

Ahl al-Sunna Refutations of Those Who Attribute a Direction to Allah

- Imam Bukhari (d. 256) believed that Allah exists without a place as stated by Ibn Hajar in *Fath al-Bari*. Ibn Hajar repeats in many places that Allah is clear of places.¹
- Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 311) said in his commentary on the verse "Then turned He (*thumma istawa*) to the heaven" (2:29):

The meaning of *istiwa'* in this verse is height and elevation... but if one claims that this means displacement for Allah, tell him: He is high and elevated over the heaven with the height of sovereignty and power, not the height of displacement and movement to and fro.²

- Imam al-Ash`ari (d. 324) said in the authentic version of his *Ibana* published by Dar al-ansar and edited by Fawqiyya Husayn Mahmud:

Allah is established on the Throne in the sense that He said and the meaning that He wills, with an establishment that transcends touch, settlement, location, immanence, and displacement. The Throne does not carry him, rather the Throne and its carriers are carried by the subtleness of His power, subdued under His grip, and He is above the Throne and above everything down to the extremities of the lower earth, with an aboveness that does not make him any closer to the Throne or to the heavens. Rather, He is as exalted high over the Throne as He is exalted high over the lower earth, and together with this He is near every creature, and He is nearer to His servant than his jugular vein, and He is witness over everything.³

- Shahrastani (d. 548) relates that Imam Ash`ari also said:

The vision of Allah does not entail direction, place, or form, or face to face encounter either by impingement of rays or by impression, all of which are impossible.⁴

- Mulla `Ali al-Qari states in *Sharh `ayn al-`ilm*:

It is obligatory that you believe that your God... is not contained in any place or direction.

He states in *Sharh al-fiqh al-akbar*:

Allah is not located in a place, whether above or below, or any other than these, and time is inapplicable to Him, unlike what the *mushabbiha* and *mujassima* and *hululiyya* or incarnationists believe.

He also cites in *Sharh al-Mishkat* al-hafiz Zayn al-Din al-`Iraqi's statement that all Four Imams agree that anyone who believes Allah lies in a specific direction has committed disbelief.⁵

- Al-`Izz ibn `Abd al-Salam does not declare those who attribute a direction to Allah to be disbelievers but only innovators:

The correct position is that the one who holds belief in Allah's direction is not declared a disbeliever, because the scholars of Islam did not bring such as these out of Islam, rather, they adjudicated inheritance from Muslims for them, burial in Muslim grounds, sanctity of their blood and property, and the obligation to pray over their remains. The same is true of all the upholders of innovations.⁶

- Imam Ghazali said in his *al-Iqtisad fi al-i`tiqad*:

The Hashwiyya asserted direction for Allah while guarding themselves from divesting Allah of His attributes (*ta`til*), falling thereby into likening Allah to creation (*tashbih*).

Allah has granted success to Ahl al-Sunna in establishing the truth. They have recognized the proper goal in establishing their method, and understood that direction is denied and disallowed for Allah because it pertains to bodies and complements them; while vision of Him is firmly established because it directly follows knowledge and attends it as its perfecting component.⁷

- Ibn al-Jawzi says in his *Daf` shubah al-tashbih*:

Some claim the verses "Good words ascend to Him" (35:10) and "He is the Omnipotent over His servants" (6:18, 6:61) as proof that He is above in sensory fashion, forgetting that sensory aboveness is only applicable to bodies or atoms, and that aboveness can also be expressed for loftiness of rank.

Furthermore, just as He said: "above His servants," He also said: "and He is with you" (57:4). Therefore whoever interprets the latter as meaning "with you in knowledge," permits his counterpart to interpret *istiwa'* (in 20:4) as "subduing" (*al-qahr*)....

Abu Ya`la says: "What is meant by "aboveness" is Allah's *istiwa'* in person on the Throne, which is a limit for him in the direction that is bounded by the Throne. As for the other directions, such as above, behind, in front, and left, they are not bounded." I say: these words are the very root of anthropomorphism, because what bounds is either greater or smaller than what is bounded, and these dimensions only apply to bodies.⁸

- Ibn Hajar states in *Fath al-bari*:

The fact that the two directions of "above" and "below" are inapplicable and impossible for Allah does not preclude His being described with the attribute of elevation (*`uluw*), for such description is only from the standpoint of the meaning of elevation, not that of sensory perception.⁹

Al-Kirmani said: "The outward meaning of the saying: "He Who is in the heaven" (*man fi al-sama'*) is not meant. Allah is transcendent above immanence and place. However, because the direction of aboveness is nobler than any other direction, Allah linked it to Him to indicate the loftiness of the Essence and the Attributes." He addresses the other expressions of aboveness in the same manner.¹⁰

- Ibn al-Hammam al-Hanafi (d. 681) said in *al-Musayara*, a commentary on Ghazali's tenets of belief:

The seventh foundation of Islamic belief is that Allah, the Exalted, is not characterized by a direction, because directions -- above, below, right, etc. -- are created with creatures... and if, by "direction" other than that is meant, which does not suggest the immanence of boundaries or corporeality, let it be made plain (i.e. that it is a loftiness of rank, not space), so that it can be examined whether it belongs truly to transcendence, and if it is misphrased or other than that, then it must be shown to be corrupt.¹¹

- Imam al-Yafi'i (d. 768) in the end of his *Kitab marham al-`ilal al-mu`dila* devotes an entire chapter to the refutation of the anthropomorphists. The title of the chapter is: *Bayan al-istidlal `ala nafi al-jiha wa al-jismiyya wa batalan madhhab man qala bihima min al-karramiyya wa al-hashwiyya wa muta'akhhiri al-hanbaliyya* (The exposition of the proofs upon which are based the negation of direction and corporeality and the invalidity of the school of those who assert them among the *karramiyya* and the *hashwiyya* and the late Hanbalis). It begins with the words:

The true Imam and teacher of the scholars of *kalam*, Imam al-Haramayn said: "The madhhab of the People of Truth (Ahl al-Sunna) is absolutely unanimous on the question that Allah is exalted above boundaries and above being characterized by directions. The Karramiyya and some of the Hashwiyya have said that He is bounded and that He is characterized by the direction of aboveness... and each of these two positions is tantamount to declaring that Allah has a dimension or that He has parts, and constitutes pure disbelief." ... I quoted this from his book *al-Irshad*.¹²

- Abu Bakr ibn al-`Arabi al-Maliki (d. 543) labels the believers in Allah's direction "followers of Pharaoh" in his *Aridat al-ahwadhi*:

Your conclusion shows that you are indeed the followers of Pharaoh, who believed that the Creator lies in a certain direction, and so he desired to climb up to Him on a ladder. He congratulates you for being among his followers, and he is your imam!¹³

- Even Ibn Hazm al-Zahiri (d. 456), the arch-enemy of Ash`ari and the Ash`ari school, says in *al-Fasl fi al-milal*:

By no means whatsoever is Allah in a place or in a time. This is the position of the vast majority of the scholars (*al-jumhur*) and ours as well, and other than this position is not permissible, for anything other than it is false.¹⁴

¹Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bari* 13:357; Cf. 3:23, 6:102, 13:309, 328, 351, 354, 355, 357, 366, 369-370, 414.

²Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir* 1:192.

³al-Ash`ari, *al-Ibana `an usul al-diyana*, ed. Fawqiyya Husayn Mahmud (Cairo: dar al-Ansar, 1977), p. 21.

⁴Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* as translated by A.K. Kazi and J.G. Flynn, *Muslim Sects and Divisions* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984) p. 85.

⁵al-Qari, *Sharh `ayn al-`ilm wa zayn al-hilm* 1:34; *Sharh al-fiqh al-akbar* (Beirut: dar al-kutub al-`ilmiyya, 1404/1984) p. 57; *al-Mirqat*, cited by Kawthari, *Maqalat* p. 321, 362.

⁶al-`Izz ibn `Abd al-Salam, *Fatawa* p. 151, 153.

⁷al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-i`tiqad* (Beirut: dar al-kutub al-`ilmiyya, 1409/1988) p. 48.

⁸Ibn al-Jawzi, *Daf` shubah al-tashbih* p. 131, 135, 260.

⁹Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bari* 6:136 (Jihad).

¹⁰*Ibid.* 13:412.

¹¹Ibn al-Hammam, *al-Musayara* p. 16-17.

¹²al-Yafi'i, *Marham al-'ilal al-mu'dila*, ed. E. Denison Ross (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1910) p. 244, 246.

¹³Abu Bakr Ibn al-'Arabi, *'Aridat al-ahwadhi* 2:235.

¹⁴Ibn Hazm, *al-Fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwa' wa al-nihal* 2:125.