

An Analysis of Christian Apologist James White’s Polemics Regarding the Qur’ān, “Created or Not?”

**HOW CHRISTIANS EMPLOY THE MISGUIDED
VIEWS OF ASTRAY SECTS
PART 3: THE “ETERNALITY OF THE QUR’ĀN” AND
DETAILS OF HISTORY**

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Bismillāh wal-Ḥamdulillāh.

In the previous two parts of this series we looked at statements of Muslim scholars cited and misunderstood by James White—those of **Imām al-Ṭabarī** (d. 310H) and **Imām al-Ṭahāwī** (d. 321H). White wrongly thinks that the paper, ink and voices of the writers and reciters are eternal, that the modes of conveyance of the Qur`ān are synonymous with Allāh's attribute of speech, and are therefore eternal. These notions and misconceptions appeared in the time of Salaf due to foreign influences and the Muslim scholars clarified the issue through reason and revelation, removing all ambiguity thereby.

The first main argument used by James White was to point out the complete opposition between what he cited from al-Ṭabarī and al-Ṭahāwī—with his gross misunderstanding of their statements—and what had happened a century earlier at the hands of the Mu`tazilah and the Caliphs of Baghdād whom they had managed to win over to their doctrine regarding the Qur`ān. In this part we shall look at the next argument developed by White, which is that the Qur`ān cannot be an “eternal document” because it relies upon details of history and assumes the reader's prior knowledge of them. As history is time-bound and the Qur`ān, contains such details and requires the reader to already be familiar with them, it is not “eternal.”

PART 3: THE “ETERNALITY OF THE QUR'ĀN” AND DETAILS OF HISTORY

White presents the following slide:¹

The Historical Reality of the Qur'anic Text

- Despite the oft repeated maxim that there is not a single fingerprint of man upon the text of the Qur'an, the reality is quite different for anyone familiar with the study of ancient texts.
- The Qur'an plainly assumes knowledge of previous texts, shows direct connection to historical events, and hence betrays any claim to uncreatedness.

He develops his argument by saying:

- The Qur'ān “arises out of the events of time”.
- The Qur'ān “plainly assumes knowledge of previous texts”.

He then gives examples by showing the following slide:

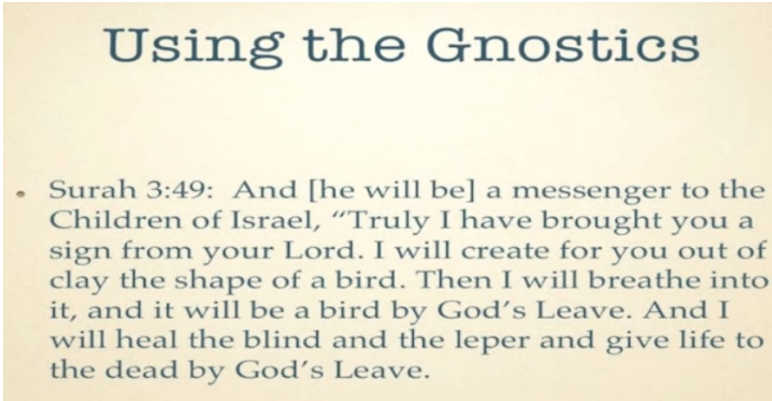
Lot and the People of Sodom

- For example, the Qur'an narrates Lot's interactions with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah four different times: Sarah 7:80-84, 26:160-174, 27:54-58, 29:28-35.
- Each time it is plain that the author *assumes his audience already knows the story from a biblical perspective.*
- How could an uncreated document depend upon a created document for its background and story?

¹ Refer to 16m:05s onwards in the video.

—He refers to the Qur`ān as an “uncreated document”, wrongly believing that this is the belief of the Muslims.

Then he shows the following slide:



—White then states that the Qur`ān quotes from canonical sources, those accepted as authentic by Christians, such as healing the blind and the leper, but also from non-canonical sources and mixes this with information from canonical sources. He is referring to Jesus (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) breathing into the birds of clay. “It’s drawing from a non-inspired document”, White says. He then asks about this story, “Was that written in an uncreated fashion in eternity past?” He proceeds to give another example of Jesus (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) speaking in the cradle as occurs in Sūrah al-Mā`idah (55:11), saying that this is also from the “gnostic-tinged” non-canonical sources which were written a lot later.

White’s argument is that this proves that the author of the Qur`ān was the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) and that he relied upon these time-bound sources—some of which are non-canonical, much later sources which are not considered revelation—and hence, the Qur`ān cannot be “eternal”.

COMMENTARY

The following points can be made regarding this argument:

1. The statement “**The Qur`ān is eternal (qadīm)**” is not from the creed of the Muslims, it was first innovated by **Ibn Kullāb** (d. 241H) in the early 3rd century hijrah after debating with the Mu`tazilah. He was unable to respond to their heresy and thus innovated another one in order to rebut theirs. He was not grounded in the Qur`ān and the Sunnah.

The basis of all of this is that Ibn Kullāb had to deny Allāh has actions tied to His will and power in order to rebut the Mu`tazilī arguments. This meant Allāh does not speak or act according to His will. Meaning, He has no chosen actions (af`āl ikhtiyāriyyah, ṣifāt fi`liyyah). He therefore had to resolve the issue of speech (kalām) and claimed that speech is defined as meaning alone. Thus, speech is **only the meaning in the self** of the one who speaks, and utterance (lafẓ) is not from it. This then led to the claim that the Qur`ān is simply the meaning that has been eternal with Allāh's self. However, this then implied that the Arabic Qur`ān that is heard and recited is something created, rather than something Allāh actually spoke Himself. Another group, the Sālimiyyah, upon the same principle of negating chosen actions for Allāh, claimed that the wording and voicing of the Qur`ān are both eternal with Allāh's self. The issue of the Qur`ān being eternal (qadīm) arose here, because these groups denied Allāh speaks and acts **according to His will**, and they did this in order to deny that events (hawādith) take place in Allāh's essence. This was in order to avoid invalidating their proof for the origination of the universe which was taken from the Hellenized Sabeans.

So the first point here is that it was never the doctrine of the Muslims to say, “The Qur’ān is eternal.”

Rather, the Qur’ān is Allāh’s speech which is tied to His will and power. Hence, there is no specific speech of Allāh which is “eternal”, even if the genus of His speech is eternal. Meaning that Allāh has always been one who speaks whenever He wills. So whilst speech is an attribute of His essence, which He has from eternity, this speech is tied to His will and power. Thus, the genus of His speech is eternal, but individual instances of His speech arise from His will, and so they cannot be eternal. Allāh spoke to Ādam after He created him. He spoke to Moses when He spoke to Him. Likewise, He spoke to the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) and He will speak to the people of Paradise. All of these instances of speech are not eternal, though the genus of speech, speech as an attribute, is eternal with Allāh. He has never ceased being one who speaks as and when He wills.

The scholars of the Muslims coined a phrase: Eternal in its genus but recent in its individual instances (qadīm al-naw‘, hādith al-āḥād). It is from perfection that Allāh speaks to whomever He wishes when He wills to do so and that He does not speak to whomever He does not wish to speak to, whenever He wills not to.

2. Upon the above, James White, in his polemic, operates on the premises of the misguided innovators who do not represent the creed of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), His Companions and the Righteous Predecessors. Upon this misconception, he develops His argument against an “eternal Qur’ān”. In other words, he is arguing against a doctrine that is not the doctrine of the Muslims, but an alien doctrine, foreign to Islām, reason and revelation.

3. As for the argument of the Qur'ān using historical details, from canonical and non-canonical sources that White alludes to, then there are two issues raised here:

- a) The issue of time-bound events of history—regardless of what those events are— being in revelation and
- b) the issue of non-canonical sources.

As for the first: Then the Qur'ān is the knowledge of Allāh, it is the speech of Allāh, it is the revelation (waḥy) of Allāh, it is the message (risālah) of Allāh. It is all these things at the same time. When a person imparts information and guidance to another with his speech, that speech also represents his knowledge because it arose from his knowledge.

Imām al-Ājurri (d. 360H) said: “Know may Allāh have mercy upon you that the saying of the Muslims whose hearts did not swerve from the truth and who were granted success upon guidance in the past and recent is that the Qur'ān is the speech of Allāh, the Mighty and Majestic, it is not created. This is because the Qur'ān is from the knowledge of Allāh the Exalted, and His knowledge is not created.”²

Upon this, Allāh's knowledge is eternal, He has knowledge of all things, past, present and future. Whatever is in the Qur'ān of the details of certain events of history, then that is from the knowledge of Allāh which He revealed to the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). Likewise, knowledge of future events given to the Prophet, that is from Allāh's knowledge. Likewise, knowledge of what is in past scriptures which Allāh revealed to Abraham, Moses, David and

² Refer to al-Sharī'ah (Dār al-Waṭān), 1/479.

Jesus (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ), that is also Allāh's knowledge which He imparted to the Prophet through His speech, the Qur`ān, as and when He willed to do so. All of these were affairs of the unseen (ghayb) to the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) and the Pagan Arabs which Allāh revealed in the Qur`ān:

تِلْكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهَا إِلَيْكَ مَا كُنْتَ تَعْلَمُهَا أَنْتَ وَلَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ هَذَا

“That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you, [O Muḥammad]. You knew it not, neither you nor your people, before this...” (11:49).³

It is our view that White already knows this and anticipated this answer and it is for this reason that he specifically chose the verses that mention things about Jesus (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) which Christians consider to be from non-canonical, apocryphal sources. With these examples it can be argued: Since these sources are not considered revelation from Allāh by Christians, then they contain information which is false, regarding events which are not real, and as such, since the Qur`ān mixes what is true according to them (healing the blind and sick) and what is false or is apocryphal, then it cannot be an “eternal document” as He incorrectly describes it, because these details are not found in the gospels that are with them. So this leads us to:

The second issue: regarding non-canonical sources. The answer to that is as follows:

³ Refer also to: (3:44), (12:3), (12:102).

First: The Christians cannot demonstrate any sound criterion for what they consider to be authentic and inauthentic revelation with respect to all the various gospels which exist and which have passed through history or surfaced at one point or another. As for the Muslims, then they have the chain of narration (isnād) and detailed biographical accounts of all transmitting authorities. They have a rigorous science through which they can say with a high degree of certainty that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said such and such a thing or did not say such and such a thing. Thus, when they make affirmations or denials, these rulings have an objective basis in fact and are based upon scientific analysis. Thus we have that which is authentic (ṣaḥīḥ), weak (ḍaʿīf), fabricated (mawḍūʿ) and many other classifications describing the status of a report.

Alongside this, the Qur`ān is related by tawātur (large-scale successive transmission) and is distinct from the Prophetic traditions (aḥādīth). The traditions in turn are distinct from the statements of the Prophet's companions. There is no confusion with respect to the speech of Allāh, the speech of the Prophet and the speech of his companions. Thus, Muslims can speak comfortably, convincingly and with certainty about what is revelation and what is not revelation, and they can make denials and affirmations with respect to reports and events regarding the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) with certainty.

The Christians cannot do this, and for this reason, the Four Gospels they have in their hands do not represent all of the events of the life of Jesus. When they make affirmations or denials regarding events of history or reports, these denials are not of the same quality and veracity as those of the Muslims. Hence, the

argument that White appears to be employing is that if it is not in the canonical gospels, it never happened. And this is not true. That the events in question gain a mention outside of canonical sources much later is also not a proof that the event did not happen. Thus, this is not a valid argument for White to use.

Second: For Muslims the proof that the events in question did happen is that the Qur'ān has corroborated them by making mention of them. This is because the Qur'ān is revelation from Allāh which confirms the original teachings and laws of previous scriptures and also brings news and reports about the unseen past as it related to the Pagan Arabs, such as the stories of Joseph, Moses and Jesus (عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ). The evidences for the Qur'ān being revelation from Allāh are more numerous and superior than the evidence for the Gospels being revelation from Allāh.⁴ So here, we would enter into a detailed discussion of the evidences that the Qur'ān is indeed revelation from Allāh and that it is not in need of corroboration and validation from altered, changed texts claimed to be revelation but which are in fact only human reconstructions of the Injīl, with much deficiency and loss. As for the Qur'ān, then it has reached us in an unbroken chain, through tawātur, which is large-scale transmission. It is intact in its words and meanings and is safeguarded from change and corruption.

Third: The original beliefs of Jesus (عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ) started to change fairly quickly after his ascension. He was raised from being a

⁴ The Four Gospels are not the Injīl that was revealed to Jesus (عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ). The Gospels have some details of what was revealed to Jesus in reconstructed form, but they are not the actual Injīl of Jesus.

servant of Allāh, which is what he said about himself in the cradle, as is mentioned in the Qur`ān:

فَأَشَارَتْ إِلَيْهِ قَالُوا كَيْفَ نُكَلِّمُ مَنْ كَانَ فِي الْمَهْدِ صَبِيًّا ﴿٢٩﴾ قَالَ إِنِّي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ

ءَاتَانِي الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلَنِي نَبِيًّا ﴿٣٠﴾

“So she pointed to him. They said: ‘How can we speak to one who is a child in the cradle?’ [Jesus] said: ‘Indeed, I am the servant of Allāh. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet.’” (19:30).

So he was raised from being a servant of Allāh to being the Son of Allāh, to being Allāh himself. The believers fell into schisms and split into different sects. Their word regarding Jesus varied and as such every party had with them something of the Injīl, the actual Gospel, in accordance with what they had preserved orally or in writing, or which had reached them. However:

- as novel doctrines developed and took shape, moving further and further away from what Jesus actually taught,
 - as sects were marginalised or became obscure,
 - as the writings they possessed disappeared or were banned and considered heretical,
- then details and events of the life of Jesus (عليه السلام) were lost.

Given the above, reports of statements of events contradicting the innovated doctrines which developed about Jesus would have been discarded and any gospels in agreement with the view of the first Israelite believers in Jesus (عليه السلام)—that he was merely a Prophet sent by Allāh calling to worshipping Allāh alone, righteous works and abiding by the law—would be considered heretical and

apocryphal. This rejection was not on any objective scientific basis involving transmission and chain of narration. Hence, Christians are not in any position to be making these types of claims and judgements regarding the Qur'ān. The recording and transmission of their reconstructed Gospels is on very shaky grounds and they have no objective, scientific criteria for determining original, sound, authentic reports of revelation and what is other than them.

CLOSING NOTES

James White operates upon the assumption that the heresies of the Kullābiyyah and Sālimiyyah are but the orthodox doctrine of Islām, and upon that basis develops arguments to rebut the statement of the Qur'ān being eternal, which is not the saying of the Muslims. As for details of history, then the Qur'ān is from Allāh's knowledge who knows of all events and statements, past, present and future. So any account in the Qur'ān whether of the 'Ād, Thāmūd, the ancient Arabian tribes which are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament, or of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon or Jesus, then it is all from the knowledge of Allāh. As for judging the Qur'ān to be of human authorship through an altered, corrupted, reconstructed, deficient form of the Injil (Gospel) of Jesus, which is missing a great deal from the life and activities of Jesus, then this is rejected. As for what does not appear in canonical texts, or appears in non-canonical texts, this is no proof at all that the events in question did not occur.

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