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# Lesson 18: The Attributes of Khabariyyah

In an earlier discussion, we have pointed out that some of the Divine Attributes are called "Transmitted Attributes" (*if t al-khabariyyah*). These are Attributes of God which are mentioned in verses of the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions, and if we believe in their outward meaning and implication, we will succumb to the notion of anthromorphism and incarnation.

Examples are "settling on the Throne" (*istaw' 'ala 'l-'arsh*) in the verse *"The All-beneficent settled on the Throne,"*1 "face" (*wajh*) in the verse *"Yet lasting is the Face of your Lord, majestic and munificent,"*2 and "hand" (*yadd*) in the verse *"The hand of Allah is above their hands."*3 In this regard, Shahrist n has said:

"A group of the predecessors (*alaf*) used to affirm Transmitted Attributes such as *yadayn* (hands) and *wajh* (face) for God, without interpreting (*ta'w l*) them, but they would say, 'Since these attributes have been transmitted in religious texts, we shall call them 'transmitted attributes''."4

Regarding the semantics of these attributes, different viewpoints and approaches have been advanced. In this lesson, we shall state and examine them:

## Literalism and Anthropomorphism

A group of the Ahl al- ad th who are labeled *Hashwiyyah*5 clings to the outward meaning of such verses, and as a result, they likened God to His creatures and believed in anthropomorphism and incarnation. Regarding them, Shahrist n has said:

"A number of the Ahl al- ad th *ashwiyyah* openly subscribed to anthropomorphism and affirm limbs and dimensions, ascent and descent, movement and transfer for God. Moreover, they attributed baseless narrations to the Holy Prophet (*'a*), most of which were taken from Jews, and regarding the Qur'an, they believed that even its letters, sounds and words are pre-existent and eternal."6

Regarding the notion of anthropomorphism, Ibn Khald n7 has also said:

"But there were a few innovators in their (*a bah* and *t bi'n*) time who occupied themselves with the

ambiguous verses and delved into anthropomorphism. One group operated with the plain meaning of the relevant verses. They assumed anthropomorphism for God's essence, in that they believed that He has hands, feet, and a face... Another group turned to anthropomorphism with regard to the attributes of God. They assumed direction, sitting, descending, voice, letter (sound), and similar things [for God]... The [people who gave consideration to the anthropomorphic verses] then tried to escape from the anthropomorphic abomination by stating that [God has] 'a body unlike [ordinary human] bodies' and 'a direction unlike directions.'

By that, they meant: '[not as those things are used] in connection with [human] bodies.' This is no defense for them, because it is a statement contradictory in itself and a combination of negation and assertion, if both (negation and assertion) are used here for one and the same concept of body. But if the two differ among themselves and [thus] disavow the commonly accepted concept of body, those [people] rather agree with us that God is devoid [of human attributes]. They consider the word 'body to be merely one of His names (used in a peculiar sense in connection with Him). Things like that depend on [religious] permission."[8]

From the two statements above and similar views, it can be inferred that those who believe in the outward meanings of the verses and traditions related to the Transmitted Attributes are of two groups. One group is concomitant with anthropomorphism and incarnation while another group is not concomitant with the same and with such expressions as "a body unlike [ordinary human] bodies," they would declare themselves free from the belief in anthropomorphism and incarnation although as Ibn Khald□n has mentioned, their offered solution does not solve the problem at all. The second approach is prevalent among the present-day Salaf□s (Wahh□b□s).[9]

## Ta'w□l Approach

In the area of Transmitted Attributes, many Muslim theologians and exegetes (*mufassir□n*) have adopted the *ta'w□l* approach. *Ta'w□l* with respect to the verses of the Qur'an has diverse meanings, one of which is synonymous with *tafs□r* (exegesis). This meaning has been widely intended among the earlier exegetes. For instance, 'Abd All□h ibn 'Abb□s is reported to have said, "I am among those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-r□sikh□n fi 'l-'ilm*)[10] and I know the interpretation (*ta'w□l*) of the Qur'an."

Another meaning of *ta'w□l* is to interpret a word contrary to its outward meaning. This term is prevalent among the contemporary exegetes and whenever the word *ta'w□l* is used without a particular context, this is the intended meaning.

The third meaning for the term *ta'w□l* is for a verse to have numerous meanings some of which are within some others. And one of them is the outward meaning of the verse as understood by the common people, but its other meanings are only known to God and those who are grounded in knowledge.

The fourth application of *ta'wīl* regarding the Holy Qur'an is to trace the roots or origins of words which do not belong in the category of word or meaning but rather in the objective or external realities [of the word]. Therefore, *ta'wīl* is not exclusive to the allegorical verses (*mutashābihāt*) and it is applicable to all verses of the Qur'an.[11]

Of the [different] meanings [of *ta'wīl* mentioned above], what is intended or meant in theological discourses is the second meaning. Mu'tazilī, Imāmī, a number of Ash'arī and Māturdī theologicans and those of other schools of theology have adopted this method. Contrary to what is sometimes thought of, this method is not exclusive to the contemporary theologians. In fact, it had also proponents among the predecessors (*salaf*). As Shahristānī has said, "Some of the predecessors would interpret (*ta'wīl*) such attributes by taking into account the compatibility of a word with its meaning."[12] Rashīd Riḍā has also said, "The leading *salaf* scholars would sometimes interpret the outward verses (*ẓawāhir*)."[13]

## Theological Foundation of Ta'wīl

As a method of exegesis, *ta'wīl* has a special theological foundation, and that is, in elucidating its sublime teachings, the Holy Qur'an uses parables so as to make these teachings understandable to the common people. As the Qur'an itself has stated,

﴿ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴾

***"Allah draws these parables for mankind so that they may take admonition."***[14]

One of the main reasons behind the allegorical verses in the Qur'an is this very principle.[15] Yet, in order for the human mind not only to dwell on the outward and metaphorical meanings and thus succumb to anthropomorphism, there have been explicit and clear verses in the Holy Qur'an that negate any kind of similitude between God and other beings. It is thus stated,

﴿ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ﴾

***"Nothing is like Him."***[16]

﴿ وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ﴾

***"Nor has He any equal."***[17]

Whenever one duly pays attention to these two points, he will neither succumb to anthropomorphism nor fall prey to intellectual suspension.

On the basis of this rule, the correct method of *ta'wīl* can be inferred, the meanings of the Transmitted Attributes can be found out and it can be said that the word *wajh* (face) in connection with God refers to the Divine Essence. When it is said, *"Everything is to perish except His Face,"*[18] it means that all essences and things will perish except the Essence of God. The reason for describing the Essence with the word *wajh* is that the face or countenance of every entity symbolizes its essence or identity. For this reason, description of their faces is used in order to determine the identity of individuals.

The word *yadd* (hand) or *yadayn* refers to the Divine Power. The verse *"The hand of Allah is above their hands"*[19] means that the Power of God is superior to all powers and it is the bedrock of all powers. And the verse *"I have created with My* [*own*] *two hands"*[20] means that "I have created Adam with My special power and Satan must not compare the origin of creation of the human being which is earth (soil) with the origin of his own creation which is fire and think of the superiority of the fire to the earth as an obstacle to his prostrating before Adam. Instead, he must take into account the superior power of the Creator of Adam and show humility to that Infinite Power.

The word *istiwī* implies domination (*istī/ī*) while *'arsh* (throne) denotes the Station of Control of the universe. Therefore, the verse *"The All-beneficent, settled on the Throne"*[21] implies domination and supremacy of God in controlling the universe, just as the 'throne' in the human context is related to the position of authority and administering a country.

## Singular and Synthetic Appearance

Concerning *ta'wīl*, this important point must be borne in mind that whenever it is said that *ta'wīl* means giving meaning to a word in contrast to to its outward meaning, this is true as long as this meaning is intended in isolation and in a sentence or phrase. In the same manner, a word is mentioned in isolation in dictionaries and its meanings are stated.

But if we consider that word in a phrase or sentence, the metaphorical or figurative meaning is not only not contrary to the apparent meaning of the word but the same meaning can also be understood from the said word, and conveying the real meaning needs a context; otherwise, it will sometimes give the wrong meaning.

For example, whenever it is said that "The city is in the hand of a mayor," the word 'hand' is never understood to mean one of the bodily limbs. In fact, anyone who can hear it will understand that it refers to administering the city. Even if the mayor has no physical hands, the same understanding will remain, and in principle, giving literal meaning to the word is incorrect in such application.[22]

## Postponement (Tawaqquf) and Delegation (Tafwīīī)

Another method which is used in connection with the allegorical verses (*mutashībihīt*) and the Transmitted Attributes (*īifīt al-khabariyyah*) is *tafwīī* (delegation). The outcome of this method is that

one can neither choose the outward meanings of the Transmitted Attributes as the *mujassamah* and *mushabbahah* do nor can one apply the method of *ta'wīl* as the *mu'awwalah* do. Some have claimed that the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and the Followers (*tābi'īn*), nay the Muslims of the first three centuries had adopted such method but historical evidence proves otherwise.

No doubt, it could never be the method of the Imāms from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*'a*) and a number of the great Companions and Followers to keep silence regarding the allegorical verses and to refrain from expressing any opinion or view. In fact, they used to interpret and give commentary on them through a different method.

We will explain this method of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*'a*) afterward. Shahristānī has pointed out that a number of the predecessors (*salaf*) used to interpret the allegorical verses.23 Yes, it can be said that most of the predecessors had adopted the method of delegation (*tafwīḍ*).24 Shahristānīs have mentioned Mālik ibn Anas (died 179 AH), Sufyān al-Thawrī (died 161 AH), Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (died 240 AH), and Dāwud ibn 'Alī al-Iṣfahānī (died 270 AH) as among the leading predecessors who were proponents of *tafwīḍ*.25

## Bases of the Proponents of Tafwīḍ

1. The Holy Qur'an has prohibited *ta'wīl* and considered pursuance of the allegorical verses as a product of sedition-mongering and *ta'wil*-orientedness:

﴿ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ في قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ﴾

***"As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they pursue what is metaphorical in it, courting temptation and courting its interpretation."***26

And on the other hand, [belief in] anthropomorphism and incarnation is also invalid. Therefore, the path of moderation is indeed that of suspension (*tawaqquf*) and delegation (*tafwīḍ*).27

This argument is incorrect because pursuance of the allegorical verses can only be considered a sign of sickness of the heart and sedition-mongering when it is in pursuance of the allegorical as it is, but if the allegorical is correctly referred back to the definitive (*muḥkam*) and interpreted in the light of the definitive, in this case it cannot be blameworthy. In fact, it can be inferred from the sayings and actions of the Prophet (ﷺ), the Imāms from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*'a*) and a number of leading Companions that such an action is acceptable and permissible.

2. Useful *ta'wīl* is a conjecture and speculation, and not knowledge and certainty, and concerning the Divine Attributes, one cannot rely on conjecture and speculation:

﴿ وَإِنَّ الظَّنَّ لا يُغْنِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا ﴾

***"And indeed conjecture is no substitute for the truth."***[28]

This argument is also baseless because cases differ with each other. Sometimes through discussion and determining the context, one can attain knowledge and certainty. At other times, one cannot obtain anything except conjecture and hypothesis. In the first case, we tend to believe in the purport of a given verse with certainty, and as hypothetical in the second case and this hypothetical belief is not legally (*shar'*) shunned because the said meaning – as stated in the discussion of *ta'wl* – is understood from the apparent meaning of the Word of God.

Furthermore, belief in the denotation of the apparent meaning of the Word of God is necessary when the proof contrary to it is not obtained because rejecting the outward aspects of the Religion without a reliable context is not permissible. In other words, concerning the allegorical verses, the preferable conjecture is a legal proof.[29]

3. If the scope of *ta'wl* is extended with respect to the allegorical verses, the scope of *ta'wl* will also be extended in all religious laws and it will end up in esoteric interpretation (*ta'wl bniyyah*) which necessitates rejection of some religious laws.[30]

It is evident that treating as one the esoteric interpretation and the *ta'wl* meant with respect to the allegorical verses has no logical basis. On account of avoiding the esoteric (*bnin*), one is not supposed to deny the truth. Instead, by believing and acting upon the truth, the esoteric must also be avoided.

## Transmitted Attributes in the School of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a)

In the school of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a), anthropomorphism (*tashbiyyah*) and incarnation (*tajsm*) are vehemently considered unacceptable, and at the same time, the method of delegation (*tafwn*) in the sense of keeping silence and not using the intellect in discussing and scrutinizing the interpretation of the Attributes is not approved also. Their method with respect to the Divine Attributes is based upon negation and affirmation; that is, the salient features related to the creatures (*makhlqt*) and contingent beings (*mumkint*) are negated from the Divine Attributes and their meanings which are appropriate to the Divine Station.

Be that as it may, *tafwn* in the sense that the human being is incapable of comprehending the nature of the Essence and Attributes of God and that he must make a pause at this point is affirmed and regarded as one of the characteristics of those well grounded in knowledge (*rsikhn bi 'l-'ilm*).[31]

In the school of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a), *ta'wl* is also a special method and that is to determine the allegorical verses in the light of the definitive verses, and to determine the use of every kind of rational (*'aql*) or textual (*naql*) hypothesis for elucidating the definitive verses, and the use of every kind of rational or textual hypothesis for elucidating the allegorical verses is not acceptable. The acceptable

*ta'wīl* is that which is done by referring to the definitive verses of the Qur'an, authentic traditions or absolute rational principles. Someone asked Imām al-Ṣādiq (*'a*) concerning the meaning of "God's settlement on the Throne". The Imām thus replied:

"This meaning cannot be denied because Allah has stipulated it. However, it must not be imagined that the Throne of Allah is settled in a particular place, on which He leans and sits. As a matter of fact, it is Allah who looks after the Throne. His Throne is not located in a particular place but rather encompasses the heavens and the earth. As He said,

﴿ وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالأَرْضَ ﴾

***"His seat embraces the heavens and the earth."***[32]

"Therefore, we affirm the Throne or Seat which Allah affirms and we reject that which He negates. That is, we never regard the Throne or Seat as encompassing Allah and He as having in need of a place or another being, but rather it is these creatures which are in need of Him."[33]

Mālik ibn Anas (founder of the Malikī school of jurisprudence) was also asked with the same question, but instead of explaining "God's settlement on the Throne," he declared posing such questions as innovation in religion (bid'ah) – "And to ask about it is bid'ah (وَالسُّؤالُ عَنْهُ بِدْعَةٌ)." Meanwhile, by giving accurate answer, Imām al-Ṣādiq (*'a*) practically proved that to ask questions in order to understand religious teachings is a natural and religious right of individuals. What is important is that the motive behind asking is to know what is unknown and not to engage in fruitless acrimonious disputes.

## Review Questions

1. Define the Transmitted Attributes (*ṣifāt al-khabariyyah*).

2. Who are these *ashwiyyah*?

3. As far as the Transmitted Attributes are concerned, which method has been adopted by the majority of Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and exegetes (*mufassirūn*)?

4. What are the meanings of *ta'wīl*? In theological discussions, which meaning of it is intended?

5. What is meant by the theological basis of *ta'wīl*?

6. State the method of suspension (*tawaqquf*) and delegation (*tafwīḍ*) with respect to the allegorical verses of the Qur'an and the Transmitted Attributes (*ṣifāt al-khabariyyah*).

7. Write down two bases of argument for those who subscribe to *tafwīḍ* along with the refutation to them.

8. What is the *Ahl al-Bayt*'s (*'a*) approach to the Transmitted Attributes?

9. Write down the special approach of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*'a*) concerning *ta'wl*.

1. Srat l H 20:5.
2. Srat al-Ramn 55:27.
3. Srat al-Fat 48:10.
4. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nial, vol. 1, p. 92.
5. On the origin of their earning this name, it is said that they were those who would attend the lecture sessions of asan al-Bar and they would sit in front rows. In the course of the lectures they would sometimes interrupt and make incorrect expressions and undersirable remarks. asan al-Bar ordered them to sit at the fringes (shiyah). As such, they became prominent with this appellation. See Muammad Zhid Kawthar, introduction to Tabyn Kidhb al-Muftar, p. 20. Another opinion on the origin of their name is that they would record at the margins (shiyah) of their books every tradition they would learn without scrutinizing its chain of transmission (sanad) or text (matn). Ja'far al-Sijistn, Buth f 'l-Milal wa 'n-Nial, vol. 1, p. 123.
6. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nial, vol. 1, pp. 105-106.
7. Ibn Khaldn (Ab Zayd 'Abd al-Ramn ibn Muammad ibn Khaldn al-aram) (1332/732 AH-1406/808 AH): a versatile Muslim scholar considered to be a forerunner of several social science disciplines as well as modern economics. [Trans.]
8. Ibn Khaldn, Al-Muqaddimah, pp. 423-424.
9. In this regard, see the books written about the Salafs and Wahhbs such as yatullh Ja'far Subhn, Wahhabism (Tehran: Naba' Organization, 1996), http://www.al-islam.org/wahhabism [1].
10. See Srat l 'Imrn 3:7. [Trans.]
11. 'Allmah al-abab'', Al-Mzn f Tafsr al-Qur'n, vol. 3, pp. 23-49.
12. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nihal, vol. 1, p. 92.
13. Tafsr al-Manr, vol. 1, p. 253.
14. Srat Ibrhm 14: 25.
15. For further information in this regard, see Al-Mzn f Tafsr al-Qur'n, vol. 3, pp. 56-63.
16. Srat ash-Shr 42:11.
17. Srat al-Ikhls (or at-Tawd) 112:1-4.
18. Srat al-Qaa 28:88.
19. Srat al-Fat 48:10.
20. Srat d 38:75.
21. Srat l H 20:5.
22. Ab mid al-Ghazl, Al-J' al-'Awm, p. 55; yatullh Ja'far Subn, Al-Ilhiyyt, vol. 1, pp. 327-328.
23. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nihal, p. 92.
24. Al-Mzn f Tafsr al-Qur'n, vol. 14, pp. 130-131.
25. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nihal, p. 93.
26. Srat l 'Imrn 3:7.
27. Al-Milal wa 'n-Nihal, p. 104.
28. Srat Ynus 10:36; Srat an-Najm 53:28.
29. Fakhr al-Dn al-Rz, Maftt al-Ghayb, vol. 7, p. 175.
30. 'Allmah al-abab' has quoted this argument from Fakhr al-Dn al-Rz. See Al-Mzn f Tafsr al-Qur'n, vol. 14, p. 133.
31. Nahj al-Balghah, Sermon 90.
32. Srat al-Baqarah 2:255.
33. Shaykh al-adq, Al-Tawd, section (bb) on the rejection of dualism (thanawiyyah) and atheism (zandiqah), adth 1.

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