

A

Aaron

See HĀRŪN

Abad

See ETERNITY

Abābīl

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ʿAbd

See SLAVES AND SLAVERY; SLAVES OF ALLAH

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ABILITY

ISTITĀʿA

Istitāʿa (ability) in the Qurʾān is synonymous with *qudra* (power, *q.v.*) but, unlike it, is used only for creatures and never for the Creator because it necessarily implies a process on the part of the agent. It is the infinitive noun of *istaṭāʿa*, the tenth derivative form of the root *ṭ-w-ʿ* (to comply) which means *aṭāqa* (to be capable) as Ibn Sīda (398-458/1007-1066) defines it (*Muḥkam* 2:225a) or, more literally, *istaṭāqa* (to try to make oneself capable), per Abū Ibrāhīm al-Fārābī (d. 350?/961?) (*Dirwān al-adab* 3:451), primarily in the physical but also in the moral sense as in “bearing with something.” Its nominal synonyms *ṭawq*, *tāqa*, and *itāqa* all derive from *ṭ-w-q* whose literal meaning is to encircle, *tāqa* (capability) being the *ṭawq* (circle) of one’s power: “if one can bear something (*aṭāqahu*), it is as if he has encompassed it and encircled its sides” (Ibn Fāris, 3:433) although “with exertion,” al-Rāghib (d. ca.502/1108) specifies (*Mufradāt*, sub *ṭ-w-ʿ*). Thus *ṭ-w-ʿ* and *ṭ-w-q* are linguistic affines in the context of “greater etymology” (*al-ishtiqāq al-akbar*), where the sharing of any two root letters in respective etymons signals a semantic commonality as well; and that is how they are used in the Qurʾān.

Usage

Istitāʿa occurs 42 times in the Qurʾān:

- I. mostly in the first lexical sense of physical ability, whether in this world
 - in the past, present, or future: *They have no*

power to help them, neither can they help themselves (Q 7:192, cf. 7:197); *And they worship beside Allah that which owns no provision whatsoever for them from the heavens or the earth, nor have they any power* (Q 16:73, cf. 36:75); *It behooves them not, nor is it in their power* (Q 26:211); *Then they will not be able to make any bequest, nor will they return to their people* (Q 36:50); *And they (the Thamūd) were unable to rise up, nor could they help themselves* (Q 51:45); or

- in hypothetical propositions: *They will not cease to fight against you till they turn you from your religion, if they are able* (Q 2:217), the first mention of the word in the Qurʾānic sequence; *But if he who owes the debt is of low understanding, or weak, or unable himself to dictate* (Q 2:282); *Pilgrimage to the House is a duty unto Allah from all people able to make their way there* (Q 3:97); *Except the feeble among men, and the women and children, who are unable to devise a plan and are not shown a way* (Q 4:98); *You will not be able to be equitable between your wives, as much as you wish to* (Q 4:128), that is, trying to love them both or all equally (cf. Jalālayn, *Tafsīr*); *And had We willed, We verily could have fixed them in their place, making them powerless to go forward or turn back* (Q 36:67).
- II. or in the next world: *If those who disbelieved but knew the time when they will not be able to drive off the fire from their faces and from their backs, and they will not be helped!* (Q 21:40); *and you can neither ward off [your punishment] nor obtain any help* (Q 25:19); *and they shall be summoned to prostrate, but cannot* (Q 68:42);
 - III. twice in the shorter form *istāʿa* as in the first “unable” in the verse *So they were unable to scale it and unable to pierce it* (Q 18:97), a shorter, disyllabic cognate connoting faster action as opposed to the trisyllabic, so that the meaning would be that they were unable to scale it swiftly and they were unable to pierce it no matter how long they tried;
 - IV. but also in that of mental and spiritual predisposition, aptly translated by Pickthall (1875-1936) as *They could not bear to hear, and they used not to see* (Q 11:20); *Behold, how they coin similitudes for you, and go astray, and cannot find a way!* (Q 17:48, 25:9); *Those whose eyes were covered against My remembrance, and who were not able to hear* (Q 18:101);
 - V. or one’s utmost power, whether in the sense of military resources as in *Make ready for them all you*