

Allah and “sitting on throne”- *Istawa alal Arsh*

***** By: Khurshid Imam *****

A. Introduction

A Christian brother copy-pasted some contents from a website and tried to prove that God is like human being in Islam. He quoted two *ayah* from Quran and emphasized that Allah has human qualities because he sits on a throne. I was asked to respond. Two *ayah* quoted were:

1. "He it is who created the heavens and the earth in six days; **then He mounted the throne.**" Quran 57:4 - M. M. Pickthall English Translation.

Then he concluded: **The Quran seats Allah on the throne**

2. "And the angels will be on its sides, and eight will, that Day, **bear the Throne of your Lord above them.**" Quran. 69:17

He pointed: **The Quran provides proof that the throne is actually literal.**

In short, his argument was that as per Quran 57:4 and 69:17:

- Allah sits on throne.
- This throne is not metaphorical, but literal.
- This indicates that Allah has material body.
- Angels will carry the throne of Allah. It means that Allah and throne are physical & literal.

I don't blame any non-Muslim for this wrong conclusion. It's mainly because of:

- a. Incorrect translation done by Quran translators.
- b. Incorrect information spread by Muslim scholars while explaining such *ayah* of Quran.
- c. Lack of effort on the part of Muslims in clearing this misconception.
- d. Lack of rational approach amongst fellow Muslims.

Little more pondering over Quran would have presented logical & correct picture of this issue.

B. Language used by God.

“Quran is God’s word”, is the claim of Muslims. Similarly, Christians and Hindus claim about Bible and Veda respectively that they are God’s words.

What do we mean by God's word? Is Almighty God bound to any particular language?

The word of God is available to us in "**language**". Language is invented by human beings. Human being invented Aramaic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and the revelations of God were in these languages. Ponder over the chronological order:

- In the beginning ONLY God existed. There was no Arabic, no Sanskrit, no Hebrew and no Aramaic.
- Then creation took place. Human being started living on the earth.
- As a result of the intellectual evolution, human being started using / inventing languages. Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic, English came into existence gradually.
- God revealed his scripture in these languages and **detailed about himself using human-languages.**

The last point has the crux of the article. God describes about himself / his actions / his doings using the language that was invented by human beings. It’s not the case that God reveals his message in a language that is not understandable for human beings. Important questions are:

How EXACTLY GOD is?

How God DOES anything?

How God performs any action?

How exactly God does creation so that we call him The CREATOR?

How exactly God sustains his creatures so that we call him The SUSTAINER?

How exactly God sees so that we call him THE SEER?

... and so on.

Any honest person will say that "I do not know exactly HOW".

Our mind perceives and understands things about which we have some experience of seeing / feeling OR at least there exists something similar to that.

C. There is no example of likeness of Allah

Imagine a hypothetical scenario. A 7 month old unborn baby is in the womb of mother. Imagine that someone from outer world can communicate to him. The baby is told that as of present he is residing within the "body" of a "human being". One day he will "come out". Then he can see lot of "man", "woman", "boy", "girl", "animals", "plants". He can sit in "car". He can see huge "mountain", he can go to "lake" which is full of water. He can see "computers", "robots", "washing machine that washes clothes", "TV that shows videos"

Do you think that above words will make any sense to the unborn baby? Can he comprehend any of these things? NO! All these are beyond his perception, beyond his small "world", beyond his imagination. You can only make a little effort in indicating nature of these things to the baby. You will use things that are within his domain to tell about out-of-womb things.

Similarly, everything that is beyond our material / physical world viz: God, paradise-hell, life of grave etc. will be understood better when we cease to exist in this physical world, when we leave this material body. Until then we can hardly comprehend exact nature of these things.

Now the question is, how God makes us understand these things? How God tells about Himself? Answer is by using the language human beings understand.

That is why the Quran describes beautifully about God in simple words:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ “...There is no example of his likeness...”. Quran 42:11

Not only “there exists nothing that can be compared to God”, but also “there exists nothing that can be compared with any likeness of Allah”. There is double layer of abstraction for Allah.

*Say: He is Allah (Almighty God), the One and Only;
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;
He begets not, nor is He begotten;
And there is none like unto Him. Quran; Quran 112:1-4*

D. How do we understand an attribute of God?

How do we know Allah? Answer: By his attributes, qualities.

We say God is *Al-Basir* i.e. "The Seer of All ". How he sees everything? Its exact sense we don't know.

A human being also sees. For me to see I require eyes, eyes that function properly, a source of light, object, image of object on retina etc. These mediums are required for completing the action of “SEEING” by a human being.

Seeing of God is different from seeing of human being. God is beyond comprehension. His actions are beyond human mind. When you talk about seeing of GOD then all mediums and processes that are required in case of seeing by a human being, are eliminated and the end result is achieved. In order for God to see there is no meaning of eye, source of light, retina, reflection etc. What we can say for sure is that the end-result i.e. SEEING is achieved. How exactly God sees, is not known to any human being.

For completing an action / attribute a human being requires a medium and a process.

When we talk about the same action / attribute for God then that medium and process are eliminated. We never know HOW EXACTLY He DOES anything.

When we say God is *As-Sami* i.e. **The Hearer of All** then hearing of God is different from hearing of human beings. We require ear, a medium where sound can travel, deciphering power of mind to understand and map the language into objects etc. However, when we say that God hears then all such mediums are eliminated and the end result of **hearing** is achieved.

When we say God is *Al-Khaliq* i.e. **The Creator** then we are only expressing the end result that He will cause things to come into existence. How exactly? No one knows. We need initial material, a process, a plan, a time line, and other favorable conditions for creation to take place.

When “Creation” is used for God then we don’t talk about those mediums that are required by human beings. We can only say that as an end result **creation** will come into existence.

Similarly, if you ponder over any attribute of God then you will realize that all attributes express the ultimate end result by eliminating the mediums.

Above points are very important to understand God or His attribute or His any action.

E. *Istawa* and *Arsh* of Allah

- Similarly, “*istawa*” when used for Allah is entirely different from “*istawa*” for human beings.
- Word “*istawa*” never means “to sit”. It is wrong translation.
- “*istawa*” actually refers “to manage”, “to take control of”. Refer to all such ayah in Quran.
- “*istawa alal arsh*” is used 7 times in Quran. 7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5 [*alil arsh e istawa*], 25:59, 32:4, 57:4 . It is used as METAPHOR.
- Metaphor, simile, symbolism, personification etc are some literary aspects that add beauty to a language. For example: “life is not *bed of roses*”, “*throw some light* on this subject”, “he is the *wall* of his cricket team”, “you are *stone hearted*”. No one takes meaning of such phrases literally.
- Quran too uses metaphors in order to convey more meaning in lesser words. For example: the phrase “*right hand possess*” مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ is used 12 times in Quran. No one understands it in literal term. It refers to slaves. Read the article “*Allah and his face, hand, eye and body*” to understand more about this subject.
- “Throne” is a popular metaphor which refers to power or sovereignty.
- Arabic dictionary of Lane also gives same meaning:

power, aepartea. (عَرْشٌ, عَرْشٌ. [See also art. عَرْشٌ.] [For عَرْشٌ also signifies] —↓ *Might, or power* : (Er-Rághib, K:) *regal power; sovereignty; dominion* : (IAar, Er-Rághib, K:) from the same word as signifying the throne, or seat, of a king. (Er-

- Oxford English dictionary also gives same meaning:
 - a. *A ceremonial chair for a sovereign, bishop, or similar figure;*
 - b. *(the throne) Used to signify sovereign power:*

A popular metaphor used in *hindi* is that ‘Politics is all about the *Chair*’, referring to the POWER of a position.

- It’s unfortunate on the part of many Muslim scholars that they have translated “*istawa-alal-arsh*” in a way that presents Almighty God anthropomorphically.
- **We are [Allah is] nearer to him than (his) jugular vein.** (Al-Quran 50:16)

Do we interpret this ayah literary and say that Allah is physically nearer to human being than man's vein? NO. Then why we take literal meaning of "istawa-alal-arsh"?

F. Analysis of All ayah that talks about the throne of Allah [istawa-alal-arsh]

Quran is the best explanation of Quran. Let's see how Quran refers to "istawa-alal-arsh" in the sense of "control/power of God" in every such ayah. Nowhere Quran indicates that there is a literal / physical throne on which Allah sits.

Note: Incorrect translation is written in "*italics* and ~~striketrough~~" and better and appropriate translation is written in that place. Translation of "yaum" as "day" is another incorrect translation in context with creation of universe. Correct translation is "interval of time".

1. Your Guardian-Lord is Allah, Who **created the heavens and the earth** in six [~~days~~] "intervals of time", and [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] "**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**" ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ: He draws the night as a veil over the day, each seeking the other in rapid succession:

He **created** the sun, the moon, and the stars, (all) **governed by laws under His command**. Is it not His to **create** and to **govern**? Blessed be Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds! (7: 54)

Comment: This ayah beautifully explains about the meaning of "istawa-alal-arsh" by giving mapping between "Creation of God" and "Controlling and governing by God".

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Created the heavens and the earth | is <u>controlling and managing</u> the sovereignty
[Words <i>istawa-alal-arsh</i> used here] |
| ✓ He created the sun | (all) <u>governed</u> by laws under His <u>command</u> |
| ✓ His to create | and to <u>govern</u> |

If you ponder deeply then you find that left side words refer to "Creation" by Allah and right side words refer to "control and governing by Allah". This makes more sense. To take literal meaning here as "established on throne" is improper.

2. Verily your Lord is Allah, who **created the heavens and the earth** in six [~~days~~] "intervals of time", and [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] "**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**" ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ, **regulating and governing all things**. No intercessor (can plead with Him) except after His leave (hath been obtained). This is Allah your Lord; Him therefore serve ye: will ye not receive admonition? (10: 3)

Comment: This ayah too talks about creation and subsequent control of affairs. After mentioning “istawa” of Allah, ayah says that he is “regulating and governing with his commands” [yodabbirul-amr]. Of course- Quran is not saying here that Allah sat on any throne. After creating, God took control of his creation.

3. Allah is He who **raised the heavens** without any pillars that ye can see; [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] “**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**” **ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ**; He has subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law)! Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate all affairs, explaining the signs in detail so that ye may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord. (13: 2)

Comment: Here also, see the pattern:

God created / raised heavens Then-----> *istawa-alal-arsh* ---Then----> God made laws for sun and moon. God regulates all affairs.

Now, what is more appropriate for *istawa-alal-arsh*?

“God established himself on throne” and made laws for creations.

OR

“God took control of his sovereignty” and made laws for creations.

4. A revelation from Him Who **created the earth and the heavens** on high. (Allah) Most Gracious [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] “**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**” **عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَىٰ** (20: 4-5)

5. He who **created the heavens and the earth** and all that is between, in six [~~days~~] “intervals of time”, and [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] “**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**”: **ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ** Allah Most Gracious: ask thou, then, about Him of any acquainted (with such things). (25: 59)

6. It is Allah Who has **created the heavens and the earth**, and all between them, in six [~~days~~] “intervals of time”, and [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] “**is controlling and managing the sovereignty**”: **ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ**; ye have none, besides Him, to protect or intercede (for you): will ye not then receive admonition? (32: 4)

7. He it is who **created the heavens and the earth** in Six [~~days~~] “intervals of time”, and [~~is firmly established on the throne~~] **“is controlling and managing the sovereignty”** ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ He knows what enters within the earth and what comes forth out of it, what comes down from heaven and what mounts up to it. And He is with you where-so-ever you may be. And Allah sees well all that ye do. (57: 4)

The phrase “*istawa-alal-arsh*” is used for Allah 7 times. Every time it is used after mentioning “God’s creation of heavens and the earth”. This phrase can either mean “God established on throne”, if taken literally OR “God took control and started governing”, if taken meaning wise. Taking literal meaning is incorrect as per the context. Correct and natural meaning is “God took control and started managing affairs”. Even if someone says that former meaning will be taken then also we need to understand that this is popular metaphor used for indicating power, control or sovereignty.

G. Importance of “*istawa-alal-arsh*”

One can question, “So God started controlling **after** creation; does it mean He was not controlling **before** that?”

Answer: Whatever existed before this particular creation God was controlling that [refer to Quran 11:7]. When heavens and earth did not exist then there was no question of controlling them. Once heavens and earth came into existence, almighty God started managing its affairs.

Another question can be, ‘Why is there so much of emphasis on “controlling and managing the universe”?’

Answer: It is important for human being to understand that God only is the ultimate **creator** and he alone is **managing the universe through his laws**. This second part of belief is missing from millions or perhaps billion of people. A good percentage of agnostic, atheist and Hindus don’t believe in binding themselves to the commands of God even though they may believe in creation by God. They don’t consider God as the final law-maker of the universe.

Atheism comes in many flavors. A large chunk of them are ready to believe in the existence of God but after that they don’t want to believe in any revelation, any law of God. They attribute every event to science but stop short of attributing them to laws-of-God.

Similarly majority of Hindus will agree with you that there is a God, when emphasized, and then they will put a full stop. They don’t believe further that we need to abide by laws made by God.

Agnostics too don’t want to bind themselves to the command of God.

For most of the non-Muslims god is like an isolated entity that has nothing to do with the management of the universe; He created the universe and then abandoned it. **Quran emphasizes**

through “*istawa-alal-arsh*” that God created the universe and manages it through his laws. All results occur in this universe based on laws of God.

So, it’s clear what is meant by “*istawa alal arsh*” of Allah. Except Salafis no Muslim says that “Allah sits on any throne”. Those who believe in such literal interpretation open more doors for problems and allow themselves to be trapped.

H. What does “Angels ‘carry’ the throne of Allah” mean?

"And the angels will be on its sides, and eight will, that Day, **bear the Throne of thy Lord above them.**" Quran. 69:17

Quoting this ayah, the allegation put was that since *angels will ‘bear’ or ‘carry’ the throne of Allah, it certainly means that throne of Allah is literal and it will be very heavy so that angels are required to carry it.*

There are many mythological narrations related to throne and angels fabricated by enemies of Islam. Sadly, we failed to purge out such narrations from Islamic theology. Translation of Quran was done with a biased mind keeping in view prevalent and popular narrations related to *arsh* of Allah. Due to all this any reader of Quran is bound to have so many misconceptions about Islam.

Quran 69:15 onwards talks about events of the Day of Judgment. Let’s analyze ayah 17.

وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ عَلَىٰ أَرْجَائِهَا وَيَحْمِلُ عَرْشَ رَبِّكَ فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ ثَمَانِيَةٌ

And the angels will be on its sides, and eight will, that Day, bear the Throne of thy Lord above them. (69: 17)

Critical word in this ayah is “*yahmelo*” coming from word “*hamal*” translated here as “to bear”.

Word “*hamal*” is used 64 times in Quran. It means to bear, to carry physically, to be responsible, to perform duty, womb, pregnancy etc. Look below at the snapshot of the meaning of this word from the Lane dictionary.

حمل

1. حَمَلَهُ, aor. َ , inf. n. حَمَلَ (Ṣ, Mgh, Mṣb, K, &c., in some copies of the Ṣ حَمَلَ) and حَمَلَانٌ, (Mgh, K,) *He bore it, carried it, took it up and carried it, conveyed it, or carried it off or away,*

بِدِيَّة, inf. n. حَمَالَةٌ, + [He bore, or took upon himself, the responsibility, or he was, or became, responsible, for a debt, and a bloodwit:] (Mṣb:) [for] حَمَلَ بِهِ, aor. , inf. n. حَمَالَةٌ, signifies كَفَلَ. (S,*K.) And حَمَلَ الْحَمَالَةَ and تَحَمَّلَهَا + [He was, or became, responsible for the bloodwit, or debt or the like]: both signify the same: (S,TA:) and تَحَمَّلَ بِهِ + He took it upon himself, or became responsible, or answerable, for it: (Mṣb in art. كَفَلَ:) and تَحَمَّلَ مُعْظَمَهُ + He took, or imposed, upon himself, or undertook, the main part of it: (Jel in xxiv. 11:) and اِحْتَمَلَ الْأَمْرَ + He took, or imposed, upon himself, or undertook, the thing, or affair; he bore, or took upon himself, the burden thereof. (L in art. قَلَد.) You

بِدْيَةٍ, inf. n. حَمَالَةٌ, + [He bore, or took upon himself, the responsibility, or he was, or became, responsible, for a debt, and a bloodwit:] (Msb:) [for] حَمَلَ بِهِ, aor. -, inf. n. حَمَالَةٌ, signifies كَفَلَ. (S,*K.) And حَمَلَ الْحَمَالَةَ and تَحَمَّلَهَا + [He was, or became, responsible for the bloodwit, or debt or the like]: both signify the same: (S,TA:) and تَحَمَّلَ بِهِ + He took it upon himself, or became responsible, or answerable, for it: (Msb in art. كَفَلَ:) and تَحَمَّلَ مُعْظَمَهُ + He took, or imposed, upon himself, or undertook, the main part of it: (Jel in xxiv. 11:) and اِحْتَمَلَ الْأَمْرَ + He took, or imposed, upon himself, or undertook, the thing, or affair; he bore, or took upon himself, the burden thereof. (L in art. قَلَد.) You

Let us take one ayah for analysis.

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ (الجمعة: ٥)

The similitude of those who were **charged with** [word *hamal* is used] the (obligations of the) Mosaic Law, but who subsequently **failed to discharge** [*hamal* word is used], is that of a donkey which **carries** [word *hamal* is used] huge tomes (but understands them not). Evil is the similitude of people who falsify the Signs of Allah; and Allah guides not people who do wrong. (62: 5)

In one single ayah, word “*hamal*” is used in two different meaning.

- *Hummelu*: they were given the RESPONSIBILITY / DUTY.
- *Yahmelooha*: They failed to carry RESPONSIBILITY / DUTY.
- *Yahmelo*: Carries

Some examples of the usage of the word “*hamal*” in Quran are:

- 2:286 - duty or responsibility.
- 4:112 – Carrying of sin or being responsible for sin.
- 7:189 – bearing or conceiving child.
- 16:25 – bearing / carrying own & others deeds.
- 20:100-101 – bearing burden of deed.
- 20:111- carrying transgression or misdeed.

24:54 – carrying of duty
29:12 – bearing fault / result
29:13 – bearing burden of deed
29:60 – responsibility
33:58 – bearing of sin
33:72 – take responsibility.
35:18 - duty or responsibility.
36:41 – bear or take responsibility

Many times this word has been used for carrying responsibility/duty. Angels follow command of God.

“They [angels] all revere their Lord, high above them, **and they do all that they are commanded**”. Quran 16:50

Let us analyze another ayah for the word “*hamal*”.

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ

“We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to **undertake** it, being afraid thereof: but man **undertook** it...” Quran 33:72

“*hamal*” is used above two times; both times – in the meaning of “to take responsibility”.

Hence: Better translation of 69:17 will be:

"And the angels will be on its sides, and eight will, that Day, carry the duty assigned by your Lord above them." Quran. 69:17

Angels are creatures of God. Angels do what they are commanded to do (Quran 66:6, 16:50.) Angels have been assigned different departments and they perform their duties accordingly. They are beyond our material world so we can't comprehend their essence. “How they perform something” is also beyond our comprehension.

So, Quran says in 69:17 that eight angels will perform duties assigned by Allah on the Judgment Day. Neither Quran talks about literal throne or about angels carrying physically any throne. Conventional mistranslation of Quran and mythological narrations has given anthropomorphic picture of Allah and thus demean the status of Allah.

To say that “*Allah sits on a throne, the throne of Allah is literal, the throne has footstall, Allah moves*”, is clearly contradicting Quran 42:11 where Allah says that there is no likeness of likeness of Allah. Allah is beyond any comprehension [Quran 6:103].

Last but not the least - let us ponder over the following statements:

1. Robert did not fear any one; he had a **heart of lion**.

2. Robert's heart sinks whenever he sees the photograph of his dead son.

If I conclude that Mr. Robert's heart had some problems and so he was operated upon and a heart of a lion was transplanted in him, then people will laugh at me. If I would further say that somehow Mr. Robert's heart would come out of his body and sink into water whenever he would see the photograph of his dead son, then people can consider me mad also. They will say that this person doesn't have any idea about metaphors. Words "heart of lion" and "heart sinks" have been used in both statements as metaphor.

Similarly, "*Arsh of Allah*" and "*holding arsh*" are used as metaphors in Quran.

I. Conclusion

1. "Allah of Islam is like a human being, He sits on the throne, His throne is carried by angels, this throne is literal" are some allegations against Islam.
2. Mistranslation of the Quran, biased translation of the Quran, some fabricated narrations and lack of rational approach are the reasons for this misconception.
3. Quran says in 42:11 that there is no likeness of likeness of Allah. We can't comprehend sense of Allah.
4. Quran says that Allah created the universe and He started managing and controlling affairs of the universe.
5. Angels will perform their duty assigned to them by Allah. This is meant in 69:17.

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