

AT-TABARĪ AND THE SEEING OF GOD

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Simply expressed, the background of speculative thought in Islam is a desire or need to make religious revelation conform to a reasonable philosophic system. Ultimately it was a question of the Islamic conception of the relation of the Creator to creation. This subject involves a number of important questions which I cannot treat in detail at this time. These include whether God can be said to have eternal attributes, whether the Qur'ān is uncreated, whether God predestines the actions of men (God's *qadar*), whether God can be seen or if He Himself can see, etc. As we know, the Mu'tazilites had shocking objections to most of these assertions. In their opinion the Islamic system of beliefs was incompatible with sound reason.

The different viewpoints in the discussion of how one conceived of God – whether He assumed an anthropomorphic attitude yet was different in essence from creation, or whether He was a pantheistic divine power, inherent in creation – could be focused on the question of whether or not the believers would be able to see God in paradise. Actually, Wensinck says that it is not improbable that the discussions concerning anthropomorphism started with the question whether God will be seen by the faithful in paradise¹. According to orthodox tradition the highest delight reserved for believers was to see God face to face on the day of resurrection².

¹ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*. Cambridge 1932, pp. 63 and 66.

² See e.g. ʿUṭmān b. Saʿīd ad-Dārimī, *Kitāb ar-radd ʿalā l-ġabmiyya*, ed. Vitestam. Lund & Leiden 1960 (Introd.) p. 34 with references. Cf. further Duncan B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*. London 1903, p. 145.

The anthropomorphic concept of God was most strongly expressed in the so-called throne-traditions, the sayings that God is seated on his throne³. The fact that God could be seen in a definite place was interpreted by the Sunnites as incontestable proof of the impossibility of pantheism. If the viewer does not have a certain perspective in respect to that which he is to see, then he cannot see it⁴.

The Muʿtazilites maintained that there was no possibility of seeing God. Precisely the circumstance in which God would find Himself in a perspective relationship with the viewer would belittle God because it would impose limits on Him. Therefore the promises of beatific vision of God in the Qurʾān and tradition were to be understood in another, more figurative manner. Since no one – and this also included the Muʿtazilites – wished to or could deny the formal wording of the Qurʾān and revelation, *kalām Allāh*, they had to carry on their arguments by means of interpretation of different passages from the Qurʾān.

When *sunna* maintains that the highest delight for the believers is to see God it has literal support in Q. 75:22-23: "Faces on that day (Day of resurrection) shall be radiant, toward their Lord they will be looking". However, *muʿtazila* could also find literal support for the pantheistic aspect in another passage, Q. 6:103: "Vision (of man) does not attain Him, but He attains the vision"⁵.

If one inquires into the motive behind the two contradictory passages in the Qurʾān, it is necessary to consult the Jewish and Christian tradition, a tradition which is involved in the Qurʾān in many ways. That the ultimate goal of the faithful is to see God face to face is a

³ The basis of these traditions are Qurʾān-passages like 11:7 and 32:4. Relevant is also Q. 10:3, even though these words originally were revealed to refute the old opinion of the Meccans, who imagined their idols were intercessors into God for them. See also ad-Dārimī, *op. cit.* (Introd.) p. 25 ff. with references to the Arabic text.

⁴ ad-Dārimī, *op. cit.* (Introd.) p. 28 ff. with ref.

⁵ The English translation of the Qurʾān-passages is according to the print authorized by *al-Azhar* 1984. For a general survey of the subject see ad-Dārimī, *op. cit.* (Introd.) p. 34 with ref.

thought which is current in both the Old and the New Testaments. Take, for example, Ps. 11:7: "... the upright shall behold His face", which is taken up in Mt. 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". At the same time the other thread of thought can be discerned: God is too holy for an ordinary mortal to endure, for example, in Ex. 33:20 where God says to Moses: "for man shall not see me and live".

Thus, both *sunna* and *mu'tazila* could quote a respective passage from the Qur'ān as a formal statement in support of their contradictory views. Besides, both sides were obliged to employ their respective methods of interpretation to the two passages themselves to bring them into a meaningful agreement with each other. Unfortunately it is somewhat difficult to grasp the argumentation used by *mu'tazila* as it was rejected and subsequently forbidden. Our main source for it is the refutations made by the representatives of *sunna* where it is presented in a somewhat caricatured manner. Another interesting question is whether and to what degree the Mu'tazilite doctrine has left its mark also on purely orthodox presentations.

We shall now see how the above-mentioned two passages from the Qur'ān, Q. 6:103 and 75:22-23 have been treated in the most famous of all exegetic works, a work which was contemporary with the Mu'tazilite debate, namely *Ĝāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by at-Ṭabarī. In the present context we will unfortunately be limited to a short survey of the discussion.

First, I would briefly like to provide some information about the author himself. Abū Ĝa'far Muḥammad b. Ĝarīr at-Ṭabarī was born in 838 A.D. in Āmul in Ṭabaristān and died in Baġdād 84 years later. Like other young men thirsting for knowledge he set out on *talab*-travels and acquired a solid education in theoretical matters. at-Ṭabarī was by nature a quiet and discreet man of research with no interest in outward success. This can be seen in his rejection of the offer of a judgeship.

at-Ṭabarī has left us a large number of works which cover widely different areas of study, from grammar and poetry to medicine. He him-

self reports, however, that the foremost object of his scientific activity was revelation. He was of the opinion that this had been made manifest in a twofold manner: 1. as the divine written word in the Qur'ān and 2. as the manifestation of the divine will in history. He devoted his most important works to these two sides of revelation. They are both equally as monumental and important in each of their respective areas. I will not be treating his great work on history, *Ta'rīḥ ar-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, in this paper.

aṭ-Ṭabarī's other great work is his above-mentioned commentary on the Qur'ān, *Ġāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Goldziher – the famous Hungarian scholar – has described it as the starting point, the fundamental work and the climax of traditional Qur'ān exegesis. The edition from which traditions will be quoted here is the Būlāq-edition of 1323-29 A.H. (30 volumes). Q. 6:103 is treated in Vol. 7, p. 199 ff. and Q. 75:22-23 in Vol. 29, p. 119 ff.

Where did aṭ-Ṭabarī stand in the discussion which above has been introduced? The answer to this question is not entirely simple, among other reasons because the different genres in Arabic literature – including *tafsīr*-literature – strictly followed established patterns from which one did not deviate with impunity. As regards *tafsīr*-works it was also a condition especially during this era of dogmatic strife, that assertions in the Qur'ān were accepted without asking the question “how” and without making comparisons, *bi-lā kayfa wa-lā tašbih*. According to the traditionalists God's essence is beyond the reach of human reasoning. What God has said cannot be explained or expressed in a better way by a human being and therefore he is not capable or not allowed to express a definite opinion about the intention of God. If by exposition of the Qur'ān was meant the expression of one's personal opinion then it was definitely not allowed. For the sake of one's health it was necessary at least formally to keep to the established pattern. The *tafsīr* must give the impression of protecting Islam against heretical lines of thought.

As I have recounted, however, the intrusive questions raised by reason even penetrated into Islam during the ninth century A.D., “in what way”, “how is it possible”? etc. The travelled and intellectual aṭ-

Ṭabarī cannot have avoided a confrontation with the dominating issues of his time. We know, moreover, from an item reported by Yāqūt that when he questioned whether God literally sat on his throne the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal threw an ink-pot at him and that his home was stoned and the police were obliged to protect him⁶. He had every reason to conceal his private opinion. If he wished to include the discussion in his *Tafsīr* he could only do it through his choice of traditions. I would like to point out in this connection that the learned aṭ-Ṭabarī traced many old traditions and preserved them for later generations.

In his exposition of Q. 75:22-23 "Faces on that day shall be radiant, toward their Lord they will be looking" (Vol. 29, p. 119 f), aṭ-Ṭabarī adopts a quite neutral, even hesitant attitude and prefers to present the opinions of others. He reports that the commentators disagree on this point. In short, aṭ-Ṭabarī describes two opinions: Some say that they really will see the Lord, *tanzurū ilā rabbihā nazran*. The foremost authorities for this are 'Ikrima and Ḥasan. Both here and when discussing the other relevant passage aṭ-Ṭabarī recounts the following interesting tradition which goes back to 'Atiyya and 'Awfī: "They will behold God but their sight will not comprehend Him because of His greatness, but His sight will comprehend them". Those who represent the other opinion favour a more figurative interpretation and say: "No, the meaning of this verse is that they shall expect recompense, *intazara t-tawāba*, from their Lord". Accordingly they understood *nāziratun* as equivalent in meaning to *muntaziratun* and in a pregnant sense, "expecting something good". Most of the traditions which aṭ-Ṭabarī gives in support of this opinion go back to Muğāhid, like this example: "They shall expect, *intazara*, recompense from their Lord but none of his creation will see, *ra'ā*, Him". This figurative interpretation of the passage in the Qur'ān is, however, exactly the one which is attributed to the Ġahmiyya sect in ad-Dārimī's *Radd*, and which firmly is refuted by ad-Dārimī⁷. After

⁶ Yāqūt, *The Irshād al-Arīb ilā Ma'rifat al-Adīb*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth (*Gibb Memorial Series* VI:6). Leiden & London 1913, p. 436.

⁷ ad-Dārimī, *op. cit.* (Arab. text) p. 57.

aṭ-Ṭabarī has conscientiously accounted for both schools of thought – and this is what characterizes aṭ-Ṭabarī, namely that he so demonstratively points out that he is well acquainted with the other way of thought – he adopts the first which is supported by ʿIkrima and Ḥasan.

aṭ-Ṭabarī did not have political ambitions but seems to have been all the more eager to make a name for himself as the exegete of revelation. But if his name and writings in this area were to achieve renown it was necessary for him to win the confidence of the orthodox. aṭ-Ṭabarī's tactic seems to have been first to report doubtful or even heretical traditions for the benefit of the reader and to show that he was well acquainted with the issues at hand. Then he would describe the correct traditions to which he himself adhered. Regarding the two apparently contradictory passages from the Qur'ān which we have quoted, aṭ-Ṭabarī, like the intellectual person he was, tried to find an explanation which would unite both passages.

Thus he first reports traditions in agreement with Q. 75:22-23 in which the Prophet emphasizes that the faithful will see (*ra'ā*) their Lord on the day of resurrection just as the disk of the moon is visible on a night when it is full and as you see (*ra'ā*) the sun when there are no clouds. Then he gives the traditions in which ʿĀ'īša guarantees that Muḥammad did not see the Lord. This is a historical statement but it clearly shows that to hold as true the assertion that Muḥammad actually saw the Lord would be to deny Q. 6:103. It can be pointed out here that traditions proving the exact opposite have been preserved, such as this one which is quoted in al-Malaṭī's *Tanbīh*: "Someone asked Ibn ʿAbbās: Did Muḥammad see the Lord? He answered: Yes, he saw him"⁸.

The main problem in the discussion with *mu'tazila* is naturally not whether or not God has been seen or will be seen but if He can be seen. Therefore it cannot be wrong to begin from concrete examples because if God can be seen at a certain time then the vision of God is in itself possible. As the present does not offer any example of seeing God, there

⁸ al-Malaṭī, *Kitāb at-tanbīh wa-r-radd ʿalā ahl al-ahwāʾ wa-l-bidaʿ*, ed. S. Dederling (*Bibl. Isl.* vol. 9). Istanbul 1936, p. 90.

are two tenses which are relevant to the discussion: the *past*, which includes above all the lives and ways of the prophets and the *future* which includes the life of the blessed in paradise. A synthesis in which the two contradictory Qur'ānic passages which represent two ancient Semitic concepts of the vision of God can be united is the following to which aṭ-Ṭabarī devotes a certain amount of attention: The light of God is too strong for human sight to endure in this world. Therefore no one has seen or shall see God here and this agrees with Q. 6:103. But on the day of resurrection God will prepare man's sight for eternity and at that time the faithful will see God face to face and this agrees with Q. 75:22-23. This interpretation allows the meanings of both verses to be harmonized⁹.

For the Mu'tazilites, however, the problem is on a different level. aṭ-Ṭabarī discusses opinions which were heretical in the eyes of the Sunnites – and perhaps also in his own – with an open-mindedness which is astonishing. The intellectual aṭ-Ṭabarī reveals that he clearly understands the so-called intellectual difficulties raised by the vision of God and he is not afraid to expound them for discussion. Even within the framework of a *tafsīr* he lets the intrusive question raised by reason come to the fore: "Is the vision of God possible"¹⁰?

It is clear that aṭ-Ṭabarī had the Mu'tazilites in mind in those passages where he discusses the possibility of the vision of God, for ex-

⁹ Compare with this way of thinking a passage in the New Testament, I. Cor. 13:12: "At present we only see the baffling reflections in a mirror, but then it will be face to face". The highest state of bliss (*visio beatifica*) is to see God, but also according to Christianity the seeing will be changed on that day. The spiritual state involves a change, so that a material being can behold an immaterial one (e.g. Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, book 22:29, *Epistulae* 147:8).

¹⁰ The seeing of God according to Christian theology is not quite comparable. In view of the new testamental salvation doctrine God revealed himself as man. The doctrine of Trinity was firmly established several hundred years before aṭ-Ṭabarī (Cf. Augustinus, *De civitate* 10:13, 32 and others). In the Old testament even God's own seeing is interesting. He saw that all that he had done was good, but according to Augustinus (10:21) likewise his seeing is otherwise than the sight of the creation.

ample in Vol. 7, pp. 200 and 202. Often at-Ṭabarī does not base his argument on traditions but gives his own commentary on the text. When he speaks of those who deny that God can be seen now or at any time in the future he obviously does not mean 'Ā'īša but his own contemporaries, the Muṭazilites.

The Muṭazilites maintained that only that which is limited can be seen. Thus it is ascribed to the known Muṭazilite, Abū Ḥudayl al-ʿAllāf (d. 840 or 849 A.D.) that he said: "The eternal, *al-qadīm*, is without end or limit. One can neither attribute a part, *baʿd*, nor entirety, *kull*, to Him. On the contrary it is creation which has these two attributes, entirety and limitation, *kull wa-ḡamī*¹¹. It is truly remarkable that at-Ṭabarī (Vol. 7, p. 201) in principle raised no objections to a similar way of reasoning. The orthodox school of thought presumed that God was limited as regards his person. He is found in one place and can move to another. Nevertheless, according to a deep-founded Islamic conception, the Creator and the creation are two different concepts, essentially defined from each other. However, at-Ṭabarī does not dare to draw the logical consequences of this line of reasoning as do *muṭazila* and declare that it is impossible to see God.

at-Ṭabarī solved the problem by introducing an irrational element: it can be proved that the corporeal essence which normally cannot know an immaterial essence does know Him. Why then could not the same conditions be valid for seeing as for knowing? It is true that the eye normally cannot see anything other than that which is limited and is found outside the eye. But God does not necessarily have to submit to the laws of nature. His essence is such that it can cancel perspective. The conclusions at-Ṭabarī draws from this line of reasoning (Vol. 7, p. 202, line 15 f.) can be summarized as follows: one cannot arrive at an understanding of God by using rationalistic methods. One can only believe in the accounts about Him. At the end therefore at-Ṭabarī is

¹¹ See e.g. al-Ḥayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-intiṣār*, ed. H. S. Nyberg, Cairo 1925, pp. 7-101; cf. al-Aṣṣarī, *Maqālāt al-islāmīyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter (*Bibl. Isl.* vol. 1) second print Wiesbaden 1963. *Fihrist* p. 662. For a survey of Abū Ḥudayl's thoughts see Wensinck, *op. cit.* p. 136 ff.

obliged to remain in the orthodox sphere and evoke the principle of *bi-lā kayfa*.

In conclusion we can observe that at-Ṭabarī was an intellectual but orthodox theologian. Through his intellectual approach he provided a contrast to the Hanbalites, whose views were much closer to the naive popular piety of the time. Perhaps it was the fact that his concept of God was highly spiritualised which made him so hated in those circles.

Despite the fact that at-Ṭabarī felt bounded by the traditional *tafsīr* and did not dare to transgress its limits he could not resist implying that he was well acquainted with more speculative thinkers and the concept of God which they stood for. Even if his understanding of the godhead could have been influenced by that of the Muʿtazilites formally he presented himself as their opponent (p. 203, line 8 f.).

at-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* is traditional in plan. It is based on the principle of *tafsīr bi-l-ʿilm*. The conservative pattern of a *tafsīr bi-l-ʿilm* hardly permitted direct participation in the scholastic or natural philosophical discussions of the time. This discussion can only be discerned in the background as we have seen from his commentary on the important question of the vision of God (see especially vol. 7 p. 200 f.). It is also clear that at-Ṭabarī introduced new ways of reasoning into his *Tafsīr*. His method shows certain points of contact with contemporary works of refutation and reveals that he in fact did take part in the debate with *muʿtazila* and *ḡahmiyya*. Possibly he connected with the attitude which has been ascribed to al-Asʿarī, who adopted *kalām* as a method¹².

¹² Wensinck, *op. cit.* p. 93.