

## FREE WILL AND THE APPOINTED TERM (*AJAL E MUSSAMMA*)

There arose in the early centuries of Islam two theological sects on the problem of whether man was free or he was predetermined. In the history of Muslim theology these sects are known as the Predestinarians, and the Libertarians. According to the former, it is said, “there is no distinction between the actions that occur in the world including the actions which occur to man, and the actions which are performed by man.”<sup>1</sup> According to the latter, there is a distinction between actions that occur in the world — including actions which occur to man — and actions performed by man. The former actions admitted by all but two of the Libertarians<sup>2</sup> to be directly created by Allah; the latter actions are taken by them to be performed by man’s free will. With regard to their common belief in free will, there were certain differences among them: i) Some of the Libertarians believed that man from birth was endowed by Allah with the gift of free will. ii) Others believed that before each act Allah endowed man with such a power.<sup>3</sup> However, their assertion of free will, as Wolfson states,

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 734.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, p. 613. These two were Nazzäm and Mu‘ammar who believed in laws of nature and secondary causes. For details see p.559 of the same book.

<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as, according to all these Libertarians, the free will which man enjoyed was acquired by him as a gift from Allah, they referred to human action as “acquisition”(aksab), evidently having in mind, as Wolfson observes, “the fact that sometimes in the Qurän the term *kasaba*, (to acquire), is used synonymously with the term ‘*amala*, (to do)”. (Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, p. 734.)

confronted the Libertarian with two difficulties: First, how would he explain those verses in the Qurän which either directly or indirectly ascribe to Allah control over human action? Second, how would he reconcile the description of Allah in the Qurän as All-Knowing and All-Powerful with his (*i.e.*, libertarian's) conception of man's free will?<sup>4</sup> The antinomies which arose from these difficulties have been presented by Wolfson under five headings which include:

- i) the antinomy of freewill and the predestinarian verses in the Qurän;
- ii) the antinomy of free will and the appointed term (*Ajal Mussamma*);
- iii) the antinomy of free will and Allah's Fore-Knowledge;

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To use the term *kasaba* (to earn something with effort) in the sense of to acquire *i.e.*, in a sense in which it becomes opposite to the verb *Khalaqa* (to create) was not correct. However, it is worth mentioning here that this fact involved them in great confusion regarding the problem of free will & predestination. 'To earn' is not antonymous of 'to create'. The term *kasaba* (to acquire) has two senses: (i) *To earn i.e.*, to acquire something as a consequence of one's own effort' and, (ii) 'to get something as a gift & bestowment or as a trust (*i.e.*, to acquire something without one's effort at earning it). Man acquires life, its capabilities, and everything at his disposal when he is born, in the second sense of 'to acquire' but as gift or bestowment. Man also acquires 'freedom of will' when he is born, but as a 'trust' conditional to the maturity of intellect & moral consciousness in him. Man does not 'create' any of these things, he just 'acquires'. It is at the maturity of moral consciousness, that man 'acquires' the responsibility of exercising the trust of 'freedom of will' in the first sense of the word 'to acquire'. The term '*Kasaba*' (to acquire), in a context in which it is used in its second sense, can quite legitimately be used as antonymous to the word '*Khalaqa*' (to create). To use the term *kasaba* (to acquire) in a context in which its use only in its first sense (*i.e.*, to earn) is relevant, to use it as opposite to the term *Khalaqa* (to create) would be improper, incorrect and illegitimate.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, p. 655

iv) the antinomy of free will and Allah's Power.

v) the antinomy of free will and preordained sustenance.<sup>5</sup>

In this article we will examine only the second of these dilemmas. Moreover, we would neither be examining this dilemma on behalf of the libertarians (*i.e.*, the *M'utazilites*) nor on behalf of any other of the Muslim theologians, but from the point of view of what we consider to be the original teachings of Islam. We firmly believe that predestinarian views had never been coherent with the original teachings of Islam as described in the Qurän. In order to substantiate this understanding we shall reconstruct the concepts of 'the appointed term' and its 'inexorability' in the light of the Quränic teachings.

Wolfson states that the Libertarians believed in the preordination of man's term of life as expressed in the Quränic teaching of "an appointed term" of life, that is, of the *ajal* (06:02). Wolfson further states that Ash'ari taking it for granted supposes that they would also accept the Quränic teaching that the *ajal* is inexorable(7:34; 63:11). "Then, having in mind the M'utazilite's (the Libertarians) belief in the freedom of will, which as Ash'ari thinks, includes the freedom of will to kill, says that the M'utazilite's (libertarians) may be asked: Tell us then about him whom someone kills violently ----- do you think that he is killed in his appointed term, or rather at his appointed term?" He thus confronts the M'utazilite (the libertarian) with a dilemma that:

"If one believes in an inexorable appointed term, then the act of killing had to take place at the appointed term, whence it is not a free act; and if one

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 660 & 663.

believes in free will, then the act of killing could take place at any time it pleased the killer, whence the appointed term is not inexorable.”<sup>6</sup>

The M’utazilites being libertarians, could in no way accept the first part of the dilemma, so the only alternative for them would have been to meet the question of ‘what would happen to the killed, if the killer, by the exercise of his free will, does not kill him at what is supposed to be his appointed term *i.e.*, *ajal*? Ash‘ari, in his *Maqalat* reports the following four solutions which had been offered by the different sects of the M’utazilites:<sup>7</sup> Before we examine the dilemma on our own, let us see how did the M’utazilites meet this problem.

I) That a man’s *ajal* is the time until which God knows that he will last if he is not killed, and not the time at which he is killed. This view implies that there is an *ajal* as Qurān teaches; but a killer can undo that divinely decreed *ajal* by using his free choice.

II) Ash‘ari states another view on the name of Abu al Hudhayl: That the man would die at the time of *ajal* even if he were not killed. What would this view seem to mean is that (i) the *ajal* is inexorable; (ii) that God has a foreknowledge of the act as well as of the time of the killing, but that, that foreknowledge is not the cause of either the act or the time of killing, so that the killing at that particular time is the free choice of the killer; (iii)

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 657. Wolfson cites with reference to Ash‘ari’s *Kitāb al-Ibana*, p.76, ll, 4-5; & 1, 6; & ll. 7-8, Hyderabad: 1321 A.H.[1903]. Cf. W. C. Klean, *The Elucidation of Islam’s Foundation*, Eng. trans. of *Al-Ibanah ‘An Usul Ad-Diyanah*. by Abu‘l-Hasan ‘Ali Ibn Ismail al-Ash‘ari, New Heaven: American Oriental Society, 1940. p.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, p.657-60

that God synchronizes the *ajal* with the freely chosen time of the killing foreknown to him.<sup>8</sup>

III)(a) The third view as described by Ash'ari in the name of other Mutazilites is: that if the murderer did not kill him, he might either die or live. This view can be interpreted to imply either a denial of the *ajal* or a denial of God's foreknowledge of the murderer's free act of killing.

(b) Another view based on a tradition which mentions the fact that some acts of obedience prolong one's span of life is as follows: If the man before his being killed deserves a prolongation of his span of life by reason of 'some acts of obedience', he will live; if not, he will die at the time at which he would have been killed which is also the time of his *ajal*.

IV) Some others, as stated by Ash'ari, consider the preceding III(a) view as impossible. Their objection to this view seems to be on the ground of its denial of God's foreknowledge of the time of the murderer's free act of killing.

In order to examine the dilemma as well as the proposed solutions, we need (1) to determine the Qurānic concept of "the appointed term" (*ajal*) and the Qurānic concept

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<sup>8</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, p. 658. An apparently similar but actually quite different answer of the same question as presented by Wolfson with reference to Nasafi which he (Nasafi) ascribes to orthodox Islam but which Hilli ascribes to the "Compulsionists" and Iji ascribes to "the People of Truth" (*ahl al-haqq*) is as follows: (i) the *ajal* is inexorable; (ii) that God has a foreknowledge of the act as well as of the time of the killing, and that that foreknowledge is the cause of both the act of killing and the time of the killing; (iii) that God synchronizes the *ajal* with the killing caused by His foreknowledge.

of its “inexorability” as referred to above in the dilemma, then (2) we are to examine the Qurānic concept of “the freedom of will” to see whether it includes “the freedom of will to kill”. (3) At the end we are to differentiate “the attempt at killing” from the “act of killing” itself.

Let us now examine the premises of the dilemma:

that *Ajal* means term of life;

that *Ajal* is appointed;

that *Ajal* is inexorable.

i) Qurān uses the term *Ajal* in the sense of “term of life” appointed by Allah for each individual. It is decreed by Allah that the extent of life for an individual, whosoever he may be, will be up to a limited term. It is in this sense that the term of life for an individual is appointed. *He it is Who created you from dust, then from a small life germ, then from a clot, then He brings you forth as a child, then that you may attain maturity, then that you may be old; and of you are some who die before, and that you may reach an appointed term (Ajal Mussama), and that you may understand.(40:67)*

ii)(a) Man has not been sent to the earth as a punishment. The purpose for which Allah has decreed this “term of life” is to see whether he chooses “to be among the righteous” by freely using the capabilities and the provisions given to him by Allah, according to the *Guidance* sent by Allah through His messengers, or whether he chooses to spend it at what pleases him. Hence the appointment of “the term of life” means an assignment for man with respect to the utilization of Divine bestowment. *And spend of that wherewith*

*We have provided you before death comes unto one of you and he says: My Lord! If only You would relieve me for a short term, then I would give alms and be among the righteous. al-Qurän,(63:10)<sup>9</sup> Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom, and He is the Possessor of Power over all things. Who created death and life that He might try you which of you is best in deeds. And He is the Mighty, the Forgiving.(67:1-2) (b) Allah has placed one, wherever he is, with His Knowledge, and the divine bestowment to anyone varies from individual to individual. This is why, the extent of the appointed term(Ajal) is not same for everyone. It is determined by Allah according to His Absolute Knowledge. .... And We said: Descend you all; some of you are enemies to others, and there is for you in the earth a dwelling place and a provision for a time.(02:36)<sup>10</sup>*

iii) Prophet of Allah, is the absolute model to be followed if one is to fulfill this assignment. One who follows in the footsteps of the Prophet in using these capabilities and the provisions of life is a *righteous* person. One who follows him not is a disbeliever, hence: *Say: Obey Allah and the Messenger; but if they turn back, Allah surely loves not the disbelievers.*(03:31-32).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, one who follows in the footsteps of the

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<sup>9</sup> For further reference see: al-Qurän, 2:38; 10:23.

<sup>10</sup> for further reference see: *We said: Descend all of you from here. And when there comes unto you **Guidance** from Me, then those who follow My Guidance shall have no fear, neither shall they grieve.*(02:38) *...O men, your rebellion is against yourselves---a provision only of this world's life, then to Us is your return, so We shall inform you of what you did.*( al-Qurän, 10:23)

<sup>11</sup> For further reference: *Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): If ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you yours sins. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.*( al-Qurän, 03:31)

*righteous is righteous, and one who does not follow in the footsteps of the righteous is the one who follows his desires.*(31:15) and also, *Show us the straight path: The path of those whom You has favored..... (al-Fateha :6-7)* <sup>12</sup>

iv) Allah can take one to task on one's being a wrongdoer, however, Allah does not make hurry in seizing the wrongdoers. He gives him/them respite. This respite is, but up to a limited term. Qurän says: *And if Allah were to hasten for men the evil, as they would hasten on the good, their appointed term(Ajal) would certainly have been decreed for them... (10:11), ...For each decree, there is an appointment( Ajal-in Kitab lit. writing, or a prescribed Divine Law).*(13:38)<sup>13</sup>

v)(a) In order to take benefit from this respite, it is necessary to say "yes" to the Call of Allah to forgive one's sins, before the appointed term(Ajal Mussamma) comes: *And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then turn to Him. He will provide you with a goodly provision*

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<sup>12</sup> For further reference see: al-Qurän, 3:30; also, *And there came from the uttermost part of the city there came a man running. He cried: O my people, follow those who have been sent! Follow those who ask of you no fee, and who are rightly guided.*( al-Qurän, 36:20-21)

<sup>13</sup> For further reference see, al-Qurän: *So We sent them the flood and the locusts and the vermin and the frogs and the blood—a succession of clear signs. But they were arrogant and became guilty.*(7:133) *And when the terror fell on them they cried: O Moses! Pray for us unto thy Lord, because He hath a covenant with thee. If thou removest the terror from us we verily will trust thee and will let the Children of Israel go with thee.*(7:134) *But when We did remove from them the terror for a term(Ajal) which they must reach, behold! they broke their covenant.*(7:135)



*to an appointed term (Ajal Mussamma)...(11:3).<sup>14</sup> (b) Allah does not accept saying “yes” by anyone, to His Call of forgiveness, when the appointed term comes; for the time to prove oneself true, in deeds, has ended. And if Allah were to take men to task on account of their wrongdoing, not a single creature (i.e., out of the wrongdoers) would he leave thereupon(i.e., on the earth), but He respites them to a fixed term(Ajal Mussamma). So when their appointed term comes they are not able to delay it an hour, nor can they advance it.(16:61); ,..... For each decree, there is an appointment( Ajal-in Kitab lit. writing, or a prescribed Divine Law).(13:38)*

### **Conclusion:**

1. What becomes clear from this study of the Qur'anic concept of the 'Appointed Term'(Ajal or Ajal Mussama) and its so-called 'inexorability', is that the so-called 'inexorability' of the 'Appointed Term' only relates to the wrong-doers. It is the wrong-doers who, when they have wasted their life in not following the Guidance of Allah in using the capabilities and the provisions granted to them, and also did not say “yes” to Allah’s Call of forgiveness before the appointed term comes, they wish for respite. But it is the Divine Law that Allah does not relieve such people at this juncture. The evil-doer, notwithstanding their wishing to do, are absolutely unable to prepone or postpone it for an hour. Thus the so-called 'inexorability' of *Ajal Mussamma*(the appointed term) as misstated

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<sup>14</sup> ,...*He(Allah) calls you that He may forgive you your sins and relieve you(yo akhiro kum) unto an appointed term(Ajal Mussamma)...( al-Qur'an,14:10); And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then turn to Him. He will provide you with a goodly provision to an appointed term(Ajal Mussamma)...( al-Qur'an,11:3)*

in the dilemma, only refers to the inability on the part of the wrong-doer to pre-pone or postpone the appointed term for an hour. It does not refer to any such inability on the part of God.

2. The concept of the so-called ‘Inexorability’ of the appointed term as stated in the dilemma is contrary to the Qurānic teachings: It contradicts with the Qurānic concept of Allah’s Power over all things as referred to in the verses 46:33, 67:01 below. It seems to be an alien concept mistakenly accepted by the Muslim theologians. The Qurānic concept in this aspect, as stated in the verses no. 23:99-100, 35:45, 10:11, 71:1-4, is (i) the concept of a Divine Law regarding the Disallowance of Respite to be given to the wrongdoer, when the appointed term comes, to prove themselves true by doing righteous deed; (ii) and inability of the wrong-doer at the preponement or postponement of the Appointed Term. In general terms it can be stated as the Divine Law of the Non-Postponement & Non-Preponement of the Appointed Term(*Ajal Mussamma*) for the Wrong-doer/s.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For further reference see the following verses of al-Qurān: *And spend of that wherewith We have provided you before death comes unto one of you and he says: My Lord! If only You would relieve me for a short term, then I would give alms and **be among the righteous.***(63:10); *But Allah relieves no soul when its term(Ajaloha) comes, and Allah is Aware of what you do.*(63:11); *And if Allah were to take men to task on account of their wrongdoing, not a single creature (i.e., out of the wrongdoers) would he leave thereupon(i.e., on the earth), **but He respites them to a fixed term(Ajal Mussamma).** So when their appointed term comes they are not able to delay it an hour, nor can they advance it.*(16:61); *Surely We sent Noah to his people,... He said: surely I am a plain warner to you: That you should serve Allah and keep your duty to Him and obey me... He will forgive you of your sins and grant you respite to an appointed term (Ajal Mussama). **Surely the term of Allah, when it comes, is not postponed...***(71:1-4); *And if Allah were to hasten for men the*

3. No where in the Qurän it is stated that when the Appointed term of life comes and the death approaches to the righteous, he asks Allah to postpone it for a further term. And nowhere in the Qurän Allah says that he will never extend the life term even for the righteous. He, Who has created death possesses Power to postpone death; and He, Who has created life possesses Power to extend the term of life, as many times as He please and upto any extent He please. *Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom; and **He is the Possessor of Power over all things; Who created Death and Life that He might try you which of you is best in deeds. And He is the Mighty, the Forgiving.***(67:02) *See they not that Allah Who created the heavens and the earth and was not tired of their creation, **is able to give life to the dead. Aye, He is surely Possessor of Power over all things.*** (46:33)

4. The attempt of the killer, as presumed on behalf of the Libertarian in the dilemma, was his free choice. The attempt resulted in killing. The killer could not have known what was Allah's Will, before it had occurred. How could the killer know whether the 'appointed term' of the 'to be killed' had come before the consequence had taken place? It is Allah Who

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*evil, as they would hasten on the good, their appointed term(Ajal) would certainly have been decreed for them...(10:11); And were Allah to punish men for what they earn, He would not leave on the back of it(i.e.,earth) any creature, but He respites them till an appointed term(Ajal Mussama); so when their term(Ajal) comes, then **surely Allah is ever Seer of His servants.*** (35:45); *Until when death overtakes one of them(i.e., the unjust), he says: My Lord, send me back. That I may do good in that which I have left. By no means! It is but a word that he speaks. And before them is a barrier, until the day they are raised. (23:99-100) For each decree, there is an appointment (Ajal-in Kitab) lit. writing, or a prescribed Divine Law.*(13:38) *It is because Allah is Seer of what the wrong-doers do(35:45); He is the Knower of what they do.*

is the Possessor of Power over all things (46:33), so only He possesses Power over all consequences. Allah so synchronized that the killer could exercise his free choice in favor of his attempt at killing, just at the moment which Allah approved as end of the “appointed term” of the ‘to be killed’.

5. Second part of the dilemma reads as follows:

“and if one believes in free will, then act of killing could take place at any time it pleased the killer, whence the appointed term is not inexorable *i.e.*, such that “it could not have been postponed or preponed”.

The occurrence of the death of the person by his being killed was according to Allah’s Will (*i.e.*, *Mashiat*) and Allah’s Permission. [*And no Self can die but with Allah's Permission (bi izn illah). (03:145); And He is the Supreme above His servants, and He sends keepers over you; until when death comes to one of you, Our messengers cause him to die, and they are not remiss. (6:61)*] If Allah did not will the death of the murdered, how could the killer, by exercising his free choice, kill him. Did the killer possess power over all things? It is in the orbit of his free choice that the intended killer can attempt at killing of a person if the situation so allows, but it is not in his power that he could kill that person at any time it pleased him if Allah does not so will. Qurān says: *.....And no one living long is granted a long life, nor is aught diminished of one's life, but it is all in a book.....(22:11)*

6. For further clarification of this point, let us examine the concepts of “Death” and of “Killing”.

(i) Every one is to die one day. This is Allah's Law.(3:185) He states the creation of *death* before He states the creation of *life*:

(ii) Death comes with Allah's permission: *And no Nafs(self) can die but with Allah's permission ---- it is prescribed that the term(Ajal) is to come .....* (3:145)

(iii) One can not be caused to die mistakenly by the angles sent by Allah. Death comes only to that person whom Allah decrees: *And He is the Supreme above His servants, and He sends keepers over you; until when death comes to one of you, Our messengers cause him to die, and they are not remiss. (6:61) Say: the angel of death, who is given charge of you, will cause you to die, then to your Lord you will be returned. (32:11)*

Thus we see that the antinomy as well as its proposed solutions, both suffer from the distortion or misinterpretation of the concepts of the 'appointed term' and its 'inexorability'.