

The Early Salaf and Categorising the Attributes of Allāh (تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى): Principles and Examples from Ibn Taymiyyah in Refuting the *Mu‘attilah* and *Mumaththilah*

The early Salaf did not categorise the Attributes of Allāh into *al-Khabariyyah*⁴⁶ and *al-‘Aqliyyah*⁴⁷, nor did they categorise them into *az-Zātiyyah* and *al-Ikhtiyāriyyah*. Rather, they would affirm what is affirmed by the *Sharī‘ah* (i.e., the Book and Sunnah). They would believe in all of that without difficulty or hesitation, completely at ease in their souls with all that they came across in the Revealed Texts related to the Names and Attributes of Allāh (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى). Likewise, they would negate from Allāh whatever He negated from Himself in the Book and what the Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) negated from Allāh in the Sunnah. And whatever Allāh and His Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) did not speak about, then they withheld from speaking about. This was the approach of the early Salaf that the People of Sunnah have remained upon till this day.

⁴⁶ As previously stated, the *Khabariyyah* Attributes can only be known from the texts of Book and Sunnah—such as Allāh’s two Eyes, two Hands, Face, etc. The affirmation of these Attributes cannot be ascertained through reason and intellect. We only know them because Allāh has informed us about them.

⁴⁷ The *‘Aqliyyah* Attributes can be ascertained through the textual proofs and by way of reason and intellect such as Allāh’s Knowing, Creating, Providing, Life, Hearing, Seeing, etc. These Attributes can be affirmed by way of sound intellect since a person sees the effects of these Attributes all around him.

However, when the misguided sects arose and divided into their various factions, the scholars of *Ahlu-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah* saw that such categorisations would be an effective tool in clarifying the Truth and refuting misguidance. Thus, we see that these categories are in complete agreement with what is found in the Book of Allāh and in the Sunnah of His Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). Furthermore, they conform with methodology of the Companions (رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُمْ) and those who followed them without any contradiction. Before the rise of the sects of Speculative Theology (*Ahlul-Kalām*) who deviated and distorted the Names and Attributes of Allāh from their true meanings, wordings and realities, the Muslims had no need of these categorisations—but in order to clarify the True Creed and refute the innovated ideologies, the scholars brought forth these defining categorisations. So, may Allāh be pleased with these noble scholars.

The historian, Taqīyyud-Dīn al-Miqrīzī (d. 845 AH رَحِمَهُ اللهُ) stated:

“Whoever applies himself assiduously in examining the compilations of the Prophetic Traditions and he is well-acquainted with the narrations of the Salaf, then he knows that he will never find from any of the Companions of Allāh’s Messenger (رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُمْ) in all of their various stations of excellence and their large number, neither with an authentic chain of narration nor a weak one, that any of them ever asked Allāh’s Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) regarding the meaning of anything which the Lord (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى) described Himself with...”

He continued:

“Not a single one of them distinguished between an Eternal (Unceasing) Attribute of His Self (*Zat*)⁴⁸ and a Discretionary Attribute (*Fi'l*)⁴⁹ connected to His Will. Rather they affirmed for Him (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى) His Eternal Attributes such as Knowledge, Power, Ability, Life, Will, Hearing, Seeing, Speech, Majesty, Generosity, Honour, Might and Greatness—and their speech was united in conveying this. This was likewise the case in their affirmation of that which Allāh (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى) described His Noble Self with, such as affirming for Himself *al-Wajh* (Face), *al-Yad* (Hand) and so on, alongside negating from Him any likeness (*tamthīl*) with the creation. So, they affirmed the Attributes without resemblance (*tashbīh*), they exalted His Attributes without negating them (*ta'īl*)—and not one of the Companions contradicted this approach in any way. And they were upon consensus (*ijmā'*) that the Attributes are to be taken [and affirmed] as they have been reported [in the Qur'ān and Sunnah].”⁵⁰

Shaikh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) stated:⁵¹

Imām Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ) said, ‘Allāh is not to be described except as he has described Himself or as His Messenger

⁴⁸ For example: Life, Ability, Knowledge, Highness, Face, Two Hands, etc.

⁴⁹ For example: Creating, Providing, Coming, Ascending, etc.

⁵⁰ *Al-Khiṭaṭ wal-Āthār* of al-Miqrīzī 2/356. Also, see *al-Mīlal wal-Niḥal* of al-Shah-rastānī 1/104.

⁵¹ See *al-Fatwā al-Ḥamawīyyah al-Kubrā* of Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah—edited, verified and annotated by Shaykh Ḥamad ibn ‘Abdul-Muhsin al-Tuwayjirī, p. 271-277.

(صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) has described Him—not going beyond the Qur’ān and *Hadīth*.⁵²

The methodology of the Salaf was that they would describe Allāh as He has described Himself and as His Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) described Him without distorting the meanings of Attributes⁵³, or negating them⁵⁴, and without enquiring into *how* the Attributes are⁵⁵, and without likening them to the creation⁵⁶. And we know that which Allāh has described Himself with is true—and there is no puzzle in that, nor is it a mystery. Rather, the meaning of the speech is known only by knowing what the intent of the conveyor of Allah’s speech was. And this is especially so when the one conveying to us (i.e., the Prophet صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) is the most knowledgeable of the creation regarding what He says, the most eloquent of the creation in explaining the Truth, and the sincerest of the creation in clarifying, enjoining good, guiding, and directing [to what is best].

And alongside all of this, there is nothing like unto Allāh, the Exalted, not with respect to His Pure and Perfect Self who is remembered and exalted through His Names and Attributes—and nor is there anything like unto Him in His Actions.

⁵² See also *Lum‘at al-I‘tiqād* of Ibn Qudāmah, p. 9. That is because the Islamic Creed is known by the textual proofs (*tawqifiyyah*), and it is not based upon the intellect, nor derived through debate, speculation, or philosophy.

⁵³ Arabic: *Tahrīf*.

⁵⁴ Arabic: *Ta‘tīl*.

⁵⁵ Arabic: *Takyīf*, i.e., asking questions as to *how* the Attributes are.

⁵⁶ Arabic: *Tamthīl*.

Just as one has certainty that Allah, the Exalted and Perfect, has an Essence (*Zāt*) that is real and Actions that are real, then likewise, He has Attributes that are real—and there is nothing like unto Him, not in His Essence, not in His Attributes and nor in His Actions. And everything that necessitates deficiency or beginning, then Allāh is free from that in reality. Indeed, Allāh, the Exalted, is deserving of [being described with] perfection that has no limit, there being nothing beyond His Perfection. And ascribing to Him that He has a beginning (i.e., an origin) is impossible due to the impossibility that He was ever absent (i.e., non-existent)—and [because] it is a must that all things that have an origin must have once been non-existent—and due the fact that everything that is originated relies on its originator—whereas Allāh’s necessary existence is established by Himself (without any need or reliance),⁵⁷ the Perfect and Most High.

The belief of the Salaf lies distinct, avoiding the denial of His Attributes and avoiding their resemblance to the created beings. So, they would not liken the Attributes of Allāh to the attributes of His creation, nor did they liken His Essence to the essence of the His creation. Furthermore, they did not negate from Him that which He affirmed for Himself, or that which His Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) affirmed for Him. And they would not deny His Beautiful Names and His Lofty Attributes, nor distort the words of the Qur’ān from their rightful meanings nor deviate the Names of Allāh or His verses.

⁵⁷ *Wājib al-wujūd* refers to the *obligatory existence*, meaning that Allāh is free of need or reliance on anything besides Him. He is Eternal and Forever for whom there is no beginning and no absence. See *al-Fatwā al-Ḥamawīyah al-Kubrā*, p. 272, Ḥamad ibn ‘Abdul-Muhsin al-Tuwayjirī.

So, each of these two sects—the sect of *ta‘tīl* (negation)⁵⁸ and the sect of *tamthīl* (likening)⁵⁹—fall into both negation of the Attributes and likening them with the creation!

The Negators do not comprehend from the Names of Allāh and His Attributes except that which resembles [in their minds] the creation, so then they proceed to negate this comprehension—thereby gathering between *tamthīl* and *ta‘tīl*. They begin by imagining resemblance and end by negating what Allāh has affirmed for Himself. Their resemblance (*tashbīh*) and likeness (*tamthīl*) is in their comprehension of Allāh’s Names and Attributes, because they have comprehended them the same way as the names of the creation and their attributes are comprehended. And their *ta‘tīl* is in their negating that which is the right of Allāh (the Exalted and Most Perfect) from His Names and Attributes that befit His Majesty, the Exalted and Most High. [Example] So, when one of them (i.e., a Negator) states: ***‘If Allāh is above the Throne, that necessitates that He is bigger than the Throne, or smaller than it or equal to it—and all of these are impossible [scenarios]***⁶⁰ or other similar things that are uttered by the Negators—then this individual does not understand the Ascendancy of Allāh over the Throne except as he understands a

⁵⁸ *Al-Mu‘attilah* (the Negators).

⁵⁹ *Al-Mumaththilah*.

⁶⁰ This is a doubt raised by the *Ashā‘irah* in order to negate the Highness (*‘al-Uluww*) of Allāh over His creation, and His Ascension over His Throne (*al-‘Arsh*). See *al-Ghunyah Fī Usūl ad-Dīn* of al-Naysabūrī, p. 74; *Qawā‘id al-Aqā‘id* of al-Ghazālī, p. 168; al-Tuwayjirī, p. 274.

body in the creation ascending over another body in the creation! So, this *necessity* that he speaks of is built upon this understanding [that he has invented].

As for the Ascendance (*al-Istiwā'*) of Allāh that befits His Majesty and that is unique to Him, then it is not bound by the false and futile necessitations that would force its negation.

The same example can be used for the one who likens Allāh to the creation (i.e., the *Mumaththil*), who claims: **'If it is the case that the universe has a maker, then He is either a substance (*jawhar*) or an incidental attribute (*ʿaraḍ*).'** These things cannot be affirmed for Allāh⁶¹—however, the *Mumaththil* cannot comprehend an existence except with the presence of these two (i.e., *jawhar* and *ʿaraḍ*).

Or there is the saying of the *Mumaththil*, **'If Allāh ascended over the Throne, then it must be like the ascending of a person above a bed or a ship.'** So, he cannot conceive ascendancy except like this.

So, both approaches involve resemblance (*tamthīl*) and both involve negation (*taʿtīl*) of the reality of what Allāh has described Himself with.

⁶¹ *Al-Hāfiẓ* Abul-Qāsim al-Aṣbahānī (رحمته الله) said: “The Salaf prohibited speech concerning *al-jawhar* (substance consisting of atoms) and *al-aʿrāḍ* (incidental properties). They said that this speech was not present in the time of the *Ṣahābah* (رضي الله عنهم) and *Tābiʿīn* (رضيهم الله). They never ceased to remain silent about this, even though they knew about it—so it suffices us to be silent concerning it just as they were silent concerning it. Or it is the case that they were silent because they did not know about it—so it suffices us that we likewise do not know what they did not know...” *Al-Hujjah fī Bayān al-Muhajjah* of al-Aṣbahānī (1/99-100).

In the first approach, the negator (*mu‘aṭṭil*) is distinguished with negating all designations of the true and real Ascendancy of Allāh [over His Throne]. And, in the second approach the *mu-maththil* (who likens the Attributes of Allāh to the creation) is distinguished with affirming [for Allāh] an ascendance which is specific to the created beings.

However, the decisive speech in this matter is that which the *Balanced Ummah* (i.e., *Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah*) is upon: Allāh Ascended over His Throne in the manner that befits His Majesty, with which He alone is singled out [without resemblance]. And this is also just as He has described Himself as All-Knowing of everything, and over everything All-Able, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing and so on. It is not permissible to ascribe to the Knowledge and Ability of Allāh particular incidental attributes that are like the incidental attributes of the knowledge of the created beings and their ability. So, likewise as it relates to Allāh, then He, the Most Perfect, is above His Throne, and we do not ascribe to His *Above-ness* over His Creation the peculiarities and specificities of the *above-ness* of one creation over another or whatever that necessitates within the created beings.⁶²

And know that there is not in the sound intellect⁶³ nor in the authentic revealed Texts anything which opposes the Salafi Path, in its origin. However, this is not the place to expand in responding to the doubts cast against truth. And whoever has

⁶² To do so would be the very essence of resemblance (*tashbīh*) and likeness (*tamthīl*) of Allāh with His creation, and Allāh is free from that.

⁶³ *Al-‘Aql aṣ-sarīh*: This is the sound intellect that is pure and free from that which pollutes it from the corrupt beliefs and desires in opposition to the Revelation from the Lord of all creation.

doubts in his heart, and desires that they are cured, then that is easy and straightforward.

Then there are those who oppose the Book, the Sunnah, and the Salaf of the *Ummah* from among the Distorters (*Muta'awwilūn*)⁶⁴ in this arena—they are in a confused state. They deny that Allāh will be seen⁶⁵ [on the Day of Resurrection] claiming that the intellect cannot accept that, and it is therefore compelled to interpretate (*ta'wīl*) the Texts [to mean other than what is apparent in them].

And the one who holds it is not possible for Allāh to have Knowledge and Ability, and Speech that is not created, and so on⁶⁶—he claims, ***'The intellect defies these affairs and is compelled to perform ta'wīl.'***

Indeed, there are those who reject the reality of the gathering of the bodies for the Day of Judgement, and they reject that eating and drinking will be real in Paradise⁶⁷ claiming that the intellect opposes these things—so it is forced to make *ta'wīl*. Then you have the one who claims that Allāh is not above the

⁶⁴ The people of *ta'wīl* are sects such as the *Ash'ariyyah* and the *Māturīdiyyah* who falsely interpret and distort the Attributes and Chosen Actions of Allāh.

⁶⁵ *Ar-Ru'yah*: the belief that Allāh will be seen by the believers on the Day of Resurrection and in Paradise with their eyes. See *Al-Ibānah* of Abul-Hasan (رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ). The *Ru'yah* is rejected by the *Mu'tazilah* and *Jahmiyyah*, and those who followed them from the *Rāfiḍah* and some of the *Khawārij*, as well as the *Ash'arīs* and *Māturīdīs*.

⁶⁶ This was claim of the *Mu'tazilah* and *Jahmiyyah*.

⁶⁷ This is the saying of the Philosophers [who ascribe themselves to Islam] and those who follow their methodology from the extremist *Bāṭiniyyah*.

Throne⁶⁸ claiming that the intellect opposes that, so therefore it is compelled to make *ta'wīl*.

It is sufficient for you as a proof against these orientations that there is not one from among them who has a universally applicable principle defining what opposes the intellect. Rather, among them are those who say that the intellect allows or obligates [a thing], then another states [about the same thing] that the intellect does not allow it!

It is astonishing to see how they weigh the intellect against the Book and Sunnah. May Allāh be pleased with *Imām* Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 179 AH) who said: **'So every time a man comes who is better in argumentation than another man, are we to leave that which Jibrīl (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) brought to Muhammad (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) due to the debating of these men?'**⁶⁹

⁶⁸ This was claim of the *Mu'atizilah*, *Jahmiyyah*, *Ash'ariyyah* and *Māturīdiyyah*, and adopted by the modern-day innovated sects who follow them such as the *Deobandīs*, *Tablīghīs*.

⁶⁹ This narration from *Imām* Mālik was collected by Abu Nu'aym in *al-Hilyah* 6/324, adh-Dhahabī in *as-Siyar* 8/88, al-Lālikā'ī in *Sharh Usūl I'tiqād ahlis-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah* 1/144. Adh-Dhahabī cited it in *al-Uluww*, p. 103, and al-Albānī stated that its chain of narration is *sahīh* in *Mukhtaṣar al-Uluww*, p. 140, and it was mentioned by as-Suyūṭī in *Miftāh al-Jannah*, p. 82.