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DESIRE: THE HIDDEN GOD

Tafsir of Surah Al-Jathiyah 45:23 with the Neuroscience of Addiction, Habits and Cognitive Bias

Hj Che Alim Hj Che Haron

BEHIND THE COVER: THE BROKEN CHAIN

A Brief Reflection on the Meaning of the Front Image

The image on the front of this book is not mere decoration. It is an arrangement of symbols that tries to capture, in a single glance, the whole message of this book.

At the centre of the image, a circle of golden chain encircles a shining ball of golden light. The chain is like desire (hawa nafsu) — it imprisons, it shackles, and at first it looks glittering and attractive, just as temptation always looks beautiful on the outside before it binds. But notice: the chain is no longer whole. It has cracked and broken at the bottom, with a few links hanging loose, as if they had only just come apart.

The golden light at the centre of the circle symbolises the human heart — the fitrah that was originally pure and radiant, as mentioned in Surah Ash-Shams: "…and inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness" (91:8). The heart never loses its light completely; it is only veiled and imprisoned for as long as the chain of desire is not broken.

The dark, misty background symbolises the darkness of the jahiliyyah of our age — an age of algorithms designed to capture attention, notifications that never stop, and temptations that come one after another without warning. Yet within that darkness, fine particles of light can still be seen floating — a sign that guidance is always present for whoever wishes to seek it, even in the darkest of conditions.

The corner ornaments in the style of Islamic architecture remind us that the struggle to subdue desire is not a struggle waged in isolation. It is built upon a tradition of knowledge, tafsir and hadith handed down through the generations — a framework that guides us so that this personal reflection does not stray from the guidance of revelation and the Sunnah.

The broken chain on this cover is not a picture of a victory already won, but an invitation — that every heart still has the chance to free itself, link by link, for as long as there is life in the body. That is the essence this little book tries to convey throughout its chapters.

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INTRODUCTION

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. All praise is due to Allah, Lord of all the worlds. Blessings and peace be upon our master the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, his family, his Companions and all who follow their path until the Day of Resurrection.

We live in an age designed specifically to stimulate desire. Every scroll on a smartphone, every notification, every "buy now" offer is arranged by engineers and data scientists to capture our attention and get us hooked on one reward after another. It is in this setting that a verse of the Qur'an revealed more than 1,400 years ago feels remarkably fresh: the word of Allah about the one who takes his own desire as a god to be obeyed.

This little book focuses on one verse — Surah Al-Jathiyah, verse 23 — and related verses, re-reading their message together with the explanations of recognised scholars, before highlighting modern scientific findings on how habits are formed, how the brain responds to repeated rewards, and how the human mind can be led astray by biases it is unaware of. The aim is not to "prove" revelation in the laboratory, for revelation does not depend on laboratory confirmation; rather, it is to show that the Qur'an's warning about the sealed heart and the veiled eyes is not mere figurative language — it describes something real about how the human mind and soul function when left to be ruled by desire.

The verse that forms the foundation of this book is the word of Allah:

SURAH AL-JATHIYAH (45) — VERSE 23
https://quran.com/45/23

أَفَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِۦ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِۦ غِشَٰوَةً فَمَن يَهْدِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

"Have you seen he who has taken as his god his [own] desire, and Allah has sent him astray due to knowledge and has set a seal upon his hearing and his heart and put over his vision a veil? So who will guide him after Allah? Then will you not be reminded?"

THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND THIS BOOK

VERSES OF THE QUR'AN: presented in full (Uthmani Arabic text) with the name of the surah and verse number, followed by a translation of the meaning in English.

EVERY HADITH: accompanied by its Arabic text, translation, brief meaning, narrator, chain of narration, grade of authenticity, scholars' commentary, and a link (URL) for the reader to check.

CLASSICAL TAFSIR: consulted first, before any connection with modern science is stated.

SCIENTIFIC SOURCES: chosen from peer-reviewed journals and official bodies. Science is provisional and constantly revised; revelation is not placed beneath theory.

SCHOLARLY HONESTY: where scholars or scientists differ, or where a connection is weak — including when a popular scientific finding fails to be confirmed again (replication) — we state it clearly.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND REFERENCES

The translations of verses in this edition are translations of meaning (Sahih International) to aid understanding; they are not a substitute for the text of the Qur'an. Readers are encouraged to consult recognised works of tafsir and

translation, and the hadith links in each chapter, for further checking. The explanations of scholars in the "Scholars' Commentary" sections are brief summaries in the author's own words; readers who wish to go deeper are encouraged to consult the original works cited.

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CHAPTER 1: WHEN DESIRE BECOMES A GOD

Tafsir of Al-Jathiyah 45:23 and Al-Furqan 25:43

Verse 23 of Surah Al-Jathiyah is among the sharpest verses in the Qur'an on the danger of following desire blindly. It does not merely remind us that desire is bad; it describes the one who follows it as someone who has "taken" his desire as a god — an accusation as grave as the accusation of shirk.

VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

SURAH AL-JATHIYAH (45) — VERSE 23
https://quran.com/45/23

أَفَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِۦ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِۦ غِشَٰوَةً فَمَن يَهْدِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

"Have you seen he who has taken as his god his [own] desire, and Allah has sent him astray due to knowledge and has set a seal upon his hearing and his heart and put over his vision a veil? So who will guide him after Allah? Then will you not be reminded?"

SURAH AL-FURQAN (25) — VERSE 43
https://quran.com/25/43

أَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ أَفَأَنتَ تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٤٣﴾

"Have you seen the one who takes as his god his own desire? Then would you be responsible for him?"

CLASSICAL TAFSIR

Ibn Kathir explains that Al-Jathiyah 45:23 describes the group whose misguidance is the worst: a person who no longer follows revelation or sound reason, but instead makes whatever his desire likes into his religion. He notes that this is in line with the meaning of Al-Furqan 25:43 — whatever his appetite and desire regard as good becomes his guide and his model, as is also mentioned in another verse about the one whose evil deeds Satan has made attractive to him until he believes them to be good.

Regarding the phrase "Allah has sent him astray due to knowledge", the commentators stress that this is not misguidance forced upon an innocent person, but the end of one whom Allah knows — with His knowledge that encompasses all things — will persist in choosing disbelief whatever path of guidance reaches him. The seal upon the hearing and the heart, and the veil over the sight, are described by the scholars as the consequence (natijah) of persistent rejection, not the initial cause of that misguidance. Al-Qurtubi stresses that Allah wrongs no one; human beings are given a choice, and the seal comes after a person has himself chosen, again and again, to close himself off from the truth.

For Al-Furqan 25:43, Ibn Kathir also cites a report from Ibn 'Abbas (may Allah be pleased with them both) that the people of jahiliyyah would often switch the objects they worshipped according to whatever seemed good to them at the time. This verse reminds the Prophet ﷺ that he was not charged with forcing guidance upon anyone; his task was only to convey.

RELATED HADITH

HADITH 1: TRIALS ARE PRESENTED TO HEARTS LIKE A WOVEN MAT

وَحَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ نُمَيْرٍ، حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو خَالِدٍ، - يَعْنِي سُلَيْمَانَ بْنَ حَيَّانَ - عَنْ سَعْدِ بْنِ طَارِقٍ، عَنْ رِبْعِيٍّ، عَنْ حُذَيْفَةَ، قَالَ كُنَّا عِنْدَ عُمَرَ فَقَالَ أَيُّكُمْ سَمِعَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ﷺ يَذْكُرُ الْفِتَنَ فَقَالَ قَوْمٌ نَحْنُ سَمِعْنَاهُ . فَقَالَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْنُونَ فِتْنَةَ الرَّجُلِ فِي أَهْلِهِ وَجَارِهِ قَالُوا أَجَلْ . قَالَ تِلْكَ تُكَفِّرُهَا الصَّلاَةُ وَالصِّيَامُ وَالصَّدَقَةُ وَلَكِنْ أَيُّكُمْ سَمِعَ النَّبِيَّ ﷺ يَذْكُرُ الْفِتَنَ الَّتِي تَمُوجُ مَوْجَ الْبَحْرِ قَالَ حُذَيْفَةُ فَأَسْكَتَ الْقَوْمُ فَقُلْتُ أَنَا . قَالَ أَنْتَ لِلَّهِ أَبُوكَ . قَالَ حُذَيْفَةُ سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ﷺ يَقُولُ " تُعْرَضُ الْفِتَنُ عَلَى الْقُلُوبِ كَالْحَصِيرِ عُودًا عُودًا فَأَىُّ قَلْبٍ أُشْرِبَهَا نُكِتَ فِيهِ نُكْتَةٌ سَوْدَاءُ وَأَىُّ قَلْبٍ أَنْكَرَهَا نُكِتَ فِيهِ نُكْتَةٌ بَيْضَاءُ حَتَّى تَصِيرَ عَلَى قَلْبَيْنِ عَلَى أَبْيَضَ مِثْلِ الصَّفَا فَلاَ تَضُرُّهُ فِتْنَةٌ مَا دَامَتِ السَّمَوَاتُ وَالأَرْضُ وَالآخَرُ أَسْوَدُ مُرْبَادًّا كَالْكُوزِ مُجَخِّيًا لاَ يَعْرِفُ مَعْرُوفًا وَلاَ يُنْكِرُ مُنْكَرًا إِلاَّ مَا أُشْرِبَ مِنْ هَوَاهُ " . قَالَ حُذَيْفَةُ وَحَدَّثْتُهُ أَنَّ بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهَا بَابًا مُغْلَقًا يُوشِكُ أَنْ يُكْسَرَ . قَالَ عُمَرُ أَكَسْرًا لاَ أَبَا لَكَ فَلَوْ أَنَّهُ فُتِحَ لَعَلَّهُ كَانَ يُعَادُ . قُلْتُ لاَ بَلْ يُكْسَرُ . وَحَدَّثْتُهُ أَنَّ ذَلِكَ الْبَابَ رَجُلٌ يُقْتَلُ أَوْ يَمُوتُ . حَدِيثًا لَيْسَ بِالأَغَالِيطِ . قَالَ أَبُو خَالِدٍ فَقُلْتُ لِسَعْدٍ يَا أَبَا مَالِكٍ مَا أَسْوَدُ مُرْبَادًّا قَالَ شِدَّةُ الْبَيَاضِ فِي سَوَادٍ . قَالَ قُلْتُ فَمَا الْكُوزُ مُجَخِّيًا قَالَ مَنْكُوسًا .

TRANSLATION:

From Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman رضي الله عنه, who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ say: "Trials are presented to hearts like a mat is woven, reed by reed. Any heart that absorbs them has a black spot marked upon it, and any heart that rejects them has a white spot marked upon it — until hearts become of two kinds: one white like a smooth stone, which no trial will harm as long as the heavens and the earth endure; and the other black and dusty like an overturned vessel, which neither recognises what is right nor rejects what is wrong, except what it has absorbed of its own desire."

Meaning: *The human heart does not become black or closed all of a sudden; it results from repeatedly accepting trials and following desire, step by step, until at last the heart is no longer able to distinguish right from wrong.*

NARRATOR:

Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman رضي الله عنه

CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):

Narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Faith (Kitab al-Iman), Hadith No. 144.

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):

روايت إمام مسلم دالم صحيح مسلم، كتاب الإيمان، حديث نمبور ١٤٤.

CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:

Muhammad ibn ʻAbdullah ibn Numayr — from Abu Khalid (Sulayman ibn Hayyan) — from Sa'd ibn Tariq — from Rib'i ibn Hirash — from Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman رضي الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:

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Sahih — narrated in Sahih Muslim.

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

IMAM AL-NAWAWI (SHARH SAHIH MUSLIM):
He explains that the parable of a mat woven reed by reed depicts a gradual process: each time a person faces a trial (a temptation or a call to falsehood) and follows it, one black "reed" is added to his heart, until at last the heart is completely dark and can no longer recognise the truth.

IBN AL-QAYYIM AL-JAWZIYYAH (CITED IN WORKS ON TAZKIYAH):
He divides the trials presented to the heart into two kinds: trials of desire (shahwah, which corrupt intention and will) and trials of doubt (shubhah, which corrupt knowledge and conviction) — and both are closely tied to the following of desire mentioned at the end of this hadith.

REFERENCE LINK:
https://sunnah.com/muslim:144a

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS: HOW HABITS FORM IN THE BRAIN

Modern neuroscience studies how repeated behaviours gradually become "automatic" — a process called habit automaticity. Research by Ann Graybiel and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has shown that a region of the brain called the basal ganglia — in particular a structure called the striatum — plays a central role in turning actions that at first require a conscious decision (controlled by the prefrontal cortex) into automatic responses triggered by particular cues, no longer requiring conscious deliberation each time.

A key element in habit formation is the dopamine reward system. Pioneering research by the neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz in the 1990s found that dopamine neurons respond not simply to the reward itself, but to the expectation of reward — a phenomenon called "reward prediction error". When a reward comes unpredictably (variable reward) — such as social media notifications, gambling, or any form of rapid stimulation — this dopamine system is more strongly stimulated than by a predictable reward, because the brain "learns" to keep chasing the possibility of the next reward.

The concept of unpredictable reward actually originates in early work by the behavioural psychologist B.F. Skinner in the mid-twentieth century on the "intermittent reinforcement schedule", which showed that unpredictable rewards produce behaviour that is harder to stop than fixed rewards. This same principle is now widely used in the design of digital apps and social media to maximise usage time.

A NOTE ON SCHOLARLY HONESTY

The science of habit is still developing, and the term "addiction" for screen or social media use is still debated among researchers — some question whether it matches the clinical definition of substance addiction or is more accurately described as problematic use. We do not claim that hadith no. 1 "predicts" dopamine neuroscience; the connection we offer is a similarity of pattern — both describe a gradual process, not a sudden change — and it should be read as a reflection, not as a scientific tafsir of the verse or the hadith.

ANALYSIS: BLACK SPOT AFTER BLACK SPOT

The connection between Al-Jathiyah 45:23 and the hadith of Hudhayfah (may Allah be pleased with him) is very clear: both reject the picture of the human heart becoming closed suddenly and arbitrarily. Rather, it is the outcome of a process — whether called a "seal" in the language of revelation, or "habit automaticity" and "absorbing desire" in the language of the hadith. Modern neuroscience adds a layer of understanding about the general mechanism behind this gradual process: each time a person follows a momentary impulse for a quick reward, the neural pathway linking the cue to the action grows stronger, and the ability to stop and think again — a function that depends heavily on the prefrontal cortex — grows weaker relative to the automatic drive from the basal ganglia.

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This does not mean that a person loses choice entirely. Both the verse and the hadith affirm that choice remains present at every "reed" that is offered — it is only the effect that accumulates. The following chapters look at two other aspects of the picture in verse 45:23: the seal upon the hearing (Chapter 2) and the veil over the sight (Chapter 3).

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CHAPTER 2: A SEAL UPON THE HEART — THE NEUROSCIENCE OF DIGITAL ADDICTION

Dopamine, Unpredictable Rewards and the Attention Economy

If Chapter 1 looked at how the heart becomes closed gradually, this chapter focuses on two sides of the same coin: what happens when a person gives in to a momentary impulse, compared with what happens when he restrains himself.

VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

SURAH AN-NAZI'AT (79) — VERSES 40-41
https://quran.com/79/40-41

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِۦ وَنَهَى ٱلنَّفْسَ عَنِ ٱلْهَوَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾ فَإِنَّ ٱلْجَنَّةَ هِىَ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

"But as for he who feared the position of his Lord and prevented the soul from [unlawful] inclination, (40) then indeed, Paradise will be [his] refuge. (41)"

BRIEF TAFSIR

Ibn Kathir explains that this verse describes the successful — those who are in awe of Allah's reckoning in the Hereafter, so that this feeling stops them from following desire in worldly matters. Al-Qurtubi adds that "preventing the soul from desire" includes restraining the soul from everything forbidden — not only obvious sinful appetites, but also hidden tendencies such as showing off, arrogance and excessive love of the world.

RELATED HADITH

HADITH 2: THE FIRE IS VEILED WITH DESIRES, PARADISE IS VEILED WITH HARDSHIPS

حَدَّثَنَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ، قَالَ حَدَّثَنِي مَالِكٌ، عَنْ أَبِي الزِّنَادِ، عَنِ الأَعْرَجِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ " حُجِبَتِ النَّارُ بِالشَّهَوَاتِ، وَحُجِبَتِ الْجَنَّةُ بِالْمَكَارِهِ ".

TRANSLATION:
From Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه: the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "The Fire is veiled (surrounded) with desires (attractive cravings), while Paradise is veiled with things that are disliked (hardships)."

Meaning: *The road to the Fire looks attractive and pleasant on the outside (because it is covered with a layer of desires), while the road to Paradise looks heavy and unpleasant on the outside (because it is covered with a layer of hardship). Whoever tears through that layer will reach what lies hidden behind it.*

NARRATOR:
Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه

CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):
Narrated by Imam al-Bukhari in Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Softening the Heart (Kitab al-Riqaq), Hadith No. 6487. (A very similar wording is narrated by Imam Muslim from Anas ibn Malik رضي الله عنه in Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 2822.)

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):

روايت إمام بخاري دالم صحيح البخاري، كتاب الرقاق، حديث نمبور ٦٤٨٧.

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CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:
Isma'il ibn Abi Uways — from Malik ibn Anas — from Abu al-Zinad ('Abdullah ibn Dhakwan) — from al-A'raj ('Abd al-Rahman ibn Hurmuz) — from Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:
Sahih — muttafaq 'alayh (agreed upon by al-Bukhari and Muslim, with the wordings of two different Companions).

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

IMAM AL-NAWAWI (SHARH SAHIH MUSLIM):

He mentions that the scholars regard this hadith as among the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ that are most concise yet deepest in meaning: a person does not reach Paradise except by passing through hardship (such as patience in worship, restraining anger and giving charity), and does not reach the Fire except by following forbidden desires.

IBN HAJAR AL-'ASQALANI (FATH AL-BARI):

He explains that the desires surrounding the Fire include things such as wine, adultery, looking at what is forbidden, backbiting and heedless entertainment — all of which look attractive at first sight, while in reality they lead to ruin.

REFERENCE LINK:
https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6487

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS: THE ATTENTION ECONOMY AND THE REWARD CIRCUIT

Since the early 2010s, former engineers and technology ethicists such as Tristan Harris (co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology) have testified before United States legislative bodies that the design of modern digital apps — especially social media — is deliberately built on the principle of "intermittent reinforcement" (variable reward) mentioned in Chapter 1, so that users keep coming back to check notifications without being able to predict when a reward (likes, comments, new messages) will appear. Such testimony became the basis of what is now widely known as the "attention economy".

From the standpoint of basic neuroscience, impulsive behaviour is linked to an imbalance between the brain's "immediate" system (involving structures such as the nucleus accumbens, part of the reward circuit) and its "control" system (chiefly the prefrontal cortex, responsible for long-term planning and self-restraint). When a reward comes quickly and unpredictably, the immediate system tends to override the control system for a moment — a pattern also studied in the field of substance addiction, although the degree of involvement varies by individual and type of stimulus.

A NOTE ON SCHOLARLY HONESTY

The term "smartphone addiction" is not an official clinical diagnosis in the main diagnostic manuals (such as the DSM-5), unlike substance addiction or gambling disorder. Research in this field is still young, and findings are mixed on the size of its long-term effects on the brain. We present these findings as a general picture of the reward mechanism, not as confirmation that every smartphone user is addicted in the clinical sense.

ANALYSIS: TWO VEILS, ONE CHOICE

Hadith no. 2 and An-Nazi'at 79:40-41 together give a clear framework: momentary hardship (restraining desire, patience in worship) leads to long-term good, while momentary pleasure (following desire) leads to long-term loss. Scientific findings on the reward circuit add an understanding of why this choice feels so hard in practice — because the human brain is naturally more stimulated by immediate and unpredictable rewards than by delayed rewards, even when the latter are of greater value. Yet verse 79:40 stresses that it is "fear of the position of one's Lord" that is able to overcome this immediate pull — a form of long-term motivation based on meaning and the

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Hereafter, not merely on willpower alone. Chapter 4 will look further at the scientific findings on self-control, including some popular findings that were later disputed by replication studies.

CHAPTER 3: A VEIL OVER THE SIGHT — COGNITIVE BIAS

When the Mind Rejects Evidence to Defend Desire

The final part of Al-Jathiyah 45:23 mentions three effects: a seal upon the hearing, a seal upon the heart, and a veil (ghishawah) over the sight. This chapter focuses on the third element — how a desire that is indulged can cover a person's ability to see and weigh evidence fairly.

VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

SURAH AL-BAQARAH (2) — VERSE 7
https://quran.com/2/7

خَتَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ ۖ وَعَلَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرِهِمْ غِشَٰوَةٌ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

"Allah has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and over their vision is a veil. And for them is a great punishment."

CLASSICAL TAFSIR

Ibn Kathir explains that this verse was revealed about those who persist in denying the truth even though clear proof has reached them. He stresses, as also mentioned regarding verse 45:23, that this seal is the consequence (jaza') of persistent denial, not an initial cause that prevents a person from choosing faith from the start. Al-Razi in his tafsir also discusses this question from a rational angle: how can Allah "seal" a person's heart when human beings are held responsible for their choices? The majority of scholars answer that the seal occurs after a person has repeatedly chosen to reject the truth, so that Allah leaves his heart to remain in its own choice — a kind of "lock" upon a decision the person himself has made again and again, not an initial compulsion.

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS: CONFIRMATION BIAS AND MOTIVATED REASONING

In cognitive psychology, the mind's tendency to reject evidence that contradicts what it already believes or wants is known as confirmation bias — the tendency to seek, interpret and remember information in ways that support existing beliefs, while ignoring or downplaying contradictory information. The psychologist Ziva Kunda, in her influential 1990 review, introduced the concept of motivated reasoning: people often reason not purely to find the truth, but to arrive at the conclusion they already want to believe — especially when that conclusion is tied to personal interest, identity or desire.

An earlier related concept is cognitive dissonance, introduced by the psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957. This theory explains that when a person's beliefs conflict with his actions (for example, someone who knows something is wrong but keeps doing it because it is pleasant), he feels psychological discomfort, and one of the easiest ways to reduce that discomfort is to change his belief — not his action — so that the two are aligned again.

A NOTE ON SCHOLARLY HONESTY

Not every popular finding in this field is firmly supported by evidence. For example, the "backfire effect" — the claim that correcting someone's false information can make him more confident in his original belief — received great attention after the study by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler in 2010, but several larger replication studies later (such as by Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter in 2019) found that this effect rarely occurs; most people actually accept factual corrections, even if their underlying beliefs may not change much. We include this note deliberately as a reminder that the social sciences too are subject to continual revision, just like any other field of science mentioned in this book.

ANALYSIS: THE VEIL WE BUILD OURSELVES

The connection between the "veil over the sight" in verses 45:23 and 2:7 and the findings on cognitive bias is not a claim that the Qur'an "predicted" the terms of modern psychology. Rather, it is a reflection on the same pattern:

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once a person has followed his desire in some matter, the human mind naturally tends to look for reasons to justify that choice, and to reject anything that challenges it — a “veil” which, according to the scholars’ tafsir, is built by the person’s own repeated choices, not imposed from the start. Awareness of this mechanism — whether from the verse or from psychological research — is the first step for a person to try to avoid it: by always being ready to question his own views again, and by not taking a feeling of certainty as proof of truth.

CHAPTER 4: THE TRULY STRONG — MUJAHADAH IN SUBDUING THE SELF

Research on Self-Control: From the "Limited Energy" Model to a Values Model

After three chapters on how desire can overpower the heart, the hearing and the sight, this chapter turns to hope: how a person can subdue his desires, and what science says about self-control — including several popular findings that are now being re-examined.

VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

SURAH ASH-SHAMS (91) — VERSES 7-10
https://quran.com/91/7-10

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّىٰهَا ﴿٧﴾ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَىٰهَا ﴿٨﴾ قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكَّىٰهَا ﴿٩﴾ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَن دَسَّىٰهَا ﴿١٠﴾

"And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it, (7) and inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness, (8) he has succeeded who purifies it, (9) and he has failed who instills it [with corruption]. (10)"

BRIEF TAFSIR

Ibn Kathir explains that Allah swears by the human soul (nafs) and the perfection of its creation, then states that Allah has inspired every soul with the path of wickedness (fujur) and the path of righteousness — meaning that human beings are given a natural ability to recognise both. True success, according to this verse, lies in a person's effort to purify (tazkiyah — cleanse and nurture) his soul through faith and righteous deeds; failure lies in letting the soul be "buried" (dassa) in the filth of sin and desire.

RELATED HADITH

HADITH 3: THE STRONG ONE IS HE WHO CONTROLS HIMSELF WHEN ANGRY

حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ يُوسُفَ، أَخْبَرَنَا مَالِكٌ، عَنِ ابْنِ شِهَابٍ، عَنْ سَعِيدِ بْنِ الْمُسَيَّبِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ ـ رضى الله عنه ـ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ " لَيْسَ الشَّدِيدُ بِالصُّرَعَةِ، إِنَّمَا الشَّدِيدُ الَّذِي يَمْلِكُ نَفْسَهُ عِنْدَ الْغَضَبِ ".

TRANSLATION:

From Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه: the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "The strong one is not the one who is good at wrestling (overpowering others by force); rather, the strong one is the one who controls himself when angry."

Meaning: *True strength is not measured by the body, but by a person's ability to restrain and master his own self at the moment he most wants to follow an impulse (in this case, anger).*

NARRATOR:

Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه

CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):

Narrated by Imam al-Bukhari in Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Manners (Kitab al-Adab), Hadith No. 6114; also narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Righteousness, Joining Ties and Manners (Kitab al-Birr wa al-Silah wa al-Adab), Hadith No. 2609.

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):

روايت إمام بخاري دالم صحيح البخاري، كتاب الأدب، حديث نمبور ٦١١٤.

CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:

'Abdullah ibn Yusuf — from Malik ibn Anas — from Ibn Shihab (al-Zuhri) — from Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab — from Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:

Sahih — muttafaq 'alayh (agreed upon by al-Bukhari and Muslim).

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

IMAM IBN 'ABD AL-BARR (AL-TAMHID):

He states that this hadith is evidence that struggling to subdue one's own self is heavier and more virtuous than fighting an external enemy, because the nearest and hardest enemy to defeat is one's own self.

REFERENCE LINK:

https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6114

HADITH 4: THE WISE HOLDS HIMSELF TO ACCOUNT, THE WEAK FOLLOWS HIS DESIRES

حَدَّثَنَا سُفْيَانُ بْنُ وَكِيعٍ، حَدَّثَنَا عِيسَى بْنُ يُونُسَ، عَنْ أَبِي بَكْرِ بْنِ أَبِي مَرْيَمَ، ح وَحَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ، أَخْبَرَنَا عَمْرُو بْنُ عَوْنٍ، أَخْبَرَنَا ابْنُ الْمُبَارَكِ، عَنْ أَبِي بَكْرِ بْنِ أَبِي مَرْيَمَ، عَنْ ضَمْرَةَ بْنِ حَبِيبٍ، عَنْ شَدَّادِ بْنِ أَوْسٍ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ قَالَ " الْكَيِّسُ مَنْ دَانَ نَفْسَهُ وَعَمِلَ لِمَا بَعْدَ الْمَوْتِ وَالْعَاجِزُ مَنْ أَتْبَعَ نَفْسَهُ هَوَاهَا وَتَمَنَّى عَلَى اللَّهِ " . قَالَ هَذَا حَدِيثٌ حَسَنٌ . قَالَ وَمَعْنَى قَوْلِهِ " مَنْ دَانَ نَفْسَهُ " . يَقُولُ حَاسَبَ نَفْسَهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا قَبْلَ أَنْ يُحَاسَبَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ . وَيُرْوَى عَنْ عُمَرَ بْنِ الْخَطَّابِ قَالَ حَاسِبُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ قَبْلَ أَنْ تُحَاسَبُوا وَتَزَيَّنُوا لِلْعَرْضِ الأَكْبَرِ وَإِنَّمَا يَخِفُّ الْحِسَابُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَلَى مَنْ حَاسَبَ نَفْسَهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا . وَيُرْوَى عَنْ مَيْمُونِ بْنِ مِهْرَانَ قَالَ لاَ يَكُونُ الْعَبْدُ تَقِيًّا حَتَّى يُحَاسِبَ نَفْسَهُ كَمَا يُحَاسِبُ شَرِيكَهُ مِنْ أَيْنَ مَطْعَمُهُ وَمَلْبَسُهُ .

TRANSLATION:

From Shaddad ibn Aws رضى الله عنه: the Prophet ﷺ said: "The wise one is he who holds himself to account and works for what comes after death; and the weak one is he who follows his own desires and then (merely) indulges in wishful hopes (of forgiveness) from Allah."

Meaning: *True wisdom is not measured by worldly cleverness, but by how far a person is willing to restrain his desires in preparation for the Hereafter. On the other hand, merely following one's wants while hoping Allah will forgive without any effort to reform oneself is a sign of weakness, not of tawakkul.*

NARRATOR:

Shaddad ibn Aws رضى الله عنه

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CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):
Narrated by Imam al-Tirmidhi in Jami‘ al-Tirmidhi, Book of the Description of the Day of Resurrection (Kitab Sifat al-Qiyamah), Hadith No. 2459.

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):
روايت إمام ترمذي دالم جامع الترمذي، كتاب صفة القيامة، حديث نمبور ٢٤٥٩.

CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:
Two chains of narration that meet at Abu Bakr ibn Abi Maryam: (1) Sufyan ibn Waki‘ — from ‘Isa ibn Yunus; and (2) ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Darimi — from ‘Amr ibn ‘Awn — from Ibn al-Mubarak — both chains meet at Abu Bakr ibn Abi Maryam — from Damrah ibn Habib — from Shaddad ibn Aws رضى الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:
Disputed. Imam al-Tirmidhi himself described it as a hasan hadith in his Sunan; however, the review of its chain by Darussalam (in the latest printed edition of Sunan al-Tirmidhi) graded it da‘if.

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

AL-HAKIM AL-TIRMIDHI (KITAB AL-AKYAS):
He makes this hadith the basis of a discussion of the "science of the soul" in Islam — that wisdom (kiyasah) lies in subjecting desire to the reckoning of the Hereafter, while weakness (al-‘ajz) lies in surrendering to the urges of desire while postponing self-reform in the name of hoping for Allah's mercy alone.

REFERENCE LINK:
https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2459

A NOTE ON SCHOLARLY HONESTY: THE CONFLICTING GRADES OF HADITH NO. 4

We found a conflict in the grading of this hadith while re-checking its sources: Imam al-Tirmidhi himself described it as a hasan hadith in his Sunan, but the review of its chain by Darussalam in the latest printed edition graded it da‘if, probably because of the standing of some narrators in its chain, which some hadith scholars dispute. We have chosen to present it nonetheless because its meaning is also supported by Hadith No. 1 and No. 3 in this book (both of which are sahih), but readers should know that this hadith on its own cannot be used as independent proof.

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS: THE "LIMITED ENERGY" MODEL RE-EXAMINED

In the 1990s, the psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues proposed the theory of "ego depletion" — that self-control works like a muscle that uses a kind of limited "energy"; each time a person resists a temptation, this store of energy is reduced, making it harder for him to resist the next temptation in the same period. The theory became very influential and popular for more than two decades.

However, a large preregistered multi-lab replication study by Martin Hagger, Nikos Chatzisarantis and more than 20 research teams around the world, published in the journal Perspectives on Psychological Science in 2016, failed to detect a consistent ego-depletion effect when it was rigorously retested. This finding sparked a major discussion in psychology about the "replication crisis", and many researchers have since moved from the "limited energy" model to models based on motivation and values — that a person is more successful at controlling himself when he has a strong reason and meaning for doing so, not merely because his self-control "energy" has not yet run out.

A related finding comes from re-examinations of the "Marshmallow Test" by Walter Mischel in the 1960s–70s (which found that children who were able to delay gratification tended to achieve better outcomes as adults). A larger replication study by Tyler Watts, Greg Duncan and Haonan Quan, published in the journal Psychological

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Science in 2018, found that when family background and socioeconomic factors were controlled for, the effect of the ability to delay gratification on later success became much smaller than reported in the original study.

A NOTE ON SCHOLARLY HONESTY

We deliberately present the failed replication of ego depletion and the shrinking effect of the marshmallow test to show that the science of self-control is still under active revision, and that popular findings are not necessarily solid forever. This does not mean that self-control is unimportant — many other studies still confirm its importance — but the mechanism behind it ("limited energy" versus "motivation and values") is still debated among researchers.

ANALYSIS: A STRENGTH THAT DOES NOT COME FROM ENERGY ALONE

Interestingly, this new direction in the science of self-control — that success in restraining desire depends more on motivation and values than on a limited store of "energy" — is actually more in line with the message of hadith no. 4 than the original "ego depletion" model. That hadith does not describe the wise person as someone who naturally has more self-control "energy"; rather, it describes wisdom as the fruit of muhasabah (holding oneself to account) and of orientation towards what comes after death — a form of meaningful, long-term motivation, exactly what current research now supports. Likewise hadith no. 3: the strength to master oneself when angry is not a matter of physical energy, but of values and the training of the soul. This is the essence of mujahadah in Islam — not merely "holding back" desire by sheer will, but building a heart that truly fears Allah (An-Nazi'at 79:40) and is oriented towards the Hereafter (Tirmidhi 2459), so that the subduing of desire comes from meaning, not merely from a struggle against momentary mental fatigue.

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CONCLUSION AND LESSONS

Desire: The Hidden God, and the Way Back

This little book began with a sharp verse — that whoever takes his desire as a god risks having his heart and hearing sealed, and a veil placed over his sight. Four main lessons can be drawn.

The heart does not close all of a sudden. Chapter 1 showed, through the hadith of Hudhayfah رضى الله عنه and research on the neuroscience of habit, that following desire is a gradual process — black spot after black spot, neural pathway after neural pathway — not a sudden change.

Two veils, one choice at every moment. Chapter 2 showed that both the path of good and the path of evil are "veiled" — one with hardship, the other with immediate pleasure — and that the brain's reward system is naturally drawn to the immediate, even though it brings long-term loss.

The veil over the mind is a veil we build ourselves. Chapter 3 showed that cognitive bias and motivated reasoning are not something that befalls people at random, but result from repeated choices to confirm what one already wants.

True strength comes from values, not merely from willpower. Chapter 4 showed that mujahadah in subduing desire — as in the two hadith presented — is more in line with current research emphasising motivation and meaning than with the old "limited energy" model that is now disputed.

CLOSING: SUCCESS AND LOSS OF THE SELF

SURAH ASH-SHAMS (91) — VERSES 9-10
https://quran.com/91/9-10

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكَّىٰهَا ﴿٩﴾ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَن دَسَّىٰهَا ﴿١٠﴾

"He has succeeded who purifies it, (9) and he has failed who instills it [with corruption]. (10)"

As long as a person still breathes, the door of return to Allah remains open. A heart that has absorbed black spots can still be cleansed through repentance, self-accounting and continuous righteous deeds — and that is why the verse of Ash-Shams uses "zakkaha" (purifies it) as an ongoing action, not a fixed state.

A FINAL REMINDER

The author is an independent researcher and not a mufti, a hadith specialist or a certified scientist. The translations and explanations in this book are a personal effort to convey knowledge based on recognised sources. Any errors are the author's own, and readers are invited to check the links provided and to consult scholars and experts on matters of law, and the relevant specialists on matters of psychology and mental health. May Allah forgive our shortcomings.

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All praise is due to Allah, who gave the strength and opportunity to complete this book. Blessings and peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, his family and his Companions.

This book is dedicated to the people who are the author's source of strength:

My beloved wife

Zaharah Mohd Latif

Children

Muhammad Hafiz, Noor Hazwani, Abdul Hakim,
Noor Hidayah, Nor Aqila, Nor Atiqah

Children-in-law

Fazilah, Malek, Hanin, Fairizal, Firwan

May Allah grant them all blessings, health and faith, and may every letter in this book be an ongoing charity whose reward continues. Aamiin.

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SURAH AL-BAQARAH (2) — VERSE 261
https://quran.com/2/261

مَّثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنۢبَتَتۡ سَبۡعَ سَنَابِلَ فِي كُلِّ سُنۢبُلَةٖ مِّاْئَةُ حَبَّةٖۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُضَٰعِفُ لِمَن يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٢٦١

"The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing."

SURAH SABA' (34) — VERSE 39
https://quran.com/34/39

قُلۡ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقۡدِرُ لَهُۥۚ وَمَآ أَنفَقۡتُم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَهُوَ يُخۡلِفُهُۥۖ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ٣٩

"Say, 'Indeed, my Lord extends provision for whom He wills of His servants and restricts [it] for him. But whatever thing you spend [in His cause] — He will compensate it; and He is the best of providers.'"

CHARITY DOES NOT DECREASE WEALTH

حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ أَيُّوبَ، وَقُتَيْبَةُ، وَابْنُ، حُجْرٍ قَالُوا حَدَّثَنَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ، - وَهُوَ ابْنُ جَعْفَرٍ - عَنِ الْعَلاَءِ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ " مَا نَقَصَتْ صَدَقَةٌ مِنْ مَالٍ وَمَا زَادَ اللَّهُ عَبْدًا بِعَفْوٍ إِلاَّ عِزًّا وَمَا تَوَاضَعَ أَحَدٌ لِلَّهِ إِلاَّ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ " .

TRANSLATION:

From Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه: the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Charity does not decrease wealth; Allah does not increase a servant who forgives except in honour; and no one humbles himself for the sake of Allah except that Allah raises him (in rank)."

Meaning: *Giving for the sake of Allah brings no loss; it brings blessing, honour and multiplied reward.*

NARRATOR:

Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه

CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):

Narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Righteousness, Joining Ties and Manners (Kitab al-Birr wa al-Silah wa al-Adab), Hadith No. 2588.

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):

روايت إمام مسلم دالم صحيح مسلم، كتاب البر والصلة والآداب، حديث نمبور ٢٥٨٨.

CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:

Yahya ibn Ayyub, Qutaybah and Ibn Hujr — from Isma'il ibn Ja'far — from al-'Ala' — from his father — from Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:

Sahih — narrated in Sahih Muslim.

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

IMAM AL-NAWAWI (SHARH SAHIH MUSLIM):

He mentions two meanings: wealth given in charity is blessed and protected from calamity so that in reality it does not decrease, or its reward is multiplied so that the outward decrease is replaced by a real increase.

REFERENCE LINK:

https://sunnah.com/muslim:2588

THREE DEEDS THAT DO NOT END AFTER DEATH

حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ أَيُّوبَ، وَقُتَيْبَةُ، - يَعْنِي ابْنَ سَعِيدٍ - وَابْنُ حُجْرٍ قَالُوا حَدَّثَنَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ، - هُوَ ابْنُ جَعْفَرٍ - عَنِ الْعَلاَءِ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ " إِذَا مَاتَ الإِنْسَانُ انْقَطَعَ عَنْهُ عَمَلُهُ إِلاَّ مِنْ ثَلاَثَةٍ إِلاَّ مِنْ صَدَقَةٍ جَارِيَةٍ أَوْ عِلْمٍ يُنْتَفَعُ بِهِ أَوْ وَلَدٍ صَالِحٍ يَدْعُو لَهُ "

.

TRANSLATION:

From Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه: the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "When a person dies, his deeds come to an end except for three: an ongoing charity, knowledge that is benefited from, or a righteous child who prays for him."

Meaning: *Books, knowledge that is spread, endowments (waqf) and a righteous child continue to bring reward to a person after his death.*

NARRATOR:

Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه

CHAIN OF NARRATION (LATIN SCRIPT):

Narrated by Imam Muslim in Sahih Muslim, Book of Wills (Kitab al-Wasiyyah), Hadith No. 1631.

CHAIN OF NARRATION (JAWI SCRIPT):

روايت إمام مسلم دالم صحيح مسلم، كتاب الوصية، حديث نمبور ١٦٣١.

CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION:

Yahya ibn Ayyub, Qutaybah and Ibn Hujr — from Isma'il ibn Ja'far — from al-'Ala' — from his father — from Abu Hurayrah رضى الله عنه — from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

GRADE:

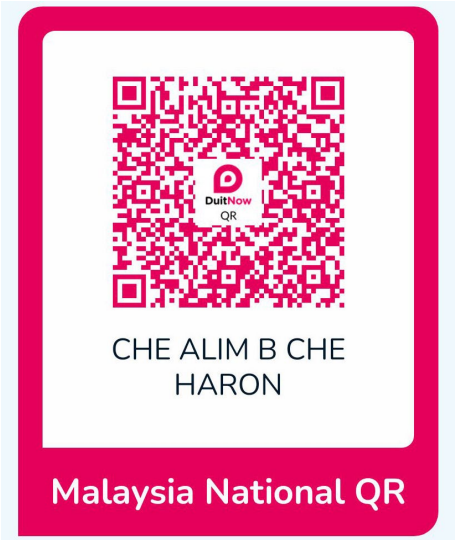
Sahih — narrated in Sahih Muslim.

SCHOLARS' COMMENTARY:

IMAM AL-NAWAWI (SHARH SAHIH MUSLIM):
He states that this hadith is evidence for the validity of endowment (waqf) and for the great reward of writing and spreading beneficial knowledge; this reward continues for its owner after death.

REFERENCE LINK:
https://sunnah.com/muslim:1631

Jazakumullahu Khairan Kathira.



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