

Lesson 17: The Divine Speech and Word

There is no dispute that speech (*takallum*) is one of the Positive Attributes and Attributes of Perfection of God, as this point has been mentioned in Qur'anic verses and traditions (*ʿaḥādīth*). However, different views have been put forth on the meaning of God's word (*kalām*) and whether God's word is contingent or eternal, and whether speech is one of the Attributes of Essence or Attributes of Action of God.

1. The Ahl al-ʿadith and ʿanbalās

The Ahl al-ʿadith and ʿanbalās consider the word of God (*kalām Allāh*) consisting of the letters and sounds (literal word). Yet, they are of the opinion that *kalām* is eternal and an Attribute of God's Essence.¹ There is no doubt in the incorrectness of this view. If letters and sounds are physical things and contingent in time, how can one consider *kalām* which is composed by them to be eternal?

2. Justice-Oriented Theologians

The Muʿtazilah and Imāmiyyah theologians regard the word of God as verbal (*lafẓī*) and contingent (*ʿādīth*). On this basis, attributing speech to God is like ascribing an action to an agent (*isnād-e ʿudrī* or emanative attribution) and not like attributing an accidental quality (*ʿarī*) to an object of accident (*maʿrūfī*) (*isnād-e ʿarī* or accidental attribution). For example, *munʿim* (benefactor) means the provider of blessing (*niʿmah*) to others; *rāziq* (sustainer) means the bestower of sustenance (*rizq*); in the same manner, *mutakallim* (speaker) means the originator of speech (*kalām*).²

On this basis, the Holy Qur'an, as the word of God, is created and contingent. Qur'anic verses clearly indicate the word of God is contingent:

﴿ مَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ ذِكْرِ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ مُحَدَّثٍ إِلَّا اسْتَمَعُوهُ وَهُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴾

“There does not come to them any new reminder from their Lord but they listen to it as they play around.”³

What is meant by ‘reminder’ (*dhikr*) in this verse is the Holy Qur’an, as another verse has thus stated:

﴿ إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ ﴾

“Indeed We have sent down the Reminder and indeed We will preserve it.”⁴

The first verse implies that their Lord does not send for them a new reminder (the Qur’an) except that they listen to it, but they do not take it seriously as they are busy in amusement and entertainment. Also, the second verse talks about the revelation of the Qur’an and guarantees its preservation. Anything which is pre-existent and eternal is indestructible, let alone having in need of any protection.

And in another place, it is thus stated:

﴿ وَإِنْ أَحَدٌ مِّنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّى يَسْمَعَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ﴾

“If any of the polytheists seeks asylum from you, grant him asylum until he hears the Word of Allah.”⁵

Characteristics such as “originated” (*muḍath*), “listening to the Reminder and Word of God,” “sending down” (*nuzūl*), and “protection” (*ʿif*) all point to the truth that the word of God consists of letters and sounds; that is, it is a verbal speech which is created and contingent.⁶

3. The Ash‘arīs and Māturdīs

The Ash‘arīs and Māturdīs have classified word or speech (*kalām*) into two, viz. verbal (*lafẓī*) and intrinsic (*nafsī*).

[Accordingly,] the Qur’an and other heavenly books which have been revealed to prophets of God are verbal word and contingent, but the verbal word is not the essence of the word (or the real word). The essence of the word or the real word is the intrinsic word (*kalām-e nafsī*); that is, the truth in the self or essence of the speaker which is represented by the verbal word. The intrinsic word with respect to God is the Attribute of Essence and is Eternal.

The main disagreement with the Ash‘arīs and Māturdīs is in proving the intrinsic word. Once it is proven, there will be no dispute that it is essential and eternal. Similarly, there will be no doubt that a verbal word cannot be without any source and that there is something in the human being which the verbal word represents. But the bone of contention is whether or not this truth is distinct from knowledge, or free-will and compulsion.

The proponents of the intrinsic word maintain that sometimes a person reports something which he

knows to be the contrary or he doubts its accuracy. Therefore, that which is the origin of the verbal word cannot be knowledge.⁷

This argument is not complete because in the above assumption, knowledge is not assented to (*taʿadduq*) yet there is conceptual (*taʿawwur*) knowledge. That is, a person who knows the incorrectness of a subject makes a conception of it and relays this conception. The same is true with doubt.

Their other argument is that sometimes a person commands to do a certain thing or forbids it without having the will or abhorrence, as the case may be, to do so. Therefore, the verbal word in the form of command and prohibition cannot be considered originating from will or abhorrence; rather, there is something in the human being which is the intrinsic word.⁸

This argument is also incorrect because in the above assumption, there is no absolute will and abhorrence in relation to the action – to bid or forbid. Without any doubt, in such an assumption the Bidder or Forbidder has a motive, such as giving trial to His servant and the like. Regardless of His motive, it is His desire or abhorrence, and it is the origin of His command and prohibition.

Yet another argument of the proponents of intrinsic word (*kalām-e nafs*) is that in terms of verbal derivation, the speaker (*mutakallim*) is the one from who the word or speech (*kalām*) emanates and not the one who originates the word or speech, for the agent of movement creates the movement in someone than himself and yet he is not called the mover (*mutaʿarrik*); rather *mutaʿarrik* is that which the movement emanates from. Meanwhile, since the verbal word's emanation from God is impossible, it must be said that beyond the verbal word is another word which is no other than the intrinsic word.⁹

The criticism to the above argument is that in terms of derivatives, one cannot make an analogy. For example, a person is called “killer” who is the agent of killing of another person; the beater is he who is the agent of beating another person; the helper is he who is the agent of helping another person. One can never consider killing, beating and helping accidental to the agents of those actions. It is true that the said actions originate from their respective agents, yet it is not accidental existence (*qiyām-e ʿarʿ*) but rather emanative existence (*qiyām-e ʿudʿr*).

The existence of the origin of their derivatives, therefore, is sometimes in the form of emanative existence as well as accidental existence at other times. The existence of movement in the mover is an accidental existence while the existence of beating in the beater is an emanative existence. The existence of word or speech in the speaker is of the latter case.

The following holy verse is also quoted to substantiate of the “intrinsic word”:

﴿ وَيَقُولُونَ فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَوْلَا يُعَذِّبُنَا اللَّهُ بِمَا نَقُولُ ﴾

“And they say to themselves, ‘Why does not Allah punish us for what we say?!’”¹⁰

In this regard, they have also cited the couplet of Al-Akh¹¹ below ¹²

إِنَّ الْكَلَامَ لَفِي الْفُؤَادِ وَإِنَّمَا جَعَلَ اللِّسَانَ عَلَى الْفُؤَادِ دَلِيلًا

Yet, such usages are metaphorical and not real and their implication is nothing except mental conceptions and psychic perceptions, and in no way do they prove the existence “intrinsic word” as a reality distinct from conceptions and perceptions.

4. Muslim Philosophers

According to the Muslim philosophers, it is true that the word *kalām* has been coined for words which denote particular meanings, but the motive or purpose for which a word is coined includes a verbal word as it conveys and points to the motive behind coining the verbal word. This point is not limited to verbal word. Sometimes, by means of signs and the like, one may convey to others his or her message or point. In conventional practice, this way of conveying message is called “speech” or “speaking”.

Meanwhile, there is no doubt that in relation to its agent, an action denotes two things. It denotes the existence of the agent as well as its qualities. On this basis, it can be said that the universe which is an Action and a creation of God expresses His existence and Attributes of Perfection. Therefore, the universe is a Word of God.

فَالْكَُلُّ بِالذَّاتِ لَهُ دِلَالَةٌ حَاقِكَةٌ جَمَالَهُ، جَلَالَهُ

So everything essentially denotes Him,

Expressing His Beauty and Glory. ¹³

The Word of God in the Qur’an and the Traditions

In the Qur’an and traditions, the word of God has broad meanings. We shall only limit to the verbal word, active word and other types of speech:

1. Some verses about the verbal word have been quoted earlier. We shall quote here a Qur’anic verse about God’s interlocution with Prophet M¹⁴ (Moses) (‘a):

﴿وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَى تَكْلِيمًا﴾

“And to Moses Allah spoke directly.”¹⁴

In other verses of the Qur’an, examples of God’s interlocution with Prophet Mūsā (‘a) have been mentioned. It is stated in those verses that in the valley of ‘Uwā Prophet Mūsā (‘a) heard a voice from God, and in this way, God imparted some truths to him.¹⁵

2. The Holy Qur’an has named the Holy Messiah (‘a) “Word of Allah” (*kalimat Allāh*):

﴿إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ﴾

“The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and His Word.”¹⁶

3. The Divine decree is also another kind of God’s word:

﴿وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَةُ رَبِّكَ الْحُسْنَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا﴾

“And your Lord’s best word [of promise] was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because of their patience.”¹⁷

4. Imām ‘Alī (‘a) has regarded the word of God as His action, saying:

يَقُولُ لِمَنْ أَرَادَ كَوْنَهُ: «كُنْ» فَيَكُونُ لَا بِصَوْتٍ يَفْرَعُ وَلَا بِنِدَاءٍ يُسْمَعُ وَإِنَّمَا كَلَامُهُ سُبْحَانَهُ فِعْلٌ مِنْهُ أَنْشَأَهُ وَمَثَّلَهُ.

“When He intends to create someone He says, ‘Be’ and there he is, but not through a voice that strikes [the ears] is that call heard. His speech is an act of His creation.”¹⁸

The Contingency of God’s Word

The “word” (*kalām*) as God’s action – verbal or non-verbal word – is contingent. If one can conceive of a word or speaker in the Divine Essence in such a way that it is not traceable to the verbal and active word, that word shall be deemed pre-existent (*qadīm*).

However, in view of the fact that the prevalent usage of “word” is the verbal one and that the same meaning is intended whenever a word is used without any exceptional context, it cannot be treated as uncreated. Be that as it may, since the word *makhḷūq* (creature or created being) is sometimes used to mean artificial word or speech, some great religious personalities have not permitted the application of the word *makhḷūq* to the Qur’an. For instance, Shaykh al-Mufīd has said:

أَقُولُ أَنَّ الْقُرْآنَ كَلَامُ اللَّهِ، وَأَنَّهُ مُحَدَّثٌ كَمَا وَصَفَهُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى وَ أَمْنَعُ مِنْ إِطْلَاقِ الْقَوْلِ عَلَيْهِ بِأَنَّهُ مَخْلُوقٌ.

“I say that the Qur’an is indeed the Word of Allah, and it is indeed contingent as Allah, the Exalted, has described it, and I do not permit the application of the word ‘created’ to it.”¹⁹

The Immaculate Imams (‘a) and the Issue of Contingency of God’s Word

In the history of Islam, especially during the ‘Abbāsid period, the discussion or dispute concerning the contingency (*‘udūth*) or pre-existence (*qadam*) of the Word of God among the various currents had reached its zenith, going beyond the level of a purely academic question and acquiring a political undertone. During that time, some individuals would be severely persecuted, imprisoned and tortured for simply believing that the Qur’an is pre-existent. For this reason, this period is also named the “Period of Inquisition” (*dawrat al-ma‘nah*).

The wise stance of the *Ahl al-Bayt* Imams (‘a) on this issue was very instructive. On one hand, they did not consider it permissible to enter into a dispute which had political undertones and a source of discord and violence against the Muslim *ummah*, urging their followers to refrain from it. Notwithstanding this, they would subtly express their view about the contingency of the Qur’an and the Word of God.

Rabbān ibn ‘alt asked Imam al-Ri‘ā (‘a), “What do you say about the Qur’an?” In reply, the Imam (‘a) said:

كَلَامُ اللَّهِ لَا تَتَجَاوَزُوهُ وَلَا تَطْلُبُوا الْهُدَى فِي غَيْرِهِ فَتَضِلُّوا.

“It is the Word of Allah. Do not violate it and do not seek guidance from other than it for you will be misguided.”²⁰

Mu‘ammad ibn ‘is‘ ibn ‘Ubayd has reported that in a letter about the contingency of the Qur’an, Imam al-Jawād (‘a) thus wrote to some of his followers in Baghdad:

وَلَيْسَ الْخَالِقُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ، وَمَا سِوَاهُ مَخْلُوقٌ، وَالْقُرْآنُ كَلَامُ اللَّهِ لَا تَجْعَلْ لَهُ اسْمًا مِنْ عِنْدِكَ فَتَكُونَ مِنَ الضَّالِّينَ.

“There is no creator other than Allah, the Glorious and Exalted, and anything other than Him is created, and the Qur’an is the Word of Allah. Do not coin by yourself any name for it lest you will become one of the misguided ones.”²¹

In this letter, the Imam (‘a) has expressed in a subtle manner the contingency of the Qur’an while prohibiting the description of it with such modifiers as “created” and the like.

The Absence of Lie in God's Word

Honesty in words and deeds is intrinsically good while telling a lie is intrinsically evil. And God is immune from any undesirable quality. In other words, honesty and truthfulness are among the Attributes of Perfection, and God is entitled to all the existential perfections. As such, He is truthful. In this regard, the Holy Qur'an has thus stated:

﴿وَمَنْ أَصْدَقُ مِنَ اللَّهِ حَدِيثًا﴾

“And who is more truthful in speech than Allah?”²²

Review Questions

1. State the point of view of the justice-oriented theologians regarding the word of God.
2. Write down the view of the Ahl al-ʿAdāb and ʿAnbalāʾs concerning the word of God along with the criticism to it.
3. State the basis of Qur'anic verses on the contingency of the word of God.
4. Write down the opinion of the Ash'arīs and Muṭtadīs about the word of God along with the criticism to it.
5. The proponents of the “intrinsic word” argue that in terms of verbal derivation, the speaker (*mutakallim*) is the one from who the word or speech (*kalām*) emanates and not the one who originates the word or speech. Write down the problem with this opinion.
6. State the manifestations of the word of God in the verses of the Qur'an and traditions (*aḥādīth*).
7. What is the basis of God's truthfulness?

¹. Aḥmad ibn ʿAnbal, Uṣūl al-Dīn, p. 56; Shahrīstānī, Al-Milal wa 'n-Niḥāl, vol. 1, p. 106.

². Qaṣṣat 'Abd al-Jabbār, Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah, p. 367; Ibn Maytham al-Baḥārī, Qawā'id al-Murād, p. 92.

³. Sūrat al-Anbiyā' 21:2.

⁴. Sūrat al-ʿAjjr 15:9.

⁵. Sūrat al-Tawbah (or Barā'ah) 9:6.

⁶. Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah, p. 360.

⁷. Sharḥ al-Mawāfiq, vol. 8, p. 94.

⁸. Ibid.

⁹. Sharḥ al-Maqṣūd, vol. 4, p. 147.

¹⁰. Sūrat al-Mujādilah 58:8.

¹¹. Al-Akhḥāl (Ghiyāth ibn Ghawth al-Taghlibī al-Akhḥāl) (c. 640–710 CE): one of the most famous Arab poets of the Umayyad period and a Christian belonging to the tribe of Taghlib in Mesopotamia. [Trans.]

- [12.](#) Sharḥ al-Maqṣid, vol. 4, p. 150.
- [13.](#) Fakḥm Sabziwārī, Sharḥ al-Manẓūmah. What has been said speaks of the active word and speech of God. Philosophers have also conceived of the essential word and speech for God. For further information, see Ayḥā al-Ḥikmah, vol. 2, pp. 585–586.
- [14.](#) Sīrat al-Nisī 4:164.
- [15.](#) Sīrat Ḥ 20:11; Sīrat al-Qaṣa 28:30.
- [16.](#) Sīrat al-Nisī 4:171.
- [17.](#) Sīrat al-Aʿraf 7:137.
- [18.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 186.
- [19.](#) Awḥil al-Maqṣid, p. 53.
- [20.](#) Al-Tawḥid, section (b) 3, ʿadth 2.
- [21.](#) Ibid., ʿadth 4.
- [22.](#) Sīrat al-Nisī 4:87.

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