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Fourth Sermon: 'Ashura – Popular Distortions and our Responsibility

In the Name of Allah, the All-Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

All Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the worlds and the Maker of all creation, and may Peace and benedictions be upon His servant and messenger, His beloved and elect, our master, our prophet, and our sire, Abu al-Qasim Muhammad, may Allah bless him and his pure, immaculate, and infallible Progeny.

I seek refuge with Allah from the accursed Satan:

“So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearst hard; they would pervert the words from their meanings, and they forgot a portion of what they were reminded of.”

(5: 13)

Our discussion concerning the distortions (*tahrifat*) in popular accounts of the historical event of Ashura consists of four parts:

1. The meaning of distortion (*tahrif*) in general.
2. A description of the distortions that have taken place in regard to the historic event of 'Ashura and their examples.
3. The factors responsible for these distortions and the causes that lead to *tahrif* in general and the special factors that have been particularly at play in relation to this historic event.
4. Our responsibility¹ in regard to these distortions, that is, the 'duty of the '*ulama*' as well as that of the common people.

Of these four, we have already discussed the first three parts in the previous sessions, and tonight, with God's grace, we will discuss the fourth topic.

To be certain, during the course of time gradually there have taken place distortions in this very great historic event, and there is no doubt that here we have a responsibility: to combat these distortions.

To state it more clearly, and to put it in somewhat self-important terms, it may be said that our generation has a mission to fight against these distortions and in misrepresentations of 'Ashura. But before we may discuss the responsibility of the scholars of the ummah (in other words, the *khawass*) and the responsibility of the people (that is, the *'awamm*), I would like to mention two points in the way of introduction.

The first point is that we should examine the past to see who has been responsible for these distortions, whether it were the scholars who were responsible for it or the common people. Next, what is our responsibility to today and who is to shoulder it?

Who has been responsible for it in the past? Usually in such cases the *'ulama* blame the people and the people put the blame on the *'ulama*. The *'ulama* say that the guilt lies with the people and their ignorance. They are so ignorant, ill-informed and un-worthy that they only deserve to be fed with such nonsense. They do not deserve to know the truth and the facts.

I heard it from the *marhum* Ayatullah Sadr, may God elevate his station, that Taj Nayshaburi would say absurd things from the *minbar*. Someone objected to him, saying, "What are these things that you say? You receive such big audiences, why don't you say some sensible things?" He replied that the people did not deserve it. Then he produced, so to speak, a 'proof' to substantiate his assertion.

The common people, the masses, also have an argument against the *'ulama* and the clerics which they often use. They say, "When a fish begins to rot, the rotting begins at the head. The scholars are like the head of the fish and we its tail." However, the fact is that in this case the responsibility and the guilt lies both upon the *'ulama* as well as the laity.

One should know that the common people too share a responsibility in such cases. In cases such as this, it is the people who let the truth to be obliterated and spread superstitious nonsense.

There is a well-known tradition which is considered reliable by scholars. A man asked Imam Sadiq (a) concerning the Qur'anic verse:

"And among them are the illiterate folks who know not the Book but only vain hopes and nothing but conjectures." (2:78)

Here God is critical of the common people from among the Jews. Although He refers to them as having been uneducated, unlettered and illiterate, nevertheless He considers them blameworthy. The questioner, while admitting that the *'ulama*' of the Jews' were indeed responsible, asks the Imam as to why the common people among them were held guilty. Was it not a valid excuse that they were illiterate commoners? The tradition is an elaborate one.

The Imam replies that such is not the case. He answers that there are certain matters that do require learning and which can only be understood by the learned and which illiterate people do not comprehend. Concerning such issues one may say that the common people are not responsible as they have not acquired learning in religious subjects. True, at times they may be held responsible for not having acquired education, and this could be an argument against them.

However, if there are cases where they have no responsibility, that is in issues which require the study of books and proper instruction under teachers. One who has never had any teacher and has never gone to school is not held responsible in such matters.

However, there are issues which a normal human being can understand with his natural faculty of a sound mind. Here it is not necessary for one to have gone to the school, to have read books and have had teachers. In other words, it does [not] require one to have a diploma or a degree or even to have received middle-school education. All that is needed is sanity and a sound mind.

Thereafter, the Imam gives an example. Suppose there is an *'alim* who preaches the people to be pious and Godfearing while he himself acts in a manner contrary to piety and Godfearing. He preaches what he himself does not practice and the people observe this contradiction between his word and deed. The Imam points out that it is not necessary for one to be educated and learned in order to see that such men are not worthy of being followed.

The common people among the Jews would observe these things with their own eyes and understand them with their minds (*wadtarru bi ma'arifi qulubihim*).¹ With their natural intelligence they could perceive that one must not follow such persons, but in spite of that they would follow them. Therefore they were responsible and guilty.

There are some matters that do not require any education or training or any linguistic expertise in any particular language such as Arabic or Persian or any training in any of such subjects as grammar, law, jurisprudence, logic or philosophy.

All that is needed is the natural gift of intelligence and they (the common people among the Jews) did possess this. They perceived these things with their natural intelligence. The Noble Prophet (s) has a saying which is one of the profoundest because of its innate self-evident character. He said:

The value of works depends solely on intentions, and everyone's recompense depends on his intentions.²

It means that the significance and worth of one's actions depends on one's intentions. If you do something unintentionally you are not guilty if it is something bad and if it is something good you do not deserve any reward.

Now if someone were to come and relate a dream and a story about someone who is forgiven his sins

and admitted to the highest stations of paradise due to something that happened to him in a condition of unconsciousness in which his will and intention had played no role whatsoever, or rather his real intentions were quite the opposite, should we accept such a thing?

Does it require book learning? Does it need literacy or the knowledge of Arabic? Only repentance and a return to God can free one from his sins:

“Verily good deeds obliterate evil deeds.” (11:114)

It is good deeds that wipe out the traces left by evil deeds. But involuntary actions are not such. However, 'we fail to use our God-given intelligence to make correct judgements.

In some books they have written that once upon a time there was a robber who used to waylay travellers, rob them and kill them. One day he came to know that a caravan of pilgrims bound for the holy shrine in Karbala was on its way. He came and hid himself in a mountain pass lying there in wait to waylay the pilgrims bound for the shrine of Imam Husayn, to rob them of their belongings and to kill them if necessary.

While he waited for the caravan to reach, suddenly he fell asleep. The caravan came and passed by while he remained asleep. In that state he saw a dream. It was the scene of the day of resurrection and he was being taken towards hell. Why? Because he had not performed a single good deed in his life. All he had done was wickedness and crime.

He was taken to the verge of hell but hell refused to accept him. Why? Because as this man slept by the wayside as the pilgrim caravan passed, the dust raised by the feet of the pilgrims of Imam Husayn's shrine had settled on his body and clothes.

As a result of this involuntary act all his sins were forgiven without his having any conscious intention, or rather despite his intention to kill the pilgrims, and contrary to the declaration of the Prophet that “the value of actions depends solely on intentions, and everyone's recompense depends on his intentions.” [There is even a couplet that has been composed on the theme.]

Indeed, hell shall not touch a body, whereupon lies the dust of the feet of Husayn's pilgrims!

It is a nice line poetically, but is unfortunately untrue from the viewpoint of the teaching of Imam Husayn.

The second point, which I must mention before describing this responsibility and duty relates to the dangers that lie in these distortions. Let us briefly discuss the dangers that lie in distortion of facts. We have already discussed the various kinds of distortion that have occurred in relation to the historic event of 'Ashura and the factors responsible for such distortions. It is possible that some people might think, 'After all what is wrong with *tahrif*?

What harm can it do and how can it create any danger?' The answer is that the danger of *tahrif* is

extraordinarily great. *Tahrif* is an indirect blow which is more effective than a direct one. If a book is corrupted (whether in respect of its wording, or its meaning and content) and it is a book of guidance, it is transformed into a book that is misleading.

If it is a book of human felicity it is transformed into a book of human wretchedness. If it is a book that edifies and elevates human beings, as a result of corruption it is changed into one that brings man's fall and degeneration. Basically it alters the very form of reality and not only makes it ineffective it has a reverse effect.

Everything is prone to certain hazards which are related to its nature. The Noble Prophet (s) said:

There are three hazards for religion: the scholar of evil conduct, the tyrannical leader (ruler), and the person who is diligent in practising religion but is ignorant.³

That is, there are three dangers for religion: 1) scholars who are evil and vicious in their conduct; 2) leaders who are tyrannical and unjust; 3) devout persons who are ignorant. The Prophet has considered them hazards for the faith.

In the same way that plants and animals are affected by certain pests and diseases, and in the same way as the human body is prone to certain diseases and disorders, religion, creed and faith are also prone to certain dangers.

Distortions of the faith, which are brought about by two out of the three categories of people mentioned by the Noble Prophet, that is, scholars of evil conduct and ignorant and sanctimonious persons, are a hazard for the faith and are destructive for religion. Corruption and distortion alter the content of a message of deliverance and the people who accept it as the truth derive an opposite result.

Ali (a), a figure with all that greatness, has a strangely distorted personality in the outlook of some people. Some people know Ali (a) only as an athlete. At times some people of very suspect motives publish pictures of Ali that show him bearing in hand a two-tongued sword, like a pythons tongue, and with facial features and expression one does not know from where they have got them. It is definite that a picture or statue of Ali or that of the Prophet never existed.

They have painted such a strange face that one can hardly believe that it is the same Ali famous for his justice, the Ali who wept at nights for the fear of God. The face of a devout man, of someone who is used to nightly worship, of someone who engages in *istighfar* at nights, the face of a sage, a judge, a man of letters is a different face.

There is another thing which is quite popular especially amongst us Iranians. We refer to the Fourth Imam (a) as "Imam Zayn al-'Abidin-e *Bimar*" (i.e. the sick one). In no language do we ever come across the epithet *bimar* along with the name of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. Such an epithet does not exist in Arabic.

He has a number of appellations, one of which is *al-Sajjad* (i.e. one who prostrates a lot), another is *Dhu*

al-Thafanat (i.e. one who has callouses on his forehead, due to prostrations). Do you find any book in Arabic that may contain an epithet synonymous with the word *bimar* for the Imam?

Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) was only ill during the days of the episode of 'Ashura (perhaps it was an act of providence meant to save the Imam's life and to preserve the progeny of Imam Husayn) and this very illness saved his life.

Several times they wanted to kill the Imam, but as he was seriously ill, they would leave him saying, *Innahu li-ma bih4* i.e., Why should we kill him. He is himself dying. Who in the world has not fallen ill at some time or another during his life?

Apart from this instance of his illness, see if you can find any other reference stating that Imam Zayn al-'Abidin was sick. But we have pictured Imam Zayn al-'Abidin as someone chronically ill, pale faced, suffering from fever and as someone bent with weakness and always carrying a walking stick and someone who moans as he walks !

The same distortion and lie about the Imam's figure has led some people to continually groan and moan and make themselves appear as chronically sick so that people may revere them for that and say, "Look at him, he is just like Imam Zayn al-'Abidin the *Bimar!*" This is distortion. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin was not any different from Imam Husayn (a) or Imam Baqir (a) in respect of physical health and constitution.

The Imam lived for forty years after the event of Karbala' and he was quite healthy like others and was not different from Imam Sadiq (a), for instance, in this regard. Why should we then call him "Imam Zayn al-'Abidin the *Bimar*"⁵

Imamate means being a model and an exemplar. The philosophy of the Imam's existence is that he is a human being of a superhuman calibre, like the prophets, who introduced themselves in these words so that the people may follow them as higher models of humanity:

I am only a mortal like you, (and) it has been revealed to me that your God is One God. (18:110)

However, when the countenance of these figures is distorted to a great degree they are no more capable of serving as models. That is, instead of being beneficial, following and emulating such imaginary figures gives an opposite result. Thus we have seen briefly the great danger that lies in *tahrif*. Actually *tahrif* is an indirect blow and a stab in the back.

The Jews are the world champion of *tahrif*. No people in world history have carried out *tahrif* to the extent that they have done. For the same reason no one has ever delivered a great blow to humanity by distorting facts and fabricating falsehoods.

Our Responsibility and Mission:

You should know that we have a serious responsibility in this regard, especially in the present times.

One cannot serve the people with a distorted version of the truth, neither was it possible in the past. It was unproductive also in the past, but its harm was lesser.

Its harm is much greater in this era. Our greatest responsibility is to see what distortions have occurred in our history; to see what distortions have occurred in the presentation of our eminent figures and personalities, and what misinterpretations have occurred in the Qur'an.

There has been no textual corruption in the Qur'an. It means that not a single word has been added to it nor a word has been deleted from it. However, the danger of distortion of the meanings of the Qur'an is as serious as any textual corruption.

What is meant by distortion of meanings of the Qur'an? It means interpreting the Qur'an in a wrong and misleading manner. Such a thing should not be permitted to take place. We should see what kind of distortions have taken place in our history in historical episodes such as the historic event of 'Ashura, which must always remain a source of lesson and education for us, being a document of moral and social training and education. We should combat such distortions.

The Duty of the 'Ulama and the People:

What is the duty of the '*ulama*' of the Ummah in this regard and the duty of the common people, the masses?

I want to make a general remark concerning the responsibility of the '*ulama*'. The deviation of an '*alim*' lies in always confronting passively the weak points and shortcomings of the people. Spiritual, moral and social weak points are a kind of sickness. In bodily illness the sick person is usually conscious of his illness and he himself seeks his own treatment.

But in spiritual illnesses that which makes things difficult is that the sick person does not know that he is sick. On the contrary he considers his illness a sign of health. He even has a liking for his illness. It is not the case that individuals are conscious of their weak points and accept them as such; rather they consider them as their strong points! It is the '*alim*' who understands the weak points of his community

When an '*alim*' is faced with a weak point of the community he has two alternatives before him:

- 1) He may struggle against these weak points, and such a person is called a reformer (*muslih*). A reformer is one who fights against the weak points of the people. The people usually do not like him.
- 2) He may consider it a difficult and formidable task to combat the weak points of the people. He may conclude that there is not only no reward to be obtained in fighting the people's weak points, but there are also disadvantages. Accordingly, he exploits their weakness.

It is here that he becomes an instance of 'the vicious scholar' (*faqih fajir*) who according to the Noble

Prophet (s) is one of the three hazards and pestilences of the faith.

I will not discuss other problems here but will confine myself to the issue of the event of 'Ashura. The common people have two weak points in relation to the mourning ceremonies held for Imam Husayn (a).

One of them is that – to the extent I have come across in my own experience (and I have not yet encountered any exception) – usually those who arrange and organize the mourning gatherings (*majalis*), whether they are held in mosques or at homes, want the *majalis* to draw good attendance. They are satisfied if there is a substantial crowd and are unhappy if the attendance is sparse. This is a weak point.

These sessions are not held to draw crowds. Our purpose is not to hold a parade or a march past. The purpose is to become acquainted with the truths and to fight against distortions. This is a weak point which the speaker has to reckon with.

Should he fight this weak point or should he exploit it like Taj Nayshaburi? Should he wish to combat this weak point it would not be compatible with the objectives of the organizers and holders of the *majlis* as well as with the wishes of the audience who like to get together and love tumult and fanfare.

Should he want to exploit this weak point then all that may bother him is how to draw larger crowds. It is here that an *'alim* stands at a crossroad: now that these people are fools and have such a weak point, should I exploit it, or should I struggle against it and go after the truth?

Another weak point present in the mourning gatherings – which is mostly from the people's side and has fortunately become lesser – is that profuse and loud weeping is regarded as the criterion of their success. After all the speaker on the *minbar* must relate the sorrowful accounts of the tragic events. While these accounts are related, the people are expected not merely to shed tears: the mere shedding of tears is not acceptable; the *majlis* must be rocked with cries of mourning.

I do not say that the *majlis* should not be rocked with mourning; what I say is that this must not be the objective. If tears are shed as a result of listening to facts and the *majlis* is rocked with mourning by descriptions of real history without false and fabricated narratives, without distortion, without conjuring companions for Imam Husayn that did not exist in history and who are unknown to Imam Husayn himself (as they were nonexistent), without attributing such children to Imam Husayn as did not exist, without carving out enemies for Imam Husayn that basically had not existed – that is very good indeed.

But when reality and truth are absent, should we go on making war against Imam Husayn by fabricating falsehoods and lies?

This is a weak point of the common people. What is to be done? Should it be exploited? Should we exploit it for our interests and take them for a ride? Should we, like Taj Nayshaburi, say that as the people are stupid, we should make use of their stupidity? No! Our greatest responsibility and the *'ulama's*

biggest duty is to struggle against the weak points of society. That is why that the Noble Prophet (s) said: –

When heresies and fabrications appear in my Ummah, the *'alim* must declare what he knows, otherwise he will be cursed by God.⁶

That is: when falsehoods and fabrications appear and when things become popular which are not part of the religion, things which the Prophet (s) has not prescribed, it is the duty of the learned to declare the truth even if the people do not like it. And may curse of God be upon him who hides the facts. The Noble Qur'an itself has declared in stronger terms:

“Those who conceal what We have revealed of the clear signs and guidance, after We have made them clear for the people in the Book, God shall curse them and they will be cursed by all the cursers.” (2: 159)

It means, the learned who conceal the truths declared by Us, who know the facts but conceal them and refrain from expressing them, may the curse of God be upon them and the curse of everyone who curses. The duty of the *'ulama* during the era of the last prophesy is to struggle against *tahrif*. Fortunately the means for such a task are also available and there are, and have been, persons among the *'ulama* who combat such weak points.

The book *Lu'lu' wa marjan* was written on this very topic of the event of 'Ashura and I have mentioned it earlier. It is by the *marhum* Hajji Nuri (may God be pleased with him) and its purpose is precisely to carry out a campaign in this regard, a most sacred duty which has been fulfilled by that great man, whose work is an instance of the first part of the above-mentioned *hadith*:

When heresies and fabrications appear in my Ummah, the *'alim* must declare what he knows ...

It is the duty of the *'ulama* to state in clear terms the facts relating to this case to the people even if they do not like it. It is the duty of the *'ulama* to combat falsehoods. It is the duty of the *'ulama* to expose the liars. The jurists (*fuqaha*) have made certain remarks concerning the issue of back-biting (*ghibah*). They say that there are certain exceptions where back-biting is permissible. Among cases relating to these exceptions is one where all the major *'ulama* have committed this kind of *ghibah*, considering it necessary and even obligatory.

This is the case of *jarh*, where the standing of a narrator (*rawi*) is critically examined. Suppose a person narrates a tradition from the Prophet (s) or from one of the Imams (a). Is one to accept his statements immediately? No. One must investigate his background to see what kind of man he was, whether a truthful person or a liar.

If you discover a weak point in the life of this person, a shortcoming, a defect, an instance of lying or misconduct, it is not only lawful for you but even obligatory (*wajib*) to discredit this person in your books.

This is called *jarh*. Although it is *ghibah* and it amounts to casting disrepute on someone – which is in general not a lawful thing to do whether the subject is dead or alive – but in this case where the matter is that of distortion of the truth and its *tahrif*, one must discredit him and the liar must be exposed and discredited.

Someone may be a great scholar in a certain field, such as Mulla Husayn Kashifi, who was a very learned religious scholar. But his *Rawdat al-shuhada* is replete with lies. No one has been spared of his lies. Even Ibn Ziyad and 'Umar ibn Sa'd are victims of his lies.

He has written that Ibn Ziyad gave fifty camel-loads (*kharwar*) of gold to 'Umar ibn Sa'd so as to make him go to Karbala' to do what he did. (Anyone who hears such a story might think that if such is the case one cannot put much blame on 'Umar ibn Sa'd. There are many who would do such a thing if given fifty camel-loads of gold.)

There is a general agreement about Mulla Darbandi that he was a good man. Even *marhum* Hajji Nuri, who criticizes his book, and with justification, says that he was a good man. This man was sincerely devoted to Imam Husayn (a) and it is said that whenever he heard Imam Husayn's name mentioned tears would come into eyes.

He was also quite well-versed in *fiqh* and *usul al-fiqh*. He imagined himself to be a jurist (*faqih*) of the first rank. However; that was not the case. He was a jurist of second or at least third rank. He wrote a book named *Khaza'in* (lit. 'treasures') which is a complete course in *fiqh* and has been published. He was a contemporary of the author of the *Jawahir* (lit. 'jewels'). He asked the author of the *Jawahir* as to what title he had given to his book. He said, '*Jawahir*.'

As the title of his own book was *Khaza'in*, he said, "There are many of such *jawahir* in our *khaza'in*." However, the *Jawahir* has been reprinted ten times and there is no jurist who does not use it or can do without it. The *Khaza'in* was printed only once and thereafter no one went after it. Although it has a thousand pages, it is not worth more than the paper used to print it.

This man, in spite of being a scholar, wrote the *Asrar al-shahadah* in which he has totally distorted the event of Karbala, altering it and twisting it out of shape, making it ineffective and inconsequential. His book is full of lies. Now should we keep our silence about him because he was a scholar, a pious man and devoted to Imam Husayn? Should not Hajji Nuri give his opinion about his *Asrar al-shahadah*? Of course, he must be subjected to *jarh* and this is the duty of an *'alim*.

We beseech God, the Blessed and the Exalted, to lead our hearts towards the truth, to forgive us the sins which we have committed through *tahrif* and otherwise, to grant us the ability to carry out successfully the duty and mission that we have in this field.

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1. Al-Tabrisi, al-Ihtijaj, vol.2, p.457.
 2. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 7, p. 225; al-Jami' al-saghir, vol. 1, p. 3.
 3. Al-Jami' al-saghir, vol. 1, p. 4.
 4. Bihar al-anwar, vol. 45, p. 61; A'lam al-wara, p. 246; ash-Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Irshad, p. 242.
 5. In the late Ayati (r), may God have mercy upon him, we have lost an invaluable asset. Five or six years ago this great man gave a lecture on the method of tabligh in one of the monthly sessions of a religious association. It was published in the second volume of Guftar-e mah. There he raised this very issue. He said, "What is this absurd notion that we attribute sickness to Imam Zayn al-Abidin? We have given such an appellation to the Imam that anyone who hears it imagines that the Imam was sick all his life." Then he related an episode that had occurred recently He said, "Some time ago I read an article in one of the periodicals where the author had complained about the plight of the government and government employees, stating that most of the government servants and officials were either incompetent or corrupt. They were either competent and corrupt, or honest and incompetent." He had cited verbatim the words of the author; who had written, "Most of the government officials are either of the type of Shimr or that of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin-e Bimar; whereas we need persons who are competent like Hadrat Abbas." He meant that Shimr was corrupt and competent, whereas Imam Zayn al-'Abidin-e Bimar was pious but - na'udhubillah - incompetent, and that Hadrat Abbas was both pious and competent. See how an apparently small distortion leads to such a great deviation.
 6. Safinat al-bihar, vol. 1, p. 63; Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 54.

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