



Dhahabi's Gifts of Gold 1

SURKHEEL (ABU AALIYAH) SHARIF

SEEKING KNOWLEDGE OR ENGAGING IN ACTS OF DEVOTION?

After relating the saying of the Imam and hadith master, Mis'ar b. Kidām: "Indeed these hadiths inhibit you from remembrance of Allah and from prayer, so will you then stop," Imam al-Dhahabī¹ asks:

"Is seeking [sacred] knowledge preferable to performing superogatory prayer, reciting the Qur'an, and divine remembrance? As for someone who is sincere to Allah in seeking sacred knowledge, and has a sharp intellect, then seeking knowledge is preferable. It must, though, be accompanied by a share of superogatory prayer and devotion. If you see someone diligent in seeking sacred knowledge, yet he has no share of [superogatory] devotion, then he is lazy and despicable, and is untruthful in [his claim of] having a good intention."²

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

Mis'ar relates that 'Abd Allah b. 'Awn, an early pietist and exemplar, stated: "Remembrance of people is a malady, whilst the remembrance of Allah is a remedy." To this, al-Dhahabī remarks:

"Yes, by Allah! Though it is strange how we, in our ignorance, ignore the cure and race towards the disease. Yet Allah, Exalted is He, strictures: *Remember Me, and I will remember you.*³ And: *But the remembrance of Allah is greater.*⁴ Allah also says. *Those who believe and whose hearts find tranquility in the remembrance of Allah. For in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find tranquility.*⁵ But this will not be attainable save with Allah's enabling grace (*taufiq*). Whoever persists in supplication and in knocking at the door, he will receive an opening.⁶

FLYING WITHOUT WINGS

Deliberating on Imam Mālik's famous statement: "Every person's saying may be accepted or rejected, except the companion of this grave; peace be upon him," Imam al-Dhahabī writes:

"There is no doubt that all those who acquaint themselves thoroughly with jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and whose knowledge is broad and intention sound, then it is not allowed for them to stick rigidly to one single school of law, or *madhhab*, in all that it states. Perhaps another *madhhab* has a stronger proof in an issue, or evidences emerge whereby the proof is clearly established to him. [In such a case] he must not follow his Imam; instead he must act in accordance with the evidence by following the Imam with whom the actual evidence lies - not out of following one's whims or desires. However, he is not to issue fatwas to the general public save in accordance with the *madhhab* of his Imam."⁷

As can be seen, one cannot object to someone making *tarjīb* - weighing-up the strongest opinion in light of the proof-texts - provided he is versed in independent legal judgement, or *ijtibād*. Explaining the requisites for such an endeavour, al-Dhahabī says:

"One who reaches the level of *ijtibād*, and a number of scholars have testified to this, then *taqlīd*; following the legal conclusions of another jurist, is forbidden to him. Just as a novice jurist, or a layman that has memorised the Qur'an - or much of it, is not allowed to undertake *ijtibād* at all. For how can he perform *ijtibād*? What can he say, and on what can he base his opinion? How can he fly and he has yet to grow wings! The third category

is the advanced, intelligent, perceptive jurist, versed in hadith, who - having committed to memory a primer in *fiqh*; and a text on juristic principles and legal theory; has studied grammar and mastered it; memorised Allah's Book; occupied himself with its exegesis (*tafsir*); and is strong in logical argumentation - has attained the rank of restricted *ijtibād*, is therefore qualified to examine the evidences of the scholars. Thus when the truth becomes clear to him in a particular issue, and it has been established by a text, and it has been acted upon by one of the great Imāms - like Abu Ḥanifah, for instance, or Mālik; al-Thawrī; al-Awzā'ī; al-Shāfi'ī; Abu 'Ubayd; Aḥmad; or Ishāq - he must follow [what he sees as] being the truth, not out of seeking a religious dispensation, but doing so while exercising pious caution. *Taqlid* is not permitted to him in the issue once the proof has been established to him."⁸

ON YAZID

In his biographical notice on Yazid b. Mu'āwiyah, Imam al-Dhahabī states:

"Yazīd is from those whom we neither curse nor love. There were those similar to him among the *khalīfahs* of the two states,⁹ and among the various provincial kings. Rather, from them were those who were far worse than him. This misfortune arose shortly after the death of the Prophet, peace be upon him; in the forty-ninth year. It was a time when [some of] the Companions were still living, such as Ibn 'Umar who was more deserving of the affair than either him; his father; or his grandfather."¹⁰

MODERATION IN WAYFARING

From the words of al-Junayd - *sayyid al-tā'ifah*; master of the spiritual faction - is: "We did not take sufism from idle-talk; but from hunger, worldly abstinence and forsaking conventional habits." After citing this remark, al-Dhahabī goes on to add:

"This is superb. What he means by this is forsaking most habits, avoiding what is superfluous of the world, and hunger without going to extremes. As for exaggerating in the issue of hunger, as monks do, and renouncing the world entirely, and the habits of the self - nourishment, sleep, and family - this exposes one to tribulations and can even lead to insanity. By this, much of the religion's monotheistic ease¹¹ is compromised. For indeed Allah

has given to all things a measure, and felicity lies in following the prophetic teachings (*sunan*). So weigh-up matters with justice: fast and break fast; pray and sleep; exercise scrupulousness with regards to sustenance; be contented with what Allah has apportioned to you; and remain silent save for good. May Allah have mercy upon al-Junayd: where is the likes of him in knowledge and spiritual states."¹²

EXALTING THE EXALTED

It was said to the Shaykh of Islam, Ibn al-Mubārak: How are we to know our Lord: He said: "Above the heavens, over the Throne (*fi'l-samā' 'ala'l-'arsh*)." The Jahmiyyah say otherwise, it was said to him? To which he replied: "We do not hold the view of the Jahmiyyah that Allah is with us right here." At this point, al-Dhahabi offers this useful gloss:

"The Jahmiyyah assert that the Creator, Exalted is He, is everywhere. Whereas the Predecessors (*salaf*) say that the Creator's Knowledge is everywhere; relying on His words, Exalted is He: *And He is with you wherever you are*.¹³ That is to say, by His Knowledge. The *Salaf* also said that Allah is over His Throne, as is stipulated in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Stated al-Awzā'ī, who was the Imam of his age: "We - while the Successors were in our midst - would say: Verily Allah, Exalted is He, is above His Throne, and we believe in whatever is related in the Sunnah of His Attributes." For it is known to the people of knowledge from the various groups, that the way of the *Salaf* was to let the verses and hadiths concerning the Divine Attributes pass as they came: without taking recourse to figurative interpretation (*ta'wil*) or textual distortion (*tabrif*), and without resemblance (*tashbīh*) or inquiring into their modality (*takyif*). Indeed, speech concerning the Divine Attributes is derived from speech concerning the Holy Essence. Just as the Muslims know that the Creator's Essence exists in reality, without anything which resembles it; so too do His Attributes exist, without anything resembling them."¹⁴

LOVE MADE PROFOUND

The jurist and Successor, 'Abīdah al-Salmānī, was once informed: We have in our possession a strand of hair of the Prophet, upon whom be peace, by way of Anas b. Mālik. He remarked: "That I possess a lock of his hair is more beloved to me than all the gold and silver on the

face of this earth.” To this lover’s sigh, al-Dhahabī had this to say:

“This utterance of ‘Abidah is a benchmark for perfect love, which is his preferring a strand of prophetic hair to all the gold and silver that people may possess.¹⁵ This statement, from this Imam, was uttered fifty years after the Prophet, upon whom be peace. So what should we say in our time if we were to find a lock of his hair reliably confirmed; or a thong from his sandal; some of his nail clippings; or shards of a cup from which he drank? If a rich person were to expend the greater part of his wealth in acquiring any of these things, would you think him a spendthrift or foolish? Never! So spend what you have in visiting his Mosque which he built with his own hands, and sending blessings on him at his Chamber in his City. And relish the sight of his Uḥud and love it; for your Prophet, peace be upon him, loved it. And revive yourself by spending some time in his Garden where he sat. For you will not be a true believer until this master becomes more beloved to you than yourself, your children, your wealth, and the whole of humanity.”¹⁶

WHEN GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE

After recording the words of Ishāq b. Rāhawayah: “If al-Thawrī, al-Awzā’ī and Mālik concur upon any matter, it is Sunnah,” al-Dhahabī comments:

“Rather, the Sunnah is whatever the Prophet, peace be upon him, made so, or the Rightly-Guided Caliphs after him. As for consensus, *ijmā’*, it is whatever the scholars of this nation, both past and present, have unanimously agreed upon: [including] a consensus which is probable (*ẓannī*) or tacit (*sukūti*). Whoever diverges from such a consensus, among the Successors (*tābi’ūn*) or their followers - due to stances arrived at via independent legal judgement (*ijtibād*) - it is tolerated from him alone. As for those who disagree with the three aforementioned Senior Scholars, then this is not deemed to be opposing the consensus, nor the Sunnah. All that Ishāq intended was that if they concur on a given issue, then it is most probably correct. Just like we say today that it is almost impossible to find the truth outside whatever the Four Mujtahid Imāms concurred upon. We say this whilst at the same time admitting that their agreement on a given issue does not constitute a consensus of the nation: but we are wary of asserting, in any issue upon which they

concur, that the truth is otherwise.”¹⁷

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END NOTES

1. He is the acclaimed Shafi’ite hadith master and historian, Shams al-Dīn Muhammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān - better known as al-Dhahabī. He was born in Damascus in 673H, of Turkoman origin, and died in 748H. He authored over two hundred books and monographs; some running into dozens of volumes. Among his students are Ibn Kathīr and also Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī. Al-Suyūṭī wrote about him that “Hadith scholars today, in the science of *riḥāl*; scrutinizing hadith reporters, and other hadith disciplines, are dependent upon four people: al-Mizzī, al-Dhahabī, al-‘Irāqī and Ibn Ḥajr.”

Cf. al-Subkī, *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi’iyyab*, 5:216-26; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa’l-Nibāyah*, 14:225; Ibn Ḥajr, *al-Durar al-Kāminab*, 3:426-7; al-Suyūṭī, *Tabaqāt al-Ḥuffāz*, 517.

Most citations in this series are translated from his twenty-five volume work, *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā* (Biographies of the Noble Ones). Finally, I would like to thank Abu Rumaysah for helping me to render into English some of the more difficult phrases and passages in this series.

2. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā* (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Risalah, 1998), 7:167.

3. Qur’an 2:152.

4. Qur’an 29:45.

5. Qur’an 13:28.

6. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā*, 6:369.

7. *ibid.*, 8:93-4.

8. *ibid.*, 18:191-2.

9. i.e. the Umayyad and Abbasid states.

10. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā*, 4:36.

11. Ar. *ḥanīfiyyat al-samḥab*. The term *ḥanīf* applies to one who “inclines from a false religion to the true religion;” the path of the pure monotheism of the Prophet Abraham, upon whom be peace. The phrase, *samḥab* - “ease, simplicity” - refers to the nature of this monotheistic path, which is one free of hardships or burdens. Hence the translation, “monotheistic ease”. Says the Qur’an [22:78]: *He has not laid on you any hardship in religion; the faith of your father Abraham.*

Cf. Ibn Ḥajr, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1989), 1:126; al-Asfahānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalm, 2002), 260.

12. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā*, 14:69-70.

13. Qur’an 57:4.

14. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā*, 8:402.

15. Also cf. 11:212-3.

16. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā*, 4:42.

17. *ibid.*, 7:116-7.