

THE INTERPRETATIONS OF Q 43,81 AND THE TECHNIQUES OF THE EXEGETES

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The Muslims had difficulties with many Qur'ān verses. With others, they appear to have created problems for themselves, or rather, had problems created for them by the accumulating exegetical tradition.

There may seem at first glance to be nothing very problematical about Q 43,81, but in its interpretation we sample a range of the strategies adopted by the exegetes.

Q 43, *az-Zuhruf*, is a sustained diatribe against all association of any beings with the one unique Deity. The *sūra*'s denunciation of *širk*, or the ascription of offspring to God, are bracketted by verses showing that, when asked who created heavens and earth even Muḥammad's contemporaries would reply "God"¹. But these same unbelievers also allege that the angels are 'the daughters of God', although they themselves disdain to have female offspring². To annoy Muḥammad, they raise questions about the nature of Christ deliberately seeking to confuse him, for they are an argumentative and stiff-necked people of extravagant belief and behaviour³. Christ was a mere creature to whom God had shown signal favour, but no more than to other chosen men⁴. If God had desired, He would have made men angels, peopling the earth with them⁵. Muḥammad is ordered to state that, if God did have off-

¹ Q 43,9; 87.

² vv. 16-17.

³ vv. 57-58.

⁴ v. 59.

⁵ v. 60.

spring, Muḥammad would be the first to worship: *qul: in kāna li-r-rahmān waladun fa-anā arwalu l-‘ābidīna*.

Theological presumption guaranteed that, for the majority of the exegetes, this daring piece of rhetoric was too bold to grasp. Muḥammad’s faith in the transcendence of the Deity had been too firm to permit him, even for debating purposes, to appear ever to compromise it. God would certainly never have permitted him to. It was for the Muslim unthinkable that Muḥammad could ever have brought himself to speak of worshipping other than God Who alone had created and Who alone was Master of Heaven and Earth and of all created things and beings. Yet, the verse uses the word “if”: “If God has offspring, then I shall be the first worshipper”. The conditional sentence seems to imply doubt which Muḥammad could not be conceded to have ever experienced. His monotheism had been too single-minded and too deeply implanted in his very being to have ever been capable of the slightest measure of dilution. Muḥammad could never have said, “If God has offspring”. The nature of this condition is such that it was thought to imply a degree of probability. That being the case, the verse must not be interpreted in strict accordance with what appears in the text [*az-zāhir*]. Nor would Muḥammad ever have used the expression “I shall worship” of anything but God alone. The verse can, however, be made meaningful by emendation – but outside the text, that is, by *ta’wīl*. “Say, Muḥammad, ‘if – [as you allege] – God has offspring, then I am the first true believer in God’s unique divinity to deny these allegations of yours.’”⁶ But to leave the particle “if”, as this interpretation does, although it interpolates expressions calculated to distance Muḥammad from the appearance of concession and transfers any doubt or weakening of strict monotheism to his unbelieving opponents, was not enough for some Muslims who remained anxious about even this slight degree of concession. “If” does seem to imply something less than outright rejection. Conditional sentences may be organised in a hierarchy

⁶ The technique was attributed to Muḡāhid, at-Ṭabarī, 25,54; cf. al-Buḡārī, 6,130; *Fath*, 10,188.

showing a decreasing scale of probability for the proposition conveyed in the protasis: 1. If it rains, I shall not go out. 2. If it were to rain, I should not go out. 3. If it had rained, I should not have gone out. In the first sentence, the probability of rain is equal to the probability that it will not rain; in the second sentence, the probability that it will rain is somewhat reduced. In the third sentence, the implication of the syntax is clearly negative. There was, in fact, no rain. Some therefore thought it expedient to move the Q 43,81 sentence down a grade in the scale of concession. Hence the *ta'wīl* ascribed to as-Suddī⁷: *qul: law kāna li-r-rahmān waladun la-kuntu awwala l-'ābidīna*. "Say: 'Were God to have offspring, I should be the first to worship God on the basis that He had offspring.'" This, as I say, has been transmitted on the basis that it was *ta'wīl*. There is never any suggestion that that was how as-Suddī actually read the passage.

Given the theological, especially the prophetological pressures, an even more satisfactory exegetical procedure was to read this particle *in*, not as the conditional "if", but as an outright negative particle meaning, in fact, 'not'. *Luġa* is summoned to the aid of *tafsīr*. Sībawayhi listed the various functions of the particle *in*: its *asl*, or basic function is as a conditional particle. In certain circumstances, its *ġazā'* must be prefixed by *fa*; it may be used *li-t-ta'kīd* in a quasi-oath, in which case, it is *muhaffafa*, or the 'lightened' form of *inna*; or it may be a negative particle, the equivalent of the negative *mā*⁸. The interpretations reported as from Ibn 'Abbās, Qatāda, Zayd b. Aslam and his son, are thus based on the quite correct assertion that in Q 43,81 *in* may be a negative⁹. *Qul: in kāna li-r-rahmān waladun fa-anā awwalu l-'ābidīna*. "Say: 'God had no offspring, as I am the first to testify.'" I say, here, "God had" for reasons which will shortly be made clear.

⁷ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *loc. cit.*; *Fath*, *loc. cit.*, 189.

⁸ *al-Kitāb*, 1,475.

⁹ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *loc. cit.*

The exegetes also engage in verse-comparison. Thus, Q 43,81 may be said to be 'like' Q 67,20: *in il-kāfirūna illā fī ġurūr* – “the unbelievers follow nothing but error”¹⁰. The comparison drawn by Ibn Zayd with Q 14,46 was less fortunate, for the latter verse has attracted its own crop of reading problems¹¹, although at-Ṭabarī can quote Ḥasan’s dictum: “The Qur’ān uses *in* as the equivalent of *mā* in four contexts: Q 14,46; Q 21,17: *law aradnā an nattahida lahwan la-ttahadnāhu min ladunnā in kunnā fā’ilīna* – that is *mā kunnā fā’ilīna*; Q 43,81 and Q 46,26: *wa-la-qad makkannāhum fī-mā in makkannākum fīhi* – that is, *mā makkannākum fīhi*.

It is highly relevant to our present concerns that occasionally a fifth verse is added to this list, Q 10,94: *fa-in kunta fī šakkin mimmā anzalnā ilayka...*¹²

In Q 43,81, God commands Muḥammad to declare that he is the first to worship God on the basis that He had no offspring. This is the contrary of as-Suddī’s *tafsīr*: “Were God to have offspring, I should be the first to worship Him on the basis that He had offspring” – but, of course, God has no offspring, nor is it fitting that He have. Some of the exegetes who adhered to the view that in Q 43,81 *in* is a conditional particle, offered as their interpretation of *fa-anā awwalu l-‘ābidīna*, “I am the first to repudiate any suggestion that God has offspring”. The interpretation rests upon an assertion that there is an Arabic verb ‘*abida ya‘badu*’ meaning ‘to reject’, alternatively, ‘to be angry’. Evidence in support of this contention is adduced from poetry.

- a. *a-lā harwaytu Umma l-Walīdi wa-aṣbahat
li-mā absarat fī r-ra’si minnī ta‘badū*

¹⁰ al-Aḥfaš, 1,289. an-Naḥḥās, 4,122.

¹¹ a. *wa-in kāna makeruhum la-tazūlu minhu l-ġibālu.*
b. *wa-in kāna makeruhum li-tazūla minhu l-ġibālu.*
a. was thought to be ‘confirmed’ by a ‘variant’:
wa-in kāda makeruhum la-tazūlu minhu l-ġibālu.

¹² at-Ṭabarī, 13, 145-148.

- b. *matā mā yašā'u dū l-wuddi yašrimu ḥalīlabū
wa-ya'badu 'alayhi lā mahāyata zālīman...*¹³

The assertion can, unusually in this instance, be further supported by evidence drawn from a *ḥadīth* text¹⁴. aṭ-Ṭabarī expresses his preference for the procedure adopted by as-Suddī: the verse's *in* is a conditional, not a particle of negation, for the use of a mere negative would not adequately express Muḥammad's nor God's repudiation of the notion that God had ever at any time had offspring. The Arabic expression: *mā kāna li-r-raḥmān waladun* would exclude only some, not all portions of time (!)¹⁵. There could remain the theoretical possibility of arguing that, following a time when God had, indeed, no offspring, there came a time when He acquired some offspring. The use of a mere negative would not sufficiently deprive Muḥammad's unbelieving opponents of the opportunity of making their blasphemous allegations, since they had not claimed that God's offspring were, like Him, necessarily eternal. God has explained to us that what they did say was that, at first, He had no offspring until He created the *ǧinn* to whom He became related and so, through them acquired descendants (!). Further, God would not furnish His Prophet with arguments that were not fool-proof. So long as any loop-hole remained in the divine denial of offspring, it would be better by far, in aṭ-Ṭabarī's view, to take *in* in this verse to be a conditional particle. Muḥammad is being ordered to say to his compatriots: "You allege that the angels are 'the daughters of God'. Well, if God had, as you claim, offspring, I should worship them before you did"¹⁶. On the contrary, God has no offspring, and it is not fitting that He should have. In this declaration, there is no element of doubt on the part of the Prophet. The verse provides a statement as subtle as that conveyed in Q 34,24: *wa-innā aw iyyākum la-ʿalā budan aw fī ḍalāl*

¹³ aṭ-Ṭabarī, 25,55; cf. al-Buḥārī, *loc. cit.*; *Fath*, *loc. cit.*, 189; *Baḥr*, 8,28.

¹⁴ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *loc. cit.*; *Fath*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ al-Makkī's repetition of this argument was challenged, *Baḥr*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Baḥr*, *loc. cit.*; al-Kaššāf, 3,104.

mubīn. In Arabic, *aw* is a particle which suggests doubt and uncertainty, but the Prophet never for one instant supposed that he was following the path of error. He did not doubt that he was following the true guidance, that he was in the right and his opponents in the wrong. Similarly, he never for one instant doubted the unreality of the offspring that other men ascribed to God. Besides, in Q 43, the denial of offspring is to be derived from the wider context.

az-Zamaḥṣarī, taking the verse *‘alā z-zāhir*, regards it as a dazzling specimen of divine rhetoric. Unhappily, in paraphrasing it, he used expressions that so shocked the orthodox that, for example, Abū Ḥayyān could not bring himself to repeat them¹⁷. The sentence is indeed conditional and deliberately cast in that form the more effectively to expose the absurdity of the proposition which the verse was designed expressly to deny. The scholars have indeed, as az-Zamaḥṣarī alleges, performed prodigies of ingenuity in their interpretations.

Characteristically, ar-Rāzī seizes the opportunity offered in the difficulties the verse has occasioned the Muslims to compose a disquisition on the logic of the conditional sentence. Like az-Zamaḥṣarī, he takes the verse *‘alā z-zāhir*, and identifies for us the motive which had induced the exegetes to depart from the *zāhir* of the text¹⁸. The conditional sentence, he argues, is not concerned with the reality of the propositions conveyed in either the protasis or the apodosis. Its sole function is to allege that from one statement a second logically follows. Thus, a condition may involve two verifiably true propositions; two demonstrably untrue propositions, or an untrue protasis and a true apodosis. The first may be illustrated by: 1. If man is an animal, man is physical. The second by: 2. If five is even, it is divisible into two whole numbers. As a condition, that is unexceptionable, but it is based on two false propositions: that five is even and that it is divisible into two whole numbers. That both are false does not prevent the apodosis from resulting

¹⁷ *Baḥr*, loc. cit.

¹⁸ *at-Taḥsīn al-kabīr*, 27, 229 ff.

logically from the protasis. We merely have to assume the truth of the protasis. One might say: If man is of stone, man is physical. The protasis is false, but assuming its truth, the apodosis follows. ar-Rāzī rules out a fourth class of condition, a true protasis with a false apodosis, since falsehood can never logically proceed from truth.

He criticises those exegetes who depart from the *zāhir* on the plea that the wording of the verse appears to imply an element of doubt as to the reality of the offspring ascribed to God. On the contrary, he argues, the verse illustrates the type of conditional sentence constructed from a false protasis and a false apodosis. In abstracting both from the conditional setting: God has offspring, and I am the first to worship that offspring, he incidentally indicates the reasoning that underlay the exegetes' anxiety that had induced them to depart from the *zāhir* of the text, to seek refuge in one or other form of *ta'wīl*.

Comparing Q 43,81 with Q 21,22: *law kāna fihimā ālibatun illā allāhu la-fasadatā*: "Were there in Heaven and Earth gods other than God, they would both fall into ruin", a sentence consisting like Q 43,81, of a false protasis and a false apodosis, ar-Rāzī meets the following objection: there is a difference between the two verses. Q 21,22 uses the conditional particle *law* which implies the non-existence of an object consequent upon the non-existence of another; whereas Q 43,81 uses the particle *in* which does not imply the non-existence of one object consequent upon the non-existence of another. *In* implies doubt and uncertainty as to whether the protasis is false or true. In the case of the Prophet, uncertainty on the question of whether God has or has not offspring is quite unthinkable. Further, it is also clear from his handling of the entire question of the formation of conditional sentences, that ar-Rāzī regards the protasis as an originally independent affirmative statement that becomes conditional or presumptive only when prefixed by the conditional particle. The truth or falsity of either protasis or apodosis cannot be determined internally in the conditional cluster, but may be known, he admits, only on the basis of additional, external information. That Heaven and Earth have not both fallen into ruin, he

says, is known from observation and it is from that observation that we perceive that there are not other gods besides God.

Of great antiquity as exegetical devices, and among the most enduring in use were the intimately connected *sabab* or identification of the circumstance that had allegedly necessitated the revelation of a verse and *ta'yīn al-mubham*, or identification of the persons involved in the verse's allusions. The difference of opinion among the scholars as to the precise function and meaning of the particle *in* used in Q 43,81 was concretised in an ancient narrative presented in his *tafsīr* by Muqātil (d. 150 A. H.). In his discussion of Q 8,31, where the Makkan unbelievers mockingly dismiss the Qur'ān revelations as 'mere tales of the ancients', Muqātil identifies the persons referred to¹⁹. The speaker was an-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārīt. Mocking the tales brought by Muḥammad, an-Naḍr reminds his listeners that he brings them the stories of Rustum and Isfandiyār. 'Uṭmān b. Maz'ūn warned an-Naḍr to take care what he says. Muḥammad tells the truth. "I too tell the truth", insists an-Naḍr. "Yes", replies 'Uṭmān, "but Muḥammad says, 'There is no god but God'." an-Naḍr claims that he also states that there is no god but God, but that the angels are 'the daughters of God' – at which God revealed: *qul: in kāna li-r-rahmān waladun fa-anā awwalu l-'ābidīna*. "There", says an-Naḍr, "Muḥammad agrees with me". al-Walīd b. al-Muḡīra exclaimed, "By God! he does not agree with you. What he is saying is, 'God has no offspring'."

Repeating the differences among the scholars as to the function and meaning of this *in*, Abū 'Ubayda underlines that, for those who take the *in* to mean 'if', the *fa*-prefixed to *fa-anā awwalu l-'ābidīna*, has the conjunctive function of *wāw*²⁰, while, to illustrate the suggestion that the verb '*abida ya'badu*, 'to repudiate' exists in Arabic he cites a line by al-Farazdaq:

¹⁹ *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2,112.

²⁰ *Mağāz*, 2,206.

*ūlā'ika qawmun in hağawnī hağawtuhum
wa-a'badu an ahğūwa 'abīdan bi-Dārimin*²¹

Some said that: *fa-anā arwalu l-'ābidīna* meant: 'I shall be the first to worship that offspring'; while others maintained that it meant either: 'I shall be the first to worship God on the basis that He has such offspring'; or, 'I shall be the first to worship God on the basis that He has no such offspring'.

To make absolutely clear that here, *al-'ābidīna* was not the *Nomen Agentis* of the root *'abada ya'budu*, 'worship', further resort was had to *luğa*. To circumvent the objections to their *tafsīr*, those who insisted that Muḥammad would never have made any concession, not even a conditional concession to disbelief, employed yet another exegetical technique, *qirā'a*. It seems that their opponents had objected that the *Nomen Agentis* of *'abida ya'badu* was not the *'ābid* which we find in Q 43,81, but *'abid*, or, as al-Ḥalīl is reported to have listed in his *Kitāb al-'Ayn*, *'abd*. To this, they could now retort that, in fact, the 'reading' of the text that had been adopted by Abū 'Abdarrahmān as-Sulamī had been precisely: *fa-anā arwalu l-'ābidīna*²².

as-Suddī may have hinted at it, but not one exegete has suggested that the use of the particle *law* in Q 43,81 would have been more in conformity with Arabic usage. Certainly, no-one has ever expressed the view that the use of *in* in the verse was a linguistic error.

²¹ *Baḥr*, loc. cit. has:

*ūlā'ika abā'ī fa-ğī'nī bi-miḥlihim
wa-a'badu an ahğūwa l-Kulayba bi-Dārimiyyin*

al-Qurṭubī, 16,119, has:

- a. *ūlā'ika ağlāsī fa-ğī'nī bi-miḥlihim
wa-a'badu an ahğūwa Kulayban bi-Dārimin*
- b. *ūlā'ika nāsun in hağawnī hağawtuhum
wa-a'badu an yuhğā Kulaybun bi-Dārimin.*

²² al-Qurṭubī, loc. cit.; *Baḥr*, loc. cit.

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