

IBN TAYMIYYAH'S THEOLOGICAL
APPROACH ILLUSTRATED:
ON THE ESSENCE (*DHĀT*) AND ATTRIBUTES (*ṢIFĀT*)
OF ALLAH

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Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim ibn Taymiyyah has acquired world renown as one of the most prolific, and most controversial, Muslim scholars in all history. Although many would recognize him only as a jurist, it is quite remarkable that a significant portion of his multifarious works actually deal with theological problems. Since he aligned himself with the extremely literalist group of Hanbalite traditionalists, Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to theology would be expected to be in line with the simple, straightforward catechisms usually produced by the traditionalists. On the contrary, his theological thought is highly profound and subtly nuanced in a way that sets it apart from the usual traditionalist manuals of the Islamic Creed. No other topic of the wide and complex corpus of Islamic theology can serve to illustrate any theologian's approach than the centrally important, yet controversial, topic of the nature of Allah and His relationship with the universe. In fact, the whole of Islamic theology could be said to be about this; all other topics being subsumed under this main theme. This study, therefore, is an attempt to illustrate the theological approach of Ibn Taymiyyah using his approach to the Nature and Attributes of Allah. In the process, the extent of his traditionalist affiliation and his relationship with the mainstream theological tradition in Islam, usually referred to as *kalām*, will be highlighted.

With the exception of the very concise *al-'aqīdat al-Wāsiṭiyyah*, Ibn Taymiyyah did not undertake a systematic discussion of the nature of Allah; His Essence and Attributes, and relationship with the universe as you would find in the works of

systematic theologians, say al-Ghazālī.¹ This is not to suggest, however, that he did not realize the significance of the divine Essence, Names and Attributes. In fact, it is probably due to his understanding of the centrality and importance of the Essence of God and His Attributes in Islam that we find them to be the central themes in almost all of Ibn Taymiyyah's polemical works.

In this study, for the sake of consistency, an attempt will be made to organize Ibn Taymiyyah's views about the Essence of God and His Attributes in a way that approximately corresponds to that used in the works of the mutakallimūn. Since methodological considerations played a crucial role in Ibn Taymiyyah's criticism of the *kalām* views concerning the Essence and Attributes of God, it is useful to begin by summarizing his methodological remarks, to put subsequent discussion into proper perspective.

Methodological Considerations

Ibn Taymiyyah's insistence on the necessity of basing all discussion of Islamic doctrines on the Qu'rān and Sunnah cannot be over-emphasized. This position is found to be even more articulated in his discussion of the Essence and Attributes of God. Like all Muslim theologians, Ibn Taymiyyah holds that the most important kind of knowledge is knowing God. To the theologians, this includes knowing His Essence, as well as His glorious Attributes and beautiful Names. Once this knowledge is deeply ingrained in the heart, the knower thereof is likely to be

¹ James Pavlin suggests that Ibn Taymiyyah "does not view the issue of Attributes of God as a separate theological problem, but rather includes it in his overall approach to understanding the Qur'ān." See his "Sunni *Kalām* and Theological Controversies." In *History of Islamic Philosophy*. Ed. S. H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman. 2 vols. 1:105-117. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Henceforth cited as "Sunni *Kalām*", 115. This, together with the fact that most of Ibn Taymiyyah's explanation of Divine Attributes was done in response to questions or in polemical contexts, may help to explain why we do not find a systematic treatment of divine Essence and Attributes in Ibn Taymiyyah's works.