



Semantics of 'Rabb' as an Attribute of God in the Framework of Quranic Teachings

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ABSTRACT

The term *rabb* as an attribute of God is repeated frequently in the Quran. It assumes a significant role in comprehension of other attributes of God as well as some Quranic teachings. Comprehension of this term requires methodological consideration of Quranic verses, traditions, and other evidence in a semantic framework. Accordingly, the only definition that can be presented for this term is *malik mudabbir*. Other definitions including *murabbi* (instructor/trainer/cultivator) are insufficient. In the definition, *Malik* may be rendered as Master/Owner/Lord meaning that He holds complete possession and absolute authority over all of creation. In addition, *mudabbir* (director/ordainer) is an attribute involving the absolute knowledge, wisdom, power, and mercy of God as well as other divine attributes. Thus, the term *rabb* comprehends various divine attributes and can have a wide range of implications. Polytheism in lordship (and following that, in divinity) emerges when an entity other than God is associated with some aspect of lordship (e.g. believing in a god that intercedes or forgives). If such beliefs did not exist, polytheism would never originate.

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Introduction

After the term Allah, *rabb* is the most frequently recurring word about God in the Quran with an incidence rate of 958. It is the only name of God existing in the Quran in a possessive construction (*idafah*) with *al-'alamin* (lit. worlds/creatures of the world) as the possessed. The expression *rabb al-'alamin* (Lord of the Worlds), with a frequency of 41 cases in the Quran, denotes that the scope of God's lordship extends to all parts and aspects of creation. This is because the term *al-'alamin* in this usage is representative of all of existence.

The term *rabb* is linked with at least two areas of meaning in the Quran. One area concerns other attributes and names of God such as Creator (*khaliq*), All-Knowing ('*alim*), All-Wise (*hakim*), All-Powerful (*qadir*), Forgiving (*ghafur*), Merciful (*rahim*), All-Aware (*khabir*), the Helper (*nasir*), etc. It also pertains to the concepts of *ilah* (god) and '*ibadah* (worship) as well as the relationship between humans and God. Since every god is a lord and worship solely relates to gods, and since there is no lord but God, it stands that there is no god other than Him and worship is solely His (see: The Holy Quran 6:102). The semantics of the word *rabb* as utilized in the Quran can play a fundamental role in explication of the semantic system of the Holy Quran as well as some of its key concepts.

The views of philologists and Quranic researchers concerning the definition of the term *rabb* as an attribute of God can be categorized into two general groups. There are those who consider this word to stem from the triconsonantal root of "r-b-b". They posit either that ownership/lordship is the essence of the term *rabb* or that it only means owner/lord (Ibn Manzur, 1982, vol. 1, p. 399; Ibn Faris, 2008, p. 356; Jawhari, 1956, vol. 1, p. 130; Farahidi, 1993, vol. 1, p. 640; Tusi, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 32-33; Tabrisi, 1998, vol. 1, p. 6; Hirawi, 1998, vol. 1, p. 697; Zamakhshari, 2006, vol. 1, p. 10; Qurtubi, 1967, vol. 1, p. 136; Firuzabadi, 1970, vol. 3, p. p. 29; Sayyid ibn Qutb, 1991, vol. 1, p. 23; Al Sa'di, 1987, vol. 1, p. 25). Others believe either that *rabb* means *tarbiyat* (training/upbringing/cultivation) or that this

makes up the main essence of the meaning (Raghib Isfahani, 1990, p. 189; Tabrisi, 1986, vol. 1, p. 97; Baydawi, 1998, vol. 1, p. 28; Qasimi, 1978, vol. 1, p. 227; Alusi, 1996, vol. 1, p. 130; Tayyib, 1959, vol. 1, p. 99). This research work utilizes a descriptive-analytical approach and seeks to answer the following questions.

- What is the exact meaning of *rabb* as an attribute of God in the framework of Quranic teachings?
- What knowledge can be gained about God by discovering the correct meaning of *rabb*?

Methodology

In order to analyze the term *rabb* as an attribute of God – like other attributes and concepts in the Quran – a systematic and cohesive approach must be taken toward teachings of revelation. In this case, a systematic approach entails examination of verses and narrations in which this word or its derivatives are employed either paradigmatically or syntagmatically, and then formation of a semantic network between these instances of the term to discover the true meaning of *rabb*. An examination of all verses and traditions is not possible in this process. Inevitably, several Quranic verses and traditions are examined in each of the areas of genetic and nongenetic anthropology, worldly phenomena, stories of the past, and social relations.

Investigation of the Meaning of Rabb in the Quran

First, the Holy Quran states:

Say, 'Shall I seek a Lord other than Allah, while He is the Lord of all things?' (The Holy Quran 6:164).

This verse seems to be the most important verse on the topic of *rabb* in the Quran. According to this verse, all instances of 'thing' (*shay'*) are vassals (*marbub*) and God is their Lord in the same way that all things are created and God is their Creator (see: The Holy Quran 39:62). Examples of the term *rabb* are presented below in the areas of genetic and nongenetic anthropology, worldly phenomena, stories of the past, and social relations among people.

Genetic Anthropology

In Quranic genetic anthropology, it is understood that all human attributes in the arc of descent and ascent (*qaws su'ud wa nuzul*) are vassals and God is their Lord. The Quran discourses on the physical human arc of ascent in terms of the creation of human beings, human development from a zygote through various embryonic stages to infancy, childhood, maturity, and on to perfection (The Holy Quran 22:5, 28:14, 12:22). Also, concerning the arc of descent of human physical attributes, the Quran states:

And whomever We give a long life, We cause him to regress in creation (36:68).

And there are some among you who are relegated to the nethermost age so that he knows nothing after [having possessed] some knowledge (16:70; 22:5).

All these attributes and conditions are instances of 'thing' (*shay'*). Hence, they are subject to the lordship of God even though in the arc of descent, deficiency emerges rather than growth and perfection.

Nongenetic Anthropology

In various Quranic verses, the directive (*mudabbir*) presence of God in nongenetic anthropology of individuals and societies is denoted in terms of opposites such as mercy and punishment (17:54), dignity and abasement (3:26), expansion and constriction of provisions (17:30), and guiding and misleading (74:31). These attributes are also instances of 'thing'; therefore, they are vassals of God as the Lord of the Worlds.

Worldly Phenomena

The term *rabb* is also applied to worldly phenomena and objects.

By the Lord of the easts and the west... (70:40).

Let them worship the Lord of this House (106:3).

Clearly, the term *rabb* does not imply the training or cultivation of these objects. Quranic verses concerning worldly phenomena on both arcs of ascent and descent represent aspects of the lordship of God: Celebrate the Name of your Lord, the Most Exalted, who created and proportioned, who determined and guided, who brought forth the pasture, then turned it into a black scum (87:1-5).

These verses denote that the growth of grass (on the arc of ascent) and its desiccation and blackening (on the arc of descent) are subject to the lordship of God. The verses convey the concepts of divine decree and genetic guidance. In various verses, the Quran identifies these corporeal arcs as admonitions for the wise (39:21).

Stories of the Past

We turned them into stubble (23:41).

This verse concerns the ancients, depicting the punishment of oppressive disbelievers. A cry struck them and they became like stubble, lifeless and worthless. This also pertains to the lordship of God, which comprehends the entirety of creation, including ancient communities.

Social Relations between Humans

The following example pertains to social relationships between people. The Holy Quran criticizes and rejects the view of the People of the Book about their scholars.

They have taken their scholars and monks as lords besides Allah, and [also] the Messiah, the son of Mary. And they were not commanded except to worship one God; there is no deity except Him. Exalted is He above whatever they associate with Him (9:31).

Both Shia and Sunni sources contain many narrations stating that the People of the Book took their scholars and rabbis

as lords and in this way practice polytheism. The content matter of these narrations is as follows: The People of the Book do not prostrate themselves before rabbis or monks. They do not pray, fast, or carry out other types of worship to them. However, since the people have unrestrictedly placed themselves at the disposal of their scholars, following their commandments without question, the Quran considers this illogical and illegitimate behavior worship (Bahrani, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 120-121; Tabari, 1991, vol. 10, pp. 80-81; Ibn Kathir, 1982, vol. 2, p. 348).

The People of the Book consider their rabbis to be *rabb*. They bestow lordship upon them. According to narrations, this means they are considered masters/owners (*malik*) of permissible and forbidden acts, and ordainers/directors (*mudabbir*) of these matters. They are not *murabbi*; that is, trainers or cultivators who attain perfection themselves. According to Shia narrations, *rabb* comprehends the concepts of creatorship (*khaliqiyyah*), ownership (*malikiyyah*), and directorship (*mudabbiriyyah*) (Qumi, 1989, vol. 1, p. 28; Saduq, 1999, vol. 1, p. 284; Saduq, 1999, vol. 2, p. 107; Saduq, 1970, vol. 1, p. 20). These concepts bear a logical relationship to one another. The true Creator is the true Owner (*malik*). This is because all creators own their creations. Therefore, all creations are owned (*mamluk*) in nature, attributes, and other aspects, and God is their only true owner. This concept is observed in the Quran as well.

That is Allah, your Lord, there is no god except Him, the creator of all things (6:102).

In this verse, creatorship is presented as a cause for lordship. In other words, there is only one lord since there is only one creator, and our creator is our lord and master (*rabb*). This true ownership requires humans to say, 'Only God is the Ordainer/Director of all things in the world. He directs everything according to the best interests and manifests His perpetual presence in the world every moment'. The directorship of God can also be understood from conceptual analysis of his true ownership. Ownership is a relationship between owner and possession allowing owners free disposition of their possessions. Since God is the true owner of all of existence, His ownership cannot be annulled and, as the world is His possession, He may direct and intervene in it in any way He pleases (Tabataba'i, 1996, vol. 1, p. 21). Thus, by analyzing the term ownership, it is understood that it also comprehends the concept of directorship. This directorship manifests in the existential effects of all things.

Synthesis of Functions of Rabb in the Quran

The following conclusions can be made based on the usages of *rabb* in the Quran.

The term *rabb* entered the Quran from the Arab lexicon. Semantically, it forms a vast network of meaning. Ontologically, it covers all domains in the order of creation including human beings. It is a complex and multifaceted concept and should be understood by considering the teachings of revelation in an integrated and systematic – not analytical – manner.

It seems that the definition of *malikmudabbir* (directing/ordaining owner) can reveal the true meaning of *rabb* in the Quran. First, this ownership is not conventional but true since it emanates from the creatorship of God, who is the sole creator of all of existence, again in a true sense. Every creator is an owner and every created being is possessed. Second, since direction and control of a possession is not possible without knowledge and power of the owner, every owner can only control their possessions to the extent of their knowledge, power, and wisdom. However, the knowledge, power, wisdom, and other perfect attributes of God must be considered in the ordaining and directive process of God. When the divine

concept of *malikmudabbir* is considered rigorously, true ownership and directorship are understood which signify perfect attributes such as knowledge, power, mercy, and wisdom of God. Therefore, it can be asserted that numerous perfect attributes are incorporated within the term *rabb*. Third, contrary to the claims of some exegetes (Maraghi, 2006, vol. 1, p. 30; Qushayri, 1984, vol. 1, p. 47; Khazin, 1995, vol. 1, p. 19), *rabb* does not mean *murabbi* (trainer/cultivator); rather, it means *malikmudabbir* (directing owner).

Semantic Components of Rabb

Now that the correct meaning of *rabb* has been determined as *malikmudabbir*, analysis of the attribution of this term to God leads to several basic teachings.

First, though the entire world is the vassal of God, the world has various tiers. The lordship of God toward prophets, for example, differs from his lordship toward other human beings. Lordship is measured on the basis of the rank of the vassal and therefore has various levels (87:3; 64:11).

Second, perhaps the reason all prayers to God in the Quran begin with *rabb* is that no divine name of God is more beneficial and fuller of loving kindness toward servants than *rabb*. Such prayers ask for the ordainment of the true owner; they ask for resolution of the needs of vassals through merciful, kind, and wise ordainment from a being that is neither ignorant of their needs nor incapable of fulfilling them.

Third, God is the absolute ordaining owner, and there is no obstacle in His ownership or directorship. Some owners do not direct the affairs of their possessions due to ignorance, impotence, or perhaps even avarice. Others are directors, but not true owners and therefore cannot direct in the manner that is necessary or desired. Since God is free of all flaws and deficiencies, He is not lacking in the direction and ordainment regarding any affair. Since He is the true creator, He is the true owner of the nature, attributes, and affairs of all creations (Sadiqi Tihrani, 1987, vol. 1, p. 94).

Fourth, the ordainment of God is not to His own benefit since He is essentially self-sufficient (*ghaniyy*) and has no need of anything (29:6). Even though His direction and ordainment encompasses all aspects and affairs in existence, His Bounty is endless and greed has no sway in it. This direction occurs without anyone asking for it and never ends (Razi, 1991, vol. 1, p. 187).

Fifth, God has not created the world without purpose or in vain, and thus He will not abandon it (44:38-39). All phenomena and creations in the world persist as a result of His consideration and blessing, and the bond between lord and vassal is all-inclusive and eternal. Comprehension of this absolute lordship is the decisive factor between complete monotheism and nihilism, which denies continuity of life and considers death to be annihilation (45:24).

Sixth, in accordance with the definition of *rabb* as *malikmudabbir*, the meaning of verse 1 of the opening chapter of the Quran, "All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds" can be stated as follows. In all of existence, every being in every condition – whether seemingly proceeding toward perfection or imperfection, or seemingly receiving reward or punishment – must only praise the One Lord since the ordainment of God is based on knowledge, wisdom, and mercy, and there can be no injustice or oppression in such direction (18:49; 3:18).

Seventh, in seeking the intercession of the prophets and saints of God, if lordship or divinity are not attributed to them, and they are not considered to be Directive Owners of intercession, this act cannot be considered polytheism in

lordship (*shirkrububbiyyah*). The distinction between the faithful and polytheists derives from this point. Polytheists deify or grant lordship to their intercessors, considering them owners of intercession. In this way, they are afflicted with polytheism as indicated in numerous Quranic verses (43:86; 39:43; 26:97-98). However, the faithful believe in monotheism in lordship. They never consider saints of God to be ordaining owners of intercession or make them partners of God in this aspect.

Conclusion

The term *rabb* is linked with at least two areas of meaning in the Quran. It relates to both the attributes and names of God and the relationship between humans and God. The views of exegetes on this issue are twofold. Some assert that *rabb* derives from the triconsonantal Arabic root of "r-b-b" and consider ownership to be an essential component of its meaning. Others believe that *rabb* means *tarbiyyat* (training/cultivation). When instances of this term in the Quran are examined in an integrated semantic network, it is understood that first, *rabb* means *malikmudabbir* (ordaining owner), which is in line with its literal meaning and the meanings stated in narrations. Second, this ownership is not conventional since it stems from the creatorship of God. The ordaining aspect refers to numerous perfect attributes of God.

The lordship of God covers all of existence. It is perpetual and multi-tiered in accordance with the various ranks of creations. Praise belongs only to God as the "Lord of the Worlds" (*rabbal-'alamin*). There is no oppression or injustice in His lordship, even if humans are unable to understand how the phenomena and events in the world require His praise.

Monotheism in lordship contrasts with polytheism in lordship. Polytheism is attribution of lordship to a person or thing other than God in any affair. In other words, it is considering a person or thing an ordaining owner and a partner of God in owning and ordaining that specific affair. If one does not consider others as ordaining owners, then polytheism in lordship does not occur. Therefore, seeking intercession or recourse to saints of God without considering them partners of God in lordship of intercession is not a case of polytheism.

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