

The Debate of Abraham (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) with Nimrūd and the Two Origin Points of Shirk

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِي حَاجَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ فِي رَبِّهِ أَنْ آتَاهُ اللَّهُ الْمُلْكَ إِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّي
الَّذِي يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ قَالَ أَنَا أَحْيِي وَأُمِيتُ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْتِي بِالشَّمْسِ مِنَ
الْمَشْرِقِ فَأْتِ بِهَا مِنَ الْمَغْرِبِ فَبُهِتَ الَّذِي كَفَرَ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ
الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢٥٨﴾

Have you not considered the one who argued with Abraham about his Lord [merely] because Allāh had given him kingship? When Abraham said, “My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death,” he said, “I give life and cause death.” Abraham said, “Indeed, Allāh brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west.” So the disbeliever was confounded, and Allāh does not guide the wrongdoing people. (2:258).

Ibrāhīm (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) debated with Nimrūd who claimed that if Allāh is one who controls life and death, then he himself is a deity

who deserves obedience because he also controls life and death.

Ibn al-Qayyim (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) explains¹ that Nimrud said that he can give and take life by starving a group of people to the point of death and then allowing some to live by feeding them and leaving others to die. Or by sparing a man's life whom he intended to kill while killing another.² Hence this is giving and taking life and as such, Nimrūd, considered himself a deity through this route, as one who is worthy of obedience, reverence and worship. He did not claim to give and take life in reality, independently, but claimed he had control over life and death, just as Allāh controls life and death. So since he has that same quality, he is to be worshipped and obeyed.

So Ibrāhīm's reply was to say: **“Then verily, Allāh brings the sun from the east, so bring it from the west.”** (2:256) So Nimrūd was confounded, and it became established that Allāh is the independent giver and taker of life—through what He has created by way of His power and will—of cause-effect systems and chains, including the sun, air, water and other entities—and that He alone is worthy of worship, not men who die and nor the celestial bodies which are created and governed by Allāh.

¹ See Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah (3/211)

² This is explained by the mufasssīrūn such as Qatādah, Mujāhid, Zayd bin Aslam, Ibn Jurayj, al-Suddī, al-Rabī, Ibn Wahb and others.

Imām al-Sa’dī (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) mentions, citing **Ibn al-Qayyim**, that in this verse is a refutation of the two types of origin points for all the shirk (associationism) in the world. The first is the worship of the righteous dead, leading to grave worship and idolatry. And the second is the veneration and worship of the celestial bodies, the sun, moon and stars.³

The first type of shirk arises due to exaggeration in the status of the righteous and Satan appeals to the natural affinity that people have towards people of righteousness, honesty and piety. He uses this affinity to draw people in a step by step fashion to venerate and worship them. So the refutation of this is that since Allāh is the giver and taker of life, then none besides Him is worthy of veneration or worship, since their life is granted to them by Allāh and they also die, whereas Allāh is the Ever-Living who never dies.

The second type of shirk is a philosophical, scientific type of shirk in which properties are ascribed to created entities, particularly the celestial bodies—because they bring about wonder and awe—leading to the shirk of ta‘īl, which means stripping created entities of their creator and giving them independence from their creator. Hence, these created entities are ascribed properties which go above and beyond the set of natural properties (ṭabī‘ah) that were given to them by their creator, who is the placer (musabbib) of all cause and effect systems (asbāb wal-musabbabāt). They are credited with the

³ See Miftāh Dār al-Sa‘ādah (3/192)

attributes of the placer of all natural causes and effects. This is the shirk of modern day atheists, naturalists and materialists who are simply more sophisticated versions of the nature worshippers of the past, save that they are able to disguise their primitive nature worship through sophisticated technical and cryptic language. However, unlike the nature worshippers of the past, they are motivated by arrogance in that they detest that their should be a “cosmic authority”. Thus, they, the two groups, are two faces of the same coin. Either nature is given the attributes of knowledge, will, wisdom, power and then worshipped by the primitives. Or it is given these attributes by the moderns through cryptic, technical language so as to avoid submitting to the Creator of all cause-effect systems, the giver and taker of life.

So both of these two types of shirk are refuted in this verse, in the evidences adduced by Ibrāhīm (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام). **Ibn al-Qayyim** said: “And within this argument is a very subtle point which is that the shirk (associationism) in the world is based upon worship of the celestial bodies and the graves. Then idols were fashioned upon their forms—as has preceded. So the two evidences which Ibrāhīm used comprise complete invalidation of their (claimed) divinity in that Allāh is the one who gives and takes life, and the living being which dies does not deserve divine status (that necessitates worship). Neither in its state of life nor after its death. For such a one has a Lord who is powerful, subduing and who regulates the giving and taking of life with respect to him. And when such a one is like this, then how can he be a deity until an idol is taken in his form and is

worshipped besides Him! Likewise, the celestial bodies which are the most apparent and largest to perception. This sun is created, controlled, subjected, it has no [volition] on its own from any angle in its behaviour. Rather, its Lord and Creator, the Sublime, is the one who brings it from the East, and so it complies to His command and will. Hence, it is created, subjected, controlled and is not a deity that is worshipped besides Allāh.”⁴

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⁴ See Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa‘ādah (3/210-211).