

Some Epistemological and Hermeneutical Dimensions
of the Doctrine of the Created Qurʾān

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The Muʿtazilites may be credited with founding the Islamic discipline of speculative theology, and though their system of thought has been widely repudiated by Muslims for many centuries, the doctrine for which they are perhaps most famous – that the Qurʾān is created rather than eternal – still attracts the interest as well as the scorn of Muslims. This doctrine has been studied as a theological question relating both to Muslim discussions of God’s attributes, and to polemics with Christians about the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Word. Because the doctrine of the created Qurʾān was forcefully endorsed by the Abbasid caliphs for a few years, it has also been studied as a political issue. It has also been associated with the secondary role that the Muʿtazilites gave to revelation in their epistemology. This morning I wish to show that in the late 4th or 10th century writings of the last great master of Muʿtazilite theology, ʿAbd al-Jabbār, the doctrine of the created Qurʾān actually serves to defend the epistemological value of revelation. It also supports his particular vision of how God’s speech functions, and thus how it should be interpreted.

Many of the Traditionalists who refrained from engaging in speculative theology refused to call the Qurʾān created, and even declared it to be positively eternal. Their

¹ Thank you for your interest in my paper. This version is intended for oral presentation to a broad audience of scholars of Islam and other religions. It provides only the most essential references, and passes over many issues that are discussed more fully in chapter three of my forthcoming dissertation, tentatively entitled “The Language of Revelation: Its Nature and Interpretation in pre-Classical Islamic Legal Hermeneutics.”

position was not of great concern to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, because he thought it obviously ridiculous to claim that something that consists of a temporal sequence of sounds, letters, words, verses, and chapters is eternal.² A more subtle challenge came from theologians who learned the speculative arguments of the Mu‘tazilites, but broke rank with them to defend traditionalist doctrines. These Ash‘arite theologians were willing to admit that the sounds one hears when the Qur’ān is recited are temporal and created, but they argued that these are not in fact God’s speech. Real speech, they proposed, is inner speech, by which they meant both an attribute of the speaker, by virtue of which he or she is said to be speaking, and also a meaning or idea in the speaker’s mind, of which words are but an outward expression. God’s attribute of speech, his inner meaning, is eternal, even though it is expressed by a temporal sequence of sounds. This theory posed more of a challenge for ‘Abd al-Jabbār, and we will see how he responded to it shortly, but first I want to present ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s own model of what God’s speech is, and what this entails for the interpretation of the Qur’ān.

Creation is an act. Thus when ‘Abd al-Jabbār claimed that God’s speech is part of his creation, he was calling it one of God’s acts. Acts, in the ontology of the Mu‘tazilites of Basra, can be characterized by various types of attributes. Some attributes follow from the nature of the act itself, and characterize it whenever it is performed. Other attributes are variable, and depend on the will or intent of the person who performs the act. For example, a beating always causes pain, but it constitutes a punishment only if the person inflicting it intends it as something that is deserved by the one who receives it. The meaning of an utterance, according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, is an attribute of the second kind; it depends not only on the verbal form of the utterance, but also on the will of the speaker.³ So for example, if I say, “listen!” . . . that’s an imperative; what makes it a command is the fact that I want you to pay attention to me.

² ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, with the commentary of Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Hāshim [Mānkadīm], ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1384/1965), 527, 531-532.

³ Richard M. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu‘tazila in the Classical Period*, Studies in Islamic Philosophy and Science, ed. George F. Hourani, et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 124-135.

This attribute of my speech – its meaning, its being a command – is known immediately and necessarily by the person to whom it is addressed, as long as that person knows the language and I am using the language properly. Even if the verbal form of the utterance is ambiguous, certain cues from the speaker and from the context make the intended meaning clear. If you understand English, when I say “listen!” you don’t have to stop and reflect on whether I want you to listen to the buzzing of the lights, or the sound of the air coming through the heating vents. You know, from fact that I am up front and you are in the audience, and from the tone of my voice, that I mean for you to listen to ME. And you understand what I want you to do immediately, without going through any process of rational inquiry. On the other hand, if I had posted a sign that says “listen!” on the wall up here before you came into the room, you would have had to go through some reflective process to determine whether it was addressed to you, whether it was a command, and if so, what you were expected to listen to.

God’s speech is like the writing on the wall, because God cannot be perceived, and so we do not have the perceptible cues that make the meaning of human speech immediately obvious to us. So the first major point of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s theory of speech is that although the Qur’ān must be interpreted using more or less the same lexicon as human speech, it cannot convey God’s intent with the same immediacy with which human speech conveys the speaker’s intent.⁴ Rather, God’s will, which determines the meaning of his speech, must be deduced from the words of revelation, and from any other evidence God has provided, through a process of rational inquiry.⁵ So God’s speech functions like a piece of evidence, a sign, placed by God in the midst of his creation so that his servants may reason from it to a knowledge of his will.

So the words of the Qur’ān serve as indicators of God’s will. Now the will that determines the meaning of God’s speech is not his will that his speech have a certain meaning; it is rather his will that something specific occur in the world as a result of his

⁴ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawhīd wa-l-‘adl*, ed. Ṭā Hā Ḥusayn, (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Ṭibā’a wa-l-Nashr, 1961-1974), 17:12, 31-32.

⁵ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 17:12, 35, 50.

speech. When God says “perform the prayer!”, what makes this a command is not his will that it be a command, but rather his will that those addressed should perform the prayer.⁶ So from his command we can infer that God wills us to perform the prayer, and from his willing that we perform the prayer, we can infer that performing the prayer is beneficial to us, because God wills only what is good for us. Moreover, since God is in a position to impose obligations on us, we may infer that prayer is not only good, but also has a legal value – either recommended or obligatory. (According to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, some additional evidence allows us to determine that prayer is in fact obligatory.)⁷ Commands, then, when interpreted, yield indicative statements about the legal values of the acts that are commanded.

The same may be said for other forms of speech beside commands, because according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the ultimate purpose of all God’s speech is to make known the legal values of those acts whose goodness or badness we could not have determined by unaided reason. Thus the meaning of all God’s speech is determined by God’s will to indicate to us the legal values of acts. It follows that all of the various forms of speech found in the Qur’ān – statement, command, prohibition, promise, threat, question, oath – when interpreted, yield indicative statements of the form: this act, performed by this person, at this time, under these circumstances, has this legal value – obligatory or recommended or permitted or forbidden. Even narratives about past peoples and prophets, or descriptions of future reward and punishment, serve to reinforce more specific statements about the law.⁸ This reduction of all revealed language to the indicative mood is in fact a common feature of Islamic legal theory, but it is seldom stated as bluntly as it is by ‘Abd al-Jabbār. For him it is a natural consequence of the view that God’s speech functions not as direct interpersonal

⁶ Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 128.

⁷ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 17:94, 107-109, 113-114, 116, 141-142; J. R. T. M. Peters, *God’s Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Mu’tazilī Qāḍī I-Qudāt Abū I-Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Jabbār bn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 66-67.

⁸ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 17: 21, 23-24, 94, 101, 119, 126, 148; ‘Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkḍīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 531; Peters, *God’s Created Speech*, 96-97, 386-387.

address, but as a created indicator, a piece of evidence from which humanity may infer the law.

So far we have seen that since God's speech is his act, it has meaning by virtue of his will, which is to reveal the law; it cannot convey this will immediately, but can only serve as a basis for human inference; therefore all God's speech functions epistemologically as evidence of the law, and must be interpreted as an indicative statement of the law. Finally, because God is just, the evidence he provides must reveal the law fully and clearly. If there is any ambiguity in God's speech, it must be accompanied by evidence that resolves the ambiguity. Most legal theorists agreed that God must clarify an ambiguous requirement before the time at which his servants are required to obey it; but 'Abd al-Jabbār went further, and required that God must resolve any ambiguity by the end of the utterance that contains the ambiguity. Otherwise that speech would have been uttered in vain, which is necessarily bad and therefore not the kind of act that can be ascribed to a just and wise God. Ambiguity may be resolved by additional verbal evidence prior to or connected to the ambiguous speech, or by other evidence, such as the dictates of reason, as long as that evidence is available to the interpreter at the time the ambiguous speech is revealed.⁹

This insistence on the clarity of God's speech is significant because the hermeneutical method of legal theorists, since al-Shāfi'ī, depended on ambiguities in the Arabic language. al-Shāfi'ī's basic method of reconciling revealed texts was to find some ambiguity in one text, and to use another apparently conflicting text as evidence that showed the ambiguous text was intended to have one rather than the other of its possible meanings. For example, a general prohibition in one passage might be shown by a later passage to have been meant to apply to only some of the things or people to which it apparently referred. 'Abd al-Jabbār's view of God's speech invalidated such a move: a general expression must be interpreted as general unless evidence available at the time of its revelation proves that it was not intended to apply to all of the things or people to which it apparently referred.¹⁰ Because God intends his speech to serve as

⁹ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 17: 27, 29, 31-35, 37-39, 42, 44, 50, 54-70, 72-73, 78, 80, 86; 'Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkadīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 531.

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 17:27-29, 54-58.

evidence, and because he is just and cannot conceal its meaning, his speech must always be interpreted to mean nothing more and nothing less than just what it appears to say, unless specific contemporaneous evidence proves otherwise. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s hermeneutics is a striking juxtaposition of rationalism and literalism.

‘Abd al-Jabbār’s theory of the created Qur’ān, then, implies that God’s speech cannot function epistemologically as human speech does, but can only function as evidence of the law, and can only be interpreted as a perfectly clear indicative statement of the legal values of human actions.

Let us return now to the challenge posed by the Ash‘arite theory that God’s speech is to be identified not with the words of the Qur’ān, but with an eternal attribute which is also a single, eternal meaning in God’s mind. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s response to this theory is revealing. He offers a number of arguments against it, but in his “Commentary on the Five Fundamentals” he starts off by pointing out how this theory undermines the epistemological value of revelation.

He argues first that the type of attribute or meaning that the Ash‘arites identify with God’s speech cannot be directly apprehended by the mind; it can only be known through some further quality to which it gives rise and through which it becomes manifest. For example, the accident of life that inheres in every atom of a living body cannot be directly perceived; we infer its existence from characteristics of which it is a necessary condition, such as the body’s capacity for autonomous movement. Just so God’s speech, if it were such an attribute subsisting in his essence, could not be directly known; we could only know it through our knowledge that the speaker has some quality, such as ‘being speaking,’ that arises from his speech. But ‘Abd al-Jabbār argued that there is no such secondary quality from which God’s speech could be inferred. In his ontology, we know that someone is speaking only if we first know his speech itself; and this is just what we cannot know directly if it is an attribute of this type subsisting in God’s essence. It follows that if God’s speech is what the Ash‘arites claim it is, we can no more have knowledge of it than we can assert that there is life in a body that shows no sign of life – a corpse.¹¹

¹¹ See ‘Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkḏīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 532-533, 536-537; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 23-24, 27, 60-64, 107, 135-136.

Now the Ash‘arites maintained that the words of the Qur‘ān express, and thus provide knowledge of, the eternal meaning or attribute of God’s speech. ‘Abd al-Jabbār countered that an expression must be the same kind of entity as the thing it expresses; one cannot be eternal and the other created; one cannot be simple and the other composite. And even if it were possible for created words to express eternal speech, they would not indicate it reliably, because verbal expression has no necessary connection to inner meaning; a person might utter a statement when her inner meaning is a command, or even when she has no inner meaning of speech at all.¹² If God’s speech is to be accessible to humanity, then, and if it is to function as evidence from which God’s servants can come to know his law, it cannot be a meaning or attribute subsisting in God; it must be identified with the created sequence of letters and sounds that we hear when the Qur‘ān is recited.¹³

Next ‘Abd al-Jabbār seeks to prove that God’s speech must be God’s act. A thing is considered someone’s act precisely when it proceeds from the agent in accordance with his or her intention and will. Likewise, we say that someone is speaking only when speech proceeds from him in the same way, in accordance with his intention and will. When a madman speaks, and we realize that his speech is not governed by his own will, we do not say that he is speaking; rather we say that a jinn is speaking through him. Hence if God’s speech does not proceed from him in accordance with his intention and will – that is, if it is not his act – then we cannot say that God is speaking.¹⁴

From what we have learned of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s epistemology and hermeneutics, we can see why it is important for him to insist that God’s speech is his act. It is because God’s speech is his act that its meaning is determined by God’s will. If it were not his act, therefore, it would not indicate his will, and thus would not be evidence of the law. Furthermore, if God’s speech were not his act, it would not be governed by his

¹² ‘Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkḏīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 527-528; al-Mughnī, 7:19-20.

¹³ ‘Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkḏīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 528-529.

¹⁴ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:48; ‘Abd al-Jabbār / Mānkḏīm, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, 535-536.

justice, because justice concerns acts, and the principle of God's justice is simply that God's acts are always good and never bad. If God's speech were not his act, then, his justice would not guarantee its clarity or even its truthfulness. There is a lot at stake for 'Abd al-Jabbār in his defense of the created Qur'ān: if God's speech is an eternal attribute rather than a created act, then it cannot serve as an indicator of the legal values of acts – which is the very purpose of God's speech.

'Abd al-Jabbār has taken a theological dispute about God's oneness, and has given it an epistemological and hermeneutical dimension. And contrary to what some earlier Western scholarship on the rationalist Mu'tazilites might lead us to expect, he did not employ the doctrine of the created Qur'ān to disparage revelation, but rather to ensure its place in his religious epistemology.

Some features of 'Abd al-Jabbār's view of language were shared by his opponents, such as his emphasis on speaker's intent, his denial that God's speech can convey intent directly, and his reduction of all God's speech to indicative statements; other features were fiercely contested, such as his insistence that the language of revelation can never be ambiguous. Remarkably, however, these basic questions about the nature and function of revealed language do not seem to have been much debated in the recent surge of interest in Islamic legal theory, in spite of the tremendous hermeneutical leverage that they offer for contemporary interpretations of the Qur'ān. There has been much said about concepts such as diligent inquiry and the common good, which provide ways of reasoning beyond the meaning that the language of revelation is assumed to have. There has been interest in exploring the historical and social contexts of revelation, and there have been critiques of the way revelation functions within Islamic thought. But I am still looking for signs of a contemporary debate over the nature and function of Qur'ānic language itself. In fact I hope to make twentieth-century and contemporary discussions of such questions a focus of my research in the next few years, and I would be very grateful for any leads you can give me. Whatever form such discussions might take in the contemporary world, I expect that they will not be able to escape the old theological problem of the created or eternal nature of the Qur'ān, which, I hope I have shown, is inextricably intertwined with the epistemological and hermeneutical dimensions of Qur'ānic studies.