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Visiting the Prophet at His Grave: Discussions about the Religious Topography of Madina

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Abstract: Theological discussions about visits to the Prophet's grave in Madina are the focus of this paper. The relevant question in this context relates to the idea of a postmortem life of the Prophet and its accessibility for believers after his death. The idea of a spiritual presence of the Prophet in this world is found in the description of religious visits to Madina, namely in the traditional Sunni books of Fiqh (describing the normative rules concerning the Prophet's grave), as well as in some books of Tafsir. These ideas have been challenged by the Wahhabi movement, in which the idea of becoming connected to the Prophet's presence is refused and the visit to Madina is seen to be focused on the mosque, not the grave of the Prophet. This reinterpretation is examined in this article on the basis of various textual references.

Keywords: Islam; prophetology; postmortal life; grave; Madina; Wahhabism



Citation: Kellner, Martin. 2024. Visiting the Prophet at His Grave: Discussions about the Religious Topography of Madina. *Religions* 15: 552. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050552>

Academic Editors: Ruggero Sanseverino and Besnik Sinani

Received: 8 February 2024

Revised: 11 April 2024

Accepted: 19 April 2024

Published: 29 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Visiting the Prophet's grave and his mosque in Madina is a common practice mostly connected to the pilgrimage. The religious concepts underlying this practice are of particular importance for the study of Islamic prophetology. In Sunni literature, we find numerous references to the fact that visiting the Prophet's grave was considered the most important goal of this journey. There are numerous indications in the books of Fiqh and Tafsīr¹ of the belief in a spiritual postmortem existence of the Prophet in this world and of the conviction of the accessibility of the prophetic existence for believers. These ideas have been challenged by Ibn Taymiya (1328/728) and his disciples. In the Wahhābi-Movement², the intended visit to graves and shrines is a highly controversial topic—the religious suspicions are connected to the question if it is allowed to ask mercy *for* the deceased person, to ask God *by* the deceased person (*tawassul*), or to receive something *from* the person in the grave. With regard to the visit to Madina, Wahhabi literature repeatedly points out that prayer in the mosque must be the goal of the journey, which is in clear contradiction to numerous statements in the Sunni tradition. Their rejection of the idea that the Prophet could be accessible at his grave is a major indication of the “anatomy of the Wahhābiya”. Discussions concerning the Prophet's grave reveal fault lines in the “*sacred landscape of Madina's physical topography*” (Munt 2014, p. 101 f) with regard to prophetological, eschatological, and faith-practical issues.

2. Theological Discussions about the Prophet's Grave in Madina

In her study of the early history of Wahhābiya, Ester Peskes describes the looting of the Prophet's tomb in Madinah from the perspective of Ahmad Dahlan, who briefly states that the Wahhābi rulers prevented people from visiting the Prophet's tomb (Peskes 1993, p. 148). This absolute prohibition, if it ever existed, did not last, but the limitation of the visit has been an issue in religious politics from the early days of the Saudi dynasty:

“When the Wahhābis first arrived, they discouraged the visit (ziyāra) to al-Madīna as constituting idolatrous tomb worship, but King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, for whom the revenues

*had some interest, justified it on the ground that he permitted pilgrims to pray in the mosque but not to visit the Prophet's tomb."*³

This could be seen as a theological nuance in the Hijazi history of ideas, yet the question about how to visit the Prophet's grave in a correct way is still highly controversial.

The visit to Madina before or after the pilgrimage (Hajj and 'Umra) is of central orthopraxical importance. In 2019, about 9 million visitors were recorded, and the majority of these visits can be attributed to religious visits.⁴ In 2017, Madina was given the title of the capital of Arab tourism.⁵

This raises the question of the motivation for visiting a city that is 400 kilometres away from the actual pilgrimage destination of Mecca. In the religious literature and in numerous online resources, controversial discussions can be observed about which landmarks of Madina should be the aim of this visit: the city of Madina itself (as a scene of Islamic history); the holy mosque (as one of the "three holy mosques", which are—as will be discussed in this article—the mosques of Makka and Madina and the Maṣḡid al-Aqṣa in Jerusalem); a certain part of the mosque (the so-called Rawḍa); or the tomb of the Prophet and the green dome built above it, which has become the landmark symbol of the city. In traditional Sunni literature, the main focus was on the grave itself. In the Wahhābī literature (inspired by the ideas of Ibn Taymiya), we can see a shift in the focus of this visit—from visiting the grave to visiting the Mosque.

The controversy is centred around the following four theological questions:

- What is the significance of the visit to Madina that is usually connected with the pilgrimage?
- Is the visit to the prophetic grave an integral part of this religiously motivated journey?
- What type of contact with the deceased person (here, the Prophet) is possible or permissible for visitors?
- What concepts of postmortem life of the human being in general and of the Prophet in particular are discussed in Islamic literature?

These topics touch upon normative aspects (the "how" of visiting Madina in Fiqh literature), eschatological questions about postmortal life (Do souls continue existing after the death of a person?), and prophetological topics (Which specific characteristics are attributed to the postmortal existence of prophets?). In this context, the differences between traditional Sunni positions and Wahhābī interpretations will be illustrated by some text examples that seem to be representative of the ideological conflict concerning the accessibility of the Prophet in the material world.

3. The Grave of the Prophet in Madina and His Postmortal Presence in Fiqh and Tafsir

The concept of prophetic postmortem life in the traditional Sunni literature is mentioned mainly in the books of Tafsir and Fiqh, especially in the context of encouraging the visiting of his grave. In the famous manual of Hanafi jurisprudence, *Marāqī al-Falāḥ*, written by Imām aṣ-Ṣurūbulālī (d. 1069/1659), we find the following description of the Prophet's postmortal existence:

"Amongst those beliefs that is confirmed with the scholars is that he, upon him be peace and blessings, is alive, provided with sustenance and enjoying all pleasures and worship except that he is veiled from the eyes of those who are deficient from the noble states." (aṣ-Ṣurūbulālī n.d., p. 302).

The interesting point here is that the author of this book seems to have no doubt about the postmortem life of the Prophet in his grave⁶ and the accessibility to the visitors. The question he discusses is merely how this connection can take place. He only mentions a difference between people who are able to perceive the spiritual reality of the Prophet's life and others who are not aware of this. The question of whether the Prophet is alive or not is not part of the discussion.

The accessibility of the Prophet's spirit to his visitors is described as follows:

“He then heads towards the noble grave standing a distance of four arm lengths with complete etiquette having his back towards the direction of prayer. He faces towards the head of the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, noting that he is gazing happily towards him, hearing his words, responding to his salaams and uttering amen to his supplication.” (aš-Šurunbulālī n.d., p. 303)⁷

In a publication of Dār al-iftā’al-miṣriyya (The Egyptian Organization for Granting Legal Opinions) we find the same idea as a part of a longer text describing how to visit the Prophet’s grave.

“A person visiting the Prophet’s tomb must feel in his heart that the Prophet is alive in his grave; he can hear a person’s greeting and words and is able to answer him. It was reported in a Prophetic hadith that the prophets are alive in their graves, praying to their Lord. The hadith scholar, Ibn Hajar said, “Death will never overcome the Prophet in his grave; he will remain alive because the prophets are alive in their graves.” A person visiting the Prophet’s tomb must know that God the Almighty presents the Prophet with the affairs of his visitors and those of the believers, making the Prophet’s supplications for forgiveness and prayers for them the grounds for amending their affairs”⁸

In the Tafsir literature, the postmortal life of the Prophet is discussed in the context of the following Quranic verse:

*“Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to Allah for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded for forgiveness for them, they would have surely found Allah all-clement, all-merciful.” (4:64)*⁹

The main topic here is that people come to the Prophet after doing wrong, seeking forgiveness. The questions discussed in exegetical literature are (i) whether this *coming to the Prophet* is limited to his lifetime or is extended to his postmortal existence by visiting his grave, (ii) whether the Prophet can intercede to God on one’s behalf (tawassul), and (iii) the possibility and permissibility of “connecting” to the soul of a deceased person (here, the Prophet).

The following famous narration that is mentioned in several books of Tafsir illustrates this idea:

In the 14th century, Ibn Kaṭīr¹⁰ mentions the “story of al-‘Utbī”, who narrated that he was sitting close to the grave of the Prophet when a Bedouin Arab came to the grave and said:

“Peace be upon you, O Messenger of Allah! Allah said: “Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to Allah for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded for forgiveness for them, they would have surely found Allah all-clement, all-merciful.” Therefore I came to you seeking forgiveness for my sin, seeking your intercession to my Lord (mustaṣfi’an bika ilā rabbi)”

Then he recited the following poetry:

O best of those whose bones are buried in the deep earth,
And from whose fragrance the depth and the height have
become sweet,
May my life be the ransom for a grave which thou inhabit,
And in which are found purity, bounty, and munificence!¹¹

Then he left, and I fell into sleep and saw the Prophet in my sleep. He said to me: “O ‘Utbī, run after the Bedouin and tell him that Allah has forgiven him.”¹²

The fact that this story—a man coming to the grave to the Prophet and becoming connected to his postmortal person—is quoted in the exegetical literature shows a kind of acceptance of this idea. The fact that Ibn Katheer does not criticise this story despite the

fact that his own teacher, Ibn Taymīya, strongly opposes this kind of religious practice is remarkable. But it is not Ibn Katheer alone who seems to accept the story of al-ʿUtbī and the possibility of becoming connecting to the Prophet's soul after this death; many scholars of Tafsīr and Fiqh have quoted the narration in different variations.

Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 1223/620), the author of the influential Hanbali Fiqh compendium "al-Muḡnī" mentions the story of al-ʿUtbī in the following context. He works out that it is recommended to visit the grave of the Prophet after finishing the Hajj and mentions the following narrations:

"Whoever makes the pilgrimage and visits my grave after my death, it is as he has visited me in my lifetime"

"Whoever visits my grave deserves my intercession"

"Whenever someone is greeting me at my grave, Allah gives back my soul so that I am able to answer his greetings."¹³

In the next part, he explains that pilgrims coming from the north and making their Hajj for the first time should not stop in Madina so that there would not be anything preventing their pilgrimage—the visit should be done after finishing the Hajj. Then, he mentions the story of al-ʿUtbī without any commentary and continues by mentioning how to enter the mosque in a proper way. (Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī 1969, vol. 3, p. 77 ff.).

Abū Ḥayyān (d. 1344/745) mentions the story in his Tafsīr in a lightly different narration, saying that it was narrated by Ali that a Bedouin came to the Prophet's grave three days after he passed away, throwing himself on the grave and throwing sand on his head; then, he started reciting the poetry mentioned above ("O best of those..."). Then, the Bedouin said, "Allah commended us to come to you seeking for forgiveness". After that—according to Abū Ḥayyān—"he was called from the grave that God has forgiven you" (wa nūdiya min al-qabri annahū qad ḡufira lak) (Ibn Ḥayyān al-Andalusī 2015, vol. 7, pp. 165–66). What is remarkable here is that he does not refer to the Prophet's communication as a dream but he mentions that the Bedouin was called by a voice from the grave. Abū Ḥayyān mentions this story without any further comments and continues with the commentary on the next part of this verse. Nothing seemed to be strange in the main "event" of this story, namely the contact between the deceased Prophet and the visitor.

Shafii jurist Abū Zakariya Yaḥyā b. Šaraf an-Nawawī (1277/676) cites this narration in his Maḡmūʿ after a practical description of how to visit the Prophet's grave. He states that the visitor should go to the grave at the place that is close to the Prophet's face and should seek intercession to his Lord through the Prophet for himself. Then, he mentions the following story related to the Āya 4:64:

"And from the best which he (the visitor) can say in this moment is what is narrated by al-Mawardī and al-Qāḍī Abū Ṭayyib and other followers of our school (sāʿir aṣḥābinā) from al-ʿUtbī conforming him (mustaḥsinīna laḥū): 'I was sitting close to the prophet's grave when a Bedouin entered, addressing the prophet: Peace be upon you, o Messenger of Allah, I heard the saying of God: 'Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you (...)', and I came here seeking forgiveness for my sins asking you for intercession to my Lord.'" Then he recited: 'O best of those whose bones are buried (...)' I fell asleep and saw the Prophet in my dream saying: 'O ʿUtbī, follow the Bedouin and tell him that he has been forgiven.'" (an-Nawawī 2009, p. 1850).

The same story is mentioned in many books of Tafsir and Fiqh, and in the Islamic history, scholars seem to accept the life and accessibility of the Prophet's soul in his grave. None of these scholars seem to find anything remarkable in addressing the Prophet after his death and being addressed by him. The narration of al-ʿUtbī appears to have been accepted to be an expression of the idea of the "metahistory" in the continuing presence of Muḥammad as the living messenger of God (Cragg 2001, p. 128).

Marion Katz stated, "*the Prophet was understood as a conscious being, who (according to many scholars, as well as widespread folk beliefs) is aware of the pious invocations, the personal greetings and the hopes and fears of individual believers*" (Holmes-Katz 2010, p. 148).

4. Visiting of Prophet's Grave in Wāḥḥābī Literature: A Different Religious Topography of Madina

4.1. The Refutation of Connecting to the Prophetic Presence after His Death

In Wāḥḥābī literature, we find concepts that are in obvious contrast to this idea of an accessible postmortal prophetic existence. The Saudi exegete 'Abd al-Raḥmān as-Sa'dī (d. 1957) stresses that the meaning of "coming to the Prophet" in Verse 4/64 is not relating to the grave of the Prophet and his postmortem presence—as mentioned in many other exegetical books—but was restricted to the Prophet's lifetime.

"This coming to the Messenger was applicable only during his lifetime, because this is what is indicated by the context; the Messenger's prayers for forgiveness could only happen as long as he was alive. After his death he is not to be asked for anything; in fact that comes under the heading of ascribing a partner to Allah (shirk)." (as-Sa'dī 2018, vol. 2, p. 207)

Another argument that is used in many Wāḥḥābī statements about the correct way to visit the Prophet's grave is the weakness in the asānīd of the story of al-'Utbī, and there are many references to the problematic chains of transmitters mentioning this story. This argument is not essential for the mentioned positions in classical texts because the story of al-'Utbī is not used to prove belief in the presence of the Prophet in his grave; rather, it was used merely as an "illustration" of his postmortal life and consciousness.

One of the most detailed Wāḥḥābī texts against the story of al-'Utbī is a text written by the popular Saudi scholar Ṣāliḥ al-Munaḡḡid on the influential website islamqa.info. In the following, an overview of the structure of this text will be given, with special attention to other scholars the author refers to.

As an introduction, the question that has been posed is mentioned. The asking person acknowledges that there is enough textual evidence to prohibit anyone from asking the Prophet for intercession (tawassul) after he has passed away. But the questioner is confused about the story of al-'Utbī, which causes doubts about what has been said about this issue.

Al-Munaḡḡid answers this question in the following way:

- (1) He makes reference to another fatwa (written by himself) forbidding this kind of *tawassul bid'ī* (heretical kind of seeking intercession).
- (2) Some of later scholars justified this kind of evil innovation by quoting Aya 4/64, and this is wrong for the following reasons:

First, the qur'anic context is not referring to the lifetime of the Prophet but how the Prophet be asked for forgiveness in this grave. And asking him for forgiveness after his death is a kind of idolatry.

Then, he quotes Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī (1343/744) as follows:

"The *salaf* und *khalaf* (predecessors and successors) explained that the verse refers to the prophet's lifetime and it is not reported that any of the companions came to the prophet's grave and asked him for intercession. Whoever claims that the companions did this is lying. How can the scholars of Hadith, Fiqh and Tafsir be ignorant of these facts?"

Then, the author mentions the reference to Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī and adds two other sources, namely the Tafsir of al-Ṭabarī (without defining what exactly he is referring to) and the Tafsir of al-Sa'dī (which was mentioned in this paper before).

Second, the story of al-'Utbī is weak in its chains of transmission, and the only people who use this story are these who want to "*misguide others from their religion*". Then, he recites the source of the story of al-'Utbī, namely Imām al-Bayhaqī, without any further comments. After that, he cites the following critique of Ibn Taymiya:

"For this reason, a group of later scholars of the followers of al-Ṣāfi'ī and Aḥmad said that his practice would be recommended (*istahabba ḍalika*) referring to this story which is not a valid proof for a religious norm. If it would have been recommended, the Sahaba and Ṭābi'īn would have followed this practice. . ."

After Ibn Taymiya, he quotes his student, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, who criticized the sanad (chain of transmission) and wrote, “Some liars brought a wrong chain of transmission for this story which is told to be a sanad to ‘Alī b. ‘Alī Ṭalīb”¹⁴.

The next author who is quoted in this fatwa is al-Albānī (d. 1999). He criticizes the weakness of the sanad in the different versions of the narration; then, he states the following in general:

“This story is wrong and contradicts Quran and Sunna, and therefore (wa-li-dālika) it is used by the innovators who allowed istiḡāṭa¹⁵ and asking the Prophet after his death for intercession, and this is well known to be the greatest evil, and Ibn Taymīya made this clear in his books.”

After that, al-Munaḡḡid refers to Ṣāliḥ Āl al-Ṣaykh (b. 1959), who used the same arguments of weakness and contradiction of the main sources of Islam. It is clear that all of these texts declared that it is forbidden to bring up devotional extremism¹⁶ connected to graves and righteous people in general and, in particular, connected to the Prophet and his grave. Keeping away from shirk is one of the main principles in Islam, as can be understood from the following hadith mentioned by Imām Aḥmad: “Shirk is the biggest tribulation”. Ibn ‘Abbās was also warning believers against believing the teachings of the Quran and Sunna.

In the end of the text, Āl al-Ṣaykh warns that if people follow the “perverted opinions” (ṣudūdāt) of some scholars, they are in danger of losing their religion.

After quoting all these texts opposing the story of al-‘Utbī, al-Munaḡḡid discusses a sensitive question. The story of al-‘Utbī was cited by Ibn Kaṭīr (who is a student of Ibn Taymīya). How can scholars who are well known for their correct creed and their precise religious method (al-ma’rūf ‘anhum ṣiḥḥat al-i’tiqād wa-salāmat al-manḥaḡ) like Ibn Kaṭīr quote a false story like this? His answer was that the fact that Ibn Kaṭīr mentions this narration does not mean that it can be taken as proof of tawassul. Then, he mentions that Āl al-Ṣaykh clarified that Ibn Kaṭīr mentions the story in a neutral form without deriving anything from it and that Ibn Qudāma transmitted it in a doubtful expression of passive tense (yurwā).¹⁷

One of the interesting aspects of this fatwa is the self-reference kind of arguing. All of the cited scholars who explicitly speak against tawassul represent the al-Munaḡḡids school of thought (Ibn Taymīya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, al-Sa’dī, Āl al-Ṣaykh, al-Albānī). The other authors mentioned in the fatwa as principal witnesses for Munaḡḡid’s position (Ibn ‘Abbās, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kaṭīr) are not cited with any explicit position in the context of tawassul. Their expressions used in this fatwa can be seen as general principles, such as warning against shirk, bid’a, etc., and their positions are not referring to the question as to whether it is permissible to speak or connect to the Prophet’s soul after his death. This summary of al-Munaḡḡid’s fatwa shows the typical structure of arguments against the mainstream Sunni positions about visiting the Prophet’s grave.

In numerous Wahhābī-influenced online publications, we find the idea that mistakes in visiting the grave of the Prophet could be a reason for losing the religion.

“Many pilgrims when they travel to Medina they pray to the graves. They make Du’a to the Prophet (peace be upon him). This could not only ruin their hajj. It could nullify their Islam.”¹⁸

“Seeking the help of the dead or asking them for support or calling upon them and asking them to meet needs and to help alleviates calamity and to bring benefits and ward off hardships are all forms of major shirk which put a person beyond the pale of Islam and make him a worshipper of idols, because no one can relieve a person of worries and distress except Allah alone with no partner or associate.”¹⁹

The scholars in this tradition—based on the fatwas of Ibn Taymiya—share some main rules of how to visit Madina and the Prophet’s mosque.

- (1) It is not allowed to intend to visit the Prophet or the Prophet's grave; rather, the visitor can visit the grave of the Prophet after spending time in the mosque;
- (2) It is not allowed to expect the intercession of a deceased person, including the Prophet;
- (3) There is a danger in elaborate funeral architecture, including the tomb of the Prophet;
- (4) It is not allowed to turn one's face towards the grave (which would be the opposite side of the qibla).

The central point in the Wahhābī fatwas, namely that it is not allowed to intend to visit the Prophet or the Prophet's grave, needs some further analyses.

The Wahhābī fatwas often suggest a scholarly consensus that traveling for the "ziyāra" of the tomb is forbidden in Islamic law.

"Travelling with the intention of visiting the grave of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is bid'ah and haram due to the Hadith which forbids traveling for worship to any other place apart from the three mosques. As for visiting the grave of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) if one happens to be in Madinah, this is entirely acceptable. Traveling with the intention of praying in the Prophet's Mosque is as a form of worship and requesting to come close to Allah. Those who are confused about this topic are those who do not understand the difference between what is permitted and what is forbidden. And Allah knows best."²⁰

These ideas presented above, as inspired by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, whose opinions about visiting graves, about seeking intercession through the Prophet, and about the religious interpretation of the visit to Madina, were the origin of a new cautious perspective on possible accesses to the world of the deceased Prophet, were traditionally confronted with fierce opposition.

"Ibn Taymiyya spent a large portion of his life in prison for his teachings; his last imprisonment was caused by his issuance of a legal opinion reportedly denouncing the visitation of the Prophet's grave. Ibn Taymiyya was defeated by his opponents, the ulama of Egypt and Syria, and died in prison together with his legal opinions condemning grave visitation and the belief in intercession. (...) After Ibn al-Qayyim, in full accordance with his master's teaching, had preached in Jerusalem about the intercession of the prophets and denied that one could set out to visit the Prophet's grave without first going to the Prophet's Mosque, a group of Ibn Taymiyya's sympathizers was arrested." (Beranek and Tupek 2009, p. 12)

4.2. The Refutation of Visiting the Prophet Based on the Hadith "lā tuṣaddu r-riḥāl"

The main textual proof for the Wahhābī position is the well-known hadith that limited traveling with the purpose of visiting mosques "One should not travel except to three mosques: this mosque of mine, the mosque in Mecca, and the Masjid al-Aqsa." (lā tuṣaddu r-riḥāl 'illā li-ṭalātati masājid: al-masjid al-ḥarām, wa-masjidī ḥadā wa- masjid al-aqṣā).²¹

The point here is that in the Wahhābī literature, the hadith is seen as clear evidence that the intention of the travel has to be to visit the mosque, not to visit the grave.

Going deeper into the linguistic structure of the hadith, it is evident that a part of the exclusion in this sentence has to be completed. Therefore, several interpretations of the text are possible: One should not travel (1. to any place/2. to any place of worship/3. to any mosque) except to three mosques: this mosque of mine, the mosque in Mecca, and the Masjid al-Aqsa.

According to the first interpretation, every kind of traveling would be forbidden, be it with the purpose of studying, medical treatment, etc. Nobody propagates such rulings.

According to the second interpretation, traveling to the Prophet's grave could be considered a restricted journey if we consider it an act of worship. However, it has to be asked if visiting the grave of a beloved person can be considered a religious act of worship.

Rather, it can be seen as an expression of gratitude, love, and loyalty, which are parts of religion.

The third interpretation of the hadith, namely that believers should not make a journey to pray in a certain mosque except the three mentioned mosques, seems to be the explanation of this hadith that has been relied upon by most traditional non-Wahhābī scholars. It does not forbid traveling to visit the Prophet's grave; rather, it shows the hierarchy of the three holy mosques and clarifies that traveling to pray in other mosques except these three is not a part of the religion.

“Muslim scholars and scholars of Islam have offered several interpretations for this saying, which seems to discourage or even forbid visitation of all other sacred sites, promise recompense for the visitation of these three mosques, or rate the importance of the three cities in descending order.” (Talmon-Heller 2022, p. 52 f)

The possibility of understanding the famous “lā tušaddu r-riḥāl-Hadith” in different ways explains the numerous texts in classical Fiqh opposing Ibn Taymiya's position.

In his Hanafi Fiqh book, “al-Ikhtiyār”, famous Hanafi scholar I-Mūṣīl (667/1268) states the following:

“When the pilgrims have completed their Hajj they should head towards Madina to visit the Tomb of the Prophet. (...) and the one who intends the visit of the prophet's grave, when he first sees the walls of Madina (sic!), should make ṣalawāt and du‘ā (...)” (al-Mūṣīlī 2009, p. 535 ff.)

Another point that is connected to the intention of religious visits to Madina is the argument that Imām Mālik (795/179) and Imām Aḥmad (855/241) disliked the expression “visiting the grave of the Prophet”. This would be another argument for the Wahhābī-position declaring the intention of visiting of the grave as a wrong innovation. But these statements can be interpreted in a completely different way.

(1) They disliked the word visit because a visit is something that is completely voluntary, and going the Prophet's grave is considered to be a kind of duty (sunna wāḡiba). Imām Mālik also disliked the saying, “I went to visit the Ka'bah”. The problem here is the word “visit”, not the act itself (Qudayš n.d., p. 5). (2) They disliked this expression because the people should not go there to visit the grave but, rather, to visit the Prophet himself.²²

According to these interpretations, especially the second one, the statements of Imām Mālik and Imām Aḥmad can be seen as an argument in favour of visiting the grave rather than as an argument against doing so.

The idea of visiting the Prophet at his tomb to establish a relation to his postmortal existence is not only expressed in the literature but can also be seen in the architecture of the Mosque. The Prophet's tomb—marked by the green dome—was considered the architecturally central point of orientation in the construction of the Prophet's Mosque due to the great importance of religiously motivated visits. The marginalization of the visit described above also put the architecture of the mosque up for discussion in the 20th century, which is explained in more detail in the following chapter.

5. The Prophet's Grave and the Green Dome: Hierarchy of Places and Symbols

The place of the Prophet's grave is still an important point of interest in the Wahhābī literature. The main irritant to the Wahhābī position is the fact that the grave is inside the mosque and could be taken as a place of worship (one of the main concerns in Wahhābī fatwas). The grave is now located in the southern part of the mosque and took on prominent architectural significance in the building of the mosque. The fact that the grave is actually a part of the mosque and located in the Qibla evoked cautious questions concerning the dangers of polytheism. But still, the green dome as a visible symbol of the Prophet's tomb is still located very close to the mihrāb—the place of the Imām leading tens to hundreds of thousands of people in prayer. With the green dome, the Prophet's grave is still a symbol of the city, of the mosque, and of the spiritual connection to the messenger.

Some plans to extend the mosque in the southern direction were discussed some years ago. According to these projects, the sacral architecture of the holy mosque would have been changed essentially by a massive extension of the southern part of the mosque. According to these plans, the obvious centrality of the Prophet's grave would have disappeared. In 2012, this was an issue discussed in a European newspaper. According to these reports, there was a fear *"that the redevelopment of the Masjid an-Nabawi is part of a wider drive to shift focus away from the place where Mohamed is buried. The spot that marks the Prophet's tomb is covered by a famous green dome and forms the centrepiece of the current mosque. But under the new plans, it will become the east wing of a building eight times its current size with a new pulpit."* (Taylor 2012).

The discussed extension of the mosque in the southern direction would result in an architectural marginalisation of the Prophet's grave. Ultimately, this plan was abandoned, and the new extension was constructed towards the eastern and western directions.²³

Another topic that caused some discussions, especially in anti-Wahhābī circles, is the Wahhābī idea of erasing the Prophet's and his companions' graves and reburying them in the main cemetery of al-Baqī'.

*"A pamphlet published in 2007 by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs—and endorsed by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz al Sheikh—called for the dome to be demolished and the graves of Mohamed, Abu Bakr and Umar to be flattened. Sheikh Ibn al-Uthaymeen, one of the 20th century's most prolific Wahabi scholars, made similar demands."*²⁴

Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wadi'i (d. 2001), a student of al-Albani and one of the leading figures of Salah Islam in Yemen at that time, had voiced his support for the destruction of graves on widely circulated cassette tapes. Al-Wadi'i, who studied at the Faculty of Shari'a at the Islamic University in Medina, wrote a thesis entitled "Ruling about the Dome Built over the Prophet's Grave" (Hukm al-qubba al-mabniya 'ala qabr al-rasul), in which he demanded that the Prophet's grave be brought out of his mosque and the dome destroyed, because the presence of the holy grave and the noble dome constituted major innovations. (Beranek and Tupek 2009, p. 5)

These architectural discussions refer to the question of the connection of the Prophet's postmortal life to his grave and the respect that believers are supposed to show in the surroundings of the grave. Moving the grave to another place and changing the visible architectural symbol on the grave are part of a shift in religious ideas underlying the visitation of the sacred spaces in Madina.

An interesting detail about the architectural construction of the green dome is highlighted in the following story. In the chapter of his Sunan called "How God honoured his Prophet after his death" (mā akrama llāhu nabīyahu ba'da mawtihi), al-Dārimī (d. 869/255) transmitted the following narration: In a time of drought shortly after the death of the Prophet, the people asked God for rain, but nothing changed. Aisha told them to make a window in the roof of the Prophet's sacred burial chamber—there should be no wall between the Prophet and the heaven (*"ḥattā lā yakūna baynahū wa bayna s-samā'i saqf"*). So, they opened a small part of the chamber, and heavy rains came down to the city. (al-Dārimī 1439, vol. 1, pp. 43–44).

This hadith is being discussed in the Wahhābī literature (as a small opening in the green dome that has not existed until now), and it is criticized for being weak. The remarkable point is that the author of the text on the Internet portal "IslamQ&A" arguing against the content of the narration (which is "used by the gulāt al-ṣūfiya as a proof for istiḡāṭa") relied on the sanad of the hadith, namely that al-Albānī proved the weakness of the narration.²⁵ Whatever we think about the chain of transmitters, there is one central point here. It seems that the classical scholars did not doubt the possibility that the prayers to the Prophet after his death might be accepted and that there seems to be a direct relation between the postmortal life of the Prophet and the place where he is buried.

The preservation of the “most sensitive part of the prophetic mosque”, namely the burial chamber, with the green dome and the historical places in and around the *Rawḍa* was a main objective in the expansion of the mosque by King Fahd. (Omer Spahic 2018, p. 237).

The general context of this discussion is the question as to whether a mosque can be connected to a grave. The warnings in this context are related to the hadith, “O Allah do not transform my grave into a worshiped idol, Allah’s anger is intensified on people who establish graves of their Prophets as places of worship (mosques).”²⁶

The word mosque is not a part of the hadith, but it is a very specific interpretation of the hadith in the sense that people are in a danger of turning the Prophet’s grave into an idol of worship by integrating it into the mosque. The answer to this interpretation from a traditional perspective relates to the literal meaning of the hadith, which is to make the graves of prophets into “places of prostration” (*masāḡid*).²⁷ In the building of the Prophet’s Mosque in Madina, this would be impossible because the Prophet’s grave is isolated from the mosque by walls that were built around the house of ‘Ā’iṣa within the first centuries of Islam (Ariffin 2005, p. 89). After the closing of the sacred chamber, nobody would be able to prostrate on the Prophet’s grave, and in this sense, the *du‘ā* of the Prophet would have been answered.

6. Conclusions

The city of Madina is a main destination of Islamic religious tourism. A lot of places in it—especially the mosque and the Prophet’s grave—are related to Muslim narratives of history and to the concept of the city’s spiritual topography. The hierarchy between mosque and grave are a main point of discussion in the literature. The conflict concerning this issue—starting with Ibn Taymiya and continued in numerous Wahhābī online publications—is rooted in deeper religious concepts about the relationship between the material and the nonmaterial worlds, between body and souls, and between believers and the soul of the Prophet. It has been shown that the idea of a connection between living people and the Prophet after this death is widely accepted in Sunni literature. The Wahhābī refutation of becoming connected to the Prophet at his grave can be seen as a break with the Sunni mainstream. The religious map of Madina is marked by divergent concepts of how to access the postmortal life of the Prophet. Tracing the lines of these discussions elucidates a deeper structure of prophetological thought in the wide landscapes of Islamic thought.

The idea that the prophetic being is still accessible to believers after his death was obviously seen as a given part of religion in the Sunni tradition. This is not just religious folklore or an expression of popular belief; rather, this appears to be a concept deeply rooted in orthodox literature. The religious–pedagogical dimensions of a spiritually experienced relationship with the Prophet could be the subject of further research.

Funding: The APC was funded by the University of Tübingen.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ In the analysis of the literature, three focal points were set: (1) The instructions on pilgrimage in the popular textbooks of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence—whereby it should be noted that not all of these books deal with the visit to Madina; (2) the interpretation of verse 4:64 in the exegetical works known as *Ummahat al-tafsir*, as well as in *Tafsir* works, which are frequently referred to in this context; and (3) the online presence of popular Wahhabi scholars who have commented on this topic.

² The Wahhābiya is a commonly used name for a Saudi Arabian purist reform movement rooted in the ideas of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792). The main reference for the Wahhābī movement and its founder is the ideology of the Syrian scholar Taqīy ad-Dīn Ibn Taymīya (d. 1328), who criticized visits to graves as heretical, idolatrous practices and strongly influenced the

legal debates about this issue. (Beranek and Tupek 2009, p. 3; Steinberg 2014, p. 37f.). The practice of visiting the Prophet's grave in the heartland of the Wahhābī movement shows the critical importance of this issue.

Watt and Winder (2012, p. 1), Al-Madina.

<https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/04/madinah.pdf>, p. 52. (accessed on 15 February 2024).

<http://madinah2017.com/?lang=en> (accessed on 7 February 2024).

Meier (1985) shows that in traditional literature, the connection of the Prophet's soul to the place of the grave was based on the concept of the Prophet's bodily existence in his tomb. (Meier 1985, pp. 29–31).

An overview of the ritual aspects concerning the ziyāra of the Prophet's grave can be found in (Behrens 2007, pp. 227–76).

<https://www.dar-alifta.org/en/article/details/166/the-etiquette-of-visiting-the-tomb-of-the-prophet-and-standing-before-his-blessed>. Retrieved 11 January 2024.

wa law annahum id ẓalamū 'anfusahum ḡā'ūka wa-staḡfarū llāha wa-staḡfara lahumu r-rasūlu la-waḡadū llāha tawwāban raḥīman.

Abū l-Fidā' Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kaṭīr (1373/774), exeget and historian, was a famous student of Taqīy ad-Dīn Ibn Taymīya.

Yā khayra man dufinat fī l-qā'i a'zumuhū, wa ṭābat min ṭibihinna l-qā'u wa-l-akamu, nafsī fidā'un li qabrin anta sākinuhu, fīhi al-'afāfu wa fīhi l-ḡūdu wa-l-karamu. It is worth mentioning here that those four lines of the poem are written in the pillars on the right and left sides of the "golden window", which is the main place for visits to the Prophet's grave from the northern side of the grave (Ariffin 2005, p. 91). This can be seen as an indication of historical acceptance of this story.

<https://answeringislamblog.wordpress.com/2021/10/05/tawassul-mediation-in-sunni-islam-pt-4/>. Retrieved 5 December 2023.

A further discussion of these narrations can be found in (Munt 2014, pp. 129–37).

The Sanad to 'Alī is mentioned in the Tafsir of Ibn Ḥayyān quoted above.

Asking for help.

Concerning the concept of devotional extremism, see Sinani (2023).

<https://islamqa.info/amp/ar/answers/179363>, Retrieved 10 February 2024.

<http://en.islamway.net/amp/article/8415/common-mistakes-in-hajj>. Retrieved 1 April 2024.

<https://islamqa.info/en/answers/36863/islamic-guidelines-for-visitors-to-the-prophets-mosque> (accessed on 7 February 2024).

In an Internet document about how to visit Madina in a proper way, the following generalized warning is presented: "WARNING DO NOT make Dua directly in front of any graves." <https://www.duaandazkar.com/wp-content/uploads/Madina-Ziyarah.pdf>. Retrieved 23 January 2024. The influential Saudi scholar Bin Baz states that the Prophet is alive in his grave but that this does not mean that he knows anything of the seen or the unseen world—this kind of knowledge was taken from him in the moment of his death (fa-dālika nqaṭa'a bi-l-mawt) and therefore nobody should ask him for anything. <https://binbaz.org.sa/fatwas/49/هلالرسولحيقيقبرهاملا> Retrieved 2 March 2024.

http://www.al-islam.de/sunna/PDF/sun0023_Die%20Grabstaette%20des%20Propheten%20besuchen.pdf. Retrieved 17 March 2024.

<https://www.islamweb.net/en/fatwa/82932/travelling-to-visit-mosques-other-than-the-three-sacred-ones>. Retrieved 29 December 2023.

https://islamweb.net/ar/library/index.php?page=bookcontents&ID=3715&bk_no=420&flag=1. Retrieved 24 January 2024.

https://www.mof.gov.sa/en/Projects/Pages/Prophet%E2%80%99s_Mosque.aspx. Retrieved 24 January 2024.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/madina-saudis-take-a-bulldozer-to-islams-history-8228795.html>. Retrieved 7 March 2023.

<https://islamqa.info/amp/ar/answers/103585>. Retrieved 13 March 2024.

Ibn Taymiya, "The outshining answer about the visitors of graves", translated by Ali Hassan Khan, <https://ahlehadith.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/the-outshining-answer-about-the-visitors-of-the-graves.pdf> (Retrieved 11 January 2024), p. 21. In another online document, there is an interesting discussion about the integration of the Prophet's grave into the mosque, which could be suspicious in terms of making the tomb a place of worship. Here, one of the most famous Salafi scholars, al-Albani, criticizes the decisions of the early generations in dealing with the grave: "Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azeez ibn Baaz (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: There is a specious argument put forward by those who worship graves, namely the fact that the grave of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) is in his mosque. The answer to that is that the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them) did not bury him in his mosque, rather they buried him in the house of 'Aa'ishah (may Allaah be pleased with her). When al-Waleed ibn 'Abd al-Malik expanded the Mosque of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) at the end of the first century, he incorporated the room into the mosque, but he did wrong thereby, and some of the scholars denounced him for that, but he believed that there was nothing wrong with it for the sake of expanding the mosque". <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/65944/why-is-the-prophets-grave-in-his-mosque-even-though-it-is-forbidden-to-take-graves-as-places-of-worship>. Retrieved 13 March 2023.

The detailed discussion about this hadith is found in a longer fatwa of Dār al-Iftā'al-miṣrīya: <https://www.dar-alifta.org/ar/fatawa/12405/الصلاةفيالمساجدالتيهاضرحة> Retrieved 2 March 2024.

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