The Ayahs of the Qur’an: The Muḥkam and the Mutashabīh

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds, Who does not resemble the creation. To Allah belong the endowments and the befitting perfections and commendations. We ask Allah to raise the rank of Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu ṣalātullāhi wa sallam, and to protect his nation from that which he feared for it. Thereafter:

Allah said in the Qur’an:

ṣūrat Al-^Imran, ayah 7 means: [Allah is the One Who has sent down to the Prophet the Book that contains muḥkam ayahs, which are the foundation of the Book, and other ayahs which are mutashabīh.] So, know firmly that the Qur’an contains two types of ayahs:

1. Muḥkam Ayahs: These are the ayahs (verses) that, according to the rules of the Arabic language, have only one meaning or are those with a clear meaning. Examples of this type of ayahs are: the saying of Allah, ta^alā:

ṣūrat ash-Shura, ayah 11 means: [There is absolutely nothing like Allah]

His saying:

ṣūrat al-Ikhlas, ayah 4 means: [Nothing is equal to Him], and His saying:

ṣūrat Maryam ayah 65 means: [Do you know of anything which is similar to Him? There is none.]

2. Mutashabīh Ayahs: These are the, ayahs that, according to the rules of the Arabic language, can have many meanings. Assigning acceptable meanings to these ayahs requires proper Knowledge of the Arabic Language
and thorough thinking. Examples of this type of *ayahs* are: the saying of *Allah*, *ta^ala*, in *Surat Taha*, *ayah* 5:

and His saying in *Surat Fatir*, *ayah* 10:

According to the rules of the Arabic language, these *ayahs* are *mutashabih*; so they can have many meanings. Assigning meanings to them must be done in a manner which complies with the Arabic language and the Religion. The assigned meanings must not contradict the *ayahs* that are *muhkam*. Surely, the *ayahs* of the *Qur'an* do not contradict one another! Likewise, the *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet, *sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam,*) neither contradict one another, nor the *ayahs* of the *Qur'an*.

There are two methodologies for explaining the *mutashabih* *ayahs* of the *Qur'an*, and both of them are valid. They are:

1. The Methodology of the *Salaf*: The *Salaf* were the scholars who lived during the first three centuries after the Hijrah (Immigration) of the Prophet, *sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam*. Most often, this methodology consisted of giving general explanations, since the scholars of the *Salaf* believed that these *ayahs* have meanings befitting to the perfection of *Allah*. Rather than saying what these meanings are, they referred these *mutashabih* *ayahs* to the *muhkam* *ayahs*. A good example is the saying of *Imam ash-Shafi^iyy*:

which means: "I believe in what *Allah* revealed according to the meaning that *Allah* willed, and in what the Messenger of *Allah* conveyed according to the meaning that the Messenger of *Allah* willed." In other words, the proper befitting meanings are not according to the sensuous and physical meanings that delusions would lead to, such as places, shapes, limbs, movements, sitting, colors, directions, smiling, laughing, or any other meanings which are not permissible to be attributed to *Allah*.

Furthermore, the Arabs during the first three Hijriyy centuries spoke the Arabic language with a natural disposition and great eloquence. Their understanding of its meanings was so sharp that they did not need to attribute specific meanings to the *mutashabih* *ayahs*. Instead, they understood that these *ayahs* have meanings that befit *Allah*, and that it is impossible that they would have sensuous and physical meanings which do not befit *Allah*.

Nevertheless, it is well known that some of the scholars of the *Salaf* did attribute specific meanings to *mutashabih* *ayahs*. In his *Sahih*, in the chapter
Tafsirul-Qur'an (Explanation of the Qur'an) Imam al-Bukhariyy attributed a specific meaning to the term "ilā wajhahu" in Surat al-Qasas, ayah 88. He said: "ilā mulkuhu," i.e., he said that word "wajh", which is an attribute of Allah, means "Mulk" or "Dominion."

2. The Methodology of the Khalaf: The Khalaf were the scholars who lived after the first three centuries after the Hijrah. For the most part, this methodology consisted of giving specific meanings to the mutashābih ayahs. The scholars of the Khalaf lived at a time when the people started to lose their natural disposition for the Arabic language. Seeing that the people had become weaker in the language, the scholars of the Khalaf feared that those with perversity in their hearts would read meanings into the mutashābih ayahs which do not befit Allah. They feared what is mentioned in Surat Al-^Imran, ayah 7. Allah said:

which means: [Those who have perversity in their hearts, follow the mutashābih ayahs, seeking discord and searching for unbefitting meanings based on their delusions.] In order to protect the creed of Islam, the scholars of the Khalaf followed the example of the scholars of the Salaf who gave specific meanings to the mutashābih ayahs. Referring them to the muḥkam ayahs, they gave specific meanings to the mutashābih ayahs in compliance with the language and with the Religion. They gave correct, acceptable meanings to the mutashābih ayahs. Allah said:

,Ayah 7 in Surat Al-^Imran means: [No one knows their true meanings except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in the knowledge of the Religion. The latter {i.e, those firmly rooted in the knowledge} say: "We believe in it, all of it is from our Lord" and none will understand the message, except the men of comprehension.] In relation to this ayah, Ibn ^Abbas said: (This is narrated by hafidh az-Zabidiyy in "Itlaf as-Sadah al-Muttaqin") "I am one of those who are firmly rooted in the knowledge of the Religion." It is well known that Ibn ^Abbas is generally regarded as being foremost among the Companions in the explanation of the meanings of the ayahs of the Qur'an.

Among those who have perversity in their hearts are the mushabbihah, those who liken Allah to His creation. The followers of Ibn Taymiyah and Muhammad Ibn ^Abdil-Wahhab are among the group of the mushabbihah.
They falsely claim that it is prohibited to make ta'wîj, i.e., to assign specific meanings to the mutashabih ayahs and especially to those that pertain to the attributes of Allah. Moreover, they innovated a devilish rule which states that assigning specific meanings to the ayahs would lead to cancelling these attributes of Allah. Their claim leads to interpretations of the ayahs of the Qur'an that contradict one another. It leads to interpretations of the hadiths of the Prophet that contradict one another and contradict the ayahs of the Qur'an. Furthermore, their claim accuses the Islamic scholars of the Salaf and the Khalaf of denying the attributes of Allah, which unjustly makes them blasphemers. Such scholars include: Ibn ^Abbas, Sufyan ath-Thawriyy, Mujahid, Sa'[id Ibn Jubayr, Malik, Ahmad, al-Bukhariyy, an-Nawawiyy, Ibn Rajab al-Hanbaliyy, Ibn-ul-Jawziyy, Ibn Hajar al-^Asgalaniyy, al-Bayhaqiyy, Abul-Fadl at-Tamimiyy, ^Abdul-Qahir al-Baghdadiyy, the linguist and scholar of Hadith Murtada az-Zabidiyy, and others.

Foremost, by their claim the mushabbiha are contradicting the Prophet, sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam. Al-Bukhariyy related that the Prophet made a du'â’ (a supplication) for Ibn ^Abbas. The Prophet said:

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"اِلْهُمَّ اَنْعَمْ الْحَكَمَ عَلَيْنَا اَنْعَمْ الْقُرْآنَ ١٩٢

which means: <<O Allah, teach him the Knowledge of Hadith and the explanation of the Qur'an.>>
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In the chapter, Tafsirul-Qur'an, (Explanation of the Qur'an), Imam al-Bukhariyy says that the term wajhahu in Surat al-Qasas, ayah 88, means "His Dominion." However, the mushabbiha who liken Allah to His creation say: "We do not interpret, but rather we go by the literal meaning," and hence (they say) wajhahu means "His face."

Ibn Hajar al-^Asgalaniyy, in his book, Al-Fath (an explanation of the meaning of Sahih al-Bukhariyy), Volume 6, page 39-40, said: "..... in reference to al-Bukhariyy's saying that the attribute of Allah, ad-dahik, means 'mercy,' it is closer to say that it means 'acceptance of deeds.' Yet, the mushabbiha insist on taking the literal meaning, and they say that Allah smiles, or laughs.

In Surat al-Qalam, ayah 42, Allah said:

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[Ly:١٩٢] اَلْهُمَّ اَنْعَمْ الْحَكَمَ عَلَيْنَا اَنْعَمْ الْقُرْآنَ

The scholars of the Salaf explained the term saq to mean hardship,' and the ayah to mean 'a day of anguish and hardship.' This explanation is known to have been given by Ibn ^Abbas, Mujahid, Ibrahim an-Nakh'ivyy, Qatabah, Sa'id Ibn Jubayr, and a multitude of scholars. Both Imam al-Fakhr ar-Raziiyy in his Explanation of the Qur'an, Volume 30, page 94 and Imam al-Bayhaqiyy in his books, Al-'Asma' was-Ṣifat, (page 245) and Fath-ul-Baqi, (Volume-13, page 428) related this explanation from Ibn ^Abbas. Ibn Qulayb also related the same about Sa'id Ibn Jubayr who took his knowledge from ^Abdullah Ibn
^Abbas and Ibn ^Umar. Yet, the mushabbihah insist on taking the literal meaning and attribute 'the shin' to Allah, by saying saq literally means 'shin.' Such a mistranslation is given in the so-called "The Noble Qur'an" by M.Khan and M. Al-Hilali. This English translation is full of misinterpretations which are blasphemous, as they amount to likening Allah to His creations.

In Surat -ul-Bagarah, ayah 115, Allah said:

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\text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:} \quad \text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:}
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Imam Mujahid, the student of Ibn ^Abbas, said that the word wajh means 'qiblah,' i.e., the direction of praying during the voluntary prayers while travelling and riding an animal. Yet, the mushabbihah insist on taking the literal meaning; they claim the term, wajh, means 'face.'

Similarly, if ayah 12 in Surat al-Tahrim:

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\text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:} \quad \text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:}
\]

were taken literally, it would mean that Allah blew part of His Soul into ^Isa (Jesus.) However, the scholars said this ayah means: [Allah ordered Jibril to blow into ^Isa the soul which is honorable to Allah.]

Also, if ayah 75 in Surat Sad:

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\text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:} \quad \text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:}
\]

were taken literally, it would mean: "What has stopped you from performing sujud to what I have created with My hands?" However, the scholars said that the word 'yadayn' in the ayah means the 'care' of Allah. Yet, the mushabbihah insist that yadayn means hands.

Likewise, if ayah 35 in Surat an-Nur:

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\text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:} \quad \text{ تعالى}
\text{قال:}
\]

were taken literally, it would mean: "Allah is the light of the heavens and the Earth." The scholars, such as al-Bayhagiyy and at-Tabariyy related that ^Abdullah Ibn ^Abbas said that this ayah means: [Allah is the Creator of guidance in the occupants of the heavens and the occupants of the Earth.] However, the mushabbihah insist on taking the literal meaning and say that Allah is 'light.'

Again, if ayah 22 in Surat al-Fajr were taken literally:
it would mean: "Your Lord comes." It was related that Imam Ahmad Ibn Hambal, who is among the authorities of the Salaf, said that this *ayah* means: [An indication of the Power of Allah has come.] In his book, Manaqib Ahmad, Hafidh Imam al-Bayhaqiyy, established that the sanad (chain) of narrators is *sahih* (authentic). Also, Ibn al-Jawziyy, al-Hambaliyy, one of the authorities of the school of Imam Ahmad, related that Imam Ahmad assigned specific, acceptable meanings to the *ayahs* which are *mutashabih*. He also said this was a proof that Imam Ahmad did not believe that the *maj* (a noun for the verb *ja*a) in the *ayah* refers to movement from one place to another. Imam Ibn al-Jawziyy also said: "It is not possible that Allah would be ascribed with motion. This is so, because Allah is not a body occupying a space." Yet, the *mushabbihah* insist on taking the literal meaning and say that *ja*a Rabbuka means "Your Lord comes" (i.e., from one place to another.)

The *hadith* of the Prophet ﷺ related by al-Bukhariyy:

was affirmed and explained by Imam Malik as a descent of the mercy of Allah and not as a descent of Allah Himself. However, the *mushabbihah* insist on taking the literal meaning. They say the *nuzul* in the *hadith* means a descent of movement, i.e., going from one place to another.

Referencing Imam al-'Ashariyy, Imam al-Bayhaqiyy, in his book, Al-Asma' was-Sifat, page 488, said: "Allah, *ta^ala*, is not in a place. Motion, stillness, and sitting are among the attributes of bodies."

Abul-Fadl al-Tamimiyy reported that Imam Ahmad Ibn Hambal said: "The linguists defined the term 'body' as something with width, dimensions, format, and parts. Allah is clear of all of that."

As for the word *istawa* in Surat Taha, *ayah 5*:

The famous linguist Abu Bakr Ibn ^Arabiyy al-Malikiyy reported that the word *istiwa* has 15 meanings in the Arabic language.

*Imam* Ibn Rajab al-Hambaliyy explained the term *al-* istiwa', as *al-istiila*', which means subjugating. When *al-istiila'* is used to explain this *ayah*, it means that Allah subjugated the *^Arsh* with a subjugation that is without a beginning, like all the attributes of Allah. If the *ayah* is explained in this manner, it means that Allah was attributed with subjugating the *^Arsh* before the *^Arsh* was created in the same way that Allah was attributed with being the Creator before He created the world of creations. In this context, the scholars have used the term *al-azal*, which means the status of existing without a beginning. Thus it can be said that Allah subjugated the *^Arsh* in *al-azal*, meaning that
Allah subjugated the *Arsh with a subjugation that is without a beginning. Yet the mushabbihah insist on taking the literal meaning, to say istiwa' means Allah 'sits' on the throne and 'firmly establishes' Himself on it.

In his book, Al-Mu'tagad, Imam al-Bayhaqiy related, in a chain back to al-'Awza'iyy, Imam Malik, Sufyan ath-Thawriyy, and al-Layth Ibn Sa'd, that when they were asked about the *ayahs and the hadiths which are mutashabih, they said:

which means: "Accept them as they came without applying a 'how' to them." This is because if one asked the question 'how?' the answer would be, 'Like this or that.' Everything other than Allah is a creation. So to say 'like this or that' would mean 'like this or that created thing' and Allah is not like the creation. Anything a person can imagine, Allah is different from it. When the scholars said: "...without applying a 'how' to them," they meant that Allah is clear of being attributed with sitting, resting, moving, limbs, bodies, and parts. They did not mean that His istiwa' of the Throne (*Arsh) has a 'how' of which we are ignorant. On the contrary, the scholars completely negated that a 'how' could be applied to Allah. So the statement of those who say "Allah sits on the Throne but we do not know how," is rejected on the basis of what these scholars said.

Anyone with a sound mind knows that sitting, no matter how it is, is an attribute of bodies. Occupying places necessitates a 'how' and applies to bodies. Furthermore, color and touching are attributes of bodies and 'how' applies to them. All of that is impossible to apply to Allah.

Similarly, when the Prophet, sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam, asked the slave woman the question: "Aynallah?", the scholars said this meant he was asking her about her belief in the status of Allah. She answered: "Fis-sama" which has the meaning that Allah has the highest status. Furthermore, Imam Malik related the same hadith with a different wording. In the narration of Malik, the Prophet asked the slave woman if she believed in both parts of the shahadatayn and she said: "yes" to both. So the Prophet said to set her free. Yet the mushabbihah insist on taking the literal meaning saying that the Prophet asked her about the place of Allah, and that she said: "In the sky," meaning that the sky is a place for Allah.

Likewise, the hadith of the Prophet, sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam, related by At-Tirmidhiyy:

means: <<If you are merciful to those on Earth, the angels, who occupy the heavens, will bring onto you the mercy of Allah.>> Yet, the mushabbihah insist
unjustifiably, on taking the literal meaning, saying the *hadith* means: "Allah, Who occupies the heavens, will be merciful to you."

So, the *mushabbiha* insist on taking the literal meanings of the *mutashabih* *ayahs*. They reject assigning specific meanings to them, and refuse to ascribe acceptable meanings to them. By doing this, the *mushabbiha* render the *ayahs* of the *Qur'an* and the *hadiths* contradictory to one another. For example: the famous *hadith* of the Prophet, related by al-Bukhariyy and Muslim:

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\text{"Allah, Who occupies the heavens, will be merciful to you."}
\]

if taken by the method of the *mushabbiha*, it would mean: "Allah is between the person and the neck of his animal." This is in direct contradiction with their claim that the *hadith* of the slave woman means: "Allah has a place, which is the sky."

Likewise, if *ayah* 4 in *Surat al-Hadid*:

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\text{[阿拉伯] لا ينجح في القلعة: بَاكِيُّ أَوَّل}
\]

is taken literally, it would mean: "Allah is with you, wherever you are." However, the scholars established that this *ayah* means: [Allah knows about you, wherever you are.] Similarly, if the saying of Allah in *Surat Fussilat, ayah* 54:

\[
\text{[阿拉伯] لا ينجح في القلعة: بَاكِيُّ أَوَّل}
\]

is taken by its literal meaning, it would mean: "Allah surrounds everything." Furthermore, if the saying of Allah, that *Ibrahim* said in *Surat as-Saffat, ayah* 99:

\[
\text{[阿拉伯] لا ينجح في القلعة: بَاكِيُّ أَوَّل}
\]

is taken by its literal meaning, it would mean: "Allah is in the countries of *ash-Sham*\(^1\)," as this *ayah* talks about Prophet *Ibrahim* moving from Iraq to the countries of *ash-Sham*. If the saying of Allah in *Surat al Bagarah, ayah* 125:

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\(^1\) *Ash-Sham* refers to the area that includes Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon.
is taken by its literal meaning, it would mean: "The Ka^bah is the residence of Allah." If ayah 128 in Surat an-Nahl is taken literally, it would mean: "Allah is physically with the pious."

It is clear that if these ayahs are interpreted based on the literal meanings, this will lead to numerous contradictions. The great scholars of Islam have ascribed proper and acceptable meanings to the mutashabih ayah and the mutashabih hadiths in accordance with the Religion, the language, and by referring them to the clear muhkam ayahs. They said Surat al-Hadîd, ayah 4,

means: [Allah knows about you wherever you are.] Surat Fussilat, ayah 54,

means [Allah knows everything.] Surat al-Baqarah, ayah 125,

means: [The Ka^bah is a house of a great honor to Allah.] Surat al-An^am, ayah 61,

refers to the fawqiyyah (aboveness) of subjugation, meaning: [All are subjugated to Allah.] Surat an-Nahl, ayah 128,

means: [Allah supports those who are pious.] Surat Taha, ayah 5,

means: [Allah subjugated the ^Arsh in al-azal with a subjugation that is without a beginning, as are all of the attributes of Allah.] In taking the mutashabih ayahs by their literal meanings, the mushabbiyah contradict the muhkam ayahs. An example is Surat ash-Shura, ayah 11,

which means: [Nothing is like Allah in any way]. They try to escape the contradiction by camouflaging it, saying that Allah has a 'face' but without
countenance; and Allah has a 'direction' which is above, but we do not know 'how' it is; and Allah has a 'shin,' but we do not know 'how' His 'shin' is. Moreover, they say that Allah 'sits' but we do not know 'how' His 'sitting' is.

The great Hanafiyy linguist and scholar of Hadith, Imam Murtada az-Zabidiyy, in his book, It'tafus-Sadatil-Muttaqin, refuted those who reject the practice of assigning acceptable meanings (ta'wil) to the mutashabih ayahs and insist on taking them by their literal meanings. Az-Zabidiyy Quoting Abu Nasr al-Qushayriyy in his book <<at-Tadhkirah ash-Shargiyah>>, said: "In essence, they are slandering the office of Prophethood; they are claiming that the Prophet ﷺ did not know the meaning of the attributes of Allah revealed to him; and they are claiming he called the creation to believe in that of which he was ignorant." However, Allah says in the Qur'an in Surat ash-Shu'ara', ayah 195:

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[\text{الله} \text{الرَّحْمَانُ} \text{الرَّحِيمُ}]
\]

which means: [The Qur'an was revealed in clear, explicit Arabic.] Az-Zabidiyy proceeded to quote: "Those people who take a position against assigning acceptable meanings are basically likening Allah to the creation." However, they camouflage it by saying that Allah has a 'hand,' but not like the hands of the creation, a 'shin', but not like the shins of creation, and a physical istiwa' that we cannot comprehend. Az-Zabidiyy addressed them with: "Your saying 'we take it by its literal meaning and it is incomprehensible' is contradictory in itself. If you take by its literal meaning, then 'sag' in Surat al-Qalam, ayah 42, is a 'shin' which is a body part composed of bone, flesh, muscle, and nerves. If you take that literal meaning, then you have committed blasphemy. However, if you deny this literal meaning, then how can you claim to validate the literal meaning?"

If one were to interpret the mutashabih ayahs and hadiths literally, one would be claiming that Allah moves up and down through the skies while sitting on the 'Arsh and encircling the creations with His alleged smiling face that has humorous eyes, and smiles. This is clearly unbefitting of Allah, the One Who does not resemble the creations in any way and is not contained by directions or place.

Rest assured that the methodologies of both the Salaf and the Khalaf are correct and neither attribute anything to Allah that does not befit Him. In simple terms, the first correct way of explaining the mutashabih ayahs in the Qur'an is to say that one believes in them according to the meaning that Allah willed without saying what that meaning is; and without a 'how,' i.e., without attributing to Allah sitting, standing, occupying places, sensuous attributes, or any of the meanings that apply to humans and other creations. Following this method, one would say: "Allah has an istiwa' which befits Him, which is not sitting, and Allah has a yad which befits Him, which is not a hand, and a wajh that befits Him, which is not a face." One cannot interpret the word sag as shin. Not one meaning for the word shin in the English language is appropriate to attribute to Allah. The second correct way of explaining the mutashabih ayahs in the Qur'an is to give to them specific meanings, which are in
accordance with the Religion and the language. Following this method, one would say: "Allah’s istiwa’ means ‘He preserves the throne,’ Allah’s yad means ‘Allah’s Care,’ and Allah’s wajh means ‘Allah’s Self,’ ‘Allah’s Dominion,’ or ‘Allah’s Qiblah.’"

Also know that among the mutashabih are matters that only Allah knows about, such as the time when the Day of Judgment will occur, the exact day the sun will rise from its setting place, the exact time when the Dajjal(1) will appear, and the like. This falls under one of the meanings of Surat Al Imran, ayah 7:

[Arabic text]

which means: [No one knows the meanings of this kind of mutashabih except Allah.]

May Allah protect us from falling into the trap of likening Allah to His creation. Imam Abu Ja’far at-Tahawiyy, in his book Al-Aqidatut-Tahawiyyah, said:

"Whoever attributes to Allah a human characteristic commits blasphemy."

We ask Allah to keep us steadfast on the correct path and creed of the Islamic scholars of the Salaf and the Khalaf. We seek refuge with Allah from falling into the trap of apostasy, because the Prophet, sallallahu ^alayhi wa sallam, said in the hadith related by at-Tirmidhiyy:

[Arabic text]

This means: <<The slave may utter a word which he does not deem harmful, but that will cause him to fall into Hellfire for seventy autumns.>> This is a place that only the blasphemers will reach.

Be extremely observant of what you utter, for Allah, ta^ala said in Surat Qaf, ayah 18:

[Arabic text]

2 The Dajjal is a man with one eye who will be given extraordinary powers and will claim himself to be God. It is mentioned in the sahib hadith that Prophet ^Isa will descend and kill him.
which means: [Every word that a person utters will be written down by the two angels, Raqib and 'Atid.] Also, beware of books that are claimed to be interpretations of the Qur'an, or translations of its meanings and in which Allah, the Exalted, is likened to His creation, by attributing to Him light, hands, eyes, shins, faces, sitting, directions, places, and the like. Allah is clear of all imperfection and of any resemblance to the creation.

Praise be to Allah the Lord of the Worlds, the One Who is clear of resembling the creation, all non_befitting attributes, and all which the blasphemers unrightfully say about Him.

Allah knows best.