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4. The Opinions of the Ancient Scholars on the Sayings of Imam 'Ali

Efforts to memorize and preserve people's sayings, after those of the Holy Prophet of Islam, centered on the sayings of Imam 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid1 relates from 'Abdu al-Hamid al-Katib,2 (of the early second century of the hijrah, whose writings are a yardstick in this art) that, "I have memorized seventy sermons of 'Ali, after which my mind began to soar." 'Ali al-Jundi also relates that 'Abdu al-Hamid was asked, "What is the secret of your high standard of eloquence?" He answered, "Memorizing the sayings of 'Ali."

'Abdu 'r-Rahman bin Nubatah, a renowned Arabian orator of the Islamic period, confessed that his intellectual and stylistic source was 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes him in the preface of *Sharh Nahji 'l-Balaghah* as saying, "I memorized hundred sections of the sayings of 'Ali, which proved to be an everlasting treasure for me."3

Al–Jahiz was a famous literary figure, a man of letters and one of the geniuses of literature during the third century of the hijrah; his book *al–Bayan wa at–Tabyin* is one of the four classical books of Arabic literature. In many places therein, he has highly praised the sayings of 'Ali.

In the first volume of the book, after recording the opinions of the masters of literature who praise the way of speaking which is brief and to the point, and condemn lengthy manners of expression, he writes that, "The long sayings which have been condemned are the sayings that have no sense, not the beneficial ones; indeed 'Ali bin Abi Talib and 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas had many long sayings."

In the same book, on page 83, al–Jahiz quotes the famous saying of Imam 'Ali: "The worth of every person is according to his knowledge." Then he praises this small sentence for more than half a page and says, "In the whole of my book if there were no sentence except this one, it would have been sufficient. The best saying is the one which, despite its being short, dispenses one from the more of it; and in which the meaning of the word should be very clear, not hidden in it."

He adds, "It is as if Allah has showered glories upon this short sentence and as if a curtain of the light of

wisdom has covered it, consistent with the sincerity, pure intention and piety of its speaker." When al–Jahiz wanted to give his opinion concerning the eloquence of £a'£a'ah bin Sawhan, he says: "The best evidence for his eloquence is that 'Ali sometimes used to ask him to lecture."5

Sayyid Radhi, in the preface of the Nahju 'l-Balaghah, gives a beautiful description praising the saying of Imam 'Ali. He says:

'Ali was the life-source of clarity of the language; the birth-place of eloquence; from him were acquired its rules. Every orator followes his example, every preacher benefits from his sayings. Despite this he progressed and went forward while others draw up short and were left behind, because his sayings had a touch of Allah's knowledge and perfume of the Prophet's sayings."

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, a Mu'tazili scholar of the seventh century of the hijrah, was an expert literary and a distinguished poet. As we know he was very much enounoured of the sayings of 'Ali, for he expressed this in his book, *Sharh Nahji 'l-Balaghah*, at various places.

In the preface of the book, he writes, "It is said in regard to his ('Ali's) sayings that it is 'superior to the sayings of the created, but inferior to the sayings of the Creator.' From him, people have learnt the art of speech and writing... It is enough to say that the recorded sayings of none of the eloquent companions of the Prophet can amount upto one tenth or even one twentieth of the compiled sayings of 'Ali. And again it is enough for proving 'Ali's superiority in this field that a person like Abu 'Uthman al–Jahiz should praise him in his *al–Bayan wa at–Tabyin* and other books."6

In the commentary on a letter of the Imam addressed to 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas, at Basra, informing the latter about the tragedy of the capture of Egypt by Mu'awiyah's army, and the murder of Muhammad bin Abi Bakr, Ibn Abi al-Hadid writes:

Look how eloquence has entrusted its guidance to this man's hands and has given him the reins; look at the astonishing combinations of words, one after another they come and are at his disposal, like a stream which flows by itself without any external force... May all praise be to Allah, Who granted to this man these great virtues and nobal merits. A young man from the Arabs, who was brought up in Mecca, did not study with any wise—man – but he appeared more knowledgeable in wisdom and profound divine matters than Plato and Aristotle. He did not live with any wise—sage of practical wisdom (i.e., ethics and morals) because none of the Qurayshites were famous in this respect – but even then he became greater than Socrates. He was not brought up in a courageous tribe as the Meccans were mostly merchants, not warriors – but he became famous as the bravest man on the earth... Khalid bin Ahmad was asked, "Who is the most courageous, Ambash, Bastam or 'Ali bin Abi Talib?" He said, "Ambash and Bastam should be compared with other men not with the one who is superior to human beings..." He was more eloquent than Subhan bin Wa'il and Qays bin Sa'idah, although the Quraysh were not the most eloquent of the Arabian tribes; the Jurhum were the most eloquent among the Arabs, but they were not intelligent...7

- 1. (translator's note) 'Izzu 'd-Din Abu Hamid ibn Abi al-Hadid (586-656 A.H.) was born in Mada'in and completed his elementary studies there; then he proceeded to Baghdad which was one of the centres of learning. In Baghdad, he studied about the different schools of theology (kalam) and at last famed as a great Mu'tazili scholar and an expert literary. His Sharh Nahji al-Balaghah (in twenty volumes) is one of the most famous, comprehensive and widely referred commentaries of the Nahju'l-Balaghah. It has been published several times in Cairo, Beirut, Najaf and Qum.
- 2. 'Abdu al-Hamid al-Katib, an Iranian orignally, was teacher of Ibn Muqaffah the well-known scholar and writer of Arabic literature. He was the scribe (katib) of Marwan bin Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph. It is said in regard to him that, "writing started from 'Abdu al-Hamid and ended with Ibnu al-'Amid, a minister of the Buyaids."
- 3. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, ibid.
- 4. The other three books are Adabu 'l-katib of Ibn Qutaybah, al-Kamil of Mubarrad and an-Nawadir of Abi 'Ali Qali.
- 5. He was one of the most respected companions of Imam 'Ali (a.s.) and a famous orator. When the Imam formally became a caliph after 'Uthman, Ta'Ta'ah addressed 'Ali and said, "You have graced the caliphate by accepting it, but it did not grace you; and you have elevated it but it did not elevate you, and verily the caliphate is in greater need of you than you of it." Ta'Ta'ah was one of the few who attended 'Ali's funeral in the darkness of night. At the end of burial of the Imam's body, he stood at the grave with a hand on his chest and by the other hand, he gathered handful of earth and scattered it on his head and delivered a moving lecture for the family and friends of 'Ali (a.s.) 'Allamah al–Majlisi has recorded his lecture in vol. 9 of Biharu 'l–Anwar under the chapter of "Martyrdom of Amiru 'l–Mu'minin (a.s.)".
- 6. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, ibid.
- 7. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, op. cit., vol. 16, p. 145.

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