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The word of God: The epistemology of language in classical Islamic theological thought

1 Introduction

One of the striking characteristics of early classical Islamic theological thought is the frequency with which language-based topics dominated arguments and discussions. This is evident in the medieval debates about the uncreated status of the Qurʾān, to deliberations about the concept of the Qurʾān's linguistic inimitability, and even to theories about the origins of language. This chapter will offer an examination of the gestation of the various discussions, investigating what was at stake in the disputes, and the wider ramifications of their impact within the sphere of theological and linguistic thought.

The Qurʾān defines itself as the veritable speech of God revealed in a flawlessly lucid Arabic diction.[1] According to traditional Muslim sources, it was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad piecemeal during the periods of 610 CE and 632 CE. Initially preserved on palm-leaf stalks, scattered parchments, shoulder blades, and limestone, and memorized in the "hearts of men," these sources state that it was eventually collated into a fixed written text, not in the lifetime of the Prophet, but during the rule of the third caliph ʿUthmān (d. 656 CE). Consisting of over 6,000 verses and divided into 114 chapters of differing length, the organization of the text is neither chronological nor indeed thematic. Lengthier chapters tend to be placed at the beginning of the text, with the exception of the opening chapter. In fact the structure of its individual chapters and segments within them seemingly intimates overriding liturgical influences and the importance attached to the Qurʾān as a recited text: key narratives and exempla are repeated in different chapters with slight and subtle variations, and many of the narratives are allusive. Additionally, individual verses within chapters adhere to intricate patterns of rhyme and cadences, all of which accentuate the aesthetic and aural countenance of the text. Interestingly, in Arabic the very etymology of the

1 The concept of God's absolute unity (*tawḥīd*) serves as the primary theological doctrine of Islam, providing the axial basis of the faith's teachings and this is consistently emphasized in the Qurʾān.

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term Qurʾān connotes the act of "recitation," and Semiticists speak of a semantic nexus with the Syriac equivalent *qeryana*; and even the Qurʾān frequently refers to the fact that it is a text to be recited and rehearsed. Certainly, embedded within the text was a distinctive range of theological, legal, eschatological, and ethical teachings; yet its arrangement underlines the significance attached to its role as a devotional text and a book of guidance. Moreover, whatever the form of address in the Qurʾān – namely, whether the text is relating God's speaking directly and issuing commands or whether the text is recounting dialogues, including the direct quotes of the Prophet's Meccan opponents or the prophets of the Biblical scriptures – the traditional belief is that it is God who is the author of all aspects of the book's composition.

Significantly, the Qurʾān stresses the uniqueness, transcendence and incomparability of God, but it also extends this sense of exceptionality to the very composition of the Qurʾān.[2] Indeed, so cogent was the idea of the text's linguistic inimitability and distinctiveness as the veritable speech of God that it is exclaimed in the Qurʾān that "Had humans and jinns (spirits) come together to replicate this Qurʾān, they would not have been able to do so, even if they were to work assiduously together in that task" (Q. 17:88).[3] In classical theological thought, arguments about the status of the Qurʾān as the speech of God, its linguistic inimitability, and broader questions about the origins of language came to dominate rational and dialectical discourses. The resolve with which scholars attempted to flesh out the issues and contextualise the arguments underlines not only the importance of perceptions of language to the discussions, but also the originality of the scholarship. The discipline within which the rational import of theological topics was expounded upon is referred to as *kalām*, a term which

2 Likewise, equally reflective of the Qurʾānic conception of God's uniqueness and transcendence is the declaration that, "Verily, they (the Arabs) have no real appreciation of God's true measure: for on the Day of Judgement the earth and the heavens will be rolled up and held in his right clutch. Glory to him for He is above the partners whom they ascribe to Him"; and "Say (to them oh Prophet): 'who will provide for you from the heavens and earth; and who has control over your hearing and sight? Who is that brings forth the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that arranges matters (of the world)?' They will say 'it is God' so why do they act without refrain?" (Q. 10:3 2)

3 The first revelations are said to have occurred at Mecca and the final ones in Medina, the city to which the Prophet had migrated in 622 CE. The traditional accounts teach that the archangel Gabriel served as God's intermediary, delivering the verses of revelation to the Prophet. Despite the fact that Islam adopts unique perspectives and standpoints with regard to its prescription of doctrine and praxis, its teachings are not simply offering an entirely new system of beliefs and practices, but are essentially constellated around also reviving a "primitive" tradition of monotheism; pre-Islamic conventions and customs are subject to either repeal or revision.

literally denotes speech. These rational theological approaches to the explication of doctrine emerged in the early 8th century CE, turning on the use of logical and dialectical strategies and premises to defend religious doctrine and dogma (see Shah 2015; van Ess 1996; El-Bizri 2008). In later years these dialectical techniques formed just one of the many aspects of *ʿilm al-kalām* (the science of theology), which came to represent the sum and substance of rational and speculative theological discourses.[4] Within the realm of *kalām*, the panoply of topics pored over by theologians included subjects such as atomism; causality; arguments for the existence of God; occasionalism[5]; moral agency; theodicy; reward and punishment; eschatology; the historical efficacy of the transmission of knowledge; political leadership; the status of God's speech; the inimitability of the Qurʾān; the nature of the divine attributes; the origins of language; and even quantum leaps (Sabra 2009; Dhanani 1994).

Historians of early Islam remain divided regarding the overall reliability of the extant literary sources.[6] Questions have been raised about their fragmentary nature, a fact that contributes to the challenge of historically dating and authenticating materials purported to be of an early provenance.[7] Texts and epistles produced later were often attributed to historical figures who lived in earlier periods; some were flagrant examples of pseudepigraphy. In some instances, the historical gaps between the extant texts and the periods to which they refer have led some to conclude that these texts offer a highly idealised and heavily redacted version of the inception of ideas and practices, one that is colored by later prejudices and presuppositions. Texts and treatises on key theological issues were in many cases composed after doctrines had passed through subtle processes of evolution. These sources may reveal more about the periods in which they were

4 Other terms are often used to refer to the treatment of issues of faith, including *uṣūl al-dīn* (the fundamentals of belief), *ʿilm al-naẓar wa'l-jadal* (the science of disputation and polemics), *ʿilmal-tawḥīḍ* (the science of God's unicity).

5 This doctrine stresses the absolute efficacy of God in all the affairs of the created world to the extent that he is perpetually intervening in creation and is the one true efficient agent of cause and effect.

6 For a summary of the issues see Humphreys (1995); Donner (1998). The authenticity of the poetry has been questioned; the Qurʾān certainly censures practices and ideas associated with the pre-Islamic period but it also condones values which it deems consistent with the Islamic ethos. Other than the Qurʾān, the pre-Islamic poetry intimates an interaction between the ideas presented in the Qurʾān and those preserved in early literary sources. The poetry often betrays a society pre-occupied with polytheism.

7 In many ways this reminds one of Michael Cook's reference (1981: 156) to "the indefinite tolerance of the source-material for radically different historical interpretations."

composed than those to which they refer. Where arguments turn on the issue of historically dating doctrines and identifying their founders, caution is warranted. However, when we move away from narrower historical questions, these texts assume importance and interest. The quality and sophistication of their arguments about the status of the Qurʾān, notions of its compositional qualities and inimitability, and the origins of language dramatically animated early and medieval thought, providing a fascinating window into attitudes to language and its analysis within the classical Islamic tradition.

2 Religious movements and sects: The dominance of rational theology

Surveys of Islamic history routinely divide its religious movements into two principal ideological branches: on the one side there are the Sunnis (*ahl al-Sunna*), who make up the majority following of the faith; while, on the other side there is the Shīʿī branch of the faith.[8] Disagreements as to who was the rightful successor to the Prophet have historically divided Sunni and Shiʿī strands of Islam, although other doctrinal distinctions eventually emerged. Within Shīʿī thought it was argued that the choice of leader (*imām*) was a divinely determined process: it was not something that could be left to the fiat of humans (see Halm 2004). The idea of the infallibility of the *imām* also became a cornerstone of the Shīʿī branch of Islam, which further divided into Ismāʿīlī, Zaydī, and a number of other groups, including the Druze. Likewise, the Sunni label encompassed a broad spectrum of groups and movements holding diverse views on theological matters and on approaches to the exposition of doctrine. Included among these were arch-traditionalists or *ahl al-ḥadīth*, who frowned upon the use of dialectical strategies and the rational explication of doctrine, as well as the Ashʿarīs and the Māturidīs, who were avid advocates of rational theological thought and its attendant strategies. However, there are also key doctrinal differences which separate the *ahl al-ḥadīth* from the Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs, and these principally turn on

8 The worldview presented by the Qurʾān is one in which a spiritual heritage is shared with Judaism and Christianity. Within the Islamic context, ancient Arabian religions are presented as reprehensibly promulgating the cult of polytheism. Although the Qurʾān refers to the fact that the pre-Islamic Arabs had recognized that God was the sole creator and sustainer of the universe, it censures them for associating lesser deities with him, and for advocating that these were able to interpose on their behalf (De Blois 2010; Berg 2003; Donner 2010; Berg and Rollens 2008; Brock 1982).

arguments about the nature of the divine attributes. The pre-eminence of Sunni theological discourses as a default position of traditionalism within histories of Islamic theology has been challenged by a number of researchers (Reinhart 2010; Wilson 2007). The inference of these researchers is that there were many movements during the formative years of Islam, each of which extolled its own brand of what it believed represented orthodoxy. Although the historical predominance of the Sunni movement and the sheer volume of its contribution to Islamic intellectual thought remains colossal, the Shīʿī, Ismāʿīlī, and Zaydī theologians, together with all the other groups and movements, contributed immensely to the evolution and expansion of the discourses of *kalām*.

Rational theological disputation comes of age with the contributions of the religious movement referred to as the Muʿtazila, who would have envisaged themselves as adherents of the Sunni movement, although hostility towards their brand of theology and the doctrines they supported led to their being rejected by the other Sunni groups.[9] Influenced by Greek philosophical ideas, they were champions of the view that reason must be the prime arbiter of truth and they assiduously used this axiom to guide their exposition of religious doctrine. It is important to bear in mind that they were not promoting a rejection of traditional doctrines but simply disapproved of absolute fideism.[10] It would be wrong to claim that the Muʿtazila were a doctrinally homogenous movement: differences

9 A political explanation can be sought for the appearance of the puritanical movement referred to as the seceders (Khawārij). In the aftermath of the civil war of Ṣiffīn (35/657) between the fourth caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) and his rival for power, Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680), sharp disagreements resulted due to the caliph's acceptance of arbitration. Having fought alongside ʿAlī, the Khawārij disputed the legitimacy of his decision, arguing that it contravened God's divine decree, they withdrew from among the ranks of his supporters. The incident later led to much speculation about the status of sinners and whether they were eternally damned. The Khawārij remained influential throughout the formative years of the Islamic polity with the state having to contend with their fractious and insurrectional activities; but their doctrines and views across a range of issues were preserved in various theological and exegetical works.

10 Traditionally, a figure by the name of Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 131/749), an Iraqi from Basra, is identified as the founder of the school. Although he seems to have been involved in disagreements about the status of sinners, an issue stirred by the Khawārij, he is said to have been influenced by philosophers in terms of his dismissing the idea that God possessed substantive attributes. He is reported to have been a frequent visitor to the study circle of the celebrated ascetic figure, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. It is recounted that during a lecture in the mosque, a question was posed to al-Ḥasan about the status of sinners. While deliberating upon his response, he was interrupted by Wāṣil who declared that a sinner could not be defined as being an absolute believer nor indeed an absolute disbeliever, but rather such an individual occupied an intermediate station between two stations (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn*). See also Madelung (1997); Crone and Hinds (1986).

on points of doctrine among its theologians were often stark and vigorous. Still, essentially, within the Muʿtazilī cosmology, God was not only considered noble and just, but it was also argued that he acted in accordance with the dictates of reason: in their view good and evil were determined by rational criteria linked to their intrinsic properties. When referring to themselves, the Muʿtazila proudly employed the epithet "the upholders and divine justice and unity." This was on account of their strident rejection of the doctrine of predestination and their denial of anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine being.[11] Such was the scale of their contribution to Islamic rational theological thought that for centuries they dominated its discourses.[12] The Sunni rationalists who emerged in opposition to the Muʿtazila were individuals who took it upon themselves to develop critiques of standard Muʿtazilī beliefs and those of other theological adversaries. An advocate of such approaches was al-Ashʿarī (d. 936 CE), who was a "convert" from the ranks of the Muʿtazila, having been trained by their cynosures. His name became eponymous with the most prominent school of scholastic theology, the Ashʿarīs (Frank 1991; also van Ess 2010). Centuries of Islamic thought were defined by discussions among these various camps, with the traditionalists disavowing and excoriating Muʿtazilī doctrine across a range of theological issues.[13] The Māturidīs, whose founder was Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE), were the dominant school of theology in Transoxania and beyond, developing a distinguished school of thought which was as active and productive as the Ashʿarī school.[14]

11 Intriguingly, despite conceiving of the divine being in terms of his unmatched quiddity, they did concede that humans were able to draw conclusions about the nature of the divine essence through intuitive reasoning: using the physical world as a reference point, it was argued, the nature of God's attributes and acts could be logically inferred. It was classified as "inferring the invisible from the visible" (*qiyās al-ghā'ib ʿalā al-shāhid*).

12 The Muʿtazila did take the view that it was the moral responsibility of humankind, by virtue of the intellectual capacities created in them by God, to recognize his existence and unity prior to the advent of revelation.

13 Traditionist scholars (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) tended to be those who devoted themselves to the study and codification of the Prophetic traditions and avoided all speculative theology. Traditionalists are those individuals who pay due deference to such sources but also argue that the techniques of rational theology and *kalām* can be used to defend traditional doctrines and dogma. Arch rationalists favoured the primacy of *kalām*-driven approaches.

14 Within the Sunni camp, there did develop a stream of rationalism which favoured making use of dialectical and rational strategies and methodologies for the defence of Sunni doctrine much to the opprobrium of the arch-traditionists. The proto-Sunni movement defined itself through its critique of the doctrines which it held to be in contravention with the body of beliefs and practices substantiated by the Prophetic sunna or custom. In fact many of the points of dispute are the corollary to "reactionary" discourses with doctrines being refined in order to qualify or refute refractory arguments.

Tensions within the Sunni camp between rationalists and arch-traditionalists on questions of methodology and issues of dogma were often as strained as those that defined relations with the Muʿtazila.

3 Discussions of the status of God's speech and the episode of the *miḥna*

The 8th and 9th centuries CE witnessed the efflorescence of Muʿtazilī theological thought, and it is during these historical periods that defining the status of God's speech became a subject of much debate and controversy. The question of whether the Qurʾān was created or uncreated later became entwined with notions of the text's eternal status. The Muʿtazilī adopted the doctrine that the Qurʾān was a created text as a cardinal belief, arguing that to suggest otherwise compromised the concept of God's unity. The notion that the Qurʾān was created and contingent was initially floated by an individual who is presented in the traditional biographical sources as a somewhat heretical figure: Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745 CE) (Schöck 2016; also see Frank 1965).[15] It is reported that Jahm was an ardent proponent of determinism and someone who inveighed against the idea that humans possessed either capacity or volition. In ways which anticipate some of the current discussions on "religious language," he also adopted the principle that it was incorrect to describe God in terms which are used when speaking of created entities: only God could be exclusively described as being the "creator," the "agent," the "originator," and the "determiner of life and death."[16] Claiming that God was the effective agent behind all actions, Jahm pronounced that humans are defined as actors in a metaphorical sense only: although one might describe the fact that "the sun is declining" or that a "tree is moving," essentially it is God who is the veritable agent who brings this about. Turning his attention to the nature of divine speech, and with the aim of accentuating the idea of God's transcendence, Jahm posited that his speech was created in time (*muḥdath*) as was his knowledge, and that God could not be designated as being a speaker in any literal sense.[17] These critical standpoints furnished threads of

15 It is even mooted that there were antecedents for these sorts of ideas explored by individuals such as Maʿbad al-Juhanī (d. 705 CE) and Ghaylān al-Dimashqī (d. 743 CE). See Judd (1999).

16 For more general background discussions on this see Alston (2005).

17 An outline of Jahm's views is presented in the heresiographical literature whose accounts of his opinions are largely complimentary. An English translation of one of these classical texts is provided in Kazi and Flynn (1984).

thought which informed later deliberations on this very subject. There are no extant sources that intimate Jahm's position or views on the actual composition of the Qurʾān or indeed its language or quality as a literary text. However, Muʿtazila luminaries were to expand on these standpoints, integrating them into discussions about the status of the Qurʾān that were informed by their conception of God's transcendence. They dismissed the view that God possessed separate divine attributes such as knowledge, power, speech, and will in any substantive sense. They were not denying the belief that God was "knowledgeable and powerful," but simply rejecting the notion that these attributes possessed an entitative status within the divine essence: namely, that they existed as separate and discrete entities in the Godhead; in their estimation such a view seemingly implied the existence of a plurality in the divine essence which was implausible. They explained that speech was the "attribute of an act"; it was by no means eternal nor did it subsist in him. Guided by their explication of this doctrine, they posited that God was not a speaker in the literal sense of the word, but rather his speech was temporal in that it existed contingently in a substrate; and with this in mind they insisted that the Qurʾān as God's revealed text must be considered created (*muḥdath* or *makhlūq*) (Peters 1976). The Muʿtazila employed the maxim: "there was a point at which it (the Qurʾān) did not exist, then it came into existence." The implications of this doctrine were portentous, leading to centuries of debates about the status of the text and its relationship to the divine essence. Initially, the traditionalists and rational theologians dismissed the use of the term *makhlūq*, which was viewed as a pejorative innovation, but were soon critiquing the assertion that God did not speak in a real sense. Moreover, the Qurʾān refers to God as speaking and listening in what was seemingly a veridical sense and uses the phrase, "the speech of God"; it even describes God's speaking to Moses (Q. 4:164). Defenders of the Qurʾān's uncreated status were soon promoting maxims such as "From him it began and to him it shall return" (Madelung 1974). They insisted that his speech was a divine attribute that was, like God himself, eternal. Literary sources that preserve the related discussions include a plethora of references to Qurʾānic verses that were adduced by the opposing theological groups to support their standpoints.

The doctrine of a created Qurʾān was not simply an abstract concern of theologians. In fact the issue took on political significance when the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833 CE) dramatically imposed the doctrine as the official state creed in 198/833 CE, an episode referred to as the *miḥna* (inquisition). The medieval scholar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), renowned as one of Sunni Islam's most celebrated historians and exegetes, devotes a section to the controversy in his voluminous universal history of the Islamic world, citing from the correspondence between the caliph and the governor of Baghdad, Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm, on

the subject (Al-Ṭabarī 1969: vol. 8, p. 639).[18] In it al-Maʾmūn declared that God has made it obligatory upon those whom he has charged with the welfare of his subjects that they should strive to uphold the teachings of the faith. He insisted that while it was the case that a majority of the state's subjects might be crude and common people who were unable to fathom not only his signs and guidance, but also the essence of the nature of his unicity, such a situation could not be condoned for those who occupy positions of authority. Lamenting this state of affairs, al-Maʾmūn identified some of the perceived menaces which result from drawing an equivalence between God and his revealed scripture, noting that common folk actually believed that the Qurʾān was an eternal (*qadīm*) and primordial document. Al-Maʾmūn mentioned various proofs that he claimed pointed to its created status, among which was a Qurʾānic verse stating, "And so we relate to you of that which has passed" (Q. 20:99), intimating that the Qurʾān was referring to events of the past and that sequentially it must have come into existence thereafter. In other instances simple lexical arguments were advanced: the Qurʾān states: "Verily; we have *made* this an Arabic Qurʾān" (Q. 12:2). Elsewhere it also employs the same verb "made" when describing the creation of the universe: "Praise be to he who created the heavens and the earth and who also '*made*' darkness and light" (Q. 6:1). The reasoning is that darkness and light were created *ex nihilo* and therefore the use of the same verb when referring to the Qurʾān indicated that it too belonged to the genus of created phenomena, as the verb "made" denotes the act of creation. A separate verse does mention that the Qurʾān existed on a heavenly "preserved tablet" (Q. 85:22), but al-Maʾmūn skilfully adduced this verse to argue that its being on a physical tablet confirmed its finite and created status. In Maʾmūn's discussions, mention is also made of the notion of an uncreated Qurʾān ominously resonating with the Christian doctrine of the *logos* in Christ. In his correspondence he went on to castigate those who profess to be true followers of the "Sunna" and the people of faith and consensus. He states that they spend their time excoriating adversaries, depicting them as deviants, apostates and renegades, while leading the common folk to espouse egregious views on the Qurʾān. In correspondence al-Maʾmūn eventually instructs his chief jurist-consult to have his letter read to all judges, decreeing that they along with the "people of *ḥadīth*" should all have their beliefs "tested" with regards to their acceptance of the doctrine of the created status of the Qurʾān. The point is made that al-Maʾmūn refused to countenance placing in a position of authority those whose faith does

18 The whole history was translated into English. The volume covering the *miḥna* was translated in Bosworth (1987). See also van Ess (1967); Hurvitz (2001); De Gifis (2014).

not meet the criterion for the true doctrine of unity. He insists that anyone who refuses to assent to this doctrine should not be allowed to issue legal edicts nor engage in the instruction of the scriptural sources, adding that the testimony of such persons was deemed invalid.

Some have argued that the episode of the *miḥna* was an attempt on the part of the caliph to assert his religious authority, and that the theological gravity of the disputes was not his main motivation.[19] Others have claimed that al-Maʾmūn was not the main instigator of this policy, but that various jurists within the court of the caliph were its true architects (Zadeh 2011: 61–62; see also Madelung 1974; Crone 2005: 131). Indeed, this led to the view that the imposition of the *miḥna* was an attempt to circumvent the textual authority of the Qurʾān and thereby increase the political power of the caliph and indeed his ministers in ways that undermined the role of scholars in interpreting the law. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that such a doctrine was espoused with such intentions in mind. Besides, neither al-Maʾmūn nor indeed leading Muʿtazilī theologians and jurists were seeking to attenuate accepted legal conventions and norms for interpreting the law; the Muʿtazilī commitment to the authority of the law and the sources used to determine juridical judgements and rulings appears unswerving. Al-Maʾmūn passed away in 218/833 CE, immediately following the imposition of the doctrine, but despite his passing, the policies of the *miḥna* were pursued by a number of his successors, including al-Muʿtaṣim (ruled 833–842 CE) and al-Wāthiq (ruled 842–847 CE), before they were eventually discarded by the caliph al-Mutawakkil in 847 CE (see Nawas 1994: 615–629). The relinquishing of the doctrine is seen as a victory of sorts for a traditionalist brand of orthodoxy. However, despite the fact that the turn of events marked a waning of the political influence of those with Muʿtazilī sympathies, the strength of this movement's contributions to intellectual thought was sustained over successive centuries.[20] Indeed, in all major areas

19 The correspondence is analysed at length by Turner (2013: 12–13). Martin Hinds concluded that the *miḥna* was simply about the authority of the caliphate and the role of caliphs as interpreters of the faith, suggesting that Muʿtazilite interests coincided with those of the state. In Hinds' estimation the episode was important because the caliphate lost the religious authority it had aspired to hold (Hinds 1996: 232–245).

20 The Sunni hero of the *miḥna* was the traditionist figure Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), who became the eponym of one of the four conventional schools of law in Islam. He is renowned for his stern opposition to *kalām*, protesting against its reliance on premises and presuppositions for the defence of doctrine which had no precedent in the Prophetic Sunna. Whatever the actual reasons for the *miḥna*, it undoubtedly marked a turning point in the consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy as the failure of the policy meant that traditionalist theological positions were eventually consolidated.

of Islamic thought, including the linguistic sciences, law, exegesis and theology, the Muʿtazilī contribution remained seminal.

There was one simple issue at the heart of the Muʿtazila's concerns: namely, if it were posited that the Qurʾān was the literal speech of God, one might infer that he possessed a physical organ with which to articulate speech; there were clear parallels with Jahm's position. Placing the Qurʾān in the realm of created entities avoided such an inference. The correspondence of al-Maʾmūn certainly provides a sense of the intricacies of the arguments and a measure of the passion with which he justified his convictions. The striking observation about the discussions is that al-Maʾmūn and the Muʿtazila were not using the arguments about the created status of the Qurʾān to question the composition of the text, its authority or indeed literary merits. These were indisputable, as evidenced by the profusion of literary works composed by Muʿtazilī theologians in which the linguistic superiority of the Qurʾān is extolled. When interpreting select Qurʾānic verses that made references to God's speaking or other physical attributes or actions, rational theologians were keen to obviate apparent anthropomorphic imagery implied by the scriptural sources. In order to achieve this, they assiduously resorted to metaphorical instead of literal interpretation. This can be witnessed in the exegesis of Qurʾānic verses such as "And indeed God spoke to Moses directly" (Q. 4:164) in addition to, "And a voice beckoned him from the right flank of the valley, from a tree on hallowed soil and said, 'Moses, I am God, the Lord of the worlds'" (Q. 28:30). Certain rational theologians were quick to dismiss the idea that these verses intimated that God physically spoke; rather, they asserted that the manifestation of this speech was materially contingent. At stake in the arguments over the question of the Qurʾān's created or uncreated status were simply competing conceptions of God's transcendence.

One of those in attendance at the debates during the period of the inquisition was the Sunni rationalist scholar Ibn Kullāb (d. 855? CE), who rigorously defended the view that the text was uncreated.[21] In the periods of the gestation of the arguments about the Qurʾān's status, the debates were mainly about the createdness versus the uncreatedness of the Qurʾān. However, in later years the discussions turned on whether the text was both uncreated and eternal (*qadīm*). Ibn Kullāb has an interesting set of views on the subject. He posits that God remains eternal with his attributes and names.[22] Ibn Kullāb also refers to speech as being one of

21 He is viewed as the progenitor of Sunni *kalām* discourses, inspiring the Ashʿarī school which became one of the main proponents of rational theology in the Sunni tradition.

22 Madelung (1974: 515). Underscoring the unity of identity within the essence, he uses the formula that his attributes are not him nor are they something other than him. Madelung argues that the issue in the pre-Miḥna period was not simply the question of temporality versus

the attributes of God that subsists within his eternal essence in the same way that knowledge and power inhere eternally within him. His point is that the attributes should not be deemed hypostatically eternal but that God is eternal and his attributes are with him eternally.[23] It is in this vein that he refers to an eternal Qurʾān, although he holds that this does not consist of letters or sounds, nor can it be fragmented, divided, segmented or parted, as it exists as an indivisible entity within God's essence. Ibn Kullāb states that the physical trace and impression (script) of the Qurʾān are constituted in its various letters and consonants and in its very recitation.[24] He therefore distinguished between the speech of God in its abstract sense within the essence of the eternal Qurʾān, and its physical "expression" or "substrate" (*ʿibāra*), which can differ and be at variance with the former. The analogy Ibn Kullāb chooses to drive home these distinctions is the liturgical act of remembering God: individuals' remembrance of him can differ, but the subject of remembrance remains immutable (Wolfson 1976: 248–9). Ultimately, he states that God's speech is called an Arabic Qurʾān because its trace or vestige (*rasm*), in terms of its form of expression and recitation (*qirāʾa*), occurs in Arabic. Ibn Kullāb even says that this is equally true of the revealed biblical scriptures whether they be in Syriac or Hebrew. Conclusively, when one hears a recital of the Qurʾān, one is actually experiencing this "expression" of his eternal speech.[25] Ibn Kullāb dismissed the idea that God is speaking in the literal or historically contingent sense of the word, for the simple reason that he derided the inference that accidents like speech can subsist within the divine essence, although within his schema all the divine attributes, including speech, exist primordially in that God is eternally with them.[26] The 10th-century bibliophile Ibn al-Nadīm, author of a

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eternality, and that traditionalists objected more to the abstract presentation of God which strips him of his personal interaction with man. Madelung (1974: 508) claims that it was Ibn Ḥanbal whose position chiefly led to the adoption of the doctrine of an eternal Qurʾān.

23 Al-Ashʿarī (1987: 357). For more on the divine attributes see Josef van Ess's entry on the Muʿtazila in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987: 6322). He explains Abū Hāshim's 'theory of states' based on a grammatical solution to a theological problem. It was the jurist Abū Ḥanīfa who are reported to have stated that an oath sworn on the Qurʾān was not binding as the text was created and something other than God (Zadeh 2011: 61–62).

24 For the suggestion that Christian ideas were being borrowed see Wolfson (1976), who devotes a chapter to inlibration (1976: 235–247); more recent studies of a critique of *kalām*-driven views are found in Mayer (2014) and Gimaret (1988).

25 He was the author of a lost apologia on the subject of the divine attributes to which al-Ashʿarī probably had access.

26 This was in deference to the Islamic theory of atomism: it maintains that the universe is made up of atoms; the smallest of these is represented by a corporeal particle which is essentially indivisible. The substances (*jawāhir*) of the world are formed from a conglomeration of atoms and accidents (*ʿaraḍ/aʿrāḍ*), which inhere in them; the latter possess no capacity for infinite

work which integrates biographical information with an inventory of the literary works of the first four centuries of the Islamic tradition, includes an anecdote of a debate between Ibn Kullāb and a Muʿtazilī protagonist who, having heard Ibn Kullāb propose that "the speech of God is God," responded by stating that "by virtue of this doctrine, he is a Christian,"suggesting that he sensed equivalences with the doctrine of the *logos* (Ibn al-Nadīm 1988: 230).

While Ibn Kullāb was positioning himself to counter the arguments of the Muʿtazila who contended that the Qurʾān was created, in later years traditionalist as well as rational theologians disavowed some aspects of the doctrines he put forward to explain the status of the Qurʾān.[27] Incidentally, the Ashʿarī school was built upon the edifices of Ibn Kullāb's theological ideas, methods, and arguments. They argued that God's speech was one of the attributes of his essence, like his knowledge and power, and was neither created nor originated. Indeed, Qurʾānic verses were frequently adduced by them to underline the fact that the sacred text fell into the category of uncreated phenomena. Yet while many Ashʿarī scholars censured Ibn Kullāb's use of the term *ʿibāra* (expression) or *ḥikāya* (replication or reproduction), when referring to the revealed text, the fact is that even these Ashʿarī theologians, like Ibn Kullāb, offered sophisticated distinctions between the material manifestation of God's speech and its unarticulated species which inhered in the divine essence; within their schema, this eternal form of the text was referred to as the *kalām nafsī* (internal speech) (al-Rāzī 1987: 1.244). To underpin their arguments, Ashʿarī luminaries were soon offering sophisticated distinctions between the act of recital and the subject of recitation; they also distinguished between the graphemic representation of the spoken word and its actual referent.

Such distinctions about the nature of God's speech were given definitive resolution in the work of the Ashʿarī theologian, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 CE). When dealing with a range of objections raised by Muʿtazilī opponents, one of the propositions that he singles out in his refutation is the contention that essentially the Qurʾān consists of chapters, verses, words, letters and phonemes, which all indicate that it is temporal and contingent. This is based on their view that

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endurance (*baqāʾ*) but God sustains them through his constant and direct intervention in the world: this is the doctrine of occasionalism. The Muʿtazila employed the term *ḥikāya* (physical representation or emulation) when referring to the physical exemplification of the Qurʾān.

27 There were some theologians who were uneasy with the idea of an eternal Qurʾān and accused Ibn Kullāb of playing an inadvertent role in the promulgation of the doctrine, claiming that when the pious ancestors challenged this view, they had never intended to state that the Qurʾān was eternal. This is Madelung's point about Ibn Taymiyya's view, which was hostile to Ibn Kullāb's reasoning but equally dismissive of the line taken by followers of the founder of the Ḥanbalī school of thought (Madelung 1974: 524–55).

the structural parts and segments of the text were materially finite and subject to enumeration as they are regimented by points of inception and termination. Responding to this, al-Bāqillānī states that these observations apply to the external act of recitation and its outward characteristics and not the divine speech of the almighty, which was an attribute of his essence. Al-Bāqillānī explained that this is because the voiced reading of the text required mechanisms of expression: namely, organs such as a tongue and larynx for the production of speech; whereas, in contradistinction, God as an absolutely transcendent being had no need for such organs. Thus, the aforementioned physical divisions and delineations of chapter and verse did not apply to the uncreated speech of God (*kalām nafsī*), which was neither finite nor subject to enumeration. Al-Bāqillānī then cites a Qurʾānic verse to drive home the distinction: "Had the ocean served as ink for the words of your Lord, it would have run dry before the words of your Lord ever finished, even if thou were to bring forth reserves the like thereof" (Q. 18:109), and "Had the trees of the world been used as pens and seven oceans been used to supply them (with ink), the words of your Lord would still not expire" (Q. 31:28). He then adds that it is recognized that a copyist is able to transcribe a number of Qurʾānic parchments using one inkwell and also that a reciter of the sacred text may complete a set number of recitations, and that these acts of devotion are defined by material finiteness and limits: they are subject to having a beginning and an end in the sense that they are but attributes of our recitation, transcription, and memory of the text. However, the concrete attribute of God's speech cannot be described as ceasing or being confined to limits. Having followed a line of argumentation in which proofs are dexterously extracted from the Qurʾān to drive home the abstract distinction between the divine speech as an eternal attribute and its worldly form, al-Bāqillānī then refers to a Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) in which the story is told of a group of companions, Arabs and non-Arabs, reciting the Qurʾān in the presence of the Prophet, who proceeded to encourage them despite an apparent disparity between the quality of their recitations. Al-Bāqillānī explains that the Arabs' recitation is seemingly flawless, while the recitation of the non-Arabs is marked by a stuttering and a lack of fluency, demonstrating the genuine distinction between the act of recitation and the subject of recitation, the act of reading and the subject of what is being read. The point made here is that infelicities of language do not impinge upon the primeval immaculateness of God's eternal speech. Referring to additional proofs, al-Bāqillānī states that following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE by Nebuchadnezzar II, the Prophet Ezra prayed to God that punishment be visited upon those who sacked the city and burned sacred scripture. Al-Bāqillānī recounts that the divine response to this plea explains that only the covers, parchment, and script of the Torah had been burned, and that "my speech was not consumed." Taking his cue from this

anecdote, al-Bāqillānī insists that had a tyrant taken a copy of the Qurʾān and set about igniting it and reducing it to ashes, would one say that the eternal speech of God has been consumed by combustion and has perished? Or would one simply say that his speech is enduring and permanent, and that it has neither been consumed by flames nor perished, but that only the parchment and script have been destroyed? Continuing this line of argumentation, al-Bāqillānī provides a cogent example of the difference between "recitation" and the "subject of recitation" by stating that had one hundred readers recited the text of the Qurʾān, would that not represent one hundred recitals with each reader being rewarded individually for the recital, making the total number of rewards one hundred? He then declares that there is only one Qurʾān that is the subject of recitation. Interwoven through the various proofs and counter-proofs, the position taken by al-Bāqillānī is one that endeavours to locate a middle path between the Muʿtazilī position of denying the uncreated nature of God's speech and the arch-traditionalist one, which refused to compromise the divine and eternal quality of the worldly version of the text in its physical form, and which viewed such formulae such as the *kalām nafsī* as representing a specious attempt to concede the doctrine of the eternal nature of God's speech (see Al-Bāqillānī 2007: 116).

Separately, a number of arch-traditionists were associated with adopting what was defined as a schema of "inlibration," which was used to explain the relationship between the divine heavenly prototype of the Qurʾān and its physical counterpart.[28] They eschewed the elaborate arguments set out by rational theologians and stated that what is between the two covers of the Qurʾān is the word of God—and that, concomitantly, that which is read, heard, and written is the veritable "Word of God." Moreover, it is suggested that in the same way that the "Word of God" is uncreated and eternal, so too are the intonations heard through an act of recitation: Qurʾānic scripture and God's speech were incontrovertibly identical. Dismissing the notion that accidents could not occur within the divine essence, they contended that God as a speaker was not confined to an eternal substrate but he could speak if and when he chose to do so. Intriguingly, a number of key mystical movements were sympathetic to such views. For example, the Sālimiyya, adherents of the mystic Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Sālim, had been passionate advocates of the belief that the physical letters and sounds of the Qurʾān were eternal (*azaliyya*). Figures linked with the movement were trenchantly opposed to the Ashʿarī notion of *al-kalām nafsī*. Indeed, members even composed diatribes

28 Wolfson (1976: 235–55, esp. 252–253). A detailed account of this concept is provided. It has been suggested that this resonates with the Christian doctrine of "incarnation," which described the relationship between the different persons of the Trinity.

against al-Ashʿarī and Ibn Kullāb (Ibn Taymiyya: 499). Ultimately, in the quest to enshrine the sacred cachet of God's speech, theologians of all persuasions had attempted to devise all sorts of formulae and syntheses of data that would conceptually safeguard the fact that in simple terms God's speech was embodied between the two covers of the Qurʾānic codex. However, such treatments, which were articulated with specific theological premises and perspectives in mind, never quite managed to solve the aporia created by the attempts to draw distinctions between the eternal word and its worldly manifestation. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the debates about whether the Qurʾān was created or uncreated affected the course of applied exegetical, literary and legal approaches to the contents of the text, the disputes about the nature of the language of the Qurʾān, God's role as a speaker, and the divine attributes inexorably spilled over into deliberations about the doctrine of the text's linguistic inimitability and composition, and likewise impinged upon ideas about the role of divine agency in the origin of language. The ensuing debates, and the tensions which issued from them, dominated theological discourses for centuries, inspiring a fecund body of literature and thought.

4 The doctrine of *iʿjāz*

Over the centuries, the conceptual quandaries originating from the attempts to explain the relationship between the eternal word of God which inhered in the divine essence, on the one hand, and its physical manifestation, on the other, brought into sharper focus the literary merits of the Qurʾān. This study of the compositional, rhetorical, and aesthetic distinctiveness of the Qurʾān was fleshed out under the rubric of *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, which, although literally denoting the act of "rendering incapable," came to represent the concept of the text's linguistic inimitability insofar as it validated the claims of Muḥammad's prophethood. Indeed, it would appear that the Muʿtazilīs may have first coined the technical use of the term *iʿjāz*, which took on greater significance in the 9th century CE, when works connected to the subject of *iʿjāz* first appeared. Although the minutiae of the concept had yet to be fully systematised, it was key theologians who were avidly engaged in the composition of such treatises (Boullata 1988; Kermani 1996; Larkin 1988; Martin 1980; Rahman 1996). Historically, the roots of the doctrine were to be found in the Qurʾān, which grandly lauds the supreme and matchless nature of its own literary arrangement. In a range of allusive narratives that preserve dialogues between the Prophet and his Meccan opponents, reference is made to their allegations that the Qurʾān consisted of "the mere words of a

mortal" (Q. 74:25); "the words of a poet" (Q. 69:41); "the mutterings of a soothsayer" (Q. 69:42); "sorcery passed down" (Q. 74:24); and even "ancient fables recounted to him" (Q. 46:17). Condemning the charges, the Qurʾānic rejoinder to this appears in the form of a challenge, insisting that if they allege that its contents are fabricated utterings, then let them and their cohorts produce a chapter the like thereof. The challenge is laid down at separate junctures in the Qurʾān; at Q. 52:33–34, the accusation that the Prophet is "manufacturing words" is mentioned, followed by a denial which asks those who truly claim so to produce a "speech similar to it." Elsewhere in the Qurʾān this challenge is expressed much more explicitly: "They will say: 'He has concocted this': say to them: 'Come forth with ten forged chapters the like thereof and call upon whomsoever you desire [to help you in this endeavor] other than God, if you are truthful'" (Q. 11:13). In a separate chapter the scale of the challenge is seemingly reduced: "They say: 'He has concocted this.' If you are in doubt concerning that which was revealed to our servant, then produce a single chapter the like thereof, calling upon your supporters other than God if you are really truthful" (Q. 2:23–24). These verses were interpreted in conjunction with the aforementioned Qurʾānic verse that defiantly declares,"Had humans and jinns [spirits] come together to replicate this Qurʾān, they would not have been able to do so."

Building on the edifices of these Qurʾānic declarations, over successive historical periods, the constellation of arguments adduced to support the idea of *iʿjāz* brought together a confluence of theological as well as literary perspectives and proofs, all of which were employed to underpin the lexical sublimity of the text. Among these was the claim that its inimitability resided in the Qurʾān's prediction of unseen events; other proofs referred to the supposed illiteracy of the Prophet which intimates the text's divine origins.[29] The irony of this was all too obvious in the context of the challenge issued by the Qurʾān to its Meccan opponents: they presented themselves as the paragons of linguistic eloquence and questioned the authenticity of the Qurʾān and its message, and yet they were unable to rise to the Qurʾānic challenge of producing a single chapter, despite the fact that the text they were actually disparaging was allegedly authored by an "unlettered individual." In the literature on *iʿjāz*, closely aligned with this line of argument is the view that it was the convention that Prophets were bestowed with specific miracles which substantiated their missions; it was even alluded to in the *ḥadīth* literature.[30] It is argued that Moses was granted powers to perform

29 It is argued that the idea of the Prophet's illiteracy is not borne out by the Qurʾān or the tradition. The inference is that this notion was developed in the later discourses (Gunther 2002).
30 This is recorded in the tradition cited by al-Bukharī, the renowned *ḥadīth* scholar in a section within his collection of traditions devoted to the virtues of the Qurʾān.

wizardry and outwit Pharaoh's sorcerers, validating his mission; this was in an era when magic was the predominant science of the day. Likewise, in an age when medicine was hailed as ground-breaking, Jesus was bestowed by God with the power to heal the sick, cure the leper, and raise the dead. In the Islamic context this miracle was not restricted to a specific moment in time but was seemingly enduring, as it turned on the inimitability of the Qurʾān, and was linked to its unceasing rhetorical pre-eminence and eloquence.

One Muʿtazilī theologian who played an important role in advancing the discourses on *iʿjāz* was al-Naẓẓām (d. 836 CE). Arguing that the miracle did not reside in the linguistic matchlessness of the text, he proffered a dissenting view on *iʿjāz*, which contended that the inimitability of the text emanated from the fact that God had prevented the Arabs from rising to the challenge set out in the Qurʾān. The concept was called *ṣarfa*, which literally denotes deflection; namely, the Arabs could quite easily have matched the linguistic marvels of the text but were deflected and bound from doing so by divine intervention. Other Muʿtazilī cynosures dismissed this dissenting view on the basis that it contravened the central tenets of human freewill and responsibility: the idea of God's intervention in such matters was inconsistent with their theology. Other criticisms of this view argued that if God had indeed deflected the will of the Arabs at the time of the challenge, the period of deflection would have expired, allowing later generations of Arabs to mount a subsequent challenge. *Ex hypothesi*, the fact that this had not occurred proved the fallaciousness of the doctrine of *ṣarfa*. It was the Muʿtazilī belle-lettrist al-Jāḥīz (d. 855 CE), a figure connected to al-Naẓẓām, who proposed the theory that the *iʿjāz* of the Qurʾān rested in the text's select choice of vocabulary or *lafẓ*. Al-Jāḥīz developed the idea that the ancient Arabs reckoned themselves the veritable masters of linguistic excellence, constantly boasting of their literary ability and flair, yet were unable to rise to the literary challenge set out in the Qurʾān. Other scholars soon weighed in with their views, including the traditionalist al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 998 CE), who sought to focus on the importance of *naẓm*, i.e., the Qurʾān's unique textual composition and lexical configuration; and the Muʿtazilī scholar al-Rummānī (d. 994 CE), who blended literary as well as theological arguments in his conspectus of *iʿjāz*.[31] Building upon the rich vein of ideas on the sacred text's inimitability, the seminal text on *īʿjāz* was written by an Ashʿarī scholar, ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078 CE), who definitively fleshed out the concept of *naẓm*. His text appeared to be designed to criticise views on *iʿjāz* outlined by a Muʿtazilī scholar, ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE), the author of the

31 The Muʿtazilī theologian al-Rummānī identified eight features of *iʿjāz*, among which he included *ṣarfā*.

Kitāb al-Mughnī, a multi-volumed theological summa which included a volume devoted to *iʿjāz*. As a result, theological, linguistic, and rhetorical characterizations of the text dominated discussions in the *iʿjāz* literature.[32]

It is unsurprising that al-Bāqillānī, an active participant in the discussions about the status of God's speech, also composed a text that dealt with the subject of the Qurʾān's inimitability. Refuting many Muʿtazilī views on *iʿjāz*, he put forward the thesis that "the aspect of its inimitability resides in its unique literary arrangement, composition and the compactness of its style." He explained that this broke with all the established linguistic conventions of composition with which the Arabs were familiar, including even their conventional forms of speech; and he added that for these reasons they were unable to respond to the challenge of competing with the text. Al-Bāqillānī's defence of the doctrine of *iʿjāz* included a lengthy comparison between select verses of the Qurʾān and an ode written by Imrūʾ al-Qays, considered the greatest pre-Islamic poet of the Arabs, seeking to illustrate the chasms between the two in terms of style, composition, and clarity of expression (Grunebaum 1950). The focus on poetry was interesting for the simple reason that the Qurʾān actually pours scorn on the claim by the Prophet's adversaries that he himself was a possessed poet and soothsayer, including the accusation that the Qurʾān was being dictated to him by someone with knowledge of ancient scripture (Q. 16:102). One does need to bear in mind the fact that poetry was a sophisticated medium of literary expression in pre-Islamic Arabia. There was a range of intricate meters and thematic formats for the composition of poetry; tribes appointed resident poets who would be called upon to defend their honour, satirise opponents, compose eulogies, and entertain. Even the Prophet installed a prominent Arab poet, Ḥassan ibn Thābit, as his advocate, a figure who declared that through his composition of poetry he would extricate the Prophet from his Meccan polytheistic peers in the same way that a baker pull outs a thread of hair from kneaded dough. Yet in the Qurʾān, in a chapter aptly entitled "the Poets," they are described as being "followed by those who err," and that "their actions do not match their words" (Q. 26:226). Those who sought to defend poetry and its relevance as a literary medium simply explained that such dicta were designed to condemn poets among the polytheists who satirised the Prophet. Nonetheless, on the issue of format, throughout the Qurʾān an attempt is made to place distance between the style of the Qurʾān and that of poetry, and at one juncture in the text it is pronounced that "we have

32 Literary devices such as hyperbaton, paronomasia, grammatical shift, ellipsis, metonymy, metaphor, synecdoche, simile, assonance, and alliteration were exemplified with reference to Qurʾānic expressions.

not taught him poetry, nor is it fitting for him but rather this is a lucid Qurʾān" (Q. 36:69). Likewise, there was a concerted effort within the classical literary tradition to draw clear distinctions between the form of rhyme (*sajaʿ*) as featured in the Qurʾān and the various rhyme patterns employed by ancient Arabian soothsayers. Distinctively, al-Bāqillānī categorically states that it was incorrect to imply that the Qurʾān employs (poetic) rhyme for the simple reason that within the literary schema of conventional rhyme and assonance, meaning is subjugated to word form; whereas in the Qurʾān, meaning dictates and determines the use and choice of words. Moreover, he notes that the patterns of rhyme that feature in the Qurʾān do not conform to models of ancient rhyme with which the Arabs were familiar: he concedes that there might exist select areas of the text's composition that appear to follow a scheme of verse, but on closer inspection, the Qurʾān's rhythmic structure is *sui generis*.

As has been suggested, the concept of the Qurʾān's linguistic inimitability and its related discussions did provide a useful channel through which scholars could move away from complicated arguments about the epistemological status of the Qurʾān as God's speech, and turn their attention to shedding light on the distinctive and exceptional qualities of its composition. However, these sorts of debates about the aesthetic and theological qualities of the language of the Qurʾān in no way undermined the importance attached to the use of pre-Islamic literary sources, including poetry and prose, to authenticate and flesh out theories of language developed by grammarians and lexicographers. And poetry was used not only for linguistic justification and exemplification in grammatical argumentation, but also within the sphere of Qurʾānic commentary (Ibn al-Anbārī 1971). Grammarians were sometimes accused of granting "poetry epistemological primacy in the interpretation of the Qurʾān," a charge they dismissed by appositely referring to the fact that the Qurʾān itself speaks of its being revealed in a clear Arabic diction with which the Arabs were familiar. Accordingly they argued it made sense to consult their poetry, the preferred medium of literary expression, in order to fathom axioms and standards of language usage to which the text adhered. There were also dicta which could be invoked to support such practices: one of the Companions of the Prophet reportedly declared that "Poetry is the (literary) register of the Arabs" and that "should a specific Qurʾānic expression escape your comprehension, then seek it in their (Arabs') poetry (*diwāns*)" (Ibn al-Anbārī 1971: 99–102).[33] Despite this use of poetry, grammarians were always eager to point out that, in terms of its linguistic traits and features, the Qurʾān

33 It has been argued that the production of such anecdotes was part of a contrived attempt to secure support for methodologies which were viewed with suspicion. See Wansbrough (1977).

was "a stronger proof for (grammatical) citation than poetry." Still, this did not diminish the enthusiasm with which "non-scriptural" sources were espoused within the traditions of exegesis and linguistic thought, as a functional approach to explaining the features of language prevailed. Thus, while the debates about the status of the word of God continued in their various theological formats and contexts, they did not hinder or impede the independence and inquisitiveness with which the study of language was avidly broached not only as an intellectual endeavour, but also in the service of the Qurʾān.

5 The debates about the origins of language

It might be expected that the gravity of the discussions about the status of the Qurʾān and even aspects of *iʿjāz* would have an enduring impact upon the treatment of the subject of the origins of language. However, these discussions developed much later within rational theological discourses of the 9th century CE, and the association with the whole debate about the created status of the Qurʾān and *iʿjāz* appears to have been eclipsed by the broader issue of the divine attributes. Early grammatical treatises and philological manuals made no mention of the subject; however, it gradually began to be expounded upon in a number of later theological, grammatical, and legal treatises in which the epistemology of language was expounded upon. Two principal opposing theses came to dominate the discussions: these were respectively referred to in Arabic as *tawqīf* (revelationist) and *iṣṭilāḥ* (conventionalist). Within the former, God was assigned a prominent role in the imposition of language; the latter implied that the establishment of language was entirely arbitrary, being the product of common convention and agreement among humans. Other views existed that combined elements of each of these main theses, but in general it is the antithesis between *tawqīf* and *iṣṭilāḥ* positions around which the different perspectives were finely calibrated. The doctrine of *tawqīf* was based on a reading of the Qurʾānic verse that states, "And indeed God taught the names (*asmāʾ*) of all things to Adam; then, he presented '*them*' to the angels and announced 'inform me of the names of these if you are truthful'" (Q. 2:31). Although the verse is allusive in its treatment of the subject, it did become the *locus classicus* adduced by proponents of *tawqīf* to defend the role of divine agency in the inception of language. In their view "the names" encompassed all the elements of language as the later conceptual classification of the parts of speech was simply a grammatical construct. Interestingly, Genesis 2:19–20, which serves as a *locus classicus* for Christians regarding the question of the status – whether arbitrary or natural – of language, states that "Out of the ground

the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." In the *tawqīf* thesis, it is not Adam but God who is the agent behind the process of naming, and of assigning meanings to words, although it was held that the nature of the relationship between words and meanings remained entirely arbitrary: there is no natural affinity or intrinsic connection between specific words and their meanings. In this sense it is important to distinguish between debates in the Islamic context and those which occurred in Greek philosophical thought. Plato's *Cratylus* offers a debate about whether there exists a natural or an arbitrary connection between words and their meanings; these two positions are expressed respectively by the concepts of *phúsis* (φύσις) and *thésis* (θέσις) (Sedley 2003; Barney 2001; Ibn al-Anbārī 1971). In the Islamic setting, however, the issue turns on the identification of the original designator of language, although both the concepts of *tawqīf* and *iṣṭilāḥ* are essentially conventionalist perspectives, for they stress the arbitrary nature of the relationship between words and sounds. Despite the fact that the dialogue in Plato's *Cratylus* presents its arguments with reference to nouns, it is the general elements of language which are the focus of attention.[34] This is also the case for the Islamic debates, for although the Qurʾānic verse refers to God's teaching "the names" to Adam, these names were identified as connoting the totality of the elements of language. The author of the first Arabic lexicographical dictionary, al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 777 or 791 CE), is reported to have proposed an onomatopoeic theory to explain the origin of a confined number of words, but such a view gained few adherents. However, in the 9th century, one theologian who subscribed to a radical version of this view was the Muʿtazilī scholar ʿAbbād ibn Sulaymān, who, it should be remembered, engaged in disputations about the createdness of the Qurʾān with Ibn Kullāb during the period of the *miḥna*. ʿAbbād argued that "a natural affinity existed between the collective phonemic constitution of words and their signified meanings," even hypothesizing that a change in the name of an entity predicates a change in its constitution (Shah 2011; also Shah 2000). He was castigated for his views by his Muʿtazilī cohorts, who described them as utterly senseless.

In opposition to *tawqīf*, the thesis of *iṣṭilāḥ* postulates that language was established via a process of commonly agreed conventions (*muwāḍaʿa*),

34 Socrates is the individual who appears in the dialogue as an arbiter between the two protagonists, fleshing out the ramifications of each of their theses through reference to etymology and other related concepts, although it is maintained that the views of Plato lie at the heart of the dialogue.

whereby humans assigned words to meanings. During the formative years of the Islamic tradition, opinions on the two theses were polarized between scholars who endorsed *tawqīf* on the one hand, and those who were proponents of *iṣṭilāḥ*. It is difficult to trace the historical gestation and origins of the different elements of the doctrine of *tawqīf*. However, once the thesis of *iṣṭilāḥ* was advocated, *tawqīf* was invoked as a counter doctrine. Loyalty to either doctrinal position was influenced by different factors. It is generally agreed that the architect of the concept of *iṣṭilāḥ* was a Muʿtazilī theologian by the name of Abū Hāshim (d. 933 CE), who was renowned for developing a defence of the Muʿtazilī doctrine of the divine attributes using the Arabic grammatical concept of "states" (*ḥāl*) as an analogue for this theory.[35] Significantly, the chief opponent of *iṣṭilāḥ* was al-Ashʿarī, who is identified in the sources as one of the first individuals to espouse the opposing doctrine of *tawqīf*, adducing traditional proofs to counter Abū Hāshim's thesis, although a number of leading Muʿtazilī scholars actually supported *tawqīf*.[36] Why Abū Hāshim devised the thesis of *iṣṭilāḥ* is not quite clear, but the subject seems to have been informed by discussions about "the names and divine attributes of God." This is evident from the fact that Abū Hāshim's thoughts on the subject appear under such headings in various theological treatises, including ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Kitāb al-Mughnī*.[37] In a section of his text which deals with the attributes and the process of naming, he explains that a given name (*ism*) can represent its named entity or referent (*al-musammā*) only through the concomitant processes of intention (*qaṣd*), choice (*irādā*) and gesticulation (*ishāra*), following which names are assigned to entities and meanings (see the discussion in Shah 2011). In this argument, intention serves as the *sine qua non* for the validation of the connection between a name and its referent, and without an awareness of this intention among interlocutors, no process of establishing language conventions and usage is possible. Had the relationship between words and meanings been determined by God, the *qaṣd*, which was intrinsic to setting up the conventions of language, would need to have been divulged through

35 His father was a leading mentor within the school; indeed, he was the teacher of al-Ashʿarī, a figure who later defected from the Muʿtazilites.

36 The basic theological arguments for *tawqīf* attributed to al-Ashʿarī are preserved in the literature of later Ashʿarite luminaries. One such work is the *Mujarrad maqālāt al-shaykh Abī ʾl-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī* ('The essential theological doctrines of Al-Ashʿarī') composed by Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015 CE), a later adherent of the school (Ibn Fūrak, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan 1987). Abū Hāshim was a prolific author but none of his works has survived; his views are dispersed across a range of later theological texts.

37 It remains an important source of early Muʿtazilī thought.

acts of gesticulation. This would have entailed God's disclosing to humans knowledge of his intentions by engaging in gesture, which is inconceivable. There is a simple logic at work in the discussions: if humans are acquainted with the "intention" of God, the notion of religious obligation becomes invalid for within Muʿtazilī systems of thought it was incumbent upon mankind to seek knowledge of God's existence independently, relying on the faculties of reason. This is explained byʿAbd al-Jabbār who comments that, "It is inconceivable that we should necessarily know God's intention in the state of obligation, just as it would be inappropriate to know necessarily His essence at the time before obligation comes into existence" (ʿabd al-Jabbār 1965: 164; Shah 2011: 321). The same form of argument appears in other theological texts where it is stated that "knowledge of the attribute of an entity," which in this context would be God's imposition of language, "would *a fortiori* necessitate knowledge of the essence of that entity, namely God" (Asnawī 1999: vol. 1, p. 302; Shah 2011: 321). Consequently, the whole doctrine of human responsibility and obligation would be without foundation. Separately, there is even an argument attributed to Abū Hāshim in which he cited a verse of the Qurʾān that declares, "never did we dispatch a Prophet except that he conversed in the language of those to whom he was sent in order to make (matters) plain for them" (Q 14:4). Abū Hāshim explains that for *tawqīf* to be viable, God would have to provide an intelligent individual with an intuitive knowledge of language. However, he dismisses this possibility by stating that this would entail such an individual's instantaneously recognizing the existence of God, consigning to irrelevance the concept of religious obligation. Hence, his argument is that the existence of a language based on common agreement and convention must by necessity precede the advent of revelation (see the detailed arguments in Shah 2011: 321ff.).

The nexus between *iṣṭilāḥ* and the divine attributes becomes evident from debates in the early tradition about distinctions between the name (*ism*) and its referent (*musammā*). A number of Muʿtazilī theologians had propounded the notion that from eternity, God had neither name nor attribute, and that these were derived through a process of *iṣṭilāḥ* and *qiyās* (analogical reasoning); consequently, they adopted the view that the *ism* (*nomen*) and the *musammā* (*nominatum*) were not ontologically one. Sensing that the concept represented an insidious attempt to assail the doctrine of the essential nature of the divine attributes, theologians affiliated to the Ashʿarī school countered by arguing that the *ism* and *musammā* were nominally one and unified; and this became a standard refrain among many later rational Sunni theologians. Al-Ashʿarī is reported to have argued that the divine names of God and His attributes can be determined only by way of *tawqīf*. This tension between the perspectives raises the possibility

that *tawqīf* may have been gone through several phases of distillation and review to counter the Muʿtazilī position on the divine names (see Shah 2013).

In the defence of the doctrine of *tawqīf*, al-Ashʿarī is reported to have resorted to the argument of infinite regress to dismiss *iṣṭilāḥ*: namely, that every stage of the assigning of meaning to words by humans would require a preceding process *ad infinitum*, which is logically absurd. Therefore *tawqīf* must be the only viable explanation for the origin of language. The attestation of proofs from the Qurʾān is fascinating, as proponents of *tawqīf* and *iṣṭilāḥ* were astute at extracting from such evidences data that supported their specific explanations. For example, the Qurʾān condemns the Meccan polytheists' practice of instituting names for their deities by stating, "These are merely names that you and your forebears invented and for which God has provided no sanction" (Q. 12:41) and (Q. 53:23). Advocates of *tawqīf* would argue that this represents an example of God's denouncing the artificiality of the polytheists' practice of "naming," which constitutes an implicit indictment of *iṣṭilāḥ*. Supporters of *tawqīf* had other verses they could adduce from their armoury of arguments: in Q. 30:22 it is pronounced that: "And among his signs are that he created the heavens and the earth; and (also) the diversity of your tongues (languages) and colors," a verse which firmly hinted at the role of divine agency in the inception of language. Still, the import of such verses was contested by those who subscribed to *iṣṭilāḥ*, as they countered that the verse was merely referring to the physical anatomy and constitution of the tongue! Correspondingly, while Q. 2:31 was identified as the *locus classicus* for the thesis of *tawqīf*, defenders of *iṣṭilāḥ* argued that the verse does not stipulate that God taught Adam "the names of all things," but rather that God empowered Adam to establish the conventions of language usage. It is therefore evident that even when presented with Qurʾānic citations, both camps were able to adapt these to support their respective standpoints. Ultimately, scriptural proofs were hostages to the various doctrinal perspectives and outlooks which were the key drivers of the discussions. In a 10th-century manual of philology, the Kufan grammarian Ibn Fāris subscribed to a particularly rigorous doctrine of *tawqīf*, making the daring assertion that Arabic orthography, grammar, and the science of prosody were the products of *tawqīf*. Historically, it was commonly accepted that within the biographical dictionaries of Arabic linguistic thought, the institution of the systematic study of grammar and the articulation of a theory of language were first formulated in the work of a Basran grammarian by the name of Sībawayhi (d. 793 CE), whereas the study of lexicography and prosody, in the form of the meters of the poems of the ancient Arabs, was refined by al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 791 CE). However, Ibn Fāris claimed that these pioneers had merely uncovered and discovered ancient disciplines of learning eroded by the passage of time. He even included in his final section on the topic of *tawqīf* an apocryphal anecdote

which states that Adam was the first person to invent all written scripts, including Arabic and Syriac, and that he did this 300 years prior to his death. According to one Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*), Adam lived for one thousand years. The report goes on to state that, having inscribed these scripts on clay, he baked them and had them buried. Following the great deluge, each race discovered one of these scripts and used it. The Arabic script was unearthed by Ismael.[38]

While clear linkages appear to exist between discussions on the divine attributes and the concept of *iṣṭilāḥ*, the idea that the doctrine of an uncreated Qurʾān initially led scholars to defend the thesis of *tawqīf* is less obvious. This argument was advanced in the work of Bernard Weiss (1974), who emphasized that the debate between al-Ashʿarī and Abū Hāshim represented the truly classic Muslim discussion on the origins of language. Weiss spoke of an affinity between the revelationist view of language's origin and the pre-speculative, orthodox understanding of the doctrine of the uncreated Qurʾān, adding that by accepting that "the Koran is the Eternal Speech of God" a climate of thought had been created in which "it is hardly appropriate to make man the ultimate author and inventor of language" (Zadeh 2008, 2009). He posed the question: "How can there be an Eternal Divine Speech, identifiable with the actual words of the Koran, if man be the originator of that instrument through which speech is possible?" Weiss explained that the controversy was short-lived because of the intervention of al-Bāqillānī, who declared the issue could not be resolved and that both *tawqīf* and *iṣṭilāḥ* were entirely plausible. Weiss referred to the fact that certain followers of al-Ashʿarī came up with the theory that defined divine speech as an abstract quality (*ṣifa* or *kalām nafsī*) inhering in the divine essence, raising it above the level of ordinary speech.[39] He claimed that, as a result, in Sunni intellectual circles the debate was brought to an end, although he did concede that the issue persisted in the works of proponents with a stern orthodox outlook. In Weiss's view, the revelationist theory was ideally suited to buttress the doctrine of an uncreated Qurʾān, especially during the time of Ashʿarī and Abū Hāshim, when the debate was at its most intense. But it seems Weiss has entirely overlooked the fact that one of the earliest exponents of rational Sunnite theology, Ibn Kullāb, had already formulated the notion of God's speech existing eternally and essentially in his essence as a *maʿnā* (entity), drawing a distinction between this speech and its temporal expression (*iʿbāra*) in the form of revealed scripture.[40] Thus, such a distinction about the status of divine speech was already outlined

38 In his book Ibn Fāris (n.d.) surveys the virtues and traits of the Arabic language.

39 See Al-Shahrastānī ([1931]–1934: 320–21).

40 Kopf (1956) previously mentioned his use of the term ʿibāra was criticized by a number of scholars, including al-Bāqillānī.

well before the debate on the origin of language intensified, intimating that the desire to defend the doctrine of the uncreated status of the Qurʾān initially had little to do with the espousal of *tawqīf*.

The tendency to associate *tawqīf* with the doctrine of an eternal, uncreated Qurʾān has persisted in modern scholarship, despite inconsistencies in this association.[41] First and foremost, there is no clear evidence that the proponents of *tawqīf* principally linked their stance to the doctrine of an uncreated Qurʾān. In addition, even the suggestion that the doctrine of *iṣṭilāḥ* could serve as an expedient accessory to the arguments for the created status of the Qurʾān is less than categorical. It is true that the Muʿtazilī theologian ʿAbd al-Jabbār stipulates that the establishment of language by human convention has to be in place before it can be used by God (ʿabd al-Jabbār 1965: 164). It is also the case that some later medieval scholars did countenance a link between the doctrine of a created Qurʾān and *iṣṭilāḥ*, but this is by no means decisive as far as the early debates are concerned. Indeed, there was an extended period of intense discussions on the topic before al-Bāqillānī's supposed intervention, and in these a number of Muʿtazilī theologians were identified as fervent supporters of *tawqīf*, including one of the most important figures in the movement's history, al-Jubbāʾī (d. 915 CE). If the corollary to this doctrine were that the Qurʾān was an uncreated text, they would hardly have been among its most enthusiastic supporters; yet many were. Weiss has also claimed that the reason why the grammarians came down on the side of *tawqīf* was out of loyalty to a strong tradition of Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), but the latitude with which such verses could be interpreted indicates that there were other factors driving the discussions.

The view that a distinct correlation existed between the thesis of *iṣṭilāḥ* and the doctrine of a created Qurʾān was supported by Michael Carter. He concluded that "If language could be proved to be a mere human institution, it would follow that the Qurʾān was created and consequently subject to all the limitations of human endeavour, thus enabling the Muʿtazilites to claim that dogma and law should be constructed on the basis of reason only" (Carter 1983). Again, there is no evidence to suggest that proving language to be a human institution was decisively linked to the debate about the created status of the Qurʾān. Furthermore, the Muʿtazilī approach to the synthesis of law was neither contingent upon nor driven by the idea of a created Qurʾān. Additionally, many later Ashʿarites endorsed the plausibility of *iṣṭilāḥ*: would they have been among its enthusiastic adherents given the implications suggested by Carter? It seems far more likely

41 See the views of Kees Versteegh (1996) who located the debate about the created-uncreated status of the Qurʾān as inspiring the positions of *iṣṭilāḥ* and *tawqīf*.

that key theologians from among the Muʿtazila and other rational theologians supported *tawqīf* because it added weight to the notion of the Qurʾān's inimitable qualities. Certainly, the crystallization of the thesis of *tawqīf* was redolent of an impulsive reaction to counter *iṣṭilāḥ*. Ashʿarī's objection to *iṣṭilāḥ* was probably initially out of concern that it could be manipulated to undermine the teaching on the divine attributes and be cited to draw distinctions between the *ism* (*nomen*) and the *musammā* (*nominatum*). One recent writer has proffered the opinion that the final victory on the subject belonged to the Muʿtazila, for they succeeded in bringing about the destruction of the orthodox view of *tawqīf,* which was superseded by *iṣṭilāḥ* (Versteegh 1996). This view appears to overlook the fact that many within the ranks of traditionalist orthodoxy still maintained that *tawqīf* was presumed to be more probable (*maẓnūn*); and more significantly, the theological doctrines that engendered *iṣṭilāḥ* were never condoned within traditionalist circles, particularly the thesis that God's divine names could be determined by a process of analogy (Asnawī 1999). Thus in many respects it was *tawqīf* that won the day. It is therefore not surprising that in a seminal medieval compendium devoted to philology, its author chose to begin his survey with the statement: "Praise be to God the creator of tongues and languages; the one who established words for meanings," which inevitably confirms the esteem in which the doctrine of *tawqīf* continued to be held within the Sunni camps (Suyūṭī 1970).

Despite such rigid interpretations of the doctrine of *tawqīf*, philologists often subscribed to theories that seemed to be in contravention of the idea of a language in which the relationship between words and their meanings was primordially defined and set. This was true of the theory of etymology, antonyms, synonyms, homonyms and even the concept of metaphor. There were even scholars who composed treatises refuting the existence of such philological phenomena. For example, Ibn Fāris, when discussing etymology, acknowledged the reality that Arabic was subject to certain patterns (*qiyās*) based on the fact that Arabs derived parts of their speech from other related parts. However, he warned that discussions about the subject had to bear in mind that language was revelationist (*tawqīf*) in terms of its inception. Likewise in the case of antonyms, which in the Arabic context relate to a single word possessing two antithetical meanings, some scholars disputed their very occurrence in the language of Arabic on theological grounds. They argued that such a phenomenon could lead to ambiguities, implying a flaw in the design of language; this was deemed inconceivable if one were to accept that language was established by the process of divine agency as implied by the doctrine of *tawqīf*. Still, philologists devised ingenious ways of rationalizing the existence of such phenomena. Indeed, a circumspect glance through some of the seminal classical dictionaries of Arabic shows that their authors included lengthy sections devoted to collating such linguistic materials and even

identifying practical reasons, such as dialectal usage and language development, to explain their incidence in the language of Arabic.[42] This is also the case for arguments about whether foreign vocabulary featured in the language of the Qurʾān: some scholars denied the possibility, insisting on the pure Arabic character of the text; others stated that although it is plausible, it could be explained by a theory of concurrence and the fact that such lexical elements had entered the vocabulary of Arabic and were used and understood by the Arabs despite their featuring in or even originating from other languages.

Although the doctrinal hegemony of *tawqīf* held sway within traditionalist circles, scholars were still able to express opinions about the status of different languages. This fact is evident in the treatise devoted to the synthesis of the principles of law by the famous representative of the literalist legal school of thought in Andalusia, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE). Discussing whether a specific language could be considered the finest of languages, he remonstrates that some people are under the misguided illusion that their native languages are unsurpassed; he explains that such views were meaningless in the context of language. Referring to the Qurʾānic verse which states that never was a Prophet dispatched, except that he conversed in the language of those to whom he was sent, he insists that nothing in the sacred sources decrees that one language was superior to another tongue; adopting an empirical approach, he stressed that language was essentially a medium of communication that was viewed in relative terms. He then moves on to criticize the Greek physician and philosopher Galen (d. 210 CE) for allegedly stating that Greek was the finest languages and that all other idioms resembled "the barking of dogs or the croaking of frogs." Ibn Ḥazm explains that one would find that speakers of different languages held similar views when hearing vernaculars with which they were not familiar. Having made the case that the appreciation of language was a relative experience, Ibn Ḥazm turns his attention to those who professed the view that Arabic is the finest of languages on the basis of its being the diction in which God's speech was revealed. Describing such views as equally implausible, he refers to the Qurʾānic verse that spoke of the dispatch of Prophets conversing in the indigenous languages of the people to whom they were sent. He then points out that the linguistic medium of God's own revelation varied, as evidenced by the revelation of the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels, the scriptures of Abraham, and the fact that God conversed with Moses in Hebrew. He concluded that all of this confirmed that these languages

42 On a related note, for theological reasons some scholars questioned the existence of metaphor in the language of Arabic on the basis that it might be used to circumvent the literal language of the Qurʾān and other textual sources for theological gain. See Shah (2000).

were equal in terms of their prestige and rank, despite the fact that Ibn Ḥazm firmly endorsed the doctrine of *tawqīf*. Conversely, there were scholars who took an entirely different view: Ibn Fāris, the author of the *Ṣāḥibī* and an unswerving supporter of *tawqīf*, declared that Arabic was the finest and most refined of languages. He even asserted that it was not possible for a translator to accurately render the Qurʾān into another language, due to its unique rhetorical and stylistic features, in the way that scholars had translated the Gospels from Greek to Ethiopic and Syriac and indeed the Torah and the Psalms into Arabic. Distinctively, conflicting opinions and views were held by scholars, despite the overall loyalty to *tawqīf*. Interestingly, in an influential article published in the 1950s, Lothar Kopf suggested that within the classical tradition it was religious dogma that hindered the development of key aspects of Arabic linguistic thought (Kopf 1956). Kopf claimed that this was evident in areas such as discussions relating to the origins of language; approaches to aspects of the interpretation of the Qurʾān; the issue of the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Qurʾān; discussions on the Qurʾān's syntax; and even musings about the linguistic ascendancy of the dialects of the Meccan Arabs. However, it has been shown that the treatment of such topics reveals not only that there was a receptivity to the analysis of different perspectives and standpoints, but also that remarkable levels of resourcefulness and creativity prevailed within the attendant scholarship. Certainly, religious doctrine was not a hindrance to the articulation and synthesis of thought but rather served as an accelerant.

6 Conclusion

Arguments about language have played a dominant role in classical theological discourses. From the initial debates about whether the Qurʾān was created or uncreated, to the disputes about the nature of the attribute of speech in the divine essence, linguistic constructs and theories have been key to the elaboration of doctrines and views. The strength and intensity of the discussions stimulated intellectual activity across a range of supplementary areas, as evidenced by the scholarship devoted to the issue of the inimitability of the Qurʾān and indeed the question of the origins of language. Yet one of the striking features of the various discourses is the fact that such an eclectic range of views and arguments was accommodated within them. Clearly, deference to religious doctrine did not prevent scholars from tackling topics objectively and openly; the rich repository of theological and linguistic literature that exists within the classical Islamic tradition bears testimony to that fact.

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