

The Emphasis on Justice in Nahjul Balaghah

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Abstract

Justice (*adl*), according to the Shia school of thought,¹ is one of the principles of religion; anything God has said and any right that He has given to anyone over anyone, is based on the principle of justice.

The Quran has placed much emphasis on justice and the Prophet of God has been a perfect manifestation of this. However, The term 'justice' appears to have been repeated more often in Nahj ul-Balaghah than in the Quran or Sunnah. This is so because, while on one hand, greater streams of revenues began to flow into the treasury of the Muslims after the Prophet's demise, on the other there was discrimination in the Caliphs' approach for distribution of revenues among various social classes.

Thus, the society was overcome with drastic class differences. Imam Ali (a.s.) then was faced with two facts, one, that he himself was a man of justice and piety, and second, he was dealing with people unacquainted with the Sunnah and *sira* of the Prophet, who themselves had not observed a trace of justice in the Muslim community. Therefore, a rift was created between the society and principle of justice. It was Imam Ali (a.s.) who put forth his greatest effort in implementing justice into Islamic governance.

Introduction

Justice (*adl*) means to equally divide something or to establish balance and equilibrium among all, whether it is a material matter or spiritual one. Relating to the second meaning, the Prophet has said, "It is with justice that the heavens and the earth stand"², meaning that all of the aspects of the universe have been established with equilibrium in such a way that even if a fraction of it were out of its place or disproportionate, the entire system of the Universe would fall apart.

According to the Shia school of thought, it is important for justice to be included among the fundamentals of religion. That is, it is essential to acknowledge that anything that God says or any right He gives over anyone is founded on principle of justice.

Justice is an important pillar in Islam. In the Quran, being just is to achieve piety:

اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَى

Be fair; that is nearer to God-woriness.[3](#)

Throughout his blessed life, the Prophet – a perfect exemplar of justice – invited others to be just and not be one-sided. When the Prophet, in order to help in paying the blood money of two individuals from Bani Sulaym,[4](#) went to Bani Qurayzah, they secretly conspired to kill him. God made their plot known to the Prophet and the following verse was revealed:

وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا

...and ill feeling for a people should never lead you to be unfair.[5](#)

In other words, it advises not to unjustly harm someone out of an aversion that one holds in the heart for those who have wronged him.

When the Prophet sent Khalid ibn al-Walid for propagation (*tabligh*), Khalid senselessly killed many people from the tribe of Bani Jadhimah. In response, the Prophet raised his hands in prayer and said, “O Allah, I loathe Khalid.” He then sent Ali to pay the blood money to the families of those who were killed, and to return any stolen property.

Those who are familiar with the Prophet’s life (*sira*) know that when he lived in Mecca, the polytheists would severely agitate him. In Medina also, he was not spared from verbal abuse and malice. However, he did not get angry or curse them on account of their persecutions. Instead, from time to time he would ask God to guide them.

When dividing the spoils of the Battle of Hunayn, a man from the tribe of Tamim named Thu al-Khuwaysara told the Prophet, “Be just; you have deviated from justice.” The Prophet was visibly upset and rejected their accusations saying, “Woe to you, if I do not act justly, who will?”

Without a doubt, Islam is a just religion and the Prophet is the enforcer and embodiment of justice. He would exercise justice to the point where during the last days of his life, in the mosque of Medina, he said, “Whoever I am indebted to, come and demand it” as the Quran initially ordered him to say:

آمَنْتُ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَأُمِرْتُ لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمْ

I believe in whatever Book Allah has sent down. I have been commanded to do justice among you.[6](#)

This is similar to what the Muslims were commanded to do:

وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ

...and, when you judge between people, to judge with fairness.[7](#)

Implementing justice has been urged more than ten times in the Quran – justice with the self, justice between the self and people, and justice between the self and God.

This was a brief mention regarding justice and its implementation during the Prophet's lifetime, wherein we can ascertain its importance in Islam. However, in Imam Ali's speeches, sermons, letters, and short sayings, we see more than triple the number of times when he instructed the people to exercise justice as well as instructed the governors and his agents to apply justice and refrain from partiality.

Why is justice emphasized in Imam Ali's speeches more than in the Quran?

The reason becomes clear from understanding the Islamic society in the year 35 AH onward. And those who are familiar with Arabian history back then can understand this era.

One of the reasons for injustice to occur is increase in wealth and a longing for higher status. In the Prophet's time, money was not enough to fight over and the little money people acquired would be equally distributed amongst everyone. Moreover, people would not take a wage for the work they vowed to do. Rather, there was no wage to take. They committed to work because they wanted to gain God's satisfaction through serving people. This changed, however, with the Prophet's death.

On the one hand, increased streams of income flowed into the state treasury from the extended lands of Islamic State; on the other hand, when it came to using the state treasury, Muslims were categorized into those who had accepted Islam earlier and who had those accepted it later. As a result, one group would receive greater benefits without having done anything for it.

During the early years of the second caliph's administration, the harm of creating social classes in this way was not yet revealed. Over time, its effects became apparent. That is to say, a deep social gap emerged among the people.

Achieving piety, which during and shortly after the Prophet's era was recognized as an admirable goal, was now replaced with attainment of the material wealth. Conversely, family rivalry and racial

competition that had been buried underneath the ashes of Islamic equality, flared up. A Tamimi would assert pride over Makhzumi and Umawi over them both and all three would show pride over Yamani.

It was in such a society that Imam Ali (a.s.) assumed the caliphate, and what an unfitting time it was!

Knowing the unfavorable situation all too well, he said, “Leave me and seek someone else. We are facing a matter that has several facets and colors, which neither the hearts can bear nor intellect can accept.”⁸

Imam Ali (a.s.) himself was a man of justice and piety; as with the rest of his virtues, these two had been acquired from the Prophet. He wanted to rule over the people with justice. Most of these people had only heard of justice in name alone and had not seen any demonstration of piety. Some of these people had neither seen the Prophet nor knew his Sunnah well. From the day they entered the Islamic society, they were just acquainted with fighting and receiving the spoils of war.

Thus Imam Ali (a.s.) was a model of justice at a time when the world was not ready to bear it. It was for this reason that justice has been greatly emphasized in the Nahjul Balaghah. It was for this reason that the enemies killed Imam Ali (a.s.), thus removing justice and replacing it with oppression, which will continue until the day universal justice will be established.

Bibliography

1. al-Mufid, Shaykh Muhammad b. M. b. Numan (1413 A.H.), *Awail al-Maqalat* (Qum: Kungereh-e Sheykh-e Mufid, 1413). In this edition the main text starts on page 33

2. Nahj al-Balaghah

^{1.} Or Imamiyyah, “... a title for those who believe in the necessity of Imamate and its continuity in all ages, and that every Imam must be explicitly designated, and must also be infallible and perfect.” (al-Mufid, p. 36)

^{2.} بالعدل قامت السموات والارض; Tafsir Safi, Commentary on the verse 7 of Chapter al-Rahman

^{3.} The Table (al-Maidah); 5:8

^{4.} An agreement was signed between the Jews and the Messenger of God to help one another in paying the blood money.

^{5.} The Table (al-Maidah); 5:8

^{6.} Consultation (al-Shura); 42:15

^{7.} Women (al-Nisa); 4:58

^{8.} Nahj ul-Balagha , Sermon 92:

دَعُونِي وَالتَّمَسُّوا غَيْرِي؛ فَإِنَّا مُسْتَقْبِلُونَ أَمْرًا لَهُ وَجُوهٌ وَأَلْوَانٌ؛ لَا تَقُومُ لَهُ الْقُلُوبُ، وَلَا تَنْبُتُ عَلَيْهِ الْعُقُودُ

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