



A Critique of the Article “God and His Attributes” in the Encyclopedia of the Quran (EQ)



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Abstract

The article “God and His Attributes,” written by Gerhard Böwering is one of the entries of the Brill *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, which despite its scholarly merits, has some weaknesses. This research tries to analyze specific weak points with a descriptive-analytical method, based on authentic Islamic sources so that the doubts are identified and answered. Some of the shortcomings of the article in question include a lack of thorough and genuine attitude toward the concept of God, His attributes, His Sublimest Names, and certain Quranic concepts such as the meaning of *al-raḥma*, the formation of the heavens, and the Prophet’s Ascension (*mi’rāj*) to the heaven. The writer shows that Bowering’s attitude toward the topics mentioned above is influenced by his probing about the pre-Islamic milieu, his view about the Qur’ān as a text written and edited by the Prophet, and early Sunni exegeses and hadith collections without analysing their authenticity or their compatibility with scientific findings. Bowering’s attitude towards the Quran has resulted in certain judgments about the content and form of this Divine book which are distant from the sublime spirit of the Quran which is a revelation both in concepts and wordings. As long as orientalists such as Bowering are not enlightened to the revelatory nature of the Quran, one should not expect a thorough and realistic attitude towards the Quran and its teachings.

Keywords: Allāh, Encyclopaedia of the Quran, God’s Attributes, Gerhard Bowering, Orientalists.

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Introduction

The Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān (EQ) has been published in six volumes by Brill publishing firm, Leiden, the Netherlands, under the editorship of Mrs. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, a professor at Georgetown University in the United States, at Brill Publishing House in Leiden, Holland. Seven hundred short and long entries of this work are dedicated to the concepts, characters, events, and beliefs mentioned in the Quran or related to the Quran, and the controversial topics and issues in the field of Quranic studies.

One of the articles in this encyclopedia is “God and His Attributes,” written by Gerhard Böwering. Gerhard Böwering has been a professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies since 1984. He taught previously at the University of Pennsylvania and has been a visiting professor at the University of Innsbruck, Princeton University, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

He published *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin-New York 1980); *The Minor Qur'an Commentary of al-Sulami* (Beirut 1995, 2nd ed. 1997); *Sufi Treatises* (Beirut 2009); *Sufi Inquiries and Interpretations* (Beirut 2010); and *The Comfort of the Mystics* (Leiden 2013); as well as numerous articles, including those in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, and the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. He is the editor-in-chief of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton 2012).

Böwering received a Mellon fellowship (1992), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2005-2006), and a fellowship from the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (2006). In 2004-2005 he gave the Erasmus Lectures at Notre Dame. He has been a member of the American Philosophical Society since 1994. (Bowering 2023, in *Religious Studies*)

Despite certain merits of Bowering's article “God and His Attributes,” and his attempt to present a comprehensive picture of God and His attributes in the Quran, this article has specific weaknesses in content



that the present research tries to highlight and explain.

Some of the shortcomings of Bowering are as follows:

1. *Bismillāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*

As for "*bismillāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*" Bowering maintains that it is: "The formula in its full form was first used by Muḥammad, who amalgamated its component parts for a reason, linking the name of Allāh with two adjectives (*al-rahmān* and *al-rahīm*), both derived from the same root denoting mercy (q.v.; only the second of which, however, is a pure adjective)" (Bowering 2003, 2:318). First, to call the important Quranic phrase a formula is a clear indication of the writer's belief about the nature of the Quran which seems to be a book written or compiled by the Prophet. Second, to call '*al-rahīm*,' a pure adjective seems to be a claim without evidence, for both of them are adjectives referring to the general and specific mercy of God. The word "mercy" in the Hebrew language is presented with a difference in wording, like many common words found in Hebrew, Arabic, and also in Syriac, for which a similar word and meaning exist, this does not mean that "al-Rahmān" is a Hebrew word (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 4:97). Rather, "al-Rahmān" refers to the abundance, fullness, and heat of God's mercy, which includes all beings (ibid, 4:98), and "al-Rahīm" by its form (*ṣīgha*) indicates affirmation (*thubūt*) and the necessity of attributing the essence to the attribute; thus "al-Rahīm" means firm and consistent mercy which admits no extension (*sa'a*) in terms of quantity; therefore, it is said that He is merciful to believers or merciful in spiritual affairs (ibid, 4:104).

2. Allāh

About the Name of God, Bowering says: "'Allāh' is not understood to be a proper name like any other, rather it is the name of the nameless God, next to whom there is no other" (Bowering 2003, 2:316). The word "Allah" is an inclusive term for all the Divine attributes and names (Ṭabrisī 1993, 1:92; Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 1:15). The adjective "proper" means "correct, or right for a particular situation" (Longman 2009, 806). It is not



clear what Bowering means by mentioning that "Allāh" is not understood to be a proper name like any other. If he means that Allāh is an all-inclusive name that refers to the Divine names and attributes, it is correct; otherwise, his remark does not seem to be accurate because Allāh is a proper name referring to God. In addition, other names such as 'al-Raḥmān' which refers to the overflowing and all-inclusive mercy of God (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 4:98), or 'al-Raḥīm' which refers to the mercy of God toward the faithful (ibid, 4:104) are also proper names referring to Allāh's general and special mercy (*al-rahmah*).

Bowering believes that "Long before the time of Muhammad, the pre-Islamic Arabs (q.v.) and the Meccans in particular, worshiped a great deity and supreme provider, called Allāh (q 13:16; 29:61; 31:25; 39:38) and invoked him in times of distress (q 6:109; 10:22; 16:38; 29:65; 31:32; 35:42)" (Bowering 2003, 2:317). The author does not provide evidence for his claim from history or tradition and only mentions some Quranic verses about the polytheists' confession that their Lord is "Allah," such as: "If you ask them, "Who created the heavens and the earth, and disposed of the sun and the moon?" They will surely say," Allah." Then where do they stray?" (Quran 16:61). According to *al-Mizān* exegesis, this verse shows the polytheists' acknowledgment of the creation, lordship, and sustenance of "Allah." However, in practice, they call upon other than God for protection (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1996, 16:148). *Nimūnih* exegesis states that "Even the idol worshipers did not doubt the 'unity of the Creator,' they were polytheists in worship, they said that they worship idols so that they become intermediaries between them and God" (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 16:336). Therefore, in this and other verses, there is no explicit reference to the fact that the people of Mecca worshiped any supreme provider named "Allah," unless we deduce this notion from the meaning of the verses or find evidence from certain pre-Islamic texts.

«الْإِلَهَةِ» (*'Ilaha*) means to worship, and its difference with «إله» (*'Ilāh*) is that in "*'Ilaha*" submission is considered, while in "*'Ilāh*" bewilderment is implied (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 1:131). The word "Allāh" is originally similar



to the Hebrew word for "*alaha*" or "*ya'lahu*" with the addition of "al" and because of its constant and widespread use [*kithrat isti'māl wa ghalabe*], it has become a specific term [*'alam*] for God (ibid). "Allah" is used only for God, because He is the Deity Whose dignity and greatness amaze the mind, and this name is one of the Sublimest Names of God (*al-asmā' al-husnā*), which refers to the Divine nature, including all the attributes of beauty and glory (ibid, 1:132). Therefore, given the etymology of the word Allah, there is no evidence of the writer's claim about Allah as being a great deity and the supreme provider of the pre-Islamic Arabs.

3. *Al-Raḥmān*

Bowering states that the name "al-Raḥmān" is another name for God, used parallel to Allāh in the Quran mainly in the Meccan phases of Muhammad's Quranic proclamation (Bowering 2003, 2:317). He says:

Al-Raḥmān eventually lost its independence in the proclamation of Muḥammad and became subsumed under the principal name of Allāh in the final redaction of the Qur'ān. It came to be understood as an adjective modifying the word God, and meaning "the merciful," though it was not counted as one of the most beautiful names of God. (ibid)

Allamah Ṭabātabā'ī asserts that "Allah" and "al-Raḥmān" are both Divine names that are different from the Divine essence (*dhāt*); hence what the polytheists had imagined that the Prophet invoked the names of God like them is not true because they considered the nature of God unattainable and considered the Divine names -which angels were also regarded as manifestations of such names- to be independent. But the verse above invalidates their claim, and according to Allama Ṭabātabā'ī, it is one of the purest statements about monotheism of nature and monotheism of worship (Ṭabātabā'ī 1996, 13: 223-224). Therefore, "Allah" and "al-Raḥmān" are not different concerning the fact that they are both Divine names; however, they are different in terms of meaning: "Allah" refers to the collective essence of all the Divine attributes (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 1:131) and this point is also mentioned in hadiths (Ṣadūq 1977, 221; Qummī Mashhadī 1989,



1:26; ‘Arūsī Huwayzī 1994, 11:1); “al-Raḥmān” refers to the boiling, fullness, and warmth of God’s mercy, which encompasses all beings; it refers to the material or spiritual abundance, heat, and fullness and when talking about God, it means the overflowing and all-inclusive mercy of God (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 4:98).

Bowering’s definition of “al-Raḥmān” is wrong in several ways:

1. It expresses that “al-Raḥmān” is an adjective that the Prophet had used to explain God with a kind of modification, whereas this Divine attribute is mentioned at the beginning of each and every sūra next to “Allah” and “al-raḥīm” through revelation to the heart of the Prophet. These words are included in the Quran because, in addition to meanings, the words of the Quran are also miracles (*Sūra al-Ḥāqqa*, 44-46; *Sūra al-Najm*: 3-4). Therefore, the author’s use of the word “redaction” indicates that he considers the Quran to be a book, similar to the Holy Scripture, written by humans that the Prophet dictated during his lifetime.

2. Bowering takes the word “al-Raḥmān” as an adjective that modifies the meaning of the word God and means “Merciful” (Bowering 2003, 2:317), while “al-Raḥmān” is one of the Divine names that refers to the abundance of God’s mercy towards all beings (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 4:98) and the term, “the Beneficent,” which means doing good, manifesting benevolence or a kindly feeling, and active kindness (*OED* 1989, 2:110) seems more suitable for this word.

3. The author believes that under the editorship of Muhammad, “al-Raḥmān” lost its independence and was placed under the name “Allah” (Bowering 2003, 2:317). Such a claim is baseless because “al-Raḥmān” is stated as one of the Divine attributes in the Quran, a name which refers to the general and comprehensive aspect of Divine mercy, hence it represents one of the Divine attributes that “Allah” refers to all of them.

4. The author states that “al-Raḥmān” was not considered one of the most beautiful names of God. This saying contradicts the verses of the Quran (al-Isrā’:110) and the hadiths (Ṣadūq 1977, 195; ‘Arūsī Ḥuwayzī



1994, 5:299) because "al-Raḥmān" is one of the Sublimest names (*al-'Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) of God, which can be used for calling or supplicating God.

4. The Sublimest Names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*)

Bowering asserts thus: "In the Quran, God is described by his 'most beautiful names' (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), traditionally enumerated as ninety-nine epithets, on which Islamic theology based its systematic expositions about the Divine essence (*dhāt*) and its attributes" (Bowering 2003, 2:317). Of course, this account is based on a hadith that enumerates the Sublimest Names of God as being ninety-nine (Ṣadūq 1977, 195; 'Arūsī Ḥuwayzī 1994, 5:299; Qummī Mashhadī 1989, 13:196). Other hadiths mention the number of the Divine names to be 360 names (Ṣadūq 1977, 190; kulaynī 1986, 1:112). In other hadiths, the Ahl al-Bayt are introduced as the Sublimest names of God ('Arūsī Ḥuwayzī 1994, 2:103; Kulaynī 1986, 1:143; Baḥrānī 1995, 2:617). In another hadith, the two names "al-Raḥmān" and "al-Raḥīm" are introduced as the Sublimest Names of God (Baḥrānī 1995, 2:617; 'Arūsī Ḥuwayzī 1994, 2:104). Ayatullah Makārim asserts that if in some of the hadiths and supplications, other names of God are mentioned in addition to these ninety-nine names, and even the number of God's names in some of the supplications reaches one thousand, this is because the names of God are unlimited like the perfections of His essence, although some of these attributes and names are special (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 7:28). As such, there are various hadiths that albeit their apparent conflict in the number of the Divine names, they refer to some of the instances of the Sublimest names of God. Therefore, if the author, through the systematic exposition of the Divine essence and attributes, intends their differentiation according to the aforementioned hadith, he is right in his claim; however, if he considers this hadith as the only reference to this differentiation regardless of other hadiths, his view barely seems sound, for the Divine names, according to other hadiths, are not limited to only ninety-nine names.

Bowering states "this overpowering transcendence and intimate



immanence of Allāh in Muhammad’s religious experience was transformed in his Quranic proclamation into the praise of the most beautiful names. They are landmarks of his prayer rather than tenets of his theology” (Bowering 2003, 2:322). As such, the most beautiful names of God articulated by the Prophet are no more than the outpouring of his personal religious experience in the form of supplication, and they have nothing to do with Islamic doctrine. Bowering’s picture of the Prophet resembles that of an ascetic or a gnostic who expresses his own personal experience of God by enumerating His Sublimest names and supplicating Him by pronouncing them. While the matter is more profound because these Names are revealed to the Prophet as part of the Quranic revelation, and the Prophet was not free to utter any Quranic word out of whim or even interfere with the order of what he articulated by revelation. In addition, these Divine names make part of Islamic theology which enlightens humans about the nature of God and His attributes.

5. Al-Raḥma

According to Bowering, “the phrase, ‘he inscribed mercy upon himself’ (*kataba ‘alā nafsihi al-raḥmata*, q 6:12; cf. 6:54), raised the question of whether his mercy was an expression of benevolence or was linked to his forgiveness of sins” (ibid). About the inscription of mercy, Allama Ṭabāṭabā’ī says:

Inscription (*kitābat*) is affirmation and definitive judgment, and since mercy-which is the outpouring of grace to the one who deserves it and bringing something to the happiness that befits it- is one of the actual (*fi lī*) attributes of the Almighty. It is correct to attribute it to His inscription, meaning: He made it obligatory upon Himself to have mercy, to bestow blessings, and to send down the good to those who deserve it. (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 7:26-27)

What is meant by mercy is that which pervades both of the worlds, such as the guidance to know Him, and the knowledge of His Oneness by giving evidence, sending down the Divine books, and giving time to disbelievers

and sinners to rectify what has been overlooked (Qummī Mashhadī 1989, 4:298). Some hadiths attest to the intensity and scope of the Divine mercy, such as those which say that the Divine mercy precedes or overpowers the Divine wrath or the hadith which asserts that on the Day of Creation of the heavens and the earth, God created a hundred mercy, one of which is mercy with which the creation will have mercy on each other, and ninety-nine was preserved for the Day of Resurrection (Suyūfī 1983, 3:6). Therefore, no single meaning can be offered as the meaning of mercy, which is an inclusive term for any kind of Divine attention or blessings towards His creatures whether it be in the form of bestowing bounties upon them, forgiving their sins, or allowing them to repent.

6. The Divine Attributes

On the Divine epithets repeated at the end of Quranic verses, Bowering holds:

The majority of the divine epithets accord with linguistic patterns of the Arabic language that display a similarity of assonance and rhyme (*saj*‘, see rhymed prose), linguistic characteristics that the Quran has in common with the utterances and oracles of the pre-Islamic Arab soothsayers (*kāhin*). This linguistic similarity accounts for the frequent repetition of such divine names at the end of Quranic verses where they function as mnemonic devices facilitating oral recitation (see orality; recitation of the Quran), especially in Medinan suras. (Bowering 2003, 2:320)

The writer does not provide any evidence for his claim about the similarity between linguistic characteristics of the Quran and the pre-Islamic soothsayers. In addition, to reduce the Divine attributes to mnemonic devices that facilitate recitation is to ignore the more important aspects of these names. As stated in *Nimūnih* exegesis, we are not merely asked to call God by these names; in reality, we are invited to implement these attributes in our soul as much as possible, and in other words, be attributed to Divine attributes (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 7:23). In addition, these



attributes are revelations of God to the heart of the Prophet; that is, they unveil transcendent realities about God and His attributes. Furthermore, their position in the Quranic verses is also through revelation, in harmony with the forms and meanings of the verses, to enlighten humankind about God and His attributes.

While Bowering refers to the attribute of wisdom in the Quran and the fact that God is mentioned as “biding to justice” (*ya‘ muru bi-l-‘adl*, 16:90) (Bowering 2003, 2:321), he states:

Never, however, is God called *al-‘ādil*, “the just,” in the Quran. This fact may be surprising because the Quran depicts God sitting in judgment over humanity on the day of judgment at the end of the world, decreeing reward or appointing punishment, granting bliss, or meeting out damnation (see reward and punishment). With the absolute authority of a monarch, God passes straight to rendering a verdict, his legal decision (*ḥukm*, q 13:41) following the model of the pre-Islamic arbiter (*ḥakam*, q 6:114) though, unlike him, not bound by foregoing arrangements, but influenced by his good pleasure (*riḍwān*) or anger (*sakhat*, cf. q 3:162; 47:28; 3:15; 5:19). (ibid)

The writer’s reference to God’s wisdom and biding justice suffice to prove that God is different from a pre-Islamic arbiter who acts according to his pleasure or anger. Because God is wise and just and His decisions do not depend on reflection or planning like human beings; rather, His decision or will is His action. In addition, the verses that the author points out do not refer to God’s being influenced by His pleasure or anger which resembles an arbiter: “Is he who follows [the course of] Allah’s pleasure like him who earns Allah’s displeasure and whose refuge is hell, an evil destination?” (Quran 3:162); “That, because they pursued what displeased Allah, and loathed His pleasure. So, he has made their works fail” (Quran 47:28); “For those who are God-wary, there will be gardens near their Lord, with streams running in them, to remain in them [forever], and chaste mates, and Allah’s pleasure” (Quran 3:15). These verses mainly refer to



the destiny of those who follow God's pleasure or displeasure and do not refer to God's actions which are influenced by His pleasure or anger; rather, these verses attest to the Divine justice or wisdom according to which Allah rewards the righteous who seek His pleasure and punishes the evildoers who earn His displeasure.

7. Meeting God

According to Bowering, "the only human being capable of seeing God in the Quran is none other than Muḥammad who experienced two visions of God as stated in q 53:5-18 (cf. 81:19-25). According to early Quranic exegesis, which seems to be closest to the Quranic text, the Prophet saw God with his own eyes" (Bowering 2003, 2:324). First, in the Quran, there is no reference to the fact that the Prophet has been the only person who saw God. There are certain Quranic verses that indicate that there is the possibility of meeting God (Quran 84:6). Secondly, in many Quranic exegeses the option that the pronouns return to Gabriel have also been stated (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 22: 487-489; Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1996, 19: 29-30) and, as such, one cannot speak about the Prophet's experience to have happened two times. Nevertheless, certain Shii and Sunni hadiths support the view that the Prophet attained proximity to God, and some of the veils were removed between him and God (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 22: 489).

In addition, Bowering asserts "The phrase that his 'heart (*al-fu'ād*) lied not of what he saw' (q 53:11) facilitated the interpretation that Muḥammad saw God with his heart, i.e., in a dream vision" (Bowering 2003, 2:324). Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī believes that this perception or encounter is neither with the apparent faculties (*quwā al-zāhirah*), such as hearing or seeing, nor with the hidden faculties (*quwā al-bāṭinah*) such as thinking or imagining; rather, such perception or intuition happens by our soul which is also called 'heart' (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1996, 19:29-30). Therefore, to call the Prophet's encounter with God, a dream-vision, which is through imaginal faculty and perhaps in a half-conscious or unconscious state, does not accord with the exegeses which refer to a transcendent perception



beyond the faculties of sight or imagination.

8. The Formation of Heavens

Referring to the verse (Quran 41:11), Bowering maintains thus “From the vapors rising from the waters the seven skies were formed” (Bowering 2003, 2:327). In the Quran, the creation of the heavens is described to be from smoke (*dukhān*): “Then He turned to the heaven, and it was smoke, and He said to it and to the earth, ‘Come! Willingly or unwillingly!’ They said, ‘We come heartily’” (Quran 41:11). According to *Nimūnih* exegesis, the fact that “The heavens were in the form of smoke, in the beginning, shows that the beginning of the creation of the heavens was from a vast mass of gases, and this is completely consistent with the latest scientific research on the beginnings of creation. Even now, many of the stars in the sky are in the form of a compact mass of gases and smoke” (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 20:228). According to one hadith from Ibn Abbas about this verse, the heaven was formed out of the vapor of the earth (Ṭabrisī 1993, 9:8). Of course, there is no reference in this hadith whether this vapor was from the waters of the earth or something else. However, the apparent meaning of the Quranic verse which uses the word ‘smoke’ (*dukhān*) confirmed by the scientific findings does not support the author’s view. Furthermore, as stated in *Mihr* exegesis, in (Quran 79: 27-33) the creation of the earth is mentioned after the heavens, but in the above verses (Quran 41: 9-12), the word “ثم” (*thumma* ‘then’) refers to a delay in the statement, not in time; that is, there is no obstacle that the creation of the earth happened after that of the heavens, but it is mentioned later in terms of expression, and this is more consistent with cosmological and geological discoveries (Riḍā’ī-İşfahānī 2009, 18:211). Therefore, the author’s remark about the creation of the heavens from vapor is neither consistent with the Quranic verses, nor with the scientific discoveries.

Conclusions

The results of the present research are as follows:

1. The author's outlook, like many writings of other orientalists, is overshadowed by certain assumptions and hangovers about the nature of the Quran. In his discourses, one can trace the view that the Quran is influenced by the pre-Islamic atmosphere and milieu from which the Quran flourished. That is why his judgments are also affected by this view, and as such, God appears as an arbiter, and the Divine epithets at the end of the verses are placed to maintain the rhyme and music of the recitation, reminiscent of the pre-Islamic soothsayers.

2. Given the author's statements, the Prophet appears as the final editor who incorporates different components of the Quran whether they pertain to its form or meanings. And the Prophet himself was influenced by his time's cultural and social atmosphere. As such, the Quran seems to be the art of the Prophet rather than a Divine revelation for the guidance of humankind. The beautiful names of God no longer appear as enlightening guides toward His essence and attributes; rather, they are landmarks of the Prophet's prayer rather than tenets of his theology.

3. Bowering's reliance on the early hadith corpus or exegeses, without scrutinizing their authenticity, has resulted in certain statements about the Quranic verses which are not approved by many of the exegetes or scientific findings. His views about the origin of the formation of the heavens or the Prophet's Ascension are examples of this.

4. Despite the merits of Bowering's article and his scholarly attempt, his attitude towards the Quran has resulted in certain judgments about the content and form of this Divine Book which are distant from the sublime spirit of the Quran. As long as orientalists, such as Bowering, are not enlightened to the revelatory nature of the Quran, one should not expect to see in their works any thorough and realistic attitude towards the Quran and its sublime teachings.



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