

## The Sacrifice of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal ﷺ

Amid the Abbasid Dynasty within the third century emerged a crisis that threatened Islam at its core. The ultra-rationalist Mu'tazilites utilized their influence over the ruling class to push a belief that could alter the way the Muslims viewed the Qur'an. They argued that the Qur'an, the speech of Allah ﷻ, was a part of creation. Such a belief is erroneous as equating the Qur'an to created speech is akin to equating the Qur'an to the speech of man. Allah ﷻ warns those who claim the Qur'an to be the speech of man,

“(The polytheist said), ‘This is nothing but the speech of a man,’ (to which Allah responds) I will put him (the polytheist) into Hell.”<sup>1</sup>

The belief of the *Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah* is that the Qur'an is the uncreated speech of Allah ﷻ. Imam al-Tahawi ﷺ writes in his famed booklet known as *al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah*,

“It (the Qur'an) is **not** creation, unlike the speech of creation (which is created).”

Many scholars were forced to utter this idea in public under the threat of their lives. However, there were some scholars who had such a tremendous love for the Qur'an that they suffered through extensive torture and persecution because of their refusal to conform to the twisted ideology of the ultra-rationalists. Among these great stalwarts of Islam was the Imam, the Mujtahid, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal ﷺ.

The impact of the torture he endured can be understood from what 'Allamah 'Abdul Hayy al-Lucknawi ﷺ narrates<sup>2</sup> from *Hilyah al-Awliyah* regarding the Imam's worship routine. He narrates from 'Abdullah ibn Imam Ahmad,

“My father used to perform 300 rakats (units) of salah each day and night, but he became very ill due to the (torture suffered via) the lashings; they severely weakened him. Thereafter, he used to perform 150 rakats (units) of salah each day, and he was approximately 80 years old at the time.”

Hafiz Ibn al-Jawzi ﷺ adds in his *Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad*,

“He used to recite one-seventh of the Qur'an each day, completing it every seven days...after the 'Isha prayer he would sleep little, and thereafter stand (in Tahajjud/night prayer) and supplicate until the time of the Fajr prayer came in.”

What kind of torture did the Imam suffer through that caused him to reduce his units of prayer from 300 to 150?

In the year 218 AH, Al-Mu'tasim (one of the rulers of the 'Abbasid Dynasty) arrived from the cities of Rome to Baghdad in the month of Ramadan. Imam Ahmad was brought before al-Mu'tasim and put to trial. Imam Ahmad was beaten in front of al-Mu'tasim. One of the guards who witnessed the event states,

“I have never seen anyone enter upon the ruler, nor intermingle with the kings who had a stronger heart than [Imam] Ahmad on that day. In his eyes, we were nothing more than flies.”

Another one of the guards says,

“I lashed [Imam] Ahmad ibn Hanbal eighty times with such lashes that had I struck an elephant with them, they would have killed it [elephant].”

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<sup>1</sup> 74:24-25

<sup>2</sup> Much of the content in the rest of the article was taken from Shaikh 'Abdul Fattah Abu Ghuddah's ﷺ selections from Hafiz ibn al-Jawzi's *Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad*. See the Shaikh's annotations on 'Allamah 'Abdul Hayy al-Lucknawi's ﷺ *Iqamah al-Hujjah* pgs. 92-94.

In a desperate attempt to get Imam Ahmad to utter these words, al-Mu'tasim attempted to heal him from his wounds on a number of occasions. To his chagrin, Imam Ahmad ﷺ refused to sway and stood his ground. He continued to utter, "The Qur'an is the book of Allah; [it is] uncreated."

When al-Mu'tasim recognized Imam Ahmad's determination, he instructed the torturers to seize him, fetter him, and have him thrown in jail.

Then al-Mu'tasim sat down and called for two wooden poles (for the purpose of having the Imam stand in between them to be lashed). Imam Ahmad says,

"Some of those who were present instructed me to hold onto any one of the two wooden poles with my hands, and thereafter I was tied onto them. Thereafter I did not understand what was said, and then my hands were exposed [to be struck]. Mu'tasim instructed the torturers to come forward, and they began to strike me with two lashes at a time..."

Salih ibn al-Imam Ahmad says that his father said,

"I fell unconscious, and regained consciousness afterwards when I noticed that the chains had been taken off. A man from those who were present said, 'We dragged you on your face, and tossed you on your back on a mat and we began trampling on you.' Thereafter they brought some barley, and instructed me to drink and vomit, to which I responded, 'I refuse to break my fast,' and so I did not drink, and I completed my fast."<sup>3</sup>

Imam Ahmad ﷺ endured this for approximately 28 months. However, it is the promise of Allah ﷻ to help His servants, as the Ummah remained firm on Imam Ahmad's stance regarding the Qur'an being uncreated, as this was and continues to remain the creed of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*. Had it not been for his unrelenting nature and spirit of sacrifice, it is possible that we may not have been able to recognize Islam.

Imam 'Ali ibn al-Madini ﷺ<sup>4</sup> said it best, "Undoubtedly, Allah supported this religion through Abu Bakr during the era of apostasy, and through Ahmad ibn Hanbal during the era of tribulation."<sup>5</sup>

May Allah fill Imam Ahmad's ﷺ grave with an ocean of light, shower him with His mercy, and make His grave a garden from the gardens of Jannah.

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<sup>3</sup> The deep love these great Imams had for various forms of worship, regardless of the circumstances, is worth reflecting upon. Their steadfastness in times of great calamity is testament to their love for Allah. These Imams were not just geniuses of their time, but they truly embodied the title of "slave of Allah." May Allah allow us to follow in their footsteps, as success does not lie merely in learning and amassing information. Among the greatest benefits of knowledge is found in implementation in our lives. Many examples can be found in 'Allamah 'Abdul Hayy al-Lucknawi's *Iqamah al-Hujjah*.

<sup>4</sup> Among the greatest Muhaddithin of his era, 'Ali ibn al-Madini was a contemporary of the likes of Imams Ahmad, Yahya ibn Ma'een, ibn Abi Shaibah, and was so influential to Imam Bukhari as a teacher that he (Imam Bukhari) said, "I have never felt inferior (with respect to the Hadith sciences) before anyone *except* with 'Ali ibn al-Madini." He passed away in the year 234 AH.

<sup>5</sup> *Tadhkirah al-Huffaz* 2:432