

# The Meaning of Destiny in Islam And its Relationship to Free Choice

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**T**wo people were locked in conflict – one rich and the other poor. They brought their case before a court. The rich man had a lawyer, while the poor guy could not afford one. When they went before the judge, the lawyer started his defense and turned the whole world upside down. You know what lawyers typically do. Then, when it was the turn of the poor guy, the judge asked him: “Where is your lawyer?” He said: “I have no lawyer; I cannot afford one.” The judge said: “What are you going to do?” He replied: “I’ll defend myself.” The judge said: “Proceed.” The man talked, and talked very nicely to the extent that the judge was impressed by his eloquence. He asked him: “Have you ever been to a school of law?” He said: “No.” “Have you ever been trained with a lawyer or something?” “No.” The judge said: “But, you speak very, very well. You sound like a lawyer.” At that, the lawyer of the rich man said:

“Your honor, it looks like he ate some *zaathar*<sup>1</sup> before he came to the court.” The poor guy remarked: “Your honor, if eating *zaathar* could make one intelligent, all the donkeys of Lebanon would be lawyers by now.”

That story is just something to get us started on our topic. Allah, *Subhanahu wa-Ta’ala*,<sup>2</sup> created man in a unique fashion. If we look into the human body, we find it is a complex of factories; I call them factories. The medical profession refers to them as systems: there is the digestive system, a nervous system, a hearing system, a sight system, a comprehending system, and so on. Every system is like a factory performing its job, and with all these factories man functions in a perfect way. When one or more of these systems develops some defect or sickness, it influences the rest of the systems. At such time we say this man is sick and needs to be treated.

All these systems function under two powers, *iradah* and *qudrat*, as we call them in Arabic. *Qudrat* is the power or

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<sup>1</sup> An edible plant which grows in abundance, even by the roadside, in Lebanon. The Lebanese believe that if someone eats *zaathar*, it makes him intelligent.

<sup>2</sup> Glory to Him who is above all

ability to do things, while *iraadah* means “choice”. For example, you could perform certain actions with your hands, or your legs, or your eyes, and so on; every system, every part of your body, has the power to do something – some action – by virtue of its *qudrah*. That action can be like a double-edged sword: it can be good or it can be evil. The power of choice has been given to man to channel his behavior, and by this it is implied that man is free. Man is free: it means nothing external is pushing him to do things in a certain way, except his own choice – his own *iraadah*.

We frequently utilize certain terminology, especially in Arabic, such as *maktūb*<sup>3</sup> or *Allah katabah ‘alayka*.<sup>4</sup> For example, “It is something ‘written’ that you will be tall or short.” That is referred to in Islamic philosophy as Destiny or *Al-Qadā’ wa-al-Qadar*. And the question of Destiny or *Al-Qadā’ wa-al-Qadar* has puzzled the ulama<sup>5</sup> throughout Islamic history: if God has “written” for me that I’ll be, say, a thief, then why does He punish me? That’s the puzzling question.

Philosophically speaking, we talk about three concepts: *iraadah*, *‘Amr*, and *‘Ilm*. *Iraadah* means “choice.” *‘Ilm* means “knowledge.” *‘Amr* means “order”. God ordered (*‘Amr*) man to be good. Man is accountable before God as to whether he follows His orders or not (*iraadah*); he is not accountable for His knowledge (*‘Ilm*). *‘Ilm* refers to the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of God is all-encompassing. God knows who is going to be born in the year 2020, if it will be a male or female, tall or short, polite or not, and if he or she will abide by the orders of God. So, although God ordered him to be a good man, He knows that this person will be disobedient in spite of the orders and will not follow the rules of God. That is what we call “written”. It does not mean that God is forcing us to do things. Everything in this life could be good, and could be evil. For example, some people say music is haram.<sup>6</sup> That is wrong. Music could be good. It could! If it is good it is halal,<sup>7</sup> if it is bad, it is haram. Otherwise, having a hand is haram, because you could extend it to another person with a pistol, and put a bullet in his head, or you could extend it to a poor person with charity or zakah.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Written

<sup>4</sup> Written for you by Allah

<sup>5</sup> Scholars

<sup>6</sup> That which is forbidden or sinful

<sup>7</sup> That which is permitted or allowed

<sup>8</sup> The obligatory poor-due (2.5% of net income)

So, it depends upon your choice – your *iraadah*; it depends on how you utilize that article which Allah created for you.

We are always between two alternatives: *al-Qudrah* and *al-Iraadah*. *Al-Qudrah* is the power of action, or saying, or thinking, while *al-Iraadah* is the power of choice. Everything in this life confronts us with alternatives. When you want to buy a suit, or a dress, you go to Hudson’s, you go to JC Penny, you go to Wards;<sup>9</sup> you circle around visiting several stores comparing prices and the materials in order to select the best, and the cheapest. Then you decide to buy that which you deem better for you. That is the choice. In the science of sociology, they say, “Oh, this man bases his decisions upon rationality.” It means that he thinks, weighs the alternatives, then decides what to do. In the area of religion, this process is called reasoning; it has the same meaning as rationality.

In this life, everything we have is a bounty from God. Everything in this universe is *ni‘mah*;<sup>10</sup> God created everything for the service of man. Take, for example, the camel, a common, daily sight in Arabia, but it is something we don’t really reflect on deeply. It is a huge animal. And we find a kid, seven years old, leading that camel, and beating it with a stick and directing it to a certain place, and the camel is obedient, even though it could stomp the child to death if it wanted. Why, and how is this possible? It is because God created that huge animal for the service of man and subjected or harnessed it for his service. And we find this written in the Qur’an: [Imam quotes Arabic. The English translation is:]

“Are they, then, not aware that it is for them that We have created, among all the things which Our hands have wrought, the domestic animals of which they are now masters? And that We have subjected them to men’s will, so that some of them they may use for riding and of some they may eat, and may have yet other benefits from them, and milk to drink? Will they not then be grateful?” [36:71-73]

If these animals are under our control, then we have the choice to mistreat them, or to treat them kindly. So that will show how we can exercise our power of choice with regard to the bounties of God. Similarly, *all* the bounties of God present alternatives where we have to choose.

The sun gives us warmth and light. It is the *taqdeer*<sup>11</sup> of Allah that the sun follows a certain pattern 365 days, so that

<sup>9</sup> The names of three department stores in Toledo, Ohio

<sup>10</sup> Bounty

<sup>11</sup> Written law

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the temperature on this earth is maintained and commensurate with the existence of human beings and other creations on this earth. Nowadays the whole world is scared. Why? They say there is some trouble with the ozone and that, if this persists, it will increase the earth's temperature. This year is a case in point. We did not see too much snow this year. Today is March 1<sup>st</sup>,<sup>12</sup> and we were supposed to have a big storm today, but it is 50 degrees outside. This means that the choices that Man has made, from the available alternatives with regard to the environment, were the wrong choices because they resulted in the imbalance of the ozone. Human beings have relationships with all the bounties of God; these relationships constitute our religion, and that is Islam. You have a relationship with yourself, you have a relationship with your brother, your family, the society around you, and you have a relationship on an international level, between states and governments, known nowadays as political science or international law. Islam organized and structured all these relationships and we have to follow the rules and laws: we are presented with alternatives to choose from, and thus exercise our *iradah*. We have a relationship with the sun and the moon, we have a relationship with the water, we have a relationship with the air, we have a relationship with the land, and maintaining these relationships comprises Islam.

The plants were created to complement man: human beings utilize oxygen from the air while producing carbon dioxide and the plants utilize the carbon dioxide while giving off oxygen, so the two complement each other. That is the precision in creation – as the Qur'an says: "We have created everything according to a law" – *taqdeer* – a precise law that is to be followed exactly.

When someone is in an area where there is scarcity of water and he urinates in the water, that is a sin in Islam. Why? Your relationship with the water requires you to keep it wholesome for the benefit of the people. Because you are playing a detrimental role by contaminating that water, you are committing a sin. Similarly we have a relationship with the air, and look at what we are doing to the air nowadays. As soon as you arrive in Detroit,<sup>13</sup> you have trouble breathing. This is because the choices we have made are detrimental and we are accountable for that. Materialism has conquered the

immaterialism or spirituality. All these relationships – with the environment, with one another, with the animals, the water and so on – form the basis for the alternatives from which man makes his choices. On this basis, the ulama of Islam came up with five categories which define our behavior according to the choices we make:

1. *Wajib*: means "a duty, or an obligation". Obligation means you *have* to do it. If you don't do it, there is a punishment.
2. *Haram*: means "forbidden or prohibited". It is anything you should not do, and if you do it, you will be punished for it. In the case of some prohibitions, the punishment is twofold: a punishment in this life, and a punishment in the Hereafter. For example, if you kill someone, there is a punishment for it in this life and there is a punishment for it in the Hereafter.
3. *Mustahab*: It is preferable to make that choice.
4. *Makrūh*:<sup>14</sup> It is preferable *not* to make that choice.
5. *Mubah*: Mubah means halal.

*Mustahab* and *makrūh* are equal in that there is no punishment in either case. In other words, if you have two alternatives and one alternative is "preferable" (*mustahab*) but you choose the other, or "not preferable" (*makrūh*) alternative, there is no punishment for it.

The general rule in Islam is that everything is halal unless declared haram. And the difference between halal and haram is very easy to determine: "If you accept it for yourself it is halal, if you cannot accept that action for yourself it is haram," that is what the Prophet said. Islam, I think, is the exercise of common sense. We eat beef because it is halal, but if that cow is not slaughtered properly and it died, then we cannot eat it because the Qur'an prohibits the consumption of carrion.

If we examine all the prohibitions in Islam, we find that, in the final analysis, they constitute preventive medicine for the individual, and protection for the environment. Before you get sick, before you upset the balance of the universe, Islam is looking out for you. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "The strong believer is better before God than the weak one." Some people interpret that hadith<sup>15</sup> as meaning "Stronger in his *īman*".<sup>16</sup> But, even if we take it that way, if you

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<sup>12</sup> 1997 or 1998

<sup>13</sup> Known as the "Motor capital of the world": it is heavily industrialized and the air is polluted

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<sup>14</sup> "Frowned upon"

<sup>15</sup> A report or account of what the Prophet said

<sup>16</sup> Inner certainty of belief in God, coupled with righteous actions

are strong in your īman, you are strong in everything else, because īman and Islam is everything: it is every minute of your life. [Imam quotes:]

“ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ ... and make lawful to them the good things, وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ and forbid them the bad things.”<sup>17</sup> See how wide-ranging and broad the rule is? What’s good and what’s bad?

Smoking. In the olden times – and I was of that opinion, also – smoking was considered makrūh, but not haram. But with the new discoveries, and knowing that smoking can cause lung cancer, today I’ll call it *khabeeth*<sup>18</sup> and it will be under *al-khabā’ith*.<sup>19</sup> And some shaykhs<sup>20</sup> will not agree with that because they smoke. And, maybe, I say this because I don’t smoke. But this is how the Qur’an can be interpreted based upon new knowledge. Fifty years ago, no one knew about lung cancer, but, nowadays, with increased

knowledge and sophisticated equipment, we can see the effects of cancer with our own eyes on a screen or a monitor. The danger associated with smoking puts it in the area of *khabā’ith*. Characterization of actions as *mubah* or *makrūh* can be changed with the passage of time and the increase in general and scientific knowledge. What is legislated by Allah cannot be changed because He knows the past, the present, and the future. But things which are governed by general rules can be categorized as *halal* or *haram* based upon new knowledge. New converts to Islam were eligible for a share of the *zakah* as stipulated in the Qur’an. But Omar bin Khattab,<sup>21</sup> in his time, stopped that practice, saying: “This was legislated when Islam was weak but, nowadays, we are strong, and if someone is coming into the fold of Islam for the sake of Islam itself, he is welcome, but if he is coming to receive some *zakah*, we don’t need him.” That’s the opinion of Omar bin Khattab. See how things are interpreted – the Qur’an itself – since that time?

<sup>17</sup> 7:157

<sup>18</sup> Bad

<sup>19</sup> “The bad things”

<sup>20</sup> Religious leaders

<sup>21</sup> The second Khalifa of Islam; became the ruler three years after the death of the Prophet