

Misconceptions about Nahjul Balaghah

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No scholar of Sunni or Shi'a profession has questioned the genuineness and authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah for more than two centuries. The first person to raise doubts about its attribution to Amir al-Mu'minin was Ibn Khallikan (d. 681/1282), who, without referring to any author or source, made the following remarks about the authorship of Nahjul Balaghah:

People have different opinions about the compiler of Nahjul Balaghah, a collection of the utterances of al-'Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) There is difference as to whether it was compiled by al-Sharif al-Murtada or his brother al-Radi. It is also said that it is not at all the composition of 'Ali (as) and that the one who compiled it and attributed it to him made it himself; but Allah knows the truth.

These remarks were made in Wafayat al-aya'n in connection with the account of the life and work of al-Sharif al-Murtada, al-Radi's elder brother. Ibn al-'Athir al Jazari (555-630/1160-1232) in Mukhtasar al-Wafayat, Salah al-Din al-Safadi (d. 764/1362) in al-Wafi bi al-wafayat, al-'Allamah al-Yafi'i (d. 768/1366) in Mir'at al Jinan, and Ibn al-'Imad in Shadharat al-dhahab were content just to repeat Ibn Khallikan's conjecture without bothering to substantiate it. Al-'Allamah al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1347) in Mizan ul-'itidal was the first person to pick up the audacity to raise the unfounded doubt to a degree of certainty a century after Ibn Khallikan. He wrote in his account of al-Murtada:

Al Sharif al-Murtada, who is accused of fabricating Nahjul Balaghah, was a scholar of considerable knowledge. Whosoever sees his book Nahjul Balaghah would come to believe that it was falsely attributed to Amir al-Mu'minin (as), because it contains open abuse rather than downgrading of the two caliphs Abu Bakr and 'Umar. Contradictions and mean matters have also crept into it, which do not conform with the spirit of the Companions of the Quraysh and our knowledge of the later Companions. One is convinced that the major part of this book is forged and unauthentic.

Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 748/1347) repeated al-Dhahabi's objections without bothering to probe deeper into the matter.

The most interesting and at the same time the weakest part of the objections concerns ascription of the authorship of Nahjul Balaghah to al-Murtada. The objectors belonged to the Umayyad West and had deep prejudices against Shii scholars, and perhaps under the impact of Umayyad propaganda their prejudice was so deep-rooted that even their scholarship could not rise above it.

Among the four contemporaries of al-Radi and al-Murtada, three, that is, al-Tha'alibi, al-Najashi (d. 450/1058), and al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463/1071) have given accounts of both the brothers. Al Shaykh al-Tusi did not give any account of al-Radi in al-Fihrist or al-Rijal, but he did not count Nahjul Balaghah among the works of al-Murtada, which dispel any conjecture attributing its authorship to him, because al-Tusi was very close to him as his student. Al-Tha'alibi and al-Khatib al-Baghdadi did not mention Nahjul Balaghah either in the account of al-Murtada or that of al-Radi. Al Najashi in unambiguous terms attributed Nahjul Balaghah to al-Radi.

Al-Tusi's exclusion of Nahjul Balaghah from the works of al-Murtada, and al-Najashi's mention of it among the works of al-Radi are sufficient to prove that it was without any doubt a work of al-Radi. The objectors, who could not even determine authorship of the book exactly, depended on nothing but their whim to raise doubts about its authenticity.

A more convincing proof of al-Radi's authorship of Nahjul Balaghah can be found in his own other works in which he has mentioned it. Those books are the following:

1. Khasa'is al-'Alimma: A manuscript of this work of al-Radi is in Rida Library Rampur (India) which reveals that Fadl Allah ibn 'Ali al-Husayn al-Rawandi (d. 555/1160) accepted Khasa'is as al-Radi's work. In this book, as quoted above, al-Radi has mentioned his intention of compiling Nahjul Balaghah.

2. Haqa'iq al-tanzil: Only the fifth part of this book is accessible to us. Its authorship is unanimously attributed to al-Radi. On page 167 of this book al-Radi makes this remark:
Anybody who needs a proof of our claim should refer to our book Nahjul Balaghah and think upon its contents. We have compiled all forms and genres of the utterances of Amir al-Mu'minin (as) in this book, which comprises sermons, letters, aphorisms, and admonitions, and is divided into three independent parts, each containing a specific genre.

3. Majazat al-'athar al-Nabawiyyah: Al-Najashi and others have included this book among al-Radi's works. At two places in this book al-Radi has referred to Nahjul Balaghah as a work of his own compilation.

It is important to note that even Ibn Khallikan, al-Dhahabi and Ibn Hajar did not question the authenticity of the attribution of Nahjul Balaghah in its entirety to 'Ali (as). They were mainly skeptical of those parts which were critical of the Caliphs Abu Bakr and 'Umar.

But if we find such utterances and writings of Amir al-Mu'minin (as) in both Shi'i and non-Shi'i sources earlier than Nahjal-balaghah, baselessness of al-Dhahabi's and Ibn Hajar's objections can be conclusively proved.

Let us again refer to Istinad-e Nahjul Balaghah by 'Arshi, a contemporary Sunni scholar of India. With respect to the harshest of the sermons concerning the issue of the caliphate, known as al-Khutbat aldhilshiqiyah, 'Arshi refers to the following early sources in which the sermon had occurred:

1. Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Khalid al-Barqi (d. 274/887) has quoted it in full in al-Mahasin wa al-'adab.
2. Ibrahim ibn Muhammad al-Thaqafi al-Kufi (d. 283/896) quoted it in al-Gharat. In his notes on al-Gharat, Sayyid Jalal al-Din Muhaddith, quoting Imtiyaz 'Ali Khan 'Arshi, says that this khutbah is not found in it; even Ibn Abi al-Hadid and al-'Allamah Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (1037-1110 or 1111/1627-1698 or 99) did not refer to al-Gharat as an early source of this sermon.
3. Abu 'Ali Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab al Jubba'i al-Basri al-Mu'tazili (d. 303/915-16) narrated it.
4. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Qubba al-Razi (a teacher of al-Mufid and a pupil of Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi, a Mu'tazili in his youth) quoted it in al-Insaf.
5. Abu al Qasim 'Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Mahmud al-Ka'bi al-Balkhi al-Mu'tazili (d. 319/931) in al-'Insaf.
6. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Musa ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, known as alShaykh al-Saduq (d. 318/930), has quoted it in two of his books: Ilal al Sharayi' and Ma'ani al-'akhbar.
7. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn al-Nu'man, known as al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) in Kitdb al-'irshad.
8. Shaykh al-Ta'ifah Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi (d. 460/1068) in al-'Amali.

'Arshi adds that al Shaykh al Saduq has narrated this Khutbah on the authority of two different chains of narrators:

Narrated to us Muhammad ibn 'Ali Majalawayh from his uncle Muhammad Ibn al-Qasim, he from Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Barqi he from his father, he from Ibn Abi 'Umayr, he from Aban ibn 'Uthman he from 'Aban ibn Taghlib, he from 'Ikrimah, he from 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas. (Ilal al-sharayi' and Ma'ani al-'akhbar)

Narrated to us Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Ishaq al-Taliqani, from 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Yahya al Jalludi, from Abu 'Abd Allah Ahmad ibn 'Ammar ibn Khalid, from Yahya ibn 'Abd al-Hamid al-Hammani, from 'Isa ibn Rashid, from 'Ali ibn Khuzaymah, from Ikrimah, from Ibn al-'Abbas. (Ma'ani al 'akhbar)

Al-Sayyid al-Radi has not quoted the entire chain of narrators, and was content to remark that the sermon was popularly known as 'al-Shiqshiqiyah', while his teacher al-Mufid narrates both the chain of narrators and the story behind its narration. This is indicative of the fact that this sermon was so famous in those days that al-Radi did not find it necessary to prove its veracity by quoting the chain of its narrators.

Surprisingly, the same famous sermon was used by his and 'Ali's opponents to question his veracity and to malign him by accusing him and/or his brother of forging it. The kind of criticism Ibn Khallikan and his followers dabbled in not only discredits them as researchers but also makes their other works suspicious in the eyes of impartial and objective students of history. Those who could not find any of the above-mentioned books to cross-check the veracity of Nahjul Balaghah had failed miserably even in determining correctly its authorship.

Al-Shaykh al-Mufid has collected a number of 'Ali's speeches in al-'Irshad concerning the issue of the succession to the Prophet (saw) and 'Ali's criticism of the ways and means adopted by his opponents to deprive him of the caliphate. The famous Khutbah known as al-Shiqshiqiyah begins with the following preface:

(A group of traditionists report by a variety of chains of authority (turuq) on the authority of Ibn al-'Abbas, who said:)

I [i.e. Ibn al-'Abbas, was with the Commander of the Faithful at al-Rahabah I mentioned the [matter of] Caliphate and those who had preceded him. He breathed heavily and said: "By God, Ibn Abi Quhatah took on...."

This khutbah ends with the following words:

Then you would have found that your world is more insignificant in my eyes than a goat's snot.

At this point 'Ali's speech was interrupted by a man from Kufah. Ibn al-'Abbas, after narrating the text of the speech, adds:

I have never regretted anything nor felt such distress like the distress I felt at losing the rest of the speech of the Commander of the Faithful, peace be on him. When he finished reading the letter, I said: "Commander of the Faithful would you continue your speech from the point which you reached?"

He answered: "In no way, in no way. It was like foam on the camel's mouth (shiqshiqah) as it opens its mouth to bellow and then falls silent."

Apart from al-'Irshad this khutbah, as claimed by 'Arshi, is found in other sources also. In no way can it be dubbed as al-Radi's or al-Murtada's fabrication.

Sayyid Hibat al-Din al-Shahristani, in Mahuwa Nahjul Balaghah, has quoted different versions of al-Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyah from: Nathral-durar wa nuzhat al-'adab by the vizier Abu Sa'id al-'Abi; al-

'Irshad by al-Shaykh ai-Mufid; al-Mahasin wa al-'adab by al-Barqi; al-Saduq in Ila'l al-sharayi'; and a book of al-Jalludi. All the versions have minor differences, which indicate that the source from which al-Radi quoted this sermon was other than these four.

After enumerating the earlier works containing this khutbah, Hibat al-Din al-Shahristani points out that Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, one of the compilers of al-Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyah, was a follower of the Banu Umayyah and a staunch admirer of the third caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan writes:

Much earlier than Ibn Khallikan made his remark questioning the authenticity of the attribution of Nahjul Balaghah, certain doubts had come to circulate as indicated by Ibn Abi al-Hadid al-Mu'tazili (d. 555/1257), who referred to a discussion concerning the attribution of al-Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyah with his teacher Abu al-Khayr Musaddiq ibn Shabib [sic. Shayb] al-Wasiti (d. 605/1208), who said:

I read this khutbah in the presenee of Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah ibn Ahmad, known as Ibn al-Khashshab (493-567/1099-1172)... and asked him if he considered this khutbah to be a forged one and not of 'Ali (as).

Ibn al-Khashshab said:

By God, I am convinced that it is from 'Ali and I am as sure of it as I am convineed of your truthfulness.

Al-Wasiti said to Ibn al-Khashshab: "A group is of the view that this khutbah was fabricated by al-Radi, may God be pleased with him." Ibn al-Khashshab said: Is it not beyond the eloquence of al-Radi or any other? How could he speak from such a high level of spirituality in such a (forceful) style? We are well acquainted with al-Radi's writings, his style and his technique. I have assessed both his poetry and prose, these words as compared to those of al-Radi are so different that there is no question of confusing them with his writings."

He further said: By God, I have read this sermon in books written two hundred years before the birth of al-Radi. Yes, of course, I have seen it written in many books. I can identify this khutbah very well and know that which of the 'ulama' and men of letters quoted it (in his work) mueh before al-Radi's father was born." (Sharh Nahjul Balaghah, vol. I)

On another occasion, in his Sharh Nahjul Balaghah, Ibn Abi al-Hadid a group of blind followers of their own whims and wishes is of the opinion that the best part of Nahjul Balaghah is fabricated and forged by a group of Shi'i writers and is something new.

Most of them consider a part of it to be the product of al-Radi's pen or of others. But this group consists of prejudiced people, whose heart's vision is blocked by partiality and who have deviated from the right and straight path of truth; they have strayed from truth due to perversion, lack of knowledge, and unfamiliarity with literature and poetry. (vol. 1, p. 543)

At another place he writes about the words of Amir al-Mu'minin (as):

His eloquence is such that he is the leader of the eloquent and the guide and master of orators. It is said about his utterances that his words are below the Word of the Creator only, but over and above the words of all creatures; and from him the world has learnt the art of speech and rhetoric.

There were people in the age of al-Radi himself whose hearts and eyes were sealed in such a manner that they attributed some of 'Ali's utterances to Mu'fiwiyah. Al-Radi's commentary on the following khutbah is important, his comment, are as follows:

People with no ability to understand literature ascribe it to Mu'awiyah whereas these are undoubtedly the words of Amir al-Mu'minin. How can dirt compare with pure gold?... '

Amr ibn Bahr al Jahiz, a critic gifted with insight and a distinct sensibility, has probed the matter minutely. He has included this khutbah in al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, and has mentioned those who attributed it to Mu'awiyah. Subsequently he says: "This speech is very much like the speeches of 'Ali (as) and is in conformity with the great man's classification of people, and it also corresponds with his manner of depicting the people's modes of behaving in anger, under oppression and waywardness, and in the state of dissimulation and fear.

Similarly, al-Radi refers to his sources on a number of occasions, and also gives an account of the circumstances that were responsible for the mood and theme of a certain sermon. He has referred to: al Jahiz; al-Waqidi; Abu Ja'far al-'Iskafi; Hisham ibn al-Kalbi; Sa'id ibn Yahya ai-'Umawi, the author of al-Maghazi; Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Salam; al-Tabari; Tha'lab; Ibn al-'A'rabi; al-Mubarrad, and many others.

How could an author who allegedly forged the utterances and writings of Amir al-Mu'minin (as) be so honest in acknowledging his indebtedness to his predecessors?

Those who raised doubts about the contents of Nahjul Balaghah were unaware of the high status and prestige of its compiler, both in the society and in the academic circles. A man of his eminence could not even think of fabricating sermons and letters in the name of al-'Imam 'Ali (as). Had any such attempt been made by anybody, Shi'i scholars themselves would have been the first to reject it, as an anthology of poetry attributed to al-'Imam 'Ali (as) (Diwan-e 'Ali) was never accepted by the majority of Shi'i scholars as authentic.

Some other such works, for example, the commentary on the Quran attributed to al-Imam al-Hasan al-'Askari (as) or Fiqh al-Rida attributed to al Imam al-Rida (as), are at issue among Shi'i scholars. But no one among al-Radi's contemporaries or from the successive generations of Sunni or Shi'i 'ulama' ever questioned Nahjul Balaghah's authenticity for more than two centuries.

Regarding the contents of Nahjul Balaghah the Muslim scholars of all shades of opinion never doubted al-Radi's veracity. They were aware of the presence of earlier sources of al-'Imam 'Ali's utterances. There is abundant reliable evidence in support of the existence of such collections in the first and second

centuries of Hijrah, from which 'Abd al-Hamid ibn Yahyfi, Ibn al-Muqaffa', and Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib had quoted al-'Imam 'Ali's sermons and letters.

In the third and fourth centuries, too, several collections of 'Ali's khutab and rasa'il were compiled, some of which have been already referred to above. Ibn Abi al-Hadid (d. 655 or 656/1257 or 58); Taqi al-Din Ahmad, known as Ibn Taymiyyah (661-728/1263-1328); and his pupil Salah al-Din al-Safadi (d. 764/1362-63) accepted Nahjul Balaghah as a genuine collection of al-Imam 'Ali's words. The former not only wrote one of the most famous commentaries on it, but also repudiated all doubts about its authenticity.

Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Safadi were among staunch opponents and critics of the Shi'ah, but both of them verified the authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah and the veracity of al-Sharif al-Radi. Al-Safadi, in the account of al-Radi, writes: People are of the view that Nahjul Balaghah is his own writing. But I heard my teacher, al-'Imam al-'Allamah Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah say: "Nahjul Balaghah is not al-Sayyid al-Radi's product. What in this book is the utterance of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) is known, and whatever is from al-Radi that is also known. (al-Wafi bi al-wafayat, vol. 2, p. 375)

Instead of going into further details of the controversy about the authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah's ascription and forwarding more evidence against those who created doubts about it, I would recommend the keen reader to consult al-Mu'jam al-mufahras li al-faz Nahjul Balaghah, edited by al-Sayyid Kazim al-Muhammadi and al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Dashti, who have done a commendable job in preparing a very comprehensive bibliography of the sources of the book along with a detailed item-by-item list of the sources of each and every sermon, letter, and saying contained in Nahjul Balaghah. Moreover, since the death of al-Radi scholars of eminence have been always interested in writing commentaries on Nahjul Balaghah, which is another very strong proof of its authenticity.

So many Sunni, Mu'tazili, and Shi'i scholars would not have taken pains to comment upon al-Radi's own fabrications. Ali Naqi Munzawi, in the catalogue of the library of Mishkat, donated to Tehran University, has enumerated 33 narrators of al-'Imam 'Ali's utterances before al-Radi and fourteen after him till the tenth Hijrah century.

Danish Pizhoh, in his preface to Farman-e Malik Ashtar, edited by Husayn 'Alawi Awi, has given a list of its early commentators. Sayyid 'Abd al-Zahra' al-Khatib, in Masadir Nahjul Balaghah wa asaniduh, has counted thirty-three books written concerning the sources of Nahjul Balaghah. Hundreds of manuscripts of Nahjul Balaghah in various libraries of the world and even a greater number of the manuscripts of other earlier works containing al-'Imam 'Ali's utterances invite all seekers of truth to trace the sources and ascertain the authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah.

There are also numerous documents available which contain certificates and testimonials issued by eminent scholars to their pupils authorizing them to narrate the contents of Nahjul Balaghah along with the permission to narrate ahadith of the Prophet (saw) and the Imams (as).

This is enough to show that Nahjul Balaghah has been considered to be of equal value in reliability with the most authentic compendiums of hadith. The narration of Nahjul Balaghah's traditions had started during the lifetime of al-Radi. Qutb al-Din al-Rawandi (d. 573/1177) in the preface of his commentary on Nahj al-balaghoh, refers to a daughter of al-Sharif al Murtada, who had studied the book under al-Radi himself and was authorized to narrate its traditions to others, and she used to narrate Nahjul Balaghah on her uncle's authority. Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahim al-Baghdadi has narrated from this learned lady of the family of the Imams (as).

Addendum: This information was sourced from:

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