

The Tasbīḥ (Glorification) of Allah the Exalted: Its Meaning and Applications

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HOW TO CITE: ABSTRACT

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This research article examines the concept of tasbīḥ (glorification) of Allah the Exalted as treated in works of Islamic creed (‘aqīdah), particularly within the chapter on the oneness of the divine names and attributes. The discussion is situated against the background of doctrinal disputes among the Mu‘aṭṭilah, the Mushabbihah, and the Mu‘awwilah, whose reinterpretations of the divine names and attributes prompted the Ahl al-Sunnah to treat tasbīḥ as a distinct topic within works on the names and attributes. Drawing on lexical sources, Qur’ānic verses, and hadith, the article defines tasbīḥ both linguistically and technically, and identifies four applications of the term in the Qur’ān and Sunnah: exaltation, prayer, remembrance, and exception. It further distinguishes two categories of tasbīḥ—transcendence (tanzīḥ) and exaltation of Allah’s majesty—and addresses two related issues: the tasbīḥ performed by all of creation, illustrated through relevant Qur’ānic verses, and the occasions on which tasbīḥ is prescribed within and outside the prayer. Three benefits of tasbīḥ are outlined on the basis of

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hadith: the forgiveness of sins, immense reward, and a heavy weighing on the scale on the Day of Resurrection. The article concludes by contrasting the orthodox understanding of *tasbīḥ* with the deviant conceptions held by polytheists and grave-worshippers, the Mumaththilah, the Mu'aṭṭilah (including the Jahmiyyah, Mu'tazilah, Kullābiyyah, and Ash'ariyyah), and the Qadariyyah, each of whom is shown to have distorted the meaning of *tasbīḥ* to accommodate their respective theological positions.

Keywords: *Tasbīḥ*; Divine Names and Attributes; *Tanzīḥ*; Ahl al-Sunnah; Deviant Sects ('Aqīdah)

Introduction

The term *subḥān* or *tasbīḥ* (glorification) is found extensively in books of creed ('aqīdah), particularly in the chapter on the oneness (tawḥīd) of the divine names and attributes, and in refutation of the Mu'aṭṭilah (those who deny the attributes), the Mushabbihah (those who liken God to creation), the Mu'awwilah (those who figuratively reinterpret the attributes), and others, because it bears a direct relation to the oneness of the divine names and attributes. Likewise, ever since the deviant sects opened the door to figurative reinterpretation (ta'wīl) and distortion (taḥrīf) in the meanings and connotations of the divine names and attributes, the Ahl al-Sunnah have, in order to establish the truth and refute falsehood, begun to discuss *tasbīḥ* specifically in the books devoted to the divine names and attributes.

This article addresses the subject through qualitative textual and analytical study. It contains six sections dealing respectively with the conceptual foundations of *tasbīḥ*, its reality and applications in the Qur'ān and Sunnah, its categories, two essential issues (the *tasbīḥ* of creation and the prescribed occasions of *tasbīḥ*), its benefits, and the conceptions of *tasbīḥ* held by the deviant sects. Qur'ānic verses and hadiths are presented in Arabic with English translations and are referenced in the footnotes.

Section One: Conceptual Foundations of *Tasbīḥ*

1. Lexical Definition of *Tasbīḥ*

The word *tasbīḥ* is the verbal noun (maṣḍar) of the verb *sabbaḥa – yusabbihū – tasbīḥan*, meaning: to glorify, to declare purity and holiness, to worship, and to pray, among other meanings. That is, in glorifying the Divine Essence, one keeps It free and pure from negative attributes (ṣifāt manfiyyah) such as defects and flaws.¹

2. Technical Definition of *Tasbīḥ*

Technically, *tasbīḥ* is to know and believe that Allah the Exalted is pure, holy, free, and exalted above every defect, flaw, and every kind of resemblance or similarity.²

3. The Ruling on *Tasbīḥ*

To negate, both in belief and in practice, every type of defect and flaw from the Divine Essence, and likewise to affirm, both in belief and in practice, every kind of perfection and attribute of excellence, is the greatest of the obligations (min awjab al-wājibāt) incumbent upon a believing servant. As for verbal *tasbīḥ* in prayer and elsewhere, however, the majority of scholars hold it to be recommended (mustaḥabb), while some of the righteous predecessors (salaf al-ṣāliḥīn) held verbal *tasbīḥ* in prayer to be obligatory.³

¹Ibn Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, 3:125; al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, 4:196.

²Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa al-Naql*, 6:177; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ ilā Bilād al-Afrāḥ*, 1:417.

³Al-Baghawī, *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*, 3:103.

Section Two: The Reality and Applications of Tasbīḥ

The reality of tasbīḥ is that the Divine Essence is glorified by the phrase *Subḥān Allāh* (“Glory be to Allah”), and that from the Divine Essence every type of defect and flaw is negated, while every type of perfection and excellence is affirmed. The word tasbīḥ, as found in the Qur’ān and Sunnah, carries the following four applications.

1. Tasbīḥ in the Sense of Exaltation (Ta‘ẓīm)

When ‘Alī رضي الله عنه was asked about the meaning of tasbīḥ, he said:

تَعْظِيمُ جَلَالِ اللَّهِ

“To exalt the majesty of Allah.”⁴

2. Tasbīḥ in the Sense of Prayer (Ṣalāh)

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما states:

كُلُّ تَسْبِيحٍ فِي الْقُرْآنِ فَهُوَ صَلَاةٌ

“Every mention of tasbīḥ in the Qur’ān refers to prayer.”⁵

Likewise, in Sūrat Ṭāhā, verse 130, prayer is designated by the term tasbīḥ.⁶ Similarly, in the ḥadīth of Ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما, the Prophet’s صلى الله عليه وسلم performance of the supererogatory prayer while riding is described using the term tasbīḥ.⁷

3. Tasbīḥ in the Sense of Remembrance (Dhikr)

Ibn ‘Amr رضي الله عنهما states:

رَأَيْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَغْقِدُ التَّسْبِيحَ

“I saw the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) counting his tasbīḥ (i.e., engaged in remembrance).”⁸

Likewise, Imām Ibn Taymiyyah states: “By tasbīḥ is meant the genus of remembrance (dhikr); thus it is said that a certain person ‘performs tasbīḥ,’ meaning that he engages in the remembrance of Allah. This includes tahlīl [saying *lā ilāha illā Allāh*] and taḥmīd [saying *al-ḥamdu lillāh*] as well. Similarly, the index finger is called al-Sabbāḥah, because it is used to point at the time of dhikr and tasbīḥ.”⁹

4. Tasbīḥ in the Sense of Exception (Istithnā’)

Allah the Exalted states in Sūrat al-Qalam:

﴿قَالَ أَوْسَطُهُمْ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ لَوْلَا تُسَبِّحُونَ﴾

“The most just of them said: Did I not say to you, why do you not glorify [Allah]?”¹⁰

Some scholars have interpreted the phrase *lawlā tusabbihūn* to mean: “Why do you not make the exception, i.e., why do you not say ‘in shā’ Allāh’ [God willing]?”¹¹

Section Three: The Categories of Tasbīḥ

Just as tanzīh (transcendence) of Allah the Exalted is of two categories, tasbīḥ of Allah the Exalted likewise falls into two categories.

1. Tasbīḥ in the Sense of Tanzīh (Transcendence)

This category is, in turn, further divided into two types. **First type:** To believe that Allah the Exalted is free and clear of every kind of resemblance and similarity [to creation]. **Second type:** To believe that the Divine Essence is exalted and pure above every flaw and defect.

⁴Al-Ṭabarānī, *Kitāb al-Du‘ā’*, no. 500.

⁵Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 19:191.

⁶Ṭāhā, 20:130.

⁷Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Hadith 1098; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith 700.

⁸Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Hadith 1502; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Hadith 3411.

⁹Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jāmi‘ al-Masā’il*, 3:292.

¹⁰Al-Qalam, 68:28.

¹¹Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 23:182; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 8:196.

2. Exaltation and Honoring of Allah's Majesty

The second category is the exaltation and honoring of the majesty and grandeur of Allah the Exalted.¹² Imām Ibn Taymiyyah states: “*Subhān Allāh* entails, along with the negation of flaws and defects, the affirmation of the attributes of perfection. *Tasbīh*, therefore, is such an exaltation of the Divine Essence as is free and clear of every defect and flaw.”¹³

Section Four: Essential Issues Concerning the *Tasbīh* of Allah the Exalted

1. The *Tasbīh* of Creation

Allah, the Lord of Might, has mentioned the “divine *tasbīh*” of creation at thirteen different places in the Noble Qur’ān, indicating that every particle of the universe sings the praise of the majesty of Allah, the Lord of the worlds. In some of these places, the *tasbīh* of every created being is mentioned, as in the words of Allah:

﴿يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمُوتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ الْمَلِكِ الْقُدُّوسِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ﴾

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth exalts Allah, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Exalted in Might, the Wise.”¹⁴

Whereas at other places, the *tasbīh* of specific creatures (such as birds) is mentioned, as in the words of Allah the Exalted:

﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرِ صَافَّاتٍ كُلٌّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا يَفْعَلُونَ﴾

“Do you not see that Allah is exalted by whomever is within the heavens and the earth and [by] the birds with wings spread [in flight]? Each [of them] has known its [means of] prayer and exalting [Him], and Allah is Knowing of what they do.”¹⁵

The above verse contains three points worthy of reflection.¹⁶

First point: ﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ﴾ [“Do you not see?”]—that is, do you not know that everything that exists in the earth and heavens—such as jinn, angels, animals, flying birds, and even plants and inanimate objects—all bear witness that the One who created us and who governs the entire universe with perfect excellence and without any flaw is free from every defect and from every associate. So when every single thing declares the *tasbīh* of Allah the Exalted, it is all the more incumbent and obligatory upon man to glorify Him and to bear witness to His oneness.

Second point: ﴿وَالطَّيْرِ صَافَّاتٍ﴾ [“and the birds with wings spread”]—after mentioning the *tasbīh* of everything existing in the earth and the heavens, the *tasbīh* of birds is mentioned separately, because when they fly they are neither on the earth nor in the sky, but suspended between the two; these birds, too, bear witness that Allah the Exalted is free from every defect.

Third point: ﴿كُلٌّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ﴾ [“Each has known its [means of] prayer and exalting Him”]—this indicates that the *tasbīh* of birds is not incidental or unthinking, but rather is based on understanding and knowledge, which Allah the Exalted has taught them and inspired within them.

2. The Prescribed Occasions for *Tasbīh*

Tasbīh is prescribed within the prayer at seven different occasions, as follows: at the opening of the prayer; in bowing (*rukūʿ*); in prostration (*sujūd*); in reciting a verse of prostration; when prompting the imam [if he errs in recitation]; for one who does not know al-Fātiḥah and the other supplications; and in the remembrances after the prayer.

Likewise, *tasbīh* is prescribed when descending from a height, upon hearing thunder, at times of astonishment, and at the time of sleep, among other occasions.¹⁷

¹²Ibn al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawāʾiq al-Mursalāh*, 1:163.

¹³Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darʾ Taʾarūḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql*, 6:177.

¹⁴Al-Jumuʿah, 62:1.

¹⁵Al-Nūr, 24:41.

¹⁶Bhattawī, *Tafsīr Bhattawī*, Sūrat al-Nūr 24:41.

¹⁷*Al-Tasbīh fī al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah*, 1:514.

Section Five: The Benefits of Tasbīḥ

The subject matter of tasbīḥ is the Divine Essence Itself. In any case, the nobility and superiority of a given branch of knowledge depends upon its subject matter (madlūl). Since the subject matter of the science of creed ('aqidah), and of tasbīḥ in particular, is the Divine Essence, tasbīḥ is an inseparable part of the most noble and excellent of all sciences, absolutely speaking. For this reason, declaring the tasbīḥ of Allah the Exalted carries countless benefits; for the sake of brevity, only three are given below.

1. The Forgiveness of Sins

The first benefit is the forgiveness of sins, even if they be as abundant as the foam of the sea. Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

«مَنْ قَالَ: سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَبِحَمْدِهِ فِي يَوْمٍ مِائَةَ مَرَّةٍ حُطَّتْ خَطَايَاهُ، وَإِنْ كَانَتْ مِثْلَ زَبَدِ الْبَحْرِ»

“Whoever says *Subḥān Allāhi wa biḥamdih* [Glory be to Allah and praise be to Him] a hundred times in a day, his sins will be wiped away, even if they were like the foam of the sea.”¹⁸

2. An Immense Reward

The second benefit is a reward so immense that it is beyond the power of man to reckon it. Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

«مَنْ قَالَ حِينَ يُصْبِحُ وَحِينَ يُمَسِي: سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَبِحَمْدِهِ مِائَةَ مَرَّةٍ، لَمْ يَأْتِ أَحَدٌ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ بِأَفْضَلِ مِمَّا جَاءَ بِهِ إِلَّا أَحَدٌ قَالَ مِثْلَ مَا قَالَ أَوْ زَادَ عَلَيْهِ»

“Whoever says, in the morning and in the evening, *Subḥān Allāhi wa biḥamdih* a hundred times, no one will come on the Day of Resurrection with anything better than what he has brought, except one who has said the same or more.”¹⁹

3. Weight on the Scale on the Day of Resurrection

The third benefit is the reward of [filling] the scale on the Day of Resurrection, and being filled with forgiveness and pardon. Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

«كَلِمَتَانِ خَفِيفَتَانِ عَلَى اللِّسَانِ، ثَقِيلَتَانِ فِي الْمِيزَانِ، حَبِيبَتَانِ إِلَى الرَّحْمَنِ: سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَبِحَمْدِهِ، سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ الْعَظِيمِ»

“There are two phrases that are light on the tongue, heavy in the scale, and beloved to the Most Merciful: *Subḥān Allāhi wa biḥamdih*, *Subḥān Allāhi al-‘Azīm* [Glory be to Allah and praise be to Him; Glory be to Allah, the Magnificent]. Allah is free from everything unbefitting Him, and all praise is due to Him alone; Allah is free from everything unbefitting Him, and He is characterized by every attribute of majesty.”²⁰

Section Six: The Meaning and Conception of Tasbīḥ According to the Deviant Sects

As is always the case, the deviant sects hold the following false views and beliefs regarding the meaning and conception of the tasbīḥ of Allah the Exalted.

1. The Tasbīḥ of the Polytheists and Grave-Worshippers

In the name of tasbīḥ, tanzīḥ, and ta‘zīm [exaltation], they have abandoned the oneness of worship (tawḥīd al-‘ibādah wa al-ulūhiyyah) altogether. They claim that Allah, the Lord of Might, is directly beyond need of being worshipped [by them]; therefore, they have taken up the worship of self-invented intermediaries between themselves and Allah the Exalted—such as jinn and devils, humans and animals, stones and trees, beasts and birds, and the living and the dead, among others.²¹

¹⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Hadith 6405; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith 2691.

¹⁹ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith 2692.

²⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Hadith 7563; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith 2694.

²¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jāmi‘ al-Rasā’il*, 1:107.

2. The Tasbīḥ of the Mumaththilah (Anthropomorphists)

In the name of tasbīḥ, they likened the Creator to creation. They claim that they perform tasbīḥ and tanzīḥ by interpreting the attributes of Allah the Exalted according to their apparent sense of “resemblance and similarity.” Whereas the correct position is that, by likening the attributes of the Creator to the attributes of creation, they have insulted the Divine Essence and characterized It with flaws and defects.²²

3. The Tasbīḥ of the Mu‘aṭṭilah (Deniers of the Attributes)

They have given the name “tasbīḥ and tanzīḥ” to their denial (ta‘ṭīl) of the beautiful names and attributes of Allah the Exalted. The ta‘ṭīl of the Mu‘aṭṭilah varies according to their false beliefs and doctrines; their degrees of ta‘ṭīl are as follows.

Tasbīḥ according to the Jahmiyyah: It is the name given to the negation of every name, attribute, and act from the Divine Essence.

Tasbīḥ according to the Mu‘tazilah: It is the name given to the negation of the attributes of the Divine Essence.

Tasbīḥ according to the Kullābiyyah: Tasbīḥ is the name given to the negation of the voluntary attributes (ṣifāt ikhtiyāriyyah) from the Divine Essence.

Tasbīḥ according to the Ash‘ariyyah: Tasbīḥ is the name given to the negation of the reported attributes (ṣifāt khabariyyah) from the Divine Essence.²³

4. The Tasbīḥ of the Qadariyyah

By removing the actions of [Allah’s] servants from Divine power and holding man to be the true creator of his own actions, they gave this doctrine the name “tasbīḥ.” According to them, attributing the creation of evil, injustice,

oppression, flaws, and defects to the Divine Essence is contrary to tasbīḥ. Therefore, they removed all these things—especially “the actions of [Allah’s] servants”—from Divine power, and gave this the name of tasbīḥ.²⁴

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion establishes that tasbīḥ occupies a central place in Islamic creed because its subject matter is the Divine Essence itself, making it inseparable from the most noble branch of knowledge. Lexically, tasbīḥ denotes glorifying and declaring Allah’s purity; technically, it means believing Allah to be free from every defect and resemblance to creation. The article has shown that the term carries four distinct applications in the Qur’ān and Sunnah—exaltation, prayer, remembrance, and exception—and that it divides into two broad categories: the negation of resemblance and defect (tanzīḥ), and the exaltation of Allah’s majesty. It has further shown that tasbīḥ is not confined to human beings but is performed by the whole of creation, including specific creatures such as birds, whose tasbīḥ the Qur’ān describes as based on knowledge rather than instinct.

Within ritual practice, tasbīḥ has seven prescribed occasions in prayer besides several occasions outside it, and its verbal performance carries considerable spiritual benefit, including the forgiveness of sins, abundant reward, and weight on the scale on the Day of Judgment. At the same time, the article demonstrates that various deviant sects the polytheists and grave-worshippers, the Mumaththilah, the several branches of the Mu‘aṭṭilah, and the Qadariyyah have each redefined tasbīḥ in ways that serve their own theological positions, whether by directing worship to intermediaries, likening the Creator to creation, denying the divine attributes in varying degrees, or removing human actions from divine power. The article thus concludes that a correct understanding of tasbīḥ, as upheld

²²Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Fatwā al-Hamawiyyah*, 1:541; Ibn ‘Uthaymīn, *Taqrīb al-Tadmuriyyah*, 1:23.

²³Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Fatāwā al-Kubrā*, 6:353; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Bughyat al-Murtād*, 1:425; Ibn Taymiyyah,

Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyyah, 1:430; al-Shinqīṭī, *Manhaj wa Dirāsāt li-Āyāt al-Asmā’ wa al-Ṣifāt*, 1:48.

²⁴*Al-Tasbīḥ fī al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah*, 1:480.

by the Ahl al-Sunnah, requires holding together both the negation of every defect from Allah and the affirmation of every attribute of perfection, and that any departure from this balance in either direction constitutes a deviation from the sound conception of *tasbīḥ*.

Recommendations

On the basis of the preceding analysis, the following recommendations are offered for future scholarship, teaching, and practice.

1. Future scholarship should undertake a systematic study of the term *tasbīḥ* in the works of Qur'ānic exegesis, distinguishing its four applications exaltation, prayer, remembrance, and exception—and documenting the usage of each in the classical commentaries.
2. Separate studies should examine the thirteen Qur'ānic passages that mention the *tasbīḥ* of creation, with attention to the exegetical discussion of how the glorification of birds, animals, and inanimate objects is understood.
3. The relationship between *tanzīḥ* (transcendence) and the affirmation of the attributes of perfection should be studied in greater detail as the central principle that holds the correct understanding of *tasbīḥ* together.

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4. Comparative studies should analyze the conceptions of *tasbīḥ* held by the Jahmiyyah, Mu'tazilah, Kullābiyyah, Ash'ariyyah, Mumaththilah, and Qadariyyah, drawing directly on the primary sources of each group and representing their positions accurately.

5. The prescribed occasions of *tasbīḥ* within and outside the prayer should be compiled in a single reference work with full hadith documentation (*takhrīj*) and jurisprudential classification.

6. The formulas of *tasbīḥ* and the virtues attributed to them should be examined through hadith criticism so that devotional practice rests on verified reports.

7. Creed curricula in universities and religious seminaries should treat *tasbīḥ* as a distinct topic within the chapter on the divine names and attributes, connecting doctrinal principles with devotional practice.

8. Preachers and religious educators should present *tasbīḥ* both as a matter of correct belief (*tanzīḥ* and *ta'ẓīm*) and as a regular act of remembrance, so that neither dimension is neglected.

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