

Sermon 19: How do you know what is for me and what is against me?!

Amir al-mu'minin was delivering a lecture from the pulpit of (the mosque of) Kufah when al-Ash'ath ibn Qays¹ objected and said, "O' Amir al-mu'minin this thing is not in your favour but against you."² Amir al-mu'minin looked at him with anger and said:

(ومن كلام له (عليه السلام

قاله للاشعث بن قيس وهو على منبر الكوفة يخطب

فمضى في بعض كلامه شيء اعترضه الاشعث، فقال: يا أمير المؤمنين، هذه عليك لا لك، فخفض (عليه السلام) إليه بصره ثم قال:

How do you know what is for me and what is against me?! Curse of Allah and others be on you. You are a weaver and son of a weaver. You are the son of an unbeliever and yourself a hypocrite. You were arrested once by the Unbelievers and once by the Muslims, but your wealth and birth could not save you from either. The man who contrives for his own people to be put to sword and invites death and destruction for them does deserve that the near ones should hate him and the remote ones should not trust him.

وما يُدْرِيكَ مَا عَلَيَّ مِمَّا لِي؟ عَلَيْكَ لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ وَلَعْنَةُ الْأَعْيُنِ! حَاتِكُ ابْنِ حَاتِكِ! مُنَافِقُ ابْنِ كُافِرٍ! وَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ أَسْرَكَ الْكُفْرُ
مَرَّةً وَالْإِسْلَامُ أُخْرَى! فَمَا فَدَاكَ مِنْ وَاحِدَةٍ مِنْهُمَا مَا لَكَ وَلَا حَسْبُكَ! وَإِنَّ أَمْرًا دَلَّ عَلَى قَوْمِهِ السَّيْفَ، وَسَاقَ إِلَيْهِمْ
!الْحَتْفَ، لِحَرِيٍّ أَنْ يَمُقَّتَهُ الْأَقْرَبُ، وَلَا يَأْمَنُهُ الْإِبْعَدُ

as-Sayyid ar-Radi says: This man was arrested once when an unbeliever and once in days of Islam. As for Amir al-mu'minin's words that the man contrived for his own people to be put to sword, the reference herein is to the incident which occurred to al-Ash'ath ibn Qays in confrontation with Khalid ibn Walid at Yamamah, where he deceived his people and contrived a trick till Khalid attacked them. After this incident his people nicknamed him "Urf an-Nar" which in the parlance stood for traitor.

قال السيد الشريف: يريد عليه السلام أنه أُسر في الكفر مرة وفي الإسلام مرة . وأما قوله: «دل على قومه السيف»، فأراد به: حديثاً كان للأشعث مع خالد بن الوليد باليمامة، غرّ فيه قومه ومكر بهم حتى أوقع بهم خالد، وكان قومه بعد ذلك يسمونه «عُرْفَ النار»، وهو اسم للغادر عندهم.

Alternative Sources for Sermon 19

(1) Abu al-Faraj, *al-Aghani*, VIII, 59.

1. His original name was Ma`di Karib and surname Abu Muhammad but because of his dishevelled hair he is better known as al-Ash`ath (one having dishevelled hair). When after Proclamation (of Prophethood) he came to Mecca along with his tribe, the Prophet invited him and his tribe to accept Islam. But all of them turned back without anyone accepting Islam. When after hijrah (migration of the Holy Prophet) Islam became established and in full swing and deputations began to come to Medina in large numbers he also came to the Prophet's audience with Banu Kindah and accepted Islam. The author of al-`Isti`ab writes that after the Prophet this man again turned unbeliever but when during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr he was brought to Medina as prisoner he again accepted Islam, though this time too his Islam was a show. Thus, ash-Shaykh Muhammad `Abduh writes in his annotations on Nahjul Balaghah: Just as `Abdullah ibn Ubay ibn Salul was a companion of the Prophet, al-Ash`ath was a companion of `Ali and both were high ranking hypocrites.

He lost one of his eyes in the battle of Yarmuk. Ibn Qutaybah has included him in the list of the one-eyed. Abu Bakr's sister Umm Farwah bint Abi Quhafah, who was once the wife of an al-Azdi and then of Tamim ad-Darimi, was on the third occasion married to this al-Ash`ath. Three sons were born of her viz. Muhammad, Isma`il and Is'haq. Books on biography show that she was blind. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid has quoted the following statement of Abu'l-Faraj wherefrom it appears that this man was equally involved in the assassination of `Ali (p.b.u.h.): On the night of the assassination Ibn Muljam came to al-Ash`ath ibn Qays and both retired to a corner of the mosque and sat there when Hujr ibn `Adi passed by that side and he heard al-Ash`ath saying to Ibn Muljam, "Be quick now or else dawn's light would disgrace you." On hearing this Hujr said to al-Ash`ath, "O' one-eyed man, you are preparing to kill 'Ali" and hastened towards `Ali ibn Abi Talib, but Ibn Muljam had preceded him and struck 'Ali with sword when Hujr turned back people were crying, "Ali has been killed."

It was his daughter who killed Imam Hasan (p.b.u.h.) by poisoning him. Mas`udi has written that: His (Hasan's) wife Ja`dah bint al-Ash`ath poisoned him while Mu`awiyah had conspired with her that if she could contrive to poison Hasan he would pay her one hundred thousand Dirhams and marry her to Yazid. (Muruj adh-dhahab, vol. 2, p. 650)

His son Muhammad ibn al-Ash`ath was active in playing fraud with Hadrat Muslim ibn `Aqil in Kufah and in shedding Imam Husayn's blood in Karbala. But despite all these points he is among those from whom al-Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, at-Tirmidhi, an-Nasa'i and Ibn Majah have related traditions.

2. After the battle of Nahrawan, Amir al-mu'minin was delivering a sermon in the mosque of Kufah about ill effects of "Arbitration" when a man stood up and said "O' Amir al-mu'minin, first you desisted us from this Arbitration but thereafter you allowed it. We cannot understand which of these two was more correct and proper." On hearing this Amir al-mu'minin clapped his one hand over the other and said, "This is the reward of one who gives up firm view" that is, this is the outcome of your actions as you had abandoned firmness and caution and insisted on "Arbitration" but al-Ash`ath mistook it to mean as though Amir al mu'minin implied that "my worry was due to having accepted Arbitration," so he spoke out, "O' Amir al-mu'minin this brings blame on your own self" whereupon Amir al-mu'minin said harshly: "What do you know what I am

saying, and what do you understand what is for me or against me. You are a weaver and the son of a weaver brought up by unbelievers and a hypocrite. Curse of Allah and all the world be upon you.”

Commentators have written several reasons for Amir al-mu'minin calling Ash'ath a weaver. First reason is, because he and his father like most of the people of his native place pursued the industry of weaving cloth. So, in order to refer to the lowliness of his occupation he has been called 'weaver'. Yamanis had other occupations also but mostly this profession was followed among them. Describing their occupations Khalid ibn Safwan has mentioned this one first of all: “What can I say about a people among whom there are only weavers, leather dyers, monkey keepers and donkey riders. The hoopoe found them out, the mouse flooded them and a woman ruled over them”. (al-Bayan wa't-tabyin, vol. 1, p. 130)

The second reason is that "hiyakah" means walking by bending on either side, and since out of pride and conceit this man used to walk shrugging his shoulders and making bends in his body, he has been called "hayik".

The third reason is --- and it is more conspicuous and clear --- that he has been called a weaver to denote his foolishness and lowliness because every low person is proverbially known as a weaver. Their wisdom and sagacity can be well gauged by the fact that their follies had become proverbial, while nothing attains proverbial status without peculiar characteristics. Now, that Amir al-mu'minin has also confirmed it no further argument or reasoning is needed.

The fourth reason is that by this is meant the person who conspires against Allah and the Holy Prophet and prepares webs of which is the peculiarity of hypocrites. Thus, in Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah (vol. 12, p. 101) it is stated: It was mentioned before Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (p.b.u.h.) that the weaver is accursed when he explained that the weaver implies the person who concocts against Allah and the Prophet.

After the word weaver Amir al-mu'minin has used the word hypocrite, and there is no conjunction in between them in order to emphasise the nearness of meaning thereof. Then, on the basis of this hypocrisy and concealment of truth he declared him deserving of the curse of Allah and all others, as Allah the Glorified says: Verily, those that conceal what we have sent of (Our) manifest evidences and guidance, after what we have (so) clearly shown for mankind in the Book (they are), those that Allah doth curse them and (also) curse them all those who curse (such ones). (Qur'an, 2: 159)

After this Amir al-mu'minin says that "You could not avoid the degradation of being prisoner when you were unbeliever, nor did these ignominies spare you after acceptance of Islam, and you were taken prisoner." When an unbeliever the event of his being taken prisoner occurred in this way that when the tribe of Banu Murad killed his father Qays, he (al-Ash'ath) collected the warriors of Banu Kindah and divided them in three groups. Over one group he himself took the command, and on the others he placed Kabs ibn Hani' and al-Qash'am ibn Yazid al-Arqam as chiefs, and set off to deal with Banu Murad. But as misfortune would have it instead of Banu Murad he attacked Banu al-Harith ibn Ka'b. The result was that Kabs ibn Hani' and al-Qash'am ibn Yazid al-Arqam were killed and this man was taken prisoner alive. Eventually he got a release by paying three thousand camels as ransom. In Amir al-mu'minin's words, "Your wealth or birth could not save you from either," the reference is not to real 'fidyah' (release money) because he was actually released on payment of release money but the intention is that neither plenty of wealth nor his high position and prestige in his tribe could save him from this ignominy, and he could not protect himself from being a prisoner .

The event of his second imprisonment is that when the Holy Prophet of Islam passed away from this world a rebellion occurred in the region of Hadramawt for repelling which Caliph Abu Bakr wrote to the governor of the place Ziyad ibn Labid al-Bayadi. al-Ansari that he should secure allegiance and collect zakat and charities from those people. When Ziyad ibn Labid went to the tribe of Banu `Amr ibn Mu`awiyah for collection of zakat he took keen fancy for a she-camel of Shaytan ibn Hujr which was very handsome and of huge body. He jumped over it and took possession of it. Shaytan ibn Hujr did not agree to spare it and said to him to take over some other she-camel in its place but Ziyad would not agree. Shaytan sent for his brother al-`Adda' ibn Hujr for his support. On coming he too had a talk but Ziyad insisted on his point and did not, by any means, consent to keep off his hand from that she-camel. At last both these brothers appealed to Masruq ibn Ma'di Karib for help. Consequently, Masruq also used his influence so that Ziyad might leave the she-camel but he refused categorically, whereupon Masruq became enthusiastic and untying the she-camel handed it over to Shaytan. On this Ziyad was infuriated and collecting his men became ready to fight. On the other side Banu Wali`ah also assembled to face them, but could not defeat Ziyad and were badly beaten at his hands. Their women were taken away and property was looted. Eventually those who had survived were obliged to take refuge under the protection of al-Ash'ath. Al-Ash'ath promised assistance on the condition that he should be acknowledged ruler of the area. Those people agreed to this condition and

his coronation was also formally solemnised. After having his authority acknowledged he arranged an army and set out to fight Ziyad. On the other side Abu Bakr had written to the chief of Yemen, al-Muhajir ibn Abi Umayyah to go for the help of Ziyad with a contingent. Al-Muhajir was coming with his contingent when they came face to face. Seeing each other they drew swords and commenced fighting at ad-Zurqan. In the end al-Ash`ath fled from the battle-field and taking his remaining men closed himself in the fort of an-Nujayr. The enemy was such as to let them alone. They laid siege around the fort. Al-Ash`ath thought how long could he remain shut up in the fort with this lack of equipment and men, and that he should think out some way of escape. So one night he stealthily came out of the fort and met Ziyad and al-Muhajir and conspired with them that if they gave asylum to nine members of his family he would get the fort gate opened. They accepted this term and asked him to write for them the names of those nine persons. He wrote down the nine names and made them over to them, but acting on his traditional wisdom forgot to write his own name in that list. After settling this he told his people that he has secured protection for them and the gate of the fort should be opened. When the gate was opened Ziyad forces pounced upon them. They said they had been promised protection whereupon Ziyad's army said that this was wrong and that al-Ash`ath had asked protection only for nine members of his house, whose names preserved with them. In short eight hundred persons were put to sword and hands of several women were chopped off, while according to the settlement nine men were left off, but the case of al-Ash`ath became complicated. Eventually it was decided he should be sent to Abu Bakr and he should decided about him. At last he was sent to Medina in chains along with a thousand women prisoners. On the way relations and others, men and women, all hurled curses at him and the women were calling him traitor and one who got his own people put to sword. Who else can be a greater traitor? However, when he reached Medina Abu Bakr released him and on that occasion he was married to Umm Farwah.

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