Ibn Rajab al-Hambali: What It Really Means to Have Knowledge!

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I came across a beautiful section of Ibn Rajab al-Hambali's 'Jami' al-'Ulum wal-Hikam,' in the middle of his explanation of the hadith: "What I have forbidden you from, avoid, and what I have commanded you with, do as much as you are able, as those who were before you were destroyed as a result of their frequent asking and differing with their Prophets."

In this chapter, he touched upon the blameworthiness of digging too deeply into the religious matters, asking questions for the sake of asking, asking about issues that have not even occurred yet, excessive argumentation, etc.

However, what really caught my eye and heart was the simple and refreshing way in which he laid out what it really means to have knowledge, as well as the true Salafi method (i.e., the method of the Salaf) in learning Islam.

He cuts to the chase, saying:

"...and the people are divided in this regard into two categories:

So, from the followers of Ahl al-Hadith are those who shut off the door to any questioning, to the point that his understanding and knowledge become limited literally to what was revealed by Allah to His Messenger. As a result, they become carriers of knowledge who lack understanding of that knowledge.

And from the scholars of opinion are those who are excessive in coming up with matters to discuss before they actually take place, that might or might not ever occur, and they preoccupy and burden themselves with answers to these questions, frequent dispute regarding them, arguing over them - to the point that this gives way to division between the hearts, and instills in them because of this desires, coldness, enmity, and hatred. Most of this takes place with the intention of simply overpowering the opponent in the argument, seeking status and reputation, and having the people turn their faces in amazement. And this has all been condemned by the rabbani scholars, and the Sunnah contains much evidence that these are despicable and forbidden.

As for the scholars of Ahl al-Hadith who implement what they learn, most of their concern is in studying the meanings of the Book of Allah, along with the authentic Sunnah and the words of the Companions and those who followed them in good that explain it, as well as studying the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah, knowing its authentic from its weak, understanding and comprehending it, and limiting oneself to its meanings. This is followed by knowing the words of the Companions and those who followed them in good in the various fields of knowledge, including Tafsir, Hadith, what is halal and haram, the principles of the Sunnah, issues of zuhd, the heart softeners, etc. This was the way of al-Imam Ahmad and those who were similar to him from the rabbani scholars of Hadith.

And in knowing all of this is enough to keep one busy from those matters brought about by opinion that bring about no benefit, and will never even take place, and just bring about argument,
dispute, and he said/she said...

And whoever adopts the method of seeking knowledge that we have outlined above will be firmly able to understand how to respond to most of the newly occurring events that take place, as the principles relating to these events exist in these same principles that we have pointed to above, and it is necessary that we adopt this path behind the leaders of its people whose guidance and understanding is agreed upon, such as ash-Shafi'i, Ahmad, Ishaq, Abu 'Ubayd, and those who traversed their path. Whoever claims to traverse the same path upon other than their methodology will fall into great loss and destruction, and has taken what it is not allowed to take, and has abandoned what is obligatory for him to implement.

And the whole point of this is to seek the Face of Allah, and to get closer to Him by knowing what was revealed to His Messenger, traversing his path, acting upon that, and calling the Creation to it. Whoever is like this, Allah will guide him and keep him firm, and will grant him revealing insight, and will teach him what he did not know. And from the knowledgeable ones who are praised in the Qur'an are those in His Saying: {"Indeed, those who fear Allah from His servants are those who have knowledge..."} [Fatir; 28]...

Nafi' bin Yazid said: "Those who are foremost in knowledge are those who humble themselves for Allah, who submit themselves to Allah to Please Him, who do not seek what is with those above them, and do not belittle those who are less than them."

And this is supported by the saying of the Prophet: "The people of Yemen have come to you. They have the most pious and soft hearts. Faith is from Yemen, understanding is from Yemen, and wisdom is from Yemen," and this is in reference to Abu Musa al-Ash'ari and those who followed his path from the scholars of Yemen, as well as Abu Muslim al-Khawlani, Uways al-Qarani, Tawus, Wahb bin Munabbih, and other scholars from the people of Yemen, and all of these are from therabbani scholars who fear Allah. All of them were knowledgeable in regards to Allah, and feared Him. Some of them had more comprehensive knowledge of the rulings and Shari'ah of the Religion than others, and their distinction from the people was not the result of their knowledge of he said/she said, or their depth in research or arguement.

Such is the case with Mu'adh bin Jabal, who is the most knowledgeable of people in regards to what is halal and haram, and is the one who will be gathered in front of all of the scholars on the Day of Resurrection. His knowledge was not of all of the various and numerous issues - in fact, his hatred of talking in regards to that which will not happen is well known. Rather, he knew Allah, and he knew the principles of His Religion.

It was said to al-Imam Ahmad: "Who should we ask questions after you?"

He replied: "'Abd al-Wahhab al-Warraq."

It was said: "But he does not have comprehensive knowledge."

Ahmad replied: "He is a righteous man, and the likes of him are guided to the truth."

And he was asked about Ma'ruf al-Karakhi, to which he said: "He has the basis of all knowledge: the fear of Allah."

...So, we say: whoever does not busy himself with the numerous matters that are not found in the
Qur'an or Sunnah, and instead busies himself with understanding the words of Allah and His Messenger, intending with this to fulfill His commands and avoid His prohibitions, then he is the one who has fulfilled the command of the Messenger of Allah in this hadith, and has acted according to its injunctions...

The above can be found in the first volume of 'Jami' al-'Ulum wal-Hikam' (p. 248-251).

Translated by Abu Sabaayaa