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The Past Master: Sheikh Al-Mufid

Sheikh Tusi, (d. 460 A.H.) introduced his mentor Sheikh al Mufid, in his *al Fihrist* thus:

"Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-No'man, al-Mufid, had the kunya Abu Abdillah, and was well known as Ibn-al-Muallim. He was among the Imamiyya theologians, and was its final authority in his time. And he was a jurist (Faqih) of the advanced order, a man of polite demeanor, he was perspicacious and quick at repartee"

Sheikh Mufid was born on 11th Dhul Qa'dah, 336 Hijra (or 338 A.H. according to Sheikh Tusi) in Ukbara near Baghdad. He grew up under the care of his father who taught him the fundamentals of Arabic literature. Thereafter, accompanied by his father, he came to Baghdad and studied under the tutelage of al-Husain b. Ali al-Basri al-Mu'tazali, popularly known as Al-JUAL, and Abu Yasir, the slave of Abul Jaish.

In the ensuing year he qualified as an Alim of keen insight, a jurist of high repute and a formidable logician. In spite of being in the prime of his life, he enjoyed supremacy over most of his contemporaries, and became known as an acknowledged authority of Imamiyya sect. The ruler of his time, Sultan Adud-ud-daulah al-Daylami al-Buwaihi frequented at Sheikh's residence to pay him respect, and to inquire after his health when taken ill.

The Origins of the title al Mufid

Once his tutor Abu Yasir recommended that he attend the lessons in theology by Ali B. Isa al-Rummani, so as to gain deeper insight into the subject. Sheikh excused himself by saying that he was not acquainted with al-Rummani, and therefore needed an introduction. Abu Yasir gave him a letter and also arranged for someone to go with him to al-Rummani.

Sheikh al-Mufid says, I entered his class, and was impressed by the great number of students. So I sat at the end of the crowd, managing to creep forward as some members of the assembly left. Then I saw one man enter, saying: "(O Master), there is someone at the door who insists on being admitted to your

presence. He is from Basrah." The master said: "Is he a man of any erudition?"

The servant said: "I do not know, but he seems very keen to be let in." The Master relented, and the man from Basrah entered. The Master welcomed him respectfully, and they had a long conversation between them. Then he asked the Master, Ali b. Isa: "How do you view al-Ghadeer and al-Ghar (the event of the cave in which Abu Bakr accompanied the Prophet during Hijrah)?"

Ali b. Isa replied that "the report of al-Ghar was a recognised event, while al-Ghadeer was just a narrative. And a narrative is not as mandatory as a recognised event." The man from Basrah then left without making any reply.

Al Mufid says: Then I came forward and said: "O Sheikh, I have a question." He said: "Ask." Then I asked: "What do you say about the one who fights a just Imam?" He said: "Such a person would be an infidel." Then, after a pause, he rectified himself and said: "He would be a transgressor."

I asked: "What do you say about Amirul Momineen Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him?" He said: "I believe he was an Imam." So I asked: "Then what do you say about the day of Jamal and Talha and al-Zubair?" He retorted that both of them had repented. I said: "The battle of Jamal is a recognised event, while their repentance is a mere narrative."

Upon hearing this, he said: "Were you present when the man from Basrah put his question?" I said "yes." He said: "Well, a narrative compares a narrative, and a recognised event compares a recognised event." Then turning to me again, he asked: "What is your name and who is your tutor?" I said: "I am known as Ibn al-Muallim, and my tutor is Abu-Abdillah, al-Jual." He said: "Stay where you are."

Then he entered his room and came out with a letter, instructing me to hand over to my tutor. When I gave the letter to my tutor, he read it and then laughed. "What transpired between you in his class? He has asked me to confer upon you the title of al-Mufid." I related to him the story, so he smiled.

The above incident has been recorded by Mirza Muhammad Baqir al-Khwansari in *Rawdhat-ul-Jannaat* (vol. 6 p. 159), quoting from *al-Saraa-er* of Ibn Idrees and from *Majmua'h Warraam*. But Ibn Shahr Ashob in his *Ma'alimul Ulamaa* says that the title 'al-Mufid' was given to Sheikh al-Mufid, by our twelfth Imam, al-Hujjah, Sahebuzzaman, may his advent be soon.

A Teacher of great Ulama

Sheikh Mufid was a man of diverse talents. Besides being a jurist of the first order, he was a great literary figure, analytic historian, theologian and traditionist. His status as a Marja' of his time kept him extremely busy, yet he found time to conduct his teaching sessions, from which emerged great Ulama like Seyyid Murtadha (Alamul Huda), Syed al-Radhi (the compiler of *Nahjul Balaghah*), Sheikh Tusi (who laid the foundation of Hawza of Najaf), al-Najashi and others.

Questions poured in from far and wide, and Sheikh answered them all. In fact, he was the defender of Imamiyya Sect, adequately aware of the needs of the Islamic world. To his credit stand several great works written in various Islamic sciences.

Ibn Abil Hadeed al-Mo'tazaly in his commentary on *Nahjul Balaghah* writes that once Sheikh Mufid saw Fatima al-Zahra, peace be upon her, in his dream. She was accompanied by her two young sons, al-Hasan and al-Husain, peace be upon them.

Addressing him, she said: "O my Sheikh, teach Fiqh (Jurisprudence) to these two boys of mine." Next day, Fatimah, the mother of Seyyid Murtadha and Syed al-Radhi came to Sheikh, holding hands of her two young sons, and uttered the same words which Fatimah al-Zahra, peace be upon her, had uttered in his dream.

Tributes by Other Scholars

Al-Dhahabi, the renowned Sunni scholar, paid tribute to al-Mufid in his *Siyaru A'alaam al-Nabalaa* (Vol 17 p. 344) saying:

The learned man of Rafidhah sect, (Rafidhah meaning Shia) author of various books, Sheikh al-Mufid. His name was Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-No'man al-Baghdadi al-Shii, popularly known as Ibn al-Muallim. He was a versatile man, with numerous treatises and theological dissertations to his credit. He was a man of reticence and refinement. Ibn Abi Tayy has mentioned him in the *History of the Imamiyya* at length, saying: "He towered high above his contemporaries in all branches of knowledge, excelling in the principles of Fiqh, Fiqh, the traditions, the science of al-Rijal, (discerning the veracity of the narrators of the traditions), exegesis of al-Quran, Arabic grammar and poetry. He entered into debate with men from all faiths and persuasions.

The Buwaihid kingdom looked upon him with great respect, and he had won the favours of the Caliphs. Resolute, charitable and humble, he was ascetic in his habits, always engrossed in prayers and fasting, and wearing coarse clothes. Reading and learning were his main traits, and he was blessed with a very retentive memory.

It is said that he had committed every work of the opponents to memory, and was thus able to answer all their doubts and disputes. Always keen to learn more, frequenting book stores. It is said that Adud al-Dawlah visited him at times, and used to say: 'Plead, and thou shalt be granted.'"

Baghdad was the capital city of Islamic Empire teeming with learned ulama of diverse denominations. Quite often, sessions of religious polemics were held in presence of the kings, and all the men of influence. Sheikh Mufid invariably attended these debates, and ably argued to defend the Shia faith.

The effect of his formidable arguments was such that his adversaries prayed for his death!

And when al-Mufid died, they displayed their joy without any shame. Ibn al-Naqib held a function for rejoicing when he heard of al-Mufid's death, and according to *Tarikh Baghdad* (Vol. 10 p. 382), he said: "I do not care when I die, after having witnessed the death of Ibn al-Muallim."

A Memorable Dream

Al-Karajaki has reported that once Sheikh Mufid saw a dream, and then dictated it to his companions and disciples. He said: I dreamt that as I was passing through a street, I saw a large crowd gathered around someone.

On enquiry, I was told that they had surrounded Umar b. al-Khattab, the second Caliph. I pushed myself forward, and when I came near him, I said: "O Sheikh, do you allow me to ask a question?" He said: "Ask." So I said: "Would you explain me how is the excellence of your friend Abu Bakr established by the *Ayah* in which Allah says: *'the second of the two, when they were in the cave'*. Your friends are making too much out of it."

He said: "This *Ayah* proves Abu Bakr's excellence in six ways:

Allah mentions the Prophet, peace be upon him, and then mentions Abu Bakr with him, as his second of the two;

Allah mentions them as being together at one place; which is a sign of mutual affinity;

Allah adds further quality of being the Prophet's "SAHIB", the Companion;

Allah relates how kind and caring the Prophet was towards Abu Bakr when he told him, "Don't grieve";

Where the Prophet assured Abu Bakr that "Allah is with us" meaning that He will help both of them simultaneously;

Allah revealed that He will send down AS-SAKINAH (serenity) upon Abu Bakr because as far as the Prophet was concerned, AS SAKINAH never parted from him

These are six proofs of Abu Bakr's excellence from the mentioned *Ayah*."

Sheikh Mufid says: "I told him that he had indeed made a good effort to make his point, and had left no room for any other person to be a better advocate for his friend. But I was going to demolish the arguments, making it like ashes blown away by the fast wind."

Sheikh said:

"When you say that Allah has mentioned the Prophet, peace be upon him and his progeny, and then mentioned Abu Bakr as his second, I do not see anything extraordinary in that. For if you ponder over it,

you will find that Allah was only revealing the number of persons present in the cave. They were two; there could have been a Mo'min and a Kafir and they would still be two."

"And when you talk of them being together at one place, it is again as simple as the first case. If there was one place only, it could have been occupied by a Mo'min and a disbeliever also. The Mosque of the Prophet is definitely a better place than the cave, and yet it was a gathering place for the believers and the hypocrites. The Ark of Prophet Noah carried the Prophet Noah, together with Satan and the animals. So being together at one place is no virtue."

"And when you talk about the added quality of being 'SAHIB', the companion, this indeed is a weaker point than the first two, because a believer and a disbeliever can both be in the company of each other. Allah, Most High, used the word 'SAHIB' in the following Ayah: *'His "Sahib" (companion) said to him while he was conversing with him: **Have you disbelieved in the One Who created you from soil and then from a small quantity of sperm, then fashioned you harmoniously as a man?'** (al-Kahf, 18:37).*

Further, we find in Arabic literature that the word "SAHIB" is used for the accompanying donkey, and also for the sword. So, if the term can be used between a Momin and a Kafir, between a man and his animal, and between a living and an inanimate object, then what is so special in it about your friend?"

"And the words 'Don't grieve' were not meant for any solace;. Because it was a statement forbidding an act. In Arabic, we have 'donta' and 'dosa' as imperative verbs. Now, the grief expressed by Abu Bakr was either an act of obedience or disobedience. If it was obedience, the Prophet would not have forbidden it, therefore it is proved that it was an act of sin and disobedience."

"As for the assurance that 'Allah is with us', the pronoun 'us' was used by the Prophet for himself. The use of plural pronoun for oneself is a sign of one's elevated status. Allah says:

***'Indeed, We are the One who has revealed the Quran, and We will most surely preserve it.'* (Al-Hijr, 15:9).**

And again:

***'We are the One who gives life and ordains death, and We are the inheritor'*(al-Hijr, 15:23).**

And the Shias have their own version, which does not seem far-fetched. They say that Abu Bakr told the Prophet that his grief was for Ali b. Abi Talib (who was left behind in Makkah), and the Prophet replied: 'Do not grieve, surely, Allah is with us' meaning; with me and my brother, Ali b. Abi Talib."

"Your claim that As-Sakinah (serenity) was sent down to Abu Bakr is indeed outrageous. Because the verse clearly states that the serenity came unto him who was helped with the unseen army.

The Ayah says:

'... Then Allah sent down on him His serenity and strengthened him with unseen forces' (al-Tawbah, 9:40).

So if As-Sakinah had descended upon Abu Bakr, he would have received the support of the unseen army. In fact, it would have been better if you had not attributed this to Abu Bakr. For according to Quran, this serenity was sent down on the Prophet twice:

'Then Allah sent down His serenity upon His messenger and the believers, and sent down forces which you did not see ...'. (al Tawbah, 9:26).

'Then Allah sent down His serenity upon His Messenger and the believers, and adhered them to the word of piety' (al-Fath, 48: 26).

In both places, the believers shared the serenity with the Prophet, but in this event of the cave, serenity was sent down to the Prophet alone, excluding Abu Bakr. This may be a pointer to the fact that Abu Bakr was not among the believers!"

Sheikh Mufid says that Umar made no reply to my arguments, and as people around him scattered, he woke up from his sleep.

An account of his death

Sheikh Mufid died on the eve of Friday, 3rd of Ramadhan, 413 A.H. His student Syed Murtadha prayed the Salaat of Mayyit for him, in the presence of nearly eighty thousand people, a crowd never seen before in any funeral in Baghdad.

Sheikh Tusi (d. 460 A.H.) describes this sad event in *al-Fihrist*:

"The day of his death drew the largest crowd ever seen in any funeral, and both, friends and foes, wept uncontrollably".

Al-Mufid remained buried in his own house for two years, and then his body was transferred to Kadhmain where it was interred near his mentor, Ja'far b. Qawlayh's grave facing the feet of our 9th Imam, Imam Muhammad Taqi, al-Jawad, peace be upon him. His grave is still visited by those who visit the holy shrines in Kadhmain.

Peace be upon him on the day he was born, and on the day he died, and on the day he will be resurrected alive.

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