

The Story of ‘Utbī.

Introduction.

We are all aware of the unfortunate destruction of Islamic sites in Makka and al-Madīna al-Munawwara. Very few objects and relics remain from the earlier generations.

However, the white marble pillars next to the final resting place of the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) still have a few lines of a famous poem inscribed upon it, dating back to the Ottoman times. This article will explain the beautiful story behind this poem, which involves a man called ‘Utbī. The reader will undoubtedly understand why our pious ancestors selected this poem to be associated with the blessed resting place of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

The Narrations.

The story of ‘Utbī has been recorded by many of the early, Muslim scholars. Professor Tāhir al-Qādirī writes that the story has been reported by the following scholars:

- Hāfiz Ibn Kathīr in his *Tafsīr*.
- Al-Bayhaqī in *Shu‘ab al-Īmān*.
- Ibn Qudāma in *al-Mughnī*.
- Imam al-Nawawī in *Kitāb al-azkār*.
- Ibn ‘Asākir in *Tārīkh Ibn ‘Asākir*.¹

A handful of these narrations will be mentioned below.

Narration One.

● ‘Alī (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that a Bedouin came to Madīna three days after the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) left this world. He presented himself to the final resting place of the Prophet and then sprinkled some of the blessed earth from his grave on his head. He then read the following poem:

يا خير من دفنت في التراب أعظمه
فطاب من طيبهن القاع و الاكم
نفسى الفداء لقبر انت ساكنه
فيه العفاف و فيه الجود والكرم

O the best person ever laid to rest. When his blessed body touched the earth,

¹ *Al-Tawassul ‘inda al-a‘imma wa’l muhaddithin*, Prof. Tāhir al-Qadiri, p. 109. Minhāj al-Qur’an Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, 2006.

*His perfumed bones made the earth and the surrounding forest fragrant.
May my soul be sacrificed for the tomb you reside in,
In it there is purity, generosity and nobleness.*

He then said:

Indeed you spoke, O Messenger of Allāh, and We heard your saying. You were conscious of Allāh and we have taken our consciousness from you. And from what Allāh revealed to you is [the verse]: ‘And if they are unjust upon themselves, they should come to you (O Messenger) and seek Allāh’s forgiveness and the Messenger should seek forgiveness for them; indeed they will find Allāh to be most-Forgiving and most-Merciful’ (4:64). I have wronged myself and I have come seeking forgiveness from Allāh from my sins. So please seek forgiveness from Allāh on my behalf.

A voice came from the grave that ‘you have been forgiven.’²

Narration Two.

- Imam al-Nawawī writes in *al-Majmū‘*:

‘Utbī said: ‘I was once sitting next to the blessed grave of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). A Bedouin came and said: ‘Salutations upon you O Messenger of Allāh! I have heard Allāh say: ‘And if they are unjust upon themselves, they should come to you (O Messenger) and seek Allāh’s forgiveness and the Messenger should seek forgiveness for them; indeed they will find Allāh to be most-Forgiving and most-Merciful’ (4:64). So I have come to you, seeking forgiveness from my sins and requesting you to intercede for me to my Lord.’ He then read:

*O the best person ever laid to rest. When his blessed body touched the earth,
His perfumed bones made the earth and the surrounding forest fragrant.
May my soul be sacrificed for the tomb you reside in,
In it there is purity, generosity and nobleness.*³

Narration Three.

- Hāfīz Ibn Kathīr records this event identically, except with a small difference:

‘...’Utbī said: ‘Then the Bedouin left. I became drowsy and thus I saw the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in my dream. He said to me: ‘O ‘Utbī! Find the Bedouin and give him the glad-tidings that Allāh has certainly forgiven him.’

² *Tafsir al-bahr al-muhit*, Vol. III, p. 283.

³ Cited in *Shawahid al-haqq*, pp. 96-97.

Narration Four.

- The following has also been recorded regarding the same poem, but in different circumstances:

It is reported from Abū Harb al-Hilālī (may Allāh be pleased with him), who said:

‘A Bedouin performed Hajj. When he came to the door of the Prophet’s mosque (in Madīna), he descended his transporting animal and tied it. He then entered the mosque until he came to the final resting place of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). He stood parallel to the Prophet’s (blessed) face and said: ‘Salutations upon you O Messenger of Allāh!’ He then offered his salutations upon Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Then, he turned again to the Prophet and said: ‘May my mother and father be sacrificed for you O Messenger of Allāh! I have come to you – burdened with sins and mistakes – seeking your intercession with your Lord. This is because Allāh said in His Book: ‘And if they are unjust upon themselves, they should come to you (O Messenger) and seek Allāh’s forgiveness and the Messenger should seek forgiveness for them; indeed they will find Allāh to be most-Forgiving and most-Merciful’ (4:64). So I have come to you, may my mother and father be sacrificed for you, heavy with sins and mistakes. I seek your intercession with your Lord that He forgives my sins and that you perform intercession for me.’ He then left in the presence of the people whilst saying:

*O the best person ever laid to rest. When his blessed body touched the earth,
His perfumed bones made the earth and the surrounding forest fragrant.
May my soul be sacrificed for the tomb you reside in,
In it there is purity, generosity and nobleness.⁴*

Reflections upon the story.

- i. In one report, a voice was heard from the grave (that the person was forgiven) and in another, ‘Utbī saw the Prophet in his dream with this same news. Either way, the result was the same; that the man’s *wasīla* was accepted by Allāh.
- ii. Moreover, the fourth narration proves that the poem had gained considerable fame and fortune over the years. This is because whereas the first report clearly indicates that the man came three days after the Prophet left this world, the last report indicates that the poem was recited two decades after the Prophet’s departure. This is because the man in the last report ‘offered his salutations upon Abū Bakr and ‘Umar’ too, who both were buried next to the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- iii. The fame and repeated-acceptance of this poem is perhaps the reason why Imam al-Nawawī suggests that *all* visitors should recite this poem when they visit the resting place of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

⁴ Al-Bayhaqī, *Shu’ab al-Iman*, 3;495, no. 4178, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya: Ibn Qudama, *al-Mughni*, 3; 298: *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, 1: 521: al-Suyuti, *al-Durr al-Manthur*, 1; 570.

iv. Imam al-Nawawī and his Shāfi‘ī companions prove from this story that the verse: ‘And if they are unjust upon themselves, they should come to you (O Messenger)...’ (4:64) is not just specific to the lifetime of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Rather it means that during his lifetime and after, the sinful believers should present themselves to the Beloved Messenger.

v. The story behind this poem illustrates that the doctrine of the *Ahl al-Sunna* dates back to the time of the Companions. Acts which others see as *shirk* are proven as legitimate from the above reports.

For instance, Ibn Taymiyya asserts that requesting someone for *du’ā* after their death leads to polytheism (*shirk*). He writes:

Prophets and the pious are alive in their graves. If hypothetically it is shown that they pray for those who are still alive – and support for this is to be found in *ahādīth* – it is still not permissible for people to request them for supplications. In previous times, no one ever performed such an act because it leads to *shirk* and it is a means of their worship to the exclusion of Allāh. On the other hand, if they are requested for supplications during their life, then this is not *shirk*.⁵

The Bedouin requested the *wasīla* of the Prophet three days after his worldly demise. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya is wrong to assert that requesting someone for a *du’ā* after his/her death is *shirk*.

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari.

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadiya Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.

⁵ *Fatāwa Ibn Taymiyya*. Vol. I, p. 330. Matbu’a Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz Publications.