

ABU HANIFA, SALAFIS, AL-FIQH AL-AKBAR, AND THE TRUTH

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

Abu Hanifa says in Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar about the qualities of God:

“He has a hand, a face, and a self. So what He, High is He, mentions in the Qur’an of the mention of the face, hand, and self, they are all attributes of His with no modality (or description).

It is not said that His hand is His power or His blessing, since such would be a nullification of the attribute. And such is the statement of the People of *Qadar* and *‘Itizaa*l.^[8]]

Rather, His hand is His attribute with no modality (or description). And His anger and His satisfaction are two of His attributes with no modality (or description)...”

One must first understand that by virtue of the fact that the book – Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar - is considered to be the first book written in the time of the Taabi’een on the topic of Tawheed in an organized and methodical fashion during an age of great controversy when Sunnis were attempting to codify the orthodox creed of Muslims that there will be statements found in it that may be problematic.

Of course Salafis would find great joy in seeing such statements like the one above, since it apparently gives credence to their arguments about what they refer to as ‘The Attributes of Allah,’ like the hand, face, eyes, foot, side, shin, self, etc.

They could easily make the claim that their ‘aqeedah is correct and in agreement with the creed of the Salaf, since Imam Abu Hanifa who is one of the Salaf says in Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar that Allah has a hand. And His hand is an attribute, similar to what they say.

So on the surface it would seem that the argument is over, and that Salafis have proven themselves to be victorious in their claims.

However, a number of other things have to be considered before accepting their arguments.

Firstly, if we are to accept that Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar is an authentic work legitimately ascribable to Abu Hanifa and that it represents the ‘aqeedah of the Salaf, Salafis have to accept all that it contains. So they’d have to also accept the following statement made by Abu Hanifa about Allah’s speech:

“And He speaks, not as our speech. We speak with tools and letters while Allah, High is He, speaks without a tool and without letters. The letters are created. And the speech of Allah, High is He, is uncreated.”`

In this passage, Abu Hanifa states that when Allah, High is He, speaks, He speaks without letters. But Salafis believe that when Allah speaks, He speaks with letters and sounds.

So, really this is another case of Salafis selectively abusing and misusing the words of the Salaf and those attributed to the Salaf in an attempt to make it seem that their creed agrees with that of the Salaf, when in fact it doesn’t.

Add to that, Salafis are those who argue that the current version of Kitab al-Ibaanah ‘an Usool ad-Diyaanah, attributed to Imam Abu al-Hasan Al-Ash’ari, is a proper ascription to him.

And in that book, it states that Imam Abu Hanifa believed that the Qur’an was created¹. But if Salafis accept that Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar is appropriately ascribed to Abu Hanifa, they have to also accept his words that contradict this claim when he says:

“The Qur’an is Allah’s word, High is He, in pages transcribed, in hearts protected, on tongues recited, and on the Prophet (PBUH) and His family revealed. Our utterance of the Qur’an is created. Our writing of it is created. Our recitation of it is created. And the Qur’an is uncreated.”

How more explicit can the Imam be? He expressly states in Al-Fiqh al-Akbar that the “Qur’an is uncreated.” But the Salafis claim that the narrations in Al-Ibaanah that claim that Abu Hanifa believed that it was created is a proper ascription to Abu al-Hasan. And at the same time they consider Al-Fiqh al-Akbar to be properly ascribed to Abu Hanifa.

In addition to that, Imam Abu al-Hasan doesn’t make any mention of Abu Hanifa as being one of those who believed that the Qur’an was created in his more prominent and well-established work entitled ‘Maqaalaat al-Islaamiyyeen.’ And according to Salafis, Kitaab al-Ibaanah was his last work.

So how do they explain the fact that Imam Al-Ash’ari waited until his final work to mention Abu Hanifa, who died more than a century prior to him, as one of those who believed that the Qur’an was created in his supposed last work, when he didn’t mention him in what they believe to be one of his earlier works?

Did not Al-Ash’ari know that Imam Abu Hanifa was the author of Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar?

They just can’t have it both ways.

Either Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar is Abu Hanifa’s work, which would make Kitaab al-Ibaanah – in its present form - not Abu al-Hasan’s work. Or the current Kitaab al-Ibaanah is Abu al-Hasan’s work, which would mean that Al-Fiqh al-Akbar is not Abu Hanifa’s work.

And if Al-Fiqh al-Akbar is Abu Hanifa's work and Salafis want to use it as proof that their 'aqeedah is no different than his, they have to accept everything in it without exception.

Now as for the issue of the statement in Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar about the hand, face, and self and them being attributes, we must consider two things in particular:

1 – Imam At-Tahaawi makes no mention of hands, a face, or a self in his 'aqeedah. And his book has been accepted as the one that represents the 'aqeedah of Imam Abu Hanifa and his two companions, Abu Yusuf and Muhammad Ash-Shaibaani.

2 – Secondly, we must understand any comment made in Al-Fiqh al-Akbar – as in other works - according to context.

According to Al-Fiqh al-Akbar, Allah has two general classifications of attributes known as 'Attributes of the Essence' and 'Attributes of Action.'

Attributes of the Essence are the essential qualities of His being.

As for attributes of action, they are things that happen outside of His being. And since He is the one responsible for those occurrences, they are attributed to Him and called 'Attributes of Action.'

Imam Abu Hanifa explains this in his book when he says:

“He doesn't resemble anything of His creation, and nothing of His creation resembles Him. He has always and will always exist with His names and His attributes of the (divine) essence and those (attributes) of action.

As for those of the essence, they are: life, power, knowledge, speech, hearing, seeing, and will.

And as for those of action, they are: creating, providing, producing, originating, manufacturing, and other attributes of action.”

So the attributes of Allah’s divine essence are seven:

- 1- Life
- 2- Power
- 3- Knowledge
- 4- Speech
- 5- Hearing
- 6- Seeing
- 7- Will

As for the attributes of action, he states things like

- Creating,
- Providing,
- Producing,
- Originating,
- Manufacturing,
- And other attributes of action

Then, Abu Hanifa says,

“He has always and will always exist with His names and attributes. He has not acquired any new name or attribute.”

So according to Abu Hanifa, Allah has 7 confirmed attributes of the essence [2], while he places no limit to His attributes of action, since the possibilities of what can exist are limitless.

As for restricting the attributes of the essence to merely seven, this is not to say that these are the only attributes that Allah has. It is merely to say that this is the number that both

revelation and reason have been able to conclude. As for the standard view of Maaturidis, the attributes of the essence are 8.

As for Ash'aris, they divide attributes a bit further to the point that some of them have stated 13 [³] and some have stated 20 [⁴].

In the end, most of that is just a difference in semantics. And the true difference is with relationship to what Ash'aris call 'Abstract Attributes', which are the 7 that Abu Hanifa mentions in Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar, while Maaturidis add an eighth called 'Takween.'

At any rate, notice how Abu Hanifa doesn't make mention of the hand, face, and self until he enumerates the attributes of the essence. And, so that the readers can see, here is the complete text prior to the mention of the hand, face, and self:

“He doesn't resemble anything of His creation, and nothing of His creation resembles Him. He has always and will always exist with His names and His attributes of the (divine) essence and those (attributes) of action.

As for those of the essence, they are: life, power, knowledge, speech, hearing, seeing, and will.

And as for those of action, they are: creating, providing, producing, originating, manufacturing, and other attributes of action.

He has always and will always exist with His names and attributes. He has not acquired any new name or attribute.”

So if He hasn't acquired any new name or attribute, there are truly no other definitive attributes of essence other than those mentioned above^[5], and the hand, face, and self aren't included among them.

Then he continues:

“He has always been Knowing by His knowledge. And knowledge has been an attribute since pre-eternity.

(He has always been) Powerful by His power. And power has been an attribute since pre-eternity.

(He has always been) A Speaker by His speech. And speech has been an attribute since pre-eternity.

(He has always been) Creator by His creative-will^[6]. And the creative-will has been an attribute since pre-eternity.

(He has always been) A Doer by His will to act^[7]. And the will to act has been an attribute since pre-eternity. The Doer is Allah, High is He. The will to act has been an attribute since pre-eternity. And the resulting entity of His will to act is created, while Allah’s will to act, High is He, is uncreated. And His attributes have been since pre-eternity un-invented and uncreated. So whoever says that they are created or invented, remains silent about them, or entertains doubts about them is one who rejects faith in Allah, High is He.”

He also says,

“And Allah, High is He, was indeed a Speaker at a time when He had not yet spoken to Musa, upon him be peace. And Allah was indeed a Creator in pre-eternity even though He had not yet created. (*There is nothing like unto Him. And He is the All-Hearing All-Seeing*). So when He spoke to Musa, He spoke to him with His speech, which has been an attribute of His since pre-eternity. And All of His attributes are without beginning from pre-eternity; contrary to the state of the attributes of created beings.

He has knowledge, not as our knowledge. He has power, not as our power. He sees, not as our seeing. He hears, not as our hearing. And He speaks, not as our speech.

We speak with tools and letters while Allah, High is He, speaks without a tool and without letters. The letters are created. And the speech of Allah, High is He, is uncreated.

He is a thing, not like other things. And the point of saying ‘thing’ is to confirm His existence while not being a divisible body, an indivisible body, and not an accident of a body.

He has no boundary. He has no opposite. He has no rival. And He has no equal.

Then finally he says,

He has a hand, a face, and a self. So what He, High is He, mentions in the Qur’an of the mention of the face, hand, and self, are all attributes of His with no modality (or description).

It is not said that His hand is His power or His blessing, since such would be a nullification of the attribute. And such is the statement of the People of *Qadar* and *‘Itizaaal.*^[8]

Rather, His hand is His attribute with no modality (or description). And His anger and His satisfaction are two of His attributes with no modality (or description)...”

So what are we to understand from all of this? How do we reconcile between Abu Hanifa’s saying after mentioning the seven attributes of the essence:

“He has always and will always exist with His names and attributes. He has not acquired any new name or attribute.”

And between his saying,

“He has a hand, a face, and a self. So what He, High is He, mentions in the Qur’an of the mention of the face, hand, and self, are all attributes of His with no modality (or description).”?

I believe that the best way to reconcile between the two is to say that ‘hand, face, and self’ are references to either one of Allah’s true attributes of the essence as stated in the first clause by Abu Hanifa. Or they are references to one of His attributes of action.[⁹]

One cannot deny that by such words being annexed to Allah’s name or pronoun in the Qur’an, they are being ‘attributed’ to Him directly even if calling them ‘attributes’ doesn’t coincide with the original linguistic definition of what an attribute is.

So calling them attributes would be a metaphorical application as opposed to a literal application. And if it is a metaphorical application, it would have to be accepted that such named ‘attributes’ are metaphorical ‘attributes.’ So the hand, face, and self would have to be a metaphorical ‘hand, face, and self,’ which are references to one of Allah’s true attributes, since there is nothing like unto Him. And ‘hand’ in its original linguistic understanding applies only to created beings.

Abdur-Rahman ibn Al-Jawzi says while mentioning the mistakes of some Hanbali scholars in the area of scriptural interpretation of the problematic verses of the Qur’an,

“And those writers who I have mentioned have erred in seven areas. The first of them is that they called the ‘reports’ ‘attributes.’ When they are merely annexations/possessive forms. And not every possessive form is an attribute. For Allah, High is He, has said: ((And I have blown into him from My spirit)) [Al-Hijr: 29]. And Allah doesn’t have an attribute known as a ‘spirit.’ So those who have called ‘the possessive form’ (idaafa) ‘an attribute’ are guilty of innovation.”

The linguist, Tha’lab says in Taaj al-‘Aroos,

“A ‘na’t’ is a description given to a specific part of the body like the word ‘lame’ (‘araj). A ‘sifa’ (attribute) is for non-specificity (‘umoom), like the word ‘magnificent’ (‘azeem) and ‘generous’ (kareem). So Allah is described with a ‘sifa’. But He is not described with a ‘na’t.’”

What this would mean is that the word ‘sifa’ (attribute) is being used metaphorically to mean ‘na’t’, which is another word for ‘attribute’ or ‘trait.’ The difference is that a ‘na’t’ describes a specific part of a body, like ‘lame’ or ‘blind’.

For this reason, Imam Bukhaari uses the word ‘nu’oot’ (plural of *na’t*), instead of ‘sifaat’ (plural of *sifa*) to refer to those reports that make mention of Allah’s anger, laughter, foot, hand, and face even though He isn’t a body and doesn’t have a body.

This would have to be the accepted interpretation. Otherwise, we must accept that Abu Hanifa contradicts his self by first limiting the attributes of the essence to the 7 mentioned above, and then later adding Allah’s face, hand, and self.

Another important question is ‘Why doesn’t Abu Hanifa add to what he considered attributes ‘the shin, the side, the eyes, the foot, and the spirit?’

This is important because Allah annexes His name or personal pronoun to each of these things in the Qur’an or the Messenger does so in the hadith. So if I am to accept that Allah has a face, self, and hand, simply because He annexes such things to His name or pronoun, I should also accept that He has eyes, a spirit, a foot, a side, a shin, a she-camel, a house, and any other thing that He has attached His name or pronoun to.

And if the Salafis agree with Abu Hanifa’s creed, they should only accept as attributes those things that Abu Hanifa declared to be attributes. This would mean that Salafis have to stop saying that Allah has a foot, a shin, a side, and eyes.

But we know that they won't do that, because Salafis are very selective about what they want to accept from the Salaf and what they don't want to accept, all the while claiming that their 'aqeeda is the 'aqeeda of the Salaf.

If they use Abu Hanifa's words about the face, hand, and self as being proof that they follow the minhaaj and understanding of the Salaf, they should only say what the Salaf said and stop adding to their words.

So to accept that these are the words of Abu Hanifa, we'd either have to accept the first interpretation or we'd have to accept the second, which would mean that he is in contradiction with his self.

And if that is so, we'd have to accept that Abu Hanifa may not have been an authority on this subject.

As for referring to these problematic verses and hadiths as 'Attribute Verses' (Aayaat as-Sifaat) or 'Reports of Attributes' (Akhbaar as-Sifaat), this was the specific terminology that scholars used to refer to them even though they didn't actually mean that such ascriptions mentioned in scripture were attributes of Allah. Imam Ibn Al-Jawzi's words above clarify the error of this sort of designation. So hopefully that should resolve any confusion about the issue.

Was Salam

Abdullah

⁸ In other words, to say such a thing would be equal to saying what the people who deny the divine decree (qadar) say and like the Mu'tazilites who say that every time Allah ascribes a hand to His self, it means 'power.'

¹ In Daar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah's 1998/1418 publication of *Kitaab al-Ibaanah*, it reads on page 40:

"Haarun ibn Ishaq al-Hamdaani mentioned about Abu Na'eem from Sulaimaan ibn 'Eesaa Al-Qaari that Sufyaan Ath-Thauri said: "I said to Hammaad ibn Abi Sulaimaan: "Proclaim to Abu Hanifa, The Idolater, that I am innocent of him."'" Sulaimaan said: "Then Sufyaan said: "That's because he used to say, 'The Qur'an is created.'"

Sufyaan ibn Wakee' said: "I heard 'Umar ibn Hammaad, the grandson of Abu Hanifa, say: "My father said to me: "The comment that Ibn Abi Lailaa demanded that Abu Hanifa repent from was his statement: 'The Qur'an is created.'" He (Hammaad) said: "So he repented from it and announced his repentance publicly. My (Hammaad) father said: "How did you turn to this?" He (Abu Hanifa) said: "I feared – By Allah – that I would be disciplined. So I used a misleading expression to trick him (heela)."

Haarun ibn Ishaq said, "I heard Ismaa'eel ibn Abi Al-Hakam mention about 'Umar ibn 'Ubaid At-Tanaafusi that Hammaad – i.e. Ibn Abi Sulaimaan – sent someone to Abu Hanifa to say: "Verily I am innocent of what you say until you repent."

Ibn Abi 'Inabah was with him (i.e. Hammaad) and said: "Your neighbor told me that Abu Hanifa invited him to what he was asked to repent from after he had already been asked to repent from it."

And it was mentioned that Abu Yusuf said, "I debated with Abu Hanifa for two months until he retracted his statement about the createdness of the Qur'an."

[Al-Ash'ari, Abu al-Hasan (*ascribed to him*), *Kitaab al-Ibaanah 'an Usool ad-Diyaanah*: 1998/1418 Daar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Marginal Notes by 'Abdullah Mahmood Muhammad 'Umar.]

On the same page, the commentator, Abdullah Mahmood Muhammad 'Umar, makes the following comments:

"Tahaawi states in his book, *Al-'Aqeedah At-Tahaawiyah*, what contradicts these narrations that claim that Abu Hanifa used to state that the Qur'an is created. And Tahaawi is more reliable in transmission and more knowing of the creed of his comrades (Abu Hanifa and his two companions) than Al-Ash'ari is. Imam Tahaawi, the Hanafi, says: "The Qur'an is the word of Allah. It came from Him as speech without it being possible to say how. He sent it down upon His messenger as revelation. The believers accept it as absolute truth. They are certain that it is, in truth, the word of Allah. It was not created like the speech of human beings..."

So the commentator, in spite of the fact that he seems to accept that the book is properly ascribed to Imam Al-Ash'ari, he establishes that such a claim made by him cannot be substantiated, since it conflicts with the reports given by those who have better knowledge of the creed of Abu Hanifa who conveyed it to the Ummah.

Add to this, Al-Ash'ari doesn't list Imam Abu Hanifa among those who believed the Qur'an to be created in his book, *Maqaalaat al-Islaamiyyeen*, even though the narrations above from Al-Ibaanah give the impression that Abu Hanifa never actually relinquished the presumed belief that the Qur'an is created.

² These seven attributes are referred to by Ash'aris as 'The Abstract Attributes' (Sifaat al-Ma'aani).

³ In addition to the seven aforementioned attributes, Ash'aris include the following six:

- Existence
- Permanence without beginning
- Endurance without end
- Absoluteness independence
- Dissimilarity to Created Things
- Oneness

Existence is known as the 'Essential Attribute' (As-sifah An-nafsiyyah), since without it Allah would not be able of being described by any of the others.

The other 5 are known as the 'Negating Attributes' (As-Sifaat As-Salbiyyah). This is because by establishing them, one negates their opposites from Allah's being.

⁴ Ash'aris also include seven other attributes called 'Signifying Attributes' (As-Sifaat al-Ma'nawiyah).

They are:

- That Allah be Powerful
- That Allah be Willful
- That Allah be Knowing
- That Allah be Living
- That Allah be Seeing
- That Allah be Hearing
- That Allah be Speaking

They are called the 'Signifying Attributes' (As-Sifaat al-Ma'nawiyah), because they signify that Allah has the attribute that each adjective implies, i.e. power, will, knowledge, life, sight, hearing, and speech.

Abu Hanifa mentions only the 7 abstract attributes. But this doesn't mean that he denies the existence of the other 13 mentioned by Ash'aris. This is because the 'essential attribute' of 'existence' and the other five negating attributes are characteristics of the 7 essential qualities. So they go without saying.

⁵ The reason that Abu Hanifa doesn't mention the 5 'Negating Attributes' (i.e. permanence without beginning, endurance without end, absolute independence, dissimilarity to creation, and oneness), the 'Essential Attribute' (Existence), and the 7 signifying attributes stated above, is that these attributes are actually qualities of Allah's main qualities, which are the 7 Attributes of the Essence or as Ash'aris call them, 'Abstract Attributes.'

⁶ The 'creative-will' is a translation of what Maaturidis refer to as 'takhleeq.'

⁷ The 'will to act' is a translation for the word, 'fi'l,' usually translated as 'action.' I translated as 'will to act' since it is more in line with the actual creed of Maaturidis who based much of their creed off of the doctrine of Imam Abu Hanifa. To translate 'fi'l' as 'action' or 'act' would imply that the creation – one of Allah's actions - is eternal without a beginning, since the author states that the 'fi'l' is uncreated.

⁸ In other words, to say such a thing would be equal to saying what the people who deny the divine decree (qadar) say and like the Mu'tazilites who say that every time Allah ascribes a hand to His self, it means 'power.'

⁹ Imam Shaukaani states in his *Irshaad al-Fuhool* while discussing the different relationships that tie between literal and figurative language that one of them is, "Assigning a thing the name of one of its forms and manifestations, like using the word 'hand' to refer to 'power...'" [*Irshaad al-Fuhool*: 1/119] In other words, the hand is a form or manifestation of power. This would mean that when one says that the 'hand' is one of Allah's attributes, he really means that it is His power even though a different word is used to apply to it. And Allah knows best.