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A short discussion about the Arsh, the Throne of Allah in light of the Holy Qur'an and Traditions.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In our discussion of the last verse of Surah Taubah;

فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُلْ حَسْبِيَ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَهُوَ رَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْعَظِيمِ

“But if the turn away, say, Allah is sufficient for me, (None has the right to be worshipped but Him). In Him I put my trust and He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne” (9: 129)

- We came to the concept of Arsh at the end of the Surah and as I said it really deserved an independent discussion to verify what the Arsh means in the Qur'an and the Hadith.
- Of course people have given different views about reality and the quality of the Arsh.
- What I will mention here is mainly taken from Al Mizan of Allama Tabatabai.
- His views of course are in line of Shia Ulama and completely different from the line of the Sunni Ulama when they explain such concept mentioned in the Qur'an.

In Sunni exegesis they have mainly mentioned one view about the Mutashabihat of the Qur'an; we just believe it and we don't know what is Arsh. Most of the Sahaba and the Tabiun, and afterwards the scholars of the 2nd to 4th century of Islam that have written on Tafsir have taken the line that this concept is not explainable.

We just believe in it, we just know that there is an Arsh. However, we don't know what the explanation for it is, but we just believe in it. This is the attitude of every Muslim for Mutashabihat. In Surah Imran it says that they believe in it but they do not question. For they believe it is only a matter of faith.

There are some instances mentioned by a previous scholar, “Whatever Allah mentioned in His book

describing Himself or anything related to Him, when it comes to explaining them, they just recite and keep silent not mentioning anything about it. Of course, they are very much afraid that whatever they explain they might go astray. In a sense it was a good attitude that they confessed that they did not have the knowledge about it. And they really did not have it. It was a positive attitude.

The negative issue was that they did not refer to Ahlulbait; especially Imam Ali (a.s.) who right from the beginning started to explain all these concepts. They did not refer to him or tried to benefit from his vast knowledge. There is another very famous example of this, which is known to the exegetists when they come to such concepts.

The great Imam Malik of the school of Jurisprudence, where he was more of Muhaddis than a jurist, therefore spoke about issues concerning faith. One Scholar said: "Someone went to Malik and asked him what is meant by the words and the Rahman sat on the Throne. Of course Malik, since he was a Muhaddis, it was hoped that if he had a Hadith from the Prophet. Malik kept silent till sweat covered his face by anger. He then said: It is known that Allah is situated above the Arsh. However, how does He situate is not possible to understand by us".

And then he said: "You should not ask about it because it is a verse of the Qur'an. And I regard anyone who asks such questions to be a Shaitan, so he had the person sent out".

This explains the whole attitude of the Sunni Muslims. In some reports it is said that he put his fingers in his ears not to hear such a question. Of course, the people who have great faith but not based on rational understanding get very upset on hearing such questions. I have seen the books of Sunni scholars even those written much later, they all have the same attitude.

- There were however more rational type of exegetes who tried to make some compatibility with the Qur'an, and the modern knowledge of their times; and therefore they tried to write a meaning for Arsh which would fit the knowledge of people of that time about the whole universe.
- Now, they say that according to Ptolemy, the whole world is created of nine firmaments, each surrounded by the other and the outer one is the biggest is Al-Arsh. This was a sphere without any star and which created the time and direction and it was due to its existence that time and space and direction came.
- There was another sphere close to it which was of course a sphere of fixed stars and stars we see belong to this 8th heaven. And according to this scientific explanation of the Qur'an which called it Al-Kursi.
- And then there are seven others that are the spheres of planets and that time it was taken apart from the earth.
- There were other seven planets including the sun and they were the seven skies. Actually these are

the seven spheres and they have managed skillfully to somehow bring all the concepts of the Qur'an in the universe into the system of the universe known at the time 4 centuries ago.

- The explanation of Arsh was very fitting into this type of system. It worked because in many Riwaya it says that even Kursi is in Arsh and everything is in Kursi. And, by this system they could explain that what we have is the Arsh of God, beyond which is nothing but God.

The Shi'ite scholars were more rational than Sunnis and they spoke of the seventh heaven nicely.

- The system of Ptolemy collapsed and proved to be wrong, that the sun is not the only planet and there are many other planets. The fixed stars, which they see as part of the Kursi, are not fixed for they are moving.

- However, even before that, if we are so fond of seeing scientific happenings, we have to question the Ptolemy system that did not fit into the reality of things. We too have to be very careful about not being carried away by some temporarily findings that may seem probable. Because they might one day be refuted for being wrong.

- So apart from them, the many premises did not fit the Qur'anic understanding of Arsh, Kursi and heavens. There were anomalies.

- Firstly, according to Ptolemy's Theory there is nothing beyond the defining spheres of space-time and directions, for there is no vacuum even but it is just God after that.

- According to the Qur'an and the Hadith, the Arsh is very close to God but beyond it are layers of creation, like Qutub etc., which exist according to many prophets and Imams.

- If we want somehow to make conformity between the theory and our concept, then we have to ignore this issue as saying this anomaly exists but we ignore it to have an explanation.

- Secondly according to Ptolemy, it is impossible for the movement of the firmament to stop until the end of the world.

- They are moving forever and there is no possibility of somehow any disturbances coming.

- They had a firm philosophy about it.

- According to the Qur'an, the whole system is going to be wrapped up the way we wrap the book and put it aside.

- He may end this system and may create another system.

- Also, there are things mentioned about Arsh having pillars in Ahadith.

- We have the Hamal of Arsh, those who carry it.
- Then they say something more problematic, they say these spheres re-touching each other nothing can exist between them.
- So in the seven skies there is no possibility of any existence according to them but the Qur'an tells us that there are umpteen creations there.
- This is totally against the Ptolemy Theory.

The Nahjul Balagha tells us: If you go the heavens you cannot find an empty space for a prayer mat and if you find one then be sure that an angel is praying there. God has not created anything more numerous than the angel of various kinds and prominence.

- Of course, there are many different issues that do not make sense here. The other thing they said that the space could not be pierced and if you did it, it will be impossible for them to come together again.
- This is the major difference between the Ptolemy Theory and that of the Qur'an and Ahadith.

The discussion by philosophers on how to reconcile that the heavens cannot be pierced through and the sayings of the Prophets about the angels and the different other creations in the heavens.

The angels do not have a fixed place. They come down to earth and go up to God and the doors of the heavens mentioned in the Qur'an, again is impossible to them. If we lived a couple of centuries ago and if we wanted to go according to scientific theory of the universe and also to stick to our rationale from the Qur'an, it would be difficult to reconcile the findings.

As I said, you are now relieved by the theory being totally rejected. Of course, some Ulama still stick to it. I remember when man first landed on the moon, some Ulama said that it is impossible according to the Ptolemy theory and so this whole episode is sham, photographed in a studio. Arsh is not the ninth heaven.

The second explanation is that this is a metaphor Arsh and Kursi are metaphorical and there is no reality outside our conceptual understanding. The metaphor when kings rule, they sit on a throne and use it as a symbol of their rulership and administration. God denotes His rulership and kingdom and this is what we understand from Majmaul Bayan as well.

Istawa means to take the rulership. Therefore, taking the administration is a metaphorical concept and in many verses we have that Allah created the heavens and the earth and then took the throne. Allah was always a ruler and when He wants to start and initiate his administration, He sits on the Throne.

According to this idea of metaphorical concept of the Arsh and Kursi, it has been accepted by even the author of Majmaul Bayan, but Allama Tabatabai says that it is impossible for us to take only metaphor

and then say it is no reality whatsoever. He says it is a hint that God takes His rulership.

Allah too has a throne, but what it is we have to find from Qur'an and the Hadiths from Ahlulbait, because the Ahle Sunnah did not have the courage to embark on an explanation. Okay, Allah uses our language to talk about kingdom, Wilayah, and we know what it means. Rulership, ownership, and we know it.

When Allah uses these words about Himself we have to differentiate the concept from the humanly attribute or quality. Kingdom on the earth is conventional, given or claimed, but has not loyalty behind it. The property never ever is a part of you. It is just our word and conception that it belongs to us or taken away from us.

But when He speaks, He owns the universe, it means that it cannot be taken away from Him as ours is taken away from us. When we talk about Arsh though symbolized for our benefit, in some part of Ahle Sunnah a group takes the Arsh and Allah sitting on it as very physical; placed somewhere in the 7th heaven; and Allah sits and He stands; and comes to the second sky and calls to the people.

But, this is completely rejected by the Shias but partly accepted by the Sunnis. It is very far away from the Qur'an. Surah Nur says;

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

“God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is a niche in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass ware; the glass ware is as shining and bright star, lit from a blessed tree that is neither eastern nor western; its oil almost glows forth even while no fire touches it; light upon light; God guides to His light whom sever He pleases and He sets forth Parables for people”. (24:35)

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. It is just an example of a very shining light or lamp and its oil is so fluorescent. It needs but a little ignition from your heart and it will delight your soul. It will enlighten the whole environment of your existence. It may not be a real lamp niche or glass but a metaphor.

He says that when we talk about these concepts there is a level of reality that we have to realize with regard to ignition. The reality of earth is a category of creation in which God holds all the administration. Whatever happens is actually an unfolding of that category of creation called Arsh. Every order comes out from it. So Allah is sitting on it. The description given in the Qur'an.

- The Ash is created and sustained by Him.

- And that is His Glory.
- It is really a huge creation.
- Then again He says that there are creatures that carry these orders, angels, and they are the carriers of the he Arsh.
- The other verses says that you will see them going around the Arsh and it is where orders are issued from.
- In Surah Yunus¹; Then He sat on the Throne. He is the Administrator. There is no is no intercessor except aher His permission. This is not as we understand from Qur'an, we understand that one is for better people and the other is to attain an end.

A Shafi that works between us and God e.g. when He created them the rule was that everything was in darkness but He created Arsh, a light through an interceptor, the sun. We need another Shafi to save us from the Sun's heat. What Allah says from that category of creation, however, they will not work until He wants them to. Everything goes back to Him and the Arsh from where He administers.

In another verse in Surah Sajdah²; He does not have a Wali except Him or a Shafi except Him. We should know that when it comes to the loyal lower level of creation we find but all these interceders will disappear on That Day. So, if the Arsh is this category of creation in which all measurements, all administration, are made, then it is a category in which the complete knowledge should exist.

- In many of the Riwaya, it says Arsh is the knowledge of God.
- The measurement and the destiny of the creation are made there.
- All measures proceed from thee through the angels who live there.
- This is what Allama says is the meaning of the verse in Surah Hadid;

"He knows what comes down from the heavens to the earth and whatever goes up from it to the heavens."(57:4)

- Arsh is that category of knowledge of God in which the measurement of the whole creation is already worked and out and proceeds from.
- Everything is inside the Arsh.
- Some say that there is an Arsh somewhere in the heavens but it is incorrect.
- It is there before, and after the creations.
- Everything was on water before it.

- Everything is just between them.
- Every part and particle would cry to praise Him after the final judgment and then all angels will come back and carry the Arsh.
- This is what Allama Tabatabai says; “Completely in conformity with the explanations by the Imams”.

Wassalam.

[1.](#) Ref: 10:3.

[2.](#) Ref: 32:3.

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