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Lady Nafisah

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Abstract

Islam urges human beings to purify themselves and provides them with male and female role models in order to guide people to successfully live their lives. In all ages, those who have reached a high level of spirituality and attained nearness to God are worthy of being exemplars for those who desire guidance.

Lady Nafisah led her life as that example, as one who was well-known for her asceticism, worship, and miracles. This article offers a brief biography of this revered woman, with a description of her noble qualities and its influence on those who were acquainted with her and benefited from her support.

Introduction

Lady Nafisah was the daughter of Hasan, son of Zaid, son of Imam Hasan (a), son of Imam Ali (a). Due to her reverence, she was titled “the Pure One” (tahirah) and “the Noble Lady of the Two Worlds [i.e. this world and the hereafter].”[2]

She was born in 145 A.H. and lived for 65 years. In the noble city of Medina where she grew up, she immersed herself in worship and asceticism as she fasted most of the days and spent most of her nights in worship through genuflection and prostration. With regards to this Lady, her niece observed during her 40 years of serving her that she had never seen her aunt sleep during the night and eat during the day.

This was not due to any sort of poverty, as Lady Nafisah was indeed wealthy and used to spend her money on the needy and the ill. Moreover, she regarded the pilgrimage to the House of God with importance, as it has been said that she visited Mecca thirty times, most of which were on foot.[3]

Her lofty status was not unknown by her society. Anne Mary Shimmel writes:

Some of the female grandchildren of the Prophet (s) such as Lady Nafisah were the most distinguished among the people of their time in terms of excellence of character and piety. Her gravesite, located in Cairo, Egypt, is still among the most visited sites of the believers.[4]

As a result of her asceticism, Lady Nafisah was able to perform extraordinary acts for those in need, such as curing the ill, praying for the poverty-stricken and freeing the detained. Until today, Egyptians continue to flock to her gravesite for their prayers to be answered.

Spouse and children

In Muntaha al-Amal, Shaykh Abbas Qummi describes Lady Nafisah's husband, Ishaq ibn Ja'far as a "God-fearing and righteous person..." whose diligence gave him the reputation of being a trustworthy scholar of hadith. His lineage goes back to the Bani Zuhrah, who were known for their honourable qualities, as well as great personalities such as Abu al-Makarim, known as Hamzah, who was the son of Zuhrah Halabi. Hamzah was a great scholar and writer of theological and jurisprudential books. His father, grandfather and brother Abdullah ibn Ali and his nephew Muhammad son of 'Abdullah were also among the great Shi'ite jurists.[5]

According to historical sources, the Bani Zuhrah were the most well-known group in the region of Halab. Shaykh Abbas Qummi writes in Muntaha al-Amal:

And from among them is [Abu al-Makarim] a teacher, writer and jurisprudent who is among the notable sayyids (descendants of the Prophet) and leaders of Halab, author of many books and famous scholar of hadith. His grave is well known in Halab at the foot of Mount Jawshan near Mashhad. On it his genealogy up to Imam Sadiq (a) and date of death are engraved on it.[6]

Historical accounts on her life and piety

The writer of Rayahin al-Shari'ah writes:

Information about Nafisah and her extraordinary deeds have been mentioned in many books, among them being: Ruh al-Rayhan, p. 103, Wafayat al-A'yan of Ibn Khallakan, Shablanji in Nur al-Absar, Shaykh Muhammad Saban in Is'af al-Raqib1n and Muqrizi in Khitat and others have also written of her in detail.

According to Nasikh al-Tawarich, in order to protect the oppressed, Lady Nafisah wrote a letter to the governors:

Since you attained dominion and became custodians over the lands of the servants of God, you chose a foundation of oppression, enmity and injustice (in your rule) and you kept for yourselves the bounties that God gave to you from His blessings and withheld them from the poor and those under your guardianship and closed the doors of comfort and livelihood on them, whereas you know that the cry of

the oppressed in the early hours, is like an arrow that pierces through a thousand steel armours and never misses its target, especially from hearts that you have caused pain to and bodies you have left without cloths. Do not hold back in oppression and injustice! We will be patient and seek refuge in God. Very soon the oppressors will receive the penalty of their actions.

When Lady Nafisah finished writing the letter, she picked it up and stood in the pathway of Ahmad ibn Tuliin and called his name. When Ahmad recognized her, he came down from his horse in respect of her dignity, took the letter and read it. The letter left a deep imprint on him as he soon afterwards, gave up oppression and injustice and built a foundation of righteousness. This incident is partly questionable because Ahmad son of Tuliin was born in the year 203 A.H. and died in the year 270 A.H., whereas Nafisah passed away in the year 207 A.H. Therefore it appears that Nafisah's disputes were with a person other than him.

Lady Nafisah's neice, Zainab, was asked about her diet. She replied:

She would eat once every three days, and whenever she desired food, a basket would appear at her place of prayer. In that basket she would find whatever she wanted. I do not know where it came from and when I asked her about it, she stated, 'Whoever perseveres in the path of the Lord the reins of the universe are in their control.'

Lady Nafisah was indeed an ascetic. The question then arises: What are some characteristics of a mystic? The great philosopher Avicenna says:

Whenever you hear that a mystic stays away from food for more than the normal time period, keep an open mind about it and consider it among the well- known doctrines of nature.[7]

Every time you hear that a mystic has achieved a feat which none other than he can achieve, do not refuse it entirely, many a time you might find its reason in the laws of nature.[8]

Nafisah was a person of great temperament and nobility of spirit. Apart from her husband's wealth, she took no money from anyone else. She had memorized the Qur'an and knew its commentary, and whenever she would recite it, she would cry and implore, "O my Lord! Make it possible for me to perform the pilgrimage of your friend, Ibrahim (a)."

Her Extraordinary Acts

Lady Nafisah entered Egypt in the year 193 A.H. When the people of Egypt heard of her arrival, they flocked to welcome her. For a while she stayed in the house of Jamal al-Din Abdullah, son of Jassas, and people from all over came to visit her and seek her blessings. After a short time, she shifted to Mansusa in Daraam. Manawi, the author of Tabaqat al-Sufiyyah [generations of Sufiam], writes,

Lady Nafisa entered Egypt, and so many extraordinary acts were seen from her that none entered Egypt

but that they visited her. Her status rose and her pure and modest home became a refuge for the people. After some time, she decided to migrate to Hijaz and live near her own kin. This decision was every difficult for the Egyptians and they begged her to stay; however, she refused.

The people of Egypt were so adamant that a great number of them assembled in the house of the governor and informed him of Lady Nafisah's imminent migration. The news was difficult for him to bear as well and he sent a letter via a messenger requesting her to change her mind. Lady Nafisah did not agree to do so. Seeing no other option, the governor himself went to visit her and with utmost humility asked her to stay. In reply to this offer, Lady Nafisah mentioned her concerns of being alone in the city, and the crowds of people kept her from her worship, recitations, and gathering provisions for the Hereafter. Thus, the governor arranged to solve the problem by giving her a house in 'Darb al– Saba' and ordered people not to occupy her more than twice a week; that is, they visited her only on Sundays and Wednesdays. She willingly accepted the offer.

Many miracles have been narrated from Lady Nafisah, a few of which will be mentioned below.

Curing the ill

A Jewish man lived in Lady Nafisah's neighbourhood and he had a daughter who was ill and unable to stand. One day her mother wanted to go to the bathhouse and did not know where to keep her daughter. Since her daughter preferred not to go with her and her mother did not want her to stay alone, her daughter asked if she could stay with Lady Nafisah.

Her mother accepted. It was time to pray at Lady Nafisah's house; the Lady brought some water to make wudii' (ablution). As she did so, she sprinkled some of the water over the girl and she was immediately cured. When her parents came, to their amazement, the girl came to greet them herself. After coming to know what had happened, the entire family accepted Islam.

Praying for the poverty–stricken

Another one of the wonders that have been related about Lady Nafisa is the story of an old woman who had four orphaned daughters. From one Friday to the other the girls used to spin cotton thread and the second Friday the woman used to take the thread to the market and sell it; with half the value she got, would buy materials and with the other half she would buy food. One day when she was passing through the market and carrying that thread on her head, a bird with sharp talons came down, grabbed the thread and took flight.

The old woman fell unconscious on the ground at this awful event. When she awoke, she kept murmuring to herself and crying over what to do with her hungry daughters. People gathered around her, and seeing her state, referred her to Lady Nafisah who through the blessing of her prayer would ask to God to solve the problem. The old woman hurried to Lady Nafisah and related her story to her and asked her to pray. Lady Nafisah raised her hands in prayer and murmured these sentences:

يا من علا فقدر وملك فقهر جبّر من امتك ما انكسر فإنها خلقك وعيالك

O the One, Who transcends and has power over everything, and rules and overwhelms. Please restore from among your nation those who are broken. Truly they are your people and dependent on You.

She recited these words and told the woman of God's capability to do everything. The woman sat at the door of the house, her heart burning for the hunger of her children. An hour had not passed when suddenly a group of people asked permission to enter the house of Nafisah. When they entered and greeted her, the merchants gave a description of their state: they were travelling in the sea and were thanking God for their health when they reached near the Lady's city and their ship got a leak and water gushed into it.

To save themselves from drowning, they tried to block the hole to prevent water from entering, though to no avail. They then desperately asked God for help with the Lady as an intercessor, and at that moment, they saw a bird drop a piece of cloth containing cotton thread. They placed the thread in the hole and the water stopped flooding the ship; then entered the city to see the Lady in thankfulness to God, and had brought 500 silver dirhams. When Nafisah heard this she started crying and said:

إلهي ما أرأفك وألطفك بعبادك

O God! How kind and merciful you are to Your servants!

Since the elderly woman used to sell her thread for 20 dirhams, Lady Nafisah told her that God has sent her 25 dirhams in return for every dirham. The woman returned to her children overjoyed. Rayahin al-Shari'ah mentions this same story and then writes that a similar event took place in the time of Prophet David (a) as well.[9]

Praying for the detained

It has also been reported that a woman's son was captured in the enemy land and she spent her time crying and worshipping in the temple because of the separation from her son. One day she told her husband about a woman who lived in this city by the name of Nafisah and asked him to visit her and tell her of their lost son and pray for him. She vowed that if her son returns, she would accept Lady Nafisah's religion.

Her husband visited Nafisah and related their story and Nafisah prayed to God to return her son. Night fell, and suddenly they heard someone knocking on the door. The woman hurried to the door and saw her son. She was overjoyed and asked him to describe how he was freed. He said, "At that time I was standing next to the door (and this was the time that the Lady had prayed) and heard a voice saying: "Release him…"

Death and burial

Lady Nafisah had dug a grave with her own hands outside her house and prayed a great deal in that grave. She had finished recitation of the Qur'an 190 times there, or according to another relation 1900 times. Zainab, her niece, mentioned that her aunt fell ill in the beginning of Rajab and wrote a letter to her husband Ishaq Mo'tamin who was in Medina at the time. Her ill state continued until the first Friday of the month of Ramadan. At this time she was overwhelmed with pain while fasting. The best doctors visited her and asked her to break her fast due to her weak state.

Lady Nafisa was astounded at this statement because she had been praying for God to take her life while in the state of prayers, and breaking her fast at this moment was simply out of the question. She did not break her fast. Instead, she recited these poetic verses:

Take the doctor away from me, leave me alone with my Beloved!
My yearning for Him has increased, in a way that
it burns my will.
My love for Him has been exposed to the rival and
my secret has been revealed. Everyone knows I am in love with Him.
I give no importance to this revelation of my
secrets, because this has been my luck. None of
those who blame those who fall in love with Him
has got it right.
My body is content with this illness, and my tearful
eyes are content with my cries and moans.

Zainab describes her aunt as being in this state until the second week of the month of Ramadan when the last moments before death came to pass. She started reciting Chapter al-An'am until she reached the verse: "They shall have the abode of peace with their Lord" and her soul ascended to the Heavens. Her husband wanted to take her body to Medina. The people came to the governor and asked him to request her husband not to do so.

Ishaq did not agree. They collected a great amount of wealth in order to dissuade him, but still he did not agree. The people of that city passed the night in great difficulty and when they saw him in the morning he was agreeable to their request. When they asked him the reason, he said, "Last night I saw the Prophet (s) in my dream and he (s) said, 'Return their wealth to them and bury her near them.'"

Lady Nafisah was buried in a part of 'Darb al-Saba' and that day was very eventful. People gathered from all over the land to pray over her and that night, after she was buried, candles were lit and from every house in Egypt the sound of crying could be heard; she was mourned greatly.

According to Nur al Absar, a number of pious and virtuous people have visited her grave, such as Yunus

of Egypt, Abil Hasan Daynuri, Abu Ali Rudbari, Abu Bakr Ahmad son of Nasr Daqqaq, Hammal Wasiti, Shuqran son of Abdullah Maghribi, Idris son of Yahya Khulani, Fadl son Fadala, Qadi Bakkar, Son of Qatiba, Ismail Mazni and Sahib Shafi'i[10].Today, her grave is a place of pilgrimage of people from all over the world[11].

Maqrizi, in al-Khtat writes:

There are few places in Egypt well known for prayers being accepted there: one of them is the gravesite of Lady Nafisah. And the first person to build a tomb over her grave was Abdullah ibn Siri ibn Hakam, the governor of Egypt and the Caliph Hafiz in the year 532 A.H. ordered its dome to be renewed and its mihrab (or altar) to be renovated.[12]

Spirituality

Some of the best spiritual words narrated from Lady Nafisah are the verses of poetry written shortly before her death. In these verses she reveals her desire for death which is, in truth, her desire to reach her Beloved – God – and she wants to be released from this worldly life so she may reach her Beloved faster. This desire for death is similar to what the true saints whisper in their invocations with God; it is as though they have witnessed death as a bridge to reach their Eternal Beloved, the same way that Imam Ali (a) says: "I swear by God! My desire for death is greater than the desire of a child for his mother's breast."[13]

Her notion of death is similar to Rumi's veses in his Ghazaliyyat of Shams Tabrizi:

On the day of death when my coffin is ready
don't think I moan this world
When you see my body, don't say: Separation!
Separation
For me is the union and meeting of that time
Which seed, when sowed, did not grow?
Why then this assumption for the seed of your
humanity?[14]

Yes, the day of death for the friends of God like Lady Nafisah is a day of union and meeting, in reality it is to rise; man is released from matter and nature and begins his upward dourney and at its height is in union with the Beloved. In this way, the mystics and true saints were farsighted, and this world not only did not tempt them, indeed, it strengthened their wing for flight towards Allah and set their desire upward.

Due to their spirituality and knowledge, they wisely and knowingly took steps forward, and in this way, success has been their friend, and God has taken their hand.

Lady Zainab of Egypt, researcher and writer, describes Nafisah in her book as a lover and friend of the

Ahl al-Bayt (a) and has brought this verse from Lady Nafisah in her book:

O my Lord! Surely I am a believer in Muhammad (s) and his progeny and children of his family, free from the corruption of the world and evil of wealth.[15]

Conclusion

Allah (swt) continuously provides male and female examples to guide humankind to the correct way of life. Indeed, Lady Nafisa's love for Allah (swt) influenced her to act upon that which pleased Him.

In return for her pure intentions and lofty acts, she was a great service to the people: not only did she act as a physician in curing the ill and helping the oppressed, her mere presence was a blessing to those who desired an example of one who modelled the Infallible Ones (as) before her.

1. Doctorate in philosophy and member of the scientific board of the Rajai University.
2. Ibn Khallakan, Wafayat al-A'yan, vol. 5, p. 423.
3. Mirza Mohammad Ali Mudarris, Rayhanat al-Adab, vol. 2, p. 440.
4. Anne Mary Shimmel, Spiritual dimensions of Islam, translator: Abdul Rahim Gohari, p. 658.
5. Shaykh Abbas Qummi, Muntaha al-Amal, vol. 2, pp. 178 & 179; Dhabih'ullah mahallati, Rayahin al-Shari'ah, vol. 5, p. 95.
6. Sheikh Abbas Qummi, Ibid., vol. 2, p. 179.
7. Ibn Sina, Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbiha, Book Ten, p. 461.
8. Ibid., p. 465.
9. Zabihullah Mahallati, Rayahin al-Sharia'h, vol. 5, p. 91
10. Sayyid Mu'min Shablanji, Nur al-Absar, p. 125.
11. See: Smith Margaret, Ibid, pp. 148-150.
12. Maqrizi, Al-Kuhtat, vol. 5, p. 94.
13. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5, Fayd al-Islam, p. 57.
14. Jamaladdin Muhammad Mauwlavi, Gazaliyat Shams Tabrizi.
15. Sayyidah Zainab, Durr al- Manthur fi Tabaat Rabbat al-Khudur, Egypt, 1312 A.H. p. 522.

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