

THE 'AMR OF GOD' IN THE KORAN

BY

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In 1892 H. Grimme stated: 'Der Koranische Amr, wörtlich Befehl, entspricht dem Mêmra 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* (1908) A. J. Wensinck combats Grimme'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* chrétien ou philonien' (p. 83).

² W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (1922), p. 40 f.; P. A. Eichler, *Die Dschinn, Teufel und Engel im Koran* (1928), p. 125; Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (1926), p. 168.

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'¹. Through a close semasiological examination of this Koranic notion we intend to raise still more doubts concerning Grimme's theory.

In the Koran *amr* occurs 152 times in the singular, 13 times in the plural (*umûr*). Mostly—nearly a hundred times—it is used in connection with Allâh, 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 Pharaoh 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 Ullâh 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

¹ D. B. MacDonald in *MW* XXII (1932), p. 28; A. Jeffery, art. on *amr* in *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurân* (1938); J. W. Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology* (1947), I, 2, 143; A. S. Tritton, *Muslim Theology* (1947), p. 9; Th. O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran* (1953), p. 39.

Solomon. So, for instance, in XVIII, 48, where it is said that Iblīs withdraws from God's command. But generally *amr Ullāh* 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' (*yatanazzalu*) 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' (*yaqḍiya*) the *amr*, and then it is 'ripe for execution' (*maf' ālan*; 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 *bayyindtin mina 'l-amri*, concrete directions in regard to the *amr*, which again must have the sense of

¹ For the Old Testament, see W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (1939), II, 78.

'divine guidance' (cf. its alternative reading in II, 181: *bayyinâtin mina 'l-huddâ wa 'l-furqânî*, concrete directions in regard to the divine guidance and help¹, this time as a present to the Muslims). In the next verse of Sûra XLV Mohammed is encouraged as follows: 'Then We granted you a clear way (*sharî'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*' (*tajrî fî'l-baḥri bi-amrihi*), then in a parallel passage (XXXI, 30) *amr* is explained as 'favour of God' (*tajrî fî'l-baḥri bi-ni'mati 'llâhi*). Another instance of this gives XI, 76, where *amr Ullâh* 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 (cry²), like the twinkling of an eye'. If the *amr Ullâh* 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, 41 f.), 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

¹ For this translation of *furqân*, see Ch. C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (1933), p. 48.

² Dropped off is here *zajra* (cf. XXXVII, 19; LXXIX, 13) or *ṣaiḥa* (cf. LIV, 31; XXXVIII, 14; XXXVI, 28, 49, 53) or *ṣa'îqa* (cf. LI, 44). Zamakhsharî supposes that *kalîma* (word) should be added, and that it refers to the creative command of God *kun* (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-lamḥin bi'l-baṣari* (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, 4f.; see also XVIII, 87)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 themselves²—'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 *fa'l-mudabbirāti amran*), as well as for the carrying out of the *amr* when ripened into a dispensation (cf. LI, 4 *fa'l-muqassimāti 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, 14f.)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 *qadr*) (to the earth), by the permission of their Lord, in view of every *amr*'. As Wensinck has shown⁴, elements of the New Years night are mixed up with the night of *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 night⁵.

¹ For other places where *amr* is the divine judgment and doom, see LXXXII, 19; LIV, 3; XXXVI, 28; XIX, 40; XVIII, 87; XVI, 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.

² Cf. R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān* (1953), p. 61: 'there is one passage which everyone acknowledges to be spoken by angels, namely XIX, 65 f.'

³ See also Balḡāwī at XIX, 40 *iz quḍiyya 'l-amru*: 'The reckoning (*ḥisāb*) 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'.

⁴ A. J. Wensinck, *Arabic New Year and the Feast of Tabernacles* (1925), p. 3.

⁵ See also Ṭabari at XCVII, 4 'The night of *qadr*, i. e. the night of Decision (*ḥukm*), in which God fixes the destinies (*qaḍā*) of the (coming) year'.

The spirit (*rāḥ*), mentioned in XCVII, 4, occurs more times in connection with *amr*. Then it is qualified as *min amri rabbī*, *min amrihi*, *min amrinā* (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, 51f.; 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 amri 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 *wahā* IV—'to reveal something to (*ilā*) 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 Ṭabarī interprets *rāḥan* here by 'revelation' (*wahyan*).

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 *homines 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. Abî'l-Şalt) XXXI, 5 (ed. Schulthess) *ajma'a 'l-qaumu amrahum*—'They (the Sodomites) made up their mind'; par. to X, 72 *fa-ajmi'û amrakum*. *Amr* in the sense of intention, plan also in Labîd XLI, 4 (ed. Brockelmann) *in kâna yaqsimu amrahu*—'If he (man) makes his plans'. Um. XXIV, 1 & 5 *lam yukhlaq al-samâ'u wa'l-nujûmu . . . illâ li-amrin sha'nuhu '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 views of the *amr* *Ullâh* with a striking resemblance 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, 1 ff. (ed. al-Khâlidi, p. 10 f.):

<i>Innamâ yaḥfazû 'l-tuqâ</i>	<i>wa-illâ 'llahi yastaqirru</i>
<i>'l-abrârû</i>	<i>'l-qarâru</i>
<i>Wa-illâ 'llahi tarja'ûna</i>	<i>lahi wirdu 'l-umûri wa'l-işdâru</i>
<i>wa-'inda 'l</i>	
<i>Kulla shai'in aḥşâ kitâban</i>	<i>wa-ladaihi tajallati 'l-asrâru</i>
<i>wa-'ilman</i>	

Finally, we wish to call attention to a remarkable parallel of *amr* with an idea in the Old Testament, namely 'eṣḏ-counsel'¹. 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, 'eṣḏ means often 'plan', 'intentions' (e. g. in Ezra IV, 5; Psalm XX, 5), sometimes, like in Sûra X, 72, implying malicious by-motives: Psalm XXXIII, 10f. 'The Lord foils the plans of the peoples ('aṣat-goyim) . . . The purpose of the Lord ('aṣat Yahwè) stands for ever'. (Cf. Sûra 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 Yahwè's 'eṣḏ 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 'eṣḏ. The executed 'eṣḏ-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 'eṣḏ effects dismay and ruin (Jeremiah L, 45; see also XIX, 17 & Micha IV, 12). And just as the disbelieving Meccans in Sûra VI, 58, the wicked warned in Is. V, 18f. defy the impendent doom, saying: 'Let the 'eṣḏ 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 'eṣḏ. The poet of Ps. LXXIII confesses that God will guide him by His 'eṣḏ, 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-

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 well-thought 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 Yahwè. 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 hypostasis¹.

- c) Surprising parallels of the Koranic *amr Ullāh*, as we have

¹ H. L. Strack u. P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N. T. aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1924) II, 302—314. Similar conclusion: Treittel in *Judaica, Festschrift H. Cohen* (1912), p. 179 ff.

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 execution 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 'eşd 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 'eşd. If we wished to indicate this schematically, we would get: the *amr Ullâh* of the poets + the 'eşd 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 'eşd. 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;

- 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.