

God and His Attributes

Lesson 4: Anthropomorphism in the Quran



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ENRICHING THE SOUL

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- What is anthropomorphism?
- It is the assignment of physical attributes to God
- At first glance, there are many verses in the Quran that attribute human-like characteristics to God . These attributes are known as الصفات الخبرية

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- 1. The Hand of God **يد الله**

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

“...The Hand of God is over their hands...”-
Quran 48:10

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- 2. The Face of God **وجه الله**

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُهُ

“To God belong the East and the West.
Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God...”-
Quran 2:115

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- 3. The Eye of God عَيْنُ اللَّهِ

وَأَصْنَعِ الْفُلْكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَوَحْيِنَا

“Build the Ark before Our Eyes and by Our Revelation...” - Quran 11:37

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- 4. Mounting the Throne الإستواء على العرش

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى

“The Compassionate mounted the Throne.” –
Quran 20:5

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **Traditionalistic views and argumentations**
- Drawing authority solely from divine revelation, tradition and the teachings of *al-salaf*, i.e., the traditionists of past generations, the basic traditionalist stance was to accept the anthropomorphic accounts literally.
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Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- Traditionalistic creeds often open with the statement, “We believe in what is written in the Quran and Sunnah. We do not interpret the text.
- The traditionalists, who considered themselves followers of the early traditionists, based their teachings on a devout adherence to the texts.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- They called their conviction “affirmation” إثبات and never “anthropomorphism تشبيه, hence the name they gave themselves, “the people who affirm [God’s attributes]” أهل الإثبات
- The basic argument justifying the acceptance of anthropomorphic accounts is a total commitment to God’s own description of Himself.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- Hence, rejecting these accounts would equal a rejection of God's own description of Himself in the Quran.
- Traditionalists later developed their argument by asserting that the acceptance of anthropomorphic accounts must be accompanied by the expression "without asking how" بلا كيف

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Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- This instruction is illustrated by the following saying by Malik b. Anas (d. 179/796): “The sitting on the Throne is known (from the Quranic verses), but the way it is actually done is unknown. Believing it is obligatory, and questioning it is an undesirable innovation”

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **The Rationalistic Stand**
- The rationalists, preferring human reason to revelation and tradition in several theological issues, perceived the anthropomorphic verses in the Quran as allegorical or figurative accounts meant to symbolize God's attributes and actions.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- The rationale behind these interpretations arises from the rationalists' anxious defense of God's absolute otherness and transcendence, along with a negation of any similarity between the Creator and the creation.
- The rationalist stance towards the anthropomorphic hadith account was a mixture of rejection and ridicule.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **The Asha'ri Stance**
- The Ash'ari solution to the problem of the anthropomorphic accounts in the Quran and hadith was an acceptance of all anthropomorphic accounts, including those rejected by the rationalists, while employing the means of figurative interpretation.

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- Like earlier traditionalists, the Ash'aris added the formula **بلا كيف** not, however, in the straightforward traditionalistic sense of “without asking how” or “without a further comment,” but more in the sense of “without attributing physical characteristics” to God, thus applying transcendentalism

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- 1. The Hand of God **يد الله**

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَمَنْ نَكَثَ
فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ

“Truly those who pledge allegiance to you pledge allegiance to God. The Hand of God is over their hands. And whoever reneges, reneges only to his determinant...” - Quran 48:10

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- The pledge of allegiance is widely known as the Pledge of Good Pleasure *بيعة الرضوان*
- The Hand of God is interpreted as a reference to one of God's attributes, such as Power, which is associated with God's Hand.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ يَدُ اللَّهِ مَغْلُولَةٌ غُلَّتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَلُعِنُوا بِمَا قَالُوا بَلْ يَدَاهُ
مَبْسُوطَتَانِ

“The Jews say, ‘God’s Hand is shackled.’
Shackled are their hands, and they are cursed
for what they say. Nay, but His two Hands are
outstretched...” Quran 5:64

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- Miserliness is clearly the intended meaning here, and those who make this statement are suggesting that God withholds His Provision and His Bounty, at least to them.
- The claim that God's Hand is shackled is then contrasted with the image of His two Hands outstretched, that is, open and giving as He bestows as He wills.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- If God's Hand can be seen as a metaphor and symbol for the blessings He bestows, then His two Hands might be a metaphor for two different kinds of blessings God might bestow.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **2. The Face of God** وجه الله

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُهُ

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Quran 2:115

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- Some scholars maintain that the Face of God is a reference to His Essence or Self.
- The face of anything is the point of interaction.
- Wherever you turn, you can interact with God and engage with Him

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كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ

“Everything will perish except for His Face...”

Quran 28:88

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فالمراد كل شيء هالك إلا دينه

“What is meant is that everything will perish except for His religion.” – Imam Ali (a.s)

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قال الامام السجاد عليه السلام : نحن الوجه الذي يؤتى الله منه

“We are the Face through which God is reached.”- Imam al-Sajjad (a.s)

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- There is a narration in the Sunni books of hadith such as Sahih al-Bukhari that quotes the Prophet (saw) to have said:

خلق الله آدم على صورته

“God created Adam according to His image”.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

عن الحسين بن خالد أيضا قال : قلت للرضا (عليه السلام) : يا ابن رسول الله إن الناس يروون أن رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله) قال : إن الله خلق آدم على صورته فقال : قاتلهم الله لقد حذفوا أول الحديث

I asked Imam al-Ridha (a.s): People narrate from the Prophet to have said: God has created Adam according to His image! The Imam said: May God kill curse them; they have omitted the beginning of the hadith.

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إن رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله) مر برجلين يتسابان فسمع أحدهما يقول لصاحبه ((قبح الله وجهك ووجه من يشبهك)) فقال له رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله) : ((يا عبد الله لا تقل هذا لأخيك فإن الله عز وجل خلق آدم على صورته

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

The Messenger of God passed by two men who were swearing at each other. He heard one of them saying to the other: May God make your face and whoever looks like you ugly. The Prophet said: O servant of God! Don't say this to your brother for God the Almighty has created Adam according to his image (meaning Adam looks like the one you are swearing at).

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **3. The Eye of God** عَيْنَ اللَّهِ

وَأَصْنَعِ الْفُلْكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَوَحْيِنَا

“Build the Ark before Our Eyes and by Our Revelation...” - Quran 11:37

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- “Before Our Eyes” is a figurative manner of saying that God will watch over and protect Noah’s building of the Ark
- “by Our Revelation” means that God instructed Noah how to build the Ark.

Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- **4. Mounting the Throne** الإِستواء على العرش

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى

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Anthropomorphism in the Quran

- Since mounting the Throne suggests the physical movement and location of a body, while God has no body, many commentators note that this phrase is a symbol for God's demonstration of His Sovereignty over His creation.

The Visibility of God

لَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنظُرْ إِلَيْكَ قَالَ لَن تَرَانِي
وَلَكِن انظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّىٰ رَبُّهُ
لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَىٰ صَعِقًا فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ
وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

The Visibility of God

- “And when Moses came to Our appointed meeting and His Lord spoke to him, he said, ‘My Lord, show me, that I might look at You’. He said: ‘You shall never see Me, but look at the mountain, if it remains firm in its place, then you will see Me’. And when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust...” Quran 7:143

The Visibility of God

- This verse speaks directly to the issue of the human inability to “see” God.
- Moses knew that God transcended all form and corporeality and thus could not be seen physically.
- He poses this question to God only to satisfy the Israelites who had pressured him to ask

The Visibility of God

وَإِذْ قُلْتُمْ يَا مُوسَىٰ لَنْ نُّؤْمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّىٰ نَرَى اللَّهَ جَهْرَةً

“And when you said, ‘O Moses, we will not believe you till we see God openly...’ Quran 2:55

The Visibility of God

- The crumbling of the mountain indicates that seeing God with the physical eye is as impossible as the mountains being able to withstand God's Self-Manifestation
- It demonstrates the annihilating power of that vision, since even the mountain, so much larger and stronger than Moses himself, was incapable of bearing it.

The Visibility of God

ومن كلام له (عليه السلام)

وقد سأله ذِعلبُ اليماني فقال : هل رأيت ربك يا أمير المؤمنين ؟

فقال (عليه السلام) : أفأعبدُ ما لا أرى ؟

قال : قال : وكيف تراه ؟

The Visibility of God

- Dhi'lib al-Yamani asked the Commander of the Faithful (a.s) whether he had seen God, when he replied, "Do I worship one whom I have not seen?" Then he inquired, "How have you seen Him?"

The Visibility of God

لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْعَيْونُ بِمُشَاهَدَةِ الْعِيَانِ ، وَلَكِنْ تُدْرِكُهُ الْقُلُوبُ بِحَقَائِقِ
الْإِيمَانِ ،

Eyes cannot see Him face to face, but hearts perceive Him through the realities of belief.

The Visibility of God

قَرِيبٌ مِّنَ الْأَشْيَاءِ غَيْرٌ مُّلامِسٌ ، بَعِيدٌ مِّنْهَا غَيْرٌ مَّبَايِنٌ

He is near to things but not through physical proximity. He is far from them but not by separation.

The Visibility of God

مُتَكَلِّمٌ بِلا رَوِيَّةٍ، مُرِيدٌ بِلا هِمَّةٍ، صَانِعٌ لا بِجَارِحَةٍ

“He is a speaker, but not with reflection. He intends, but not with preparation. He molds, but not with (the assistance of) limbs.”

The Visibility of God

لَطِيفٌ لَا يُوصَفُ بِالْخَفَاءِ، كَبِيرٌ لَا يُوصَفُ بِالْجَفَاءِ، بَصِيرٌ لَا يُوصَفُ
بِالْحَاسَةِ،

“He is subtle but cannot be attributed with being concealed. He is great but cannot be attributed with haughtiness. He sees but cannot be attributed with the sense (of sight).”

The Visibility of God

رَحِيمٌ لَا يُوصَفُ بِالرَّقَّةِ، تَعْنُو الْوَجُوهُ لِعَظَمَتِهِ، وَتَجِبُ الْقُلُوبُ مِنْ
مَخَافَتِهِ.

“He is Merciful but cannot be attributed with weakness of heart. Faces feel low before His greatness and hearts tremble out of fear of Him.”