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The First Discussion

One may, in all certainty, state that `Ali b. Abi Talib's apostolic preparation, both “moral and intellectual,” began upon the Prophet's first burst of Divine Revelation. The latter took practical steps in order to reach his intended goal of entrusting `Ali with the task of leading, “socially and politically” immediately after his death. It would appear from the course of events – and from what biographical works, histories and the more reliable transmitters have related – that this was achieved in two ways.

First, as Leader, the Prophet was himself committed to taking `Ali under his tutelage from childhood, taking charge of his moral education, attending to him, doing his utmost never to be separated from him except when necessary.

Second, of all the Companions, `Ali was singled out in terms of status, knowledge and position, which pertained to the very existence and future of Islam.

A. With regard to the first point, biographical works and books in traditions all have endeavoured to illustrate many pertinent details. But the matter of the Prophet taking `Ali under his charge since childhood and educating him in his own house was a conspicuous part of his noble life.¹ It is enough to recall what Imam 'Ali himself has stated in his sermon known as “*al Qasiah*”:

You well know *my* place of close kinship and special standing with God's Messenger. He put me in his lap when *I* was a child, embraced me close to his heart, offered me shelter at his berth. And there, admitted into physical contact with him, *I* scented his fragrance. He chewed the food bits to feed me. Never did he find in me a mendacious word, nor a pater's deed. *I* used to follow him as the weaned young camel does its mother's trail. And every day he would bring *up* some new teaching in morals, admonishing me to emulate him. Every year he retired to [the Cave of] Hira' where *I* alone would see him. No single roof then had joined God's Messenger and Khadijah in Islam but that *I* was its third member. *I* witnessed the light of the revelation and message, and inhaled the scent of prophethood ...²

The picture related by Imam 'Ali himself regarding the manner in which the Prophet used to treat him reveals the true dimensions of the purpose.

A special training was intended for `Ali. Extraordinary care and effort were taken to ensure that he remain very close to the light of Divine Revelation and exposed to the “fragrance of prophethood”; that he be one of three persons in the Prophet's house at the time of revelation. Occupying such an eminent place, he imbibed his first lessons and instruction directly from the Prophet. All this was reflected in his intellectual and doctrinal make-up, for “Never shall he bow down to any idol.”³ Never at any moment was his mind confounded by idolatry, as his behaviour shows: “Not a mendacious word, nor a patterer's deed”

All this reveals, without the shadow of a doubt, a special moral preparation. What is noteworthy in this respect is that the Prophet's commitment to put `Ali in his special care was not limited to the period of childhood or boyhood. And it did not stop at any specific phase –the Prophet had made sure that `Ali was always at his side, day and night; as when `Ali says, “My visitations to the Prophet were of two kinds: one by night and another by day...”⁴ Indeed, one never finds the Messenger of God ever separated from or leaving behind `Ali, except in the instance where it was necessary to protect the Prophet's life, or to safeguard the Islamic Call against danger. To corroborate, let us mention one example for each occasion.

i) The first context is linked to the protection of the Prophet's life. On the night of his blessed flight to Medina, the Prophet had left `Ali behind to lie in his bed⁵ as a subterfuge against the Meccans lying in wait for him; it allowed him to evade their plot to kill him.⁶ With this, God revealed the following: “And there is he who barter himself to earn the satisfaction of God...” (Qur'an II:207, “*al-Baqarah*”) – as recalled by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi.⁷

ii) The second context is linked to the protection of the Islamic Mission. The Prophet had wished to go on one of his military expeditions called Tabuk. So he left `Ali behind in Medina as his vicegerent (*khalifah*).⁸ Ibn Ubayy b. Salul, who headed the group of “Hypocrites,” had remained in the city, and the situation demanded that the Prophet leave `Ali behind in the hope of forestalling any unexpected development that might threaten the Prophet's reign in Medina. Said al-Tabari:

With the Messenger of God departed [i.e. to Tabuk], among the “Hypocrites” and the irresolute who stayed behind figured `Abd Allah b. Ubayy, who was brother to the Banu `Awf b. al-Khazraj. Abd Allah b. Nabtal was brother to Banu `Amr b. `Awf, and Rifa`ah b. Zayd b. al Tabun to Banu Qaynuqa`. And all – that is all those mentioned – were among the most infamous of the “Hypocrites”; they counted among those who used to conspire against Islam and its people.

He also added: “Ibn Hamid has told us that Salamah related from Ibn Ishaq – who related it from `Umar b. Ubayd, who related it from Hasan al-Basri – that God has brought down [these words: ***Indeed they had plotted sedition before, and upset matters for thee...***” (Qur'an 9:48, “*al-Tawbah*”).

But here, the “Hypocrites” understood that, with `Ali remaining in Medina, the opportunity was lost. “The Hypocrites,” continues al-Tabari, thus started to calumniate about `Ali b. Abi Talib. They claimed that he

was [chosen to be] left behind only because he was a burden to [the Prophet, who wanted only release from him.

When they made these claims, `Ali took his sword and went off to find God's Messenger at Jurf, situated at some distance from Medina, and there told [him]: "Prophet of God! The Hypocrites allege that you have kept me behind; that you find me a burden and that you seek release from me."

[The Prophet] replied, "They lie. I left you behind for what [lay in wait behind me. Do you not consent, O `Ali, to having the same position with respect to me that Aaron did with Moses, save that no Prophet shall ever come after me?" With this, `Ali returned to Medina, and God's Messenger resumed his journey.⁹

Al-Bukhari¹⁰ and Muslim¹¹ have recorded the tradition relating to (`Ali's) "position"(or "station") according to Sa`d b. Abi Waqqis, who said that

The Messenger of God has [chosen] to leave `Ali behind in Medina during one of his expeditions. So `Ali said to him: "O Messenger of God! You have left me behind with the women and the children." I heard God's Messenger reply, "But you consent to be related to me in the same station that Aaron was to Moses, save that there shalt be no prophethood after me."¹²

One striking fact is that the Prophet used to express anxiety and apprehension at `Ali's absence from him; he eagerly awaited him and sought reassurance. Ibn Kathir¹³ related Umm `Atiyyah's statement that "The Prophet sent off fighters, and among them was `Ali. I heard the Prophet say: `O God, do not take my life before you let me see `Ali again'.¹⁴

Occasionally, it happened that when offered a meal, the Prophet could not bear eating it alone; nor was he satisfied with praying to God that `Ali may join him, but that this be made an opportunity for demonstrating the station and rank of `Ali. It is recorded about Anas b. Malik that he related, "The Prophet had a fowl (in one account a `roasted fowl'¹⁵) and uttered: `O God, bring me this your most beloved person, so he may eat this fowl.'

And God brought him", who then ate it with him..."¹⁶ It is noteworthy that some accounts speak of an attempt , after that appeal, to turn `Ali away upon his arrival at the Prophet's house; but it was thwarted by the Prophet's own intervention, according to what Ibn Kathir has related.¹⁷ However, the apparent sense of the account is that the Prophet meant also to affirm and to establish that `Ali was best loved by God.¹⁸

All this leaves little doubt that our Prophet's special education of `Ali was aimed at preparing and training him for the responsibility of leading the Mission of Islam, and not merely to become part of its political staff or personnel. The Prophet was committed to educating and to training the Companions collectively, but not to the same degree or with the same method and attention as he was with `Ali. This shows that the responsibility `Ali had been charged with was much weightier than that of the other Companions.

B. The second way alluded to above concerns the fact that 'Ali had been singled out; it concerns his competence in knowledge –particularly Qur'anic – and the positions which were historically decisive to the Prophet and to the Mission. It concerns his firm training in the provisions of the law. There is abundant evidence for this. Anyone who peruses the books on traditions, biography and history would profit immensely in this regard.¹⁹

Let us now cite some examples that support our idea, together with the evidence for them.

The Prophet had undertaken, both on his own and by Divine Command, the task of inculcating `Ali, as he did no one else, in the learned and intellectual knowledge of the Qur'an. He hoped to do it with respect to the root principles and sources of learning, reflective wisdom and its rules, and by instructing him in the provisions of the law, its allowances and prohibitions.

Tradition has it that 'Ali uttered, “The Messenger of God has taught me countless pathways to knowledge, opening for me a thousand others for each one...”²⁰ `Ali himself sometimes used to hasten to the Prophet in quest of knowledge, learning and judgements. At other times, the Prophet himself initiated the instruction: “Whenever I questioned the Prophet, he obliged; when I remained silent, he anticipated me...”²¹ At one time, he declared, “God has given me an inquisitive tongue and a sensible heart.”²² In this connection, Imam 'Ali stated in a lengthy *hadith*,

Every verse that has come down to the Messenger of God he recited or dictated to me, and I wrote it down in my own hand. He taught me its interpretation and explanation, its abrogating and abrogated parts, clear and allegorical verses, particular and general injunctions. He invoked God that He may give me understanding of it and that I may commit it to memory.

So I did not forget a single verse of God's Book, not any knowledge that he transmitted to me. I wrote it down, from the moment of his invocation. The Messenger of God spared no knowledge taught to him by God concerning what is allowed and what prohibited, no command or proscription – now and for ever – but that he taught it to me and that committed to memory. And I have not forgotten one letter of it ...²³

Al-Suyuti asserts that Mu`ammar – as related by Wahb and, after him, Abu al-Tufayl – said the following: “I heard 'Ali giving an address and saying: `Ask me. By God, nothing will ye ask that I shall not discuss. So ask me about the Book of God and, by God, there is not a verse that I shall not know – whether it was revealed at night or in the day, on a mountain or on shore...”²⁴ Al-Suyuti also affirms, “Verily, none of the Companions dared to say, `Ask me,' except `Ali...”²⁵

Everything that 'Ali had talked about, of which history has left reliable record, was attested to by the prominent Companions. The scholars and the most prominent among them own to it. In his *al-Hilyah*, Abu Na'im records that Ibn Mascud had said, “The Qur'an has come down in seven recitals, none of which is without its explicit [*zahir*] and implicit [*batin*] meanings. And `Ali b. Abi Talib [understood] both the explicit and the implicit meanings.”²⁶

It is related that Ibn `Abbas had uttered: `By God, `Ali b. Abi Talib was given nine-tenth of the knowledge.”²⁷ Also quoted from him are the words: “We used to discourse over how the Prophet had assigned `Ali sundry [*lit.*, seventy] responsibilities which he assigned to no one else.”²⁸

In practice, `Ali was the authority for the Companions in respect of every learned or administrative question that occurred to them, every juridical dilemma. It is affirmed of `Umar b. al-Khattab, the Second Caliph, that he said, “Without `Ali, `Umar would have perished,”²⁹ also uttering, “God forbid that there be a problem and no Abu Hasan to [solve] it.”³⁰ He is further said to have declared: “The most decisive [*aqda*] of us is Ali ³¹ where “decisiveness” implied knowledge of all the legal provisions. where “decisiveness” implied knowledge of all the legal provisions. where “decisiveness” implied knowledge of all the legal provisions. where “decisiveness” implied knowledge of all the legal provisions. where “decisiveness” implied knowledge of all the legal provisions.

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1. Ibn Hashim, al-Sirah al-nabawiyah, ed. Mustaa al-Saqqa et al I:246.
 2. Nahj al-balaghah, ed. Dr. Subhi al-Salih, Sermon No. 192, pp. 300-01.
 3. Manaqib Amir al-Mu'min'in II:540, Hadith No. 1045, narrated by Abu Saïd; cf. al-Sa'id cf. al-Sahili, al-Rawd al-ani III: 16, n. 1: “The first person to perform the prayer ritual was `Ali.” He also stated that the same was said by Salman, Khabbab, Jabir, Abu Saïd. This is repeated in Tabarani's work.
 4. Al-Nassa'i, al-Sunan al-kubra, “al-Khasa'is” V: 141, Hadith No. 8502.
 5. Ibn Hisham, Sirah II:95 (Cairo: Matba`ah al-Hijazi, 1937).
 6. Ibid.
 7. Al-Tafsir al-kabir, Third Edition V:204 (Tehran: Dar Nashr al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah).
 8. Sahih al-Tirmidhi, ed. Kamat al-Hut V:596 (Matba`at Dar al-Fikr).
 9. Ta'rikh al-Tabari II: 182-83. Cf. Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah wal-nihayah VII:240ff.
 10. Al-Shaykh al-Nasif, al-Tajj al jami lil-usul II:332. It was related by al-Bukhari, Muslim and al-Tirmidhi.
 11. Sahih Muskm IV: 1873.
 12. Sahih al-Tirmidhi V:596.
 13. Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah wal-nihayah VII:357.
 14. Al-Shaykh Mansur `Ali Nasif, al-Tajj al jami lil usul ahadith al-rasul III:334, Third Bamuq edition (Istanbul: Dar Ihya" al-Kutub al-`Arabiyyah, 1961).
 15. al-Tajj al jami VII:351.
 16. al-Tajj al jami III:336.
 17. al-Tajj al jami, pp. 351-52.
 18. Ghayat al-ma'mul, Sharh al jami lil usul, III:336, n. 6, where it is said, “And with this: `Ali was best loved by God.”
 19. Cf Ibn Manzur, MukhtasarTa'rikh Ibn Asakir XVII:356ff and XVIII up to p. 51.
 20. Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Irshad, p. 22, as narrated by `Abd Allhh b. Mas'ud.
 21. al-Tajj al jami lil usul VIII:335; al-Suyuti, Tar'ikh al-khulafa ; p. 170; Ibn Hajar, al Sawaiq al-muhriqah, pp. 126-27.
 22. Al-Suyuti, al-Ittiqan IV:234.
 23. Nahj al balaghah, ed. Dr. Subhi al-Salih, Sermon No. 210, p. 325. See also alMajlisi, Bihar al-anwar 92:99 (Tehran).
 24. al-Ittiqan IV:233; cf. Tabaqat Ibn Sad II:338; Ibn Hajar, al-Sawa'iq al'-muhriqah, p. 127.
 25. Ta'rikh al-khulafa p. 166.
 26. Recorded in Suyuti's al-Ittiqan IV:233.
 27. Al-Qanduzi, Yanail al-mawaddah I:68-9.
 28. Hilyat al-awliya I:68, Fifth Edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al Arabiyyah).

29. Ibn Kathir, at-Bidayah wal-nihayah VII:359; cf, al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa p. 171

30. Ibid VII:373; Ibn Hajar, al-Sawa`iq al-muhriqah, p. 127.

31. Ibn Sa`d, al-Tabaqat al-kubra III:339, Second Edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al`Ilmiyyah, 1408 AH).f

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