

213496 - Commentary on the hadith “People are like a hundred camels, among which you can hardly find one that is fit for riding”

the question

There is a hadeeth called that a human being is like a camel and if we take 100 camel, out of this one is suitable for journey. Could you explain the idea behind this hadeeth?

Detailed answer

Al-Bukhaari (6498) and Muslim (2547) narrated that ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) say: “People are like a hundred camels, among which you can hardly find one that is fit for riding.” This is the version narrated by al-Bukhaari. The version narrated by Muslim says, “You will find that people are like a hundred camels, among which a man cannot find one that is fit for riding.”

Al-Haafiz Ibn

Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The report without the definite article and without the word hardly means: among one hundred camels, you will not find one that is fit for riding, because the one that is fit for riding should be amenable and easy-going. Similarly, among one hundred people you will not find one who is fit to be a friend, who could be helpful to his companion and is gentle and kind to him.

The report which says you will hardly find is more appropriate, because it emphasises the idea more and is more reflective of reality, even though the meaning of the first report boils down to the same

thing, and the absolute negation may be interpreted as emphasis and as meaning that what is rare is an exception and is not the rule.

Al-Khattaabi said: The Arabs refer to one hundred camels as “ibl” [the word translated as camels in this hadith]. So they say So and so has ibl, meaning one hundred camels, and So and so has two ibls, meaning two hundred camels.

I say: according to this, the report that does not use the definite article mentions one hundred by way of explaining the word ibl, because the phrase ka ibl (like ibl) means like one hundred camels. Because the word ibl by itself was not commonly used to refer to one hundred, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) mentioned one hundred so as to highlight that meaning and avoid any confusion. With regard to the report of al-Bukhaari, the definite article is used in a generic sense.

Al-Khattaabi said: The scholars interpreted this hadith in two ways:

1.

that with regard to the rulings of religion, all people are equal, and there is no discrimination between one of high status and one of low status, like one hundred camels among which there is not one that is fit for riding, which refers to one that may be saddled and ridden. They are all fit only for carrying loads, but they are not fit to be saddled and ridden upon;

2.

that most people have shortcomings; as for people of virtue, their number is very few, so they are like the camel that is fit for riding

among camels that are fit only for carrying loads. We see this also in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “but most of mankind know not” [al-A’raaf 7:187].

I say: al-Bayhaqi narrated this hadith in Kitaab al-Qada’, regarding the judge treating both disputants equally, basing it on the first interpretation (that people are equal with regard to the rulings of religion). And he narrated from Ibn Qutaybah that the “camel that is fit for riding” is the high-quality she-camel that is selected from among camels that are used for riding, and if she is among other camels she can be recognised. What the hadith means is that in terms of lineage, people are like one hundred camels among which there is no camel that is fit for riding, so they are equal.

Al-Azhari said: The Arabs call the camel that is fit for riding najeeb if it is male and najeebah if it is female (najeeb means high-quality). The ha’ in the word raahilah (translated here as a camel that is fit for riding) is used for emphasis [it does not mean that the camel in question is necessarily female]. He said: The view of Ibn Qutaybah is wrong. What is meant is that those who have little interest in this world, who have attained perfection in that regard and are eager for the hereafter, are few, as rare as the camel that is fit for riding among one hundred camels.

An-Nawawi said: This is a better interpretation of the hadith, and even better than this is the view of others, that those people whose character is pleasing and of perfect quality are few.

I say: this is the second interpretation, but it emphasises the attributes of those who have little interest in this world, whereas it is more appropriate to understand it in broader terms, as the Shaykh said.

Al-Qurtubi said: it is more appropriate to understand this metaphor as meaning that the generous man, who carries people's burdens and loads and relieves them of their distress, is very rare and dear, like the camel that is fit for riding among many other camels.

Ibn Battaal said: What the hadith means is that people are many, but those among them who are pleasing are few. al-Bukhaari hinted at this meaning by including the hadith in the chapter entitled Raf' al-Amaanah (loss of trust), because if a person has this characteristic (loss of trust, i.e. he is dishonest and untrustworthy), it is better not to mix with him. End quote.

Fath al-Baari
(11/335)

From this we may conclude that the hadith is to be interpreted as emphasising the equality of people.

But it may be that what it means is that those people who are pleasing in terms of religious commitment and good character are few or rare, just as you may find one hundred camels among which there is not one that is fit for riding.

This second interpretation is the one that is favoured by most of the scholars.

Ibn al-Atheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“People are like a hundred camels, among which you will not find one that is fit for riding” means: a person who is pleasing and of high quality is very rare and dear, like the camel of high quality that is strong enough to carry loads and travel far, which you cannot find among many camels. End quote.

An-Nihaayah

(1/15)

See also: Mirqaat al-Mafaateeh

(8/3360); ‘Umdat al-Qaari (23/85); at-Tayseer (1/395);

Haashiyat as-Sindi ‘ala Ibn Maajah (2/479)

And Allah knows best.