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A Talk About The Speech Of Allah

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Verses 253 – 254**

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai

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The sentence, “***among them are some to whom Allah spoke***” (2:253), shows that Allah did speak to some people; it proves that an actual occurrence did happen, that it is not an allegory or analogy; and that Allah has named that occurrence His “speech”. We shall discuss this subject in two parts:

First: The words of Allah prove that all the blessings, bounties and distinctions which Allah has reserved for His prophets and apostles and which are hidden from other people’s perception, like revelation, speaking, the descent of the spirit and the angels, and the witnessing of the great divine signs; as well as the things which He has informed His prophets and apostles about, like the angels, Satan, the Tablet, the Pen, etc., are actual and factual things.

There is no allegory in their claims: when they said “angels” they did not mean “mental powers calling towards good”; when they talked about “revelation”, they were not referring to “the products of those mental powers”; the holy spirit and faithful spirit, in their language, were not used for “the highest degree of those mental powers from which pure thoughts rain down for the good of the human society”; Satan and jinn were not allegorical names for “base desire and unjustified anger which call towards evil and disorder”; “the whispering of slinking Satan” was not another name for “the evil thoughts which disrupt a good society or make one commit bad actions”; and so on.

The Qur'anic verses, as well as the declarations of the previous prophets, show in the clearest way that they used these words in their actual meanings, not in an allegorical style. Nobody, except an obstinate and reckless contender, can have any doubt about it – and we have not undertaken to convince such a contender! If such clear expressions were to be explained away in this way, then all the spiritual facts given by these apostles could be interpreted in purely materialistic terms, totally rejecting existence beyond the matter! We have discussed it in short in the topic of miracle.

Anyhow, divine speech is a factual and actual thing, and it creates the same result which is created by our talking. It may be explained as follows:

Allah has named some of His actions “speech” and “speaking”:

“And Allah spoke to Musa (directly) speaking (to him)” (4: 164).

“Among them are some to whom Allah spoke” (2:253).

And He has explained this vague expression in the verse:

“And it is not for any man that Allah should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger so that he reveals by His permission what He pleases” (42:51).

The exceptional clause, “except by revelation …”, would be meaningless unless the speaking (mentioned in “should speak to him”) is taken to mean real speaking. It then follows that the speaking by Allah is real, even though it may have a special style and method. In short, the principle of “speaking” by Allah is a reality and cannot be denied.

What is the reality of speech from our point of view? Man needs society and civilization, and, as a result, needs all the essential ingredients of co-operative civilization – and “speaking” is one of them. Nature has guided man to express his thoughts through the medium of the voice which is produced from his mouth. He has made various combinations of his voice as signs to describe various ideas which are produced in his mind. Needless to say that the only way to convey hidden ideas and thoughts to others is to appoint, and agree upon, some signs for them. Man needs speech because there is no method to understand, and make others understand, other than words, the variously mixed and combined sounds which have been agreed upon as signs, and made as tokens for objects and ideas. That is why a language is closely related to the developmental stage of the society which it serves. When the society develops, the language also widens its circle to cope with it. In this manner, languages develop and widen their circles in direct relation with the development stages of the respective societies.

Speech makes others understand what is in the mind of the speaker, through the medium of combined sounds; these sounds have been agreed upon, by the speaker and the listener, as tokens and signs to convey certain ideas.

It follows that man develops speech when he is with other men. (Also, some animals who live together in

colonies, and who have voices, use some particular sounds to express some particular feelings. This may be called their speech.) If there were a man completely cut off from other human beings, he would not need any speech, because there would be no need to communicate with others. Likewise, other creatures, who do not need any society or co-operation in their existences, do not need speech; two examples of this category are the angels and Satan.

It is certain that the speech of Allah does not emanate from Him as it does with us. The human voice issues from the larynx and arrives at particular sounds by movements of the tongue, teeth, jaws and lips, and interaction between them. And, what is more, our speech is only a sign or token which we have agreed upon; sounds, per se, have no value or meaning if there be no prior agreement as to what they mean. But Allah is too great in splendour and too high in glory to have any limb or organ, or to need help from such things as words, which have no real worth at all – whose value depends upon the agreement of the speaker and the listener. Allah has said:

“Nothing is like a likeness of Him” (42: 11).

Still, Allah in the verse mentioned earlier:

“And it is not for any man that Allah should speak to him except by revelation ...” (42:51).

Confirms for Himself the reality of speaking, although He disallows for Himself that speaking with which we are familiar. Allah dissociates Himself from that speech which is known to us and whose only value is that of a token or sign – which depends on agreed upon meanings. But He confirms speech for Himself with its particular effect. As the particular effect is the same, that is, making the other party understand the message, it can be called “speech” although it has no resemblance to our speech. It is like the words, scale, lamp and armament, which were made in old days for certain primitive tools and implements, and are now equally correctly used for new types of machine scales, electric bulbs and modern military hardware, because their effects are the same, even though the shapes are completely different.

The method by which Allah lets His apostles and prophets know what He intends to convey to them is His speech. But we have not been told what is its reality and how it happens. But, in any case, its effect is the same: making the listener understand the intended message.

Divine speech is a divine action, like His other actions – giving life and death, sustaining, guiding, forgiving, etc. In other words, it is an attribute of action, not an attribute of person like knowledge, power and life. (The attributes of persons are not other than the person-himself). As “speaking” is an attribute of action, like other such attributes, it may be described in terms of space and time. Allah has said:

“And when Musa came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said: “My Lord: show me (Thyself), so that I may look upon Thee.” He said: “You can never see Me” (7: 143).

“...and indeed, I created you before when you were nothing” (19:9).

“...then Allah said to them, Die; (and thereafter) He gave them life” (2:243);

“We give sustenance to you and to them” (6: 151).

“Our Lord is He Who gave to everything its creation, then guided it” (20:50).

“Then He turned to the (mercifully) that they might turn (to Him)” (9: 118).

In these verses the speech of Allah is qualified by the time and the place of its occurrence, like His other actions, e.g., creating, giving death, life and sustenance, guiding and turning towards His servants with mercy.

This explanation is enough for tafsir, which is the subject of our book. We shall comment shortly afterwards on theological disputes and philosophical arguments concerning this topic.

Here another aspect of this subject should be looked into. Allah has not used the words “speech” and “speaking” except about His talk with human beings. Of course, “word” and “words” have been used in other contexts. He has said:

“The Messiah, ‘Isa son of Maryam is but an apostle of Allah and His word which He communicated to Maryam” (4: 171).

Here, “word” has been used for a human being himself. Also, He says:

“And the word of your Lord that is the highest” (9:40).

“And the word of your Lord has been accomplished truly and justly” (6: 115).

“...the words of Allah will not come to an end” (31:27).

In these verses, “word” and “words” mean the decree of Allah, or some sort of creation.

The word, “saying”, has been used by Allah referring to His talk with human beings as well as with others. He says in connection with His talk:

- With man:

“So We said: “O Adam! Surely this is an enemy to you and to your wife” (20: 117).

- With angels:

“And when your Lord said to the angels: “I am going to place in the earth a khalifah”” (2:30).

“When your Lord said to the angels; “Surely I am going to create a man from dust”” (38:71).

- With Satan:

“He said: ‘O Iblis! what prevented thee that thou shouldst do obeisance to him whom I created with My two hands’” (38:75).

- With inanimate things:

“Then He directed Himself to the heaven and it was a vapour, so He said to it and to the earth: ‘Come both, willingly or unwillingly.’ They both said: ‘We come willingly’” (41:11).

“We said: ‘O Fire! be cold and a safety to Ibrahim’” (21:69).

“And it was said: ‘O earth! swallow down thy water, and O sky! withhold (thy rain) ...’” (11:44).

All the above, with their diversity, are included in the following two verses:

“His command, when He intends anything is only that He says to it: ‘Be’ and it is” (36:82).

“...when He has decreed a matter, He only says to it: ‘Be’ and it is” (19:35).

We find that Allah uses the word, “saying”, about His address to those who have reason and hearing power, like man, as well as to inanimate things which do not have such powers (as we understand them) like the earth and the sky. Also, it is clear that the last mentioned two verses are a sort of explanation to the previously mentioned verses.

On pondering on all these aspects, one finds out that the divine “saying” means creating a thing to show the intended meaning. So far as the matters of creation are concerned, when Allah creates a thing and brings it into existence, it exists. And the very thing is a “saying” of Allah, because it, by its existence, shows the particular intention of Allah for its creation. It is known that when He intends a thing and says to it: ‘Be’ and it comes into being, no word passes from the Creator to the thing created; there is in fact only the existence of the thing, and nothing else. Therefore, that is the thing created, and also it, in itself, is the word ‘Be’. In short, His saying, in matters of creation, is the creation itself, it is nothing separate from it.

In matters other than creation – for example, when He says something to a man – it means that He creates something which gives that man an inner knowledge of the intended message. It may be by creating a voice in a body [like in the tree, for His talk with Musa; and in the curtain of light, in the case of the Prophet Muhammad (S)]; or by some other method which we do not know, or whose modality we do not understand.

The same is, more or less, the case of His speaking to the angels or Satan. But there is an important difference.

Unlike our existence, the existence of the angels and Satan is not biological and social. As a result, they

do not achieve gradual perceptive perfection as we do. They do not have to make signs and tokens to indicate their intentions. When they want to understand, or make someone else understand, a thing it is not done through the medium of the voice. There is no combined sound, emanating from the larynx with inter-related actions by various parts of the mouth; and, also, there is no hearing, through a hole called the ear, receiving the sound from the air and conveying it through an intricate mechanism to the brain. Still, the reality of “saying” exists in both groups – and in their like, if there by any. And, as explained earlier, that reality is “making the addressee understand the intended message.”

In short, among the angels, as well as among the Satans, there is “saying”, but not like ours. Likewise, between Allah and the angels (and between Him and the Satans) there is “saying” but not through the medium of voice and word.

In the same way, we may explain the “saying” which is attributed in the Qur'an to the animals. For example, Allah says:

“...an ant said: “O ants! enter into your dwellings ...” (27: 18).

“...then said (the hoopoe): “I comprehend that which you do not comprehend, and I have brought to you a sure information from Sheba”” (27:22).

The same meaning may be applied in the cases where Allah “says” or “reveals” something to such animals. For example, And your Lord revealed to the bee, (saying):

“Make hives in the mountains and in the trees and in what they build” (16:68).

There are some other words synonymous, or near in meaning, to “saying” and “speaking”; for example, revealing, inspiring, informing and relating. Allah says:

“Surely, We have revealed to you as We revealed to Nuh and the prophets after him ...” (4: 163).

“And (I swear by) the soul and Him Who made it perfect” (91:7).

“Then He inspired it to understand what is wrong for it and right for it” (91:8).

“He (the Prophet) said: “Informed me the All-knowing, the All-aware”” (66:3).

“He relates the truth ...” (6:57).

The explanation, written in the beginning about the speech of Allah, applies to these words also: There is an actual and factual occurrence which Allah has named His, speaking, revealing and inspiring etc.; and it has the same effect that speaking, etc. has; it makes no difference whether we know its reality or not. (We shall have some further discussion about Revelation in chapter 42, God willing).

Even though the basic meaning is common to all the abovementioned words, their use is determined by

context, and its suitability for the literal meaning. An utterance is called “speech” when the main emphasis is on conveying the message to the listener’s mind; that is why this word had been used when Allah wanted to show the excellence and high status of the prophets, because, in this context, the emphasis is on communicating which naturally draws the attention to the recipient of the communication. It is called “saying” when the main attention is on the intended meaning; and it is for this reason that the creative and legislative decrees and commandments are called “saying”: He said,

“The truth then it is and the truth do I speak” (38:84).

“That I will most certainly fill hell with thee and with those of them who follow thee, all” (38:85).

And it is called “revelation” when it is hidden from others; and, therefore, the communication of the message to the prophets is named thus:

“Surely We have revealed to you as We revealed to Nuh and the prophets after him ...” (4: 163).

Second: How is the word “speaking” used? In the beginning, words were made for phenomena which can be perceived by one of the five senses. Gradually the meanings shifted towards those meaning which could be perceived by the mind only. When a word is made for a material thing is used for a mental process or a metaphysical meaning, it is in the beginning done with allegorical sense; but the continued use makes the latter its real meaning.

Likewise, the advancement of civilization and technology amends, improves and changes the tools and implements which are used by man. But even with such continuous changes and improvements, the name does not change. In old days, a “lamp” was a metal or earthen receptacle containing oil or fat in which a wick was placed and then lighted for illumination at night. From stage to stage it changed shape, technique and source of light; and now we have these electric bulbs, in which not a single thing of the original “lamp” remains.

Still, we call it and similar other things “lamp” because the purpose is the same; this apparatus illuminates the night as the original lamp did. So long as this basic purpose is served by a new apparatus the original name, “lamp”, is transferred to it in reality, not allegorically, even if all appearances have changed.

This example shows that a word is easily transferred to a change or new shape of the original form if the purpose of the original remains unchanged, and that this also will be its “real”, and not “allegorical”, meaning. Today, there are thousands and thousands of old names used for new items, and these names are treated as their real ones, not allegorical; because, in spite of radical changes in shapes and techniques, the original purpose has remained intact. Likewise, in every language there are countless words which were made for material things, and were later used for metaphysical objects – in reality, not as an allegory.

It shows that when the words “speaking” and “saying” are used in places where the effect is “letting the audience know the message” they are used in their real meaning. It is for this reason that we said earlier that when “saying” or “speaking” was attributed to Allah, it was used in its real sense. It is the same with other words which are used sometimes for Allah, and at other times for human beings, like life, knowledge, will, giving, withholding, etc. As the net result and effect of these words is found in the person and actions of Allah, they are attributed to Him in their real meanings, even though their modality and other aspects are totally different from what we understand from these words.

The same is the explanation of “exalting the apostles by degrees of rank”. This exalting is a real thing, and not just a thing found in the mind of the speaker. We have already explained the difference between real existence and the existence in mind, under the heading “Knowledge and Action” under verse 2:213. We gave there the example of the phrase “a man who is president”. Now “a man” has a real existence, but his “being president” is a thing found in the minds of people only. Such aspects have no existence outside the mind.

Many sincere men of religion have fallen into the error of thinking that this exalting by Allah is also like the above-mentioned presidency. Once they had committed themselves to this explanation, they had to say that the effects of that exalting (for example, the things of the next world – paradise, hell, the questioning, the reckoning etc.) had the same relationship with this exalting as the paraphernalia of the presidency have with the said office – that the said relationship was, so to say, in the mind of the speaker only; it had no existence outside. They did not realize that such an explanation lowers the dignity of God, reducing Him to a position of sub-ordinate to His own suppositions and thoughts – Glorified is He from such sacrilegious imputations.

Such people, because of that basic error, are not ready to believe that the prophets of Allah and His chosen servants have been given some really-existing spiritual perfections, which the Qur'an and the traditions clearly attributed to them; these people try to interpret such verses and traditions in such a way as to rob them of their real existence and turn them into the above-mentioned things which exist only in the mind.

A Philosophical Discussion About The Speech Of Allah

Philosophers point out that when a speaker conveys his thought to the mind of a hearer, by means of words, it is popularly called speech and talk, and its net result is that the hearer understands and the speaker is understood. The reality of speech is “what conveys an idea to the other party”; rather particulars – the medium of words, and their being produced by the passage of air through the larynx, mouth, and lips and their entering the ears of the hearer – are inconsequential; they are not essential to the reality of speech. Whatever describes the intended meaning is speech; even the movement of your hand to call someone to your side or to indicate to him to sit down, etc. is your speech, albeit without your uttering a single word.

Taking this as their basis, the philosophers say: the things found in the universe depend on their causes for their existence and for their characteristics. By their existence they pronounce the existence of their causes; and by their characteristics and faculties they show the characteristics and faculties of their causes. Therefore, every “effect” is a speech for its cause, and by this speech that cause talks about its own perfection.

And all existing things taken separately or jointly, and their aggregate, the universe, are, in this way, the speech of God; by this speech, God describes His perfect attributes which are otherwise hidden from us. Allah is the Creator of the universe, and the universe is His creation. In the same manner, He speaks via the medium of the universe about His names and attributes, and the universe is His speech.

They go even further: They say that deep thinking leads one to the belief that the ultimate “speech” is God Himself. We say that the universe leads to the Creator; but leading is a quality of existence and nothing in the universe exists on its own. Every thing exists because God has given it existence. When a thing leads to the Creator, it does so by the existence and qualities given to it by the Creator. In other words, it is the Creator Himself Who leads to Himself through His creation. In the same way, it is He Himself Who leads to His creation. He Himself leads us to Himself; in this sense, He is the speech and the Speaker and the meaning; and at this stage, we may say that His speech is His person or an attribute of His person. Also, He Himself, by creating the universe, leads us to His power and wisdom; the universe is, thus, His speech to lead us to the Creator; and in this sense, speech (i.e., the universe) is an attribute of His action.

The author says: Quite apart from the question of the correctness of this interpretation, the words of the Qur'an do not support it.

Speech, as mentioned in the Qur'an and sunnah, is something different from the Speaker and the hearer. Allah says:

“Among them are some to whom Allah spoke” (2:253).

“And Allah spoke to Musa (directly) speaking” (4: 164).

“And Allah said: “O ‘Isa!”” (3:55).

“And We said: “O Adam!”” (2:35).

“Surely, We have revealed to you” (4: 163).

“Informed me the All-knowing, the All-aware” (66:3).

There are numerous similar verses. Obviously, the speech or talk mentioned in them cannot mean the Person of Allah by any stretch of imagination.

Discussion Of Speech In Theology

This subject was among the very first points of contention in the Muslim world; and that is why theology was named ‘ilm ul-kalam (علم الكلام = the knowledge of speech) in Islam. The question which split the Muslim scholars was whether the speech of Allah was eternal.

The Ash‘arites said that it was eternal. But they invented a new meaning for ‘speech’. According to them, ‘speech’ means the thought and meaning which is found in the mind of the speaker, and the spoken word is a mere manifestation of that ‘speech’. They named it al-kalamu ‘n-nafsi (الكلام النفسي) that is, the speech found in the person. Armed with this new meaning, they said that the ideas and thoughts of Allah are nothing more or less than the Knowledge of Allah. And, as the knowledge of Allah, they are self-existent, eternal. So far as the spoken words are concerned, they are obviously created, and separate from the person of Allah.

The Mu‘azilites said that it was created. And they interpreted ‘speech’ as the words which are spoken and which show the meanings for which they are made. They said that this was the meaning of ‘speech’ as understood by all; and what the Ash‘arites had named “the speech found in the person” is not speech; it is knowledge. In other words, when we talk, we do not find in our minds anything other than the mental pictures or the meanings which we express in our words. If that mental picture is called “the speech found in the person” then it is knowledge and nothing else. And if they use this name for something else, that something is unknown to us all.

The Ash‘arites say that it is possible to use two or more adjectives or names for a single thing, depending on the aspect or aspects which are to be emphasized. Now, if we think about that mental picture in terms of its being the picture of a truth or fact, then it will be called “knowledge”; and if we look at it as a picture which can be transmitted to others, then it will be called “speech”.

The author says: All this conflict and polemic is quite beside the point. The Knowledge of Allah, whether its meaning, is al-‘ilm ul-huduri (العلم الحضوري), that is, the knowledge which is always present; the knowledge which is not separate from the person of Allah.

And what these theologians, the Ash‘arites and the Mu‘azilites, are arguing and talking about is al-‘ilm ul-husuli (العلم الحصولي), that is, the knowledge which is acquired. Such knowledge is acquired when ideas are produced in the mind; these ideas do not exist outside the mind. And we have proved somewhere else that ideas and quiddities are abstract things which do not exist outside the minds of human beings (and of some animals which perform their duties of life with the help of the five senses and some feelings).

Allah, High and Glorified is He, is too great to be attributed with a “mind” with which He might perceive ideas and quiddities, which are not found outside the imagination of the perceiver. Otherwise, He would become a compound or composed thing and would be liable to transitory phases; and even His speech

would have the potentiality to be wrong. Great and Glorified is He from such things.

It is clear from the above explanation that the polemics of the Muslim theologians are totally beside the point. What they were talking about was a kind of acquired knowledge which is beneath Divine dignity. And the ever-present and eternal Knowledge of Allah is not under dispute as it is not called “speech” even by the Ash‘arites.

Further details, as to how He knows the ideas which we express in words, will be given in a more appropriate place.

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