

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) (d. 463H) on Contagion



Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said:¹

As for his saying: “*There is no contagion*”, then it is a prohibition from that anyone should say: “A thing passes [what it has] to another thing” and it is [him (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ)] informing that a thing does not pass [what it has] to another thing. So it is as if he is saying: Nothing infects anything else [with what it has]. He says: No one afflicts anyone else with anything of:

- a physical constitution (khalq),
- action (fi‘l),
- disease (dā’)
- or ailment (marad) [that he has].

The Arabs used to say the likes of this in their Jāhiliyyah, that when something of these affairs connect with another thing, it passes on to it. So Allāh’s Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) informed them that their saying and belief in this regard, it is not like that and he prohibited from that statement.

So the meaning here is that the Pagan Arabs **used to exaggerate** and hold that **mere contact or proximity to a person** would allow the transfer of states, conditions, including diseases, from one person or animal to another. And from this, the further notion

¹ Al-Tamhīd (Mu’assasah al-Furqān, 1439H) 16/99, 104.

can arise that the quality of “infecting” or “passing on” was found in that thing, just like the quality of quenching thirst is found in water, or the quality of satiating hunger is found in food. The Prophet (ﷺ) negated this and prohibited that such things should be said, because this is shirk in the asbāb, minor shirk, wherein:

- something that is not a cause is made to be a cause, or
- exaggeration is made in a cause, over and above the actual degree of causality given to it by its Creator.

So the Pagan Arabs and Disbelievers of Jāhiliyyah were upon this notion, the transfer of permanent qualities or incidental attributes, a’rāḍ, such as disease states, by mere contact or proximity, this was presumed by them and grossly exaggerated in, they exaggerated in the degree of causality of things.²

Exaggerating in the causality of things is something that the Naturalists and the Mu‘tazilah fell into, and whenever anyone exaggerates in the causality (sababiyyah) of a thing, or a means, over and above what Allāh placed in it, then this enters people into the arena of minor shirk or making false statements about al-Qadar, and what it comprises of asbāb (ways, means) .

One of the specific ways in which this can happen is by **confusing association or coincidence with causation**, as indicated by al-Qurṭubī, and we have cited that and discussed it previously.

² This is similar to what their modern-day counterparts are upon with respect to their superstitious belief in viruses, presented as the science of virology, when it is a laughable pseudoscience, a type of siḥr (magic, sleight of hand) involving deceptive techniques and procedures, built upon ignorance and misconstruing of realities.

While pointing out the errors of the Pagan Arabs of Jāhiliyyah in the subject of contagion, and the Naturalists and Muʿtazilah in relation to the subject of causation, al-Qurṭubī said:

The cause of this [error] is the confusion between the perception of the senses with the perception of intellect. For what he sees is an effect taking place in the presence of something else [an **association** between two things], and this is the share of perception. But as for **causation** [itself], then this is not known through perception, but by way of intellectual reasoning.³

In light of this, the way we look at all the various statements of the Prophet (ﷺ) in this subject matter is that his statements comprise a solution, a cure, a treatment. They comprise a rectification of these ideas and beliefs, these erroneous thoughts, **and they provide such guidance which places protective barriers around the minds and hearts of people** so that they do

³ Al-Mufhim (Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1417) 5/621. And the intent here is to highlight the mistake of the disbelievers in that they often present **association** as **causation** within their sciences—or leave people to assume causation. By way of this they are able to deceive people into believing baseless claims whenever that may serve a purpose. To give an example as to how this can take place, Legionnaires’ disease is a type of pneumonia a person gets from contaminated water systems. So if a group of people are exposed to this because they share a water supply and they develop this disease, it can quite easily be claimed, by association, that contagion has taken place, and contagion can be declared the cause in the outbreak. However, Legionnaires’ disease is not passed from person to person, it comes through contaminated water systems. So prior to this being established and known, contagion would have been invoked. This is similar to Cholera, it is not passed person to person, rather it comes from water and food contaminated with fecal matter. And this comes back to down to issues of hygiene, sanitation, infrastructure and so on. So we can see how very easy it is to confuse association with causation and how this can be used to make claims of contagion. This was nature of the error that led the Pagan Arabs to their erroneous notion of contagion.

not venture into that field and thereby follow or resemble the Pagans and Disbelievers in their gross exaggerations and superstitious ways and resemble their thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours.

He (ﷺ) continues a little later:

... And as for his saying: *“Let not the owner of sick camels pass them by the healthy camels of another, and let the owner of healthy camels [let them graze] where he wills.”*

He is saying: He should not let any of his sick camels to come close to or approach the healthy camels of another, for it will harm him [the owner], due to what this will create in his heart of doubt [of contagion], that the [disease] will pass on [to his camels], even though nothing passes from one thing to another in reality.⁴

⁴ So the speech of Ibn 'Abd al-Barr indicates that disease does not pass from one being to another. Since **a'rāḍ (states, conditions)** found in entities are not transferrable, then they must be recreated in people through a combination of factors and even if we include **inoculation** within this, then it still does not mean that an instance of disease passed from one being to another like a squirrel jumps from one tree to another. This is because disease is not a noun-entity, it is a state, a condition that has to arise and set and take hold in a body, it is multifactorial, multicausal and requires individual susceptibility. So the more accurate and precise thing to say is that “Allāh creates disease afresh in each individual on account of combined factors”. This would not change even if we included inoculation as a cause.

For example, if there is a leper with a severe case of leprosy and another person with a cut happens to rub his wound on the arm of that leper through which noxious material enters into his bloodstream and triggers a healing phase reaction, then if he has sufficient vitality, this will resolve and not progress to disease. But if he lacks vitality, is susceptible and is overwhelmed by the inoculated material then it can progress into another case of leprosy over time. However, this is not contagion which is the subject of discussion and contention. This is disease arising on account of numerous factors, one of them

So this shows the primary underlying concern for which this barrier against minor shirk have been placed. And this barrier is to recommend the owner of sick camels not to let them graze or drink water by the healthy camels of another, to protect the thoughts and ideas of the owner of healthy camels from baseless fears, thoughts, presumptions, which lead to omens and notions of contagion comprising exaggeration in the *asbāb*.

However, as we have pointed out frequently over the past six months, this is not to deny that **inoculation** can take place, wherein a wound, cut, abrasion on the skin allows noxious, morbid material on the skin surface of another person or animal to enter, and this will then initiate a detoxification program in the body [which is then interpreted as the “disease” and its symptoms] of that person or animal.

Further, in the case of scabies, it is actually an **infestation**, not an infection, and involves a particular type of mite, which can neither jump nor fly. Rather, it is picked up from contaminated surroundings and feed. So this mite—which may ordinarily be on the skin surface and not cause anything—finds entry under the skin either through:

—cuts and abrasions,

being inoculation. So we do not say that the instance of leprosy in the first person passed on to the second person, speaking as if the disease itself is moving around, because now we are returning to what starts to resemble the saying of the People of Jāhiliyyah, or is a stepping stone towards it.

Rather, we say leprosy was made to develop in the second person afresh and inoculation was one of the numerous factors through which this happened. This distinction is based upon what has been said by some of the scholars such as al-Baghawī and we have cited that in a previous article, [baghawi-contagion.pdf](#) — 7 July 2020. Refer also to our article on Ibn al-Qayyim and contagion where this is also odiscussed, [ibn-al-qayyim-contagion.pdf](#) — March 2020.

—or due to malnutrition of the camel.

Malnutrition affects the “**immunological status**” of the camel where the mite is more easily able to penetrate the skin, which ordinarily it would not.


Refer to: “**Imām al-Ṭahāwī on Contagion**” for further discussion on this matter of camels, mites and scabies.

[tahawi-contagion.pdf](#) — 22 September 2020

But inoculation is a separate category to contagion and people become confused in this topic because they have been influenced by the exaggerations of the disbelievers, in their inaccurate and misleading statements.

For example: We read in a popular medicine website:

Is cholera contagious?

Cholera is highly **contagious** . Cholera can be transferred person to person by infected fecal matter entering a mouth or by water or food contaminated with *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria. The organisms can survive well in salty waters and can contaminate humans and other organisms that contact or swim in the water.

Take note of the highly misleading, exaggerated statement that “Cholera is highly contagious”. Cholera is not passed person to person by physical touch or proximity. Rather, water or food contaminated with fecal matter is the route through which a person gets cholera. Cholera does not “jump” or “transmit” from one person to another when they sit together or make skin to skin contact. In fact, this is clearly an instance of inoculation through the mouth with contaminated food or water. Cholera outbreaks occur in places with lack of sanitation, lack of clean water, lack of

proper housing infrastructure and drainage. Malnutrition or nutritional deficiency is also a strong background factor for susceptibility to disease in general.

Some have spoken and written on this subject without grasping these matters and noting these distinctions. Upon a simplistic understanding, they have wrongly thought and also propagated the idea that when someone holds the view of “no contagion” that they are automatically denying specific worldly realities such as what has been pointed out above about inoculation.

However, we are and have always been very precise in our speech. This issue of inoculation has been explained by the likes of Ibn Qutaybah and al-Baghawī. We distinguish between the general term “mixing” which is open-ended and vague and the specific act of inoculation. The vagueness of the term “mixing”—which is routine, ordinary contact or closeness between people as they go about their daily activities—its ambiguity and lack of precision keeps the door open for the thoughts, feelings, statements and actions that the Pagans and Disbelievers used to do and still do today, upon their superstitious and exaggerated belief in contagion.⁵

⁵ **Ambiguity, Clarity of Language, Association and Causation:**

It is for this reason, that in the other view, “mixing” has to be qualified, so it is said: “Mixing **may sometimes** be made a means for the passing of disease from one to another.” However, **this wording retains the ambiguity**, and keeps the avenue open for people to exaggerate in the issue of mixing and in treating disease as a noun entity with its own property of transmission. Whereas when we say inoculation is a means, it refers to a very specific type of encounter through which disease can be freshly created in a person if Allāh (ﷻ) wills to do so. And as for what is besides that, of ordinary contact or nearness, then no evidence exists that disease passes on like that, and this was from the exaggeration and superstition of the Arabs. This has been revived by the disbelievers through their false and inaccurate theories of disease, in particular, the pseudoscience of virology. As for colds and flus, they are not contagious at all and no scientific evidence exists demonstrating that they are.

So what we say is that Allāh creates disease afresh in each individual through combined factors that are all under His will, command and control (and that can include inoculation). Here, we have eliminated all ambiguity due to very precise, specific speech, and we have also spoken with a statement that can never oppose factual reality, and which in fact, accommodates all truth.

However, with the ambiguous, broad term “mixing”, **association or coincidence** is easily confused with **causation**, which is an error in reasoning, the same type that the Pagans of Jāhiilyyah would fall into, in their belief in contagion. Al-Qurṭubī pointed out the nature of this error when discussing the topic of contagion.

To give an example: It could be the case that in a hotel, the air conditioning system is unclean and has mould throughout. As people visit, a small percentage of susceptible guests, who lack vitality and have weakened “immune systems” due to other factors, start developing a fever, runny nose and cough. This is the body’s natural, pre-programmed response to eliminate toxic and morbid materials. However, this can easily be presented as an outbreak of a “contagious respiratory illness” due to confusion between association and causation. Just because the guests who got this illness all happened to visit the same hotel and may have mixed with each other, it does not mean that each person got sick due to mixing with a sick person. Very often, the true causes of disease may remain hidden, and “contagion” is a simplistic explanation that people will tend towards—being naturally prone to suspicions, presumptions, assumptions coupled with incomplete knowledge of the specific ways, means and causes that were in effect.

As for colds and flus, they are pre-determined, in-built, healing programs. They detoxify the body of morbid materials, dead or damaged cells, linings and tissues. They arise due to build up of toxicity and waste materials coupled with nutritional deficiency and have climate-based triggers. That is why they follow seasonal patterns in all parts of the world. And as for “viruses”, they are not the cause, rather, they are part and parcel of the healing program—acting as waste-carriers and molecular messengers. It is the route through which the unwanted, harmful material is shed from the body. However, the disbelievers—due to their ignorance and due to stripping the creation of Allāh’s rubbūbiyyah and His names and attributes—are either ignorant or feign ignorance of the true biological meanings of these processes and programs, which are in-built, automated. All acute illnesses are actually healing phase programs to maintain the body’s integrity and point to the fact that Allāh is al-Shāfi and the Ṭabīb—the Healer.

Today, these superstitious, Jāhiliyy beliefs, thoughts, statements and behaviours have been revived through false, inaccurate theories of disease and pseudosciences such as virology which the extremely wealthy among the disbelievers have turned into a conceptual weapon for economic, social and political ends.

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (رحمه الله) then says:

But the soul dislikes that, especially alongside the belief of contagion they used be upon in their Jāhiliyyah.

Meaning, that the owner of healthy camels is made to feel uneasy, because the nearness of sick camels to his healthy camels makes him prone to certain thoughts and feelings that lead to the harbouring of omens and exaggeration in the issue of contagion. Hence, the owner of sick camels is advised to avoid mixing them with the healthy camels of another because it is harm (adhā) to the owner of healthy camels and makes him vulnerable to certain thoughts and ideas.

In addition, it may be the case that his camels get scabies because they picked up the mites from the environment and not because of mixing itself. And if his camels are malnourished, the mites already on the surface will more easily penetrate the skin due to reduced immunological function. Yet, the owner may wrongly think it was because of contagion.

However, if no mixing took place, the camels would still get scabies due to picking up mites from the environment, and he would know that this is from the decree of Allāh, meaning through ways and means other than mixing. So the exaggeration in mixing—which is what the Arabs used to do—is avoided, and this

prohibition of mixing sick camels with healthy ones becomes an effective barrier to an exaggerated belief in contagion and to wrongful thoughts, feelings and statements. This is what the Salaf explained to be the intent of the Messenger (ﷺ).

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr says in al-Istidhkār:⁶

As for his saying: “*There is no contagion*”, then its meaning is that nothing infects anything else. A sick person does not infect a healthy person and Allāh does whatever He wills, nothing occurs except what He wills. The Arabs, or most of them used to speak with contagion and omens, and among them were those who did not used to believe in that and reject it.

Allāh’s Messenger (ﷺ) said: “*There is no contagion*”, this is his notification that whatever was believed regarding it—by whoever believed it among them [the Pagan Arabs]—was false.

The Pagan Arabs were not a uniform group and they did have various creeds, some of them fringe, some of them more mainstream. Among the Arabs were

—Those who were Dahriyyah, the Materialists, who denied resurrection, and claimed there is just matter, life and death in cycles, and claimed they will not be brought back to life.

—Those who affirmed Allāh’s rubūbiyyah and His decree but associated partners with Him in worship.

Thus, the Pagan Arabs affirmed Allāh’s rubūbiyyah, they affirmed that He controls life and death and that all things are

⁶ Al-Istidhkār (Dār al-Waṭī: 1414H) 27/54-55.

under His dominion, and they affirmed Allāh’s decree, because they argued, as occurs in the Qur’ān, that:

لَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مَا أَشْرَكْنَا وَلَا آبَاؤُنَا

“... if Allāh had so willed, we and our forefathers would not have committed shirk”.⁷

So not all of them rejected Allāh’s decree such that it can be said that they denied contagion was by Allāh’s decree, even though this is the explanation given by numerous scholars.

Ibn al-Qayyim explained this issue of exaggeration in the causes, explaining the nature of the error of the Pagan Arabs, when he said about the ḥadīth, “*There is no contagion*”:

This negates what the Pagans used to affirm of a recurring type of causation [through mixing] that follows a single course, it not being possible for it to be invalidated, nor diverted from its place, nor for it to be opposed by [means] that are stronger than it. It is not as the one whose knowledge is deficient says that they [the Pagans] used to consider [contagion] to be an independent efficient cause on its own [outside Allāh’s will and power].⁸

⁷ See the Qur’ān: 6:148 and also 16:35, 43:20. Al-Sa’dī commented: “Allāh has informed that the Pagans will justify their shirk and declaring unlawful what Allāh made lawful through the argument of al-Qaḍā and al-Qadar, and that they will make Allāh’s will which encompasses everything of good and evil a proof for themselves in repelling blame from themselves.”

⁸ I’lām al-Muwaqqi’īn (Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1423H) 4/65. We should keep in mind however, that atheists, materialists and naturalists who reject a Creator will obviously say that contagion exists without a Creator. Hence to them, it occurs outside the domain of the Creator’s will and power, because they do not accept a Creator to begin with. As such they strip the causes (asbāb) and effects (musabbabāt) of their Creator (musabbib). And as for those Pagans, then they exaggerate in the causes which Allāh has created. Further, the Pagans were not

Ibn al-Qayyim explains here that the true nature of the error of the Pagans was in relation to sababiyah (causation) and its factors, and their exaggeration with respect to the created ways and means. This is similar to what we find amongst the Pagans and Disbelievers today, though it is underpinned by false, inaccurate theories of disease and pseudoscience, such as what can be found in virology, which leads them exaggeration in the asbāb (causes) and many false claims arise because of that. And this is what Muslims have blindly followed them in— both doctors, and naturally therefore, the common folk—and thus have resembled them in their thoughts, feelings and behaviours as is readily apparent today.⁹

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Reproduced below is a relevant section from an earlier article on the ḥadīths regarding the plague: “**Higher Wisdoms in The Ḥadīth Regarding the Land of Plague**”: [hadith-plague-land.pdf](#) — 25 April 2020.

THE VARIATION IN DISPOSITIONS AND INCLINATIONS OF PEOPLE

Naturally, people vary in their mental constitutions and emotional dispositions. If one fears a particular sickness, it is an individual personal matter. Precautions can be taken by such a person in accordance with his or her constitution, disposition and fears. **However, that does not mean that such measures**

all of the same type, they were of categories with various beliefs regarding creation, resurrection and the likes.

⁹ This exaggeration of the disbelievers and the fact that Muslim doctors have been affected by it was mentioned numerous times by Shaykh al-Albānī.

are always in accordance with the factual realities or ways and means that are justified and warranted.

They may be measures which simply give reassurance to the heart and mind of such a person. If a person fears a butterfly as the scorpion or hornet is feared, he may take measures against butterflies, but those measures are in accordance with his beliefs and presumptions, not in accordance with factual realities.

And this is why scholars such as Ibn al-Qayyim make a very insightful point in that among the people are those predisposed to imagining things (*awhām*) and having fears which induce such psychological and emotional states that suppress the body's vital processes, and which in turn lead to the very disease being feared. Such people predispose themselves to disease through such imaginations and fears and they are the ones likely to be put to trial with belief in contagion. It is for the likes of these people that the commands have come in the ḥadīths to not enter a land of plague, to flee from the leper and not to pass sick animals by healthy ones—so that they can be protected from the consequences of their own imaginations, presumptions and fears and not be put to trial with belief in omens and contagion.

From this consideration, we can also see the wisdom, conciseness, breadth and depth of meaning (*jawāmi' al-kalim*) in the speech of the Messenger (ﷺ) in that he put ...

- belief in evil omens in their various forms,
- contagion,
- influence of stars and,
- imagined harm from Jinns in relation to travel

... all together in one sentence. This is because they all involve things which have no reality and which are but the presumptions and imaginations in the mind of the individual. And the Messenger (ﷺ) gave guidance for the benefit of such people. Hence, for the one who harbours omens, he

advised that the omen be repelled and pushed out of the mind through reliance upon Allāh and continuing to do the activity which he set out to do originally. And with respect to the one who is fearful of disease and may be prone to belief in contagion should he get a disease, he advised him to not enter the land of plague and not to mix with a leper.

We mention once more what **Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim bin Sallām** (رحمته الله) said:

The prohibition of *‘Let not the owner of sick camels pass them by the healthy camels of another’* is not affirmation of contagion. Rather, it is because if the healthy camels became sick through Allāh’s decree, it might occur in the heart of their owner that this was due to contagion. Hence, he would start doubting and be put to trial. Hence, he [the Prophet] ordered the avoidance of this practice. And some people have carried [the ḥadīth] to mean that [the prohibition] is due to fear for the healthy on account of the one with the disease, and this the most evil of what the ḥadīth has been carried to mean, because it facilitates the way for believing in omens which is prohibited against. However, its angle is as I have presented.¹⁰

Abū ‘Ubayd is an Imām of the Salaf with deep insight into the affair of Tawḥīd and into the loftier wisdoms of the Prophetic Sunnah regarding this subject matter.

Upon this note, there are some doubts on this subject matter which are addressed in the section below.

REMOVAL OF DOUBTS

Recently, an audio from Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (رحمته الله) was translated and published on social media in which he was asked

¹⁰ Badhl al-Mā‘ūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭā‘ūn, pp. 187 and is mentioned by al-Baghawī in Sharḥ al-Sunnah (12/169).

about the view of Ibn Ḥazm (and others) on contagion—and there may have been some confusion as to whether Ibn Ḥazm or Ibn Ḥajar was being referred to in the course of the discussion.¹¹ It was mentioned in the course of the answer that Ibn Ḥazm was a Ṣāḥirī (literalist).¹² The objective behind the distribution of this speech—at the specific point in time and context it was distributed—was to make it appear that those who have another view of contagion, that they are upon the way of Ibn Ḥazm of literalism in this particular subject matter. This is an indirect way of discrediting that view, kind of resembling an ad hominem attack, without having to engage in a meaningful discussion based on evidences.

Alongside this, claims of “consensus” have been invoked, despite the presence of numerous valid interpretations being something known, acknowledged and written about by many of the scholars. Then, very apparent contradictions also become manifest wherein on the one hand it is said there are two valid interpretations and then on the other hand the opposing interpretation is claimed to be a superficial “literalist” one through the opportunistic use of a statement of a scholar to that end, and the claim of “consensus” is also invoked. It’s not clear how two valid views can exist alongside the claim that there is consensus on one of them. So all of this indicates incoherence and incomprehension.

¹¹ Ibn Ḥajar provides a detailed discussion of this subject, lists all the various views and prefers that held by the likes of Abu ‘Ubayd, al-Ṭahāwī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Khuzaymah and others.

¹² I had not come across Ibn Ḥazm’s view on this so far and nor was I aware that he had one. However—at cursory glance—it appears that his position is that, “*Flee from the leper as you would flee from a lion*” means: Do whatever you want to do, even if you flee from the leper, you cannot escape Allāh’s decree, you will still get leprosy if He decrees it.

This approach of trying to support one's view is not knowledge-based, evades meaningful discussion and has some resemblance to the actions of the people of taqlīd where the objective is just to support a view.

Further, claims have been made of “following the way of the Salaf” in this issue, **but without really quoting anyone from the first three centuries, let alone the first six.** And this is alongside the failure or the inability to study and actually comprehend the view that has been propounded and explained in detail in many articles for the past six months.

In all of these articles the following objectives have been and continue to be pursued:

—1. Identifying what is correct or agreed upon from all interpretations and accepting all insights and truths, keeping in mind that not everything a scholar says in a subject is always correct or without contention.

Scholars, throughout 1400 years, collectively, in discussing this subject, have captured various aspects of the truth. So a person who desires truth will always pursue the evidence, and bring together everything which is true and piece it together with coherent explanations.

—2. Reconciling all of that to provide a coherent picture.

—3. Showing the connection of all of that to the issue of Tawhīd and its completion, and to shirk and its manifestations in the realm of thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours.

—4. Making sure that such a picture matches factual reality, stripped of the false claims of the disbelievers and their pseudosciences and sleight of hand magician's tricks passed off as science, especially in the realm of “virology” and contagion.

—5. And making sure that all doors are closed for the Mu'tazilah, Naturalists and Orientalists, so that they have nothing

with which to attack the Sunnah, claiming contradiction therein. And this is achieved by ensuring that all explanations for the Prophetic traditions are internally and externally coherent with each other.

So this article is a continuation of these objectives, as well as a removal of shubuhāt (misconceptions) which are spread by those who do not bother to read them and who also actively discourage others from reading them.