

# ABŪ MANŞŪR AL-MĀTURĪDĪ'S UNIVERSALIST INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

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## Abstract

This article, composed of three main sections, analyzes the views of the founder of the Māturīdī school of Islamic Sunnī theology, Abū Manşūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), that directly concern or can be legitimately associated with nationalism. The first part will discuss al-Māturīdī's theoretical framework concerning the relation of superiority among the Muslim nations by examining his arguments about the superiority of man over the angels and that of Adam over Satan/the Devil (*Iblīs*). It will also discuss the Arab-*Ajam* (non-Arab) relationship, a context in which the Imām intensifies his discussion of nationalism, and I will unpack his perspective on the relationship between the Arabs and the non-Arabs in terms of superiority. The second part will examine relationship between the Qurʾān and Arabic *qua* the language of the Qurʾān as well as the possibility and probability of the Qurʾān being revealed in any language other than Arabic. The third part will focus on the relationship between the wording and meaning in the Qurʾān as well as between translations of the Qurʾān and its Arabic original. In the conclusion, I will suggest the relevance of al-Māturīdī's Qurʾānic hermeneutics to the present situation of the Turks as a non-Arab Muslim nation vis-à-vis the question of better understanding the meaning and essence of the Qurʾān.

*Key Words:* The Qurʾān, al-Māturīdī, Arabic, non-Arabic, nationalism.

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## I. Superiority among the Kinds of Beings and among the Muslim Nations

Al-Māturīdī discusses the relationship of superiority among the Muslim nations on the basis of the Aristotelian categorization of beings into substance and accident, the principal scientific paradigm of the ancient and medieval ages. For al-Māturīdī, neither nations nor any other beings or kinds of beings are superior to one another *in substance* or *substantially*. However, one can legitimately talk of the existence of superiority among beings with respect to certain properties or qualities, that is, *in accidents* or *accidentally*. The Imām treats this latter type of superiority through the relationship between man and the angels on the one hand and between Adam and Iblīs or the Devil on the other.

### 1. The Relationship of Superiority between Angels and Man and between Adam and the Devil

Man, in revealed religious traditions, shares the domain of rational beings with angels, *jinn*s, and satans, the last being non-believer *jinn*s according to Islamic theology. In these traditions, man is compared to angels and is said to grow angelic inasmuch as he acquires good attributes and moral virtues and adheres to them and is likened to Satan or is said to become satanic inasmuch as evil attributes prevail over him to the extent of becoming his nature, as it were. Thus, angels have always stood for every kind of goodness and beauty as well as obedience to God, i.e., piety. Satan, on the other hand, has always symbolized all kinds of evil and disobedience to God. The relationship between man, angels, and Satan is thus epitomized by the story of creation as it occurs in the Qurʾān, in which Satan or the Devil tempts Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit with the promise that they will become immortal or angels once they do so.<sup>1</sup> Muslim theologians discussed which of these three kinds of rational beings is superior. Al-Māturīdī also addresses the same question in interpreting various Qurʾānic verses in his exegetical *magnum opus*, *Taʾwīlāt Ahl al-sunnab*.

Al-Māturīdī sees no superiority among these three types of beings with respect to substance; he refuses such a relation of substantial superiority, at least between man and angels. In the context of the

<sup>1</sup> Q 2:35-36. For the Biblical version of the story, see *Genesis*, 2:16-3:19.

interpretation of the verse, “فَلَوْ شَاءَ لَهَدَاكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ”<sup>2</sup> if it had been His will, He could indeed have guided you all,”<sup>2</sup> he quotes the following remarks of the famous scholar of the second generation of Islam, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728): “If God had willed, He would have prevailed and overpowered the human beings, incapacitating them to commit a sin, as He did to the angels. God has created the latter with an obedient nature; therefore, they never commit a sin.”<sup>3</sup>

Al-Māturīdī goes on to quote al-Baṣrī, who places the angels above the messengers, prophets, and all human beings on the basis of the assumption that the angels are by nature obliged to obey God (i.e., instinctually) and cannot fail to do so. Afterwards, al-Māturīdī discards al-Baṣrī's position as contradictory because al-Māturīdī holds that one who is compelled instinctually to be obedient cannot be superior to one who acts with his free will despite the carnal desires rooted in him and in spite of the wants that overcome him and prevent him from acting in obedience to God.<sup>4</sup> In theological and philosophical terminology, al-Māturīdī maintains that volitional action is superior to instinctual action and that a volitional agent is superior to an agent that is limited by instinct. Therefore, he argues, it is clearly contradictory to claim that the angels, on the grounds of their quality of instinctuality (which implies inferiority), should be superior to human beings on the basis of their attribute of volitionality (which entails superiority).<sup>5</sup> The Imām, nevertheless, fails to conclude his argumentation decisively: either the angels are inferior to men because of the instinctual nature of their action or they act by free will because of their superiority to men.

<sup>2</sup> Q 6:149.

<sup>3</sup> Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm al-musammā Taʾwīlāt Abl al-sunnab*, ed. Fāṭimah Yūsuf al-Khiyamī (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah Nāshirūn, 2004), II, 189 (Q 6:149).

<sup>4</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, II, 189 (Q 6:149).

<sup>5</sup> This view finds its roots in al-Māturīdī's conception of the God-world relation and his critique of the deist philosophers' approach to this relation. See, al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu and Muhammed Aruçi (Beirut: Dār Şādīr & İstanbul: Maktabat al-Irshād, 2007), 108, 184. For a detailed analysis of this subject, see also my recent monograph: Tahir Uluç, *İmām Māturīdī'nin Âlemin Ontolojik Yapısı Hakkında Filozofları Eleştirisi* (Konya: Aybil Yayınevi, 2016), 93 and on.

He continues to quote al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī regarding the relationship between angels and human beings: “God made the angels superior [to humans] through the substance and origin [out of which they are created].”<sup>6</sup> However, for al-Māturīdī, the assumption that the angels are superior through their substance is wrong on both rational and scriptural bases. It is wrong rationally because a thing cannot be superior to a substance out of which he is also created because of that very substance.<sup>7</sup> If we understand his words correctly,<sup>8</sup> his argumentation includes the following ambiguity: Al-Baṣrī argues that the substance and origin out of which the angels are created – Muslim and Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal relates a prophetic tradition saying that the substance in question is light – is superior to that out of which man was created – which many Qur’ānic verses specify to be soil – and therefore, angels are superior to human beings. On the other hand, al-Māturīdī considers this argumentation to be problematic, holding that two things formed of the same substance cannot be superior to each other based on their substance. Nevertheless, al-Baṣrī does not clarify that the substance of angels is the same as that of human beings. Neither does al-Māturīdī himself make such a claim. Therefore, al-Māturīdī’s argumentation seems to be problematic from this perspective. Alternatively, by the words substance (*jawhar*) and origin (*aṣl*), he may mean the universal and common matter of all beings rather than the specific or particular matter of each thing.

As for the scriptural evidence al-Māturīdī invokes to refute al-Baṣrī’s position, this comprises the following verses: “For God says that something is superior by its substance only in connection with nice and good deeds, as it occurs in the following verses: “See you not how God sets forth a parable? – A goodly word like a goodly tree.”<sup>9</sup> “From the land that is clean and good, by the will of its Cherisher, springs up produce, rich after its kind.”<sup>10</sup> “To Him, mount up all words of purity.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt*, II, 189 (Q 6:149).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The phrase in question reads as follows: “فلا يجوزُ أن يكونَ لأحدٍ بالجوهرِ نفسه فضلٌ على .”  
”ذَلِكَ الْجَوْهَرِ”

<sup>9</sup> Q 14:24.

<sup>10</sup> Q 7:58.

<sup>11</sup> Q 35:10.

What al-Māturīdī means to establish by these Qurʾānic passages is that the tree, the word, and the land are described as good and beautiful – or conversely, as evil and ugly – on the basis of their certain features and not because of their substance.

Al-Māturīdī holds that the beings with different substances are not superior or inferior to one another purely on the basis of their substance because, in his opinion, God holds no one superior to another in substance; on the contrary, He holds them superior to one another on the basis of their actions.<sup>12</sup>

To recapitulate, the Imām lays down the following three principles in connection with these Qurʾānic verses:

1) Nothing is superior to anything else by its substance because God does not hold anything superior to anything else on such grounds.

2) Beings acquire superiority to each other through their volitionally acquired features, not through their inborn or instinctual qualities.

3) Superiority is acquired through volitional and good deeds.

In a context in which one discusses superiority among beings in general and among human beings in particular, the question of what kind of relationship exists between men and women in these terms may come to mind, attracting particular attention in the present age in which the Western ideology of feminism may resonate with Muslim societies to a certain extent. Thus, one may ask whether al-Māturīdī, who rejects any kind of substantial superiority among beings, rejects also any notion of superiority between the male and female genders. In clearer terms, does he maintain this egalitarian attitude vis-à-vis the thorny issue of gender in Islam? In this context, I shall focus on his interpretations of the following two Qurʾānic verses, which might be relevant in this context:

1) وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ: And women have rights as they have responsibilities, fairly; but men have a degree [of superiority] to them.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, II, 189 (Q 6:149).

<sup>13</sup> Q 2:228.

This passage is part of the Qur'ānic verse laying down the procedure for divorce, clarifying that women have rights as well as responsibilities but that men hold a degree of superiority over women. Al-Māturīdī relates the following five views regarding the nature of that superiority: “The superiority in question is the fact that: 1) men hold the authority of divorcing, not women; 2) men have principality and authority; 3) Allah has made men superior to women through goods and combat; 4) men have the merits of custodianship, testimony, and intelligence that women lack; 5) men are superior to women in rights and through the dowry that they give to women.”<sup>14</sup>

Upon citing these five opinions with the modality of *qīla*, alluding to his disapproval of them or at least the neutrality of his position with respect to them, he expresses his own opinion: “The one degree of superiority that belongs to men is the fact that men have authority among women (*al-mulk fibā*), that they are superior to women in rights, and that men are made custodians over women.”<sup>15</sup>

One can hardly ignore the patriarchal tone in al-Māturīdī's discourse on the gender relationship, but his following remarks in interpreting a related Qur'ānic verse add a counterbalancing hue to that tone:

2) “الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ: Men are the custodians of women because Allah has made men superior to women and because men support women from their means.”<sup>16</sup>

First, al-Māturīdī specifies that this verse should be viewed within the context of the marital relationship between men and women, clarifying that husbands are specifically the custodians of their wives and not over women absolutely, mentioning as evidence for this opinion the end of the verse, “because men support women from their means.” Of special interest to our discussion is that al-Māturīdī maintains that this verse supports the validity of the wedding contract; thus, the marriage of Muslim women without the existence or presence of their legal guardians (*walī*) and custodians lies in clear contradistinction to al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/819), who asserts the

<sup>14</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wilāt*, I, 181 (Q 2:228).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Q 4:34.

invalidity of such marriages on the basis of the same verse. Al-Māturīdī goes on to say that,

...[t]he superiority of men as pointed out in the verse is the superiority of creation in that God made men the folk of profit and trade, performing various professions and fulfilling the needs of women. It is in this respect that men are custodians of women. On the other hand, God made women weak and incapable of running businesses and working in the professions and fulfilling their needs; men are custodians of women, caretakers of their affairs, fulfillers of their needs, and their maintainers. It is for this reason that God made it incumbent upon men to take care of the affairs of women. *Though God has made this task incumbent upon men, if women are put in charge of their own affairs and fulfill their own needs, such as trading and buying drinks, these dealings are valid and lawful for them. The matter of the wedding contract is compared to this: Though men are the custodians of women, if the latter are given custodianship regarding the wedding contract and thus exercise their own custodianship [and marry by themselves], this [marriage] is valid and lawful just as their other dealings are valid and lawful.*<sup>17</sup>

We have deliberately italicized these remarks by al-Māturīdī to suggest that one may consider these contradictory to the previous remarks in the same passage because he, on the one hand, describes women as incapable *in creation* of taking care of their affairs and of fulfilling their needs by themselves, and on the other, says that their transactions are valid and lawful as they try to meet their basic needs, validating their wedding contract by analogy with their commercial contracts. In fact, this evident contradiction stems from a deeper tension between the Ḥanafite legal opinion that allows a Muslim woman to exercise her own custodianship regarding marriage and the prevailing patriarchal attitude in Medieval as well as contemporary Muslim societies. Nevertheless, if one says that women are weak and incapable *in creation* of taking care of themselves but that it is lawful for them if they do take care of themselves, we can rightfully take that “incapability in creation” as related to the social roles that have been assigned to women rather than as an “innate incapacity” on their part. Overall, al-Māturīdī's remarks on the gender

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, I, 413 (Q 4:34).

relationship do not contradict his overall egalitarian attitude among beings; on the contrary, he is consistent with his general outlook on this thorny issue.

We will observe, as we proceed, that the three principles above have many ramifications in the Māturīdian theological and anthropological thought. On the other hand, al-Māturīdī revisits the debate over whether human beings or angels are superior in connection with the interpretation of the verse, “وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا: We have honored the sons of Adam above a great part of our creation.”<sup>18</sup> However, this time he says that we cannot judge the superiority of one over the other because we have no knowledge about that, nor do we need such knowledge, and this issue exclusively belongs to God and is none of our business.<sup>19</sup>

Once he has said this, he makes the following remarks relying on the last of the three principles mentioned above:

It is not permissible to put the most wicked and sinful human beings on a par with the angels, who never disobey God even for the blink of an eye, and to say that the former are superior to the latter. Yet if one is to make such a comparison, one can compare the angels only with the prophets, messengers, and pious human beings in general. Thus, one can say that some humans are superior to some angels. However, as we have already pointed out, the verdict regarding this issue pertains solely to God and we have no say about it.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, to establish the superiority of Adam to the angels, al-Māturīdī invokes the 31<sup>st</sup> verse of the Sūrat al-Baqarah, “وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا: And He taught Adam all the names,” and the 34<sup>th</sup> verse of the same Sūrah, “وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا: And behold, We said to the angels, ‘Bow down to Adam!’, and they bowed down.” Al-Māturīdī takes the Qur’ānic report that God taught Adam the names, and the angels learned the names from him as a means through which he was made superior to the angels. He also cites the second verse for the superiority of Adam to the angels insofar as he is made the locus or direction of the angels’ prostration. However, he does not fail to clarify that in this case, Adam was simply acting as a place of prostration, a place on which the Muslims place their

<sup>18</sup> Q 17:70.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʿwilāt*, III, 179 (Q 17:70).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



forehead during the ritual prayer; otherwise, God is the only being to whom the prostration is actually dedicated. He adds, as another conclusion to be derived from this verse, that prostration is not an act of worshipping in itself.<sup>21</sup> We will further examine al-Māturīdī's conception of superiority on the basis of knowledge and function as we proceed.

We have already stated that the *jinn*s in general and Iblīs in particular are another kind of rational being with whom humans are compared in terms of superiority. Al-Māturīdī treats this subject in one of the Qur'ānic contexts mentioning the disobedience of Iblīs to the divine command to bow down to Adam: “ قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَّارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ: (Iblīs) said, 'I am better than him; You created me from fire, and You created him from clay.'”<sup>22</sup>

I should like to emphasize two points in this passage:

- 1) Iblīs views himself as superior to Adam.
- 2) He bases his claim of superiority on the fact that he is created from fire, whereas Adam is created from soil.

Here, Iblīs takes the following two points as certain, although they are in fact in need of being demonstrated: First, the superiority in substance of fire to soil and second, that the superior does not bow down to the inferior. Regarding the first point, al-Māturīdī says the following:

Iblīs – may God damn him – thought that since the nature of fire is ascending and highness and that of soil is descending and lowness, the one that is of the first nature is better than the other that is of the second. Therefore, Iblīs said that he was better than Adam and that God created him from fire and Adam from soil. Alternatively, he said so because all things improve and grow ripe through fire.<sup>23</sup>

However, for al-Māturīdī, this reasoning of Iblīs is erroneous as he goes on to argue,

If Iblīs, the God-damned, considered well, he would come to realize that clay is superior to fire because fire is from soil, which is like the

<sup>21</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wilāt*, I, 34 (Q 2:31).

<sup>22</sup> Q 38:76.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wilāt*, IV, 285 (Q 38:76).

origin and mother of all other things. This is so because the improvement and ripening of things comes true through fire but their first beginning is from soil, just like that of a son from the begetting mother.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, to al-Māturīdī, soil is superior to fire. With respect to the origin of fire from soil, I assume that al-Māturīdī means that such sources of fire as wood or coal originate from the earth.

Regarding the second point, al-Māturīdī holds that God may make the superior subordinate to the inferior as a kind of divine testing for both sides and because of a certain wisdom in his knowledge. For this reason, God commanded Iblīs to bow down to Adam; however, the former disobeyed this divine order because he failed to see that the bowing-down to the inferior by the superior contains a wisdom and a truth.<sup>25</sup>

One can recapitulate the discussion that al-Māturīdī has carried on so far regarding the relation of superiority between man and the angels on the one hand and between man and Iblīs on the other as follows: It is not correct to rest the claim that an angel is superior to man on the former's substantial superiority and natural compulsion to obey God because no substance whatsoever is superior to others. Thus, no claim of superiority for the angels can rely on such a reason, and al-Māturīdī makes no decision on whether the angels are superior or inferior to men on these grounds. Nor can their superiority rest on their natural compulsion to obedience because, for al-Māturīdī, the good actions of one who acts in such a way by fighting the opposite powers drenched in its nature and by displaying a free will is superior to the good action of one who acts in such a way simply according to his instinctual nature and cannot do otherwise. Al-Māturīdī goes only that far, shying deliberately away from drawing the logical conclusion that although the angels are possessed of free will (i.e., the power and capacity of disobeying and sinning), they always obey God. However, al-Māturīdī keeps silent about this, saying that we do not have the knowledge to decide upon this.

Overall, al-Māturīdī thinks that a substance is not superior because of its essence but because of the good deeds and actions originating

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

from it. In addition, God may make the superior subordinate to the inferior for the reason and wisdom of testing both sides.

## 2. The Relationship of Superiority between Arab and non-Arab Muslims

Writings and discourses whose titles include the words "Islam" and "nationalism" in various combinations discuss the position of nationalism in Islam almost exclusively on the basis of the following Qurʾānic verse and the Prophetic tradition:

O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most superior of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things.<sup>26</sup>

O men! Your Lord is one and your father is one. The Arab is not superior to the non-Arab, nor is the non-Arab to the Arab, nor is the black to the red and the red to the black only through the fearing of God.<sup>27</sup>

I should like to add that this tradition occurs in the Farewell Sermon of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) but is not included by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) in their *Ṣaḥīḥs* but is by Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) in his *Musnad*.

Al-Māturīdī gives approximately the same explanations of the verse quoted above as the other exegetes do: since all human beings are created from a single pair of a male and a female, they all come from the same ancestry and therefore there is no difference among them in this respect. Therefore, it is vain and meaningless to boast about one's ancestry and seek for superiority to other people based on this.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, one needs to keep in mind that along with the material quoted above, many other Qurʾānic verses and Prophetic

<sup>26</sup> Q 49:13.

<sup>27</sup> Abū ʿAbd Allāh Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal al-Shaybānī, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnāʾūṭ et al. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2001), XXXVIII, 474 (no. 23489).

<sup>28</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, IV, 548 (Q 49:13).

traditions are related or can be legitimately associated with the fact and ideology called “nationalism.” For instance, al-Māturīdī sets forth most of his views concerning the issue in connection with the following verse: “وَلَقَدْ اخْتَرْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَىٰ الْعَالَمِينَ: And We chose them above the nations upon knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

I would like to draw attention to two points in this verse:

- 1) God chose one nation above the others.
- 2) That nation is the sons of Israel.

As has been clarified by the verse quoted above, if all men are generated from the same ancestors and if there is no superiority or inferiority among them with respect to their genealogy, how and why did God choose one nation above the others? Another issue is that the Qurʾān itself describes the sons of Israel as the group that is most hostile to the Muslims, together with the nonbelievers.<sup>30</sup> In addition, does this not play into the hands of the sons of Israel, especially the Zionist ones, in their claim to be “God’s Chosen Nation”?

Classical exegetes of the Qurʾān such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) are completely aware of the questions and problems which we have mentioned, with the possible difference that they did not raise these issues as clearly as we have done. They generally tend to think that those sons of Israel who were said to be chosen above others were exclusively those who lived in a certain limited period of time and that those above whom the sons of Israel were chosen were also exclusively those who lived in the same limited period; thus the issue is that a certain group of people was chosen above another certain group of people and not that all sons of Israel who are born until the end of time are chosen above all others to come until the same time.

The exegetes certainly alleviated the problem by narrowing down the scope of the verse but could not solve it completely. For in that case, the question rises why God chose *that* generation of the sons of Israel above *those* other people. In an effort to answer this question, al-Māturīdī opens the door for a more recent and contemporary problem. I will first discuss al-Māturīdī’s answer and then discuss the problem that I think his answer gives rise to.

<sup>29</sup> Q 44:32.

<sup>30</sup> Q 5:82.

The verse in question writes that the sons of Israel are chosen above *the* other people “upon knowledge,” and al-Māturīdī focuses his discussion on the phrase “عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ (upon knowledge),” which has been, as he reports, interpreted in more ways than one by the exegetes:

1) God chose *the* sons of Israel upon knowledge; that is, because of knowledge. God gave *the* sons of Israel that knowledge which He did not give to *the* others that He might disclose the superiority and honor of *knowledge* to all creatures (*al-‘ālamīn*; literally, the worlds). This is the same as saying that He taught Adam the names of things to establish Adam’s superiority over the angels, who were not endowed with the knowledge of the names of things!

2) God held them superior because He *knew* the things and reasons that are possessed by *the* sons of Israel. *The* other people do not have knowledge of such reasons and meanings. Hence, they might have been held superior to *the* other people because of those reasons and meanings.

3) It is upon knowledge (i.e., because of knowledge) that God held *the* sons of Israel superior. He led *the* others to that knowledge and thus *the* sons of Israel were held superior because they taught *the* others those things that they needed.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that the first and third of these interpretations are similar; God gave the sons of Israel a certain kind of knowledge that He did not give to *the* others, through which the sons of Israel acquire a privileged status and gain superiority over the others. In the second interpretation, God makes the sons of Israel superior to the others because He knows of a property found in the former. Although these three interpretations are somewhat different, all say that the sons of Israel were held superior not because of their race or substance but rather because they were endowed with a property, i.e., knowledge.

Al-Māturīdī finds the third interpretation preferable and defines the relation between Arab and non-Arab Muslims (*mawālī*) on the basis of having knowledge and teaching it to others. As he says that the sons of Israel were held superior to the others because the former taught the latter what the latter needed, he compares this to the

<sup>31</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt*, IV, 461 (Q 44:32).

superiority of the teacher to the pupil and proceeds to make the remarks that open the door for the problem to which we have already referred:

As it is said, The Arabs are superior to the non-Arabs because the latter need the former for learning their [Arabic] language and some other things they need. The Arabs required that superiority due to the need of the non-Arabs for them. In the same manner, the tribe of Quraysh is superior to other Arabs because the latter need the former for learning some things, and the Quraysh attains this status because they were held superior to others by means of that knowledge. Thus, Allah made other people need the sons of Israel for accessing the knowledge of some things; it might have been for this reason that they required having superiority and being held superior to *the* others.<sup>32</sup>

In conclusion, al-Māturīdī asserts that the Arabs are superior to the non-Arabs and that the Quraysh are superior to other Arab tribes because of their Arabic knowledge and in this particular respect. To emphasize this point again, this is not an essential superiority; on the contrary, it is contingent on the knowledge of Arabic as a means to knowledge of Islam. Therefore, other nations can acquire the same position if they acquire the same knowledge. Al-Māturīdī makes remarks to this effect in interpreting the following Qurʾānic verse: “وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوا أَمْثَالَكُمْ: If you turn back from Him, He will substitute in your stead another people; then, they would not be like you!”<sup>33</sup>

This verse includes a divine threat if the Muslims should turn from God, He will substitute in their stead a new people. However, the exegetes disagreed in their identification of the “you” and the “another people” occurring in the verse as well as in interpreting whether this remained just a warning and threat or had occurred as a historical fact. Al-Māturīdī summarizes these views in the following remarks:

1) Some asserted that those who turned back were the Meccans and that God substituted in their stead another people, the Medinans. Al-Māturīdī considers this interpretation to be far-fetched because the

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Q 47:38.

Sūrat Muḥammad containing this verse was revealed in Medina. Thus, the phrase “if you turn back” cannot address the Meccans.

2) Others said that God threatened the Medinans that if they were to turn back, He would substitute in their stead another people who were more obedient to Him. However, the Medinans did not turn back, neither did God bring another people in their stead.

3) Some also said that the verse could be understood in two ways:

a) The first: “If you turn back from Him, He will substitute in your stead another people;” that is, you did not turn back, neither did He bring another people in your stead.

b) They turned back and God substituted in their stead a group of people from the tribes of al-Nukha<sup>ḥ</sup>, Aḥmas, and Kindah. Regarding those who turned back, they were the tribes of Ḥanzalah, Asad, and Ghaṭafān.<sup>34</sup>

Citing the following narrations, al-Māturīdī concludes that

1) God’s threat to bring another people materialized.

2) Those in whose stead God brought another people were the Arabs in general.

3) The substitutes were the *‘Ajām*; i.e., the non-Arabs in general or the Persians in particular.

As will be explained in connection with the interpretation of another verse below, the root meaning of the word *‘Ajām* in Arabic is tongueless or dumb. The Arabs called the non-Arab people by this word because they could not speak Arabic at all or well. Thus, the word in its root meaning referred to one who fails to speak Arabic fluently or one who does not speak Arabic as his or her native language. Later, it came to refer to non-Arabs in general and to Persians in particular. In the following narrations, the term seems to be used in both meanings. Al-Māturīdī talks about them in the following way:

1) When the Prophet Muḥammad was asked about the identity of the “another nation” referred to in the verse, “If you turn back from Him, He will substitute in your stead another people,” he stroked the

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt*, IV, 516 (Q 47:38).

thigh of Salmān al-Fārisī (i.e., Salmān of Persia or Salmān the Persian) and said, “I swear by God, who holds my soul in His hand, that if religion were hung to the Pleiades (*Thurayyā*), even then, some men from the Persians would attain it.”

2) Abū Hurayrah is said to have related that The Prophet (peace be upon him) recited the verse, “If you turn back from Him, He will substitute in your stead another people.” His Companions asked, “Who are they?” The Messenger of God stroked Salmān’s shoulder and said: “This one and his people.”

3) It is said in another tradition: “I swear by God who holds my soul that if Faith were hung to the Pleiades (*Thurayyā*), a group of men from the Persians would get it.”

4) The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, “I visioned a flock of black sheep, after which a flock of white sheep appeared to mix up with the black one, and they all followed me.” The Companions said, “O Messenger of God! (peace be upon him) How did you interpret your vision?” He said, “The *‘Ajams* (non-Arabs in general or the Persians) shall share with you in your religion and progeny.” They said, “The *‘Ajams*, o Messenger of God?!” He said, “If faith were hung to the Pleiades (*Thurayyā*), a group of men from the *‘Ajam* would get it. The happiest of the *‘Ajam* through faith are the Persians (*abl Fāris*).”<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the authenticity of these four narrations, I should like to say that the portion with its variants “If religion or faith were hung to the Pleiades (*Thurayyā*), the Persians would get it” occurs in al-Bukhārī’s<sup>36</sup> and Muslim’s<sup>37</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥs* and in al-Tirmidhī’s<sup>38</sup> (d. 279/892) *Sunan*. Thus, we can say that this narration is authentic according to the standards of the science of *ḥadīth*. As for the fact that al-Māturīdī cites these narrations with all their variants, one should note that almost all classical exegetes of the Qurʾān, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr, quote the first three narrations listed above. However, the part describing the vision in the fourth narration does not occur in other exegetical books. However, al-Ḥākim al-Nīsabūrī

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Al-Bukhārī, “al-Tafsīr,” 62 (Sūrat al-Jum‘ah).

<sup>37</sup> Muslim, “Faḍā’il al-ṣaḥābah,” 230.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Tirmidhī, “Tafsīr al-Qurʾān,” 63 (Sūrat al-Jum‘ah).



(d. 405/1014) cites this narration in his *al-Mustadrak*,<sup>39</sup> which is known among the scholars of *ḥadīth* to include narrations that are excluded by al-Bukhārī and Muslim from their *Ṣaḥīḥs* even though they meet their standards of authenticity. Thus, one can say that the part in question is also authentic according to the criteria of the *ḥadīth* scholars.

It is now appropriate to ask the following critical question, “What does al-Māturīdī mean by citing the reports praising the Persians in the context of the interpretation of that verse, in almost all variants?” First, as we have already noted, such reports were made before al-Māturīdī, who just cited these. Second, it is not tenable to hold that by mentioning these reports, he might have wished to exalt the Persians out of nationalistic feelings because recent studies about al-Māturīdī's biography, though with some measure of caution, say that he was most likely Turkish, and not Persian.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, as a scholar who has read al-Māturīdī's *Ta'wīlāt* from the beginning to the end and who has studied his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd* very carefully, I should say that I have encountered no statement by al-Māturīdī about whether he is an Arab, Persian, or Turk. However, in departing from the linguistic characteristics especially of the *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, modern scholars generally assume that Arabic was not his native language.<sup>41</sup> We know that Samarqand, in which he was born and grew up, was heavily populated by the Turks; however, Persians also existed there albeit to a much lesser degree. In addition, recent studies describe al-Māturīdī as a significant representative of the legal, intellectual, and theological tradition, which was strongly related to the Turks in the region as well as to the later Turkish polities in Turkestan, Khurasān,

<sup>39</sup> Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥākim al-Nisābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā l-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1990), IV, 437 (no. 8194).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Bekir Topaloğlu, “Ebū Mansūr el-Māturīdī,” in *Kitābü’l-Tevhīd, Açıklamalı Tercüme* [Turkish translation of *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*], trans. Bekir Topaloğlu (Ankara: İSAM Yayınları, 2014), 17 and on; Ahmet Ak, *Büyük Türk Âlimi Māturīdī ve Māturīdīlik* (Istanbul: Bayrak Matbaası, 2008), 34-36.

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich Rudolph, *al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015), 125 and on.

the Middle East, and Anatolia.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, al-Mâturîdî's mention of the reports above must be related to his universalist understanding and interpretation of Islam.

On the other hand, one can observe that al-Mâturîdî focuses on the part of the narration informing his readers that the non-Arabs or the Persians share the Arabs' religion and progeny. Then, al-Mâturîdî makes the following interesting remarks:

If this report is authentic, it can be mentioned as evidence equalizing the non-Arabs to the Arabs because the Prophet said, 'they will share with you in your progeny.' Once they shared with the Arabs in their progeny, the non-Arabs became equal to the Arabs. The statement 'they will share with you in your progeny' possibly means that the non-Arabs will share with the Arabs in their progeny because they will marry the Arabs and have children with them.<sup>43</sup>

Al-Mâturîdî makes the equality of the non-Arabs to the Arabs conditional upon the authenticity of that report. However, the Qur'anic verse and the Prophetic tradition quoted at the beginning of this section clarify that all men come from a single set of ancestors, that superiority is obtained through piety, and that the Arab is not superior to the non-Arab except through piety. Furthermore, while this report states that non-Arabs shall share the Arabs' religion and progeny, al-Mâturîdî rests the equality of the non-Arabs with the Arabs on the bond of kinship rather than the tie of faith. Thus, he contradicts the principle that he laid down in connection with the interpretation of the verse quoted above and thus clearly contradicts himself.

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that although the Qur'anic verses and the Prophetic traditions stipulate the principle that all people have the same ancestry, that superiority is only obtained through the fear of God, and that the Arab is superior to the non-Arab through the fear of God or through God-consciousness (*al-taqwâ*)

<sup>42</sup> See Sönmez Kutlu, "Bilinen ve Bilinmeyen Yönleriyle İmâm Mâturîdî," in *İmâm Mâturîdî ve Maturidilik: Tarîhî Arka Plan, Hayatı, Eserleri, Fikirleri ve Maturidilik Mezbebi*, ed. Sönmez Kutlu (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2003), 18 and on; Wilferd F. Madelung, "Maturidiliğin Yayılışı ve Türkler," trans. Muzaffer Tan, in *İmâm Mâturîdî ve Maturidilik: Tarîhî Arka Plan, Hayatı, Eserleri, Fikirleri ve Maturidilik Mezbebi*, ed. Sönmez Kutlu (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2003), 305 and on.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Mâturîdî, *Ta'wîlât*, IV, 516 (Q 47:38).

and *vice-versa*, in reality and in practice, the Arabs have always tended to think that they have a privileged status among the Muslim peoples because of the assumption that Arabic is the “language of the Qurʾān.” More interestingly, this sense of privileged status is found (sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly but always ironically) among the learned rather than the grassroots. Therefore, al-Māturīdī's recourse to intermarriage as a means of equalizing the non-Arabs to the Arabs shows the existence of such perceptions of superiority even in an area such as Samarqand, which is far from Arab lands. For this reason, al-Māturīdī tries to counterbalance this perception of superiority by mentioning glad-tidings about the non-Arabs from the tongue of the Prophet Muḥammad.

I would like to cite a striking anecdote as example for the perception of superiority by scholars of Arab lineage. The exegete al-Qurṭubī quotes the writer of the famous Arabic lexicon *al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, al-Jawharī of Otrar, Turkestan (d. 393/1003), in connection with the interpretation of the word *al-shuʿūb* (الشُّعُوبُ), which occurs in the following section of the verse quoted above and is translated as “nations.”

We ... made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other:<sup>44</sup> “*Shiʿb* (الشَّيْبُ) are those people who ramified out of the Arab and non-Arab tribes. The plural is *shuʿūb* (الشُّعُوبُ). And *al-Shuʿūbiyyah* (الشُّعُوبِيَّةُ) is a sect whose members do not regard the Arabs as superior to the non-Arabs.”<sup>45</sup>

It seems that the perception of Arab superiority to non-Arabs was so deeply rooted that one is easily stigmatized as sectarian simply if one refuses to confess – in conformity with the very Qurʾānic principle – that the Arabs are superior to the non-Arabs!

Before proceeding to the next section, I want to note that al-Māturīdī's aim in suggesting that what principally constitutes the Qurʾān is the universal meaning and not the local Arabic wording and that the Qurʾān can therefore be recited in another language, such as

<sup>44</sup> Q 49:13.

<sup>45</sup> Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Farḥ al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān (Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī)*, ed. Aḥmad al-Bardūnī and Ibrāhīm Aṭfīsh (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1964), XVI, 344.

Persian, is to allow Islam to cross the boundaries of Arabs and Arabic and to reveal its universal character.

## II. The Possibility of the Qurʾān Being Revealed in a Language Other than Arabic

The Qurʾān describes itself as a book that is revealed by God in Arabic.<sup>46</sup> There is no essential problem with this because the Qurʾān, like any other book, should have and be in a language, a human language, because it addresses human beings. However, some of the verses noting that the Qurʾān is revealed in Arabic continue, "... لَعَلَّهُمْ / *la'allabum* (it is hoped that they ...)" or "... لَعَلَّكُمْ / *la'allakum* (it is hoped that you ...)." This phrase, called *adāt al-tarajjī* (i.e., the preposition of hoping or expectation) is used to express the notion that something is desired or expected to happen. The phrase should be translated as "it is hoped ..." according to its context. Thus, the four Qurʾānic verses noting that the Qurʾān is revealed in Arabic should be understood and interpreted in the following way: The Qurʾān is revealed in Arabic, "it is hoped that they may fear God"<sup>47</sup> or "it is hoped that you may understand."<sup>48</sup> Alas, many translations of the Qurʾān in many languages gives this preposition – to me wrongly – a meaning of justification or explanation and render the verse – with small differences and in approximate terms – as "We revealed the Qurʾān in Arabic in order that you may understand."

Now, what is the difference between these two interpretations and what kind of problem does the second interpretation cause? The problem, directly, is the fact that the Qurʾān was given to all people, not to the Arabs alone. When the Qurʾān addresses the Arabs as one of its target audiences, the interpretation "We revealed the Qurʾān in Arabic in order that you may understand" is reasonable, but the interpretation is also problematic when the other nations are at issue because it does not seem to be logical – at least to me – to transmit a book to a person specifically in a foreign language in order that he may understand.

<sup>46</sup> For the Qurʾānic verses clarifying the Arabic nature of the Qurʾān, see Q 20:113; Q 26:198-199; Q 12:2; Q 39:28; Q 41:1, 41-42; Q 43:1.

<sup>47</sup> Q 20:113; Q 39:28.

<sup>48</sup> Q 12:2; Q 43:1.

Conversely, if we understand the verse as “We sent down the Qurʾān in Arabic, and it is hoped that you may understand,” it makes sense for both Arab and non-Arabs – although not in the same manner. This is such that an Arab audience understands the Qurʾān at a linguistic level without an extra lingual effort because Arabic is his native language and the non-Arab audience understands the Qurʾān by learning Arabic or the Arab teaches them the Qurʾān in their own language by learning their language. In brief, while the interpretation “We sent down the Qurʾān in Arabic in order that you may understand” gives the Arabs a special status and discards the non-Arabs as the audience of the Qurʾān, the understanding “We sent down the Qurʾān in Arabic, and it is hoped that you may understand” both conforms and contributes to the universal character of the Qurʾān. Hence, the latter approach allows different nations with different languages to understand the Qurʾān and confirms the fact that the Qurʾān addresses all humanity.

Having noted these debates, I would like to proceed to a more fundamental problem that revolves around the Arabic character of the Qurʾān, and this is the main issue that I shall address in the context of the Māturīdian tradition. The problem is related to the following two verses:

1) *وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ بَعْضِ الْأَعْجَمِينَ فَقَرَأَهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ مُؤْمِنِينَ*: Even if we had revealed it to any of the non-Arabs and he had recited it to them, they would not have believed in it.”<sup>49</sup>

2) *وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ*: If We had made it a non-Arabic Qurʾān, they would have said: “Why are its verses not explained in detail? Is it non-Arabic although he is an Arab (Is it non-Arabic although we are Arabs?)”<sup>50</sup>

When one reads these verses, especially the second verse, one may have the following initial impression: If God had sent down the Qurʾān in a language other than Arabic, then the Arabs would have objected and rejected it because they could not have understood it. Therefore, God found their objection rightful and did not send down the Qurʾān in any language other than Arabic but rather revealed it in Arabic. Nevertheless, given the Qurʾān’s claim to be a universal book

<sup>49</sup> Q 26:198-199.

<sup>50</sup> Q 41:44.

(that is, addressing not only the Arabs but also the non-Arab nations), this “Arabist” attitude will constitute an excuse or justification for non-Arabs to reject the Qurʾān on the basis of the linguistic barrier that the Qurʾān’s Arabic nature poses to them. Therefore, logically, either the possibility that the Qurʾān might be revealed in a language other than Arabic should not constitute an excuse for the Arabs to reject the Qurʾān or the actuality that the Qurʾān is revealed in Arabic should also constitute an excuse for non-Arabs to reject the Qurʾān. In fact, there is a third choice, which reflects the actual Muslim attitude: The Qurʾān’s revelation in any language other than Arabic is a rightful excuse for the Arabs but not for the rest of humanity! Thus, non-Arabs should learn Arabic to understand the Qurʾān. In an attempt to solve this problem, al-Māturīdī interprets the following four Qurʾānic verses in a way that is both original and striking:

1) أَنْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ عَلَى الطَّاغُوتَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا وَإِنْ كُنَّا عَنْ دِرَاسَاتِهِمْ لَعَاْفِيلِينَ أَوْ  
تَقُولُوا لَوْ أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْنَا الْكِتَابَ لَكُنَّا أَهْدَى مِنْهُمْ  
“Lest you should say, ‘The Book was sent down to two Peoples (Jews and Christians) before us and we were unaware of their study’ or lest you should say, ‘If the Book had only been sent down to us, we should have followed its guidance better than they.’”<sup>51</sup>

This verse clarifies that the reason for the revelation of the Qurʾān in Arabic is the elimination of the Arabs’ plea and excuse in their words, “God sent down a book to the Jews and the Christians but not to us; if He had sent to us alike, we would be guided better than they.” Al-Māturīdī understands this verse in the same way in general, with the following exception: Al-Māturīdī holds that even though God sent down the Qurʾān to put an end to their argumentation and nullify their excuse, they in fact had no evidence and excuse. In this context, al-Māturīdī also cites the verse, “We have sent messengers as the bearers of good news as well as a warning, that mankind, after the coming of the apostles, should have no plea against God.”<sup>52</sup> Then, he says that the verse should be understood as “They would not have any plea against God even if He did not send the messengers and the books.”<sup>53</sup> Al-Māturīdī adds that the Arabs might present a plea in two

<sup>51</sup> Q 6:156-157.

<sup>52</sup> Q 4:165.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, II, 195 (Q 6:156-157).

ways, the first of which concerns us here:<sup>54</sup>

The book was sent down in their language, not in ours, and we do not understand their language and 'we were unaware of their study.'<sup>55</sup> If the revelation of the Scripture in a language other than Arabic were an argument and excuse for the Arabs, the same would be an argument and excuse for non-Arabs in refusing to follow the Qurʾān because the Qurʾān is not revealed in non-Arabic, and the non-Arabs did not know the language of the Arabs. Yet the non-Arabs have no argument and excuse for failing to know Arabic because God created the way and means leading them to a knowledge of the Qurʾān. In the same manner, the Arabs had no excuse for failing to follow the rulings that had been laid down in the Scriptures that were revealed in a language other than their own because they had the power and capacity to access those Scriptures and to learn therefrom. This indicates that God may hold men responsible for those things to which men have no direct access but have the means to access.<sup>56</sup>

As one can see, al-Māturīdī is trying to strike a middle ground in interpreting the verse. On the one hand, he accepts that the Qurʾān is revealed in Arabic to remove the excuse of the Arabs cited above, and on the other, he argues that this excuse is invalid and groundless. For, otherwise, an excuse exists for the non-Arabs to reject the Qurʾān. With this purpose in mind, he describes the Arabs' excuse as such. In addition, the Arabs could access the contents of the Torah and the Gospel by learning the language in which they were revealed. It is interesting that in this context, al-Māturīdī makes no reference to the language of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

2) Al-Māturīdī raises the same issue in the context of the following verse: "وَكَمْ مِّن قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَاهَا" <sup>57</sup> How many towns have We destroyed?" For the Imām, by this verse, God threatens to destroy the Meccans because of their denial of Muḥammad's prophetic mission and office, just as He destroyed previous nations for their denial of their

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<sup>54</sup> The second excuse is their confusion about which sect of the Jews and Christians they should follow because they are divided into many opposing sects. See al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, II, 195.

<sup>55</sup> Q 6:156.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, II, 195 (Q 6:156-157).

<sup>57</sup> Q 7:4.

prophets. Therefore, this verse should be understood as follows: “How many towns have We destroyed, *because of their denial of their prophets?*” Accordingly, you Meccans will also incur the same punishment if you deny the divine mission and office of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>58</sup>

However, in order for this interpretation to be meaningful, the Meccan idolators should be aware that previous nations were destroyed because of their denial of their prophets; however, they did not know this because they had no Scriptures. Nevertheless, for al-Māturīdī, a lack of knowledge is also not an excuse in this context because the Meccan idolators can access this knowledge through those who had the Scriptures (in this context, the Jews and the Christians). Hence, the argument and threat in the verse is binding and does apply to the Meccan idolators.<sup>59</sup>

Here, al-Māturīdī cites the relationship between the Arabs and the non-Arabs in terms of their being addressed by the Qurʾān. This is such that the relation of the Arabs to the People of the Book (i.e., the Jews and the Christians) is like that of the non-Arabs to the Arabs.

Even if the non-Arabs did not know the book that was revealed in the language of the Arabs, the proof still applies to them that their denial of the Prophet shall invoke upon them their destruction because they had the means to access the knowledge of the destruction. In the same manner, even if the Meccans had no knowledge that previous nations had been destroyed by God because of their denial of their prophets, the same proof applies to them because they can learn it from the People of the Book.<sup>60</sup>

3) وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ بَعْضِ الْأَعْجَمِينَ فَقَرَأَهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ مُؤْمِنِينَ: Even if we had revealed it to any of the non-Arabs and he had recited it to them, they would not have believed in it.”<sup>61</sup>

The letter of the verse says that even if the Qurʾān were sent down to a non-Arab person and he recited it to them, they would not believe in it. However, such exegetes as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī interpret the verse interestingly as meaning that they did not

<sup>58</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, II, 207 (Q 7:4).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Q 26:198-199.



believe in an Arab prophet; if it were to be sent down to a non-Arab, they would not believe in him, either. These exegetes, however, seem to take that as meaning that all Arabs denied the Qurʾān, while in fact at the outset, most of them denied it but a few of them believed it. Alternatively, the verse addresses only the deniers or the non-believers. In clearer terms, the verse suggests that the deniers shall not believe in the Qurʾān, regardless of whether it is revealed in Arabic or in any other language. The exegetes, however, do not understand the verse in this manner, as will be seen in the following lines:

Al-Ṭabarī,<sup>62</sup> Ibn Kathīr,<sup>63</sup> and al-Qurṭubī<sup>64</sup> take the word *aʿjamīn* (أَعْجَمِينَ) occurring in the verse to refer to dumb animals, the non-fluent or inarticulate Arabs or non-native speakers of Arabic, regardless of whether they speak Arabic well. They also tend to see a miracle in the transmission of the Qurʾān to someone who is either speechless altogether or is an inarticulate speaker of Arabic and his recitation of such highly eloquent a text as the Qurʾān under such linguistically disadvantageous circumstances to the Arabs who are naturally fond of eloquence and especially poetic eloquence, adding that the non-believers would still deny that it was revealed by God.

Al-Māturīdī repeats the same views concerning the interpretation of the verse:

1) Some exegetes interpreted the verse as follows: God transmitted it to one of themselves (that is, an Arab person), but they refused to believe. If He were to transmit it to a non-Arab person, how much worse would their reaction be?

2) Some others asserted, “If we had revealed it to any of the non-Arabs and he had recited it to them,” then the Arabs would have been the most miserable people because they could not have understood it. Al-Māturīdī describes this as being similar to the first interpretation.

<sup>62</sup> Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Jizah: Dār Hajr li-l-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ wa-l-Iʿlān, 2001), XVII, 647.

<sup>63</sup> Abū l-Fidāʾ ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl ibn Shihāb al-Dīn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-aẓīm*, ed. Sāmī ibn Muḥammad al-Salāmah, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭibah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1999), VI, 146-147.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, XIII, 139.

3) Still others said, If He had sent it down to one of the dumb beasts and that dumb beast had explained it to them, they would not have accepted it. This suggests their obtuseness and stubbornness.

Afterwards, al-Māturīdī cites his own interpretation:

The verse, “If we had revealed it to any of the non-Arabs and he had recited it to them,” might mean the following: If We had revealed it in a language other than Arabic, they would have not understood it and would have said, “Why are its verses not explained in detail? Is it non-Arabic although we are Arabs (or although he is an Arab)?”<sup>65</sup> Yet We transmitted it in Arabic such that they might not say so.<sup>66</sup>

Hence, al-Māturīdī mentions the excuse of the Arabs in the context of the interpretation of this verse but does not say that it is invalid; on the contrary, he quotes it in an affirmative tone.

4) “وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ” If We had made it a non-Arabic Qurʾān, they would have said: ‘Why are its verses not explained in detail? Is the Qurʾān non-Arabic although he is an Arab? (or although we are Arabs?)’<sup>67</sup>

Al-Māturīdī takes this verse to mean that even if the Qurʾān were transmitted in an extraordinary manner, the deniers would still refuse to believe in it because of the extremity of their stubbornness. For him, the Qurʾān, which is revealed in Arabic, being transmitted to a non-Arab person – or more generally a Scripture being transmitted to a prophet in a language other than his own – and he reciting it to his people is something more extraordinary than a Qurʾān revealed in Arabic being transmitted to an Arab prophet – or a Scripture being transmitted in his own language –. The deniers, however, would still refuse to believe even if this happened.<sup>68</sup>

I would like to draw attention to the following two points regarding al-Māturīdī’s interpretation of this verse:

1) The exegetes disagreed on the meaning of the part of the verse: *أَأَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ*. First, the phrase literally just means, “is it/he non-Arab/ic and Arab/ic?”. Second, the words *‘ajamī* and *‘arabī* are used

<sup>65</sup> Q 41:44.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, III, 542 (Q 26:198-199).

<sup>67</sup> Q 41:44.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, IV, 382-383 (Q 41:44).

to refer both to persons (that is, non-Arabs and Arabs) and to language (that is, non-Arabic and Arabic). Accordingly, the verse in theory may mean one of the four alternatives: (1) non-Arab and Arab; (2) non-Arabic and Arab; (3) non-Arab and Arabic; (4) non-Arabic and Arabic.

Provided that the verse talks of a Scripture that is revealed and of a person to whom it is revealed, one of the words *aʿjamī* and *ʿarabī* should refer to the language and the other should refer to a person. Therefore, the first and the fourth choices are automatically discarded. Since the first part of the verse says “وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا: If We had made it a non-Arabic Qurʾān,” the language of the Scripture should be certainly non-Arabic. However, who is the “Arab” mentioned in the part writing, “Is it non-Arabic although he is an Arab (or although we are Arabs)?” Does the word refer to the prophet to whom the Scripture was sent down, as I have preferred, or does it refer to the people who are addressed by the Scripture; that is, the Arabs? Al-Māturīdī identifies the reason for the surprise expressed by the audience at a non-Arabic Scripture being transmitted to an Arab prophet. Thus, he understands and interprets the verse in the sense that “what is unusual and weird is that a non-Arabic Scripture was transmitted to an Arab prophet.” Otherwise, for him, it is not unusual or strange that a non-Arabic Scripture should be transmitted to the Arabs because this is neither unusual nor strange; on the contrary, this is something reasonable and possible. His concluding words clarify that he understands the verse in this manner:

This verse provides evidence that if God had transmitted the Qurʾān in a non-Arabic language, it would still have been the Qurʾān, and that the difference in the language would not have changed or desecrated the Qurʾān. Therefore, this verse provides evidence regarding Abū Ḥanīfah’s (may Allah have mercy upon him) opinion that if someone recites [the Qurʾān] in Persian during his ritual prayer, his ritual prayer remains valid.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, I should like to say regretfully that although almost all Turkish translators of the Qurʾān are afraid to write that “It is weird that a non-Turkish Qurʾān should be transmitted to the Turks,” they

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<sup>69</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, IV, 383 (Q 41:44).

did not shy away from interpreting the verse in question as, “It is weird that a non-Arabic Qurʾān should be transmitted to the Arabs.”

### III. Reading the “Qurʾān” in Languages Other Than Arabic

We know that the Qurʾān relates the same stories and events in different chapters and contexts, sometimes in more detail and at more length, sometimes more briefly, and sometimes in different words. Departing from this fact, the Imām concludes that:

1) The same meaning and truth can be expressed in the same language in different words.

2) The same meaning and truth can also be expressed in different languages.

3) The Qurʾān can be written in different languages. More clearly, translations of the Qurʾān in different languages remain the Qurʾān.

The first of the verses upon which al-Māturīdī relies to support this view is the one narrating that Iblīs disobeyed God’s command to bow down to Adam. He first cites the 31<sup>st</sup>-33<sup>rd</sup> verses of the Sūrat al-Ḥijr as follows:

Not so Iblīs: he refused to be among those who prostrated themselves. God said: “O Iblīs! what is your reason for not being among those who prostrated themselves?” Iblīs said: “I am not one to prostrate myself to man, whom You did create from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape.”<sup>70</sup>

He then goes on to quote the following:

God said in another place: “Not so Iblīs: he refused and was haughty: He was of those who reject Faith.”<sup>71</sup> “God said to him: ‘O Iblīs! what is your reason for not being among those who prostrated themselves?’”<sup>72</sup> God said in another place: “O Iblīs! What prevents you from prostrating yourself?”<sup>73</sup> God also said in another place: “What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you? He said: ‘I am better than he: You created me from fire and him from clay.’”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Q 15:31-33.

<sup>71</sup> Q 2:34.

<sup>72</sup> Q 15:32.

<sup>73</sup> Q 38:75.

<sup>74</sup> Q 7:12.

After quoting the verses that describe the same subject in different words and phrases, al-Māturīdī concludes:

God related this incident in different words. It is known that His address to Iblīs took place one time and not many times... This proves that the difference and change in words do not alter the ruling nor change the meaning. This also demonstrates that using different words is permissible as long as they express the same meaning. In a similar way, reciting it in a language other than that in which it is revealed is valid as long as it expresses the same meaning.<sup>75</sup>

By his last sentence, al-Māturīdī implies that reciting the Qurʾān in languages other than Arabic is permissible as long as the words in those languages express the same meaning.

In the context of the verses describing the phases of Adam's creation by God, al-Māturīdī revisits the thought that the difference of wording within the same language does not change the meaning but this time noting the following difference:

A difference in wording is permissible if it is intended to indicate different states rather than a single state. For this reason, we can mention as an example the description of different states concerning the story of Adam's creation. God once said, "The state of Jesus before God is like that of Adam. He created him from dust."<sup>76</sup> God also said: "He it is who created you from clay."<sup>77</sup> He again said: "We created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape."<sup>78</sup> This is a case of describing different states. It is possible that this may happen in languages other than this. Here, the Qurʾān mentions [the story] in different wording, with accretion and reduction, because the difference in wording does not change the meaning.<sup>79</sup>

Al-Māturīdī corroborates his view using two more groups of verses:

1) For al-Māturīdī, the verses "أَسْأَلُكَ يَدَكَ فِي جَنَّتِكَ" Move (Moses)

<sup>75</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʿwīlāt*, III, 49 (Q 15:31-33). Also see *ibid.*, III, 172 (Q 17:61).

<sup>76</sup> Q 3:59.

<sup>77</sup> Q 6:2.

<sup>78</sup> Q 15:26.

<sup>79</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Taʿwīlāt*, III, 173 (Q17:61).

your hand into your bosom”<sup>80</sup> and “وَأَدْخِلْ يَدَكَ فِي جَيْبِكَ: Put (Moses) your hand into your bosom,”<sup>81</sup> show that it is permissible the wording to differ and change as long as the same meaning and import is expressed.<sup>82</sup>

2) إِنَّ هَذَا لَفِي الصُّحُفِ الْأُولَى صُحُفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى “: And this is in the earlier Books, the Books of Abraham and Moses.”<sup>83</sup>

Al-Māturīdī notes in interpreting the second group of verses:

These two verses demonstrate that the difference between languages does not change the truth and reality of things because God bears witness that this point [i.e., the one that is made in the verse] is found in the earlier Scriptures in this language. This furnishes evidence for Abū Ḥanīfah’s validation of reading the Qur’ān in Persian.<sup>84</sup>

To recapitulate, al-Māturīdī thinks that the same meaning and truth can be expressed in the same language in different words, that the same meaning and truth can be expressed in different languages, and that it is permissible to recite the Qur’ān in different languages – here in Persian –, including the compulsory recitation during ritual prayer. One should lay a special emphasis upon the fact that al-Māturīdī speaks of the validity and permissibility of reading the Qur’ān during prayer and at other times in a language other than Arabic as a methodologically principal ruling and not as a provisional permission only and solely for those who do not know Arabic until they learn it. It should be emphasized that he says “reading or reciting the Qur’ān in Persian” and not “reading its Persian translation” or “reading its translation in Persian.”

In this context, one can assert the following objection: the Qur’ān is a miraculous book and God asserts and establishes this on the basis of its inimitability. If the translations of the Qur’ān are considered to

<sup>80</sup> Q 28:32.

<sup>81</sup> Q 27:12.

<sup>82</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wilāt*, III, 595 (Q 28:32).

<sup>83</sup> Q 87:18-19.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wilāt*, V, 441 (Q 87:18-19). The Arabic passage reads as the following:

لَأَنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى شَهِدٌ بِكَوْنِ هَذَا فِي الصُّحُفِ الْأُولَى بِهَذَا اللِّسَانِ، فَيَكُونُ فِيهِ حُجَّةٌ لِأَبِي حَنِيفَةَ فِي تَجْوِيزِ الْقِرَاءَةِ بِالْفَارِسِيَّةِ.

be like the Qurʾān, this would invalidate God's challenge that none can produce anything like the Qurʾān.

One can take Q 17:88 as an example of one of the Qurʾānic passages that make the point of the Qurʾān's inimitability: "If the whole of mankind and *jinn*s were to gather together to produce the like of this Qurʾān, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed each other up with help and support."<sup>85</sup>

I tend to consider this objection as a clear example of circular reasoning and informal fallacy, termed *muṣādarab ʿalā l-maṭlūb* in the classical Arabic logic or *petitio principii* as its equivalent among the Latin scholastics. This type of fallacy includes the conclusion, which is yet to be proven, within a premise of the argument, often in an indirect way such that its presence within the premise is hidden or at least not easily apparent. I see the objection above as such because it regards the point that the Arabic phraseology of the Qurʾān is exclusively the Qurʾān proper as a proven premise and then describes its translations as distinct and alternative like versions of the Qurʾān. However, that point is the conclusion that is yet to be proven and not the premise that has been already demonstrated. Therefore, the objection is infected with circularity and is invalid logically. Therefore, since the Arabic phraseology of the Qurʾān is not considered by al-Māturīdī as the only Qurʾān proper, its phraseology in other languages shall not be the like of the Qurʾān that incurs the challenge made by God. In addition, al-Māturīdī does not raise in this context the issue of the translation of the Qurʾān as a breach of the inimitable nature of the Qurʾān.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

One can mention many contexts and fields in which Islam's claim of universality is tested. In my opinion, one of these important contexts is the possibility that the Qurʾān's message can be expressed in different languages and practiced by different societies. In the first context, the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān should lie in its meaning and not in its wording or should lie first and primarily in its meaning and not in its wording. In other words, when the Qurʾān is translated

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<sup>85</sup> Q 17:88.

<sup>86</sup> See al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt*, III, 191-192 (Q 17:88).

into other languages, the translation should be *equally* valuable and meaningful. The second context is the capacity of the Qurʾān to transform any society in any region and in any age who accept it as having been transmitted from God and who follow its commands, carving out a society of the caliber and value of the first society that the Qurʾān produced at the beginning of Islam. This, in the final analysis, means that the same status should be granted to other languages and nations as that granted to Arabic and the Arabs as a result of the Qurʾān being revealed in Arabic and the Arabs' acceptance of it. If this status is denied for other languages and nations, then the Qurʾān shall remain alien with respect to non-Arab Muslims, regardless of how many centuries they have been Muslims, of how much self-sacrifice they have suffered for Islam and of their contributions to Islam.

The Prophet's words of praise, "If religion or faith were hung to the Pleiades, a group of men from the Persians or non-Arabs would get it," referring to non-Arabs in general and the Persians in particular, should be understood within this context. God transmitted a Scripture to the Arabs through a prophet from among themselves and in their language, explaining His religion therein. Therefore, its understanding and acceptance by the Arabs is not the same as that by the non-Arabs; on the contrary, this is more difficult for the latter. In his words, already quoted, the Prophet in a sense noted this difficulty and the reward to be attained in return for accepting it, both in this world and in the hereafter. Regarding this Prophetic tradition, one should note that these Prophetic glad tidings are conditional upon having faith and performing good deeds. Therefore, it goes without saying that the term "good deeds" should be understood as making a contribution to humanity in moral, cultural, civilizational, intellectual, and technological terms. Hence, the glad tidings apply only to those Arabs and non-Arabs who conform to these conditions and not to all Arabs and non-Arabs for all time to come without any limitation.

Al-Māturīdī's attitude toward the relationship between the Arabs and the non-Arabs, his remarks on the possibility of the Qurʾān being revealed and expressed in languages other than Arabic, and his highlighting the Persian language and people all result, I believe, from his universalistic view of Islam rather than from any *Shuʿūbī* tendencies, that is, anti-Arab feelings. As a reflection of the "pure" or "original" Ḥanafī tradition in his discourse, he believed that the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān lies in its meaning rather than its



wording; in other words, the Qurʾān is constituted by its meaning and not necessarily by its wording. Consequently, he argued that the recitation of the Qurʾān's translation in any language – including the compulsory ritual recitation during daily prayers – is the same as the recitation of the Qurʾān in its Arabic original. This attitude of al-Māturīdī results from a methodological understanding of the Qurʾān or Qurʾānic hermeneutics rather than from an anti-Arabist or anti-Arabicist reactivity or from Persian parochialism. Alas, the hermeneutics of Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Māturīdī has not been accepted even within the later Ḥanafī tradition; on the contrary, al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī's Arabicist outlook dominated the Ḥanafī-Māturīdī school. For centuries, this has hindered the Turkish people – as well as other non-Arab Muslims – from accessing the contents of the Qurʾān at an ideal level and has been one of the most important obstacles to understanding the Qurʾān.

I would like to conclude my study with a series of considerations on the relevance of this discussion to the present age. As a natural and sad result of the imposition of Arabic upon non-Arab Muslims as the unique language of the Qurʾān and thus of the religion, the Turkish nation has had no direct access to the contents of the Qurʾān until recently, in the early twentieth century. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, hundreds of Turkish translations of the Qurʾān have been produced, tens of original Qurʾānic exegetical works have been composed by Turkish scholars in the Turkish language, almost all of the classic Arabic exegetical works as well as many modern Qurʾānic commentaries have been translated from various languages into Turkish, numerous classics of Islam from a wide range of fields including *falsafah*, *kalām*, *taṣawwuf*, and *fiqh* have been translated into Turkish, and thousands of academic studies have been written. Thus, the Turkish language has become a language of religion *par excellence*. Therefore, I want to raise the following questions and ponder the answers that we may give to them.

Have the Turkish-centered studies, both original and translations, helped to raise the level of the Islamic scholarship, thought, and culture in Turkey? I think that anyone with common sense and fairness will answer this question positively. Has the fact that Arabic was the only language of religion in Turkish society until recently, when the Turkish language became a language of religion, hindered

the development of Islamic thought and culture in Turkey? I think anybody with fairness should also accept that the Arabicist attitude is one of or the most important obstacle to the Qurʾān in particular and to Islamic religious lore in general.

Turkishism, which is the main factor behind this tremendous increase in the level of Islamic knowledge and culture, is, in the final analysis, a product of Turkish secular nationalism and the Westernization process. This shall also be accepted by those who not only are fair-minded but also possess some knowledge. Is it not thus striking and of course sad that the universal Muslim community in general and the Turkish nation as an indispensable part thereof came in particular to this point only one millennium after the establishment of Islam and as the result of Westernization? The fact that Westernization brought us to this point is important insofar as we have not arrived at it through our own dynamics, as in the case of al-Māturīdī, but through the compelling influence of certain external factors. Are there any other theological, legal, social, moral, and intellectual opinions and interpretations that, although produced and pronounced centuries ago by al-Māturīdī and many other Muslim thinkers who have been obscured by history, we are yet to first realize and then adopt through external factors?

As one local example among many global examples, the present Turkish government and the Turkish Higher Education Council should only be praised for having recently opened over 60 faculties of divinity and Islamic studies in the last decade and for their other support and contributions to Islamic learning and studies in general. However, their increasingly Arabicist educational policies, which call for the teaching of Islamic sciences to Turkish students by Turkish professors in Arabic, seem to be not only unaware of the achievements made in the last century but also to be an attempt to reverse the course of a major historical trend. As a professor of Islamic studies, I am fully aware of the importance of Arabic as well as other Islamic and Western languages such as Persian, Urdu, and Bahasa Indonesia on the one hand and English, French, and German on the other in researching and accessing the classical and modern scholarship in the field. However, knowledge of a foreign language as a means of research is one thing, but conducting education entirely in a foreign language is another. Therefore, the recent noticeable Arabicist tendency by the designers of the new Islamic studies programs and curricula to replace Turkish with Arabic in education,

even at the undergraduate level, is not desirable for the Turkish language as a means of religious learning and culture. Finally, such an Arabicist outlook not only fails to contribute to better teaching of Arabic to Turkish students at the faculties of divinity and Islamic studies but also poses a major obstacle for students as they seek to understand what they are being taught in the classroom.

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