

The Hadith Jibril Explained, from Classical Commentaries - Sidi Shariq khan

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate

The Gabriel Hadith

The Gabriel Hadith was narrated by the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, one of the closest and most knowledgeable companions of the Prophet ﷺ. It was narrated only a few weeks before the death of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, and described by Imam Nawawi as “one of the great precepts of religion”. It reads as follows:

On the authority of Umar also, may Allah be pleased with him, who said: One day, while we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, there appeared before us a man dressed in pure white clothes and his hair was jet black. There were no signs of travel on him, yet none of us knew him. He sat in front of the Messenger ﷺ, he rested his knees against his knees, and placed his palms on his thighs, and said, “O Muhammad, inform me about Islam.” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Islam is that you testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, and you establish prayer, pay Zakat, observe the fasting of Ramadan, and perform pilgrimage to the house if you are able.” He (the questioner) said, “You have told the truth.” It amazed us that he would ask the question and then confirm the answer. He (the questioner) said, “Inform me about Iman.” He (the Prophet) replied, “That you affirm your faith in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, the Last Day, and you affirm your faith in Divine Destiny, the good of it and the evil of it.” He (the questioner) said, “You have told the truth.” He (the questioner) then said, “Inform me about Ihsan.” He (the Prophet) said, “That you worship Allah as though you see Him, though if you do not see Him, verily He sees you.” He (the questioner) then said, “Inform me about the Hour.” He (the Prophet) remarked, “The one questioned knows no more than the questioner.” He (the questioner) said, “Tell me of its signs.” He (the Prophet) said, “That the slave-girl will give birth to her master, and that you will see barefooted, destitute, goat-herdsmen vying with one another in the construction of tall buildings.” Then he (the questioner) left, and I stayed with him (the Prophet) for a while. He then said to me, “O Umar, do you know who this questioner was?” I replied, “Allah and His Messenger know best.” He (the Prophet) remarked, “He was Gabriel, he came to you to teach you your religion.”

The first question asked by Gabriel was about the nature of Islam. The Messenger responded by mentioning the five pillars of action, i.e. those five things that every able-

bodied Muslim must *do*. Therefore, Islam in this context is connected to the physical since the submission implied are actions done with one's body. By extension then, Islam here also includes laws governing other human actions, like marriage, divorce, sales, jihad, and so on.

The second question was about the nature of Iman. The Messenger replied by mentioning the six pillars of belief, i.e. those six things that every Muslim must *know*. Therefore, Iman in this context is connected to the intellectual since belief is knowing something with one's mind.

The third question was about the nature of Ihsan. The Messenger replied by describing the state one must have to worship one's Lord, i.e. the sincere state in which every Muslim must *be*. Therefore, Ihsan in this context is connected to the soul since a state, like sincerity, is something one possesses in one's heart. By extension, Ihsan also entails the inculcation of other praiseworthy states, like patience, piety and generosity, and the removal of vile states, like rashness, arrogance and miserliness.

Finally, the fourth question was about the Hour. The Hour, or time in general, ties the previous three together as it relates to how one manifests his tri-dimensional existence (body, mind and soul) in this temporal world. The above can be further understood with the help of Figure 2 below.

***** Figure not available *****

In this figure, Iman is drawn at the centre, and Islam and Ihsan on either side, as two complementary branches. This is because Iman is the prerequisite condition for the necessity of the other two. For example, prayer is not obligatory on someone who does not believe in Allah and His Messenger r. In addition, the tenants of faith remain the same from beginninglessness to eternity. That is to say, the Iman of a Muslim is identical to the Iman of all the Prophets and Messengers that were sent to the children of Adam. This is obvious from what Iman entails, i.e. belief in the very fundamentals of the reality of the Creator and His creation. The teachings of Islam and Ihsan, on the other hand, have varied depending on the people to whom they were sent, culminating in the Islam and Ihsan of the Muslims. It is also of interest to note that the stronger one's Iman is, the stronger one's Islam and Ihsan typically become.

Islam and Ihsan are considered complementary branches since they stand in somewhat opposition to one another. Islam is very quantifiable ('five' prayers, 'two and a half' percent Zakat) but Ihsan is unquantifiable (one cannot say 'three' units of sincerity, 'four' units of piety.) Islam is guidance for the seen body, whereas Ihsan is guidance for the unseen soul, both of course being temporarily conjoined in this world. It should be noted

that knowledge and practice of both Islam and Ihsan are obligatory for the believer.

In reality, only the Messenger of Allah ﷺ exemplified the totality of the above in his person without fault or blemish. With this realization, the scholars of Islam specialized in specific fields, and Allah thereby preserved and transmitted His guidance, and fulfilled His promise that, “**We shall preserve it.**” In this context, it has been stated that “division of labour is the secret to any great civilization.” Thus, with the development of various sciences the application of the primary texts was transmitted and preserved. For example, Iman was preserved in the science of Theology (Aqidah), Islam in the science of Jurisprudence (Fiqh), and Ihsan in the science of Sufism (Tasawwuf). In addition, various other ancillary sciences were developed to ensure the preservation and correct understanding of the foundational sciences mentioned above.

Thus, the Gabriel Hadith describes the perfect balance for all peoples from the advent of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ until the Day of Standing. It roots one in reality, while guiding one’s body and soul to the best of this world and the next. It should be noted, however, that this balance is not a ‘strait and narrow’, such that if one steps to either side in the slightest, one is astray. To illustrate this, one need look no further than the two closest companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and Umar ibn al-Khattab. One notices a striking contrast between these two great men, for Abu Bakr was known for his mercy and softness, whereas Umar was known for his strength and might, may Allah be well pleased with them both. This indicates, among other things, that the ‘perfect balance’ is more of a range than a narrow line. One is not required to uproot one’s personality to earn the pleasure of Allah; rather, after gaining a firm understanding of the fundamental beliefs, one must attempt to establish the few basic actions and states that should be present, and remove other actions and states that should be absent. This is how Islam guides one to peace, contentment, and tranquility in both this world and the next, while allowing one to be oneself. Truly, Allah is Most Merciful.

Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah ennoble his countenance, is reported to have said, “On either side of truth, there are two falsehoods.” The two falsehoods mentioned by Imam Ali can be seen as extremes on either side of the perfect balance described above. Recall that this balance was established by conjoining the laws of physical actions and spiritual states. The two extremes would therefore be excessive focus on physical laws, to the point of neglecting spiritual states, and excessive focus on spiritual states, to the point of neglecting physical laws. In this context, Abdullah Yusuf Ali stated in his commentary on the Quran, “...the mission of Islam is to avoid the extremes of lawlessness on the one hand and extreme formalism on the other.” The danger of these two extremes has been articulated by Imam Malik who is reported to have said, “He who practices Sufism without learning Sacred Law corrupts his faith, while he who learns Sacred Law without practising Sufism corrupts himself. Only he who combines the two proves true.” Furthermore, Imam al-Shafi’i is reported to have said, “A Jurist and a Sufi, do not be one without the other, for

the Jurist [only] has not tasted piety in his heart, and as for the Sufi [only], he is an ignorant one, and how can an ignorant one ever prosper? I am, by the right of Allah, giving you sincere advice.” Allah teaches the believers to seek protection from these two extremes with the words, **“Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not the path of those who earn Your wrath, nor those who go astray.”**

The people who earn the wrath of Allah are those who focus on the physical and neglect the spiritual. This is because laws require strength for effective enforcement, but if this enforcement is not tempered by mercy, it leads to wrath. Those who show wrath in turn earn wrath. There is a consensus that the people referred to by **“those who earn your wrath”** are the Jews, or, more generally, the Jewish archetype. Judaism focuses on laws and justice, and less on spirituality. Moses, for example, is known for the ‘Ten Commandments’. This emphasis on social justice is epitomized in the well-known Jewish ideal of ‘an eye for an eye’.

On a historical level, focus on the physical has led to a vicious oppressor-oppressed cycle. If Jews are oppressed, theoretically they must oppress others to exact justice in obedience to their ‘eye for an eye’ ideology. This behaviour is evident in the fact that the Jews, after being horrifically oppressed in Europe, have imposed the same oppression on the Palestinians. Indeed, throughout the history of the Jews, one finds that they have earned the ‘wrath’ of Allah in this manner.

The corruption of oneself Imam Malik spoken of, which results when one focuses on the physical and neglects the spiritual, is manifest by the Jewish people in their corrupt implementation of their prophetic teachings. Divine laws require a pious state in order to produce a healthy society; a society lacking this state may follow the letter of the law outwardly, but neglect the spirit of the law inwardly. Furthermore, the focus on laws can also lead to an obsession with minute details, while grossly ignoring the general aim of the divine guidance. For example, the Quran tells the story of the Jews who, after being prohibited from fishing on the Sabbath, would throw a fishing net in the water during the Sabbath, but not remove it until afterwards. Allah says:

Ask them concerning the town standing close by the sea. Behold! They transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath. For on the day of their Sabbath their fish did come to them, openly holding up their heads, but on the day they had no Sabbath, they came not: thus did We make a trial of them, for they were given to transgression.

This example demonstrates the danger of interpreting the Divine Law by those lacking piety and humility. To such people, the guidance of the Sacred becomes a light matter, something to be toyed with as one wishes, and thus loses its sacredness. In this context, it has been said that although the Jews had possessed

knowledge, they did not use it to worship Allah.

Referring back to the supplication “**Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not the path of those who earn Your wrath, nor those who go astray.**”, the people who go astray are those who focus on the spiritual and neglect the physical. Thus, they are in definitive opposition to those who earn the wrath of Allah. This is because the word used in the Arabic for those who go astray also has the meaning of those who follow their delusions. Again, there is consensus that the people referred to here are the Christians, or, the Christian archetype. Christianity focuses on the state of its followers, with less emphasis on attaining justice or enforcing laws. The life of Jesus u was very spiritual and disconnected from the world - he did not marry or live in a house, nor did he stay in one place for long. Even the sayings of Jesus u in the Islamic tradition are very spiritual. For example, Jesus u is reported to have said, “This world is a bridge, so traverse across it quickly and don’t spend time building on it.” Thus, the Christian teachings focus on instilling exalted human states on its followers, states such as love for Jesus u, compassion and tolerance for mankind. In Christianity if one proclaims his love for Jesus u, according to the Christians, his sins are forgiven.

The emphasis on perfecting one’s spiritual state is epitomized in the well-known Christian ideal of ‘whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also’, being precisely opposite to the ‘eye for an eye’ ideal of the Jews.

On a historical level, focus on the spiritual and lack of focus on what is right and wrong, has led to a corruption of the original teaching. As a result, the Christians intense love for Jesus u caused them to elevate him and equated him with Allah. In addition, as Christians encountered other faiths and ideas, there was a lack of condemnation of falsehood, resulting in an incorporation of foreign ideas into their own teaching. In this context, it has been said that the Christians worshipped, but without any knowledge, being precisely opposite to the case of the Jews who had knowledge, but didn’t use it to worship.

Islam, of course, occupies the middle ground between these two great world religions, as Allah says, “**We have appointed you a middle nation, that you may be witnesses against mankind.**” Indeed, a scale must be perfectly balanced before it can testify to the unbalance of anything else. This balance is epitomized in the words of Allah, “**We ordained therein for them: ‘Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds, equal for equal’. But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity it is an act of atonement for himself**”, a clear indication that the teaching of Islam is the middle path between the extreme justice of the Jewish teaching and the extreme mercy of the Christian teaching. This perfect balance was fittingly demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad r. Most are familiar with the oppression he and the believers faced in Mecca, without any retaliation from them. This state was similar to the Christian ideal of ‘turn the other cheek’. However, upon their migration to Medina and the

acquisition of strength and numbers, some retribution was gained in battles against their past oppressors. This state was closer to the Jewish ideal of 'an eye for an eye'. Finally, in one of the defining moments of Islam, the Messenger of Allah r returned to open Mecca and free the Kaaba of idols. When at the Kaaba, the Prophet did two things: 1) he forgave the inhabitants of the city seeking refuge in the Kaaba, thereby breaking the oppressor-oppressed cycle (something the Jews have not been able to do) and 2) he destroyed the idols in the Kaaba, thereby removing all traces of falsehood and impurity (something the Christians have not been able to do). This established the justly balanced teaching that is singularly Islam.

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