

## Conclusion

The material attributed to and about Imam 'Ali in *Nahj al-Balaghah* and *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* portrays women in vastly different ways. The selections from *Nahj al-Balaghah* portray Islam as male-normative, and women as exceptions. 'A'ishah is attacked the grounds of her femininity and for stepping out of her place as a woman. Women are inferior to men in their essential nature, and should be kept out of the public sphere, strictly covered, and secluded. Unlike in the Qur'an, women are likened to animals (beasts, carnivores, and scorpions).

This set of values best represents the cultural norms of Islamic Iraq at the time *Nahj al-Balaghah* was compiled. This raises the question of why Imam 'Ali – who was raised in the Arabian Peninsula and only moved to Iraq towards the end of his life – would choose to codify the value system of that region as the Islamic norm, particularly given his less than favourable experiences there (including civil unrest, culminating in his assassination).

### Summary of Main Ideas about Women

#### *Nahj al-Balaghah*

- Men are intellectually, spiritually, and ethically superior.
- Women are inferior because they menstruate.
- Men are normative.
- Men belong in the public sphere, and women belong in the private sphere.
- Women are evil.
- Women are bestial.
- Women do not belong in the public sphere; women's seclusion is ideal.
- Women are interested in trivial things
- Male authority is necessary.
- Chastity is emphasised for women but not men.

- Men are responsible for enforcing chastity on their womenfolk.

Although the idea that women are intellectually deficient has persisted in Shi'i discourse, this idea mimics Aristotle's views of women. This leads to the possibility that these ideas emerged after the Prophetic era due to the importation of ancient Greek ideas into Islamic thought, as well as pre-Islamic cultural interchange. This does leave open the question of why Aristotle would be the more influential ancient Greek thinker in the Islamic world – as opposed to, say, Plato, who expressed much more

gender-egalitarian views; perhaps the answer lies in the harmony between Aristotle's views and the cultural reality of mediaeval Mesopotamia. Of course, correlation does not prove causality.

There is no reason why Imam 'Ali could not have been familiar with Aristotle's views, or that he could not have come up with a similar idea. Nonetheless, it is my hope that someone (perhaps, a specialist in philosophy) who is reading this will take up this train of thought and continue exploring the influence of the Greek philosophical heritage on the development on ideas about women in the Islamic world.

In contrast, *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* is attributed to the era *before* the adoption of Greek thought in the Islamic Empire, and to a region and time in which women were more visible in public society. With that in mind, it is not surprising that *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* presents an equitable view of women and men – one in which both women and men are involved in the public sphere, the affairs of the religious community, and sacred narrative. No creational differences between women and men are implied, and men and women are criticized for their actions, not their gender. In short, *Nahj al-Balaghah* presents a sharp gender hierarchy, whereas *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* offers a much more egalitarian message.

While both *Nahj al-Balaghah* and *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* are associated with Shi'ism, *Kitab Sulaym* is more concerned with constructing a Shi'i identity. Despite the centrality of *Nahj al-Balaghah* in the Shi'i heritage, these passages from *Nahj al-Balaghah* recur in Sunni works. In contrast, *Kitab Sulaym* has the tone of a counter-narrative – a counter-narrative to the first three *khalifahs* and the Umayyads, and one of the ways that it establishes its alternative view is by going against the 'orthodoxy' of misogyny established by 'Umar and Mu'awiyah in favour of the equal inclusion of women and the spiritual position of Fatimah al-Zahra'. That is, it delineates Shi'i identity as one which is non-misogynistic.

As for textual authenticity, it is clear from the foregoing that there is no evidence to lend credence to the above selections on women from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, particularly the sermon on the deficiencies of women; the common practice of listing alternative sources as justifications for them falls short when actually challenged. The alternative textual sources also weaken the popular view that some of these words were addressed to 'A'ishah at the Battle of the Camel. It is also likely that the sermon on the 'deficiencies' of women is an amalgamation of material from three different sources, some of which is also in *Sahih Bukhari*. Needless to say, the presence of different parts of this sermon in different books, attributed to various people at different times, makes it unlikely that these words were actually addressed to 'A'ishah, or that they were said by Imam 'Ali at all.

The contents of these sermons can also be challenged logically. Thematically, they contradict the Qur'an, as well as the status of Fatimah al-Zahra' and other sacred women in the Shi'i tradition. Therefore, despite the concern quoted in the introduction, one can easily set aside these sermons without actually challenging the entire corpus of Shi'i narrations. (One can even argue that most of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is authentic, while at the same time dismissing these passages.) The question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* is more complex; while it is not necessary to accept *Kitab Sulaym* as authentic in order to reject these passages from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, there at least is a stronger argument

for the authenticity of much of *Kitab Sulaym*, compared to these sermons.

*Nahj al-Balaghah* is far more prominent than *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, and these passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are often used to promote cultural restrictions on women. Essentially, some people unwittingly portray Imam 'Ali as a misogynist. However, by arguing for the textual unreliability of these sermons, and by presenting the alternative picture of women in *Kitab Sulaym*, it is possible to challenge this portrayal of Imam 'Ali, and instead to present him as offering a distinctly Shi'i view of women as being one of equity and inclusiveness.

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