

AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON DIVINE ESSENCE: A TRANSLATION FROM
THE *IQTIṢĀD FĪ AL-IṬIQAD* WITH
NOTES AND COMMENTARY

by

Dennis Morgan Davis Jr.

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being that did not come within the conception of his own fantasy. That is, then, the way to resolve the objection.

The Eighth Proposition

[50.15] We propose that God most high has nothing to do with the characteristic of being seated upon the throne. For every [51] being that is situated upon a body and abides thereon certainly has extension, since [that being] must either be greater, lesser than, or equal to [the body in which it resides], all of which cannot but imply extension. For, if it is possible for him to contact the body of the throne on that upper side, then it is [also] possible for him to contact the other sides and he turns out to be spatial. But the opponent does not in any way suppose this, even though it may be logically inferred from his doctrine. In sum, [God] does not abide upon any body [as a body], and there is no [other] condition by which he could except as accident , and it has already been shown that God most high and holy is neither body nor accident. Therefore, this proposition has no need of being demonstrated further than this.

[51.7] It might be said: Then what do these divine words mean, “The Merciful is established on the throne”?²⁰⁵ And what do those other [words] of Muḥammad

mean: [A 98] “God most high descends each night as low as the heaven of this lower world”?

[51.9] We would say: The discussion that would be required to explain this issue would be lengthy. Nevertheless, we will suggest the straight path through those two citations that leads to their correct interpretation, and that is for us to speak of people as being of two kinds: common and learned.

[51.12] For the common people we believe it best not to impose allegorical interpretations of those texts upon them, but to eliminate [52] from their beliefs anything that would imply anthropomorphism or argue for temporality [in God], and verifying that God is a being “like unto whom there is nothing else; he hears and sees [all].”²⁰⁶ When the common people ask the meaning of these verses, rebuke them and say to them, “That is beyond your capacity. Continue on your own path. Each science has its practitioners.”

[52.4] [Our response] should conform to what some of the forefathers²⁰⁷ said when questioned about [God’s] sitting [upon the throne]. They said, “That he is seated is known, in what manner is not known. To ask about it is heretical innovation, [A 99] but it is incumbent [upon us] to have faith in it.” This is

because the intellects of the masses are not capable of understanding intelligibles²⁰⁸ and they do understand them through words, for they are also incapable of perceiving the many various meanings that the Arabs give to words, taking them metaphorically.

[52.7] On the other hand, for those who are learned, it is appropriate to explain the [intellectual] meaning to them and cause them to understand it. But I do not mean by this to say that such a method is obligatory for everyone, for there is no obligation imposed except the obligation to deny any resemblance between God and his creatures. But as for the meaning of the Qurʾān, the revelation does not oblige everyone to comprehend all of the Qurʾān. Nor do we agree with the opinion of those who say that this pertains only to obscurities, such as the single letters that open certain chapters of the Qurʾān.²⁰⁹ These single letters have not actually been placed there as though they were words whose meaning was based on the usual value that the Arabs gave to them of old; therefore, we are in the same case as if someone were to speak to us with single letters that were words for him, but without having previously agreed with us [53] about their meaning. It is clear that that meaning would be unknown by us.

In the way he uses them, [A 100] those single letters come to be the same as a language newly invented by him.

[53.3] On the other hand, those words of Muḥammad (the blessing and peace of God be upon him), “God most high descends to the heaven of this world,” have an intelligible meaning, and it can be seen that they have been given in order to make something understood, since, upon hearing them, any person understands that they mean either what they literally express or some other metaphorical meaning. How, then, can it be said that this is ambiguous? Rather, it is a text about which the ignorant will imagine an erroneous meaning while one with understanding will grasp the correct meaning. It is like the saying of the Most High, “He [God] is with you wherever ye are” (Qurʾān 57:4). An ignorant person will imagine it in an associative meaning, contrary to the meaning of the position of God on the throne. The wise person, on the other hand, will understand it in the sense that God is with all things inasmuch as he knows and comprehends all with his knowledge. Likewise with [Muḥammad’s] saying (upon him be peace), “The heart of the believer is between two fingers of the All-Merciful.” The ignorant person imagines two members made of flesh, bone, and

nerves ending in cuticles and fingernails and originating in the palm of the hand.

The wise person, on the other hand, interprets that meaning metaphorically, excluding the literal value of the words. That is to say, in this text the fingers indicate the end for which fingers serve—the mystery, the spirit, and the reality of [the fingers] is the power [A 101] to turn things around whatever way the subject desires. So also, in the previous saying of the Most High, “He [54] is with you,” the union expressed by the word “with” is the union that is had in the understanding between subject and object.

[54.2] But one common expression²¹⁰ of Arabic is for the effect to be expressed by the cause, and the means to the end to denote the end. As God most high says in a sacred hadith, “Whosoever will draw near to me a handbreadth, I will draw near to him an arm’s length; and whosoever will come to me walking, I will go to him running.”²¹¹ Here “running” means to the ignorant person the motion of moving the feet with great rapidity, and in the same way “come” means for him the action of coming closer in distance. On the other hand, for the intellectual it means the end or object which the physical coming closer is trying to achieve—that is, grace or favor. Thus, the metaphorical meaning of the text is this: My

mercy and my grace are poured out upon my servants with much more promptness than that with which they serve me. This is also like what God most high says elsewhere, “Verily, great is the desire with which the pure of heart have to come to meet me, but my desire to meet them is unsurpassed.”²¹² The Most High is certainly above the literal meaning of that word “desire” here, which is a kind of [A 102] moral pain and a need that demands to be satisfied so that the subject can rest and be comforted—that is, an actual imperfection. But, on the other hand, as desire causes the person desired to kindly welcome the desiring person and to pour out favors upon him then it will turn out that the word “desire” here comes to be used to mean that effect produced by desire. Likewise, the words “wrath” and “pleased” express the will to punish and to reward, [55] which are ordinarily two effects of the same. So likewise, when [Muḥammad] said, “The black stone is the right hand of God upon his earth,”²¹³ the ignorant person believes that by this was meant the hand as opposed to the left hand—that is, a corporeal member made of flesh and blood and divided into five fingers. But if this same ignorant person were to open the eyes of his intellect, he would know that if [God] is seated upon a throne, his right hand

could not be in the shrine of the Ka'aba, nor would that hand be a black stone.

He would notice, therefore, if he had the smallest amount of aptitude, that the

term "right hand" is a metaphor for the means of receiving guests. It is

commanded that the stone should be touched and kissed in the same way that it

is commanded for the hand of the king to be kissed, and it is in this sense that the

word is used. The man of perfect intellectual insight into language does not make

too much of such things, because he understands right away their true import.

[55.8] Let us return, then, to the meaning of [A 103] "sitting" and "descending." As for "sitting," that it indicates a relation to the throne is not impossible; but it is not possible that the throne should be related to God except inasmuch as the throne is an object of the knowledge of God or of his will, or of his power; or inasmuch as it is a substrate similar to the substrate of accident; or inasmuch as it is a place such as is occupied by [physical] body. But some of these relations are intellectually inadmissible and several do not accord well with the meaning of the word taken metaphorically. But there should be, among all of these relations—besides which there are no other—a relation [56] that reason would not disallow and that would not be incompatible with the meaning of the

term. Now then, that [the throne of God] is a place or a substrate, like substance is to accident, is not incompatible with the meaning of the word, but reason insists that it is impossible, as has already been demonstrated. That it is the object of God's knowledge and will, reason does not contradict, but it is incompatible with the meaning of the word. As for the throne being an object of God's power—that is, something that falls within the realm of his determining and dominion even though it is the greatest of the created beings²¹⁴—this brings praise to God [A 104] because it points out and emphasizes the greatness of the one besides whom there is no greater. This is something that does not contradict and is consistent with the meaning of the term. That the metaphor is consonant with its literal meaning is obvious to anyone who knows the Arabic language. The only ones who will find any difficulty in understanding it are those who, because of their lack of philological training consider only vaguely the import of the Arabic vocabulary, similar to the way an Arab would understand the language of a Turk knowing only the rudiments of it. One of the phrases that are well said and common is: "The ruler sat over his kingdom." And the poet says:

In Iraq did Bashir establish his seat,

Sans sword, sans bloodshed, he accomplished the feat.

[56.10] On this subject some of the companions of the Prophet said that the meaning of “The All-Merciful is seated upon the throne,” encompasses the same [56] idea as “Then went he to set himself in the heaven, which was then a vapor of smoke.”²¹⁵ As for what pertains to the words of Muḥammad, “God descends to the heaven of this lower world,” they also admit of metaphorical interpretation for two reasons. The first is because the attribution of the descent of God himself is a metaphorical attribution, since in reality [A 105] it must be attributed to one of his angels, the same as in the text in which God says, “inquire of the city,” where those inquired of are actually her inhabitants. And this also is a very common metaphor in the language—I mean, the metaphor that consists in attributing acts to the lord that belong to his subject. Thus, it is said, for example, that “the king has halted at the gate of the city,” when what is meant is his army. For if it were said to the person who had informed us that the king had halted at the gate of the city, “Why have you not gone out to meet him?” he might respond, “I have not gone out because the king has left to hunt and he has not stopped yet,” to which no one would then say, “Then how can he

have halted if you now say that he has not yet stopped?" The reason is that the meaning of the first phrase was that not the king but his army had halted at the gate of the city. This is obvious and evident.

[57.11] The second reason is because the word "descend" is often used in the sense of stooping benevolently, graciously condescending to one's neighbor, just as, on the other hand, the word "lift oneself up" is used in the sense of pride or haughtiness. It is said, for example, "So and so lifts his head to the clouds of heaven," to indicate that he is haughty. And it is also said, "He has lifted himself up on high" to indicate that he has become haughty; and if his social status has become elevated, it is said that he is in the seventh heaven. On the other hand, if [58] his position declines it is said, "He has fallen to the depths." And if he shows himself to be benevolent and kindly toward his neighbor it is said, "He lowers himself to the ground and abases himself even to the lowliest degree." [A 106] Once this is understood—once it is understood that the word "descend" can be interpreted in the sense of coming down in position, or in rank because of having lost status, or in the sense of "condescend," which is to lower oneself through humility and benevolence by omitting all of those acts that bring with them the

high status of the noble and rich, then it only remains to consider in which of the three senses to which the word “descend” is given may it reasonably be permissible to refer [to God].

[58.6] As for descent being a downward path, reason holds it to be impossible [that this would apply to God], as we said previously. For, that movement is not possible except with respect to beings that occupy a place in space. As for [it being] a lowering of status, that is also impossible, since God most high is eternal in his attributes and in his glorious majesty, of which it is impossible that he should be deprived. As for descent understood in the sense of condescension, benevolence, and the omission of those acts that are [usual] for one who is wealthy and in need of nothing—this sense is possible, that descent may be predicated of God.

[58.10] And it is said that when the speech of God most high came down saying “[His is] the highest estate and he hath the throne,” the companions of the Prophet were overcome by a [A 107] great fear. They lost the confidence needed to make their pleas to a being endowed with such overwhelming majesty. But then it was explained to them [by the Prophet] that despite his majesty and the

exaltedness of his state above his servants, God most high was merciful to them, and solicitous of them, and would listen to their petitions. Now then, answering petitions is a veritable condescension in relation the height of God's majesty and self-sufficiency. And so the use of the term "descend" was to encourage the hearts of people to offer their petitions and even to bow and prostrate themselves before him. For, someone who is overcome with fear before the majesty of God most high, will feel inadequate [even] to bow and prostrate himself before him.

[59.4] The [collective] offerings of all men, when compared to the majesty of God most high, would be something more base and contemptible than the meager movement of just one finger made by a slave in order to endear himself to the king of the land. And if that slave were to attempt to honor any king in such a way, it is certain that he would be deserving of lively punishments for it. In fact, it is the custom of kings to sever from their service men of base condition, not allowing that such people should prostrate themselves to them and that they should not even kiss the doorpost of their palaces, because it is beneath them that any other than princes and nobility should serve them [A 108], as has been the custom among some caliphs. And if the Most High did not condescend from his

exalted majesty in mercy and benevolence, it is for certain that the hearts of men, astounded by the majesty of his glorious presence, would lose their command of reason so as to think, their tongues so as to make mention of him,²¹⁶ and their members would lose the power of movement. Thus, whoever reflects on how great the divine majesty is and, at the same time, how great the divine condescension, will understand without any kind of doubt that the metaphorical sense of the word “descent” is in perfect harmony with the majesty of God and with the semantic value that that term has in the Arabic language, though it is not just as the ignorant would understand it.²¹⁷

[60.1] But someone might still say, “Is it not the case that [the Qur’an] specifies that the heavens [belong to] the world?”²¹⁸ We would say this refers to [the world’s] rank as last, below which there is no other, such as when it is said, “He has come down even to the earth and he has ascended even unto the Pleiades,” in the supposition that the Pleiades are the highest stars and the earth the lowest place of all.²¹⁹

[60.4] Does it not specifically say [in the Qur’an] that [God] descends by night, saying, “He descends every night”? We would say this is because in

solitude is the most appropriate condition in which [A 109] to pray, and the night is precisely the best time to be alone, since that is when all the world sleeps and when, therefore, the remembrance of created things is most easily erased and the soul of one who prays feels more inclined to the remembrance of God most high. Such a prayer is precisely the kind that might most be hoped to be heard by God, not [the prayer] that comes from distracted hearts full of mundane concerns.

Ninth Proposition

[60.9] We propose that God most exalted and high, is visible, contrary to [the claims of] the Mu‘tazilites. There are two reasons why we treat this problem in this first part, which is dedicated to the study of the being of God most high: First, is because to deny visibility with respect to a being logically leads to a denial of all spatial relation for him.²²⁰ But we want to show how the negation of all spatial relation with God can be reconciled with the affirmation that he is visible. Second, because the most high [61] is, according to us, visible in his being, by the existence of his essence and not by reason of some of his acts or attributes. Indeed every being of actual essence must necessarily be visible, just