

# Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ)

## on Contagion



Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said—in explanation of the ḥadīth of the bedouin and his camels where the bedouin, upon hearing the negation of contagion, questioned as to how this can be when he, as part of common experience, sees a camel with scabies mix with other healthy camels and they all fall develop scabies:<sup>1</sup>

This [the bedouin’s response] is based upon what they used to believe about contagion, that it is a cause for the occurrence of scabies by way of it, and this is from the presumptions of the ignorant. They used to believe that when a sick [animal or person] mixes with the healthy, he makes them ill. So the legislator negated and falsified that.

When the bedouin presented his misconception [of contagion], the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) replied to him with his statement; “*So who passed it to the first one?*”

This is an answer reaching the extremity of [rhetorical] eloquence and elegance.

Its essence is: Where did the scabies which “transmitted” [to the first camel] come from according to their claim?

If it is said in response: “From another camel, then an infinite chain is necessitated, and if it is some other cause [other than this], then he should express it.

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<sup>1</sup> Faṭḥ al-Bārī (10/297).

And if its said in response that the one who did it [i.e. created it] in the first one is the same one who did it in the second, then the claim is affirmed, which is that the one who did this with all of them is al-Khāliq (the Creator), al-Qādir (the Able, Powerful) over all things, and it is Allāh, (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى).

And he (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said, explaining how the ḥadīths that negate contagion explicitly and those that appear to affirm it are to be reconciled:<sup>2</sup>

The angle of reconciliation between them has preceded in the chapter on leprosy, and the summary of it is that his saying, “*There is no contagion*” is a prohibition against believing in it and his saying, “*Let not [the owner of sick camels pass them by the healthy camels of another]*”, the reason for the prohibition is for fear of [the owners] falling into belief in contagion.

Or fear that [baseless] suspicions [in this matter] may have [adverse] effects [upon a person]. The likes of this [explanation] has preceded in the ḥadīth, “*Flee from the leper...*”

This is because the one who does not believe leprosy is contagious, he [nevertheless] finds aversion in his soul [from being near to the leper], such that if he was compelled to be near [the leper], he would be harmed by that.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it is more befitting for the intelligent person to not subject himself to the likes of that, but to keep away from causes of harms and avoid paths leading to [harmful] suspicions and Allāh knows best.

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<sup>2</sup> Faṭḥ al-Bārī (10/298).

<sup>3</sup> This is explained by al-Qurṭubī who says that a person is harmed in his soul, by being next to a leper, despite him knowing it is not contagious, and this is because the worry and anxiety generated by the harm can itself be a cause of illness. So its best for a person to avoid this situation by keeping away from the leper.

And he (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said, after summarising views on contagion, and preferring its negation as the superior view held by the likes of Abu ‘Ubayd, al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭahāwī, Ibn Khuzaymah and others.<sup>4</sup>

“This reaches extreme verification and precision and it is better in my view than the reconciliation which al-Bayhaqī mentioned and whoever followed him in that such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and those after him.

**This is because [this reconciliation between the ḥadīths] negates contagion in principle, completely, as is stated explicitly in the authentic reports.**

As for what [appears] to clash with [this negation] from what has been reported [from the Prophet], then it is carried upon putting an end to what may lead to [belief in contagion]. This is opposed to the way which they [the other group] have reconciled [between the reports], for it affirms contagion in general.

**[Imām] Mālik**, when asked about the ḥadīth pertaining not looking at the lepers, said: ‘I have not heard of any dislike regarding it, and I do not see that the prohibition has come regarding it except for the fear that something may happen in a believer’s soul.’ Meaning, he falls into believing in contagion.”

He (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) also said along similar lines:<sup>5</sup>

“[The fourth view]: That disease is not contagious through its own property.<sup>6</sup> Rather, to whichever person a disease occurs,

<sup>4</sup> Badhl al-Mā‘ūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭā‘ūn, p. 297.

<sup>5</sup> Badhl al-Mā‘ūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭā‘ūn, pp. 343-344.

<sup>6</sup> This is what the disbelievers are upon today wherein they divide disease into “infectious” or “communicable” and “non-infectious” or “non-communicable”, thereby giving some diseases the property of “infectiousness”. No disease has

then that is due to Allāh (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى) creating that in him afresh. For this reason, many who are afflicted with a disease about which it is said that it is ‘contagious’ are observed where a healthy person mixes with them often and nothing afflicts him at all, and many who have not mixed at all with the one with the disease are observed, yet the disease (still) afflicts that person (nevertheless). And all of that occurs from the taqdīr (decree) of Allāh, the Exalted.

The last two views are well-known, and that which is preferred [as the superior view] in the subject of contagion is the last one, upon the generality of his (صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) saying: ‘*Nothing infects anything else*’ and his (صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) saying to the one who affirmed contagion: ‘*So who infected the first one?*’, whose corroboration has already preceded.”

After presenting various views, interpretations and approaches in reconciling between the ḥadīths on this subject, Ibn Ḥajar preferred the view of the negation of contagion.

This is the view of scholars such as **Shaykh al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Ḥakamī**, **Shaykh Muḥammad Amān al-Jāmī**, **Shaykh Muqbil** and **Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Luḥaydān** in the modern era.<sup>7</sup>

It is the negation of the notion of contagion in principle and speaking only with the fresh creation of disease instance in every entity for whom it has been willed and decreed, arising therein through its sum of causes.

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any such property in the scheme of Allāh’s creation, and this arises due to misinterpretation of observations in Allāh’s creation.

<sup>7</sup> Someone with no knowledge in these affairs made the bold claim in mid-2020 that there is “almost an ijmā’ (consensus)” present among contemporary scholars on the matter of contagion. This is a very strange assertion to use in an argument given that it is a well-known issue of difference with scholars of the past having included the ḥadīths of contagion in works dealing with confusing or apparently contradictory ḥadīths, leading to divergent views.

The notion of “spread” is a mental construction only, no disease “spreads” or is “transmitted” in physical reality, as the aʿrāḍ (incidental attributes) that develop in entities cannot be transmitted. Rather, they are recreated in each entity through their sum of causes.

Ibn Hajar dismissed the claims of physicians during the plague that occurred in Egypt, that people should not visit those sick with the plague:<sup>8</sup>

A group of physicians have mentioned what precaution a healthy person may take during the era of the plague from mixing with the one who has been afflicted with the plague.

Al-Qāḍī Tāj al-Dīn said: ‘We have seen the common-folk withholding from that until they abandoned visiting the one with the plague.<sup>9</sup> And that which we say regarding it is that if two trustworthy, knowledgeable physicians testify that such [visitation] is a cause of bringing harm to the one who does so, then withholding from mixing is [at least] permissible, or greater than that.’

I [Ibn Ḥajar] say: The testification of the one who testifies with that is not accepted because sensory perception [direct experience] falsifies it. These plagues have been present repeatedly in the lands of Miṣr and Shām, and there have been very few houses devoid of [victims]. And the afflicted one has those from his family and close ones that look after him, mixing with him more intensely than one who is not from his own family, yet many of them, rather most of them, are safe from [that plague]. So whoever gave testimony that that is a cause of harm for the one who mixes is an arrogant denier.

<sup>8</sup> Badhl al-Māʿūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭāʿūn, pp. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning, they stopped visiting the sick which is from the right of a Muslim.

As such, the very notion of “contagion” does not exist, in principle, and ascribing the property of “infectiousness” or “contagiousness” to a disease is an error, because no disease has such a property.

This is what the Prophet (ﷺ) was teaching the bedouin with respect to his camels and scabies with words that are clear, apparent, without any ambiguity:

- (لا يعدي شيئ شينا) “*Nothing passes [what it has] to anything else*”
- (فما أعدى الأول) “*So what passed it to the first one?*”
- (لا عدوى) “*There is no contagion*”

For a disease to be freshly created in another entity [even in the contagionist view, for it to “spread, transmit”] it requires causes and factors outside of itself.

Hence “infectiousness” or “contagiousness” cannot be the property of any disease, and this is why it is said, “No disease is contagious through its property”.

No disease has been given this property in the same way that ice has been given the property of being cold or water having the property of quenching thirst, or fire that has the property of heat and so on. Had a disease been “infectious” or “contagious”, then everyone who mixed with the sick person would become ill, but that is not the case, as not everyone is susceptible to disease because of other factors from Allāh’s decree.

This understanding is greater in singling out Allāh in His complete disposal of all affairs, just as al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Ḥakamī (رحمته الله) said:

**The intent is that the negation of contagion is absolute, it is upon its totality** and within it is singling out Allāh (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى) with full disposal [of all affairs] in His creation... and within that lies strengthening of the heart of the believers, aiding of them

with the strength of reliance and soundness of certainty, and proof for them against the polytheists and all of the stubborn opposers.<sup>10</sup>

Abu ‘Iyaad

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<sup>10</sup> Ma‘ārij al-Qubūl (Dār Ibn al-Qayyim), 3/984-989.