: الحيوان؛ لأنها لا تزول ولا تبعد كما تبعد هذه الدار وتزول، فتكون الدار وصفت بالحياة لهذا المعنى، والمراد أهلها. ويجوز أن يكون التقدير في قوله: ﴿لهي الحيوان﴾ هي ذات الحيوان، أي: دار الآخرة هي دار الحياة، كأنه لم يعتد بحياة هذه الدار حياة. (التفسير البسيط، سورة العنكبوت آية ٢٩)

ⁱⁱ قال الزركشي: ألا يتنافيا اجتماعا فيجب الحمل عليهما عند المحققين ويكون ذلك أبلغ في الإعجاز والفصاحة. (البرهان في علوم القرآن، النوع الحادي والأربعون، فصل في أمهات مآخذ التفسير)

ⁱⁱⁱ قال الماوردي: فيكون المعنيان معا مرادين، لأن الله لو أراد أحدهما لنصب على مراده منهما دليلا، وإن جاز أن يريد كل واحد من المعنيين بلفظين متغايرين لعدم التنافي بينهما، جاز أن يريدتهما بلفظ واحد يشتمل عليهما. (النكت والعيون، مقدمة المؤلف، فصل في جواز الاجتهاد في استخراج معاني القرآن)

^{iv} قال ابن عاشور: ولما كان القرآن نازلا من المحيط علمه بكل شيء، كان ما تسمح تراكيبه الجارية على فصيح استعمال الكلام البليغ باحتماله من المعاني المألوفة للعرب في أمثال تلك التراكيب، مظنوننا بأنه مراد لمنزله، ما لم يمنع من ذلك مانع صريح أو غالب من دلالة شرعية أو لغوية أو توقيفية. (التحرير والتنوير، المقدمة التاسعة)

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