

Ahl al-Bayt And Caliphate

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Introduction

One of the topics repeatedly discussed in Nahj al-Balaghah is that of the Ahl al-Bayt and Caliphate. Thus it is necessary to take up this discussion – which is related to the special topic of Caliphate after the Holy Prophet and the exclusive position of Ahl al-Bayt among the people.

The issues which have been set forth in this regard consist of the following:

- The distinguished and extraordinary position of Ahl al-Bayt and the fact that their knowledge and gnosis originates from an exceptional source and that they cannot be compared with others.
- Precedence and entitlement of the Ahl al-Bayt, especially Amir al-Mu'minin (A.S.), to the seat of Caliphate, whether through decree of will, merit or relationship.
- Criticism of the Caliphs.
- The philosophy behind 'Ali's forbearance and tolerance with regard to his indisputable right and its limits, in which he neither exceeded nor fell short in his criticism and objection.

The Distinguished Position of Ahl al-Bayt

هُمْ مَوْضِعُ سِرِّهِ وَ لَجَأْ أَمْرِهِ وَ عَيْنُهُ عِلْمِهِ وَ مَوْئِلُ حُكْمِهِ وَ كُهُوفُ كُتُبِهِ وَ جِبَالُ دِينِهِ بِهِمْ أَقَامَ اِنْحِنَاءَ ظَهْرِهِ وَ أَذْهَبَ اِرْتِعَادَ فَرَائِصِهِ ... لَا يُفَاقِسُ بِالْمُحَمَّدِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَ آلِهِ مِنْ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةِ أَحَدٌ، وَ لَا يُسْوِي بِهِمْ مَنْ جَرَّتْ نِعْمَتُهُمْ عَلَيْهِ

أَبْدًا. هُمْ أَسَاسُ الدِّينِ، وَعِمَادُ الْيَقِينِ. إِلَيْهِمْ يَفْتُحُ الْغَالِي، وَبِهِمْ يُلْحَقُ التَّالِي،
وَلَهُمْ خَصَائِصٌ حَقٌّ الْوِلَايَةِ، وَفِيهِمُ الْوَصِيَّةُ وَالْوِرَاثَةُ. لَأَنَّ إِذْ رَجَعَ الْحَقُّ إِلَى أَهْلِهِ، وَنُقِلَّ إِلَى مُنْتَقِلِهِ

“They are the depository of His secret, shelter for His affairs, receptacle of His knowledge, source of His wisdom, caves of His books and mountains of His religion. With them, Allah straightened the bend in religion’s back and removed the trembling of its limbs... None from this Ummah can measure with the Aal (progeny) of Muhammad, blessings of Allah on him and his family. The one on whom their blessings flow can never be equal to them.

They are the foundation of religion and the pillars of certainty. The fast-pacers have to turn back to them and the slow-pacers have to strive to reach them. They possess the special qualities of the right of the vicegerency. The testament and the inheritance (of the Prophet) are concerning them. This is the time when truth has returned to its owner and has been moved to its place.”¹

That which can be understood in these few sentences is the extraordinary spirituality that Ahl al-Bayt enjoy, which places them at a level far above the commonplace. At such a level, nobody can be compared to them. Just as in the case of Prophethood, it is wrong to uphold a comparison of other people to the Prophet; similarly in the affair of Caliphate and Imamate, with the existence of personalities at this level, it is absurd to speak of others.

نَحْنُ شَجَرَةُ النُّبُوَّةِ وَ مَحَاطُ الرِّسَالَةِ وَ مُخْتَلِفُ الْمَلَائِكَةِ وَ مَعَادِنُ الْعِلْمِ وَ يَتَابِعُ الْحُكْمِ

“We are the tree of Prophethood, the place of descent of the Message, the place of frequentation of Angels, the treasure-troves of knowledge and the fountainhead of wisdom.”²

أَيْنَ الَّذِينَ زَعَمُوا أَنَّهُمْ الرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ دُونَنَا كَذِبًا وَ بَغْيًا عَلَيْنَا أَنْ رَفَعَنَا اللَّهُ وَ وَضَعَهُمْ وَ أَعْطَانَا وَ حَرَمَهُمْ وَ
أَدْخَلَنَا وَ أَخْرَجَهُمْ بِنَا يُسْتَعْطَى الْهُدَى وَ يُسْتَجْهَى الْعَمَى إِنَّ الْأَئِمَّةَ مِنْ قُرَيْشٍ غُرِسُوا فِي هَذَا الْبَطْنِ مِنْ هَاشِمٍ لَا تَصْلُحُ
عَلَى سِوَاهُمْ وَ لَا تَصْلُحُ الْوِلَاةُ مِنْ غَيْرِهِمْ

*“Where are those who falsely and unjustly claimed that they are “**the firmly rooted in knowledge**” (3:7) other than us, although Allah raised us in position and kept them down, bestowed upon us knowledge but deprived them, and entered us (in the fortress of knowledge) but kept them out. With us guidance is to be sought and blindness (of misguidance) is to be changed into brightness. Surely the Imams (divine leaders) are from the Quraysh. They have been planted in this line through Hashim. It would not be appropriate for other than them, nor would leaders other than them be suitable (for this position).”³*

نَحْنُ الشِّعَارُ وَ الْأَصْحَابُ وَ الْخَزَنَةُ وَ الْأَبْوَابُ وَ لَا تُؤْتَى الْبُيُوتُ إِلَّا مِنْ أَبْوَابِهَا فَمَنْ أَنْتَاهَا مِنْ غَيْرِ أَبْوَابِهَا سُمِّيَ سَارِقاً

"We are the near ones, the companions, the treasure holders (of his knowledge) and doors (to the Message). Houses are not entered save through their doors. Whoever enters them through other than their doors is called a thief. "[4](#)

فِيهِمْ كَرَائِمُ الْقُرْآنِ، وَ هُمْ كُنُوزُ الرَّحْمَنِ. إِنْ نَطَقُوا صَدَقُوا، وَ إِنْ صَمَتُوا لَمْ يُسْبِقُوا.

"The exalted verses of praise of Qur'an are about them (i.e. the descendants of the Prophet) and they are the treasures of Allah, the Compassionate. When they speak, they speak the truth, but when they remain silent no one can speak unless they speak."[5](#)

هُمْ عَيْشُ الْعِلْمِ وَ مَوْتُ الْجَهَلِ يُخْبِرُكُمْ حَلْمُهُمْ عَنْ عِلْمِهِمْ وَ ظَاهِرُهُمْ عَنْ بَاطِنِهِمْ وَ صَمَتُهُمْ عَنْ حِكْمَمَنْطِقِهِمْ. لَا يُخَالِفُونَ الْحَقَّ وَ لَا يَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ وَ هُمْ دَعَائِمُ الْإِسْلَامِ وَ لَائِجُ الْاعْتِصَامِ. بِهِمْ عَادَ الْحَقُّ إِلَى نِصَابِهِ وَ انْزَاحَ الْبَاطِلُ عَنْ مُقَامِهِ وَ انْقَطَعَ لِسَانُهُ عَنْ مَنْبِتِهِ. عَقْلُو الدِّينِ عَقْلٌ وِعَاءَةٌ وَ رِوَايَةٌ فَإِنَّ رُوَاةَ الْعِلْمِ كَثِيرٌ وَ رُعَاةَ قَلِيلٍ

"They are life for knowledge and death for ignorance. Their forbearance tells you of their knowledge, their outward self of their inner self, and their silence of the wisdom of their speech. They do not oppose the truth nor do they differ (among themselves) about it. They are the pillars of Islam and the asylums for its protection. With them, the truth has returned to its proper place and falsehood has departed from the place in which it settled, and its tongue has been severed from its root. They have understood the religion with comprehension, insight and adherence to its precepts, not through (mere) hearsay and narration. Indeed the narrators of knowledge are many, but its guardians are few."[6](#)

Aside from these aphorisms in Nahj al-Balaghah, an incident has been narrated where Kumayl ibn Ziyad Nakha'i says:- 'Amir al-Mu'minin (A.S.) [during the period of Caliphate and his stay in Kufa] took hold of my hand and together we went towards the graveyard, which was on the outskirts of the city."

As soon as we reached a silent spot in the desert, 'Ali (A.S.) sighed deeply and began to speak.

At the outset of his talk, he said:- "O Kumayl the hearts of the sons of Adam are in the rank of vessels. The best vessels are those which best preserve their contents. Thus, whatever I say, you record it."

In this talk which is quite lengthy, 'Ali (A.S.) divides the people from the viewpoint of pursuance of the true path into three categories. Thereafter he expresses anguish for the reason that he does not find anyone worthy enough to be entrusted the numerous mysteries which are stored in him. However, in the end of his speech, he says: Of course it is not such that the earth remains entirely devoid of any men of God. In every age there are such individuals, although they may be few:

اللَّهُمَّ بَلَى لَا تَخْلُو الْأَرْضُ مِنْ قَائِمٍ لِلَّهِ بِحُجَّةٍ إِمَّا ظَاهِرًا مَشْهُورًا وَ إِمَّا خَائِفًا مَغْمُورًا لِلَّذِي تَبَطَّلَ حُجَّجُ اللَّهِ وَ بَيِّنَاتُهُ وَ

كَمْ ذَا وَأَيْنَ أُولَئِكَ؟ أُولَئِكَ وَاللَّهُ الْأَقْلَوْنَ عَدَداً وَالْأَعْظَمُونَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ بَهْمٌ حُجَّةٌ وَبَيْنَاتٍ حَتَّىٰ
 يُودِعُوهَا نُظَرَاءُهُمْ وَيَزْرَعُوهَا فِي قُلُوبِ أَشْبَاهِهِمْ هَجَمَ بِهِمُ الْعِلْمُ عَلَىٰ حَقِيقَةِ الْبَصِيرَةِ وَبَاشَرُوا رُوحَ الْيَقِينِ وَاسْتَلَانُوا
 مَا اسْتَوْعَرَهُ الْمُتَرَفُونَ وَأَيْسُوا بِمَا اسْتَوْحَشَ مِنْهُ الْجَاهِلُونَ وَصَاحُبُوا الدُّنْيَا بِأَبْدَانٍ أَرْوَاحُهَا مُعَلَّقَةٌ بِالْمَحَلِ الْأَعْلَىٰ
 أُولَئِكَ حُلَفاءُ اللَّهِ فِي أَرْضِهِ وَالدُّعَاءُ إِلَىٰ دِينِهِ آهٌ شَوَّقًا إِلَىٰ رُؤْيَتِهِمْ

"Indeed the earth is never devoid of one who rises for Allah with a proof, either openly and publicly, or fearfully in secret, in order that Allah's proofs and signs should not perish. How many are they and where are they? By Allah, they are few in number, but they are the greatest in esteem before Allah."

Through them Allah guards His proofs and signs until they entrust them to others like them and sow the seeds thereof in the hearts of those who are similar to them. Knowledge has led them to real understanding and so they have associated themselves with the spirit of conviction. They find easy what those living in ease regard as hard.

*They are familiar with what the ignorant find oppressive. They live in this world with their bodies here but their souls are attached to the highest station. They are the vicegerents of Allah on His earth and the callers to His religion. How I yearn to see them!"*⁷

In these sentences, although the names of Ahl al-Bayt are not mentioned even in the form of a hint, yet if we look at similar sentences in Nahj al-Balaghah regarding the Ahl al-Bayt, it becomes obvious that the sentences are in reference to the Ahl al-Bayt.

From all that we have narrated in this saying from Nahj al-Balaghah, it becomes clear that apart from the subject of the Caliphate and the leadership of the Muslims in political affairs, the issue of Imamate has been eloquently and clearly expressed with the particular meaning of the term 'proof' (hujjah) as held by the Shi'ah.

- [1.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 2.
- [2.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 109.
- [3.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 144.
- [4.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 154.
- [5.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 154.
- [6.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 239.
- [7.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah no. 146.

Precedence and Priority

In Nahj al-Balaghah this matter has been rationalized on three principles:

- 1) The will and designation of the Holy Prophet.

- 2) The worthiness of Amir al-Mu'minin, (A.S.) and the fact that the robe of Caliphate was suitable only for him.
- 3) The close genealogical and spiritual relation that Hazrat had with the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.).

1) Will and Designation

Some reckon that the matter of designation has not been mentioned in Nahj al-Balaghah at all and what is referred to is only the matter of competency and worthiness. Such reckoning is incorrect because first of all, just as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, in Sermon No.2, 'Ali (A.S.) very explicitly says about Ahl al-Bayt:

وَفِيهِمُ الْوَصِيَّةُ وَالْوِرَاثَةُ

i.e. *the testament and the inheritance of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A) are concerning them.*

Secondly, 'Ali (A.S.) on many occasions has spoken about his right in such manner that one cannot explain them save by the mailer of appointment and clarification of his right to the seat of Caliphate by means of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.). In those talks, 'Ali (A.S.) does not wish to say that why they have kept him aside and appointed others in spite of comprehensiveness of the conditions. By his talks it is meant that they have robbed his certain and definite right. It is evident that it is only by designation and previous appointment by the Holy Prophet that one can speak of certain and definite right. Competency and worthiness establishes potential right and not actual right and in the case of potential right it is wrong to speak of snatching away of certain and decisive right.

Now we shall mention some instances where 'Ali (A.S.) reckons the Caliphate to be his just right. For example it is mentioned in sermon No.6 that at the beginning of his Caliphate when he became aware of the revolt of Ayesha, Talha and Zubair and decided to confront them, he said (after mentioning a few points on the current state of affairs) :

فَوَاللَّهِ مَا زِلتُ مَدْفُوعًا عَنْ حَقِّي، مُسْتَأْثِرًا عَلَيْيَ، مُنْذَ قَبَضَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى نَبِيَّهُ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ حَتَّى يَوْمِ النَّاسِ هَذَا

"By Allah, from the day the Prophet passed away until today, I have been continually deprived of my right, with others being given preference to me."

In Sermon No.170 which is in effect not a sermon and it would have been better if Sayyid Razi (may Allah exalt his position) brought it under the section of maxims of 'Ali (A.S.), he narrates an incident which is as follows: 'In the presence of some people, a person approached me and said: "O son of Abu - Talib! You are greedy of Caliphate."

I replied:

بَلْ أَنْتُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا حَرَصٌ وَأَبْعَدُ وَأَنَا أَخْصُ وَأَقْرَبُ وَإِنَّمَا طَلَبْتُ حَقًا لِي وَأَنْتُمْ تَحْوِلُونَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَهُ وَتَضْرِبُونَ
وَجْهِي دُونَهُ فَلَمَّا قَرَأْتُهُ بِالْحُجَّةِ فِي الْمَلِإِ الْحَاضِرِينَ هَبَ كَانَهُ بُهْتَ لَا يَدْرِي مَا يُجِيبُنِي بِهِ

*“Rather, you are, by Allah, greedier although more remote, while I am more suited as well as nearer. I have only demanded it as my right while you are preventing me from it and turning me away from it.”
When I rebuked him with (my) argument (and proof), he rose up as if bewildered, not knowing what reply to give me about it.’*

It is not known who the person making such an objection was, and when this objection was made. Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:- The person who objected was Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas and it was on the day of the “Shura” (Assembly). Thereafter he says: However the Imamiah believe that the person who objected was Abu ‘Ubaydah and it was on the day of Saqifah.

Following these sentences, it has been mentioned that ‘Ali (A.S) said:

اللهم اني استعدك على قريش و من اعانهم فانهم قطعوا رحمي و صغروا عظيم منزلتي و اجمعوا على منازعني
اما هولي

“O Allah, I seek Thy succor against the Quraysh and those who are assisting them because they have denied me (the rights of) kinship, have belittled my high position and are united in opposing me on a matter (Caliphate) which is my right.”

Below these sentences, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:- “Sentences like the above sentences of ‘Ali based upon grievance against others and the fact that he has been unjustly deprived of his certain right has been narrated to the extent of successive transmission and is in conformity to the views of Imamiah who say that ‘Ali has been appointed by indisputable designation and nobody had any right to take the seat of Caliphate under any circumstances.

Ibn Abi al-Hadeed himself is the supporter of ‘Ali’s superiority and excellence. According to him, inasmuch as the sentences of Nahj al-Balaghah impart the purport of the Imam’s priority, it is needless to explain it. However the above sentence according to him needs to be justified since it has been stipulated that the Caliphate has been the special right of ‘Ali (A.S.) and this cannot be conceived but by appointment and the fact that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.) has fixed the responsibility and clarified the right on behalf of God.

One of the companions of ‘Ali (A.S.) belonging to the tribe of Bani-Asad asked ‘Ali (A.S.) as such:

«كيف دفعكم قومكم عن هذا المقام و انت احق به»

“How is it that your people have deprived you of this station (Caliphate) whereas you were most worthy of it?”

Amir al-Mu'minin (A.S.) responded to this question and his reply is the same as what has come down in Sermon No. 160 in Nahj al-Balaghah. ‘Ali (A.S.) explicitly states that greed and avarice on the one hand and negligence (of the interests of the people) on the other hand were the only factors leading to such a situation.

»فانها كانت اثرة شحت عليها نفوس و سخت عنها نفوس آخرين«

“It (the matter of the Caliphate) was an act of appropriation (of something) for which some became greedy and others relinquished”.

This question and answer took place during ‘Ali’s Caliphate at the time when he was involved (in opposition) with Mu’awiya and his wiles. Amir al-Mu’minin (A.S.) disliked discussion of this matter under such circumstances. So, before replying, he reproved him saying that every question has its own appropriate place and time and that it was not proper to discuss the past at that moment. He told him that the issue of the day was that of Mu’awiya.

و هلم الخطب في ابن أبي سفيان...

“Come now to the affair of Ibn Abi Sufyan (Mu’awiya)...”.

Anyhow, just as it was his usual temperate method, he did not refrain from answering and clarifying the past realities. In the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya, he explicitly says:

أری تراثی نهباً

“I witnessed the plundering of my inheritance..”.

It is obvious that by inheritance he did not mean family or kinship inheritance but spiritual and divine inheritance.

2) Virtue and Superiority

The second issue after the subject of distinct designation and definite right is the subject of virtue and superiority. This matter too has repeatedly been mentioned in Nahj al-Balaghah. In the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya, ‘Ali (A.S.) says:

وَإِمَّا وَاللَّهُ لَقَدْ تَقْمِصَهَا ابْنُ أَبِي قَحَافَةَ وَإِنْ لَيَعْلَمْ إِنْ مَحْلِي مِنْهَا الْقَطْبُ مِنَ الرَّحِيمِ يَنْحُدِرُ عَنِ السَّيْلِ وَلَا يَرْقِي إِلَى الطَّيْرِ

"By Allah, the son of Abu Quhafah (Abu Bakr) dressed himself with it (the Caliphate) while he certainly knew that my position in relation to it was the same as the position of the axle in relation to the mill. The torrent (of knowledge and virtue) flows down from me and birds cannot rise up to (the loftiness of) my position."

In Sermon No. 195, he first recalls the level of his submission and faith towards the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.) and then recounts his sacrifices and help in various instances. Thereafter, he narrates the incident of the demise of the Holy Prophet when his head rested on his chest, and then mentions the event of giving ‘Ghusl’ (Ablution) to the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.) with his own hands while the angels were assisting him in this work and he could listen to their humming voices and perceive the manner in which a group amongst them would come and another group amongst them would depart while sending salutations upon the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.). And right until the last moment of the Holy Prophet’s burial, the murmuring of the angels did not cease reaching ‘Ali’s ears.

After recalling his various special positions – the position of his submission and belief, (contrary to some of the other companions) his unequalled sacrifices, his relationship with the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.) and the fact that the Holy Prophet breathed his last on his very lap, he says:

فَمَنْ ذَا أَحْقُّ بِهِ مِنِّي حَيَا وَمِيتًا

"Thus who has greater rights with him than I, during his life or after his death?"

3) Relationship and Lineage

Just as we are aware, moments after the Holy Prophet’s demise, Sa’d b. ‘Ubadah al-Ansari claimed the Caliphate and a group amongst his tribe gathered around him. Sa’d and his followers chose the place of Saqifah for this very purpose. However Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and Abu ‘Ubaydah al-Jarrah reached there and prevented the people from falling for Sa’d b. ‘Ubadah’s plot and instead took allegiance from the people in Abu Bakr’s favor.

In this assembly, words were exchanged between the Muhajirin and Ansar and various factors played their role in determining the ultimate fate of this gathering.

One of the so-called winning cards, which the Muhajirin and the supporters of Abu Bakr played, was that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.A.) was from Quraysh and that they themselves belonged to the Holy Prophet’s clan. In the commentary of Sermon No.65, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:

'Umar addressed the Ansars: "The Arabs will never agree to have you as the head of the state since the Prophet was not from amongst you. Certainly the Arabs will not oppose if the Caliphate is allowed to one in whose house rests the Prophethood Who can oppose us in connection with rulership and inheritance of Muhammad whereas we are his ones and his relatives."

Again, just as we are aware, during that very moment, 'Ali (A.S.) was fulfilling his personal responsibility of burying the Holy Prophet's body. After the termination of this event, 'Ali (A.S.) enquired from those present in that gathering about the reasoning put forth by both the opposite groups and after listening to them he criticized and rejected the reasoning of both the groups. In this connection, the sayings of 'Ali (A.S.) are the same which Sayyid Razi has mentioned in Sermon No.65.

'Ali (A.S.) asked: "What did the Ansars say?" They replied: "There should be one chief from us and one from amongst you." Amir al-Mu'minin said: "Why did you not argue that the Prophet (S.A.W.A.) had instructed that whoever is good amongst the Ansars should be treated well and whoever is bad he should be forgiven!"

The people said: "What proof is there against them in this?"

Amir al-Mu'minin said: "If the government was (to be) from among them, there would have been no instruction (to others) for them." That is, giving instructions to others about them is proof that the government belongs to other than them.

Then he said: "What did the Quraysh plead?" The people said: "They argued that they belong to the lineal tree of the Prophet." Then Amir al-Mu'minin said:-

احجوا بالشجرة و اضعوا الثمرة

"*They defended themselves with the plea of the tree but neglected the fruit.*"

In other words, if the tree indicates true relationship where others are the branches of that tree and the Prophet is one of those branches, then Ahl al-bayt of the Prophet are the fruits of those branches.

In Sermon No. 160, a part of which was narrated earlier, there is a repertoire of questioning and answering between one Asadi man and 'Ali (A.S.) wherein the latter argues in connection with the matter of relationship too. His expression is as such:

أَمَا الْإِسْتِبْدَادُ عَلَيْنَا بِهَذَا الْمَقَامِ وَنَحْنُ الْأَعْلَوْنَ نَسْبًا وَالْأَشَدُونَ بِالرَّسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ نَوْطًا

"*As for the predominance over us in this station (of Caliphate), when we are the loftiest in lineage and the strongest in relationship with the Messenger of Allah (s)....*"

The reasoning of relationship set forth by ‘Ali (A.S.) is a kind of logical dispute. Taking into account the fact that others had fixed the matter of genealogical relationship as the main argument and proof, ‘Ali (A.S.) would say:

“Leaving aside all other matters like designation, virtue and worthiness, if we take into consideration the same lineage and relationship which others wish to rely on, I would still be more worthy than the other claimants to the seat of Caliphate.”

Criticism against The Caliphs

The next point with regards to this subject is the issue of criticism against the Caliphs. Criticism by ‘Ali (A.S.) against them is an indisputable fact, and the method adopted by Hazrat in this regard is highly instructive. ‘Ali’s criticism against the Caliphs is not emotional or prejudiced but analytical and logical and it is for this reason that great importance is attached to his criticism.

If criticism is based on emotions and the outburst of annoyance, it takes a particular shape and if it is logical and based on true judgment in the realities, it takes another shape. Emotional criticism is usually the same for every human being because it is due to a series of curses and taunts that it is offered. Vilification and curse in such a case has no foundation.

But logical criticism is based on moral and spiritual qualities and depends on special historical features of a person’s life and as such, they cannot be the same for all the individuals. It is due to this that the value of degree of a criticizer’s realism becomes evident.

Some of the criticism leveled against the Caliphs in Nahj al-Balaghah is general and implicit while others are particular and explicit. The general and implicit criticisms are those very ones which ‘Ali (A.S.) categorically expresses about his clear and definite right being snatched away from him.

Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says: “Complaint and criticism by Imam against the Caliphs is widely transmitted (متواتر) even if it is in the form of general and implicit criticism. Once Imam heard an oppressed person crying out: “I have been oppressed and injustice imposed on me.” ‘Ali (A.S.) replied to him: (Come let the depressed hearts gather together) Let us cry out together because I too have been put to oppression persistently.”

Moreover, he narrates from one of his trusted contemporaries famous by the name of Ibn A’alia who said: “I was in the presence of Ismail bin ‘Ali Hanbali, the Imam of Hanbalites. At that moment he inquired from a traveler who had returned from his journey to Kufa about his journey and all that he had seen in Kufa. While narrating the events, he expressed with deep regret the incident of severe criticism

by the Shi'ah on the day of Ghadeer against the Caliphs. The Hanbali 'Faqih' said:

"What is the fault of those people? 'Ali has himself opened this door". The traveler replied: "Then what is our duty in these circumstances? Should we consider these criticisms as valid and correct or false and wrong? If we consider them as correct, we have to leave one side and if we consider them to be incorrect, we have to leave the other side"!

When Ismail heard this question he moved from his place and dispersed the gathering. The only thing which he said was that this was a question for which he too had not found an answer.

Abu Bakr

Criticism of Abu Bakr has come in an explicit form in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya and has been concluded in two sentences.

Firstly that: "He was very well aware that I am more worthy than him and Caliphate is a garb which fits properly on me only. In spite of knowing this fact why did he do such a thing? During the period of Caliphate, I was similar to a person having a thorn in his eyes or a bone stuck in his throat.

وَاللَّهُ لَقَدْ تَقْمِصَهَا أَبْنَاءُ أَبِيهِ قَحَافَةً وَإِنَّهُ لَيَعْلَمُ أَنَّ مَحْلَ الْقَطْبِ مِنَ الرَّحْمَنِ

"By Allah, Ibn Abi Quhafah (Abu Bakr) dressed himself with it (the Caliphate) while he certainly knew that my position in relation to it was the same as the position of the axle in relation to the mill.

Secondly: why did he select the next Caliph after him, especially since once during his period of Caliphate he asked the people to cancel the agreement of allegiance and release him from this commitment? When one is doubtful of his own ability in this affair and asks the people to accept his resignation, then on what basis does he appoint the next Caliph?

«فَوَاعْجَبَ بَيْنَاهُو يُسْتَقِيلُهَا فِي حَيَاتِهِ اذْعَدَهَا لَاخْرَ بَعْدَ وَفَاتِهِ»

"It is strange that during his lifetime he wished to be released from it (the Caliphate) but he confirmed it for the other for after his death."

After mentioning the above sentence, 'Ali (A.S.) uses the most severe words against the two Caliphs thus laying bare the root of their connection with one another. He says:

«لَشَدَّ مَا تَشَطَّرَا ضَرَعِيهَا»

"Together they shared its udders strictly between themselves."

About the matter of Abu Bakr's resignation, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says that two versions exist about the

sentences once uttered by Abu Bakr on the pulpit during the period of his Caliphate. Some narrate that Abu Bakr said:

وليكم و لست بخيركم

i.e. the responsibility of Caliphate has been put on me while I am not the best among you.

However most narrate that he said:

اقيلوني فلست بخيركم

“You excuse me for I am not the best among you.”

The sentences of Nahj al-Balaghah approve that the sentence of Abu Bakr was presented in its second form.

'Umar

Criticisms against 'Umar in Nahiul-Balaghah have taken another form. Apart from the joint criticisms leveled against him and Abu Bakr by use of the sentence « لشد ما تشرطا ضرعيها » a series of criticisms have been leveled against him taking into consideration his moral and spiritual characteristics. 'Ali (A.S.) has criticized two moral qualities of 'Umar:

Firstly, his harsh and rude behavior – in this regard, he was just the opposite of Abu Bakr. In character, 'Umar was rough, harsh-tempered, and incited fear.

Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:

“The distinguished companions refrained from meeting 'Umar. Ibn Abbas expressed his opinion about the matter of « عول » after 'Umar's death. He was asked as to why he didn't disclose his opinion before and he replied: “Due to fear of 'Umar.”

The whip of 'Umar (درة عمر) had become a proverb for his harshness such that afterwards it was said:

« درة عمر اهيب من سيف حاجج »

The whip of Omar is more fearful than the sword of Hajjaj.

'Umar's rudeness was more towards the women and hence they were fearful of him. At the time of Abu Bakr's death, when the women from his household were lamenting over his death, 'Umar was persistently forbidding them from such an act. However the women continued their lamentation and crying. Finally 'Umar dragged out Umm Farwa, sister of Abu Bakr from among the women and lashed

her with his whip. After this incident, the women dispersed.

Another moral quality of ‘Umar which has come under criticism in the sayings of ‘Ali (A.S.) is the matter of making haste in judgment and then turning back from the same judgment i.e. his self-contradiction. Repeatedly, he would pass judgments and later on when he would realize his mistakes, he would confess to them.

Many instances have been narrated in this regard. For example ‘Umar has himself said:

كلكم افقر مني عمر حتى رباث الحجات

“All of you, even women, are more learned than ‘Umar.”

Similarly the sentence:

لو لا علي لهلك عمر

“Were it not for ‘Ali, ‘Umar would have perished.” It is said that this sentence was heard from him over 70 times. It was in connection to these very mistakes that ‘Ali (A.S.) used to correct him.

Amir al-Mu’minin ‘Ali (A.S.) has reproached ‘Umar on these two very qualities, which have been strictly approved by history i.e. his severe harshness such that his companions were fearful of expressing the truth, and secondly his haste and repeated mistakes and consequently his apologies in wrong decision making.

About the first matter ‘Ali (A.S.) says:

فصيرها في حوزة خشناه يغليظ كلمها و يخشن مسها..... فصاحبها كراكب الصعبة ان انسق لها خرم و ان اسلس لها تفحم

“He (Abu Bakr) put the Caliphate in a rough enclosure where the utterance was crude and the touch was harsh.... The one in control of it was like the rider of an unruly camel. If he pulled up its rein, the nostril would be slit but if he let it loose he would be thrown.”

About his haste, numerous mistakes and consequently his apologies, ‘Ali (A.S.) says:

« ويكثر العثار فيها و الاعتذار منها »

“His mistakes were plenty and also the excuses there-from.”

Murtadha Mutahhari says:-

“As far as I can recollect, the first and second Caliph have been remembered and come under criticism in Nahj al-Balaghah in an explicit manner only and only in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya. In other places, if at all it exists it has either come in a general form or possesses a sarcastic remark like in the famous letter which he writes to ‘Uthman b. Hunayf in connection to the matter of Fadak.”

Or for example in Letter No.62 where he says: “It never occurred to me and I never imagined that after the Prophet, the Arabs would snatch away the Caliphate from me. Suddenly, I noticed people gathering around the man for pledging allegiance to him.”

Or in Letter No.28 in reply to Mu’awiya, he says:- “You have said that I was dragged like a camel with a nose string to swear allegiance.... What humiliation is it for a Muslim to be the victim of oppression so long as he does not entertain any doubt in his religion or any misgiving in his firm belief?

‘Uthman

‘Uthman has been mentioned in Nahj al-Balaghah more than the previous two Caliphs have. The reason is obvious – In an incident, which history named it as the great conspiracy and the close relatives of ‘Uthman himself i.e. the Bani-Umayyah had a greater hand in it than others, ‘Uthman was killed and the people immediately surrounded ‘Ali (A.S.).

Hazrat too, willingly or unwillingly accepted their allegiance and this affair naturally created a problem for him during his period of Caliphate. On the one hand, those desirous of the seat of Caliphate accused him of having a hand in the death of ‘Uthman and so, he was bound to defend himself and clarify his position in this matter.

On the other hand, there was a revolutionary group which had revolted against ‘Uthman’s rule and was reckoned to be a powerful force and was amongst the followers of ‘Ali (A.S.). The enemies of ‘Ali (A.S.) wanted him to force them surrender so that they could be brought to justice for their crime in the killing of ‘Uthman. Hence ‘Ali (A.S.) was supposed to set forth this matter in his speeches and explain his position.

Besides, during the life-time of ‘Uthman, when the revolutionary group had surrounded ‘Uthman and forced him to either mend his ways or else resign, the only one who was trusted by both the sides and who acted as a mediator between them and expressed one side’s views to the other (besides his own views) was ‘Ali (A.S.)

Moreover, corruption in ‘Uthman’s organization was much more rampant and as his duty, ‘Ali (A.S.) could not remain silent and avoid discussing these matters either during the lifetime of ‘Uthman or the period after him. Collectively, these factors are the reasons for ‘Uthman’s name being mentioned more than others in the sayings of ‘Ali (A.S.).

In Nahj al-Balaghah, altogether on sixteen occasions, discussions on ‘Uthman have taken place and

most of them are related to the matter of his assassination. In five instances, ‘Ali (A.S.) seriously acquits himself from having taken any part in the assassination and in one instance introduces Talha who made the topic of ‘Uthman’s assassination a pretext for instigating the people against ‘Ali (A.S.) as the one having a hand in the conspiracy against ‘Uthman.

On two occasions, he seriously reckons Mu’awiya to be the guilty one; the same Mu’awiya who used ‘Uthman’s assassination as a pretext for plotting and disrupting the moral and heavenly Government of ‘Ali (A.S.) and who shed crocodile tears and provoked the helpless people to bring to justice the killers of the innocent Caliph (for his own benefit).

Mu’awiya’s Skilful Role in the Killing of ‘Uthman

In his letters to Mu’awiya, Hazrat ‘Ali (A.S.) says: “What more do you wish to say? Your unseen hand, right up to your elbow, is stained with ‘Uthman’s blood, yet you continue to speak of his blood!”

This part is extremely interesting. ‘Ali (A.S.) raises the curtain from a mystery which (even) the sharp eyes of history have barely been able to discover. It is only in this present era that researchers, by seeking help and guidelines from the fundamentals of psychology and sociology have brought out this point from the hidden angles of history. Otherwise, it was extremely difficult for most of the people who lived in the past to believe that Mu’awiya had had a role in ‘Uthman’s murder or at least had been negligent in defending him.

Mu’awiya and ‘Uthman were both from Bani Umayyah and had tribal connections. Such strong connections were based on pre-calculated objectives and definite policies, which the historians of today reckon to be similar to party connections of today.

That is to say, it was not the racial or tribal sentiments only, which connected them to one another. The tribal connections were a base for pulling them together to organize and coordinate mutual materialistic goals. Personally too, Mu’awiya had seen kindness and support from ‘Uthman and was open with his friendship and support. Therefore no one could believe that Mu’awiya had an inside hand in this affair.

Mu’awiya who followed only one aim and regarded all possible means to achieve that aim to be permissible, never allowed any feelings nor emotions to enter his destructive and inhumane logic. He decided that with the death of ‘Uthman he could reap much better benefits than when he was alive and he could have more power by shedding his blood than by the blood circulating in his veins. Thus, he prepared the ground for his assassination. Moreover, at that time when he was in perfect control of extending his useful help and able to prevent his assassination, he abandoned him in the days before his death.

However, the sharp-sighted eyes of ‘Ali (A.S.) could see the invisible hands of Mu’awiya and he was aware of the events occurring behind the curtain. For this reason, he officially introduced Mu’awiya as

the one responsible and answerable for ‘Uthman’s death.

In Nahj al-Balaghah we find a lengthy letter which Imam (A.S.) has written in reply to the letter of Mu’awiya. In his letter, Mu’awiya accuses Imam (A.S.) of having participated in the assassination of ‘Uthman and Imam (A.S.) replies to him as such:

ثم ذكرت مل كان من امري وامر عثمان ذلك ان تجاب عن هذه لرحمك منه، فaina كان اعدي له و » اهدي الي مقاتله امن بذل له نصرته فاستقعده و استكه؟ ام من استنصره فتراخي عنه وبيث المنون اليه حتى اتي قدره؟...و ما كنت لاعذر من اني كنت انقم عليه احداً فان كان الذنب اليه ارشادي و هدائي له فرب ملوم لا ذنب له و قد "يستفيد الظنة المتنصل و ما اردت" الا الاصلاح ما استطعت و ما توفيقي الا بالله عليه توكلت

*"Then you have recalled my position vis-a-vis ‘Uthman, and in this matter an answer is due to you because of your kinship with him. So (now tell me), which one of us was more inimical towards ‘Uthman and who did more to bring about his killing; or who offered him his support but he made him sit down and stopped him (from helping); or who was it whom he called for help but turned his face from him and drew his death near until his fate overtook him? Of course, I am not going to offer my excuse for reproofing him for (some of) his innovations. If my good counsel and guidance to him was a sin, then I accept it, for many an innocent people are blamed. Verily, sometimes a counselor sees no result from his work but mistrust from the other side. My intention was "... **only to put things in order as far as I can; and my success lies only with Allah: in Him I have put my trust..**"(11:88).[1](#)*

In another letter addressed to Mu’awiya he writes:

فاما اكتارك الحجاج في عثمان و قتلته فانك انما نصرت عثمان حيث كان النصر لك و خذلتة حيث كان النصر له

"As regards your frequent arguments in the matter of ‘Uthman and his murder, you only helped ‘Uthman when it was really to your own benefit and you forsook him when it was only to his benefit."[2](#)

‘Uthman’s murder itself gave birth to sedition and opened the door to other sedition in the Islamic world, which has entangled it for centuries and its effect still remains. From the collective speeches of ‘Ali (A.S.) in Nahj al-Balaghah, it can be inferred that he was a severe critic of ‘Uthman’s policies and reckoned the revolutionaries to be rightful in this regard.

At the same time, he has not reckoned ‘Uthman’s murder committed by the hands of the rebels to be in conformity with the general interests of Islam. Before ‘Uthman’s assassination, Hazrat ‘Ali (A.S.) was already worried about this matter and was foreseeing its consequences and aftermath. Whether or not ‘Uthman’s crimes were to such an extent that, according to the Shari’ah, he deserved to be killed, and whether the motives for killing ‘Uthman were intentionally or unintentionally provided by his associates, and all paths other than killing him were closed to the rebels, is one matter; and whether ‘Uthman’s

being killed by the rebels while he was on the seat of Caliphate, was in the interests of Islam and the Muslims or not, is another matter.

From the speeches of ‘Ali (A.S.), it can be inferred that he wanted ‘Uthman to forsake the path which he was following and choose the true and fair Islamic path – And in the event of non-acceptance, the revolutionaries would dismiss and perhaps imprison him and the Caliph who would be worthy of taking over the seat of Caliphate would later on investigate into ‘Uthman’s crimes and pass the necessary judgment.

Thus ‘Ali (A.S.) neither issued any orders concerning the killing of ‘Uthman nor did he aid him against the revolutionaries. The entire efforts of ‘Ali (A.S.) were directed in this course that the legitimate demands of the revolutionaries be fulfilled without the need for a drop of blood to be shed or that (at least) ‘Uthman himself repents from his past actions or willingly entrusts the affair to his citizens. ‘Ali (A.S.) judged the two sides as such:

»استأثر فاساء الاثرة و جزعتم فاساتم الجزع«

“*‘Uthman appropriated everything for himself and did it in an evil manner. You (revolutionaries) were impatient and agitated against it and did it in an evil manner.*”³

At the time when he set forth the demands of the revolutionaries before ‘Uthman (as a mediator) he expressed his apprehension as to the possibility of ‘Uthman getting killed in the seat of Caliphate and the door of sedition thus being opened before the Muslims. He addressed ‘Uthman as such:

و اني اشدك الله الا تكون امام هذه الامة المقتول، فانه كان يقال: يقتل في هذه الامة امام يفتح عليها القتل و القتال
الي يوم القيمة، و يلبس امورها عليها، و بيت الفتنة فيها، فلا يبصرون الحق من الباطل، يموتون فيها موجاً؛ و
يمرجون فيها مرجاً

“*I adjure you by Allah that you should not be that Imam of this Ummah who will be killed, because it has been said: An Imam of this Ummah will be killed after which the path to killing and fighting will open for them till the Day of Judgment. He will confuse their affairs for them and spread dissension amongst them. As a result, they will not discern truth from falsehood, and will be in a state of agitation and utter confusion.*”⁴

Just as previously narrated from ‘Ali (A.S.) himself, during ‘Uthman’s lifetime Imam (A.S.) has objected and criticized and admonished him either in his presence or in his absence. Similarly after his death too, Imam (A.S.) has perpetually reminded the people about his deviations. He did not follow the principle of:

“Remember your dead with goodness”. (It is said that this is the saying of Mu’awiya and was uttered for the benefit of corrupt governments and personalities whose past lives were tainted till their death so that there would remain no lesson for the future generation and no danger for the future corrupt governments). Here are some instances of criticism:

(1) In Sermon No.128 in the sentences which ‘Ali (A.S.) has used at the time of bidding farewell to Abu Dharr when the latter was being exiled to Rabdha on the orders of ‘Uthman, he has clearly objected and criticized such action and has implicitly introduced ‘Uthman’s government as a corrupt one.

(2) In Sermon No.30 there is a sentence which was already narrated:

إِسْتَأْثَرَ فَاسَاءَ الْأَثْرَةَ

“He appropriated everything for himself and did it in an evil manner.”

(3) ‘Uthman was a feeble-charactered person and did not possess self-determination or steadfastness. His relatives, especially Marwan b. al-Hakam who was once banished by the Holy Prophet but was summoned by ‘Uthman to go to Medina and made his minister, had a strong dominance over him and they did whatever they liked in his name. ‘Ali (A.S.) openly criticized him in this regard and said:

فَلَا تَكُونُنَّ لِمَرْوَانَ سَيِّقَةً يَسُوقُكَ حِينُ شَاءَ، بَعْدَ جَلَالِ السِّنِّ وَ تَقْضِيَ الْعُمُرِ

“Do not be like the driven beast for Marwan so that he may drive you wherever he likes, despite your seniority of age and length of life.” ⁵

(4) ‘Ali (A.S.) was an object of suspicion for ‘Uthman. The latter reckoned the presence of ‘Ali (A.S.) in Medina to be disturbing and detrimental to himself. ‘Ali (A.S.) was thought to be a haven and the source of hope for the insurgents since they would sometimes shout slogans in his name and were openly calling for the dismissal of ‘Uthman and the establishment of ‘Ali’s (A.S.) leadership.

Thus ‘Uthman wished for ‘Ali’s absence from Medina so that the forces of insurgents would be ineffective due to his absence. However, on the other side he could see with certainty the manner in which ‘Ali (A.S.) was mediating with good-intentions between him and the insurgents and how his presence was a source of peace. Anyhow he asked ‘Ali (A.S.) to leave Medina and go temporarily to his farm in Yanbu’ which was approximately 12 Km or more from Medina.

But it did not take long before ‘Uthman left uneasy by the vacuum created by ‘Ali’s absence and sent a

message for him to return to Medina.

Naturally, when ‘Ali (A.S.) returned, the slogans shouted in his favour gained force and so he was once again asked to leave Medina.

Ibn Abbas had brought ‘Uthman’s message requesting ‘Ali (A.S.) to once again leave Medina and proceed towards his farm. ‘Ali (A.S.) was upset by this insulting behavior of ‘Uthman and said:

يا ابن عباس ما يريد عثمان الا ان يجعلني جملاناضحا بالغرب اقبل و ادبر، بعث الي ان اخرج ثم بعث الي ان اقدم ثم هو الان يبعث الي ان اخرج، والله لقد دفعت حتى خشيت ان اكون اثما

“O Ibn Abbas, ‘Uthman only wants to treat me like the water-drawing camel so that I go forward and backward with the bucket. Once he sent me word that I should depart, then sent me word that I should return. Now again he sends me word that I should go. By Allah I continued protecting him till I feared lest I become a sinner.”⁶

(5) More severe than all these is what has been mentioned in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya:

إِلَى أَنْ قَامَ ثَالِثُ الْقَوْمِ نَافِجًا حِضْنِيْهِ بَيْنَ نَثِيلِهِ وَ مُعْتَلِفِهِ، وَ قَامَ مَعَهُ بَنُو أَبِيهِ يَخْضِمُونَ مَا لَلَّهِ خِضْمَ الْأَبْلِ نِبْتَةً
الرَّبِيعِ ، إِلَى أَنْ اتَّكَثَ قَتْلُهُ، وَ أَجْهَزَ عَلَيْهِ عَمَلُهُ، وَ كَبَّتْ بِهِ بَطْنَتُهُ.

“...Till the third man of these people arose lifting his chest from out of his excrement and his trough. With him his cousins also rose up, swallowing up Allah’s wealth like a camel devouring the foliage of spring, until his rope broke down, his actions finished him and his gluttony brought him down.”

In describing this part, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:

“These expressions are the most bitter expressions and I think it is even more severe than the famous Hatee’ah poem which is said to be the most satirical poem of the Arabs.” The famous Hatee’ah poem is as follows:

دع المكارم لا ترحل لبغيتها

و أقعد فانك أنت الطاعم الكاسي

1. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 28.

2. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 37.

3. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 30.

4. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 162.

5. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 162.

6. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 235.

A Bitter Silence

The third section on the subject of Caliphate which has been reflected in Nahj al-Balaghah is the matter of silence and moderateness of ‘Ali (A.S.) and its philosophy.

By silence is meant the abandonment of a revolt and abstention from carrying the sword in hand.

Otherwise, just as we had previously mentioned ‘Ali (A.S.) did not desist from setting forth his claim and complaining at opportune situations the injustice done to him.

‘Ali (A.S.) remembers this silence as bitter and reckons it to be an affliction and an agony of death:

وَاغْضِبْتُ عَلَيْ القَدِيرِ وَشَرِبْتُ عَلَيْ الشَّجَرِ وَصَبَرْتُ عَلَيْ أَخْذِ الْكَظْمِ وَعَلَيْ اْمْرِ مِنْ طَعْمِ الْعَالَمِ

*“I shut my eyes while there was a thorn in it and drank while there was a bone stuck in my throat. I was patient while my throat felt suffocated and there was a taste (in my mouth) more bitter than colocynth.”*¹

‘Ali’s silence was logical and a well-calculated one, not merely arising from compulsion and helplessness. He had two options and he chose the one that was based on expedience and was the most difficult and fatiguing one. It was easy for him to rise up in revolt and, if he had no friends or helpers, then at the most it would have resulted in martyrdom for him and sons. Martyrdom was the goal of ‘Ali (A.S.) and incidentally in this very situation he addresses Abu Sufyan in one of his famous sentences as such:

وَالله لَابْنِ أَبِي طَالِبٍ أَنْسٌ بِالْمَوْتِ مِنَ الطَّفْلِ بَثْدِي أَمْهٖ

*“By Allah the son of Abu Talib is more at ease with death than an infant with the breast of its mother.”*²

By this sentence, ‘Ali (A.S.) had made Abu Sufyan and others understand that his silence was not due to fear from death but rather for the reason that his active revolt and martyrdom in such a situation would have been damaging to Islam (and not to the advantage of Islam).

‘Ali (A.S.) himself specifies that his silence was a pre-calculated one. He himself says that he selected the path which was nearer to prudence:

وَطَفِقْتُ أَرْتَأً بَيْنَ أَنْ أَصْوِلَ بِيَدِ جَذَاءَ، أَوْ أَصْبِرَ عَلَى طَخِيَّةِ عَمِيَاءَ، يَهْرُمُ فِيهَا الْكَبِيرُ، وَيَشِيبُ فِيهَا الصَّغِيرُ، وَيَكْدُحُ فِيهَا مُؤْمِنٌ حَتَّى يَلْقَى رَبَّهُ! فَرَأَيْتُ أَنَّ الصَّبَرَ عَلَى هَاتَانِ أَحْجَى، فَصَبَرْتُ وَفِي الْعَيْنِ قَذَى، وَفِي الْحَلْقِ شَجَأَ

“Then I began to think whether I should assault or endure calmly the blinding darkness of tribulations wherein the grown up become feeble and the young grow old and the true believer acts under strain till

he meets Allah. I found that endurance thereon was wiser. So I adopted patience although there was a thorn in the eye and suffocation in the throat. ”³

Islamic Unity

Naturally, everybody wishes to know which matter kept ‘Ali (A.S.) in so deep a thought that he did not wish to see any harm come to it and instead attached so much importance that he was prepared to tolerate the agonies and the sufferings?

Roughly it should be said that the important reason was the unity of the Muslims and the non-initiation of discord. The Muslims who were newly displaying their power and strength to the world were indebted to their unity and alliance of their creed (of faith). They acquired their astounding prosperity in the later years from this very unity. It was due to this expediency that ‘Ali (A.S.) as a rule, kept silent and acted moderately.

Is it believable that a pious youth of thirty three years could have been pushed to such corners; and controlled himself to such extent and been so much loyal towards Islam that for the sake of Islam, he chose the path which lead to his own deprivation of rights?

Yes, it is possible to believe. The extraordinary character of ‘Ali (A.S.) became manifest in such a situation. It is not merely a conjecture. ‘Ali (A.S.) has himself rationalized his actions and has, with utmost explicitness, given no reasons for his behavior other than his concern over discord among the Muslims. Especially during the period of his own Caliphate when Talha and Zubair broke their allegiance and started an internal conspiracy, ‘Ali (A.S.) repeatedly compares himself with them (i.e. Talha and Zubair) after the departure of the Holy Prophet and says: “I have overlooked my obvious right for the sake of not causing discord among the Muslims while they (in spite of willingly and voluntarily giving their allegiance) have broken it and have not bothered about the emergence of disunity among the Muslims.

In explaining Sermon No.119, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed narrates from Abdullah ibn Junadah who said: “In the initial period of ‘Ali’s Caliphate, I was in Hijaz and I intended to go to Iraq. In Mecca I performed my ‘Umra’ (lesser pilgrimage) and came to Medina. I entered the mosque of the Holy Prophet and saw that people had gathered together for prayers. ‘Ali (A.S.) who had his sword with him came out and delivered a sermon. In that sermon, after praising and glorifying God and sending salutation upon the Holy Prophet, he said:

“After the Holy Prophet’s departure, we (the household members of the Prophet) never ever imagined that the Ummah would usurp our right. However, that which could not be imagined did really occur. They usurped our right and we were ranked on par with the low-class people. Tears rolled down from our eyes and problems stood facing us.”

و ايم الله لو لا مخافة الفرقه بين المسلمين و ان يعود الكفر و يبور الدين لكانا علي غير ما كنا لهم عليه

“By Allah, if it were not for the fear of discord between the Muslims, the return to unbelief and destruction of religion, our stand towards them would have been a different one.”

Thereafter, he continued his speech by referring to Talha and Zubair and said: “These two gave their allegiance to me but later broke it. They took Ayesha along with them to Basra so that they could create disunity among you Muslims.”

Moreover, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed narrates from Kalbi that:

“Before going to Basra, ‘Ali (A.S.) in one sermon said: “After the Holy Prophet, the Quraysh snatched our right from us and attributed it exclusively for themselves.”

فرأيت ان الصبر علي ذلك افضل من تفريق كلمة المسلمين و سفك دمائهم و الناس حديثو عهد بالاسلام و الدين
يمخض مخض الوطن بفسده ادنى وهن و يعكسه اقل خلق

“I realized that patience in that is better than dissipation of the Muslim creed and their bloodshed. I reckoned that the people are newly converted Muslims and the religion like a large leathern water bag, capable of being destroyed by the slightest weakness and of being overturned by the most insignificant person”.

Thereafter he said:

How good it would have been if Talha and Zubair had resorted to patience for a year or at least a few months and witnessed my rule and then taken a decision. However, they did not hold out and revolted against me. They entered into a skirmish with me for a matter in which Allah had never set any right for them.

Under the sermon of Shiqshiqiya, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says: “Regarding the event of ‘Shura’, (consultative council) since Abbas was aware of its result, he suggested to ‘Ali (A.S.) not to attend the meeting. Although ‘Ali (A.S.) reckoned Abbas to be right as far as the results were concerned, he still did not accept his suggestion.” His reason was as he said:

أني اكره الخلاف

“I dislike discord.” Abbas said:

إذا ترى ما تكره

“Then you will encounter what you dislike.”

In Vol. 2 under sermon 65, he narrates as such: “One of the sons of Abu Lahab recited a poem regarding the virtue and the just right of ‘Ali and at the same time vilified his enemies.” ‘Ali prohibited him from reciting such poems (which in fact was a kind of provocation and threat to unity) and said:

سلامة الدين احب الينا من غيره

“We reckon the safety of the religion (and the continuation of the fundamentals of Islam) to be a matter more lovable and valuable than anything else.”

More explicit than this is what has come down in Nahj al-Balaghah itself. This explicitness can be seen in three different instances in Nahj al-Balaghah:

(1) When Abu Sufyan intended to create sedition under the pretext of offering his support to ‘Ali (A.S.), Hazrat replied:

شقا امواج الفتنة بسفن النجاة و عرجوا عن طريق المنافرة، وضععوا تيجان المفاخرة.

*“Steer clear through the waves of mischief with the boats of deliverance; turn away from the path of dissension and put off the crowns of pride.”*⁴

(2) In the Shura (consultative council) of six people, when ‘Uthman was selected by Abdur-Rahman ibn al-Auf, he (i.e. ‘Ali) said:

لقد علمت انى احق الناس بها من غيرى و و الله لا سلمت امور المسلمين و لم يكن فيها جور الا على خاصة.

*“You have certainly known that I am the most rightful of all for the Caliphate. By Allah, so long as the affairs of the Muslims remain intact and there is no oppression in it save on myself I shall keep quiet.”*⁵

(3) At the time when Malik al-Ashtar became the Governor of Egypt, Hazrat (A.S.) wrote a letter to the people of Egypt. (This letter is different from the famous lengthy directive). In this letter he relates the era of the beginning of Islam till he reaches to a point where he says:

فامسكت يدي حتى رأيت راجعة الناس قد رجعت عن الاسلام يدعون الي محق دين محمد صلى الله عليه و آله فخشيت ان لم انصر الاسلام و اهله ان اري فيه ثلما او هدما تكون المصيبة به علي اعظم من فوت ولايتكم التي انما هي متاع ايام قلائل.

*"I withheld my hand only as long as I saw that many people were reverting away from Islam and calling for the effacement of the religion of Muhammad, blessings of Allah on him and his family. I then feared that if I did not help Islam and its people, I would see in it a breach or destruction, the calamity of which would be far more grievous to me than the loss of authority over you which was in any case, only to last for a while."*⁶

Two Outstanding Stances

In his sayings, ‘Ali (A.S.) refers to two distinguished stances on two occasions and reckons his stance in these two instances to be a privileged and limited one. That is to say, in each of these two crucial instances he took such a decision that only a few in this world would be capable of taking under the given circumstances. In one of these two crucial cases, ‘Ali (A.S.) had kept silent while in the other he revolted – A splendid silence and a more splendid revolt. The stance adopted by ‘Ali (A.S.) in the case of his silence is the same, which we have explained.

In certain circumstances, silence and moderation requires more strength, power and possession of the ‘self’ than bloody uprisings. Imagine a person who was the symbol of bravery, courage and zeal, a person who had never shown his back to the enemy and the brave ones shivered due to fear from him. Conditions and circumstances became such that politically-motivated people took advantage of the crucial situation and made things difficult for him such that when his most beloved wife was subject to insults, she addressed her husband with such sentences that make mountains move from their places. She (A.S.) said:

“O son of Abu Talib! Why have you crawled in one corner of the house? You are the same person in fear of whom the brave ones could not sleep. Now you are exhibiting yourself as a weak one before the people. I wish I had died and not seen such a day.”

Angered by the events, ‘Ali (A.S.) is provoked as such on the side of his wife who holds him extremely dear. What power was it that could not move ‘Ali (A.S.) from his place. After hearing the speech of Hazrat Zahra (A.S.), he consoles her and says: “No, I have not changed. I am the same as before. Expediency lies in something else”. He comforts her until Zahra (A.S.) is content and hears from her the sentence of:

حَسْبِيَ اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ

Below Sermon No.215, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed has narrated this famous incident:

“One day Fatimah (A.S.) called on ‘Ali (A.S.) to revolt. At that very moment the call of “Muezzin” could be heard saying:

أَشْهُدُ أَنَّ مُحَمَّداً رَسُولُ اللَّهِ

“I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”.

‘Ali (A.S.) asked Zahra (A.S.): “Would you like this call to be extinguished”? She replied: “No”. ‘Ali (AS.) said: “Then my words are the same.”

However the splendid revolt (limited to ‘Ali (A.S.) himself) which he was proud of and about which he used to say that none had the courage to do what he did was the revolt against the Kharijites.

فَانَا فَقَاتُ عَيْنَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لِي جُنْدٌ عَلَيْهَا أَحَدٌ غَيْرِي بَعْدَ أَنْ مَاجَ غَيْهُبَاهَا وَاشْتَدَّ كُلُّهَا

“So now, O people, I have put out the eye of dissension. No one except me ventured towards it when its darkness was surging and its frenzy was intense.”

The apparent piety of the Kharijites was such that it would keep any discerning believer in doubt. An atmosphere obscure and gloomy and a sphere full of doubt and hesitation had come into existence. They were 12,000 people who had calluses on their foreheads and knees due to excessive prostration. They practiced abstinence in their food, clothing and way of life. Their tongues were constantly moving in praise of God. However, they were unaware of the spirit of Islam and did not possess the Islamic insight. They wanted to compensate all their shortcomings forcibly through bowing and prostration. They were narrow-minded, apparent – worshippers, ignorant, rigid and a big barrier in front of Islam.

As a matter of great honour, ‘Ali (A.S.) says: “It was I who perceived the great danger brought about by these narrow-minded so-called religious people. Their calloused foreheads, their ascetic garb and their constant liturgical praise of God could not blind my discerning vision. It was I who realized that if ever they establish themselves, they would so drive Islam towards stagnation, conventionalism, petrifaction and outward show such that the back of Islam would no longer be straightened.

Yes! This honour was only for the son of Abu Talib! Which powerful soul existed that would not be moved in the face of such (outwardly) impressive personalities? And which power existed, that could rise up to strike their heads and not tremble?

- [1.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 26.
- [2.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5.
- [3.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 3.
- [4.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5.
- [5.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 72.
- [6.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 62.

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