

A REAL STUDENT OF KNOWLEDGE: Baqee ibn Mukhlid al-Andalusi

By

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He was one of the students of knowledge in Andalus, and among the most zealous of them in its pursuit, for that matter. Baqee ibn Mukhlid began his studies by pursuing Hadith of the Holy Prophet. He moved from scholar to scholar in Andalus, collecting and absorbing their hadith until he could find no more people to take from. Eventually, he had collected all the hadith available from the scholars of Andalus. Yet his thirst remained unquenched. He asked those around him, “Who is the most knowledgeable person on earth today in hadith?” The resounding answer he received was: “Ahmad ibn Hanbal.” He immediately resolved to go to Baghdad to take knowledge from him.

Baqee was a poor person who did not possess anything, not to mention the means or resources to get to a place as far as Baghdad. But did that stop him? No! His passion for knowledge was too overwhelming. He began the journey, relying on Allah. He would find work until he had enough money to travel, then proceed as far as he could, and then stop and work until he gathered some more means. According to some reports, he spent 5 years in this manner before reaching Baghdad.

What determination! How many youth today are caught up in sports and pastimes, exerting their physical energies in their pursuit? Is there any greater honor than expending oneself in the service of Allah’s Book and the Sunnah of His noble Messenger, as Baqee did?

After this arduous journey, Baqee reached the outskirts of Baghdad. During his journey, the terrible Inquisition of Imam Ahmad had begun, including his prolonged torture and imprisonment for almost two years. He was finally released, only to be placed under house arrest. Baqee was totally unaware of these circumstances, being on the road for so long. He arrived to the eastern part of Baghdad, and found a caravan leaving the city. He asked them, “How can I find Ahmad ibn Hanbal?” Taken aback, they began questioning him as to his motives. News of Imam Ahmad had

reached the whole word, and this person was ignorant. They subsequently informed Baqee what had happened to Imam Ahmad and told him further that not only was he forbidden to meet anyone, but no person was allowed to see him as well.

Baqee was distressed. He had traveled this tremendous distance only to meet Imam Ahmad, and now was being prevented at the very end of his journey! Baqee resolved not to waste time and decided to study with other scholars in this renowned city of knowledge. He entered the city and found his way to the largest masjid.

He found the masjid bustling with activities and circles of learning. He moved from one circle to another, until arriving at one particular gathering which had a massive number of students. In this halaqah, the shaykh was speaking with a raised voice alternating with a suppressed one. He found that the students were learning *Ilm al-Rijaal*, the study of the narrators of hadith, and the shaykh was none other than Yahya b. Ma'een. Whenever the shaykh would mention a trustworthy and reliable narrator, he would do so with a firm, raised voice, and when mentioning those that were weak or not reliable, he would do so with a suppressed tone. After observing the halaqah for some time, Baqee was astonished that this shaykh knew every transmitter he was being questioned about so well. He decided to test him with the narrators he knew from Andalus, most of whom he had personally studied with.

He called out, "O Imam, I am Baqee ibn Mukhlid, and I came walking all the way from Andalus. Allow me to ask questions."

Yahya replied, "You have a greater right than others. Go ahead."

Baqee began to ask him about the scholars and transmitters of Andalus, one by one, and Yahya ibn Maeen replied about each one with a familiarity that amazed Baqee. This shaykh had never lived in Andalus and knew the scholars there better than its own residents did. Since the rest of the people in the massive were getting impatient, Baqee decided to end his series of questions with one final one.

"One last question."

"Go ahead."

"What do you say about Ahmad ibn Hanbal?"

A deafening silence fell over the crowd. All knew the position of Imam Ahmad vis-à-vis the authorities. He had earned the wrath of the Abbasid rulers and was currently under house imprisonment after a prolonged state of torture. This was a dangerous

question. Would Yahya ibn Maeen answer with a political or religious response? Would he be cautious or forthright?

After a few moments of silence, Yahya ibn Meen replied with great force, “Woe unto you! Watch what you are saying!” He continued speaking, with increasing passion, “Woe unto you! Someone like me is being asked about Ahmad ibn Hanbal!” Raising his voice, he cried out, “That man is the Imam of all the Muslims, the Imam of the Sunnah.”

He went on, “I swear by Allah, there is no one on the earth better than Ahmad ibn Hanbal! I swear by Allah, there is no one on the earth more knowledgeable than Ahmad ibn Hanbal! I swear by Allah, there is no one on the earth more virtuous than Ahmad ibn Hanbal! ” He began going on and on with the virtues of Imam Ahmad, praising his status and knowledge, and praising him unlike any other.

This was the testimony of Yahya ibn Maeen, the greatest scholar of his time in Jarh and Ta’deel (the science of judging the trustworthiness of the narrators), on behalf of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Hearing this description, Baqee became more saddened than before. He had come all the way here to meet Imam Ahmad and could not. His desire to learn from Imam Ahmad increased more than ever. He returned to his hotel and began thinking at length how he could devise some plan to meet Imam Ahmad and take from his knowledge.

One day, after the Zuhr prayer, he went out from his hotel during the heat of mid-day and found his way to the house of Imam Ahmad. He found the guards resting and inattentive. With great resolve and unable to wait any longer, he went right past them and knocked on the door of the house. After a few moments, Imam Ahmad himself emerged to find this young man awaiting him.

“O Imam, I am Baqee ibn Mukhlid. I have come to you all the way from Andalus by foot. Please teach me.”

Imam Ahmad was impressed by the endurance and persistence of this young man. He replied, “You are more deserving than others. But you know very well my condition and what has happened to me, and what can happen to those who meet me.”

“I don’t care, even if they imprison me. I want you to teach me.”

“You have indeed excelled in the pursuit of knowledge. So do what I tell you.”

“Ok.”

“Go back and come back to me tomorrow at this same time, when the guards are inattentive and there are few people around. But come in the form of a beggar. You can come to me, and I’ll teach you briefly one or two hadith, and then you can leave.”

Baqee agreed and came back the second day dressed like a pauper, crying out “Sadaqah! Sadaqah! May Allah have mercy on you!” The guards paid him no mind in this state. Baqee approached Imam Ahmad’s house and knocked on the door. Imam Ahmad came out and drew Baqee close to him in the doorway. While handing him a piece of bread, he said to him, “Memorize this,” and began relating hadith narrations to him. After giving him 2 or 3 Prophetic hadith, he told him to go back. Baqee emerged from the house, the bread in hand, wailing out as he left the scene, “Sadaqah! Sadaqah! May Allah have mercy on you!”

This manner of teaching continued for some time. Imam Ahmad’s house imprisonment extended through the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Mu’tasim to that of his successor al-Wathiq. The next Abbasid ruler al-Mutawakkil finally released Imam Ahmad from this state and allowed him to go out freely.

Imam Ahmad eventually returned to the Great Masjid of Baghdad to resume his circle, and found countless numbers of eager students from all reaches of the Muslim world, eager for his instruction. His circle quickly became so large that in its far reaches his voice could no longer be heard, and relay persons had to be utilized in different corners to spread the teaching to other regions of the noble halaqah.

Baqee saw this situation and felt deprived from Imam Ahmad once again. He had to share the Imam with countless others and could not ask him what he wanted. He struggled to remain patient with this state of affairs for a number of days, but one day, when Imam Ahmad arrived and sat in his place, he stood up and cried out at the top of his voice, “O Imam! I am Baqee ibn Mukhlid!”

Imam Ahmad responded, “Let him through.” As he made his way through the crowds, people looked at him in amazement. Who was this unknown person, who was allowed by Imam Ahmad to come through the people directly to himself? When he reached Imam Ahmad, he told him, “Sit with me here,” and cleared a place beside him.

Imam Ahmad allowed Baqee to ask questions freely and exclusively. Baqee began to ask and ask and ask, until he began to feel embarrassed in front of others.

Imam Ahmad then stood up and said to the crowd, pointing to Baqee, **“Whoever of you desires to see a true student of knowledge, then let him look at this one!”**

Some time later, Baqee fell ill and could not leave his hotel residence. Imam Ahmad, noticing his absence in his circles, asked, “Where is Baqee ibn Mukhlid?” He was told that he was ill. Imam Ahmad stood up and said, “Get up. Let’s go visit him.” He took his entire circle to visit Baqee ibn Mukhlid!

From the uproar, Baqee knew Imam Ahmad was coming to visit him. The hotel owner, seeing Imam Ahmad approaching, cried out in excitement, “The Imam of the Muslims is coming!”

This was the status of this great student of Imam Ahmad. He eventually returned from Baghdad to Andalus and went on to become one of its finest scholars.