

# A Letter Of Warning To My Friends Concerning The Danger Of Backbiting

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# بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ والحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله

## Prologue

It is our lot, my brothers in Islām, that we live in an age of abject profanity, universal decadence, and abysmal deviation. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ described the Muslims of the last days in a *āadāth* reported by the Companion Thaubān ؓ as *many but like scum or debris (ghuthà' l )*. Most of those who call themselves Muslims today are a class of people that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ would not even like to see, for in a *āadāth* reported by Imām al-Tirmidhā (d. 279 h. / 892), he ﷺ is reported to have said:

O Allāh, let it not see me, nor let me see it: a time in which the ulema will not be followed, and the people will not be ashamed [to act shamefully] in the presence of the noble [or forbearing] (Arabic: *al-āalām l )*. Their hearts are the hearts of foreigners [that is, non-Arabs, and therefore by implication, non-Muslims, since in the beginning of Islām, the religion was confined to the Arabs], while their tongues are the tongues of Arabs.

Al-Āfiā al-'Irāqā (Zain al-Dān, d. 806 h. / 1404; Cairo) mentioned in his *al-Mughni 'an āamli 'l-Asfār fi 'l-Asfār* in which he traced the source of the *āadāth* which Imām al-Ghazālā (d. 505 h. / 1111; Tās, Iran) mentioned in his *lāyā' 'Ulām al-Dān* that the above *āadāth* was reported by Imām Aāmad (d. 241 h./855, Baghdād) in his *al-Musnad* from the Companion Sahl ibn Sa'd ؓ. It was also reported that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: "In the end of time there will be ignorant worshippers and sinful ulema." Al-'Irāqā ascribed the *āadāth* to al-Āakim (Abā 'Abd Allāh, d.405 h. / 1014) in his *al-Mustadrak*, and he mentioned that the *āadāth* was reported by the Companion Anis ؓ.

These are times in which deviation and sin is the norm even in the lands of Muslims. One of the weaknesses of the human soul is that its sensitivity for a particular evil, and the indignity and outrage which it normally experiences upon witnessing that evil, becomes dulled or even numbed by continually witnessing that evil being committed by the people who surround it. However, the fact the generality of people commit a certain sin makes that sin no less abhorrent to Allāh, the Lord of Truth, Who alone determines what is good and what is evil. He, the Lord of Majesty and Honour, declared in his Inimitable Book: "Say [to them, O Muāammad]: The bad and the good are not equal, even though the abundance of the bad amazes you. So fear Allāh [by avoiding the bad], O you who believe that you may prosper." (5:100) Abā Nu'aim al-lābahānā (d.430 / 1038; Isfahan) mentioned in his *Āilyat 'l-Auliya'* that Fuçail ibn 'lyād (d. 187 h. / 802, Makkah) is reported to have said: "Don't be dispirited by the paths of truth on account of the fewness of its people, and don't be deceived by the profusion of the damned, [and know that] the fewness of the seekers will not hurt you."

So when a certain evil becomes prevalent, we have to make an enormous effort to resist the urge to follow the erring masses, or even just not to concur with them in regarding what Allāh has declared to be a sin or abomination as inoffensive or slight. No doubt it takes a great strength of character, rather all the power that the soul can muster to stand alone against the relentless tide of deviation, to singularly defy the rest of the fallen nation of Islām. However, those who show steadfastness can count on a final triumph exalted beyond all imagination, for it has been reported that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: "Whoever holds on to my Sunna when my people [nation, *ummah*] will have deviated, he will get the reward of one hundred martyrs." The *āadāth* was reported in the famous *āadāth* collection known as *Mishkāt al-Maābāā* in the chapter *Kitāb al-'Imān*. Mulla 'Alā al-Qārā (d. 1014 h. / 1606; Makkah), who wrote a well-known commentary on that collection, mentioned that the *āadāth*

has been ascribed by Mārak to the book *al-Zuhd* compiled by Abā Bakr al-Baihaqā (d. 458 h. / 1066; Niābār). He mentioned that al-Baihaqā reported the *āadāth* from the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās ؓ. Imām Muslim (d. 261 / 875; Samarkand) reported from the Companion Abā Hurairah that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: “Islām began as a strange thing and it will become again as it was. How fortunate (*āābā’* / ) are those strangers [or alternately: They will have the Paradise of Tābā (or the Tree of Tābā in Paradise)]. That is one way to translate this *āadāth*; however, in light of the interpretation which Mulla ‘Alā al-Qārā related from al-Zamakhsharā, it can be translated in this wise: “When Islām began its partisans were few, and they were outcasts. Its partisans will again become few, and outcasts...” Mulla ‘Alā al-Qārā suggested that the best interpretation of who the later *strangers* (*al-ghurabā’* / ) are is that they are those who rectify what the people will have corrupted of the Sunna. May Allāh record us amongst those strangers.

There is one mortal sin (*kabārah* / ) which has been so widespread for so long that the generality of Muslims, including most of the ulema, commit it routinely without even realising that they are committing a sin. Indeed, hearts have become so insensitive to its offensiveness that were one of the *strangers* to tell them that they are committing a great sin, they would invariably look at him incredulously as if he were quite odd. Then if the *stranger* persisted, they would soon dismiss him as a mad fanatic. I refer to the deadly vice of devouring people’s honour and reputation. Indeed, it is so loathsome a sin that even my ancestors in England, who were not Muslims, appreciated its vileness, for they called it *backbiting*, while Allāh, the Lord of Mankind, in His Inimitable Book likened it to eating the flesh of our dead brother!

I accepted Islām in 1974 and until quite recently, I used to backbite everybody regularly just like all the Muslims around me, including ulema and reputedly pious and godly people. I have to date spent sixteen years living in half a dozen countries of the so-called Muslim world, yet since the time I accepted Islām until the time I finally realised that I had been committing a great offence, nobody but a lawyer, who was not even a Muslim, ever reproached me for backbiting. I had heard and read the *āadāth* which deprecate backbiting, but Satan managed to beguile me into believing that I had some valid excuse on particular occasions to backbite particular persons. There was a time that my ignorance was so immense that I thought I was permitted to backbite a particular person because I was prepared to dishonour him face to face. Then I progressed a little and thought that I had a right to backbite so and so because he had wronged me, and my ignorance assured me that a victim has a right to complain. When I became more knowledgeable about the details of the Holy Law (*aākām al-Āharā’ah*), Satan busied me with the religious violations of others. I started to denounce people behind their backs in the mistaken belief that since my indignation was for the sake of Allāh – given that these people were violating His *Sharā’ah* – so it was permissible for me to mention their contraventions to others with impunity. Alas, how wrong I was. Indeed, hardly anything I ever criticised was so serious as my own criticising, for it was outright backbiting, and, as I since learned and will document in this treatise, backbiting is worse than usury, and usury is worse than adultery, and adultery is worse than drinking wine.

Allāh, exalted is He, declares in His Truthful Book:

O You who believe, greatly avoid suspicion, for some suspicion is sin, and do not spy on [one another], nor backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the dead flesh of his brother? [Nay!] Then you detest it. [So in the same way detest backbiting which in reality is just as despicable as eating the dead flesh of your brethren.] And fear Allāh. Allāh is Oft-relenting, Merciful. (*Surah al-Āujurāt*: 49:12)

The interpretation and the interpolations that I have made above are according to the famous commentary of the Qur’ān by Abā ‘I-Barakāt al-Nasafā (d. 710 / 1310; Baghdad), known as *Mudārik al-Tanzāl*, or, more popularly, as *Tafsīr al-Nasafā*. Concerning the circumstances behind the revelation of this

verse, Ääfiæ 'Imàd al-Dán ibn Kathár (d. 774 / 1373; Damascus) mentioned in his *al-Tafsár*<sup>1</sup> a report of al-Suddá (d.128 / 745):

On a certain journey [the Companion] Salmàn al-Farsá was in attendance on two of the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ assisting them and sharing their food. One day when the people proceeded, Salmàn remained behind asleep instead of travelling with them. His two companions called for him, but they did not find him, so [when they alighted,] they struck their tent by themselves saying: "Salmàn does not want..." or they said: "That slave does not want anything except to come to food prepared and tents made ready." When Salmàn finally came along, they sent him to the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ to ask for some food for them. So he left and came to the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ with a bowl and said: "O Messenger of Allàh, my two companions have sent me to you to get from you some food for them if you have any." The Prophet ﷺ replied: "What did your companions do with the food they had? They have already eaten!" So Salmàn went back and told them what the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ had said; whereupon, they came to him themselves and said: "By Him Who sent you with the truth, we have not had any food since we encamped." The Messenger of Allàh ﷺ told them: "You two have eaten [the flesh] of Salmàn by what you said about him." Then the words, "Would one of you like to eat the dead flesh of his brother..." were revealed.

Ibn Kathár reported that Ääfiæ Çiyà al-Maqdasá (d. 643 / 1245; Damascus) reported in his [*äadäth* compendium] *al-Mukhtâr* by way of Äassàn ibn Hilàl from Äammàd ibn Salamah from Thàbit that [the Companion] Anis ibn Màlik said:

It was the custom of the Arabs that some of them would serve others on their journeys. [On one such journey] a certain man attended on Abâ Bakr ؓ and 'Umar ؓ. [One time] the two of them went to sleep; when they woke up, they found that the man had not prepared any food for them; whereupon, they declared: "That fellow is an excessive sleeper [*na'âm / fa'âl* which indicates habituality and excessiveness]. Then they woke him up and said: "Go to the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ and tell him that Abâ Bakr and 'Umar send him their greeting of peace (*salâm*), and that they ask you for some food. [When the man did that,] the Prophet ﷺ told him: "They have eaten." [When the man conveyed that to them,] they came and said: "O Messenger of Allàh, what have we eaten?" He replied: "The flesh of your brother! By Him in Whose power is my soul, I certainly do see his flesh between your front teeth!" Thereupon they said: "Ask forgiveness for us, O Messenger of Allàh!" He said: "Ask him to ask forgiveness for you."

Ismà'ál Ääqqá al-Bârâsawá (d. 1127 / 1715; Bursa, Ottoman Turkey), the author of the encyclopaedic commentary of the Qur'an (*tafsár*) called *Râä al-Bayân*, narrated:

It is reported that when the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ would go on a campaign or travel, he used to put a needy person with two well-to-do persons that the needy person go ahead of them to the place of encampment and prepare their food and drink for them. So on one of his journeys he put Salmàn al-Farsá with two persons. [On one occasion,] Salmàn went ahead to attend to the camp, but he fell asleep and did not prepare anything for them. When the two arrived, they asked: "Didn't you make anything?" He replied: "No, I fell asleep." They said: "Go to the Messenger of Allàh and ask him for some food for us." So Salmàn went to the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ and asked for food. The Messenger of Allàh ﷺ said: "Go to 'Usàmah ibn Zaid and see if he has any extra food. [If he has,] he will give you some." ['Usàmah was the keeper of

<sup>1</sup>(Beirut, Dàr al-Fikr) pp. 217 –218; vol. 4

the food and gear of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ – al-Bārāsawā]<sup>2</sup> However, 'Usamah replied: "I don't have anything." So Salmān returned to them and told him what had happened. They said: "'Usamah had food, but he was stingy with it. Then they sent Salmān to a number of Companions, but he did not get anything from them. When he returned [without success], they said to one another: "If we sent him to the Well of Sumaiāah [a famous and prolific well in Medina as mentioned in *al-Qāmās*. – al-Bārāsawā], it would dry up [before he got there!] So the two of them set off [themselves] to spy on 'Usamah to see whether he actually did have some food which he was supposed to give them according to the instructions of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ. When they came to the Messenger of Allāh, he said: "Why do I see green meat [the Arabs call black (*al-aswad* / ) green (*al-akhḡar* / ) and green black – al-Bārāsawā] in your mouths?" [It would seem that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ meant by *meat* dead meat which had turned black from age in order to depict their backbiting with the ugliest picture. On the other hand, it is possible that he meant by *green*, *freshness*, that is, the freshness of the meat which they had taken, for a such a meaning came in the *āadāth*. "The world is sweet (*āulwah* / ), green (*khuḡrah* / ), fresh (*naḡrah* / )..." That is to say succulent (*ghaḡḡah* / ), fresh (*āarāy* / ), and soft (*nā'imah* / ). – al-Bārāsawā] They said: "By Allāh, O Messenger of Allāh, we have not had any meat today." He replied: "You have been eating the flesh of 'Usamah and Salmān all day long [that is, you have backbitten them – al-Bārāsawā]! Thereupon, Allāh revealed the verse [of backbiting]."<sup>3</sup>

In the verse (*āyah*) of *al-Āujurāt* cited above Allāh, exalted is He, says: "...and do not backbite one another. Would you like to eat the dead flesh of your dead brother? You would detest it!" Here there is a purposive, and eloquent omission (*āadhfl* / ) of some words which are necessarily implied as al-Nasafā (d. 710 / 1310; Baghdad), a Āanafā imām and renown commentator of the Qur'ān, mentioned in his commentary referred to previously, *Mudārik al-Tanzāl*, as did al-Zamakhsharā (d. 538 h. / 1144; Kharizm); and other commentators. We are supposed to understand the verse in this way: Allāh asks: "Would you like to eat the dead flesh of your brother?" They reply: "Of course not!" Thereupon, Allāh, exalted is He, confirms their denial by saying: "So you would detest that. In that case, detest devouring his reputation which is just as abominable in the sight of Allāh as eating the dead flesh of a brother is in your sight." Fakhr al-Dān al-Razā (d. 606 / 1210; Herat) pointed out:

Here there is an indication that a person's reputation [or honour, or image, or public image – Arabic: *'irḡ* / ] is like his flesh and blood. That is the obvious inference (*qiyās*) because a person's honour is more precious than his flesh. So just as it does not befit a reasonable person to eat the flesh of the people, it certainly does not befit him to tear apart their reputation since that hurts a person even more.

Ibn Kathār mentioned in his *al-Tafsār*<sup>4</sup> while commenting on the words of Allāh, exalted is He

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated in this treatise, all explanatory interpolations into a text as indicated by square brackets [...] are my own. In this instance, I have indicated that the interpolation is not mine but the author of *Rāā al-Bayān*. In a previous instance; namely, the interpretation of the verse of the Qur'ān on page 3, I indicated that the interpolations were al-Nasafā's by mentioning that subsequently. Although the format of excessive interpolation is not so conventional in English, there is a need for us Muslims to import the convention in order to better teach and learn our religion. As you can easily see by judging from just the texts of Muslim scholars which I cite in this document, it is quite customary. Moreover, it is a highly effective teaching technique, and quite Arabic, and Arabic is the colour of Islam. Sometimes it may seem to the uninitiated that I have made an interpolation into a text of a verse of the Qur'ān or a *āadāth* gratuitously; whereas, it is an interpolation which is required either according to the precepts of Arabic grammar or the Science of *al-Ma'āni* which is also concerned with the meanings of words in context beyond what can be determined by the knowledge of the lexical meanings of the words or the syntactical meanings. The practical knowledge of the Science of *al-Ma'āni* is sadly lacking to the Orientalists and the generality of translators.

<sup>3</sup>(pp. 88-89; vol. ?)

<sup>4</sup>p. 210; vol. 4

{Would you like to eat the dead flesh of your dead brother? You would detest it!}  
 “That is to say: Just as you detest that instinctively, detest this [that is, backbiting] by virtue of the *Sharā’ah* (the Divine Law), for the punishment of this is more severe than that [that is, the punishment for eating the dead flesh of your brother.]”

The commentators affirm that the adjective *dead* can be construed to modify *flesh*, as I have construed it in translating the verse above; as also it may be construed to modify *brother*. The first construction is the more poignant—it engenders the notion of flesh which has rotted to the point that it has begun to stink and crawl with worms.

They point out that backbiting is like eating the flesh of a dead brother [or the dead flesh of a brother] because it is an offense which is committed in his absence, or behind his back [as the English idiom *backbiting* indicates]. On the other hand, as al-Zamakhsharā, and al-Rāzā observed in their commentaries, insulting a Muslim to his face is like eating his flesh live: it hurts him more than what is said in his absence, so its offense is more heinous.

In the verse (*āyah*) cited above, the words *dead brother* show that backbiting is an offence which involves a Muslim, not an unbeliever (*kāfir*) because an unbeliever does not have any honour as Allāh, exalted is He, declares: “Verily, honour is for Allāh and His Messenger and for the believers.” *al-Munāfiqān*: 63:8

The Prophet ﷺ said: “The whole of a Muslim is prohibited for every [other] Muslim: his blood, his reputation and his wealth.” That is the wording of the version reported by Imām Muslim (d. 261 / 875; Samarkand) in his celebrated *Āḥādīth*, while Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 256 / 870; Khartank, Samarkand) has:

Verily, your blood, your property, and your reputation are inviolable [that is, sacred; Arabic *āarām* / ] for you like the inviolability [sacredness; *āurmah* / ] of this your day [it was the Day of ‘Arafah] in this your month [Dhu ‘l-Ājjah] in this your place [Makkah al-Mukarramah].

Murtuḥa al-Zabādā (d. 1205 / 1790; Cairo), who wrote a huge commentary on the work *Īyā’ ‘Ulām al-Dīn* of Imām al-Ghazālā (d. 505 h. / 1111; Tās, Iran), explained that blood is what preserves our lives, while property is the mainstay of our blood. Both are necessary for the preservation of the body. But just as we have a bodily existence, we have an abstract existence (*āuratun ma’nawāyah* / ). He is referring to the existence we have in the minds of our fellow human beings which in English we call our *reputation*, or our *image*, or our *public image*, and which in Arabic is called *‘irḥ* / . We see in this *āadīth* that the Prophet ﷺ mentioned *reputation* (*‘irḥ*) alongside *blood* and *property* which shows that its inviolability (*āurmah* / ) is like their inviolability. Our reputations are just as precious to us as our blood and property. Indeed, reputation is more precious as the ulema have pointed out. Do you not see that an insult or an offense of backbiting which we hear about hurts us more than a wound or the destruction of our property. For a wound may cure in a few days, and we may quickly replace lost property without great hardship of mental distress; whereas, an offense to our honour may hurt us all our lives, or perturb our states of mind for days. That is because we are creatures of thought – we live in our minds. As for what we do not hear about, it has worked its evil in the hearts of our brethren, and mangled our relations with our fellows.

In order to get a better idea of just how sacred a Muslim’s reputation really is consider the following reports. Ibn Kathār reported in his *al-Tafsīr* that Ibn Mājah (d. 273 / 887) reported that Ibn ‘Umar said:

I saw the Prophet ﷺ going round the Ka’bah saying: “How good you are, and how good is your breeze! How great you are, and how great is your inviolability! By Him in Whose power is the soul of Muāammad, the inviolability (*āurmah* / ) of a believer is greater than yours – [the inviolability] of his property, and his blood, and [the inviolability of his honour, for it is not permitted] to think of him anything but good.

Ibn Kathār reported that al-Ismà'álá (d. 381 / 982) reported that Ibn 'Umar once looked at the Ka'bah and said:

How great you are, and how great is your inviolability (*äurmah* / )! However, the inviolability of a believer in the sight of Allàh is greater than your inviolability.

Let a Muslim consider what a sacrilege it would be to slight the Ka'bah, or to insult it. Then, let him keep in mind that it is a greater sacrilege to slight the honour of another Muslim as the previous reports show.

It should be made clear at this point that backbiting (Arabic: *ghābah* / ) refers to mentioning something about a fellow Muslim which, although it is true, is demeaning. Whether or not a thing is demeaning will be known by considering whether or not it is something the person would like to hear if he were present. Imām Muslim reported from the Companion Abā Hurairah that the Messenger of Allàh ﷺ one day asked the Companions if they knew what backbiting meant. They replied that Allàh and His Messenger knew better. The Prophet ﷺ said: "It means your mentioning about your brother what he would dislike to hear." One of them asked: "Suppose what we say about him is true?" The Prophet ﷺ replied: "If what you say about him is true, you have backbitten him; whereas, if what you say about him is not true, you have slandered [libelled] him." Ibn Abā al-Dunyā (d. 281 h. / 894; Baghdād) reported that the Companion Ibn Mas'ād said: "Backbiting (*ghābah*) means that you say something [derogatory] that you know about your brother; whereas, if you say about him what is not true [literally: not in him], that is libel (*buhtān* / )."

We should be warned here that slandering a Muslim, or libelling him by saying something offensive about him which is not true [which in Arabic is called *buhtān*, or *buht* / ] is a ticket to Hell. Al-Zabādā reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Whoever slandered a Muslim, Allàh will confine him in the Dregs of Khabal." The Prophet ﷺ explained that *the Dregs of Khabal* is a place in Hell where the blood, pus, and drippings of the damned collect.

Ibn Äjir al-Haitamá (d. 975 h. / 1567; Makkah) reported in his book *al-Zawājir 'alā Iqtirāf al-Kabā'ir* that al-Äabarāná (d. 360 / 971; Isfahàn) reported with a strong (*jayyid* / ) chain of narration the following *äadāth*:

Whoever mentioned what is not true about a man in order to discredit him, Allàh will confine him in the fire of *Jahannam* (Hell) until he should undo what he said about him.

Ibn Äjir mentioned that al-Äabarāná (d. 360 / 971; Isfahàn) reported another version of that *äadāth*:

Any man who spreads talk about a Muslim of which he is innocent in order to shame him in this world, Allàh will take it upon Himself to cause him to melt in the Fire on the Day of Resurrection until he should undo what he said about him.

He reported that Äämad (d. 241 h. / 855; Baghdād) reported the following *äadāth*:

Five things brook no expiation [reparation]: to believe that Allàh has an associate or that anything is like Him (*shirk* / ), to take a life without any due warrant, to libel [that is, slander by saying what is not true about a person], to flee from battle in the face of the enemy, to swear falsely, and knowingly in the name of Allàh in order to take unlawfully a person's property.

## Backbiting Is Worse Than Adultery And Usury

While few people appreciate the offensiveness of backbiting a Muslim, people of religion are normally appalled by sins like adultery, usury, and drinking, perhaps because their harm is more tangible: adultery destroys the family and breaks bonds which are holy, while usury bleeds a man's property, and drinking leads to every abomination. Yet, backbiting is worse than usury, and usury is worse than adultery.

Al-Ääkim (Abâ ʿAbd Allâh, d. 405 h. / 1014) narrated in his *al-Mustadrak* from Shuʿbah from Zaid from Ibrâhâm from Masrâq that [the Companion] Ibn Masʿûd said: the Messenger of Allâh ﷺ said:

Usury (*al-riba* ) has seventy-three [levels] of sin, the least of which is like the sin of a man who couples with his mother, and the worst form of usury is to attack the reputation (*ʿirç* / ) of a Muslim.

Al-Ääkim declared this *äadâth* to be utterly authentic (*äâäää*) according to the criteria (*sharâ* / ) of the two *shaiḥhs* [that is, al-Bukhârâ and Muslim, and what he means by *criteria* is that the narrators of this *äadâth* are all narrators whom both al-Bukhârâ and Muslim transmitted from in their respective *Äääääs* although they did not report the *äadâth*]. Furthermore, al-Dhahabâ (d.748 / 1348; Damascus) confirmed the opinion of al-Ääkim in his *al-Talkhâä* (in which he edited *al-Mustadrak*) by saying: "It is according to the criteria (*sharâ* / ) of al-Bukhârâ and Muslim." Imâm al-Suyâtâ (d. 911 / 1505; Cairo) also indicated that this *äadâth* is rigorously authentic (*äâäää*) in his *al-Jâmiʿ al-Saghâr*. ʿAbd al-Raʿâf al-Munâwâ (d. 1031 / 1622; Cairo) mentioned in his commentary of *al-Jâmiʿ al-Saghâr* that al-Ääfiæ al-ʿIrâqâ (Zain al-Dân, d. 806 h. / 1404; Cairo) mentioned in his *al-Mughni ʿan Äamli ʿl-Asfâr fi ʿl-Asfâr*, which we had occasion to mention at the outset of this treatise, that the chain of narration (*sanad*) of this *äadâth* is rigorously authentic (*äâäää*).

Nâr al-Dân al-Haithamâ (d. 807 / 1405; Cairo) reported in his *al-Majmaʿ al-Zawâʿid*<sup>5</sup> that Äʿishah ﷺ said:

The Messenger of Allâh ﷺ asked his Companions: "Do you know what is the worst kind of adultery (*al-zinâ* / ) in the sight of Allâh?" They replied: "Allâh and His Messenger know better." He said: "The worst kind of adultery in the sight of Allâh is to have a free hand at the reputation of a Muslim." Then he recited [the verse of the Qurʿân]: "Those who harm believing men and women, not for anything they have done, they have committed libel and an obvious sin." (*al-Azâb*: 33:58)

Al-Haithamâ ascribed the *äadâth* to Abâ Yaʿlâ (307 h. / 919; Mosul), and he declared the *äadâth* to be rigorously authentic (*äâäää*). However, the wording which Ibn Ääjr narrated is "...the worst kind of usury (*al-riba* / )" instead of "...the worst kind of adultery (*al-zinâ* /)". The two phrases are quite similar in form since they are distinguished in the original Arabic only by a dot.

Ääfiæ al-Mundhirâ (d.656 / 1258; Egypt) also reported this *äadâth* in his *al-Targhâb wa ʿl-Tarhâb* with the word "usury (*al-riba* / )" instead of "adultery (*al-zinâ* /)". Moreover, he also declared that the narrators were the narrators of the *Äääää* [of al-Bukhârâ] which means that the *äadâth* would be rigorously authentic (*äâäää*) provided it were free of any hidden defect (*ʿillah* / ), and that it was not at variance with *äadâth* which are sounder than it [that is, it were not what is technically termed *shâdh* / ].

Ibn Ääjr reported in his *al-Zawâjir* that al-Bazâr (d. 292 / 905; al-Ramlah, Palestine) reported with a strong (*jayyid* / ) chain of narration (*sanad*) [which means it is either rigorously authentic (*äâäää*), or authentic (*äasan*)]: "The worst form of usury (*al-riba* / ) is that a person attack the reputation (*ʿirç* / ) of his brother."

<sup>5</sup> (Beirut, Dâr al-Rayân, Dâr al-Kutub al-ʿArabâ, n.d.), p. 92; vol. 8

Abâ Dâwâd al-Sijistânâ (d. 275 / 889; Basra), one of the foremost imâms of *âadâth* and the author of the *Sunan* which is one of the six standard collections of *âadâth*, reported in his *Sunan* (*âadâth* no. 4876) in the chapter *Kitâb al-Adab* in the section *al-Ghâbah* from the Companion Sa'âd ibn Zaid: "Among the worst form of usury (*al-riba*) is to attack the reputation (*'irç*) of a Muslim without warrant."

Al-Munâwâ observed in his *al-Faiç al-Qadâr* (p. 531; vol. 2), a commentary on *al-Jâmi' al-Saghâr* of al-Suyâtâ, as did Ibn al-Athâr in his *Jâmi' al-Uââl*, that Abâ Dâwâd was silent about the status of this *âadâth*, the implication being that the *âadâth* is rigorously authentic (*ââââ*) according to Abâ Dâwâd. Although that is not always the case as Ibn Âajr al-'Asqalânâ (d. 852 / 1449; Cairo) and al-Sakhâwâ (d. 902 / 1497; Medina) verified; however, it *is* the case here as was confirmed by 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Arna'ât, a contemporary scholar of *âadâth*, in his annotation to the *âadâth* in the *Jâmi' al-Uââl* of Ibn al-Athâr which he edited. Al-Suyâtâ designated by abbreviation [his normal practice in his *al-Jâmi' al-Saghâr*] that the *âadâth* is authentic (*âasan*). NB: Require more documentation here. Check the commentaries of the *Sunan*.

The wording of the *âadâth* of Abâ Hurairah referred previously which was reported in *al-Majma' al-Zawâ'id* of al-Haithamâ is: "The worst form of adultery (*al-zinâ*) is a man's attacking the reputation of his brother."

#### A Section on the Significance of a *Hadîth*'s Being Corroborated by Reports from Other Companions (*Shawahid*) or by Other Lines of Transmission (*Tawabi'*)

In order to make an important point, I will have to digress here briefly in order to acquaint those who do not have much of a background in the Science of the Principles of *Âadâth* (*'Ilm 'Usâl al-Âadâth*) with a basic precept. A *âadâth* of one Companion which corroborates the meaning of another *âadâth* of another Companion is referred to technically as a *shâhid*. A *âadâth* may be rated weak (*çâ'îf*) because one of its narrators (*ruwât*) was found to have weak memory, or because it was his custom to try to conceal the identity of his *shaikh* who was weak by referring to him by a name by which he is not well known, or which misleads the unwary to think he is somebody else who has a good standing among the experts [which is a demeanour referred to technically as *tadlâs*], or because the *âadâth* is discontinuous (*mursal*). Now if that weak *âadâth* was reported from another Companion [that is, it has a *shâhid*], or by the same Companion but by way of a chain of narration (*sanad*) which doesn't have that weak narrator (*râwâ*) [that is, it has a *tâbi'*]; then the weak (*çâ'îf*) *âadâth* will acquire an improved status: *authentic by virtue of other than itself* (*âasan li ghairihâ*) provided that the chain of narration (*sanad*) does not contain anyone who was known to be a forger of *âadâth* or was suspected of it. This point is a well known rule, and is expounded in the authoritative texts of the science like *Taçrâb al-Râwî* by al-Suyâtâ, and *Fatâ al-Mughâth* of al-Sakhâwâ. Êafar Aämad al-'Uthmânâ (d. 1394 h. / 1974; Pakistan) discussed the rule in his *Qawâ'id fi 'Ulâm al-Âadâth*,<sup>7</sup> and he referred to authorities like al-'Irâqâ, Ibn Âajr al-'Asqalânâ, Ibn al-Humâm, al-Suyâtâ, and al-Sha'rânâ. Similarly, if a *âadâth* does not fulfil the rigorous requirements to be graded as rigorously authentic (*ââââ*), but it has a *shâhid*, or a *tâbi'* which corroborate it, it will acquire the new status: *rigorously authentic by virtue of other than itself* (*ââââ li ghairihâ*).

Having learned the rule, consider that the *âadâth* of Sa'âd ibn Zaid (which Abâ Dâwâd al-Sijistânâ reported) is corroborated by the *âadâth* of Ibn Mas'âd which al-Ââkim narrated and which we mentioned previously, for it also has the words "...the worst form of usury is to attack the reputation of a Muslim." Furthermore, al-Suyâtâ mentioned in his *al-Jâmi' al-Saghâr* that the *âadâth* was also reported by Imâm Aämad, and al-Munâwâ mentioned in his commentary on *al-Jâmi' al-Saghâr* that

<sup>6</sup> (Beirut, Dâr al-Kitâb al-'Arabâ, n.d.), p. 92; vol. 8.

<sup>7</sup> (Riyâç, al-'Aibakân, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1404h.), p. 78

al-Bazār (d. 292 / 905; al-Ramlah, Palestine) reported the *āadāth* is his *al-Musnad* from Abā Hurairah with two chains of narration (*sanad*), one of which Ääfiæ al-Mundhirā (d.656 / 1258; Egypt) declared [in his *al-Targhāb wa 'l-Tarhāb*] to have a strong (*qawā' /* ) chain of narration (*sanad*). Al-Munawā further mentioned that al-Haithamā, (d. 807 / 1405; Cairo) said [in his *al-Majma' al-Zawā'id*] that the narrators (*ruwāt /* ) of one of the [two] chains of narration are the narrators of the *Āāāāā* of al-Bukhārā except for Muāammad ibn Nu'aim who [nonetheless] is utterly reliable (*thiqah*) although he has some weakness. The weakness referred to here is a relative matter and does not at any rate impair his status as utterly reliable (*thiqah*); otherwise, al-Haithamā would not have called him utterly reliable (*thiqah*), but merely reliable (*ādāq /* ) which technically refers to a degree of reliability slightly less than utterly reliable (*thiqah*). Given these several corroborating chains along with an original rigorously authentic (*āāāāā*) chain in both the report of Ibn Mas'ād, and Sa'ād ibn Zaid, one can appreciate that the *āadāth* is very authentic indeed. In fact, even the weak versions of this *āadāth* by virtue of the rigorously authentic (*āāāāā*) versions will acquire the status of authentic by virtue of other than itself, while the authentic versions will acquire the status of rigorously authentic (*āāāāā*).

Ibn Äajr al-Haitamā mentioned in his *al-Zawājir* that Ibn Abā al-Dunyā (d. 281 h. / 894; Baghdād), an early compiler of *āadāth* (*muāaddith*), reported from the Prophet ﷺ:

Usury (*al-ribā /* ) has seventy degrees of sinfulness, the least [form] of which were as if a man were to couple [to have intercourse] with his mother, and the worst usury (*al-ribā*) is to offend the reputation [or honour, Arabic: *'irç /* ] of a Muslim.

Ibn Abā al-Dunyā reported it in his *Kitāb al-Ghābah* (*āadāth* no. 34) from Abā Hurairah. al-Zabādā mentioned in his commentary (p. 327; vol. 8) that it was reported by Ibn Jarār al-Äabarā (d. 310 / 923; Baghdād) and al-Baihaqā, and he said that Ibn Mājah reported it in abridged form. Furthermore, al-Zabādā mentioned that the *āadāth* was reported by Abā Hurairah, Ibn Mas'ād, al-Barā', and Ä'ishah. It means that the *āadāth* of Abā Hurairah has at least three corroborating *āadāth*, that is, *shawāhid* [the plural of *shāhid*], and as I explained already even a weak *āadāth* will become strong if it has *shawāhid*. The only condition is that the *āadāth* not be a forged one; this provision is superfluous if we do not consider forged *āadāths* to be included in the class of weak *āadāths*. Al-Ääfiæ al-'Irāqā (Zain al-Dān, d. 806 h. / 1404; Cairo) mentioned in his *al-Mughni 'an Äamli 'l-Asfār* that the *āadāth* of Ibn Mājah has in its chain of narration (*sanad*) Abā Ma'shar, whose name is Najāā, and he said that he is a narrator who is a matter of controversy among the authorities. Since the authorities maintain that if there is a difference of opinion about a narrator some holding him to be utterly reliable and others unreliable or weak, then his *āadāth* will in any case not be less than authentic (*āasan*) although they may not be rigorously authentic (*āāāāā*). That means that at worse the *āadāth* of Abā Ma'shar are authentic (*āasan*).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, al-'Irāqā mentioned that Ibn Mājah reported the *āadāth* of Ibn Mas'ād, "Usury has seventythree levels of sin...", with a rigorously authentic (*āāāāā*) chain of narration (*sanad*).

Ibn Äajr mentioned that Ibn Abā al-Dunyā reported from the Companion Anis ؓ:

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ exhorted us with a sermon (*khuābah*) in which he mentioned usury (*al-ribā*) and denounced its practice saying: A *dirham* [ , formerly a silver coin] which one acquires through usury is more abominable in the sight of Allāh than thirty-six acts of adultery (*zānā /* ) which one commits; whereas, the worst form of usury (*al-ribā*) is to offend the reputation (*'irç*) of a Muslim.

He also mentioned that Ibn Abā al-Dunyā reported from the Companions Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh ؓ , and Abā Sa'ād al-Khuçrā ؓ that they both said:

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: Beware of backbiting, for backbiting is worse than adultery (*zīnā*). How often a man commits adultery, then repents and Allāh forgives him; whereas, He will not forgive the one who backbites until the one who is backbitten forgives him.

Murtuḡa al-Zabādā mentioned while commenting on this *āadāth* which al-Ghazalā also reported:

However, that he should forgive him [that is, the one who backbit him] is quite out of the question. It is reported that a man backbit Ibn al-Jalā' and thereafter sent somebody to ask him to forgive him, but Ibn al-Jalā' refused saying: "I have not got in all my scroll [of deeds] a better deed than this! How can I efface it?"

In the chain of narration (*sanad*) of the above *āadāth* of Jābir رضي الله عنه and Abā Sa'ād al-Khuḡrā رضي الله عنه there is a narrator (*rāwā' / روى*) called 'Abbād ibn Kathār al-Ramlā whom the authorities considered weak.<sup>9</sup> However, the *āadāth* stands vindicated by virtue of numerous corroborating *āadāth* (*shawāhid*).

Al-Khaāb al-Tibrāzā (d. 741 / 1340), the author of the *āadāth* compendium *Mishkāt al-Maābāā*, reported that Anīs رضي الله عنه :

He who commits adultery (*al-zīnā / زنى*) repents; whereas, there is no repentance for he who commits backbiting (*al-ghābah / غيب*).

Mulla 'Alā al-Qarā (d. 1014 h. / 1606; Makkah), who wrote *Mirqāt al-Mafātāā*, a commentary on *Mishkāt al-Maābāā*, explained that the Prophet's statement ﷺ: "He who commits adultery repents..." means that it is conceivable that he repent, or that usually he repents because the sin of adultery is enormous in his estimation; whereas, the Prophet's statement ﷺ: "...whereas, there is no repentance for he who commits backbiting" means that usually there is no repentance for him because the sin of backbiting is insignificant in his sight; whereas, in the sight of Allāh it is great. He further mentioned that according to the adage: "When wrong (*al-balāyah / بلاء*) is widespread, it becomes right [that is, in the sight of the people]." He suggested that an alternative explanation is that there is no separate repentance for him since the acceptance of his repentance depends on the wish of the one who is offended.

Imām al-Suyātā (d. 911 / 1505; Cairo) reported in his *al-Jāmi' al-Saghār* from the Companion al-Barā' ibn 'Āzib the *āadāth* of the the Prophet ﷺ :

Usury (*al-ribā*) has seventy-two levels of sin, the least of which were like the sin of a man who had intercourse with his mother, and the worst form of usury is for a man to attack (*istiālah / استيلاء*) the reputation of his brother.

The author of *Tanzāh al-Sharā'ah al-Marfā'*<sup>10</sup>, Ibn 'Arāq mentioned that the above *āadāth* has the narrator (*rāwā' / روى*) 'Umar ibn Rāshid whom al-'Ijlā held to be utterly reliable narrator (*thiqāh*), but whom the generality of authorities held to be weak (*ḡa'āf*). However, the *āadāth* is authentic (*āasan*), or rigorously authentic (*āāāā*) by virtue of numerous corroborating *āadāth* (*shawāhid*).

The Secret of the Prophet's ﷺ Comparing Backbiting to Usury and Then Making it the Worst Kind of Usury

<sup>9</sup> As was mentioned in *Taqrīb al-Tahdhāb* of Ibn Ājir al-'Asqalānā entry no. 3140, and in *Khulāāah Tahdhāb Tahdhāb al-Kamāl* of Āfā al-Dān al-Khazrajā (d. after 923 / after 1517)

<sup>10</sup>(Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Alamāyah 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1401 h.), p. 105; vol. 2

Al-Munawá explained in his commentary that the word *istiàlah* , which I translated as *attack*, means *to look down on*, or *to be haughty with*, or *to attack the honour of*. He quoted al-Qàçá al-Baidawá:

*To attack his honour* means to take from it more than he has a right to given what has been said to him [by the one whom he backbites], and more than is permitted him [according to the *Shará'ah*]. That is why it was compared to usury and, in fact, made a type of usury; then, moreover, made the worst of all types of it, for backbiting is more harmful than usury, and more evil. Honour is more precious and more serious to the soul than property by virtue of both reason and the *Shará'ah*, and that is why the Lawgiver (*al-Shàri'* ) [that is, Allàh or His Messenger] obliged in the case of defamation of honour what it did not oblige in the case of plundering of property. [Presumably, he means that To Be completed.

Consider that any acquaintance which is made between two Muslims, necessarily entails a mutual trust: each Muslim is obliged to respect and honour the other. It were as if the reputation of each one of them was on loan to the other, for a person's reputation is a most sacred trust. It is incumbent on us to preserve the reputation of an acquaintance. However, if we backbite him, we decrease his reputation and devour his honour just as the usurer (moneylender) devours the property of one who takes a loan from him by taking interest instead of preserving his property by taking back only as much as he originally loaned. Moreover, what the backbiter devours is more precious to a Muslim than what the usurer devours. It would seem that that is why the Prophet ﷺ called it the worst form of usury, but Allàh, high and holy is He, knows best.

#### An Answer to the Claim of Abu al-Faraj Ibn al-Jauzi That the *Hadiths* Which Explicitly Declare Backbiting to Be the Worst Form of Usury and Usury to Be Far Worse than Adultery

I have laboured the matter of the incontestable authenticity of the *àadàth* which declare backbiting to be far worse than adultery and usury for a particular reason. The reason is that Abà 'I-Faraj Ibn al-Jauzà (d. 597 / 1201; Baghdad), one of the great scholars of Islàm, the author of about three hundred books, and the first to produce a specialised work on forged *hadiths*, dedicated a chapter in that work on forged *àadàth*, which is known as *al-Maudà'at*, in which he examined many of the reports which declare usury to be more sinful than adultery (and among them the reports which make backbiting worse than both of them). He maintained that all are apocryphal (*bààil* ), for he claimed at the end of the chapter:

Know that one of the things which refutes the authenticity of these *àadàth* is that the degree of acts of disobedience is known by its effect. Now adultery corrupts genealogy [that is, descent: *al-ansàb* ], and results in inheritance being given to those who do not deserve it, and brings about ugly effects in a way which eating a morsel which does not lead to the commission of something prohibited does not.

Although the last part if this statement is slightly confusing, the general meaning is clear – Ibn Jauzà insists that the tangible harm of adultery is enormous, whereas the tangible harm of usury is not comparable to it. That the tangible harm of adultery enormous is something which no Muslim would dispute with him. However, it does not follow that because the harm caused by backbiting to a person's reputation is not tangible its harm can not be greater than the harm of adultery. Honour and reputation are intangible things to start with, yet their sacredness is awesome. The Prophet ﷺ declared the honour and inviolability of a Muslim's blood, property and honour to be like the honour and inviolability of the Day of Arafah, in the sacred month of Hajj, in the holy precinct of Makkah; indeed, he declared the inviolability of a Muslim to be greater than that of the Holy Ka'bah, and Allàh, exalted is He, compared the sin of backbiting to eating the dead flesh of a brother. So if numerous reports, many of which are rigorously authentic (*àààà*) on their own, come to us from the Prophet ﷺ informing us that

usury is much worse than adultery, and backbiting is the worse kind of usury, we had better to take the matter very seriously and be warned, rather than to philosophise. Al-Munàwá reported that al-Ghazàlá said: "The people who spend all the day attacking the honour of people and do not consider that wrong are amazing – especially considering that the Prophet ﷺ says that backbiting is worse than adultery! Those who can not manage to control their tongues when they talk with the people should seek [asylum in] seclusion, for it is easier to be patient with loneliness than it is to be patient with being quiet in association."<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, al-Suyâtá in his *al-La'ali al-Masnâ'a* in the chapter *al-Mu'âmalât* contradicted Ibn al-Jauzî and showed that some of the *âdâth* that are relevant to our topic are rigorously authentic (*ââââ*); whereas, others are strengthened by *shawâhid* and *tawâbi'* [plural of *tâbi'*; that is, a variant chain of narration to the same Companion]. Indeed, Ibn 'Arrâq quoted Ibn Hajr al-'Asqalâná in his *al-Qaul al-Musaddid* referring to Ibn al-Jauzî as *reckless* because he maintained that Äusain ibn Muâammad ibn Bahrâm al-Marwazî who related the *âdâth* of 'Abd Allâh ibn Äanzalah: "A dirhem of usury which a man eats knowingly is worse than thirty-six acts of adultery," was weak (*ça'âf*). Ibn Hajr answered him saying: "Äusain ibn Muâammad was a narrator (*râwá* رَوَى) whom both al-Bukhârâ and Muslim depended on; the authorities agreed that he was utterly reliable (*thiqah*). Moreover, he did not relate this *âdâth* alone, for others related it too [that is, there are *tawâbi'*]." <sup>12</sup> Then Ibn Äajr mentioned the corroborating reports of other narrators.

Ibn al-Jauzî is famous for his hasty dismissal of sound *âdâth* as forged. That is what prompted Imâm al-Suyâtá to write his *al-La'ali al-Maânâ'ah fâ 'l-Aâdâth al-Maudâ'ah* in which he revised the entire *al-Mauçâ'ât* of Ibn al-Jauzî correcting over three hundred *âdâth* as al-Suyâtá mentioned at the end of his book *al-Ta'aqqabât* in which he abridged his book *al-Nukat al-Badâ'ât* which latter book he wrote only to mention the places in which he corrected Ibn al-Jauzî.<sup>13</sup> Al-Suyâtá said at the end of *al-Ta'aqqabât*:

The number of *âdâth* in which I have corrected Ibn al-Jauzî [for claiming *âdâth* to be forged] which in no way can be considered forged is about three hundred *âdâth*. Among them there is one *âdâth* in the *Äâââ* of Muslim, one *âdâth* in the *Äâââ* of al-Bukhârâ as it was narrated by Äammâd ibn Shâkir [he is one of the students of al-Bukhârâ and one of the important transmitters of the *Äâââ*], thirty-eight *âdâth* from the *Musnad* of Imâm Äamad, nine from the *Sunan* of Abâ Dâwâd, thirty from *al-Jâmi'* of *al-Tirmidhâ*, ten *âdâth* from the *Sunan* of al-Nisâ'á, thirty *âdâth* from the *Sunan* of Ibn Mâjah, sixty *âdâth* from the *al-Mustadrak* of al-Äâkim. Then by counting only once the *âdâth* which recur in the different books more than once, we get a total sum of one hundred and thirty *âdâth* from the six standard collections (*al-kutub al-sittah* / ), the *Musnad*, and *al-Mustadrak*. Then there are a large number of *âdâth* [which Ibn al-Jauzî claimed to be forged but which in no way can be considered forged] in the compilations of al-Baihaqá: *al-Sunan*, *al-Shu'ab*, *al-Ba'th*, *al-Dalâ'il*, and others; and the *Äâââ* of Ibn Khuzaimah and his *al-Tauââd*, and the *Äâââ* of Ibn Äibbân, and the *Musnad* of al-Dârimá, *al-Târikh* of al-Bukhârâ, and his *Khalq al-Af'âl*, and his *Jâz al-Qirâ'ah*, and the *Sunan* of al-Dâraquâná.<sup>14</sup>

'Abd al-Äayy al-Laknawá (d. 1304 / 1886; Lucknow, India), one of the foremost masters of the Science of *Äâdâth* in the previous century without any doubt, and a prolific author of precious works

<sup>11</sup> *al-Faiç al-Qadîr*, p. 129; vol. 3

<sup>12</sup> *Tanzîh al-Sharâ'ah al-Marfâ'ah 'An 'l-Akhbâr al-Shaná'ah al-Mauçâ'ah*, (Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-'Älamâyah, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1401), p. 194; vol. 2

<sup>13</sup> Introduction to *Tanzîh al-Sharâ'ah*, p. , by 'Abd al-Wahhâb ibn 'Abd al-Laâáf

<sup>14</sup> 'Abd al-Fattâa Abâ Ghuddah, who edited *al-Raf'u wa 'l-Takmâl fâ 'l-Jarâ wa 'l-Ta'dâl*, (Beirut, Dâr al-Bashâ'ir al-Islâmâyah, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1407), mentioned that al-Suyâtá mentioned in his *al-Ta'aqqabât 'alâ 'l-Maudâ'ât* (al-Maâba' al-Muâammadá), p. 74 and (al-Maâba' al-'Alawá), p. 60

in the field, mentioned in his *al-Raf' u wa 'l-Takmál fā 'l-Jarä wa 'l-Ta'däl*, a masterly text on the Science of Narrators and Criticism:

Know that there are a number of *äadäth* scholars (*muäaddithän*) who are close-minded and impetuous (*muta'annitän*) in their criticism of *äadäth* on account of their narrators, for they all too hastily claim a *äadäth* to be forged if they find any fault with a narrator (*räwä*) no matter how slight, or because a *äadäth* is [seemingly] opposed to other *äadäth*. Among them [that is, among those close-minded and impetuous *äadäth* scholars (*muäaddithän*)] is Ibn al-Jauzá, the author of *al-Mauçä'ät*, *al-'Ilal al-Mutanähiyah fi 'l-Aäädäth al-Wähiyah*.<sup>15</sup>

Why did Ibn al-Jauzá make the mistakes that he did and earn the reputation among the authorities as impetuous and unreliable in his claims that *äadäth* are forged? Imäm al-Suyätä has provided some valuable insights into the matter. He mentioned in his *al-La'älä al-Maänä'ah fä 'l-Aäädäth al-Maudä'ah*<sup>16</sup> in the chapter *al-Mubtada'* the *äadäth*: "Three things increase the strength of eyesight: looking at green vegetation, at running water, at a handsome face." After enumerating many different lines of transmission for this *äadäth*, and many *shawähid* and *tawäbi'* [I trust that the attentive reader has learned the meaning of these two vital technical terms by now], al-Suyätä said:

Know that it is quite customary for the *hufäæ*<sup>17</sup> like al-Ääkim [d.405 h. / 1014], Ibn Äibbän [d. 354 / 1019; Bust], and al-'Uqailä [d. 323 / 934; Makkah], and others to pronounce a *äadäth* to be apocryphal (*bääl*) because of a particular chain of narration (*sanad*) for that particular text (*matn*), yet that text is well-known by different lines of transmission (*äuruq*). The *hufäæ* mention instances of such forgery in the record (*tarjumah*) of a narrator (*räwä*) to denounce him as a forger. Now Ibn al-Jauzá is deceived by that, for [it is his habit] to pronounce the text (*matn*) to be forged unconditionally [that is, he pretends that every line of transmission is forged], and he records that in his *al-Mauçä'ät*. That is quite inappropriate and the people have blamed him for that, among them lately Ibn Äajr al-'Asqalänä<sup>18</sup> [d. 852 / 1449; Cairo]. Now his listing the present *äadäth* as forged is an example of that [that is, declaring the text (*matn*) to be forged unconditionally just because somebody happened to forge a *sanad* for it, although there are other lines of transmission and *shawähid* which al-Suyätä enumerated]

Al-Ääkim stated in the record of his shaikh Abä Bakr Muäammad ibn Aämad ibn Härän al-Shäfi'ä: "One day I visited Abä Muäammad 'Abd Alläh ibn Aämad al-Thaqafä al-Muzakkä and he related to me a *äadäth* with a tenebrous *sanad* up to al-Äajjä ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafä: He said: I heard [the Companion] Samurah ibn Jundab ascribe to the Prophet ﷺ: "For whomever Alläh desires good, He gives him the [minute] understanding of the religion." I declared: "It is apocryphal (*bääl*)! Abä Bakr al-Shäfi'ä only wanted to win your favour [by mentioning a line of transmission in which al-Äajjä ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafä figures] because you are a descendent of al-Äajjä."

Now it is well known that that particular text (*matn*) is rigorously authentic (*ääää*) by virtue of other lines of transmission (*äuruq*). Al-Ääkim pronounced it to be forged on account of that concocted *sanad* which Abä Bakr al-Shäfi'ä forged. How often we find the au-

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Raf' u wa 'l-Takmäl fä 'l-Jarä wa 'l-Ta'däl*, (Beirut, Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmīyah, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1407), pp. 320-325

<sup>16</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Äufäæ* refers to those experts who know by what lines of transmission there are for a given *äadäth*, and know the status of their narrators and their *shaiks* and the *shaikhs* of their *shaiks* knowing more of the narrators at each level of transmission (*al-äbaqah*) than they do not know. It does not simply mean one who has memorised vast numbers of *äadäth*. This definition was provided by Äafar Aämad al-'Uthmänä (d. 1394 h. / 1974; Pakistan) in his *Qawä'id fi 'Ulām al-Äadäth*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Äajr criticised *al-Mauçä'ät* of Ibn al-Jauzá in his *al-Qaul al-Musaddid fi 'l-Dhabb 'an Musnad Aämad* mentioning twenty-four *äadäth* which Ibn al-Jauzá claimed to be forged but which are not. He wrote that book specifically to correct Ibn al-Jauzá, and to warn the people of his excesses.

thorities saying: "This *äadäth* is apocryphal (*bääll* ) by this *sanad*." It means that the other *sanads* are not [necessarily] apocryphal.

That kind of a statement [which concerns a concocted *sanad* stuck on to an authentic text (*matn*)] is not something which should be mentioned in books which record forged *äadäth*, rather, it should be registered in the books of criticism and authentication (*jarä wa ta'däl* ) [of narrators] under the record (*tarjumah* ) of the person [who concocted the *sanad* and] deserves to be discredited.<sup>19</sup>

'Abd al-Fattaä Abä Ghuddah in a note to *al-Raf'u wa 'l-Takmil fä 'l-Jarä wa 'l-Ta'däl*<sup>20</sup> which he edited and annotated with learned and documented notes referred to another example of the mistake of judging a text (*matn*) to be apocryphal (*bääll* ) because of a concocted *sanad*. The example was again provided by al-Suyätä in his *al-La'älä al-Maänä'ah fä 'l-Aäädäth al-Maudä'ah* where he mentioned that al-Khaäb [al-Baghdädä, d. 463 / 1072; Baghdad] denounced a certain *äadäth* to be forged and that Ibn al-Jauzá therefore listed it in his *al-Mauçä'ät* as a forged *äadäth*. Al-Suyätä remarked: "This *äadäth* should not be listed as forged since it has been transmitted by other than this [concocted] *sanad*." <sup>21</sup>

'Abd al-Fattaä, Alläh bless his soul and benefit us from his awesome erudition, explained: "Now the point which Äafiä al-Suyätä is making is a point of great consequence, for he has pinpointed the difference between what is supposed to be registered in the books of forged *äadäth* (*al-mauçä'ät* ), and what is supposed to be registered in the books of criticism and authentication (*al-jarä wa 'l-ta'däl* ) [of narrators]. So get it, and hold on to it! Alläh teach and guide you!"<sup>22</sup>

'Abd al-Fattaä thereafter mentioned that one of his *shaihs*, Aämad ibn al-Äädäq al-Ghumärä, discussed this failing in the scholarship of Ibn al-Jauzá in his book [that is, the book of Aämad ibn al-Äädäq al-Ghumärä] *al-Mathnaunä wa 'l-Battär* (p. 172; vol. 1) where he wrote:

The fact that a *äadäth* becomes stronger by virtue of the plurality of its lines of transmission (*äuruq* ) so that it rises from the status of weak (*ça'if*) to the status of authentic (*äasan*), or from the status of authentic (*äasan*) to the status of rigorously authentic (*äaäää*) is well-known. However, because Ibn al-Jauzá did not [know or] look for other lines of transmission and did not consider the matter holistically [that is, judge the text (*matn*) with the sum total of lines of transmission in view], he made the blunders that he did in his *al-Mauçä'ät*. For frequently he claimed [*äadäth* which are actually only] weak (*ça'if*) to be forged; yet, those *äadäth* [which he claimed to be forged] do not deserve to be relegated to the status of even very weak (*wähäl* ) let alone to the status of forged (*mauçä'ah* ); and likewise, he claimed to be forged *äadäth* which are authentic (*äasan*) and rigorously authentic (*äaäää*). The *äufäæ* rallied to protest, and they warned about [the shortcomings of] his *al-Mauçä'ät*, and they admonished the people from depending on his judgements unless they were competent authorities [capable of recognising for themselves when he is right].

Now the reason for his blunders is that he finds a *sanad* with some narrator (*räwä* ) who is suspected of lying (*muttähäm* ), or whose identity is unknown (*majhäl* ) and rather than search for another corroborating *sanad*, he proceeds rashly to pronounce the *äadäth*

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Raf'u wa 'l-Takmil fä 'l-Jarä wa 'l-Ta'däl*, pp. 325-326, in a footnote by the editor and annotator, 'Abd al-Fattaä Abä Ghuddah, which note he referred to *al-La'älä al-Maänä'ah fä 'l-Aäädäth al-Maudä'ah*, p. 117; vol. 1. However, he observed that there were serious omissions in the print, so he amended it by referring to original manuscripts.

<sup>20</sup> p. 326

<sup>21</sup> 'Abd al-Fattaä Abä Ghuddah mentioned in a note in *al-Raf'u wa 'l-Takmil fä 'l-Jarä wa 'l-Ta'däl*, p. 326, that the source of this citation from al-Suyätä to *al-La'älä al-Maänä'ah fä 'l-Aäädäth al-Maudä'ah*, p. 43; vol. 1, and he referred the listing of the *äadäth* as forged by Ibn al-Jauzá to his *al-Mauçä'ät*, p. 136; vol. 1 (presumably those are older prints).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-327

[meaning its text (*matn*)] to be forged; whereas, there are actually other chains of narration (*asānād* / , the plural of *sanad*) which preclude the possibility of declaring the *āadāth* to be forged. Rather, it rises to the status of authentic (*āasan*), or rigorously authentic (*āāāā*) as Āāfiā al-‘Irāqā [Zain al-Dān, d. 806 h. / 1404; Cairo], and his student Āāfiā Ibn Āajr al-‘Asqalānā [d. 852 / 1449; Cairo] expounded in their books and their dictations (*amālī himā /* ). Moreover, both of them wrote specific treatises to vindicate particular *āadāth* of the *Musnad* [of Imām Aāmad from the allegations of forgery levelled by Ibn al-Jauzā. Ibn Āajr criticised *al-Mauçā‘āt* of Ibn al-Jauzā in his *al-Qaul al-Musaddid fi ‘I-Dhabb ‘an Musnad Aāmad* mentioning twenty-four *āadāth* which Ibn al-Jauzā claimed to be forged but which are not.]. Al-Suyātā followed them up with his book *al-Ta‘aqqabāt* mentioning that many *āadāth* [which Ibn al-Jauzā claimed to be forged] are authentic (*āasan*) and rigorously authentic (*āāāā*) because of *shawāhid* and *tawābi‘*. Ibn al-Jauzā is to be forgiven for that for he did not realise that there are *shawāhid* and *tawābi‘*.

After quoting Aāmad ibn al-Āadāq al-Ghumārā, ‘Abd al-Fattaā remarked:

The excuse for that is not very convincing since a person who undertakes to judge a *āadāth* has to look for all lines of transmission, or at least qualify his statements and judgements [by saying that this particular *sanad* is forged, or that I have not been able to find any sound version of this *āadāth*]. For just as it is not correct for a judge to decide on an issue without knowing all the evidence, both for and against, it is certainly not excusable for a person to compile a book on forged *āadāth* without making exhaustive researches to find all lines of transmission. To reject what the the Prophet ﷺ actually said is a serious matter, and so judging *āadāth* to be forged is an enormous responsibility.

The reason I have discussed in so much detail the foibles of Ibn al-Jauzā is that some contemporary writers blindly follow him in declaring *āadāth* to be forged, or they follow previous authors of works on forged *āadāth*, like al-Shaukānā<sup>23</sup>, who blindly followed him. What has come to us from the the Prophet ﷺ concerning the abomination of backbiting has come to us by incontestably authentic transmission. The Prophet ﷺ made a point of emphasizing its loathsomeness by comparing the taking of a single dirhem of usury to thirty six acts of adultery, and the least form of usury to having intercourse with one’s mother in public. Then he declared backbiting to be the worst form of usury. It were as if words can not even describe its execrability, for what ungodly thing, what unspeakable crime could be worse than to have public intercourse with one’s mother! If a Muslim believes what the Prophet ﷺ said and keeps what he said in mind, how can he backbite when he recoils at the thought of having intercourse with his mother, let alone what is more execrable than it? So let not Satan cheat us out of guidance by letting ourselves be persuaded to pretend that the *āadāth* which declare backbiting to be far worse than adultery are forged, or that the Prophet ﷺ only meant to frighten us. Allāh forbid, he was not a liar, nor a pretender! Nor is it permissible to pretend that it is a question of hyperbole (that is, figurative exaggeration of the truth) because the universal rule is that the speech of Allāh or his Prophet will be taken literally unless there is a conclusive indication that shows that the literal meaning is not implied, or unless the literal meaning contradicts the *Sharī‘ah* or reason. For example, the Prophet ﷺ described one of the Companions when a woman asked him his opinion about the man since she was considering to marry and he replied: “As for Abā Jahm, he never takes the rod off his shoulders.” Now the Prophet ﷺ meant to say that Abā Jahm habitually beat his family members or his wives. He did not mean to say that he ate, slept, bathed and prayed with his cane on his shoulders because that is improbable. The fact that it is improbable dictates that the literal meaning is not implied, and everybody can understand what the Prophet ﷺ meant without any confusion. It is an example of a figure of speech called *majāz mursal* / one kind of which is to say all of some-

thing and mean part of it. Allāh, exalted is He, says in his Noble Book: "They put their fingers in their ears when [they hear] the lightening bolt for fear of death."<sup>24</sup> Al-Nasafā mentioned that although fingertips is meant, the use of the word *fingers* conveys a sense of exaggeration which fingertips does not. One can easily understand that Allāh does not literally mean that they put their whole finger in their ears since that is, practically speaking, impossible. Similarly, when Allāh, exalted is He, says in His Inimitable Qur'ān: "The *Hand* of Allāh was above their hands."<sup>25</sup> any person who has proficiency in Arabic and its modes of speech, and is imbued with the light of the divine uniqueness (*al-tauāād /* ) immediately understands that the literal meaning, which is the limb of a body, is categorically not implied for Allāh is not compounded, nor does He have a body nor any of the attributes of bodies which are originated phenomena; for, Allāh, exalted is He, is the Creator not a creature; He ever existed as did all His attributes. That is known by reason and by the definitive texts of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah like Allāh's word: "Nothing is like Him and He is the One Who hears [all things that can be heard without any ear – al-Nasafā], the One Who sees [all things that can be seen without any eye – al-Nasafā]."<sup>26</sup> So since the literal meaning is precluded by reason and the *Sharā'ah*, we are compelled to understand a figurative meaning (*majāz /* ) which we either commend to Allāh, or determine according to the rules of language and with the transcendent majesty of Allāh in view. Al-Nasafā says that it means that those who took oath from Prophet ﷺ by taking his hand, it was as if they took oath from Allah Himself. Al-Suyātā says it means that Allāh was cognizant of their oath, and that He will redeem them for taking it. Ibn Juzai al-Kilbā says it is an imaginary picture (*takhyāl wa tamthāl /* ) the implication of which is that the hand of the Prophet ﷺ which is over the hands of those who took oath from him is the *Hand* of Allāh in meaning not literally, and what that means is that by taking oath from the Prophet ﷺ it were as if they took oath from Allāh

However, in the case of the *āadāth* which declare usury and backbiting to be worse than adultery, and backbiting to be the worst kind of usury, there is no indication which is sufficient warrant to interpret the *āadāth* in other than their literal implication. Nobody disputes that backbiting is a major sin (*kabārah /* ), and how could anybody dispute when Allāh explicitly declares it in the Qur'ān to be like eating the dead flesh of one's brother. No doubt adultery, and usury are also major sins, both being prohibited by the Qur'ān and Sunnah and terrible consequences promised for those who commit either of the two. However, the same is true for backbiting; so what categorical indication is there which prohibits us from understanding the *āadāth* we are concerned with in the obvious literal manner which requires that backbiting and usury are worse than adultery, and that backbiting is worse than them both? The fact that backbiting does not have a prescribed punishment (*āadd /* ) while adultery does is irrelevant; it is what the experts in the principles of *fiqh* call *a deficient effective cause* (*'illah qāāirah /* ). The proof that it is deficient is that there are sins which are clearly amongst the gravest that a human being could possibly commit, judging by what punishment is promised in the hereafter for those who commit them; yet none of them have prescribed punishments. Consider the ostentation (*riyā /* ), conceit (*'ujb /* ), disobeying one's parent's (*'aqq /* ), bearing false witness (*shaādat 'l-zār /* ), and swearing in the name of Allāh that one is telling the truth (*al-yamān al-ghamās /* ) while one is lying and knows it.

Äujjat al-Islām Imām al-Ghazālā determined the legal excuses for backbiting to be only six and Imām al-Nawawā (d. 676 h. / 1277; Hauran, Syria); and Imām Ibn Äjir al-Haitamā (d. 975 or 974 h. / 1567; Makkah); and Murtuça al-Zabādā (d. 1205 / 1790; Cairo); and other great authorities confirmed that.

<sup>24</sup> *al-Baqara*: 2:29

<sup>25</sup> *al-Fatā*: 48:10

<sup>26</sup> *al-Shurā*: 42:11

Many well-meaning people harbour the delusion, that they have a valid excuse for the backbiting that they commit, It is imperative for them to learn what actually constitutes a valid excuse to backbite.

## Concerning The Six Legitimate Excuses For Backbiting

The first excuse which Imàm al-Ghazàlá mentioned in his *lāyà' 'Ulām al-Dān* is the need to complain to someone who is in power or authority against somebody who has wronged you **provided that that person of authority is actually in a position to compel the offender to pay you back for what he has done to you.** Al-Ghazàlá very aptly gives the example of a judge who has required you to pay a bribe in some litigation. He states that you have the right to complain about that to a high authority [the president, governor, or minister of justice, for example] who has the power to compel the judge to give your money back to you, or to remove him from office. The implication here is that you may not mention that to anyone else short of the high authority. If one failed to keep the matter to himself, and told others about the judge's corruption, he would be committing backbiting which is certainly worse than the sin of extorting a bribe which, no doubt, is very serious in itself. Indeed, backbiting is worse than adultery as we learned from authentic *āadāth*

NB: The following several *āadāths* are out of place, so find an appropriate place for them.

He mentioned that Aāmad reported with an authentic (*āasan*) chain of narration, as did a number of other authorities the following *āadāth*.

Whoever defended a brother from backbiting, Allāh takes it upon Himself to free him from the Fire.

He mentioned that Imàm al-Tirmidhā (d. 279 h. / 892; Tirmidh) reported the following *āadāth* mentioning that its chain of narration (*sanad*) was authentic (*āasan*):

Whoever defended the reputation of his brother, Allāh will defend his face from the Fire on the Day of Resurrection.

Furthermore, if one speaks ill about a Muslim by referring to a sin of which he has repented, it is like saying something about him which is not true since one who repents of a sin is like one who is innocent of it. Ibn Abā al-Dunyā (d. 281 h. / 894; Baghdād) reported from the Prophet ﷺ in his *Kitāb Dhamm al-Ghābah*. "Whoever speaks ill about a Muslim concerning a sin of which he has repented, he will not die until he [himself] commits it."

It is important to realise that backbiting involves communicating anything at all about a person of which he is ashamed, as Imàm al-Ghazàlá mentioned in *lāyà' 'Ulām al-Dān*, be it something in his character, his race, his social class or caste, his looks, his body or stature, his habits, his clothes, his car or riding beast, his house, his wife, his children, his religion; that is, some impropriety or short-coming in his Islām. For example, if you mention to someone that so and so wears dirty clothes, or that his children are unmannered, or that his wife does not cover herself properly in public, or that he is fat, or lazy, or bald, or crippled, or impotent, or that his house is unclean, or that he works as a doorman, or a driver, or a garbage-man, or any such lowly job about which a person would not like others to know, or that he only studied to grade ten, or that his car is an old wreck, or that he's black, or cross-eyed, or bald, or buck-toothed, or split-lipped, or stricken with white or black leprosy, or impotent, or that his wife is barren, or that he does not pray in the mosque, or that he does not perform

*rukâ' /* or *sajdah /* properly, or that he recites the Qur'ân poorly – all such statements are backbiting, and backbiting is worse than adultery (*zânâ*).

Another think to realise is that backbiting is not restricted to the tongue, but includes any means which communicates a defect which is a cause of embarrassment to somebody whether it is by a sign of the hand, or the eye, or by imitating a person, or by writing about him. Furthermore, it is immaterial whether the person is dead or alive, for speaking ill about a person is backbiting even if he died centuries ago.

Ibn Äajr al-Haitamá ( d. 975 h./ 15 67; Makkah) in his book, *al-Zawâjir 'alâ Iqtirâf al-Kabâ'ir*, which we had occasion to mention above, related that Abâ Ya'lâ (307 h. / 919; Mosul), a famous *muâaddith* (scholar of *âadâth*), reported from Abâ Hurairah ﷺ:

We were with the Prophet ﷺ when a man got up [and left.] The people said: O Messenger of Allâh ﷺ, how feeble he is! Or they said: How weak he is! He ﷺ replied: You have backbitten your companion and devoured his flesh!

Ibn Äajr mentioned in the same book that Imâm Abâ Dawâd (275 h. / 889; Basra), one of the six most famous imâms of *âadâth*, and Imâm al-Tirmidhâ (d. 279 h. / 892), and al-Baihaqâ (d. 458 h. / 1066; Niâapur) reported a *âadâth* which al-Tirmidhâ said was *âasan ââââ* / which means that its chain of narration (*sanad*) is authentic (*âasan*) in itself and rigorously authentic (*ââââ*) by virtue of other chains (*sanads*) of the same *âadâth*. They reported that Ä'ishah ﷺ said:

I said to the Prophet ﷺ: It is enough for you that Äaffâyah [another wife of the Prophet ﷺ who before accepting Islâm was a Jewess] is so and so—some of the narrators (*ruwât /* ) said that she meant *short*. He replied: You have uttered a word which were it to be mixed with the sea, it would overpower it [that is, cause it to stink, as Ibn Äajr explained]. She said: I imitated a man in front of the Prophet ﷺ. He said: I would not imitate a person even if I were given such and such.

Imâm al-Ghazâlâ reported in his *läyâ' 'Ulâm al-Dân* a *âadâth* of Ä'ishah ﷺ:

A short woman came into our room [while the Prophet ﷺ was sitting there]. When she went away I made a sign with my hand to the Prophet ﷺ that she was short. He replied: You have backbitten her!

Murtuça al-Zabâdá mentioned in his commentary (p. 542; vol. 7) that al-Äâfiæ al-'Irâqâ said that this *âadâth* was reported by Ibn Abâ al-Dunyâ and Ibn Marduweh ( d. 410 / 1019) in his *al-Tafsîr* both of them with the same chain of narration (*sanad*) in which there is a person called Äassân ibn Mukhâriq. Äâfiæ al-'Irâqâ said that Ibn Äibbân said that Äassân is an utterly reliable narrator (*thiqah*), and al-'Irâqâ affirmed that the other narrators are utterly reliable (*thiqah*). Al-Zabâdá reported the *âadâth* of Ibn Abâ al-Dunyâ with its chain of narration (*sanad*) to Ä'ishah: "A short woman entered [my room] while the Prophet ﷺ was sitting there. I made a sign with my thumb like this, and I motioned with it to the Prophet ﷺ indicating that she was short. The Prophet ﷺ said: You have backbitten her!" The fact that Ibn Äibbân rated Äassân ibn Mukhâriq means that even if others declared him to be weak (*da'îf /* ) means that the *âadâth* can not have a status of less than reliable (*âasan /* ) according to a well-known rule of the Science of the Principles of *Äadâth*.

Ibn Äajr mentioned that Ibn Abâ al-Dunyâ reported from Ä'ishah ﷺ:

Once while I was sitting with the Prophet ﷺ I said about a woman: What a long trail (*dhail /* ) [that is, the trail of her garment which dragged along behind her] she has! The Prophet ﷺ ex-

claimed: Disgorge! Disgorge! [that is, throw out what is in your mouth.] So I disgorged a piece of flesh.”

He mentioned that Abâ Dawâd al-Tayâlasâ (d. 228 h. / 841), Ibn Abâ al-Dunyâ, and al-Baihaqâ (d. 458 h. / 1066; Niâapâr) reported from the Companion Anis:

The Prophet ﷺ ordered the people to fast one day and said: “Let nobody at all break his fast until I give him permission. So the people fasted until the evening. Then they came one by one and said: O Messenger of Allâh, I am fasting, may I have your permission to break my fast. He would, thereupon, grant them permission. Then a certain man [came and] said: O Messenger of Allâh, two girls of your people have continued to fast, and they are too shy to come and ask your permission to break fast, so give them permission to break their fast; whereupon, the Prophet ﷺ turned away from him. Then the man asked again, but again the Prophet ﷺ turned from him saying: They have not fasted. How can one who spent all the day eating the flesh of the people [pretend to] be fasting? Go to them and order them to throw up [and we shall see] if they are [really] fasting. So he went to them and told them to throw up. Each one of them threw up a clot of blood. The man returned to the Prophet ﷺ and told him [what had happened]. The Prophet ﷺ declared: By Him in whose power is my soul, if that [clot] had remained inside them, the Fire would have devoured them.

Ibn Äajr continued: A similar version [of the previous *äadâth*] was reported by Imâm Aämad (d. 241 h./855, Baghdâd), and Ibn Abâ al-Dunyâ, and al-Baihaqâ by way of a narrator (*râwâ*) who was not named from ‘Ubaid, the freedman of the Messenger of Allâh ﷺ, except that Aämad said:

... Then the Prophet ﷺ said to one of them [in this version the girls were brought to the Prophet ﷺ]: Throw up. Whereupon she threw up pus, blood, putrefaction, and flesh until she filled half a cup. Then he said to the other: Throw up. Whereupon she threw up some pus, blood, putrefaction, fresh meat and other matter until she filled the cup. Then he said: These two fasted from what Allâh had permitted them [that is, food since it is permissible for one who is not fasting], and they broke their fast with what Allâh had prohibited them from: they sat together and began to eat the flesh of people.

Ibn Äajr mentioned that Ibn Äibbân (d. 354 / 1019; Bust) reported the *äadâth* about the stoning to death of the Companion Mu‘âz ibn Mâlik al-Aslamâ in his *Äääää* which is a famous collection of *äadâth*. Ibn Äibbân restricted himself to reporting only those *äadâth* which in his opinion were rigorously authentic (*äääää*); however, his conditions were more lenient than Imâm al-Bukhârâ’s and Imâm Muslim’s. The *äadâth* is reported from Abâ Hurairah ؓ who said:

[Mu‘âz ibn Mâlik] al-Aslamâ came to the Messenger of Allâh ﷺ and said: I declare that I have committed adultery. He testified against himself four times saying: I have gone into a woman unlawfully. Each time the Messenger of Allâh ﷺ turned away from him... [Ibn Äibbân related the entire *äadâth* until the point where the Prophet ﷺ asked Mu‘âz:] What is your purpose in telling me this? He replied: I want you to purify me. The Messenger of Allâh ﷺ ordered him to be stoned [to death] and so he was stoned. The Prophet ﷺ heard two men of the Anââr [one of the two indigenous Arab tribes which inhabited Medina at the time of the Prophet ﷺ] talking. One of them said to the other: Look at the one whose offence Allâh was concealing; he would not give up until he got himself stoned [to death] like a dog! The Messenger of Allâh ﷺ kept silent and proceeded until after some time he passed by a dead donkey with its legs sticking up in the air; whereupon he asked: Where are so and so and so and so? They replied: Here we are, O Messenger of Allâh. He said to them: Eat the carcass of this donkey. They said: May Allâh forgive you! Who would eat that? The Messenger of Allâh ﷺ replied: What you have devoured of that man’s reputation just now is more offensive than

this carcass. By Him in whose power is my soul, even now he [Mu'az] bathes in the rivers of Paradise.

This *äadäth* is a source of many important rules (*aäkäm* / ), it also affords us several subtle points relevant to the issue of backbiting. Firstly, Mu'az was dead when the two Ansärs backbit him. The Prophet's rebuking them clearly shows that backbiting the dead is just as much prohibited as backbiting the living. Secondly, whether they backbit him because they regretted that he would not spare his own life, or whether they backbit him because of their indignation against him for violating the *Sharä'ah*, they had no valid excuse to do so. A little later we will return to these two subtle causes of backbiting when we enumerate the causes of backbiting according to Imäm al-Ghazälä. Thirdly, the Prophet ﷺ stated explicitly that backbiting is more offensive than eating a dead carcass. The ulema are all agreed that eating carrion (*maitah* / ) is categorically prohibited (*haräm* / ), and, moreover, is a major sin (*kabäran* / ). So backbiting has to be just as categorically prohibited (*haräm* / ), and just as much a major sin (*kabäran* / ).

Ibn Äajr mentioned that Abä Ya'lä (307 h. / 919; Mosul), and al-Äabaränä (d. 360 / 971; Isfahan), and Abä Shaikh (d. 369 / 980) reported:

Whoever eats the flesh of his brother in the world, that flesh will be presented to him on the Day of Resurrection, and he will be told: Eat it now that you are dead even as you used to eat it while you were alive. So he will eat it and grimace and make a clamour.

Previously I mentioned that Imäm al-Ghazälä mentioned six excuses under which it is permissible to backbite. The first excuse I have already discussed; namely, to complain to an authority to get justice. The Arabic term of the first excuse is *taæallum* / . The second excuse is to complain to a person who has authority and power about an offender with the intention to get that authority to use his power to stop the offender from committing that offence. The Muslim experts of the *Sharä'ah* (*fuqhähä* / ) refer to this excuse as *al-isti'änah fä iæälat 'l-munkar* / . For example, you may complain to a father that his son is harassing the girls on the street, or to a teacher that one of his students is playing the fool during at prayer in the mosque. However, we have to have a correct intention because if our real purpose is to slight the person's reputation we will be guilty of backbiting. Imäm al-Ghazälä points out that this is very slippery ground because people often complain to authorities about others ostensibly with the intention to stop the offence, yet actually their intention is to hurt that person's reputation. They had been harbouring a grudge against the person; when he committed some offence, they seized the opportunity to get revenge by hurting his reputation. We have to be sure that our real intention is to show sincere goodwill (*naäääh* / ) to the Muslims. He says that it is better to complain to the authorities even in the example he gave of complaining to the ruler about a judge who has demanded or taken a bribe from you. Some of the ulema have said that just as sometimes we have an excuse to eat carrion (*maitah*); for example, under starvation; in the same way sometimes we have an excuse to backbite, yet the more honourable thing to do is to avoid it in any case.

The third excuse which Imäm al-Ghazälä mentioned is to seek legal opinion (*fatwä* / ). This excuse is called *istiftä* / ; it means to seek legal opinion (*fatwä* / ) from an expert of the *Sharä'ah*, popularly called a *mufätä* or an *'älim*. For example, one may tell a *mufätä* that my father, or my wife, or my brother has wronged me in such and such a way, so tell me what are my rights, and what can I do now? However, the better thing to do is to keep the persons involved anonymous. For example, you can ask the *mufätä* what do you say about a man whose father wronged him by taking his land or his inheritance? The proof that it is permissible to mention specific persons is the consensus of the ulema of Isläm. That consensus is based on several factors...Among them is the famous *äadäth* of Hind the daughter of 'Utbah, the wife of Abä Sufyän, which was reported by al-Bukhärä and

al-Muslim and many others from Ā'ishah رضي الله عنها in which Hind said to the Prophet ﷺ: "Abâ Sufyân is a stingy man. He does not give me enough for myself and my child, so I take [from his property] without his knowledge." He replied: "Take from his property what is sufficient for you and your child in honour [that is, it is no crime for you to do so]." There are many simple-minded people who can not formulate a question in an anonymous and abstract form, so the provision to mention specific persons is an important facility. Moreover, specific details may help a *muftâ* give a more appropriate decision (*fatwâ*) as some of the ulema have pointed out.

The fourth excuse is to warn a Muslim (*taâdhâr*) about something bad in a person in order that he can protect himself from it. Imâm al-Ghazâlâ gives the example of a person who comes to you to ask your advice about marrying his daughter to so and so. If you know that that boy is not good for his daughter, and you know that the person who is asking your advice will refrain from marrying his daughter to that boy if you simply tell him not to marry her to him that is all you are lawfully permitted to tell him. Backbiting is evil—we are permitted to do it under necessity just as much as necessity dictates, no more. I already mentioned the example of the dispensation for a starving man to eat carrion (*maitah*) [which means a dead animal, or an animal which has not been killed according to Islamic rite]. He may eat it, but just enough of it to preserve his life. However, if you feel that the person who is asking you your advice about marrying his daughter to a boy or man whom you know is not good for her may not refrain from marrying her to him unless you give a concrete reason for opposition, you may mention one of his bad aspects. If you feel that one is not enough to convince the person to change his mind, you may mention two bad aspects. If the person changes his mind, you may not tell him anything more. If you mention two bad qualities when one is enough to convince the father not to marry his daughter to that person, you commit a sin.

In the same way, you can warn a Muslim not to take a certain house or apartment if you know that the neighbours will harm him by being noisy, or because his children would be a bad influence on his children. You can warn a Muslim that such and such a shopkeeper sells meat which is not lawfully slaughtered (*âlâh*) provided you are sure about that. You can warn a judge (*qâçâl*) that a certain person is not a suitable witness to a case of court because you know that he does not have probity (*'adâlah*) which means he commits major sins, or persists in minor ones. In a similar way, you can warn that a person is an unsuitable authority about the *Sharâ'ah*-ulema, *muftis*, authors of books or articles on Islamic topics, or speakers. Formerly, this applied to the criticism, or discreditation of the narrators (*ruwât*) of *âdâth*. People who give legal opinion (*fatwâ*) have to have both integrity (*'adâlah*) and dependability (*çabâl*) which means that they convey the opinions of the competent authorities (who are the imâms) without mistakes.

Imâm al-Ghazâlâ emphasised that discrediting a Muslim is a delicate affair: one has to be sure that ones intention is to warn the Muslims about a danger, not to hurt somebody's reputation because of anger or jealousy, for that would then be backbiting even though outwardly you have an excuse. Furthermore, al-Ghazâlâ insisted that it is not permitted for us to seek somebody's opinion about somebody else even for a legitimate reason if we know that there is enmity or rivalry between the two because we can not expect to get an unbiased opinion from a person about his rival.

The fifth excuse for backbiting is to mention a person by a nickname which has become the usual name by which a person is referred to even though it literally indicates some uncomplimentary trait, or imperfection. For example, the nickname *Baldy* although it may describe a person's imperfection, yet the people refer to him by that name; perhaps they do not even know his real name. Since Baldy has let that become his nickname, it may be presumed that he does not take offence by such reference to him. No doubt, if we learned that he does not like that name, it would be backbiting to use it. Moreover, what matters is what Baldy inwardly feels about that name because, as al-Ghazâlâ pointed out a person may dislike a reference to himself, but may not say anything because of other factors. For example, he does not want to make a scene, or the person who refers to him by that name is his senior: his boss, or teacher, for example. Many of the famous narrators of *âdâth* (*ruwât*)

acquired uncomplimentary nicknames which became so usual and widespread that few people even know their real names. Al-Zabādā gave about fifty examples. The *āadāth* of al-A 'mash are reported in all six of the famous compendiums of *āadāth*. He is always referred to by that name, rather than his real name, Sulaiman ibn Mihrān, because few people know him by his real name. Yet the term *al-a'mash* literally means *blear-eyed* [that is, a person who has sore running eyes]. *Al-A'raj* was also a famous narrator (*rāwāʾil* ); *al-A'raj* is his nickname; it means *the Lame*. *Al-athram* refers to *one who has a gap between his front teeth*. It is the name of a famous narrator (*rāwāʾil* ). The ulema have been referring to him by that name for centuries.

Some time ago an acquaintance of mine was trying to indicate one of his friends to me. He said, "Do you know so and so?" While I was trying to think if I knew him, he said, "He was just here; he's the one who has the squinted eye," and he squinted his eye as he said that. That was a clearcut example of backbiting. It was not a nickname which he had acquired and it was not a thing my acquaintance would have said in his friend's presence because he knows he would not like it. Although my acquaintance's primary purpose was to give a clear description by which I could recognize who his friend was, yet he did it in a way which is not permissible. He should have described him in terms which were not uncomplimentary, and even if he could not do so at the time, he should have realized that it is more important to preserve people's honour than it is to make them known to others. It is quite common for people to describe others by their defects since their defects stand out and others can recognize who you mean if you describe them by their defects. Nonetheless, we have to be very careful to avoid it since it is backbiting, and backbiting is a major sin.

The sixth and final excuse for backbiting is that the person commits in public without any shame the offence which you mention. For example, you may mention that a person is a singer, if he sings in public to the accompaniment of music or sings love songs without feeling any shame about that. Maybe he is even proud of that. Al-Ghazālā reported the *āadāth*: "Whoever casts down the veil of shame from his face, [what the people say] about him is not backbiting." He also reported that al-Āasan al-Baārā said: "There is no backbiting for three people: a sectarian (*āāib al-hawāʾil* ), a sinful person (*al-fāsiq* ) who commits a sin openly, and a tyrant (*al-imām al-fājir* )." Al-Ghazālā pointed out that if the same person commits some other sin secretly, the mention of it will be backbiting because he feels shame for it and that is why he does it secretly. For example, the same singer may not pray, but he does not announce that; rather, he tries to hide it because he feels ashamed of that. If you tell the people that he does not pray, that would be backbiting and would not be excusable unless you meant to complain about that to someone who was in a position to counsel him, or compel him to pray as we discussed under the second valid excuse.

## Listening to Backbiting is Backbiting

Having mentioned the six valid excuses for backbiting, I should point out that listening to backbiting and accepting it is also backbiting. That is something which few people realise. Al-Ghazālā said that if somebody mentions something blameworthy about another and you say, "O really?" or say, "I didn't know he was like that. I used to think he was so pious!" that is also backbiting. In fact, he says that simply to remain quiet is also backbiting. That is learned from numerous *āadāth* including the *āadāth* of Mu'āz which I mentioned previously. In that *āadāth* one of the Companions said to the other: "Look at the one whose sin Allāh was hiding. He would not give up until he got himself stoned like a dog." The other just kept quiet, yet the Prophet ﷺ reprimanded them both telling both of them that they had devoured the honour of their brother and that that was more offensive than devouring a dead donkey.

Ibn Ājir mentioned in his *al-Zawājir* that Aämad reported with a good chain of narration (*sanad*) as did a number of other authorities the following *āadāth*: "Whoever defended a brother from backbiting, Allāh takes it upon Himself to free him from the Fire."

Ibn Äajr said: al-Tirmidh  reported another * ad th* which al-Tirmidh  declared to have a good (* asan* / ) chain of narration (*sanad*): "Whoever defended the reputation of his brother, All h will defend his face from the Fire on the Day of Resurrection."

Ibn Äajr said: Ab  Shaikh reported the * ad th*: "Whoever defended the honour of his brother, All h will defend him from the punishment of the Fire. The Messenger of All h ﷺ then recited the verse (*ayah*): "It is Our duty to help the believers." (*al-R m*: 30:48)

Ibn Äajr said: the Companion Anis ؓ reported: "The Messenger of All h ﷺ said: Whoever defended the reputation of his brother in this world, All h, the Great and Glorious, will send an angel on the Day of Resurrection to defend him from the Fire."

Ibn Äajr said: [Ab  M s ] al-A bah n  ( d. 571 / 1175; Isfah n) reported:

Anybody in whose presence a brother was backbitten and he was able to defend him, and did defend him, All h will defend him in this world and the next. However, if he did not defend him, All h will humiliate him in this world and the next.

Ibn Äajr said: Ab  Daw d and Ibn Ab  al-Duny  and others reported:

No Muslim forsakes a Muslim in a situation in which his honour is violated and his reputation is slighted, except that All h will forsake him in a situation in which the help of All h is dear to him. No Muslim defends a Muslim in a situation in which his reputation is slighted and his honour is slighted, except that All h will help him in a situation in which the help of All h is dear to him."

## The Consequences of Backbiting in the Hereafter

As we have seen from the verses of the Qur' n and the * ad th* of the Prophet ﷺ, backbiting is an enormous crime; being careless about it has disastrous consequences in the hereafter. All h, glorious and mighty is He, warns us in His inimitable Book:

Damnation [or destruction; Arabic *wail* / ] for every habitual backbiter (*humazah* / ), every habitual reviler (*lumazah* / )! (* urah al-Humazah*: 104:1)

Ab  'l-Barak t al-Nasaf  (d. 710 / 1310; Baghdad), the  anaf  im m, and celebrated commentator of the Qur' n mentioned in his commentary, *Mud rik al-Tanz l*, that the word *humazah* / refers to one who finds fault with people behind their backs, and, moreover, he points out that the inflection [or construction] of the word on the pattern *fu'lah* / indicates that he does it habitually; that is why I translated it as *habitual backbiter*. He said that the word *lumazah* / refers to one who tell people their faults to their faces. Again the inflected form of the word on the pattern *fu'lah* / means that he does it habitually; that is why I translated it as *habitual reviler*. Jal l al-D n al-Suy t  (d. 911 / 1505; Cairo) mentioned in his famous commentary that the word *wail* / means *punishment*, or alternately, it is the name of a valley in Hell; that is why I translated it as *damnation* or *woe*.

Ibn Äajr reported in his *al-Zaw jir* that A mad reported from [the Companion] Ibn 'Abb s the * ad th* which follows presently about the punishment of backbiters in Hell with a rigorously authentic (* ad th*) chain of narration (*sanad*) except that there is a narrator in the chain of narration (*sanad*) who is a subject of controversy (*mukhtalif f h l* / ) among the authorities; however, many authorities have declared him to be utterly reliable (*thiqah*). As I indicated before, means that the * ad th* can not be less than authentic (* asan*) according to the established rule in the science of the Principles of  ad th (' *Ilm Us l al- ad th* / ) that a narrator (*r w l* / ) who is a subject of controversy among the authorities, some of them holding him utterly reliable (*thiqah*) and others discrediting

him, his *äadäth* will be judged as not less than authentic (*äasan*), although it may not deserve to be rated as rigorously authentic (*äaäää*). See, for example, the book *Qawä'id fi 'Ulâm al-Äadäth* by Äafar Äamad al-'Uthmänä (d. 1394 h. / 1974; Pakistan), pp. 75-77, where he quoted the imams al-Mundhärä, Ibn al-Qaäään, Ibn Daqäq al-'Äd, al-'Alä'ä, Ibn al-Humäm, al-Suyätä, and Ibn Äajr al-'Asqalänä to the effect that if the authorities differed concerning the authentication (*tauthäq*) or discrediting (*taç'äfl*) of a narrator (*räwä*), the *äadäth* of that narrator (*räwä*) will be authentic (*äasan*). That is why Ibn Äajr al-Haitamá specifically mentioned that there is a narrator in the *äadäth*'s chain of narration (*sanad*) who is a subject of controversy. Now let us get back to the *äadäth* – Ibn Äajr reported that Ibn 'Abbäs said:

The night that the Prophet of Alläh ﷺ was taken of the Heavenly Ascension (*al-Mi'räj*), he looked into the Fire and there he saw people eating dead carcasses. He said, "Who are they, O Gabrael?" He replied, "They are those who eat the flesh of people." He saw a man who was quite red and blue. He said, "Who is that, O Gabrael?" He said, "That is the one who hamstrung the She-camel [of the Prophet Ääliä ﷺ], which incident is mentioned in the Qur'an].

Ääfiä al-Mundhirä (d.656 / 1258; Egypt) reported in his *al-Targháb wa 'l-Tarháb* that the Companion Anis said:

The Prophet ﷺ said: When I was taken on the Ascension (*al-Mi'räj*), I passed by some people who had nails of copper with which they gouged their faces and breasts. I said: Who are they, O Gabrael? He said: They are those who eat the flesh of the people and attack their reputations.

Ääfiä al-Mundhirä said that Abä Dawäd reported the *äadäth* saying that some [of the *äadäth* experts: *muäaddithän*] have reported this *äadäth* in *mursal* form [that is, the Follower reports the *äadäth* directly from the Prophet ﷺ without mentioning the name of the Companion].

Ibn Äajr reported that Ibn Jarär al-Äabarä (d. 310 / 923; Baghdäd) [the author of one of the oldest extant, and most highly regarded commentaries of the Qur'an] reported that [the Companion] Abä Umämah said:

The Messenger of Alläh ﷺ came to the Baqä' al-Gharqad [the ancient graveyard of Medina] and stood by two earthen graves and said: Did you bury so and so and so and so [a woman, as the feminine form of the Arabic noun of anonymity indicates]? They replied: Yes, O Messenger of Alläh. He said: So and so has just been made to sit up and [now] he is being beaten. Then he said: By Him in whose power is my soul, he has been beaten such a blow that not there is not a limb except which has been cut off, and his grave has burst into fire. He has shouted so loudly that all creatures but men and *jinn* have heard it. If it were no for the distractedness of your hearts and the excessiveness of your talk, you would hear what I hear. They said: O Messenger of Alläh, what is the sin of these two? He said: As for so and so, he did not keep clean of urine; and as for so and so, (or he said so and so [using a form which indicates a woman]), he used to eat the flesh of people [that is, he used to backbite them]

Ibn Äajr continued: Äamad also reported this *äadäth* by way of Ibn Jarär, but his wording is different. We [Ibn Äajr says] will mention it presently in the section on talebearing [in his book from which we are quoting: ) *al-Zawäjir 'alä Iqtiräf al-Kabä'ir*], and he [Äamad] added the following:

They said: O Prophet of Alläh, until when will they be published? He replied: That pertains to the unknown (*al-ghaib*), nobody knows it but Alläh, exalted is He.

Ibn Äajr continued: The chains of narration of this *äadäth* are numerous. It was reported by a large number of Companions with both rigorously authentic (*äaäää*) chains of narration and other than that

[that is, with authentic (*āsan*), and weak (*ḥa'if*) chains of narration (*asānād*)]. I [Ibn Ājir says] have mentioned previously some of its versions in the beginning of the chapter on ritual purity (*Kitāb al-Āārah*). Upon considering the various versions (*āruq*), one can presume that they refer to several incidents. In the light of this, the impression that one may get that the *ādāth* are mutually contradictory is dispelled. I noticed that the Ḥafīḥ al-Mundhirā (d.656 / 1258; Egypt) indicated some of what I say, for he said:

Most of the versions (*āruq*) mention that the two [souls] were being punished for tale-bearing (*namāmah*) [that is, relating to others such things that people have said or done that will hurt the reputation of the people whom we tell about or impair his relationship with the person to whom we bear the information], and for [not keeping clean of] urine. However, it is evident that the Prophet ﷺ happened on one occasion to pass by two graves in which the occupant of one of them was being punished for backbiting (*ghābah*) and the other for [not keeping clean of] urine.

Ibn Ājir continued: Al-Aābahānā [Muāammad ibn 'Umar ibn Aāmad al-Madānā (d. 581 / 1185; Isfahan) reported: "Backbiting (*ghābah*) and talebearing (*namāmah*) scrape away belief (*āmān*) the way a shepherd knocks down [the leaves] of a tree." Al-Mundhirā said in his *al-Targhāb wa 'l-Tarhāb* that al-Aābahānā reported it from the Companion 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān who reported it from the Prophet ﷺ.

Imām al-Ghazālā reported in his *lāyā'* that Qatādah [ibn Di'āmāh al-Sadāsā, one of the leading students of the Companion Anīs at Basra] (d. 117 / 737; Wāsīt, Iraq) said:

We were told that the punishment in the grave is three parts: a third is from backbiting, a third is from [not cleaning oneself of] urine, and a third is from [bearing] malicious slander (*al-namāmah*).

Ibn Ājir reported that Muslim and others reported [that the Prophet ﷺ said]:

Do you know who is destitute? They said: He among us is destitute who has not *dirhem* nor any belongings. He said: He is destitute from my nation (*ummah*) who comes on the Day of Judgement having performed prayer and fasting, and having given *zakāt* (prescribed charity), and also having insulted this one, and having slandered that one, and having taken that one's property unlawfully, and having spilled that one's blood, and having hit that one. So that one is given from his good works, and that one, and that one, and if his good works finish before he pays what is due to them, their evil deeds will be dumped upon him, and then he will be dumped in the Fire.

Āafīḥ al-Mundhirā mentioned that Al-Aābahānā reported that the Companion Abā Umāmāh said:

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: Indeed, a man will be given his book unfolded and he will say: O my Lord, where is such and such good deeds which I performed? They are not recorded in my scroll. He will tell him: They have been effaced due to your backbiting the people.

## Concerning The Eight Common Causes Of Backbiting

In order to better recognise backbiting, and in order to know how to cure ourselves of it, it is important to know its causes. Imām al-Ghazālā determined the number of causes of backbiting to be eleven. While eight affect the common people, three are more likely to affect the ulema and the men of religion: sufis, muftis, *qadis*, teachers, imams of mosques, and sermon-makers (*al-khutabā*).

### The First Cause: Anger And Hatred

The first cause which al-Ghazàlá mentioned is anger. It is a natural human impulse to seek revenge from one who has hurt us or offended us, and one way to hurt an offender is to attack his reputation. Al-Ghazàlá observed that when anger remains unappeased, it backs up in the breast as hatred which is a perpetual cause of backbiting unless one is guided by religion and restrains the soul from venting its anger and hate in ways which Allàh has forbidden.

### The Second Cause: To Get Along With Ones Peers

The second cause is to backbite in order to get along with our peers, and to go along with them in their conversation. When people get together, they usually take pleasure in talking about others and invariably they slight the reputations of others and offend their honour. Even if one does not wish to participate in their backbiting, he may not want to spoil their fun by informing them bluntly that they are backbiting, and backbiting is prohibited, for he may fear that they will resent him and regard his company as dull, or burdensome, and thereafter tend to avoid him. Likewise, he may fear to get up and leave for the same reasons. Indeed, Satan may persuade him that one has to overlook a few things in the interests of good companionship. So he proceeds to humour them by participating in their conversation helping to pick apart the characters of their fellows showing his amazement and indignation at what they describe about the faults of their brothers.

### The Third Cause: Rivalry

The third reason people backbite is to offset criticism of ourselves which we anticipate will reach some figure of prestige such as a ruler, a boss, a family head, a leader, or the head of a social circle and so on. For it often happens that one of our fellows has a difference with us, or a rivalry, and we anticipate that he will try to slight the reputation we enjoy with that personage, so we try to beat him to the draw by shooting first. Imàm al-Ghazàlá observed that not only is it common for people to commit backbiting in such a situation, but they often even fabricate lies about others in order to achieve their wretched ends.

### The Fourth Cause: Evasion

The fourth cause of backbiting is what we can aptly call *getting off the hook*. If someone accuses us of doing something which somebody else actually did, it is instinctive for us whose characters have not been polished long by the noble polish of knowledge and action not only to deny doing it, but to tell who did do it as well. On the other hand, if we did do it, but did not do it alone, the instinctive reaction is to inform our accuser that so and so was in on it too. Similarly, even if we did it by ourselves it is common reaction to try to reduce our blame by mentioning that so and so does it too. Every one of these instances is an instance of backbiting and in every instance it was incumbent on us to conceal our brother's fault. In the first instance it was sufficient to simply tell our accuser that we did not do it. Of course, if the offence is a crime against the person or property of another, and we are asked to bear testimony to the competent authority that is a duty and the dispensation is there to accommodate it as we mentioned while discussing the fourth valid excuse for backbiting.

### The Fifth Cause: Self-Praise

The fifth cause of backbiting is to exalt ourselves by demeaning others which is commonly called *putting yourself up by putting others down*. Often I have witnessed reciters of the Qur'ân (*qârâ'*) doing this: they mention the defects of the recitation of others, meaning thereby to inform their listeners of their own expertise.

#### The Sixth Cause: Jealousy

The sixth cause of backbiting is jealousy. It is especially common in women. If one of them says, "how beautiful is so and so," another will reply, "too bad she's not so short," or "too bad she's not so arrogant."

#### The Seventh Cause: Joking and Making Fun

The seventh cause is to pass the time, and to play and joke, and make people laugh by telling funny or amazing things about them at the expense of their honour, or by mocking them in a demeaning way which is colloquially termed *making a fool of someone*. The difference between laughing with somebody and laughing at them is that laughing at them would hurt them if they were there, while laughing with them would not.

#### The Eighth Cause: Ridicule

The eighth of the common causes of backbiting is contempt and ridicule. Although it is more often a cause of showing disrespect to people in their presence, it also induces people to disrespect others in their absence. As we previously pointed out, showing disrespect to people in their presence is more injurious than showing it behind their backs because it hurts more, and so its sin is greater. As al-Zabâdâ observed this cause overlaps somewhat the previous cause. He mentioned that the author of the famous treatise on Sufism: *Qât al-Qulâb*, mentioned only seven common causes uniting this cause with the previous one.

### Concerning The Three Subtle Causes Of Backbiting

There are three subtle causes of backbiting; they are subtle because Satan decks them out in the disguise of piety. As Imâm al-Ghazâlâ put it they spring from an intention which is basically good, but which Satan misdirects and perverts.

#### The First Subtle Cause of Backbiting

The first which he mentioned is amazement at some religious violation or shortcoming which surprises one. For example, one might exclaim: "I can't believe what I saw. So and so let's his wife go out in public improperly covered!" The person was right in being amazed, but he should not have mentioned the person's identity. Al-Zabâdâ remarked that this is so subtle a matter that few people except the elite detect it. Imâm al-Ghazâlâ gives two examples. The first is that one should say: "I don't know why he loves his servant-girl so much, she's so ugly!" The second is that one should say: "I don't know why he always sits with so and so, he's so ignorant!"

#### The Second Subtle Cause of Backbiting

The second cause springs from compassion for another on account of some misfortune which besets a brother; however, it is also a matter of disgrace. For example, one might say: "O, I'm so sad to hear

that so and so gave up saying prayers," or "...that he started to drink," or "...that he's disobedient to his parents," or "...that his son was arrested for harassing women. It's such a disgrace for him!" The person's concern is to be appreciated, but he should not have let it lead him to mention the person by his name. Satan directs a good impulse into an evil result – a good deed stolen right from under his nose, and as evil one landed in its stead – all on account of ignorance and carelessness. If he had compassion for him, he should have prayed secretly to Allāh to guide him, or rescue him from public disgrace.

NB: Discussion needed to counter what was said in *al-Durr al-Mukhtār*

### The Third Subtle Cause of Backbiting

The third subtle cause is anger for the sake of Allāh because of somebody's disregard or religion, or his violation of it. We have to guard ourselves in our anger from mentioning particular persons. Rather, we should vent our anger by confronting the offender to his face and scolding him. If we did that we would have the reward of enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil (*al-amr bi 'l-ma'rāf wa 'l-nahy 'an 'l-munkar*) which is enjoined by the Qur'ān, instead of the sin of backbiting.

Imām al-Ghazālā mentioned that these three forms of backbiting are seldom recognised even by the ulema, let alone the common people. The ulema think that since their backbiting in these three instances is for Allāh's sake, they are justified in doing it. However, there is neither any need, nor any valid excuse for backbiting in any of the preceding cases.

### Concerning The Way To Cure The Tongue From Backbiting

Know that all bad character traits can only be cured by [imbibing] the concoction ( or paste: Arabic *ma'jān* ) of knowledge and action {that is, when useful knowledge which is clean of all taint of impurity is mixed with righteous action free of ostentation (*riyā* ) and show (*sum'ah* ), and are compounded according to the recipe of the *Sharā'ah* so as to produce a concoction, it will benefit whoever used it to cure his disease}. A disease can only be cured by the application of the diametric opposite of the original cause of the disease. {Such as when the cold humour predominates and produces a disorder, one has to diagnose that factor, then cure the disorder by medicines which are hot in their effect so that they can counter the abnormal cold effect which is the cause of the disorder. In a similar way, one would cure a disorder caused by a predomination of the hot humour by applying a medicine whose effect was cold.}

So we have to diagnose the cause of backbiting. {Indeed, the recognition of the causes is the crucial factor in treating any abnormality.} Now the treatment of backbiting has two aspects: one is general, and the other is specific. The general treatment [can be summarised in the following several points]:

1. One should realise that by backbiting one exposes oneself to the wrath of Allāh, exalted is He, a fact to which the *ādhāth* we related previously testify.
2. One should realise that backbiting will cause one's good deeds to come to nothing on the Day of Resurrection { Ibn Abī al-Dunyā [d. 281 h. / 894; Baghdād] reported that [the Companion] Ka'b [ibn Mālik al-Ansarā al-Salamā (d. 51 h.)] said: "Backbiting causes good deeds to come to nothing [or to be in vain].", for backbiting causes one's good deeds to be given to the person whom one backbites in compensation for the desecration of his honour. If one does not have good deeds with which to requite him, that person's evil deeds will be given to the one who backbit him, and, nonetheless, the backbiter will be subject to the hatred of Allāh, mighty and majestic is He. Indeed, the backbiter will have the status in the sight of Allāh of one who eats dead meat [carrion, Arabic: *maitah* ], and if his evil deeds outweigh his good deeds, the slave [of Allāh] will enter the Fire. Certainly, it might

happen that when the evil deeds of the one whom a person backbit are given to the person who backbit him his evil deeds will preponderate with the result that he enters the Fire. In any case, the least that can happen is that one's backbiting decreases the reward that one gets for one's good deeds, and only after the trauma of being grilled by enquiries and wasted by an arduous tirade of questions and answers. The Prophet ﷺ said: "By Allāh, not even fire in dry wood [destroys] faster than backbiting destroys good deeds." {Al-'Irāqā said: I did not find any source of this *āadāth*. Al-Sakhāwā [d. 902 / 1497; Medina] remarked: He [that is, al-'Irāqā] means to say that he did not find any source traced back (*marfā' /* ) to the Prophet ﷺ. However, it has been reported [as the saying] of al-Āsan al-Basrā [d. 110 / 728; Basra]: "Beware of backbiting, for by Him in whose power is my soul, it destroys good deeds faster than fire destroys dry wood." Ibn Abā al-Dunyā reported it and he reported it with the chain of narration.} It was reported that a man said to al-Āsan[al-Basrā]: "It has reached me that you have backbitten me." Al-Āsan replied: "You have not achieved such a rank in my sight that I should award my good deeds to you!" When a person [truly] believes the reports that have come concerning backbiting, he will not utter with his tongue [a word] of it for fear of that {that is, the threats that the reports comprehend}.

3. It is beneficial for one [in the treatment of backbiting] to take a warning from the faults of others for oneself, and [scrutinise himself to] see if one does not have that same fault. Then, if one finds that he has it, he should busy himself with [removing] his own fault remembering the saying of the Prophet ﷺ: "How fortunate (*āābā /* ) are those [or alternately: They will have the Paradise of Tābā (or: They will have the Tree of Tābā in Paradise)] whose own faults distract them from the faults of others..." {Al-'Irāqā said: "Al-Bazār [. 292 / 905; al-Ramlah, Palestine] reported it from [the Companion] Anis with a weak (*ḥa'if*) chain of narration." I [al-Zabādā] say: The complete *āadāth* is: "...and gave away his surplus property [in charity], and restrained himself from surplus talk, and contented himself with the *Sunnah* without deviating from it to heretical innovation (*bid'ah /* )." Al-Dailamā (d. 509 / 1115) also reported it [in his *Firdaus al-Akhbār bi Ma'thār al-Khiāb*]; his version was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.} When a person finds a fault in himself, he should be ashamed to ignore his own fault in order to blame another {for blaming oneself is more appropriate than blaming another}. Rather, he should realise that another's inability to rid himself of that defect is like his own inability to rid himself of [whatever he discovers of] his own defect given that that defect were something related to his act and his will. However, were that defect a physical one {which Allāh has created that way, and so it is not in our power to change it}, then to blame that thing is to blame its Creator {that is, in effect – even if the person does not intend it}. For whoever blames a work, blames the worker. A man once said to a wise man: "O Ugly Face!" He replied: "Its creation was not left up to me that I should perfect it {that is, make it beautiful. Rather, it is the creation of Allāh, exalted is He. There is nothing of ugly except that Allāh created it.} When the slave does not find any defect in himself {that is, nothing appears to him after careful introspection}, let him thank Allāh, exalted is He, [for the blessing of an immaculate soul], and let him not defile himself with the gravest of defects {since attacking the reputations of people and devouring their dead flesh is one of the worst defects of all}. Nay, were he to be objective, he would realise that his opinion about himself – that he is free of all defects – {is a misguided opinion}; it reveals his ignorance about himself {and his delusion}, and that [that is, ignorance about ones own defects, or the self-righteous delusion that one is pure of all defect] is the worst of defects, {for human nature requires that one have defects except those whom Allāh, exalted is He, has made pure [that is, the prophets].}

4. It is also beneficial for one to reflect that his hurting another by backbiting is like his hurting from somebody else backbiting him. So if he does not like to be backbitten, he should dislike for another what he dislikes for himself {and that is the mark of perfect faith}.

These considerations are the general treatment of backbiting. {It is sufficient for a discerning soul to meditate upon [these remedies] with the eye of intuition and gain from them a cure for his chronic disease.}

As for the detailed treatment, it involves diagnosing the effective cause of one's backbiting, for an ailment is only cured by removing its cause. We have already enumerated the causes of backbiting {eight common and three special cause were delineated}.

**(To be continued)**