

A Discussion on ARSH

THRONE OF ALLAH – at-Taba Tabai (AR)

There are various opinions about Arsh and the words “ He rose above the Throne”. Some commentators opine that these words are among the symbolisms used in the Qur’an and we should refrain from debating about them. These are the commentators who are against crossing limits in discussion on the manifest book and Sunnah and consider it a Bidat. But, the Qur’an and Sunnah enjoin people to ponder about them, to research upon their meanings and to understand them better. How can they ban such debates, and researches on such verses and proofs that are evident to the learned. We too will for the moment from discussing it.

Others however, have debated over the meaning of Arsh. They say:

- Arsh is that ninth stage of heavens,
- that surrounds the entire material worlds,
- and is called Atlas because there are no stars in it.

- This is the heaven that creates and fixes the time through its movements,
- and below it is the 8th layer of heavens,
- which is the station of the fixed stars.
- Below this 8th heaven are the other seven heavens,
- each being the station of the stars like Saturn, Mercury etc.

This idea cannot be termed as the explanation of the Qur’anic verses because in truth, Qur’an is compatible to the explanation of Bethlimus. Those who believe in this idea have explained the Arsh and the seven heavens in this context and those who find it against the Qur’an have refuted it. For instance, this assumption says that the limit of the creation is the ninth heaven and there is nothing existing beyond it. It then says that the movement of the heavens is permanent and unending each layer is connected with the other and all have been created from the same source. There is no gap or interlinking doors between them.

Contrary to this, the verse of the Qur’an and Hadiths speak of the screens between the Arsh and the lower heavens.

- They believe the Arsh to have pillars that are carried by certain carrier and indeed God will soon roll up the skies like a parchment.
- They say that in the heavens, reside creations similar to the angels and
- there is no space to step into it
- because there are unlimited angels who are prostrating or bowing or are in some other form of obeisance to their Lord.
- The heavens have their doorways and near the Sidratul Muntaha is Paradise to which the deeds of men are taken.

- They are totally against those who believe in the limitation after the ninth heaven wherein they believe is the Arsh.

Their assumption is rejected because it is against the verses of the Qur'an and Hadiths.

We should not be perturbed for they and their ideas are not according to the Qur'an and Hadiths. It may be possible that the description of the Qur'an about the heavens is against it. They have drawn a limitation on the creation and have ignored the sayings of the Qur'an and the Hadiths.

- Actually there is no physical existence of any Arsh,
- and the words “ And He rose over the Throne” or the “ Rahman sat on the throne” denote the lordship of God over all the creations.
- Some times the word “ Istawa” is used in the sense of “Istila” or predominance.
- The taking control over the throne may denote the manner in which a king sits on the throne when he begins his official work of administration making enquiries about his kingdom.
- But this cannot apply to God,
- because He is the all-knowing and is aware of all that goes on in His created worlds,
- so we can say that He rises over or assumes control to bestow the divine graces on mankind.
- Or we can say that he created mankind gave him life, and then death etc.

There is a doubt about this view, though we confirm the same that it is a symbolism about God taking control of all creations as befits His Lordship, to enforce His control and kingship, His power to implement His orders that are evident in our system of life. It is true that according to our statements the manifest decrees a way of life. God speaks about all these truth for He is the all knowing.

In other words even if kingship and total control have the same meaning as we derive out from the manifest verses of the Qur'an, there is a difference in their meaning and application. They are pure decrees truly applicable to His Divine Presence but for us they are commandments that do not cross the limit for us. We call someone our leader because we follow his guidance and orders and not that this society is our body and he is the head. When we call someone the heart of something or a part of something we do not do so because he is actually a heart but that he acts as the heart and the body part essential for a complete physique or body. He is essential to the welfare of our society and our lives are attached to his importance.

In verse 64 of Surah Ankabut god says, “ This life is but a vain sport and play” because our religious aims are connected with our wealth, children, well-being, and rulership together with other vague desires. Our strivings to achieve all this is like the play of children and there is no difference in the two. God criticizes this life of ours spent in achieving our vague and vain desires and calls it a wasteful play of children, because it has become the center of dreams and desires.

The words “ He rose above the Throne” are a symbolism that denotes the control and kingship of God over the universe. It also proves that this is truth, and this is a station where all the decrees concentrate despite being various and contradictory. There are other verses that prove the same though they speak only about the Arsh or the Throne attributing only to the One God.

In verse 129 of Surah Taubah He says, “ He is the Lord of the great Throne.” Verse 7 of Surah Mumin says, “ Those who bear the Throne and those around it celebrate the praise of their Lord.” Again in verse 17 of Surah Al Haqqah He says, “ And the angels shall be on its sides, and above them shall bear the Throne of your Lord.” Verse 75 of Surah Zumur says, “ You will see the angels surrounding the throne.”

As you find, these verses speak of a physical throne and this why we believe in Him sitting on a throne. It has not been said just for imagination but it is the proof that it exists in physical form. This verse like the verse on Nur is not just symbolism but an irrefutable truth just as it is for the celestial tablet and the pen. In verse of Nur we cannot say that the universe is the reflection of God or the olive tree is also a symbolism regarding God, because we believe that all this has been spoken of to describe the truth that shall manifest itself.

Whatever we have said in the context of “ He rose over the Throne” is that this Throne is the core, the center where all the deeds are gathered, and from where all the decrees in this universe are issued and we have already discussed it. Verse 3 of Surah Yunus confirms this by saying, “ He rose over the Throne disposing the affairs of all creations.”

This verse denotes the Arsh in relation to administration and control, and it depicts the divine existence of God and His power to impose His will, so intercession will also be connected to His divine will. “ None can intercede without His permission.” Everything takes place because it is allowed to do so by God/ like heat that is required for raising the temperature, or the fire that is required to burn things or melt them.

They are not caused by themselves but by the permission of God, because His permission is required.

This sentence takes us to the one-ness of God or to the Unity of One God as in “ It is (only) Allah who has created the heavens and the earth.” This sentence takes us further where one system of arrangement is replaced by another not by itself but by the will of God, because He says, “ No One can intercede without His permission”. This means there can be no intercessor between God and the implementation of His will but with His permission, for nothing is permitted to exist contrary to His will. It is just as the sun is the intermediary between the earth and God and thus brightens the earth by its light. A canopy or a portico is also an intermediary that takes the sun’s rays and gives us shadow.

When this intercession will be with His permission, then the total system of control in the universe will also be from Him. And so, when man evolves intermediaries of his own they are contradictory to the divine truth and it is just that he wants to escape the truth caused by God.

This is why we find people who disobey and do not accept the truth because their minds are unable to accept them. When man resorts to rebellion due to his ignorance then this deed is like accepting and obeying the will of God. When he denies God then he actually accepts Him. In verse 123 of Surah Anam God says, “ But they plot not but against their ownelves, but they perceive not.” And in verse 69 of Surah Al Imran God says, “ But they shall not lead astray anyone but themselves and they perceive not.” In verse 31 of Surah As Shura He says, “ And you cannot escape from Allah in this earth and you have no protector besides Him nor any Helper.”

His words, “ No One can intercede without His permission” is the proof that those who are deemed as intercessors against His will are allowed to be deemed as such because of another will of His. Actually the disobedience is like the other side of the scale and two sides rise and fall against each other and the Lord helps in balancing the scale according to His will.

The verse of Surah Nur proves the control and arrangement of God and negates the existence of any other. Verse 4 of Surah Sajdah that says, “ God, it is who created the heavens and the earth and what is in between them in six days and firmly established on His Throne, for you there is none besides Him as guardian, nor any intercessor; will you not then reflect”, confirms the verse that says that there is none but Him in total control of all in the universe.

These two verses tell us that Arsh is the station where all the systems of control are created and developed and the Divine Decrees of the Lord are issued from there. The 20th verse of Surah Buruj says the same thing, “ While God is encompassing over them.” Then in verse 75 of Surah Zumur He says, “ The angels surrounding the Throne celebrating the praise of their Lord” and it shall be judged between them with justice. Also pointing towards the same meaning because the angels are His intermediaries and carriers, and establish His decree, for they obey His command only and this is why He has settled them around the Arsh or the Throne.

In verse 7 of Surah Mumin He says, “ And those angels who bear His throne and surround it glorify the praises of their Lord and believe in Him and ask for forgiveness for those who believe.” In addition to confirming that the angels surround the earth, this verse also tells us that there are some people who are also carrying the throne of their Lord and they should be of the caliber that is compatible to that station which is the center of all decrees of the Lord.

The verse 17 of Surah Haqqah confirms this by saying, “ And the angels will be on its sides, the eight angels will that day bear the Throne of your Lord above them.”

This confirmation is further strengthened by verse 4 of Surah Al Hadid that says, “ And then He rose over the Throne. He knows what goes into the earth and what comes forth from it and what descends from heavens and what ascends thereto.”

So,

- God knows all that takes place,
- whatever enters earth and
- what comes out of it,
- what descends from the heavens and
- what ascends to it and
- His knowledge is all encompassing.

The angels too who are the carriers of the throne are under His command and control. He is ever present and existed even before the creation of the universe took place. He himself says in Surah Hud, “ God created the heavens and earth and all that exist between them in six days and then He rose above the Throne on Water.”

A Discussion on Hadiths

There is no record of any debates or discussion between the companions of the Messenger regarding Arsh and Kursi, the truth in the Qur’an, and the issue of Tawhid or the unity of God. This populace of the Muslims has practiced the literal translation or interpretation of the book. The *Ta’bain* and the commentators too have followed the same pattern. There is a tradition recorded from Sufyan bin Ainia that it is better to remain silent or just recite the Qur’an about the verses wherein God has explained His attributes.

Imam Malik says that one day a person told him,

O Abu Abdullah tell me what is the meaning of *He rose over the Throne*.

The narrator then says that he had never seen Malik so upset. His forehead was full of perspiration and his students were silent but thinking. Malik then controlled himself and said,

It is improper to use the word “How” about God and there is nothing false about God rising above the water on the Throne. It is imperative to believe in it and it is “Bida” to question about it. I fear about you being led astray.

He then turned the man out from his room.

He used the Hadith of Umme Salma when he said it is untoward to say “How” about God when asked to explain “ He rose above the throne on water”. Umme Salma had said it is wrong to use the word “How” about it. This ascension is not wrong for he has to believe and deny it is a sin.

This was how the ignorant people explained the Qur’an .

We know fully well that till date none of these scholars have left any explanation about this. The only people who discussed and explained this were Imam Ali and his progeny of the Holy Imams.

We present a few details of what and how they have explained about it.

Shaykh Suduq quotes Salman Farsi in his book Tawhid. Salman said,

One of the answers of Imam Ali to Jailiq was - The angels carry the Arsh and it is not as you deem about it materially but is a creation of God . God is its owner and uses it.

Kafi says the man had asked, *Is God carrying the heavens or the Arsh is carrying God?*

The Imam answered,

God is the creator and sustainer of the heavens and earth and all that exist between them. He has told us about this in His own words.

The man then said , I ask about the words, “ And the angels will be on its sides, and eight angels on that Day will bear the Throne of your Lord above them,” when you say that God sustains the heavens and the earth. The Imam replied,

God has created the Arsh from four Nur or lights.

- One is red from which everything red has been created,
- the second is green from which all things green have been created,
- the third is yellow from which all things yellow have been created and
- the fourth is white through which all things white have been created.

- By Arsh we mean that knowledge that God has bestowed upon the carriers.
- It is the light of His omnipotence that is lit in the hearts of the believers and this is why the ignorant consider them to be enemies.
- It is because of this light that every creation on this earth and the heavens search for a pathway that leads to Him.
- They have created different ideologies and religions in search of this path.
- And all that exists is sustained through the light of His omnipotence.
- They do not have the power over harm and benefit and
- they have no power over life and death.
- God has prevented the heavens and the earth from disintegrating by encompassing them.
- He is the light and life of everything.

The man then said, “ Please tell me where God is.” The Imam answered,

He is here, there, above and below. He is with us and away from us, as He has said Himself in verse 7 of Surah Mujadilah, “ There is no secret counsel of three and He is the fourth, nor five but He is their sixth. Not of less than that or more but He is with them.” In verse 7 of Surah Ta Ha , “ He knows the secret and that which is yet more hidden.” In verse 255 of Surah Baqarah He says, ‘ He knows what happens to them in this world and what will happen to them in the hereafter.”

- His Kursi or control extends over all the heavens and the earth and all that exists between them, but He never tires.
- He is exalted and almighty and in view of this we can say that the carriers of the Arsh are those learned Ulama on whom He has bestowed His knowledge.
- Nothing is beyond the control of these four lights (Nur).
- This is the light He had bestowed on His dear ones and had showed them to the Prophet Ibrahim. He says, “ In this, We showed Ibrahim the Light of both the heavens and the earth, so that He becomes one who has certitude.”
- How can the carriers in heaven carry God when they exist because of the life and Nur He has bestowed in their hearts.

The Compiler’s Words

When the man asked to know if the Arsh carried God, when God carries the entire creation; what he had understood was that “Hamal” meant a load of one body carried by another. The Imam explained that what it actually meant was the existence of things through God, but this existence was not an independent one, for God sustains them and they do not sustain Him.

When the man heard the reply about the 8 angels and the throne, which meant that the sustenance of the creation is based on God and He has no partners - but this is not compatible with the verse - so the Imam explained it through knowledge, and the meaning of Arsh here is knowledge.

Since there is a contradiction in both these explanations seemingly, so the Imam refashioned his answer; *Knowledge does not mean the normal connotation that comes to the mind. The people understand knowledge for that they can attain it. Here it means the light, greatness and power of God that has been bestowed upon these carriers. The load is both for God and those others upon whom He has bestowed the knowledge because He is the owner of our deeds who has given us the ownership of that knowledge.*

All things therefore exist because of the light, the greatness and the power of God. This is the Arsh that encircles us and this light means the total ownership of God. God is the sustainer of this light and is also the sustainer of those on whom this light has been bestowed together with the light itself.

In the words “ He rose over the Throne”, Istawa means the ownership and control of God and in the “ carriers of Arsh” it means knowledge and they both are connected to the station from which all things have been created and manifested. In other words, *this is the station of knowledge and from, emanate all the systems of control and this is from where all creations get their existence.*

When the Imam said, “ It is the power of this Nur that enlightens the heart”, he meant that it not only guides the true believers towards welfare and to God, but it is also regarded as the fountainhead for the destruction of the enemies of God and the ignorant ones. This is the station from which emanates the general system of the universe under which all creations exist whether they exist as the learned or as the ignorant.

And the words of the Imam, “ the hearts are enlightened by the light and glory”, refers to the awakening that guides the true believers towards God, is the fountainhead, and it is from here that the destruction of the disbelievers emanate. It is from here that the system of sustenance for all the universe is issued for all creation to exist whether they be enlightened or ignorant.

The Imam said that the life of everything is the responsibility of God and each creation has a life and a light.

In a nutshell we can say, the entity of God is the sole entity from which every living creation gets its life and existence. It is He who plans and executes everything. None of those who exist do so of their own accord and power for they all exist due to God and His power of creation. He is their king, owner and Lord and it is his deed that gives birth to them.

When the Imam said, “ He is here, there, above and below “, he means that everything exists due to Him. He is their protector and there is no place where He does not exist. It is not possible that He is here but not there. When we say that He is here or with someone it does not mean that He is not in another place with another person. It means that He is ever present everywhere. The different directions are mentioned to denote that He is everywhere.

This meaning highlights the knowledge of deeds and His knowledge of deeds compared to those in existence is that everything is in His knowledge and nothing is unknown or unseen for Him. This is why the book says the Throne or Kursi encompasses everything including what there is in their hearts or core. And then He says, “ He knows all that is manifest and all that is hidden” to explain that He is all encompassing. The conclusion we now draw is the Kursi is the Arsh and is protected by God and it is the center of all knowledge. This Kursi encompasses all that is in the heavens and on earth.

The Imam said that all that exist do so because God created them and none of them is beyond the encirclement of the four Nur or light that he had mentioned earlier. This will be further discussed when we study the Me’raj.

This is the divine light that God has shown to his apostles or chosen ones. He has symbolized the Arsh as the Nur or light. The word Malkut also means the station of the angels. This is where the Arsh is symbolized surrounded by the angels who also carry it. This is only a symbolism because every station in the known universe is very inferior to be the station of God. We will be discussing this later to show that Arsh means the glorified and great Divine station.

When the Imam said “ How the carriers carry the Arsh of God”, he was confirming what he had said earlier that Arsh is the place of existence of all creations, and this is a prominence, so the carriers of the Arsh are the carriers of God because they exist only for that purpose. And since the Imam has mentioned the knowledge of creation, here he has likened them to Nur. This is because he says that their hearts are enlightened and this Nur or light guides them.

In the book Tawhid Shaykh Suduq has quoted Hannan bin Sadeer who said that I asked the 6th Imam about the meaning of Arsh and Kursi and he said,

- The Arsh has umpteen and varied attributes.
- In the Qur’an wherever Arsh has been mentioned it has a different but definite attributes like in the words, “ The Lord of the great Arsh” wherein it means the great realm.
- In the words, “ And the Merciful rose above the Arsh on water” it means that God is all encompassing on His creation.
- This describes the creations but if this sentence had the word Kursi then the meaning would have been other than the Throne, because Arsh and Kursi are the doorways to the unknown.
- They themselves are unknown and unseen and are similar in this.

- Kursi is the evident doorway through which all new creations come into existence.
- Arsh is that hidden and unseen thing that embodies the knowledge about the attributes of the creations, like their, place, their reason, their attributes, their movements and their idleness.
- The beginning and the end of all creations are found in it.
- So the Arsh and Kursi are connected because of knowledge, but the realm of Arsh is separate from the realm of Kursi and the knowledge of Arsh is hidden and more secret than the knowledge of the Kursi.
- So the words, “ The Lord of the great Arsh” means that God is protector of the Arsh, that is more prominent than the Kursi though it is connected to it.
- Its attributes are greater than that of the Kursi and embody the conditions of the creations.
- Arsh and Kursi are interconnected and each makes the other create one thing from another creation; like the word Ali that has been used to compliment one another.
- Both are connected with the mercy of God who is all-powerful and almighty.

The Compiler’s Words

The saying of the Imam that the

- Arsh has many attributes, confirms our explanation that Arsh is the embodiment of all the activities of the entire universe and his saying that they create one out of another further confirms it.

The words of the Imam “ This is the knowledge of the condition of the creation”, means the causes and attributes of the creations and the word “ Kefiyah” is used even for the creation of things. It is like when we say how someone has done a certain deed and we also say how a certain creature was born or created.

The Imam then said, “ If this word (Kursi) has been used in the sentence then it will mean something other than the throne.” It means both Arsh and Kursi are part of the unknown and unseen from where the creations come into existence, but if they are both mentioned together then their meanings are different.

- One shows us the path to the unseen or we can say that the center of creation is the same but the doorways are two.
- One is connected with this material world and the other remains in the unseen.

When he said, “ The Kursi is actually unseen” but from it all creations are made evident, then it means that the creation comes into existence without having any precedence. Since all the creations are unprecedented, they are all connected with Kursi.

And when this is clear that the creations are unprecedented and is not dependent on the situations or conditions for creativity because if they could create things one after another then those commands and creations would not be unprecedented. So, when they are unprecedented then God creates them one after another and then the conditions are removed to be replaced by other conditions. He causes new reasons from the old. As we have said, all creations are unprecedented, so all causes are unprecedented. All actions of God will be unprecedented and unparalleled.

Yes, above these conflicting causes there is another determination and cause and they negate the others and they encircle the effects e.g. if someone decides to walk a certain distance and then stands still half way through because of another decision that asks for rest, arrests his first action. Now, these two decisions are contradictory but they both obey the command of the almighty Decision-Maker and that which creates them is the greater decision. Both are busy in taking the person to his actual goal. The Kursi has similar meanings to their contradiction and the Arsh is the station of their acting in cohesion. It is now clear that the second decision overrules the first.

If we name the first decision to be Kursi and the second to be Arsh then it is because Kursi is the place from where the kings issue their decrees and his servants are busy with the some work or another. Here, the chair-persons sometimes contradict one another and so one decision overrules another and makes it void. But the Arsh, which is the station of the absolute ruler of all the decisions, is above contradictions and it contains all the unseen knowledge and information that were in the Kursi. So it is the center for all creations and they are created in an unprecedented fashion.

And when he said, “ All creations come out from this doorway”, it means whatever is in Arsh is in Kursi in details and is evident in different forms and the manifestations of both are ancient.

So, the word of the “How” means the concentration of causes; the word “Kaun” means their concentration and “Bida’ their beginning and the end. The word “Qadr’ means the quantity and condition of things and “Hud” means their comparative existence with others. “Makan” means their station of existence. “ Positive ness” or Musbit means its reality and “Sifat” may mean its attributes.

In the words “ the knowledge of words, the actions and the idleness”, the knowledge of words means the proof of the knowledge through words. The knowledge of action and idleness is the knowledge of the conditions that comes from a certain decision. Action and idleness are opposite one another. Action refers to doing something while idleness refers to the stoppage of that action.

When he said, “ The knowledge of the conditions” he was referring to Arsh. He then spoke about the manifest doorways that referred to Kursi. Bida means the control of one cause on another. So, the Arsh and Kursi are like neighbors who instigate one another to do things. The word “Ishtiqaq” has been used as a symbol for it means to split and bring forth.

The words, “ The Ulama are the keepers of the truth about both” refers to the Arsh and Kursi and that the Ulama through them search and discern the truth. They should be aware of the details of the arrangements and its conditions.

The Late Shaykh Suduq has quoted Imam Sadiq in his book Tawhid that,

One day some one asked the Imam about “ The throne on the water” so he said, “ what do the people say about it?” The man said, “ They say that the Arsh is on water and God lives on the Arsh.” The Imam said,

They lie about God because these words then mean that God has the attributes of the creations and is their protector. But, this is wrong because the result will be that they are stronger than God and are able to carry Him, or that they can create the Jinns, mankind, the sun and the moon and thus thought their knowledge to be superior than the things in existence before them.

The Compiler’s words

This tradition proves the existence of the knowledge of Arsh. The real creation was on water when the variety of the creations had not been manifested and God knew about them all.

There is a tradition in the book *Ehtijaj* that a person asked Hazrat Ali about the distance between the earth and the heavens and he replied,

The time it takes to say *La Illaha Illallah*