

Qur'ānic Eschatology and Cosmology: Classical and Modern Perspectives on the End of the Universe

Introduction

The Qur'ān contains numerous verses that hint at the ultimate fate of the cosmos. In an era when many cultures viewed the universe or starlight as eternal, the Qur'ān boldly asserted that the heavens and earth are finite and destined to end at an appointed time 1 2. Classical Muslim scholars understood these verses as references to the Day of Judgment – a cataclysmic event in which the current world will be utterly destroyed and a new order of creation will arise. Modern commentators, armed with contemporary cosmology, have revisited these scriptures to explore intriguing parallels with scientific theories about the end of the universe. In this paper, we will present a scholarly commentary on several key Qur'ānic verses (6:1–2, 13:2, 30:8, 31:29, 35:13, 46:3, 55:26, with special focus on 21:104) that discuss the end of the universe. We will examine classical and modern *tafsīr* (exegesis) on these verses, and correlate their imagery with current cosmological models – in particular the "Big Freeze" versus the "Big Crunch." Our analysis will argue that the Qur'ān's language, especially the metaphor of "rolling up" the sky in 21:104, aligns more naturally with a Big Crunch scenario of cosmic collapse (followed by renewal) rather than an indefinite Big Freeze. The discussion is framed academically at the intersection of Islamic theology and astrophysics, focusing solely on Qur'ānic perspectives and scientific theories without reference to other religious traditions.

Finite Creation: Qur'ānic Verses on an Appointed End

A recurring theme in the Qur'ān is that the universe is *not* eternal, but was created for a limited duration. Multiple verses state that the heavens and the earth, and all celestial bodies within, operate only up to a **specified term (ajal musammā)** decreed by God. For example, "We have not created the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, but with truth and [for] an appointed term" ² . In Sūrah 46:3 (cited above), the Qur'ān unambiguously declares that the entire cosmos exists only until a divinely fixed deadline. Likewise, Sūrah 13:2 says God "subjected the sun and moon, each running [its course] for a specified term" ³ , a phrase repeated in 30:8, 31:29, and 35:13. These verses conveyed to early Muslim audiences that the sun, moon, and stars would not shine forever – a remarkable assertion at a time when the prevailing philosophy among many learned people was an eternal, unchanging universe ¹ .

Another emphatic reminder of cosmic mortality appears in Sūrah 55: "All that is on [the earth] will perish, and there will remain only the Face of your Lord, Full of Majesty and Honor (55:26-27) 4. Classical commentators note that "all that is on it" (Arabic: kullu man 'alayhā*) refers to every creature and object in the world – in fact, "the whole universe" according to some exegetes 5. In Sūrah 6:1–2, the Qur'ān ties the creation of humanity and the world to a finite timeline as well: "He (God) created you from clay and then decreed a term [for you], and a specified time known to Him" 1. Many classical scholars understood this as two terms – the finite life of each human and the finite term of the world itself, culminating in the Hour (Day

of Resurrection) known only to God 6 7 . In summary, the Qur'ānic message is clear that the universe had a beginning and will have an end at a predestined time. This concept of an impending cosmic expiration was woven through the scripture long before modern science conceived of stellar lifecycles or cosmic entropy.

Classical Tafsīr: Traditional Understanding of Cosmic Cataclysm

Early and medieval Muslim scholars took the above verses as descriptions of the Day of Qiyāmah (Judgment Day), when the present heavens and earth will be completely overturned. The classical *tafsīr* literature, while not scientific in the modern sense, offers rich metaphors and narratives conveying the totality of this cosmic catastrophe. In explaining Qur'ān 21:104 – "The Day when We will fold up the sky like the folding of a scroll (or book of writings)..." – commentators unanimously understood the image of a **scroll being rolled up** to signify the sky (or the fabric of the universe) being compacted and erased, much as a scribe rolls up a parchment after finishing writing ⁸ . **Ibn 'Abbās**, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, stated that *sijill* in this verse means "a sheet of a book," and that "the sky will be folded up like a scroll with its writings*," essentially closing the book of this world ⁸ . The prolific exegete Ibn Kathīr, as well as Mujāhid, Qatādah, and al-Ṭabarī, all affirmed this straightforward meaning ⁸ . In other words, classical scholars envisaged the physical sky literally collapsing or contracting at the end of time, consistent with the Qur'ān's metaphor.

Prophetic hadith reports buttressed this understanding with dramatic imagery. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī narrates that the Prophet said on the Day of Judgment, "Allah will grasp the earth and fold up the heavens in His Right Hand," and declare His supremacy as King 9. In this narration (and similar reports), the seven heavens and seven earths – a Quranic expression for the totality of the cosmos – are rolled up or folded into a tiny fraction of their former expanse, "no more than a grain of seed in His hand" 9. Such descriptions leave no doubt that in classical Islamic thought, the universe will undergo a violent contraction and dissolution by God's command at the final Hour. This stands in stark contrast to any notion of a slow, natural winding-down; rather, it will be a divinely orchestrated implosion of cosmic order.

Other Qur'ānic passages reinforce the cataclysmic tenor of this event. Sūrah 39:67, for instance, echoes the hadith by stating "the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand" on the Last Day (though not among the verses we are focusing on, it concurs with 21:104). Verses describe the mountains being blown away like dust, the seas set ablaze, the sun darkened, and the stars falling (e.g. 81:1–3, 82:1–2, 69:13–16), all of which classical scholars took as literal or semi-literal portents of the world's annihilation. Crucially, the Qur'ān also says that after this destruction, **a new world will be created**: "On the Day the earth will be changed to another earth, and so will be the heavens..." (Qur'ān 14:48) 10 . Classical exegetes like Ibn Kathīr commented that God will "replace the present universe with a new creation" fit for the eternal Hereafter 10 . Thus, traditional Islamic eschatology envisions a cyclical process: the universe's divinely wrought collapse followed by its resurrection or re-creation. This theological idea that "As We began the first creation, We shall repeat it" (as stated in 21:104) fits neatly with the concept of a cosmic cycle of death and rebirth ordained by the Creator.

In summary, classical *tafsīr* presented the Qur'ānic "end of the universe" verses as vivid prophecies of an abrupt, total and God-driven cosmic upheaval. The heavens will be torn down and folded, the earth shattered, and **nothing of the current order will survive except by God's will** 4. Importantly, this understanding includes a **contraction** (folding up) of the cosmos, not an eternal continuation. While medieval Muslims of course did not use terms like "Big Crunch," their portrayal of the heavens collapsing in on themselves is notably analogous to a massive cosmic implosion. To explore that analogy more deeply,

we now turn to modern cosmological models of how the universe might end, and then compare them with the Qur'ānic vision.

Cosmological Theories of the Universe's Fate: Big Freeze vs. Big Crunch

Contemporary astrophysics has proposed several scenarios for the ultimate fate of the expanding universe. The two most widely discussed outcomes are often nicknamed "Heat Death" (Big Freeze) and "Big Crunch." In simple terms, the fate depends on whether cosmic expansion continues forever or eventually reverses. We briefly outline these scenarios:

- **Big Freeze** (**Heat Death**): If the universe's expansion never stops, it will keep spreading matter and energy ever more thinly. Over incredibly long timescales, galaxies will recede beyond each other's horizons; star formation will cease once available gas is exhausted; existing stars will burn out; and remaining stellar remnants (white dwarfs, neutron stars, black holes) will gradually disappear (black holes via Hawking evaporation) ¹¹ ¹². The universe heads toward a state of *maximum entropy* essentially a near-empty, cold darkness where no organized energy exchanges can occur. This "Big Freeze" is also called the **Heat Death** of the universe: all matter decays and temperatures asymptotically approach absolute zero ¹³ ¹⁴. The timeline for such a demise is almost unimaginably vast (trillions upon trillions of years) ¹⁵, and the end comes not with a bang but a whimper a gradual fizzle into silence. For a vivid description, astronomy sources describe a Big Freeze universe as "getting darker and quieter until...particles are so far apart they rarely interact", ultimately a true death of everything ¹⁶.
- **Big Crunch:** This is the opposite scenario a *cosmic collapse*. If the collective gravity of matter (and any other attractive forces) is strong enough to halt and reverse the current expansion, the universe would reach a maximum size and then begin contracting. Galaxies would start rushing back together; distances shrink; temperatures rise as everything compresses. Ultimately, all matter and space itself could collapse to an extremely dense state, perhaps an "infinitely" dense singularity, essentially the universe in reverse going back to a point ¹⁷ ¹⁸. This violent implosion is termed the Big Crunch, envisaged as a fiery demise where the cosmos ends in the opposite manner that it began (the Big Bang). Some theorists even speculated that a Big Crunch *could* transition into a new Big Bang a cyclic rebirth of a new universe from the ashes of the old. In earlier decades, many astronomers considered the Big Crunch plausible if the universe's density was above a certain "critical" value such that gravity would eventually win over expansion ¹⁷ ¹⁸. A "closed" universe geometry (positively curved like a sphere) was associated with this re-collapse scenario.

For much of the 20th century, the cosmic fate question was often phrased as "fire or ice?" – Will the universe end in a fiery collapse (Crunch) or an icy dissipation (Freeze)? ¹⁸. By the 1990s, observations of matter density suggested we were near the tipping point between these outcomes ¹⁷. Then, in 1998, the discovery of the universe's accelerating expansion upended expectations ¹⁹ ²⁰. Distant supernova measurements (awarded the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics) revealed that cosmic expansion is speeding up, apparently driven by a mysterious repulsive force termed dark energy ¹⁹. In the standard model that emerged (Lambda-CDM, with dark energy as a cosmological constant), gravity alone would *not* overcome expansion; instead, the expansion rate will continue to accelerate, leading to an ever-colder, lonelier universe. In other words, current mainstream science favors the Big Freeze scenario – a fate of "gradually"

fading to an icy black" void 18. NASA's reports summarized: if there isn't enough matter to reverse expansion, "the expansion would never end...modern astronomy might one day be reduced to legend as the universe fades to black." 18.

It is worth noting that other exotic scenarios exist (e.g. the **Big Rip**, where dark energy increases and eventually rips apart even atoms, or a **Big Bounce** cyclic model), but these are beyond our scope here. The Big Rip has been deemed unlikely by recent analyses of dark energy's behavior [2]. The Big Bounce concept (an endless series of expansions and contractions) is speculative but philosophically intriguing. For our purposes, the dichotomy remains: **eternal expansion (Freeze)** vs. **eventual collapse (Crunch)**.

As of the mid-2020s, astrophysical measurements (e.g. of the cosmic microwave background and large-scale structure) still indicate an accelerating expansion consistent with a Big Freeze. However, this could be refined by future discoveries. Indeed, very recent data from the Dark Energy Spectroscopic Instrument (DESI) in 2025 hints that dark energy might be *weakening* over cosmic time ²² ²³. If true (and it's early to tell), this raises the tantalizing possibility that acceleration could slow and reverse in the far future – allowing a Big Crunch after all ²⁴ ²⁵. In short, science has not reached the final word: the fate of the universe remains an open question, hinging on the still-mysterious nature of dark energy. With this scientific backdrop in mind, we now return to the Qur'ān's eschatological imagery and compare it to these models.

"Rolling Up the Heavens": Qur'ān 21:104 and the Big Crunch

Among our highlighted verses, Qur'ān **21:104** stands out for its strikingly concrete metaphor of how the universe will end: "[Remember] the Day when We shall roll up the heaven as a scroll is rolled up for writings. As We began the first creation, We shall repeat it – a promise binding upon Us. Indeed, We will do it." This verse likens the sky (or the cosmos at large) to a scroll or book that will be **folded in on itself** at the end of time. Classical commentators, as noted, explained that just as a scroll or papyrus containing written text can be rolled up, so will the fabric of the universe be compacted and removed from existence 8. The verse then immediately asserts that God will recreate ("repeat") creation just as easily as He originated it in the first place, underscoring a renewal after the end. Let us analyze this through multiple lenses:

Classical and Scriptural Context: In the 7th-century Arabian context, a **scroll** (Arabic *sijill*) was a familiar object – rolled up when one finished reading or writing. The Qur'ān's use of this simile conveys vivid finality: the "story" of the universe is written, and on the Last Day, God will roll up the manuscript of existence, putting an end to the current cosmic order. The promise to "repeat the first creation" was understood by classical scholars to mean resurrection – not only of humans for judgment, but also the making of a new heavens and earth (as explicitly stated in 14:48) 10. Thus, traditional exegesis saw 21:104 as encapsulating both the destruction of the world and the subsequent creation of a new world, in one majestic sweep.

Modern Reflections – Quran and Big Crunch: Contemporary Muslim thinkers have naturally been struck by how *21:104*'s imagery resonates with the idea of a **Big Crunch** in cosmology. If we strip away the theological framing, "rolling up the heavens" suggests a universe that *contracts* rather than expands forever. In fact, a 2022 study observing Qur'ānic and scientific perspectives states that **"the Islamic perspective only supports the closed universe theory"**, referencing the Qur'ān 21:104 as proof ²⁶. In other words, these authors argue that the Qur'ān's description aligns with a universe that will eventually stop expanding and *fold back onto itself*. Another research article likewise concludes that after an era of expansion, *"the end*

of the world [will entail] a great contraction", as reflected in Qur'ānic text and consistent with physicists' Big Crunch scenario 27.

Perhaps the most remarkable modern commentary comes from outside the Islamic tradition: **John Archibald Wheeler**, a renowned American physicist, was so intrigued by the Qur'ān's scroll metaphor that he cited **21:104** in his book *A Journey into Gravity and Spacetime*. On the same page where Wheeler muses that "spacetime [is] like a great unrolling papyrus scroll" loaded with the events of history ²⁸, he notes that the Qur'ān had **already** "described the rolling of the heavens like the rolling up of scrolls," and he even included an illustration of this verse ²⁹. It amazed Wheeler that an ancient scripture would use an image so compatible with modern geometrical views of spacetime ²⁹. Wheeler's reflection highlights that the Quranic language is not only poetic but uncannily apt – essentially depicting the spacetime fabric contracting in a manner analogous to how general relativity visualizes a closed universe.

Modern Islamic websites and writers often explicitly connect 21:104 to the Big Crunch theory. For instance, one commentary points out that Sūrah 21 notably contains both the **origin** and **end** of the universe: verse 30 of the same sūrah is commonly interpreted as hinting at the Big Bang ("the heavens and earth were joined entity, then We separated them"), while verse 104 speaks of the Big Crunch ("We shall roll up the heaven like a scroll") ³⁰. In this reading, *Al-Anbiyā'* (Chapter 21) presents a remarkable **cosmic chiasmus**: a beginning out of unity (expansion from singularity) and an ending in collapse back to unity, followed by a new beginning. The Quranic text itself says "as We began the first creation, We will repeat it", which powerfully suggests a **cyclic model** of the universe in a theological sense ³⁰. Some have argued that this implies an eventual "Big Crunch" followed by *another* "Big Bang" – essentially a divinely orchestrated Big Bounce ³⁰. While classical scholars understood the "repeat" mainly in terms of resurrection and new creation *for the afterlife*, not a new physical Big Bang, the parallel with a cyclic cosmology is certainly intriguing.

Qur'ān vs. Big Freeze: On the other hand, if we consider the Big Freeze scenario, the Qur'ānic depictions seem far less congruent. The scripture does not describe the end of the world as a slow dimming of starlight or a heat death over eons; rather, it describes sudden, catastrophic events. The Hour is repeatedly said to come "upon you unexpectedly" (Qur'an 7:187) and to be so sudden as to feel "like the twinkling of an eye, or even nearer" (Qur'an 16:77) 31 32 . These descriptions convey an **abrupt calamity** that overtakes the universe in an instant by God's command, not a protracted dying out. A Big Freeze has no single "Day" of doom – it is a staggered process across an almost infinite timeline, lacking the drama of a scroll rolled up "in Our hand." By contrast, the Qur'ān's language about the end is apocalyptic: the trumpet will be blown, "**the mountains will be set moving**", "**the sky will be cleft and red like molten oil**", etc., all happening in a short period (see Sūrah 70:8, 69:16, 55:37 among others). This is much more reminiscent of a sudden cosmic *implosion* or violent transformation (as in a Big Crunch or even Big Rip) than a slow fade-out.

Moreover, **Qur'ān 21:104** explicitly draws a parallel between *the end* and *the beginning: "Just as We began the first creation, We will repeat it."* In astrophysical terms, a Big Freeze provides no obvious way to "repeat" creation – an eternally expanded, heat-dead universe cannot spontaneously reset itself without new physics. A **Big Crunch**, however, at least offers the conceptual possibility that after the collapse, a new explosion (Big Bang) could happen, starting the cycle anew ³³. Even if one does not subscribe to a literal cyclic universe, the Quranic promise that God will recreate the heavens and earth (14:48, 21:104) is in clear thematic harmony with a universe that ends by contracting and then is *reborn*, but not with one that simply stretches out to an entropic infinity. As one science-and-Qur'ān commentary put it, *"the aforementioned verse [21:104] lends support to the [Big Crunch] theory"*, as opposed to an ever-expanding universe, and notably it occurs in the same discourse as the creation from an initial unity ³⁰.

It is important to clarify that the Qur'ān is not a science textbook and uses rich figurative language to impart theological truths. When we say the Qur'ān "favors" the Big Crunch, we mean that *if* one maps its metaphors onto modern cosmological models, the scenario of a closed universe collapsing fits the scriptural imagery far better than an open universe freezing. Classical Muslim scholars did not use terms like "gravity" or "space-time curvature," yet they believed gravity (*thaql*) would indeed play a role in the end: the Qur'ān (7:187) says the timing of the Hour "weighs heavily upon the heavens and the earth", which one modern interpreter intriguingly took to imply a gravitational burden on the cosmos ³¹ ³⁴. This same source linked the "heavens folded up" with the idea of **folding space-time** itself, noting that in relativity gravity is the curvature of space-time – a concept surprisingly echoed by envisioning the sky folded like a scroll ³⁴ ³⁵. While such readings are speculative, they illustrate how elastic the Qur'ānic symbolism is, capable of accommodating even cutting-edge scientific analogies. At the very least, one can say the Qur'ān *comfortably allows* for a Big Crunch-type ending, whereas a Big Freeze portrayal would seemingly conflict with the sudden and purposive climax that Islamic eschatology insists upon.

Conclusion: Eschatology Meets Cosmology

In conclusion, our examination of Qur'ānic verses alongside classical *tafsīr* and modern cosmology suggests a remarkable consonance between the **Qur'ānic vision of the universe's end and the Big Crunch model** posited by astrophysics. The Qur'ān repeatedly affirms that creation is finite and marching toward a definitive "Hour" decreed by God ² ³⁶. Classical commentators depicted this Hour in vivid detail – the heavens collapsing like rolled scrolls, the earth crumpling, and the cosmos being gathered in God's hand ⁹ – imagery that aligns strikingly well with a cosmic contraction or termination of space-time. Modern cosmology's Big Freeze scenario, by contrast, finds little mirror in the Qur'ān's dramatic apocalyptic narratives. Instead, the metaphor of **scroll-rolling (Q.21:104)** and the promise of *recreation* resonate with the idea of a closed universe that ends in a collapse and possibly a new genesis ³⁰. Indeed, several contemporary Muslim scholars and even physicists like John Wheeler have been fascinated by how the Qur'ān's language prefigures concepts of an expanding then contracting universe ²⁶ ²⁹.

It must be emphasized that from a doctrinal perspective, the Qur'an's purpose is to guide spiritually, not to divulge scientific data. Quranic references to cosmic phenomena are typically brief and serve a religious moral: in these verses, to warn of the coming Judgment and the transient nature of worldly life. Yet, as our analysis shows, engaging these ancient texts with modern scientific insight can yield a rich dialogue. The Qur'ān's metaphorical depiction of an unfolding and refolding cosmos can be seen as a profound philosophical statement: creation has a deliberate beginning and an end, both under divine control. Science, in pursuing the fate of the universe, is seeking the same grand truth in physical terms. As of today, the prevailing evidence favors an ever-expanding universe headed for a Big Freeze – a fate that seems at odds with the Qur'ānic "scroll." However, science is not static; new discoveries (such as signs that dark energy might change over time) could reopen the possibility of a cosmic turnaround 24. Regardless of what future cosmology decides, the Qur'an will continue to challenge and inspire with its eschatological imagery. For scholars at the intersection of theology and astrophysics, verses like 21:104 offer a fascinating case study of how an ancient revelation can engage with contemporary scientific discourse. In the Qur'anic worldview, the end of the universe is not a cold dissolution, but a purposeful closure of one creation and the inception of another - a cosmic renaissance underscoring the power and wisdom of the Creator. Such a perspective not only "favors" a Big Crunch narrative in scientific terms, but also elevates it, portraying the death of the universe not as the ultimate ruin, but as the **prologue to renewal** 30 – "As We began the first creation, We shall repeat it... a promise binding on Us, indeed We shall fulfill it." ²⁹

Sources:

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- Quran Project essay "Spacetime Papyrus Scroll" (2023) notes on 21:104 supporting Big Crunch theory and its pairing with 21:30 (Big Bang) 30.
- Journal of Positive School Psychology (2022) "Scientific and Quranic Explanation of the Collapse of the Universe" (Khalid, et al.) noting Qur'an's alignment with a closed universe model 26.
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