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Obstacles and Hindrances

What are the obstacles and impediments which prevent a prayer from ascending to Allah? This is the question we will attempt to answer in this part of the book.

Supplication, as they say, is the ascending qur'an (*al-qur'an as-Sa'id*) vis-à-vis the descending Qur'an (*al-qur'an an-nazil*) from Allah, the Exalted. The descending Qur'an calls toward the servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) of Allah, turning (*iqbal*) toward Him, taking shelter (*luju'*) in Him and attaining total absorption in Him; whilst the ascending qur'an involves a response (*talbiyah*) to that call. The invitation is from Allah to His servants, while the response is from the servants to Allah.

However, there are a number of obstacles and hindrances which impede a prayer from ascending to Allah. Among the most important of these obstacles is wrongdoing and disobedience to Allah.

A phrase in the supplication of *kumayl* reads, "O Allah, forgive those of my sins which withhold the prayers." Again in another phrase it says: "I beseech You -by Your might- that my wrongdoings should not veil my prayer from You."

In the coming pages we will try to analyse these impediments.

The Role of Sins in Veiling Man from Allah

Bad deeds play two roles in man's life:

The first role is that they take man away from Allah, and cut him off from Him. As a result, he is unable to attain the state of turning to Allah and being mindful of Him; as the reality of supplication is turning toward Allah. If a sinner is veiled from Allah by his sins, then he will surely be veiled by them from supplication.

The second role of the sins is that they prevent the prayer from ascending to Allah. If a prayer reaches Allah, then the response from Him would certainly be accomplished; for He is neither incapable nor miser. But here the supplication lacks the ability to reach Allah.

Therefore, sometimes sins stop a person from supplicating, and at other times they withhold the ascent of a prayer to Allah.

This cursory look at the effect of sins needs more explanation.

The Twofold Role of the Soul in Receiving and Giving

The soul (*qalb*) is a connecting device which, on the one hand, receives from Allah, and on the other hand, it gives out; similar to the twofold function of the physical heart in pumping blood in and out through the veins and arteries.

Now, if the soul loses this feature of connecting man to Allah, then it would be devoid of all its value and it would no longer be of any benefit. It would be lifeless exactly like the physical heart at the time of death.

On the one hand, the soul receives from Allah, the Exalted, the guidance, light and spiritual insight, and, on the other hand, it gives out this guidance and light to man in {manipulating} his movements, speech, stands, actions and relations.

Let us contemplate on the Qur'an to understand this bilateral role of the soul from its perspective.
The Role of the Soul in Receiving Guidance from Allah

The verses that point to the first aspect, that is, the role of the soul in receiving from Allah, are as follows:

1. *"The faithless say, 'Why has not the Qur'an been sent down to him all at once?' So it is, so that We may strengthen your heart with it, and We have recited it {to you} in a measured tone."*[1]

The Qur'an descends on the heart at once and sometimes in parts. It strengthens the heart, and the heart acquires from it the Divine light and guidance.

2. *"Allah has sent down the best of discourses a scripture composed of similar motifs, whereat quiver the skins of those who fear their Lord, then their skins and hearts soften to Allah's remembrance..."*[2]

According to this verse, the heart receives from the Qur'an that which humbles and softens it. The heart interacts with the guidance of Allah and His light which He has sent to His servants. For the Qur'an is indeed a guidance from Allah, His light, and His proof to His creatures.

3. *"O mankind! Certainly a proof has come to you from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a manifest light."*[3]

This guidance and light is specific to the hearts of the believers (*mu'minin*) and the pious (*muttaqin*), as

they receive it and interact with it.

4. ***"This is an explanation for mankind, and a guidance and advice for the Godwary."***[4]

5. ***"... these are insights from your Lord, and a guidance and mercy for a people who have faith."***[5]

The Role of the Soul in Giving Out Guidance

In the second aspect, the heart plays the role of disseminating the light and guidance it has received from Allah, and in manipulating the movements, speech, stands, relations and the concerns of a person. Here it is that man moves with the light and guidance of Allah, speaks with the light and guidance of Allah, takes his stands based on the guidance and light from Allah, and walks amidst the people with the light and guidance of Allah.

The verses that point to this second aspect of the soul are as follows:

1. ***"Is he who was lifeless, then We gave him life and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people, like one who dwells in a manifold darkness which he cannot leave?"***[6]

2. ***"O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah and have faith in His apostle. He will grant you a double share of His mercy and give you a light to walk by, and forgive you, and Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful."***[7]

This light based on which the believers establish their relations with the people and move with it among them, be it in politics, business, or in rest of their affairs, is in fact the light of Allah which He sends to His servants. He, the Exalted, says:

"...and one whom Allah has not granted any light has no light."[8]

The role of the heart in the process of receiving and giving out guidance is that of an arbitrary. It receives this light from Allah and then directs with it man's power of sight, hearing and the rest of his organs. And this is a sign of the heart being healthy and sound; it receives the Qur'an and gives out the Qur'an, similar to the fertile soil which takes in light, air and water, and gives out good fruits.

Mentioning one of the characteristics of the Qur'an, Imam 'Ali ('a) says: "The Book of Allah by which you see, speak and listen."

If the soundness of the heart is lost, then it would be devoid of the power of receiving the Divine light and of manipulating man's actions. Hence, it would be unable to receive the descending Qur'an from Allah, thus losing the power of directing man to raise the ascending qur'an toward Allah through maintaining prayer (*salat*) and supplication. And this is the state of the obscurity of the heart (*inghilaq al-qalb*). Allah, the Exalted, says:

"Deaf, dumb, and blind; they will not come back {to the right path}"[9]

A deaf and blind person is not able to receive any call or light, and thus he is unable to speak also. With regard to the Banu Isra'il, Allah says:

"Then your hearts hardened after that, so they are like stones, or even harder..."[10]

Indeed a stone cannot receive any light, air or water, rather it rejects all that comes toward it of these things. Subsequently, it does not give out any fruit. This is in contrary to the fertile soil which produces fruits as a result of what it receives of the light, air and water.

Similarly, this is how the heart becomes if its spiritual soundness is lost. It does not receive any light, nor does it give any, and this is the state of complete obscurity; the state of the dead heart; a state in which the heart has lost all signs of life, for the life of the heart depends on what it receives and gives out. So when it is devoid of this feature, it is devoid of life.

Regarding the death of the heart, Allah says:

- ***"...Indeed Allah makes whomever He wishes to hear, and you cannot make those who are in the graves hear"***[11],
- ***"Indeed you cannot make the dead hear, nor can you make the deaf hear the call..."***[12],
- ***"It is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them, they will not have faith.***[13]

The flaw is not in the strength of the call or in its delivery; rather, it is in the ability of the dead to hear. This is exactly the state of the obscurity of the heart and its disconnection from Allah, the Exalted.

But what is the reason of this disconnection and obscurity?

Factors which Cause the Obscurity of the Heart

The Islamic narrations assert that of the most significant factors that lead to the obscurity of the heart and its alienation from Allah are two things: disregard (*i'rad*) for the signs (*ayat*) of Allah, and commiting sins.

Some of the verses which point to the first factor are:

1. ***"Those who deny Our signs are deaf and dumb, in a manifold darkness."***[14]

According to this verse, denying the signs of Allah is the cause of deafness and of remaining in darkness in one's life.

2. ***"And when Our signs are recited to him he turns away disdainfully as if he had not heard them***

{at all}, as if there were a deafness in his ears. 15

We notice in this verse a mutual relation between disregard for the signs of Allah and being disdainful of them, and the deafness of the ears.

Regarding the second factor, that is the sins, Allah, the Exalted, says:

"No indeed! Rather their hearts have been sullied by what they have been earning"16

This verse clearly implies that the sins committed by a person evolve to become a rust and dirt on the heart, sealing it and cutting it off from Allah.

Sins Invert the Heart

Man commits sins until his heart is cut off from Allah. If the heart is disconnected from Allah, it gets inverted. It becomes upside down and loses all its operative features.

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says: "My father used to say, 'Nothing is more destroying for the heart than the sin it commits. The heart indeed engages in a battle with the sin, and the sin continues to remain in it until it overpowers the heart. Hence, it becomes turned upside down."17

He ('a) is also reported to have said, "When a person commits a sin, a black spot appears in his heart. If he repents of it, it disappears, but if he persisits {in committing the sin}, the spot becomes bigger until it overcomes his heart. {If this happens,} then he would never become victorious after this."18

Sins Deprive Man of the Sweetness of Remembrance

The believing hearts experience sweetness in the remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allah; a sweetness above which there is no sweetness. But when the heart becomes turned upside down, it is deprived of this sweetness and it no longer perceives it; just like an ill person whose physical health has been inverted by illness, and as a result he loses the appetite for good things, not because they are no more good, but because he no more desires them.

The same applies to the heart; when it is inverted, it is deprived of the sweetness of remembering Allah, the Exalted, and it no longer tastes the sweetness nor sees any attraction in His remembrance. According to a narration, "Allah revealed to Prophet Dawud that the least I do to a person who does not practice his knowledge, out of seventy kinds of spiritual punishments, is that I remove from his heart the sweetness of my remembrance."19

A man came to Imam 'Ali ('a) and complained, "O Commander of the Faithful! I have been deprived of prayer (*salat*) at night." He ('a) replied, "You are a person whose sins have binded him."20

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says: "When a person commits a sin, he is deprived of the Night Prayer (*salat al-*

layl). Indeed the {effect of a} bad deed on the one who commits it is faster than the {effect of a} knife on meat."[21]

Sins that Withhold Prayer

As mentioned earlier, the alienation of the heart from Allah, the Exalted, is among the direct effects of sin on man. If the heart is disconnected from Allah, then it will neither receive the guidance from Him nor give it out.

Supplication is one of the things which man raises to Allah. This is why we said that it is the "ascending qur'an" which man raises to Allah after receiving the "descending Qur'an" from Him. So if a person is detached from the descending Qur'an then he would undoubtedly be detached from the ascending Qur'an.

Accordingly, he would be held back from supplication and would not succeed in making it. And even if the need presses him to pray to Allah, He, the Exalted, would withhold his prayer from ascending and hence he would not find any response.

Imam 'Ali ('a) says: "Sin hinders response (*ijabah*)."

A man once asked Imam 'Ali ('a) about the verse ***"Call Me, I will answer you***" saying, "What has happened to us, we pray but we are not answered." He ('a) replied, "Which of your prayers do you expect to be answered when you have closed its doors and ways. So be wary of Allah and reform your deeds, and purify your hearts, bid the good and forbid the wrong, thus Allah will answer your prayers."[22]

Imam 'Ali bin al-Husayn Zayn al-'Abidin ('a) is narrated to have said, "And the sin which causes prayer to be rejected and the skies to turn dark is disobedience (*'uquq*) to the parents."[23]

According to another tradition, "The sins that lead to the rejection of prayer are bad intention, impure heart, hypocrisy, despairing of the response from Allah, delaying the obligatory prayers until the lapse of their {prescribed} time, to neglect attaining proximity to Allah through good deeds and charity, and employing foul and obscene language."[24]

Imam al-Baqir ('a) says: "It so happens that a person asks Allah for a need and it is in His power to grant him his need in the near future. But the person commits a sin, so Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, says to the angel, 'Do not grant his need and deprive him of it, for he has become the subject of My wrath and deserves to be deprived from Me.'"[25]

Obstacles and Factors of the Ascension of Deeds

The obstacles (*'awa'iq*) and factors (*'awamil*) of the ascent of the deeds have been mentioned in the Islamic sources. Both of them have direct relation with the actions of man. The 'obstacles' hinder the

elevation of the deeds to Allah, the Exalted, whereas the 'factors' help in the ascension of the deeds to Allah.

Hereunder we will cite two traditions, one regarding the 'obstacles' and the other concerning the 'factors', leaving the explanation of this significant issue in the Islamic education and culture to another occasion, if Allah wills.

Obstacles of the Ascension of Deeds

Shaykh Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Ali al-Qumi, a resident of the city of Rayy, relates in his book *Al-Munbi' 'an Zuhd an-nabi* from 'Abd al-Wahid, from those who reported it to him from Mu'adh bin Jabal, that the narrator said, "I said, 'Tell me a tradition (*hadith*) which you have heard from the Messenger of Allah (S) and have it in memory exactly the way he had told you.' He said, 'Indeed!', and then Mu'adh started weeping.

Then he said, 'May my father and mother be his ransom, he said {this} to me while I was near him.' {Mu'adh} said, 'As we were walking, he raised his eyes toward the skies and said, 'All praise is due to Allah who decides for His creatures whatever He likes.' He then called me, 'O Mu'adh!', I answered, 'Yes, O Prophet of Allah and the master of the believers.' He (S) said, 'O Mu'adh!' I replied, 'Yes, O Messenger of Allah, the leader of the good and the Prophet of mercy.'

He (S) then said, 'I am telling you something that no prophet has ever told his nation. If you preserve it, your life will be of benefit to you; but if you hear it and do not preserve it, then you will have no excuse before Allah.'

Then he said, 'Indeed Allah created seven angels before He created the seven heavens (*sama'*). For each heaven He appointed an angel whom He dignified with His greatness. And He kept at each door, out of the doors of the heavens, an angel as a doorman. The guardian angels record the deeds of His servant from morning until evening, and then they ascend with the deed while it has a light like that of the sun, until when they reach the lower heaven (*sama' ad-dunya*) they start praising the deed and amplifying it.

So the {doorman} angel says: 'Stop! Strike with it the face of the one who performed it. I am the angel of backbiting (*ghibah*), I do not let the action of one who backbites pass by me to the other {angel}. This is what my Lord has commanded me with.'

The Holy Prophet (S) continued, 'Then the angels come {again} the next day carrying a good deed with them. They pass by the {first} angel, praising and amplifying the deed until they reach the second heaven. So the angel in the second heaven says: 'Stop! Strike with it the face of the one who performed it. Indeed he had intended to acquire the world with it. I have been entrusted with the world, I shall not let his deed pass by me to the other {angel}.'

The Prophet (S) said, 'Then the angels ascend –with pride– with the deed of a person who is delighted at giving charity and performing prayers. They pass with it until the third heaven when the angel says: 'Stop! Strike with it the face of the one who performed it. I am the angel of arrogance (*kibr*).' The angel would then say, 'This is the deed with which he displayed pride in front of the people in their sittings. My Lord has ordered me not to let his deed pass by me to the other {angel}.'

The Prophet (S) continued, 'The guardian angels ascend with the deed of a person while it shines like a brilliant star in the sky, accompanied by the reverberation of {his} *tasbih*, fasting and *hajj*. They journey with it to the fourth heaven where the angel says: 'Stop! Strike with this deed the face and the belly of the one who performed it. I am the angel of self–conceit (*'ujb*). He was vain about himself that he has performed a deed, and maintained self–conceit in himself. My Lord has ordered me not to let his action pass by me to the other {angel}.'

The Prophet (S) said, 'The angels ascend with the deed of a person like a bride being taken to the bridegroom. They pass by the {fourth heaven} to the angel of the fifth heaven with *jihad*, prayers, {and charity} between two prayers (*salatayn*), while the deed echoes a sound like that of the camels and has a brilliance like that of the sun.

The angel says: 'Stop! I am the angel of jealousy (*hasad*). Strike with it the face of the one who performed it and make him carry it on his shoulder. He used to be jealous of those who were learning or working in the way of Allah; and whenever he used see a merit in the action or worship of someone, he would be envious of him and fall into jealousy.' So he would carry his deed on his shoulder while it would be cursing him.'

The Prophet (S) continued, 'The angels ascend with the action of a person, with prayers, *zakat*, *hajj* and *'umrah*, and they cross with it to the sixth heaven. {Here} the angel says: 'Stop! I am the angel of mercy. Strike with it the face of the one who performed it, and obscure his eyes because he did not have mercy on anything. When he saw a servant from among the servants of Allah falling into a sin for which he would be punished in the Hereafter, or afflicted with a calamity in this world, he would rejoice! My Lord has commanded me not to let his deed pass by me.'

The Prophet (S) said, 'The angels ascend with the deed of a person who performed them with endurance, out of knowledge (*fiqh*) and piety, containing the sound of thunder and light like that of a lightning, while three thousand angels accompany it. They journey with it to the seventh heaven where the angel says: 'Stop! Strike with it the face of the one who performed it. I am the angel of *hijab* (barrier). I obstruct any deed which has not been performed for the sake of Allah. {The owner of this deed} intended to acquire status with the rulers, and to be remembered by the people, and to attain fame in the cities. My Lord has instructed me not let his deed pass by me to the other {angel} so long as it is not purely for Allah.'

The Prophet (S) continued, 'The angels happily ascend with the deed of a person, with prayers, *zakat*,

fasting, *hajj*, *'umrah*, good conduct, silence and the remembrance of Allah in abundance, escorted by the angels of the heavens and the angels of the seven heavens altogether. They pass by all the obstacles until they stand in the presence of {Allah}, the Glorified. They testify that he was of those who prayed and supplicated. {Here, Allah} says: 'You are the guardians of the deed of my servant, while I am vigilant of what is in his heart. He did not aim {to reach} Me with this action, and My curse is upon him.' So the angels say, 'Upon him is Your and our curse.'"

The narrator says: "Then Mu'adh began weeping. He said, 'I said, 'O Prophet of Allah! Which action should I perform and be sincere in it?' He (S) replied, 'O Mu'adh! Follow your Prophet in {performing deeds with} certainty (*yaqin*).'

Mu'adh says: 'I said, 'You are the Messenger of Allah, while I am Mu'adh {i.e. an ordinary person}.' He ('a) said, 'O Mu'adh! If there is any deficiency in your action, then keep your tongue away from your brothers {in faith}, and from the memorizers of the Qur'an. Accept the responsibility of your wrongdoings and do not hold your brothers responsible for them. Do not have high opinion of yourself by censuring your brothers. Do not elevate yourself by putting down your brothers. Do not show off your deeds. Do not enter the Hereafter through this world. Do not use foul language in your sittings such that people become cautious of you because of your ill-nature.

Do not whisper with a {third} person while you are {talking to} someone else. Do not inflate the {mistakes of the} people lest the good of this world is severed from you. Do not tear the people lest the dogs of the dwellers of the hell fire tear you. Allah, the Exalted, says: 'By those who draw {it} out gently'26, do you know who are these 'who draw {it} out gently?' They are the dogs of the dwellers of the hell fire who grab with the teeth the flesh and the bones.' I said, 'Who is able to acquire such characteristics?' He (S) replied, 'O Mu'adh! It is easy for whom Allah has made it easy."

The narrator says: "I did not see Mu'adh reciting the Qur'an much more than repeating this tradition."27

Factors of the Ascension of Deeds

In contrast to the obstacles, there are factors which elevate the deeds to Allah, the Exalted, when they are unable to ascend on their own. Some of these factors have appeared in a Prophetic narration, blended with the gleam of Prophetic light and Divine revelation.

We will mention the full text of the narration here as reported by 'Allamah al-Majlisi in *Bihar al-Anwar*, which he related from *al-Amali* of Shaykh as-Saduq.

As-Saduq narrates in *al-Amali* from Sa'id bin al-Musayyab, from 'Abd ar-rahman bin Sumarah who said:

"One day we were with the Prophet of Allah (S) when he said, 'I saw some astounding things yesterday.' So we said, 'O Prophet of Allah! What is it that you saw? Tell us about it, may our souls, families and

children be your ransom.'

He said, 'I saw a man from my nation whom the angel of death had approached to take his soul, but his goodness (*birruhu*) to his parents came inbetween and stopped him from it.

And I saw a man from my nation for whom the torment of the grave had been spread out, but his ablution (*wudhu'*) came in and held him back from it.

And I saw a man from my nation who had been driven into a trap by the devils (*shayatin*), but the remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, came to his aid and delivered him from them.

And I saw a man from my nation lolling out his tongue of thirst, but whenever he arrived at a fountain, he was not given {to drink}. So his fasting (*siyam*) in the month of Ramadan came to him and gave him a drink and quenched his thirst.

And I saw a man from my nation and the prophets sitting in circles, but whenever he neared a circle, he was driven away. So his bath from *janabat* came to him, took his hand and seated him beside them.

And I saw a man from my nation before and behind whom there was darkness, on whose right and left there was darkness, and beneath whom there was darkness; he was sunk in darkness, but his *hajj* and '*umrah* came to him and took him out of the darkness and admitted him into the light.

And I saw a man from my nation {trying} to speak to the believers but they would not speak to him, so his kindness toward womb relatives (*silat ar-rahim*) came to him and said, 'O congregation of the believers! Do speak to him as he used to maintain good relations with his womb relatives.'

Thus, the believers spoke to him, shook hands with him, and he remained with them.

And I saw a man from my nation protecting himself from the Fire and its flames with his hands and face, so his charity (*sadaqah*) came to him and turned to become a shade over his head and a veil on his face.

And I saw a man from my nation whom the keepers of hell had seized from everywhere, but his enjoining good (*amr bi al-ma'ruf*) and forbidding wrong (*nahy 'an al-munkar*) came inbetween and delivered him from them, and put him in the company of the angels of mercy.

And I saw a man from my nation kneeling down while there was barrier between him and the mercy of Allah, but his good conduct (*husn al-khulq*) came in and took his hand and admitted him into Allah's mercy.

And I saw a man from my nation whose record {of deeds} had inclined towards the left (*shimal*), but his fear (*khawf*) of Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, reached him, took his record and put it in his right (*yamin*).

And I saw a man from my nation whose deeds weighed light in the scales, but his giving generously (*afratuhu*) came to him and made his scales weigh heavy.

And I saw a man from my nation standing on the brink of the Hell, but his hope (*raja'*) in Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, reached him and rescued him from it.

And I saw a man from my nation who had fallen in the Fire, but his tears out of the fear (*khashyah*) of Allah came to his aid and took him out from it.

And I saw a man from my nation on the bridge (*sirat*) wavering like the wavering of a palm tree on a day of tempestuous wind, but his entertaining a good opinion (*husn al-zann*) of Allah came and his wavering calmed down and he crossed the bridge.

And I saw a man from my nation on the bridge who would sometimes creep, and crawl at times, and get stuck at other times, so his prayers (*salat*) came and made him stand on his feet, thus he crossed the bridge.

And I saw a man from my nation who had reached the doors of the Heaven but whenever he neared a door it would be closed on him. So the testimony that 'There is no god but Allah' which he had uttered out of belief came to him, thus the doors were opened for him and he entered Paradise.28

1. Qur'an, 25:32.
2. Qur'an, 39:23.
3. Qur'an, 4:174.
4. Qur'an, 3:138.
5. Qur'an, 7:203.
6. Qur'an, 6:122.
7. Qur'an, 57:28.
8. Qur'an, 24:40.
9. Qur'an, 2:18.
10. Qur'an, 2:74.
11. Qur'an, 35:22.
12. Qur'an, 27:80.
13. Qur'an, 36:10.
14. Qur'an, 6:39.
15. Qur'an, 31:7.
16. Qur'an, 83:14.
17. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.73, pg.412.
18. Ibid, pg.327.
19. Dar as-Salam of Shaykh al-Nuri, vol.3, pg.200.
20. 'Ilal-al-Sharayi', vol.2, pg.51.
21. Usul al-Kafi, vol.2, pg.272.
22. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.376.
23. Ma'ani al-Akhbar, pg.270.
24. Ibid, pg.271.
25. Usul al-Kafi, vol.3, pg.373.

26. Qur'an, 79:2.

27. We have quoted this long tradition from 'Uddat ud-Da'i, pg.228 230. The following annotation is also from the same book, "Sulayman bin Khalid says: 'I asked Abu 'Abdillah al-As-Sadiq ('a) regarding the verse, "Then We shall attend to the works they have done and then turn them into scattered dust." (Qur'an, 25:23).' He said, 'By Allah, {they would be turned into scattered dust} even if their works were whiter than the {cloth made by the} Coptic, {because} when any forbidden (haram) thing appeared before them they would not leave it." The author of Mir'at al-'Uqul says: "{The tradition} entails an indication to the failure (habt) of the acts of devotion (ta'ah) because of the vicious acts. Failure (ihbat) means the annulment of good deeds such that they lose the effects expected of them. It is contrasted by absolution (takfir) which means the erasure (isqat) of sins such that they become devoid of the properties expected of them."

28. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.7, pg.290 291.

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