155478 - Important questions about the beliefs of Ahl as-Sunnah concerning the names and attributes of Allah

the question

Are all the attributes of Allah similar to one another or are there several different attributes, each of one is different from another? Similarly, do His names have the same meaning or similar meanings, or does each name have a meaning that is different to others? Is it permissible to say that the attributes of Allah are infinite, and so are His names, or are they finite and limited, and that Allah knows them?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

There is no doubt that the attributes of Allah are different with regard to their meanings. The attribute of power is not the same as the attribute of might, which is not the same as the attribute of knowledge. No rational person would say that they are similar to one another in terms of meanings. We will explain that further below.

Secondly:

The belief of Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l-Jamaa'ah concerning the names of Allah is that they are the same in that they refer to His Essence, may He be glorified and exalted, and are different with regard to their meanings.

To explain that further, we say: His names al-Qadeer (the Powerful), al-'Aleem (The All-Knowing), al-'Azeez (the Almighty), al-Hakeem (the Wise) – for example – all point to one Essence, which is the holy Essence of Allah. So in this regard they are the same and not different. But at the same time, the attributes of power, knowledge, might and wisdom differ from one another. So in this

sense they differ from one another.

So the beautiful names of Allah are synonymous in that they refer to one Essence, but the attributes referred to in those names differ from one another.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Allah, may He be glorified, has told us that He is All-Knowing, Powerful, All-Hearing, All-Seeing, Forgiving, Most Merciful, and other names and attributes. We understand the meaning of that, and we can differentiate between knowledge and power, between mercy and hearing and vision; we know that all the names agree in that they refer to the Essence of Allah. Even though they have different meanings, they are in agreement and are the same with regard to His Essence, different with regard to His Attributes.

Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa, 3/59

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The names and attributes of Allah, may He be exalted, are names in that they refer to His Essence and they are attributes with regard to the meanings contained in these words. In the first regard they are the same because they refer to one Essence, namely Allah, may He be exalted and glorified, and in the second regard they are different because each one has a different meaning.

So al-Hayy (the Ever-Living), al-‘Aleem (the All-Knowing), al-Qadeer (the Powerful), as-Samee‘ (the All-Hearing), al-Baseer (the All-Seeing), ar-Rahmaan (the Most Merciful), ar-Raheem (the Most Compassionate), al-‘Azeez (the Almighty), al-Hakeem (the All Wise) are all names of one named entity, who is Allah, may He be exalted, but the meaning of al-Hayy (the Ever-Living) is different from the meaning of al-‘Aleem (the All-Knowing), and the meaning of al-‘Aleem (the All-Knowing) is different from the meaning of al-Qadeer (the Powerful), and so on.

Rather we say that they are names and attributes because the Qur’aan refers to that, as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful”

[Yoonus 10: 10]

“And your Lord is Most Forgiving, Owner of Mercy”

[al-Kahf 18:58].

The second verse indicates that the Most Merciful is the One Who has the characteristic of mercy. There is consensus among linguists and the way people understand the language that no one can be called ‘aleem (knowing) except one who has knowledge; no one can be called samee‘ (hearing) except one who has hearing; no one can be called baseer (seeing) except one who has sight. This matter is too clear to need any proof.

Al-Qawaa’id al-Mathla fi Sifaat Allah wa Asma’ihi al-Husna, p. 8

The same may be said about the names of the Qur’aan, the names of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and the names of the Last Day. In each case they all refer to one thing – the Qur’aan or the Messenger or the Last Day – but at the same time they differ in that each of these names refers to an attribute that is different from others, so the names carry different meanings.

Thirdly:

The belief of Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah concerning the beautiful names of Allah – according to the correct view – is that they are not limited to a specific number and the same may be said concerning His attributes. Allah, may He be exalted, has names that He has kept to Himself in the knowledge of the unseen with Him, and these names refer to attributes. So His names and attributes are not limited to a specific number.

Among the evidence for this belief is the following:

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It was narrated that ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Mas’ood said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “There is no-one who is afflicted by distress and grief, and says: ‘Allaahumma inni ‘abduka ibn ‘abdika ibn amatija naasyati bi yadika, maada fiyya hukmuka, ‘adlun fiyya qadaa’uka. As’aluka bi kulli ismin huwa laka sammayta bihi nafsaka aw anzaltahu fi kitaabika aw ‘allamtahu ahadan min khalqika aw ista’tharta bihi fi ‘ilm il-ghayb ‘indaka an taj’al al-Qur’aana rabee’ qalbi wa noor sadri wa jalaa’ huzni wa dhihaab hammi (O Allaah, I am Your slave, son of Your slave, son of Your maidservant; my forelock is in Your hand, Your command over me is forever executed and Your decree over me is just. I ask You by every name belonging to You which You have named Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or You taught to any of Your creation, or You have preserved in the knowledge of the Unseen with You, that You make the Qur’aan the life of my heart and the light of my breast, and a departure for my sorrow and a release for my anxiety),’ but Allaah will take away his distress and grief, and replace it with joy.” He was asked: “O Messenger of Allaah, should we learn this?” He said: “Of course; everyone who hears it should learn it.”

Narrated by Ahmad, 3704; classed as saheeh by Shaykh al-Albaani in as-Silsilah al-Saheehah, 199.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The beautiful names of Allah are not limited and are innumerable. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, has names and attributes that He has kept to Himself in the knowledge of the unseen with Him. They are not known to any Angel who is close to him or any Prophet who was sent, as it says in the saheeh hadeeth: “…. I ask You by every name belonging to You which You have named Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or You taught to any of Your creation, or You have preserved in the knowledge of the Unseen with You…”

So His names may be divided into three types:

(i) Those by which he called Himself and taught them to whomever He willed of His Angels or others, but He did not reveal them in His Book.

(ii) Those that He revealed in His Book and taught them to His slaves.

(iii) Those that He kept to Himself in the knowledge of the unseen, so none of His creation knows them. Hence the du‘aa’ says: “You have preserved” i.e., only You know them; it does not mean that He is the only one who is called by them, because the names that are proven to be only for Him include names that Allah revealed in His Book.

Badaa’i‘ al-Fawaa’id, 1/174-176

Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

It should be noted that the beautiful names of Allah are not limited to ninety-nine.

Tafseer Ibn Katheer, 2/328

See also Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa by Ibn Taymiyah, 22/482-486

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It was narrated that ‘Aa’ishah said: I noticed that the Messenger of Allaah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was not in the bed one night, so I looked for him, and my hand fell on the sole of his foot. He was in the mosque, with his feet held upright, and he was saying, “O Allaah, I seek refuge in Your pleasure from Your wrath, in Your forgiveness from Your punishment. I seek refuge in You from You. I cannot praise You enough; You are as You have praised Yourself.”

Narrated by Muslim, 486

The attributes – as we have mentioned – are connected to the names. Every name that is proven to be a name of Allah refers to an attribute as befits His Majesty, may He be glorified and exalted.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

He (the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) stated that praise of Allah cannot be limited; if he knew all His names he would know all His attributes and thus be able to praise Him

sufficiently, because His attributes are only expressed through His names.

Dar’ Ta‘aarud al-‘Aql wa’n-Naql, 3/332, 333

Some of them thought that the names of Allah, may He be exalted, were limited to a specific number, which is ninety-nine! An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) narrated that the scholars are unanimously agreed that the names of Allah are not limited to this number. In the answer to question no. 41003 we have quoted the evidence to show that they are not limited to this number, as well as quoting the opinions of the scholars in refutation of those who thought that the names of Allah, may He be exalted, were limited to this number.

To sum up: the names, attributes and actions of Allah, may He be exalted, have no limit. No one will doubt this who studies the evidence of the Qur’aan and Sunnah, examines the belief of Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah, and bases his belief in the names and attributes of Allah on proper rules and guidelines.

And Allah knows best.