

Imām al-Ṭabarī (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) (d. 310H) on Contagion



Al-Ṭabarī (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said:

That which is correct in our view is what is authentically reported from him (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) that he said: “*There is no contagion*” and that nothing will afflict a soul except what has been written for it.

As for the sick person coming close to the healthy person, then it does not necessitate ailment and sickness for the healthy person.

Save that it is not desirable for a person of health to be close to the leper and to [one with] an illness which the people dislike. Not because it is unlawful (ḥarām), but out of the precaution that a healthy person might think—in the case that he later got the disease—that his mixing with the [sick person] was the cause of what afflicted him.

This would then lead him to enter into what he (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) prohibited and what he falsified from the affair of jāhiliyyah with respect to contagion.¹

¹ As cited in Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī of Ibn Baṭṭāl (Maktabat al-Rushd) 9/411 and also by Ibn Ḥajar in Faṭḥ al-Bārī (al-Maktabah al-Salafiyyah) 10/162.

Notes:

1. The view of al-Ṭabarī and many others is explained as follows:

Allāh (عَزَّوَجَلَّ) creates disease through factors that He brings together for each individual from the creational systems of cause and effect and there is no such thing as contagion wherein disease is allegedly “transmitted”. This is because disease is a state, a condition, an incidental attribute (‘araḍ) that arises and sets in a body on account of multiple factors that are external to itself. Hence, it can never have the property of being “infectious” or being “transmitted” because it is not a noun-entity like a cat, dog or squirrel, that can jump—or be “transmitted”, or “sent”—from one person to another. It is created afresh in each individual through factors that Allāh brings together for that person.

2. As we have pointed out previously, on the basis of the statements of Ibn Qutaybah and al-Baghawī, we distinguish between “inoculation” and “contagion”. Inoculation is a means of **the fresh creation of an instance of disease** in another individual so long as there is susceptibility and lack of vitality in that person. Aside from this, the term “mixing” is too broad and vague and allows false presumptions of contagion to continuously arise and remain. This leaves the ground fertile for errors in principles of causation and such thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours against which the Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) desired to place barriers though his guidance in this matter. Refer to our articles on the statements of **al-Ṭaḥāwī, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, al-Baghawī, and al-Qurṭubī** for further explanation in this issue.

3. Al-Ṭabarī has alluded to:

— the confusion between **coincidence**, **association** (being in the presence of someone) and **causation** (the actual cause of the disease), and

—exaggeration in the causative power (sababiyyah) of mixing, which is the foundation for such thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours that are found with the Pagans in the matter of contagion.

Their error is not restricted to the claim that contagion occurs outside of Allāh’s decree and power, this is a deficient explanation. Rather, the issue revolves around errors and exaggerations in causation, which lead to baseless thoughts, feelings and statements and laughable actions.

4. Due to the complexity of the asbāb (creational cause effect systems) and **incomplete knowledge** with respect to them, “contagion” is often invoked as a simplistic explanation. As a result the true multifactorial causes of disease in a population or a herd are ignored, with “mixing” being purely coincidental. This has happened frequently in history.

The problem of exaggeration is compounded by the fact that a false and inaccurate germ theory model of disease has allowed contagion to be invoked very easily while the true causes of disease dismissed or ignored. We have given examples of **pellagra**, **beriberi** and **scurvy** in other articles to illustrate.

5. People living in the same household or region are subject to the same health-producing or disease-causing factors, including water and food supply, air quality, toxicity, temperament, lack of sanitation, industrial pollution, EMF radiation, the seasons and changes therein, and so on. These are shared, common factors

that envelope an entire population over large geographical distances. Then there is also individual susceptibility which arises on account of many factors that are unique to each person including nutritional status, habits and lifestyle. All of what has been mentioned is under the will and power of Allāh (عَزَّوَجَلَّ).

To illustrate: In an outbreak of disease such as cholera for example, it is very easy to invoke “contagion” and exaggerate in it. However, cholera occurs because of contamination of the water and food supply with feces and putrefaction. So this is a population level issue.

If a person ingests feces which contains morbid waste material that is being feasted upon by bacteria—and this is an example of inoculation of waste, toxic material into the body—they will fall ill but only if they lack vitality, which is often the case in certain countries due to poverty and malnutrition. Person to person “transmission” does not take place through ordinary routine, casual contact.

Disease is not “transmitted”, it is created in another person afresh through factors that Allāh brings together for that person. This can include inoculation, as indicated earlier, which is a very specific event, as opposed to the vague and ambiguous term “mixing” in which the scope for false presumption remains large. However, even with inoculation, no disease is “transmitted”. Rather, **a new instance of disease** was created afresh, after a person was subjected to only one of its causes, which is inoculation of foreign, morbid, toxic material.

For more clarification on this refer to: **Ibn al-Qayyim (رحمته الله) on the Subject of Contagion: [ibn-al-qayyim-contagion.pdf](#)** — March 2020.

6. To make the matter clearer, we reproduced something from our article on al-Ṭaḥāwī and contagion regarding scabies in camels:

First, scabies or scabies is a **hygiene related parasitic disease** connected to poor nutrition and inadequate hygiene.

The “immunological” condition of the host determines the ability of the mite to infest. The mite may routinely be found on the skin and scabies may never develop. Mites burrow into the upper layer of the skin—where individual susceptibility allows that—and replicate. Cuts, wounds and abrasions will facilitate that. Scabies is not an *infection*, but an **infestation**. Infestation leads to itching due to the sensitivity of the skin to the proteins and feces of the mites. The skin reacts causing rashes, pimples and blisters. Infestation occurs from the surroundings, through contaminated environmental materials, including feed. Scabies is claimed to typically spread through **prolonged and intimate**, skin-to-skin contact² and not through casual contact. **The scabies mite can’t jump or fly, and it crawls very slowly.**

Second, what relates to contagion in light of the above. Animals live in the same location, in the same conditions, where mites exist in the surroundings or in contaminated materials. Over time, given the right climatic conditions and poor nutrition, a herd may get scabies but not necessarily because it passed from one animal to the other. So just as the first one got scabies, then

² So this is what has been called **inoculation**, however as Ibn Hubayrah () has explained, the origin of this illness manifesting on the skin comes internal from lack of vitality in the internal organs. This affects the efficiency of skin-regeneration, especially in sensitive areas. When the skin deteriorates and becomes necrotic, due to not being replaced quickly enough through the biological processes and pathways, it attracts ticks and mites that are already in the environment and on the skin.

likewise, the others can get scabies in the same way, without requiring “transmission”. The herd has simply been subject to the same environmental circumstances and multifactorial causes of the appearance of the disease, during a particular period of time. However, this can create **the illusion of contagion**.³ For this reason, given the fact that Allāh creates disease in a herd or a population through a complex set of factors—**which may not be apparent to people, rather they may be obscured and hidden, or not discoverable at that point in time**—they are prone to invoking “contagion” as the explanation.

And this is error with respect to the *asbāb* (created ways and means) which can subsequently turn into exaggeration. Knowing this, the Prophet (ﷺ) said what he said, in order to cut off such presumptions which bring corruption and harm to creed. He (ﷺ) said: “*Let not the owner of sick camels pass them by the healthy camels of another.*”⁴ And this can be viewed from the same angle from which he prohibited sitting at a table where alcohol is consumed, or free-mixing between sexes or a man being alone with a non-maḥram female, because these are stepping stones to harm and corruption.

So he (ﷺ) cut off the avenues to these vices and in the same manner, he cut off all the avenues that lead to minor shirk, and from them is what relates to this subject matter, indicating

³ This has indeed been the case with diseases such as pellagra, considered to be contagious through microbes and germs, but later discovered to be caused by vitamin deficiency. The same with leprosy, thought to be contagious in the ordinary common sense of the word but now known not to be contagious, 95% of people are not susceptible to it. It is in reality a disease of toxic overload and malnutrition and is not fundamentally caused by a bacterium as is claimed by the germ theorists who only have a one-track, narrow-minded, mono-causal, cop-out explanation for so-called “infectious disease”.

⁴ And upon the other interpretation, the other view, we would say that this is to avoid “inoculation”, but this has nothing to do with contagion that the Prophet (ﷺ) negated, as that is a separate category.

the perfection of his guidance and his perfection of the affair of Tawḥīd.

7. One should be able to see from the above how there is much scope for people to have thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours which are baseless and built upon exaggeration. It is for this reason that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) ordered the people to avoid such situations wherein they will be put to trial by these affairs, wherein **coincidence and association** are wrongly treated as **causation**.

This is the explanation found with the Salaf such as **Imām Mālik, Abu ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim bin Sallām, al-Ṭahāwī** and many others. However, these considerations have been largely neglected over the centuries, way after the era of the Salaf, and especially in the modern age wherein the Muslims are merely blind-followers of the disbelievers in their sciences, theories and models, the effects of which are apparent.

The influence upon **Muslim doctors** in this respect has been alluded to by Shaykh al-Albānī on occasions.

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Reproduced below is a section from: “**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 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 (*jawāmiʿ 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** (رحمة 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.”⁵

⁵ Badhl al-Mā‘ūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭā‘ūn, pp. 187 and is mentioned by al-Baghawī in Sharḥ al-Sunnah (12/169).