

Jesus as *Kalimat Allah* The Word of God (peace be with him)

HAJJ MUHAMMAD LEGENHAUSEN

Abstract

In all probability, the Book of the Christians who were addressed by God in the Qur'an and described as "People of the Book" was of the genre of ancient biography, and the divine book that is the revelation God sent to Jesus ﷺ was never published as a text of what God said to him. If the revelation given to Jesus ﷺ was conveyed to his followers through his life, in word and deed, this would explain the use of the term *Injil* in the Qur'an for both the divine revelation and for the gospels used by the Christians. Both could be called *Injil* because the gospels tell the story of the life that expressed the divine revelation given to Jesus ﷺ. This would also help to explain why Jesus is given a title, *Word of God*, that would otherwise seem to signify revelation. Furthermore, it is consistent with the traditional interpretation of the exegetes of the Qur'an, according to which Jesus ﷺ is the Word of God because his mother, Maryؑ became pregnant due to God's command which resulted in the virgin birth. It also explains why the divine command by which Mary became pregnant is conveyed by the angel of revelation, Gabriel. The divine word that became Jesus, on the interpretation suggested here, is not merely a creative word, but also a word of revelation.

Keywords

Jesus, Mary, Gospel, *Injil*, revelation, Gabriel, Allamah Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan*.

In the Qur'an, Jesus, peace be with him,¹ is called *Kalimat Allah*, the "Word of God," or rather, to be more precise, he is referred to as *kalimatin min Allah* "a Word from God." Angels called out to Zachariah: ﴿'Allah gives you the good news of John, as a confirmer of a Word from God, eminent and chaste, a prophet, among the righteous.'﴾ (3:39). A few verses later comes the Islamic annunciation, when the angels said:

﴿O Mary, Allah gives you the good news of a Word from Him, whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, distinguished in the world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near [to Allah]./ He will speak to

¹ Muslims use the phrase *'alayhi al-salam* (peace be with him) after mentioning the names of the prophets as a sign of reverence, in many books this salutation is printed in small letters as ﷺ, and this practice is followed in this article. A longer salutation is used when mentioning the name of Muhammad, may peace and blessings be with him and his household, abbreviated as ﷺ.

people in the cradle and in adulthood, and will be one of the righteous.’/ She said, ‘My Lord! How shall I have a child seeing that no man has ever touched me?’ He said, ‘So it is that Allah creates whatever He wishes. When He decides on a matter He just says “Be!” and it is./ And He will teach him the book and wisdom, the Torah, and the *Injil* (gospel).’ (3:45-48).²

The Christians are admonished against the deification of Jesus in another verse: ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and *His Word* that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him.’ (4: 171). Jesus is also called a *qawl al-Haqq*, “a saying of the Truth,” where *al-Haqq*, “the Truth” means God: ‘That is Jesus, son of Mary, a *Saying of the Truth*, concerning whom they are in doubt.’ (19:34)

The term used is *kalimah*, meaning “word”, derived from the root *klm*, from which is also derived *kallama* (he spoke) and *kalām* (speech, speaking). All of these terms are used with respect to divine speech in the Qur’an. Although there is no reference to Jesus ﷺ in the Qur’an that specifically uses the phrase *the word of God* (*al-kalimah Allah*), we may be justified in the assertion that God calls Jesus ﷺ the Word of God in the Qur’an because the expressions mentioned above, e.g., *kalimatīn min Allah* (a word from God) and *kalimatuhu* (His word), are used exclusively for Jesus ﷺ among all human beings. There is no other prophet or any other human being given the title by which Allah honors Jesus ﷺ as His word; so, in this sense, we can say that Jesus ﷺ is *the* Word of God according to the Qur’an. Nevertheless, the words of God are many, and we can understand the designation given to Jesus ﷺ better if we consider other verses of the Qur’an in which similar phrases are used. Sometimes *kalimah* is used for the words spoken by God to Adam,³ Abraham,⁴ and other “servants” of God,⁵ including Mary⁶ (peace be with all of them), and His prophets.⁷ Sometime what is meant by the word of God is more general, the command of God, or the divine message: ‘...He made the word of the faithless the lowest; and the word of Allah is the highest...’ (9:40); and ‘If all the trees on the earth were pens, and the

² Notice the transparency of the angel for the Blessed Virgin. The angel conveys God’s message to her, and she answers the angel by directly addressing God.

³ (2:37).

⁴ (2:124).

⁵ (37:171).

⁶ (66:12).

⁷ (37:171).

sea replenished with seven more seas [were ink], the words of Allah would not be spent.﴾ (31:27).

The exegetes (*mufassirin*) of the Qur'an have disputed the question of why Jesus ﷺ is called "Word of God." Generally, they agree (explicitly or implicitly) that the term is not to be understood as the *Logos* in the Christian sense. However, according to some exegetes, including 'Allamah Tabataba'i, there is an important connection between the "Word of God" as a title for the Messiah ﷺ, and the creative word of God; not because Jesus as *Logos* plays any part in creation, but because Jesus is directly created by the command of God without the mediation of a father. This view is in agreement with most of the commentators, both Shi'i and Sunni, as well as Western scholarship.⁸

In what follows, I will take the liberty of criticizing some of the views expressed in Tabataba'i's interpretation of the Qur'an, *Al-Mizan*. Before doing so, a few words may be permitted about this work and its author.

'Allamah Tabataba'i (1904-1981)

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i was born in a village near Tabriz in 1904.⁹ He came to Qom in 1946 after the Soviets invaded Azerbaijan. He had already begun work on exegesis of the Qur'an, which, he reports, the clerics of Qom considered unworthy of the efforts of anyone capable of the study of Islamic law. Nevertheless, he began teaching the exegesis of the Qur'an soon after his arrival in Qom. While in Qom, he also taught philosophy and authored several books and articles on the subject. He was also deeply involved in practical and theoretical mysticism.¹⁰ Islamic mysticism is usually known as Sufism, and one enters into its study, as a rule, under the direction of a guide who is linked by a succession of teachers that starts with the Prophet ﷺ and his son-in-law, 'Ali ﷺ. Directed training in the spiritual path is often organized into specific Sufi orders. Sometimes instead of the term *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *'irfan* (gnosis) is used. Some authors use *tasawwuf* for practical mysticism and *'irfan* for theoretical mysticism. In the case of 'Allamah Tabataba'i, we can find more influence of the Sufi tradition in his philosophical work¹¹ than in his exegesis of the

⁸ This interpretation is also given by Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and Tabarsi, according to Ayoub (1992), 131-135; and Zamakshari, as reported in Gätje (1976), 126f.; also this interpretation is given by the 8th/14th century Sufi Shi'ite exegete, Sayyid Haydar Amuli; see Amuli (1385/2007), Vol. 6, 228. For Western scholarship, see Robinson (1991), 11; and Zahniser (1991).

⁹ For a more complete biography, see Algar (2006).

¹⁰ See Tihriani (2003).

¹¹ See Legenhausen (2008).

Qur'an. He also studied the esoteric sciences of numerology and He is called *'Allamah*, which is a title of respect derived from *'ilm*, "knowledge", and indicating great learning.

He was reputed for his simple living, his deep piety, his mysticism, and for his work in Islamic philosophy and, of course, the exegesis of the Qur'an. Many of his students have become famous scholars in their own right, and his stamp on the understanding of Islam in the Shi'ite world today is indelible. He may be considered the father of contemporary Islamic philosophy, and the reviver of the science of exegesis of his day. Whatever criticism of his views is expressed here should be taken as tribute rather than complaint.

Al-Mizan

The name *al-Mizan*, means "the scale" and the full title of the work is *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, "The Scale in Exegesis of the Qur'an". It was begun in 1954 and was completed in 1972. Since 'Allamah was not teaching and studying Islamic law, he was not receiving the stipend that is normally given to those who study in Qom; and, as a result, he lived in poverty. He was paid a small amount for each volume of *Al-Mizan* as it appeared, and otherwise lived on money from the sale of a small plot of land. A former student reports¹² that he said he preferred the small amount he earned to asking for the stipend. He wrote out the first draft of each section of the commentary without the dots of the Arabic script, and so, in a kind of shorthand. Then he would go back over it, make slight revisions and add the dots. When asked why he used this method, he said that in this manner he could write eleven pages in the time it would otherwise take to write ten.

Once he was visited by someone who claimed to have the ability to contact the spirits of the dead, who was directed to 'Allamah by the spirit of Aristotle, who advised the medium to study the *Asfar* of Mulla Sadra with 'Allamah. The students present asked the medium to contact other famous scholars to ask about difficult points in their books and were impressed by the answers they were given. 'Allamah asked the medium to try to contact his father and ask whether he was satisfied with his son. The medium told 'Allamah that his father's only complaint was that he did not share in the blessings due for writing *Al-Mizan*. 'Allamah said that he had not thought

¹² The information from this and the next paragraph was reported by Ayatullah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi in conversation, 3 December 2007.

that the work merited any blessings but that he would offer half of them for his father and the other half for his mother. After that it was reported that his father was completely satisfied with him.

Al-Mizan was written, in part, as a rebuttal to the sort of modernism espoused by Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida in their *Al-Manar*,¹³ but ‘Allamah does not advocate a return to tradition. Traditional exegesis often consisted in the collection of narrations pertinent to each verse of the Qur’an, some of which went so far as to exclude any intrusion of the compiler’s own words. Other interpretations were written that reflected a particular position in *kalam* (scholastic theology), or the orientation of the Sufis. Instead of interpreting the Qur’an through the lens of some particular theological position, or letting narrations stand in place of interpretation, ‘Allamah proposes that cross references in the Qur’an should be the key to interpretation. However, in addition to the formal exegesis of each verse, or rather, *ayah* (sign) of the Qur’an, or group thereof, the relevant narrations attributed to the Prophet and Imams are given, followed by discussions of philosophical, social, or historical questions pertinent to this section of the Qur’an.

Interpretations of the “Word of God”

Tabataba’i considers four interpretations that might be given for “Word of God” in (3:45). He rejects the first three and accepts the fourth. The reasons given by Tabataba’i in this regard are worth further critical examination.

The first interpretation is to take “Word of God” to mean something like “God’s promise. Jesus ﷺ may have been called the “Word of God” because he was a fulfillment of God’s promise. Tabataba’i rejects this interpretation rather quickly. First, he claims that although this interpretation is supported by the Bible, it is not supported by the Qur’an. This implies that the support of the Bible is not sufficient to confirm the interpretation. It is not clear why this should be so, for even given the doctrine that the Bible has been corrupted (*tahrif*), there should be a presumption that Biblical evidence is sound unless it conflicts with the Qur’an or well founded hadiths. Furthermore, if the Biblical promise of the Messiah is taken to be derived from those parts of the Bible that have been corrupted, it would mean that almost the entire Bible should be rejected, and this is inconsistent with the reliance on the Bible for evidence

¹³ See ‘Abduh and Rida (1927-1936).

that is found in various Islamic narrations. ‘Allamah himself, when considering the different meanings that have been given for the word *Messiah* rejects some of those commonly given by other exegetes, e.g., that he was wiped clean from sin, or that Gabriel wiped him with his wings, in favor of the view that it means one anointed with oil to be king, in accordance with the prophecies of the Old Testament, and he cites the gospel of Luke (1:28-33) in support. If we are willing to use this passage to provide a proper understanding of the word *masih* (*Messiah*) as it occurs in the Qur’an, we can also refer to its mentioning that Jesus ﷺ would be given the throne of David and rule over the house of Jacob as a reference to his being a fulfillment of the prophecies.

Tabataba’i claims that according to the Qur’an (61:6), Jesus ﷺ brought the good news of a prophet who would come after him and “he was not the one whose good news was given by the others.” However, the good news of the coming of Jesus was given to Imran, according to the Qur’an, albeit implicitly. According to narrations of the Ahl al-Bayt,¹⁴ Imran was given the good news of the coming of a boy, which led to the surprise reported in the Qur’an at the birth of Mary (3:36). So, with all due respect, it seems that the fact that Jesus ﷺ brought the good news of Ahmad[ؑ] is in no way inconsistent with the Biblical claim that others also brought the good news of his coming, but rather the fact that at least some were given the good news of the coming of Jesus ﷺ is confirmed by the Qur’an.

Tabataba’i also mentions another argument against this interpretation, that Jesus ﷺ is the Word of God in the sense of being His promise. According to this interpretation, the “Word of God” means His promise, while it is Jesus ﷺ himself who is called the “Word of God” and not merely the fact of his coming. This begs the question against the interpretation, which claims that by a figure of speech the term used for the promise of his coming is applied to the person of whom it was promised that he would come. Despite these criticisms, it seems that Jesus ﷺ is not called the “Word of God” because he is the fulfillment of God’s promise, for other prophets were also promised by God and yet are not given this title. If the Qur’an meant to single out Jesus ﷺ as being the fulfillment of a divine promise in an especially pronounced manner, we should expect mention of this feature to figure in the Qur’an more saliently than it does. However, this does not mean that the term “Word of God” lacks the sense, as one meaning among others, of being what was promised. Similarly,

¹⁴ *Bihar*, 14, 199, 8. See Muntazir Qa’im (2005), 66.

if several people in a tribe have an aquiline nose, one of them might be called “the eagle” because of his keen eyesight, but in conjunction with the shape of the nose, so that both associations are called forth when the term is applied. In some cases, the associations may both be so strong that the person would not have been given the appellation if either of them were absent; but in other cases one of the associations might be weaker. I would venture to guess that in the case of Jesus, the association with the divine promise is part of the meaning of “Word of God”, although the association is not so strong that he would not have been given the title if his coming had not been prophesied.

The second interpretation considered by Tabataba’i is that Jesusﷺ was called the “Word of God” because he explained the Torah, giving it the meaning intended by God, and clarifying the religious matters about which there were differences among the Jewish scholars. Tabataba’i rejects this interpretation with the remark that it is simply not supported by the Qur’an. Nevertheless, he himself cites the following *ayah*: ﴿When Jesus brought the clarifications, he said, ‘I have surely brought you wisdom, and to clarify for you some of the things about which you differ. So be wary of God and obey me.’﴾ (43:63). So, why is Jesusﷺ not the Word of God in the sense of being the bringer of God’s revelations? One reason is that all the prophets brought revelations, and yet the term “Word of God” is only applied to Jesusﷺ. As argued above, the fact that a term could be used in a certain sense for several people but is used for only one of them does not imply that this common meaning is not part of the intended meaning. Of course, there should still be some reason for the distinction. Later, I will suggest a possibility for such distinction. Perhaps a reason Tabataba’i says that this interpretation is not supported by the Qur’an is that in the places in which Jesusﷺ is called God’s Word, special attention is given to affirm that Jesusﷺ was a humble servant of God and should not be deified. The points that the Qur’an seems to emphasize are that Jesusﷺ works miracles by the permission of God, his birth was miraculous by God’s will, and that he was rejected by the people to whom God sent him just as other prophets were rejected. Furthermore, the creative word “Be” pronounced by God to bring about the conception of Jesus is found repeatedly. All of this might seem to show that the textual support of the Qur’an favors the view that Jesusﷺ is called the “Word of God” because he is brought into being directly by the divine command and is born of a virgin. Nevertheless, the considerations that favor interpreting “Word of God” to mean God’s creative word only rule out the

interpretation of “Word of God” as meaning one who brings revelation if the two are incompatible. We can go further to agree with Tabataba’i that if the creative and revelatory meanings are incompatible, a stronger case can be made for the former on the basis of the text of the Qur’an itself. As mentioned, we will have to examine this sort of interpretation more closely later.

The third interpretation mentioned by ‘Allamah is that the Word of God is the promise given by God to Mary in the annunciation. It is clear, however, Jesus ﷺ is not the annunciation, and so Tabataba’i rejects this interpretation as obviously incorrect. However, the third interpretation might be interpreted metaphorically in the manner of the first proposed interpretation. Jesus ﷺ could be understood to be God’s word in the sense of being what was promised through revelation to the Hebrew prophets, ‘Imran, and to Mary in the annunciation. In that case, the third interpretation should be considered to be included in the first.

There is no reason based on the text of the Qur’an to think that Jesus ﷺ might be called the “Word of God” in the sense of the annunciation to the exclusion of the divine promise of his advent given to others, but the sense of the annunciation can be included in the more general meaning of being what was promised by God. Hence there are three main interpretations reviewed by Tabataba’i that might be called promissory, revelatory, and creative. ‘Allamah argues in favor of the creative interpretation and rejects the others. To the contrary, I would suggest that all three are consistent.

As for the creative sense, Tabataba’i simply states that although everything is brought into existence through God’s creative word, “Be!”, this normally occurs through the usual natural mediating causes. In the case of Jesus ﷺ, however, the virgin birth implies that Jesus ﷺ was brought into existence without the mediation of a father.

And in this way, he became the “Word” itself, as we see in the verse: ... *and His Word which He communicated to Maryam (4:171)*. It gets support from the verse 3:59, coming at the end: *Surely the likeness of Jesus is with Allah as the likeness of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him, “Be”, and he was.*¹⁵

¹⁵ Tabataba’i (1986), Vol. 6, 14.

Further support could be found for ‘Allamah’s view if he referred again to the gospel of Luke (1:34-35):

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” /The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” (NIV)

Now, the Qur’an emphatically rejects the appellation “Son of God” which is associated with the deification of Jesusﷺ and condemned as polytheism. However, it is here that the Qur’an would replace the term “Son of God” by “Word from God” where Mary is reported in the Bible as asking how she can have a baby while being a virgin. The Biblical answer is that the baby needs no father, for he will be the son of God. This is the apparent meaning of the Biblical verse, without the superimposition of any other theological doctrines that would be associated with the term “Son of God”. The Qur’an rejects the imagery of paternity, but allows that Mary becomes pregnant when God’s spirit is breathed into Mary: ﴿And (remember) her who guarded her chastity; We breathed into her of Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for all peoples.﴾ (21:91).¹⁶ So, since the Qur’an uses the expression “Word of God” where the Bible uses “Son of God” and the Biblical term is used to explain the virgin birth, we could consider the phrase of the Qur’an as having a similar significance minus the idea of divine fathering to which the Qur’an objects. It would follow that Jesusﷺ is called the *word of God* in the Qur’an because he was brought into existence by God without a father, but by direct divine decree, in accordance with the interpretation of most of the exegetes (*mufassirin*).

Needless to say, the exegetical *methodology* suggested above would not be acceptable to the *mufassirin* because it requires us to make use of a verse of the Bible that conflicts with the Qur’an in order to support an interpretation of the Qur’an! However, the suggestion here is that it should be acceptable to consider how the Bible verse would have to be rewritten to accord with the Qur’an, and that the functional role of the replaced phrases may shed some light on the meaning of those that would have to replace them. Of course, this would be highly speculative, and such an interpretive methodology could not be considered religiously authoritative; but it should not be dismissed, because familiarity with the Biblical text could have been

¹⁶ Cf. (19:16-22), (66:12), (4:171).

expected on the part of at least some of those who heard the Qur'an from the Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ, and such expectations would surely be taken into consideration by the divine author of the revelation.

Regardless of whether one accepts this sort of methodology or not, there remain a few questions about the favored interpretation, that Jesus^ﷺ is called God's word because, as 'Allamah says, "he became the "Word" itself." Since there was no Jesus to become the word prior to God's creative command, it seems that it would have been better to say that the *word* became Jesus, or as the Gospel of John puts it, "and the word was made flesh."¹⁷ It is precisely at this point that Christian theology brings in discussions of the Incarnation, and the standard Muslim interpretation also seems to say that something became incarnate, if not divinity itself, then, at least the divine word. 'Allamah, however, cautions against such a literal reading. It is not the case that God's word "Be" (*kun*) formed from the two Arabic letters *kaf* and *nun* somehow were transformed into the flesh and blood of Jesus^ﷺ. What is meant is no more and no less than that Jesus^ﷺ came into being as a result of the direct command of God, where by *direct* is meant without a father. There is no more incarnation here than there is in the case of Adam.

Commenting on another verse of the Qur'an, 'Allamah writes:

It is known that when He intends a thing and says to it: 'Be' and it comes into being, no word passes from the Creator to the thing created; there is in fact only the existence of the thing, and nothing else. Therefore, that is the thing created, and also it, in itself, is the word 'Be'. In short, His saying, in matters of creation, is the creation itself, it is nothing separate from it.¹⁸

According to a narration reported by Kulayni, when Imam Sadiq^ﷺ was asked about (4:171), he said, "It is a created spirit. God created it in Adam and Jesus." Shaykh Saduq says that Imam Baqir^ﷺ said that they were two created spirits, each selected and chosen as the spirit of Adam and the spirit of Jesus^ﷺ.¹⁹ The emphasis here is on the fact that the spirit of God that became Jesus^ﷺ is a *created* spirit. Jesus^ﷺ is not the Creator, but is, rather, a creature. If it may be said that the spirit of

¹⁷ John 1:14.

¹⁸ Tabataba'i (1986), Vol. 4, 138.

¹⁹ Kashani, (1402/1982), Vol. 1, 524.

God became incarnate in Jesusﷺ, it must be made explicit that what became incarnate is not God, but the created spirit of God.

The Angel Gabriel

There is no inconsistency between the promissory, revelatory and creative senses in which Jesusﷺ may be called “the Word of God.” The first link between these senses is the angel Gabriel. Gabriel was the angel who conveyed revelation to all the prophets, and it is Gabriel who conveyed God’s creative word to Mary in the annunciation. In the Qur’an’s treatment of the annunciation, Gabriel does not merely report to Mary that she will have a child, but he conveys to her the divine spirit.²⁰ Hence, the angel of revelation and the angel by which the creative command of God are conveyed to Mary are one. It is consistent with this that the word of revelation and the word of the divine creative command should also be linked in the person of Jesusﷺ.

The next indication of a link between revelation and the creation of Jesus by divine fiat, comes in the repeated references to Mary and Jesus (peace be with them) as a sign.²¹

﴿Certainly We gave Moses the book so that they might be guided/ and We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign﴾ (23:49-50).

Here we find a direct comparison in the Qur’an between the revelation given to Mosesﷺ in the form of a book and the guidance provided through Jesusﷺ and his motherﷺ. The virgin birth is not compared to the proof miracles brought by Moses against the Pharaoh’s sorcerers, but with the book. This suggests that Jesus and his mother were a revelatory sign, rather than just a miracle. This point is underscored by the manner in which Mary, peace be with her, answers those who tried to slander her.

Kalām

In order to understand why Jesus as the word of God or any other word of God, such as the Torah or even the Glorious Qur’an, cannot be considered as the *logos* in the Christian sense, we should consider the controversy over divine speech among the Muslim theologians. In Shi’i theology, the divine attributes are divided into attributes

²⁰ Qur’an (19:17).

²¹ See the discussion in Shomali (2007).

of essence and attributes of action. The attributes of essence include life, power and knowledge. Speech is considered an attribute of action, like creation, because God cannot be considered a speaker until He creates speech, just as He cannot be considered a Creator until He creates. This is an oversimplification. Since God is not in time, there is no before or after, so that God can be considered to be a creator after some date but not before that date; however, the creation itself is temporal and is causally subsequent to God. Hence we can say that the attributes of action depend on the causal relations between God and His creatures, or more simply, on His actions, while the attributes of essence require no consideration of anything other than God. God is powerful regardless of His action, and regardless of how His power is exercised, so His power is considered to be an attribute of essence. On the other hand, God may be considered as a speaker only in consideration of His communication to another being, a creature. Hence, the attribute of speaking is a divine attribute of action.

Some of the early Muslim theologians, the Ash‘arites, held the view that God can be considered a speaker even if He does not communicate to anyone else because He can have an internal speech (*kalām al-nafsī*), a knowledge of the meanings He intends to convey in the appropriate circumstances. On this basis, the Ash‘arites held the view that the Qur’an is eternal, since it always existed, as it were, in the mind of God, and that the attribute of speaking is one of God’s attributes of essence. For the Mu‘tazilite and Shi‘i theologians, however, there is no internal speech of God, for God has no need of discursive thought. Indeed, for those theologians who take a philosophical stance as well as the Sufi theologians, God is considered as pure simple existence. Any *logos* or meaning would have to be an abstraction in the understanding of human (or angelic) intellects, not a characteristic of divinity itself.²² Hence, for the Shi‘ah, the attribute of speaking is one of God’s attributes of action.

The dispute over the speech of God and the eternity of the Qur’an led to a bloody dispute during the Abbasid dynasty, masterfully described by van Ess in scholarly detail.²³ What is important for our discussion, however, is to see that however much room there might be to find an analogue to the Christian idea of an eternal *logos* in the meaning of revelation in the mind of God as affirmed by the Ash‘arites, in the philosophical views of God and His attributes that have come to

²² For a discussion of God’s attributes according to what may be considered classical Shi‘i theology, see McDermott (1978). For a more modern discussion see Misbah Yazdi (1374/1995), vol. 1.

²³ See van Ess (1992), 446ff.

dominate contemporary Shi'ite theology, such a view would be considered anathema and inconsistent with the simplicity and unity of God.

Gospel

One of the exegetical problems that occurs with regard to the issue of Jesus ﷺ in the Qur'an pertains to the *Injil* (Gospel). The Qur'an refers to this, in the singular, as the revelation given to Jesus ﷺ. However, what the Christians know as the gospels are not collections of words from God revealed to Jesus ﷺ. Hence, when the Qur'an refers to the *Injil*, it should not be taken to mean the New Testament, or its four gospels, for the gospels were not revealed to Jesus ﷺ. Elsewhere, I have argued that this puzzle may be solved if the book revealed to Jesus was considered to be expressed in his life instead of in a formal text.²⁴ The revelation of God to Jesus, Gospel (*Injil*), is made manifest in his life, and so the four gospels may be called *gospels* (*anajil*) because they report the events in the life of Christ ﷺ.

The term “gospel” (**euuagge, lion** euaggelion) occurs in the Bible in such phrases as “the gospel of Christ”, “the gospel of God”, and “the gospel of the kingdom.” The word means a reward for good tidings, or the good tidings themselves, and is used to indicate the glad tidings of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not to be sought in the distant future, but is near at hand,²⁵ a kingdom that is “not of this world”.²⁶ Christians generally interpret the gospel to be the teaching of the good news of salvation through faith in Christ's redemption. Muslims, however, reject the doctrine of the crucifixion on which the doctrine of Christian redemption is based, because of the explicit statement of the Qur'an: ﴿and they did not kill him, and they did not crucify him﴾ (4:157). Hence the *Injil* of the Qur'an cannot be understood to be the good news of Christ's redemptive suffering on the cross as taught by Christians.²⁷

If we look at the use of the word *Injil* in the Qur'an, we find it employed to mean the teachings given by Jesus ﷺ to his followers: ﴿and we followed [the previous prophets] with Jesus son of Mary, and We gave him the *Injil* and We put in the hearts

²⁴ Legenhausen (2006).

²⁵ Mark 1:15.

²⁶ John 18:36.

²⁷ It should be noted, however, that some Muslims have proposed a non-literal understanding of the statements of the Qur'an or of the gospels in order to attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction. For discussion of this see Leirvik (1999), 72-73, 78-80, 100-101; and Legenhausen (1999), 117-154.

of those who followed him kindness and mercy.﴾ (57:27). ﴿And We followed them with Jesus son of Mary, to confirm that which was before him of the Torah, and We gave him the *Injil* containing guidance and light, confirming what was before it of the Torah, and as guidance and advice for the Godway./ Let the people of the *Injil* judge by what Allah has sent down in it.﴾ (5: 46-47)²⁸

In these *ayat* we find that God sent down the *Injil* to Jesus, so that the *Injil* is the divine revelation given to Jesusﷺ. At the same time, the Christians are said to be the people of the *Injil* and they are to judge by what Allah has sent down in it, which suggests that the *Injil* is a book according to which they can judge. Yet the Christians did not possess any book purporting to contain the words that God revealed to Jesusﷺ. One way of consistently reconciling these seemingly distinct uses of the term *Injil* in the Qur'an, one for the revelation, and the other for the text possessed by the Christians, that is, the gospels, is to take the revelation given to Jesusﷺ to be expressed through his words, deeds, and life as described in the gospels (with the exception of those parts that, according to the Qur'an, are corrupt, including the doctrine of the crucifixion). Following 'Allamah Tabataba'i, our attempt here is only to reconcile the verses of the Qur'an with one another, and like 'Allamah, we may be allowed to appeal to what is in the Bible to help elucidate the meaning of such terms as *Messiah* and *Injil*.

'Allamah Tabataba'i notices that with regard to the Torah and the Qur'an, there are specific references in the Qur'an about how these books were revealed, being written on tablets and descending in plain Arabic language, respectively. With regard to the *Injil*, however, there is no such description. Nevertheless, since the revelation of the *Injil* to Jesusﷺ is repeatedly mentioned side by side with the revelation of the Torah and the Qur'an, 'Allamah takes it that the *Injil* must be considered to be "a book like the other two."²⁹ To the contrary, it seems that it may be considered "a book" only in two ways: first, in the sense of being God's message of good news revealed to Jesusﷺ and conveyed to the people through his words and deeds; and second, in the sense that this divine message expressed through the life of Jesusﷺ has been reported in the book (the New Testament) of the Christians.

'Allamah is well aware of the difficulty for the exegesis of the Qur'an posed by the use of the term "*Injil*":

²⁸ Also see Qur'an (7: 157).

²⁹ Tabataba'i (1986), Vol. 10, 186.

The Qur'an insists on naming the book of Jesus as *Injil* (Gospel, in the singular) and on saying that it was sent down from Allah. It is in spite of the fact that there are several Gospels, and the four attributed to Mathew, Mark, Luke and John existed since before the revelation of the Qur'an and were well-known at that time.³⁰

'Allamah takes this to mean that there must have been a single book revealed to Jesus ﷺ, a book just like the Torah and the Qur'an, but that it "was later altered and deleted." However, the statements of the Qur'an and hadiths that refer to the judgment of the Christians in accordance with the *Injil*, and that fact that they were called "People of the Book" because of their use of the Bible, suggests that what is meant by the *Injil* is the book read by the Christians.

One of the difficulties that arises in any attempt to consider the gospels contained in the Bible to be a corruption of an earlier text of revelation to Jesus ﷺ is the problem of *genre*. The gospels do not purport to be a book of divinely revealed laws or other propositions revealed to Jesus, but rather report the events of his life, his teachings in word and deed. While the Torah is a collection of revealed sacred history and law, the Gospels are of a different genre, that of ancient biography. In his introduction to the life of Alexander the Great, Plutarch wrote, "I am writing not histories, but lives."³¹ Hence, the book revealed to Jesus ﷺ and the book in the possession of the Christians are of two different genres: the former is the revelation given to Jesus, while the latter is biography. At the same time, the uses of the term *Injil* in the Qur'an should not be taken to be merely homonymous, for there is no indication to support the idea that a change of meaning is involved.

The puzzle of the shift in genre of the *Injil* from a book of revelation to an ancient biography can be solved, however, if we consider the ancient biographies of Jesus ﷺ to report what was revealed to Jesus ﷺ. Plutarch's famous line about writing lives rather than histories provides a clue, because "life" (Greek, *bios*) can also be used to mean the course a person takes from birth to death or a biography. If God's revelation to Jesus ﷺ was the good news of the kingdom that is not of this world as expressed in the words and deeds of Jesus ﷺ through his life, then a biography of Jesus ﷺ that focused on his mission of conveying what was revealed to him could also be considered a divine book, not because the biography contains a text revealed by God

³⁰ Tabataba'i (1986), Vol. 5, 11.

³¹ Plutarch, *Alexander*, Ch. 1; cited in Ehrman (2008), 72.

to Jesusﷺ, but because it describes the life in which Jesusﷺ manifested to others God's revelation to him.

Perhaps it will be objected that there may have been a book in the form of a text given by God to Jesusﷺ that was called the *Gospel (Injil)*, but that it was lost. However, even a cursory review of early Christian writings makes this hypothesis seem exceedingly implausible. Given an alternative hypothesis that is consistent with the Qur'an and hadiths and is more likely given the historical record, we should reject the view that there was ever a book in the possession of the Christians that contained the text of the divine revelation to Jesusﷺ and that was corrupted in such a manner as to result in the Christian gospels.

Indeed, there were Christian gospels other than those that became canonical in the New Testament, but none of them has the form of a book in which Jesus reports revelations that he claims were given to him by God. Most of the non-canonical gospels, like the canonical ones, are biographies, and most of them are believed to have been written later than the synoptic gospels of the New Testament. There are, however, two important exceptions: the Gospel of Thomas and the hypothetical source used by Matthew and Luke that scholars call *Q*. The Gospel of Thomas is not a biography, but a collection of sayings attributed to Jesusﷺ. Some scholars believe that the Gospel of Thomas predates the canonical gospels. It is also believed that *Q* was a collection of such sayings. So, Muslims might be disposed to hypothesize that the *Injil* mentioned in the Qur'an is some such original gospel containing the revelations given to Jesusﷺ, just as the Torah and the Qur'an are taken to contain text revealed to Mosesﷺ and Muhammadﷺ respectively. Furthermore, it might be thought that since the genre of the gospel can be supposed to have changed from collections of sayings to biography (under the assumption that the Gospel of Thomas and *Q* predate the synoptic gospels), this shows how an original text of revelation may have been corrupted to take a different form in the genre of biography. This sort of hypothesis, however, is not plausible, for several reasons. First, the sort of sayings that are collected in the Gospel of Thomas, like those that are believed to have made up *Q*, do not purport to be reports of divine revelation. What we find is a list of sayings each of which is prefaced by, "Jesus said." Nowhere do we find in the early Christian literature any book that purports to contain what God said to Jesusﷺ.

Second, there is no evidence that any such book was in the possession of the Christians who are mentioned in the Qur'an.³²

If some Christian gospels, whether canonical or not, are to be considered corrupted forms of an original text of divine revelation to Jesus, this should be determined by inconsistencies between such gospels and what is taken to be authoritative by Muslims in the text of the Qur'an and reliable hadiths, not by suggesting that the gospels of the Christians were so drastically altered that the genre changed from a report of the text revealed by God to a report of the sayings, life and teachings of Jesus ﷺ.

Just as the divine revelation given to Muhammad ﷺ is made manifest in the form of the Qur'an as a book in Arabic, so too, the revelation given to Jesus ﷺ may be supposed to have been made manifest in the form of his life, including his conduct and teaching. If this is right, we can say that the Torah was revealed in Hebrew, the Qur'an in Arabic, but the Gospel is revealed in deeds as well as words. All three "books" were originally revealed in all their detail by God, and so, all three are called the word of God. Since, however, the form in which the divine revelation was manifest to the prophets in the cases of Moses ﷺ and Muhammad ﷺ was textual, while in the case of the Gospel it was made manifest in the life of Jesus ﷺ, Jesus ﷺ himself is to be considered the word of God, just as the Torah and the Glorious Qur'an are considered the word of God.

The Good News and the Kingdom in the Qur'an

If we are to understand the gospel of Jesus from the perspective opened by the Qur'an, there are several principles that can be used. First, the gospel is the "good news" brought by Jesus ﷺ. Second, the content of this good news is concerned with the kingdom of God. These two principles can be derived from an examination of how the term "gospel" (**euuagge,lion** euaggelion) was understood by the earliest Christians, and continued to be understood by many Christians in the succeeding centuries, even if there were later elaborations that added the doctrine of redemption. Third, the Qur'an purports to reaffirm the basic message of the earlier revelations. Hence, in order to understand the perspective taken in the Qur'an of the gospel, we

³² For a discussion of the Christian literature that may have been current in Arabia at the time of the advent of Islam, see Leirvik (1999), 22-41, and Robinson (1991), 15-22.

should examine how the Qur'an deals with the issues of God's kingdom and the good news of it.

It is repeated in the Qur'an that ﴿to God belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth﴾.³³ This reaffirms the gospel teaching that the expected kingdom is not to be sought in an earthly ruler, but in divine sovereignty. The second point that is common between the teachings of the gospels and the Qur'an about the Kingdom, is that it is near. About the Day of Judgment, God says in the Qur'an: ﴿The true Kingdom, on that day, will belong to the Beneficent﴾ (25:26).³⁴ So, the true Kingdom is God's and it will be realized or made manifest at the end of the world. Here we find a common ambiguity in gospel teachings and in the Qur'an: both speak of the Kingdom as the actual fact of God's sovereignty, and as that which is near and will be manifest at the end of the world. Although it seems as if there were two senses of the divine *kingdom*, one for the kingdom that exists here and now and another for what is to be expected, the appearance of contradiction is removed if one holds that there is one kingdom, which is divine rule over all things, and that the kingdom to be expected is not another kingdom, but simply the complete manifestation of this divine sovereignty. In order to understand the relation between the understanding of the Kingdom in the gospels and in the Qur'an, what is more important than how to reconcile descriptions of the kingdom as already established and yet coming, is that both senses are present in both the gospels and in the Qur'an. In both, there is a contrast between the outward phenomena (*zahir*) and an inward meaning (*batin*), and both Jesus ﷺ and Muhammad^ﷺ invite people to turn from their preoccupations with the outward in favor of the spiritual or inward life.

The term for bearing good tidings (*bashshara*) is derived from the same root as that used for human being (*basher*): *b sh r*. In the Qur'an, The Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ is repeatedly called a bearer of good tidings (*bashir*) and a warner (*nadhir*). If the message he brings is really a confirmation of the good news brought by the earlier prophets, we should expect to find mention of the kingdom in verses that refer to the good tidings he brings. We should also expect some explication of how the teachings he brought about the kingdom differ from how this was currently understood among the Christians.

³³ (2:107), (3:189), (5:17), (5:18), (5:40), (5:120), (9:116), (24:42), (42:49), (45:27), (48:14).

³⁴ See also (40:16).

«The Jews and the Christians say, ‘We are Allah’s children and His beloved ones.’ Say, ‘Then why does He punish you for your sins?’ Rather you are humans from among His creatures. He forgives whomever He wishes, and punishes whomever He wishes, and to Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them, and toward Him is the return. / O People of the Book! Certainly Our Apostle has come to you, clarifying for you after a gap in the apostles, lest you should say, ‘There did not come to us any bearer of good news nor any warner.’ Certainly there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner. And Allah has power over all things.» (5:18-19)

The message here is an essentially moral one: we will all be punished for our sins and rewarded for our good deeds regardless of our religious affiliations. It is for God to decide and not for man. His sovereignty is over all things and all peoples. The Prophet^c brings the good news of God’s kingdom from which none are excluded and in which all are subject to being punished or rewarded in accordance with how they live. The law that God sets for man is to establish a harmonious community of peace and love.

In the last sections of his “The Spirit of Christianity”, Hegel describes the Kingdom of God.

What Jesus calls the “Kingdom of God” is the living harmony of men, their fellowship in God; it is the development of the divine among men, ... they make up not a collection but a communion, since they are unified not in a universal, a concept (e.g., as believers), but through life and through love.³⁵

He concludes his essay on a rather remorseful note:

Between these extremes of the multiple or diminished consciousness of friendship, hate, or indifference toward the world, between these extremes which occur within the opposition between God and the world, between the divine and life, the Christian church has oscillated to and fro, but it is contrary to its essential character to find peace in a nonpersonal living

³⁵ Hegel (1996), 277-278.

beauty. And it is its fate that church and state, worship and life, piety and virtue, spiritual and worldly action, can never dissolve into one..³⁶

The essential character of a Kingdom of God whose subjects live in fraternal harmony is also the ideal to which we are invited by the Qur'an: «O People of the Book! Certainly Our Apostle has come to you, clarifying for you much of what you used to hide of the Book, and excusing many. Certainly there has come to you a light from Allah, and a manifest Book. / With it Allah guides those who follow His pleasure to the ways of peace, and bring them out from darkness into light by His will, and guides them to a straight path.» (5: 15-16).

Conclusion

In all probability, the Book of the Christians who were addressed by God in the Qur'an and described as "People of the Book" was of the genre of ancient biography, and the divine book that is the revelation God sent to Jesus ﷺ was never published as a text of what God said to him. If the revelation given to Jesus ﷺ was conveyed to his followers through his life, in word and deed, this would explain the use of the term *Injil* in the Qur'an for both the divine revelation and for the gospels used by the Christians. Both could be called *Injil* because the gospels tell the story of the life that expressed the divine revelation given to Jesus ﷺ. This would also help to explain why Jesus is given a title, *Word of God*, that would otherwise seem to signify revelation. Furthermore, it is consistent with the traditional interpretation of the exegetes of the Qur'an, according to which Jesus ﷺ is the Word of God because his mother, Mary[ؑ] became pregnant due to God's command which resulted in the virgin birth. It also explains why the divine command by which Mary became pregnant is conveyed by the angel of revelation, Gabriel. The divine word that became Jesus, on the interpretation suggested here, is not merely a creative word, but also a word of revelation.

Of course, the suggestions here are of a speculative nature, and do not carry any authoritative weight as dogma. This essay may be considered an exercise in Islamic speculative theology. It is hoped that it may promote greater mutual understanding and communion among all who accept the divine mission of Jesus Christ ﷺ. As for the truth of these matters and the success of the effort, Allah knows best.

³⁶ Hegel (1996), 301.

References

- ‘Abduh, M., and M.R. Rida, (1927-36), *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-hakim (Commentary on the Wise Qur’an)*, Cairo. (Commentary on the Wise Qur’an usually referred to as *Tafsir al-manar* because it originally appeared in instalments in the journal *al-Manar*.)
- Algar, Hamid, (2006), “Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn: Philosopher, Exegete, and Gnostic” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17:3, 326–351.
- Ayoub, Mahmoud M., (1992), *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters, Volume II: The House of ‘Imran*, Albany: SUNY.
- Amuli, Sayyid Haydar ibn ‘Ali, (1385/2007), *Tafsir al-muhit al-a‘zam wa al-bahr al-khasam fi ta‘wil kitab Allah al-‘aziz al-muhkam*, 7 vols., Qom: Nur ‘ala Nur.
- Ehrman, Bart D. (2008), *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gätje, Helmut, (1976), *The Qur’an and its Exegesis*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hegel, G. W. F., (1996), *Early Theological Writings*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kashani, Fayd, (1402/1982) *Tafsir al-Safi*, Beirut: Mu’assissah al-A‘lami li-al-Matbu‘at.
- Legenhausen, M. (2008), “Allamah Tabataba’i’s Footnote to Mulla Sadra’s Proof of the Sincere,” in C. Kanzian and M. Legenhausen, eds., *Proofs for the Existence of God: Contexts - Structures - Relevance*, Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.
- Legenhausen, M. (2006), “Reflections on Revelation and Authority Among Shi‘ites and Mennonites,” *Conrad Grebel Review*, 24:1, 32-44.
- Legenhausen, M. (1999), *Islam and Religious Pluralism*, London: Al-Hoda.
- Leirvik, Oddbjørn, (1999), *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, Uppsala: Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia LXXVI.
- McDermott, Martin J. (1978), *The Theology of Al-Shaikh Al-Mufid* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq).

- Misbah Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi (1374/1995), *Amuzesh-e Aqayed*, 3 vols. (Tehran: Sazman Tablighat Islami).
- Muntazir Qa'im, Mahdi, ed., (2005), *Jesus (Peace be with him) through the Qur'an and Shi'ite Narrations*, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an.
- Robinson, Neal, (1991), *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- Shomali, Mohammad Ali, (2007), *Mary, Jesus and Christianity: An Islamic Perspective*, London: Institute of Islamic Studies.
- Tabataba'i, 'Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn, (1986), *Al-Mizan*, tr. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, Tehran: WOFIS.
- Tihrani, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Husayni, (2003), *Kernel of the Kernel: Concerning the Wayfaring and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect, A Shi'i Approach to Sufism from the Teachings of Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i*, Albany: SUNY.
- van Ess, Josef, (1992), *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam, Band III*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Zahniser, A. H., (1991) "The word of God and the apostleship of 'Isa: a narrative analysis of Al 'Imran (3):33-62", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 36:1, 77-112.