

The Authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah

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Today we are going to discuss five different ways in which Imam ‘Ali u taught the community, about life and about religion:

The first of these was via spiritual teaching and practice. By spiritual I refer to the ways in which he encouraged righteousness, piety and fear of Allah. His own practice remains a lasting example of unconditional humility and submission to his Lord’s Majesty and Might.

A second access was afforded by sermons pertinent to the contemporary affairs of the Muslim nation of the time.

Thirdly, he communicated with various governors of the Islamic state. A prime example of this is his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, Governor of Egypt.

In addition, there was the correspondence with people such as Muawiyah who refused to accept ‘Ali (as) as their Imam, or to concede that it was the people who had elected him to be their Caliph.

There were too, deeper and more intimate communications by which he transferred subtle and concealed knowledge to his close disciples such as Kumayl bin Ziyad al-Nakhaai and Maytham al-Tammar.

Clearly, his means of communication differed from one group to another.

The authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah

Many cast doubt on the authenticity of the chain of transmission, or isnad, of this work and claim that it is really the work of the compiler. However, those familiar with al-Radhi's writings can easily identify differences between his and Imam 'Ali's styles.

In his book, the great scholar of Najaf, Sayyid Abdul Zahra Husayni introduces, from authors who lived and died a long time before Sharif al-Radhi, 114 references for most of the sermons included in Nahjul Balaghah. As an example, he mentions that Sermon 3, which elaborates on the issue of the Prophet Muhammad's succession, was attributed to Imam 'Ali a long time before Sharif al-Radhi compiled Nahjul Balaghah.

This sermon begins with the following statement, 'By Allah, the son of Abu Quhafah donned the mantle of succession in the clear knowledge that my position in relation to that was analogous to that of an axle in relation to a hand mill.'

Those references include the following attributions of this sermon to Imam 'Ali (as):

- Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman, Ibn Qubba al Razi, a Mu'tazilite who later turned to the twelve Imams, in 'Al-Insaaf'.
- Abul Qasim al-Balkhi, who died in 317 AH
- Al-Hasan bin Abdullah al-'Askari.
- Al-Sadouq ibn 'Ma'ani al-Akhbar' pp. 360 & 'Ilal el-Sharaye' pp. 150
- Ibn Abd Rabbah al-Maliki who died in 328 AH
- Sheikh Mufid, Sharif al-Radhi's teacher, in 'Al-Irshad'. This book has been translated into English by Professor Haward.
- Qadi Abd al-Jabbar Mu'tazili who died in 415 AH.
- Abu Saeed Al-Aabi who died in 422 AH
- Sharif Al-Murtadha' in 'Al-Shafi'

Ibn Maytham Bahrani in Vol. 1 page 252 of his commentary on Nahjul Balaghah, comments that he had found that sermon in two books, both written before the birth of Sharif al-Radhi. The first, was 'Insaaf', written by Abu Ja'far bin Qubba, a great Mutazilite who died before Sharif al-Radhi was born. The second, a manuscript dated 64 years prior to the birth of Sharif al-Radhi, by Abul Hasan 'Ali bin Muhammad bin Furat, Vizier to the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir Billah.

Such evidence serves to remove all doubt on the authenticity of that particular sermon.

Furthermore, the great mutazilite commentator of Nahjul Balaghah, Ibn Abi al-Hahdid, records in Vol. 1 page 205, 'My teacher al-Wasiti, reported that in year 603 he had had the following conversation with his teacher, Ibn Khashab:

When I asked him if the above sermon had been fabricated he replied, 'No, by Allah I know that it is from Imam 'Ali u as clearly as I see you before me now.'

I then said that many people claim that sermon to be Sharif al-Radhi's. He responded by saying that neither Sharif al-Radhi nor anyone else was capable of producing such an eloquent sermon. He continued by saying, 'We have studied Sharif al-Radhi's writings and are familiar with his style. There is no similarity between the two works.'

He also said, 'By Allah, I found this sermon in books written two hundred years before Sharif al-Radhi was born.'

Allamah Amini, the author of 'Al Ghadir', the most authentic and seminal reference on the issue of Imamah – published in 11 volumes, gives 28 references for the above sermon in volume 7 pp 82.

It follows that no other book is able to provide more authentic references than Nahjul Balaghah.

Let us now look at the following arguments regarding the authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah in toto.

The first is that Sharif al-Radhi comments briefly, at the end of certain sermons, to present his own feelings and ideas about them. Sometimes he explains words which he thought necessary to insert in certain places. The content of those comments, in close proximity to the words of those speeches themselves have made it very easy for anyone with knowledge of Arabic literature, to realise that the author of the comments cannot possibly be the author of the speeches.

If we compare the Qur'anic commentary of Sharif al-Radhi, 'Haqeeq ul-Tanzil' in which he says that although Imam 'Ali's eloquence is superhuman, when a Qur'anic ayah is included in a speech, it stands out as a brilliant jewel among pebbles. We can use the same comparison to illustrate the difference between Imam 'Ali's sermons and Sharif al-Radhi's comments.

The second is that Sharif al-Radhi was not an unknown during his own lifetime. He occupied secular and religious positions of note, in a period during which both religion and literature blossomed. He lived in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire which was at that time the world centre of civilisation and culture.

Indeed, Sheikh Mufid, Sharif al-Radhi's teacher, was alive while Nahjul Balaghah was being compiled and survived long after Sharif al-Radhi had already passed away. Having said this, we also have before us books by other scholars of that period. These do not contain, even in the slightest form, anything

similar to Nahjul Balaghah.

The third is that the speeches of Imam 'Ali u were well known to scholars before Sharif al-Radhi was ever born. For example, the historian Masoudi, who died in 340 AH, that is, 66 years before Sharif al-Radhi's death, writes in his book Muruj al-Thahab Vol 2 pp. 431, and I quote, 'More than 480 speeches of 'Ali ibn Abu Talib u have been memorised by numerous people. These were delivered in an extempore manner and people frequently quoted them as being the words of Imam 'Ali u.'

It is clear that if 480 speeches were collected, they would make a book bigger than Nahjul Balaghah. This serves to explain Sharif al-Radhi's sub- title for Nahjul Balaghah 'A Selection from the Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abu Talib'.

In his commentary on Nahjul Balaghah, Ibn Abi al-Hahdid includes the statement by the prominent secretary of the last Umayyid Caliph, Abdul Hamid bin Yaya, who died in 132 AH., 'I have memorised 70 speeches of 'Ali ibn Abu Talib u and have benefited much from the advantages and blessings they bestowed on me.'

Allamah Hasan al-Nadobie, in his commentary on Al-Bayan wal Tabyeen, wrote, 'Most probably Ibn al-Muqaafa derived his powerful expressions from Amir al-Muminin 'Ali 'Ali ibn Abu Talib u. This is no doubt why he frequently said that, 'he had drunk his fill from the springs of Imam 'Ali's speeches.'

Ibn Nabata, who died in the year 374 AH said, 'I have memorised a treasury of speeches, the blessing of which multiplies by the number of times it is taken advantage of. I have identified a hundred varieties of different sermon from Imam 'Ali u.'

Al Kishi, in 'Al-Rijal', a compilation of biographies of the transmitters of ahadith, reports that Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn Husayn I used to regularly listen to the speeches of Imam 'Ali u. Abu al-Sabah al-Kinani confirmed this, saying, 'Zayd used to listen to me reciting Imam 'Ali's speeches.'

Fourthly, other scholars contemporary to Sharif al-Radhi, also collected the work of Imam 'Ali u. A few include material in the supplements of their books such as:

- Ibn Maskawaih d.421 AH in his 'Tajarib al-Umam' – The Experiences of Nations.
- Hafiz Abu Na'im al-Isphahani d.430 AH in his 'Hilyat al-Awliyaa' – The Adornment of Sages
- Shaikh al-Tusi d.460 AH
- Al Amidi in his book 'Ghorar al-Hikam'

The Source of the Doubts

It is surprising that for almost 250 years, no voice was raised to question the authenticity of Nahjul

Balaghah. Indeed, many sunni scholars wrote commentaries on it. For example: Abul Hasan al-Baihaqi d. 565 AH, Ibn Abi al-Hahdid d. 655AH and Taftazani and others.

It may be that because of the above commentaries, Nahjul Balaghah became known throughout the Islamic world. However, since its contents cover the issue of Khilafah it drew extreme reaction from followers of the School of Khilafah. They, determined to deter general readership, did all they could to cast doubt of its authenticity. Thus, it was that Ibn Khallakan d. 681AH, who made the first attempt to question its authorship.

When we look into Ibn Khallakan's actions, it is clear that he was fond of Yazid ibn Muawiyah. He admits this, 'In the year 633, when I was in Damascus, I memorised the whole collection of Yazid's poems because I was extremely fond of him. I was thus able to recognise his authentic poems from those of fabricators.' See Wafayat al-Ayan Vol 1 pp. 507. It is apparently due to this fondness that Ibn Khallakan felt he should attack all those whom Yazid had disliked. Yazid is notable for being the worst ever enemy of Ahl al-Bayt.

One may wonder why in over 250 years, no controversial voice was raised from centres such as Baghdad within the heartlands of Islamic learning, and why it finally arose in Cordoba or Kairawan, the provincial home of Umayyad influence.

I now quote from Professor Muhammad Muhyidin, erstwhile Professor of Arabic Literature at Al-Azhar University Cairo, 'Nahjul Balaghah is a selection of utterances of Amir al-Mumineen, 'Ali ibn Abu Talib u adopted by Sharif al-Radhi Abul Hasan Muhammad bin Hasan al-Mousawi. It contains distinguished rhetoric and the finest examples of eloquence, and that is fitting that it contains the expressions and utterances of the person, after the Prophet (S), who was the greatest master of word and reason.

The person with the greatest facility in Arabic literature. I studied Nahjul Balaghah from early youth and loved it from an early age. I saw my father read it often and discovered that my eldest uncle spent long hours pondering over it, in appreciation of its clarification and in admiration of its style.'

Tuhaf al-Uqouol

'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Shu'ba al Harrani who died in 320 AH, that is 86 years before Sharif al-Radhi died, included in his book 'Tuhaf al-Uqouol', sections entitled 'The Maxims of the Prophet (S)', 'The Maxims of the Imams' and 'Allah's Confidential Talks with Musa and Isa (as)'.

In the section of Imam 'Ali's maxims he writes that, 'The reports which relate long maxims and words of wisdom of Imam 'Ali (as) need a volume specifically dedicated to the subject of monotheism. We however, refer to only one sermon on monotheism before we move to more common sermons and sayings appropriate to the topics included herein.'

You will find that the sermon on monotheism included by al-Harrani is identical to that included in Nahjul

Balaghah. Also identical in both is the advice given by Imam ‘Ali (as) to his son Imam Hasan (as).

Lastly, despite Harrani’s manuscript not being available to Sharif al–Radhi while he compiled Nahjul Balaghah, the letter from Imam ‘Ali (as) to Malik al–Ashtar, his governor in Egypt, is essentially similar in both works.

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