

24. Hadith Al-Rayah, A Truly Messy One

Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) states:

....قال الرافضي والرابع أنه كان أشجع الناس

والجواب أنه لا ريب أن عليا رضي الله عنه كان من شجعان الصحابة ... أما قوله إنه كان أشجع الناس فهذا كذب بل كان أشجع الناس رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم

The Rafidhi said: “The fourth (point) is that he (‘Ali) was the bravest of mankind....

The reply is that there is no doubt that ‘Ali, may Allah be pleased with him, was one of the brave ones among the Sahabah ... As for his statement that he (‘Ali) was the bravest of mankind, that is a lie. Rather, the bravest of mankind was the Messenger of Allah.¹

Our dear Shaykh has removed the words of the Shi’i scholar from its proper context. The style of expression adopted by the latter was very common in Arabic texts, and the word “mankind” in it *always* excluded the Prophet, *sallallahu ‘alaihi wa alihi!* In other words, when the Shi’i scholar mentioned “the bravest of mankind”, the phrase “*after* the Messenger of Allah” is automatically implied. Similar expressions can be found in these words of Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas, a very senior Sahabi, as documented by Imam al-Hakim (d. 403 H):

يا هذا على ما تشتم علي بن أبي طالب ألم يكن أول من أسلم ألم يكن أول من صلى مع رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ألم يكن ازهد الناس ألم يكن أعلم الناس؟

“O you! On what basis do you curse ‘Ali b. Abi Talib? Is he not the first to accept Islam? Is he not the first to perform *Salat* with the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him? **Is he not the most ascetic of mankind? Is he not the most knowledgeable of mankind?**”²

Al-Hakim declares:

هذا حديث صحيح الإسناد

This *hadith* has a *sahih* chain.[3](#)

Al-Dhahabi (d. 748 H) confirms:

على شرط البخاري ومسلم

(*Sahih*) upon the standard of al-Bukhari and Muslim[4](#)

Will our dear Shaykh accuse this noble Sahabi of telling lies? Anyway, the Shaykh himself makes absolutely no attempt to claim Abu Bakr or ‘Umar was braver than Amir al-Muminin, ‘*alaihi al-salam*, in physical battle. Rather, he re-defines the word “bravery”, and then plays a new card:

والشجاعة تفسر بشيئين أحدهما قوة القلب وثباته عند المخاوف والثاني شدة القتال بالبدن بأن يقتل كثيرا ويقتل قتلا عظيما والأول هو الشجاعة وأما الثاني فيدل على قوة البدن وعمله وليس كل من كان قوي البدن كان قوي القلب ولا بالعكس

And “bravery” is explained with two things. **One of them is strength of the heart, and its firmness in the face of fear.** The second is great strength in physical fighting, to kill a lot of people. **Only the first is bravery.** As for the second, it (only) proves physical strength. And, not everyone who is physically strong has a strong heart, and not vice versa.[5](#)

So, “bravery” is only to have a fearless heart. Whether this translates into action on the battlefield or not is irrelevant. Rather, the warrior who firmly faces multiple enemy fighters in battle, and kills them is not brave at all. He is only “physically strong”. Our Shaykh justifies his new definition in this manner:

والنبي صلى الله عليه و سلم كان أكمل الناس في هذه الشجاعة التي هي المقصودة في أئمة الحرب ولم يقتل بيده إلا أبي بن خلف قتله يوم أحد ولم يقتل بيده أحدا لا قبلها ولا بعدها وكان أشجع من جميع الصحابة

The Prophet, peace be upon him, was the most perfect of mankind in this type of bravery (i.e. of the heart) which was what was expected in the war commanders. He never killed anyone with his hand except Ubayy b. Khalaf. He killed him on the Day of Uhud, and never killed anyone else before or after them. Yet, he was braver than all the Sahabah.[6](#)

This analogy does not work in the cases of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman though. The Messenger of

Allah was the ruler of Arabia at that time. Heads of state are not expected *anywhere* to participate in battle like foot soldiers. Rather, they are to be shielded from the enemy as much as possible. As for Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, they were ordinary soldiers. Therefore, they had every obligation and chance to participate in multiple combats with enemy fighters. But what happened?

Obviously, since Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah's new definition is hinged upon the roles of the Prophet in battle, it is inapplicable in the cases of anyone who was not the head of state at the times of the battles.

Moreover, one honestly wonders about the logic of the Shaykh's separation of fearlessness of the heart from battle valour. Can a person with a timid heart willfully confront fully armed, firmly determined, well-trained and highly experienced enemy fighters, in *mortal* combats, in battle?

But then, what exactly does Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah want us to pick from his incongruous definition? He minces no words about it:

وإذا كانت الشجاعة المطلوبة من الأئمة بشجاعة القلب فلا ريب أن أبا بكر كان أشجع من عمر وعمر أشجع من عثمان وعلي

Since the type of bravery that is required from the rulers is the bravery of the heart, then there is no doubt that Abu Bakr was braver than 'Umar, and 'Umar was braver than 'Uthman and 'Ali.⁷

Strange indeed! Were Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman rulers during the lifetime of the Prophet?! In any case, there is an implicit admission in these wild gymnastics of our dear Shaykh that the trio were no match at all for Amir al-Muminin in terms of physical strength and battle successes. However, he *must* nonetheless place them above him at any cost. Therefore, he lumps things up and tables patently desperate excuses. He also apparently assumes – contrary to logic – that the heroic achievements of 'Ali in battle required less courage than the trio's relative battle redundancy!

Then comes the big question, and Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah makes another attempt:

وأما قوله ما انهزم قط فهو في ذلك كأبي بكر وعمر وطلحة والزبير وغيرهم من الصحابة رضي الله عنهم فالقول في أنه ما انهزم كالقول في أن هؤلاء ما انهزموا قط ولم يعرف لأحد من هؤلاء هزيمة وإن كان قد وقع شيء في الباطن ولم ينقل فيمكن أن عليا وقع منه ما لم ينقل والمسلمون كانت لهم هزيمتان يوم أحد ويوم حنين ولم ينقل أن أحدا من هؤلاء انهزم بل المذكور في السير والمغازي أن أبا بكر وعمر ثبتا مع النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يوم أحد ويوم حنين ولم ينهزما مع من انهزم ومن نقل أنهما انهزما يوم حنين فكذبه معلوم وإنما الذي انهزم يوم أحد عثمان وقد عفا الله عنه وما نقل من انهزام أبي بكر وعمر بالرأية يوم حنين فمن الأكاذيب المختلفة التي افتراها المفترون

As for his (i.e. the Shi'i scholar's) statement that he ('Ali) NEVER fled (the battlefield), then he was, in this (merit), like Abu Bakr, 'Umar, Talhah, al-Zubayr and others among the Sahabah, may Allah be pleased with them. The statement that he ('Ali) never fled away is like the statement that these people

too never fled away. It is not known that any of them ever fled away. And if something had happened (from them) in secret which has not been reported, it is possible that something happened from ‘Ali too which has not been reported.

The Muslims fled away the battlefield twice – on the Day of Uhud and on the Day of Hunayn and it is not reported that anyone of these people fled away. What is mentioned in the *Sirah* (i.e. biography of the Prophet) and *al-Maghazi* (i.e. reports of battles) books is that Abu Bakr and ‘Umar stood firmly with the Prophet, peace be upon him, on the Day of Uhud and on the Day of Hunayn and did not flee away with those who fled away.

Whoever reported that they both fled away on the Day of Hunayn, his lie is obvious. **The only one (of them) who fled away on the Day of Uhud was ‘Uthman**, and Allah has forgiven him. As for what is reported concerning the flight of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar with the flag on the Day of Hunayn, it is one of the fabrications which the forgers forged.⁸

The Shaykh agrees that Amir al-Muminin never fled the battlefield, no matter how hopeless things became. This is very crucial in determining who was brave and who was cowardly. There is no doubt that anyone who flees the battlefield is a coward. Interestingly, our Shaykh confesses that ‘Uthman was a coward who fled away on the Day of Uhud. No wonder, he never attempts anywhere to claim that ‘Uthman was braver than ‘Ali. But then, he argues that Abu Bakr and ‘Umar too, like ‘Ali, never fled away. Apparently, if he ever admits that either of the duo was a coward who fled away, his entire argument crashes. One fact, however, remains undeniable. There are reports indicating that both Abu Bakr and ‘Umar fled the battlefields. Our Shaykh instinctively throws them out as fabrications. He also seeks to counter such reports with what is “mentioned” – with no proof of authenticity – in the history books. A fair researcher, of course, would like to examine these “forged” reports alleging Abu Bakr’s and ‘Umar’s cowardice, to determine the truth of the matter by himself.

Well, according to an authentic report, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman fled the battlefields repeatedly on different occasions. It did not happen once, twice or thrice. Rather, on several occasions of battle, the trio fled away, as documented by Imam Muslim (d. 261 H):

حدثنا محمد بن أبي بكر المقدمي وحامد بن عمر البكرائي ومحمد بن عبد الأعلى قالوا حدثنا المعتمر (وهو ابن سليمان) قال سمعت أبي عن أبي عثمان قال لم يبق مع رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم في بعض تلك الأيام التي قاتل فيهن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم غير طلحة وسعد عن حديثهما

Muhammad b. Abi Bakr al-Muqaddami, Hamid b. ‘Umar al-Bakrawi and Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-A’la – al-Mu’tamar (and he is Ibn Sulayman) – father – Abu ‘Uthman:

“**None remained** with the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, **on some of the DAYS** in which the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, was fighting **apart from Talhah and Sa’d**. They both (i.e.

Talhah and Sa'd) narrated that to me.”[9](#)

On the days of the successive battles, everyone else used to flee – apparently including Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman – except Talhah and Sa’d.

Among such days, the Day of Uhud (3 AH) readily comes to mind. The most notorious runner on that day was ‘Uthman. Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah himself admits this. Nonetheless, this is an explicit *hadith* from *Sahih al-Bukhari* confirming his flight:

حدثنا موسى بن إسماعيل حدثنا أبو عوانة حدثنا عثمان هو ابن موهب قال: جاء رجل من أهل مصر وحج البيت فرأى قوما جلوسا فقال من هؤلاء القوم؟ فقالوا هؤلاء قريش قال فمن الشيخ فيهم؟ قالوا عبد الله بن عمر قال يا ابن عمر إني سألتك عن شيء فحدثني هل تعلم أن عثمان فر يوم أحد؟ قال نعم .

Musa b. Isma'il – Abu ‘Awanah – ‘Uthman b. Muhib:

An Egyptian man came and performed the *Hajj* to the House. So, he saw some people sitting, and asked, “Who are these people?” They said, “They are the tribe of Quraysh.” He said, “Who is the old man amongst them?” They replied, “He is ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar.” He said, “O Ibn Umar! I want to ask you about something; please tell me about it. **Do you know that ‘Uthman fled away on the Day of Uhud?**” Ibn ‘Umar said, "**Yes.**"[10](#)

Referring to this ugly incident, Allah states:

إذ تصعدون ولا تلوون على أحد والرسول يدعوكم في أخراكم فأثابكم غما بغم لكيلا تحزنوا على ما فاتكم ولا ما أصابكم والله خبير بما تعملون

(And remember) when you ran away (dreadfully) without even casting a side glance at anyone, and the Messenger was in your rear calling you back.[11](#)

The Prophet was calling ‘Uthman while he was fleeing away. He heard him, but did not even cast a side glance at anyone, not even at Muhammad! He was completely frightened, and sought to run away from the Messenger of Allah as quickly as they could, in order to save his own life. It was indeed a great flight, and a great tragedy!

On the Day of Hunayn (8 AH) too, the Sahabah fled away again! This is referred to by Allah in His Book:

لقد نصركم الله في مواطن كثيرة ويوم حنين إذ أعجبتكم كثرتكم فلم تغن عنكم شيئا وضاقت عليكم الأرض بما رحبت ثم وليتم مدبرين

Truly, Allah has helped you on many battlefields, **and on the Day of Hunayn** when you rejoiced at your great number but it availed you naught and the earth, as vast as it is, was straitened for you. **Then you fled away.** [12](#)

The statement is general. Therefore, everyone fled except whoever there is concrete evidence clearing him. ‘Umar, in particular, was one of the runners on that day. Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256 H) records:

وقال الليث حدثني يحيى بن سعيد عن عمر بن كثير بن أفلح عن أبي محمد مولى أبي قتادة أن أبا قتادة قال لما كان حين نظرت إلى رجل من المسلمين يقاتل رجلا من المشركين وآخر من المشركين يختله من ورائه ليقتله فأسرعت إلى الذي يختله فرفع يده ليضربني وأضرب يده فقطعتها ثم أخذني فضمني ضما شديدا حتى تخوفت ثم ترك فتحلل ودفعته ثم قتله وانهزم المسلمون وانهزمت معهم فإذا بعمر بن الخطاب في الناس فقلت له ما شأن الناس؟ قال أمر الله ثم تراجع الناس إلى رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم

Al-Layth – Yahya b. Sa’id – ‘Umar b. Kathir b. Aflah – Abu Muhammad, freed slave of Abu Qatadah – Abu Qatadah:

On the Day of Hunayn, I saw a Muslim fighting with one of the pagans and another pagan was hiding himself behind the Muslim in order to kill him. So I hurried towards the pagan who was hiding behind the Muslim to kill him, and he raised his hand to hit me but I hit his hand and cut it off.

That man got hold of me and pressed me so hard that I was afraid, then I knelt down and his grip became loose and I pushed him and killed him. **The Muslims fled, and I too fled WITH THEM.**

Suddenly, I met ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb AMONGST THE PEOPLE and I asked him, “What is wrong with THE PEOPLE?” He said, “It is the Command of Allah.” Then THE PEOPLE returned to the Messenger of Allah. [13](#)

Abu Qatadah referred to those Sahabah who fled away as “the people”. They fled but later returned to the Messenger at the battlefield. The interesting part is that while Abu Qatadah himself was fleeing away “with them”, he met ‘Umar “amongst the people”! In other words, ‘Umar too was fleeing away with the people! He was “amongst” the people speeding off the battle ground. If the second *khalifah* had stayed with the Messenger of Allah, Abu Qatadah – who had run away from the Prophet – would never had met ‘Umar “amongst the people”!

A rather unfortunate turn was ‘Umar’s attempted justification of the Sahabah’s run from the battlefield. He claimed that those Sahabah – including himself – were obeying “the command” of Allah. We searched the Qur’an and *ahadith* to locate this “command”. But, we came up with nothing like it. Rather, this is what we read:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا إذا لقيتم الذين كفروا زحفا فلا تولوهم الأدبار ومن يولهم يومئذ دبره إلا متحرفا لقتال أو متحيزا إلى فئة فقد باء بغضب من الله ومأواه جهنم وبئس المصير

O you who believe! When you meet those who disbelieve, in a battlefield, **never flee from them**. And whoever flees away on such a day – unless it be a stratagem of war, or to retreat to a troop, – he indeed has drawn upon himself Wrath from Allah. **And his abode is Hellfire**, and worse indeed is that destination! [14](#)

Does it really look like the Sahabah were obeying Allah with their great flight? We do not think so.

- [1.](#) Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-Halim b. Taymiyyah al-Harrani, Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah (Muassasat Qurtubah; 1st edition, 1406 H) [annotator: Dr. Muhammad Rashad Salim], vol. 8, pp. 75–76
- [2.](#) Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah al-Hakim al-Naysaburi, al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-‘ahihayn (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah; 1st edition, 1411 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 3, p. 571, # 6121
- [3.](#) Ibid
- [4.](#) Ibid
- [5.](#) Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-Halim b. Taymiyyah al-Harrani, Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah (Muassasat Qurtubah; 1st edition, 1406 H) [annotator: Dr. Muhammad Rashad Salim], vol. 8, p. 77
- [6.](#) Ibid, vol. 8, p. 78
- [7.](#) Ibid, vol. 8, p. 79
- [8.](#) Ibid, vol. 8, p. 91
- [9.](#) Abu al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi, ‘ahih Muslim (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-‘Arabi) [annotator: Muhammad Fuad ‘Abd al-Baqi], vol. 4, p. 1879, # 2414 (47)
- [10.](#) Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma’il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-J’ufi, al-Jami’ al-‘ahih al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha], vol. 3, p. 1352, # 3495
- [11.](#) Qur’an 3:153
- [12.](#) Qur’an 9:25
- [13.](#) Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma’il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-J’ufi, al-Jami’ al-‘ahih al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha], vol. 4, p. 1570, # 4067
- [14.](#) Qur’an 8:15–16

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