



IN DEFENSE OF IMĀM AL-BARBAHĀRĪ

An analysis of the defamation circulated against this
illustrious scholar by the orientalist and the people
of innovation



Hassan Somali
Imam of Germantown Masjid, Philadelphia



In the Name of Allāh, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

In Defense of Imām al-Barbahārī (d. 329H)¹

In preparation for my class on *Sharḥ al-Sunnah* I came across a number of derogatory remarks directed towards the noble Imām, Abū Muḥammad al-Barbahārī (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ). After a small amount of research, I discovered that this sentiment is prevalent among many Western academics. So I decided to briefly address these issues in defense of the honor of this Imām and to analyze the validity of these claims and their truthfulness.

The Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

"مَنْ رَدَّ عَنْ عِرْضِ أَخِيهِ ، رَدَّ اللَّهُ عَنْ وَجْهِهِ النَّارَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ."

“Whoever defends the honor of his brother, then Allāh will protect his face from the fire on the day of Resurrection.”²

I have divided these spurious claims into three categories:

1. That which was mentioned as a disparagement but is actually considered to be praiseworthy and not blameworthy at all.

¹ He is the Imām, Abū Muḥammad, Al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Khalaf al-Barbahārī. He was born in the year 252H and died 329H. Al-Sam‘ānī mentioned in *al-Ansāb* (1/307) that the word Barbahārī is an ascription to Barbahār, which is a herbal medicine imported from India. His biography can be found in *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā* (24/258-260) of al-Dhahabī.

² Tirmidhī (no. 1931) and others. Shaykh Albānī declared it to be authentic in *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (no. 1931).

2. That which contradicts what Imām Barbahārī stated himself in his own works.
3. That which opposes what the reliable and credible Muslim historians have stated.

1. That which is actually praiseworthy to the discerning eye

Joseph Norment Bell (1979, p. 49) said:

“Now the *Kitab al-Sunna* of al-Barbahari was in part intended to furnish the unsophisticated majority among the followers of Ibn Hanbal with rules of thumb for identifying heretics.”³

Joseph Norment insinuates that the book *Sharḥ al-Sunnah* was unsophisticated and he explicitly accused the majority of the students of Imām al-Barbahārī of being simpletons.

- I. A similar accusation was made against the believers at the time of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) by the hypocrites:

﴿ وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا كَمَا ءَامَنَ النَّاسُ قَالُوا أَنُؤْمِنُ كَمَا ءَامَنَ السُّفَهَاءُ أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ

هُمُ السُّفَهَاءُ وَلَكِن لَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

“And when it is said to them, ‘Believe as the people have believed,’ they say, ‘Should we believe as the foolish have believed?’ Unquestionably, it is they who are the foolish, but they know [it] not.” [Al-Baqarah: 13]

³ Joseph Norment Bell. 1979. *Love theory in later Hanbalite Islam*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- II. Intelligence and sophistication that does not lead one to faith and compliance to the divine revelation is considered blameworthy, not praiseworthy. Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymīyah (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) said concerning this:

وقد يكون الرجل من أذكىء الناس وأحدهم نظراً ويعميه الله عز وجل عن أظهر الأشياء . وقد يكون من أبلد الناس وأضعفهم نظراً ويهديه لما اختلف فيه من الحق ياذنه . فلا حول ولا قوة إلا به ، فمن اتكل على نظره ، واستدلأه ، أو عقله ، ومعرفته خُذَل ، ولهذا كان النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم كثيراً ما يقول: «يا مقلب القلوب ثبت قلبي على دينك

“A man may be [considered] to be from the most intelligent of the people and the sharpest of them in terms of perception, and Allāh blinds him from the most obvious of matters; and a person may be from the most unintelligent of the people and the weakest of them in terms of perception and Allāh, by His Will, may guide him to the truth of that which they differ. None has the might nor power except Allāh. Whoever solely relies upon his perception, reasoning, intelligence and understanding, will be forsaken. That is why the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) would frequently say: ‘O changer of hearts, make my heart firm upon your religion.’”⁴

Al-Dhahabī said:

لعن الله الذكاء بلا إيمان ، ورضي الله عن البلادة مع التقوى

⁴ Dar’ Ta’ārud al-‘Aql Wa al-Naql (9/34).

“May Allāh curse intelligence without faith; and may He be pleased with simplicity with piety.”⁵

- III. When you understand what the orientalists deem to be intelligence then your amazement at these allegations will cease.

Michael A. Cook et al. (2011, p. 261) said:

“Ibn Qudāmah’s and al-Barbahārī’s statements indicate that the Ḥanbalīs stood apart from many other Muslim thinkers in that they viewed *ta’wīl* as illegitimate and integrated this attitude into their legal thinking as a moral liability rather than a moral asset.”⁶

Thus, they consider speculative theology and arbitrary figurative reading of the texts, explaining them contrary to their apparent meanings—even if this pertains to the Names and Attributes of Allāh—to be enlightenment, and adherence to the Qur’ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) to be retrogression.

In addition to the above example, the censure voiced against Barbahārī due to him thwarting the spread of the Mu’tazilah and other deviant sects can also be included in this category.

⁵ *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā* (14/62).

⁶ Cook, M.A. et al. 2011. *The Islamic Scholarly Tradition: Studies in History, Law, and Thought*. Leiden: Brill.

2. That which opposes what Imām al-Barbahārī has stated in his own works

GF Haddad, an infamous Sufi and self-proclaimed disciple of Nazim al-Qubrusī⁷, wrote:

“The worst controversy attached to al-Barbahārī and his group by far was their anthropomorphist⁸ teaching on the bases [sic] of weak narrations attributing limbs to Allāh. Ibn al-Athīr relates the Caliph al-Rāḍī’s edict against the Ḥanbalīs in the year 323.”⁹

The accusation of anthropomorphism [*Tashbīh*] is a blatant lie, as Imām al-Barbahārī said in *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*:

“May Allāh have mercy upon you! Know that speculative speech about the Lord, the Most High, is a newly invented matter and is an innovation and misguidance. Nothing is to be said about the Lord except what He, the Mighty and

⁷ Nazim al-Qubrusī, the spiritual leader of GF Haddad, claimed in a recorded sitting that the pen is lifted from him and that Allāh gave him permission to revile the Salafīs and so-called Wahhabīs. How can we accept anything from a group of individuals who claim that they have been given divine permission to insult and curse their adversaries?

SunniPureIslam (2011) *Nazim Haqqani Al Naqshbandi no longer accountable to Allah*. Available at: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=aJWGZAoymzA> [Accessed: 3 February 2016].

⁸ Ibn Mubārak stated “If a person says to you, ‘O *Mushabbih*,’ then know that he is a *Jahmī*.” *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā* (5/393)

⁹ Haddad, G.F. 2002. *Some of the Contemporaries and Colleagues of Imām Aḥmad* [Online]. Available at: https://www.abc.se/home/m9783/ir/d/ccia_e.pdf [Accessed: 3 February 2016].

Majestic, described Himself with in the Qur’ān and what the Messenger of Allāh (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) explained to his Companions. So, He, the Mighty, is One: "There is nothing like Him and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing."¹⁰

And he said:

“No one says about the attributes of the Lord, the Most High, 'Why?' except one who doubts about Allāh, the Blessed and Most High.”¹¹

The Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

لَوْ يُعْطَى النَّاسُ بِدَعْوَاهُمْ لَادَّعَى نَاسٌ دِمَاءَ رِجَالٍ ، وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ

“If people were given according to their claims, then people would claim the wealth and blood of men.”¹²

Another accusation that the orientalist and the people of innovation labeled against Barbahārī was that he was an anarchical agitator, leading a mob of vigilantes who went around meting out punishments to the sinners and heretics without recognition of the jurisdiction of the rulers or the rule of law. Yet again this opposes what this Imām stated in his own words, because recognition of the jurisdiction of the Muslim leaders and the obligation to refer such matters to them is

¹⁰ *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*, p. 31-32. Translation of our noble brother, Abū Ṭalḥah (رَحِمَهُ اللهُ).

¹¹ *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*, p. 32.

¹² Bukhārī (4522) and Muslim (no. 3234). The wording is that of Muslim.

recorded and stressed in *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*. This allegation could also be included in the third category from the perspective that Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr attributed this type of behavior to a body of zealous commoners, who lived during that time, and not to any of the scholars of the Sunnah.¹³

3. That which opposes what the reliable and credible Muslim historians have stated

Zoltan Szombathy (2013) said:

“One of the most repulsive historical characters of the Buyid period, a certain Hanbalite zealot called al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941).”¹⁴

Michael Cook (2003, p. 103) said:

“In early tenth century Baghdad, the Ḥanbalite Barbahārī was manifestly a demagogue¹⁵.”¹⁶

The historian Ibn al-Athīr in his book *al-Kāmil Fī al-Tarīkh* also transmits some dubious allegations, which many of the orientalist and people of innovation have just parroted, but this appears to be a result of his aversion towards *Ahl al-Sunnah*

¹³ Bidāyah (11/157).

¹⁴ Szombathy, Z. 2013. *Libertinism in medieval Muslim society and literature*. London: Gibb Memorial Trust.

¹⁵ Defined in the Oxford dictionary as: A political leader who seeks support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than by using rational argument.

¹⁶ Cook, M. A. 2003. *Forbidding wrong in Islam: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and him opposing them as it pertains to certain creedal issues. An indication that Ibn Athīr might have been prejudiced on account of some of his own beliefs is that his brother is known to also have Ash‘arī inclinations and Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī criticized him¹⁷ due to his figurative interpretation of some of the attributes of Allāh in his book *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*.

﴿ لَقَدْ كَانَتْ فِي قَصَصِهِمْ عِبْرَةٌ لِأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ مَا كَانَ حَدِيثًا يُفْتَرَى وَلَكِنْ تَصْدِيقَ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَتَفْصِيلَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴾

“Indeed in their stories, there is a lesson for men of understanding. It (the Quran) is not a forged statement but a confirmation of Allāh’s existing Books [the Taurāh (Torah), the Injīl (Gospel) and other Scriptures of Allāh] and a detailed explanation of everything and a guide and a Mercy for the people who believe.”

It is clear that some human historical accounts are fabricated and invented, and there are methodical guidelines to identify when this occurs.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī said:

“I used to believe that Ibn al-Athīr was Salafī in matters of creed and far from *Ta’ṭīl* (denial of the attributes of Allāh) and *Tajahhum* (the way of the Jahmīyah), as I saw the later scholars who were engaged [in authorship] quote from his book *Sharḥ Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*. However, when I saw his explanations of the beautiful names of Allāh, I found him to be from the wretched Jahmīyah, who deny [the Attributes of Allāh].” *Sabīl al-Rashād* (6/269)

An important stipulation is that the historian must be known for his integrity and not allow his religious or political orientation to cause him to lie or be unjust. That is why Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymīyah said:

كانت شهادتهم مقبولة على سائر فرق الأمة بخلاف أهل البدع والأهواء،
كالخوارج والروافض، فإن بينهم من العداوة والظلم

“That is why the testimony of Ahl al-Sunnah upon the other sects of this nation is acceptable, in opposition to the people of innovation and desires like the Khawārij and the Rāfiḍah, because with them is oppression and transgression.”¹⁸

Abū Muḥammad Ibn Ḥazm said:

فاعلموا ان تقويل القائل كافرا كان أو مبتدعا أو مخطئا مالا يقوله نسا كذب
عليه ولا يحل الكذب على أحد

“Know, that falsely attributing a statement to anyone whether it be a non-Muslim, an innovator or someone in error, which he did not explicitly say, is a lie upon him; and it is not allowed to lie on anybody.”¹⁹

Therefore, these reckless remarks and questionable occurrences are unacceptable and to be rejected outright, as they contradict the version of events documented by credible Islamic historians such as Ibn Kathīr, al-Dhahabī and others.

¹⁸ *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwá* (15/298).

¹⁹ *Al-Faṣl Fī al-Milal* (5/33).

Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr said, when talking about Imām Barbahārī:

العالم الزاهد الفقيه الحنبلي الواعظ... وكان شديدا على أهل البدع والمعاصي ،
وكان كبير القدر عند الخاصة والعامّة

“The scholar, the abstainer, the Ḥanbalī jurist, the admonisher...He was stern against the people of innovation; and he was held in high regard by the elite and the masses.”²⁰

The renowned scholar and historian, Ibn Kathīr has nothing but praise for Imām Barbahārī. He acknowledged his virtue and considered his efforts in exposing the heretics of his era a commendable act.

Conclusion

Imām al-Barbahārī was upon the methodology and creed of Imām Aḥmad and the other Imams of the Salaf, which is based upon the Qur’ān and Sunnah. This is the sole reason that a number of Western academics and innovators attempt to vilify al-Barbahārī and the Ḥanbalīs in general.

It should be noted that we do not claim infallibility for our scholars, but as Imam al-Ṭahāwī stated:

وعلماء السلف من السابقين، ومن بعدهم من التابعين – أهل الخير والأثر، وأهل
الفقه والنظر – لا يذكرون إلا بالجميل، ومن ذكرهم بسوء، فهو على غير السبيل

“And the early scholars from the first generations and their successors, the people of good and [those who adhere to] the narrations, and the people of understanding and discernment,

²⁰ *Al-Bidāyah Wa al-Nihāyah* (15/137).

are only to be mentioned with good [words]. Whoever speaks ill of them is not on the correct path.”²¹

Furthermore, if someone makes a claim, then they must substantiate it with solid evidence, and not rely upon hearsay.

May Allāh have mercy upon this noble Imām and all of the scholars of the Sunnah, and may He bless us to walk upon their path and to die upon Islām and the Sunnah.

Hassan Somali 2/3/2016

²¹ ‘*Aqīdah al-Ṭahawīyah* (p. 30).