

The Burdah Sharīf

1.0. What is it?

The Qasīdah Burdah Sharīf is a famous poem written by Imam Sharf al-Dīn Abū Abd Allāh al-Busīrī (608-695 AH), in praise of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). Regarding its superiority and acceptance, it is sufficient to say that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) himself heard it and gave it his seal of approval.

It comes to no surprise that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) showed his overwhelming approval of his ode. The poem is brimmed with sincerity, unparalleled devotion and ecstatic love for the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). Even seven hundred years after it was written, the poem still retains its popularity among Muslims, who by reading it, re-kindle their flame of *Īmān* and strengthen their allegiance to the beloved Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

The official name of this poem is *al-Kawākib al-Durriya fī Madh Khayr al-Bariyya*, (the Celestial Lights in praise of the Best of Creations). It is also called Qasīdah Mīmiyya (because all the verses end with the letter Mīm). However, it is more famously known as the Burdah Sharīf.

2.0. Who wrote it? A brief biography of Imam Busīrī.

Shaykh Sharf al-Dīn Abū Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn Sa'īd was born on the first of Shawwāl in 608 A.H./7th March 1213 in the Egyptian village of Dulās. He belonged to the tribe of Sanhāja and this is why some Muslims call him Sanhājī. However, he is more famously known as Busīrī, in reference to where he lived most of his life.

He finished the memorisation of the Holy Qur'ān at the age of thirteen. He spent his youth pursuing Islamic education in Cairo and reports say he became proficient in *Ilm al-Hadīth*, *Sīrah*, *Maghāzī* and *Ilm al-Kalām*. In particular, he became an expert in Arabic literature and most of his works were on this.¹ As a result of this proficiency, a large part of his life was spent as a poet laureate for kings and sultans in the Mamlūk period, as well as a copyist and calligrapher.

Imam Busīrī was a pious Sufi too. In *Tasawwuf*, he became a disciple of Abū al-Abbās Ahmad al-Mursī (d. 686/1287) and took the inner teachings of Islam from him. He joined the Shādhli order (al-Mursī was a disciple of Abū Hasan al-Shādhli) in Alexandria. Imam Busīrī also wrote poems in praise of al-Mursī and Abū Hasan al-Shādhli.

¹ p.8. *Tiyb al-Warda Sharh Qasīdah Burdah*. Allama Abū al-Hasanat Muhammad Ahmad Qadiri.

One day, he was walking back from the Sultan's court when an Islamic scholar asked if he had ever seen the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in his dream. Imam Busīrī replied that he hadn't. But the question did spark a real desire to meet him. That very night, Imam Busīrī saw the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and his Companions in his dream. When he woke, his love for the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) reached fever pitch and he began writing poetry in praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).²

He journeyed to Makka to perform the Hajj in 653/1255 and then fulfilled his lifelong desire to meet his master, Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in al-Madīna al-Munawwara. Late on in his life, he spent ten years in worship at Bayt al-Maqdis, Jerusalem.

3.0. The Burdah and how it came about

Imam Busīrī suffered from a stroke. So he decided to write a poem in praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) as a means of *Shifā* (cure). Shortly after he finished it, one night the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) appeared in his dream and Imam Busīrī recited this poem to him. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) gave him a garment (*Burdah*) and prayed for him. When he woke the next morning, Imam Busīrī was miraculously cured from his illness. This is why the poem is famously called the Burdah Sharīf; Burdah means cloak.

That same morning Imam Busīrī met Shaykh Abū al-Rajā al-Siddiq, who was considered the *Qutb* (Spiritual Pole) of his time. He said to him, 'O Imam Busīrī! I would like to hear the poem you read and devoted to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him)'. Imam Busīrī became confused as he had not read this poem to anyone else but the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in his dream. So he asked him which poem? The man replied 'the one you devoted and read to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) last night and starts '*A min Tuzakkiru Jīrānin...*' He explained to Imam Busīrī that he too heard that poem the previous night as he recited in the presence of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

Thereafter, Imam Busīrī's story became famous and eventually reached Bahā al-Dīn (d. 677), who was the vizier of King Tāhir. He sent for the poet and requested for it to be recited in his presence.

Sa'd al-Dīn Farīq (d. 691 A.H.), the seal keeper of the minister, suffered from an eye illness that threatened his sight. In a dream, he saw someone instructing him

² p.22. *Tiyb al-Warda Sharh Qasīdah Burdah*. Allama Abū al-Hasanat Muhammad Ahmad Qadiri. Many observers say that it was his illness that led him to write poems in praise of the Prophet (peace be upon him). This is not the case. The above story is one factor, as well as the influence of al-Mursi and his journey to Hajj.

to go Bahā al-Dīn and request him to place the sacred Burdah on his eyes for cure. Bahā al-Dīn informed him that he had many sacred relics of the Prophet, but there was no Burdah. But then he realised that the Burdah referred to the poem of Imam Busīrī. So the manuscript of the poem was placed on his eyes and he found cure from this.

4.0. The Burdah's acceptance.

From then on, this Qasīdah has become famous all over the world and is known for the blessings it provides for the reciter. The poem has been memorised and recited for centuries. Until recently, the verses adorned al-Masjid al-Nabawī. One verse is still to be found written on the ancient key leading to the Sacred Chamber of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

Allāma Mustafā ibn Abd Allāh (Hājī Khalīfa) notes that in the Arabic language alone, forty commentaries have been written on the Qasīdah Burdah Sharīf. In addition, it has been translated into Latin, German, French, English, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Punjabi.³ One of the earliest commentaries was by Muhammad ibn Abd Allāh al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392). Another important commentary was written by Zakariyya al-Ansārī (d. 926/1520), a student of Ibn Hajar. He was the chief Shāfi'ī judge in Qatybay (Egypt) and was considered as some as the *Mujaddid* of the ninth Islamic century. Ibn Hajar al-Haythamī (d. 974/1567) also wrote a commentary on the Burdah.

His mausoleum (Mizār Sharīf) is in Alexandria, Egypt, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

5.0. Why a Burdah?

This is not the first time the Prophet (peace be upon him) gave a Burdah to an individual who recited poetry in his presence. Ka'b ibn Zuhayr was a famous poet who in his early life directed his poetry against Islam and the Prophet (peace be upon him). The Muslims in al-Madīna learned about this and thus considered him as a clear enemy of Islam. After the conquest of Makka, he presented himself to the Prophet (peace be upon him). He sat down and did not at first inform the Messenger that he was Ka'b. He asked, 'O Messenger of Allāh! If I was to bring to you Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, repenting and submitting to Islam, would you accept him?' The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied 'yes.' He then said, 'I am Ka'b.' Many Muslims wanted to behead him when they learnt who he was, but the Prophet stopped them. Then Ka'b read a poem of praise. The Prophet loved the poem and gave him his cloak as a gift. Ka'b kept this Burdah throughout his life. Sayyiduna Mu'āwiyah (may Allāh be pleased with him) purchased the cloak from his descendants.

³ p.10. *Tiyb al-Warda Sharh Qasīdah Burdah*. Allama Abū al-Hasanat Muhammad Ahmad Qadiri.

6.0. Outline of the contents.

The poem consists of ten chapters and 162 verses on various aspects of the Prophet's (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) life, ranging from his birth, to the Mi'rāj, the praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and on Jihad:

- i. On yearning to see the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him)
- ii. On warning of the dangers of the self.
- iii. On the praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- iv. On his birth.
- v. On his miracles.
- vi. On the Qur'ān.
- vii. Mi'rāj al-Nabī (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- viii. On the struggle/Jihad of Allāh's Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- ix. On seeking forgiveness and intercession through the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- x. On petition of one's state.

7.0. A brief commentary on three verses.

7.1.

**'Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the sovereign of both this world and the hereafter, and the leader of all men and jinns'
'He is [also] leader of Arabs and non-Arabs'**

Commentary.

Being the last prophet, the prophet for the whole of mankind and having been sent with the ever-lasting miracle of the Qur'ān, it is an indisputable fact that our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the greatest of Allāh's creation. This couplet is merely reflecting and highlighting this fact.

Nobility and respect can stem from two sources; attributes which a person is born with, and attributes which he acquires throughout his life. On both accounts, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) possesses features that indeed reflect his superiority over all beings.

As for attributes ascribed from birth, Allāh ensured that all His prophets and messengers came from respectable and established backgrounds. This is so the enemies of Islam could not accuse him of claiming to be a prophet to enhance his social status. In the Qur'ān, Allāh reminds us of the people of Shu'ayb (peace be upon him), who although denied the message that he brought from Allāh, acknowledged his high social background:

And were it not for your tribe, we would have certainly stoned you
(11:91).

Like previous prophets, our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) too came from a respected tribe and background. In fact, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) belonged to the most revered tribe in Makka, the tribe of Quraysh.

Even the enemies of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) acknowledged the noble background of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). Abū Sufyān was asked by Heraclius, the Roman leader, about his lineage and tribal background, and he admitted that it was pure and the best among Arabs.

As for the qualities that he acquired with the blessing and mercy of Allāh, they are too numerous to mention. Allāh has not only granted him outright superiority over humans, but over previous prophets too. For instance, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was the first being to be created, and the last Prophet to be sent to this earth. On the Day of Judgement, he will have the most followers. He will also be the first person to seek intercession from Allāh and the first whose intercession will be accepted. In fact the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) summed it up quite eloquently in a Hadith recorded by Imām Dārimī:

Ibn Abbās (may Allāh be pleased with him) narrates that the Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) were once waiting for him. He appeared and heard his Companions talking from a distance. One Companion said 'How wonderful is it that Allāh chose Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) as His friend'. Another Companion said 'How wonderful is it that Mūsā (peace be upon him) had the privilege to talk to Allāh. Another said 'Īsā (peace be upon him) is the word of Allāh and his *Rūh*' and somebody else remarked 'Ādam (peace be upon him) was chosen by Allāh'. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) then appeared, greeted them and said, "Indeed I heard what you were saying and rightly so, Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) is Allāh's friend, Mūsā (peace be upon him) is His trusted one, and indeed Īsā (peace be upon him) is Allāh's word and *Rūh*. Behold! I am Allāh's most beloved and I bear no pride in saying so. I will hold the banner of praise (*Hamd*) on the Day of Judgement and Ādam and all his children will be beneath me. I will be the first intercessor and the first person whose intercession is accepted on the day of Judgement, and I bear no pride in saying so. I will be the first to knock on the door of Paradise. Allāh will open the door and allow me and the poor Muslims to enter, and I bear no pride in saying so. I am the most honoured person of this world and the hereafter, and I bear no pride in saying so."

Hence, Imam Busīrī's verse is merely reflecting what the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) has told us himself concerning his superiority over Arabs and non-Arabs, human beings and Jinns, and his exalted status in this world and the hereafter.

7.2.

“Refrain from what the Christians claimed about their Prophet (i.e. trinity and divinity). And (otherwise) sat whatever you like in his praise, keeping common sense in mind.”

This verse acts as a margin-drawer to how Muslims should perceive and describe the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

First and foremost, when describing our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), we are warned to abhor from *Shirk*, or polytheism. The unfortunate plight of the Christians is well documented in the Holy Qur’ān. Upon shown miraculous feats, they began to misinterpret Sayyiduna Īsā’s (peace be upon him) original monotheistic message. In countless verses, Allāh informs us that Jesus preached the oneness of Allāh to his people, but his followers distorted the truth beyond recognition.

Imam Busīrī (may Allāh be pleased with him) warns us in this verse not to follow the footsteps of the Christians who believed that Jesus was God, or the Son of God. Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the Messenger of Allāh. He is not Allāh’s son. All bounties, blessings, privileges and proximity that the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) possesses is due to Allāh’s limitless mercy and favour upon him. As Allāh says in the Qur’ān, ‘And mighty is the Grace of Allāh upon you’ (4:113).

In no circumstance can comparisons be drawn between Allāh the Almighty and His last Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). Our comparison to the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is analogous to a drop compared to the ocean. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) compared to Allāh is not even this, because Allāh’s capacity, power, might and ability is beyond measurement and human understanding.

Hence, so long as we do not proclaim that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the son of God or His partner, then we are free to praise the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in any amount.

Some Muslims ignorantly argue that excessive praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) leads to comparisons with Allāh, and hence to *Shirk*. This argument is baseless and logically flawed. If someone claims that Muslims are drawing parallels with Allāh and His Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) by excessive praise, then this claim itself is *Kufr*. This is because when comparing two variables, we need to know the scope and limit of each variable. So when comparing the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) with Allāh, we need to know the ability and scope of both. But in this case, there is no limit on Allāh’s scope, power and status. We cannot draw comparisons with Allāh and anything else in the world because His being *per se* is unfathomable or perceivable.

To clarify this point, let us assume that we would like to compare two students’ intellectual ability. In order to do this, we need to know their educational achievements (e.g. exam results and IQ level) and assess them relatively. We cannot evaluate which student is brighter if we only know the results of one student. Similarly, if, as some claim, Muslims are placing the Prophet (peace and

blessings of Allāh be upon him) on par with Allāh, then this would mean that we know the scope and power of Allāh too, in order to make comparisons. But obviously, no one can place a limit on Allāh's power, and if one does, it can lead to *Kufr*.

In short, no matter how excessively we praise the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) it cannot lead to placing him on par with Allāh, because, quite simply, we do not know how great Allāh is. As Imam Busīrī asserts in this couplet, we should refrain from calling the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) the partner or son of God, but otherwise praise him in any amount. Lastly, Imam Busīrī then invites us to praise the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) with dignity, pride and wisdom. *Wah-takimī* derives from the word *Hikmah*, or wisdom. It means that when we mention the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), we should apply wisdom to our thought and expression, to prevent us from uttering words that are inapplicable to the Prophet's (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) high rank and status.

7.3.

“Indeed, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is like the sun in terms of excellence and the previous prophets are like the stars. Which radiate the light to the people in the dark.”

Imam Busīrī (may Allāh be pleased with him) received divine approval and world-wide acceptance not only because of his praise of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), but also because he was a gifted poet. Throughout the *Burdah* and other works, he used his linguistic skills to write astonishing and heart-warming poetry, and this fact is clearly evident in this verse.

He writes that in terms of excellence and virtue, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is analogous to the sun, and the previous prophets and messengers are like the stars. Together they radiate and illuminate the path of guidance to people in the dark. Our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) can be compared to the sun and previous prophets to the stars in numerous ways:

i. In terms of proximity- In the same way the sun is the closest star to us, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the closest being to us, a point clearly reinforced in the Qur'ān:

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is closer to the believers than their ownselves” (33:6).

Assuredly there has come to you a messenger from among yourselves, heavy upon him is your suffering; ardently desirous of your welfare, to Muslims is most kind and merciful (10:128).'

His love and affection for his followers is so deep that it is difficult to fathom. For instance, every Prophet has a special answered Du'ā. Our Prophet (peace and

blessings of Allāh be upon him) has saved this Du'ā for the day of Judgement when he will Insha Allāh intercede for us.

ii. In terms of light and warmth- The sun is the source of life and sustenance, and without it, our existence is incomprehensible. Everything on this earth is dependent upon the sun for light and warmth. Similarly, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is our source of sustenance. He brought the divine message from Allāh Almighty and saved humanity from destruction. He radiated our hearts with his flawless character, words of divine wisdom and his perfect Sīrah.

iii. The abrogation of all religions- During the night, the absence of the sun means we can faintly see the stars. However, during the day, the dazzling light of the sun means it is impossible to see any of the stars. Similarly, previous prophets and religions are like the stars who, after the appearance of the sun, are no longer visible. Hence, when the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) came, he nullified all previous religions and Islam became the only source of guidance visible to the people. Imām Bājūrī says:

When the sun appears, no one can see the stars. Similarly, when his (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) religion appeared, it nullified and abrogated all previous religions.

Allāma Qutb Qastalānī includes 'the sun' as one of the names of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and explains why (i) because of its immense benefit to all (ii) because of its lofty and exalted nature (iii) because the sun is the greatest of all stars (iv) due to the blinding light of the sun, we cannot look at the sun directly. Similarly the overwhelming presence, the grandeur and status of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) means we cannot encompass his true nature.

8.0. Concluding remarks.

8.1. At the time of crisis and need, Muslims call their master Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

When faced with his illness, he decided to write this ode to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and certainly, Allāh responded. This has been a tradition from the time of the Companions until today.

i. The Muslims were engaged in a fierce battle with Musaylma Kazzāb during the Battle of Yamāma. Allāma Ibn Athīr ⁴ describes the events as follows:

Then Khālid ibn Walīd challenged the enemies to fight. Thus according to the [established] practice of the Muslims, the Muslims proclaimed *Yā*

⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Majd al-Dīn* (d. 606 A.H.) of Mosul. Author of a dictionary of unusual words in the Hadīth *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Hadīth*, and a large Hadīth collection *Jāmi al-Usūl*.

Muhammadau loudly. They then killed all those who challenged them to fight.⁵

Hāfiz Ibn Kathīr wrote after describing the events of the battle:

Then Khālid ibn Walīd led the call according to the established practice of the Muslims. The custom of that time was to proclaim *Yā Muhammadau*.⁶

Both Ibn Athīr and Ibn Kathīr have clarified that it was the established practice of the Companions and Successors to proclaim *Yā Muhammadau* loudly in times of difficulty and hardship. The Muslims who deny the legitimacy of such calls are the same ones who respect the opinion of Ibn Kathīr immensely. Hence, this quote is strong evidence against their view.

ii. There was a severe drought in India. One of the local scholars decided to write a book about the superiority of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) to alleviate their sufferings, which he named *Nashr al-Tiyb*. As a result, the conditions of the people changed. The name of the scholar was Ashraf Alī Thānwī.

iii. Even when it comes to minor pains, the Companions called upon the Prophet to alleviate their sufferings. In Qādī Iyād's *al-Shifā* (p. 251), it is mentioned that Sayyiduna Abd Allāh ibn Umar (may Allāh be pleased with him) suffered from a numb leg. Someone said to him, 'Mention the most beloved to you, the pain will disappear.' He said, 'Yā Muhammad' and it immediately became better.

8.2. Imam Busīrī does explain the *Aqīdah* of the Ahl al-Sunna very well.

In turn, this allows us to appreciate what the *Aqīdah* of Muslims was prior to the appearance of the more so-called puritan form in the 19th Century. For example, he devotes a whole chapter to *Mawlid al-Nabī* and *Mi'raj al-Nabī* so obviously he was an advocate of their celebrations. In clear terms, he refers to the importance of the *Wasīla* of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

8.3. Imam Busīrī was a product of the pious climate he was fortunate to live in.

The religious climate was ripe for the *Burdah*, namely the rule of the Mamluk period. Sufism was not only accepted during this period, but the norm. Great scholars of this period included Abū al-Hasan Shādhli, Abū al-Abbās al-Mursī, Sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Disūqī (d. 676/1277), Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī (d. 675/1276), Ibn al-Arabī (d. 637/1240) and Ibn al-Farīd (d. 732).

⁵ *Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*. Vol. II, p. 246. Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi Publications, Beirut.

⁶ *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*. Vol. VI, p. 324. Dar al-Fikr Publications, Beirut.

8.4. The Burdah as a metaphor for *Mahabba al-Rasūl*.

The Burdah is not just a poem; it is a means to praise the Prophet, to heal oneself spiritually and physically, and to produce visions of the Prophet. One of the earliest commentators of the Burdah, Muhammad ibn Abd Allāh al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) wrote:

Reciting the Burdah can prevent disasters. If people only knew the value of the poem, then they would write it on the pupils of their eyes with gold ink. (p. 53 Thesis)

Even when he wrote this commentary, al-Zarkhashī saw this as a means of wiping his own sins clean.

To conclude, it is worth reflecting why the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) bestowed a Burdah, and not any other type of clothing to both Ka'b ibn Zuhayr (may Allah be pleased with him) and Imam Busīrī. In the same manner a cloak covers the entire body, one's love for the Prophet (peace be upon him) engulfs the whole body. Just like a Burdah provides warmth, *Mahabba al-Rasul* provides inner & outer warmth. It provides one with peace and protection.

*O Lord! Through the means of the Chosen One, enable us to reach our goals!
And forgive for us what has passed, O the Most Noble One!*

9.0. Further reading.

*English translation of the Qasīdah Burdah

<http://www.alahazrat.net/library/englisharticles/qasida/>

*An excellent thesis on the Sufi teachings of the Burdah.

<http://dar.aucegypt.edu/handle/10526/1334>

10.0 Bibliography

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