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Altercations

On various occasions, al-Ma'mun tried to force Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) into the arena of complex debates with various groups and creeds. He used to conduct scientific and intellectual sessions to which he invited giant thinkers, leading scientists, the atheists of the century, and debaters whose scientific might was feared and before the stubbornness of whose complex arguments the evidence was muted and due to the fierceness of whose doubt the proof was weakened.

In all such debates, the Imam would come out victorious over his opponents due to the tremendous power of knowledge he possessed without forcing himself into the sophistry of arguments to which some might have resorted in order to demolish the structure of his opponent's argument and weaken his ability to provide evidence. Rather, he depended in his debate upon honest arguments in order to prove right to be right, his miraculous ability of conviction, and his calm stylistic method.

Al-Nawfali Warns the Imam

Al-Nawfali tried to warn the Imam against attempting to deal with the debates of such people when the Imam asked him why al-Ma'mun had invited him to debate them, for al-Ma'mun had asked the Catholic archbishop, the High Rabbi, leading Sabians, the Hindu high priest, followers of Zoroaster, Nestus the Roman medical scientist, and a group of orators, to enter into a scientific debate with Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.). He sent Yasir the servant to the Imam to tell him about the time when the debate would start, requesting him to attend. When Yasir went out and al-Nawfali was alone with the Imam, the Imam (a.s.) turned to him and asked him in the form of a dialogue, "O Nawfali! You are an Iraqi, and the heart of an Iraqi is not severe; so, what can you gain from causing your cousin to require us to meet with disbelievers and rhetoricians?"

Al-Nawfali answered, "May my life be sacrificed for yours! He wants to put you to test, and he loves to know how much knowledge you possess. He has, indeed, built his assumption on a shaky foundation, and doomed, by God, what he has built." He asked, "And what has he built?" He answered, "Scholars of *kalam* and innovators are opposite of the scholars. A scholar does not deny the undeniable, whereas

rhetoricians and polytheists are people who deny and try to prove what is not true. If you argue with them and tell them that God is One, they would say, 'Prove His Oneness,' and if you say that Muhammad (S) is the Messenger of God, they would say, 'Confirm his Message,' then they would press their lies on a person while he tries to disprove their lies, and they would continue to prove that he is mistaken till he abandons his argument; so, beware of them, may my life be sacrificed for you."

He smiled and asked, "O Nawfali! Do you fear that they will disprove my argument?" He answered, "No, by God! I have never worried about you, and I hope God will enable you to have the upper hand over them." The Imam asked again, "O Nawfali! Would you like to know when al-Ma'mun will feel regretful?"

He answered, "Yes." He said, "When he hears me argue with the people of the Torah quoting their own Torah, with the people of the Gospel (Bible) quoting their own Gospel, with the people of the Psalms quoting their own Psalms, with Zoroastrians arguing in their Persian language, with the Romans in their own Latin, and with rhetoricians using their very rhetoric. So, if I closed all the avenues of argument in the face of each arguing party and disproved his claim, making him renounce his statement from its onset and referring to my own statement, then al-Ma'mun would know that he would not achieve what he aspires. It is then that he will feel regretful; *We are God's, and Unto Him is our return.*"

Thus does the Imam show that he was taking lightly and was not concerned about such persons whom al-Ma'mun wished to gather together against him trying to embarrass him with their falsification and arguments which he hoped might close for the Imam (a.s.) all the avenues of argument. When the session starts and the Imam (a.s.) is invited to join it, discussion starts and the Imam (a.s.) starts his debate with the Catholics, making the Bible his reference to prove his own defense of the Unity of God and disprove the Godhead of Christ (a.s.) by those who regarded him as a god besides God.

Then he follows with a magnificent discussion proving that the Bible in circulation today is not the same which God had revealed to Christ (a.s.) and that it is authored by some of the disciples of Jesus (a.s.) who are the authors of the four gospels, depending in his argument on the fact that the details presented by each one of them stand in flagrant contradiction with those of the other. The Catholic archbishop slipped into an obvious self-contradiction; for he on one hand sanctified the authors of the four gospels and held them above lying while, on the other hand, he admitted to the Imam that they did tell lies about Christ (a.s.).

Then the Imam (a.s.) goes to debate the High Rabbi, scholar of the Jews, to prove the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (S) from the previously revealed divine testaments, after which he follows with a very logical debate. Having argued with him that one of the requirements of a Prophet was to perform something all other creation are unable to perform, he asked him about the reason why they, the Jews, refrained from believing into the miracles of all prophets other than Moses (a.s.) son of Imran (Amram), and the High Rabbi answered him saying, "We cannot admit the prophethood of any who professes prophethood except after bringing us knowledge similar to that brought by Moses." Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said to him, "Then how come you admitted the prophethood of other prophets who preceded Moses (a.s.)

who did not split the sea, nor cleave the stones so that twelve springs would gush forth from it, nor took their hands out shining white as Moses did, nor did they turn a cane into a snake?!" It was then that the High Rabbi overcame his stubbornness, submitted to the argument, and admitted that any supernatural act beyond human capacity was indeed a proof of prophethood.

The Imam (a.s.) asked him then about the reason why they did not believe in the prophethood of Jesus (a.s.) despite the fact that he brought forth miracles beyond human capacity such as bringing the dead back to life, healing those who were born blind and the lepers, and about the reason why they did not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad (S) despite his bringing an extra-ordinary miracle, that is, the Holy Qur'an while he was neither a scholar nor a writer. The High Rabbi had no answer at all.

Then came the turn of the Zoroastrian high priest whom the Imam debated depending on the priest's belief in the prophethood of Zoroaster. The Zoroastrian tells the Imam that Zoroaster brought them what no other man had ever brought them before. "We did not see him," he continues, "but the stories of our ancestors told us that he legalized for us what no other person before made legal; so, we followed him." The Imam asked, "You believed in the stories which came to you about him, so you followed him, didn't you?" "Yes," he answered. The Imam (a.s.) said, "This is the case with all other nations. Stories came to them about what the prophets had accomplished, what Moses (a.s.), Jesus (a.s.), and Muhammad (S) had all brought them, so why did you not believe in any of these prophets, having believed in Zoroaster through the stories that came to you about him saying that he brought forth what others did not?"

Imam's Debate With the Sabian

The Zoroastrian high priest had no more to say. The Imam then turned to the debate's witnesses, having finished debating with the chief representatives of those creeds, asking anyone else to go ahead and put forth any question he had, everyone abstained from doing so. It was then that Imran the Sabian, who was one of the most distinguished scholars of the science of kalam of his time, approached the Imam (a.s.) and asked him how he could prove the existence of the Creator, and the discussion between them delved into the deepest depths of this complex question, while the Imam answered the man's questions through obvious scientific facts in a gloriously simple way.

Among the questions Imran asked was: "Master! Was the Being known to Himself by His Own Self?" The Imam said, "Knowledge is acquired by something which would negate its opposite, and so that the thing itself would be existing through what it is negated about it, without the existence of anything which contradicts its existence so that a need arises to negate that thing about itself by defining what is known about it. Do you understand, O Imran?" He said, "Yes, by God, master! Tell me, then, by what means did He come to know what He knew, by a pronoun or by something else?"

The Imam (a.s.) said, "If it had been by a pronoun, would He then find anyway not to establish for that pronoun a limit where knowledge ends?" Imran answered, "Yes, He will have to find such way." The Imam then asked him, "Then what is that pronoun?" Imran could not provide any answer. The Imam

(a.s.) said, "Is it alright if I ask you about the pronoun and you define it by another pronoun? If you answer in the affirmative, then you would make both your claim and statement void. O Imran! Ought you not come to know that the One cannot be described by a pronoun, and would not be described except by a verb, by deed, by action, and He cannot be expected to be parts and kinds like human beings?"

Then Imran asked him, "Master! The knowledge I have says that the being is changed in his essence by his action of creating..." The Imam (a.s.) said, "Does your statement, O Imran, mean that the being does not in any way change its essence except when it affects its own essence in a way which changes it? O Imran! Can you say that the fire changes its own self, or that the heat burns itself, or have you seen anyone seeing his own vision?" Imran said, "No, I have not seen that; could you please tell me, master, is it in that in the creation, or is it the nature of creation in it?"

The Imam (a.s.) said, "Yes, O Imran, He is above all of that; He is not in the creation, nor is the creation in Him; He is elevated above that, and bad indeed is your knowledge about Him, and no might except in God. Tell me about the mirror: are you in it or is it in you? If neither one of you is in the other, then how did you come to see your own self's reflection in it?" Imran said, "Through the light between myself and itself." The Imam (a.s.) said, "Can you see of that light more than what you can see with your own eyes?"

He answered, "Yes." The Imam (a.s.) said to him, "Then show it to us..." It was then that the man was too baffled to say a word. The Imam (a.s.) said, "I do not see the light except leading you and the mirror to come to know each without being in either one of you. There are many such examples which the ignorant simply cannot observe, and God Has the greatest example."

Thus did the Imam face the challenge of Imran the Sabian's doubting method, demolishing its structure and dispelling the ambiguity of the complex doubts which he could not understand till vision became clear to him. The Imam (a.s.) did not determine an evidence except after building it with simple easy to understand proofs out of the everyday life of man in order not to leave any way for the opponent to doubt after transforming a most complex theory into an easy and commonsense idea, all of that by employing a very beautiful and miraculous style.

Debating al-Maroozi

In another session, al-Ma'mun invited him to debate Sulayman al-Maroozi, Khurasan's scientist in *kalam*, and the debate between them dealt with some significant topics which were being debated then by scholars of the science of *kalam*, and the starting-point of the discussion was the issue of *badaa*. The Imam (a.s.) explained its sound meaning, indicating that the Sublime and Dear God had innermost knowledge which nobody but He knew, and that was the source of *badaa* and knowledge which He taught His angels and Prophets.

To explain it in a way which would remove all confusion and ambiguity, we can say about *badaa* is that God makes manifest that His Will is linked to an advantage which necessitates it, and the apparent

reality is that His Will is hinging on what is opposite to it. Then He after that makes manifest His actual Will when the advantage is satisfied from all aspects and the reasons for which it was not previously manifested are removed, and it appears to the creation as if God willed to abandon His first Will, hence it is in the view of creation, not in the reality of Will, *badaa*.

This is the theory of *badaa* in its simple logical context which Imamis (Shi'as) uphold and which some people misunderstood and misinterpreted, giving it a wrong meaning which necessitated attributing ignorance (!!!) to the Almighty God and an excuse to wage an unfair campaign of defamation against Imami Shi'as by their opponents from among the followers of other sects.

Imam Proves Badaa

The Imam (a.s.) has proven the accuracy of *badaa* in which Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) believe by first quoting the Holy Qur'an, for God Almighty said, "So leave them alone, for you shall not be blamed for that,"¹ meaning thereby that He intends to annihilate them, then the Almighty, according to the *badaa* theory, He has said, "So remind, for reminding may avail the believers,"² which indicates a shift from the first decision as observed from studying the context of both verses.

Second, he tries to prove it by traditions narrated from his forefathers from the Messenger of God (S) who said: "God sent his *wahi* to one of His prophets to inform him that he would die on a particular day, and when that prophet was told so, he pleaded God, the King, while on his bed, saying, 'Lord! Postpone my demise till I see my son growing up to carry out my will,'¹ till he fell from his bed, whereupon God sent his *wahi* again to the same prophet to inform him that He decided to postpone it."

It is apparent that *badaa* in the meaning which we indicated requires no alarm whatsoever and it does not justify waging a campaign of defamation to those who believe in it.

Eternity Versus Transience of the Will

The same discussion led to discussing the will's eternity and transience, and the Imam (a.s.) stood to disprove the theory which called for the eternity of the will, proving its being transient by revealing its own self-contradiction, removing the confusion which may occupy anyone's mind in its regard.

Will, as the Imam (a.s.) says, is one of the actions of the Almighty. It is not one of His attributes; therefore, it is transient, not perpetual, since an action is a form of event, and the deed cannot be identical to the doer, so the will cannot be identical to the willing person. Will is not like hearing or seeing or knowing as al-Maroozi tried to prove, because it does not make sense, the Imam says, to say that He wanted Himself. Does He want to be "something," or does He want to be Alive, Seeing, Hearing, or Able? If this is according to His Will, it would require the impossible which is the change occurring to the self, for the meaning then would be that He wanted Himself to be something which was not... Sublime is God greatly above all of this.

Thus did the debates between the Imam and al-Maroozi occur frequently about the eternity of the will versus its transience about relevant matters.

Al-Maroozi's Argumentativeness

In his debates with the Imam, al-Maroozi kept arguing and coming back to the same point from which he had started his argument in an inflexible argumentative manner. While accepting that to desire something (to "will", to wish) is a verb, he goes back to deny that and claim that it is an adjective, and he may admit something and say something else.

The Imam asks him, "O Abu Sulayman! Can you tell me if the will is a verb or not?" He says, "Yes, it is a verb." He asks, "Is it causative, since verbs are?" "It is not a verb," comes the answer. The Imam (a.s.) asks, "Is there any with Him who is eternal?" Sulayman answers, "Willing is doing." He says, "O Sulayman! This is the same which you criticized Dirar and his followers about for saying that everything God Almighty has created in His heavens and earth, ocean or land, dog or pig, monkey, human, or an animal, is God's will, and that God's will gives life and takes life away, and it goes here or drinks from there, marries, enjoys food, commits immoral acts, disbelieves and commits *shirk*..."

Sulayman said, "It is like hearing, seeing, or knowing; that is, it is an adjective, an attribute." Having abstained from providing an answer to the Imam's question, Sulayman goes back to the beginning of the argument regarding whether the will is an adjective, an attribute, or a verb, but the Imam nevertheless repeats his argument with him by following another route different from the one he took first, which indicates how commonsense the idea seems to him and his ability to prove it however he willed.

Imam's Style in Debating

The debate continues between them in the same calm manner in which the Imam (a.s.) coins his questions, which is the most magnificent method of debate. In his way of providing answers, the Imam never blocks the way before his opponent to continue the debate; rather, he leaves him completely free to debate in whatever manner he wishes through his questions till he brings him to a dead-end where he cannot proceed anymore just to go back seeking another route which the Imam himself wants him to seek out of his own will and after his own conviction.

Al-Ma'mun Rebukes al-Maroozi for Fumbling About

But Sulayman kept fumbling about in his answers to the Imam's questions after the Imam had closed before him all avenues of his argument, and al-Ma'mun was quick to notice his fumbling about which indicated Sulayman's loss, so he rebuked him and criticized him. It is reported that during the debate, when ar-Ridha' (a.s.) asked him to continue his questions, he said, "Will is one of His attributes." The Imam said, "How many times has it been said that it is one of His attributes, so is it a new attribute, or

has it always been so?" Sulayman said, "New." The Imam (a.s.) said, "*Allahu Akbar!* You are telling me that His attribute is new! Had it been one of His attributes, and an eternal one, then He willed and He created as long as His will and His creation are eternal...! This means it is an attribute of someone who did not know what he did! God is Elevated above this..."

Sulayman said, "Things are not a will, and He did not will anything." Here the Imam said, "You have hissed, O Sulayman! He did and He created as long as His will and His creation are eternal...?! This is the attribute of someone who does not know what he did! Elevated is God above all of that." Sulayman, turning to al-Ma'mun, then said, "Master! I have already informed him that it is like hearing and seeing and knowing." Al-Ma'mun said, "Woe unto you, Sulayman! How you have erred and how often you have repeated yourself! Stop it and take another route, for you seem to be unable to provide any answer better than that."

The debate continues after that till Sulayman's tongue is tied, whereupon al-Ma'mun says, "O Sulayman! This is the most learned descendant of Hashim," and the session disperses.

Imam Debates Ali ibn al-Jahm

The Imam (a.s.) conducted a very magnificent debate with Ali al-Jahm dealing with the infallibility of prophets in which he explained in a very beautiful way the actual meaning of some verses which may on the surface give the impression to the contrary.

Interpreting the Holy Qur'an According to One's Opinion

The Imam (a.s.) started his discussion with Ali ibn al-Jahm by criticizing him and those who interpreted the Book of God according to their own viewpoint, stating that he and those have to refer to those whom God endowed with the faculty of knowledge and understanding in order to learn the actual and accurate interpretation of its verses according to the sacred verse which says, "And none knows its interpretation except God and those deeply grounded in knowledge."³

Interpreting Verses Whose Superficial Meaning Suggests

Prophet's Fallibility

Then the Imam (a.s.) started explaining the verses whose superficial meaning indicates the fallibility of and possibility of sinning by prophets. He indicated that Adam's transgression took place while he was in Paradise, not on earth, and the infallibility in question is earthly, and that he did not commit any act as long as he lived on earth which contradicted his infallibility as proven by the sacred verse: "God did indeed choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of Imran above all people."⁴

As regarding the verse which states: "And remember Zun-nun when he departed in wrath; he imagined

that We had no power over him, but he cried through the depths of darkness, `There is no god but Thou! Glory to Thee; I was indeed wrong,'"5 what is meant by "he imagined that We had no power over him" is that he realized that God was not going to sustain him." Had he thought that God was unable to overpower him, he would have then committed *kufr* (disbelief) and he would have also committed *'isyan*, transgression.

As regarding the verse "And (with passion) did she desire him, and he would have desired her,"6 the case regarding what the wife of al-'Aziz wanted, and what Yousuf (a.s.) desired to do, are two different things, for she wanted to commit a sin while he desired to kill her if she forced him; therefore, God saved him from the deed of killing her and its terrible consequences, and saved her from her own wishful desire to commit a sin.

As regarding David, his statement that the defendant had committed injustice by asking for the goat, it was an error only within the framework of the case, and it took place before he had asked the defendant about his defense against the plaintiff's claim, and it is not a transgression, for God corrected for him his decision by bringing him the example of the two kings. As regarding his marriage with the widow of Oorya, which was regarded by people at that time as a sin and criticized him for it, it was done for the sake of effecting a legislative interest whereby David wanted to shatter the then prevalent custom of a widow not getting married after the death of her husband.

It is similar to what happened to the Prophet with Zainab daughter of Jahsh, wife of Zayd ibn Haritha who had been adopted by the Prophet (S), for the Prophet, by marrying Zainab after granting her divorce from Zayd, wanted to shatter the pre-Islamic custom whereby a man would not be permitted to marry the former wife of someone he had adopted as is clear in the text of the Holy Qur'an. The Prophet (S) was apprehensive of the criticism of the hypocrites of his action, so the Almighty addressed him by saying, "Do not fear people; it is more fitting that you should fear God,"7 since it was God Who ordered him to marry her as we understand from the verse, "Then when Zayd had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality), We joined her in marriage to thee in order that (henceforth) there may be no difficulty to the believers in (the matter of) marrying the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality, their marriage) with them, and God's command must be fulfilled."8

By providing such glorious knowledge of the exegesis of sacred Qur'anic verses, and by giving such honest interpretations which safeguard the integrity of the context, the Imam (a.s.) used to dispel the unusual confusion of those who did not have a deep actual understanding of the Glorious Book of God.

An Artificial Argument

In his book *Al-'Iqd al-Farid*, Ibn Abd Rabbih al-Andalusi recorded a debate on the subject of Imamate between the Imam and the caliph al-Ma'mun which seems to be stamped with artificiality, and we think it is possible that some fanatics among those who deviated from the line of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) had

fabricated it, for he stated the following in his book:

"Al-Ma'mun said to Ali ibn Musa, 'Why do you claim it (Imamate) for your own selves?' He answered, 'Due to Ali and Fatima (a.s.) being near in kin to the Messenger of God (S).' Al-Ma'mun said, 'If it is only a matter of kinship, then the Messenger of God (S) had left behind him those who were closer in kinship to him than Ali or any of his relatives, and if you mean the kinship of Fatima (a.s.) to the Messenger of God (S), then the matter (Imamate) after her should have belonged to al-Hasan and al-Husayn (a.s.) whose right was confiscated by Ali even while they were still alive, taking control of what was not his.' Ali ibn Musa could not provide an answer."⁹

Let us record the following regarding this quotation:

The Imam did not claim his right to caliphate only on account of his kinship to the Prophet (S) but rather on account of the clear statements made by the Prophet (S) emphasizing that he was to be the caliph after him, in addition to the personal qualifications Imam Ali (a.s.) had had which distinguished him above the rest of *sahaba*.

The concept of caliphate according to Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) is that it is decreed according to a divine text, not dictated due to factors of kinship, politics, etc. God is the One Who chooses, and His choice is voiced by His Prophet, whoever He sees to be most fit to safeguard the Message and the interest of the nation, as we explained when we quoted Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) discussing the subject of Imamate. The claim of those who said that they deserved caliphate due to their kinship to the Prophet (S) is similar to the claim of those who said that the *muhajirun* (immigrants) were more qualified than the *ansar* (supporters of Medina) due to the nearness of the first party to the Messenger of God (S).

The Imam, if this story is true at all, would not have been unable, as the story suggests, to answer al-Ma'mun's objection that there are among the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) those who have more priority than Ali (a.s.) or any of his relative, an apparent reference to his grandfather al-Abbas ibn Abdul-Muttalib, to it.

It was al-Abbas himself who approached the Imam requesting him to stretch his hand to him so that he would swear the oath of allegiance to him when he felt that the fate looked ominous and that the environment was threatening of a revolt, but the Imam refused to accept such an oath privately; rather, he preferred that such an oath be sworn to him in public and before eye witnesses after finishing the funeral rites of the corpse of the Messenger of God (S) which was still lying in state waiting to be bathed. If you suppose that al-Abbas had any right to caliphate, he would then have relinquished it.

As regarding al-Hasan and al-Husayn, they were then very young, and neither *wilayat* nor *wisayat* can be enforced on caliphate till they were old enough, for caliphate is a post which permits no *wisayat* at all; therefore, the issue of caliphate was confined to Ali (a.s.) alone.

This is our argument if we suppose that caliphate is a matter decided due to kinship to the Prophet (S).

But if we say that it is decreed by a divine decree, these proofs will not be relevant.

But the fact that al-Ma'mun's way of thinking regarding the issue of caliphate, and his views with which

he confronted the *faqih*s in his debates with them, as the author of *Al-'Iqd al-Farid* himself mentions, proving that caliphate was the legitimate right of only Ali rather than anyone else among the *sahaba*, this fact itself convinces us that this fabricated dialogue quoted above was written by some fanatic followers of other sects.

These are some debates and discussions of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) which were narrated about him in which he debated some scholars of *kalam* of his time which we wanted to indicate here briefly in order to give the reader a general idea about the style employed by the Imams among the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) in their debates and discussions with others, so that the reader may live the free democratic environment which dominated that period of time in its intellectual and scientific spheres.

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1. Al-Thariya:54
 2. Al Thariyat:55
 3. Aali Imran:7
 4. Aali Imran:33
 5. Al Anbiyaa:87
 6. Yousuf:24
 7. Al Ahzab:37
 8. Al Ahzab:37
 9. Al-'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. 2, p. 285 and also Vol. 5, p. 103

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