

The Hadith of ALLAH's "Descent"

The scholars differed concerning the meaning of Allah's "descent" in the mass-narrated (mutawatir) hadith:

Our Lord - Blessed and Exalted is He! - descends every night to the lowest heaven in the last third of the night and says: Who is supplicating Me so that I may answer him? Who is asking forgiveness from Me so that I may forgive him? [1]

Ibn `Asakir said:

The Mu` tazila said: [Allah's] "Descent" (nuzul) is the descent of any given sign of His, or that of His angels. The Mushabbiha and Hashwiyya said: Descent is the descent of His person (dhat) through movement (haraka) and displacement (intiqaal). Al-Ash`ari took the middle road and said: Descent is one of His attributes. [2]

Al-Bayhaqi further reports that Al-Ash`ari said: "What is meant by the descent is an act brought to be by Allah in the nearest heaven every night, which [the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him --] has named a descent, without movement nor displacement. Exalted is Allah above the characteristics of creatures!" [3]

Imam al-Haramayn said in his epistle al-Nizamiyya: "Whoever possesses one iota of reason harbors no doubt whatsoever that change, displacement, and removal are among the attributes of bodies." [4]

Al-Qurtubi said that the hadith is elucidated by that related by al-Nasa'i in his Sunan al-Kubra and `Amal al-Yawm wa al-Layla whereby the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him -- said:

Allah waits until the first part of the night is over, then He orders a herald (munadiyan) to say: Is there anyone supplicating so that he may be answered, anyone begging for forgiveness so that he may be forgiven, any petitioner so that he may be granted his request? [5]

The above narration is confirmed by the hadith of `Uthman ibn Abi al-`As al-Thaqafi from the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him --:

The gates of heaven are opened in the middle of the night and a herald calls out: Is there anyone supplicating so that he may be answered? Is there anyone asking so that he may be granted? Is there anyone afflicted so that he may be delivered? At that time there is no Muslim who invokes for anything except Allah answers him, except the adultress who runs after her pleasure and her intimate companion. [6]

Thus the calling out, in al-Qurtubi's view, is directly attributed to Allah in Bukhari and Muslim's narrations in order to highlight His regard and His emphasis, as when one says: "The sultan calls out for this," whereas it is actually a herald who calls out the sultan's order as elucidated in the above two versions. This is confirmed by Imam Malik's statement: "It is our Blessed and Exalted Lord's command which descends; as for Him, He is eternally the same, He does not move or go to and fro," [7] although it is established that Malik forbade discourse of any kind about the hadiths of Allah's attributes, preferring not to interpret the hadiths of descent one way or the other and that he said about them: "Let them pass without entering into modality." [8]

Nevertheless, not all the Salaf let them pass, as al-Bayhaqi relates from the Tabi`i Hammad ibn Zayd that he interpreted Allah's descent to the nearest heaven as "His turning to" (nuzuluhu iqbaluhu). [9]

Ibn al-Jawzi cautioned: "Since you understand that the one who descends towards you is near to you, content yourself with the knowledge that He is near you, and do not think in terms of bodily nearness." [10] Ibn al-Jawzi actually read the verb "descend" in the hadith of Bukhari and Muslim as yunzilu ("He orders down") instead of yanzilu ("He comes down"). [11] This was also the Ash`ari imam Ibn Furak's reading according to Ibn Hajar who confirms its soundness in view of al-Nasa'i's narration. This further confirms al-Qurtubi's reading and the interpretations of Malik and Hammad ibn Zayd.

AL-BAJI'S COMMENTARY

Abu al-Walid al-Baji stated in his commentary of Malik's Muwatta':

The Prophet's -- Allah bless and greet him -- saying that our Exalted Lord descends every night to the nearest heaven is to inform us that supplication at that particular time is answered, petitioners are given what they request, and those who ask for forgiveness are forgiven. It warns us as to the great merit of that time and strongly encourages us to make abundant supplication, petition, and contrition at that time. It was narrated from the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him -- in similar terms that Allah Almighty and Exalted said: "If My servant comes near Me one hand-span I come near him one cubit. If he comes near Me one cubit I come near him an arm's length. If he comes to Me walking, I come to him running." [12] He did not mean by this hadith a coming-near in terms of distance, for such is impossible and inexistent. All he meant was the servant's coming-near in terms of good works, and Allah's coming-near in terms of answer and acceptance. In the same sense one says "So-and-so is near So-and-so," and they say of the leader "He is near his people" if he helps them a lot and welcomes them. This is well-known in the language of the Arabs. [13]

IBN `ABD AL-SALAM'S COMMENTARY

Ibn `Abd al-Salam said:

The meaning of His coming closer to us by descending to the nearest heaven, or by His drawing-near a cubit and an arm's length, [14] is that He treats us with munificence (ikram) in the manner of the liege-lord that walks towards his servants and condescends to them, turning to them with full attention (muqbilan `alayhim) and examining their needs one by one. That is why He says: "Is there anyone supplicating so that I may answer him? Is there anyone asking so that I may grant him? Is there anyone seeking forgiveness so that I may forgive him?" [15]

IBN HAJAR'S COMMENTARY

Following is the text of Ibn Hajar's commentary on the hadith of descent:

Those who assert direction for Allah have used this hadith as proof that He is in the direction of aboveness. The vast majority of the scholars reject this, because such a saying leads to establishing boundaries for Him and Allah is exalted above that. [16]

The meaning of "descent" is interpreted differently:

- | Some say that the external meaning is meant literally: these are the Mushabbiha and Allah is exalted above what they say.
- | Some reject the validity of the hadiths cited in that chapter altogether. These are the Khawarij and the Mu` tazila in their arrogance. What is strange is that they interpret figuratively what is related to this in the Qur'an, but they reject what is in the hadith either out of ignorance or out of obduracy.
- | Some have taken them as they have come, believing in them without specificity, declaring Allah to be transcendent above modality (kayfiyya) and likeness to creation (tashbih): these are the vast majority of the Salaf. That position is reported by al-Bayhaqi and others from the Four Imams, Sufyan ibn `Uyayna, Sufyan al-Thawri, Hammad ibn Salama, Hammad ibn Zayd, al-Awza` i, al-Layth, and others.
- | Some interpreted them in a way that befits the linguistic usage of the Arabs.
- | Some have over-interpreted them to the point that they almost tampered with their text.
- | Some have made a difference between a kind of interpretation that is likely and current in the linguistic usage of the Arabs, and another kind which is far-fetched and archaic, interpreting in the former case and committing the meaning to Allah in the latter. This is reported from Malik, and among the Khalaf it is asserted decisively by Ibn Daqiq al-` Id (d. 702). [17]

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Al-Bayhaqi said: "The safest method is to believe in them without modality, and to keep silence concerning what is meant except if the explanation is conveyed from the Prophet himself, in which case it is followed." The proof for this is the agreement of the scholars that the specific interpretation is not obligatory, and that therefore the commitment of meaning to Allah is safest....

Ibn al-`Arabi al-Maliki said:

It is reported that the innovators have rejected these hadiths, the Salaf passed them on as they came, and others interpreted them, and my position is the last one. [18] The saying: "He descends" refers to His acts, not His essence. Indeed, it is an expression for His angels who descend with His command and His prohibition. And just as descent can pertain to bodies, it can also pertain to ideas or spiritual notions (ma`ani). If one takes the hadith to refer to a physical occurrence, then descent would be the attribute of the angel sent to carry out an order. If one takes it to refer to a spiritual occurrence, that is, first He did not act, then He acted: this would be called a descent from one rank to another, and this is a sound Arabic meaning.

In sum the hadith is interpreted in two ways: the first is: His command or His angel descends; the second is: it is a metaphor for His regard for supplicants, His answering them, and so forth.

Abu Bakr ibn Furak has said that some of the masters have read it yunzilu - "He sends down" - instead of yanzilu - "He descends" - that is, He sends down an angel. This is strengthened by al-Nasa'i's narration through al-Aghurr from Abu Hurayra and Abu Sa`id al-Khudri: "Allah waits until the first part of the night is over, then He orders a herald to say: Is there anyone supplicating so that he may be answered?..." [19] There is also the hadith of `Uthman ibn Abi al-`As: "The gates of heaven are opened in the middle of the night and a herald calls out: Is there anyone supplicating so that he may be answered?..." [20] Al-Qurtubi said: "This clears all ambiguity, and there is no interference by the narration of Rifa`a al-Juhani whereby "Allah descends to the nearest heaven and says: I do not ask about My servants anyone besides Myself," [21] for there is nothing in this which precludes the above-mentioned interpretation.

Al-Baydawi said:

Since it is established with decisive proofs that the Exalted is transcendent above having a body or being circumscribed by boundaries, it is forbidden to attribute to Him descent in the sense of displacement from one place to another place lower than it. What is meant is the light of His mercy: that is, He moves from what is pursuant to the attribute of Majesty entailing wrath and punishment, to what is pursuant to the attribute of Generosity entailing kindness and mercy." [22]

Some Misleading Reports From the Salaf

One of the Jahmi scholars said to Ishaq ibn Rahuyah: "I disbelieve in a Lord that descends from one heaven to another heaven," whereupon he replied: "I believe in a Lord that does what He wishes." [23] This response is also narrated from Fudayl ibn `Iyad, Yahya ibn Ma`in, and al-Awza`i. [24] Al-Bayhaqi narrates the incident with a sound chain through al-Hakim from Ishaq ibn Rahuyah, and he identifies the Jahmi scholar as Ibrahim ibn Abi Salih, then comments: "Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Hanzali made it clear, in this report, that he considers the descent (al-nuzul) one of the attributes of action (min sifat al-fi`l). Secondly, he spoke of a descent without `how'. This proves he did not hold displacement (al-intiqal) and movement from one place to another (al-zawal) concerning it." [25]

Beyond disputation or misleading concision, Ahl al-Sunna accept and believe all the authentic reports that came from the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him --, including the hadith of Allah's "descent" to the nearest heaven, and they believe, at the same time, in a Lord that does what He wishes and befits Him. This was elaborated by Ibn Jahbal al-Kilabi in his lengthy refutation of Ibn Taymiyya's belief on Allah's "direction" (jiha), "aboveness" (fawqiyya), and "descent" (nuzul).

No doubt related to the above is Ibn Taymiyya's addition from Ibn Rahuyah whereby he said: "He is able to descend without the Throne being vacant of Him" (yaqdiru an yanzila min ghayri an yakhlua al-`arshu minhu)! This is identical

with Hammad ibn Zayd's reported view that "He is in His place and He comes near His servants however He wishes" (huwa fi makanihi yaqrubu min khalqihi kayfa sha'). [26] Ibn Taymiyya also attributes this position to Ibn Mandah [27] - Abu Bakr al-Najjad's student - who composed a book he named al-Radd `Ala Man Za`ama Anna Allaha Fi Kulli Makan Wa `Ala Man Za`ama Anna Allaha Laysa Lahu Makan, Wa `Ala Man Ta'awwala al-Nuzula `Ala Ghayri al-Nuzul ("Refutation of Those Who Claim That Allah Is In Every Place, and Of Those Who Claim That He Is Not In Any Place, and Of Those Who Interpret the Descent to Mean Other than the Descent"). [28]

AL-KHATTABI'S COMMENTARY

Bayhaqi follows up on the narration of Ibn Rahuyah's reply with the following explanation by Abu Sulayman al-Khattabi:

One does not imagine of the descent of One Who is not governed by the attributes of bodies that it pertains to the meanings of a descent from top to bottom, or a displacement from above to below. It is only a report of His power and benevolence towards His creatures, His pity for them, His responsiveness to their supplications, and His forgiveness of them. He does what He wishes, modality is not applied to His attributes, nor quantity to His acts. Glory to Him! {There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.} (42:11)... And the position of all the Predecessors concerning the above is just as we said, and it was narrated thus from a group of the Companions. [29] One of the shaykhs among the hadith scholars who are foremost references in the knowledge of narrations and narrators slipped and turned away from this path when he narrated the hadith of descent and then remarked: `If someone asks how our Lord descends to the heaven, the answer is: He descends as He wishes; if he asks: Does He move (hal yataharrak) when He descends? The answer is: If He wishes, He moves, and if He does not wish, He does not move.' And this is a gross and crucial mistake (khata' fahish `azim)! For Allah Almighty is not described by movement, since movement and stillness follow one after the other in the same entity: it is specifically possible to attribute movement to whatever can be attributed stillness, and both of them are among the accidents of originated matter (min a`rad al-hadath) and the attributes of creatures. Whereas Allah is exalted high above them, {There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him.} (42:11) If that shaykh had trodden the path of the pious Predecessors and had not ventured into what is of no concern to him, he would not have come out with a statement such as this gross mistake. I only mentioned this so that such manner of talk should be cautiously avoided, for it does not result in good nor in the benefit of guidance. We ask Allah protection from misguidance, from speaking in prohibited terms, falsehood, and impossibilities. [30]

Al-Khattabi in his commentary on Abu Dawud also states:

This [hadith] belongs to the knowledge in whose outward expression we have been ordered to believe and not seek to disclose its inward sense. It is one of the many ambiguities (mutashabih) which Allah has mentioned in His book. [31]

AL-MATURIDI, IBN HAZM, AND IBN `ABD AL-WAHHAB

Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333) said: "To suggest a place for Allah is idolatry." [32] Similarly Ibn Hazm al-Zahiri - the declared enemy of the Ash`ari school - said: "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." [33] He further states:

[Allah's descent] is an act which Allah Almighty and Exalted does in the nearest heaven pertaining to an opening for the acceptance of supplication. It refers to the fact that that hour is the likeliest time for acceptance, answer, and forgiveness for those who strive, seek forgiveness, and repent. [34]

Even Sulayman ibn `Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab (the brother of the founder of the Wahhabi Sect - Ibn Abdul Wahhab - editor) declared as an unbeliever anyone who attributed place to Allah: "Whoever believes or says: Allah is in person (bi dhatihi) in every place, or in one place, is a disbeliever (kafir)." [35] Accordingly Hammad ibn Zayd's statement that "He is in His place and He comes near His servants however He wishes," if authentic, must

be interpreted in a way to suggest other than the ascription of place, as did al-Bayhaqi with Ibn Rahuyah's answer to the Jahmi. [36]

IBN `ABD AL-BARR'S CONTROVERSY

Literalists often quote Ibn `Abd al-Barr's controversial words on the hadith of descent in al-Tamhid:

The hadith [of Allah's descent] provides evidence that Allah is in (fi) the heaven, on (`ala) the Throne, above (fawq) seven heavens, as the Congregation (jama`a) said, and this is part of their proof against the Mu`tazila and the Jahmiyya's claim that Allah is in every place and not on the Throne....

Part of the right owed Allah's Speech is that it be taken in its literal sense (`ala haqiqatihi), until the Community concurs that what is meant is the metaphorical meaning, when there is no way to follow what is revealed to us from our Lord except in that way....

Istawa is known in the language and understood to be height (`uluw), rising above something, fixity in a place (al-tamkin), and settledness in it (al-istiqrar fihi)... and istawa is "settledness in height" (al-istiqrar fi al-`uluw). Allah said to us: That you may mount upon (tastawu) their backs, and may remember your Lord's favor when you mount (istawaytum) thereon (43:13), And it (the ship) came to rest (istawat) upon (the mount) al-Judi (11:44), and And when you are on board (istawayta) the ship, you and whoso is with you (23:28). [37]

IBN AL-`ARABI'S REFUTATION OF IBN `ABD AL-BARR

The above was firmly rejected by Ibn al-`Arabi in his commentary on the hadith of descent in al-Tirmidhi:

Some ignorant people have trespassed bounds in interpreting this hadith, claiming there is proof in it that Allah "is in the Heaven, on the Throne, above the seven heavens." We say that this is a sign of tremendous ignorance.

What the hadith said is "He descends to Heaven" without specifying from where He descends or how He descends. Yet they said - and their proof is, again, based on the literal sense - {The Merciful established Himself over the Throne} (20:4).

We ask: What is the Throne in Arabic, and what is istawa?

They reply: As Allah said: That you may mount upon (tastawu) their backs, and may remember your Lord's favor when you mount (istawaytum) thereon (43:13).

We say: Allah is Mighty and Higher than to have His istiwa' on His Throne compared to our sitting on the backs of animals.

They say: And as He said: And it (the ship) came to rest (istawat) upon (the mount) al-Judi (11:44).

We say: Allah is Mighty and Higher than a ship that sailed and then docked and stopped.

They said: And as He said: And when you are on board (istawayta) the ship, you and whoso is with you (23:28).

We say: Allah forbid that His istiwa' be similar to that of Noah and his people. Everything in the latter case is created, as it consists in istiwa' with an elevation and a settling in a place involving physical contact. The entire Umma is in agreement, even before hearing the hadith of descent and the arguments of those who rejected it, that Allah's istiwa' does not involve any of those things. Therefore do not give examples from His creation for Him!...

They say: Allah said: {"He rules all affairs from the Heaven to the Earth} (32:5).

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We say: This is true, but it does not provide any proof for your innovation.

They say: All the firm believers in the Oneness of Allah raise their hands to the Heavens when supplicating him, and if Musa had not said to Pharaoh: "My Lord is in the Heaven," Pharaoh would not have said: {O Haman... set up for me a lofty tower in order that I may survey the god of Moses} (28:38).

We say: You are lying about Musa (, he never said that. But 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.

They say: What about Umayya ibn Abi al-Salt who said: "Glory to Him Whom creatures are unable to know in the way He deserves to be known, Who is on His Throne, One and One Alone, Sovereign and Possessor over the Throne of Heaven, unto Whose Majesty faces are humbled and prostrate"? And he - Umayya - had read the Torah, the Bible, and the Psalms.

We say: It is just like you, in your ignorance, to cite as proof, first Pharaoh, then the discourse of a pre-Islamic Arab supported by the Torah and the Bible, which have been distorted and changed. Of all of Allah's creation the Jews are the most knowledgeable in disbelief and in likening Allah to creation. [38]

What we must believe is that Allah existed and nothing existed with Him; that He created all creation, including the Throne, without becoming subject to disclosure through them, nor did a direction arise for Him because of them, nor did He acquire a location in them; that He does not become immanent, that He does not cease to be transcendent, that he does not change, and that He does not move from one state to another.

Istiwa' in the Arabic language has fifteen meanings both literal and figurative. Some of these meanings are suitable for Allah and the meaning of the verse (20:4) is derived from them. The other meanings are not accepted under any circumstances. For example, if it is taken to mean being fixed in a place (tamakkun), settling (istiqrar), connecting (ittisal), or being bounded (muhadhat): then none of these are suitable for the Creator Almighty and Exalted and no one should try to find His likeness in His creation.

One may refrain from explaining the verse, as Malik and others have said: "Istiwa' is known" - he means: its lexical sense- "and its modality is unknown" (wa al-kayfu majhul) [39] - that is: the modality of whatever is suitable for Allah among the senses of istiwa': therefore who can specify such modality? - "and asking about it is innovation" - because, as we have just made clear, probing this matter is looking for dubious matters and that is asking for fitna.

Hence, from what the Imam of Muslims Malik has said, we can conclude that the istiwa' is known; that what is suitable for Allah is left unspecified; and that He is declared transcendent above what is impossible for Him. As for specifying what is not suitable for Him, it is not permissible for you, since you have completed the declaration of oneness and belief by negating likeness for Allah and by negating whatever it is absurd to believe concerning Him. There is no need for anything beyond that, and we have already explained this in detail.

As for the phrases: "He descends, He comes, He arrives," and similar ones whose meanings it is impermissible to apply to His Essence: they refer to His actions... Al-Awza`i explained this when he said, about this hadith: "Allah does what he wishes." [40] It suffices to know or simply to believe that Allah is not to be defined by any of the characteristics of creatures and that there is nothing in His creation that resembles Him and no interpretation that can explain Him.

They said: We must say "He descends" without asking how. We say: We seek refuge in Allah from asking how! We only say whatever Allah's Messenger -- Allah bless and greet him -- has taught us to say and what we have understood from the Arabic language in which the Qur'an was revealed. And the Prophet said: "Allah says: O My servant, I was ailing and you did not visit me, I was hungry and you did not feed me, I was thirsty and you did not give me drink..." [41] None of this is suitable of Allah whatsoever, but He has honored all these actions by expressing them through Him. In the same way, the saying "Our Lord descends" expresses that His servant and angel descends in His name with His order pertaining to whatever He bestows of His Mercy, gives out of His generosity, and showers His creation out of His bounty.

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The poet says:

I have descended - therefore do not suspect me of jealousy! - in the station of the generous lover. [42]

A descent can be either figurative or physical. The descending that Allah spoke about, if understood as physical, would mean His angel, Messenger, and slave. However, if you can understand it to mean that He was not doing any of this and that He then turned to do it in the last third of the night, thereby answering prayers, forgiving, bestowing, and that He has named this "descending from one degree to another and from one attribute to another," then that - ironically - is addressed to those who have more knowledge than you and more intelligence, who are firmer in belief in Allah's Unity and are less confused than you - nay, who are not confused at all! [43]

They say in ignorance that if He meant the descending of his Mercy he would not make that only in the last third of the night, because His Mercy descends day and night. We say: Yes, he singled out the night, and the day of `Arafa, and the hour of Jum`a, because the descent of His mercy in them is more abundant, and its bestowal is even greater than. Allah told us of this when He said: {And those who beg forgiveness in the early hours of the morning} (3:17). [44]

AL-`IRAQI AND IBN JAHBAL'S DISMISSAL OF IBN `ABD AL-BARR

The Renewer of the eighth Islamic century and teacher of Ibn Hajar, Shaykh al-Islam Zayn al-Din al-`Iraqi said about Ibn `Abd al-Barr: "He is one of those who hold that Allah has a direction, therefore beware of him." [45] The Shafi`i Imam Ibn Jahbal al-Kilabi indicated Ibn `Abd al-Barr's isolation from the position of most scholars, particularly Malikis, on the questions of istiwa' and descent:

Concerning what Abu `Umar ibn `Abd al-Barr said, both the elite and the general public know the man's position and the scholars' disavowal of it. The Malikis' condemnation of it, from the first to the last of them, is well-known. His contravention (mukhalafa) of the Imam of North Africa, Abu al-Walid al-Baji, is famous. [46] It reached a point that the eminent people of North Africa would say: `No-one in North Africa holds this position except he and Ibn Abi Zayd!' although some of the people of knowledge cited an excuse for Ibn Abi Zayd in the text of the great qadi Abu Muhammad `Abd al-Wahhab [ibn `Ali ibn Nasr al-Baghdadi (d. 422)] al-Baghdadi al-Maliki [47] - may Allah have mercy on him. [48]

AL-QARI'S RECAPITULATION

Al-Qari commented the following on the hadith of descent:

"Our Lord descends" means that His command descends to one or more of His angels, or that His herald descends.

"Blessed and Exalted is He" means: Abundant are His goodness, Mercy, and the marks of His beauty. Also, He is exalted above the attributes of creatures pertaining to ascent and descent, and elevated with His splendor, magnificence, and majesty above the properties of contingency. It was said that "Blessed and Exalted" are parenthetical clauses inserted between the verb and its circumstantial modifier [of time, place, etc.] to warn about transcendence, so that no-one falsely imagine that the attribution of the modifier to the verb is real.

"Every night to the lowest heaven": Ibn Hajar said: "Meaning His order and mercy descend, or His angels." [49] This is the figurative interpretation of Imam Malik [50] and others; it is indicated by the sound narration: "Allah waits until the first part of the night is over, then He orders a herald (munadiyan) to say: Is there anyone supplicating so that he may be answered, etc." [51] A second figurative interpretation - also attributed to Imam Malik - is that it is a metaphor (isti`ara) to signify turning to (iqbal) [52] the supplicant with fulfillment, kindness, mercy, and the acceptance of remorse in the manner of the generous, especially kings when they alight near the needy and weak.

Al-Nawawi said in Sharh Sahih Muslim:

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There are, concerning this hadith and those like it among the hadiths and verses of the divine Attributes, two well-known schools of thought. The school of the vast majority of the Salaf and some of the scholars of kalam holds that we must believe in their reality according to what befits Allah Almighty and Exalted, but that the literal import we commonly apply to ourselves is not meant, nor do we say anything to interpret them figuratively, believing firmly that Allah is utterly transcendent above the properties of contingency (huduth). [53] The second school is that of the majority of the scholars of kalam and a number of the Salaf - related from Malik and al-Awza`i - and holds that they are interpreted figuratively but only according to their appropriate contextual meanings. On that basis, this hadith has two interpretations. [54]

Then he cited the two interpretations we mentioned above. From what he said, as well as from the words of the godly scholar Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi, Imam al-Haramayn, al-Ghazzali, and others both among our own Imams and the rest, it is understood that the two schools agree upon the dismissal of the literal meaning of the following: the "coming" (al-maji'), the "form" (al-sura), the "person" (al-shakhs), the "leg" (al-rijl), the "foot" (al-qadam), the "hand" (al-yad), the "face" (al-wajh), "anger" (al-ghadab), "mercy" (al-rahma), the "establishment over the Throne" (al-istiwa' `ala al-`arsh), the "being in the heaven" (al-kawn fi al-sama'), and others. Understood literally, all these would necessarily result in definitely false impossibilities entailing positions whose status is disbelief (kufr) by Consensus. Due to this, all of the Khalaf and Salaf were compelled to dismiss the literal meaning of the word.

They differed only with regard to the following: Should we dismiss the literal meaning while believing firmly that Allah Almighty and Exalted described Himself with whatever befits His majesty and magnificence, without interpreting it figuratively as something else? This is the way of most of the Salaf, and it involves a non-specific type of figurative interpretation (ta'wil ijmalī). Or should we dismiss the literal meaning while believing firmly that Allah Almighty and Exalted described Himself with whatever befits His majesty and magnificence, and interpreting it figuratively as something else? This is the way of most of the Khalaf, and it consists in a specific type of figurative interpretation (ta'wil tafsilī). [55]

The Khalaf did not want, in adopting the latter, to deliberately contravene the pious Salaf - we seek refuge in Allah from such a notion about them! However, it was only out of the necessity in which their times placed them, because of the abundance of the mujassima and Jahmiyya among other misguided sects, and their sway over the minds of the general public. By adopting specific figurative interpretation, they aimed to deter them and prove their doctrines false. Thereafter, many of them expressed regret and said: "If we had the pious Salaf's purity of doctrine and enjoyed the scarcity of naysayers which they enjoyed in their time, we would not probe into the figurative interpretation of any of these."

It is by now clear that Malik and al-Awza`i - major figures of the Salaf - interpreted this hadith in its specifics. Similarly did Sufyan al-Thawri interpret istiwa' over the Throne as the decision of Allah's command, its equivalent being {Then turned He (thumma istawa) to the heaven when it was smoke} (41:11). [56] Among those who did the same is Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq. Indeed a whole group of them, as well as later scholars, said that whoever believes Allah to be in a particular physical direction is an unbeliever, as al-`Iraqi has explicitly stated, saying:

This is the position of Abu Hanifa, Malik, al-Shafi`i, al-Ash`ari, and al-Baqillani. All the groups have agreed upon interpreting such texts as {And He is with you wheresoever you may be} (57:4), {There is no secret conference of three but He is their fourth[, nor of five but He is their sixth, nor of less than that or more but He is with them wheresoever they may be]} (58:7), {Wheresoever you turn, there is Allah's countenance} (2:115), {We are nearer to him than his jugular vein} (50:16), "There is no heart except it lies between the two fingers of the Merciful," [57] and "The Black Stone is Allah's right hand on earth." [58] This agreement makes plain to the reader the validity of the authorities' decision that the pause in the verse

{None knows its explanation (ta'wil) save Allah And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge [They] say: We believe therein}[59] (3:7)

is after the clause "who are firmly grounded in knowledge," not Allah's name. [60]

I say: The vast majority consider that the pause comes at Allah's name, and have declared it a mandatory pause (waqf lazim).⁶¹ This is the literal meaning, for ta'wil is the meaning which Allah Almighty and Exalted meant, and in reality none knows that meaning except Allah Almighty and Exalted, and there is no God beside Him. One that speaks

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concerning its meaning is speaking only according to what is shown to him, and no-one can say: "This interpretation is what Allah meant" categorically. [62]

The disagreement, in the final analysis, is verbal. Hence, many of the latter-day authoritative scholars have avoided designating the interpretation (ta`yin al-ta`wil) as any given item among the suitable items of a word, leaving its designation to Allah's knowledge. This is a median position between the two schools and a pleasing taste of the two springs. Ibn Daqiq al-`Id chose another median position, saying:

If interpretation stems from an evident and prevalent figurative understanding, then it ought to be applied without reserve. If it stems from a far-fetched, aberrant figurative understanding, then it ought to be left out. If one is as good as the other, then difference in its permissibility or impermissibility is a matter of juridical effort. This matter does not present any danger to the two sides of the argument.

I say: Reserving judgment in this matter is only for lack of a preponderant alternative, although reserving judgment is supported by the position of the Salaf, among them the Greatest Imam [Abu Hanifa], and Allah knows best.

Al-Qadi [`Iyad] said:

What is meant by His descent is the approach of His Mercy, the increase of His kindness toward His servants, and the acceptance of their contrition, in the custom of generous kings and clement liege-lords when they alight near a needy, suffering and weak people.

It was narrated: "Allah comes down from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven." [63] That is: He shifts from all that is necessitated by the Attributes of Majesty - such as the rejection of the arrogant, indifference to them, the subduing of enemies, and the exacting of punishment from the wicked - to all that is necessitated by the Attributes of Beauty, such as forbearance, mercy, the acceptance of contrition, gentleness toward the destitute, fulfillment of needs, leniency and alleviation in the commands and prohibitions, and pardon towards apparent sins. Hence it was said that this is a figural manifestation (tajalli suri) and not a real descent (nuzul haqiqi). The difficulty is thereby resolved, and Allah knows best. [64]

NOTES

1. Narrated from Abu Hurayra by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, Ahmad, Malik, and al-Darimi. It is narrated from twenty-three Companions, as stated by al-Kattani in Nazm al-Mutanathir.
2. Ibn `Asakir, Tabyin Kadhīb al-Muftari (p. 151).
3. As quoted by al-Bayhaqi in al-Asma' wa al-Sifat (Hashidi ed. 2:371).
4. Ibn al-Juwayni, al-Nizamiyya (p. 20).
5. Narrated from Abu Sa`id al-Khudri and Abu Hurayra by al-Nasa'i in al-Sunan al-Kubra (6:124 #10316) and `Amal al-Yawm wa al-Layla (ed. Faruq Hammada p. 340 #482). Al-Qari declared it sound in Mirqat al-Mafatih (1994 ed. 3:299).
6. Narrated by al-Bazzar, Kashf al-Astar (4:44); al-Tabarani, al-Kabir (9:51). Al-Haythami declared it sound in Majma` al-Zawa'id (10:209). Also narrated - with a weak chain - by Ahmad in his Musnad.
7. Narrated from Habib ibn Abi Habib by al-Dhahabi in Syar A`lam al-Nubala' (8:418), but al-Dhahabi himself reported in Mizan al-I`tidal (1:452) that all of Ibn Abi Habib's narrations are forged. This is an extreme statement in light of Ibn `Abd al-Barr's mention of Habib in al-Tamhid (24:177) as merely weak, and he adds: "His reports from Malik are full of mistakes and condemned matters." However, Ibn `Abd al-Barr in al-Tamhid (7:143) also narrates this report from Habib, then goes on to narrate it from Mutarrif with a sound chain, adding: "It is possible that the matter be as Malik said, and Allah knows best." The "Salafis" reject the report because of Habib's weakness, but Mutarrif's chain does not contain him.
8. As mentioned by al-Tirmidhi in his Sunan (Book of zakat, hadith "Verily, Allah accepts the zakat and takes it with His right Hand..."), Ibn al-Jawzi in his Daf` Shubah al-Tashbih (p. 195-196), al-Dhahabi in Syar A`lam al-Nubala' (al-Arna'ut ed. 8:105), Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, al-Jami` (p. 124), and others.
9. Al-Bayhaqi, al-Asma' wa al-Sifat (Kawthari ed. p. 456, Hashidi ed. 2:380).
10. Ibn al-Jawzi, Daf` Shubah al-Tashbih (p. 196).

11. Ibid. (p. 192).
12. Narrated from Abu Hurayra by Bukhari and Muslim: "I am as My servant thinks of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me. If he mentions Me in Himself I mention him in Myself. If he mentions Me in a gathering, I mention him in a better gathering. If he comes near Me one hand-span (shibran) I come near him one cubit (dhira`an). If he comes near Me one cubit I come near him an arm's length (ba`an). If he comes to Me walking, I come to him running."
13. Al-Baji, al-Muntaqa (1:357).
14. See the al-Baji's explanation of this hadith in the post "Abu al-Walid al-Baji."
15. Ibn `Abd al-Salam, al-Ishara ila al-Ijaz (p. 106).
16. `Abd al-`Aziz bin Baz inserted the following footnote at this point: "What he means by `the vast majority of the scholars' is the vast majority of the scholars of kalam. As for Ahl al-Sunna - and these are the Companions and those who followed them in excellence - they assert a direction for Allah, and that is the direction of height, believing that the Exalted is above the Throne without giving an example and without entering into modality. The proofs from the Qur'an and the Sunna for this are innumerable, so take heed and beware. And Allah knows best."
17. Ibn Hajar elsewhere reports Ibn Daqiq al-`Id's words in full: "We say concerning the various attributes that they are real and true according to the meaning Allah wills for them. As for those who interpret them, we look at their interpretation: if it is close to the rules of language in use among the Arabs we do not reject it, and if it is far from them we relinquish it and return to believing while declaring transcendence." In Fath al-Bari (1959 ed. 13:383).
18. Again Bin Baz here interjects: "This is an obvious mistake which goes against the plain import of the texts that have come to us concerning the descent, and likewise what is cited of Baydawi later is null and void. The correct position is that of the Pious Salaf who believed in the descent and let the texts pass as they came to them, affirming Allah's descent in the sense that befits Him, without asking how nor giving an example, just as the rest of His attributes. That is the safest, straightest, most knowledgeable, and wisest way. Therefore hold on to it, cling to it stubbornly, and beware what contravenes it so that you may reach safety. And Allah knows best." The gist of these remarks is that Bin Baz refuses to preclude displacement from Allah.
19. See above, n. 5
20. See above, n. 6.
21. Narrated from Rifa`a ibn `Araba al-Juhani as part of a longer hadith by al-Darimi in his Musnad, Ahmad in his, al-Nasa'i in `Amal al-Yawm wa al-Layla, Ibn Majah in his Sunan, al-Tabarani in al-Kabir (5:49-51 #4556-4558), Ibn Hibban with a sound chain in his Sahih according to al-Arna'ut (1:444 #212), al-Tayalisi in his Musnad (p. 182 #1292), al-Bazzar in his. Al-Haythami in Majma` al-Zawa'id (10:408) said that some of al-Tabarani's and al-Bazzar's chains are sound.
22. Ibn Hajar, Fath al-Bari (1989 ed. 3:37-38; 1959 ed. 3:32-33 #1094).
23. Narrated by al-Dhahabi who identifies the scholar as Ibrahim ibn [Hisham] Abi Salih in Mukhtasar al-`Uluw (p. 191 #234).
24. See n. 40.
25. In al-Asma' wa al-Sifat (2:375-376 #951),
26. Quoted in al-Dhahabi, Siyar (8:213).
27. Al-Dhahabi in Mizan al-`itidal (3:479) said of Ibn Mandah: "He became confused towards the end of his life... and attributed to a number of scholars sayings pertaining to doctrine which they were not known to hold."
28. In Majmu` Fatawa Ibn Taymiyya (5:376-380).
29. Jubayr ibn Mut`im, Abu Bakr, `Ali, Ibn Mas`ud, `Ubada ibn al-Samit, Rufa`a ibn `Uraba, Jabir, `Uthman ibn Abi al-`As, Abu al-Darda', Anas, `Amr ibn `Abasa, Ibn `Abbas, Umm Salama, Abu Musa al-Ash`ari, and others, see al-Daraqutni's monograph which compiles all their narrations.
30. As quoted by al-Bayhaqi in al-Asma' wa al-Sifat (2:378-379 #956).
31. Al-Khattabi, Ma`alim al-Sunan (Hims ed. 5:101).
32. Quoted in Abu Hanifa, Kitab al-Fiqh al-Akbar bi Sharh al-Qari (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-`Arabiyya al-Kubra, 1327/1909) p. 16; cf. al-Maturidi, Sharh al-Fiqh al-Akbar in Majmu`a Rasa'il (Hyderabad: Matba`at Majlis Da'irat al- Ma`arif al-Nizamiyya, 1903).
33. In al-Fisal fi al-Milal (2:125).
34. As cited in al-Kawthari's marginalia on Daf` Shubah al-Tashbih (1998 repr. p. 50). Note that `Uthman ibn Sa`id al-Darimi stated: "We do not concede that all actions are created.... The descent, the walking, the running (al-harwala), and the establishment on the Throne and to the heaven are eternal without beginning (qadim)." In his Naqd al-Jahmiyya (Cairo, 1361/1942 p. 121) as quoted in al-Kawthari's Maqalat (p. 314). Ibn Hazm rejected this position in al-Fisal (2:124): "If the establishment on the Throne is eternal without beginning, then the

- Throne is eternal without beginning, and this is disbelief."
35. In al-Tawdih `an Tawhid al-Khallaq Fi Jawab Ahl al-`Iraq (1319/1901) p.
 36. New ed.: al-Riyad: Dar Tibah, 1984.
 37. Note that in our time Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani revived the claim that Allah is in a place above the Throne which he called al-makan al-`adami ("the inexistential place") in his introduction to al-Dhahabi's Mukhtasar al-`Uluw. He was refuted by Shaykh Hasan `Ali al-Saqqaf in his book Talqih al-Fuhum al-`Aliya ("The Inculcation of Lofty Discernment").
 38. Ibn `Abd al-Barr, al-Tamhid (7:128-131). See also al-Haytami's fatwa "Is it permissible to say that `Allah is in the heaven'?" and Nuh Keller's article "Is it permissible for a Muslim to believe that `Allah is in the sky' in a literal sense?" as well as the discussion on istiwa' in the forthcoming post, "Istiwa' is a Divine Act".
 39. Umayya ibn Abi al-Salt recited a funeral eulogy for the disbelievers who died at Badr and died during the siege of al-Ta'if. Ibn Hajar said in al-Isaba (1:133 #549): "There is no contest among the authorities in history that Umayya ibn Abi Salt died an unbeliever."
 40. This wording is not established as authentic: See the relevant discussion in our biographical notice on Imam Malik - Allah be well-pleased with him.
 41. Also related from Ishaq ibn Rahuyah as narrated by al-Bayhaqi in al-Asma' wa al-Sifat (2:375-376 #951) and al-Dhahabi in Mukhtasar al-`Uluw (p. 191 #234) and the Siyar (9:558 #1877); Fudayl ibn `Iyad as related from al-Athram by Bukhari in Khalq Af`al al-`Ibad (p. 14); Yahya ibn Ma`in as cited by Lalika'i in Sharh Usul I`tiqad Ahl al-Sunna. The latter two are cited by Ibn Taymiyya in Majmu`a al-Fatawa (5:377).
 42. Narrated from Abu Hurayra by Muslim and Ahmad.
 43. The scholars also often quote al-Shafi`i's saying that when he first arrived in Egypt they did not understand him, whereupon "I descended, and descended, and descended until they understood me."
 44. Imam Malik said: "It is our Lord's command which descends." Narrated by Ibn `Abd al-Barr himself in al-Tamhid (7:143) from Mutarrif with a sound chain. He then admits: "It is possible that the matter be as Malik said, and Allah knows best."
 45. Ibn al-`Arabi, Arida al-Ahwadhi (2:234-237).
 46. In Tarh al-Tathrib (2:382).
 47. Imam Abu al-Walid al-Baji, Sulayman ibn Khalaf al-Maliki al-Qurtubi.
 48. Perhaps a reference to his commentary on Ibn Abi Zayd's Risala (Dibaj p. 262).
 49. In Tabaqat al-Shafi`iyya al-Kubra (9:78).
 50. In Fath al-Bari (1959 ed. 3:32 #1094), as quoted above.
 51. See n. 7.
 52. See n. 5.
 53. Attributed to Hammad ibn Zayd by al-Bayhaqi (al-Asma' wa al-Sifat, al-Kawthari ed. p. 456, al-Hashidi ed. 2:380) as stated.
 54. Note the strong affirmation of both the reality of the Attributes and Allah's transcendence which is the mark of the accomplished scholars of Ahl al-Sunna in doctrine.
 55. Al-Nawawi, Sharh Sahih Muslim, Book of Salat al-Musafirin wa Qasruha.
 56. See al-Buti's excellent discussion of these two types in al-Salafiyya (p. 132-144), translated in Shaykh Hisham Kabbani's Islamic Beliefs and Doctrine According to Ahl al-Sunna (p. 117-134) and his Encyclopedia of Islamic Knowledge (1:106-119).
 57. "The understanding of istiwa' as Allah's turning to a particular command concerning the Throne is not far-fetched, and this is the ta'wil of Imam Sufyan al-Thawri, who took as corroborating evidence for it the verse: {Then turned He to the heaven when it was smoke} (41:11), meaning: "He proceeded to it" (qasada ilayha)." In al-Yafi`i, Marham al-`Ilal (p. 245) and Abu al-Ma`ali Ibn al-Juwayni, al-Irshad (p. 59-60).
 58. Narrated from `Abd Allah ibn `Amr by Muslim, from Anas by al-Tirmidhi (hasan sahih), and from al-Nawwas ibn Sam`an by Ahmad, al-Nasa'i, Ibn Majah, Ibn Hibban in his Sahih, al-Hakim, and others, all with sound chains. Al-Hakim declared the hadith sound and al-Dhahabi concurred. The continuation of the hadith states that the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him -- used to say: "O Transformer of hearts! Make firm our hearts in Your Religion," and that he also said: "And the balance is in the Merciful's hand, He elevates a people while he abases others, and so until the Day of Resurrection."
 59. Narrated from Ibn `Abbas, Jabir, Anas, and others by Ibn Abi `Umar al-Ma`dani in his Musnad, al-Tabarani, al-Suyuti in his Jami` al-saghir (1:516 #3804-3805), Ibn `Asakir in Tarikh Dimashq (15:90- 92), al-Khatib in Tarikh Baghdad (6:328), and others. It is considered forged by Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn `Adi (al-Kamil 1:342). Cf. al-Ahdab, Zawa'id Tarikh Baghdad (5:321-323 #949). However, al-`Ajluni stated that it is sahih as a halted report from Ibn `Abbas as narrated by al-Quda`i in the wording: "The Corner [of the Black Stone] (al-rukn) is Allah's Right Hand on earth..." and declared it hasan as a hadith of the Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him --.

- Ibn Qutayba in Ta'wil Mukhtalif al-Hadith (1972 ed. p. 215; 1995 ed. p. 198, 262) said that it was a saying of Ibn `Abbas and relates a saying of `A'isha that the Black Stone is the depository of the covenant of human souls with Allah on the Day of Promise (alastu bi rabbikum). Its mention in the Reliance of the Traveller (p. 853b) as "narrated by al-Hakim, who declared it sahih, from `Abd Allah ibn `Amr," is incorrect.
60. On the various positions on this question, see Ibn Kathir's Tafsir for this verse, Zakariyya al-Ansari's al-Muqsid li Talkhis Ma fi al-Murshid (p. 45) and especially al-Dani's (d. 444) al-Muktafa fi al-Waqf wa al-Ibtida'.
 61. As al-Qari goes on to say the majority stop at Allah's name, but both readings are possible, as stated by al-Suyuti in al-Itqan (1:264), al-Raghib in Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an, Zakariyya al-Ansari in al-Muqsid li Talkhis Ma fi al-Murshid (p. 45), al-Dani in al-Muktafa (p. 195-197), and others. The Prophet -- Allah bless and greet him -- defined {those who are firmly grounded in knowledge} (3:7) as "Those whose oaths are kept, whose tongues are truthful, whose hearts are upright, and whose stomachs and genitals are abstinent. They are among {those who are firmly grounded in knowledge}." Narrated from Abu al-Darda', Abu Umama, Wathila, and Anas by al-Tabarani in al-Kabir (8:152 #7658), and from Ibn `Abbas by al-Hakim (`Ata' ed. 8:152 #7658) with a sound chain as confirmed by al-Dhahabi.
 62. Among the Salaf, Ibn Qutayba in his Ta'wil Mukhtalif al-Hadith took the position chosen by al-`Iraqi. This is also the position of Dr. al-Buti in his book Min Rawa'i` al-Qur'an.
 63. Cf. Fakhr al-Islam al-Pazdawi's remarks: "For us [Maturidis], {those who are firmly grounded in knowledge} (3:7) have no share in the knowledge of the ambiguous content of Qur'an (al-mutashabih) other than to pure acquiescence (al-taslim), believing in the real nature of the meaning (haqqiyya al-murad) in Allah's presence and that the pause at His saying: {None knows its explanation save Allah} (3:7) is required (waqf wajib). The People of Belief belong to one of two levels in knowledge: some over-zealously demand that it be read without pause - those are tested with a form of ignorance - and some demand the pause - those are honored with a form of knowledge.... An example of the ambiguous verses are the individual letters that open certain suras. Another example is the affirmation of Allah's vision with the sight of the eyes in reality in the hereafter, according to the explicit text of the Qur'an: {On that day will faces be resplendent, looking towards their Lord} (75:22-23). For He exists with the attribute of perfection, and the fact that He can be seen both by Himself and others, is among the characteristics of perfection; moreover, the believer is apt to receive such bestowal of Allah's gift. However, the affirmation of direction is precluded (ithbat al-jiha mumtani'). It follows that the description of the vision is among the ambiguities, and so it is obligatory to acquiesce to it while believing in its reality. Similarly, the affirmation of the Hand and the Face are real (ithbat al-yad wa al-wajh haqq) in our school, known through its principle but ambiguous through its description (ma'lumun bi aslihi mutashabihun bi wasfihi). It will not be permitted to invalidate the principle on the grounds that one is unable to comprehend the description. The Mu'tazila went astray only in this respect, for they rejected the principles because of their ignorance of the Attributes - and they became nullifiers-of-Allah's-attributes (mu'attila')." In 'Ala' al-Din al-Bukhari's (d. 730) commentary on al-Pazdawi's Usul entitled Kashf al-Asrar (1:55-60). 'Ala' al-Din al-Bukhari comments: (1:60) "By saying: 'For us,' the Shaykh shunned the position of those who say: 'Allah is not to be described as possessing a face and hands, rather, what is meant by the face is contentment (al-rida) or the Essence (al-dhat) and the like; and what is meant by the hand is power or favor and the like.' The Shaykh therefore said: Rather, Allah is described with the attribute of Face and that of Hand, together with the upholding of His transcendence (tanzih) above having a form (sura) and a limb (jariha).... Similarly with the affirmation of modality (ithbat al-kayfiyya): its description is ambiguous, therefore it is obligatory to acquiesce to it, firmly believing in its reality without busying oneself with interpretation."
 64. Narrated from Abu al-Khattab by al-Tabarani in al-Kabir (22:370 #927) with a weak chain as indicated by al-Haythami in Majma` al-Zawa'id.
 65. Al-Qari, Mirqat al-Mafatih (1892 ed. 2:136-137, 1994 ed. 3:298-301).

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