Imam Ali's Distinguished Place in Literary History

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Ali deserves a distinguished place in literary history," Devenport remarks, "in as much as he" had cultivated his mind with an ease and assiduity unusual in his age and country. He left many collections of sentences, proverbs and poetical pieces. Goblin and Latté published fragments of these sentences, the former at Leiden in 1629 and the latter in 1746. Vather published Goblin's fragments in French in 1660. Oakley, in the third edition of his 'History of Saracens', has given an English translation of 169 of Ali's sentences. A treatise also by Ali upon the magical science is said to be still preserved in the Imperial Library at Constantinople. Such a man was Ali May he forever repose on the bosom of the Eternal Beatitude."

Arabic literature reached its climax by means of his precious sayings and sermons a few of which have been collected by Syed Shareef al-Razi in the form of a book, known as "Nahjul Balagha."

Students of the Arabic language will observe with interest the assistance that Ali gave to Abul Aswad-ad-Duwali in the task of systematizing Arabic grammar. Abul Aswad was one of the most eminent of the Tabieen, an inhabitant of Basra, and a partisan of Ali under whom he fought in the battle of Siffin.

In intelligence, he was one of the most perfect of men, and in reason he was one of the most sagacious. He was the originator of Arabic grammar. It is said that Ali laid down for him the principle: the three parts of speech are, the Noun, the Verb, and the Particle, telling him to prepare a complete treatise based upon it.

Hassan al-Basri called him "the Scholar of God in this community.

There is a tradition to the effect that Ali had great skill in writing the Kufic characters. He was able to make the elongated Kaf which is characteristic of that script with such uniform exactness that it was scarcely possible even with a compass to distinguish any difference between the Kafs that he had written.

There are traditions that affirm that Ali had a copy of the Quran of his own, a special copy which he had annotated according to the conversations he had with the Holy Prophet. This additional writing on the margin of his own Quran is apparently in the nature of commentary from the Prophet that others did not know. It has a bearing on the existence of a mysterious book that is called the Jafr'.

AI-Kulaini remarks that, “when the Apostle taught anything to Ali, Ali evolved from it a thousand other things. He declares that the Sahifa in Ali’s handwriting was seventy cubits in length, as measured by the arm of the Apostle, and that it contained everything permitted and forbidden”, and everything necessary for mankind, And in the Jafr, or secret book, he assures us that there was to be found, “the knowledge of prophets, and of the scholars of the Bani Israel”.

Masudi shows how the later Imams were accustomed to refer at times to these secret books that Ali left in their keeping. Belief in the existence of these sacred and secret books with the Imams was firm.

In one of the popular books that Muhammad Bakir Majlisi wrote in the seventeenth century, the “Hayatul-Kulub”, or Life of Hearts, it is related that at the time when Muhammad appealed to the Nassara (Christians) in Najraan in Yemen to accept him as a Prophet whose coming had been foretold by Jesus, a great book called the “Jama” was referred to in the course of the debate.

It was a collection of writings of 1,24,000 Prophets. The first part was the book of Adam, “which related to the kingdom of the Most High, what He had created and He has decreed in heaven and earth respecting things temporal and eternal.

This book, which contains all sciences, was transmitted by life father of mankind to Prophet Shays. Shays added his contributions to the great work and handed it to Prophet Idris, and likewise there were the writings of the Prophets Abraham and Moses and Jesus until at last the time came for the great and final work of Ahmad (or Muhammad).

A Persian manual on the lives of the Imams, which is a compilation from the voluminous works of Majlisi, was written in Persian and lithographed in Teheran in 1912. It is called “TazkeratuI-A’imma,” and here it stated that the ‘Jaf. wa jaameaa’ is a book that the scholars agree that Ali had in his possession,

and that the part that now exists consists of twenty-eight portions, and that each portion has twenty-eight pages, and each page has twenty-eight divisions “and no one besides God, the Prophet and the Imams know the character in which it is written, unless the sinless Imams would have taught it to one.”

The same modern manual mentions also “the Book of Ali” (the Sahifa), “which the Prophet dictated and Ali wrote. It is seventy meters long and the width of a sheepskin. It is also called the ‘Jama’, and it shows what things are permitted and what things are forbidden”. Two other minor works of the same sort are the “Jafr Abyad” (the white Jafer),

which has fourteen portions, and each portion has fourteen divisions, and the writing of Fatima,

with many traditions, to show that God taught Adam twenty-five of the Divine names, Noah knew eight, Abraham had six, Moses had four, Jesus had two, and Assif Ibn Barkhia had one, whereas the Apostle of God knew seventy-two of these names, which he taught to Ali.

Collections have been made of maxims and aphorisms that have originated from Ali. A hundred of these were collected by the Persian poet Rashid al-Din and they have been translated into German. There are one hundred and sixty nine of these moral sayings given in Ockley's History of the Saracens (p. 339).

It was said to Ali, "What is generosity?" He replied, "That from which the initiative proceeded, for what cometh after a request is liberality and munificence."

On another occasion he remarked, "He who seeketh to do justice unto men, let him desire for them what he desireth for himself."

According to historian Masudi (Murooj-uz-Zahab Masudi Vol. II, page 33, Egypt), Hazrat Ali is credited with not less than 480 treatise, lectures and epistles on a variety of subjects dealing with philosophy,

religion, law and politics, as collected by Zaid lbn Wahab in the Imam's own lifetime. So highly valued are these contributions both for contents and their intrinsic literary worth that some of his master pieces have formed throughout the course of Islamic history, subjects of study in centers of Muslim learning.

Indeed, his reputation seems to have traveled to Europe at the time of the Renaissance. Edward Powcock, (1604-1691); a professor at the University of Oxford, published the first English translation of his 'Rhetoric'. Khawja Hasan Nizami has quoted a list of the following Muslim Scholars who have collected the teachings of Hazrat Ali in their respective books.

1. Seerat-e-Ali by Hafiz Hamadan Ibrahim who died in 181 A.H.
2. Musnad-e-Ali by Ahmed bin Ibrahim who died in 226 A.H.
3. Musnad-e-Ali by Muhammad bin Abdullah who died in 258 A.H.
4. Akbar-wo-Seyar-e-Ali by Yaqoob bin Shaiha who died in 262 A.H.
5. Musnad-e-Ali by Qazi Ismail who died in 283 A.H.
6. Musnad-e-Ali by Abubakr Ahmad bin Ali who died in 292 A.H.
7. Musnad-e-Ali by Ahmed bin Shoaib Nisayee who died in 303 A.H.

The historian John J. Pool (author of the life of H. M. Queen Victoria) in his book 'Studies in Mohammedanism' says "Ali was the first Caliph to protect and encourage national literature. The Prince was a scholar himself and many of his wise sayings and proverbs are published in a book. It is a remarkable work and deserves to be more widely read in the west."

In Summing up Hazrat Ali's worth, Masoodi says, "if the glorious name of being the first

Muslim, a comrade of the Holy Prophet in exile, his faithful companion in the struggle for the Faith, his intimate associate in life and his kinsman; if a true knowledge of the spirit of his teachings and of the Book;
if self-abnegation and practice of justice; if honesty, purity and love of truth; if a knowledge of law and science, constitute a claim to pre-eminence then all must regard Hazrat Ali as the foremost Muslim. We shall search in vain to find, either among his predecessors (save one) or among his successors, those virtues with which God had endowed him".

His Outstanding Merit over Everybody in Religious Knowledge

Reports of his Outstanding Merit, Peace be on him, over everybody in Religious Knowledge (Ilm)

[Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Tamimi al-Nahwi informed me: Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Muharibi al-Bazzaz told me: Hisham b. Yunis al-Nahshali told us: 'A'idh b. Habib told us on the authority of Abu al-Sabbah al-Kinani, on the authority of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, on the authority of his father, on the authority of 'Ikrima, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas, who said:]

The Apostle of God, may God bless him and his family, said: "Ali b. Abi Talib is the most learned of my community and the most capable of giving legal decisions after me in (matters upon) which (men) differ.

[Abu Bakr Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Ji'abi informed me: Ahmad b. 'Isa Abu Ja'far al-'Ijli told us: Isma'il b. 'Abd Allah b. Khalid told us: 'Ubayd Allah b. 'Umar told us: 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. 'Aqil told us on the authority of Hamza b. Abi Said al-Khudri, on the authority of his father (Abu Said al-Khudri), who said:]

I heard the Apostle of God, may God bless him and his family, say: "I am the city of knowledge and 'Ali is its gate. Therefore, whoever wants knowledge should learn it from 'Ali, peace be on him."

[Abu Bakr Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Ji'abi informed me: Yusuf b. al-Hakam al-Hannat told us: Dawud b. Rashid told us: Salama b. Salih al-Ahmar told us on the authority of 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd al Rahman, on the authority of al-Ash'ath b. Taliq who said: I heard al-Hasan al-'Arani relating on the authority of Murra, on the authority of 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, who said:]

The Apostle of God, may God bless him and his family, summoned 'Ali and went apart with him. When he returned to us, we asked him: "What covenant (ahd) did he make with you?" He replied: "He taught me a thousand doors of knowledge and he opened from each (of these) doors a thousand (more) doors."

[Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. al-Muzaffar al-Bazzaz informed me: Abu Malik Kuthayyir b.

Yahya told us: Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Abi al-Sirri told us: Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah b. Yunis told us on the authority of Sa'd al-Kinani, on the authority of al-Asbagh b. Nubata who said:] When the pledge of allegiance was made to the Commander of the faithful, peace be on him, for the caliphate, he went out to the mosque wearing the turban and cloak of the Apostle of God, peace be on him and his family. He went up on the pulpit. After praising and glorifying God, and giving admonition and warning, he sat down confidently, knitted his fingers together and placed them on his stomach. Then he said: "Question me before you lose me. Question me, for I have the knowledge of those who came earlier and those who will come later. If the cushion (on which a judge sits) was folded for me (to sit on), I could give judgements to the people of the Torah by their Torah, to the people of the Gospels by their Gospels, to the people of Psalms by their Psalms and to the people of the Furqan (i.e. Qur'an) by their Furqan, so that each one of these books will be fulfilled and will declare, 'O Lord, indeed 'Ali has given judgement according to Your decree.' By God, I know the Qur'an and its interpretation (better) than anyone who claims knowledge of it. If it were not for one verse in the Book of God, most High, I would be able to inform you of what will be until the Day of Resurrection." Then he said: "Question me before you lose me, for by Him Who split the seed and brought the soul into being, if you questioned me about (it) verse by verse, I would tell you of the time of its revelation and why it was revealed, I would inform of the abrogating (verse) and the abrogated, of the specific and general, the clearly defined and the ambiguous, of the Meccan and the Medinan. By God, there is not a party who can lead astray or guide until the Day of Resurrection, without me knowing its leader, the one who drives it forward and the one who urges it on."

Examples of such reports are (so many) that the book would become (unduly) long in (reporting) them.- Kitab Al-Irshad (The book of Guidance) by Shaykh al-Mufid.