

Fast 16: The attributes and names of God

- In the Holy Quran, God is plainly stated to be above all material conceptions:

“Vision cannot comprehend Him, and He comprehends all vision...” — 6:103

And He is not only above all material limitations but even above the limitation of metaphor:

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

So transcendent is the Divine Being, that a likeness of Him cannot be conceived, even metaphorically. Not only is it that “nothing is like Him”, but moreover nothing is even like a likeness of God.

- To indicate His love, power, knowledge and other attributes, the same words had to be used as are in ordinary use for human beings, and therefore God is spoken of in the Holy Quran as seeing, hearing, speaking, being displeased, loving, being affectionate, having control of matters, etc. but the conception is not quite the same.
- God sees and hears, but that does not mean He has eyes and requires light to see things, or has ears and requires some medium, such as air, to convey sound to Him. God creates, but that does not mean He has hands like a man and needs material with which to make things. The “hands” of God are spoken of in the Holy Quran (5:64), but it is simply to give expression to His unlimited power in bestowing His favours on whom He will, and this is in accordance with the Arabic idiom.
- God’s Throne or *‘arsh* is spoken of in the Holy Quran, but it does not signify any seat or place, rather representing His control of things as a monarch’s throne is a symbol of his power to rule. The phrase “He is established on the Throne” (7:54 etc.) is used after mentioning the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in relation to the Divine control of creation, and the law and order to which the universe is made to submit by its great Author. It is nowhere said in the Quran that God sits on the *‘arsh*; it is always His controlling power that is mentioned in connection with it. Similarly, His *kursī* or ‘chair’ (2:255) is mentioned, but it means His knowledge.
- **Proper name of God:** *Allāh* is the proper or personal name of God, as distinguished from all other names which denote His attributes. It is also known as the greatest name of God (*ism a ‘zam*). Being a proper name it does not carry any significance, but being the proper name of God, it comprises all the attributes which are contained separately in the attributive names. Hence the name Allah is said to gather together in itself all the perfect attributes of God:

“Allah — there is no God but He. His are the most beautiful names.” — 20:8

- The word *Allāh* is not derived from any other word. Nor has it any connection with the word *ilāh* (god or object of worship). The word *ilāh* is widely used in the Quran to mean an object of worship, for example:

“And your God is one God; there is no God but He.” — 2:163

Here the word for God, used three times, is *ilāh*:

ilāhu kum — your God

ilāh-un wāḥid-un — one God

lā ilaha — no God

Another example is in the last chapter of the Quran, where Allah is called “the god of mankind” or *ilāh-in nās*.

- It is sometimes said that the word *Allāh* is a contracted form of *al-ilāh*, so that it means ‘the god’. This view is not correct.

In Arabic, if something has *al* or ‘the’ before it, then when you call upon it, you don’t say ‘the’. For example, Allah is called ‘the Beneficent’, or *al-Raḥmān*. When you call upon him by this name, you don’t say *yā al-Raḥmān* (‘O the Beneficent’), but you say *yā Raḥmān* (‘O Beneficent’). So if *Allāh* were *al-ilāh*, it would be **incorrect** to call upon Him as *yā Allāh*, but we **do** call upon Him by saying *yā Allāh*.

- Moreover, this supposition would mean that there were different gods, one of which became gradually known as *al-ilāh* (the god) and was then contracted into *Allāh*. This is against facts since the idol-worshipping Arabs before Islam never applied the word *Allāh* to anything but to the Supreme Being Who was recognized by them as the Creator of the universe. They had numerous *ilāhs* or gods but none of them was ever called by them as *Allāh*.