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‘Fire Cannot Harm It’: Mediation, Temptation and the Charismatic Power of the Qur’an

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Orality and Corporality

The miraculous charisma of the Qur’an, both in this world and the next, forms part of a larger constellation of traditions recurrent throughout the body of literature focusing on the excellent qualities (faḍāʾil) of the revelation to Muhammad. This genre of writing starts to coalesce around the beginning of the third/ninth century,\(^1\) as evinced by the respective musannaf collections of ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) and Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), both of which contain sections dedicated to the subject. With the Fadāʾil al-Qurʾān of Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224/838), we have an early example of an entire monograph organised under this particular rubric. While the traditions gathered in these collections are drawn from sayings ascribed to the Prophet, the Companions and early jurists, which were in circulation during the second/eighth century,\(^2\) the genre as a literary form comes to reflect theological concerns as they developed in the course of the third/ninth and forth/tenth centuries.\(^3\)

These writings draw inspiration from the Qur’an, which itself repeatedly emphasises the special nature of the revelation as a central theme. Scholars such as William Graham and Daniel Madigan have pointed out that one of the unique characteristics of the Qur’an is its awareness of itself as a scripture very much configured in terms of an oral communication.\(^4\) A sustained focus within the Qur’an highlights the revelation as an otherworldly, inimitable articulation. The unbelievers (mushrikūn) consistently react to the Qur’an with the refrain this is obvious magic (ḥādhā sihrun mubīn),\(^5\) while when the jinn listen on they exclaim that this is a wonderful recitation! (qurʾānān ʿajaban).\(^6\) This miraculous intrusion of the divine into human history is repeated in the Qur’an with the recurring challenge for humankind and the jinn to come together to try to produce something which could rival the divine revelation received by Muḥammad.\(^7\)

As for the collection of the oral revelation into the physical form of writing, one of the central concerns surrounding early Muslim narratives on the codification of the Qur’an is the question as to what extent the written form of the text reflects the original divine communication to Muḥammad.\(^8\) According to Muslim accounts a bifurcation between oral and written lines of transmission, concomitant with the
variae lectiones (qirāʾāt) – themselves expressed both orally and textually – characterises the early dissemination of the Qurʾan.\(^9\) The dichotomous relationship between the oral and the textual is further accentuated in a leitmotif which runs throughout the Qurʾānic discourse concerning a divine urschrift, referred to as the original scripture (umrn al-kitāb, Q. 43:4), preserved upon a heavenly tablet (al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz, Q. 85:22).\(^10\) This heavenly archetype is very much akin to the pre-existent Torah of Judaism,\(^11\) and is a concept found in other scriptural traditions which stretch across the ancient religious landscapes of Mesopotamia.\(^12\)

With the semantic nexus surrounding the words inzāl and tanzīl, the Qurʾān depicts the revelation as a downward movement from heaven to humanity. The charismatic quality of scripture in both oral and written terms is articulated in Q. 56:77–9, It is a noble recitation (qurʾān karīm) in a hidden scripture (kītābin maknūn), which only the pure touch (lā yamassuḫu illāʾl-muṭahharūn). Thus, the unique and sanctified character of the revelation as manifest both aurally and textually is already expressed in the Qurʾān. The radical uniqueness of the revelation is repeated throughout the Ḥadīth literature surrounding the faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān, in the belief that divine presence and tranquility (sakīna), directly connected to the Hebrew shekhīnā and the Syriac shekīnāthā, descends over the body when reciting the Qurʾān.\(^13\)

The Qurʾānic discourse refers to the revelation as glad tidings (bushrā), serving as a guide (hudā) and a mercy (raḥma) for humanity.\(^14\) This configuration around the illuminating power of revelation points to the larger role of the Qurʾān in salvation history. The eschatological importance of the Qurʾān is also crystallised in early Ḥadīth literature. In the faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān section of Ibn Abī Shaybaʾs Muṣannaf, the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. ca 59/679) is recorded as saying, ‘Blessed is the interceding (al-shafti) Qurʾān for the one who possesses it on the Day of Resurrection’.\(^15\) Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) relates on the authority of the companion Abū Umāma al-Bāhili (d. ca 81/700) a similar account, ascribed to the Prophet, ‘Recite the Qurʾān, for on the Day of Resurrection it will be an intercessor (shāfi) for those who possess it (li-aṣḥābihi)’.\(^16\) The idea that the Qurʾān can intercede on behalf of the believer appears as a central feature to the eschatological currents running throughout the faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān literature.\(^17\) ʿAbd al-Razzāq in his Muṣannaf and al-Dārīmī (d. 255/869) in his Ḥadīth collection record a saying attributed to Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652–3), famous Companion and early reciter, that the Qurʾān is the ‘rope of God’, an intercessor, whose wonders never cease (lā tangaḏīʿajāʾibuhu).\(^18\) In other collections, a similar statement concerning the never-ending marvels of the Qurʾān is ascribed directly to the Prophet.\(^19\)

Attitudes toward the special status of the Qurʾān, both in its oral articulation and its written form, go through a radical transformation with the controversy surrounding the question of the temporality of Godʾs speech and the createdness of the Qurʾān, which
comes to dominate theological debates by the end of the second/eighth century. One of the consequences of this controversy is that the ways in which the oral and written forms of the Qur’an are conceptualised come to take on explicit theological meanings. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), for example, in his Ta’wil mukhtalif al-ḥadīth, speaks directly to rationalist theologians (ašhāb al-kalām) when he argues that the Qur’anic aya only the purified touch it (Q. 56:77–9) and the Prophetic ḥadīth ‘do not travel with the Qur’an into the land of the enemy’ both demonstrate that the physical codex (muṣḥaf) is veritably one and the same as the divine, uncreated Qur’an, and not just an indication (dalil) of it.

In contrast, Dāwūd al-Īṣbaḥānī (d. 270/884), the founding leader of the Zāhiriyya, draws on the same Qur’anic aya to argue that the heavenly Qur’an, which is in a hidden book (kitāb makhnūn), is uncreated, while that ‘which is in our midst’ (bayna aẓhurinā) is created and temporal. From this, he claims that menstruants and those in a state of major impurity (junub) may indeed touch the muṣḥaf, an opinion which stands in contradistinction to the dominant juridical discourse on the matter. Ultimately, this is a legal position upheld by the later Zāhiriyya. Such is the case with Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), the prominent Zāhiri jurist of Cordoba, who contends that the Qur’anic aya only the purified touch it is not a prohibition (nahī), but a statement of fact, referring to how angels touch the heavenly scripture; and that the Prophet himself is known to have sent letters to ritually impure in fiđels (kuffār), containing Qur’anic ayas calling them to Islam. Ibn Ḥazm takes this as justification for letting menstruants, those in a state of major impurity and infidels all handle the codex. The position of the Zāhiriyya on this issue reflects a broader process of trying to work out the relationship between the divine revelation and its material manifestation in human existence.

The growing significance of the faḍā’il al-Qur’ān literature, in a sectarian milieu marked by competing visions over the nature and function of scripture, suggests an attempt at delineating the centrality of the Qur’an, not only vis-à-vis the importance of Ḥadīth, but also within an increasingly tense theological debate concerning scripture itself. As a genre, the very function of the faḍā’il al-Qur’ān is to draw attention to the centrality of scripture, a centrality which is arguably part of the Qur’an’s self-image, itself very much conceived of as an oral revelation. We can trace within this literature, however, an effort to collapse together the oral and material expressions of the Qur’an as not only equivalent articulations, but as equally sanctified. This process of suturing the oral to the written develops out of a historical context where the use of writing in the spheres of learning and ritual praxis itself had been hotly debated.

Throughout this literature there is a recurring emphasis on the eschatological power of the Qur’an to intercede on behalf of humanity. This charismatic capacity is often
configured through a metaphoric language of corporality, which highlights a confluence between the oral and material expressions of scripture. The homiletic force of Abū ʿUbayd’s Fadāʾil al-Qurʾān leaves no doubt that believers should embrace the Qurʾān for its power of intercession, with an explicit eye toward the Day of Resurrection. The notion that one who possesses the Qurʾān is protected come the end of time not only accords to the Qurʾān a special role in the mediation between the divine and the human, but, as figurative language, speaks to the materiality of scripture, suggesting that through the process of memorisation (ḥifẓ) one internalises the Qurʾān and thus comes to possess it and be protected by it.28 Similarly, the common figurative expression found throughout these sources of ‘bearers of the Qurʾān’ (hamalat al-Qurʾān) as a designation for those who have memorised and thus ‘carry’ scripture, underscores a further collapsing together of the oral and the physical in the discursive imaginaire.

As mentioned above, one of the main aims of the fadāʾil al-Qurʾān literature is to highlight the primary role of scripture in the course of human affairs. This centrality is echoed in a range of discourses, as, for example, is the case in the various writings detailing the Prophetic medicine (al-ṭibb al-nabawi) practiced by Muḥammad and the Companions, where the recitation of Qurʾānic ayas is repeatedly used in conjunction with the preparation and ingestion of herbal remedies.29 Such sentiments concerning the otherworldly power of the revelation, as expressed in the Qurʾān, the Prophetic Ḥadīth and the sayings of the Companions, point not only to the power of the words, but also to the special nature of the physical object of the codex itself. Given its unique importance, it is not surprising to see, from an early period, the material Qurʾān used in an entire range of theurgical practices, from amulets and talismans to bibliomancy (jaʾl al-Qurʾān) and divination.30 The practice, for example, of ingesting Qurʾānic ayas written down on paper or other media comes under scrutiny by early jurists interested in maintaining the ritual purity of the Qurʾān.31 The emphasis on internalising scripture, both literally and figuratively, gives rise to questions concerning the charismatic status of the physical Qurʾān as a written text.

‘Fire Cannot Harm It’

These inquiries into the power of the Qurʾān as text and object intersect not only with the issues of sanctity (ḥurma) and purity (ṭāhira), but also with a broad range of problems regarding the nature of the divine message. Of specific concern is the relationship between the Qurʾān as divine speech and the physical codex as the receptacle for the word of God. Of the many sources of contention, one particular Prophetic Ḥadīth serves as a site of a sustained debate. Tracing the reception and interpretation of this saying enables us to survey a diverse set of responses concerning the nature of the physical codex as a vessel of revelation.
Abū ʿUbayd is one of our earliest sources for this ḥadīth, which appears in his Fadāʾil al-Qurʾān. He relates on the authority of the Companion ʿUqba ibn ʿĀmir (fl. first/seventh century), who heard the Prophet say, ‘If the Qurʾān were on an untanned hide and then thrown into a fire, it would not burn’ (law kāna al-Qurʾān fi ihāb thumma ʿulqiya fīʾl-nār la-mā ihtaraqa’). This statement comes to engender an entire range of interpretations, all of which make some kind of claim about the nature of the charismatic power of the Qurʾān in relationship to the material world. For his part, Abū ʿUbayd interprets this saying figuratively to mean that the hide is the heart (qalb) of the believer, and is the vessel in which the Qurʾān is memorised. According to him, this ḥadīth affirms that the believer who has memorised the Qurʾān will not suffer hellfire on the Day of Judgment.

While this saying disseminates throughout the body of writings focusing on the ḥadīth literature in general, it is with Ibn Qutayba in his Taʾwil mukhtalif al-ḥadīth that we see a fuller exploration into the theological implications of this individual Prophetic tradition. It is of note that the discussion concerning the significance of this ḥadīth takes place in the context of an explicitly theological work, which, in the style of a heresiography, sets out to champion the partisans of Prophetic tradition (ahl al-ḥadīth) over the practitioners of speculative theology (ahl al-kalām). The introduction of this work refutes the ways in which various factions (firaq), such as the Khawārij, the Murjiʿa, the Muʿtazila and the Shiʿa, have used and interpreted Prophetic ahādīth to advance positions which Ibn Qutayba holds to be heretical.

Ibn Qutayba opens his discussion by citing a group who argued that this ḥadīth is patently false, as Qurʾanic codices are known to burn just like other books. In order to counter such a claim and to elucidate a saying which seems to invest the physical Qurʾān with a miraculous power to withstand fire, Ibn Qutayba advances three explanations. First, he quotes the Basran philologist al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828), who argues, like Abū ʿUbayd in his Fadāʾil al-Qurʾān, for an allegorical signification, where the hide stands in for a person. Ibn Qutayba explains this to mean that the body of a man who has memorised the Qurʾān will not be punished on the Day of Resurrection. He draws his second explanation from an unidentified group of people who assert that, during the lifetime of the Prophet, fire indeed could not harm the physical Qurʾān. This, they explain, served as a miracle (muʿjiza) proving the veracity of Muhammad’s prophethood. In these two interpretations lies a divergence between an allegorical reading, supporting the figurative internalisation of the Qurʾān, versus a literal reading, which invests the physical mushaf with miraculous power.

It is, however, in his last explanation where Ibn Qutayba engages most obviously with the question of the material form of the Qurʾān in relationship to divine speech. Here he argues that the antecedent of mā ihtaraqa (‘it would not burn’) refers not to the
hide, but to the Qur’an. Such a distinction, between the hide and the text written on it, separates the Qur’an as the speech of God from the material medium on which it is recorded. Ibn Qutayba argues that while the leather and ink might burn, the Qur’an would not, for it is as though God has lifted it up right off the hide and protected it from the fire. This final line of argumentation alludes to the divine urtext of the Qur’an, as protected by God from all harm.38

Ibn Qutayba, however, when suggesting that God lifts the Qur’an up off the hide, is quick to distance himself from the theologians (aṣḥāb al-kalām) who argue that the material codex is merely an indication (dalīl) of the true Qur’an, which due to its eternality cannot subside in a material manifestation. He stresses that the Qur’an does exist literally (ʿalā ʿl-haqīqa) and not figuratively (ʿalā majāz) in its physical form.39 Such a configuration suggests, as some of Ibn Qutayba’s later interpreters have understood, that the Qur’an as text does indeed have a miraculous power to withstand fire.40 Needless to say, while this interpretation falls in line with Ibn Qutayba’s broader proto-Hanbalī theology,41 it would seem to run contrary to his position concerning the human, physical articulation (lafẓ) of the Qur’an, which he held to be created and temporal.42

It is in the theological realm that a succeeding generation of scholars, such as al-Ṭāhāwī (d. 321/933),43 Ibn Mahdī (d. ca 385/995)44 and Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015),45 come to interpret this saying, all within a discourse of resolving theological problems raised in the corpus of Prophetic traditions (i.e. taʾwillsharḥ mushkil al-ḥadīth).46 Following in large part Ibn Qutayba, the Ḥanafī jurist al-Ṭāhāwī offers two interpretations. The first gives a figurative meaning to the saying, explaining away any literal attempt to understand how a physical copy of the Qur’an could withstand fire. The second is akin to what Ibn Qutayba suggests in his third interpretation, namely, that God protects the Qur’an from burning by lifting the text of the Qur’an up off the hide.47 Thus, it is the hide which burns and not the Qur’an.

In the case of this particular ḥadīth, we find with the Ashʿarī theologians Ibn Mahdī and Ibn Fūrak an explicit rejection of the notion that the eternal Qur’an itself could reside in a material medium. They both argue, in contrast, that this saying supports the Ashʿarī position that the Qur’an, when written on a tablet or on leather, is not actually residing in a physical form, for it is not possible for divine speech to dwell within the vessel of writing.48

This view of the speech of God and its relationship to the Qur’an serves as a standard position in Ashʿarī theology, where divine kalām is an eternal attribute, equivalent to God’s eternal commandment (al-amr al-azālī), whereas the Qur’an written down in a material form is an expression (ʿībāra) of divine, undifferentiated kalām.49 Such a move links the heavenly tablet (al-lawḥ al-mahfūz) and the Qur’an written in codices as both mimetic copies of God’s eternal speech. Key to this distinction is the
separation of ‘inner speech’ (al-kalām al-nafṣī), which is an eternal and an essential quality of God, and ‘articulated speech’ (al-kalām al-lafẓī), which is temporally expressed.⁵⁰

It is in such a light that the Ashʿarī theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) turns to this ḥadīth in his al-Hṣāf fi-mā yujab iʿtiqāduhu, a credal and theological work aimed in large measure against Muʿtazilī and Ḥanbalī theologians. Al-Bāqillānī argues that by this saying the Prophet did not mean that the leather, the ink and the written letters of the Qurʾan (al-ḥurūf al-muṣawwara) would not burn, but rather that the eternal speech of God, which is the Qurʾan, cannot be harmed, for it is not conceivable for the eternal to be burned or destroyed. For al-Bāqillānī, this line of argumentation is explicitly set against those who argue that the eternal Qurʾan dwells in the temporal vehicles of language and writing and, as such, addresses the Ḥanbalī notion that the human articulation of the Qurʾan is veritably the same as God’s eternal speech.⁵¹

**Divine Deterrence and Demonic Temptation**

Such a panoply of interpretations highlights how this particular ḥadīth is axiomatic of broader theological issues. One of the most provocative responses in this examination of the intersection of material existence and divine revelation comes from the Imāmī jurist, theologian and all around adīb of Baghdad, al-Sharīf al-Murtada (d. 436/1044). In his collected literary and theological lectures, the Ghurar al-fawāʾid wa-durar al-qalāʾid, he brings to the topic a perspective highly influenced by Muʿtazilī theology. Al-Murtada challenges Ibn Qutayba’s analysis of this saying by recounting a refutation offered by the philologist and exegete Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940).⁵² In the process, al-Murtada sets out to demonstrate the folly of both men, while putting forth an interpretation which to many would appear to be quite radical.

The focus of al-Murtada’s argument centres on the nature of the Qurʾan as language and as a material object. Al-Murtada refutes the claim that there is any charismatic element to the physical form of the Qurʾan which would prevent it from being burned, either by God lifting up the text off the leather, or by the hide itself withstanding the flames.⁵³ He also goes on to reject the theory that the physical codex of the Qurʾan was impervious to fire during the lifetime of the Prophet, for if that were the case, he argues, than why would this particular miracle have been hidden from all the Companions who related each of the Prophet’s miraculous feats. Furthermore, al-Murtada ridicules Ibn Qutayba’s suggestion that anyone could just memorise the Qurʾan and thus escape the fire of damnation. He concludes that if this were so, then everyone who was juridically bound to follow the religious law (i.e. al-mukallafūn) would need only to rely on memorising the Qurʾan and could go about sinning completely safe in their minds, free from fear of punishment.
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For al-Murtadā this *hadīth* functions as a rhetorical adage (‘ālā ẓarīq al-maṭḥal) used to aggrandise (ta‘zīm) the status of the revelation to Muḥammad. Accordingly, the Qur’an has nothing to do with material elements, not the leather, nor the ink, and thus is distinct from the written object itself (al-maktūb). As he argues:

The Qur’an in reality (fī’l-ḥaqīqa) does not reside (yaḥull) in leather; as it is not in leather, this *ḥadīth* can ascribe burning to leather and not to the Qur’an. And since this is case, [Ibn Qutayba’s] claim that the hide is burned and not the Qur’an is pointless, for this is the situation for all speech (kalām), which is written on a hide or any other material.

On this issue al-Murtadā stresses that the Qur’an has no special linguistic superiority (maziyya), which would separate it from any other form of speech, either poetry or prose. He argues that the oral and textual dissemination of any given linguistic expression depends upon temporal preservation. Accordingly, as a written articulation, it is like any oral expression which has been written down, such as the poetry of Imrūʾ al-Qays (d. ca 550 AD) or the juridical teachings of al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820). Thus, al-Murtaḍā concludes, if the Qur’an were only written on a single leather hide and not preserved in the minds of humans, were that hide to burn, then the sacred text would be lost forever.

By locating the miracle in something other than the textual expression of revelation, al-Murtaḍā turns to the role that divine intervention plays in the formation of the Qur’anic challenge (taḥaddī). To fully understand al-Murtadā’s position on this *ḥadīth* and its implications for the oral and textual forms of the Qur’an, we must understand his broader approach to scripture and divine speech. As a student of the Imāmī scholar al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1032), al-Murtaḍā developed a theology heavily shaped by Muʿtazilī rationalism, particularly with regard to the justice (ʿadl) of God and the monotheistic emphasis on God’s oneness (tawḥīd) as determinate factors in the refutation of an eternal, uncreated Qur’an. Despite this close intellectual affinity with Muʿtazilī thought, al-Murtaḍā spends a good deal of his energy questioning many of their teachings. To this end, he dedicates an entire monograph on the inimitability of the Qur’an, al-Mudīḥ ‘an jihat i’jāz al-Qur’ān, aimed at challenging the theories promoted by such Muʿtazilī theologians as Abū’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) and al-Qādī ʿAbd al-Jabbar (d. 415/1024), who locate the miracle of the Qur’an in its linguistic arrangement (naẓm) and eloquence (jusāhā), respectively. Throughout this work, which he summarises in his later theological compendium, al-Dhakhīra fi ʿilm al-kalām, al-Murtaḍā sets out to promote the notion of divine deterrence (ṣarfā) as the probative dimension of Qur’anic inimitability.

There are several key points to keep in mind when considering al-Murtaḍā’s interpretation of this *ḥadīth*. As with his master al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, al-Murtaḍā distances himself from the early Shiʿī claim that additional ayas were secretly added to
the Qur’an (ziyāda).  

He too comes to reject the early Imāmī claim that the ʿUthmānic text is incomplete and contains omissions (nuqṣān), a position which gains favor amongst the Usūlis. Al-Murtaḍā, influenced by the Muʿtazilī doctrine of the created Qur’an, believes the Qur’an to be temporally produced (muḥdath), and not eternal. Furthermore, he upholds the theory of ʿarfa, namely the idea that God intervened to prevent humanity from rivaling the Qur’an, as the probative factor of its inimitability and of Muhammad’s prophethood. These positions taken together serve to situate the Qur’an as a temporally disseminated revelation, whose miracle lies neither in its language nor message, but in divine deterrence.

We should note that the theory of divine deterrence is a position promoted by a number of early Muʿtazila, such as Ibrāhīm al-Nazẓām of Basra (d. ca 220/835), along with many of the Baghdad Muʿtazila, as for example al-Rummānī (d. 384/994), who lists ʿarfa as one of the causes of inimitability in his treatise al-Nukat fī iʿjāz al-Qurʾān. However, a good number of the Muʿtazila object to this theory, as is the case with al-Qādī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, who throughout his writings vocally champions linguistic superiority and eloquence (faṣāha) as explanations for Qur’anic inimitability.

Al-Murtaḍā, in contrast, argues that the Qur’an is ultimately made up of the eloquence of the Arabs, and though it might differ from their customary literary form, the difference is not so great that they would have been unable to match it. He rejects the concept that the Qur’anic miracle is based upon events, future or past, that would have been unknown to the Prophet (al-akhbār ʿan al-ghuyūb), as does he refuse to recognise the Qur’an as miraculous merely because it appeals to reason and contains no contradictions. The premise that the miracle of the Qur’an lies in its character as the eternal, uncreated word of God means absolutely nothing to him, for he upholds the Qur’an as temporally contingent, consisting of letters and sounds, which are written, recited and heard. Like all other forms of linguistic expression, the Qur’an is meaningful speech (al-kalām al-mufīd), which occurs in time through successive ordering of words, one word after another. In this regard al-Murtaḍā sees no difference between the linguistic position of the Qur’an and all other forms of language. For this reason he rejects that the Qur’an is miraculous either on stylistic or rhetorical grounds.

As for the question of naẓm, he turns to the theory of the Muʿtazili theologian Abū’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, who in his ʿUyūn al-masāʿīl waʾl-jawābāt championed the stylistic arrangement (naẓm) and composition (taʿlīf) of the Qur’an as being beyond the reach of humans, equal to raising the dead or healing the blind. For al-Murtaḍā what is meant by naẓm is the successive arrangement of words (ḥurfūf) into a specific stylistic form, such that the naẓm of poetry differs from that of prose, as the words are arranged using a differing stylistic order (tarkīb). Though al-Murtaḍā acknowledges...
that the naẓm of the Qur’an differs from all other forms of speech (ḍurūb al-kalām), he does not believe this is sufficient cause for the inimitability of the Qur’an. As he argues, whoever has the power of words is capable of arranging them and placing them in any given order. Without acknowledging it, al-Murtadā sides momentarily with ʿAbd al-Jabbār, when stating that the superiority of speech does not lie in its formal stylistic arrangement, as one poet might offer a better poem than a rival, though both poets share the same metre.

Though rhetorical eloquence (faṣāḥa), unlike formal genre, has a clear subjective dimension, for al-Murtadā it too does not sufficiently explain the problem of inimitability. On this issue, he challenges ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s premise that the superiority of the Qur’an occurs through its linguistic excellence. According to al-Murtadā, as mentioned above, the Qur’an is ultimately made up of the eloquence of the Arabs, and though it might differ from their customary literary form, the difference is not so great that they would have been unable to match it. Al-Murtadā does not deny that the Qur’an is an eloquent expression, but he argues that there is not any form of eloquence which could be beyond the reach of humankind, and, as such, eloquence itself cannot form the basis of a miracle.

Having discounted all other theories, al-Murtadā turns to divine intervention as the only viable explanation as to why the Arabs were unable to meet the challenge. On this issue, he emphasises the absurdity of the claim that due to the superior eloquence of the Qur’an the Arabs were unable to produce something to rival even the shortest chapter, Sūrat al-Kawthar, which consists of only three ayas. Such a hypothesis is anathema to al-Murtadā’s notion of language and scripture. Though one of the obvious consequences of ṣarfa is the devaluation of the Qur’an as a special linguistic form, the power of God to intervene in the course of human history is in no way diminished. On this point al-Murtadā rejects the claim made by ʿAbd al-Jabbār and others which holds that if one believes in divine intervention then the Qur’an ceases to be a miracle. Al-Murtadā refutes this by explaining that the Qur’an is indeed an inimitable miracle, which humankind is incapable of equalling or approaching, but that the cause of this inimitability is not located in the temporal medium of language. According to him the doctrine of ṣarfa is the only way of understanding why the Qur’an remains unrivalled.

Al-Murtadā pushes the point, claiming that there is no form of eloquence which would be beyond human capacity. He holds that the Qur’an is not a miracle in and of itself (bi-nafsihi), nor does it break with the natural course of events (ʿāda) merely through its eloquence; rather, it is an indication of what is the miracle in truth (ʿalāʾl-ḥaqīqa), namely that God has prevented humankind from achieving its likeness.

Furthermore, al-Murtadā sees the doctrine of ṣarfa as the only way to demonstrate that the Qur’an is not a demonic deception or temptation aimed at misleading the world.
For him, the problem with the theory that eloquence is the cause of Qur’anic inimitability is that humans have no way of determining the degree of eloquence possessed by the Devil or the jinn. Since language is temporal and contingent, it is well within the Devil’s power to master in order to tempt humanity. The notion that God prevented the Arabs from outdoing the Qur’an, according to al-Murtadā, sidesteps this problem altogether, as it locates the miracle not in language, which is necessarily contingent, but in a divine act.

The syllogistic logic buttressing his argumentation is based in the premise that God is just and does not seek corruption (istīfsād); thus no miracle of God can be evil; as the Devil may readily be capable of using eloquent language to tempt humankind, it is not possible that the miracle of the Qur’an be based purely on a vehicle of expression within the Devil’s capacity. Therefore, only a divine act which prevents humanity from rivaling the linguistic form of the Qur’an can serve as the miraculous proof of the truthfulness and benevolence of the revelation to Muḥammad.

Such a position concerning the status of the revelation as ultimately no different from any other linguistic form naturally divests the physical codex of the Qur’an of any charismatic power. It is for this reason that al-Murtadā is averse to the notion that the material form of the Qur’an possesses a miraculous capacity to withstand fire. Though al-Murtadā’s support for şarfa gains a significant amount of support in Imāmī Shī‘ī circles, eloquence (faṣāḥa) and stylistic arrangement (naẓm) are never entirely disregarded as probative causes of Qur’anic inimitability. Furthermore, as within Sunnī traditions, there is a broad acceptance amongst the Shī‘a of the miraculous power of the Qur’an as both a text and an object. The Akbhārī scholar al-Majlisi (d. 1110/1698), for example, in his monumental work the Biḥār al-anwār, outlines a range of charismatic powers accorded to the Qur’an, both as an oral revelation and as a physical form, echoing a discourse already present in the Kitāb al-kāfî by the Shī‘ī Ḥadīth scholar al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941).

**Without an Intermediary?**

In contrast to the Mu‘tazilī, Ash‘arī and Imāmī systems of thought, theologically the Ḥanābīla are foremost in according to the Qur’an an eternal presence within the material world. Throughout the heresiographical literature, the followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal are infamously accused of believing in a kind of divine indwelling (ḥulūl), when they argue that there is no difference between the recitation of the Qur’an (al-qirā’a) and that which is recited (al-maqrū’). In many of the heresiographies, this notion is paralleled to the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, positioning the sounds heard during recitation as themselves equal to divine speech, even though expressed through a human intermediary.
The Ashʿarī assertion that the material Qurʾan, in its temporal form as text and sound, is an expression (ʿibāra) of the undifferentiated, eternal speech of God, is directed as much to the Muʿtazilī argument for the created Qurʾan as to an unrestricted Ḥanbalī belief that the eternal word of God manifests directly in the temporal plane of human existence. This theory of mimetic mediation is echoed in Māturīdī kalām, similar in many points to Ashʿarī thought. Thus, on the relationship between eternal divine speech and the temporal letters and sounds of the Arabic Qurʾan, the Māturīdī theologian Abūʾl-Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1115), following in large part the Ashʿarī position, states that the Māturīdī imāms of Samarqand strongly disagree with the Ḥanbalīs, who, he argues, believe that that which is written in the codices and is recited from the Qurʾan is the same as the eternal word of God.

According to Abūʾl-Muʿīn, the Ḥanbalī belief suggests a divine indwelling in a temporal vehicle – a position that evokes a Christian-sounding notion of transubstantiation. In contrast, Abūʾl-Muʿīn advances the Māturīdī view that writing the Qurʾan in codices, reciting it on the tongue, and preserving it in the heart all point (dālla) to divine speech as a mimetic reproduction (ḥikāya) and expression (ʿibāra), but that none of these activities truly make the essence of God’s eternal speech reside in temporal vehicles. He stresses that the word “God”, mentioning God, worshipping God, and writing expressions which point to God, are not the same as God’s very essence. To demonstrate this, Abūʾl-Muʿīn draws on the analogy of translation to describe how it is that the speech of God, which is an eternal and indivisible divine attribute, can be expressed in the Arabic Qurʾan. He argues that this reflects the same process as when ‘a translator (tarjumān) expresses (yuʿabbiru) through an expression (ʿibāra) which is not the same as the original expression and through a language which is not same as the original language.’

In contrast to this portrayal, which fails to perceive a heterogeneity amongst the Ḥanbalīs on this issue, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the famed Ḥanbalī reformer, argues that while human recitation (tilāwa) replicates the uncreated speech of God, the temporal vessel through which it is articulated is created. Thus, the human voice and the ink in codices, which render the speech of God through the form of the Qurʾan, are both created. Divine speech, he argues, is itself nonetheless uncreated. Ibn Taymiyya records a debate between al-Qāḍī Yaʿqūb (d. 486/1093) and Ibn ʿAqīl (d. 513/1119), which is itself indicative of a movement amongst many Ḥanbalīs to distance themselves from the claim that the uncreated, eternal speech of God is manifested in temporal vessels such as the human voice and the written word. Ibn Taymiyya, however, develops this argument further by explicitly reformulating the meaning of eternality as a description of God’s speech. Thus, he sets out to examine the equation of an uncreated Qurʾan with an eternal Qurʾan. In doing so Ibn Taymiyya does not wish to theologically strip the Qurʾan, as the speech of God, of
its eternality; rather, he seeks to qualify the concept of what eternal, divine speech means.

To this end, the situation is slightly more complicated than Wilferd Madelung suggests when he argues that Ibn Taymiyya disavowed ‘the Ḥanbalite school doctrine of the eternity of the Qur’an’.96 To be sure, Ibn Taymiyya on various occasions argues that the pious forefathers (salaf) never explicitly stated that the speech of God was eternal (qdīm); rather, according to him, they only claimed that it was uncreated (ghayr makhlūq).97 Yet, in the course of several legal opinions (fatāwā) where these ideas are formulated, Ibn Taymiyya recognises that the uncreatedness of divine speech is itself an indication of its eternity. To this end, he upholds, albeit in a qualified sense, that the speech of God is eternal and that the Qur’an is itself this divine speech.

As Ibn Taymiyya outlines several times, the pious forefathers believed that God continues to speak as He wishes (‘lam yazal Allāh mutakalliman idhā shā’a’), and it is in this sense that he argues that divine speech is eternal.98 In support of this claim, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that ‘the words (kalimāt) of God have no end (lā nihāya lahā)’.99 He makes this move in order to re-examine the meaning of qadīm as a qualifier of God’s speech, arguing for the radical alterity of divine, uncreated kalām,100 which begins in and returns to God.101 This is done in direct opposition to the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī theologians who characterise God’s eternal speech as undifferentiated meaning (maʿnāwā ḥid), a position which, as we have seen, ultimately suggests that the revelation to Muḥammad is a translation into Arabic made by Gabriel, insofar as the Arabic Qur’an is a temporal expression of the eternal, indivisible speech of God. Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly baulks at such an idea as abhorrent.102 Furthermore, his qualification on the eternality of divine speech is also directed to those who, within the framework of Ḥanbalī theology, equate the ink of the codices and the sounds of the human recitation as being the very same as the eternal speech of God. This is also a notion which Ibn Taymiyya fervently rejects.103

It is of note that, despite these vocal objections, the structural outline of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology of divine speech strongly echoes Ashʿarī and Māturīdī frameworks, particularly regarding the notion of intermediation between divine, uncreated eternal speech and the material realm of temporal existence. As Ibn Taymiyya argues, the Qur’an is the speech of God, which is established in the codices (huwa muthbat fī’l-maṣāḥif). This divine speech disseminates from Him (muballaghan ‘anhu); nonetheless it is heard from reciters (qurrā’), and not heard directly from God. To clarify this, Ibn Taymiyya draws the analogy of how humans can see heavenly bodies, such as the sun or moon, either directly (bi-ṭarīq al-mubāḥshara), or through an intermediary (bi’l-wāṣīta), such as a reflection in water or a mirror. Likewise, he argues, humans hear uncreated, divine speech through an intermediary; however, just as the vision of the sun or moon in water is a reflection of
these heavenly bodies, so too is the speech of God through the intermediary of the physical codex and the human voice also a reflection of this divine, uncreated speech.104

For Ibn Taymiyya this ‘reflection’ does not in any way distort the formal quality of the revelation; it is not translated from undifferentiated speech into Arabic, and in this regard his conception of mediation is distinct from the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī doctrinal position on this issue. As Ibn Taymiyya argues, the nature of the Qur’an, as unmediated divine speech, in its very essence is an Arabic articulation.105 Such a delineation suggests a more immediate presence of the uncreated, eternal speech of God as it refracts through the material realm, written and intoned.

In a similar vein, the famous Ḥanbālī mystic ‘Uthmān ibn Marzūq (d. 564/1169) is recorded as having formulated a parallel distinction: ‘faith is uncreated in its words as well as in its works; the movements of man are certainly created, but the eternal looms (yaẓhar) in them, just as the speech [of God] looms in the utterances of man [when reciting the Qur’an]’.106 It is thus not surprising to hear how Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal himself interpreted the hadīth that fire would not burn the Qur’an to mean that the person whose heart has memorised the scared scripture would escape the fire of damnation,107 suggesting that by internalising the Qur’an the body becomes a vessel protected by divine speech. As Ibn Taymiyya argues in his reformulation of the significance of the uncreated Qur’an, the speech of God is intoned in the body of the believer through acts of memorisation and recitation; to this end he cites, on several occasions, the Prophetic hadīth ‘a belly without a bit of the Qur’an in it is like a broken-down house’,108 suggesting a full internalisation of divine speech within the temporal vessel of the human body.109

While we can readily survey a broad theological spectrum concerning the status of revelation as manifested in a physical form, in terms of praxis the Qur’an in the daily lives of Muslims, both as text and object, often takes on an other-worldly power. Such sentiments concerning the unique role of the revelation, as expressed in the Qur’an, the Prophetic Hadīth, and the sayings of the Companions, not only point to the power of the words, but also to the special nature of the material form of the Qur’an itself.110 Given its unique importance, it is not surprising to see, from an early period, the physical Qur’an used in a wide array of practices, such as the making of amulets and talismans and the tradition of bibliomancy, not to mention the ingestion of specific ayas for medicinal and divinatory purposes.111 Although such practices of veneration toward the Qur’an as a material object have a very early history, many already present in a nascent form by the second/eighth century, with the rise of Muṭṣazili rationalism the power of the physical Qur’an emerges as a theological point of continued debate. It is thus inside the framework of what evolve into pre-existing categories that theologians came to question how it was that fire could not harm the Qur’an.
NOTES

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6 Q. 72:1.

7 Q. 2:23; Q. 10:38; Q. 11:13; Q. 17:88; Q. 52:34.


‘Fire Cannot Harm It’


12 Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, pp. 50–1.


23 For an overview of the early juridical opinions concerning touching the Qur’an in a state of impurity, see my article, ‘Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur’an’ (forthcoming in the Journal of the American Oriental Society); also see M.J. Kister, ‘La yamassahu illa ‘l-mutahharān… Notes on the Interpretations of a Qur’anic Phrase’, Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 34 (2008), pp. 309–314. I would like to thank Yohanan Friedmann for sharing with me a copy of this article prior to its publication.


26 See for instance, Q. 4:153 and Q. 6:7. Daniel Madigan argues that the Qur’an depicts itself fundamentally as an oral articulation, and that the repeated recourse to such figures as kitāb, šuhuf and zubūr fits into a broader semantic pattern of metaphors focusing on the central importance of orality. Thus, he concludes that the divine address ‘bears the name kitāb not because of its form (which remains oral, fluid, and responsive) but because of its origin and its nature as a communication of God’s knowledge’ (Madigan, The Qur’ān’s Self-Image, p. 164).


In his introduction, Ibn Fūrak references the work of Ibn Mahdī (*Kitāb muskīl al-ḥadīth*, p. 7). Daniel Gimaret, in his edition, highlights the strong influence of Ibn Mahdī’s *Ta‘wil* on Ibn Fūrak; this work exists as a manuscript preserved in the Dār al-Kutub, Cairo (491 majā‘ī‘); see Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb muskīl*, ‘Muqaddimā‘, pp. 23ff.


This saying also appears in the *gharīb al-ḥadīth* genre, as with al-Zamakhshārī (d. 538/1144), who argues that this *ḥadīth* functions merely as metaphor (*tanthīl*) for how by memorising the Qur‘an one internalises it and is thus protected from hellfire (al-Zamakhshārī, *al-Fā‘i‘iq fi gharīb al-ḥadīth* (4 vols. Cairo: l-ISā al-Bābh al-Halabī, 1969), vol. 1, p. 67). Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1210), in contrast, views the saying as a reference to a miracle which occurred during the time of the Prophet as proof of the divine power of the Qur‘an (Ibn al-Athīr, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), p. 288; see al-Suyūtī for a list of variants, *al-Ītqān*, vol. 5, p. 103–5.)


48 Gimirat comments how a large portion of Ibn Fūrāk’s interpretation of this hadīth is taken from Ibn Mahdī, who is quoted in the footnotes (Ibn Fūrāk, Kitāb mushkil, pp. 152–4).


52 Though al-Sharīf al-Murtada’s does not mention which of Ibn al-Anbārī’s works is his source, according to the list of titles attributed to Ibn al-Anbārī in the tabaqāt literature there are several obvious candidates, chief among them are the Gharīb al-hadīth, his treatise al-Radd ‘alā man khālaf mushaf ʿUthmān and the Risālat al-mushkil, said to refute both Ibn Qutayba and Ibn Abī Ḥātim, none of which appear to be extant; see Fuad Sezgin, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums (9 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1967–84), vol. 8, pp. 151–4.


60 While al-Shaykh al-Mufīd recognises that a large number of Imāmī theologians and jurists hold that the Qurʾān is not complete, he maintains its integrity (al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, Kitāb awāʾil al-maqāllāt, ed. Muḥād Muḥaqiq (Tehran: Muʿassasa-i Mutālāʾāt-i İslāmī, 1993), pp. 30–1).


62 Ibn Bābawāyah (d. ca 391/1001), for instance, famously stated that whoever claims that the Shiʿa believe there to be something missing from the collected Qurʾān is a liar (kādhīb) (Ibn Bābawāyah, Muṣānnafāt al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (14 vols. Qumm: al-Muʿtamar al-ʿAlamī li-İlfiyyat al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1413/1992–3), vol. 5, Risālat al-iʿtiqādāt, pp. 84–6). Ibn Bābawāyah does, however, wrestle with the Shiʿa hadīth reports which affirm that a much larger version of the Qurʾān had originally been revealed, stating that there are many revelations, not
all of which are the Qur’an (pp. 84–5). The result opens up a space for extra-Qur’anic revelation, effectively legitimising the traditions, for example, which affirm the rightful claims of ʿAli as valid, though not themselves as part of the Qur’an which we now possess; presumably this was the fate of ʿAli’s muḥṣaf, which Ibn Bābawayh asserts as the authentic copy of revelation, but which the early community ignored (p. 86). Cf. al-Ṭūsī, Tihyān fi tasārīr al-Qurʾān, ed. Āghā Buzurg al-Tībrānī (10 vols. al-Najaf: al-Maḥāra al-ʿIllīyya, 1957–63), vol. 1, p. 3; al-Ṭabarī, Majmaʿ al-bayān li-ʿulūm al-Qurʾān (10 vols. Beirut: Muʿassasat al-ʿAʾlamī li-l-Maḥābāt, 1995), vol. 1, p. 43; see also Etan Kohlberg, ‘Some Notes on the Imāmīte Attitude to the Qurʾān’ in S.M. Stern, A. Hourani and V. Brown, Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented to Richard Walzer (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 209–24. On how modern Twelver Shiʿī scholars have approached the issue concerning the integrity of the transmission of the Qurʾān, see Abū l-Qāsim al-Kūṭī, The Prolegomena to the Qurʾān, tr. Abdulaziz A. Sachedina (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 135–62.

63 Many Imāmī Shiʿa held that the Qurʾān was produced in time (muḥdath), but would not go so far as to say it was created (mahkhlūq). For an overview of opinions on this subject, see al-Majīṣi (d. 1110/1698), Biḥār al-anwār (110 vols. Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyya, 1376/1957), vol. 92, pp. 118–21; cf. Martin Mc Dermott, The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid (Beirut: Librarie orientale, 1978), pp. 90–1, pp. 353–5.

64 al-Asḥārī relates that al-Nazzām argued, ‘the sign and wondrous affair (uṣūbā) in the Qurʾān is what it contains in regard to accounts of the unseen realm; as for its structure (taʾlīf) and composition (naẓm) humankind would be capable of this, were it not that God prevented them by incapacitating them from achieving both’ (al-Asḥārī, Kitāb maqālāt al-ʿIlmīyyīn ed. Hellmut Ritter (2 vols. Istanbul: Maḥāra al-Dawla, 1929–30), vol. 1, p. 225; see also al-Khayyāt, Kitāb al-intiṣār, ed. H.S. Nyberg (Cairo: Maḥāra al-Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyya, 1925), p. 28; Ibn Tāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1038), al-Firāq bayn al-firaq, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktatab Muḥammad ʿAlī Subayh, n.d.), p. 229).


Abūʾl-Muʿīn, *Tabṣīra*, vol. 1, p. 301. Compare this with Abūʾl-Qāsim al-Samarqandi’s (d. 342/953) Ḥanafi creed, translated into Persian under the Sāmānīd ruler Nūh ibn Mānsūr (reg. 366/976–387/997), which folds this question of mediation back onto the issue of whether or not the Qurʾān can be destroyed when thrown into fire (Abūʾl-Qāsim al-Samarqandi *Tārjuma-i al-Sawād al-aʿẓam*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī (Tehran: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1969), pp. 116–7).

Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 12, pp. 248–50; Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes that while the human recitation of the Qurʾān is created, that which is recited is not (p. 250).


96 Madelung, ‘The Origins’, p. 513. It is of note that Madelung only cites from a small selection of Ibn Taymiyya’s fatāwā, taken from Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā’s edition Majmūʿat al-rasāʾīl waʾl-masāʾīl (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Manār, 1926), which is explicitly an abridgement; these same legal opinions, along with a fuller display of Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas on this issue, can be found in his complete collection of fatāwā.


98 ‘fa-kalāmuḥu qadīm bi-maʾnān annahu lam yazal mutakalliman idhā shīʿaʾ’ (Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, vol. 12, p. 19). As he later argues, ‘the salaf state that God continues to speak if he wishes, and if it were said that the speech of God is eternal (kalām Allāh qadīm), in the sense that He is not speaking after He stops to speak, and that His speech is not created and that [His speech] is not an eternal indivisible meaning (maʿnā wāḥid) residing in His essence, but rather He continues speaking if He wishes, then this statement is correct (ṣaḥīḥ)’ (vol. 12, p. 248).


105 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, vol. 12, p. 64.

106 The passage leading up to this quotation, found, according to Ibn Rajab, in one of Ibn Marzūq’s writings on ʿuṣūl al-dīn, details a debate as to whether or not Ibn Marzūq upheld the actions of humanity to be eternal (Ibn Rajab, al-Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila, ed. Abū Hāzim Usāma ibn Hasan et al. (4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 259–60, quoted by Wolfart Heinrichs, art. ‘Uthmān b. Marzūk’ in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn); as a technical term, the concept of immanence or manifestation (ẓuhūr) is developed to explicitly address the problem of divine indwelling (ḥulūl) (see Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, vol. 12, p. 82, p. 173).


109 Ibn Taymiyya quotes this ḥadīth and other Qur’anic ayas to support his argument that the pious salaf believed that ‘the Qur’ān which God had brought down to His servant and Prophet
is the speech (kalām) of God, is revealed and not created (ghayr mukhlūq); from Him it begins and to Him it returns; it is in the hearts (ṣudūr) of humanity’ (Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, vol. 12, pp. 104–5; cf. p. 129). He also cites this hadīth to argue against the notion of divine indwelling (ḥulūl): ‘whoever says that the Qur’ān is in the codices and in the hearts has spoken correctly (qad šadaqa) … whoever says the Qur’ān is written in the codices and memorised in the hearts, has spoken correctly; but whoever says that the ink, the paper, the attribute of the worshipper or his action, or his memorising or recitation is eternal or uncreated, this is a grave error’ (vol. 12, p. 247; cf. p. 105, p. 173).
