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Tawheed: Its Meaning & Categories

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The noble *Shaykh*, Muhammad ibn Saalih Ibn al-'Uthaymeen – may Allaah raise his status among the guided ones, was asked about the meaning of *Tawheed* and its categories.

He answered, saying:

Linguistically, *Tawheed* is the noun derived from the Arabic root verb: وَحَدَ / يُوَحِّدُ (wahhada / *yuwahhidu*) which means to make something one. This is not accomplished except by a negation and affirmation, both together – negating this characteristic from anything other than the thing which is being singled out, and affirming it to that thing. For example, we say that mankind will not fulfill the concept of *Tawheed* unless and until they testify that nothing deserves any form of worship except Allaah. By this, we negate any right of worship to anyone or anything other than Allaah (ﷻ), and we affirm it to Allaah alone. This is because negation alone equates to an absolute and complete negation, just as affirmation alone does not restrict others from sharing in the characteristic. So if you were to say, "So and so is standing," then you have affirmed that he is indeed standing but you have not singled him out alone, restricting this action only to him because it is possible, based on this saying alone, that someone else could also be standing with him. Similarly, if you were to say, "No one is standing," then you have absolutely and completely negated the action of standing for anyone. However, if you said, "No one is standing except Zayd," then you have singled out Zayd alone with the action of standing, negating it from anyone other than him. This is the true actualization of *Tawheed* in reality – meaning that *Tawheed* is not fulfilled unless it contains both negation and affirmation.

As for the categories of *Tawheed* as it pertains to Allaah, they all fall under the general definition of *Tawheed* as “Singling out Allaah alone (ﷻ) with anything and everything that specifically pertains to only Him.”

The categories of *Tawheed*, as mentioned by the people of knowledge, are three:

1. **Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyah** (*Tawheed* of Allaah’s Lordship)
2. **Tawheed Al-Uloohiyah** (*Tawheed* of Allaah’s sole right to all worship)
3. **Tawheed Al-Asmaa was-Sifaat** (*Tawheed* of Allaah’s names and attributes)

The scholars know this categorization by studying and examining the verses of the Quraan and *Hadeeths*. They found that all forms of *Tawheed* fall under one of these three categories.

1. Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyah

Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyah is to single out Allaah alone with the actions of creating (everything), owning (everything), and controlling (everything). The details of this meaning are as follows:

First, as for singling out Allaah alone (ﷻ) with the action of creating; He is the Creator other than Whom there is no creator. Allaah (ﷻ) says:

﴿ هَلْ مِنْ خَالِقٍ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَرْزُقُكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ﴾

Is there are creator other than Allaah that provides you with sustenance from the heavens and earth? There is nothing deserving of worship besides Him alone.

[Soorah Faatir, 35:3]

And He says, clarifying the falsehood of the disbelievers’ gods:

﴿ أَفَمَنْ يَخْلُقُ كَمَنْ لَا يَخْلُقُ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴾

Is He who creates like someone who cannot create? Will you not then remember?

[Soorah An-Nahl, 16:17]

So Allaah alone is the only Creator. He created everything, decreeing the creation before its existence. His creation includes what He Himself has made by His own actions as well as the actions of the creation. For this reason, it is from the completion of *Eemaan* in *Qadr* (Pre-decree) to believe that Allaah is the Creator of the servants' actions as He (ﷺ) said:

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ وَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Allaah created all of you and what you do.

[Soorah As-Saaffaat, 37:96]

One perspective of understanding this is that the actions of a servant are part of his characteristics. So since the servant is a creation of Allaah, then Allaah is his Creator and the Creator of his characteristics too. This could also be understood from the perspective that the actions of the servant are a result of his decision and capability, both of these are characteristics (of the creation) created by Allaah (ﷺ). So the creator of that which causes something is also the creator of the result.

Question:

How do we combine between the singling out of Allaah alone (ﷺ) with the action of creating and the fact that the action of creating has also been attributed to other than Allaah as the following verse indicates:

فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ الْخَالِقِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

So blessed is Allaah, the best of creators.

[Soorah Al-Muminoon, 23:14]

And this is also indicated by the statement of the Prophet (ﷺ) regarding the image-makers:

يُقَالُ لَهُمْ: أَحْيِوْا مَا خَلَقْتُمْ

“It will be said to them (on the Day of Resurrection): ‘Bring to life what you have created!’”

Answer:

The answer to this is that anyone other than Allaah cannot create as He does; they are not able to bring something into existence from nothing, nor can they bring to life the dead. The “creation”

of other than Allaah is merely the changing or converting of something from one state to another, but it is still originally a creation of none other than Allaah (ﷻ). So an image-maker, for example, when he makes an image, he is not actually bringing something into existence. Rather, the most he is capable of doing is converting something from one state to another, such as changing clay into the image of a bird or camel, for example. Or he may convert a plain white canvass into a colorful picture simply by painting it. Still, the paint and canvass are both from origins of that which only Allaah can create.

This is the difference between attributing the act of creating to Allaah and attributing it to the creation. Understanding this, Allaah (ﷻ) is singled out alone with the act of creation that specifically applies to Him.

Second, as for singling out Allaah alone as it relates to owning the dominions; Allaah is the only absolute owner of everything. He (ﷻ) said:

﴿ تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴾

Blessed is He in Whose hand is the dominion (of all things). And He is capable of doing anything.

[Soorah Al-Mulik, 67:1]

And He says:

﴿ قُلْ مَنْ يَمْلِكُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ يُحِيرُ وَلَا يُجَارُ عَلَيْهِ ﴾

Say: “In whose hand is the sovereignty of everything, while He protects (all), while none can protect against Him?”

[Soorah Al-Muminoon, 23:88]

So the true and absolute owner and king is Allaah (ﷻ) alone. Attributing ownership of something to others besides Allaah is merely from the point of associating those things with the creation. Allaah (ﷻ) has affirmed this type of ownership in His statement:

﴿ أَوْ مَا مَلَكْتُمْ مَفَاتِحَهُ ﴾

...or those (houses) to which you possess the keys.

[Soorah An-Noor, 24:61]

And in the verse:

﴿ إِلَّا عَلَى أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ ﴾

...except with their wives or what their right hands possess.

[Soorah Al-Muminoon, 23:6]

And there are other texts that show that others besides Allaah have a sense of possession or ownership. However, this possession is not the like ownership of Allaah. It is a limited and restricted possession specific to someone. For example, a particular house that *Zayd* owns, is not the possession of '*Amr* and vice versa. Further, this ownership is restricted in that people are not allowed to do everything they would like with their wealth or possessions except in a way Allaah permits them. For this, the Prophet (ﷺ) forbade the wasting of money and Allaah said:

﴿ وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَامًا ﴾

And do not give to the foolish people your wealth that Allaah has made a means of support for you.

[Soorah An-Nisaa, 4:5]

This shows that the possessions of people are based upon a restricted and limited ownership. On the contrary, the ownership of Allaah (ﷻ) is an absolute and complete ownership. Allaah does with it whatever He wants; He will not be questioned but they will be.

Third, as for the controlling of all the affairs, Allaah (ﷻ) alone is singled out with this action. He is the One who controls all affairs of the creations. He controls the heavens and earth as He (ﷻ) says:

﴿ أَلَا لَهُ الْخُلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ تَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

To Him belongs the creation and the command. So blessed is Allaah, the Lord of all creations.

[Soorah Al-'Araaf, 7:54]

This is a complete and all-encompassing control; nothing and no one can prevent or oppose His decision. As for the control of the creation such as a person being in control of his own wealth or children or those in his service – this is a restricted and limited type of control.

By this, it becomes clear the truthfulness and correctness of our definition that *Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyyah* is to single out Allaah alone with the actions of creating (everything), owning (everything), and controlling (everything).

2. Tawheed Al-Uloohiyyah

Tawheed Al-Uloohiyyah is to single out Allaah alone with all acts of worship. People must not take anyone or anything else along with Allaah, worshipping them or seeking nearness to them as they do with Allaah (ﷻ). This is the type of *Tawheed* with which the polytheists went astray due to it – these same polytheists which the Prophet (ﷻ) fought, the safety of their blood and wealth being lost as well as their land and homes. It is this type of *Tawheed* with which the Messengers were sent, and by which the books were revealed along with the other two types: *Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyyah* and *Tawheed* of Allaah's names and attributes. But most of what the Messengers focused on correcting among their people was this type of *Tawheed* – *Tawheed Al-Uloohiyyah*.

Tawheed Al-Uloohiyyah is that people are not to give any form of worship to other than Allaah (ﷻ) – not an angel brought near (to Allaah), nor a Messenger sent (by Allaah), nor to a righteous servant (of Allaah), nor to anything else created. Worship is not deserved by anyone but Allaah (ﷻ) alone. Whoever violates this type of *Tawheed*, not fulfilling what it entails, then he is a polytheist, a disbeliever even if he were to accept and believe in *Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyyah* and the *Tawheed* of Allaah's names and attributes. If someone were to believe that Allaah (ﷻ) is the only Creator, owner, and controller of all affairs and that He deserves what befits Him of names and attributes, yet he worships along with Allaah other than Him; then his acceptance of the other two types of *Tawheed* would never benefit him. So if one were to completely believe in *Tawheed Ar-Ruboobiyyah* and *Tawheed Al-Asmaa was-Sifaat*, yet he goes to the grave of someone deceased, worshipping him, making vows to him and seeking nearness to him, then such a person is a polytheist, a disbeliever destined to reside in the Fire forever. Allaah says:

﴿ إِنَّهُ مَنْ يُشْرِكُ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ حَرَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ الْجَنَّةَ وَمَأْوَاهُ النَّارُ وَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ أَنْصَارٍ ﴾

Indeed, whoever makes *Shirk* (associating partners in worship) with Allaah, then Allaah has forbidden Paradise for him, his destination is the Fire, and there will never be any helper for the transgressors.

[Soorah Al-Maaidah, 5:72]

Anyone who has read the Book of Allaah (ﷺ) knows that the polytheists that the Prophet (ﷺ) fought, making their blood and wealth permissible, taking captives from their families, and inheriting their lands – these same people used to believe and accept that Allaah alone is the sole Lord and Creator; they used not to make *Shirk*, associating partners, in this particular belief of theirs. However, they used to worship along with Allaah others. By this, they became complete polytheists.

3. Tawheed Al-Asmaa was-Sifaat

Tawheed Al-Asmaa was-Sifaat is to single out Allaah alone with what He has named Himself with or described Himself with in His Book or upon the tongue of His Messenger (ﷺ). This is by affirming whatever (names and attributes) Allaah has affirmed for Himself without distorting or denying them or their meanings, nor believing them to be similar to the creation's, and without questioning "How" they are (seeking thereby to arrive at the same level of understanding of them as Allaah Himself has). It is incumbent to believe that whatever Allaah has named and described Himself with of names and attributes are real and actual. However, we do not delve into them, asking "How" they are and we do not believe them to be similar to the names and attributes of the creation in any way.

This is the category of *Tawheed* regarding which various groups of this nation went astray, those who pray towards the same direction as we do and ascribe themselves to Islaam.

From these groups, there are those went to deviated extremes in negation and incorrectly trying to avoid attributing any deficiencies to Allaah. Their extremism was so severe that it took them out of Islaam. Other groups are slightly less in their deviance, and yet others are closer to *Ahlus-Sunnah*, the People of the *Sunnah*. The way of the *Salaf*, or those righteous predecessor Muslims who followed Islaam correctly in belief, action, and manners; their way with regards to this type of *Tawheed* is that they name Allaah and describe Him with what He has described Himself with. They accept and believe in these names and attributes as being real and actual, yet in a manner that befits Allaah. They do not distort their meanings, deny them altogether, nor do they question them or believe they are similar to the names and attributes of the creation.

An example of this is that Allaah (ﷻ) has named Himself with the names of *al-Hayy* (The Ever-Living) and *al-Qayoom* (The One Who controls and sustains everything). So it is obligated upon us to believe that *al-Hayy* is one of Allaah's names and we must also believe in whatever characteristics this name implies which is a perfect, ever-lasting and complete life that was not preceded by inexistence nor will it ever end. Allaah has also named Himself *as-Samee'* (The All-Hearing) so likewise, it is upon us to believe it is one of His names and that He has the attribute of complete hearing of everything at all times. He is attributed with the action of hearing as well, which is necessitated by this name and its attribute, for one that is named "Hearing" yet does not actually have the characteristic of hearing, nor the action of hearing sounds and voices, then this is an impossible contradiction.

Another example is that Allaah (ﷻ) says:

﴿ وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ يَدُ اللَّهِ مَغْلُولَةٌ غَلَّتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَلَعْنُوا بِمَا قَالُوا بَلْ يَدَاهُ مَبْسُوطَاتٍ يُنْفِقُ ﴾

كيف يشاء ﴿

And the Jews say, "Allaah's hand is tied up (He is stingy)!" Be their hands tied up and be they accursed for what they uttered. Rather, both His hands are widely outstretched. He spends (of His Bounty) as He wills.

[Soorah Al-Maaidah, 5:64]

In this verse, Allaah says, "**Rather, both His hands are widely outstretched.**" So He has affirmed to Himself two hands with the descriptions of being widely outstretched – which is that He gives generously. So from this, it is obligated upon us to believe that Allaah does in fact have two actual hands, widely outstretched in giving and bestowing favors generously. However, it is also upon us that we do not try to imagine them with our hearts, nor speak about them with our tongues, questioning how they are in reality, nor do we believe they are similar to the hands of the creation because Allaah (ﷻ) says:

﴿ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴾

There is nothing similar to Him. And He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.

[Soorah Ash-Shoora, 42:11]

And He also said:

﴿ قُلْ إِنَّمَا حَرَمَ رَبِّيَ الْفَوَاحِشَ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَمَا بَطَنَ وَالْإِثْمَ وَالْبَغْيَ يُغَيِّرُ الْحَقُّ وَأَنْ

﴿ تُشْرِكُوا بِاللَّهِ مَا لَمْ يُنَزِّلْ يِه سُلْطَانًا وَأَنْ تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴾

Say: “My Lord has only forbidden **al-Fawaahish** (immoral sins, adultery, etc.) whether committed openly or secretly, sins (of all kinds), **oppression committed without right, joining partners (Shirk - in worship) with Allaah for which He has given no authority, and that you say things about Allaah of which you have no knowledge.**”

[Soorah Al-'Araaf, 7:33]

And He (ﷻ) says:

﴿ وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ يِه عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ

﴿ مَسْئُولاً ﴾

And follow not that of which you have no knowledge. Certainly, the hearing, the sight, and the heart – of each of those you will be questioned.

[Soorah Al-Israa, 17:36]

So whoever believes or says that these two hands of Allaah's are similar in any way to the hands of the creation, then he has denied and made a lie out of Allaah's statement:

﴿ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِه شَيْءٌ ﴾

There is nothing similar to Him.

[Soorah Ash-Shoora, 42:11]

And such a person has also disobeyed Allaah when He says:

﴿ فَلَا تَصْرِبُوا لِلَّهِ الْأَمْثَالَ ﴾

So do not put forth similarities (with anything) to Allaah.

[Soorah An-Nahl, 16:74]

And as for the one who questions them or speaks about “How” they are, then he has spoken about Allaah things of which he has no knowledge and he has followed that of which he has no knowledge.

We will give another example regarding Allaah’s attributes, which is the *Istiwa* (Rising over) of Allaah over His throne. Allaah has affirmed for Himself that He rose over the throne in seven places in His Book, all of them with the wording “*Istawa*” and all associated with the words “**upon the throne.**” If we refer back to the word *Istiwa* as it is used in the Arabic language, we find that if it is joined with the preposition “over, upon” then the meaning can only be to rise over, or to rise above. Therefore, the meaning of the verse:

﴿ الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى ﴾

The Most Merciful rose over the throne.

[Soorah TaaHaa, 20:5]

And other similar verses – the meaning is that he rose over His throne, a rising above that is specific to this action and to His throne and not the general type of rising above all of the creations in general. This rising over is confirmed to Allaah in a real, actual manner; He is over His throne in a manner that befits Him (ﷻ). It does not resemble the way in which people rise over and settle on a chair, or rise upon a riding animal. Nor does it resemble the way in which people ride on other vessels such as Allaah mentions in His statement (using the same word - *Istawa*):

﴿ وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَامَ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ لِتَسْتَوُوا عَلَى ﴾

﴿ ظُهُورِهِ ثُمَّ تَذَكَّرُوا نِعْمَةَ رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا اسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَذَا ﴾

﴿ وَمَا كُنَّا لَهُ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴾

And (He’s the One) Who created all things in pairs and made for you ships and cattle on which you ride, in order that you may mount firmly on their backs and then may remember the favor of your Lord when you mount thereon, and say: “Glory to Him who has subjected this to us, and we could never have it (just by our own efforts).”

[Soorah Az-Zukhruf, 43:12-13]

So the *Istiwa* of the creation above and over something is in no way similar to the manner in which Allaah rose over His throne because “**There is nothing similar to Him.**”

As for the one who says, “The meaning of Allaah’s *Istiwa* over the throne is actually ‘the conquering (*Isteelaa*) of the throne,’” then he has made a grave mistake because this is changing and distorting a word from its correct, intended meaning, displacing it from its right place.¹ It is also in complete opposition to what the Companions (رضي الله عنه) were in unanimous agreement upon as well as those who followed after them. So whatever necessitates a false meaning regarding Allaah (عز وجل) is never accepted by a believer. The Quraan was revealed in plain Arabic language as Allaah (عز وجل) says:

﴿إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ﴾

Indeed, We have made it an Arabic Quraan that perhaps you may understand.

[Soorah Az-Zukhruf, 43:3]

And according to the context of “*Istawa* above something” in the Arabic language, this means to rise over or settle upon. So the meaning of “*Istawa* upon the throne” is that He rose over and above it in an actual manner that befits His majesty and greatness. Explaining this *Istiwa* to mean “conquering” is without doubt distorting the intended meaning of the word in that this is a negation of the actual meaning with which the language of the Quraan indicates which is to “rise over.” Giving it any other meaning is complete falsehood and lies.

Further, we know that the *Salaf* and those who follow them were all united upon this meaning because there has not come even a single word from them explaining it to mean otherwise. And if a wording comes in the Quraan or *Sunnah* and nothing has been reported from the *Salaf* that explains it with a meaning contrary to its apparent meaning, then the base rule is that they accepted and remained upon the apparent meaning and they believed in whatever it indicated.

If one were to ask, “Has anything explicit been reported from the *Salaf* that they explained *Istawa* to mean ‘rising over’?”

¹ Allaah condemns those who do this saying, “**Among those who are Jews, there are some who displace words from their right places.**” [Soorah An-Nisaa, 4:46] – T.N.

We answer, yes, that has definitely been reported from the *Salaf*. And even assuming that nothing explicit has come, then still, the base rule is that whatever wording is confirmed in the Noble Quraan or the Prophetic *Sunnah*, then the meaning is to be taken as it is understood in the Arabic language. So the *Salaf* indeed affirmed this meaning.

As for explaining *Istiwa* as “conquering” (*Isteelaa*), then this would imply several false and incorrect inferences such as:

1. This would imply that the throne, before the creation of the heavens and earth, was not the possession of Allaah because Allaah (ﷻ) said:

﴿ إِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ اسْتَوَى عَلَى الْعَرْشِ ﴾

Indeed, your Lord is Allaah, Who created the heavens and earth in six days and then *Istawa* over the throne.

[Soorah Al-‘Araaf, 7:54]

So explaining *Istawa* here to mean “conquering” would mean that He was not the One who conquered and controlled the throne before the creation of the heavens and earth, nor was He at the same time of their creation!?

2. If *Istawa* did in fact mean “conquering”, then it would also be correct to say that Allaah *Istawa* over the earth, and He *Istawa* over anything of His creations (as He is, and always has been, in complete control of them). This is without doubt a false meaning that does not befit Allaah (ﷻ).
3. This is a form of displacing words from their right places. (See footnote #1 on page 11.)
4. This is in complete opposition to what the righteous *Salaf* were in unanimous agreement upon.

In conclusion, regarding this type of *Tawheed* – *Tawheed Al-Asmaa was-Sifaat*, the *Tawheed* of Allaah’s names and attributes; it is incumbent upon us to affirm to Allaah whatever He has affirmed to Himself or His Messenger has affirmed of names and attributes in a real, actual manner without distorting the meanings or denying them, and without questioning them asking “How” they are, and without believing they are similar to those of the creation.