

The Allegorical Texts (I&II)

Anthropomorphism

CENSURE OF THE ANTHROPOMORPHISTS

Ḥāfiẓ Abu'l-Faraj 'Abdu'r-Raḥmān **Ibn al-Jawzī** al-Baghdādī al-Ḥanbalī says, in his famous work *Daf'u Shub'ah at-Tashbīh*, "Thus, since Allāh knows that (human beings cannot comprehend Him), He described Himself with words which they understand Then, after establishing His existence by mentioning words which they were familiar with, He **negated any resemblance** (to what these words mean), by saying, **لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ** "There is nothing like unto Him" [Qur'ān, 42:11]. . . . Then, (we should realize that) the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) did not mention the [allegorical] ahādīth all at once. Rather, he used to mention a word from time to time. Thus, whoever collects (these ahādīth) together in a way which conjures up images has committed a grave blunder." "Then (we should bear in mind also that) **they are very few in number**, and the **authentic reports among them are still fewer**, and then they are Arabic, which allows the use of idiom and metaphor."

And he says, in "*Talbis Iblīs*," pp.111, "Common muḥaddīths have taken in accordance with **sensual perception** that which is related to the attributes of the Originator, because they did not mingle with the Jurists (Fuqahā) whereupon they might learn to interpret the allegorical (**mutashābih**) in conformity with the decisive (**muḥkam**). And (in fact) we have seen in our times (people) from among them compiling books . . ."

He continues, later in *Daf'u Shub'ah at-Tashbīh*, "I have seen some of our companions [i.e. Ḥanbalīs] speaking about the fundamentals in an inappropriate manner, for they have compiled books by which they **have soiled the madhhab** (of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal). And I have seen them stoop to the level of laymen, for they have taken the Attributes according to sense-perception. Thus, they heard that Allāh created Adam upon H/his image, and so attributed to Him an image and a face in addition to His essence, as well as a **mouth, lips, molars, a glowing** for His **face, two hands, two fingers, a palm, a small finger, a thumb, a chest, a thigh, two shins and two feet**. They said, 'We have not heard any mention of the **head**.' They have gone by the literal in (the matter) of the Names and Attributes (**al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt**), and have named (these things) attributes, (which is) an innovated appellation (**Bid'ah**), for which they have no evidence, be it textual or rational.

Ibn al-Jawzī refers specifically, in his book *Daf'u Shub'ah at-Tashbih*, to **Abu Ya'la** and **Ibn al-Zaghūnī** of the **corrupt** Ḥanbalis. Abū Isma'il 'Abdullāh ibn Muḥammad al-Anṣārī **al-Harawī**, another anthropomorphist, compiled a collection of forty ḥadīth, in which he drew upon **weak, strange** and **fabricated** ḥadīth to attribute various **bodily organs** to Allāh. **al-Subki** relates, in "**Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyyah al-Kubra**", that Abu Isma'il **al-Harawi** said, "'I asked Yahya ibn 'Ammar about **Ibn Ḥibbān** (i.e., the famous Muḥaddith) , saying 'Did you see him?' He said, 'How could I not have seen him, considering that we expelled him from Sijistān? He had a lot of knowledge, but not much religiousness. He came to us and denied that Allāh has limits, and so we drove him out of Sijistān.' (Subkī says,) Look at how ignorant this critic is! I wish I knew who is deserving of criticism!! One who affirms limits for his Lord, or one who denies them?"

Ibn al-Jawzī continues, "And I have advised the followers as well as the followed, and told them, 'O our companions! You are people of narration and following. Your great Imām, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (may Allāh have mercy upon him) used to say, while he was under the (lashing of) whips, '**How can I say that which has not been said?**' So, **beware of innovating** into his madhhab what is not a part of it. Then, you have said regarding the ḥadīth, 'They should be taken according to their literal (meaning),' but the literal (meaning) of 'foot' is a (bodily) limb, and whoever says, 'He istawā upon the Throne with His Holy Self,' has considered Him as being in the realm of sense-perception.'"

—— Note : **Istiawā'**, an allegorical attribute, is mentioned in a number of verses of the Qur'ān. The position of the **salaf** is therefore that we affirm it as an attribute for Allāh, deferring its exact import to Him. **Imām Malik** was once asked, 'How did He **istawā'** upon the Throne?' He became furious, and replied, 'The istiawā' is known, its specification is inapplicable, to believe in it is obligatory, and questioning about it is an innovation. And, I see you as nothing but an innovator.' Then, he said to his companions, 'So, expel him (from this gathering).' The interpretation of **istawā'** given by some of the latter **Ash'arīs** is that it means that Allāh conquered (i.e. established His authority over) His Throne. It is worth noting that **the approach of the salaf is not anthropomorphism** (tashbih), nor is the approach of the latter Ash'arīs a negation or denial (**ta'til**) of the attributes. See Class handout "*The Allegorical Texts I & II*" for further details.

Ibn al-Jawzī says, in the conclusion of the book, "When a group of the ignorant, learned of this book of mine, it did not appeal to them, because they have become accustomed to the words of their **corporealist** shaykhs. Thus, they said, 'This is not the madhhab.' I said, 'It is not your madhhab, nor the madhhab of those shaykhs of yours whom you have blindly followed, but I have exonerated Imām Aḥmad (may Allāh have mercy upon him), and cleared him from false reports and insane utterances."

Method of the True Salaf Regarding *Mutashābihāt*

The scholars of the **true Salaf** — that is, the pious Muslims of the **first three centuries** after the Hijra of the Prophet (ﷺ) — used to interpret the allegorical verses (**mutashābihāt**) in the following way: they refuted the unacceptable interpretations but did not specify which one of the acceptable meanings was the intended meaning of the verse or the ḥadīth.

When **Imām Malik, al-Shāfiʿī**, and others were asked about the interpretation of the verse “**al-rahman ‘ala al-‘arsh istawā**” in particular, and about similar verses in general, they used to say: “Accept these verses and ḥadīth as they were given without believing that they have meanings which pertain to a manner, such as images, descriptions related to creations, and the like.” Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal said: “Allāh mentioned Establishment (*al-istiwāʾ*) and Establishment is only what Allāh mentioned about it, **not** what humans imagine about it.”

From these quotations it is clear that the **Salaf**, including **Imām Aḥmad**, rejected the meanings that imply a mode or manner (**kayf**) of “establishment” *because specifying the manner implies a resemblance to created things*.

Thus we see that the way of the **Salaf** was mere acceptance of expressions on faith without saying how they are meant, and without additions, subtractions, or substituting meanings imagined to be synonyms, while stressing Allāh’s absolute transcendence beyond the characteristics of created things in order to preclude likening Him to His creation.

To suggest or cite opinions that they added the terms: “sitting” or “in person” (**bi al-dhāt**) or “sitting in person” or “literally” (**ḥaqīqatan**) is to give the lie to their insistence on rejecting the **kayf** of Allāh’s establishment.

When forwarding their opinions on this subject, “**Salafis/Wahhābīs**” are fond of quoting, not the **bila kayf** (no-modality) opinions of the great Imāms of Ahl al-Sunnah, but those of the **anthropomorphists** that lived around them and deviated from their views, although they claimed to follow their schools. We have already

mentioned some of them, like the Ḥanbalis **Ibn Ya'la** and **al-Zaghuni** condemned by **Ibn al-Jawzī**, and the Ḥanbalis **'Abdullah ibn Aḥmad**, **Ibn Sa'id al-Dārimī**, and **Ibn Khuzayma** denounced by **al-Razi** and **Kawtharī**: As we said before, their assertion that the only alternative to the **Jahmī** belief that “**Allāh is in every place**” is to say that “**He is in one place only, above His throne**” is just as false as saying He is in every place for Allāh exists without place. Yet the belief that He exists in a place is what yesterday's and today's **anthropomorphists** pass as the opinion of the true **Salaf**. However, just because someone lived in the first three centuries, it does **not mean** that he represented the doctrine (Aqīdah) of the true Salaf. It will be clear from the forthcoming opinions of the **Salaf** and **Khalaf** that the correct position of Ahl al-Sunnah never adds “**in person**” or “**literally**” — which is to specify a modality — to the mention of Allāh's establishment on the Throne, and that to suggest space in the slightest manner is **to leave Islam**.

The Methodology of the Khalaf

— *The Khalaf scholars are those who came in succeeding generations after those of the first three Hijrī centuries.*

They are so-named for their successorship of the inheritance of the Prophet (ﷺ), acquiring the knowledge and understanding and of religion. An example of their method is in the interpretation of the verse: **yad Allāhi fawqa aydihim** (58:10) translated as: “Allāh's Hand is over their hands.” **Khalaf** scholars usually give an explicit meaning to such verses. This way is acceptable insofar as there is a fear that people will otherwise interpret them anthropomorphically, likening Allāh to his creations (**tashbīh**) and begin to speak of His “**Hand**” as a literal (**haqīqī**) attribute, in the manner of **Ibn Taymiyyah**, **Ibn Qayyim**, and the early Ḥanbali anthropomorphists decried by **Ibn al-Jawzī**. Thus the **Khalaf** scholars here explain the words **yad Allāh** (Allāh's Hand) in this verse as referring to ‘**ahd Allāh**, that is, “the Covenant with Allāh”. Similarly they interpreted the word **yadayy** (Allāh's two hands) in the verse **lima khalaktu bi yadayy** which is literally “for what I created with My two Hands” as “care” (**al-'Ināya**).

The explanation of the word in other verses confirms the above meanings. The scholars have pointed out that **al-yad** among the Arabs also signifies strength (**al-quwwah**). The verse “We have built the heaven with (Our) hands” (51:47) is cited in **al-Hāfiẓ al-Zābidī**'s massive dictionary of Arabic “**Tāj al-'Arās**” (10:417) as an illustration that “hands” may mean “strength.” Allāh says: “And make mention of our bondmen, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, men of parts (literally of two hands) and vision” (38:45) meaning, “men possessing strength.” It also means ownership (**al-mulk**) as Allāh said: “Lo! the bounty is in Allāh's hand” (3:73). It also means favor, as it is said: “So-and-so has a hand over so-and-so,” to mean that he owes him a favor. It also means a kind of link, as Allāh said: “Or he agrees to forego it in whose hand is the marriage tie” (2:237).

As **Imām Nawawī** said in the passage already quoted from his '*commentary on Saḥīḥ of Muslim*', many of the **Salaf** also applied such figurative interpretation (**ta'wīl**) of Allāh's "Hand," as shown from the explanation of **aydin** (Hands) as meaning "strength" in the verse:

"We have built the heaven with (Our) hands" (51:47)

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari said in his *Tafsir*: Ibn 'Abbas (رضي الله عنه) said: "It means: with strength." He reports an identical position from **Mujāhid**, **Qaṭāda**, **Manṣūr**, **Ibn Zayd**, and **Sufyan al-Thawrī**.¹ This is also **Imām al-Ash'ari**'s explanation according to **Ibn Furāk** in the latter's recension of Ash'ari's school.²

These interpretations are all **acceptable** and they **do not imply the slightest denial** of any of Allāh's Attributes on which there is **consensus**. We should nevertheless obligatorily believe that the word **yad** (hand) does not mean an organ as we know it, in accordance with the verse already cited: "**There is nothing like Him whatsoever**" (42:11) and that the word **yad** does not imply a resemblance to creatures.

As for the Prophet (ﷺ)'s saying: "**The Black Stone is Allāh's right hand**," if it is established as true, then the mind witnesses that Allāh is not spatially confined anywhere and is not divisible; and the senses witness that the Black Stone is not literally the right hand of Allāh, rather, that it consists in prosperity and blessing.³ Yet we see the excesses of the anthropomorphists at work here also: **Ibn Rajab** relates in *Dhayl tabaqāt al-ḥanābila* that **Ibn al-Fa'us al-Ḥanbalī** gave the ḥadīth a literal meaning: "*He used to say: The Black Stone is Allāh's Right Hand literally (ḥaqīqatan)*."⁴ Ash'ari's biographer **Abū Bakr ibn Furāk** writes that he embarked on a study of **kalām** (theology) because of this ḥadīth according to **Subkī** in **Tabaqāt al-shāfi'iyyah**.⁵

1 Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir* 7:27.

2 Abū Bakr ibn Furāk, *Mujarrad Maqalāt al-Ash'arī* (Beirut, 1987) p. 44.

3 This ḥadīth on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (رضي الله عنه) and others is related by Ibn Abi 'Umar al-Ma'danī in his *Musnad*, Tabarānī, Suyūṭī in his *Jāmi' al-Sagḥir* 1:516 (#3804-3805), Ibn 'Asākir in *Tārīkh Dimashq* 15:90, 92, and others. It is considered ḍa'if (weak) by Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn 'Adī, and Albānī. Ibn Qutayba in *Gharib al-ḥadīth* (3:107(1)) says that it is a saying of Ibn 'Abbās (رضي الله عنه).

4 Ibn Rajab, *Dhayl tabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* 7:174-175.

5 al-Subkī, *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah* 3:53.

Ibni Taymiyyah & Tajsīm

The Sources of Ibn Taymiyyah's Ideas

The resemblance of Kawtharī's censure of Ibn Taymiyyah to Ibn al-Jawzī's censure of the anthropomorphizing Ḥanbalis of his time is striking. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Ibn Taymiyyah in fact took his own materials from a related group, as Kawtharī says: "Ibn Taymiyyah replicates part and parcel what is found in

- a** — 'Uthmān ibn Sa'id al-Darimi's *al-Radd 'alā al-Jahmiyyah*, and
- b** — the *Kitāb al-Sunnah* attributed to 'Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, and
- c** — Ibn Khuzayma's *al-Tawḥīd wa Ṣifāt al-Rabb*."

A brief analysis of these three sources of Ibn Taymiyyah:

- a** — 'Uthmān Ibn Sa'id al-Dārimī al-Sajzī (d. 280)

(not the Muḥaddith 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dārimī, author of the *Sunan*, who died in 255Hj)

He is said by some biographers to have studied with Aḥmad, al-Buyūṭī, Yahya ibn Ma'in, and Ibn al-Madini. However, *he is never mentioned* in the Six Books of traditions, which points to problems concerning his person, in view of the teachers he is said to have studied with. He wrote his books against *Bishr al-Marisi* and the Jahmiyyah at large. In his fervor to *refute* their *excessive figurative interpretations*, he fell into the opposite extreme of anthropomorphism illustrated by the excerpts of *Kitāb al-Sunnah* quoted after the section below. One also wonders why Ibn Taymiyyah would take up arguments originally meant for **Jahmīs**, who **were heretics**, and redirect them to the **Ash'aris**, who are **the Ahl al-Sunnah**. Here are some examples of what his book *al-Naqd 'ala al-jahmiyyah* (The critique of the Jahmīs) contains:¹ p. 20: "*The Living, the Self-Subsistent, does what He wills, moves if He so wills, descends and ascends if He wills, collects and spreads and rises and sits if He wills, for the distinguishing mark between the living and the dead is movement: every living thing moves without fail, and every dead thing is immobile without fail.*" In this phrase the author has compared Allāh to every living thing, although "nothing is like Him whatsoever"[Qur'ān, 42:11]. p. 23: "*Those who object claim that Allāh has no limit, no boundary, and no end, and this is the principle upon which Jahm has built all of his heresy and from which he has carved his falsehoods; these are statements that we have never heard anyone say before him... Allāh certainly has a limit... and so has His place, for He is on His Throne above the heavens, and these are two limits. Any person who declares*

that Allāh has a limit and that His place has a limit, is more knowledgeable than the Jahmis." In these statements we see that al-Darimi **considers Imām al-Shāfi'ī a Jahmi**, since Imām al-Shafi'ī explicitly stated:

"Know that limit and finiteness do not apply to Allāh."²

We wonder at those who revived the views of al-Dārimī in later times such as Ibn Taymiyyah, and in modern times such as those who call themselves "**Salafis**," and who could not be farther from the doctrine of the true Salaf. Does any rational person doubt that one who declares "Allāh has a limit" is worshipping an idol? As 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī said in *al-Tabsira al-Baghdādiyyah*, *al-Asma' wa al-sifat*, and *al-Farq bayn al-firāq*: it is obligatory to declare as unbeliever someone who says that Allāh has limits.³ Although today's "Salafis" dare not show the same openness as al-Dārimī in claiming limits to the Creator, yet this belief of theirs is couched in their repeated denial that Allāh is *everywhere*, which **no Muslim** asserts in the first place. Oblivious of the point, Wahhabis and "Salafis" are most confused about this in their belief that the only alternative to the constructed claim that "Allāh is in every place" is their real claim that "He is in one place only, above His throne."

Each claim is as worthless as the other since both ascribe spatial location to Allāh, Exalted is He above what they claim. Both are equally false in devising for Him, respectively, dispersion in an infinity of places, and limitation in a single place. Both are disbelief according to Imām 'Abd al-Ghāni al-Nabulsi's limpid statement:

"Whoever believes that Allāh permeates the Heavens and the Earth, or that He is a body sitting on His Throne, is a disbeliever, even if he thinks he is a Muslim."

'Uthmān Ibn Sa'id al-Dārimī al-Sajzī's book *al-Naqd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah* (cont'd) p. 25: *"He created Adam by touching him (masisan)."* p. 75: *"If He so willed, He could have settled on the back of a gnat and it would have carried Him thanks to His power and the favor of His lordship, not to mention the magnificent Throne."*

This is a risible, ugly, astonishing combination of **tajsīm**(antropomorphism), **takyif**, **tashbih** (corporealism), and **tamthīl**. In a word, the author's premiss for inferring that the object of his worship can settle on top of a gnat is his understanding that Allāh physically settles on the Throne. One of the greatest indications of Ibn Taymiyyah's anthropomorphist views is that in advocating the interpretation of **istiwā'** as *istiqrar* or settling — absolutely condemned by the true Salaf, as we mentioned — he does not hesitate to reproduce the above statement verbatim. It is ironic that he does so in his *Tā'sis*, an attack on al-Rāzī for a book the latter wrote in refutation of anthropomorphists.⁴ p. 79: *"He is distinguished from His creation and above His Throne with a patent distance in between the two, with the seven heavens between Him and His creatures on earth."* p. 92 and 182:

"If the Lord sits on the chair or foot-stool (kursī), a kind of groaning is heard similar to that of the new camel saddle. This is because of the pressure of Allāh's Essence on top of it."

The latter view — also held by **Abu Ya'la** — is but another illustration of the aberrations of the **Hashawiyyah** or populist anthropomorphists. As **Ibn al-Jawzī** and **Kawtharī** mentioned, if the ḥadīth of the **groaning** is established then it is a foremost case of figurative interpretation (**ta'wīl**) whereby the groaning stands for the submission of the chair or foot-stool to the Creator. Yet, the authenticity of the ḥadīth has been questioned. **Ibn al-Jawzī** mentioned the weakness of two of its narrators and Ibn 'Asākir wrote a monograph entitled *Bayan al-wahm wa al-takhlit fi ḥadīth al-atit* (The exposition of error and confusion in the narration of the groaning). Concerning its meaning **Ibn al-Jawzī** said after citing al-Khattabī: 'The meaning of the **groaning of the kursi** is its impotence before Allāh's majesty and greatness, as it is known that the groaning of the camel saddle under its rider is a indication of the power of what sits on top of it, or its impotence to bear it. The Prophet (ﷺ) drew this kind of simile for Allāh's greatness and majesty in order to teach the Arab who had sought Allāh's intercession with the Prophet (ﷺ) that the One whose greatness is overwhelming is not to be sought as an intercessor with those under His station. As for al-Qādi Abū Ya'lā's words: "*the groaning is because of the pressure of Allāh's Essence on it: this is overt anthropomorphism.*"⁵ p. 100: "*Who told you that the top of the mountain is not closer to Allāh than its bottom?... The top of the minaret is closer to Allāh than its bottom.*" According to the author the tall man is closer to Allāh than the short one, and so is the one who flies a plane in comparison to those on the ground. The nearest to Him would then be the astronauts. However, this is contrary to the teaching of our religion, whereby Allāh's servant is closest to Him when in prostration,⁶ and prostration is abasement not elevation. Allāh explicitly equated prostration with proximity to Him when He ordered: "**Prostrate and draw near**" (96:19). And the Prophet (ﷺ) revealed that no Muslim uses the Prophet Yunus' prayer: *lā ilāha illā anta subḥānaka innī kuntu mina'z-ẓālimīn* (21:87) except it is answered, yet Yunus (عليه السلام) spoke it in the belly of the whale, deep under the sea.⁷ Besides this, Muslims clear Allāh from place, whether high or low, and for them His **'uluw** or elevation is a loftiness of rank not spatial height, just as his **'aẓamah** or greatness has nothing to do with bulk. The author's influence on Ibn Taymiyyah is undeniable, as the latter formulates a few centuries later the exact same view al-Dārimī forwards. As Ibn Taymiyyah explicitly declares in his *Ta'sīs*, written against al-Rāzī's *Asās al-taqdīs* (The foundation of declaring Allāh transcendent) itself written in refutation of **Karrāmī** anthropomorphists:

"The Creator, Glorified and Exalted is He, is above the world and His being above is literal, not in the sense of dignity or rank."⁸ We quote this passage in full below, in the section on Ibn Taymiyyah's conception of Allāh's "**descent**." It is enough for now to show his remoteness from the position of Ahl al-Sunnah in this respect. As **Ibn Hājar al-'Asqalānī** stated in *Fath al-Bari*: Al-Kirmanī (d. 786) said: "*The external meaning of "in the heaven" (fi al-samā') is not meant (in the Prophet (ﷺ)'s ḥadīth: "Do you not trust me who am trusted by the One in the heaven?"), for*

Allāh is transcendent above incarnation in a place; but because the direction of elevation is nobler than any other direction, Allāh predicated it to Himself to indicate the loftiness of His Essence and Attributes."

Others than Kirmanī addressed in similar terms the expressions that came down concerning elevation and similar topics.⁹ p. 121: *"We do not concede that all actions are created. We have agreed by consensus that the movement, the descent, the walking, the running (al-harwalah), and the establishment on the Throne and to the heaven are eternal without beginning (qadīm)." The consensus of scholars says the exact reverse, and Ibn Hazm al-Zāhirī (d. 456) explicitly states in his al-Fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwa' wa al-nihal:*

*"If the establishment on the Throne is eternal without beginning, then the Throne is eternal without beginning, and this is disbelief."*¹⁰ It is not only the false reference to consensus that is unsettling in these statements, or their utter lack of foundation in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Rather, the author should have begun by questioning the logic of attributing eternity without beginning to the establishment on the Throne and to the heaven, when the Throne and the heaven themselves are not eternal without beginning! This has been pointed out by Kawtharī and others.

b — 'Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 290): He wrote a book which he named *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, but whose stand in relation to the Sunnah and anthropomorphism can be judged by the following excerpts:¹¹ p. 5: *"Is istiwa' other than by sitting (julūs)?"* p. 35: *"He saw Him on a chair of gold carried by four angels: one in the form of a man, another in the form of a lion, another in that of a bull, and another in that of an eagle, in a green garden, outside of which there was a golden dais."*

This seems taken verbatim **from the Bible**, Book of Revelation (4:2-7): *"There was someone on the Throne... from it issued lightning, voices, and thunder... in its midst and around it stood four angels... the first was like a lion, the second like a young bull, the third has the face of a man, and the fourth is like an eagle in flight."* **Kawtharī** appropriately calls this *"the grossest idol-worship (al-wathaniyyah al-kharqa') to which they ("Salafis") are calling the Umma today."* p. 64: *"Allāh spoke to Mūsā (عليه السلام) with His lips" (mushafahatān), that is: upper lip against lower lip".*

Kawtharī mentions that the same is found in **Abū Ya'lā's** *Tabaqāt* in his biography of *al-Istakhri*, and **falsely attributed to Imām Aḥmad**. p. 68: *"Verily Allāh did not touch with His hand except Adam, whom He created with His own hand, Paradise, the Torah, which He wrote with His own hand, and a pearl which He wrought with His own hand, then dipped into it a stick to which He said: Stretch thyself as far as I please and bring out what is in thee with My leave, and so it brought out the rivers and the vegetation."* p. 70: *"If the Lord sits on the chair or foot-stool (kursī), a kind of groaning is heard similar to that of the new camel*

saddle.” **Ibn Sa’id al-Dārimī** also endorses this, the previous, and the next view in his book. p.71: “*Allāh sits on the kursī and there remains only four spans vacant.*”

This is a commonplace of the **Hashawiyyah**. **Al-Khallal** (d. 310), one of Imām Aḥmad’s companions, repeats it countless in his *Kitab al-Sunnah*, attributing it to **Mujāhid**, and declares anyone who *denies it to be a jahmī, kāfir, and zindīq*.¹²

Ibn al-Qayyim (main student of Ibn Taymiyyah) endorses it unreservedly in his *Bada’i’ al-fawā’id*,¹³ and the grammarian and commentator **Abū Hayyān al-Andalusī** relates the same about Ibn Taymiyyah in his *Tafsir al-nahr al-madd min al-bahr al-muhit* (The commentary of the river extending from the ocean): “*I have read in a book by our contemporary Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah written in his own hand and which he entitled Kitab al-‘arsh (The Book of the Throne): “Allāh the Exalted sits (yajlisu) on the kursī, and He has left a space vacant for the Prophet (ﷺ) to sit with Him.” Taj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Barnibari tricked him into thinking that he was supporting him until he obtained that book from him and we read this in it.*”¹⁴

It is related that the commentator of Qur’ān and historian **al-Ṭabarī** (d. 310) was nearly killed for questioning it, as **Ibn Hibbān** (the famous Muhaddith, the author of *Sunan*) was nearly killed for questioning that Allāh had a limit. The Ḥanbalīs asked about the purported ḥadīth of the Prophet (ﷺ)’s sitting on the Throne next to Allāh. This ḥadīth is traced to Layth who is supposed to have related it from Mujāhid. In the view of some of the Ḥanbalīs it provided the meaning of the verse: - ‘*asā an yab’athaka rabbuka maqāman maḥmūda*, - “Perhaps your Lord shall raise you to an exalted station” (17:79). **Ṭabarī** replied: “It is absurd” and declaimed: ‘**subḥāna man laysa lahū anīs wa la lahū fi ‘arshihī jalis’** which means: Glory to Him who has no comrade nor “one-who-sits-next-to-Him” on the Throne.

When they heard this they threw their inkwells at him and he withdrew to his house. Imām **Ṣuyūtī** mentions some of this in *Tahdhir al-khawass min akadhib al-qussas* (The warning of the elect against the lies of story-tellers), and **Ibn al-Jawzī** relates in *Al-muntazam* that Thābit ibn Sinān mentions in his “History”: “I hid the truth about this because the mob had gathered and forbidden the visit of **Ṭabarī** in the daytime, and said that he was a rejectionist (rafid) and a heretic (mulhid).¹⁵

Al-Khallāl, **Ibn al-Jawzī**’s offenders, **Ibn Hibbān**’s and **Ṭabarī**’s would-be killers, **Ibn Qayyim**, and **Ibn Taymiyyah** all form the party that maintain that *Allāh sits on the Throne then places his feet on the kursī as one would on a footstool, and that the Prophet (ﷺ) sits on the throne by His side*. All this seems to replicate another passage of the Bible, namely what is found in the Gospel according to Mark (19:16): “*Then the Lord [Jesus], after he spoke to them, was raised to the heaven, and sat at the right of Allāh.*”¹⁶ Yet these anthropomorphists claim that their views represent the way of the true Salaf, and that to depart from it was to leave Islām.

What is clear, on the contrary, is that to follow the views of Ibn Taymiyyah and the persecutors of Ahl al-Sunnah in ascribing Allāh **a body** is to commit disbelief,

while to leave the views of Ibn Taymiyyah and the persecutors of Ahl al-Sunnah is a sign that one follows the Salaf. p. 149: *"He showed part of Himself."* p. 164: *"And His other hand was empty without anything in it."**

c — Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311):

He wrote a large volume which he named *Kitab al-tawḥīd* (Book of the declaration of oneness),¹⁷ which he later regretted having authored, as established by two reports cited by Bayhaqī with their chains of transmission.¹⁸ Imām Fakhr al-Din Rāzī was so repelled by **Ibn Khuzayma's** book that he renamed it: **Kitab al-shirk**¹⁹ (Book of associating partners to Allāh) just as Kawtharī later renamed **'Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad's** book: **Kitab al-zaygh** (Book of aberration).²⁰

Ibn Khuzayma cites, as a proof for establishing that Allāh has a foot and other limbs, the verse: *"Have they feet wherewith they walk or have they hands wherewith they hold, or have they eyes wherewith they see, or have they ears wherewith they hear?"* (7:195). This contravenes the sound position of the Salaf expressed by **al-Muqri** as related by **Abū Dāwūd** in his *Sunan*: *"Allāh hears and sees" means: He has the power of hearing and seeing (not the organs).*"²¹

Kawtharī points out that **Ibn Khuzayma's** understanding is identical to that of the anthropomorphists of Tabaristan and Isfahān mentioned by **al-Saksakī** in his *al-Burhan fi ma'rifat 'aqa'id ahl al-adyan* (The demonstration concerning the knowledge of the doctrines of the people of religion) who say: *"If He does not have eyes, nor ears, nor hand, nor foot, then what we are worshipping is a watermelon!"* and they claim in support of their views that Allāh in the Qur'ān has derided those who lacked limbs by saying: *"Have they feet wherewith they walk?"*²²

Ibn al-Jawzī says the following about him:

I saw that **Abū Bakr Ibn Khuzayma** compiled a book on Allāh's attributes and divided it into chapters such as: *"Chapter of the Asserting of His hand"; "Chapter of His Holding the Heavens on His fingers"; "Chapter of the Asserting of His foot, in spite of the Mu'tazila."* Then he said: Allāh said: *"Have they feet wherewith they walk or have they hands wherewith they hold, or have they eyes wherewith they see, or have they ears wherewith they hear?"* (7:195); then he informs us that he who has no hand and no foot is like cattle.

I say: Verily I wonder at that man, with all his lofty skill in the science of transmission of ḥadīth, saying such a thing, and asserting for Allāh what he vilifies the idols for not having, such as a hand that strikes and a foot that walks. He should have asserted the ear also. If he had been granted understanding, he would not have spoken thus, and he would have understood that Allāh reviled the idols in comparison to their worshippers (i.e. not to Him). The meaning is: You have hands and feet, how then do you worship what lacks them both?

Ibn 'Āqil al-Ḥanbalī (d. 515)²³ said:

“Exalted is Allāh above having an attribute which occupies space — this is anthropomorphism itself! Nor is Allāh divisible and in need of parts with which to do something. Does not His order and His fashioning act upon the fire? How then would He need the help of any part of Himself, or apply Himself to the fire with one of His attributes, while He is the one Who says to it: “Be coolness and peace” (21:69)? What idiotic belief is this, and how far remote it is from the Fashioner of the dominions and the firmaments! Allāh gave them the lie in His book when He said: “If these had been gods, they would never have gone down to it” (21:99): how then can they think that the Creator goes down to it? Exalted is Allāh above the ignorant pretenses of the mujassima!”²⁴

These, then, are the sources of Ibn Taymiyyah’s stand on ascribing a body and a direction to the Creator. As we have seen these sources have little to do with the established position of **Imām Aḥmad** on these questions. On the contrary, we know with certainty that **Imām Aḥmad** irrevocably **condemned** the slightest ascription of a body to Allāh, whether or not the speaker added: *“but not like other bodies.”* In *Manāqib Aḥmad*, al-Bayhaqī relates that he said:

“A person commits an act of disbelief (kufr) if he says Allāh is a body, even if he says: Allāh is a body but not like other bodies.” He continues: *“The expressions are taken from language and from Islam, and linguists applied “body” to a thing that has length, width, thickness, form, structure and components. The expression has not been handed down in Sharī’ah. Therefore, it is invalid and cannot be used.”²⁵*

Given that the correct followers of the **madhhab of Imām Aḥmad** in the fourth and fifth centuries stand firmly on the side of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah, we should not be astonished that they would reject the proponents of likening Allāh to creation (**tashbih**) both then and later. Indeed, such views were contained and prevented from being disseminated far and wide until Ibn Taymiyyah threw the full weight of his learning and skill behind them. In repayment for his efforts he was duly arrested more than once in his career.

1 ‘Uthmān ibn Sa’id al-Dārimī, *Kitāb al-naqd ‘ala al-jahmiyya* (Cairo, 1361/1942).

2 al-Shāfi’ī, *al-Fiqh al-akbar fi al-tawḥīd li al-Imām Abi ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shāfi’ī*, 1st ed. (al-Azbakiyya, Cairo: al-matba’a al-adabiyya, 1324/1906 or 1907) p. 8. The original manuscript of this work is kept at the Zahirīyya Library in Damascus, Ms. #Q-2(3).

3 Cited in Kawtharī’s *Maqālāt* p. 314.

4 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Ta’sīs fi al-radd ‘ala asās al-taqdis* 1:568.

5 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Daf’ shubah al-tashbih* p. 268.

6 “*Aqrabu ma yakūnu al-‘abdu min rabbihī wa huwa sājidun fa akthirū fihī al-du‘ā’*”, related by Muslim, Ṣalāt #482, Abū Dāwūd, Ṣalāt #875, al-Nisā’i 2:226, and Aḥmad in the *Musnad* 2:421.

7 “*Da’watu dhi al-nuni idhā da’ā rabbahū wa huwa fī batni al-hūt... lam yad’u bihā rajulun muslimun fī shay’in qattu illā istajāba allāhu lah’*”, related by Tirmidhī (#3500), al-Nisā’i in ‘*Amal al-yawmi wa al-layla*’ (#656), al-Ḥākim 1:505 and 2:383. The latter declared it sound (ṣaḥīḥ) and Dhahabī confirmed him.

8 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Ta’sīs al-radd ‘ala asās al-taqdis* 1:111.

9 Fath al-Bārī 13:412.

- 10 Ibn Hazm, *al-Fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwa' wa al-nihal* 2:124.
- 11 'Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Kitab al-Sunnah* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Salafiya, 1349/1930).
- 12 al-Khallāl, *al-Sunnah* p. 215-216.
- 13 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Bada'i' al-fawa'id* (Misr: al-Matba'a al-Muniriya, 1900?) 4:39-40.
- 14 Abū Hayyān, *Tafsīr al-nahr al-madd* 1:254 (Āyat al-kursi).
- 15 See the introduction to Ibn Jarir al-Tabari's *Kitab ikhtilaf al-fuqaha'* (The differences among jurists), ed. Frederik Kern, Egypt 1902.
- 16 Quoted in Saqqa op. cit.
- 17 Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn Khuzayma, *Kitab al-tawhid wa-ithbat sifat al-rabb allati wasafa biha nafsahu...* (Cairo: idarat al-tiba'a al-muniriyya, 1354/1935).
- 18 Bayhaqī, *al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt*, ed. Kawtharī, p. 267.
- 19 Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* 14:27 (#151).
- 20 Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, p. 355.
- 21 Abū Dāwūd, Sunan, *Kitab al-Sunnah*, ch. 19, last ḥadīth.
- 22 Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, p. 361.
- 23 One of the great early authorities of the Ḥanbali school.
- 24 Ibn al-Jawzi, *Daf' shubah al-tashbih* p. 172-174.
- 25 al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib Aḥmad*. Unpublished manuscript.

Ibni Taymiyyah & Tajsīm

The following is translated from 'Maqālāt al-Kawthari' [The Articles of Kawthari] by Muhammad Zāhid ibn al-Ḥasan al-Kawthari (Riyadh and Beirut: Dar al-ahnaf, 1414/1993) p. 350-353.

How much did the Ḥanbalis **Ibn 'Uqayl** and **Ibn al-Jawzī** suffer at their hands (the anthropomorphists), and how much was the former falsely summoned to repent from being a **Mu'tazilah** whereas they were both only declaring Allāh's transcendence!

[Note: Ibn al-Jawzī's book against the so-called Ḥanbali anthropomorphists has received many editions and is widely available. The title is: '**Daf' shubah al-tashbih bi akuffi al-tanzīh**', "The Repelling With the Hands of Purification of the Sophistries of Anthroporphism", also known as '**al-Baz al-ashabb al-munqadd 'ala mukhalifi al-madhab al-hanbali**', "The Flaming Falcon Swooping Down on the Dissenters of the Ḥanbali Madhhab" Editions: Damascus, 1926; Cairo, 1977?; Beirut, 1987; Amman, 1991; and recently, a new edition by Imām Abū Zahrā]

Then there was the story of Ibn al-Qudwa al-Karrāmī against **Imām Fakhr al-Din Rāzī**... Then there was the mischief (**fitnah**) of **Abd al-Ghani al-Maqdisī** [al-Ḥanbali], it can be found in the Appendix (or towards the end) of Abū Shama's 'al-Rawdatayn' [a book on Salah al-Din's times]. Then there were the many mischiefs (**fitan**) of **Ibn Taymiyyah** in Damascus which have become known far and wide. They are detailed in Taqī al-Din al-Ḥisnī's (1351-1426 M) '*Daf'u shubahi man shabbaha wa tamarrad*' [The Repelling of the Sophistries of the One Who Rebels and Likens Allah to Creation], which is in print [Cairo, 1350/1931, but recently reedited and published by Imām Abū Zahrā together with Ibn al-Jawzī's work]...

Much of the historical evidence related to Ibn Taymiyyah and his student (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah) is recorded in '**al-Sayf al-Saqil fī al-radd 'alā ibn Zafīl**' [The Burnished Sword in Responding to Ibn Zafīl, by Abu al-Ḥasan **Taqī al-Din al-Subkī** (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'adat, 1356/1938) and its gloss (*hāshiatuh*), which is in print.

Ibn Taymiyyah is the one who broadcast their (the **mujassimah**'s) deviant writings in Egypt and Syria at a time such writings were non-existent in these two countries. The *simple-minded were completely fooled* by his books due to the purported refutations of innovations they found in them, written with a fluent style. They did not perceive that his lines were laced through and through with deadly poisons.

Ibn Taymiyyah replicates part and parcel what is found in the book of Uthman ibn Sa'īd **al-Dārimī** (See page 6 of this paper) [*al-Radd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah*], the book of **Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal** [*Kitāb al-Sunnah*], and the book of **Ibn**

Khuzayma [*al-tawhīd wa Ṣifāt al-Rabb*], therefore one answers him in the same way that one answers them.

It will not hurt to mention some of the texts from among his writings in the book which he named '**al-Ta'sis** *fi radd asas al-taqdis*' [The Laying of the Foundation: Refutation of "The Foundation of the Sanctification of Allāh", a book by **Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī**], and which is found inside volumes 24, 25, and 26 of '*al-Kawakib al-Darari*' [The Brilliant Stars, probably comprising two books with this or similar titles, respectively by Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī and Mar'ī ibn Yūsuf al-Karmī, extolling the praises of Ibn Taymiyyah] in the Zahirīyya Library in Damascus, and in other of his books, in order that those who are passionately in love with Ibn Taymiyyah be fully aware of who it is they love so much.

In the '**Ta'sis**' Ibn Taymiyyah says this: "Indeed '**al-'arsh**' (the throne) in language means '**al-sarīr**' [elevated seat or couch], so named with respect to what is on top of it (*wa dhālika bi al-nisba ilā mā fawqihī*), just as 'the roof' is so named with respect to what is under it (*ka al- saqfi bi al-nisba ilā mā taḥtihi*). Therefore, if the Qur'ān attributes a throne to Allāh — which is not like a roof with respect to Him (but the reverse) — it is then known that this throne is, with respect to Allāh, like the elevated seat is with respect to other than Allāh. And this makes it necessarily true that He is on top of the throne (*wa dhālika yaqtadi annahū fawqu al-'arsh*)."

So then the **Throne** is, for Ibn Taymiyyah, the seat (**maq'ad**) of Allāh the Exalted — Exalted is He from such a thing!

In the same book he also says: "It is well-known that the Book, the Sunnah, and the Consensus (of scholars) nowhere say that all bodies are created (*lam tantiq bi anna al-ajsama kullahā muḥdathatun*), nor that Allāh Himself is not a body (*wa annallāha laysa bi jismin*). None of the Imāms of the Muslims ever said such a thing. Therefore if I also choose not to say it, it does not expel me from religion nor from Sharī'ah."

Indeed the above is complete impudence. What did he do with all the verses declaring Allāh to be far removed from having anything like unto Him? Does he expect that the idiocy that every single idiot can come up with be addressed with a specific text? Is it not enough that Allāh the Exalted said: "**Nothing is like unto Him**" (42:11)? Or does he consider it permissible for someone to say: Allāh eats this, and chews that, and tastes the other thing, just because no text mentions the opposite? Now this is disbelief laid bare (*al-kufr al-makshuf*) and pure anthropomorphism (**wa al-tajsim al sarīh**).

In another passage of the same book he says: "**You** (Ash'aris & Maturidis, i.e., the majority of the Ahlu Sunnah) say that :

- He is neither a body (**laysa huwa bi jismin**),
- nor an essence (**wa lā jawhar**),
- nor confined (**wa lā mutahayyiz**),

- and that He has no direction (**wa lā jihatān lahū**),
- and that He cannot be pointed to as an object of sensory perception (**wa lā yusharu ilayhi bi Ḥissin**),
- and that nothing of Him can be considered distinct from Him (**wa lā yatamayyazu minhu shay'in min shay'**),
- and you have asserted this on the grounds that Allāh the Exalted is neither divisible (**laysa bi munqasim**)
- nor made of parts (**wa lā murakkab**)
- and that He has neither limit (**wa annahū lā Ḥadda lahū**)
- nor end (**wa lā ghayat**),
- with your view thereby to forbid one to say that He has any extent/measure (**Hadd**) or dimension (qadr),
- or that He even has a dimension that is unlimited (**aw yakūna lahū qadrūn lā yatanahā**).

And how do you allow yourselves to say or do this without (evidence from) the Book and the Sunnah?"

The reader's intelligence suffices as comment on these heretical words (hadhihi al-kalimat al-ilḥādiyyah). Can you imagine for an apostate (maariq) to be more obvious (aṣraḥ) than this, right in the midst of a Muslim society?

In another place [of Ibn Taymiyyah's book '**al-Ta'sis fi radd asas al-taqdis**', written to refute **Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzi's** '*Asas al-taqdis*', he says: "It is obligatorily known that Allāh did not mean by the name of 'the One' (al-Wāḥid) the negation (salb) of the Attributes (al-Ṣifāt)." Ibn Taymiyyah is here alluding to all that entails (Allāh's) "coming" to a place and the like.

[Ibn Taymiyyah continues,] "Nor did He mean by it the negation that He can be perceived with the senses (wa lā salba idrākihi bi al-Hawass), nor the denial of limit and dimension (wa lā nafi al-Ḥaddi wa al-qadr) and all such interpretations which were innovated by the Jahmiyyah and their followers. The negation or denial of the above is not found in the Book nor the Sunnah." And this is on an equal footing with what came before with regard to pure anthropomorphism and plain apostasy.

And in his book '**Muwāfaqat al-ma'qūl**' [full title: '*Bayān muwāfaqat Ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl li Ṣarīḥ al-ma'qūl*'], The Exposition of the Conformity of Sound Transmitted Proof-Texts With What Is Evidently Reasonable] that is in the margin of his '**Minhāj**' [full title: '*Minhāj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah fī naqdi kalam al-shī'a wa al-Qadariyyah*'], The Road of the Prophetic Sunnah in the Criticism of the Sayings of Shi'as and Predestinarians] Ibn Taymiyyah asserts (2:75, 1:264) that things occur newly in relation to Allah (*Sarraḥa bi qiyāmi al-Hawādith billāhi subḥānah*) and that Allah has a direction according to two kinds of conjecture (*wa Sarraḥa bi annahū ta'ālā*

fi al-jihati 'ala al-taqdīrayn). And we Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamā'ah know, what the Imāms say concerning Him who deliberately and intently establishes that Allāh has a direction, unless his saying such a thing is a slip of the tongue or a slip of the pen.

Then (2:26, 2:13) there is his establishing that the concept of movement applies to Allāh, along with all the others who establish such a thing. Then his denial that there is an eternal sojourn in hellfire (*inkar al-khulūdi fi al-nār*) has filled creation, and so has his saying concerning the different kinds of pre-existence (*al-qidam al-naw'i* : i.e. for Allāh and the world). Refer to what he says in his criticism of the book 'Marātib al-ijmā' ' [The Grades of Consensus] by Ibn Hazm p.169...

There is amply more salutary material for him who burns with thirst to know more in our continuation of (Subki's) '*al-sayf al-Saqīl*' [The Burnished Sword], Allāh willing, concerning the disgraces of Ibn Taymiyyah and of his student Ibn al-Qayyim...

The **Imām Abu Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī** says in his book '**al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt**' that **al-Ash'arī** and most of the theologians (*mutakallimīn*) have pronounced every innovator whose innovation consists in or leads to disbelief, a disbeliever. This is the case for one who declares that the One he worships • has a form/image (*Sūrah*), or • that He has a limit or a boundary (*Haddan wa nihāyah*), • or that movement and stillness may be applied to Him. There is no ambiguity for anyone endowed with a conscience that they are unbelievers, the *Karrāmī* anthropomorphists of *Khurasān* who said that "• Allāh is a body with a limit and an end under Him" (*inna Allāha jismun lahū Ḥaddun wa nihāyatun min taḥtihi*) and that "• He is in contact with His Throne" (*wa innahū mumassun li 'arshihī*), and that "• He is the locus of newly occurred events" (*wa innahū maḥallu al-ḥawādīth*), and that "• His speech and His will are created in Him" (*wa annahū yaḥduthu fihī qawluhū wa irādatuhū*).

And Allāh Most High knows best.

Ibni Taymiyyah & Tajsīm

Translated from **Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī**'s biography of Ibn Taymiyyah in *al-durar al-kāmina fi a'yān al-mi'at al-thāmina* [The Hidden Pearls Concerning the Famous People of the Eighth Century] Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-ma'ārif al-uthmāniyyah, 1384 H, vol. 1:144-160.

An enquiry [of Ibn Taymiyyah's position] was conducted with several scholars [in Cairo] and a written statement was written against him, in which Ibn Taymiyyah said: "I am Ash'ari," and his handwriting is found with what he wrote verbatim, namely: "I believe that the Qur'ān is a meaning which exists in Allāh's Essence (mi'na qā'imun bi dhāt Allāh), and it is an Attribute from the pre-eternal Attributes of His Essence (*wa huwa ṣifatun min ṣifāti dhātihī al-qadīma*), and that it is uncreated (*wa huwa ghayru makhlūq*), and that it does not consist in the letter nor the voice (*wa laysa bi ḥarfin wa la ṣawt*), and that His saying: "The Merciful established Himself over the Throne" is not taken according to its external meaning (*laysa 'alā zāhirihi*), and I don't know in what consists its meaning, nay only Allāh knows it, and one speaks of His "descent" in the same way as one speaks of His "establishment" (*wa al-qawlu fī al-nuzūli kal-qawli fī al-istiwā*)."

It was written by Aḥmad **ibn Taymiyyah** and they witnessed over him that he had **repented** of his own free will from all that contravened the above. This took place on the **25th of Rabī' al-Awwal of the year 707 Hijrī** and it was witnessed by a huge array of scholars and others. [p. 148.]

(Najm al-Din Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Qawī) al-Tūfi (al-Ḥanbali) said: "He (i.e., ibn Taymiyyah) used to bring up in one hour from the Book and the Sunnah and language and speculation (a quantity of material) which no-one could bring up in many sessions, as if these sciences were before his very eyes and he was picking and choosing from them at will. A time came when his companions took to over-praising him and this drove him to be satisfied with himself until he became proud before his fellow human beings, and became convinced that he was a scholar capable of independent reasoning (*istash'ara annahū mujtahidun*). Henceforth he began to answer each and every scholar great and small, past and recent, until he went all the way back to 'Umar (رضي الله عنه) and **faulted him** in some matter. This reached the ears of the **Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Raqiyy** who reprimanded him. Ibn Taymiyyah went to see him, apologized, and asked for forgiveness.

"He also spoke against 'Ali (رضي الله عنه) and said: He made mistakes in seventeen different matters...

"Because of his **fanatic support** of the Ḥanbali school he would attack Ash'arīs until he started to insult **Imām al-Ghazālī**, at which point some people opposed him and would almost kill him...

"They ascertained that he had blurted out certain words concerning doctrine (*Dabatu 'alayhi kalimātin fi al-'aqā'id mughīrah*) which came out of his mouth in the context of his sermons and legal decisions, and they mentioned that he had cited the tradition of Allāh's **descent** (to the nearest heaven), **then climbed down two steps from the minbar** and said: "*Just like this descent of mine*" and he was categorized as **an anthropomorphist** (*wa nusiba ila al-tajsīm*).

"They also mentioned his refutation of whoever uses the Prophet (ﷺ) as a means (*man tawassala bi al-nabi (ﷺ)*) or seeks help from him (*aw istaghātha*)... (i.e., Tawassul)

"People were divided into parties because of him. Some considered him an anthropomorphist [**mujassim**] because of what he mentioned in '**al-'aqida al-Hamawiyyah**' and '**al-'aqida al-waashiyyah**' and other books of his, such as Allāh's **hand, foot, shin, and face being literal attributes of Allāh** (*Ṣifātun ḥaqīqiyyatun lillāh*) and that He is established upon the Throne with His Essence (*wa annahu mustawin 'ala al-'arshi bi dhaatihi*). It was said to him that were this the case He would necessarily be subject to **spatial confinement** (*al-taḥayyuz*) and **divisibility** (*al-inqisām*). He replied: "I do not concede that spatial confinement and divisibility are (necessarily) properties of bodies (*ana lā usallimu anna al-taḥayyuz wa al-inqisām min khawaṣṣ al- ajsām*)," whereupon it was adduced against him (*ulzima*) that he held Allāh's Essence to be subject to spatial confinement.

[Note: Ibn Taymiyyah nowhere explicitly rejects limit and dimension for Allāh. In fact he says in his answer to Rāzi ('al-Ta'sis') that the rejection of limit (**Hadd**) and dimension (**Qadr**) for Allāh is nowhere found in the Book and the Sunnah (as quoted in Kawtharī's 'Maqālāt' p. 351), whereas the **Ahl Sunnah 'aqidah** explicitly states: "*The Glorious and Exalted Lord is above and beyond sharing in the properties of having directions or spatial limits: thoughts cannot measure Him, locations cannot contain Him, dimensions cannot encompass Him*" (Imām **al-Juwaynī** in '**Lam' al-adillat fi qawā'id 'aqā'id ahl al-Sunnah**' [The Radiance of Proofs Concerning the Bases of the Beliefs of Ahl al-Sunnah]). **Ibn Taymiyyah** even says that there are two kinds of **tashbīh** [likening of Allāh], one of which "whose meaning it would be improper to disallow" (Beirut edition of '*Majmū' fatāwa shaykh al-islam...*' 3:172, and again in the '**Ta'sīs**' that "the Book, the Sunnah, and the Consensus nowhere say that all bodies are necessarily created, nor that Allāh Himself is necessarily not a body" (quoted in Kawtharī p. 350).]

"Others considered him someone who conceals unbelief [**zindīq**] due to his saying that the Prophet (ﷺ) is not to be sought for help (*lā yustaghāthu bihi*) and the fact that this amounted to diminishing and impeding the establishing of the greatness of the Prophet (ﷺ)...

"Others considered him a hypocrite [**munāfiq**] because of what he said about 'Ali (رضي الله عنه):... *that he had been forsaken (makhdhūlan) everywhere he went, had repeatedly tried to acquire the khilāfah and never attained it, fought out of lust*

*for power rather than religion, and said that "he loved authority while 'Uthmān (رضي الله عنه) loved money." He would say that Abu Bakr (رضي الله عنه) had declared Islam in his old age, fully aware of what he said, while 'Ali (عليه السلام) had declared Islam as a boy, and the boy's Islam is not considered sound upon his mere word..." In sum he said **ugly things** such as these, and it was said against him that he was a hypocrite, in view of the Prophet's (ﷺ) saying (to 'Ali (عليه السلام)): "**Only a hypocrite would show you hatred.**" [p. 153-155]*

Ibni Taymiyyah & Tajsim

MUHAMMAD AL-GHAZĀLĪ (b. 1917) ON IBN TAYMIYYAH

by Dr. Aḥmad Hijāzī al-Saqqā

Regarding **Ibn Taymiyyah**, **Ibn Qayyim**, **Ibn 'Uthaymīn**

Ibn Taymiyyah says in '**al-Ta'sīs**' [a refutation of Rāzī's '**al-Asās**']:

"The Creator, Glorified and Exalted is He, is above the world (**fawqu al-'ālam**) and his being above is literal (**fawqīyyatan ḥaqīqīyyatan**), not in the sense of dignity or rank (**laysat fawqīyyat al-rutba**). It may be said of the precedence of a certain object over another that it is with respect to dignity or rank (**rutba**), or that it is with respect to location (**makān**). For example, respectively: the precedence of the learned over the ignorant and the precedence of the Imām over the one praying behind him. Allāh's precedence over the world is not like that, rather, it is a literal precedence (i.e. in time) (**qabliyyah ḥaqīqīyyah**). Similarly the elevation (**'uluww**) above the world could be said to be with respect to dignity or rank, as for example when it said that the learned is above the ignorant. But Allāh's elevation over the world is not like that, rather He is elevated over it literally (i.e. in space) (**huwa 'ālin 'alayhi 'uluwwan ḥaqīqīyyan**). And this is the known elevation and the known precedence."

Now, can a rational person doubt that what **Ibn Taymiyyah** means by the above is a physical aboveness and a physical elevation? And here is **Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyyah** (Ibn Taymiyyah's star pupil) who does not deny that Allāh is on the Throne, and that while He is there, He **places his feet on the 'kursī'**, and that **Muḥammad (ﷺ) is sitting by His side on the Throne**. This resembles what is found in the Gospel according to Mark (19:16): "Then the Lord [Jesus], after he spoke to them, was raised to the heaven, and sat at the right of Allāh." **Ibn Qayyim** said in his book '**Badā'i' al-Fu'ād**' (4:40): "The ḥadīth about the intercession of Aḥmad is upon the authority of Aḥmad al-Muṣṭafā (ﷺ) himself, and the ḥadīth of his being made to sit on the Throne has also come to us, so we do not reject it (*Ḥadīthu al-shafā'ati 'an Aḥmad ila Aḥmad al-Muṣṭafā (ﷺ) musnaduhū wa jā'a al-Ḥadīthu bi iq'adihī 'alā al-'arshi ayfan fa lā najḥaduhū*)."

[Note: The Commentator and grammarian **Abu Ḥayyān** says in his '**Tafsīr al-nahr al-mād min al-baḥr al-muḥīt**' [The Commentary of the River Extending From the Ocean] (Damascus ms.? 1:254): "I have read in a book by this — our contemporary — Aḥmad **ibn Taymiyyah** written with his own hand and which he entitled '**Kitāb**

al-'arsh' [The Book of the Throne]: "**Allāh the Exalted sits (yajlisu) on the Kursi, and He has left a space vacant to let the Prophet (ﷺ) sit with Him.**"

Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Bārnibāri tricked him into thinking that he was supporting him until he took that book from him and we read this in it." This phrase is reportedly found in the Damascus manuscript of the 'Nahr' but not in the Cairo printed edition.]

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ṣālih **al-'Uthaymīn** (the most likely candidate to replace bin Bāz, who recently passed away and regarded as one of the highest authorities of Wahhabism/Salafism in our age) says in his explanation of **Ibn Taymiyyah's 'Aqīda wāṣiṭiyyah'** (Cairo: Maktabat al-'ilm ed. p. 23):

"Coming and arrival (al-majī' wa al-ityān) are (two) of Allāh's active attributes (min Ṣifāt Allāh al-fi'liyyah). These two are established as belonging to Allāh in the way that befits Him. Their proof is that He says: "And thy Lord shall come with angels, rank on rank" (89:22) and "Wait they for naught else than that Allāh should come unto them in the shadows of the clouds with the angels?" (2:210). To explain these verses as a reference to the coming or arrival of Allāh's order (**amr**) is unsound, because it contravenes the external meaning (**ẓāhir al-lafẓ**) of the verse and the consensus of the early generations (ijmā' al-salaf), and there is no proof-text for it (**la dalīla 'alayh**)."

The commentator is saying that "the coming" is not explained as "the coming of the order," rather it is explained as a coming which befits the majesty of Allāh without anthropomorphic imagery nor suggestion of modality (**min ghayri tashbīh wa la takyīf**). That is, he is establishing that there is a body that moves by coming and by returning (**ay annahū yuthbitu jisman yataḥarraku bi al-majī'i wa al-rujū'**), however, he does not declare it openly as a bodily entity (**la yuṣarriḥu bi al-jismiyyah**). And this is the Salafi/Wahhabi madhhab.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ṣālih **al-'Uthaymīn** says that Allāh is in the heaven in person or with His Essence (bi dhātihī) and that despite this he draws near to the servant during the latter's prayer, *just as the sun is in the heaven, while its rays reach creatures on earth.*

[**Note #1:** Ibn Taymiyyah establishes this clear-cut case of similitude (tamthīl) for Allāh's Attributes of knowledge, watchfulness and protection in the '**Aqīda wāṣiṭiyyah**' (Salafiyya ed. 1346/1927 p. 20): "The phrase 'and He is with you' (cf. 57:4) does not mean that He is mixed in (mukhtaliṭ) with creation... Nay the moon... one of the smallest of Allāh's creations, is both placed in the heaven (mawdū'un fi al-samā') and present with (wa huwa ma') the traveler and the non-traveler wherever they may be, and [a fortiori] He, the Exalted, is over (**fawq**) the Throne (but) as a watchful guardian of His creatures; He is their protector and is cognizant of them".]

[**Note #2:** Ibn Taymiyyah elsewhere denies this simile as valid for attributes according to **Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah** in '**Kitāb al-Rūḥ**' (Madani ed. 1984 p. 59): " [The soul's movement] is unrelated to the body, for it rises until it reaches what is above the heavens (*taṣ'adu ilā mā fawq al-samāwāt*) then it alights back on earth between the time that it is seized and that of the body's burial in the grave — and that is a brief time — whereas the body neither rises nor alights like it. Similarly its ascension from and return to the body during sleep or wakefulness. Some have compared it to the sun and its rays, for the sun is in the heaven (*fa innahā fi al-samā'*) while its rays are on earth (*shu'ā'uha fi al-arḍ*). But our shaykh (**Ibn Taymiyyah**) said: "This example does not apply, because the sun itself or in its essence (*fa inna nafs al-shams*) does not descend from the heaven, and the radiance that is upon the earth (*'alā al-arḍ*) is neither the sun *nor its attribute* (*laysa huwa al-shamsu wa la ṣifatuha*), but merely a nonessential, contingent accident (**'araḍ**) which happens to take place because of the sun, and because of an (earthly) body facing it; whereas the soul itself (*al-rūḥu nafsuhā*) ascends and descends."

Ibn 'Uthaymīn says ('Sharḥ al-'aqidah al-wāṣiṭiyya' p. 44):

"The proof that Allāh is (directly) in front of the person who prays is the Prophet's (ﷺ) saying: If one of you stands in prayer, let him not spit in front of him (*qibala wajhihi*) for Allāh is in front of him (**fa inna Allāha qibala wajhihi**); and so this confrontation (*muqābala*) is established for Allāh literally (**thābitatun lillāhi Ḥaqqatan**), in the way that befits Him. Nor does it contradict His elevation (*'uluwwahū*), for what reconciles the two matters is that with respect to the creature (*fi Ḥaqq al-makhlūq*) both can be put together, just as the sun at its rising (*kamā law kānat al-shamsu 'inda ṭulū'ihā*) is facing him who faces the East (*fa innahā qibalu wajhi man istaqbala al-mashriq*), at the same time being in the heaven (*wa hiya fi al-samā'*). And if this is true for created things, then it is more rightfully so for the Creator."

These are the very words of Shaykh **Ibn 'Uthaymīn** who is a Salafī/Wahhabī. It is possible to force upon him the proof (based on his own words) that the external meaning (**ẓāhir**) of Allāh's words: "**Prostrate thyself, and draw near (unto Allāh)**" (96:19) indicates physical proximity. But no rational person can say that such a meaning is meant here, for when the person at prayer prostrates, he does not draw near to a body nor to Allāh's body! This proves that the proximity in question is that of His mercy (**al-iqtirāb iqtirābu raḥmatih**), and that the words "in front of him" in the above ḥadīth mean that Allāh is looking over him and taking account of his works (*Allāh nāẓiruhū wa muḥṣi 'alayhi a'mālahū*).

Shaykh **Ibn 'Uthaymīn** differentiates between the '**kursī**' and the "**arsh**". He says ('Sharḥ al-'aqida al-wāṣiṭiyyah' p. 15): "The **kursī** is the place of the two feet, and the '**arsh** is that upon which Allāh made **istiwā**.'" The meaning of his words is that **Allāh sits on the 'arsh and then places His Feet on the kursī**. This is anthropomorphism (**tajsīm**).

Furthermore, it is not permitted to differentiate (between **kursī** and **'arsh**), for the one who sits on the 'arsh does not place his feet on the kursi; also, there are many texts adducing that the **'arsh** is the **kursī**.

The Shaykh **Ibn 'Uthaymīn** reinforces his opinion concerning **anthropomorphism** by saying ('Sharḥ' p. 42):

"It is established that **Allāh** the Exalted **has feet** (*al-qadam thābit lillāhi ta'ālā*), and the People of the Way of the Prophet (ahl al-Sunnah) have explained the leg and the foot (**al-rijl wa al-qadam**) as being literal according to what befits Allāh (*ḥaqīqatan 'alā al-wajhi al-lā'iq billah*); whereas the People of Figurative Interpretation (ahl al-ta'wīl) have explained **'al-rijl'** as being the group which Allāh will place in the Fire, and **'al-qadam'** as being those who are sent forth (*muqaddamīn*) to the Fire... and I reject and return their explanation to them on the grounds that it contravenes the external meaning of the words (*bi annahū mukhālifun li ṣāhir al-lafẓ*)."

[Note: See **al-Sufuri**, **'Nuzhat al-Majālis'**, entitled "[6] Correct Belief": "Concerning the Prophet's (ﷺ) saying: "The Fire (Jahannam) will not cease to be thrown into, and it will say: Is there more? until the Lord of Might (Rabb al-'izzat) places into it His **'qadam'** [lit. "foot"]," **Imām Hasan al-Baṣrī** *Raḥimahullāh* said that **'qadam'** means those whom Allāh has sent forth (qaddamahum Allāh) from the most evil of creatures, and has established as inhabitants of the Fire. Others have said that the **'qadam'** are a creation which Allāh creates and then casts into the Fire. It is confirmed by what is found in the sound narrations: "Paradise will remain partly vacant until Allāh gives rise (**yunshi'**) to a special creation and makes them dwell in it and fill it." Another sound narration has "His **'qidam'** (timelessness)," and another narration has: "Until the Lord of Power (al-Jabbār) places his **'rijl'** [lit. "leg"]..." **'Rijl'** is an expression to mean a large assembly (jamā'ah), and it is said: "A **'rijl'** of locusts have fallen upon us."]

What inspired **Ibn 'Uthaymīn** to say such words (as Allāh's **feet** or legs being literal) is the external meaning of the aḥādīth such as the following: "**al-Khallāl** said in '*Kitāb al-Sunnah*' on the authority of Qutāt ibn al-Na'mān who said: I heard the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) saying: 'When Allāh was *relieved* from His creation he established Himself over His Throne (istawā 'ala 'arshihi) and reclined (**istalqa**) and placed one of **His legs on top of the other** (wa waḍa'a iḥḍa rijlayhi 'ala al-ukhra), and said: Verily it does not befit human beings (innahā lā tuṣliḥu li bashar)." Al-Dhahabi and others said: "Its chain of transmission is sound according to the criteria of Bukhārī and Muslim." And note well that the Salaf are the "People of ḥadīth" (ahl al-Hadīth), and that they do not practice figurative interpretation (la yu'awwīlūn)!

From 'Daf' al-shubuhaat 'an al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali' [The Refutation of False Arguments Made Against the Shaykh Muhammad al- Ghazali] (Cairo: Maktabat al-kullīyyāt al-azhariyya, 1410/1990) p. p. 57-59.

Ibni Taymiyyah & Two Tawhīds

ABU ḤĀMID IBN MARZŪQ ON IBN TAYMIYYAH

Refutations of Ibn Taymiyyah's Two Tawhīds

(Translated with permission from the Waqf Ikhlas 1993 offset reprint)

The (division of **Tawhīd** into) Oneness of Godhead (**Tawhīd al-ULūhiyyah**) and Oneness of Lordship (**Tawhīd al-Rubūbiyyah**) was **invented** by **Ibn Taymiyyah** who claimed that all Muslims among the (**Ash'arī**) theologians (al-Mutakallimīn) worshipped other than Allāh due to their ignorance of '**Tawhīd al-ULūhiyyah**,' and he claimed that they only knew, of **Tawhīd**, the '**Tawhīd al-Rubūbiyyah**' which consists in affirming that Allāh is the Creator of all things, and he claims that the polytheists (**al-mushrikūn**) admitted it also. He therefore declared all Muslims to be unbelievers (**kāfir**), and Muḥammad **ibn Abd al-Wahhāb** imitated him in this, and others imitated Muḥammad **ibn Abdul Wahhāb** in it.

The late savant **al-Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Zayni Dahlan** (d. 1304 H) looked into this particular matter in a small section of his treatise '**al-durar al-saniyyah fi al-radd 'ala al-wahhābiyyah**' [The Resplendent Pearls in Refuting the Wahhabis], and so did the savant **al-Shaykh Ibrahim al-Samnudi al-Manṣurī** (d. 1314 H) who spoke excellently in his book '**sa'ādat al-dārayn fi al-radd 'ala al-firqatayn al-wahhābiyya wa al-ẓāhiriyya**' [The Bliss of the Two Abodes in the Refutation of the Two Sects: Wahhabis and Zahiris], and the late savant **al-Shaykh Salāma al-'Azzami** (1376 H) also wrote valuable words about it in his book '**al-barāhīn al-saati'a fi raddi ba'd al-bida' al-shā'i'a**' [The Radiant Proofs in Refuting Some Widespread Innovations]...

I myself have looked at the words of Ibn Taymiyyah on the subject of '**Tawhīd al-Rubūbiyyah**' and '**Tawhīd al-ULūhiyyah**' in four different places within his books, and I mention these words in their totality for the reader's perusal, before turning to refute them.

1. 'Fatawi' of Ibn Taymiyyah vol. 1 p. 219

On the explanation of the Prophet's (ﷺ) saying: "**wa la yanfa'u dhal jaddi minka al-jadd**" (3:27) [Riches and good fortune will not profit the possessor thereof with You]:

"He has shown in this saying two great principles (aṣlayn 'aẓimayn): the first is '**Tawhīd al-Rubūbiyyah**,' and it is that there is no giver for what Allāh has prevented, and there is no preventer for what He has given, and that He is the only one to be relied upon, and the only one to be asked from; the second principle is '**Tawhīd al-ILūhiyyah**,' and it is the exposition

of what benefits and what does not benefit, and that he who receives money or worldly status or leadership derives no benefit therefrom before Allāh nor salvation from His punishment. For Allāh the Exalted gives worldly status both to whom He loves and whom He does not love, while He does not grant belief (imaan) except to whom He loves...

“ ...**‘Tawḥīd al-Ilūhiyyah’** is that one worship Allāh and not associate anyone nor anything in partnership to Him, and obey Him and His Messengers, and do what He likes and what He is pleased with. **‘Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah’** entails what He has decreed and made to pass, even if it includes what He did not order nor made obligatory nor held pleasing to Him. The servant is ordered (also) to worship Allāh and to do what He has been ordered, and this is **‘Tawḥīd al-Ilūhiyyah,’** and to seek forgiveness from Allāh in relation to this, and this is Tawḥīd to Him, and thus he says: “ *īyyāka na’budu wa īyyāka nasta’īn* ” [Thee alone do we worship and Thee alone do we ask for help].”

2. **‘Fatawi’ of Ibn Taymiyyah vol. 2 p. 275**

“What is intended here is the exposition of the absolute state of the servant to Allāh, who worships Him and seeks His help and so acts with a view to Him and seeks His help (in doing so), and His saying “ *īyyāka na’budu wa īyyāka nasta’īn* ” [Thee alone do we worship and Thee alone do we ask for help] substantiates (yuḥaqiq) **‘Tawḥīd al-Ilūhiyyah’** and **‘Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah,’** although godhead (**al-ilaahiyyah**) comprises (tataḍamman) lordship (**al-Rubūbiyyah**), whereas lordship stands in need of (tastalzim) godhead. Therefore, even if one, when mentioned by itself, comprises the other (i.e. godhead comprises Lordship), it is nevertheless not prevented from bearing a specific meaning unto itself when it is mentioned in contrast with the other.

“For example, in His saying: *‘qul a’ūdhu bi rabb al-nās’* [Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind], He has reunited the two nouns (i.e. Godhead and Lordship), since the god (al-ilaah) is the object of worship that has a right to such worship (al-ma’būd al-ladhī yastaḥiqqu an yu’bad) while the Lord (al-rabb) is the one who has authority over His servant (al-ladhī yurabbi ‘abdah).”

3. **‘Minhaj ahl al-Sunnah’ of Ibn Taymiyyah (Bulāq: al-maṭba’a al-kubra al-amīriyya, 1321/1904) vol. 2 p. 62**

“The (Ash’arī) theologians (al-mutakallimūn)... have fallen short of the knowledge of the rational proofs which Allāh mentioned in His Book, so they strayed from them and went into different, innovated directions which, due to the falsehoods contained in them, they went out of some of the truth which they and other than them share in believing, and they entered

into some of the innovated falsehoods, and they have taken out from Tawḥīd what belongs to it, for example, '**Tawḥīd al-ilāhiyyah**' and the establishment of the literalness of Allāh's Names and Attributes. They did not know, of Tawḥīd, other than the '**Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah**' which consists in affirming that Allāh is the Creator of all things, and this Tawḥīd was affirmed by those who associated partners to Allāh (**al-mushrikūn**), about whom Allāh said: "If thou shouldst ask them: Who created the heavens and the earth? They would answer: Allāh" (31:25), and He said: "Say: Who is Lord of the seven heavens, and Lord of the Tremendous Throne? They will say: Unto Allāh all that belongeth" (23:6-87), and He said of them: "And most of them believe not in Allāh except that they attribute partners unto Him" (12:106). So does the group that is from the belief of the early generations (al-ṭā'ifatu min al-salaf) say to them (the Ash'arīs): Who has created the heavens and the earth? And they reply: Allāh. And yet together with this they worship other than him (**wa hum ma'a dhālika ya'budūna ghayrah**). For verily the Tawḥīd which Allāh has ordered unto His servants is the '**Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah**' which comprises the '**Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah**,' and is that they worship Allāh and not attribute anything as partner to Him, in order that religion (**dīn**) belong in totality to Allāh."

[**Note:** In the above quote **Ibn Taymiyyah** equates idolaters and polytheists (mushrikūn) with Muslims, and he equates the **Ash'ari** scholars of **kalām**, i.e. those who used rational discourse as a method of theological enquiry from **Imām al-Ash'arī** (d. **324 H**) to his own time (d. **728 H**), the same as polytheists in belief ('**aqidah**).]

4. 'Risālat ahl al-Suffa' of Ibn Taymiyyah p. 34:

" '**Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** ' by itself does not negate disbelief in Allāh [**kufr**] and does not suffice."

[**Note:** Here Ibn Taymiyyah questions the Tawḥīd of all Muslims indiscriminately.]

I say: **Ibn Taymiyyah** has camouflaged the writings which he has inflicted upon the uneducated and their likes among the half-educated (al-mutafaqqiḥa) with a lot of sayings by the pious early generations (**al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ**) and quotations from the Book and the Sunnah, in order to further and promote his **heretic tendencies** (hawāh) in their market.

However, in the above words he has made his tendencies quite clear, and he did not connect them to anything in the Book nor the Sunnah nor the Salaf. With Allāh's power and the success which He grants I shall repay him in his own currency but with a real and ample measure, the currency with which he has duped and deceived the simple-minded, and I shall provide the proofs with which to show that his words quoted in the above four places are false in thirty-two different ways.

1. **Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal**, to whom **Ibn Taymiyyah** falsely affiliated himself in front of **Ḥanbalīs**, never said that Tawḥīd consisted in two parts, one being **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and the other **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, nor did he ever say that “whoever does not know **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, his knowledge of **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** is not taken into account because the idolaters also had such knowledge.” Anyone can check that **Imām Aḥmad never said** such a thing in his doctrine (*‘aqīdah*) as recorded in the compilations of his followers such as **Ibn al-Jawzī’s** *‘Manāqib*’ and other books, none of which contain this drivel.
2. None of the Followers of the Followers (**atba’a’ al-Tābi’īn**) ever said to his companions (i.e. students of younger generations) that Tawḥīd consisted in two parts, one being **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and the other **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, nor did any of them ever say that “whoever does not know **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, his knowledge of **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** is not taken into account.” If humankind and jinn joined together to prove that one of the **atbaa’ al-Tābi’īn** ever said such a thing, they would not succeed!
3. None of the Followers (**al-Tābi’īn**) ever said to their companions (i.e. students of younger generations) that Tawḥīd consisted in two parts, one being **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and the other **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, and if humankind and jinn joined together to establish that one of them ever said such a thing, they would not succeed!
4. None of the **Companions of the Prophet** (ﷺ) ever said that Tawḥīd consisted in two parts, one being **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and the other **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, nor did any of them ever say that “whoever does not know **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, his knowledge of **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** is not taken into account because the idolaters also had such knowledge.” And I defy whoever stakes a claim that he has knowledge, to try and trace for us such a fabricated division back to the Companions — even with an inauthentic narration (*wa law bi riwāyatīn wāhiya*)!
5. Nowhere in the extensive **Sunnah of the Prophet** (ﷺ), which is the exposition of the Book of Allāh the Mighty and the Majestic, whether in the books of *‘Ṣaḥīḥ*’, the *‘Sunan*’, the *‘Masānid*’, or the *‘Ma’ājim*’, is it related that the Prophet (ﷺ) ever said to his Companions or ever taught them that Tawḥīd consisted in two parts, one being **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and the other **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, nor did any of them ever say that “whoever does not know **Tawḥīd al-ULūhiyyah**, his knowledge of **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** is not taken into account because the idolaters also had such knowledge.” If humankind and jinn joined together to establish that the Prophet (ﷺ) ever said such a thing, even with an inauthentic chain of transmission, they would not succeed!

6. Indeed the books of the Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ) overflow with the fact that the Call (da'wah) of the Prophet (ﷺ) to the people unto Allāh was in order that they *'witness that there is no god except Allāh alone and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allāh'*, and in order that they repudiate idol-worship. One of the most famous illustrations of this is the (sound) narration of **Mu'adh ibn Jabal** (رضي الله عنه) when the Prophet (ﷺ) sent him to (govern) Yemen and said to him: **"Invite them to the witnessing that (there is no god but Allāh and Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allāh). If they obey this, at that time tell them that they are obligated to pray five prayers in every twenty-four hours..."** And it is narrated in five of the **six books of authentic traditions**, and **Ibn Hibbān** declared it sound, that a beduin Arab reported the sighting of the new moon to the Prophet (ﷺ) and the latter ordered the people to fast without asking this man other than to confirm the two witnessings. According to this drivell of **Ibn Taymiyyah**, it would have been necessary for the Prophet (ﷺ) to call all people to the **Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah** of which they were ignorant, for as for **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** they knew it already; and he should have said to Mu'adh (according to this drivell): **"Invite them to Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah"**; and he should have asked the beduin who had sighted the new moon of Ramaḍan (according to this drivell): **"Do you know Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah?"**
7. In His **Glorious Book** which falsehood cannot approach whether from the front or from the back, Allāh never ordered **"Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah"** to His servants, nor did He ever say that *"whoever does not know this Tawḥīd, his knowledge of Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah is not taken into account."*
8. Rather, Allāh ordered the utterance of an Absolute Word of Oneness (kalimat al-Tawḥīd muṭlaqa), for He said as He addressed His Prophet (ﷺ): **"Know that there is no other god except Allāh alone"** ('fa'lam annahū lā ilāha illallāh'). And He spoke similarly in all of the verses of Oneness (Tawḥīd) that are mentioned in the Qur'ān including Sārah **al-Ikhlāṣ** which is equivalent to one third of the Qur'ān.
9. It would have been necessary for Allāh, if we were to believe this drivell (of **Ibn Taymiyyah**), that since His servants all knew about **Tawḥīd al-Rubūbiyyah** and did not know about **Tawḥīd al-Ulūhiyyah**, He should have made it explicitly clear to them and not misguided them and not punished them for their ignorance of half of Tawḥīd, nor said to them: *"Today I have perfected for you your Religion and I have completed My blessing upon you and I have accepted for you Islām as a religion."* And we seek refuge in Allāh from the treacheries of the tongue and the corruption of folly.

Ibn Taymiyyah & Descent

Ibn Taymiyyah's Literal Representation of Allāh's "Descent"

We understand something of the contemporary scholar's impression of Ibn Taymiyyah from the *Tuhfat al-nuzzar* or "Travels" of **Ibn Battuta**, who relates:

"When I came to Damascus there was a man called Ibn Taymiyyah speaking about religious science, but there was something strange in his mind one day he was giving the Jum'a sermon and he said, "Our Lord descends to the nearest heaven thus," then he went down two steps on the minbar and he said "like my descending" (kanuzuli hādhā)."

This well-known incident is confirmed both internally through Ibn Taymiyyah's own writings, and externally as related in **Ibn Ḥājar's** *Durar*: (Najm al-Din Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Qawi) **al-Tufi** (al-Ḥanbali) said:

*"They ascertained that he had blurted out certain words concerning doctrine which came out of his mouth in the context of his sermons and legal decisions, and they mentioned that he had cited the ḥadīth of Allāh's descent, then climbed down two steps from the minbar and said: "Just like this descent of mine" and he was categorized as an **anthropomorphist**."*¹

Ibn Taymiyyah's conception of Allāh's bodily descent is also stated in his own writings, as shown from the following excerpt from his *al-Ta'sis fi al-radd 'ala asas al-taqdis*, written as a refutation of **Imām al-Razi** who was a fierce enemy of the *Karramiyyah* and other anthropomorphists:

*"The Creator, Glorified and Exalted is He, is above the world and His being above is literal, not in the sense of dignity or rank. It may be said of the precedence of a certain object over another that it is with respect to dignity or rank, or that it is with respect to location. For example, respectively: the precedence of the learned over the ignorant and the precedence of the Imām over the one praying behind him. Allāh's precedence over the world is not like that, rather, it is a literal precedence (i.e. in time). Similarly the elevation above the world could be said to be with respect to dignity or rank, as for example when it said that the learned is above the ignorant. But Allāh's elevation over the world is not like that, rather He is elevated over it literally (i.e. in space). And this is the known elevation and the known precedence"*²

It should be clear that the above in **no way represents the position of Imām Aḥmad** or his school. As **Ibn al-Jawzī** reported in his *Daf' shubah al-tashbih*: 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Dabbas related to us that Rizq Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Tamimī said: "**Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal did not attribute a direction to the Creator.**"³

¹ Ibn Ḥājar, al-Durar 1:153.

² Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Ta'sis al-radd 'ala asas al-taqdis 1:111.

³ Ibn al-Jawzī, Daf' shubah al-tashbih p. 135.

Ibn Taymiyyah & Descent

Ibn Taymiyyah Compares Allāh to the Moon In his infamous 'Aqida wāṣiṭiyyah.

Ibn Taymiyyah establishes a clear-cut case of **tamthil** or similitude for Allāh and His attributes by comparing Him to the moon in his interpretation of the verse 57:4: "He is with you wherever you are": The phrase "and He is with you" does not mean that He blends into creation... Nay the moon... one of the smallest of Allāh's creations, is both placed in the heaven (*mawdu'un fi al-samā'*) and present with the traveler and the non-traveler wherever they may be. And the Exalted is above (**fawq**) the Throne, as a watchful guardian of His creatures and their protector Who is cognizant of them.¹

Ibn Taymiyyah's admirers may falsely claim that he represents the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah, but we all know that none of the Ahl al-Sunnah ever compared Allāh to the moon, or Allāh's knowledge to the moon's rays. Exalted is Allāh high above the fancies of those who give such examples for Him. **Yet we find today** the same type of aberration still passing for Islamic education, in books such as **Ibn al-'Uthaymīn's** *Sharh al-'Aqida al-Wāṣiṭiyyah*, which we will address in a few pages, and where the author (ie. Ibn 'Uthaymīn), dissatisfied with Ibn Taymiyyah's moon, turns to comparing Allāh to the sun instead.

In consequence of such strange positions, **Ibn Taymiyyah** was **imprisoned** by agreement of the Muslim scholars of Egypt and Syria who wished to prevent the dissemination of his ideas. His imprisonment, it should be stressed, came as a result of the consensus of the scholars of his time and **not**, as it is falsely claimed by his admirers, a **massive conspiracy against him**. Nor was he put in jail by a tyrannical ruler, nor **due to the jealousy of his contemporaries**, as is postulated today by some of those who claim to follow his teachings. One fears the authorities made him something of a martyr instead, and thus stimulated interest in his otherwise pedestrian observations touching on Divine attributes. We will mention his deviations concerning other topics later, insha Allāh. We close this section with the recapitulation of Ibn Taymiyyah's deviations and his unmitigated condemnation by **al-Haytami**. Ibn Ḥājar **al-Haytami's** Scathing Condemnation of Ibn Taymiyyah Shaykh al-Islam Aḥmad ibn Muhammad Abu al-'Abbas Shihab al-Dīn **al-Haytamī**, known as Ibn Ḥājar **al-Haytami** (909-974/ 1504-1567) was the **Shāfi'ī Imām** of his time, a brilliant scholar of in-depth applications of Sharī'ah, and with **Imām Aḥmad al-Ramlī**, represents the foremost resource for legal opinion (fatwā) for the entire late **Shāfi'ī** school. He was educated at al-Azhar, but later moved to Makkah, where he authored major works in Shāfi'ī jurisprudence (Fiqh), Ḥadīth, tenets of faith (Aqāid) , education, Ḥadīth commentary, and formal legal opinion.

His most famous works include *Tuhfat al-muhtāj bi sharh al-minhāj* (The gift of him in need: an explanation of "The Road"), a commentary on **Imām Nawawī's Minhaj al-Ṭālibīn** (The seeker's road) whose **ten volumes** represent a high point in Shāfi'ī scholarship; the **four-volume al-Fatawa al-kubra al-fiqhiyyah** (The major collection of legal opinions); and *al-Zawajir 'an iqtiraf al-kabā'ir* (Deterrents from committing enormities) which with its detailed presentation of Qur'ān and ḥadīth evidence and masterful legal inferences, remains unique among Muslim works dealing with godfearingness (**taqwa**) and is even recognized by **Hanafi** scholars like **Ibn 'Abidin** as a source of authoritative legal texts (**nusus**) valid in their own school.²

This Shāfi'ī Imām Ibn Hājar **al-Haytami** writes in his *Fatawa ḥadīthiyya*:

Ibn Taymiyyah is a slave which Allāh has forsaken and misguided and blinded and deafened and debased. That is the declaration of the Imāms who have exposed the corruption of his positions and the mendacity of his sayings. Whoever wishes to pursue this must read the words of the **Mujtahid Imām Abu al-Ḥasan (Tāqi al-Dīn) al-Subkī**, of his son **Tāj al-Dīn Subkī**, of the **Imām al-'Izz ibn Jama'a** and others of the **Shāfi'ī, Maliki, and Hanafi** shaykhs...In short, his words are not given any importance whatsoever; rather they are thrown aside into every wasteland and rocky ground, and it must be considered that **he is a misguided and misguiding innovator** (mubtadi' ḍall muḍill) and an ignorant who brought evil (jāhilun ghalun) whom Allāh treated with His justice, and may He protect us from the likes of his path, doctrine, and actions, Amin...Know that he has differed from people on questions about which **Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī** and others warned us. Among the things **Ibn Taymiyyah** said which violate the scholarly consensus are:

1. that he who violates the consensus commits neither disbelief (**kufr**) nor transgression (fisq)
2. that our Lord is subject to created events (**maḥallun li al-ḥawādith**) — glorified, exalted, and sanctified is He far above what the wrong-doers and rejecters ascribe to Him!
3. that He is complex or made of parts (**murakkab**), His Essence standing in need similarly to the way the whole stands in need of the parts (**taftaqiru dhātuhū iftiqara al-kulli li al-juz'**), elevated is He and sanctified above that!
4. that the Qur'ān is created in Allāh's Essence (**muḥdath fi dhātillāh**),³ elevated is He above that!
5. that the world (**al-'ālam**) is of a pre-eternal nature (**qadim bi al-naw'**) and that it existed with Allāh from pre-eternity (**wa lam yazal ma' Allāh**) as an everlasting created object (**makhlūqan dā'iman**), thus making it necessarily existent in His Essence (**fa ja'alahū mujaban bi al-dhāt**) and not acting deliberately (**la fa'ilan bi al-ikhtyar**), elevated is He above that!⁴

6. his sayings about Allāh's "corporeality," "direction," "displacement," (**al-jismiyyah wa al-jihah wa al-intiqal**), and that He **fits** the *size of the Throne*, being neither bigger nor smaller, exalted is He from such a hideous invention and wide-open disbelief (**kufr**), and may He forsake all his followers, and may all his beliefs be scattered and lost!
7. His saying that the fire shall go out (**al-nar tafnī**),⁵
8. and that the prophets are not free from sin (**al-anbiya'a ghayru ma'sūmīn**),⁶
9. and that the Prophet (ﷺ) has no particular status before Allāh (**lā jāha lahū**)⁷ and must not be used as a means (**lā yutawassalu bihī**),⁸
10. and that the undertaking of travel (**al-safar**) to (Madinah to see) him in order to perform his visit (**al-ziyārah**) is a disobedience (**ma'siyah**) in which it is unlawful to shorten the prayers,⁹ and that it is **forbidden to ask** for his intercession (**shafā'ah**) in view of the Day of Need
11. and that the words (**alfaz**) of the Torah and the Gospel were not substituted, but their meanings (**ma'ani**) were.

Some said: "Whoever looks at his books does not attribute to him most of these positions, except that whereby he holds the view that Allāh has a direction, and that he authored a book to establish this, and forces the proof upon the people who follow this school of thought that they are believers in Allāh's corporeality (**jismiyyah**), dimensionality (**muhadhat**), and settledness (**istiqrār**)." That is, it may be that at times he used to assert these proofs and that they were consequently attributed to him in particular. **But** whoever attributed this to him from among the **Imāms of Islam** upon whose greatness, leadership, religion, trustworthiness, fairness, acceptance, insight, and meticulousness there is agreement — **then they do not say anything except what has been duly established with added precautions and repeated inquiry**. This is especially true when a Muslim is attributed a view which necessitates his disbelief, apostasy, misguidance, and execution. Therefore if it is true of him that he is a disbeliever and an innovator, then Allāh will deal with him with His justice, and other than that He will forgive us and him.¹⁰

1 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-'Aqida al-Wāṣiyyah* (Salafiyya ed. 1346 / 1927) p. 20.

2 Very slightly adapted from Nūḥ Keller's biographical notice on Haythami in his *Reliance of the Traveller* p. 1054.

3 The *Jahmis* believed that the Qur'ān was created.

4 These are of the crassest expressions of *kalām* and speculation in which one could possibly indulge.

5 This was refuted by San'ani in *Raf' al-astar*.

6 This is a logical corollary of his belief that contradicting the **ijmā'** on matters of belief and law is neither *kufr* nor *fiṣq*.

7 A reference to Ibn Taymiyyah's manner of answering questions specific to the Prophet (ﷺ) with generalities about all human beings.

8 The scholars' refutation of this heresy innovated by Ibn Taymiyyah is detailed in the second part of the present paper.

9 Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī says in *Fath al-Bārī* (1993 ed. 3:66) about Ibn Taymiyyah's prohibition to travel in order to visit the Prophet (ﷺ): "This is one of the ugliest matters ever reported from Ibn Taymiyyah." Yet even today the Saudi scholar **Bin Baz** (who recently passed away) persists in saying that it is **forbidden** to travel with the intention of visiting the Prophet (ﷺ) and comments that this was not an ugly but a correct thing for Ibn Taymiyyah to say!

10 Ibn Ḥajar **al-Haythami** al-Makki's *Fatāwa ḥadīthiyya* (Cairo: Halabi, 1390/1970) p. 114-117.

Our view on Mutashābihāt

THE METHOD OF AHL AL-SUNNAH

TOUCHING ON THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

It should, by now, be sufficiently clear in what way **Ibn Taymiyyah** deviated from the doctrine of **Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah**. Much less can he and those who follow his ideas be properly described as **Salafi**.

This section highlights the method of the true **Salaf** with regard to interpreting ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān, and how the **Khalaf** or *scholars of later generations*, applied that method to the needs of their times, expanding its details but retaining its priorities, according to the paramount belief that there is nothing like Allāh whatsoever. Present-day "Salafis" attack the **Khalaf** and pretend that we should keep to the way of the Salaf, although "Salafis" are closer in spirit to those whom the Salaf and Khalaf fought, namely, the **anthropomorphists**. As said earlier, common to all **Ahl al-Bid'ah** groups is *their arbitrary reading of texts* which admit of some uncertainty with regard to their interpretation. There are, in fact, **two types of verses** in the Qur'ān. On the **one** hand, we find verses called **muḥkamāt** (conveying firm and unequivocal meaning). On the **other**, we find those called **mutashābihāt** (allegoricals). It is in the interpretation of the latter that **Ahl al-Bid'ah** come to the fore.

The Mutashabihat (Ambiguities/Allegoricals) In Qur'ān and Ḥadīth

Let us begin with the definition of the word mutashābih:

A verse or a ḥadīth is called mutashābih if:

- 1 it has more than one meaning in Arabic and
- 2 its meaning or interpretation is not explicit.

An example of the mutashābih is the verse:

al-Raḥmānu 'alā al-'arsh istawā. (20:5) which is sometimes translated as "*The Merciful is established on the Throne*," while the word **istawā** has over **fifteen meanings** in Arabic among which are:

1. **to settle** (istaqarra), as in verse 11:44: "And the ship came to rest (istawat) upon al-Jūdi"; the anthropomorphists apply this to verse 20:5, as stated by **Ibn Battal** and **Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī**.

2. **to ascend** or rise (irtafa'a); **al-Baghawī** says that it is the meaning of 20:5 according to Ibn 'Abbas (رضي الله عنه) and most of the commentators of Qur'ān.
3. to rise above or **tower above** ('ala); this is the meaning given by **al-Mujāhid** for 20:5 in *Saḥiḥ al-Bukhārī*, and **Ibn Battal** declares it to be "the true position and the saying of Ahl al-Sunnah";
4. **to become straight**, as in verse 48:29: "And it stands firm (istawā) upon its stalk";
5. **to attain maturity**, as in verse 28:14: "And when he reached his full strength and was ripe (istawā)";
6. **to subdue** (qahara), **conquer** (istawla), and **prevail** or overcome (ghalaba), as in the poet's saying concerning Bishr ibn Marwan's conquest of Iraq: *istawā bishrun 'alā al-'iraq* and that boasting: *idhā mā 'alawna wa istawayna 'alayhim ja'alnāhum mar'a li nistrin wa ta'irin* or: "When we tower over them and overcome them, we shall make them a pasture for eagles and other birds." **Ibn Battal** and Abū Maṣṣūr **al-Baghdādī** attribute the interpretation of 20:5 as istawla chiefly to the Mu'tazila;
7. **to mount** (sa'ida), as in verse 23:28: "And when you are on board (istawayta) the ship" and 43:13: "That they may mount (li yastawu) upon their backs," and with regard to 20:5 this is worse than istaqarra;
8. **to attain the end-point of an act** such as growth, as in verse 28:14 already cited, or such as creation (intihā' khalqihī ilayh), as in verse 41:11: "Then turned He to the heaven when it was smoke." This is the interpretation of **Ibn Hazm** who explains istiawā' as "an act pertaining to the Throne, and that is the termination of His creation at the Throne, for there is nothing beyond it." **etc.**

"To rise," "ascend," and "rise above" must be understood in the sense of rank and lordship, not in the sense of physical elevation or displacement. Among the least injurious and most befitting meanings of verse 20:5 — and Allāh knows best — is also "subdue" (qahara) and "conquer" (istawla). By this we understand that Allāh praises Himself as the Irresistible (*al-qahhar*) in declaring that even the greatest of all creations, the Throne, lies subject to Him. This in nowise suggests, as one objection goes, that subduing and conquering suppose prior opposition in the face of the Creator, no more than do the attributes of Irresistible (*qahhar*) or Omnipotent (*qahir*) presuppose any resistance or power on anyone's part. This is confirmed by the verses: "He is the Omnipotent (*qahir*) over His slaves" (6:18, 6:61) and "Allāh prevails (*ghalib*) in His purpose" (12:21) To those who object to *istawla* on the grounds that it supposes prior opposition, **Ibn Ḥājar** remarked that that assumption is discarded by clinging to the verse: "Allāh was ever Knower, Wise" (4:17), which the commentators, he says, have explained to mean "He is ever Knower and Wise." Yet again, we never tire of saying "**There is nothing like Him whatsoever**" (42:11) and that the best explanation is the recitation of

the verse as it was revealed and its leaving it unexplained. This was the way of **Imām Mālik**, **Imām al-Shāfi'ī**, al-Awzā'i, **Imām Aḥmad**, and the rest of the **Salaf** with regard to this verse. However, in the face of the false suggestions of those who, between the time of the Salaf and ours, have represented the Creator of heaven and earth as a limited body sitting in a confined space, it has been and still is an obligation of **Ahl al-Sunnah** to clarify ambiguities some used to spread falsehood. And this has been the position of **Ahl al-Sunnah** since **Imām Bukhari**, **al-Khattabī**, **Ibn Battal**, and **Ibn al-Jawzī**, through the time of **Imām Nawawi**, **Subkī**, and **Ibn Ḥājar**, as the present paper abundantly makes clear.

Literalism and Attributes of Allāh

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I received a letter in Jordan not too long ago from a British Muslim, asking me questions about modern calls to replace traditional Islām with an ostensible “**return to the way of the Salaf**, or ‘early Muslims.’” When I answered one of these questions, I realized that many other people might be wondering the same thing, and thought that presenting the question to you tonight in a wider forum might be of greater benefit to the British Muslim and non-Muslim audience.

The letter asked me:

- Are the Ḥanbalī Mujtahid Imāms al-Dhāhirī and Ibn Hazm considered Ahl al-Sunnah?
- And was Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal an **anthropomorphist**—meaning someone who ascribed human attributes to Allāh?
- Can you provide me examples of the sayings of Imām Aḥmad that show he did not have anthropomorphic ‘Aqīdah?

The questions proved to be related in ways unsuspected by their author. What unites them is **literalism** as an interpretive principle, which is the subject of my talk tonight. We will look at it first in respect to **ijtihād**, meaning the ‘qualified deduction of Islamic legal rulings from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth.’ But we will look at literalism also, and most carefully, from the point of view of ‘**Aqīdah** or Islamic belief, in understanding the Qur’anic verses and prophetic Ḥadīths that are called **mutashābihāt** or ‘unclear in meaning’—such as the verse in Sūrat al-Faṭḥ that says, “**Allāh’s hand is above their hands**” (Qur’ān 48:10)

—termed ‘unclear in meaning,’ **mutashābih**, because linguistically hand can bear multiple interpretations, and its ostensive sense seems to imply ‘belief in a God with human attributes,’ that is, **anthropomorphism**, an understanding categorically rejected by the Qur’anic verse in Sūrat al-Shūrā,

“**There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him**” (Qur’ān 42:11).

We shall see that **literalism** was a **school of thought** in Islamic jurisprudence, though not considered a very strong one by traditional scholars. But in tenets of faith, and particularly in interpreting the relation of the **mutashābihāt** to the attributes of Allāh, **literalism** has never been accepted as an Islamic school of thought, neither among the Salaf or ‘early Muslims,’ nor those who came later.

In answer to the **first question**, “Are the Ḥanbalī Mujtahid Imāms **al-Dhāhirī** and Ibn Hazm considered Ahl al-Sunnah?” Dāwūd ibn ‘Alī **al-Dhāhirī** of Isfahān, who died 270 years after the Hijrah, and Abū Muḥammad **ibn Hazm**, who died 456 years after the Hijrah, were not followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal but **Dhāhirīs** or ‘**literalists**’ in jurisprudence. Whether **Dāwūd al-Dhāhirī** was a *mujtahid*—meaning qualified to issue expert Islamic legal opinion—has been disagreed upon by Muslim scholars, not only for reasons we will discuss, but also because little that he wrote has come down to us.

As for **Ibn Hazm**, traditional Islamic scholars have not accepted his claims to be a *mujtahid*, the first qualification of which is to have comprehensive knowledge of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. Scholars point to his many substantive mistakes in Ḥadīth knowledge, and adduce, for example, that if someone doesn’t even know, as **Ibn Hazm** did not, about the existence of the *Sunan* of al-Tirmidhī, who died nearly a hundred and fifty years before **Ibn Hazm** did, it is not clear how he can be considered a *mujtahid*. But aside from their qualifications, what interests us tonight is their Dhāhirism or ‘**textual literalism**’ as an interpretive method.

What the **Dhāhirīs** are most famous for is their denial of all **qiyās** or analogy. It is recorded, for example, that Dāwūd **al-Dhāhirī** held that the Qur’anic prohibition of saying “Uff” in disgust to one’s parents did not prove that it was wrong to beat them, since the literal content of the verse only concerned saying “Uff,” and no analogy could be drawn from this about anything else. Similarly, **Ibn Hazm** seems to have believed the prohibition in Ḥadīth of urinating into a pool of water did not show that there is anything wrong with defecating in it. These are two examples of denials of what is called in Arabic a **qiyās jaliyy** meaning an a *fortiori* analogy.

Denying the validity of the a *fortiori* analogy is so counterintuitive, that **Imām al-Juwaynī**, who died 478 years after the Hijrah, has said:

The position adopted by the most exacting of scholars is that those who deny analogy are not considered scholars of the Ummah or conveyers of the Shari’ah, because they oppose out of mere obstinacy and exchange calumnies about things established by an overwhelming preponderance of the evidence, conveyed by whole groups from whole groups back to their prophetic origin (**tawātur**).

For most of the **Shari’ah** proceeds from **ijtihād**, and the unequivocal statements from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth do not deal [in specific particulars by name] with even a tenth of the Shari’ah [as most of Islamic life is covered by general principles given by Allāh to guide Muslims in every culture and time], so they [the literalists] are not considered of the learned” (al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lam al-nubalā’* [Beirut: Mu’assasa al-Risālah, 1401/1984], 13.105).

From Imām al-Ḥaramayn **al-Juwaynī**’s remark that “the unequivocal statements from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth do not deal with even a tenth of the Shari’ah,” we can understand a main impetus of **Dhāhirī** thought by which it differed from the four schools of **Sunnī** jurisprudence; namely, that it radically truncated the range

and relevance of the Shari'ah to nothing more than those rulings established by the literal wording (**dhāhir**) of Ḥadīths or verses. And this is perhaps one reason today for renewed interest in the long-dead school, namely, that it frees people from having to learn and follow the large part of the Shari'ah deduced from the general and comprehensive ethos of the Qur'ān and Sunnah.

But **secondly**, if one reflects for a moment on the **Fiqh** questions we hear urged today by youthful reformers in our mosques, it is plain that a great many of what are termed "**Salafi ijtihāds**" are not salafī (early Muslim) at all, but mere **Dhāhirī** or literalist interpretations of Ḥadīths. To their credit, the movement we are speaking of has revived interest in Ḥadīth among Islamic scholars across the board. But it has also given rise to a **bid'ah** or 'reprehensible innovation'; namely, that the emphasis on Ḥadīth and its ancillary disciplines to the exclusion of other Islamic sciences equally necessary to understanding the revelation, such as Fiqh methodology, or the conditioning of Ḥadīth by general principles expressed in the Qur'ān, has created a false dichotomy in many Muslims' minds of either Fiqh or Ḥadīth, where what is needed is **Fiqh** or 'understanding' of Ḥadīth.

For example, a young man, after leading us at Ṣalāt al-Fajr prayer in Chicago a few months ago, told a latecomer to the first rak'ah (who had been finishing his Sunnah prayer when the iqāmah (call to commence) was made): "If the prescribed prayer begins, you don't finish the Sunnah, but quit and join the group. Don't listen to Abū Ḥanīfah, or Malik, or Shāfi'ī; the Ḥadīth is clear: **La Ṣalāta ba'da al-iqāmah illā al-maktuba** 'There is no prayer after the iqāmah except the prescribed one.'"

Now, the **dhāhir** or 'literal meaning' of the Ḥadīth was as he said, but the Imāms of Shari'ah have not understood it this way for the very good reason that Allāh says in Sūrat Muḥammad of the Qur'ān, "And do not nullify your works" (Qur'ān 47:33), and to simply quit an act of worship—namely, the Sunnah rak'as before fajr—is precisely to nullify one of one's works.

Scholars rather understand the Ḥadīth to mean that one may not begin a Sunnah (or other nāfilah) prayer after the call to commence (iqāmah) is given. And this is very usual in human language: to use a general expression, in this case, "There is no prayer" to mean a specific part or aspect of it; namely, "There is no initiating a prayer." Consider how the Qur'ān says, "Ask the village we were in, and the caravan that we came with" (Qur'ān 12:82), where the **dhāhir** or literal meaning of village and caravan; namely, the assemblage of stone huts and the string of pack animals, are not things that can be asked—but rather a specific aspect or part of them is intended; that is, the people of the village and the people of the caravan, or rather, just some of them. There are many similar expressions in every language, "Put the tea on the stove," for example, not meaning to heap the dried leaves on the stove, but rather to put them in a pot, add water, and light the stove, and so on. It is all the more surprising that anyone, **Dhāhirī** or otherwise, could have ever imagined that Arabic, with its incomparable richness in figures of speech, could be so impoverished as to lack this basic expressive faculty.

In reference to **modern re-formers of Islām**, such literalism necessarily forces itself upon someone trained in Ḥadīth alone, as most of them are, when they try to deduce Shari'ah rulings without mastery of the interpretive tools needed to meet the challenges that face the **mujtahid**, for example, in joining between a number of Ḥadīths on a particular question that seem to conflict, or the many other intellectual problems involved in doing ijtihād. This has made some contemporary Muslims seriously believe that it is a matter of either following "the Qur'ān and Sunnah," or one of the schools of the mujtahid Imāms.

This idea has only gained credibility today because so few Muslims understand what ijtihād is or how it is done. I believe this can be cured by familiarizing Muslims with concrete examples of how mujtahid Imāms have derived particular Shari'ah rulings from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. Such examples would first show the breadth of their Ḥadīth knowledge—Muḥammad ibn 'Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Munādī, for example, who died in 272 years after the Hijrah, heard Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal say that **having memorized three hundred thousand Ḥadīths was not enough to be a mujtahid**—and second, would show the mujtahids' mastery of the deductive principles that enabled them to join between all the primary texts.

Until this is done, the advocates of this movement will probably continue to follow the ijtihād of non-mujtahids (the sheikhs who inspire their confidence), under the catch phrase "Qur'ān and Sunnah" just as if the real mujtahids were unfamiliar with these. The followers perhaps cannot be blamed, since "for someone who has never travelled, his mother is the only cook." But I do blame the sheikhs who, whatever their motivations, write and speak as if they were the only cooks.

Finally, if the shortcomings of **Dhāhiri** interpretation is plain enough in **Fiqh**, in **'Aqīdah**, it can amount to outright **kufr**, as when someone reads the Qur'anic verse,

"Today We forget you as you have forgotten this day of yours" (Qur'ān 45:34), and affirms that **Allāh forgets**, which is an imperfection, and not permissible to affirm of Allāh. Of this sort of literalism, Dāwūd **al-Dhāhiri** and **Ibn Hazm** were innocent, for this is **anthropomorphism**, meaning to believe Allāh has human attributes, and as such is beyond the pale of Islām.

Regarding the **second question** that I received in my letter, of whether Imām **Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal** was an **anthropomorphist**, this is something that has been asked since early times, particularly since someone forged an anthropomorphic tract called **Kitāb al-Sunnah** [The book of the Sunnah] and put the name of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's son Abdullah on it. It was published in **two volumes** in Dammam, **Saudi Arabia**, by **Ibn al-Qayyim Publishing House**, in 1986.

I looked this book over with our teacher in Ḥadīth, Sheikh Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut, who had examined it one day, and said that **at least 50 percent of the Ḥadīths in it are weak or outright forgeries**. He was dismayed how **Muḥammad al-Qahtānī**, the editor and commentator, could have been given a Ph.d. in Islamic

faith ('Aqīdah) from Umm al-Qura University in Mecca for readying for publication a work as sadly wanting in authenticity as this.

Ostensibly a "Ḥadīth" work, it contains some of the most hard-core **anthropomorphism** found anywhere, such as the Ḥadīth on page 301 of the first volume that "when He Most Blessed and Exalted sits on the Kursi, a squeak is heard like the squeak of a new leather saddle"; or on page 294 of the same volume: "Allāh wrote the Torah for Moses with His hand while leaning back on a rock, on tablets of pearl, and the screech of the quill could be heard. There was no veil between Him and him," or the Ḥadīth on page 510 of the second volume: "The angels were created from the light of His two elbows and chest," and so on.

The work also puts lies in the mouths of major Ḥanbalī scholars and others, such as Khārijah [ibn Mus'ab al-Sarakhsi], who died 168 after the Hijrah, and who on page 106 of volume one is quoted about **istiwā'** (sometimes translated as being 'established' on the Throne), "Does istiwā' mean anything except sitting?"—with a chain of transmission containing a liar (kadhdhab), an unidentifiable (majhul), plus the text, with its contradiction (mukhālafah) of Islamic faith ('Aqīdah). Or consider the no less than **forty-nine pages of vilifications of Abū Ḥanīfah** and his school that it mendaciously ascribes to major Imāms, such as relating on page 180 of the first volume that **Ishāq ibn Maṣṣūr al-Kusaj**, who died 251 years after the Hijrah said, "I asked Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, 'Is a man rewarded by Allāh for loathing Abū Ḥanīfah and his colleagues?' and he said, 'Yes, by Allāh.'" To ascribe things so fatuous to a man of godfearingness (taqwā) like Aḥmad, whose respect for other scholars is well attested to by chains of transmission that are rigorously authenticated (ṣaḥīḥ), is one of the things by which this counterfeit work overreaches itself, and ends in cancelling any credibility that the name on it may have been intended to give it.

The ascription of this book to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's son 'Abdullah fails from a Ḥadīth point of view, since there are two unidentifiable (majhul) transmitters in the chain of ascription whose names are given as **Muḥammad ibn al-Hasan al-Simsar** and **Muḥammad ibn Ibrahim al-Harawi**, of whom no other trace exists anywhere, a fact that the editor and commentator, **Muḥammad al-Qahtani**, on page 105 of the first volume tries to sweep under the rug by saying that the work was quoted by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah.

But the fact that such a work even exists may give one an idea of the kinds of things that have been circulated about Aḥmad after his death, and the total lack of scrupulousness among a handful of anthropomorphists who tried literally everything to spread their innovations.

Another work with its share of anthropomorphisms and forgeries is **Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's Ijtīmā' al-juyūsh al-Islāmiyyah** [The meeting of the Islamic armies], published by 'Awwad al-Mu'tiq in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1988, which on page 330 mentions as a Ḥadīth of the Prophet (ﷺ), the words "Honor the cow, for it

has not lifted its head to the sky since the [golden] calf was worshipped, out of shame (ḥayā') before Allāh Mighty and Majestic," a **mawḍū'** Ḥadīth forgery apparently intended to encourage Muslims to believe that Allāh is physically above the cow in the sky.

On page 97 of the same work, **Ibn al-Qayyim** also mentions the Ḥadīth of Bukhārī, warning of the Antichrist (al-Masih al-Dajjāl), who in the Last Days will come forth and claim to be God; of which the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Allāh has sent no prophet except that he warned his people of the One Eyed Liar, and that he is one-eyed—and that your Lord is not one-eyed—and that he shall have unbeliever (kāfir) written between his two eyes" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 8.172). **Ibn al-Qayyim** comments, "The Prophet (ﷺ) negated the attribute of one-eyedness [of Allāh], which is proof that Allāh Most High literally has two eyes." Now, any primer on logical fallacies could have told **Ibn al-Qayyim** that the negation of a quality does not entail the affirmation of its contrary, an example of the "Black and White Fallacy" (for example, "If it is not white, it is therefore black," "If you are not my friend, you must be my enemy," and so on), though what he attempts to prove here does show the kind of anthropomorphism he is trying to promote. Forged chains of Ḥadīth transmission in **Ibn al-Qayyim's** *Ijtīmā' al-juyūsh al-Islāmiyyah* are the subject of a forthcoming work by a Jordanian scholar, In Sha' Allāh, which those interested may read.

For all of these reasons, the utmost care must be used in ascribing tenets of faith to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal or other Imāms, especially when made by anthropomorphists whose concern is to create credibility for the ideas we are talking about. Many would-be revivers of these ideas today have been misled by their **uncritical acceptance** of the statements and chains of ascription found in the **books of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim**, which they cite in print and rely on, and from whence they get the idea that these were the positions of the early Muslims and prophetic Companions or Ṣaḥābah.

Umbrage has unfortunately been taken at the biographies I appended to my translation *Reliance of the Traveller* about **Ibn Taymiyyah** and Ibn al-Qayyim, which detail the gulf between **Ibn Taymiyyah's** innovations and the 'Aqīdah of the early Muslims, though anyone interested can read about it in any number of other books, one of the best of which has been published in Cairo in 1970 by Dar al-Nahda al-'Arabiyyah, and is called **Ibn Taymiyyah laysa salafiyyan** [Ibn Taymiyyah is not an early Muslim], by the Azhar professor of Islamic faith ('Aqīdah) Mansur Muḥammad 'Uways, which focuses primarily on tenets of belief. Another was written by a scholar who lived shortly after Ibn al-Qayyim in the same city, Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr al-Ḥisnī, author of the famous Shāfi'ī Fiqh manual *Kifāyah al-akhyar* [The sufficiency of the pious], whose book on Ibn Taymiyyah is called *Da'f' shubah man shabbaha wa tamarrada wa nasaba dhālika ila al-sayyid al-jalīl al-Imām Aḥmad* [Rebuttal of the insinuations of him who makes anthropomorphisms and rebels, and ascribes that to the noble master Imām Aḥmad], published in Cairo in 1931 by Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah. Whoever reads these and similar works with

an open mind cannot fail to notice the hoax that has been perpetrated by moneyed quarters in our times, of equating the tenets of a small band of anthropomorphists to the Islamic belief ('Aqīdah) of Imām Aḥmad and other scholars of the early Muslims (al-salaf).

The real ('Aqīdah) of Imām Aḥmad was very simple, and consisted, mainly of **tafwid**, that is, to **consign to Allāh the meaning** of the **mutashābihāt** or 'unapparent meanings' of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, accepting their words as they have come without saying or claiming to know how they are meant. His position is close to that of a number of other early scholars, who would not even countenance changing the Qur'ānic order of the words or substituting words imagined to be synonyms. For them, the verse in Sūrah Ṭāhā, "The All-Merciful is 'established' (**istawā**) upon the Throne" (Qur'ān 20:5) does not enable one to say that "Allāh is 'established' upon Throne," or that "The All-merciful is upon the Throne" or anything else besides "The All-merciful is 'established' (**istawā**) upon the Throne." Full stop. Their position is exemplified by Sufyān ibn 'Uyayna, who died 98 years after the Hijrah, and who said, "The interpretation (tafsīr) of everything with which Allāh has described Himself in His book is to recite it and remain silent about it." It also resembles the position of Imām Shāfi'ī, who simply said: "I believe in what has come from Allāh as it was intended by Allāh, and I believe in what has come from the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) as it was intended by the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ)." ."

It should be appreciated how far this school of **tafwid** or 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allāh' is from understanding the **mutashābihāt** or 'unapparent in meaning,' scriptural expressions about Allāh as though they were meant literally ('alā al-dhāhir). The Ḥanbalī Imām Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad **al-Khallāl**, who died in Hijrah year 311, and who took his Fiqh from Imām Aḥmad's students, relates in his book al-Sunnah through his chain of narrators from Ḥanbal ibn **Ishāq al-Shaybanī**, the son of the brother of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's father, that Imām Aḥmad was asked about the Ḥadīths mentioning "Allāh's descending," "seeing Allāh," and "placing His foot on hell"; and the like, and Aḥmad replied: "We believe in them and consider them true, without 'how' and without 'meaning' (**bi lā kayfa wa la ma'nā**)."

And he said, when they asked him about Allāh's *istiwā*' [translated above as established]: "He is 'established' upon the Throne (**istawā** 'ala al-'Arsh) however He wills and as He wills, without any limit or any description that be made by any describer (*Daf' shubah al-tashbih*, 28).

This demonstrates how far Imām Aḥmad was from anthropomorphism, though a third example is even more explicit. The Imām and Ḥadīth master (ḥāfiẓ) al-Bayhaqī relates in his *Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad* [The memorable actions of Imām Aḥmad], through his chain of narrators that:

Aḥmad condemned those who said Allāh was a "body," saying, "The names of things are taken from the Sharī'ah and the Arabic language. The language's

possessors have used this word [body] for something that has height, breadth, thickness, construction, form, and composition, while Allāh Most High is beyond all of that, and may not be termed a “body” because of being beyond any meaning of embodiedness. This has not been conveyed by the Sharī’ah, and so is rebutted” (*al-Barahin al-sati’a*, 164).

These examples provide an accurate idea of Aḥmad’s ‘Aqīdah, as conveyed to us by the Ḥadīth masters (ḥuffāẓ) of the Ummah, who have distinguished the true reports from the spurious attributions of the **anthropomorphists’ opinions** to their Imām, both early and late. But it is perhaps even more instructive, in view of the recrudescence of these ideas today, to look at an earlier work against Ḥanbalī anthropomorphists about this **bid’ah**, for the light this literature sheds upon the science of textual interpretation, and I will conclude my talk tonight to it.

As you may know, the **true architect of the Ḥanbalī madhhab** was not actually Imām Aḥmad, who did not like to see any of his positions written down, but rather these were conveyed orally by various students at different times, one reason there are often a number of different narratives from him on legal questions. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the real founder of the Ḥanbalī madhhab was the **Imām** and Ḥadīth master (ḥāfiẓ) **‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzī**, who died 597 years after the Hijrah, and who recorded all the narratives from Imām Aḥmad, distinguished the well-authenticated from the poorly-authenticated, and organized them into a coherent body of Fiqh jurisprudence.

Ibn al-Jawzī—who is not to be confused with **Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah**—took the question of people associating anthropomorphism with Ḥanbalism so seriously that he wrote a book, *Daḥ’ shubah al-tashbih bi akaff al-tanzih* [Rebuttal of the insinuations of anthropomorphism at the hands of transcendence], refuting this heresy and exonerating his Imām of any association with it.

One of the most significant points he makes in this work is the principle that **al-Idāfatu lā tufidu al-ṣifa**, meaning that an ascriptive construction, called in Arabic an **idāfah**, ‘the x of the y’ or in other words, ‘y’s x’ does not establish that ‘x is an attribute of y.’ This is important because the anthropomorphists of his day, as well as **Ibn Taymiyyah in the seventh century** after the Hijrah, used many ascriptive constructions (**idāfah**) that appear in Ḥadīths and Qur’anic verses as proof that Allāh had “attributes” that bolstered their conceptions of Him.

To clarify with examples, you are doubtless familiar with the Qur’anic verse in Sūrat al-Faṭḥ of the Ṣaḥābah swearing a fealty pact (**bay’ah**) to the Prophet (ﷺ), that says, “Allāh’s hand is above their hands” (Qur’ān 48:10).

Here, with the words **yad Allāhi** ‘the hand of Allāh,’ **Ibn al-Jawzī**’s principle means that we are not entitled to affirm, on the basis of the Arabic wording alone, that “Allāh has a hand” as an attribute (ṣifah) of His entity. It could be that this Arabic expression is simply meant to emphasize the tremendousness of the offense of breaking this pact, as some scholars state, for the Prophet (ﷺ) placed

his hand on top of the Ṣaḥābah's, and the wording could be a figure of speech emphasizing Allāh's backing of this action; and classical Arabic abounds in such figures of speech. The Prophet himself (ﷺ) used hand as a figure of speech in the **rigorously authenticated** (ṣaḥīḥ) **Ḥadīth**, *Al-Muslimu man salima l-Muslimūna min lisānihī wa yadih* "The Muslim is he who the Muslims are safe from his tongue and his hand," where hand means anything within his power to do to them, whether with his hand, his foot, or by any other means. As Imām al-Ghazālī says of the word hand:

One should realize that hand may mean two different things. The first is the primary lexical sense; namely, the bodily member composed of flesh, bone, and nervous tissue. Now, flesh, bone, and nervous tissue make up a specific body with specific attributes; meaning, by body, something of an amount (with height, width, depth) that prevents anything else from occupying wherever it is, until it is moved from that place.

Or [secondly] the word may be used figuratively, in another sense with no relation to that of a body at all: as when one says, "The city is in the leader's hands," the meaning of which is well understood, even if the leader's hands are missing, for example (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥjam al-'awam 'an 'ilm al-kalām* [Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, 1406/1985], 55).

We have already mentioned the school of thought of **Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal**, Shāfi'ī, and other early Muslims of understanding the **mutashābihāt** or 'unapparent in meaning,' scriptural expressions about Allāh by **tafwid** or 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allāh.' But secondly, we have seen from the example of the hand, that because of the figurative richness the Arabic language, and also to protect against the danger of anthropomorphism, many Muslim scholars were able to explain certain of the **mutashābihāt** or 'unapparent in meaning' expressions in Qur'anic verses and Ḥadīths by **ta'wīl**, or 'figuratively.'

This naturally drew the criticism of **neo-Ḥanbalīs**, at their forefront **Ibn Taymiyyah** and **Ibn al-Qayyim**, as it still does of **today's "reformers" of Islām**, who echo these two's arguments that figurative interpretation (**ta'wīl**) was a reprehensible departure (**bid'ah**) by **Ash'arīs** and others from the way of the early Muslims (salaf); and who call for a "return to the Sunnah," that is, to **anthropomorphic literalism**. Now, the obvious question in the face of such "reforms" is whether literalism is really identical with pristine Islamic faith ('Aqīdah). Or rather did figurative interpretation (**ta'wīl**) exist among the salaf? We will answer this question with actual examples of **mutashābihāt** or 'unapparent in meaning' Qur'anic verses and Ḥadīths, and examine how the earliest scholars interpreted them:

1. **Forgetting.** We have mentioned above the Qur'anic verse,

"Today We forget you as you have forgotten this day of yours" (Qur'ān 45:34), which the early Muslims used to interpret figuratively, as reported by a scholar who was himself an early Muslim (salafi) and indeed, the sheikh

of the early Muslims in Qur'anic exegesis, the Ḥadīth master (ḥāfiẓ) Ibn Jarir **al-Ṭabarī** who died 310 years after the Hijrah, and who explains the above verse as meaning: "‘This day, Resurrection Day, We shall forget them,’ so as to say, ‘We shall abandon them to their punishment.’" Now, this is precisely **ta’wīl**, or interpretation in other than the verse’s ostensive sense. **Al-Ṭabarī** ascribes this interpretation, through his chains of transmission, to the Companion (Ṣaḥābī) Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه) as well as to Mujāhid, Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه)’s main student in Qur’anic exegesis (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8.202).

2. Hands. In the verse,

"And the sky We built with hands; verily We outspread [it]" (Qur’ān 51:47), **al-Ṭabarī** ascribes the figurative explanation (**ta’wīl**) of with hands as meaning "with power (**bi quwwah**)" through five chains of transmission to **Ibn ‘Abbās** (رضي الله عنه), who died 68 years after the Hijrah, **Mujāhid** who died 104 years after the Hijrah, **Qaṭādah** [ibn Da’ama] who died 118 years after the Hijrah, **Manṣūr** [ibn Zadhan al-Thaqafī] who died 131 years after the Hijrah, and **Sufyān al-Thawrī** who died 161 years after the Hijrah (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 27.7–8). I mention these dates to show just how early they were.

3. Shin. Of the Qur’anic verse,

"On a day when shin shall be exposed, they shall be ordered to prostrate, but be unable" (Qur’ān 68:42),

al-Ṭabarī says, "A number of the exegetes of the Companions (Ṣaḥābah) and their students (**tabi’in**) held that it [a day when shin shall be exposed] means that a dire matter (**amrun shadīd**) shall be disclosed" (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 29.38)—the **shin**’s association with direness being that it was customary for Arab warriors fighting in the desert to ready themselves to move fast and hard through the sand in the thick of the fight by lifting the hems of their garments above the shin. This was apparently lost upon later anthropomorphists, who said the verse proved ‘Allāh has a shin,’ or, according to others, ‘two shins, since one would be unbecoming.’ **Al-Ṭabarī** also relates from **Muḥammad ibn ‘Ubayd al-Muḥāribī**, who relates from **Ibn al-Mubārak**, from **Usāma ibn Zayd**, from ‘Ikrimah (رضي الله عنه), from Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه) that shin in the above verse means "a day of war and direness (**ḥarbin wa shiddah**)" (ibid., 29.38). All of these narrators are those of the **ṣaḥīḥ** or rigorously authenticated collections except Usāma ibn Zayd, whose Ḥadīths are **ḥasan** or ‘well authenticated.’

4. Laughter. Of the Ḥadīth related in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī from Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) that the Prophet (ﷺ) said,

"Allāh Most High laughs about two men, one of whom kills the other, but both of whom enter paradise: the one fights in the path of Allāh and is

killed, and afterwards Allāh forgives the killer, and then he fights in the path of Allāh and is martyred”, the Ḥadīth master al-Bayhaqī records that the scribe of Bukhārī [Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf] **al-Farabrī** related that Imām al-Bukhārī said, “The meaning of laughter in it is mercy” (*Kitāb al-asmā’ wa al-ṣifāt*, 298).

5. **Coming.** The Ḥadīth master (ḥāfiẓ) Ibn Kathīr reports that Imām al-Bayhaqī related from **al-Ḥākīm** from Abū ‘Amr ibn al-Sammāk, from Ḥanbal, the son of the brother of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s father, that Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal figuratively interpreted the word of Allāh Most High, “And your Lord shall come . . .” (Qur’ān 89:22), as meaning “His recompense (thawāb) shall come.”

Al-Bayhaqī said, “This chain of narrators has absolutely nothing wrong in it” (*al-Bidāyah wa al-nihāyah*, 10.342). In other words, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, like the Companions (Ṣaḥābah) and other early Muslims mentioned above, sometimes also gave figurative interpretations (**ta’wīl**) to scriptural expressions that might otherwise have been misinterpreted anthropomorphically. This was also the way of **Imām Abul Ḥasan al-Ash’arī**, founder of the **Ash’arī** school of Islamic belief, who had two views about the **mutashābihāt**, the first being **tafwīd**, or ‘consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allāh,’ and the second being **ta’wīl** or ‘figurative interpretation’ when needed to avoid the suggestion of the anthropomorphism that is explicitly rejected by the Qur’ān.

In light of the examples quoted above about such words about Allāh as ‘**forgetting**,’ ‘**hands**,’ ‘**shin**,’ ‘**laughter**,’ ‘**coming**,’ and so forth, it is plain that Muslims scholars of ‘Aqīdah, whether of the **Ash’arī** school or any other, did not originate **ta’wīl** or figurative interpretation, but rather it had been with Muslims from the beginning, because that was the nature of the Arabic language. And if the above figures are not the salaf or ‘early Muslims,’ who are? **Ibn Taymiyyah** and **Ibn al-Qayyim**, who died more than seven centuries after the Hijrah?

In view of the foregoing examples of figurative interpretation by early Muslims, we have to ask, Whose ‘early Islām’ would today’s reformers of ‘Aqīdah have us return to? **Imām Abū Ḥanīfah** first noted, “Two depraved opinions have reached us from East, those of **Jahm** [ibn Safwān], the nullifier of the divine attributes, and those of **Muqatil** [ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi, the likener of Allāh to His creation” (*Siyar a’lam al-nubala*, 7.202).

These are not an either-or for Muslims. **Jahm**’s brand of **Mu’tazilism** has been dead for over a thousand years, while **anthropomorphic literalism** is a heresy that in previous centuries was confined to a handful of sects like the Ḥanbalis addressed by **Imām Ibn al-Jawzī** in his *Daf’ shubah al-tashbih*, or like the forgers of *Kitāb al-Sunnah* who ascribed it to Imām Aḥmad’s son ‘Abdullāh, or like the **Karramiyyah**, an early sect who believed Allāh to be a **corporeal entity** “sitting in person on His Throne.”

As for Islamic orthodoxy, the Imām of **Ahl al-Sunnah** in tenets of faith, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī says in his ‘Aqīdah manual **Uṣūl al-dīn** [The fundamentals of the religion]:

Anyone who considers his Lord to resemble the form of a person [. . .] is only worshipping a person like himself. As for the permissibility of eating the meat he slaughters or of marriage with him, his ruling is that of an idol-worshipper.

. . . Regarding the **anthropomorphists of Khurasan**, of **the Karramiyyah**, it is obligatory to consider them unbelievers because they affirm that Allāh has a physical limit and boundary from underneath, from whence He is contact with His Throne (al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* [Istanbul: Matba’a al-Dawla, 1346/1929], 337).

In **previous Islamic centuries**, someone who worshipped a god who ‘sits,’ moves about, and so forth, was considered to be in serious trouble in his faith (‘Aqīdah).

Our question should be: If anthropomorphic literalism were an acceptable Islamic school of thought, why was it counted among heresies and rejected for the first seven centuries of Islām that preceded **Ibn Taymiyyah** and his student **Ibn al-Qayyim**, and condemned by the scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah thereafter?

TO SUMMARIZE everything I have said tonight, we have seen three ways of understanding the **mutashābihāt**, or ‘unapparent in meaning’ verses and Ḥadīths: **tafwīd**, ‘consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allāh,’ **ta’wīl**, ‘figurative interpretation within the parameters of classical Arabic usage,’ and lastly **tashbīh**, or ‘anthropomorphic literalism.’

We saw that the way of **tafwīd** or ‘consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allāh,’ was the way of **Shāfi’ī**, **Aḥmad**, and many of the early Muslims. A second interpretive possibility, the way of **ta’wīl**, or ‘figurative interpretation,’ was also done by the Companions (Ṣaḥābah) and many other early Muslims as reported above. In classical scholarship, both have been considered Islamic, and both seem needed, though **tafwīd** is superior where it does not lead to confusion about Allāh’s transcendence beyond the attributes of created things, in accordance with the Qur’anic verse,

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ “There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him” (Qur’ān 42:11).

As for **anthropomorphism**, it is clear from this verse and from the entire history of the Ummah, that it **is not an Islamic school of thought**, and never has been. In all times and places, Islām has invited non-Muslims to faith in the Incomparable Reality called Allāh; not making man a god, and not making God a man.

Wa jazākum Allāh khayran, wa’l-ḥamdu li-LLāhi Rabbil ‘Ālamīn. ••

Is it permissible for a Muslim to believe that Allāh is in the sky in literal sense?

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No. The literal sense of being “**in the sky**” would mean that Allāh is actually in one of His creatures, for the sky is something created. It is not permissible to believe that Allāh indwells or occupies (in Arabic, *ḥulūl*) any of His creatures, as the Christians believe about Jesus, or the Hindus about their avatars.

What is obligatory for a human being to know is that Allāh is **Ghaniyy** or “**absolutely free from need**” of anything He has created. He explicitly says in Sūrat al-Ankabut of the Qur’ān, “**Verily Allāh is absolutely free of need of anything in the worlds**” (Qur’ān 29:6).

Allāh mentions this attribute of **ghina** or “freedom of need for anything whatsoever” in some seventeen verses in the Qur’ān. It is a central point of Islamic ‘**Aqīdah** or faith, and is the reason why it is impossible that Allāh could be Jesus (ﷺ) or be anyone else with a body and form: because bodies need space and time, while Allāh has absolutely no need for anything. This is the ‘Aqīdah of the Qur’ān, and Muslim scholars have kept it in view in understanding other Qur’anic verses or Ḥadīths.

Muslims lift their hands toward the sky when they make supplications (**du’ā**) to Allāh because the **sky is the qiblah for du’ā**, not that Allāh occupies that particular direction—just as the **Ka’bah** is the **qiblah** of the prayer (ṣalāt), without Muslims believing that Allāh is in that direction. Rather, Allāh in His wisdom has made the qiblah a sign (**āyah**) of Muslim unity, just as He has made the sky the sign of His exaltedness and His infinitude, meanings which come to the heart of every believer merely by facing the sky and supplicating Allāh.

It was part of the divine wisdom to incorporate these meanings into the prophetic Sunnah to uplift the hearts of the people who first heard them, and to direct them to the exaltedness and infinitude of Allāh through the greatest and most palpable physical sign of them: the visible sky that Allāh had raised above them. Many of them, especially when newly from the **Jahiliyyah** or “pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance”, were extremely close to physical, perceptible realities and had little conception of anything besides—as is attested to by their idols, which were images set up on the ground. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (رضي الله عنه) mentions, for example, that in the Jahiliyyah, they might make their idols out of dates, and if they later grew

hungry, they would simply eat them. The language of the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) in conveying the exaltedness of Allāh Most High to such people was of course in terms they could understand without difficulty, and used the imagery of the sky above them. Imām **al-Qurṭubī**, the famous Qur'anic exegete (**mufasssīr**) of the seventh/thirteenth century, says:

The Ḥadīths on this subject are numerous, rigorously authenticated (**ṣaḥīḥ**), and widely known, and indicate the exaltedness of Allāh, being undeniable by anyone except an atheist or obstinate ignoramus. Their meaning is to dignify Allāh and exalt Him above all that is base and low, to characterize Him by exaltedness and greatness, not by being in places, particular directions, or within limits, for these are the qualities of physical bodies (*al-Jāmi li aḥkam al-Qur'ān*. 20 vols. Cairo 1387/1967. Reprint (20 vols in 10). Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, n.d., 18.216).

In this connection, a Ḥadīth has been related by Imām Mālik in his Muwatta' and by Muslim in his Ṣaḥīḥ, that Mu'āwiyah ibn al-Ḥakam (رضي الله عنه) came to the Prophet (ﷺ) and told him, "I am very newly from the Jahiliyyah, and now Allāh has brought Islām," and he proceeded to ask about various Jahiliyyah practices, until at last he said that he **had slapped his slave girl**, and asked if he should free her, as was obligatory if she was a believer. The Prophet (ﷺ) requested that she be brought, and then asked her, "**Where is Allāh?**" and she said, "In the sky (**Fī al-samā**)"; whereupon he asked her, "Who am I?" and she said, "You are the Messenger of Allāh"; at which he (ﷺ) said, Free her, "for she is a believer" (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5 vols. Cairo 1376/1956. Reprint. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1403/1983, 1.382: 538).

Imām Nawawī says of this Ḥadīth:

This is one of the "Ḥadīths of the attributes," about which scholars have **two positions**. The **first** is to have faith in it without discussing its meaning, while believing of Allāh Most High that "**there is nothing whatsoever like unto Him**" (Qur'ān 42:11), and that He is exalted above having any of the attributes of His creatures. The **second** is to figuratively explain it in a fitting way, scholars who hold this position adducing that the point of the Ḥadīth was to test the slave girl: Was she a monotheist, who affirmed that the Creator, the Disposer, the Doer, is Allāh alone and that He is the one called upon when a person making supplication (du'ā) faces the sky—just as those performing the prayer (ṣalāt) face the Ka'bah, since the sky is the qiblah of those who supplicate, as the Ka'bah is the qiblah of those who perform the prayer—or was she a worshipper of the idols which they placed in front of themselves? So when she said, In the sky, it was plain that she was not an idol worshipper (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharḥ al-Nawawī*. 18 vols. Cairo 1349/1930. Reprint (18 vols. in 9). Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1401/1981, 5.24).

It is noteworthy that **Imām Nawawī** does not mention understanding the Ḥadīth literally as a possible scholarly position at all. This occasions surprise today among some Muslims, who imagine that what is at stake is the principle of accepting a single rigorously authenticated (**ṣaḥīḥ**) Ḥadīth as evidence in Islamic faith ('Aqīdah),

for this Ḥadīth is such a single Ḥadīth, of those termed in Arabic **aḥad**, or “conveyed by a single chain of transmission”, as opposed to being **mutawātir** or “conveyed by so many chains of transmission that it is impossible it could have been forged”. Yet this is not what is at stake, because Ḥadīths of its type are only considered acceptable as evidence by traditional scholars of Islamic ‘Aqīdah if one condition can be met: that the tenet of faith mentioned in the Ḥadīth is *sālimun min al-muarada* or “free of conflicting evidence”. This condition is not met by this particular Ḥadīth for a number of reasons.

First, the story described in the Ḥadīth has come to us in a number of other well-authenticated versions that vary a great deal from the “Where is Allāh?—In the sky” version. One of these is related by **Ibn Hibbān** in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* with a well-authenticated (**ḥasan**) chain of transmission, in which the Prophet (ﷺ) asked the slave girl, “‘Who is your Lord?’ and she said, ‘Allāh’; whereupon he asked her, ‘Who am I?’ and she said, ‘You are the Messenger of Allāh’; at which he (ﷺ) said, ‘Free her, for she is a believer’” (*al-lḥsān fi taqrīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibban*, 18 vols. Beirut: Muassasa al-Risala, 1408/1988, 1.419: 189).

In another version, related by **Abd al-Razzāq** with a rigorously authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*) chain of transmission, the Prophet (ﷺ) said to her, “Do you testify that there is no god but Allāh?” and she said yes. He (ﷺ) said, “Do you testify that I am the Messenger of Allāh?” and she said yes. He (ﷺ) said, “Do you believe in resurrection after death?” and she said yes. He (ﷺ) said, “Free her” (*al-Musannaf*, 11 vols. Beirut: al-Majlis al-Ilmi, 1390/1970, 9.175: 16814).

In other versions, the slave girl cannot speak, but merely points to the sky in answer. **Ibn Hajar al-Asqalāni** has said of the various versions of this Ḥadīth, “There is great contradiction in the wording” (*Talkhis al-habir*, 4 vols. in 2. Cairo: Maktaba al-Kulliyat al-Azhariyya, 1399/1979, 3.250).

When a Ḥadīth has numerous conflicting versions, there is a strong possibility that it has been related merely in terms of what one or more narrators understood (*riwāyah bi al-ma’na*), and hence one of the versions is not adequate to establish a point of ‘Aqīdah.

Second, this latter consideration is especially applicable to the point in question because the Prophet (ﷺ) explicitly detailed the pillars of Islamic faith (**īmān**) in a Ḥadīth related in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* when he answered the questions of the angel Gabriel, saying, True faith (**īmān**) is to believe in Allāh, His angels, His Books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe destiny (**qadar**), its good and evil (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1.37: 8)—and he did not mention anything about Allāh being “in the sky”. If it had been the decisive test of a Muslims belief or unbelief (as in the “in the sky” Ḥadīth seems to imply), it would have been obligatory for the Prophet (ﷺ) to mention it in this Ḥadīth, the whole point of which is to say precisely what “īmān is”.

Third, if one takes the Ḥadīth as meaning that Allāh is literally “in the sky”, it conflicts with other equally *ṣaḥīḥ* Ḥadīths that have presumably equal right to be

taken literally—such as the **Ḥadīth qudsī** related by **al-Ḥākim** that Allāh Most High says, “I am with My servant when he makes remembrance of Me and his lips move with Me” (*al-Mustadrak ala al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*. 4 vols. Hyderabad, 1334/1916. Reprint (with index vol. 5). Beirut: Dar al-Marifa, n.d., 1.496), a Ḥadīth that **al-Ḥākim** said was rigorously authenticated (ṣaḥīḥ), which **al-Dhahabī** confirmed.

Or such as the Ḥadīth related by **al-Nasāi**, **Abū Dāwūd**, and **Muslim** that “the closest a servant is to his Lord is while prostrating” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 1.350: 482)—whereas if Allāh were literally “in the sky”, the closest one would be to Him would be while standing upright. Or such as the Ḥadīth related by **al-Bukhārī** in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in which the Prophet (ﷺ) forbade spitting during prayer ahead of one, because when a person prays, “his Lord is in front of him” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 1.112: 406).

Finally, in the Ḥadīths of the **Mi'rāj** or “Nocturnal Ascent”, the Prophet (ﷺ) was shown all of the seven heavens (samāwāt) by Gabriel (جبرائيل), and Allāh was not mentioned as being in any of them.

Fourth, the literal interpretation of Allāh being “in the sky” contradicts two fundamentals of Islamic 'Aqidah established by the Qur'ān. The first of these is Allāh's attribute of **mukhālafah li al-ḥawādīth** or “not resembling created things in any way”, as Allāh says in Sūrat al-Shūra, “**There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him**” (Qur'ān 42:11), whereas if He were literally “in the sky”, there would be innumerable things like unto Him in such respects as having altitude, position, direction, and so forth. The second fundamental that it contradicts, as mentioned above, is Allāh's attribute of **ghinā** or “being absolutely free of need for anything created” that He affirms in numerous verses in the Qur'ān. It is impossible that Allāh could be a corporeal entity because bodies need space and time, while Allāh has absolutely no need for anything.

Fifth, the literalist interpretation of “in the sky” entails that the sky encompasses Allāh on all sides, such that He would be smaller than it, and it would thus be greater than Allāh, which is patently false.

For these reasons and others, Islamic scholars have viewed it obligatory to figuratively interpret the above Ḥadīth and other texts containing similar figures of speech, in ways consonant with how the Arabic language is used. Consider the Qur'anic verse “Do you feel safe that He who is in the sky will not make the earth swallow you while it quakes” (Qur'ān 67:16), for which the following examples of traditional **tafsīr** or “Qur'anic commentary” can be offered:

(**al-Qurtubī**:) The more exacting scholars hold that it [“in the sky”] means, “Do you feel secure from Him who is over the sky”—just as Allāh says, “Journey in the earth” (Qur'ān 9:2), meaning journey over it—not over the sky by way of physical contact or spatialization, but by way of omnipotent power and control. Another position is that it means “Do you feel secure from Him who is over (‘alā) the sky,” just as it is said, “So-and-so is over Iraq and the Hijāz”, meaning that he is the governor and commander of them (*al-Jāmi li aḥkam al-Qur'ān*, 18.216).

(**al-Shirbini al-Khatib**;) There are various interpretive aspects to “He who is in the sky,” one of which is that it means “He whose dominion is in the sky,” because it is the dwelling place of the angels, and there are His Throne, His Kursi, the Guarded Tablet; and from it are made to descend His decrees, His Books, His commands, and His prohibitions. A second interpretive possibility is that “He who is in the sky” omits the first term of an ascriptive construction (iḍāfah)—in other words, “Do you feel safe from the Creator of him who is in the sky”; meaning the angels who dwell in the sky, for they are the ones who are commanded to dispense the divine mercy or divine vengeance (*al-Siraj al-Munir*. 4 vols. Bulaq 1285/1886. Reprint. Beirut: Dar al-Marifa, n.d., 4.344).

(**Fakhr al-Din al-Razi**;) “He who is in the sky” may mean the angel who is authorized to inflict divine punishments; that is, Gabriel (upon whom be peace); the words “cause the earth to swallow you” meaning “by Allāh’s command and leave” (*Tafsir al-Fakhr al-Razi*. 32 vols. Beirut 1401/1981. Reprint (32 vols. in 16). Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1405/1985, 30.70).

(**Abū Ḥayyān al-Nahwī**;) Or the context of these words may be according to the convictions of those being addressed [the unbelievers], for they were anthropomorphists. So that the meaning would be, “Do you feel safe from Him whom you claim is in the sky?—while He is exalted above all place” (*Tafsir al-nahr al-madd min al-Bahr al-muhit*. 2 vols. in 3. Beirut: Dar al-Janan and Muassasa al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, 1407/1987, 2.1132).

(**Qāḍi Iyāḍ**;) There is no disagreement among Muslims, one and all—their legal scholars, their Ḥadīth scholars, their scholars of theology, both those of them capable of expert scholarly reasoning and those who merely follow the scholarship of others—that the textual evidences that mention Allāh Most High being “in the sky”, such as His words, “Do you feel safe that He who is in the sky will not make the earth swallow you,” and so forth, are not as their literal sense (**dhāhir**) seems to imply, but rather, all scholars interpret them in other than their ostensive sense (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharh al-Nawawī*, 5.24).

We now turn to a final example, the Ḥadīth related by Muslim that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: Your Lord Blessed and Exalted descends each night to the sky of this world, when the last third of the night remains, and says: “Who supplicates Me, that I may answer him? Who asks Me, that I may give to him? Who seeks My forgiveness, that I may forgive him?” (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1.521: 758).

This Ḥadīth, if we reflect for a moment, is not about ‘Aqīdah, but rather has a quite practical point to establish; namely, that we are supposed to do something in the last third of the night, **to rise and pray**. This is why Imām al-Nawawī, when he gave the present chapter names to the headings of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, put this Ḥadīth under “Instilling Desire to Supplicate and Make Remembrance of Allāh (**dhikr**) in the Last of the Night, and the Answering Therein”. As for the meaning of “descends” in the Ḥadīth, **al-Nawawī** says:

This is one of the “Ḥadīths of the Attributes”, and there are **two positions** about it, as previously mentioned in the “*Book of Īmān*”. To summarize, the **first** position, which is the school of the majority of early Muslims and some theologians, is that one should believe that the Ḥadīth is true in a way befitting Allāh Most High, while the literal meaning of it as known to us and applicable to ourselves is not what is intended, without discussing the figurative meaning, though we believe that Allāh is transcendently above all attributes of createdness, of change of position, of motion, and all other attributes of created things.

The **second** position, the school of most theologians, of whole groups of the early Muslims (salaf), and reported from **Mālik** and **al-Awzāī**, is that such Ḥadīths should be figuratively interpreted in a way appropriate to them in their contexts. According to this school of thought, they interpret the Ḥadīth in two ways. The first is the interpretation of Malik ibn Anas (رضي الله عنه) and others, that it [“your Lord descends”] means “His mercy, command, and angels descend,” just as it is said, “The sultan did such-and-such,” when his followers did it at his command. The second is that it is a metaphor signifying [Allāh’s] concern for those making supplication, by answering them and kindness toward them (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, 6.3637).

The Ḥadīth scholar **Ali al-Qāri** says about the above Ḥadīth of Allāh’s “descending”: You know that **Mālik** and **al-Awazāī**, who are among the greatest of the early Muslims, both gave detailed figurative interpretations to the Ḥadīth. . . . Another of them was **Ja’far al-Ṣādiq**. Indeed a whole group of them [the early Muslims], as well as later scholars, said that whoever believes Allāh to be in a particular physical direction is an unbeliever, as **al-Irāqī** has explicitly stated, saying that this was the position of **Abū Ḥanīfah**, **Mālik**, **al-Shāfi’ī**, **al-Asharī**, and **al-Baqillānī** (*Mirqat al-mafātiḥ: sharḥ Mishkāṭ al-masābih*. 5 vols. Cairo 1309/1892. Reprint. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, n.d., 2.137).

It is worth remembering that **al-Irāqī** was a ḥāfiẓ or “Ḥadīth master”, someone with over 100,000 Ḥadīths by memory, while **Ali al-Qāri** was a Ḥadīth authority who produced reference works still in use today on forged Ḥadīths. In other words, each had the highest credentials for verifying the chains of transmission of the positions they relate. For this reason, their transmission of the position of the unbelief of whoever ascribes a direction to Allāh carries its weight.

But perhaps it is fitter today to say that Muslims who believe that Allāh is somehow “up there” are not unbelievers. For they have the **shubha** or “extenuating circumstance” that moneyed quarters in our times are aggressively pushing the **bid’ah of anthropomorphism**. This **bid’ah** was confined in previous centuries to a small handful of Ḥanbalīs, who were rebutted time and again by ‘**ulamā** of Ahl al-Sunnah like Abd al-Raḥmān ibn **al-Jawzī** (d. 597/1201), who addressed his fellow Hanbalīs in his *Daf shubah al-tashbih bi akaff al-tanzih* [Rebuttal of the insinuations of anthropomorphism at the hands of divine transcendence] with the words:

If you had said, “We but read the Ḥadīths and remain silent,” no one would have condemned you. What is shameful is that you interpret them literally. Do not surreptitiously introduce into the madhhab of this righteous, early Muslim man [Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal] that which is not of it. You have clothed this madhhab in shameful disgrace, until it can hardly be said “Ḥanbalī” any more without saying anthropomorphist (*Daf shubah al-tashbih bi akaff al-tanzih*. Cairo n.d. Reprint. Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyyah, 1396/1976, 2829).

These beliefs apparently survived for some centuries in Khorasan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the East, for Imām **al-Kawtharī** notes that the Ḥanbalī **Ibn Taymiyyah** (d. 728/1328) picked up the details of them from manuscripts on sects (nihāl) when the libraries of scholars poured into Damascus with caravans fleeing from the Mongols farther east. He read them without a perspicacious teacher to guide him, came to believe what he understood from them, and went on to become an advocate for them in his own works (al-Kawthari, *al-Sayf al-saqil fi al-radd ala Ibn Zafil*. Cairo 1356/ 1937. Rep. Cairo: Maktaba al-Zahran, n.d. 56).

He [Ibn Taymiyyah] was imprisoned for these ideas numerous times before his death, the ‘ulamā of Damascus accusing him of anthropomorphism (al-Asqalāni, *al-Durar al-kamina fi ayan al-mia al-thamina*. 4 vols. Hyderabad 134950/193031. Reprint. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, n.d., 1.155).

Writings were authored by scholars like Abū Ḥayyān **al-Nahwi** (d. 745/ 1344), Tāqi al-Din **Subkī** (756/1355), Badr al-Din ibn Jamaa (d. 733/ 1333), al-Amir al-Sanani, author of *Subul al-salām* (d. 1182/1768), Taqi al-Din **al-Ḥisnī**, author of *Kifayat al-akhyar*, (d. 829/1426), and Ibn Hajar **al-Haytami** (d. 974/1567) in rebuttal of his ‘Aqīdah, and **it remained without acceptance** by Muslims **for another four hundred years**, until the eighteenth-century **Wahhabi movement**, which followed Ibn Taymiyyah on points of ‘Aqīdah, and made him its “**Sheikh of Islām**.” But was not until with the advent of printing in the Arab world that **Ibn Taymiyyah’s** books (and the tenets of this sect) really saw the light of day, when a wealthy merchant from Jeddah commissioned the printing of his *Minhaj al-Sunnah* and other works on ‘Aqīdah in Egypt at the end of the last century, resurrected this time as **Salafism** or “return to early Islām.” They have since been carried to all parts of the Islamic world, borne upon a flood of copious funding from one or two modern Muslim countries, whose efforts have filled mosques with books, pamphlets, and young men who push these ideas and even ascribe them (with Ibn Taymiyyah’s questionable chains of transmission, or none at all) to the Imāms of the earliest Muslims. My point, as regards considering Muslims believers or unbelievers, is that this kind of money can buy the influence and propaganda that turn night into day; so perhaps contemporary Muslims have some excuse for these ideas—until they have had a chance to learn that the God of Islām is transcendently above being a large man, just as He is transcendently above being subject to time or to space, which are but two of His creatures.

To **summarize** what I have said in answer to your question above, scholars take the primary texts of the Qur'ān and Sunnah literally unless there is some cogent reason for them not to. In the case of Allāh "**descending**" or being "**in the sky**", there are many such reasons. **First**, a literal interpretation of these texts makes it impossible to join between them and the many other rigorously authenticated texts about Allāh being "with" a servant when he does dhikr, "**closer to him than the jugular vein**" (Qur'ān 50:16), "**in front of him**" when he prays, "**closest**" to him when he is prostrating, "**in the sky**" when a slave girl was asked; "**with you wherever you are**" (Qur'ān 58:4), and so on. These are incoherent when taken together literally, and only become free of contradictions when they are understood figuratively, as Mālik, al-Awzāī, and al-Nawawī have done above. **Second**, the Prophet (ﷺ) detailed the beliefs that every Muslim must have in the Gabriel Ḥadīth in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and others, and did not mention Allāh being "**in the sky**" (or anywhere else) in any of them. **Third**, Allāh's being "**in the sky**" as birds, clouds, and so on are in the sky in a literal sense contradicts the 'Aqīdah of the Qur'ān that there is "**nothing whatsoever like unto Him**" (Qur'ān 42:11). **Fourth**, the notion of Allāh's being in particular places contradicts the 'Aqīdah expressed in seventeen verses of the Qur'ān that Allāh is free of need of anything, while things that occupy places need both space and time.

These reasons are not exhaustive, but are intended to answer your question by illustrating the 'Aqīdah and principles of traditional '**ulamā** in interpreting the kind of texts we are talking about. They show just how far from traditional Islām is the belief that Allāh is "**in the sky**" in a literal sense, and why it is not permissible for any Muslim to believe this. And Allāh alone gives success.