

ALI 416 – Theology and Worship in Nahjul Balagha Readings #1 – Divine Essence

One of the fundamental issues dealt with in the *Nahj al-balaghah* relates to theological and metaphysical problems. In all, there are about forty places in the sermons, letters, and aphorisms where these matters are discussed. Some of these pertain to the aphorisms, but more often the discussion is longer, covering sometimes several pages. The passages on *tawhid* in the *Nahj al-balaghah* can perhaps be considered to be the most wonderful discussions of the book. Without any exaggeration, when we take into account the conditions in which they were delivered, they can almost be said to be miraculous.

The discussions on this theme in the *Nahj al-balaghah* are of a varied nature. Some of them constitute studies of the scheme of creation bearing witness to Divine creativity and wisdom. Here, 'Ali speaks about the whole system of the heaven and the earth, or occasionally discusses the wonderful features of some specific creature like the bat, the peacock or the ant, and the role of Divine design and purpose in their creation. To give an example of this kind of discussion, we may quote a passage regarding the ant:

‘Have you observed the tiny creatures that He has created? How He has made them strong and perfected their constitution and shaped their organs of hearing and sight, and how He has styled their bones and skin? Observe the ant with its tiny body and delicate form. It is so small that its features can hardly be discerned by the eye and so insignificant that it does not enter our thoughts. See how it roams about upon the ground and arduously collects its livelihood. It carries the grain to its hole and deposits it in its store. It collects during the summer for the winter and, when winter arrives, it foresees the time to reemerge. Its livelihood is guaranteed and designed according to its built. The Benefactor and the Provider does not forget or forsake it. He does not deprive it, even though it should be in hard and dry stones and rocks. You will be amazed at the delicate intricacy of its wonderful constitution if you investigate the structure of its alimentary canals, its belly, and its eyes and ears which are in its head ..’ (Khutba # 185)

However, most of the discussions about *tawhid* in the *Nahj al-balaghah* are rational and philosophical. The rare sublimity of the *Nahj al-balaghah* becomes manifest in these discourses. In these philosophical and rational discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah* on *tawhid* what constitutes the focus of all arguments is the infinite, absolute and self-sufficing nature of the Divine Essence. In these passages, 'Ali ('a) attains to the heights of eloquence, and none, neither before him nor after him, has approached him in this aspect.

Another issue dealt with is that of the absolute simplicity (*al-basatatal-mutlaqah*) of the Divine Essence and negation of every kind of multiplicity, divisibility in the Godhead and refutation of separability of the Divine Attributes from the Divine Essence. This theme occurs repeatedly in the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

A Bitter fact

We, the Shi'ah Muslims, must confess that we have been unjust in regard to our duty with respect to the man whom we, more than others, take pride in following; or, at the very least, we must admit falling short in our duty towards him. In substance, any kind of failure in fulfilling our responsibility is an act of injustice on our part. We did not want to realize the significance of 'Ali ('a), or we had been unable to. All our energy and labour were devoted to proclaiming the Prophet's statements about 'Ali and to denouncing those who ignored them, but we failed to pay attention to the intellectual side of Imam 'Ali's personality.

Sadi says: *The reality of musk lies in its scent, Not in the perfumer's advice.* Applying Sa'di's words to our attitude regarding Imam 'Ali's personality, we did not realize that this musk, recommended by the Divine Perfumer, itself carried its pleasant aroma, and before everything else we should have tried to know its scent and become familiar with it. That is, we should have familiarized ourselves and others with its inner fragrance.

The Divine Essence

Does the *Nahj al-balaghah* have anything to say about the Divine Essence and how to define it? The answer is, Yes, and a lot. However, much of the discussion revolves around the point that the Divine Essence is Absolute and Infinite Being, without a quiddity. His Essence accepts no limits and boundaries like other beings, static or changeable, which are limited and finite.

A changeable being is one which constantly transcends its former limits and assumes new ones. But such is not the Divine Essence. Quiddity, which may qualify and confine Him within limits of finitude, is not applicable to Him. None of the aspects of being are devoid of His Presence, and no kind of imperfection is applicable to Him, except absence of any imperfection whatsoever: the only thing amiss in Him is absence of defect or inadequacy of any kind.

The sole kind of negation applicable to Him is the negation of all negations. The only kind of non-being attributable to Him is the negation of any kind of imperfection in relation to Him. He is free from all shades of non-being which characterize the creatures and effects. He is free from finitude, multiplicity, divisibility, and need.

The only territory that He does not enter is that of nothingness and non-being. He is with every thing, but not in any thing, and nothing is with Him. He is not within things, though not out of them. He is over and above every kind of condition, state, similarity, and likeness. For, these qualities relate to limited and determinate beings characterized by quiddity:

“He is with everything but not in the sense of [physical] nearness. He is different from every thing but not in the sense of separation.” (Sermon 1)

“He is not inside things in the sense of physical [pervasion or] penetration, and is not outside them in the sense of [physical] exclusion [for exclusion entails a kind of finitude].” (Sermon 186)

“He is distinct from things because He overpowers them, and the things are distinct from Him because of their subjection to Him.” (Sermon 152)

That is, His distinctness from things lies in the fact that He has authority and control over them. However, His power, authority and sovereignty, unlike that of the creatures, is not accompanied with simultaneous weakness, subjugation, and subjection.

His distinction and separateness from things lies in the fact that things are totally subject to His power and authority, and that which is subject and subordinated can never be like the one who subjugates and commands control over it. His separateness from things does not lie in physical separation but is on account of the distinction which lies between the Provider and the provided, the Perfect and the imperfect, the Powerful and the weak.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* the very basis of all discussions on Divine Essence rests on the position that God is Absolute and Infinite Being, which transcends all limits and finitude. No point of space or time, nor any thing is devoid of Him.

He is with everything, yet no thing is with Him. Since He is the Absolute, and the Infinite, He transcends all time, number, limit and proximity (all kinds of quiddities). That is, time and space, number and limit are applicable to a lower stage i.e. stage of Divine Acts and creation. Everything is from Him and returns unto Him. He is the First of the first and the Last of the last. He precedes everything and succeeds everything. This is the idea that forms the axis of all discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.