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Lesson 28: The Subjects of the Poems of the Shi'ah Poets

The Shi'ah poets have recited poetry in various arenas and diverse themes, which may be classified into the following:

1. Argumentation against the Usurpers of the Ahl al-Bayt's ('a) Rights

The Shi'ah poets and orators, believing in the guardianship {*wilayah*} of 'Ali ('a) and his progeny, spoke out immediately after the event of Saqifah and the oppression against 'Ali ('a), defending the right of the Imam and trying to describe the course the Holy Prophet (S) specified with respect to the Imamate and guardianship through the language of poetry. In this regard, it was known that Kumayt al-Asadi was the first to open the gate of argumentation for the Shi'ah poets.

'Allamah Amini attributes this fact to Jahiz and then continues thus:

Long before the fetus of Kumayt was to be formed, a number of the great *sahabah* and *tabi'un* such as Khuzaymah ibn Thabit Dhu'sh-Shahadatayn, 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas, Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas, 'Ammar ibn Yasir, Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, Qays ibn Sa'd al-Ansari, Rabi'ah ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, Zafar ibn Zayd ibn Hudhayfah, Najashi ibn Harith ibn Ka'b, Jarir ibn 'Abd Allah Bajli, and 'Abd Allah ibn Janbal had defended the right of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) through their poems.¹

Among the first persons to have recited poetry in defence of 'Ali ('a) was 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib. Shaykh al-Mufid says, "When the Prophet (S) passed away, 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan was not in Medina. When he arrived in Medina, I saw that the people had pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr. As such, he stood at the middle of the mosque and recited this poem:

ما كنت احسب أن الأمر منصرف عن هاشم ثم منها عن أبي حسن!

أليس أولى من صلى لقبلكم و أعلم الناس بالقرآن و السنن؟

I did not imagine that they would take away the matter of caliphate from the Banu Hashim and among whom from Abu'l-Hasan ('Ali)!

Is he not the first person to pray toward your qiblah and the most learned of people about the Qur'an and the Sunnah?2

Similarly, a number of other Hashimite poets from among the *sahabah* and *tabi'un* had also recited poetry in defence of the right of 'Ali ('a). For instance, while reciting poetry Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas has thus said:

الا ان خير الناس بعد محمد وصي النبي المصطفى عند ذي الذكر

و اول من صلّى و صنوبيه و اول من اردى الغواة لدى بدر

Be aware that the best of people after Muhammad in the sight of God is the successor of Prophet al-Mustafa (S).

He is the first performer of prayer, the brother of the Prophet, and the first person to drive away the tyrants in (the Battle of) Badr.3

Mughayrah ibn Nawfal ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib addressed the supporters of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) during the Battle of Siffin and poetically said:

فيكم وصي رسول الله قائدكم و صهره و كتاب الله قد نشرأ

Among you is the successor of the Messenger of Allah (S)—your commander—and his son-in-law, and the Book of Allah is scattered.4

Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas ibn 'Utbah ibn Abi Lahab has been one of the famous poets at the end of the first century AH. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih has narrated: "When Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik was circumambulating

{*tawaf*} the *Ka'bah*, Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas was reciting this poem while getting water from the well of Zamzam:

يَأْيَهَا السَّائِلُ عَنْ عَلِيٍّ تَسْأَلُ عَنْ بَدْرِ لَنَا بَدْرِيٍّ

مُرَدِّدٍ فِي الْمَجْدِ ابْطَحِي سَائِلَةَ غَرِّهِ مَضِيٍّ

O he who is asking from 'Ali! You are asking from the moon of Banu Hashim and the one present at the Battle of Badr.

Are you doubtful in praising the greatness of the 'abtahi' man, or asking about his precedence in Islam?5

Among the first persons to have recited poetry in defending the right of the Commander of the Faithful 'Ali ('a) was a woman named Umm Mastah ibn Athathah. Historians have narrated, thus: After Abu Bakr and 'Umar treated 'Ali harshly to acquire his allegiance by force, Umm Mastah came to the mosque, stood in front of the grave of the Prophet and recited this poem:

قَدْ كَانَ بَعْدَكَ أَنْبَاءٌ هَنْبِئَةٌ لَوْ كُنْتَ شَاهِدَهَا لَمْ تَكْثُرِ الْخُطْبُ

أَنَا فَقَدْنَاكَ فَقَدَ الْأَرْضُ وَابِلَهَا فَاخْتَلَّ قَوْمُكَ فَاشْهَدْهُمْ وَ لَا تَغْبُ

After you, an event and differences have occurred that would never happen if you were present.

We lost you just as the soil would lose water. Your community is going astray. Be witness and neglect not.6

Among the poets who used to engage in argumentation and defend the right of 'Ali ('a) was the great Arab poet and man of letter, Abu'l-Aswad Daw'ili who lived in Basrah at the place of the tribe of Banu Qashir that were sympathetic to 'Uthman ibn 'Affan. None of them could surpass Abu'l-Aswad in speech. So, they instead persecuted and harassed him, throwing stones at his house every night. He gave this reply to them:

يَقُولُ الْأَرْدَلُونَ بِنُوقَشِيرٍ طَوَالَ الدَّهْرِ لَا تَنْسَى عَلِيًّا!

فقلت لهم و كيف يكون تركي من الأعمال مفروضاً عليّ؟

أحب محمداً حباً شديداً و عباساً و حمزة و الوصياً

بني عم النبي و اقربيه أحب الناس كلهم إلينا

فان يك حُبُّهم رشداً اصبه و لست بمخطيء ان كان غياً

هم اهل النصيحة غير شك و اهل مودتي ما دمت حياً

رايت الله خالق كل شى هداهم واجتبي منهم نبياً

و لم يخصص بها احداً سواهم هنيئاً ما اصطفاه لهم مرياً

The vile people such as Banu Qashir say, "With the passage of time, why have you not forgotten 'Ali?'"

I said to them, "How could I abandon deeds that are incumbent upon me?"

I love Muhammad so much, and 'Abbas, Hamzah and the successor {wasi} (i.e. 'Ali) as well.

The cousins and nearest of kin of the Prophet are the most beloved of people for me.

If love for them is guidance, I have attained it then, and if this love is useless, then I have lost nothing.

Undoubtedly, they are the people of admonition and my beloved ones so long as I live.

I regard God as the Creator of everything. He has guided them and appointed the Prophet from among them.

Except them, nobody is worthy of it. May this God's choice of them be pleasant!7

This continued until finally, at the end of the Umayyad rule, great and famous poets such as Kumayt al-Asadi, Kuthayyir 'Azzah and Sayyid Humayri who thawed themselves in the guardianship {wilayah}, have recited more poems in defense of 'Ali's ('a) right.

2. The Shi'ah Poets' Confrontation with the Umayyad and 'Abbasid Poets

The second subject about which Shi'ah poets have recited poetry is the poems they have composed to counter the Umayyad and 'Abbasid poets. After 35 AH when 'Uthman ibn al-'Affan was murdered, the Umayyads used to utilize the weapon of poetry to attain their wicked objectives and incite people against the Commander of the Faithful ('a).

Among those who had recited poetry against the Imam was Walid ibn 'Uqbah, maternal brother of 'Uthman, who has been described by the Qur'an as *fasiq* {transgressor}.⁸ He had accused Banu Hashim, the head of which was 'Ali ('a), of killing 'Uthman, saying:

بنی هاشم ردوا سلاح ابن اختکم و لا تنهبوه لا تحل نهائیه

بنی هاشم کیف الهوادة بیننا و عند علی درعه و نجائبه

بنی هاشم کیف التودد منکم و دم ابن اروی فیکم و حرائبه

O Banu Hashim! Return the weapon of your maternal cousin and do not usurp his property as his property is not lawful for you.

O Banu Hashim! How could harmony be established between you and us while the chain mail and camels of 'Uthman are with 'Ali?

O Banu Hashim! How could I accept your friendship while the spears of Ibn Arwa ('Uthman) are with you?⁹

Then, 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib answered him, saying thus poetically:

فلاتسألونا سیفکم ان سیفکم اضعی و القاه لدى الروع صاحبه

و شبهته کسری و قد کان مثله شبیهاً بکسری هدیة و ضرائبه

منا عليُّ الخير صاحب خيبر و صاحب بدر يوم سالت كتائبه

و كان ولي الأمر بعد محمد عليّ و في كل المواطن صاحبه

وصي النبي المصطفى و ابن عمه وأول من صلى و من لان جانبه

You may not get your sword from us because when its owner was frightened, he threw it and it was lost. You likened him to Khosroe, and in fact he was like him. And his horses and properties were like that of his (Khosroe).

'Ali, the good, is from us; the victor of Khaybar and Badr when the hostile army came.

'Ali is the one vested with authority after Muhammad and the companion of the Prophet in all the wars. He is the successor of Prophet al-Mustafa and his cousin. He is the first person to perform prayer and the one who is so well-mannered. 10

Walid ibn 'Uqbah composed his next poem against the Commander of the Faithful ('a) when he wrote a letter to his brother, 'Umarah ibn 'Uqbah who was then living in Kufah, inciting him to be inimical to the Imam, saying thus:

ان يك ظنّي في عمارة صادقاً ينم و لا يطلب بذحل و لا وتر

يبيت و اوتار ابن عفان عنده مُخيمَةً بين الخورنق و القصر

تمشى رخيّ البال متشزر القوى كانك لم تسمع بقتل ابي عمر

الا إنّ خير الناس بعد ثلاثة قتيل النجيبى الذي جاء من مصر

If my guess is ever correct about 'Umarah, he is sleeping and does not take revenge!

He is sleeping comfortably while the murderers of ‘Uthman are near him encamping between the Khawarnaq {magnificent building} and the Palace!

He is walking with a peace of mind and sound body, as if he has not heard of the killing of Abu ‘Amru (‘Uthman).

Be aware that the best of people after the three persons¹¹ is the one who has been killed by the ‘tajibi’ who came from Egypt. ¹²

Then, Fadhl ibn al-‘Abbas ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib replied to him reciting thus:

أَتَطْلُبُ ثَاراً لَسْتُ مِنْهُ وَ لَالَهُ وَ مَا لِبْنِ ذَكَرَانَ الصَّفُورِيِّ وَ الْوَتْرِ

كَمَا افْتَخَرَتْ بِنْتُ الْحِمَارِ بِأُمَّهَا وَ تَنْسَى أَبَاهَا إِذَا تَسَامَى أَوْ لَوْ الْفَخْرُ

إِلَّا أَنْ خَيْرَ النَّاسِ بَعْدَ نَبِيِّهِمْ وَصِي النَّبِيِّ الْمُصْطَفَى عِنْدَ ذِي الذِّكْرِ

وَ أَوَّلُ مَنْ صَلَّى وَ صَفُونَبِيِّهِ وَ أَوَّلُ مَنْ أَرْدَى الْغَوَاةَ لَدَى بَدْرِ

Are you taking revenge for a person who has no relationship with you? Ibn Dhakran Safuri is one thing while taking revenge for ‘Uthman is another.

You can still remember that you were suffering from poverty, he forgot the father of his donkey while taking pride in the mother of his horse.

Be aware that the best of people after the Prophet in the sight of God is the successor of Prophet Mustafa.

He is the first to have performed the prayer, the brother of the Prophet, and the first person to have driven away the oppressive contingent in (the Battle of) Badr. ¹³

Sometime during the Battle of Jamal when the supporters of the Umayyads and the so-called ‘Uthmanis were reciting *rajaz*-metered¹⁴ verses in affirming their movement and inciting their supporters, the companions of the Commander of the Faithful (‘a) were also answering them in return. Among these persons were ‘Ammar ibn Yasir and Malik al-Ashtar. For example, some members of the tribe of Banu ‘Abbah who had surrounded the camel of ‘A’ishah would take the reins of camel and would be killed.

The last person to have taken the bridle of camel said, thus:

نحن بنو ضبّة أصحاب الجمل ننعي ابن عقان باطراف الاسل

رُدّوا علينا شيخنا ثم بجل

We are the Banu ʿAbbah, supporters of (the Army of) Jamal, and are taking ‘Uthman’s revenge with our spears.

Return to us our sheikh in safety. 15

Malik al-Ashtar rushed to confront him and said, thus:

كيف نرُدُّ نعثلًا و قد قخل سارت به أمُّ المنايا و رحل

How could we return Na‘thal (‘Uthman) while he is enshrouded, swords having penetrated his body, and is dead?!

Then, Malik al-Ashtar gave a strike to him and killed him. 16

During the Battle of Siffin, due to the prolongation of the battle, in addition to military combat and confrontation, there was also confrontation in poetry in its broadest sense between the two belligerent armies. Nasr ibn Muzahim has mentioned great poets such as Malik al-Ashtar, Khuzaymah ibn Thabit, Fadhl ibn al-‘Abbas, Qays ibn Sa’d ‘Udayy ibn Hatam, ‘Amru ibn Hamq al-Khaza’i, Hujr ibn ‘Udayy al-Kindi, Nu‘man ibn ‘Ajlan al-Ansari, Muhammad ibn Abi Sabrah Qurayshi, Mughayrah ibn Harith ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib, Jundab ibn Zuhayr, Abu Zubayd at-Ta’i, Ahmar (an Iraqi poet), Abu Habbah ibn Ghuzayyah al-Ansari, and others who had recited poetry in countering the poets of the people of Sham. The Commander of the Faithful (‘a) himself had been giving replies to individuals such as ‘Amr ibn al-‘As.

Ibn Abi’l-Hadid thus says: “Najashi was one of the Iraqi poets in (the Battle of) Siffin who had been ordered by ‘Ali to confront the poets of the people of Sham such as Ka’b ibn Ju’ayl and others.”¹⁷

Lesson 28: Summary

The Shi‘ah poets had recited poetry in various arenas:

1. Argumentation: After the event of Saqifah, the truth-speaking Shi‘ah poets spoke out in defense of the Commander of the Faithful’s (‘a) right, among whom were the leading orators of the Banu Hashim such as ‘Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn Harith ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib and Mughayrah ibn Harith ibn ‘Abd al-

Muttalib.

2. Confronting the Umayyad and 'Abbasid poets: After 'Uthman's murder in 35 AH, the Umayyads used to recite poetry against the Commander of the Faithful ('a). From then on, the Shi'ah poets responded through poetry.

For example, during the Battle of Siffin there was also a battle of poetry between the two warring parties.

Lesson 28: Questions

1. What does 'Allamah Amini say about the argumentation of the Shi'ah poets?
2. Since when did the Shi'ah poets' confrontation with the poets affiliated to the enemies of the Shi'ah start?

1. 'Allamah Amini, *Al-Ghadir fi'l-Kitab wa's-Sunnah wa'l-Adab* (Tehran: Dar al-Kitab al-Islamiyyah, 1366 AHS), vol. 1, p. 191.

2. Shaykh al-Mufid, *Al-Jamal*, 2nd edition (Qum: Maktab al-'Alam al-Islami (Publication Center), 1416 AH), p. 118.

The identity of the one who recited this poem is a source of disagreement among historians and writers. Shaykh al-Mufid has attributed this poem to 'Abd Allah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib. In *Al-Isabah*, Ibn Hajar has regarded Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas ibn 'Utbah ibn Abi Lahab as the one who recited it. In the book *Al-Manaqib*, Muwayyid ad-Din Khwarazmi has identified 'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's (S) uncle, as the composer of this poem. In the book *Al-Majalis*, Sharif ar-Radhi has attributed it to Rabi'ah ibn Harith ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib.

Qadhi Baydhwani, in his exegeses {tafsir} of the Qur'an, has considered it belonging to Hassan ibn Thabit. Zubayr ibn Bakkar has said, "One of the children of Abu Lahab had recited this poem." Finally, Qadhi Nur Allah has rejected the view of Ibn Hajar, saying that the one who recited must be prior to the event of Saqifah and he could not be Fadhl ibn al-'Abbas ibn 'Utbah because he was born later.

So, the one who recited it bore the name of Fadhl; hence, Fadhl ibn 'Utbah ibn Abi Lahab. Sayyid 'Ali Khan ash-Shirazi, *Ad-Darajat ar-Rafi'ah fi Tabaqat ash-Shi'ah* (Qum: Mansurat Maktabah Basirati, n.d.), p. 193. At any rate, this difference in opinion has no contrary effect on our discussion because it is obvious that the one who recited it had been one of the Shi'ah.

3. *Ad-Darajat ar-Rafi'ah fi Tabaqat ash-Shi'ah*, p. 143.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

5. Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abd Rabbih al-Andalusi, *Al-'Aqd al-Farid* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1409 AH), vol. 5, p. 75.

6. 'Abd al-Hamid ibn Abi'l-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah* (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabi, 1961), vol. 6, p. 43.

7. 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Al-Aghani* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), vol. 12, p. 321.

8. Surah 32: 18: "Is he then who is a believer like he who is a transgressor {fasiq}? They are not equal." For the commentary of this verse, see the following Sunni references: *Al-Qurtubi, Tafsir* (Cairo, 1947), vol. 14, p. 105; *At-Tabari, Tafsir Jami' al-Bayan*, under commentary for this verse; *Al-Wahidi, Asbab an-Nuzul* (Dar ad-Diyan Li't-Turath edition), p. 291. {Trans.}

9. *Ad-Darajat ar-Rafi'ah fi Tabaqat ash-Shi'ah*, p. 188.

10. Ibid., p. 189.
11. It alludes to the Prophet (S), Abu Bakr and 'Umar. {Trans.}
12. Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 2, p. 114.
13. Ibid.
14. Rajaz: name of several meters, two of which are the most important. {Trans.}
15. Al-Jamal, p. 118.
16. Ibid.
17. Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 4, p. 87.

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