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Preface By the Compiler of Nahjul Balaghah, al-'Allamah ash-Sharif ar-Radi

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful the Compassionate

So now, praise is due to Allah who has held praise as the price of His bounties, protection against His retribution, pathway to His paradises and means for multiplication of His good treatment, and blessings be on his Messenger, the Prophet of Mercy, the torch of the people, the chosen one from the origin of greatness and family of long-standing honours, the plantation of all engrossing glory and the branch of sublimity full of fruits and foliage, and on the members of his family who are lanterns of darkness, protection of the peoples, brilliant minarets of religion and high standards of greatness, Allah may shower upon them all blessings befitting their distinction as reward for their actions and suitable to the chastity of their lineage so long as the morning dawns and the stars twinkle.

In my early age at the dawn of youth I commenced writing a book on the characteristics of the Imams covering the account of their virtues and masterpieces of their utterances. The purpose of the compilation was stated by me in the beginning of the book. Therein I completed the portion relating to the account of Amir al-mu'minin 'Ali (peace be upon him) but I could not complete that part concerning the other Imams due to impediments of the time and obstacles of the days. I divided the book into several chapters and sections, in a manner for its last section to comprise whatever had been related to 'Ali's (p.b.u.h.) short utterances such as counsels, maxims and proverbs but not long lectures and detailed discourses.

A number of my friends and brothers-in-faith, while wondering at its delicate and blossoming expressions, admired the contents of this particular section, and desired me to complete a book which should cover all the forms of the utterances of Amir al-mu'minin, including diverse materials such as lectures, letters, counsels, ethics, etc., as they were convinced that the entire proceedings would comprise wonders and surprises of eloquence and rhetoric's, brilliant jewels of Arabic language and shining expressions about faith; collected in any other work, nor found together in any other book, because Amir al-mu'minin was the fountain of eloquence and the source of rhetoric's.

Through him the hidden delicacies of eloquence and rhetoric's came to light, and from him were learnt its principles and rules. Every speaker and orator had to tread on his footprints and every eloquent preacher availed of his utterances. Even then none could equal him and so the credit for being the first and foremost remained '4th him, because his utterances are those that carry the reflection of Divine knowledge and savour of the Prophet's utterance.

Accordingly, I acceded to their request as I knew that it meant great reward, handsome reputation and a treasure of recompense. The object of this compilation is to bring forth Amir al-mu'minin's greatness and superiority in the art of rhetoric's, in addition to his countless qualities and innumerable distinctions, and to show that he had risen to the highest pinnacle of this attainment; was singular among all those predecessors whose utterances are quoted here and there, whereas his own utterances are such an on-rushing stream that its flow cannot be encountered and such a treasure of delicacies that cannot be matched.

Since I proudly trace my descent from him I have a pleasure of quoting a couplet of al-Farazdaq: "These are my forefathers O' Jarir. When we get together, can you claim forth their equals?" [1](#)

In my view Amir al-mu'minin's utterances are divisible in three categories; firstly Sermons and Decrees, secondly Letters and Communications and thirdly Maxims and Counsels, Allah willing I have decided to compile first the Sermons, then letters, and finally the Maxims and Counsels, whilst proposing a separate Chapter for each category, leaving blank page in between each so that if anything has been left out and becomes handy afterwards it may be inserted therein, whereas any utterance which is routine or in reply to some question or has some other aim does not fit in with any of my divisions should be included in the category for which it is most suitable or to which its subject matter is most akin. In this compilation, some sections and sentences have crept in whose arrangement savours of disarray and disorderliness.

This is because I am only collecting the most representative brilliant utterances but do not wish to arrange or array them.

The characteristic of Amir al-mu'minin² in which he is un-paralleled and is shared by no one, is that his utterances on reclusion, piety, remembrance of Allah and admonition are such that when a person peruses them without bearing in mind that they are the words of a man who enjoys great and ruling position and who controls destinies of men he can have no doubt that it is the utterance of a man who has no interest other than reclusion and no activity save worshipping; who is confined to the interior of some house or the valley of some mountain where he hears nothing save his own murmur and sees no one except himself.

He would not believe that this is the utterance of one who plunges in battles with drawn sword severing heads and vanquishing the heroes and comes back with his sword dripping with blood and heart's fluid. And despite all this he is supreme among the recluse and chief among the saints.

This distinction is one of those astonishing characteristics of Amir al-mu'minin with which he collected in himself contradictory qualities and patched together diverse greatnesses. I often mention these to my brethren-in-faith and put them wondering over it. It is indeed a subject to ponder over and think about.

Within this compilation, some repetition of words or subject matter are to be expected, as the utterances of Amir al-mu'minin have been known to be related in numerous forms. Sometimes it happened that a particular utterance was found in a particular form in a tradition and was taken down in that very form. Thereafter, the same utterance was found in some other tradition either with acceptable addition or in a more attractive style of expression. In such a case with a view to further the object of compilation and to preserve the beautiful utterance from being lost it was decided to repeat it elsewhere. It has also happened that a particular utterance had appeared earlier but due to remoteness it has been entered again. This is through omission, not by intent.

In spite of all this I do not claim that I have collected Amir al-mu'minin's utterances from all sources and that no single sentence of any type or construction has been left out. In fact I do not rule out the possibility that whatever has been left out might be more than what has been collected, and what has been in any knowledge and use is far less than what has remained beyond my reach. My task was to strive to the best of my capacity and it was Allah's part to make the way easy and guide me to the goal; Allah may will so.

Having completed my work, both in the collection and compilation of this manuscript; Nahjul Balaghah, the pathway of rhetoric's would be the appropriate title of the book, in that it would open the doors of eloquence for the reader and shorten its approach for him; the scholar and the student would meet their needs from it while the rhetoricians as well as the recluse would find their objectives in it as well.

In this book would be found a wonderful discussion on Allah's One-ness, Justness and His being free from body and form, that would quench every thirst (for learning), provide cure for every malady (of unbelief) and remove every doubt.

I seek from Allah succor, protection against straying, correctness of action and His assistance. I seek his protection against mistakes of heart before mistakes of tongue and against mistakes of speech before mistakes of action. He is my Reliance and lie is the best Trustee.

1. Al-Farazdaq, whose name was Hammam ibn Ghalib, belonged to the tribe of Bani Darim and was a notable poet. He was generally at loggerheads with another Arab poet named Jarir ibn 'Atiyyah and they showed their merit only in mutual abuse and boasting over each other. The quoted couplet of al-Farazdaq is a link from that chain, wherein he addresses Jarir saying "My forefathers were such as you have just heard, now you come forward with what your forefathers were, and if there were any one like mine, name them before all of us."

Reciting this couplet about his own fore father's as-Sayyid ar-Radi challenges everyone to bring forth their like, if any. Al-Farazdaq had addressed only Jarir but its quotation here has made it general and universal when its addressee is no more one single individual, but every person can consider himself to be its addressee. Despite this generality and universality the challenge to name their "like" remains unresponded like the Qur'anic challenge "then bring forth it's Like."

As-Sayyid ar-Radi has pointed at this relationship and distinction at such an appropriate moment that there can be no better occasion, because the greatness of the personality (namely Amir al-mu'minin) through whom he claims pride has already been mentioned and eyes have stood dazzled at the brilliance of his status while mind has acknowledged the sublimity of his position. Now hearts can easily be made to bow before the height and greatness of this individual who bears relationship to him.

Thus at the moment when heart and mind were already inclined as-Sayyid ar-Radi's eloquence-conscious eyes turned the sight towards himself as he was the ray of the sun whose abundant light dazzles the eye, and a scion of the same lineal tree whose root is in the earth and whose branch extends up to the sky. Now who is there who would remain unaffected by this relationship and distinction and refuse to acknowledge his greatness and sublimity?

2. In the world such persons are rarely found in whom besides one or two virtuous qualities other qualities might also attain prominence, much less the convergence of all contradictory qualities, because every temperament is not suited for the development of every quality, each quality has a peculiar tempo and each virtue needs a particular climate, and they are appropriate only for such qualities or virtues with which they accord, but where there is contradiction instead of harmony the natural tendencies act as obstacles and do not allow any other quality to grow.

For example, generosity and bountifulness demand that a person should possess the feeling of pity and God-fearing so that on seeing anyone in poverty or want his heart would rend, and his feelings would be disturbed at other's tribulations while the dictates of bravery and fighting require that instead of pity and compassion there should be the passion of bloodshed and killing, prompting the person at every moment to enter into scuffle, ready to kill or be killed. These two qualities differ so widely that it is not possible to fuse the delicacies of generosity into the stiff manifestations of bravery just as bravery cannot be expected from Hatim nor generosity from Rustam.

But the personality of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (p.b.u.h.) showed full accord with every greatness and complete harmony with every accomplishment, and there was no good attribute or accomplishment which he lacked, nor any robe of greatness or beauty which did not fit his body. Thus the contradictory qualities of generosity and bravery were found in him side by side. If he rained like the cloud in generosity, he also fought bravely standing firm as a mountain.

Thus his generosity and liberty of nature was of a degree that even during days of want and starvation whatever he earned as the wage of his day's toil its major part was distributed among the poor and the starving, and he would never allow a beggar to return disappointed from his door, so much so that even when in the battle field the enemy asked him his sword he threw it before him being confident of the prowess of his naked arm. An Urdu couplet says:

The unbeliever depends on his sword but the believer fights even without it.

And his bravery and courage was such that the onslaught of armies could not shake the firmness of his foot with the result that he achieved success in every encounter and even the bravest fighter could not save his life in an encounter with him. Thus Ibn Qutaybah writes in al-Ma'arif, "Whomever he encountered was prostrated."

The heartless nature of the brave is not won to thinking or pondering nor do they have anything to do with foresight or fore-judging but 'Ali (p.b.u.h.) had the quality of thinking of the highest degree. Thus, ash-Shafi'i said as follows: "what can I say about a man in whom three qualities existed with three other qualities that were never found together in any other man – generosity with want, bravery with sagacity and knowledge with practical achievements".

It was the result of this proper thinking and correct judgment that when after the death of the Prophet some people advised him to fight and promised to enlist warriors for him he rejected this advice, although on such occasions even a slight support is enough to encourage the heartless brave, yet 'Ali (p.b.u.h.) far-sighted mind at once foresaw that if battle was raged at that moment the voice of Islam would be submerged under the clutter of swords, and then even if success was achieved it would be said that the position was gained by dint of sword and that there was no right for it.

Thus, by withholding his sword on the one hand he provided protection to Islam and on the other saved his own right from

the imputation of bloodshed. When the veins are full of daring blood and the bosom full of flames of anger and wrath it is extremely difficult to curb the passion of vengeance by adopting the course of forgiving and, despite authority and power, to pardon and overlook.

But 'Ali's (p.b.u.h.) metal used to shine on such occasions when his forgiving nature would accommodate even his blood-thirsty foes. Thus, at the end of the Battle of Jamal he made a general proclamation that no one who flees away from the field or seeks our protection would be molested and he let go without any punishment even such enemies as Marwan ibn Hakam and 'Abdullah ibn Zubayr.

And the treatment that he meted out to 'A'ishah matchless manifestation of his nobility and high character – is that in spite of her open enmity and rebellion he sent with her women in men's garb to escort her to Medina. By giving his own personal malice the garb of fundamental differences, man not only deceives others but also tries to keep himself under deception, and in these conditions such a delicate situation arises that a man fails to distinguish and separate his personal malice from a fundamental difference but easily mixing them together considers that he has followed the Command of Allah, and In this way he satisfies his passion for vengeance as well.

But Amir al-mu'minin's discerning eyes never got deceived nor did they willingly deceive themselves. Thus, on an occasion when after prostrating the opponent he placed himself on his bosom the vanquished opponent spat on his face. As man his rage should have risen and his band should have moved quicker but instead of being enraged he got off from the man's bosom lest his action would be tarnished by personal feeling, and slayed him only after the anger had subsided.

There is nothing in common between combat and encounter and reclusion and God-fearing because one shows valour and courage while the other supplication and submission. But Amir al-mu'minin was a unique combination of both these qualities as his hands that were bound in devotion were equally active in the battlefield, and side by side with relaxing in seclusion for devotion he was a common visitor of the field of action.

The scene of the night of Harir puts human wit in astonishment and wonder when closing his eyes to the bloody action around he spread his prayer cloth and engaged himself in prayer with full peace of mind and heart while arrows were darting off sometimes over his head and sometimes from his right or left. But he remained engaged in Allah's remembrance without any fear or apprehension. After finishing he again cast his hand on the sword's handle and the fierce battle that then followed in unparalleled in history. The position was that on all sides there was such hue and cry and fleeing activity that even voices falling on the ears could not be discerned.

Of course, after every moment or so his own call of Allahu Akbar rose in the atmosphere and resounded in the ears, and every such call meant death of a foe. Those who counted these calls of takbir recorded their number as five hundred and twenty three.

The taste for learning and God-knowing does not combine with material activity but Amir al-mu'minin adorned the meetings of learning and scholarship along with war-like pursuits, arid he watered the field of Islam with springs of learning and truth along with shedding streams of blood (in battles).

Where there is perfection of learning, then even if there is not complete absence of action, there must no doubt exist shortness of action. But Amir al-mu'minin treaded the field of knowledge and action equally, as has been already shown in ash-Shafi'i's verse. Examples of harmony in utterance and action are quite rare but Amir al-mu'minin's action preceded his utterance, as he himself says: O people I do not exhort you to any action but that I myself first proceed towards it before you and do not desist you from any matter but that I first desist from it myself.

As soon as we think of a recluse and a pious man we visualise a face null of frowns because for piety severity of temper and hardness of face are inseparable so much so that the thought of a smile on the lips of a pious man is regarded as a sin. But despite extreme piety and self-denial Amir al-mu'minin always had such appearance that his light temper and brightness of face was apparent from his looks and his lips always bore playful smile.

He never showed frowns on his fore-head like the dry recluse, so much so that when people could not find any defect in him this very lightness of temper was taken to be his fault, while hard temper and bitter face was held to be a virtue. If a man possesses cheerful heart and joyous temper he cannot command authority over others; but Amir al-mu'minin's cheerful face was so full of awe and dignity that no eye could face it. Once Mu'awiyah tauntingly said "Allah bless 'Ali. He was a man of cheerful taste," then Qays ibn Sa'd retorted. "By Allah despite cheerful disposition and entertaining countenance he was more awe-inspiring than a hungry lion and this awe was due to his piety not like your awe over the non-descripts of Syria."

Where there is rule and authority there is also a crowd of servants and workers, checks of grandeur and eminence with equipment of pageantry but Amir al-mu'minin's period of rule was an example of the highest simplicity. In him people saw only a tattered turban in place of a Royal Crown, patched apparel in place of the regal robes and the floor of earth in place of the ruler's throne. He never liked grandeur and pageantry nor allowed show of external grandiosity. Once he was passing on a horse back when Harb ibn Shurahbil started walking with him and began talking. Then Amir al-mu'minin said to him, "Get back because walking on foot with me by one like you is mischievous for the ruler (me) and an insult to the believer (you).

In short he was such a versatile personality in whom numerous contradictory qualities had joined together and all the good attributes were centered in their full brightness as though his oneself was a collection of several selves and each self was an astounding portrait of achievement which showed forth the delineation of distinction in its untained form, and on whose accomplishment one wonders with bewilderment.

A Persian couplet says:

The figure of my beloved is so beautiful that when I cast my glance on the body from head to foot, every spot thereof calls my attention claiming to be the most enchanting.

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