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A Glimpse of Nahjul Balaghah's Sermon of Disparagement (Al-Khutbah al-Qasiah). This paper offers a glance into the reasons for Divine trials, qualities of Satan, and the effects and consequences of arrogance and following one's desires.

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A Glimpse of Nahjul Balaghah's Sermon of Disparagement (Al-Khutbah al-Qasiah)
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Abstract

A masterpiece of Shi'i Islam literature, *Nahjul Balaghah*, or *The Peak of Eloquence*, is a celebrated collection of sermons, letters, tafsirs, and narrations attributed to Imam Ali – the cousin and son- in-law of Prophet Muhammad – and compiled by Sharif al-Razi, a Shi'a scholar in the tenth century.

Among the 245 sermons, Deenparvar touches upon the 'Sermon of Disparagement', in which the Imam condemns Satan for his arrogance – a quality that lures people to committing a myriad of other immoral actions – and warns people not to fall into Satan's trap. This paper offers a glance into the reasons for Divine trials, qualities of Satan, and the effects and consequences of arrogance and following one's desires.

Introduction

In the following paper, I will provide a commentary on the excerpt from the 'Sermon of Disparagement' from *Nahjul Balaghah*. Imam Ali said:

Then He put His angels on trial concerning these attributes in order to distinguish those who are modest from those who are vain. Therefore, Allah, who is aware of whatever is hidden in the hearts and whatever lies behind the unseen said:

Verily I am about to create man from clay," And when I have completed and have breathed into him of My spirit, then fall ye prostrating in obeisance unto him. And did fall prostrating in obeisance the angels all together, Save Iblis... **(*38:71–74*).**

His vanity stood in his way. Consequently, he felt proud over Adam by virtue of his creation and boasted over him on account of his origin. Thus, this enemy of Allah is the leader of those who boast, and the fore– runner of the vain.

It is he who laid the foundation of factionalism, quarreled with Allah about the robe of greatness, put on the dress of haughtiness and took off the covering of humility. Do you not see how Allah made him low on account of his vanity and humiliated him for his feigning to be high? He discarded him in this world and provided for him burning fire in the next world.

ثُمَّ اِخْتَبَرَ بِذَلِكَ مَلاَئِكَتَهُ اَلْمُقَرَّبِينَ لِيَمِيزَ اَلْمُتَوَاضِعِينَ مِنْهُمْ مِنَ اَلْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ فَقَالَ سُبْحَانَهُ وَ هُوَ اَلْعَالِمُ بِمُضْمَرَاتِ اَلْقُلُوبِ وَ مَحْجُوبَاتِ اَلْغُيُوبِ إِنِّي خالِقٌ بَشَراً مِنْ طِينٍ فَإِذا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَ نَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ ساجِدِينَ فَسَجَدَ اَلْمَلاَئِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ إِلاَّ إِبْلِيسَ اِعْتَرَضَتْهُ اَلْحَمِيَّةُ فَافْتَخَرَ عَلَى آدَمَ بِخَلْقِهِ وَ تَعَصَّبَ عَلَيْهِ لِأَصْلِهِ فَعَدُوُّ اَللَّهِ إِمَامُ اَلْمُتَعَصِّبِينَ وَ سَلَفُ اَلْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ اَلَّذِي وَضَعَ أَسَاسَ اَلْعَصَبِيَّةِ وَ نَازَعَ اَللَّهَ رِدَاءَ اَلْجَبَرِيَّةِ وَ اِدَّرَعَ لِبَاسَ اَلتَّعَزُّزِ وَ خَلَعَ قِنَاعَ اَلتَّذَلُّلِ أَلاَ يَرَوْنَ تَرَوْنَ كَيْفَ صَغَّرَهُ اَللَّهُ بِتَكَبُّرِهِ وَ وَضَعَهُ بِتَرَفُّعِهِ فَجَعَلَهُ فِي اَلدُّنْيَا مَدْحُوراً وَ أَعَدَّ لَهُ فِي اَلآخِرَةِ سَعِيراً.

The Trial of Angels

A few points will made using the above excerpt:

1. Divine tests are not limited to humans alone; angels are tested as well.

2. Humility and arrogance exists in the world of angels.

3. The relationship between angels and humans.

The system of creation is a complete structure in which God has made the means and tools for reaching perfection available; tests and trials are one of those means.

Angels were created and tested before humans. ‘Testing’ means becoming aware of the truth in something. A teacher does not know if the student has studied or not; therefore he must test him to know, although divine tests are not to make Allah aware of the truth of the matter for He knows everything.

Some believe the motive is for the angels themselves to know their own rank; others hold that testing angels is for others to understand why some are chosen and others, like Satan, have fallen. In reality, tests are there to separate the lines from one another.

Testing is also defined as: ‘to become’ or to ripen, develop, and to leave the state of rawness towards the state of completion. If there were to be no trials, development would not happen. Trials are not just to become informed, but are rather an operation and form of transformation in which each person’s identity and personality rises and emerges. Testing and trials are a workshop where the reality of a person are formed and revealed. This subject matter is found in a few other areas of the sermon and has come in regards humans as well:

أَلاَ تَرَوْنَ أَنَّ اَللَّهَ سُبْحَانَهُ اِخْتَبَرَ اَلْأَوَّلِينَ مِنْ لَدُنْ آدَمَ ص إِلَى اَلْآخِرِينَ مِنْ هَذَا اَلْعَالَمِ بِأَحْجَارٍ لاَ تَضُرُّ وَلاَ تَنْفَعُ

Do you not see that Allah, the Glorified, has tried all the people among those who came before, beginning with Adam, up to the last ones in this world with stones which yield neither benefit nor harm?

And in another instance Imam Ali says:

وَضَعَهُ بِأَوْعَرِ بِقَاعِ اَلْأَرْضِ حَجَراً وَ أَقَلِّ نَتَائِقِ اَلدُّنْيَا مَدَراً وَ أَضْيَقِ بُطُونِ اَلْأَوْدِيَةِ قُطْراً بَيْنَ جِبَالٍ خَشِنَةٍ وَ رِمَالٍ دَمِثَةٍ وَ عُيُونٍ وَشِلَةٍ وَ قُرًى مُنْقَطِعَةٍ

He placed the House of Allah in the most rugged stony part of the earth and on a highland with least soil thereon, which no plant grows there, and among the narrowest valleys between rough mountains and soft sandy plains, where travel is difficult upon and springs of scanty water and scattered habitants.

In any case, those who are honoured to go for pilgrimage are faced with difficulties they must endure so that they may strengthen themselves, or at least change their previously held abilities. A group of people are transformed in that short time period and for the rest of their lives find themselves on the path of guidance and bliss; yet some are not able to make use of that environment and opportunity and instead of rising, they fall. Hence, trials themselves are a workshop for self-building. In another instance the Imam says:

قَدِ اِخْتَبَرَهُمُ اَللَّهُ بِالْمَخْمَصَةِ وَابْتَلاَهُمْ بِالْمَجْهَدَةِ وَامْتَحَنَهُمْ بِالْمَخَاوِفِ...

Allah tried them with hunger, afflicted them with difficulty, tested them with fear, and upset them with troubles.

Thus, trials are not there just to become informed; rather, it is an examination where one must progress and his cruelties get dispelled. In another section it says:

> وَلَكِنَّ اَللَّهَ يَخْتَبِرُ عِبَادَهُ بِأَنْوَاعِ اَلشَّدَائِدِ وَيَتَعَبَّدُهُمْ بِأَنْوَاعِ اَلْمَجَاهِدِ وَيَبْتَلِيهِمْ بِضُرُوبِ اَلْمَكَارِهِ إِخْرَاجاً لِلتَّكَبُّرِ مِنْ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَإِسْكَاناً لِلتَّذَلُّلِ فِي نُفُوسِهِمْ وَلِيَجْعَلَ ذَلِكَ أَبْوَاباً فُتُحاً إِلَى فَضْلِهِ وَأَسْبَاباً ذُلُلاً لِعَفْوِهِ...

Allah tries His creatures by means of different troubles, wants them to render worship through hardships and involves them in distresses, all in order to extract out vanity from their hearts. In sermon 91, he emphasizes this very point:

> وَقَدَّرَ الْأَرْزَاقَ فَكَثَّرَهَا وَقَلَّلَهَا، وَقَسَّمَهَا عَلَى الضِّيقِ والسَّعَةِ فَعَدَلَ فِيهَا لِيَبْتَلِيَ مَنْ أَرَادَ بِمَيْسُورِهَا وَمَعْسُورِهَا، وَلِيَخْتَبِرَ بِذلِكَ الشُّكْرَ والصَّبْرَ مِنْ غَنِيِّهَا وَفَقِيرِهَا...

He ordained livelihoods with plenty and with paucity. He distributed them narrowly as well as profusely. He did it with justice to test whomever He desired, with prosperity or with destitution, and to test through it the gratefulness or endurance of the rich and the poor.[1]

In truth, the scarcity and abundance in sustenance based on God's wisdom and justice is for people's growth and transformation so that they progress and come to understand that both are to his benefit; just as seen in narrations:

> ومن الناس من لا يصلحهم الا الفقر فاذا اغنيته أفسده ذلك

There some people whom if reach great livelihood and sustenance, will become corrupt; therefore their best interest and welfare lies in the shortening of livelihood.

If an individual was placed in a crisis with hardships and adversities and did not turn to sin (a prohibited or haram act) and gave thanks to his Lord, his thanks and patience would be the symbol of a positive and building growth and evolution. Clearer and more eloquent than all is the last sentence from saying number 90:

> لا يَقُولَنّ أحدُكم: اللهمّ إنّي أعوذ بك من الفتنة؛ لأنّه ليس أحدٌ إلاّ وهو مشتملٌ على فتنة، ولكنْ مَن استعاذ فليَستَعِذْ من مُضِلاّت الفتن، فإنّ الله سبحانه يقول: " واعلموا أنّما أموالُكم وأولادُكم فتنة" و معنى ذلك انّه سبحانه يختبرهم بالاموال و الأولاد ليتبيّن السّاخط لرزقه و الرّاضي بقسمه و ان كان سبحانه اعلم بهم من انفسهم و لكنّ لتظهر الأفعال الّتي بها يستحقّ الثّواب و العقاب.

None of you should say, "O Allah, I seek Your protection from trouble" because there is no one who is not involved in trouble, but whoever seeks Allah's protection he should seek it from misguiding troubles, because Allah, the Glorified, says:

And know you that your wealth and your children are a temptation! (***8:28***)

and its meaning is that He tries people with wealth and progeny in order to distinguish one who is displeased with his livelihood from the one who is happy with what he has been given. Even though Allah, the Glorified, knows them more than they know themselves yet He does so to let them perform actions with which they earn reward or punishment.

This means let a truth be recognized and formed within them; that person who becomes angry, complains, and protests to God because of crises and his livelihood and or that person who is not fazed by the ups and downs, but rather expresses his gratification. Reaching the level of satisfaction after passing through difficulties and hardships is that very truth that is revealed and made present.

Hence, it is made clear that tests and trials are not there to increase God's knowledge; rather it is a workshop where people can grow, develop, and reach perfection or burn and get eliminated. Even clearer than the aforementioned evidence is the following passage:

> ثُمَّ اِخْتَبَرَ بِذَلِكَ مَلاَئِكَتَهُ اَلْمُقَرَّبِينَ لِيَمِيزَ اَلْمُتَوَاضِعِينَ مِنْهُمْ مِنَ اَلْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ فَقَالَ سُبْحَانَهُ وَ هُوَ اَلْعَالِمُ بِمُضْمَرَاتِ اَلْقُلُوبِ وَ مَحْجُوبَاتِ اَلْغُيُوبِ إِنِّي خالِقٌ بَشَراً مِنْ طِينٍ فَإِذا سَوَّيْتُهُ...

To understand this test and trial so that 'humble' (**متواضعين**) be distinguished from the 'arrogant' (**مستكبرين**), God the glorified, who knows that which is hidden in the hearts and that which is unseen within, announced:

"Indeed I am about to create a human being out of clay. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down to him in prostration. So thereat the angels prostrated, all of them together, but not Iblis, he refused to be among those who prostrated." (***15:28-31***)

The proof in the passage is "**وهو العالم بمضمرات القلوب...**"– "*And who knows that which is hidden in the hearts...*" – shows that God's motive behind this test is not to learn something that He did not know.

Iblis: A Symbol of Intolerance and Arrogance

What is zeal (*hamiyyah*)? 'Zeal' has various meanings and usually its negative connotations are used, which are arrogance, self- importance, and vanity. For example, the Qur'an uses this word with the suffix 'pagan ignorance' (*jahiliyyah*): the bigotry of pagan ignorance (**حمية الجاهلية**: *amiyyata jhiliyyati*) inclined to be used in simple constituents. Zeal is a power of anger which when excited will lead to an

outbreak.

In any case, that which is intended in this sermon is arrogance and pride. A perfect example of this can be seen in Iblis, who showed arrogance towards God and sold his greatness, all of which was revealed in a distinct event. He ignored and objected God's command in regards to Adam and prostrating to him, and the product of this arrogance and pride were two other vices: boastfulness and the prejudice of pagan ignorance.

He bragged about the virtue of his creation and used it as a weapon against his creator; he who was a creation of God, who had nothing of himself to boast about, and all of which he had was from God. Bigotry of pagan ignorance thus refers to blindly advocating and supporting something with no logical base.

Iblis's words here are the root of racism and nationalism, which has caused major difficulties for various nations throughout history, and colonizers have used this deceiving tool and weapon in taking advantage of the deprived.

> فَعَدُوُّ اللهِ إِمَامُ الْمُتَعَصِّبِينَ، وَسَلَفُ الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ، الَّذِي وَضَعَ أَسَاسَ الْعَصَبِيَّةِ، وَنَازَعَ اللهَ رِدَاءَ الْجَبْرِيَّةِ، وَادَّرَعَ لِبَاسَ التَّعَزُّزِ، وَخَلَعَ قِنَاعَ التَّذَلُّلِ...

Thus, this enemy of Allah is the leader of those who boast, and the fore-runner of the vain. It is he who laid the foundation of factionalism, quarrelled with Allah about the robe of greatness, put on the dress of haughtiness and took off the covering of humility.

The Effects of Arrogance and Pride

One of the important points made in the *Nahjul Balaghah* (Peak of Eloquence) is the development of thinking and motivation in reflection and contemplation. Those who listen closely to these sermons and study them, fall into deep thought and through struggling to understand, discover the truth and find proper solutions.

Sometimes by means of a one lettered word, like "فا", a matter is brought to mind and conclusions made upon it. For instance, in this section of the sermon, as philosophers would say, the minor premise (*al-sughra*) and conclusion (*natijah*) of a coupled syllogism are clearly stated, and detecting the major premise (*al-kubra*) is left to the reader:

1) Satan was arrogant towards God. (Minor Premise)

2) Whoever does such towards the Divine, is an enemy of God. (Major Premise)

3) Then, Satan is an enemy of God. "**عدو الله**" (Conclusion)

Thus, the outcome of arrogance is rivalry with God, which is greater than any sin and the source of all evil and immorality.

Another matter is the headship and leadership of the arrogant:

إِمَامُ الْمُتَعَصِّبِينَ، وَسَلَفُ الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ

That is to say, a person who places himself arrogantly before God as His enemy and opposes His command, not only has he ruined himself and deviated from the right path, but he has played a role in the misguidance and fall of others; just as it has been stated in the Qur'an:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ

We made them leaders who invite to the Fire. (***28:41***)

Four Traits of Iblis

1. The foundation of prejudice is ignorant attachments and blind defense. Wherever there is a thoughtless bias, it is a sign of linkage to Satan, where the biased are inspired by him and act according to his command.

(**وضع أساس العصبية**: It is he who laid the foundation of factionalism)

2. Iblis ranks at the highest level of the arrogant and bigots. He considered himself equal to God and His might, and saw greatness and power in himself. As a result, his course of action was to argue and oppose God's command, and instead of carrying out God's order, he himself issued a command.

(**نازَعَ اللهَ رِدَاءَ الْجَبْرِيَّةِ**: quarrelled with Allah about the robe of greatness)

3. He considered himself to be glorious and undefeatable, and overlooked his weakness and vulnerability. (**وادّرع لباس العزّ**: put on the dress of haughtiness)

4. He separated himself with the garment of modesty and humility and turned in pursuit of transgression and rebellion. (**خلع قناع التذلّل**: took off the covering of humility)

The Penalty of the Arrogant

أَلاَ تَرَوْنَ كَيْفَ صَغَّرَهُ اللهُ بِتَكَبُّرِهِ... وَأَعَدَّ لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ سَعِيراً

After mentioning the effects of arrogance and its manifestations, Imam Ali hints at the punishment of the prideful, in which its consequences are the miseries that will befall upon them:

“Do you not see how Allah made him low on account of his vanity and humiliated him for his feigning to be high? He discarded him in this world and provided for him burning fire in the next world.”

The natural consequences of ‘arrogance’ and ‘vanity’ are humiliation, lowliness, disgrace, and punishment. An important point is the relation between the opposition of the proud and their arrogant lives with the system of creation. Whoever argues with this system and the laws of the universe is condemned to defeat; just as he who swims against the water current will get caught up in its waves.

Therefore, he who wants to step foot in the forbidden realm of God’s power is like a person who disregards and neglects gravity, and will definitely fall prey to nature’s wrath and will fall with force and lose his life. An arrogant person places himself in a spot which is specifically for God alone.

On the night journey of ascension (*mi’raj*), Angel Gabriel told Prophet Muhammad:

لو دنوت انملةً لاحترقت

If I get any closer I will burn

In another words, one can say that these four acts: He belittled and lessened (**صغّر**) Iblis, He brought down his rank (**وضع**), He discarded him in this world (**جعل في الدّنيا مدحورا**), and He provided for him burning fire in the next world (**اعدّ...**) are not direct actions; they are consequences of Iblis’s actions.

In this way, God has created the law and system based upon truth and justice, to reach perfection and growth, and as a tool set for testing. For this reason, if people or any other creature steps foot along the appointed path, he will reach this goal and will attain success. And if one discards this path and chooses another, he will break.

Hence, the outstanding system of the divine is such that it does not bode well with arrogance, does not accept vanity, and will naturally have a harsh punishment awaiting it. This means that the four acts attributed to God, were in reality Iblis’s doing, and since he did not adhere and follow the system and rejected it, he crumbled among the great machinery of the universe’s system. Imam Ali says: “**صغّره الله بتكبرّه ووضعه بترفّعه**” It was arrogance and vanity that brought this calamity upon himself, and not God.

The Divine Secrets of Trial

وَلَوْ أَرَادَ اللهُ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَخْلُقَ آدَمَ مِنْ نُور يَخْطَفُ الأبْصَارَ ضِيَاؤُهُ، وَيَبْهَرُ الْعُقُولَ رُوَاؤُهُ، وَطِيبٍ يَأْخُذُ الأنْفَاسَ عَرْفُهُ، لَفَعَلَ، وَلَوْ فَعَلَ لَظَلَّتْ لَهُ الأعْنَاقُ خَاضِعَةً، وَلَخَفَّتِ الْبَلْوَى فِيهِ عَلَى المَلائِكَةِ.

If Allah had wanted to create Adam from a light whose glare would have dazzled the eyes, whose handsomeness would have amazed the wits and whose fragrance would have caught the breath, He could have done so; and if He had done so, people would have bowed to him in humility and the trial of the angels through him would have become easier.

وَلكِنَّ اللهَ سُبْحَانَهُ يَبْتَلِي خَلْقَهُ بِبَعْضِ مَا يَجْهَلُونَ أَصْلَهُ، تَمْيِيزاً بِالاخْتِبَارِ لَهُمْ، وَنَفْياً لِلاسْتِكْبَارِ عَنْهُمْ، وَإِبْعَاداً لِلْخُيَلاَءِ مِنْهُم

But Allah, the Glorified, tries Hi ' creatures by means of those things whose real nature they do not know in order to distinguish (good and bad) for them through the trial, and to remove vanity from them and keep them and keep them aloof from pride and self-admiration.

God's tests are a serious and fundamental matter, and typically must be in tough and productive situations so that people grow and build themselves for their change and transformation to take place.

Passing through the difficulties and ups and downs is to attain power and perfection; the more the difficulties, the more the growth and progress, just as reaching the peak of physical strength and developing strong and firm muscles is gained by enduring pressure and perseverance in difficult tasks. If a person is not able to bear the pressure with resistance, he will not reach that summit; and if he does bear it, buds of growth and perfection will open and the quantity of means will turn into the quality of power.

If man was not created from a dark clay, but rather from a mesmerizing light, and such a light that none felt equal to or even close to in stature, then there would no longer be an excuse for the angels to say that this human made of clay will cause corruption and bloodshed on earth. And before it, Iblis would never say 'I am better, for he is of clay and I am of fire.' Surely prostrating before Adam would have been much easier.

Thus, if the truth and motive behind Adam's creation was known– that he is worthy of being God's representative on Earth (*khalifatullah fil'ardh*), and the growth, perfection, development, and prosperity that arises will be a result of that which radiates from his existence, Iblis would have never stood before him and would have been submissive and obedient.

In such a situation, testing and trials would not have a purpose, and every person would obey God's commands. It is similar to setting out a colourful tablecloth in a room, with various delicious foods and beverages all acquired with lawful money and then invite a group of hungry people to eat from the lawful food (*halaal*) and not from the distasteful and unlawful food that can be found in another room. If one does not choose to eat from the unlawful food, it cannot be used as proof and reasoning for his faith and piety.

Therefore, the system of the universe set for people and other creatures to reach perfection is not a

formality; this system is based upon a set of truths in which people play the main role in. An important act and reaction must form in his existence, and that is divine testing that reveals and builds the gems of human existence.

Divine tests, however, are demonstrated when the 'tools used for testing' are a serious matter and to an extent undistinguishable. That is to say, a situation must arise in which, from a spiritual perspective and in order to make a choice, a need for great inner struggle must form in the individual until intellect dominates desires and the state of submission before God comes to life within them.

Then after a choice is made, a sacred choice in which its practices are a reflection of one's inner struggle. Imam Ali says the following in regards to this ambiguity – the secret of divine testing:

Allah tries his servant in a matter they do not know the truth of, and this is ambiguous, for in a situation where they do not know and are unaware of the philosophy behind God's command, room for doubt and uncertainty is prepared.

Therefore, he must think and discern the truth from falsehood and that which he questioned in regards to submitting to God, with the help of the intellect, eliminate from one's self to finally make a decisive choice to follow God's command in all situations and give it priority before everything else.

وَلكِنَّ اللهَ سُبْحَانَهُ يَبْتَلِي خَلْقَهُ بِبَعْضِ مَا يَجْهَلُونَ أَصْلَهُ

God's creation is tried in things whose real nature people do not know. The angels were unaware of the secrets behind Adam's creation and his eligibility in being God's representative, and did not know that people's growth, prosperity and development on earth will occur through him. Knowing the truth behind an obligation is easier.

If God created Adam from a light greater than their light, they would recognize it and know the secret of his creation. For that reason, prostrating to Adam would not have been difficult for them; they would have accepted without question and as a result, being tried and tested would be meaningless.

During Imam Ali's era, people's trials were carried out in a similar situation. During the Battle of Siffeen, Imam Ali issued an order to attack Mu'awiyah's army, but Mu'awiyyah created doubt and uncertainty amongst the Imam's followers. From one end, Mu'awiyyah's army attached copies of the Qur'an to the end of spears and declaring adherence to the it, and from another end the command to fight (*jihad*) came from the Imam were both uncertain to the people; here the conditions for testing were formed to distinguish the faithful from the faithless.

فَاعْتَبِروا بِمَا كَانَ مِنْ فِعْلِ اللهِ بِإِبْلِيسَ، إِذْ أَحْبَطَ عَمَلَهُ الطَّوِيلَ، وَجَهْدَهُ الْجَهِيدَ، وَكَانَ قَدْ عَبَدَ اللهَ سِتَّةَ آلاَفِ سَنَة، لاَ يُدْرَى أَمِنْ سِنِي الدُّنْيَا أَمْ مِنْ سِنِي الاْخِرَةِ، عَنْ كِبْرِ سَاعَة وَاحِدَ

You should take a lesson from what Allah did with Satan; namely, He nullified his great acts and extensive efforts on account of the vanity of one moment, although Satan had worshipped Allah for six thousand years – whether by the reckoning of this world or of the next world is not known.

Two points are taken from this passage:

1– Learning from Iblis's test

2– A warning from retribution

God's tests and trials are not limited to Iblis alone; rather everyone, particularly humans, are being tested. Therefore, his past and his fate should be a made a lesson for all. The word "**فاعتبروا**" is the Imam's direct order to take a lesson from history and to avoid letting time pass by. This has been repeated fifteen times in the sermon, using different terms:

1) **انظروا**: look (4 times)

2) **فاعتبروا**: take lesson (3 times)

3)**فاحذروا** : you should fear (3 times)

4)**الحذر** : beware

5) **فاتّقوا**: be conscious

6) **اتّعظوا**: take admonition

7) **استعيذوا** : seek protection

8) ؟ ؟: (fear) Allah! Allah!

9)**تدبروا** : think

None should be arrogant about their worship and faith. Rather, people should constantly be between the two states of 'fear' and 'hope,' for perhaps there are people who worship for many years and seem God-conscious and pious through appearance, but when faced with the ups and downs in life, Satan's calls, and the desires of their souls they lose their stature and exit the realm of religion and piety. A clear example of this is Iblis who had six thousand years of worship under his belt, but when tested he failed and his worship nullified.

An influential method to people's guidance and happiness is preparing the grounds for people to open their hearts, accept guidance and instructions, and walk upon the path of piety and faith. If people become familiar with the life events of those who have deviated from the truth and see the outcome of sin and rebellion against God, they will accept the truth more comfortably and easily.

Imam Ali initially discusses the events taken place in Iblis's past, accounting the turning points, stumbles, and lapses in judgment. He then uses the appropriate setting and with a sentence to take caution "**فاعتبروا**" he warns the readers from falling due to such lapses. Similar to the verses regarding the fate of the people of Noah and the people of A'ad and Thamud mentioned plenty in the Qur'an and advised by it to take lessons from them:

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِمَنْ خَافَ عَذَابَ الْآخِرَةِ

There is indeed a sign in that for him who fears the punishment of the Hereafter. (***11:103***)

Warning from 'adverse consequences' and 'lost efforts'

Iblis worshiped for six thousand years (though it is unclear if this is based on the years in this world or the hereafter). Either way, all of his worship was nullified because of refusing to prostrate to Adam and carrying out God's command; thus, he became imprisoned by 'adverse consequences.' Whoever disobeys His orders will suffer a doomful fate and will leave this world faithless, unless if he turns back and repents:

وَكَأَيِّنْ مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ عَتَتْ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهَا وَرُسُلِهِ فَحَاسَبْنَاهَا حِسَابًا شَدِيدًا وَعَذَّبْنَاهَا عَذَابًا نُكْرًا

How many a town defied the command of its Lord and His apostles, then We called it to a severe account and punished it with a dire punishment. So it tasted the evil consequences of its conduct, and the outcome of its conduct was ruin. (***65:8-9***)

Verily people should be worried about their future and struggle to preserve their faith, as Imam Ali said:

الدنيا كلّها جهل الّا مواضع العلم, و العلم كلّه حجّة الّا ما عمل به, و العمل كلّه رياء الّا ما كان مخلصاً و الإخلاص على خطر حتّى ينظر العبد بما يختم له

This world (dunya) is in the darkness of ignorance, unless there which the light of knowledge shines; and all of knowledge is proof, other than that which is acted upon; and all actions are hypocritical, other than that which is sincere; and sincerity is in harm's way, until one sees where his end lies ahead.[2]

In truth, we must carry our faith and piety unharmed and unscathed to our destination and till the last moment of our lives protect it so that Satan and our internal desires do not harm it.

In another saying, Imam Ali points out this matter:

الغنى والفقر بعد العرض على الله

Fortune and misfortune will be determined [on the Day of Judgment] after being presented to God.[3]

That is to say danger threatens people to the last moment and calls for steadfastness and faithfulness to submit until the end.

The Phrase "By the reckoning of this world or next"

1. In regards to Iblis's six thousand years of worship, Imam Ali says that it is not clear whether these six thousand years are years in this world or the next. As you know, a 'day' is calculated with the rising and setting of the sun. However, on the Day of Judgment when the system of the universe breaks down, time will have another meaning. Therefore, we must place day, month, and year within a figurative meaning; that is to say in that world's context, but with a likeness to time in this world in terms of "expanse" and "narrowness."

For instance, the prosecution and punishment of a person who has killed a hundred people compared to a person who has killed one person is not the same; rather, it is a hundred times more than the other. So if the punishment for killing one person is one year, then the punishment for killing a hundred people is a hundred years – this is in terms of the difference between the two crimes, and not the year as similar to worldly years.

"Fifty thousand years" (**خمسين الف سنة**) in the verse: "**في يوم كان مقداره خمسين الف سنة**" regarding the Day of Judgment, or "A thousand years" (**الف سنة**), indicates this very difference in the time and quantity of difficulties relating to the people of the next world and the relative prolonged and shortened period.

Ibn Abbas said the following about the verse "***Whose span is fifty thousand years***": For the disbelievers, the Day of Judgment is like fifty thousand years, for the punishment is so severe they will feel that day to prolong that much. Also, in the commentary of Ibn Maytham, regarding how the righteous and the believers will perceive that day to be short: "

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri says someone told the Prophet, "The Day of Judgement is fifty thousand years. How long!" The Prophet replied, "I swear by He who holds my life in the power of His grip, that day is so easy and short for the believers that it is even easier than performing two rak'ahs (set) of obligatory prayers in this world."[4]

Thus, that time in the hereafter is based on a different scale and foundation, for how is it possible for the Day of Judgment to be fifty thousand years for one person and a moment for another?

2- Ibn Maytham writes in his commentary: "In Sharif Radi's[5] version instead of "**لا يُدري**" (passive verb), "**لا يَدري**" (active verb) has been used.

Before we discuss the meanings of these two phrases, it is necessary to point out that the quote taken from Ibn Maytham is used given that he had Allamah Sharif Radi's manuscript of Nahjul Balaghah. Although there are similar ones in other places as well,[6] in terms of the authenticity of the document, this is valuable. The chain of narration of this book goes back to over a thousand years and shows that the *Nahjul Balaghah* we hold in our hands today is the same copy as the one written by Sharif Radi.

This makes its citations and connection to the time of Imam Ali clear and it preserves our connection with the fourth and fifth century, an era where vast and countless Islamic resources were untouched, and the tragic events of the Mughal and European invasions along with the destruction of great libraries had not taken place yet. This is one of the rare books which have such authentic scholarly and academic grounds in terms of manuscripts.

Now the primary content: If it is **يَدري** (active verb), the meaning becomes such that Iblis is one of the individuals who also does not know those six thousand years are of what year; it has not been mentioned for anyone to know. However, if we read it as of **يُدري** (passive verb), then it must be that Imam Ali briefly heard the Prophet say something regarding this matter, although no commentary or explanation has been given. It could be that the Imam knew the explanation and details concerning it, but did not tell the people, for their minds could not bear to receive and understand it. For instance, if its days were six thousand years then each would be calculated as fifty thousand years in this world. The number 6,000 would be multiplied by (360 x 50,000) which would equal to 108,000,000,000 days.[7]

In any case, the calculation and acceptance of it is implausible for the general public and the best interpretation is the passive tense of **لا يدري** ; meaning "it will not be known."

A Moment of Following One's Desires; A Lifetime of Regret

A Moment of Following One's Desires; A Lifetime of Regret (**The extensiveness of one hour**)

Why was Iblis's six thousand years of worship nullified? He was arrogant for an hour. Of course, one hour does not mean sixty minutes here; it refers to one moment, the moment of decision making and the actions carried our afterwards are dependent on it.

Therefore, those individuals who do good deeds and are on the path of worship and piety must pay attention not to be heedless of the path to God which in all arenas, especially political and societal matters, can throw one from the peak of faithfulness to the bottom of faithlessness and can bring to ruins a lifetime's worth of struggle to finally make one a dweller of the hellfire.

Those during the time of Imam Ali, who stood facing him in opposition and led three bloody battles against the Imam, fell from such a cliff and were overtaken with arrogance and a thirst for power until finally in a moment, after years of faithfulness, fell to the depths of the hellfire:

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَاقِبَةَ الَّذِينَ أَسَاءُوا السُّوأَىٰ أَنْ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَكَانُوا بِهَا يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

Then the fate of those who committed misdeeds was that they denied the signs of Allah and they used to deride them. (***30:10***)

1. Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon of Skeletons (Khutbah al-Ashbah).
2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 2, p. 29.
3. Sharh ibn Maytham, vol. 4, p. 246.
4. Commentary of Ibn Maytham, vol. 4, p 246.
5. Known in Arabic as al-Sharif al-Radi or in Farsi as Sharif Razi or Sayyid Razi. Born in Baghdad in the year 970 CE. His most notable work is the compilation of the Peak of Eloquence (Nahjul Balaghah), a collection of Imam Ali (as)'s quotations. His elder brother, Sayyid Murtadha was also a great scholar; a theologian and poet.
6. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 47 and 275.
7. Commentary of Ibn Maytham, vol. 4, p. 247.

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