

# Imām Aḥmad (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ)

## on Contagion



Shaykh Sulaymān bin ‘Abd Allāh (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) (d. 1233H) wrote in “Taysīr al-‘Azīz al-Ḥamīd”, his explanation of Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, of Shaykh al-Islām Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ), in the chapter on omens and the ḥadīth pertaining to contagion:<sup>1</sup>

And [Imām] Mālik said, when asked about the ḥadīth, “*Flee from the leper...*”, “I have not heard anything objectionable about it, and I do not consider what has come regarding that except due to the fear that something may occur in the soul of the believer [of corruption in creed].”<sup>2</sup>

And the meaning of this is that he negated contagion in principle [altogether], and he carried the command to avoid [the leper, the sick] from the angle of preserving the capital and closing the avenue, so that something of the [illness] does not occur in the one who mixes [with the leper, the sick] and he thinks it is because of the mixing, and thus affirms the contagion which the legislator negated.

And this [view] has been adopted by Abu ‘Ubayd, Ibn Jarīr [al-Ṭabarī], al-Ṭaḥāwī, and it is mentioned by al-Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā from Aḥmad.

<sup>1</sup> Taysīr al-‘Azīz al-Ḥamīd (Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 1428H), p. 753-754.

<sup>2</sup> This is related by al-Qurṭubī in his tafsīr of al-Baqarah, (2:243).

Ibn Mufliḥ said:<sup>3</sup>

وقد قال إسحاق بن بهلول: وذكرت لأحمد بن حنبل هذا الحديث يعني حديث جابر أن النبي ﷺ أخذ بيد مجذوم فوضع يده معه في القصعة فقال بإسم الله، ثقة بالله<sup>(٤)</sup>، فقال: إليه أذهب، فيحتمل أن هذا كما ذهب إليه عمر وغيره من السلف إلى الأكل معه.

And Ishāq bin Bahlūl had said:

I mentioned this ḥadīth to Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, meaning the ḥadīth of Jābir that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) took the hand of a leper and placed it in the pot with his own and said: “*In the name of Allāh, placing trust in Allāh.*”<sup>4</sup> So he [Aḥmad] said: “I adopt that [as a course of conduct].” So it is likely that this is [the same] as what ‘Umar adopted and others from the Salaf of eating with him [the leper].

## NOTES

**1.** Ibn Abi Shaybah in his Muṣannaf, under the chapter heading of “Eating with the Leper”, relates: Wakī reported to us from Sufyān, from Qays, from Miqsam: “They used to avoid eating with the blind, the lame and the sick, until this verse was revealed:

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَى حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى أَنفُسِكُمْ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Mufliḥ in Ādāb al-Sharīah (Mu‘assassat al-Risālah, 1419H), 3/360

<sup>4</sup> This ḥadīth is not authentic though these actions are related from the Companions.

**“There is not upon the blind [any] constraint nor upon the lame constraint nor upon the ill constraint nor upon yourselves when you eat from your [own] houses...” (24:61)**

Imām al-Baghawī said in explanation of this verse:<sup>5</sup>

Saʿīd bin Jubayr and al-Ḍaḥḥāk and others said: “The lame, blind and sick used to refrain from eating with the healthy because people used to consider it unclean<sup>6</sup> and would dislike eating with them... so this verse was revealed.”<sup>7</sup>

Mujāhid said: “This verse was revealed allowing them to eat in the homes of those whom Allāh mentioned in this verse...”

## 2. Al-Qurṭubī said in his commentary on this verse:

A group said: “The Arabs and whoever was in Madīnah, before the sending [of the Prophet] used to avoid eating with those with a condition. Some of them used to consider that unclean because the blind person’s hand would roam around [in the food], the lame person would take up lots of space and because of the sick person’s odour and maladies.

And these are the manners of Jāhiliyyah, and [comprise] arrogance, so this verse was revealed to permit them (i.e. those mentioned to eat in the homes of those mentioned).”

**3.** As for ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) then he would deliberately drink from the same place of the same vessel that Mu‘ayqīb would drink from, and he had leprosy. ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) did that in order to ward off belief in contagion from himself.

<sup>5</sup> Ma‘ālim al-Tanzīl (8/63).

<sup>6</sup> The word (تَقَدَّرَ) means to remove oneself far from unclean things.

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the meanings, another being that the Arabs did not like to eat with them out of fear that they may wrong them, as these people are not able to access or eat the food in the same way as others.

It is related from Maḥmūd bin ‘Ubayd (d. 96H), who relates from ‘Abd Allāh bin Ja‘far bin Abī Ṭālib that he said:

“For I have seen ‘Umar bin al-Khāṭṭāb call for a vessel in which there was water, and Mu‘ayqīb would drink from it—and this disease [of leprosy] had taken hold in him—then he [‘Umar] would drink from it, and would deliberately place his mouth on the same spot [of the vessel] where [Mu‘ayqīb had placed his] mouth, knowing he was doing so because he disliked that anything of [belief in] contagion should enter into his soul.”<sup>8</sup>

**5.** And as for other Companions, then Ibn Baṭṭāl writes:

“[Ibn Jarīr] al-Ṭabarī said: ...Ibn Bashār narrated to us, from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān: Sufyān narrated to us: From ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin al-Qāsim from his father: “That the delegation of Thaḳīf came to Abu Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. Food was brought and one man stepped back. He said: ‘What is with you?’. He said: ‘A leper.’ So [Abu Bakr] called [the leper] and ate with him.

From Salmān and Ibn ‘Umar that they both used to make food for the lepers and would eat with them. And from ‘Ikrimah that he stepped back from a leper and Ibn ‘Abbās said to him: ‘O you who goes away, perhaps he is better than me and you.’”

From ‘Ā’ishah (رضي الله عنها): “... I had a freed slave who was afflicted with that disease who would eat out of my bowl, drink from my vessel and sleep in my place.”<sup>9</sup>

They said: Allāh and His Messenger falsified contagion.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Al-Tamhīd (1/53-55) and Ibn Sa‘d in al-Ṭabaqāt (4/109-111).

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah (8/233).

<sup>10</sup> Refer to Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī of Ibn Baṭṭāl (Maktabat al-Rushd), 9/410 and Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah (Maktabah al-Rushd, 1425H) 8/232-233.

6. In this view contagion is negated and falsified altogether, since not everyone who mixes with a sick person gets sick.

This indicates that either the mixing is purely coincidental and/or there are other additional factors in disease causation.

Upon that “contagiousness” or “infectiousness” can never be the property of any disease. This means that the very concept of contagion itself dissolves and one just speaks of the fresh creation of disease instance for whomever it is decreed through its sum of causes. Disease which is an ‘araḍ (incidental attribute) is not “transmitted” as such, it is freshly created in each entity.

The notion of “spread” is itself a mental judgement, it’s conceptual, whereas in external physical reality, disease instances are created afresh in each entity for which it has been decreed, through its sum of causes.

Since the notion of contagion can affect thoughts, feelings, statements and behaviours, what is related from these Companions is to ignore the notion of contagion and proceed upon normal, routine activities knowing full well that all things are through Allāh’s decree, and if they fell ill, it is by Allāh’s decree not through contagion and its alleged effects.<sup>11</sup>

This is the view supported by Imām Ibn Khuzaymah and Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Luḥaydān and others wherein the very notion of contagion is seen as something that competes with and undermines al-Qadar and undermines reliance upon Allāh itself,

---

<sup>11</sup> As for ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) turning back from the land of plague, that is not due to the notion of contagion, but due to avoiding the disease causing conditions in that land that have enveloped its people, similar to how a person does not go to or choose to live in a highly polluted city, or a city where there is frequent murder, robbery and looting, or not entering a burning or collapsing building and the likes. This is to avoid the causes of harm.

and leads people to fear, incapacity and the likes, drawing them to superstition and omens.

**7.** In the contagionist view, mixing is considered to be a means by Allāh’s permission of the “spread” of disease. Thus avoidance of the leper or the sick is considered from the means and part of reliance.

However, in this view, since no evidence is established that the mixing itself was the actual cause, it is merely an assumption, the scope remains for the same error to be made that was made by the bedouin in the matter of his camels and scabies.<sup>12</sup>

He confused association with causation.

Illness can occur in a herd or a population on account of shared and common factors that envelope and affect them all within a given place and duration of time. However, this is interpreted as “contagion”, and this is how the notion developed historically, when people sought simplistic explanations as to why people in the same place all get ill at the same time while being ignorant of the complexity of causes and multifactorial, multicausal nature of disease itself.

Diseases long thought to be “contagious” through ordinary routine contact are now known not to be and this includes leprosy. Many diseases were and are still thought to be contagious on the back of speculative theories of disease while the reality is that the true causes of these diseases return back to chronic nutritional deficiencies and/or toxicity of various forms and types. Some examples include scurvy, pellegra, beri beri and others. For a long time, they were wrongly blamed on “germs” but their causes were discovered to be chronic vitamin deficiencies which

---

<sup>12</sup> Refer to: <http://cv2020.s3.amazonaws.com/bedouin-contagion.pdf>

as soon as they are addressed, the disease disappears (without synthetic medications or blood-poisoning injections).

**8.** It is for this reason—errors in causation and its effects on thoughts, beliefs, emotions, statements and actions—that the subject of contagion is connected to the subject of Tawḥīd because it generates superstitious thoughts and behaviours that harm and undermine it.

Abu 'Iyaad

@abuiyaadsp | abuiyaad.com

13 Rajab 1443 / 14 February 2022—v.1.03