

The Spirit and the Word: of the Command of My Lord

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Abstract

This article will discuss what is meant by the term *روح* (Spirit) in the Qur'an. It will show that there is a consistent interpretation that is applicable to all of the verses where this term has appeared. The spirit is a creation of God that does not have a material, temporal, or gradual origination. It is a means of spiritual support that is also not material, temporal or gradual.

The existence of Spirit (*روح*) was among the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (saw) as it is frequently mentioned in the Qur'an. This raises a question, as it did at the time of revelation, about the nature and reality of the spirit (17:85).

Qur'anic verses on the Spirit can be classified into five main categories:

- (1) Gabriel as a Spirit;
- (2) the human spirit;
- (3) the Spirit of divine revelation and support;
- (4) Jesus as Spirit; and
- (5) the spirit in the Hereafter.

By investigating each of these sets of verses, we can deduce a comprehensive interpretation that is applicable to all Qur'anic usages of the word spirit.

Verses about Gabriel

In the Qur'an, the Spirit of Sanctity (*روح القدس al-Qudus*, often translated as the Holy Spirit and the Trustworthy Spirit or *الروح الامين al-Amīn*) both refer to Gabriel. This can be deduced by comparing the

following verses:

Say, the Holy Spirit has brought it down duly from your Lord (16: 102);

This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart so that you may be one of the warners, (26: 192–194)

Say, ‘Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel [should know that] it is he who has brought it down on your heart with the will of Allah’ (2:97)

Gabriel is a trustworthy messenger responsible for descending the Qur’an upon the heart of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) (81: 19–21). The Qur’an also included Prophet Jesus (as) as one who was supported and strengthened by the Spirit of Sanctity (*Rūḥ al-Qudus*; 2:87, 2:253, 5:110). Given the above verses, the term *Rūḥ al-Qudus* in these verses can best be interpreted as Gabriel as well.

Verses about the Creation of Adam

The story of Adam’s creation – which marks the creation of humankind – can provide some insight to the meaning of spirit in the Qur’an:

When your Lord said to the angels, ‘Indeed I am about to create a human being out of clay. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him (38:71–72; also in 15:28–29).

What is My spirit in these verses? The answer can be deduced from another verse that describes the creation of Adam (as):

“He created him from dust, then said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was” (3:59).

Matching the two accounts with one another, it becomes clear that “breathed into him of My spirit” is the same as “said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was”. In other words, the creation of Adam (as) from clay or dust refers to the creation of his body, while breathing into him of His spirit refers to the attachment of spirit to this body. The first one is a material and temporal creation, while the second one is immaterial and timeless. The dichotomy between the two aspects of mankind’s creation can clearly be seen in verse 23: 14, where, after talking about the different stages of the embryonic development, it says:

“Then We produced him as [yet] another creature”, meaning a creation of another nature. It can also be seen in verses 32:7–9.

What can be inferred from these verses is that spirit is an immaterial and timeless reality. The verse confirms this:

“They question you concerning the Spirit. Say, ‘The Spirit is of the command of my Lord’” (17:85)

and the command of my Lord has been defined elsewhere as:

“His command, when He wills something, is to say to it ‘Be,’ and it is” (36:82).

Now we can have a consistent sense of spirit that is applicable to all of these verses: it is a direct, immaterial and non-gradual effusion by God, as opposed to His material and gradual creatures.

Verses about Revelation and Spiritual Support

The Qur’an says,

“He sends down the angels with the Spirit of His command to whomever He wishes of His servants: ‘Warn [the people] that there is no god except Me; so be wary of Me’” (16:2).

Given the verses discussed above, there is a clear connection between “the Spirit” and “His command”. In other words, of His command is an interpretation and explanation of what is meant by the Spirit. It is effectively and concisely saying that the Spirit is a matter of God’s command (17:85); it is of an immaterial and timeless nature just as His command is to say to something ‘Be’ and it is (36:82).

The same applies to the verse:

“He casts the Spirit of His command upon whomever of His servants that He wishes, that he may warn [people] of the Day of Encounter” (40:15).

The verb ‘casts’ (*yulqī*) could also be a subtle reference to the non-gradual nature of the Spirit and His command. And so it goes with the verse:

“Thus have We revealed to you the Spirit of Our command. You did not know what the Book is, nor what is faith” (42:52).

A question that remains is: What does it mean that the angels descend with the Spirit (16:2, 97:4)? These two verses show that the Spirit accompanies the angels when they bring down revelation (16:2) or when they descend by every decree and command of God on the Night of Ordainment:

“In it the angels and the Spirit descend, by the leave of their Lord, by every command” (97:4).

Given the above discussions, it can be said that the descent or accompaniment of the Spirit applies to cases where there is a direct and non-gradual effusion by God – whether in the form of revelation of verses or the decrees of the universe.

This also clarifies how God has described His support for genuine believers:

“He has written faith into their hearts and strengthened them with a spirit from Him” (58:22).

Being strengthened by a spirit refers to a spiritual support and an immaterial effusion. The strengthening of Prophet Jesus (as) by *Rūḥ al-Qudus* also refers to the same form of spiritual and immaterial support. Simply putting it, the Spirit is a force that is different from natural forces and the means of this world. Perhaps Gabriel is called the Spirit of Sanctity and the Trustworthy Spirit because he has a share of this reality. His descent to this world, whether to strengthen Prophet Jesus (as) or bring revelation to Prophet Muḥammad (saw), is also accompanied by the Spirit – or even united with it – and it is especially marked by sanctity and trustworthiness.

Perhaps it can be said that the angels are manifestations of the spirit. It is the same reality at a lower plane of existence (*tanazzul*). The same can be said about the human spirit. In other words, spirit is a single reality that has different instances in different levels of beings and planes of existence. It is one existential reality that sometimes may take different forms. [1](#)

Verses about Prophet Jesus

About the conception of Prophet Jesus (as), God says that it was done through Our Spirit blowing into Mary (as):

“We sent to her Our Spirit [That is, Gabriel] and he became incarnate for her as a well-proportioned human” (19:17).

‘Our Spirit’ here has been most commonly interpreted as Gabriel. [2](#) If so, then consistency requires that Gabriel is the Spirit that was the means of blowing into Mary’s womb:

“We breathed into it of Our spirit” (21:91, 66:12).

Not only was Jesus (as) conceived by the means of God’s Spirit and strengthened by it later, but he was a spirit himself:

“The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him” (4:171).

It is interesting that the same term ‘cast’ (*alqā*) has been used here as in verse 40:15 (quoted above), again alluding to the non-gradual nature of the Spirit. God’s word (*kalimah*, or *qawl* in 16:40) refers to the self-same word of ‘Be’ (*kun*), which is a way of referring to an immaterial and non-gradual creation:

“All Our word to a thing, when We will it, is to say to it ‘Be!’ and it is” (16:40).

Hence, Jesus (as) is God’s word and spirit in the sense that his creation was not through natural means and a temporal process. His creation was a matter of God’s command, just like Adam’s:

“Indeed the case of Jesus with Allah is like the case of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was” (3:59).

Therefore, it could be said that when the Qur'an says:

"We sent to her Our Spirit" (19: 17)

it is referring to the descent of an immaterial and timeless reality, which is of the nature of God's command. The same can be said about the blowing of spirit into Mary's womb. Hence, Our Spirit in these verses refers to the same reality as the other verses, and Gabriel's role here was apparently that he was a carrier of this reality.

Verses about the Resurrection

Finally, there are two verses that talk about the angels and the Spirit in the context of the Hereafter:

"The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day whose span is fifty thousand years" (70:4);

"On the day when the Spirit and the angels stand arrayed. None shall speak except whom the All-beneficent permits and who says what is right" (78:38).

The above discussion of the angels being accompanied by the Spirit should clarify what is meant here.

"He directs the command from the heaven to the earth" (32:5),

meaning that the affairs of this world of nature descend from the immaterial and timeless realm. God conducts this direction of affairs through His angels (79:5), who are accompanied by the Spirit (97:4). Just as the angels and the Spirit are means of descending and executing God's command in this world during its life, they will gather and ascend the affairs of this world toward Him upon its termination:

"Then it ascends toward Him in a day whose span is a thousand years by your reckoning" (32:5).

So again, the Spirit describes God's immaterial and timeless command, but this time its ascent from this realm, not its descent to it.

A Review of Narrations

1. Imam al-Ḥadiq (as) said, *"The Spirit is an angel greater than Gabriel and Michael. It was with the Messenger of God and after him it has been with the Imams."* In some narrations, he added, *"It supports them. Not everything that is sought is found."*³

Notes

a. Apparently, what is meant by 'angel' in narrations like this is not a member of the same species, but a creation that is immaterial and transcendent like the angels. In other words, 'it is an angel' means 'it is an immaterial being.'

b. There are also many early exegetes that have interpreted the Spirit as an angel that is greater than [other] angels in creation.[4](#)

c. The last part of the hadith suggests that the accompaniment and support of the Spirit is a blessing and grace from God that

“He grants to whomever He wishes” (3:73, 5:54, 57:21, 57:29, 62:4).

In other words, it cannot be acquired, just as the positions of prophethood or Imamate also cannot be acquired.

d. It should be noted that the Qur’an explicitly says that “the angels and the Spirit descend” in the Night of Ordainment (*Laylat al-Qadr*)

“by the leave of their Lord, with every command” (97:4),

and there are many hadiths saying that they descend upon the heart of the Infallible of the time.[5](#) Yet, the above hadith suggests that the Spirit is always with the Infallibles. Therefore, the accompaniment of the Spirit with the Infallibles must have different degrees or forms, and a higher degree or a special form of it occurs on the Night of Ordainment.

2. It is narrated from Imam’s al-Baqir (as) and al-Ridha (as): *“The Spirit is one of God’s creatures that has sight, power and support. He places it in the heart of His messengers and the believers.”*[6](#)

3. Once Imam al-Ridha (as) was asked, “Is it not that the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*) is Gabriel?’ He replied, ‘No. The Spirit is a creature that is greater than Gabriel. Gabriel is one of the angels but the Spirit is greater than the angels. Is it not that God says: ***‘In it the angels and the Spirit descend’***” (97:4).[7](#)

Note

The Imam has drawn on this verse to show that the separate mention of the Spirit next to the angels indicates that the Spirit is not one of the angels; otherwise the verse would have simply said ‘angels’ and that would have included the Spirit as one of them. Similarly, in some supplications that are recommended to be read every day and night in the Month of Ramaḥan, one sends blessings upon a list of holy beings including prophets, angels, and saints. The list distinctly mentions Gabriel, *Rūḥ al-Qudus* (the Spirit of Sanctity or the Holy Spirit) and *al-Raḥmān al-Amīn* (the Trustworthy Spirit), which shows that they are distinct beings.[8](#)

4. Once Zurarah asked Imam al-Baqir (as) about the verse,

“They question you concerning the Spirit. Say, ‘The Spirit is of the command of my Lord’” (17:85).

The Imam said, *“It is a one of God’s creatures, and He adds to the creation whatever He wishes [35: 1].”*[9](#)

5. Once either Imam al-Bḡqir (as) or Imam al-Ḥadiq (as) was asked about the Spirit in verse 17:85. He replied, “*It is the spirit that is in the animals and people.*” The inquirer asked, “And what is that?” He answered, “*It is from the spiritual world (al-malakūt), from divine power (al-qudrah).*”¹⁰

6. In one of his supplications Imam al-Sajjād (as) asks God to bless Michael and Gabriel, and then he asks God to bless “the spirit who is over the angels of the veils; and the spirit who is of Thy command.”¹¹

Notes

a. This shows that there is more than one spirit, with different charges.

b. Overall, this supplication confirms the idea that there is much similarity between the spirit and the angels – both being immaterial beings that direct the affairs of the universe by God's command.

7. It has been narrated that the Prophet used to say in his bowing and prostration, “*Glorified and Sacrosanct is the Lord of the angels and the Spirit.*”¹²

8. Wahab ibn Munabbih said, “The Spirit is an angel that has ten thousand wings. The distance between each of its two wings is the distance between east and west. It has a thousand faces. Each face has a thousand tongues, a thousand pair of lips and a thousand pair of eyes which glorify the All-Mighty God.”¹³

Note

a. Wahab ibn Munabbih is not a trustworthy narrator.

b. Overall, this description shows the immense creation and the special makeup of the Spirit compared to the other angels, although its authenticity must be verified.

9. Imam al-Ḥafīdīq (as) said, *“Indeed the spirit of a believer is more connected to God’s spirit than the sunray’s connection to the sun.”*¹⁴

Note

This narration relates to the Qur'anic verses that say that God blew of His spirit in Adam (15:29, 32:9, 38:72). It shows that although all human spirits are connected to God, belief can strengthen this tie.

Summary

To summarize:

1. The Spirit is a special creation of God whose creation is immaterial and non-gradual, like the angels.

2. It supports and strengthens the angels in their direction of affairs of universe, and in their bringing of revelation to the prophets.
3. It is a means of spiritual support and strength for the prophets and believers.
4. Its ascent to God and standing before Him on the Day of Resurrection refer to the end of God's command with regard to this universe.

1. Shuj'at, Maqalat, 1/17–19
2. Qumm, 2/49. Samarqand, Ba'r al-'Ulum, 2/371. Tha'lab, 6/209. 'abab, 16/46. 'abris, 6/784. 'af, 3/276
3. Qumm, 2/279. 'Ayyash, 2/317, p. 161. 'aff, Ba'ir al-Daraj, 1/455–457 and 1/461–462 Kf, 1/273 and 1/682–683
4. 'abab, 30/15
5. Qumm, 2/431. 'aff, Ba'ir al-Daraj, 1/220ff. Kf, 1/249ff
6. 'Ayyash, 2/316, p. 160
7. Barq, 2/315. Kf, 1/386–387
8. Tahdhb, 3/121. Ibn 'aw's, lqb al-A'mil, 1/98 and 1/217
9. 'Ayyash, 2/317, p. 159
10. 'Ayyash, 2/317, p. 163
11. 'afa, Supplication 4, translated by William Chittick.
12. Suyut, 6/309
13. Suyut, 6/309
14. Kf, 2/166, p. 4

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