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3. Two Distinctive Characteristics of Imam 'Ali's Sayings

The sayings of Imam 'Ali (upon whom be peace) possess two distinctive characteristics for which they are famous from the very beginning:

- 1. Eloquence (farahat) and clarity (balaghat).
- 2. They each contain many meanings, they are multi-dimensional. Any of these two characteristics would have been enough to raise the value of the Imam's sayings, but the combination of these two (that is, the ability to combine in a saying two different matters, sometimes antithetical, while at the same time preserving eloquence and clarity) has placed the sayings of 'Ali on the level of a miracle. For the same reason, his sayings have achieved the distinction of being half-way between the sayings of human beings and the sayings of God. A famous and well- known sentence describes them as the saying which is "superior to the sayings of the created, but inferior to the sayings of the Creator."

Elegance and Eloquence in the Sayings of 'Ali: There is no need to explain the elegance of the Nahju 'l-Balaghah to a person who besides knowing the Arabic language is careful in his speech and understands the elegance of a literary work. The essence of elegance cannot be described.

Even after fourteen centuries the Nahju 'I-Balaghah has not lost any of its subtlety, attraction and mellifluence which it had for the people of 'Ali's time. We do not intend to present proofs of this fact here. But because of its relevance to the subject, here we shall discuss the effects of the sayings of 'Ali on his audience, starting from the Imam's own time upto now, even though a great difference and change has taken place in the ways of thinking and literary tastes. I shall start with the period of the Imam.

The friends of Imam 'Ali, particularly those who enjoyed eloquence, were enamoured of his sayings. Ibn 'Abbas was one of them; according to al–Jahiz, in *al–Bayan wa at–Tabyin*, he was one of the distinguished orators of his time. 1 He did not hide his eagerness to hear, and pleasure at hearing, the elegant sayings of the Imam.

Once when the Imam was delivering a sermon (which later became famous as *ash–Shaqshaqiyyah*) Ibn 'Abbas was present in the audience. In the course of this sermon, a man from Kufa handed a letter containing some questions to 'Ali and thus the sermon was interrupted. After reading the letter, 'Ali did not continue with his lecture, even though Ibn 'Abbas insisted. Ibn 'Abbas there–upon said, "Never have I been so sorry in my life for interruption of a speech as I was for the interruption of this sermon." Praising a letter of Imam 'Ali addressed to him, Ibn 'Abbas says, "Sparing the Prophet's sayings, I never gained from any saying except from this one."2

Muʻawiyah bin Abi Sufyan, a bitter enemy of 'Ali (upon whom be peace), confesses to the supernatural beauty and eloquence of the sayings of Imam 'Ali. Muhqin bin Muhqin was a person who deserted Imam 'Ali and joined Muʻawiyah. In order to please Muʻawiyah, he said, "I have come to you from the most dumb person." This flattery was so repulsive that Muʻawiyah himself corrected Muhqin by saying, "Woe on you, 'Ali is the most dumb man?! The Quraysh did not know eloquence before him; he is the one who showed the path of eloquence to the Quraysh."3

The people attending the lectures of 'Ali were very much affected by them. As a result of his admonitions hearts were moved, spirits soared, bodies shuddered and tears flowed down the cheeks. Even now, whose heart is not moved by reading his admonitions or hearing them recited?

After recording the famous sermon known as al–Gharra', Sayyid Radhi writes, "When 'Ali was delivering this sermon bodies shuddered, tears flowed and heart–beats quickened." Overflowing with love of Allah and with a soul shinning from the torch of sincerity, Hammam bin Sharih, a companion of 'Ali, insisted the Imam to describe the complete qualities of pious and God–fearing men. On the one hand, 'Ali did not want to turn down his request and on the other hand, he was afraid that Hammam would not be able to bear it. So, in a few sentences, the Imam gave a short answer. But Hammam was not satisfied, rather his yarning became greater and he insisted more. Imam 'Ali began the lecture again. He inserted in his description of pious people about hundred and five attributes, and the lecture had still not come to its end. But as the speech of 'Ali proceeded, the heart–beats of Hammam became faster and faster; his agitated spirit was becoming even more agitated and trying to break out of the prison of his body. Suddenly a frighful cry was heard. The cry had come from none other than Hammam. When the people reached him, he was already dead, he had left this mortal world which is but a cage for the mu'min. 'Ali said: "This is the outcome of which I was afraid. It is amazing to see how eloquent preachings affect the perfect souls." These were the reactions of 'Ali's contemporaries to his sayings.

- 1. al-Jahiz, Abu 'Uthman, al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin, vol. I, p. 230.
- 2. Nahju 'I-Balaghah, letter No. 22.
- 3. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahji 'l-Balaghah, vol. I, Cairo 1959, p. 24.

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