151794 - The divine attributes are to be affirmed in a literal sense, not metaphorical

the question

I am a teacher of Arabic language, and based on my literary perceptivity and my study of metaphor, I think that some of the verses which speak of the divine attributes are more metaphorical than literal. For example, when Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning), “The Hand of Allah is over their hands” [al-Fath 48:10], what is meant is might and power; I do not think that it is a hand in the real sense of the word. Similarly, when He, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning), “for verily, you are under Our Eyes” [at-Toor 52:48], what is meant is under Our care and protection. My sense of the language refuses to accept that it is referring to an eye in a real sense. Can you explain this matter to me?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Correct belief should be based on what is proven in the Quran and Sunnah, as understood by the early generations (salaf) of this ummah, namely the Sahaabah, Taabiʻeen and leading scholars. They were unanimously agreed that the divine attributes mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah are to be affirmed without discussing how or likening Him to His creation, and without denying any of His attributes or interpreting them in a way different from the apparent meaning. We do not differentiate between any of the divine attributes, no matter what category they come under. Every divine attribute that is mentioned in a saheeh text must be affirmed.

The Quran and Sunnah came to teach people about the attributes of their God, and this can only be done by understanding the words in a real sense; this is the basic principle with regard to statements. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) conveyed the Holy Quran in both wording and meaning; not a single letter was narrated from him to suggest that any of the

divine attributes should be interpreted in a way different from its apparent meaning, or that its apparent meaning is not intended, or that it means likening Him to His creation, or other phrases used by those who deny the divine attributes or interpret them in a way other than their apparent meaning. This is casting aspersions upon the Quran or upon the Messenger who was enjoined to convey and explain it. If anything of what they had mentioned was essential, then the Quran and the Prophet would have explained it and not concealed it. How could it be otherwise when it is proven in a number of saheeh hadeeths, the authenticity of which is agreed upon, that these attributes are to be affirmed, and there are other attributes mentioned in other hadeeths, such as His descending, His foot, His smiling, and His rejoicing, without any word to suggest that they should be understood in a way different from the apparent meaning, and without any Sahaabi having found it problematic to take them as they appear to be and according to what may be understood from them. If there was anything in the apparent meaning that could be regarded as not befitting to the divine or as likening the divine to any created being – and it is not possible for there to be any such thing in the Quran or Sunnah – then the infallible Prophet would have pointed it out and highlighted it to people, and the people of reason at that time would have questioned it, for they were more eager to attain good and adhere to it.

When innovations appeared, and people emerged who said that these attributes were to be understood in a metaphorical, rather than a real, sense – as was the view of the Jahamis and Mu‘tazilah and those who agreed with them – the early generations and leading scholars responded by stating that these attributes are to be understood in a real sense, not in a metaphorical sense. Their comments on this matter are abundant and well-known. We will quote some of their comments here:

-1-

‘Uthmaan ibn Sa‘eed ad-Daarimi (d. 280 – may Allah have mercy on him) said:

, may He be exalted, we know about the concept of metaphors from the language of the Arabs, which you have taken and used to confuse and mislead the ignorant. By means of this concept you denied the reality of the divine attributes, on the basis of the metaphor argument. But we say: It is

wrong to judge the most common style in the Arabic language on the basis of its rarest style; rather we should understand the statements of the Arabs on the basis of the most common style, unless you can produce proof that what is meant here is the rarer style (namely metaphor). This is the approach that is most fair, and it is not right to approach the divine attributes that are well known and understood as they appear to be by people of common sense, and twist the meaning on the grounds that these are metaphors.

End quote from Naqd ad-Raadirmi ‘ala Bishr al-Mireesi, 2/755

-2-

Imam Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jareer at-Tabari (d. 310 – may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If someone were to say: What is the proper approach with regard to the meaning of these attributes that you have mentioned, some of which are mentioned in the Book and revelation of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, and some were mentioned by the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)? Our response is: The correct approach in our view is to affirm the meaning in a real sense, without likening Him to His creation, as Allah said of Himself in the Quran (interpretation of the meaning): “There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer” [ash-Shoora 42:11]. … So we affirm all of the meanings that we said are mentioned in the reports and the Quran and the revelation according to their apparent meaning, and we reject any likening of Him to His creation. Hence we say: He, may He be glorified and exalted, hears all sounds, but not through a hole in an ear or through any physical faculty like those of the sons of Adam. Similarly, He sees all people with vision that is not like the vision of the sons of Adam, which is a physical faculty of theirs. He has two hands, a right hand, and fingers, but not in a physical sense; rather His two hands are outstretched, bestowing blessings upon creation, not withholding good. And He has a countenance or face, but it is not like the physical faces of the sons of Adam that are made of flesh and blood. We say that He smiles upon whomever He will of His creation, but we do not say that this is showing teeth (like a human smile); and He descends every night to the lowest heaven.

End quote from Tabseer fi Ma‘aalim ad-Deen, p. 141-145

-3-

Imam Abu Ahmad Muhammad ibn ‘Ali ibn Muhammad al-Karji who is known as al-Qassaab (d. 360 AH) said concerning the Qaadari belief in a letter that he wrote for the caliph al-Qaadir bi Amr-Allah in 433 AH, which was signed by the scholars of that time to confirm its content, which was sent to the various regions:

Allah is not to be described except as He has described Himself or as His Prophet has described Him. Any attribute that He has ascribed to Himself or that His Prophet has ascribed to Him, is an attribute in a real sense, and is not metaphorical. If it was metaphorical, then it would have been necessary to explain it in a manner different from the apparent meaning, so it would have been said: What is meant by vision is such and such, what is meant by hearing is such and such, and so on; it would have been explained in a way different from what one would understand from the apparent meaning. As the approach of the salaf is to affirm the attributes without interpreting them in a way different from the apparent meaning, this proves that they are not to be understood in a metaphorical sense; rather they are plain facts.

End quote from al-Muntazam by Ibn al-Jawzi, speaking of the events of 433 AH; Siyar A‘laam an-Nubala’, 16/213

-4-

Imam al-Haafiz Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ishaaq ibn Mandah (d. 395) said, affirming the divine attribute of the two hands:

Chapter on the verse in which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “(Allah) said: ‘O Iblees (Satan)! What prevents you from prostrating yourself to one whom I have created with Both My Hands’” [Saad 38:75]. And he quoted words of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) that could prove that Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, created Adam (peace be upon him) with His two hands in a real sense.

And he said, affirming the divine attribute of the countenance or face:

Chapter on the verse in which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “Everything will perish save His Face” [al-Qasas 28:88]. And Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “And the Face of your Lord full of Majesty and Honour will abide forever” [ar-Rahmaan 55:27]. And he quoted proven reports from the Prophet which indicate that this is to be understood in a real sense.

End quote from ar-Radd ‘ala al-Jahamiyyah, p. 68, 94

-5-

Imam Haafiz al-Maghrib Abu ‘Umar Yoosuf ibn ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abd al-Barr al-Andalusi al-Qurtubi al-Maaliki (d. 463) said:

In principle, words are to be understood in a real sense, unless the ummah is unanimously agreed that something is not to be understood in a real sense, and is rather a metaphor, because there is no way to follow what has been revealed to us from our Lord except on that basis. Rather we should understand the words of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, on the basis of the most apparent and clearest meaning, unless there is a strong reason to do otherwise. If it were justifiable for anyone to claim that something is a metaphor, then no statement would mean anything. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is far above saying anything in the Quran except that which is said in a manner that may be understood by the Arabs on the basis of their style of speech. Istiwa’ (rising above (the Throne)) is well known and understood in Arabic; it means rising above something and becoming settled and established.

He said, narrating that there was consensus among Ahl as-Sunnah concerning this matter: Ahl as-Sunnah are unanimously agreed that all the divine attributes mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah are to be affirmed, and we are to believe in them and understand them in a real sense, not as metaphorical. But they do not discuss the nature of any of them. As for the followers of innovation, the Jahamis, all the Mu‘tazilah and the Khaarijis, all of them deny the divine attributes and do not understand them in a true sense; they claimed that the one who affirms them is likening Him to

His creation. According to those who do affirm the divine attributes, these people are denying God. The truth is on the side of those who base their understanding on the wording of the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messengers, and they are the leaders of al-jamaa‘ah, praise be to Allah.

End quote from at-Tamheed, 7/131, 145

-6-

Imam al-Haafiz adh-Dhahabi said, after quoting the words of al-Qassaab referred to above:

As Allah exists in a real sense, not metaphorically, His attributes cannot be taken as metaphorical, because in that case they could not be divine attributes, because the attributes are connected to the one who possesses those attributes. As He exists in a real sense, not in a metaphorical sense, His attributes cannot be metaphorical. As there is nothing equal or similar to Him, there can be nothing like His attributes.

He said, commenting on the words of Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr mentioned above:

He spoke the truth, by Allah. Whoever interprets all the divine attributes in a manner other than their apparent meaning, and regards the words as metaphorical, that will inevitably lead him to denying the Lord and likening Him to something non-existent. It was narrated from Hammaad ibn Zayd that he said: The likeness of the Jahamis is that of people who said: On our land there is a palm tree. It was said: Does it have leaves? They said: No. It was said: Does it have branches? They said: No. It was said: Does it have bunches of dates? They said: No. It was said: Does it have a trunk? They said: No. It was said: Then you do not have a palm tree on your land!

End quote from al-‘Uluw, p. 239, 250

There are many similar reports. See: al-Ashaa‘irah fi Mizaan Ahl as-Sunnah by Shaykh Faisal ibn Qazzaaz al-Jaasim, in which there are many more such quotations from the early generations and the leading scholars.

This is the basic principle with regard to the texts that speak of the divine attributes, including the

two verses mentioned (in the question). The leading imams of the earlier and later generations quoted them to affirm the divine attributes of the hand and eye, among other evidence, yet they interpreted the verses in a manner that is appropriate to the context, as we shall see below.

Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said, explaining this concept:

The words of Allah (interpretation of the meaning), “The Hand of Allah is over their hands” [al-Fath 48:10], are to be understood according to their apparent meaning. The hand of Allah, may He be exalted, is over the hands of those who are swearing allegiance, because His hand is one of His attributes, yet He is above them, above His Throne. So His hand is above their hands. This is the apparent meaning of the words and is the real meaning, which is to affirm that allegiance to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is as if it were allegiance to Allah, may He be glorified and exalted. It does not mean that the hand of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is directly on top of their hands. Do you not see that we say that the sky is above us, even though it is distant from us? So the hand of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is above the hands of those who swore allegiance to His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), even though He is far above His creation.

End quote from al-Qawaa‘id al-Muthla, in Majmoo‘ Fataawa ash-Shaykh, 3/331

The words of Allah (interpretation of the meaning), “for verily, you are under Our Eyes” [at-Toor 52:48], were interpreted by some of the early generations as meaning “within Our vision or sight”; this is an explanation as dictated by the context, hence this verse confirms two things, the vision and eye of Allah.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Sharh al-Waasitiyyah: If it is asked: how do you explain the preposition bi in the phrase bi a‘yunina (translated above as “under Our eyes”, lit. “in our eyes”)? Our response is: we explain it as meaning that the eye is with or accompanying them. If you say “you are under my eye” it means my eye is accompanying you or, in other words, I am watching you and my gaze never shifts away from you. Hence what is meant is that Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is saying to His Prophet: Be patient with the decree

of Allah, for you are surrounded with Our care and We are watching you so that no one can harm you.

It does not refer to location (being “in” or “inside”), because that would imply that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was inside the eye of Allah! – which is impossible.

Moreover, this was addressed to the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) when he was on earth, so if you were to say that he was in the eye of Allah, this interpretation of this verse of the Quran is not correct.

Prior to that he said: If it were to be said that among the salaf there were those who interpreted the words of Allah “under Our eyes” as meaning in Our vision; it was interpreted thus by well-known, leading scholars among the early generations, but you say that interpreting it in a manner other than the apparent meaning is haraam, so what is the answer? Our response is that they interpreted it according to the context, whilst still affirming the basic meaning, which is the attribute of the divine eye. Those who distort the meanings say that it means “in Our vision” without affirming the divine eye, whereas Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah say that “under Our eyes” means in Our vision, whilst affirming the divine eye.

End quote from Majmoo‘ Fataawa ash-Shaykh, 8/264

Shaykh Saalih Aal ash-Shaykh (may Allah preserve him) said: “for verily, you are under Our Eyes” [at-Toor 52:48] means you are in Our vision and sight, and under Our care and protection.

This interpretation is the interpretation of the salaf for this phrase, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was not in the eye of Allah (in the singular) which is His attribute; rather he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was “under the eyes” of Allah (in the plural); that is because Allah has the attribute of two eyes. Hence Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah interpreted this as coming under the heading of what is implied by the verse, and implication is one of the ways in which the phrase may be interpreted. A phrase may be interpreted according to its exact meaning, or according to what it implies, or according to what is indicated by the

context.

Hence they said: What it means is that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was in (or under) the vision and sight of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, and under His care and protection. This is what is implied by the words “under Our Eyes” [at-Toor 52:48].

Therefore this does not come under the heading of interpretation in a manner other than the apparent meaning, as was claimed by those who did not understand. Rather it comes under the heading of what is implied, and implication – i.e., understanding the implications of a word – is a clear part of the Arabic language.

Even though the early generations affirmed the divine attribute of the two eyes, they could interpret something- as in the case of this verse – on the basis of what it implies, or they could interpret it on the basis of what the context indicates, and some may think that this comes under the heading of interpretation in a manner other than the apparent meaning, but that is wrong.

Implication is one thing and context is something else; these are two ways of understanding the wording of a phrase.

As for interpreting something in a manner other than the apparent meaning, this is ignoring what the wording indicates.

End quote from Sharh al-Waasitiyyah

From the above it is clear that these two verses are to be understood in a real sense, and that in them is an affirmation of the divine attributes of the hand and eye, and there is nothing wrong with interpreting the verse as dictated by its context or what it implies, without denying the divine attributes mentioned in it. Perhaps this is what you sensed by your linguistic perceptivity, i.e., the general meaning that is implied or dictated by the context, but it is wrong to think that this comes under the heading of metaphor, which would lead to denying one of the divine attributes or to denying the apparent meaning of the text.

And Allah knows best.