

Concerning The Throne

Says the Shaykh Abu Ja'far: Our belief concerning the Throne (*'arsh*) is that it is something which is carried or supported by the whole of creation.¹ And *'arsh* according to another interpretation is knowledge (*ilm*). And as-Sadiq, on whom be peace, was asked (the meaning of) the saying of Allah, the Mighty and Glorious:

"The Beneficent One, Who it established on the Throne" (Qur'an 20:5).²

He said: He is equidistant³ from everything, and not a single thing is nearer to Him than another. Now that *'arsh*⁴, which is supported by the whole of creation,⁵ is borne by eight angels, each possessing eight eyes, each eye as large as the world.

One of the angels is of human shape and he asks Allah to provide daily bread for the sons of Adam. The second is of the shape of a bull, and he asks Allah to provide daily bread for all beasts. And the third is of the shape of a lion, and he asks Allah to provide daily bread for all beasts of prey. And the fourth is of the shape of a fowl, and he asks Allah to provide sustenance for all birds.

Today there exist four angels, but when the Day of Resurrection comes, they will become eight in number.

The *'arsh* which means knowledge is borne by four amongst the ancients and four amongst the later ones; the former ones are Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, on all of whom be peace; and the later are Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan, and Husayn, the blessings of Allah upon them. This is what has been handed down from the Imams by a reliable chain of authorities concerning the Throne and its bearers.

Now the reason why these persons became the bearers of the *'arsh*, that is the knowledge (of Allah), is that the ancient prophets, who lived prior to our Prophet Muhammad, namely, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, brought four different faiths. It was through these that the true knowledge passed to them (i.e. Muhammad, Ali, etc.). Similarly the true knowledge was transmitted after Muhammad, by 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn to those amongst the Imams who came after Husayn.⁶

1. Reading with N العرش إِيَّاهُ حَمَلَةٌ جميع الخلق D omits حملة

2. This passage (Qur. 20,4) is explained in Tawhid, 258. Cf. 'Ali's philosophical explanation to the Christian, p.259. "He who asserts that God is part of (min) a thing, or in (fi) a thing, or above ('ala) a thing, he verily has associated (some one with Allah)", 260. Allah's eminence is allegorical, 261, line 2; these expressions have no reference to bodily existence, *ibid.*, lines 6-7. The next section, bib 48, p.261, explains Qur. 11, 7, "and His Throne was upon the water". Water was created prior to the heavens and earth. The arsh is described in bib 49, p. 263. Kursi is the outward gate, الباب الظاهر and arsh, the inward gate, الباب الباطن the arsh was the fourth of created things, the first three being

(1) Atmosphere (al-hawa'), (2) the Pen (al-qalam), and (3) the Light (an-nur).

3. The Imam takes the literal meaning of istawa, that is, to be or make oneself equal to, or in respect of, something. The relationship of Allah to each one of His creatures is equal, that of the Creator to the created.

4. Here the translator has an interesting note. He says "Shaykh Mufid, on whom be peace, writes that the literal meaning of 'arsh is sovereignty (سلطنة) and kingdom (ملك) and that 'arsh which is carried by angels is in the seventh heaven, and that is only a portion of the 'arsh which means 'kingdom'. This much belief concerning 'arsh is sufficient and the tradition, by which Sh. Saduq has described the qualities and the appearance of the angels carrying the arsh, is one which has come down through a single source (حديث آحاد). Therefore to believe in the qualities of the angels, to believe in the tradition as having been handed down from the Imams and to believe that the angels who carry the 'arsh have the appearance as described in the hadith, all this is not necessary. What is certain is that which we have related. The translator, Badayuni "

5. Here there is a variation in the texts: N العرش الذي حملة جميع الخلق; D العرش الذي جملة جميع الخلق. If jumlatu be adopted as the correct reading –and there are good grounds to do so –the meaning would be "that 'arsh which is the sum and substance of creation . . .

6. The meaning of arsh as knowledge was ascribed to it only in order to bring in the prophets and Imams, who were considered to be the torch-bearers of the light of knowledge – a beautiful simile, deriving its origin from the remote past, and dear to the heart of the artistic Persian.

For arsh, see MB, 355. In Sunnite theology, the 'arsh may be a seat of light or a red hyacinth (MC, 148), and "Allah created the preserved tablet from a white pearl, which is ,seven times longer than the distance between Heaven and earth, and attached it to the Throne". Also "Allah created the Throne from His Light, and the chair is attached to the throne, and all water is within the chair, and the water is on the back of the wind" (loc. cit.). "Round the throne are four rivers, and four angels stand over these rivers. The throne has tongues equal in number to the tongues of all creatures and all these praise God" "The Heavens are, as compared with the throne, like a lamp hanging between heaven and earth" (loc. cit.). It is therefore obvious that the 'arsh is something far more wonderful than the kursi.

According to Ibnu'l-'Arabi, arsh is the Universal Body (Affifi, 63,n.1), or the Muhammadan Logos (*ibid.*, 66, n. 1, no. 5). The body of the Perfect Man is constituted of the arsh (p.82). This is clearly under Ism'ili influence, cf. creation of `arsh, Kalami Pir, 39; anthropomorphism is foolish, 59; `arsh refers to the soul of man, 92.

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