160892 - Is saying that the angels do not eat and drink mean that one is likening them to Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted?

the question

Some people are of the view that saying that the angels do not eat and drink means that one is likening them to Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted. Is this true? I hope that you can explain that.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

The Holy Qur’an indicates that the angels do not eat and drink, as it says in the story of the guests of Ibrahim (peace be upon him):

{But when he saw that their hands did not reach out towards it [the food he offered them], he had misgivings about them and conceived a fear of them. They said: Fear not; we have been sent to the people of Lut} [Hud 11:70].

Ibn Jarir at-Tabari (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

They refrained from eating the food because they were not among those who eat.

End quote from *Jami` al-Bayan*, 15/387.

Al-Hafiz Ibn Kathir (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The angels have no interest in food; they neither desire it nor eat it.

End quote from *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-`Azim*, 4/333.

Al-Fakhr ar-Razi narrated that the scholars were unanimously agreed on this meaning, as he (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The scholars are unanimously agreed that the angels do not eat, drink or marry; they glorify Allah night and day, without pause. As for the jinn and devils, they do eat and drink.

End quote from *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, 1/76.

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

… They do not eat and they do not drink; rather they are solid, meaning that they have no alimentary canal like humans. They speak, hear, see, ascend and descend – as is proven in the authentic texts – yet despite that, their attributes and actions are not like the attributes and actions of humans. Thus the difference between the Creator and His creation is greater than the difference between angels and humans, because both are created, and created beings are more similar to one another than a created being can be to the Creator, may He be Glorified and Exalted.

End quote from *Majmu` al-Fatawa*, 5/354.

Secondly:

Saying that the angels do not eat and drink is not likening them to Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted. That may be discussed on the basis of several subtle issues having to do with the issue of likening itself.

-1-

The fact that the angels do not need food and drink does not mean that they do not need anything at all, which is something that is affirmed only for Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted. Rather they do not need food and drink because of the way in which Allah created them; the angels' having no need for food and drink is something that is possible, but it is not in a complete and perfect sense, because in their case, it is something that is possible and that results from the way

in which Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, created them. It is not an inherent quality that they must inevitably possess, as in the case of the Lord, may He be Glorified and Exalted.

-2-

There are many created things that have no need for food and drink, such as inanimate things. Obviously, it cannot be said that this is likening them to Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, because in the case of inanimate objects, their having no need of food and drink is an indication of imperfection, not an indication of perfection. That is because there is no doubt that it is an indication of their inferiority to created things that are superior to them – namely plants, animals and humans – which is why they do not need food and drink. This indicates that merely having no need of food and drink is not an indication of resemblance to the Creator, may He be Glorified and Exalted.

-3-

The most important and subtle point is that saying that there is nothing like unto Allah – which is mentioned in the verse

{There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing} [Ash-Shura 42:11] –

does not mean denying any similarity that could be common to both the Creator and the created being. Rather it means:

1.. Denying that the Creator and created beings share any of the attributes of Lordship that belong exclusively to Allah, such as divinity, oneness, the power to create, and so on.

2.. Denying that they share any of the attributes that belong exclusively to created beings, such as death and having been brought into existence after having not existed.

3.. Denying that the attributes that the Creator and the created being have in common are at the same level of perfection.

4.. Denying that the attributes of both the Creator and a created being are the same in nature.

This refers to the attributes in the way in which they are manifested.

As far as suggesting that this is denying any basic commonality in some of the attributes, that is not correct. That is the basis on which those who deny or misinterpret the divine attributes based their argument.

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

The comparison that is not allowed is likening the Creator to created beings in the following:

1.. Ascribing to Allah any attribute that is unique to created beings.

2.. Ascribing to a created being any attribute that is unique to the Creator, for the Lord is far above having any attribute that is unique to created beings.

3.. Saying that a created being is equal to Allah in any of His perfect attributes.

4.. By the same token, it is not possible for anyone else to share with Allah in any of His affairs in any way. In fact it is even more impossible for one created being to share anything with any other created being; rather the essence and attributes of every created being are exclusively his, and no other created being shares that with him. If it is said that this one shares this attribute with another, what this really means is that this created being is similar to another created being in that regard, such as when you say that this human shares a human quality with another human, or he shares an animalistic quality with an animal. What is meant is that they resemble one another in that regard, otherwise the humanity of Zayd is something that no one else shares with him; rather they share a common quality in that they are both human in general terms, but they do not share the exact same human essence. The humanity that is shared between people is no more than a concept; in reality they do not share anything in the true sense of the word, for the nature of each individual is unique to him and not shared with others. Rather what is shared is a general concept, which is no more than an idea in the mind. As no one else shares with the created being his essence, attributes and deeds, it is more appropriate that no one should share with the Creator any of His own attributes.

But one created being may resemble another and be equal to him or compete with him, whereas in the case of Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, there is none equal to Him, none like unto Him and none that can compete with Him.

End quote from *As-Safadiyyah*, 1/100-101.

To give a simple example: Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, describes Himself as Hearing and Seeing, and He also described humans as hearing and seeing, as He says:

{Indeed, We created man from a sperm-drop mixture that We may try him; and We made him hearing and seeing} [Al-Insan 76:2].

This does not imply that the two attributes of hearing and seeing are the same for both the Creator and the created being. Rather it means that man understands the word “hearing” as something that he can imagine with regard to the Creator and the created being, even though he does not know exactly what is appropriate for the Creator in terms of hearing, just as he may not know what is appropriate for every created being in terms of hearing, until he sees the created being or it is described to him.

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

Having names and attributes in common does not mean that one can be likened to the other, or that they are the same or equal. Moreover, that is applicable to any two existing beings; they will inevitably have some names and attributes in common and be similar in that regard. So whoever does not accept that which must be accepted will be denying the attributes of Allah, and whoever says that any of Allah’s attributes is the same as any attribute of created beings will be likening the created being to the Creator.

The correct approach is to reject likening Allah to any created being and to reject any denial of His attributes. Therefore we must affirm the perfect attributes of Allah in order to reject any denial of His attributes, and we must affirm those attributes that are uniquely His in a manner that rejects the way of those who liken Him to created beings.

But there is a group of people who regard likening His attributes to those of humans and saying that His attributes are similar to those of humans as being one and the same, and they say that it is not possible for something to be similar to something else in one way and to differ from it in another way. Rather in their view, when any two things are different, such as black and white, there can be no similarity between them in any way at all, and when any two things resemble one another, such as physical things, in their view they say that they resemble one another in every aspect, and there is no difference between them except some minor differences. These people say that anyone who affirms attributes which necessarily imply physicality – according to their view – is likening the Creator to the created being. This is the way of many of the scholars of kalam, such as the Mu`tazilis and the Ash`aris and those who agreed with them, such as al-Qadi Abu Ya`la and others. As for the majority of scholars, they say that one thing may resemble another in one way and not another. This view is what was narrated from the early generations (salaf) and the imams, such as Ahmad and others.

End quote from *As-Safadiyyah*, 1/101-102.

And Allah knows best.