

The Transmission of this Sermon

It is documented that this sermon is a portion of a letter which Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) wrote after ‘Umro ‘As took over the reins of the rule of Egypt after the martyrdom of Muhammad b. Abi Bakr. In that letter, the Imam (a.s.) related the painful events which transpired after the passing away of the Noble Prophet (S). The Imam (a.s.) ordered that his letter be read publically so that the masses would know what transpired and so that the satanic whispers which were prevalent in the community at that time would not impact the people.

It is not improbable to believe that the Imam (a.s.) spoke the words in this sermon [which we will be reviewing] more than once – the first time being after The Battle of Jamal – the war in which ‘A’ysha played the principle role as one of the leaders in that major act of sedition; and that he repeated his words in another lengthy letter which he wrote.

Ibn al-Jawzi has stated:

The scholars of biography (*sirah*) have related that when ‘Ali, peace be upon him, had concluded The Battle of Jamal, he ascended the pulpit in Ba‘rah (Iraq) and delivered this sermon. In reality, his words point to the instigations for The Battle of Jamal and the misdeeds of ‘A’ysha .[1](#)

As for those who have narrated this sermon before Sayyid al-Ra‘i the list includes Abu Talib al-Makki in his book, *Quwwatul Qulub*; the late Shaykh al-Kulayni in volume five of *Furu’ al-Kafi*; Ibrahim b. Hilal al-Thaqafi in his book *al-Gharat*; Ibne Qutyabah in his book *al-Imamah wal Siyasa*; and al-Tabari in his book *al-Mustarshid* (with some variations) – this list of references has been derived from *Masadir Nahjul Balaghah*, vol. 2, pg. 86.

Amongst the commentators on the text of *Nahjul Balaghah* – specifically the contemporary writers – much has been said in regards to the explanation of this sermon, and it is for this reason that we begin with the following introduction to ensure that the discussions in regards to this sermon are made clear.

During the course of history, the character of the woman has gone through much discussion and many

extreme things have been stated as pass judgement on women. Sometimes their status as a human being has been diminished, and at other times, their very nature of being considered a human being has been called into doubt!²

At other times they had been thought of as being nothing more than a mere slave; in other instances, they were considered as the superior sex and the concept of 'female domination' of society was brought forth as the ideal notion! In regards to each of these views, it can be said that all of these extreme interpretations have had immense repercussions on one another.

In today's society, especially in the Western societies, or those who emulate "The West" and claim to follow democracy, we see the same sorts of discussions in regards to women.

During election times, politicians realized that they needed to gain the vote of the women, as men and women tend to vote in similar patterns; in addition, the capitalist system heavily required that women enter the workplace – especially considering the fact that most often, women are paid less than men and are given less opportunities than men to excel in the work environment. As well, the entire system of marketing and advertising which makes up a large part of the political and economic propaganda also requires the use of women [to market and sell their products].

It is due to all of these reasons that in their speeches, various nations continuously "defend" women's rights and do their utmost to elevate the character of women; however in their practical actions, we don't see any attempt in sincerely and honestly working to elevate their honour and status; thus the women of today have been caught up in many levels of frustration and disappointment – the same things which they were also deprived of in the past.

This same thing can also be seen when you wade through the religious texts in which some groups maintained women's rights as merely slogans to promote and defended them due to some act of pretension; they interpreted the religious texts in such a way as to paint a picture that a majority of the women would relate to and would – albeit in a dishonest way – show the women as having some predisposition [which they do not possess].

The sermon narrated above and other similar limited statements which are contained in *Nahjul Balaghah* have not remained un-touched from being discussed and commented upon.

Sometimes, the chain of narrators (*sanad*) has been called into question, and sometimes the explanation of the text has been discussed such that the smallest amount of filth of weakness can be attributed to women. Another one of the plots has been to go to an extreme (in discussing this sermon) such that some state that women in general are the complete totality of deficiencies and incompetency!

However, in the midst of this discussion, there are two things which we cannot deny – the first is that this

sermon was delivered **after** The Battle of Jamal and we know that the person who was at the centre of that war was the wife of the Noble Prophet (S) – ‘A’ysha who had been encouraged by two companions of the Prophet (S) – namely Talha and Zubayr and in an unprecedented move entered the battlefield, resulting in the spilling of the blood of many innocent and uninformed individuals. Some scholars state that the number of people killed in this one battle exceeded 17,000!

Indeed it is true that after the army of ‘A’ysha , Talha and Zubayr lost the war, this wife of the Prophet expressed her remorse (at what she had done), and that the Commander of the Faithful ‘Al i (a.s.), simply due to the respect [which he had for] the Prophet (S) honourably returned her back to Madina, however the ill-effects which this war left on the Muslim society will remain forever in the annals of history.

The second point which must be mentioned is that in many of the verses of the Qur’an we see that humanity on a whole has been condemned – for example:

﴿إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١﴾ إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢﴾ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٣﴾﴾

Indeed man has been created covetous: anxious when an ill befalls him and grudging when good comes his way.[3](#)

In another place in the Qur’an we read:

﴿إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا...﴾

...Indeed he (the human being) is most unjust and senseless.[4](#)

In yet another place in the Qur’an we read that the human being is one whose rejection of the bounties of God is transparent and apparent for everyone to see:

﴿إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ﴾

Man is indeed a manifest ingrate.[5](#)

In one more place, the human being has been considered as a creation that anytime a blessing reaches him, he goes into a state of rebellion:

﴿إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنَافٍ ﴿١﴾ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَيْطَغَىٰ ﴿٢﴾ أَنْ رَأَاهُ اسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٣﴾﴾

Indeed man becomes rebellious, when he considers himself without need. [6](#)

There are many more such verses as well in the Qur'an.

Without a doubt the human being is not, within his nature, to be a *manifest ingrate*, nor is he *most unfair and senseless*, nor is he *rebellious*. Rather, apparently what is meant here is that these verses are talking about human beings who have – willingly – not gone under the training and nurturing of the Divinely appointed leaders, and just like plants, allow themselves to grow on their own. They do not have a guide, nor do they have anyone to help them wake up from their spiritual slumber, and thus they are caught up in their own whims and desires.

It is for this reason that in the Qur'an there is praise for those people who possess God-consciousness and submit to the orders of Allah, and principally [the existence of] humanity themselves have been introduced as the ultimate purpose behind the creation of the universe:

﴿وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا﴾

Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given them an advantage over many of those whom We have created with a complete preference. [7](#)

When we speak about the female gender as well, we see that the same rules apply (as mentioned above in these verses of the Qur'an).

Amongst women, there are those who are noble such that it is even difficult to find men who have reached their calibre; but the opposite of this is also true that there are many women who have gone astray and are the source of many of the societal evils.

By keeping this introduction in mind, let us now begin the interpretation and clarification of the sermon mentioned (about the “deficiencies in women”) and at the end of our discussion, we will bring up some final points in this regards.

Just as we noted above, the Imam (a.s.) delivered this sermon after The Battle of Jamal and it was meant to be a warning for all of the Muslims, so that they would not fall into such a painful predicament in the future.

The Imam (a.s.) started off by saying:

مَعَاشِرَ النَّاسِ إِنَّ النِّسَاءَ نَوَاقِصُ الْإِيمَانِ نَوَاقِصُ الْحُظُوظِ نَوَاقِصُ الْعُقُولِ.

O' people! Women are 'deficient' in faith, 'deficient' in shares, and 'deficient' in intelligence.

He then went on to explain the reasons behind each of these three forms of 'deficiency' and states:

فَأَمَّا نُقْصَانُ إِيمَانِهِنَّ فَفُعُوْدُهُنَّ عَنِ الصَّلَاةِ وَ الصِّيَامِ فِي أَيَّامِ حَيْضِهِنَّ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ عُقُولِهِنَّ فَشَهَادَةُ امْرَأَتَيْنِ
كَشَهَادَةِ الرَّجُلِ الْوَاحِدِ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ حُظُوْظِهِنَّ فَمَوَارِيْثُهُنَّ عَلَى الْأَنْصَافِ مِنْ مَوَارِيْثِ الرَّجَالِ

As regards to the 'deficiency' in their faith, it is their abstention from prayers and fasting during their menstrual period. As regards to their 'deficiency' in their intelligence it is because the evidence of two women is equal to that of one man. As for the 'deficiency' of their shares it is because their share in inheritance is half of that of men.

There is no doubt that these three forms of 'deficiency' have their own understandings. If Allah has removed the responsibility of praying and fasting from women during their monthly menstruation period, then it is because during the time of their menstruation, they enter into an "almost-ill" period in which they require rest and they are not in a position to engage in acts of worship.

If the testimony of two women is equivalent to one man than it is due to the fact that the sentiments and emotions of a woman often overpower them and they may give testimony in favour of one and to the determinant of another merely based on their emotions.

A woman's portion of the inheritance is half of that of a man only in certain circumstances when children and wives are inheriting from the man; whereas in relation to inheriting from a father and mother – in many instances – the inheritance (of a man and woman) are the same and also in regards to the inheritance of brothers and sisters and their children – their inheritance is also similar. In other words: a woman – as a mother or sister – in many instances, takes an equal share of inheritance as a man.

Another reason why sometimes the man gets double the share of inheritance than the woman is due to the fact that the financial maintenance and all of the woman's daily requirements are the responsibility of the men (in her life) and not only does the woman not have to spend her own money on the maintenance of her children, but in fact her husband must provide all of her requirements, even if a large amount of money comes to her by way of inheritance or anything else.

Therefore, all of these differences (between the genders) which Islam has brought have been carefully calculated (and there are logical reasons behind each one of them).

However one thing which we cannot deny is that in every case, a woman and man are not equal from all aspects and those who propagate the claim of them being 'completely equal' or have, as recently spoken about the woman being greater than a man merely proclaim this belief of theirs – however their actions are completely different!

We find no President of a country who can state that men and women are completely equal and who would, when appointing his cabinet ministers for the various departments, appoint an equal amount of women and men in his government [simply based on their gender]; and also the Secretary General of an organization, when he is appointing individuals to various posts in the committees, normally do not appoint people merely based on their gender and not look to ensure that they have an equal amount of either gender on the cabinet – this does not occur even in the ‘Western world’, nor in the secular countries!

That which is closer to the truth and is far removed from all forms of ostentation is that: With all of the abilities that God has given to the two genders, we can easily understand and deal amongst them with justice so that each of these two are able to blossom within their own God-given abilities and with their created talents and powers which are within them, that they themselves and their society on a whole can make use of them. This is the best way that we can describe the issue, and as we continue on and go into our discussion on the finer points, God willing, we will offer a more-in-depth commentary on this issue.

At the end of the sermon, the Imam (a.s.) brings a short conclusion and states that:

فَاتَّقُوا شِرَارَ النِّسَاءِ وَكُونُوا مِنْ خِيَارِهِنَّ عَلَى حَذَرٍ

So beware of the evils of women. Be on your guard even from those of them who are (reportedly) good.

He concludes his sermon and says:

وَلَا تُطِيعُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَعْرُوفِ حَتَّى لَا يَطْمَعَنَّ فِي الْمُنْكَرِ

Do not obey them even in good things so that they may not attract you to the evil things.

It is clear that the meaning of ‘not obeying women even in good things’ does not mean that if they encourage towards good actions such as the prayers (*Ṣalat*), fasting, justice and goodness that we are to disobey them; rather it means that we must not unconditionally follow them. In other words, ‘goodness’ must be performed because it is good, and not because one’s spouse has commanded it to be done, such that one becomes bold and they think that they now can order you to do bad things and that they will be obeyed.

Even though the wordings in *Nahjul Balaghah* in this section are not specifically directed to one’s wife and all women in general have been included in the discussion, however it is clear that such an issue would usually occur more so within the context of a husband and wife relationship.

Therefore, what has been mentioned in this sermon – and also keeping in mind the verses of the Qur’an

which speak on the obligation to *enjoin the good and forbid the evil*, and the necessity to accept that from others – applies to men and women alike, and the meaning of this sermon is not that one needs to ignore the performance of good deeds! Rather, the meaning of this sermon is that one’s actions must not be done through unconditional obedience (of another person).

In any case, those women with true faith, awareness, intellect and dedication (to the faith of Islam) are definitely exempt from this ruling; those women whose pleasure lies in Allah’s pleasure; whose anger is the anger of Allah – such as Fatima al-Zahra (a.s.) – whose commands were nothing other than advising towards goodness and righteousness, and who constantly sought to attain the pleasure and closeness of the Creator.

This point is also clear that when it is said: ‘be careful of even the good ones amongst them’ that “good” is a relative term and is not absolute, as one should not only not be on the lookout for those who possess ‘absolute goodness’, rather one must accept such a person’s advice and consider their council as being worth something. It is for this reason that in the history of Islam, we see men who gave great importance to the suggestions of their wives.

In some of the verses of the Qur’an we see that asking women for advice has actually been considered as a noble trait. For example in regards to weaning a child off of his mother’s milk, we read the following in Suratul Baqarah:

وَالْوَالِدَاتُ يُرْضِعْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ حَوْلَيْنِ كَامِلَيْنِ لِمَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُنْمِ الرِّضَاعَةَ... فَإِنْ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْهُمَا ۖ وَتَشَاوُرٍ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا ۗ

Mothers shall suckle their children for two full years – that for such as desire to complete the suckling ... And if the couple desire to wean, with mutual consent and consultation, there will be no sin upon them...8

1. Note that what Ibn al-Jawzi has stated and that which Sayyid al-Raḥī have stated in regards to the delivery of this sermon differ from one another.

2. Refer to the following passages of the Old and New Testament (Bible) – [added by the translator]:

Burn The Daughter: “And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire.” (Leviticus 21:9)

Cut Off Her Hand: “When men strive together one with another and the wife of the one draweth near for to deliver her husband out of the hand of him that smiteth him, and putteth forth her hand, and taketh him by the secrets: then thou shalt cut off her hand, thine eye shall not pity her.” (Deuteronomy 25:11–12)

Female Births Get Penalty: “Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean.” (Leviticus 12:2) ... “But if she bear a maid (female) child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days.” (Leviticus 12:5)

Female Inferiority: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” (I Corinthians 11:3)

Female Inferiority: “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the

woman; but the woman for the man.” (I Corinthians 11:8–9)

Jesus Will Kill Children: “Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and they that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.” (Revelation 2:22–23)

Kill The Witches: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Whoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death. He that sacrificeth unto any god, save to the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed.” (Exodus 22:18–20)

Rape My Daughter: “Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing. But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go.” (Judges 19:24–25)

Silence The Woman: “Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” (I Timothy 2:11–14)

Stone The Woman: “If a man be found lying with a woman married to a husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her;” (Deuteronomy 22:22)

Stone The Woman: “Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour’s wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you.” (Deuteronomy 22:24)

Wives, Submit Yourselves: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.” (Ephesians 5:22–24)

Women Shall Not Speak: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” (I Corinthians 14:34–35)

Women’s Sorrow: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” (Genesis 3:16)

Rip Up Pregnant Women: “Samaria shall become desolate; for she hath rebelled against her God: they shall fall by the sword: their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up.” (Hosea 13:16)

The Wicked Woman – Part 1: “Give me any plague, but the plague of the heart: and any wickedness, but the wickedness of a woman.” (Eccles. 25:13)

The Wicked Woman – Part 2: “Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die.” (Eccles. 25:22)

The Wicked Woman – Part 3: “If she go not as thou wouldest have her, cut her off from thy flesh, and give her a bill of divorce, and let her go.” (Eccles. 25: 26)

The Wicked Woman – Part 4: “The whoredom of a woman may be known in her haughty looks and eyelids. If thy daughter be shameless, keep her in straitly, lest she abuse herself through overmuch liberty.” (Eccles. 26:9–10)

The Wicked Woman – Part 5: “A silent and loving woman is a gift of the Lord: and there is nothing so much worth as a mind well instructed. A shamefaced and faithful woman is a double grace, and her continent mind cannot be valued.” (Eccles. 26:14–15)

The Wicked Woman – Part 6: “A shameless woman shall be counted as a dog; but she that is shamefaced will fear the Lord.” (Eccles.26:25)

The Wicked Woman – Part 7: “For from garments cometh a moth, and from women wickedness. Better is the churlishness of a man than a courteous woman, a woman, I say, which bringeth shame and reproach.” (Eccles. 42:13–14)

[3.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul Ma’arij (75), 19–21

[4.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul Ahzab (33), 72

[5.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul Zukhruf (43), 15

[6.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul ‘Alaq (96), 6–7

[7.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul Isra’ (17), 70

[8.](#) Al-Qur’an, Suratul Baqarah (2), verse 233

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