
Prophetic Teachings on Plague and Covid 19 Infection

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ABSTRACT

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is “Mercy for All Worlds” as declared by Allāh the Almighty. His mercy encapsulates every sphere of human life including health. He was really concerned about the development of a healthy society. A thorough study of *ḥadīth* literature reveals the fact that he (peace be upon him) was aware of the communicable nature of diseases. The way he guided people to respond in time of plague is highly commendable. He forbade entering a plague-stricken land and did not allow leaving it if one was already there. The *ḥadīth* on plague teaches what is now called “quarantine for epidemics”. The principles suggested by him for the preservation of health and prevention from diseases are still seen with much honor in the medical sphere. This research article highlights the efficacy of his teachings on plague in preventing communicable diseases such as Covid 19.

Key words: Plague, *Al-Ṭā‘ūn*, epidemic, *Yersinia pestis*, harm

The misery of epidemic infections is not a present world phenomenon. Early man was no lesser a victim of these “killer entities” than us. There is written and pictorial evidence of infectious diseases from Egypt and Mesopotamia around 1000 BC, India about 750 BC, Greek about 500 BC, and China about 100 BC.¹ In ancient Greece and Egypt, historical accounts describe epidemics of smallpox, leprosy, tuberculosis, meningococcal infections and diphtheria.² Evidence of schistosomiasis has been found in Egypt in the kidneys of 3000 years old Egyptian mummies.³ And the marks of smallpox are evident on the mummy of Ramses V (1157 BC).⁴

Plague was the most devastating of the epidemic diseases. It contributed as one of the factors to cause demise of some glorious empires and changed the course of history. In 160 AD, the plague contributed to the fall of the Han Empire of China (202 BC-221 AD). About six years later, the *Antonine Plague* (165-180 AD) ravaged the Roman Empire and killed the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius (121-180 AD) along with five million others resulting in the fall of the Roman Empire.⁵ A new round of plague of a magnitude fully comparable to the Antonine Plague hit the Roman World in 251-66 AD known as “*Cyprian Plague*.”⁶

Another major plague epidemic occurred at Pelusium, Egypt, in 540 A.D. and reached Constantinople in 542. In the following decades, it spread into Europe and Asia and was known as *The Plague of Justinian*. Another plague struck Europe in 1104-10 A.D. and stamped out more than 90 percent of the Europeans.⁷

Years 1345-1351 brought one of the worst pandemics of history claiming death of 24 million Europeans at a rate of 3 out of 10, and contributing to a total death toll of 40 million worldwide.⁸ The macarenas of

the Plague of Middle Ages is still remembered by the gloomy name ‘*The Black Death*’. Agnolo di Tura describes what he saw in Siena in 1348: “The mortality began in Siena in May 1348. It was horrible and cruel And it is not possible for human tongue to tell of the horror.... Father abandoned child, wife, husband.... None there were who for money or friendship bury the dead.... And in many places in Siena huge pits were dug and the multitude of the dead were piled within them.... And I, (Angolo di Tura) buried my five children with my own hands. And there were those so poorly covered with earth that the dog dug them up and gnawed their bodies throughout the city. And there were none who wept for any death, for everyone expected to die.”⁹

The origin the term plague is a Latin word ‘*plaga*’ meaning a “blow” or “wound”. It was associated with misfortune or a disaster, and it was not necessarily associated with disease. During the later Roman Empire, when the Church issued a definitive Latin “*Vulgate*” edition of the Old and New Testament, plague naturally came to mean “a blow from” above. References to the plague occur in the Bible and half of them occur in the first five books of Old Testament, known collectively as *Torah or Pentateuch*.¹⁰

The Greeks conceived plague as a punishment or test for humans as Homer’s epic poem, “*The Iliad*” mentions that Apollo used his silver bow to rain down plague upon the Greeks, after Agamemnon had insulted his priest, Chryses.¹¹ The same conception was prevalent among the Muslims. Ibn Khātimah, a medical writer from Andalusia (Muslim Southern Spain), writing in 1349 testified that: “This is an example of the wonderful deeds and power of God, because never before has a catastrophe of such extent and devastation occurred. No satisfactory reports have been given about it,

because the disease is new, and God only knows when it will leave the earth.”¹²

Since then it did not sit quietly and had reemerged in various parts of the world. In China, it struck upon the Ming dynasty in 1641 – 1644 and helped end the regime. Spain (1647-1652), England (1665-1666), France (1720-1722) had been the poor victims. 1885-1950 plague again spread worldwide and there was an epidemic in India (Surat) in 1994.¹³ The last case reported is of John Tull and Lucinda Marker, a couple contracted the disease in November 2002 in United States.¹⁴

Plague has also been mentioned in the *aḥādīth* as *al-Ṭā‘ūn*. The Holy Prophet has given instructions regarding this disease. First, consider what *al-Ṭā‘ūn* is? Ibn Manẓūr says *wabā’* signifies *al-ṭā‘ūn* (plague); or a common or general disease (an epidemic).¹⁵ Zabīdī quotes from the exegesis of Muwaṭṭā that *wabā’* signifies a quickness, or commonness of death among men. Lexicographers define *wabā’* by plague, whereas Zabīdī quotes from *Al-Nuzhah* that according to the physicians plague is a kind of *wabā’*.¹⁶ Hence, *al-Ṭā‘ūn* is a kind of *wabā’* which is characterized by a quickness or commonness of death among men.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) provided considerable sayings on the contagiousness of diseases. One of them is about plague. He has forbidden to enter the place where a plague epidemic has struck and disallowed to leave that place to prevent the spread of the disease. His words regarding the plague have been narrated by his companions Usāmah ibn Zayd, Sa‘d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khūzaymah ibn Thābit, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf and Zayd ibn Thābit. Imam al-Bukhārī narrates this *ḥadīth* as:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: " الطَّاعُونَ رَجَسٌ أُرْسِلَ عَلَيَّ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَوْ عَلَيَّ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ فَإِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ بِهِ بِأَرْضٍ فَلَا تَقْدُمُوا عَلَيْهِ وَإِذَا وَقَعَ

بِأَرْضٍ وَأَنْتُمْ بِهَا فَلَا تَخْرُجُوا فِرَارًا مِنْهُ ، قَالَ أَبُو النَّضْرِ: لَا يُخْرِجُكُمْ إِلَّا فِرَارًا مِنْهُ " ^{17.}

Allāh's Messenger said:

“Plague is a calamity which was sent to a group of Banū Isrā’īl, or upon those who were before you. So, when you hear that it has broken out in a land, don’t go to it, and when it had broken out in the land where you are, don’t go out running out of it. In the narration of Abū Naḍar the words are: “It will not get you out but running out of it.”

This hadith is a strong argument in favour of communicability of diseases and refutes the superstitions of Arabs who used to relate such diseases to the effect of stars. This also goes against those scholars who used to negate contagiousness of diseases constructing their argument on the hadith *lā ‘adwā* (there is no contagion)¹⁸ and stands with those set of *aḥādīth* that prove contagiousness: “*firra min al-majdhūmi kamā tafirru min al-asadi*” (run away from a leper as you run away from a lion) ¹⁹ and *lā yūridū mumriḍ ‘alā muṣiḥh* (a sick camel should not be taken to the healthy one).²⁰ While explaining the *ḥādīth* al-Bayhaqī states: “What has been proved from the Prophet (peace be upon him) is that *lā ‘adwā* (*there is no contagion*) is the negation of the belief of the people of ignorance who attribute *‘adwā* to other than Allāh. And Allāh by His Will had made the association of the healthy with the one who has something from these ailments a cause for the origin of *‘adwā*. Therefore, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: run away from a leper as you run away from a lion and a sick camel should not be taken to the healthy one. He also said about the plague: when you hear that it has broken out in a land, don’t go to it. Each of these is with the destiny of Allāh.”²¹

Mullā ‘Alī Qārī quotes Shihāb al-Dīn al-Turbushī and approves of his explanation as the nicest interpretation. He expounds as follows: “The scholars differ in the interpretation. One group says that *lā ‘adwā* signifies the denial and refusal of contagion which the apparent of the *ḥadīth* indicate. The scholars of this view are in majority. The other party does not refute *‘adwā* as the Prophet (peace be upon him) had said “*firra min al-majdhūmi kamā tafirru min al-asadi*” and *lā yūridū mumriḍ ‘alā muṣiḥḥ*. He intended with *lā ‘adwā* to negate the belief of the doctors because they think that communicable diseases are effective in any case. He made them to know with this saying that the fact is not as they speculate, but this is related to the will of Allāh. If He wills the diseases transmit and if He does not they cannot. The *ḥadīth* “then who caused the scab in the first camel” points to this *‘adwā* and nothing else, then who caused the scab in the first camel? He further classified in the *aḥadīth firra min al-majdhūmi* and *lā yūridū mumriḍ ‘alā muṣiḥḥ* that the closeness with them is the cause of the cause of the transmission of diseases, so avoid them as you keep yourself away from a slating wall and a defective sheep.”²²

According to Ibn Qutaybah, the command of fleeing from a leper is because of a natural fact, that is, the transfer of a disease from a body to another via touch, close association and breathing of bad air. For this reason, in many diseases like leprosy and plague the transfer of a disease occurs from the patient to the healthy due to close association with him. When a disease like plague inflicts a place and the healthy person flees from it fearing that it will reach him. This is not allowed as it is a kind of escape from the destiny of Allāh. He explains: “The odour of a leper is intensified and it sickens the one whose sitting, talking and lying with a leper prolongs. It mostly affects the wife from the husband and vice versa and their child has

tendency towards it. Due to this reason, the doctors advise to prevent association with a leper, not because of *'adwā*, but because of the effect of this odour as it sickens the person who breaths it for a long time. For this reasons, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said *lā yūridū mumriḍ 'alā muṣiḥh* because sometimes one of the camels has wet scab and when he mixes with other camels or rubs with them or harbors their sitting place the water that comes out from his lesions reaches them and infects them”²³

Ibn Qayyīm is also a strong votary of the contagiousness of diseases and supports the view of Ibn Qutaybah. He comments on leprosy as: “In the view of medical practitioners, this disease is contagious and hereditary, and who lives with a leper or tuberculoid leper, he gets this disease by the effect of his breath. Owing to his perfect love and unusual passion of well wishing, he (peace be upon him) forbade every person of his *ummah* to adopt ways which involve him in any bodily or healthy badness or defect. Sometimes when the odour of the sick’s breath reaches a healthy person sickens him. We have seen that some diseases can make healthy people sick via the breath of patient. And this breath is a cause among the causes of communicability of diseases.”²⁴

Similarly, while commenting on plague, he elucidates the medical reason behind the instruction of staying in a plague-stricken area as follows: “During an epidemic, leaving that area and travelling to a far off land involves much movement of the body which can be harmful and there is also a fear of transmission of the disease to that area. Therefore, to stop from leaving that place is better and travelling to uninflected areas is harmful.”²⁵

Health is considered a bounty of Allah because a state of good health with leisure at hand enables a man to fulfill his duties towards Allah devotedly, whereas diseases can hamper the progress of his on-going efforts

in prayers. Therefore, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), being kind and considerate, taught preventive measures to his followers. He was keen in preventing them from infectious diseases and other diseases in general. Regarding the plague, he forbade to enter a plague-stricken land and did not allow to leave it if one is already there. To enter a plague-stricken land is synonymous to exposing oneself to harm or even death which is disallowed in Islam. This *ḥadīth* teaches what we now call “quarantine for epidemics”. This principle is being used nowadays to prevent the spread of Covid 19 infection.

In medical science the basis of prevention of plague is still the quarantine which was instructed by the Prophet (peace be upon him) a long time ago. According to medical experts, the control of plague requires the knowledge of the epidemiology of the infected animals, the vectors of transmission and the potential sources of human contact.²⁶

The causative agent involved in plague is a bacillus *Yersinia pestis* which was identified in 1894 by Alexander Yersin (1863-1943) and Shibasaburo-Kitasato (1852-1931). It was seen in both rats and humans who had died of plague during an epidemic in Hong Kong. Two years later, in Bombay, Paul Louis Simond (1858-1947) established that the link between rats and humans was the rat flea, *Xenopsylla cheopis*.²⁷

Rodents serve as its hosts and the vector is usually the rat flea. The bacillus can be transmitted from a host to a human via the bite of a vector. The bacillus proliferates in the flea’s esophagus and prevents food from entering into its stomach. To overcome starvation, this ‘blocked flea’ begins to suck blood and in this attempt deposit the bacillus into the victim’s skin. The bacillus invades nearby lymphoid tissue producing an inflamed, necrotic and hemorrhagic lymph node called “bubo”. This kind of plague is known

as “**Bubonic Plague**” which has 1-15% mortality in treated cases and 40-60% mortality in untreated cases. Sometimes direct inhalation of the bacillus can occur resulting in “**Pneumonic Plague**”. It causes a multilobe hemorrhagic and necrotizing bronchopneumonia. It has 100% mortality if not treated within the first 24 hours of infection. When the bacillus is deposited in the vasculature, bypassing the lymphatics, “**primary septicemic plague**” can occur characterized by early dissemination with sepsis occurs but without the formation of bubo. It has 40% mortality in treated cases and 100% mortality in untreated cases.²⁸

The symptoms may include high fever 37-40.9 °C, chills, myalgias, sore throat, headache, weakness, malaise, enlarged, painful, swollen lymph node, vomiting (bloody at times), nausea, gastro-intestinal complaints (may precede a bubo), abdominal pain (more common in patients with septicemic plague), constipation, diarrhea, black or tarry stools, cough which may be productive of bloody sputum, shortness of breath and stiff neck (if meningitis infiltration has occurred).²⁹

The usual signs of the diseases are inguinal (60%), axillary (30%), cervical (10%), or epitrochlear (10%) bubo, usually not larger than 5cm, extremely tender, erythematous, and surrounded by a boggy hemorrhagic area. The patient often flexes, abducts, and externally rotate the hip near an involved inguinal node to reduce pain at the site.³⁰

Control measures usually involve the use of insecticides to control fleas, trapping of animals, and the education of people to avoid contact with certain animals. Persons living in endemic areas should also provide themselves with personal protection such as living in rat-proof houses, wearing shoes and garments that cover the legs, application of insecticides, and sick animals especially cats, should not be handled.³¹ One such control

measure used in Covid infection is to quarantine. It implies to keep someone who might have been exposed to COVID-19 away from others. It helps to prevent spread of disease by asymptomatic carries of corona virus. In quarantine, one should stay at home, separate himself from others, monitor his health, and follow directions from his state or local health department.³²

In view of the mechanism of action of infectious diseases such as plague and Covid 19, recall the efficacy of Islamic teachings that are beneficial to the present day in preventing the spread of these diseases. The Holy Qur'ān elucidates a general principle in this regard. It says:

وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ

“Do not expose yourselves to ruin.” (Al-Baqarah 2:195)

The Hoy Prophet (peace be upon him) has also straightened out the same principle of avoiding harm or cause of harm. He has been reported to have said:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: «لَا ضَرَرَ وَلَا ضِرَارَ»³³

“There shall be no inflicting of harm on oneself and on other selves.”

The Qur'ānic verse and *ḥadīth* stated above imply that exposure to harm is taken as a suicidal attempt in the sight of Allāh Almighty if the circumstances permeate. Therefore, a person tested positive for corona should not put himself in danger. He should stay at home and prevents others from harm also. In addition, a *ḥadīth* levels this exposure to humiliating oneself even if death does not occur. The Hoy Prophet (peace be upon him) has been reported to have said:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: " لَيْسَ لِلْمُؤْمِنِ أَنْ يَذِلَّ
نَفْسَهُ " قِيلَ: " وَمَا إِذْلَالُهُ نَفْسَهُ؟ " قَالَ: " يَتَعَرَّضُ مِنَ الْبَلَاءِ
لِمَا لَا يُطِيقُ " ³⁴

“No believer may humiliate himself”. When he was asked how any person would humiliate himself? He replied: “By exposing himself to calamity with which he cannot cope.”

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has given the necessary directives to avoid all risk that might harm one. He should take care of his health and take precautionary measures to prevent diseases. So, he directed to avoid entering a land where an epidemic of plague has broken out. On the other hand, it is equally obligatory on a Muslim to avoid harming others. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said:

عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: «الْمُسْلِمُ مَنْ سَلِمَ
الْمُسْلِمُونَ مِنْ لِسَانِهِ وَيَدِهِ، وَالْمُهَاجِرُ مَنْ هَجَرَ مَا هَمَى اللَّهُ
عَنْهُ» ³⁵

“A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue and hands. And a Muhājir is the one who abandons all what Allāh has forbidden.”

He warned his followers emphatically against exposing any individual to harm. He instructed to take safety measures to prevent such harm. He said:

عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: «مَنْ مَرَّ فِي شَيْءٍ مِنْ
مَسَاجِدِنَا أَوْ أَسْوَاقِنَا بِنَبَلٍ، فَلْيَأْخُذْ عَلَيَّ نَصَاهَا، لَا يَعْقِرُ بِكَفِّهِ
مُسْلِمًا» ³⁶

“Whoever passes through our mosques or markets carrying arrows should grasp them well with his hand, so that he does not accidentally inflict injury on any Muslim.”

This instruction incorporates a general rule or principle that a Muslim should not become source of harm or injury for others. We can deduce from it convincingly that it is not allowed for a Muslim to transmit his disease to other fellow beings. Hence, a person having a communicable disease, such as Covid, should not mix up with others lest he communicate his disease to them. In accordance with this principle, he forbade one to leave an area where plague has struck in his presence. This is because if he will move to other areas, thinking to escape the decree of Allah, he will not be able to escape, but he will carry the germs of the disease to that land and will become a potential carrier and a suitable vehicle to transmit the infective organisms to the susceptible hosts. In plague, the human contacts are potential sources of the transmission of infection. Therefore, the Prophet (peace be upon him) instructed all contacts to stay at their places and face the calamity patiently, and in return of their patience they are rewarded with the honour of the death of martyrs. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) pronounced:

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ، زَوْجِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ، أَنَّهَا أَخْبَرَتْنَا: أَنَّهَا سَأَلَتْ رَسُولَ
اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَنِ الطَّاعُونَ، فَأَخْبَرَهَا نَبِيُّ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ:
«أَنَّه كَانَ عَذَابًا يَبْعَثُهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ، فَيَجْعَلُهُ اللَّهُ رَحْمَةً لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ، فَلَيْسَ
مِنْ عَبْدٍ يَقَعُ الطَّاعُونَ، فَيَمُوتُ فِي بَلَدِهِ صَابِرًا، يَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُ لَنْ يُصِيبَهُ إِلَّا مَا
كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَهُ، إِلَّا كَانَ لَهُ مِثْلُ أَجْرِ الشَّهِيدِ»³⁷

“Narrated ‘Ā’ishah: (The Wife of the Prophet) I asked Allah’s Apostle (peace be upon him) about the plague. He told me that it was a punishment sent by Allāh on whom

He wished, and Allāh made it a source of mercy for the believers, for if one in the time of an epidemic plague stays in his country patiently hoping for Allāh's reward and believing that nothing will befall him except what Allāh has written for him, he will get the reward of a martyr."

The same principle is applied on the Covid infection also. A person who tries his best to prevent others from others from this infection by quarantining himself, or who is trying to treat the infected person like health workers, and he dies in the process, he is written a martyr in the Book of Record. Therefore, as per the Prophetic instruction, all covid positive persons shall be directed to stay at their places and face the calamity patiently, to get reward in the sight of Almighty.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that the *aḥādīth* of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) contain some useful instructions that are deemed to prevent infections. On one hand, these *aḥādīth* comprise general teachings on keeping away from infection-sources and on the other hand these also educate on the prevention of specific communicable diseases. Still both kinds pave the way for one purpose that humankind should be prevented from harm, whether the harm is due to plague or Covid 19 infection.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) defined a Muslim in a way which may suggest this purpose explicitly. He declared avoiding harm to others is the fundamental element of Islam. On this foundation stands the construct of a Muslim's life. A Muslim who fails to avoid harm and does not prevent others from it, in fact, contradicts his claim of being a true believer. After proclaiming faith, there are certain liabilities entitled upon him. The Holy

Prophet (peace be upon him) said in this regard that a Muslim should follow the policy of *'lā ḍarara wa lā darāra* i.e., There should be no inflicting of harm on oneself and on others. One should never wrong with others. He must strive to remove pain or trouble from them. He should educate them on leaving disease-causing practices. Hence, all Covid patients must follow the sayings of the Prophet and quarantine themselves to prevent others from harm.

The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) taught a useful principle that a person is subjected to humiliation by exposing himself to a calamity which he cannot cope with. And the Holy *Qur'ān* declared it synonymous to committing suicide. There is no sign of intellect and not an ounce of bravery in colliding with a disease by will. In line with these basic principles, he particularly forbade entering a plague-stricken land because in plague the human contacts are potential sources of transmission of infection. He instructed healthy people to stay away and avoid contact with them so that they could not catch the disease. He also asked those who were in a plagued area to stay there so that germs could not be carried to other places. The *ḥadīth* is based on a precautionary measure which is now termed in the medical nomenclature as “quarantine”. The same principle of quarantine is the most effective measure to prevent Covid infection. A Covid positive shall avoid going to public places or mixing with his closer relatives. He shall use face mask and stay at 6 meters to prevent the transmission of his infection.

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