

Khalq al-Qur'ān

خلق القرآن

'The createdness of the Qur'ān'

The issue of whether the Qur'ān could be said to have been created at one point, or not, formed a core debate in medieval Islamic thought, and drew with it the problem of whether the text of the Revelation was to be regarded as a part of the Divinity itself.

The controversy was intensified by the position of the Mu'tazila theologians who held that "the Speech of Allah Most High is created, invented, and brought into being"¹ – in the form of the scripture, the Qur'ān.

For the Mu'tazila theologians it made no sense to think of God's commandments as existing before the creation of the beings to whom they were addressed. Nor did the doctrine explain the clear references and rulings in the Text that referred to events and people in the lifetime of the Prophet.² Nor did the doctrine explain the phenomenon of divine abrogation of an earlier *sūra* on the basis of such events.

The Mu'tazila instead held that God's word, both in the heavenly and worldly editions, was *created* and did *not* exist eternally.³

In these debates the Ash'arīs set themselves in opposition to the rationalising approach of the Mu'tazila. For the Ash'arīs the fact that the Qur'ān was 'revealed' to the Prophet Muhammad, not a source of 'inspiration' to him, meant that the Qur'ān was a physical incarnation of the eternal word of God.

If God is eternal, what does that mean for the Qur'ān? Their solution was based on the following Qur'ānic passages:

And verily it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom.⁴

Nay, but it is a glorious Qur'ān, On a guarded tablet.⁵

¹ Among the evidences the Mu'tazila adduced were: Qur'ān XXI (*al-Anbiyā'*) 2: *There comes not to them a new reminder from their Lord but they hear it while they sport* وَمَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ ذِكْرِ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ مُحَدَّثٌ إِلَّا اسْتَمَعُوهُ وَهُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ; and XXVI (*al-Shu'arā'*) 5: *And there does not come to them a new reminder from the Beneficent Allah but they turn aside from it* وَمَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ ذِكْرِ مِنْ الرَّحْمَنِ مُحَدَّثٌ إِلَّا كَانُوا عَنْهُ مُعْرِضِينَ.

² Such as 'guests should leave early *without seeking to remain for conversation* [since that was] *troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of [dismissing] you* فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا مُسْتَأْنِسِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ إِنْ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ يُؤَدِّي النَّبِيُّ فَيَسْتَخِي مِنْكُمْ [Qur'ān XXXIII (*al-Aḥzāb*) 53]; and the verses revealed on the occasion of marital problems among the Prophet's wives: *And when the prophet secretly communicated a piece of information to one of his wives-- but when she informed (others) of it, and Allah made him to know it, he made known part of it and avoided part; so when he informed her of it, she said: Who informed you of this? He said: The Knowing, the one Aware, informed me* وَإِذْ أَسْرَأَ النَّبِيُّ إِلَىٰ بَعْضِ أَزْوَاجِهِ حَدِيثًا فَلَمَّا نَبَأَتْ بِهِ بِهِ وَإِذْ أَسْرَأَ النَّبِيُّ إِلَىٰ بَعْضِ أَزْوَاجِهِ حَدِيثًا فَلَمَّا نَبَأَتْ بِهِ بِهِ [Qur'ān LXVI (*al-Tahrīm*) 3] and much of the materials in *sūra* XXXIII (*al-Aḥzāb*).

³ One Mu'tazilī, Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf, formulated it as: the Qur'ān which was preserved on the Preserved Tablet was a prototype ('*araḍ*), subsequently displayed through three places: the place where it was kept, the place where it was written and the place where it was read and heard.

⁴ Qur'ān XLIII (*al-Zukhruf*), 4: وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيَّ حَكِيمٌ And Lo! in the Source of Decrees, which We possess, it is indeed sublime, decisive.

⁵ Qur'ān LXXXV (*al-Burīj*) 21-22: بَلْ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ Nay, but it is a glorious Qur'ān, On a guarded tablet

The 'original of the Book' (lit. '*Umm al-Kitāb* 'The Mother of the Book') is thus pre-existent with God, and of God, in *al-lūh al-mahfūz*, the 'Guarded Tablet'.

At this level, the Revelation is eternal, not bound by space and time. The Ash'arīs classified the word of God into two levels, i.e. *kalām nafsī* and *kalām lafẓī*. The formless *kalām nafsī* co-exists with God's Essence and is eternal – the 'heavenly edition' as it were, and the *kalām lafẓī* is the 'worldly edition' manifested in the world through Muḥammad. The *kalām nafsī* is God's Essence which acquires its shape in the form of words spoken in the world, an embodiment that does not change its essence by merging the two 'editions'.^{6 7}

At the far end of the scale from the Mu'tazila were the textual literalists (the *Ḥashawiyya*) who held the ultimate position that 'the alphabetical characters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*), the materials on which they are written, the colours in which they are written, and all that is between the two covers [of the volumes of Qur'ān] is beginning-less and pre-existent (*qadīma azaliyya*).'

A secondary issue in the controversy was the status of the *ḥadīth*. Al-Shāfi'ī was adamant in insisting that these possessed a scriptural status (and can actually abrogate the Qur'ān). If, by logical reasoning, the Qur'ān was accepted as 'created', what does this imply for the masses of *ḥadīth* that maintain its 'uncreatedness'? It would necessarily marginalise them.

The position eventually worked out by the Ash'arīs, was that the Qur'ān was the beginning-less speech of Allah Most High unchanged, uncreated, not of recent origin in time, nor brought into being, but that the alphabetical characters and so on were created, originated, and produced. This became the dominant position.⁸

During the long course of the debate the various schools of thought elaborated their position on the *Khalq al-Qur'ān*:

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| The Jahmīs | 'Created' as a set of meanings, given physical expression to by Muḥammad; |
| The Mu'tazila | 'Created' and not co-eternal with God ("if the Quran is the word of God, he logically "must have preceded his own speech"; if the Quran could be subjected to abrogation, with a new verse abrogating an earlier one, it could not be eternal); |
| The Māturīdīs | 'Created' – the 'text' of God's speech is not God's actual speech, it only represents it. The 'inner speech' of God is what is co-eternal with Him; |
| The Ash'arīs | 'Uncreated' - the eternal speech is of God, but there is a distinction between the words of God and their realisation, i.e. the alphabetical characters and so on were created ; |

⁶ In Sunnism it is believed that Allah's divine doctrines are held and preserved by Allah in heaven on tablets. In Shī'ism it is believed that God is pure spirit, having no need of preserving what it knows in material form... The Sunni belief in an independent Qur'an is viewed in Shī'ism as a remnant of idolatry and polytheism. Sunnism holds that the Qur'an was not created, and thus on a par with God himself. Shī'ism sees having two uncreated, eternal entities, God and the Qur'an, as abrogating monotheism, and thus rejects that notion. In Shiite belief, the Qur'an has been created, and God is the sole uncreated, eternal entity.

⁷ A. Shalabī, *al-Yahūdiyya*: (Cairo: Maktabah an-Nahḍa al-Maṣriyya, 1988), 222: "The doctrine of the Qur'an eternity cannot be separated from the influence of Jewish and Christian teachings which believe in the eternity of Torah and Jesus Christ."

⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *قواعد العقائد في التوحيد* ('Foundations for Islamic Belief'): "He speaks, commanding, forbidding, promising, and threatening, with a speech from eternity, ancient, and self-existing. Unlike the speech of the creation, it is not a sound which is caused through the passage of air or the friction of bodies; nor is it a letter which is enunciated through the opening and closing of lips and the movement of the tongue. The Qur'ān, the original Torah, the original Gospel of Jesus, and the original Psalms are His Books sent down upon His Messengers. The Qur'ān is read by tongues, written in books, and remembered in the heart, yet it is, nevertheless, nevertheless, ancient, subsisting in the Essence of God, not subject to division and or separation through its transmission to the heart and paper. Moses heard the Speech of God without sound and without letter, just as the righteous see the Essence of God in the Hereafter, without substance or its quality". (Tr. from C. Cornille (ed.) *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, 2009, Cascade Books, p.147. Text in رسائل الغزالي Dār al-Fikr, Beirut 1996, p.62).

That is, not merely a reporting of what God said, but in some way the actual manifestation of an action of the Divinity. The textualists – with such verses in mind – were pursuing this line of thinking.

The insistence of the Mu'tazila, on the other hand, on the *createdness* of the Qur'ān stemmed from their unease at the implications of the textualist position. If Muslims rejected the 'dual nature' of Christ as God and Man as fantasy, why would they not equally reject the 'dual nature' of the Qur'ānic text as fantasy?¹⁵

In each case, they argued, the transmission of the 'word of God' / *logos* was via the same intermediary: Gabriel (*Jibrā'il*) – the divine manifesting itself thereby in the human world. In each case it is the incarnation of the word of God: in the Messiah and in the human linguistic fabric of the Qur'ān:¹⁶

He hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture with truth, confirming that which was (revealed) before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel. [Qur'ān III (Āl 'Umrān), 3]

*The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was a messenger of Allah, and His word, which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him [Qur'ān IV (al-Nisā'), 171]*¹⁷

The Mu'tazila therefore argued that if Muslims believed in the 'createdness' of Jesus Christ, who is stated as the 'word of God' in some Qur'ānic verses, they would have to believe in the createdness of the Qur'ān which is also stated to be the 'word of God'.

Why is the Khalq al-Qur'ān debate still important in Islamic reform?

The debate, first of all, has implications for hermeneutics – the *tafsīr* literature upon which all Islamic law is based. Secondly, it has a knock-on effect on how to enact, in human organisation and behaviour, the directives of the Qur'ān and the doctrinal rulings derived from it.

The Mu'tazila theologians who embraced the createdness of the Qur'ān tended to interpret metaphorically the literal meaning of texts and searched for the spiritual and ethical spirit behind the provisions of some Qur'ānic legislation. This was weakening the importance of the literal meaning of the Text, and thus weakening the importance of the Arab sciences of the Text relative to the foreign, interloper sciences (the *'ulūm dakhīla*) of Reason.

The Muslim theologians, who held to the eternity of the Qur'ān, necessarily interpret the Qur'ān with a more strictly textual, not metaphorical or allegorical approach. They work according to the principle: *al-'ibra bi-'umūm al-lafẓ lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab* – 'the precepts are derived from the universality of the expression, not the specificity of the context.'¹⁸ That is, that the closer one holds to the textual words of the Qur'ān (i.e. in its very *Arabic fabric*), the closer one is to God's will. This enshrines the supremacy of text over meaning, as a foundation of the faith.

Textualism trumping contextualism – the fear of Qur'ānic historicity

The suggestion that the Qur'ān was a document created in history places the metaphysical origins of the Qur'ān in question. It means that historical events mentioned in the Qur'ān will not have been determined from eternity. All value concepts contained in the Qur'ān, whether they are theological-ritual normative doctrines or ethic-legal laws, will thus have no definite and permanent status on the grounds that all of these concepts were revealed within the historical

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "A messenger of Allah, and His word", رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ.

¹⁸ The rule in fundamentals of jurisprudence is that the general meaning of the words are used to derive a ruling, not the specific reason(s) for their revelation. One of the implications of this is that it removes the possibility of the 'historicity' of the Qur'ān, and supports the application of Qur'ānic rulings outside their original intention, on the understanding that everything stated is eternally relevant.

context of Arab societies at a specific era, one that is very different from the historical context of Muslim societies today.

The fear is, for the textualists, that no moral values held by Muslims can be said to be permanent and Qur'ānic. The door is therefore left open for free human speculation on issues of morality and ethics. The behavioural and ethical implications of this are clear:

- Are Muslims permitted to understand the Qur'ān as communicating ideas relevant only to a certain time and a certain place – based on the time and context of the revelation?
- Can Muslims thus be permitted to discern the generic religio-ethical spirit or moral ideals that underlie these Qur'ānic rulings, beyond the letter of the texts?
- Or is the text immutable and literally true, irrespective of context, time or place, irrespective of changes in circumstances, cultures, demographics, and inter-faith communications?

The issue remains alive today. On February 13th 2005 His Eminence Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, Member of the Committee of Grand Scholars in Saudi Arabia, reaffirmed his position that the 'fallacy' of the belief of the created Qur'ān –

would entail other subsequent invalid results. This would give way to the wrong claim of the resemblance between Allah's Word and that of people, since both, according to them, were created. This would go against Allah's saying: *His is the Creation and Commandment* (Qur'ān: VII,54). The commandment cannot be made except through speaking. If Allah's Word is created, thus, there will be only one possibility of creation without the existence of the commandment. This will even lead to the invalidation of the meaning of the Holy Qur'ān.

How these questions were resolved or not resolved continues to have has implications for the Islamists' reading of scripture, and accordingly their actions that are made on this basis. To date the behavioural and ethical implications of the prevailing textualism has resulted in alienating Muslims from navigating their faith in a way that is sensitive to their actual experience, under the command simply to submit to the sacred text as something that must perforce *override* human experience.

This remains a powerful argument against reform-minded, modernising Muslims who argue that the contemporary world requires contemporary solutions.