THE 'AMR OF GOD' IN THE KORAN

BY

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In 1892 H. Grimm stated: 'Der Koranische Amr, wörtlich Befehl, entspricht dem Memra der Targume ... Mohammed stellt ihn dar als einen Ausfluss von Gott, ursprünglich als Wort des göttlichen Mundes gedacht und als solches von rein geistiger Natur. Dieses hat Gott von Anfang an in die Schöpfung hineingesprochen. 41, 11. Darauf schied er sieben Himmel und bedeutete jeder Himmelszone ihren Amr. So entsteht für Gott ein weites Organ, vermittelt dessen er die Räume des Himmels in stetiger Verbindung an sich selbst setzt' (Mohammed, II, 51). For a long time this view was a received opinion¹: Rudolph calls the amr 'das hypostatierte Wort', comparable with the memrâ and the logos of Philo and the New Testament, Eichler styles it a 'göttliche Hypostase' and Tor Andrae renders amr in XVI, 2 without more ado by 'Worte'².

In the last two decades, however, one couches it in more guarded terms, and particularly the Anglo-Saxons discern the hypothetical character of this view. MacDonald declares that amr 'inclines towards a memra or logos doctrine', Jeffery states

¹ With one exception, however! In the third 'stelling' of his thesis Mohammed en de Joden te Medina (1906) A. J. Wensinek combats Grimm's point of view. Unfortunately, W. has never mentioned later on in any of his writings his grounds for this attack. He makes merely an oblique reference to it in his La Pensée de Ghazzâlî (1940): 'il est cependant douteux si, dans la terminologie de ce livre (Koran), amr ait une relation quelconque avec le logos crétien ou philonien' (p. 83).

cautiously: 'it would seem', Sweetman writes: 'might point', while Tritton speaks of 'a suggestion of hypostases'. O'Shaughnessy avoids altogether the use of the logos-idea in this connection, and prefers to limit its function to an 'intermediary force between God and the world'. Through a close semasiological examination of this Koranic notion we intend to raise still more doubts concerning Grimm's theory.

In the Koran amr occurs 152 times in the singular, 13 times in the plural (umār). Mostly—nearly a hundred times—it is used in connection with Allāh, less often it is applied to men, and once to the heavens (XLI, 11).

When amr is attributed to or effected by men, it can signify:

1) Command. XX, 65 of the Pharao c. s.; XX, 92 of Aaron; XX, 94 of Moses; XXI, 81 of Solomon; III, 145 of Mohammed.
2) Affair. E. g. XVIII, 15 'He will favour your affair', i. e. of the people of the Cave.
3) Intentions. X, 72 'Collect your intentions and your idols (i. e. make up your mind with respect to your idolatry) and do not longer conceal your (malicious) intentions (towards me Noah)'.
4) Deeds, conduct. LIX, 15; LXV, 9: People, citizens, who taste the evil results of their conduct.
5) Religion, rites. XXIII, 55 'And they have become divided as to their religion among themselves into sects'. See also XXII, 66.

In the passage, where amr has become an attribute of the heavens (XLI, 11), it points to the destiny and task, indicated to them by the Creator.

Amr Ullāh is usually translated by 'command' or 'bidding of God'. And indeed, sometimes this expression says nothing more than that amr is a quality of leading individuals like Moses or

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Solomon. So, for instance, in XVIII, 48, where it is said that Iblis withdraws from God's command. But generally amr Ullâh has a more pregnant sense.

In X, 3 is described how God after the creation of the world ascends His throne to 'arrange the amr' (yudabbiru 'l-amra). According to VII, 52, this relates to the course of the celestial bodies, the change of day and night. It is also due to God's amr that heaven and earth endure (XXX, 24), that man receives his food and life on earth continues (X, 32). In these passages amr refers to the preservation of the universe which is represented in Semitic thought1 as a sequel to the creation. VII, 52 'His is the creation (khalq) and the creatio continua (amr)'. World-order is not hold up by secondary causes of which God is the First Cause, but by a series of separate well-considered divine dispensations which are one by one creative acts.

From His throne the Almighty plans His government. To this end the amr, i.e. the design to-be-prepared for the Gubernatio Dei, 'descends' (yatanazzala) between the seven heavens and the earth (LXV, 12). Thus 'He arranges the amr from the heaven to the earth; then it (i.e. the amr-design when completed) ascends (ya' ruju) to Him' (XXXII, 4). Now, after this preceding inquiry of the state of affairs in the world, God 'determines' (yaqdiya) the amr, and then it is 'ripe for execution' (maf' ilân; see VIII, 46). The design has become a dispensation.

When amr is settled in this way, providential rule can be exercised. This proves to have a two-sided effect: for the good and for the bad, accordingly as men deserve to be favoured or to be punished. In the first case amr is synonymous with God's guidance and grace, in the second case with God's judgment and damnation.

In XXI, 73 Isaac and Jacob are charged to guide people with God's amr, i.e. guidance, since it consists of appeals to good works, prayer and alms-giving. In XLV, 16 it is said that God gave first the Israelites bayyinâtin mina 'l-amri, concrete directions in regard to the amr, which again must have the sense of

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1 For the Old Testament, see W. Eichrodt, Theologie des Alten Testaments (1939), II, 78.
'divine guidance' (cf. its alternative reading in II, 181: bāyīndītīn mina 'l-ḥudd wa 'l-furqāni, concrete directions in regard to the divine guidance and help, this time as a present to the Muslims). In the next verse of Sūra XLV Mohammed is encouraged as follows: 'Then We granted you a clear way (sharī'a) in regard to the divine guidance (amr'). (In a direct line of this meaning of amr lies the fifth noticed use of amr when attributed to men, viz. 'rites', divine guidance in an instituted form). Occasionally this providential amr-rule manifests itself even as divine favour. For when in XXII, 64 is mentioned that the ships 'range the sea through His amr' (tajrī fīl-baḥrī bi-amrīhi), then in a parallel passage (XXXI, 30) amr is explained as 'favour of God' (tajrī fīl-baḥrī bi-nī'mati 'llāhi). Another instance of this gives XI, 76, where amr Ullāh is specified as 'God's mercy and blessings', inasmuch as it will be realised in the birth of a son for Abraham and his wife.

More frequently, however, the heavenly dispensations are inauspicious and sinister. X, 25 'Till . . . Our amr comes to it (the earth) by night or by day, then We make it a stubble-field, as if there had been grown nothing the day before'; LIV, 50 'And Our amr is but a single (cry), like the twinkling of an eye'. If the amr Ullāh is coming, one should not wish to hasten it (XVI, 1). And Lot is told of the amr concerning the Sodomites 'that their roots would be cut off towards the morning' (XV, 66). At the moment Noah is said to embark it comes (XI, 41f.), and when it has been executed, the water of the Flood abates (XI, 46). Amr is the doomsday which the Israelites accelerate through their worship of the golden calf (VII, 149). But for the God-fearing the amr is 'easy', since for him it consists

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1 For this translation of furqān, see Ch. C. Torrey, The Jewish Foundation of Islam (1933), p. 48.
2 Dropped off is here saṭra (cf. XXXVII, 19; LXXIX, 13) or ṣaiḥa (cf. LIV, 31; XXXVIII, 14; XXXVI, 28, 49, 53) or ṣal'īqa (cf. LI, 44). Zamakhsharī supposes that kalīma (word) should be added, and that it refers to the creative command of God kūn (II, 423). But it is more likely that this passage points at the Last Judgment, for it forms part of a long penitential sermon. Moreover, the only place where the expression ka-lāḥītīn bi-l-baṣārī (like the twinkling of an eye) also occurs is XVI, 79 which deals with the Lord's Day.
of pardon of sins and excellent reward (LXV, 4 f.; see also XVIII, 87)\textsuperscript{1}.

With respect to the executive part of His amr, i.e. His plans and purposes for the world, God is assisted by a host of faithful angels. XIX, 65 'We'—as they state themselves\textsuperscript{2}—'descend only with an amr of your Lord'. They are employed for the drawing up of the amr when still a design (cf. LXXIX, 5 \textit{fa'il-mudabbir\text{\textsuperscript{a}}ti amran}), as well as for the carrying out of the amr when ripened into a dispensation (cf. LI, 4 \textit{fa'il-muqassim\text{\textsuperscript{a}}ti amran}). In the first case, amr is presumably related to the account of human deeds which is made for the coming divine Judgment. Everybody on earth has guardian angels around him as a kind of secret service 'to observe him in view of the amr' (XIII, 12), and his deeds are accurately recorded by them (cf. LXXXII, 10ff.); it is their account which is read on the resurrection day! (cf. XVII, 14 ff.)\textsuperscript{3}.

An interesting example of amr as divine dispensation communicated by angels gives XCVII, 4: 'The angels and the spirit descend therein (i.e. the night of \textit{qadr}) (to the earth), by the permission of their Lord, in view of every amr'. As Wensinck has shown\textsuperscript{4}, elements of the New Year's night are mixed up with the night of \textit{qadr}, that is to say the belief that God decrees in it everything for the coming year. This agrees well with our idea of amr as dispensations to be executed, for which purpose the angels, after God's deciding of fates, descend to the earth in the same night\textsuperscript{5}.

\textsuperscript{1} For other places where amr is the divine Judgment and doom, see LXXXII, 19; LIV, 3; XXXVI, 28; XIX, 40; XVIII, 87; XLI, 35; 79; XI, 61, 69, 78, 84, 103; XL, 78; VII, 75; XLVI, 24; VI, 8, 58; II, 103, 106; XLVII, 23; LVII, 13; IX, 24, 107; V, 57.
\textsuperscript{2} Cf. R. Bell, \textit{Introduction to the Qur'an} (1953), p. 61: 'there is one passage which everyone acknowledges to be spoken by angels, namely XIX, 65 f.'.
\textsuperscript{3} See also Balq\text{\textsuperscript{a}}wi at XIX, 40 \textit{iz qa\text{\textsuperscript{a}}fa \textit{t'amru}: 'The reckoning (\textit{his\text{\textsuperscript{a}}db}) is finished and the two groups go to Paradise and Hell'. And compare LXV, 4 'God will make for him (the God-fearing) His amr easy' with LXXXIV, 8 'And he shall be reckoned with by an easy reckoning'.
\textsuperscript{4} A. J. Wensinck, \textit{Arabic New Year and the Feast of Tabernacles} (1925), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{5} See also \textsuperscript{T\text{\textsuperscript{a}}b\text{\textsuperscript{a}}r\text{\textsuperscript{a}}} at XCVII, 4 'The night of \textit{qadr}, i.e. the night of Decision (\textit{hukm}), in which God fixes the destinies (\textit{qa\text{\textsuperscript{a}}fa}) of the (coming) year'.
The spirit (rāḥ), mentioned in XCVII, 4, occurs more times in connection with amr. Then it is qualified as min anrī rabbī, min anrīhi, min amrīnā (XVII, 87; XVI, 2; XL, 15; XLII, 55). Usually one resorts here again to a hypostase-hypothesis, and declares that rāḥ is a second emanation, subsequent to amr (Grimme, II, 51 f.; Rudolph, p. 41; Horovitz, Hebrew Union College Annual, II, 189). Min is understood as denoting a separation.

In XVII, 87 we are told that Mohammed is questioned about the spirit, and that he is instructed to answer: al-rāḥu min amrī rabbī- ‘The spirit belongs to (min partitivus!) the amr of my Lord’. Could it not be that Mohammed at this moment is thinking of the earlier revelation (XCVII, 4) in which is stated, as we have seen above, that the angels and the spirit descend from heaven on account of every amr? If this supposition is right, the rāḥ at this place must be, as in Ezekiel, an angelic being¹ who in particular is entrusted with the execution of amr-dispensations. In XVI, 2 and XL, 15 he re-enters on the scene, and is sent down to warn servants of God’s choice to fear their Lord. It is a kind of final notice in view of the impending doomsday. In XLII, 52 rāḥ is undefined and the object of the verb waḥd IV—‘to reveal something to (ild) someone’. The most plausible inference, therefore, is to take here rāḥ for a divine revelation, message or communication², and to render: ‘And thus We acquainted you (Mohammed) with a communication from Our guidance (amr)—you did not know, ere this, what the Book was, or what the faith—but We made it a light whereby We guide the servants of Our choice’.

Looking for possible ‘sources’ of the Koranic amr, it appears useful to turn one’s eye to the Ancient Arabian Poetry. Although its relation to the Koran poses a lot of unsettled questions, it offers at least parallels dating from the time before and during Mohammed’s appearance as a prophet. And one has a fair

¹ The other possibilities, suggested by the Muslim commentators, are that with rāḥ a divine revelation or the soul of man is meant.
² Also Ṭabarî interprets rāḥan here by ‘revelation’ (waḥyūn).
chance that such a parallel exerted an influence on the idiom and thought of the Holy Book.

A use of *amr*, analogous to the Koran, is especially made by the so-called *h omines religiosi* among the Arab poets, people with a strong inclination to monotheistic belief and with interest in religious matters which is rarely found among their fellows.

First, we cite a few parallels of *amr*, attributed to men or heavenly bodies. Um (ayya b. Abîl-Şall) XXXI, 5 (ed. Schulthess) ajma‘a ‘l-qaumu amrakum—'They (the Sodomites) made up their mind'; par. to X, 72 fa-ajmi‘ad amrakum. *Amr* in the sense of intention, plan also in Labîd XLI, 4 (ed. Brockelmann) in kâna yaqsimu amrakum—'If he (man) makes his plans'. Um. XXIV, 1 & 5 lam yakhlaq al-sa‘āda wa‘l-nujûmu ... illâ li-amrin sha‘nahu ‘azîmu—'The heavens and stars are only created ... for a lofty destiny'; compare with XLI, 11 'He (God) indicated to every heaven its destiny (or task).

Next, some examples are given of poetic to the Koranic notions of it.

Um. LV (after a description of the King of Heaven on His throne follows an eulogy of the angels who are drawn up in front of Him:)

10 'They who are elected for His *amr*, are excellent servants! ... 16 'And in the depth of the air and under the compact masses of water, they ascend and descend;
17 'And between the layers of earth's innermost parts angels move to and fro with the *amr*.

This is *amr* in its first stage: the outlines of the proposed world-government are being marked, and to this end angels traverse the universe in all directions, carrying the *amr*-designs which are to be drawn.

Labîd III, 1ff. (ed. al-Khâlidî, p. 10f.):

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\text{Innamâ yahfa‘u } 'l-tuqâ} \quad \text{wa-ilâ 'illahi yastaqirru} \quad \text{'l-qarâru} \quad \text{'l-ibrârâ} \\
\text{Wa-ilâ 'illa hi tarjâ‘âna} \quad \text{lahi wirdu 'l-unûri wa-il-îsdâru} \quad \text{wa-inda } 'l \\
\text{Kulla shai‘in ahsâ kitâban} \quad \text{wa-ladaihi tajallati 'l-îsrâru} \quad \text{wa-ilman}
\]
'Verily, the pious walk in the fear of the Lord and in God constancy is established,
'To God you are returned and with God is the coming in and dispatch of the umár,
'Everything He determines and bears in mind and to Him the secrets are disclosed.

This is amr in its second stage: in the heavenly council-hall the amr-designs are brought in (by the angels, as may be understood), and dispatched as amr-dispensations when every communicated act of the creatures has been recorded.
Zaid b.'Amr b. Nufail says in one of his poems: (Kitāb al-Aghānī III, 16)

... rabban adhānu. Izā tuqussimati 'l-umāru a-lam ta'lam bi-anīn 'illahi aqīnād rijālan kāna sha'nuhum wa-abqād akharīna bi-birri ul-fijāru qaumin;
'. . . a Lord (i.e. no idols) I profess. When the umār are allotted,

'Do you not know that (then) God wrecks the impious
'And saves the others because of their piety?

The last stage of the amr-process: the divine decrees are being executed. The pious will enter upon the joys of Paradise, the wicked will go to Hell.

It is on the ground of this faith the devout Ḥassān b. Thabit dares to wish in one of his poems (CXXXIII, 7f. ed. Hirschfeld):

'That the amr of God may descend upon us hastily this very night or to-morrow,
'Then we shall stand in the Hour and participate in the pure good.

Whereas on the other hand the same poet attributes an ominous sense to amr, when referring to the enemies killed in the battle of Badr he states (XV, 15b):

wa-amru 'illahi ya'khuza bi-2l-qulābi 'And the amr of God clutched the hearts.
Finally, we wish to call attention to a remarkable parallel of *amr* with an idea in the Old Testament, namely *ʾesāṭ*-counsel*. Though it is there far from being such a dominant notion as *amr* in the Koran, it is nevertheless a like characteristic term for the divine Providence, and it bears as such interesting corresponding connotations.

Applied to men, *ʾesāṭ* means often ‘plan’, ‘intentions’ (e.g. in Ezra IV, 5; Psalm XX, 5), sometimes, like in Surah X, 72, implying malicious by-motives; Psalm XXXIII, 10f. ‘The Lord foils the plans of the peoples (*ʾasāt-goyîm*) ... The purpose of the Lord (*ʾasāt Yahuwē*) stands for ever’. (Cf. Surah XII, 21 ‘And God is well able to execute His purpose (*amr*)’, i.e. in spite of the evil intentions of his brethren, in Egypt things were going well with Joseph on account of God’s protection.)

Used as an attribute of God, it refers first of all to His purposes in the world-order. When in Isaiah XXVIII, 29 it is stated that Yahuwē’s *ʾesāṭ* is wonderful, it is a conclusion made after an exposé on the wise providential rule which procures everything at the right moment (cf. also Job XXXVIII, 2ff.). In Is. XLVI, 11 God declares that He ‘designs’ as well as ‘executes’ His *ʾesāṭ*. The executed *ʾesāṭ*-dispensations are, equally as in the Koran, for good or ill. In Is. XLVI, 10f. it appears to be divine favour, expressed in the intention to liberate Israel from the Babylonian captivity through the rise of Cyrus. For Babylon, however, God’s *ʾesāṭ* effects dismay and ruin (Jeremiah L, 45; see also XIX, 17 & Micha IV, 12). And just as the disbelieving Meccans in Surah VI, 58, the wicked warned in Is. V, 18f. defy the impending doom, saying: ‘Let the *ʾesāṭ* of the Holy One of Israel approach and come, that we may get to know it’. But also the sense of divine guidance is appropriate to *ʾesāṭ*. The poet of Ps. LXXXIII confesses that God will guide him by His *ʾesāṭ*, i.e. His guiding wisdom (vs. 24; see also Ps. CVI, 13; CVII, 11).

If we want to draw some conclusions on the ground of what we have found, it can be stated:

a) Only in a few cases the *amr* of God is what a translation of ‘command’ or ‘bidding’ would justify. For, instead of re-

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1 For a detailed analysis of it see the thought-provoking article of P. A. H de Boer *The Counsellor in Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (1955), pres. to H. H. Rowley.
presenting incidental or arbitrary actions of a divine will, *amr* refers usually to different stages of a carefully prepared and wellthought out world-order. And instead of depicting the activity of a more or less despotic ruler of the universe, it relates to the discretion of a wise and righteous governor of the world. Consequently it is advisable, either to leave it untranslated or to render it differently, as the context requires, by 'providential rule', 'dispensation', 'guidance', 'mercy', 'divine judgment', 'punishment', 'doom(sday)', and such like.

b) It appears that one can do without a hypostase-hypothesis when elucidating the expression *amr Ullāh*. And if Koranic ideas can be made clear from within, i.e. from the context and parallel passages, it is to prefer to explanations with the help of non-Islamic notions. Moreover, it is very unlikely that Mohammed would have operated with a logos-doctrine. It is far from the Koran with its extreme and overheated monotheism to ascribe to God hypostases! Divine attributes are the utmost. Not even the more appropriate term for a logos, *kalima*, gives occasion for such an assumption, as Th. O'Shaughnessy demonstrates in his monograph *'The Koranic Concept of the Word of God'* (1948). And he quite rightly observes: 'Word' or *Verbum* as a proper name is a Christian idea, not Mohammed's idea' (p. 59).

But also—supposing the hypothesis were right that *amr* in the Koran is related to the *memrā* of the Targumim—one is not entitled to infer a logos-doctrine from *amr*. For, Strack-Billerbeck have found in their penetrating study of this concept that *memrā* is merely a somewhat vague designation of God ('eine umschreibende Gottesbezeichnung'), in substitution for the name Yahwē. It has the same function as the known appellative Adonai. Its theological import is very limited and it has certainly no bearing on a divine hypostasis.¹
c) Surprising parallels of the Koranic *amr Ullāh*, as we have

seen, are met in the religious parts of the Ancient Arabian Poetry. There, for instance, the angels are equally busy with their intermediary functions, while assisting in the make-up and exaction of the dispensations. It appears that by means of some selected examples the whole process of the amr of God in the Koran could be reproduced. But details may vary. In Um. LV, 16f. the amr is carried throughout the universe by angels, whereas in Sûra LXV, 12 the amr seems to traverse the world on its own. Yet, I presume, that at this place the angels as carriers are to be understood, as Blachère supposes that in XXXII, 4 the word ya’ruju indicates 'non seulement le décret divin mais aussi l’Archange chargé de le transmettre sur terre'). The application of amr in the Koran is also more elaborate.

d) It is noteworthy that, while the parallels in the Arab poems relate especially to the equipment and entourage of the amr, the analogies of ešd in the Old Testament are more of a semasiological nature. The whole apparatus of the angelic service is missing, but on the other hand nearly all the Koranic connotations of the amr Ullâh are found again. Or, to put it otherwise: the amplification which Mohammed gives to the amr of the poets appears to be for the greater part exactly that which the Koranic amr has in common with ešd. If we wished to indicate this schematically, we would get: the amr Ullâh of the poets + the ešd of the O. T. = the Koranic amr Ullâh. Thus the tempting conclusion seems obvious that Mohammed combined ingeniously the amr-conception of the poets with the connotations of ešd. Yet, this is reconstruction made up in a study, and a bit over-simplified and conjectural. Besides, we have to bear in mind:

1) the connection between Arab Poetry and the Koran is still obscure;
2) it is generally regarded a very precarious procedure to assume direct Koranic borrowings from the O. T.;
3) one would like to have more similar instances of Arab Poetry + Old Testament = Koran. One example does not allow far-reaching conclusions;

2 Acta Orientalia, XXIII
4) a possible factor always to be reckoned with is a common Semitic stock to which such similarities can be reduced.

However this may be, whether the discovered analogies are 'accidental' or represent an historical connection, they illustrate the *amr*-idea of the Koran and bring it out in relief.