178915 - How to Understand the Names and Attributes of Allah

the question

It is well known that Ahl As-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah affirm the attributes of Allah, may He be Glorified, without discussing how they are, without likening or comparing Him to His creation, and without denying any of them. When they affirm them, they do not discuss how they are, and they understand them on the basis of the famous statement of Imam Malik: “The Istiwa’ [Allah’s rising over the Throne] is known, but how it occurred is unknown.” What I do not understand is that if we apply this to all of the divine Attributes, someone may ask us: So what is meant by Allah smiling? Or what is meant by the Countenance of Allah? Or what is meant by the mercy of Allah, or what is meant by the Shin of Allah, and all other divine Attributes? Shouldn’t we understand their meaning in a manner that is befitting to Allah, so we will not be like those who say, “We do not know and we leave their meaning to Allah”? The problem is that when the Arabs interpreted the meanings of the divine Attributes, they would interpret them on the basis of what they saw of created beings. Please explain, because we are confused about this, as some of the innovators among the Ash`aris have made us confused.

Summary of answer

The creed of Ahl As-Sunnah wal Jama`ah regarding the attributes of Allah is that they affirm them and affirm the meanings indicated by the words in linguistic terms, and they leave knowledge of how the attributes are and their nature to Him, while believing that we cannot compare any of the divine Attributes to the attributes of created beings, for there is none like unto Him either in His Essence or in His attributes.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Does Ahl As-Sunnah wal Jama`ah discuss how the divine Attributes are?

Ahl As-Sunnah wal Jama`ah do not discuss how the divine Attributes are; rather they leave knowledge of that to Allah. Hence they believe in the attributes of Allah , may He be Exalted, and they believe in their meanings, but they leave the matter of how they are to Him, may He be Glorified.

Ibn Al-Majishon, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and others among the early generations (may Allah have mercy on them) said: “We do not know the nature of what Allah has attributed to Himself, even though we understand what the words mean." (Dar’ Ta`arud Al-`Aql wa’n-Naql, 1/115)

Abu At-Tayyib, the father of Abu Hafs ibn Shahin, (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“I attended a lesson with Abu Ja`far At-Tirmidhi and someone asked him about the Hadith which speaks of the descent of the Lord [in the last third of the night]: How does this descent occur? Will there be something above Him? He replied: We understand the descent [in linguistic terms], how it occurs is unknown, believing in it is obligatory and asking about it is an innovation.”

Adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The jurist and scholar of Baghdad in his time spoke the truth, for asking about the divine Descent is not ambiguous, because people usually ask about ambiguous words in the language. Rather the divine Descent, speech, hearing, seeing, knowledge and rising over the Throne are phrases which are clear in meaning for anyone who hears them. But if they are ascribed to the One of Whom it is said that there is none like unto Him, then the attribute is connected to the One to Whom it is ascribed, and its nature is unknown to people." (Al-`Uluw li’l-`Aliy Al-Ghaffar, p. 2130214)

Abu Bakr Al-Isma`ili (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “We believe that Allah rose over the Throne, without discussing how, because He has said that He rose over the Throne, but He did not say how He rose over it." (Ma`arij Al-Qubul, 1/198)

The creed of Ahl As-Sunnah wal Jama`ah regarding the attributes of Allah, may He be Exalted, is

that they affirm them and affirm the meanings indicated by the words in linguistic terms, and they leave knowledge of how the attributes are and their nature to Him , whilst believing that we cannot compare any of the divine Attributes to the attributes of created beings, for there is none like unto Him, may He be Glorified, either in His Essence or in His attributes.

What is meant by Allah's smiling?

With regard to the questioner's saying that if we say this, someone may ask us: So what is meant by Allah smiling? Or what is meant by the Countenance of Allah?

We say: "What is meant by Allah's smiling is to affirm that Allah, may He be Exalted, possesses the attribute of smiling in a true – not metaphorical – sense, in a manner that is befitting to Him, may He be Glorified, without likening Him to His creation or discussing how it is. Therefore we affirm the attribute and affirm the linguistic meaning, and we leave knowledge of how it is to Him, as noted above. This is applicable to each of the divine Attributes.

Shaykh Ibn Jibrin (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"We affirm the divine Attribute, but we do not liken or compare it to the attributes of His creation, because likening and comparison can only be between created beings. We say: If Allah, may He be Exalted, has affirmed it for Himself, then we affirm it without going to extremes in discussing it, or saying anything that is not true. It is known that the attribute of a created being is something that it is appropriate for him, so in the case of the created being, the word dahk (smiling or laughing) refers to laughing, making a sound, at something that he admires or which brings him joy or makes him happy. But in the case of Allah, He smiles as He wills, in a manner that is appropriate to Him, the nature of which we do not know." (Fatawa Ash-Shaykh Ibn Jibrin, 63/96)

Understand the meaning of Allah's Names in a manner that is befitting to Him

With regard to the questioner's saying, Shouldn't we understand their meaning in a manner that is befitting to Allah, so we will not be like those who say, "We do not know and we leave their

meaning to Allah”?

We have previously discussed, in the answer to question 138920 , what is meant by leaving the meaning of the divine names and attributes to Allah . To sum up what was mentioned there, leaving the meaning thereof to Allah is of two types.

- The first type is affirming the words and the meanings indicated by them , then leaving knowledge of how they are to Allah. This way is correct, and it is the view of Ahl As-Sunnah.
- The second type is affirming the word [which refers to a divine Attribute] without affirming its meaning. This way is incorrect.

There is a difference between affirming the meaning of the attribute in the true sense of the word, and affirming the nature of that attribute.

The scholars of the Permanent Committee said:

“What is required is to affirm what Allah affirmed for Himself of two hands, two feet, fingers and other attributes which are mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah, in the way that is befitting to Allah, may He be Glorified, without distorting the meaning or discussing how they are, and without likening Him to His creation or denying the divine Attributes. They are to be taken as something real, not something metaphorical." (Fatawa Al-Lajnah ad-Da’imah 2/376)

Therefore we must differentiate between the meaning, which we are obliged to believe in and affirm, and discussing the nature of the attribute, which we cannot know, because there is nothing like unto our Lord, may He be Glorified and Exalted.

Shaykh Al-Islam (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“More than one of those who narrated consensus among the early generation, including Al-Khattabi, stated that the view of the early generations was that the verses which speak of the divine Attributes are to be understood according to their apparent meaning, without trying to say how the divine Attributes are or likening them to the attributes of created beings. This means that the way we should speak of the divine

Essence, and the same approach should be followed. So if the way to speak about His Essence is by affirming the existence of His Essence, without discussing its nature, then the way to speak about His attributes is to affirm that they exist, without discussing how they are. Hence we say that Allah has a hand and can hear, but we do not say that what is meant by His hand is power, or that what is meant by His hearing is knowledge.... These attributes are to be ascribed to Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, in a manner that is befitting to His Majesty, just as the attributes of anything are to be ascribed to it in a manner that is befitting to it. Thus it is established that knowledge is an attribute which is to be ascribed to Allah, and it has its own characteristics, and the same is true of the divine Countenance.... Similarly, with regard to His actions, we know that the act of creation means bringing something into existence from nothing, even though we cannot discuss how that action happens and we cannot compare it to our own actions, for we do not do any action except when we need to do that action, whereas Allah is Free of need, Worthy of praise. Similarly, what is meant by the Divine Essence is known in general terms, even though it cannot be compared to the essences of created beings, and no one knows how it is except Him, and no one could comprehend how His Essence is. This is how we should understand the divine Attributes.

The believer learns about the impact of these attributes, for that is the purpose of learning about them. Therefore he learns that Allah has power over all things, and that Allah has encompassed all things with His knowledge, and that on the Day of Resurrection, the entire earth will be in His grip, and the heavens will be rolled up in His Right Hand , and that the believers will gaze upon the Countenance of their Creator in Paradise and will find pleasure therein beside which all other pleasures will fade into insignificance, and so on. He also learns that he has a Lord, Creator and One Who is worthy of worship, but he does not understand the nature of any of that. Rather all that people may understand is like that: they understand some aspects of a thing, but they do not comprehend its essence, and in fact their knowledge of their own selves is also like that." (Majmu` Al-Fatawa, 6/355-358)

How can we discuss the nature of the divine Attributes when there is none

like unto Him?

With regard to the questioner’s words ‘The problem is that when the Arabs interpreted the meanings of the divine Attributes, they would interpret them on the basis of what they saw of created beings’, we say: When the Arabs interpreted the attributes of created beings, they interpreted them on the basis of what they saw, knew and understood of them. How can we discuss the nature of the divine Attributes when there is none like unto Him, may He be Exalted, no vision can encompass Him, and they cannot encompass Him with their knowledge?

No one will be safe from the specious arguments of the innovators except one who follows the way and path of the early generations and follows in their footsteps.

And Allah knows best.