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- Amina Inloes**

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The authenticity of the information in Nahjul Balagha is rarely challenged. The present book aims to challenge the authenticity of some of the passages present in Nahjul Balagha regarding women through three means: a traditional approach, textual criticism and comparing texts regarding the treatment of women. There is a belief that some material may have been attributed to Imam Ali (as) posthumously, thus painting him as a misogynist.

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Abstract

One of the most controversial Shi'i texts today is a sermon in *Nahj al-Balaghah* (an early eleventh century collection of materials attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib) describing women as deficient in faith and intellect. This is only one of several passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah* which come across as unfavourable to women.

While, in the Shi'i tradition, the authenticity of materials in *Nahj al-Balaghah* is rarely challenged, this paper challenges the authenticity of these passages about women through three means: (a) a traditional approach based on alternative sources and chains of narration; (b) textual criticism, including the suggestion that the notion of women being 'deficient' was actually taken from Aristotle, not Imam 'Ali; and (c) comparing the treatment of women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* with the treatment of women in *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, the earliest extant Shi'i text. This will be done under the premise that if the portrayals significantly conflict, the material in *Nahj al-Balaghah* may reflect a later set of cultural-religious norms and have been attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib posthumously.

Additionally, it argues against the common view that some of these passages were addressed specifically to 'A'ishah (as opposed to all women) due to her participation in the Battle of the Camel by a deeper examination of the alternative textual sources. It also highlights the ethical problems involved in attacking women through their gender – which is often done in Shi'i historical narrative with respect to 'A'ishah – and considers the persistence of these ideas about the nature of women in contemporary Shi'i

ideologies of gender.

Keywords: Shi'ism; 'Ali ibn Abi Talib; *Nahj al-Balaghah*; *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*; women; *hadith*

Introduction

Introduction¹

Anyway, these words exist in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, and solutions must be sought for them [...]. If we challenge their authenticity, then our entire [corpus of] sacred sources will come into question. If we say they're pseudo-universal propositions [addressed only to one woman], then not only women but men and many other rulings based on them will be affected. If we accept them as they are, then we must resolve the consequences of their incongruity with our present society. What we can say is that there's a kind of absolute neglect regarding such *ahadith*. They aren't addressed seriously, so no serious solutions are found for them.² – A contemporary Iranian thinker on the narrations about women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* 'Women are deficient in intellect' is one of the most controversial Shi'i narrations today.

This and other unfavourable narrations about women attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are particularly troubling in the Shi'i tradition since the Shi'i tradition treats Imam 'Ali as inerrant and as a paragon of justice and humanity. He is also put forward as a model of an ideal husband. These passages are also troubling since he was married to the Prophet's daughter, who is lauded in the Shi'i tradition as a perfect and inerrant woman; this led Annemarie Schimmel to remark that he 'ought to have had a more positive attitude' towards women.³

It goes without saying that the Qur'an includes both men and women in its discussions of humanity, and does not make negative generalizations about women; additionally, these narrations are difficult to accept today due to the mass participation of women in intellectual endeavours. Thus, these narrations seem to contradict both the received text as well as everyday experience. Nevertheless, there is strong resistance to questioning the authenticity of this material due to the sanctity surrounding *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

I will approach the – in Shi'i circles – often taboo question of the authenticity of this material in three ways. First, through a detailed analysis of the alternative textual sources for these passages and their chains of narration; this is because alternative sources are often cited as supporting evidence for the authenticity of material in *Nahj al-Balaghah*; however, an in-depth look at the alternative sources not only shows that they do not substantiate the authenticity of these sermons, but also introduces new problems. While doing so, I will also explore the 'middle ground' solution that the sermon on women's 'deficiencies' was addressed solely to 'A'ishah (rather than to all women) due to her participation in the

Battle of the Camel, and whether or not that is actually substantiated by the alternative sources. I will also explore the ethical problem which arises when attacking a female figure through her femininity. Third, I will engage in textual critique, and consider the possibility that the concept of the ‘deficiency’ of women actually dates back to antiquity – specifically, Aristotle.

Lastly, I will offer a comparative approach and explore how ideas on the nature and role of women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* compare with those in *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, the oldest extant Shi'i text which is centred on Imam 'Ali; my theory is that if the portrayals conflict, then perhaps the later material (i.e. *Nahj al-Balaghah*) which conforms to post-Prophetic cultural norms (i.e. the social values of the classical 'Abbasid Empire) could have been attributed to Imam 'Ali posthumously. Since I have never seen an analysis of gender in *Kitab Sulaym*, I suspect this approach may be unique. The use of both classical and contemporary methods is intended to offer a multi-dimensional and comprehensive insight into the question of the authenticity of these passages.

- [1.](#) I would like to thank M. J. Elmi, Ian Netton, Shaikh Mohammed Ali Ismail, Shaikh Yahya Seymour, Alexander Khaleeli, Amir Dastmalchian, and the anonymous reviewers for reading over this article and offering genuinely constructive feedback. Additionally, I would like to thank Shaikh Qassim al-Asady for assisting with the translation of an obscure word, and, in years past, Sayyid Muhammad al-Musawi and Shaikh M. S. Bahmanpour for thoughtful discussions on this subject. I also would like to thank Edward Skidelsky and Gabriele Galluzzo of the University of Exeter for taking the time to correspond regarding Aristotle's views about women. (Of course, I am not at all implying that any of the above agree with everything that is written here, only that they had useful insights.) This article is based on a chapter from my PhD thesis 'Negotiating ShD'D Identity and Orthodoxy through Canonizing Ideologies about Women in Twelver ShD'D A'ÁdDth on Pre-Islamic Sacred History in the Qur'Án', submitted to the University of Exeter in 2015.
- [2.](#) The contemporary Iranian thinker, Abdolkarim Soroush, on the narrations about women in *Nahj al-Balaghah*. Abdolkarim Soroush, in Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1999), 226. (She is transcribing from an audio recording.) Transliteration adjusted for consistency with this article. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181, 223.
- [3.](#) Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum International, 2003), 54. She does, however, admit to the possibility that such statements are inauthentic (i.e. they were not actually said by 'Ali ibn Abi Talib).

A Brief History of Nahj al-Balaghah

Nahj al-Balaghah (compiled 1009–1010 ce/400 ah – that is, slightly after *al-Kafi* and *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih*, two of the most prominent Shi'i books of *hadith*) consists of sermons, letters, and sayings attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and was compiled by al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015 ce), a prominent Shi'i scholar. This was roughly three centuries after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 ce), and well after the 'orthodox' norms of thought regarding women were established in classical Islamic thought.

His aim was not to present a book of *hadith*, history, or jurisprudence, but rather to demonstrate the

literary style and eloquence of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. Because of this, he did not include chains of narration or indicate where he took his material from. As a result, a discussion of the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is challenging.

The idea that al-Sharif al-Radi himself wrote it has been dismissed due to the presence of portions of *Nahj al-Balaghah* in other sources, and an identifiably different writing style in his own works. However, because he did not include chains of narration – traditionally, the first means of authenticating a *hadith* – the passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are not admissible within Shi’i scholarship as a source for deriving jurisprudence, although, in practice, they figure strongly in the Shi’i worldview.

However, within the Shi’i tradition, the work has gained such prominence that ‘Allamah Tabataba’i, the famous twentieth-century exegete, said, ‘For us, whoever wrote *Nahj al-Balaghah* is ‘Ali, even if he lived a century ago’. This was in response to the assertion that Western scholars claim that the material in *Nahj al-Balaghah* does not actually trace back to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating a genuine reverence for the book, this response may have been politicized; such ideological concerns often make it difficult to raise genuine questions – particularly about gender or the authenticity of texts – in contemporary Shi’i (and Sunni) discourse.

Arguing for the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* also has a polemical dimension, since Sunni scholars argue against its authenticity due to its severe criticisms of the first three caliphates and Mu’awiyah. Reza Shah-Kazemi notes that, ‘over the centuries, Shi’i scholars have assiduously rebutted the charges against the authenticity of *Nahj*’, although he cites the more tempered opinion that ‘a large portion’ of *Nahj al-Balaghah* can be reliably traced to Imam ‘Ali rather than every single word.¹ (Shah-Kazemi, incidentally, does not delve into the sermons on women, even though his book explores justice and the intellect in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, and so it would have been an ideal opportunity to explore whether these perceptions of justice and intellect extend to women.)

However, Hossein Modarressi observes that, late in the third century *hijri*, 400 sermons were ascribed to Imam ‘Ali; while, half a century later, that number had grown to 480.² Today, openly questioning the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* can lead to hostility, although it is sometimes done privately.³ A reasonable approach to the authenticity of the contents of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, however, is to treat it like any other book of *hadith* – that is to say, to discuss the authenticity of each passage individually, rather than evaluating the book as a whole, particularly since al-Sharif al-Radi collected the contents from different manuscripts and sources.⁴

One common method of exploring the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is to look for other sources which contain the same passages; another common approach is to compare the passages to the Qur’an. As mentioned above, both approaches will be used here, in addition to textual criticism along with a sprinkling of speculation.

¹. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006), 3, citing the Encyclopedia of Islam.

[2](#). Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 14. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that material published later is inauthentic, since reliable material could have been discovered in other books.

[3](#). Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i, *A Shiite Anthology*, trans. W. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain, 1980), 5–6 (discussion with Henri Corbin). Also see Reza Shah Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali*, 3–4; he also cites the same exchange between Corbin and Tabataba'i. See also M. Motahhari, Selection [sic] from *Glimpses of Nahj al-Balaghah* [a translation of portions of Sayri dar Nahj al-Balaghah], trans. anonymous (n.p.: n.l., 1975).

[4](#). The late Sayyid Fadlallah also mentions on his official website that not everything in *Nahj al-Balaghah* can be ascribed to Imam 'Ali and that each passage should be evaluated individually; he also rejects the idea that al-Sharif al-Radi wrote it himself. Bayynat, 'FAQ – Authenticity of Nahj Al-Balagha' . Accessed 18 August 2014.

Women are Deficient in Intellect

The sermon regarding women that has received the most attention in *Nahj al-Balaghah* is the sermon on the deficiencies of women. [1](#) Presented as '[An excerpt] from his speech after the Battle of the Camel, in condemnation of women', it reads:

O people! Women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect (*inna al-nisa' nawaqis al-iman nawaqis al-huzuz nawaqis al-'uqul*). As for their deficiency in faith, it is their sitting back from ritual prayers and fasting in the days of their menstruation. And as for their deficiency in their intellects, it is because the testimony of two women is like the testimony of one man. As for their deficiency in shares, it is because their inheritance is half that of men. So beware the evils of women. Be on guard against the good ones among them, and do not obey them in good so that they do not desire evil. [2](#)

Reactions among Shi'i scholars with respect to this sermon have been multifold. Historically, commentators tended to accept these views as facts about the nature of women, [3](#) as did the prominent modern Sunni reformer, Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), who wrote that 'it is a thing corroborated by the experience of centuries!' He describes the sermon as apt on the grounds that women's mental capacities are geared towards their primary responsibilities in child-rearing and domestic duties; his comments are a reminder that this way of thinking is not limited to Shi'ism. [4](#)

A common view is that these words were actually directed at 'A'ishah bint Abi Bakr, the instigator of the Battle of the Camel – which was the first major civil war among Muslims and resulted in tremendous loss of life – but out of respect for the fact that 'A'ishah was a widow of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib spoke to her in the plural ('women') rather than to her directly ('you'). This view is expressed in *Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah* by Ibn Abi al-Hadid, generally taken as the starting point for launching an investigation into *Nahj al-Balaghah*. He takes the statements about women's deficiencies at face value but then explains that they are directed at 'A'ishah who erred in what she did (at the Battle of the

Camel).⁵ This view is reinforced by one of the alternative sources, *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas*, which says that the speech was directed at ‘A’ishah. (Of course, that still leaves the question of whether *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas*, which was compiled significantly after *Nahj al-Balaghah*, should be accepted as a reliable source.).

This view, espoused by the prominent Shi’i scholar Naser Makarem Shirazi, is popular today, perhaps because it sidesteps the issue – that is, it neither necessitates rejecting the authenticity of the passage, nor does it necessitate that these statements about women be taken as truth. However, the fact remains that even if the quotation is addressed to ‘A’ishah alone, it still reflects a very negative view of women; if a similar statement were addressed to an ethnic minority, it would not be accepted.⁶

Additionally, even if these criticisms were only directed at ‘A’ishah, that would still set a precedent of demonizing ‘A’ishah for her gender. That is to say, rather than being criticised for leading a rebellion, she is being criticised for stepping out of her place as a woman, with the implication that other women should stay in line lest they end up like ‘A’ishah. This is not dissimilar to a (presumably, spurious) narration in another book which denigrates ‘A’ishah on the grounds that she menstruated (an attack which is both figuratively and literally ‘below the belt’); that is, it attacks her via her femininity, a common tactic for intimidating women into leaving male space.⁷

This brings up the greater issue of historical narrative – how history is told, and what morals are presented from the story. Traditionally, the main critique of ‘A’ishah is that she disobeyed the Qur’anic verse telling the wives of the Prophet to stay in their homes (Q 33:32–33). However, firstly, this verse is directed solely at the wives of the Prophet and not women in general; in fact, women such as Zaynab bint ‘Ali or Nusaybah are praised for their public stance during times of conflict. Secondly, over ten thousand men are reported to have joined ‘A’ishah in the campaign, hence violating the Qur’anic commandments not to engage in sedition or killing, but similar criticisms are not levied against them.

The real issue is not that ‘A’ishah left her home but, rather, what she did. Nonetheless, ‘A’ishah is usually condemned for leaving her home. For this reason, it will be particularly interesting to see how ‘A’ishah’s rebellion is portrayed in *Kitab Sulaym*, and whether or not, in that work, Imam ‘Ali condemns her as a woman, or as a rebel.

This historical narrative, combined with this sermon, is what the contemporary scholar Naser Makarem Shirazi uses to justify an ideology of gender which restricts women:

Imam ‘Ali wished to speak of her and her actions in an indirect manner to open the eyes of the people and therefore the method which he chose was to explain the religious rulings which are specific to women, and the rulings highlighting the ‘limitations’ and ‘restrictions’ in the rights and privileges of women and men, and to show us that they are not equal – in all areas of life – and that this too is for a reason. Through this, he wanted to show the people that ‘A’ishah is the same as other women in these certain issues and to make them question themselves as to why they should have followed her and

listened to her advice (over that of Allah and the Noble Prophet).[8](#)

While he mentions 'limitations' and 'restrictions' on both women and men, no limitations or restrictions for men are outlined in this sermon; therefore, 'equal' is a euphemism. Ironically, the points that Makarem Shirazi brings up here are in opposition to the efforts of contemporary Shi'i apologists to 'prove' that Islam is not unfair or oppressive to women; for instance, today, it is common to argue that the differences between men and women in giving testimony or receiving inheritance are not due to any innate difference in worth or intellectual capacity between men and women. Even more ironically, Makarem Shirazi begins his discussion with the insistence that these words apply only to 'A'ishah, but concludes by explaining that they really should apply to all women because all women suffer from these deficiencies!

The remaining view is that these sermons are inauthentic on the basis that they conflict with the Qur'anic treatment of women. Ayatollah Ishaq Fayyad (a *marja'* living in al-Najaf al-Ashraf) and Ayatollah Fadlallah have expressed this view, and it has been attributed to Ayatollah Sane'i as well.[9](#) Despite his adoption of a theological theory centring on inherent spiritual differences between the female and male, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli also implies that he doubts the authenticity of this sermon by saying that these words are beneath Imam 'Ali – even if they were only directed at one woman – and that the best thing to say about the authenticity of the sermon is 'I don't know'.[10](#) It has also been suggested that this sermon was fabricated to defame Fatimah al-Zahra' (the wife of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib) in order to reduce her claim to Fadak, a conflict which is seen as symbolizing whether Abu Bakr or 'Ali ibn Abi Talib had the right to succeed the Prophet as caliph.

This view is not without merit since the sermon itself refers to a woman's lesser standing in receiving inheritance and offering testimony, both of which were pivotal issues regarding Fadak, in that Abu Bakr claimed that prophets did not leave inheritance, and that one female witness (namely, Umm Ayman) was insufficient because the Qur'an requires one male or two female witnesses.[11](#) Mahdi Mehrizi, an Iranian scholar who has written extensively on the subject of women and Shi'i *ahadith*, observes that this narration conflicts with the Qur'an and with other *ahadith*, including *ahadith* which refer to the '*aqf* of women.[12](#)

It has also been suggested that these statements should be taken as socially contextualized, in that girls in that era tended to marry quite young (as young as nine years old), and at an age before they were intellectually mature enough to advise their husbands; or that women in general tended to be denied education opportunities and hence lacked opportunities for intellectual growth. However, these interpretations are incompatible with the perception of Imam 'Ali as a man whose wisdom and words transcended his era, as well as the fact that his wife and daughter were known for being knowledgeable. Lastly, in her book on the view of women in Shi'i sources, Rawand Osman also questions how this sermon fits in with the Qur'an and the historical actions of the women from the household of the Prophet.[13](#)

Five alternative texts are identified in secondary literature as verifying this sermon:

1. *Tadhkirat al-Khawas* by Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256/1257 ce, Hanafi)
2. *Qut al-Qulub* by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996 ce, Sufi Shafi'i)
3. *al-Kafi* by Shaykh al-Kulayni (d. 941 ce, Shi'i)
4. *al-Amali* by Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 991 ce, Shi'i)
5. *al-Ikhtisas* by Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022 ce, Shi'i) [14](#)

Of these works, the strongest – according to modern Shi'i scholarship – would be *al-Kafi*; not only is it the most highly regarded *hadith* collection, but it is also the earliest source listed. The next strongest sources would be *al-Amali* and *al-Ikhtisas*, both of which are *hadith* collections by well-known Shi'i scholars in roughly the same era. The least reliable would be *Qut al-Qulub* and *Tadhkirat al-Khawas*, since – like *Nahj al-Balaghah* – they do not include chains of narration or sources, and are not by Shi'i scholars; *Tadhkirat al-Khawas* is particularly weak, given the centuries elapsed between it and *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

Al-Kafi, therefore, is the most logical source to start with. However, an investigation into *al-Kafi* reveals only the last sentence of the sermon:

From a group of our companions, from Ahmad ibn Abi 'Abd Allah, from whoever related it, from al-Husayn ibn al-Mukhtar, from Abi 'Abd Allah, peace be upon him: 'The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, said, "Beware the evils of women, and be on guard from them. And if they command you to good, then oppose them, so that they may not desire evil from you."'" [15](#)

While this sentence is, admittedly, not the most favourable towards women, it does not explicate the intellectual and spiritual deficiencies of women in the same way that the sermon does. This narration is also questionable from a *rijali* (biographical) standpoint, in that it has a gap in its chain of narration. Therefore, to say this sermon is substantiated by *al-Kafi* is misleading. [16](#)

The next two sources, *al-Amali* and *al-Ikhtisas*, contain texts that are essentially identical to the excerpt from *al-Kafi*, but with slightly different chains of narration. However, the context of this narration is different. In this narration, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib is giving ethical advice, such as not being suspicious of others, and there is no indication that it is connected with the Battle of the Camel. This, therefore, raises a question as to whether the sentiments in the sermon can really be said to have been directed at 'A'ishah at the Battle of the Camel. The narration concludes with him saying:

[...] And it is upon you to [associate with] sincere brothers, and increase your benefit from them, for they are a resource in ease and a shield in misfortune. And, in your speech, consult those who fear Allah, and love your brothers according to their amount of piety, and beware of the evils of women, and be on

guard from the good among them. If they command you to good, then disobey them so that they may not make you desire evil. [17](#)

Like in *al-Kafi*, only the last sentence of the sermon is mentioned. However, a key point is the way in which ‘brothers’ are discussed as a group separate from ‘women’. While the Qur’an does not separate female from male believers, and instead frequently refers to them together (for instance, as *al-mu’minun wa al-mu’minat*, lit. ‘the male believers and female believers’), this separation implies that men are normative in humanity, and women are exceptions. As in *al-Kafi*, there are gaps in the chain of narration in both of these sources; additionally, two of the narrators are considered questionable. One is Abu Jarud, the founder of Zaydi–Jarudi Shi’ism – that is to say, someone who defected from the Imams and hence might be considered suspect from a Twelver Shi’i view, albeit his narrations are not necessarily rejected. [18](#)

The other is Muhammad ibn Sinan, considered by some to be among the *ghulat* (heterodox extremists); this would be in line with an association noticed between misogynistic narrations and some narrators described as being among the *ghulat*. [19](#) In any case, given its different context, this narration is insufficient to reinforce the sermon in *Nahj al-Balaghah*. [20](#)

This exhausts the Shi’i sources, and leads to the Sunni sources. While Sunni sources can be admissible as a valid source of narrations in Shi’i scholarship, the fact remains that Sunni and Shi’i scholars have different standards for the acceptability of narrators, and many Sunni narrators are not accepted in the Shi’i tradition, and vice versa. Additionally, the possibility that this sermon may have been fabricated for polemical reasons also makes a non–Shi’i transmission of this sermon insufficient from a Shi’i perspective.

In any case, the first Sunni source is *Qut al-Qulub*, which contains a number of misogynistic and gynophobic statements (including an exegesis equating ‘fools’ (*sufaha*) with ‘women and children’). [21](#) (The equation of ‘fools’ with ‘women’ is also mentioned in *al-Faqih*, a point which will be revisited later.) [22](#) With respect to this sermon, it contains this passage:

And in the advice of Luqman to his son: ‘O my son, beware the evil woman, for she will make you old before you grow old; and beware the evils of women, for they do not call to good,’ and he was on guard from the good ones among them. [23](#)

Clearly, this passage is even less substantial in its support for the sermon. Firstly, it also only contains the last sentence; secondly, it also does not appear in the context of the Battle of the Camel; and, lastly, it is not even attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib! In fact, the mention of *Qut al-Qulub* as a supporting reference for the sermon is quite a stretch (albeit one which is only discovered when one actually opens up *Qut al-Qulub* to see what it says). Additionally, this statement contains neither a source nor a chain of narration – particularly important since it is a non–Shi’i text – and so it can be set aside.

The final source is *Tadhkirat al-Khawas*. Unlike the previous four sources, this work actually does

contain the full text of the sermon (with some slight differences in wording), and is attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib at the Battle of the Camel. However, accepting *Tadhkirat al-Khawas* as a supporting source is also problematic since, like the above, it contains neither sources nor a chain of narration; the excerpt is simply introduced by ‘biographical scholars have said (*qala ‘ulama’ al-siyar*)’, and *sirah* is a known area of *hadith* fabrication. Additionally, because it was compiled roughly three centuries after *Nahj al-Balaghah* (and six centuries after ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib), it cannot verify whether this sermon was present in earlier sources.

In short, while five sources are traditionally listed as supporting this sermon, a deeper examination of these sources shows that they do not actually lend credence to the authenticity of the sermon or locate it at the Battle of the Camel. None are considered authentic via the methodology of traditional *hadith* analysis, and only one actually contains the ‘meat’ of the sermon which is the discussion of the deficiencies of women. Although, as Makarem Shirazi mentions, it is not outside the realm of possibility for ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib to have said the same thing more than once, that then makes it difficult to argue that these words were addressed specifically to ‘A’ishah.

There is, however, one source that is *not* traditionally mentioned, and that is *Sahih al-Bukhari*, in which essentially the same statement is ascribed to the Prophet:

Once Allah’s Apostle, peace and blessings be upon him, went out to the musalla for ‘Id al-Adha or ‘Id al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, ‘O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire are you (women).’

They asked, ‘Why is it so, O Allah’s Apostle?’

He replied, ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.’

The women asked, ‘O Allah’s Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?’

He said, ‘Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?’

They replied in the affirmative.

He said, ‘This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Is it not true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?’ The women replied in the affirmative.

He said, ‘This is the deficiency in her religion.’²⁴

Since *Sahih al-Bukhari* is not considered a source of Shi’i *hadith*, there is no need to consider whether or not this narration should be taken as authentic within the Shi’i tradition. At first glance, the attribution of an essentially identical statement to the Prophet, albeit in a different circumstances, would seem to

bolster the possibility of the authenticity of the sermon. However, it also raises a new problem, in that it suggests an entirely new origin for these sentiments.[25](#)

The Aristotelian connection

This leads to a deeper examination of the text of the tradition, and a surprising and almost entirely neglected concordance between this (and other) selections of *Nahj al-Balaghah* with quotations from Aristotle, to the degree that if one were to publish the quotations from Aristotle and put the name of Imam 'Ali on them, they would probably be accepted at first glance. The first idea that emerges is the concept of the 'deficiency' of women (*nawaqis* literally meaning 'deficient'). The idea that a woman is deficient, or is an incomplete man, traces back to ancient Greece, in that Aristotle held that women were incomplete copies of men and were deficient in two main ways: their reproductive physiology and their intellectual faculty.

Aristotle's view of the female as a 'mutilated male' parallels a description of Bilqis found in *Tafsir al-Qummi*, saying that Bilqis could not have been given 'of every thing' (Q 27:23) because she lacked a male organ and a beard.[26](#) (This identification of women with eunuchs and pre-pubescent boys, and the implication that women, eunuchs, and pre-pubescent boys are inferior to men and hence should not be given authority, is also found in another saying in *Nahj al-Balaghah*.)[27](#) Hence, women are closer to animals. Aristotle maintained that because men are naturally superior to women in terms of intellect, men are the rulers and women are the ruled.[28](#) He elaborates on this in his *Politics*:

Hence there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form. [...] [T]he temperance of a woman and that of a man are not the same, nor are their courage and justice, as Socrates thought, but the one is the courage of command, and the other that of subordination, and the case is similar with the other virtues. [...] [A]s the poet said of woman: 'Silence gives grace to woman' – though that is not the case likewise with a man.[29](#)

The tacit comparison between women and slaves here resembles an equivalency between marriage and slavery for women which underpins classical Islamic perceptions of marriage.[30](#) In this quotation, it is also of note that Aristotle treats the woman as an exception to the human norm rather than as part of the human norm (a trend which even continues in much of contemporary Islamic thought), and the mention of woman's 'courage' calls to mind a statement in *Nahj al-Balaghah* that courage is a virtue for men and a defect for women;[31](#) another quotation attributed to Imam 'Ali says that a woman's image is on her face, but a man's in his speech.[32](#)

Of course, such a description of women does not take into account the strict social restrictions on women (in both ancient Greece as well as Islamic Mesopotamia) that kept them cloistered inside, and

socially and financially dependent, giving the average woman no recourse for survival but jealousy, scolding, and tears. Since ancient Greek thought is considered to have heavily influenced the development of the first few centuries of Islamic thought, and *Nahj al-Balaghah* was not compiled until the eleventh century ce, it is entirely possible that beliefs of ancient Greek origin could have been ascribed to the Prophet or 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, particularly since it is generally felt today that Byzantine and Mesopotamian cultural restrictions on women were imported into classical Islamic culture and were not present in the Islamic community during the time of the Prophet.³³ The fact that, as will be seen, comparable ideas are not found in the earlier text, *Kitab Sulaym*, lends credence to this idea.³⁴

In discussing Aristotle's view of women, Lynda Lange cites a seventeenth century Frenchman who says:

Aristotle [...] pretends that women are but monsters [...]. If a woman (how learned soever she might be) had wrote as much of men, she would have lost all her credit; and men would have imagined it sufficient to have refuted such a foppery by answering that it must be a woman, or a fool, that had said so.³⁵

Although dealing with entirely different traditions (ancient Greek and Christian European), Lange's observations summarize the entire problem of saying the sermon is directed to 'A'ishah: if such things were said about men – or any other group – they would never be accepted.

[Aristotle, Nahj al-Balaghah, and contemporary Shi'i ideologies of gender](#)

It should be emphasised that the question of the authenticity of this sermon is not a theoretical or historical issue. Instead, these ideas persist in dominant views of women among contemporary Shi'is. Even in translation, Aristotle's description of women strongly resembles descriptions of women by some twentieth-century Shi'i scholars who argue that because a man is more spiritually, ethically, and intellectually complete than a woman, men must be in authority over women at all times. (Of course this is not the only contemporary Shi'i view on gender; however, it is taken as 'orthodox' in many circles.). The interested reader is invited to pause and take a moment to guess which words are Aristotle's, and which belong to twentieth century Shi'i scholars, and to reflect on how this exercise indicates the sharp relevance of these concepts to the Shi'i experience here and now. (The very interested reader is invited to consult the endnotes to discover which quotations are from antiquity and which from the modern era.)

a) For man's nature is the most complete, so that these dispositions too are more evident in humans. Hence a wife is more compassionate than a husband and more given to tears, but also more jealous and complaining and more apt to scold and fight. The female is also more dispirited and despondent than the male, more shameless and lying, is readier to deceive and has a longer memory; furthermore she is more wakeful, more afraid of action, and in general is less inclined to move than the male, and takes less nourishment. The male on the other hand, as we have said, is a readier ally and is braver than the female [...].³⁶

b) The feelings of woman are aroused quicker than a man's. Her sentiments are excited sooner than those of man; that is, a woman, in matters with which she is involved or of which she is afraid, reacts sooner and with more acuteness just as she feels, while a man is more cool headed [...]. In activities based on reasoning, and in abstruse intellectual problems, woman cannot equal man, but in literature, painting and all matters that are related to aesthetics, she is not behind man. Man has more ability to keep a secret than woman, and he keeps unpleasant private matters to himself better than a woman [...]. Woman is more soft-hearted, and instantly resorts to weeping, and occasionally to fainting.[37](#)

c) Men have much greater judicious prudence than women, and consequently they are much stronger and braver and more capable of performing strenuous tasks requiring intrepidity and forbearance, while women's life is dominated by feelings [...]. 'Men are the maintainers of women' is not confined to husbands [...]; rather, it gives authority to the men, as a group, over the whole group of women, in the common affairs which affect lives of both sexes on the whole. The general social aspects which are related to man's excellence as, for example, rulership and judiciary, are the things on which a society depends for its continuance. It is because of the prudence and judiciousness which are found in men in a higher degree than in women. Likewise, fighting and defence depend on strength and far-reaching strategic planning. In such affairs men have authority over women.

d) As far as the broad issues and general social aspects – like rulership, judiciary and war – are concerned, they have to be controlled by intellect, free from the influence of emotions and feelings. Thus they have to be entrusted not to women but to men who are governed more by intellectual power than emotional feelings.[38](#)

e) [As for woman] because of her lack of rationality and her deficiency in organization and her inability to get to the level of men, by-and-large Islam does not allow her to be appointed as a judge or to give her the guardianship over her children even in case of the death of the father. So, how can it be possible for her to be allowed to guard the interests of the umma and whatever is related to such an overwhelming task?[39](#)

From these passages – four of which come from twentieth-century Shi'i thinkers and only one of which comes from Aristotle – it is clear that the concept of the 'deficiency' of woman as well as the sense of a woman being ethically weaker continues to have a far-reaching impact on Shi'i thought.

Textual analysis continued: menstruation and evil

The second issue of note is the negativity associated with menstruation. A discussion of perceptions of menstruation in the Shi'i tradition, as in the Sunni tradition, is complex; suffice it to say here that there is, at least, a logical problem, in that menstruating women do not actually fast less since they are expected to make up missed fasts during the year. Additionally, it is hardly fair to criticize women for a natural process.

It goes without saying that uneasiness with menstruation predates Islam, and it is quite possible that some ancient attitudes towards menstruation influenced the discussion of it among Muslims. Even in the twentieth century, menstruation was still mentioned as a ‘biological’ and ‘scientific’ reason for the need for male authority;⁴⁰ similarly, in his commentary on his sermon, Makarem Shirazi explains that ‘during the time of their menstruation, they enter into an almost-ill period in which they require rest and are not in a position to engage in acts of worship.’

Lastly, there is the characterization of women as evil, which recurs three other times in *Nahj al-Balaghah* – once in another sermon (to be discussed in the next section), and in the sayings ‘a woman is a scorpion whose grip is sweet’ and ‘a woman is evil entirely, and the worst evil in her is that one cannot do without her.’⁴¹ The narrations equating woman with evil are inconsistent with another saying in *Nahj al-Balaghah* which says that ‘the doer of evil is worse than evil itself’ (saying 32), which separates the person from evil.

The portrayal of woman as evil is not found in the Qur’an, and Sayyid Fadlallah politely says that this narration is irreconcilable with the Qur’an unless another meaning is intended.⁴² The perception of woman as evil dates back to antiquity, including Judaeo-Christian and Sunni perceptions of Eve, as well as in the trope of demon-goddesses and evil seductresses – mythologies which persist even in today’s popular literature. The image of woman as a devourer of man also plays on a primal (male) fear, and the imagery of a scorpion-goddess also dates back to ancient mythologies; whether or not Imam ‘Ali actually said these things, he did not invent them.

It would seem unlikely that these statements would issue forth from Imam ‘Ali given the favourable reports of domestic harmony in his marriage to Fatimah al-Zahra’.⁴³ While some scholars would maintain that Fatimah al-Zahra’ was an exception to womanhood, and that that these statements apply to ‘ordinary’ women (perhaps, those who menstruate), Mahdi Mehrizi notes that the Qur’an itself presents the Virgin Mary and Asiyah as ‘examples for the believers’ and not as ‘exceptions’.⁴⁴

This sermon can be read in tandem with another sermon in *Nahj al-Balaghah* which offers the notion of ‘womanly views’; unlike the above, here, the textual evidence supports the view that it is directed at ‘A’ishah.

As regards a certain woman, she is in the grip of womanly views, and malice is boiling in her bosom like the furnace of the blacksmith. If she were called upon to deal with others as she is dealing with me she would not have done it. Even hereafter she will be allowed her original respect, while [her] reckoning is an obligation on Allah [...].⁴⁵

As above, directing these insults to ‘A’ishah does not change the fact that they are demeaning to other women, and are along the same lines as an ethnic slur. While women may suffer particularly from the stereotype of harbouring malice, ‘A’ishah is hardly the only person to have rode out to war harbouring malice. The alternative sources in this case neither provide additional information nor pre-date *Nahj al-*

Balaghah; some are copied from *Nahj al-Balaghah* itself, and one is narrated from a drunkard who was reputed to narrate *hadith* while imbibing. Therefore, they cannot lend support to the presence of this text in earlier sources.⁴⁶

Should the sermon on women's 'deficiencies' really be looked at as three separate passages?

Up until now, there has been a tacit assumption that this sermon should be treated as one whole, originating from one source, and which is either authentic or inauthentic as a whole. However, the presence of snippets of it in other sources suggests that it in fact may be an amalgamation of three different pieces. This idea is reinforced by the differing style between the three pieces. The sermon can be broken up as follows:

- a) **The eloquent statement:** 'O people! Women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect.'
- b) **The gloss:** 'As for their deficiency in faith, it is their sitting back from ritual prayers and fasting in the days of their menstruation. As for their deficiency in shares, it is because their inheritance is half that of men. And as for their deficiency in intellect, it is because the testimony of two women is like the testimony of one man.'
- c) **The exhortation:** 'So beware the evils of women. Be on guard against the good ones among them and do not obey them in good so that they do not desire evil.'

Despite the fact that the phrase 'women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect' may be unpleasant to some people, language-wise, it is eloquent, succinct, and powerful; no doubt this is why Sharif al-Radi selected this line. As discussed above, it may have resulted from the attribution of ancient ideas to Imam 'Ali; the attribution of the sayings of wise people to the Prophet or Imams is a known cause of *hadith* fabrication.⁴⁷ The second part of the sermon comes across as an explanatory gloss. Often, in *hadith*, explanatory glosses by transmitters were mistakenly added to *hadiths* as part of the text (this is referred to as a *hadith* being *mudraj*); although, in this case, it could have been taken from *Bukhari* as well.⁴⁸ Not only is the style of this section different, in that it lacks the eloquence and force of the first sentence, but it also is easy to challenge logically. Then, the sermon concludes with the third part – the exhortation – which appears as a separate narration attributed to various people in different circumstances.⁴⁹

Needless to say, the likelihood that this passage was constructed of separate parts, each of which appears in different books attributed to various people at various times, lends further support to the view that these words were not actually said to 'A'ishah at the Battle of the Camel, or even by Imam 'Ali at all.

Summary of Narrations

Topic

Sources

Implications

Notes

- [1.](#) This sermon is frequently numbered as Sermon 80, although differences in numbering appear in different editions.
- [2.](#) My translation, aimed at a literal rendition of the passage. Some of the translations in this article from Nahj al-Balaghah are my own, while others are taken or adapted from the widely circulated English translation Peak of Eloquence, translated by Askari Jafery ([Bombay]: Islamic Seminary for World Shia Muslim Organisation, 1978).
- [3.](#) In Surat al-Mar'ah fi al-Turath al-Shi'i, Muhammad al-Khabbaz cites the following examples: 'Ali ibn Zayd al-Bayhaqi Farid al-Khurasani says in Ma'arij Nahj al-Balaghah, 'The intellects of women are intellects which are overcome by greed, desire, and fear'; al-Shaykh al-Mirza Habib al-Hashimi al-Khu'i says in his Manhij al-Bara'ah fi Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah 'As for categorizing their intellects with "the intellects of women", it is because they have the shared qualities of shortcoming and deficiency, and a paucity of understanding regarding the commonweal specifically with respect to civil administration and warfare'; al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi says in Tawdih Nahj al-Balaghah, 'The weakness of the intellectual faculties of women established in 'ilm al hadith; and she is emotional and cannot be depended on for important/great matters [...]. Allah the Exalted has created the woman for domestic tasks [...] and therefore he has placed in her strong emotions so that she will care for her house and her children, and with this, her intellectual power decreases'. Muhammad Khabbaz, Surat al-Mar'ah fi al-Turath al-Shi'i (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2009), 79–100.
- [4.](#) Muhammad 'Abduh, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah I, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 129.
- [5.](#) Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah VI, 20 vols. (n.p.: Dar al-Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 214.
- [6.](#) Osman notes the view that says it was aimed at 'A'ishah, and suggests that could have been part of a time that had 'anti-woman sentiments' since Sunni narrations condemning women's political leadership also emerged at a similar time, although that presupposes that the passage in Nahj actually dates to the era of Imam 'Ali. Fatima Mernissi suggests that the Sunni narration condemning female leadership emerged due to the fact that from 629–632, there were various claimants to the Sassanid throne, including two women. Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. M. Lakeland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1991), 50; Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi'i Islam* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 157–158.
- [7.](#) The section in Bihar reads: 'Maryam was batul, and Fatimah is batul. Al-Batul is one who does not see redness ever – that is, she does not menstruate, for menstruation is disliked (makruh) among the daughters of the prophets. [...] The Prophet said: 'O 'A'ishah, O Hamra' [the Red], Fatimah is not like human women – she does not get ill as they get ill.' Using 'Hamra' [the Red] in this manner is a way of turning around the nickname 'Humayrah', often treated as a flattering nickname given to her. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar al-Jami'ah li-Durar Akhbar al-A'immat al-Athar XLIII, 110 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Wafa', 1983), 15, no. 13. This is particularly relevant given the demonization of menstruation in this sermon.
- [8.](#) Nasir Makarem Shirazi, *The "Deficiencies" of Women* [a partial translation of his extensive commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah], trans. S. Bhimji ([Canada]: Islamic Publishing House, 2012), 3.
- [9.](#) Ayatollah Fayyad expressed this view privately in a discussion with a Shi'i scholar in London on the grounds that this statement contradicts the Qur'an.
- [10.](#) 'Abd Allah Javadi Amoli, *Tafsir-e Tasnim XI*, 34 vol. (Tehran: Asra', 2014), 294–5. Special thanks to Shaikh Mohammed Ali Ismail for pointing this out.
- [11.](#) See discussion of this in Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi & Karim Douglas Crow, *Facing One Qiblah: Legal and Doctrinal Aspects of Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2005), 47. Abu Bakr also rejected Imam 'Ali as a witness on the grounds that he was married to Fatimah.
- [12.](#) Mahdi Mehrizi, 'Ta'ammoli dar Ahadith-e Nuqsan-e 'Aql-e Zanan', in *'Ulum-e Hadith LXXXI*, 81–99.
- [13.](#) Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna*, 158–162. I was once told privately by an Iranian of the older generation that Ayatollah Motahhari held this view but that it was posthumously removed from his work.
- [14.](#) 'Abd al-Zahra' al-Khatib, *Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah wa Asaniduhu II*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa', 1985), 86–97. Al-

Khatib's work is considered one of the standard works today for sourcing Nahj al-Balaghah. Additionally, Makarem Shirazi lists several others, but the texts he lists do not contain any of the passages from the actual sermon and only contain supplementary material, such as a letter from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to 'A'ishah asking her why she performed jihad as a woman.

[15.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi V, 517, no. 5.

[16.](#) 'Allamah al-Majlisi, Mir'at al-'Uqul XX, 334, no. 5.

[17.](#) Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), al-Amali (Qum: Markaz al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1417 AH), 380, no. 8; Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Nu'man al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), 226.

[18.](#) Hossein Modarressi, Tradition and Survival, 121–125.

[19.](#) al-Tustari cites al-Tusi as saying that his narrations are confused and contain ghuluw. However, the tendency in modern scholarship is to accept his narrations. Muhammad Taqi al-Tustari, Qamus al-Rijal IX, 12 vols. (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, 1419 AH), no. 306 (entry 6807). He is also described as 'very weak' in Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Ardabili, Jami' al-Ruwat II, 2 vols. (Qum: Maktabat Ayatullah al-Mar'ashi al-Najafi, 1403 AH), 124.

[20.](#) The chain of narration in al-Amali (50th session) is: [unspecified] from Muhammad ibn al-Husayn ibn Abi al-Khattab, from Muhammad ibn Sinan, from Abu al-Jarud, from Abu Ja'far al-Baqir, from his father, from his grandfather, the Commander of the Faithful. Muhammad ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), al-Amali, 380 no. 8

The chain of narration in al-Ikhtisas is: Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, from Muhammad ibn Sinan, from some men (ba'd rijalihi), from Abu Jarud, narrating without links (yarfa'uhu) from the Commander of the Faithful. Muhammad ibn Nu'man al-'Akbari al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, n.d.). Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Nu'man al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, 226.

[21.](#) Abu Talib al-Makki, Qut al-Qulub II, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997), 424.

[22.](#) Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih IV, 4 vols. (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin fi al-Hawzah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 226, no. 5534.

[23.](#) Abu Talib al-Makki, Qut al-Qulub II, 400.

[24.](#) Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari II (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr li-al-Taba'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawdi', 1981/1401 AH), book 24, no. 541. This idea recurs in other parts of Bukhari as well. One of my former students, Mohsan Mear, has argued that in all of the Sunni recensions of this narration, the narrators should be considered as inauthentic as per Sunni rijal works.

[25.](#) A similar phenomenon is found in an infamous narration in which men are instructed not to let their daughters learn how to read, in that it is attributed through different chains to both 'A'ishah as well as the Imams. (This is despite the fact that both 'A'ishah and many women in the Imams' households were learned.)

[26.](#) 'The female is, as it were, a mutilated male'. Aristotle, Generation of Animals, trans. A. L. Peck [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1942), 175 (Book II, section 3). This translation uses the phrase 'deformed male', although 'mutilated male' is commonly used in literature debating the ideological ramifications of this sentence. While Aristotle's erroneous descriptions of the physical inferiority of women (such as women possessing fewer teeth or a smaller brain) are taken in conjunction with the rest of his worldview to imply that he was attempting to provide a biological basis for male domination – as, indeed, is done in the some contemporary Shi'i gender ideology.

The opposing view should also be noted, in that Robert Mayhew in The Female in Aristotle's Biology. Reason or Rationalization argues that Aristotle was not ideologically motivated and that feminist critiques of Aristotle are not loyal to what Aristotle actually wrote. Paul Schollmeier offers a defence of Aristotle's view, and suggests that some of Aristotle's views could be construed as 'revolutionary' or gender egalitarian, albeit, at the same time, he concedes that 'Aristotle does argue that men and women by nature have different psychologies, and even that men are psychologically superior to women'. Paul Schollmeier, 'Aristotle and Women: Household and Political Roles', in Polis XX no. 1–2 (2003), 22–42. However, in this case, the use of it in the narration is similar to that by Aristotle, regardless of what he intended – that is, the female is reproductively imperfect compared to the male. The narration about Bilqis is in al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 110, no. 3 (citing Tafsir 'Ali ibn Ibrahim).

[27.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, saying number 102: 'Shortly a time will come for people when high positions will be given only to

those who defame others, when vicious people will be regarded as witty and the just will be regarded as weak. People will regard charity as a loss, consideration for kinship as an obligation, and worship grounds for claiming greatness among others. At this time, authority will be exercised through the counsel of women, the posting of young boys in high positions and the running of the administration by eunuchs.’

This description could refer to the harem culture of the ‘Abassids, with some women exerting authority in a behind-the-scenes manner and the employment of eunuchs. Otherwise, even today, neither the counsel of women nor eunuchs is politically prevalent in the Muslim world, although dire predictions such as this are sometimes used in sermons about the evils of the end of time to indicate why women should not have authority.

- [28.](#) In discussing Aristotle’s work, Nicholas Smith specifically notes Aristotle’s description of women as ‘alogical’ and as inherently psychologically different from men due to their different role (what would be described in contemporary Shi’i terminology as ‘separate-but-equal’). In his discussion of Aristotle, he mentions that women are seen as having deliberative intellect over household and procreative matters but not political matters; this is similar to ‘Abduh’s view that women are understood to have been granted by nature the intellectual capacity necessary to carry out domestic tasks. ‘Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women’, in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* II, no. 4 (October 1983), 467–478. Maryanne Cline Horowitz holds that Aristotle’s view of the inferiority of female human nature led to many of the historical Western views of the inferiority of womankind and the subordination of women to men. Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ‘Aristotle and Woman’, in *Journal of the History of Biology* IX, no. 2 (Fall 1976), 183–213. Much of what they say would hold true if ‘Western’ were substituted with ‘Islamic’.
- [29.](#) Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1932), 63–65.
- [30.](#) The assumption that marriage is somehow akin to slavery for women (milk al-nikah, or ‘ownership through marriage’, as opposed to ‘milk al-yamin’, or slave-owning) underlies most Shi’i and Sunni classical discourse on marriage, and is thought to have emerged from the prevalence of slave-wives in the ‘Abbasid era. It has been challenged in recent years by Kecia Ali, who has written extensively on this subject.
- [31.](#) ‘The best traits of women are those which are the worst traits of men, namely: vanity, cowardice and miserliness. Thus, since the woman is vain, she will not allow anyone access to herself; since she is miserly, she will preserve her and her husband’s property; and since she is weak-hearted, she will be frightened by everything that befalls her.’ Nahj al-Balaghah, saying number 234.
- [32.](#) Surat al-mar’ah fi wajhhiha wa surat al-rajul fi mantiqih. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* LXVIII, 293, no. 63.
- [33.](#) See the seminal work by Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992).
- [34.](#) Muhammad al-Khabbaz mentions the similarities between the portrayal of women between Aristotle and Nahj al-Balaghah in Surat al-Mar’ah fi al-Turath al-Shi’i; however, he does not develop the idea.
- [35.](#) Lynda Lange, ‘Woman is not a Rational Animal’, in *Discovering Reality* CLXI (1983), 1–15. . Accessed 27 February 2015. Citing François Poulain de la Barre.
- [36.](#) The mystery speaker is Aristotle. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, Books 7–10, ed. and trans. D. M. Balme [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1991), 219. This quotation indicates that the idea that women are ‘weak-hearted’ also predates Imam ‘Ali; Aristotle, in his case, extends it to animals as well as humans – for instance, calling upon the precedent of female and male cuttlefish. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, Books 7–10, 219–220.
- [37.](#) The mystery speaker is Ayatollah Motahhari. Translation taken from Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, *Woman and Her Rights in Islam* [A translation of *Nezam-e Huquq-e Zan*], trans. M. A. Ansari (n.p.: Islamic Seminary Publications, [1982]), 54.
- [38.](#) The mystery speaker here is the renowned exegete ‘Allamah Muhammad Huasyn Tabataba’i (d. 1981). This translation was quoted from the exegesis of verse 4:34 in ‘Allamah Tabataba’i, *al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur’an*, trans. S. A. Rizvi (Tehran: WOFIS, 1983); however, it has been lightly edited for grammar.

[39.](#) The final mystery speaker is the late Ayatollah al-Khu'i, who was almost universally acknowledged as the most learned scholar among Twelver Shi'a during his time. Ironically, I wrote much of this while living in his former house, which at the time was inhabited by religious students from abroad. I hope he is not raising objections from the grave! Talib Aziz quoting Ayatollah al-Khu'i in 'Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja'iyah' in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208–209.

[40.](#) Ayatollah Motahhari, *Woman and Her Rights in Islam*, 7.

[41.](#) Regarding the comparison between a woman and a scorpion, there is nothing substantive regarding alternative sourcing in *Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah* (see volume 4, page 52); one alternative source (Ghurur al-Hikam) is given for the saying equating woman with evil (*Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah*, volume 4, page 185).

[42.](#) Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunnah*, 155, citing Sayyid Fadlallah.

[43.](#) A Sunni narration mentions marital strife between Imam 'Ali and Fatimah al-Zahra'; however, this narration is not accepted in the Shi'i tradition, and the marriage of 'Ali and Fatimah is held up as the example of an ideal marriage.

[44.](#) Mahdi Mehri, 'Ta'ammoli dar Ahadith-e Nuqsan-e 'Aql-e Zanan'. In the Shi'i tradition, Fatimah al-Zahra' is described as not having ever menstruated.

[45.](#) Sermon 156.

[46.](#) The alternative sources are listed as (1) al-Tusi (d. 1067), *Talkhis al-Shafi*; (2) al-Hilli (16th century), *Mukhtasar Basa'ir al-Darajat*; (3) al-Tabrisi, *al-Ihtijaj* (beginning of the sixth century hijri); (4) al-Muttaqi al-Hindi (d. 1567), *Kanz al-'Ummal*; (5) al-Majlisi (d. 1698), *Bihar al-Anwar*. Of these, I was only able to find the exact text in the latter two, although this could be an issue of manuscripts. *Kanz al-'Ummal* lists it in volume XVI, page 186, no. 44216; however, the chain of narration is simply given as 'Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan, from his father', with no indication of how it reached al-Muttaqi al-Hindi many centuries later. 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-Malik al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, *Kanz al-'Ummal*, 18 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1979).

Shaikh Yahya Seymour also noted some other problems with the chain of narration. First, while most rijali scholars consider Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan to be unknown (*majhul*), he should really be seen as 'condemned' in the Twelver tradition because he writes a letter accusing Imam al-Kazim and Imam al-Sadiq of falsely claiming the Imamate. al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi I*, 366–7, no. 19.

Additionally, the sermon is narrated from Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah by Waki' ibn al-Jarrah, who used to contradict Imam 'Ali on fiqh by fasting continuously (i.e. without breaking his fast) and was known for drinking *nabidh* [an alcoholic beverage made from dried fruits such as dates]. In this regard, an account in *Tarikh Baghdad* says: 'Waki' ibn al-Jarrah came to us and settled himself in the mosque on the Euphrates. I used to come to him to hear hadith from him. So he asked me for *nabidh*. So I brought it to him at night in a wineskin, and I met with him to read hadith with him while he was drinking. And when he exhausted what I had brought him, he put out the light, and I said to him, "What is this?" And so he said, "If you had given us more, we would have given you more." al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad XIII* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997), 477. See also Muhammad Taqi al-Tustari, *Qamus al-Rijal X*, 437.

[47.](#) See 'Abd al-Hadi al-Fadli, *Introduction to Hadith* (London: ICAS Press, 2002) for a discussion on various reasons why fabricated hadiths are thought to have come into existence.

[48.](#) This, incidentally, is one of the explanations of hadith implying *tahrif* (alteration) of the Qur'anic manuscript in the Shi'i tradition, in that perhaps the explanations of commentators were interpolated into Qur'anic verses in *ahadith*. See M. S Bahmanpour, 'Review of Revelation and Falsification: The *Kitab al-Qira'at* of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sayyari, Critical Edition', in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies III*, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 231–233.

[49.](#) I would like to thank my colleague Alexander Khaleeli for bringing up this possibility, which I feel has a strong likelihood of being correct.

Women and Beasts

The next selection from *Nahj al-Balaghah* to be discussed is a ‘description of the misguided’ (*sifat al-dal*), the relevant portion of which reads:

Beasts are concerned with their bellies. Carnivores are concerned with assaulting others. Women are concerned with the adornments of this ignoble life and the creation of mischief herein. Believers are humble, believers are admonishers, and believers are afraid [of Allah].¹

As with the above, Ibn Abi al-Hadid asserts that this sermon was delivered about ‘A’ishah while Imam ‘Ali was marching towards Basra. However, the same concerns about applying it solely to ‘A’ishah remain – namely, that it would still be condemning her on account of her gender, and the passage does not indicate that it is truly directed at ‘A’ishah. While I am not defending her choice to incite civil war, I would say that any human being, male or female, should be given the basic respect of being critiqued for their actions, not through gender stereotypes, and it would be rather stereotypical and demeaning to say that a woman would ride to battle simply for the sake of ‘adornments’. Additionally, as a wife of the Prophet, ‘A’ishah lived a simple life without ‘adornments’ (Q 33:28–29), and so this makes it less likely that these words would have been directed at her. There also remains the question of whether these words would apply to Fatimah al-Zahra’ or other revered women.

The separation of ‘believer’ from ‘woman’ is itself discomfiting, because it implies that men are believers, and women are threats; additionally, like the passages discussed in the previous sections, it implies that men are normative in Islam. The classification of women with ‘beasts’ and ‘carnivores’ goes against the essential humanity of women in the Qur’an, as well as the classical definition of the human as a ‘rational animal’. However, the idea that woman is a creature of passion but not intellect is central to the dominant contemporary ideology of gender in Shi’ism.

As before, the most immediate way to explore the textual authenticity of the selection is to examine alternative sources. Three are traditionally mentioned:

1. al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 5, p. 82 (d. 941 ce, Shi’i)
2. Ibn Shu’bah al-Harrani, *Tuhaf al-Uqul*, p. 108 (d. 990 ce, Shi’i)
3. al-Warram, *al-Majmu’ah*, p. 77. (d. 1252 ce, Shi’i)²

Of them, again, *al-Kafi* holds the strongest weight in the Shi’i tradition. However, the relevant excerpt in *al-Kafi* reads differently:

The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, used to often say [...]: ‘O people, the concern of carnivores is attacking,³ and the concern of beasts is their bellies, and the concern of women is men.

And indeed the believers are empathetic, fearing, cautious – may Allah make us and you from among them.’⁴

Like the passage from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, this excerpt still juxtaposes women and believers; however, the object of women’s interest is considerably different! This fits in with a set of narrations saying that because Adam was created from the earth, man is concerned with land; and because Eve was created from Adam, women are concerned with men.⁵ However, that strand of narrations could also be rejected since the dominant Shi’i view – in contrast to the dominant Judaeo-Christian and Sunni view – is that Eve was *not* created from Adam.⁶ The idea that Imam ‘Ali ‘often’ said this further discredits the argument that this was directed at ‘A’ishah. Additionally, the chain of narration is incomplete.⁷

This leads to the second Shi’i source, *Tuhaf al-Uqul* by al-Harrani. *Tuhaf al-Uqul* does contain the operative phrase ‘the zeal of women is for this world, and mischief in it.’⁸ However, again, the context is different, in that it is part of a lengthy ethical exhortation attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the context does not give any indication that this was delivered with respect to the Battle of the Camel. There is, again, the problem of lack of sourcing in that the book does not provide chains of narration; that is to say, it suffers from the same problem as *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

The last source is *al-Majmu’ah* from al-Warram. Since it post-dates *Nahj al-Balaghah* by three centuries, and also does not have sources or chains of narration, it cannot be used to validate its presence in earlier sources.

Summary of Narration

Topic

Source

Implications

Notes

¹. Sermon 153.

². ‘Abd al-Zahra’ al-Khatib, *Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah* II, 354–359.

³. An alternate version says ‘eating’, which is orthographically similar to ‘attacking’ (ta’addi versus taghaddi).

⁴. ‘Ayyuha al nas, inna al sib’ himmatuha al-ta’addi [alternate: taghaddi] wa inna al-baha’im himmatuha butunuha wa inna al-nisa’ himmatuhunna al-rijal wa inna al mu’minun mushfiqun kha’ifun wajilun, ja’alana Allah wa iyyakum minhum.’

Muhammad ibn Ya’qub al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* V, 8 vols. (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1367 ah (solar)), 82, no. 9.

⁵. See, for example, al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* V, 337, no. 3, 4 & 6.

⁶. The idea that Eve was not created from Adam is a Shi’i-specific view is emphasised in a narration in *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih*, in which Imam al-Sadiq explicitly refutes this idea, which is described as being a belief which was circulating at that time. al-Saduq, *al-Faqih* III, 379, no. 4336. Shi’i narrations both support and oppose the idea that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, but the narrations supporting this idea are often said to be the product of taqiyyah (that is, they were said but not meant to be believed) or else simply to be inauthentic.

⁷. The narration is marfu’, meaning that the narrator did not take it directly from the Imam but does not indicate who passed it on to him.

⁸. ‘Inna al-nisa hammuhunna zinat al-dunya wal-fasadu fiha’, in al-Hasan ibn ‘Ali al-Harrani, *Tuhaf al-Uqul*, ed. ‘Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama’at al-Mudarrisin, 1404 AH), 156.

Women in Nahj al-Balaghah: Women's Seclusion

These sermons can be viewed in tandem with a letter from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, in which Imam 'Ali advises his son: [1](#)

Do not consult women because their view is weak and their determination unstable. Cover their eyes by keeping them under the veil because strictness of veiling keeps them for long. Their coming out is not worse than your allowing an unreliable man to visit them. If you can manage that they should not know anyone other than you, do so. Do not allow a woman matters other than those about herself, because a woman is a flower not an administrator. Do not pay her regard beyond herself. Do not encourage her to intercede for others. Do not show suspicion out of place, because this leads a correct woman to evil and a chaste woman to deflection. [2](#)

Women's intellectual and ethical deficiencies, and why women should not be in positions of authority, have already been discussed extensively above. The idea that women are mentally weak and should not be concerned with matters beyond themselves goes against the portrayal of Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet, as well as other women in the households of the Imams who were encouraged to pursue and teach Islamic knowledge. [3](#)

Unlike some of the other sermons, the operative points of this text are reproduced in *al-Kafi* and *al-Faqih* as being part of a letter from Imam 'Ali to his son. However, the chain of narration in *al-Kafi* is missing a narrator, and, as usual, *al-Faqih* does not provide sources. [4](#) The most accurate conclusion that can be deduced by the inclusion of this content in these two books is that the portrayal of Imam 'Ali as being restrictive towards women, and the exclusion of women from the public sphere, was considered normative by this era, and hence did not raise any proverbial eyebrows.

The main contribution that this section brings to the discussion is the exhortation for women's seclusion. It goes without saying that the focus on woman as a sexual being – in terms of seclusion, keeping her away from men, female chastity, and male jealousy – is male normative, and also diverges from the Qur'anic portrayal of women as complete beings in favour of the Aristotelian view of women as imperfect beings. [5](#) It also thematically contradicts the teachings on chastity in the Qur'an, in that the Qur'an treats chastity as equally important for men and women, and also makes a woman responsible for her own chastity (for instance, in the praise of the Virgin Mary protecting her own chastity). In contrast, this excerpt instructs a woman's menfolk for force her to be chaste, thereby removing her own agency.

Rawand Osman cites Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, who wrote extensively on Islamic law pertaining to women, as describing this view as problematic since Shi'i jurisprudence prescribes Islamic modest

dress for women but does not require seclusion or prohibit ‘decent mixing between men and women’.⁶ She also notes a narration from Imam al–Sadiq condemning a man who preferred to stay in his home on the grounds that he would not be able to learn about his religion there; the same could be said for women.⁷

She observes that the Qur’an prescribes women’s seclusion as a *punishment* for illicit conduct rather than as a norm.⁸ Lastly, she also notes that the text is self–contradictory because ‘if not allowing a woman to know any man is not jealousy out of place, then what is?’⁹ It should be noted that, like the ancient Greek views of woman, this passage acts as a self–fulfilling prophecy: if a woman is kept inside of her home, discouraged from considering anything but herself, treated primarily as a sexual being, and perpetually treated with distrust, then how could she be expected to be anything but an intellectually deficient flower?

Atypically, this narration focuses on actual veiling instead of mere seclusion, which tends to receive more attention in the classical tradition. Interestingly, here, the veil and seclusion are presented as being for the benefit of the woman, instead of being for the sake of preserving men from women’s temptations, which is how the *hijab* is typically discussed today. The observation that a strict *hijab* ‘preserves’ women could also refer to the simple truth that, in a harsh desert, being fully covered preserves a woman’s appearance. Regardless of whether or not these words truly trace back to Imam ‘Ali, they represent the cultural norm in the heart of the tenth century Islamic empire whereby women were not expected to be present in the public sphere.

A word is in order on the contemporary ramifications of such beliefs, and how the presumption that women’s seclusion is Islamic affects the Shi’i worldview. While an underlying principle of *fiqh* is that ‘whatever is not forbidden is permissible’, post–Prophetic Shi’i texts about women take the opposite approach: they are generally based on the baseline assumption that a woman must be unseen and unheard, and then it must be proven some part of a woman (such as the face) can be seen, or her voice heard. It is as if there is a feedback loop – an otherwise inauthenticable text promoting women’s seclusion (such as this) is accepted on the grounds that it agrees with preconceived ideas about what is Islamic, and then it is used to reinforce the view that women’s seclusion is Islamic. This view, in turn, is used to draw greater conclusions about what women cannot or should not do in society.

Summary of Narration

Topic

Source

Agrees with

Implications

¹ Generally this letter is considered to have been addressed to al–Hasan ibn ‘Ali, although some scholars argue that it was addressed to Muhammad ibn al–Hanafiyah, a younger son of Imam ‘Ali.

² Letter 31.

³ A common saying, albeit not substantiated as a hadith, is that Islam would not have survived were it not for the sword of ‘Ali and the wealth of Khadijah. Regarding the wives of the Imams, one can consider the role of the wives and female

relatives of Imam al-Husayn in publicising his message after he was killed; the mother of Imam al-Kazim, who is said to have been appointed by her husband to teach women; and Fatimah al-Ma'sumah.

[4.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi V, 510, no. 3

[5.](#) The implication that women are imperfect beings can also be found in the predominantly Sunni recension of the narration which says that there are four women to have 'reached perfection': Asiyah, Maryam, Khadijah, and Fatimah – which is often considered to be favourable to women, but which implies that all other women are imperfect. In contrast, this narration usually appears in Shi'i sources as 'the four women to have been selected [by Allah]'.

[6.](#) Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna*, 165–166.

[7.](#) *Ibid.*, 166, note 101, citing al-Kulayni, al-Kafi I, 31.

[8.](#) *Ibid.*, 106.

[9.](#) *Ibid.*, 166.

The Portrayal of Women in Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays

The portrayal of women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* sends a death-knell to anyone arguing that Imam 'Ali viewed women in an equitable light – if, of course, these passages are taken as authentic. To shed more light on the question of Imam 'Ali's views of women, it is now time to examine *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*. Since *Kitab Sulaym* is considered to be the earliest extant Shi'i text, it deserves special attention. Whether or not *Kitab Sulaym* is authentic in whole, in part, or even not at all; and whether or not *Kitab Sulaym* actually traces all the way back to the first century *hijri*, *Kitab Sulaym*, at the very least, reflects the social mores and worldview of pre-'Abbasid Shi'a, and therefore stands in contrast to most other Shi'i works, including *Nahj al-Balaghah*, which were compiled later.

[A brief introduction to Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays](#)

Kitab Sulaym consists of 91 narrations attributed to or about 'Ali ibn Abi Talib passed on through a disciple of his named Sulaym ibn Qays, said to have died while al-Hajjaj (d. 95 ah) was in power. While there is disagreement over whether Sulaym ibn Qays was the compiler's real name or a pseudonym, the content indicates the compiler was aligned with the Shi'i cause, was against the Umayyads, and was situated in the early period of Islam. The question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* is complex, with the possibility that different narrations (or even portions of single narrations) date to different eras. Hossein Modarressi feels that the core of *Kitab Sulaym* traces back to the early Umayyad era, with later insertions, revisions, and accretions; he is optimistic that the original text can be identified and recovered. Specifically, he notes that a good portion of the book can be established to date to the reign of Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (r. 105–125 ah).[1](#)

He feels that the content itself is reflective of popular Shi'ism in the Umayyad period; as he puts it, 'It is a

display of primitive, unsophisticated beliefs among the rank and file of the Shi'ites of Kufa during the late Umayyad period with clear residues of the usual Kaysani exaggerations on the virtues of the House of the Prophet. It also refers to the Umayyad positions on some of the matters discussed', and that that '[m]any such popular, unsophisticated Shi'ite lines of interpretation and belief were later transformed and developed by the Shi'ite rationalists of the fourth and fifth centuries.'² Amir-Moezzi, on the other hand, favours the idea that *Kitab Sulaym* is essentially authentic, but that it is impossible to discern the original manuscript from the revisions and accretions.³

Robert Gleave, Patricia Crone, and Tamima Bayhom-Daou have each approached the question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* by analysing individual narrations; in fact, Robert Gleave suggests the evaluation of the entire book in said manner as a future project for the willing. Gleave argues that a narration in *Kitab Sulaym* which addresses *hadith* narration dates to the late 8th century/early 9th century (and perhaps could have been taken from al-Shafi'i),⁴ while Crone holds that a narration on Mu'awiyah's efforts to spread false narrations dates between 762 and 780 – or, more specifically, to the time when the Shi'a were optimistic about the 'Abbasid revolution and before they had realized that it would make their situation worse.⁵

Bayhom-Daou examines the same narration as Gleave and identifies it as pre-classical; she notes that the narration dates to a time when the Imam himself was seen as an answer to the problem between conflicting narrations, whereas by the time the Four Books were compiled, Shi'i scholars were dealing with the different problem of having conflicting narrations attributed to the Imams themselves.⁶

Regardless of precisely when the material in *Kitab Sulaym* originated, its earlier provenance is evident in tone of the book with respect to the discussion of women. In this regard, it is distinctly different from in *Nahj al-Balaghah* as well as some other later narrations, and is more similar to the style of narrations attributed to the Prophetic era. This is despite the fact that *Kitab Sulaym* addresses some of the same issues as *Nahj*, such as the tension between Imam 'Ali and 'A'ishah.

It also contains material that is distinctly and unequivocally Shi'i, and therefore contributes to the delineation of a unique Shi'i identity, including a uniquely Shi'i conception of gender roles. Primary themes in the book include the Saqifah (where Abu Bakr was selected as the first caliph), the killing of Fatimah al-Zahra' by Abu Bakr and 'Umar; the usurpation of Fadak from Fatimah al-Zahra', and the opposition of the companions – including Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'A'ishah, and Hafsa – to Imam 'Ali. A narration attributed to Imam al-Sadiq indicates that *Kitab Sulaym* also became understood to be a text that demarcated Shi'i identity.⁷

With respect to the portrayal of women in *Kitab Sulaym*, one its main features is inclusion. Both women and men are summoned for important discussions: the Prophet summons both the women and men of the tribe of 'Abd al-Mutallib to hear his bequest (*hadith* 61);⁸ Imam al-Husayn specifically asks both women and men to oppose Mu'awiyah (*hadith* 26); and Mu'awiyah orders that false *ahadith* against Imam 'Ali be taught to women and children (*hadith* 26). Nowhere is it suggested that women should

remain in the house or be uneducated. When Fatimah al-Zahra' dies, women cry copiously; no one suggests that their voices are shameful and should be silenced.⁹ Fatimah and 'A'ishah are both in the vicinity during the Prophet's funeral prayers, although 'A'ishah does not participate due to divine intervention (*hadith* 4).

Imam 'Ali is described as the Imam of every male and female believer (*mu'min* and *mu'minah*), whereas the sermons in *Nahj al-Balaghah* distinguish between women and believers. Umm Ayman argues publicly with Abu Bakr in the mosque; this is in contrast to the exhortation that women's views are weak, and that women should not leave the house. There is also an emphasis on the inclusion of Fatimah al-Zahra' in sacred narrative – such as in the story of the *mubahilah* (*hadith* 11, 26) and *hadith al-kisa'* (*hadith* 11) – and the wives of the Prophet are included in and aware of contemporaneous events as opposed to being silent, hidden, or invisible.

Safiyah marries the Prophet of her own accord; ironically, her marriage is portrayed as one that frees her, instead of as a form of ownership, since her dowry was her freedom (*hadith* 55). This is in contrast to the wives of the later Imams, who are rarely mentioned, as well as the likening of marriage to slavery. While it is not the most flattering form of inclusion, the legitimacy of matrilineage is also alluded to in the frequent mention of 'Umar's ignoble grandmother (*hadith* 4, 48); this is in keeping with Bernheimer's observation that matrilineage was considered of more import in the Prophet era.¹⁰

Despite the common portrayal of Fatimah al-Zahra' as someone who neither saw nor seen by men, several narrations describe Fatimah al-Zahra' as being in the same room as male companions, and some narrations about her are related by men, thus implying that they saw or at least heard her (*hadith* 1, 21, 48, 49, 61). Several narrations also speak of when she went on a mule with Imam 'Ali to visit the houses of the companions to remind them of their allegiance to 'Ali (*hadith* 4, 12).

Rather than sending her husband to speak on her behalf, Fatimah al-Zahra' speaks up about Fadak and argues intelligently and convincingly with Abu Bakr and 'Umar (*hadith* 14, 48); there is no question of her having 'womanly views'.¹¹ Perhaps due to the early provenance of the text, there is less of an emphasis on *hijab* as the defining value for a woman.

The only mention of Fatimah al-Zahra's clothing is an allusion to her *khimar* (*hadith* 4), a head-covering which was considered traditional for that era, in contrast to some portrayals today which focus extensively on her being covered and unseen, and describe her as wearing as many as eight layers of clothing (in the heat of Medina no less). Additionally, a narration specifically mentions the time before the wives of the Prophet (not women in general) were told to take on the *hijab*; this narration has the Prophet, 'A'ishah, and Imam 'Ali sleeping in one room and, out of need, sharing one blanket (with the Prophet in the middle) (*hadith* 36, 60).

A crucial barometer for the treatment of women in *Kitab Sulaym* is the portrayal of the animosity between 'Ali and 'A'ishah. In the interpretation that the sermon on 'women's deficiencies' in *Nahj al-Balaghah* is

directed at ‘A’ishah, ‘A’ishah is criticized through her femininity – through deficiencies in her essential nature and intellect, and because she left the house; while, at the same time, the other perpetrators of the civil war are not criticized for violating the Qur’an. Here, the portrayal is the opposite: Talha and Zubayr are criticized for encouraging ‘A’ishah to leave her house and thereby to violate the Qur’an (*hadith 29*).

On the one hand, this removes a sense of agency from ‘A’ishah, since it implies she would not have gone without their urging; but on the other hand, it removes the gendered aspect of the condemnation of her and also holds the male perpetrators responsible. Additionally, this passage specifies that the command to stay at home applied only to the wives of the Prophet as opposed to to all women.

This is in keeping with an absence of gendered critiques in *Kitab Sulaym*. ‘A’ishah and Hafsa are criticized for their actions, but not for being deficient in intellect or menstruating. In fact, the only mention of menstruation is to say that people in a state of ritual impurity (*janabah*) or who are menstruating may not enter the Prophet’s mosque – except for the Prophet’s womenfolk (*hadith 51*). This portrayal differs from the discomfort with menstruation in the sermon on women’s deficiencies. While the narration from *Bukhari* asserts that the majority of the dwellers in Hell are women, the description of the dwellers of Hell here (*hadith 7*) is ungendered – and, given the number of male villains in the text, one gets the feeling that more men than women may be on their way to Hell.

Instead, an unusual feature of the portrayal of Imam ‘Ali in *Kitab Sulaym* is his use of childbirth as a metaphor. This adds legitimacy to (and sympathy for) the female experience. In one of these narrations, Imam ‘Ali gives the example of a woman wanting to give birth quickly; he says: ‘You have broken away from ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib like the breaking away of the head which parts from the body, like a woman giving birth who wants the child to leave her sooner and does not prevent a hand from touching it’ (*hadith 12*).

This example combines both the male and female experience (warfare and childbirth) as normative, and shows some empathy for the condition of women during childbirth. In the other, he provides a *du’a* to make childbirth go faster; this is done in the name of Maryam and is one of the few places in Shi’i *hadith* literature where she is actually invoked in an archetypal sense as a mother (*hadith 88*). Additionally, one of the presuppositions by Aristotle as well as commentators on the sermon on women’s deficiencies is that a woman is intellectually deficient so she will focus more on housework, which is her natural role; however, *Kitab Sulaym* describes Imam ‘Ali coming outside covered in flour because he was grinding flour at home (*hadith 55*).

The only misogyny in *Kitab Sulaym* is attributed not to Imam ‘Ali but rather to his opponents. For instance, ‘Umar is cited as saying ‘what do we have to do with the opinions of women’ after he attacks the house of Fatimah (*hadith 4*). It also says that Mu’awiyah ordered the Arabs to marry non-Arab women, but not to let Arab women to marry non-Arabs; and to disallow inheritance from leaving the Arabs, and not to give non-Arab women property or gifts. This is to keep money in the hands of the Arab tribes (*hadith 23*).[12](#)

While the intent may not have been to marginalize or restrict women, it nonetheless does that; and the idea that a woman should not marry outside of her culture is still prevalent today. Ironically, although the inclusion of Mu'awiyah's directive is intended to discredit him, a narration is included in *al-Faqih* equating 'women' with 'fools' and explaining that the point of that is to indicate that it is abhorrent (*makruh*) to leave inheritance to women.¹³

In sum, the treatment of women in *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* is vastly different from that in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, even though both books are centred on Imam 'Ali and discuss similar themes. Both books are also internally self-consistent in how they portray women, which suggests that the material about women in each book comes from a specific era.

The portrayal of women in *Kitab Sulaym* is much closer to how the Prophetic era is envisioned – with women attending the Prophetic mosque with men, and without a stigma attached to women appearing in public. Unlike many of the narrations discussed in these chapters, there are no gendered attacks criticising women for being female or on the basis of their reproductive systems; instead, people, male and female, are criticized for going against *ahl al-bayt*.

While there is no guarantee that the content of *Kitab Sulaym* is authentic, because it traces to an earlier era, it should be seen as more reflective of the cultural norms of the Prophetic era, and reinforces the idea that more restrictive or misogynistic narrations are products of a later era. Unlike *Nahj al-Balaghah*, *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* provides a much more equitable and inclusive portrayal of women.

Summary of Narrations

Topic

Source

Implications

Notes

¹. Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, 83–36.

². *Ibid.*, 85.

³. Robert Gleave, citing Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, 'Note bibliographique sur le Kitâb Sulaym b. Qays, le plus ancien ouvrage shi'ite existant', in M.A. Amir-Moezzi, M.M. Bar-Asher and S. Hopkins (eds), *Le shi'isme Imamite quarante ans après. Hommages à Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 33–48.

⁴. Robert Gleave, 'Early Shiite hermeneutics and the dating of *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*', in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 78, no. 1 (2015), 83–103.

⁵. Crone holds that this narration is obviously a piece of 'political satire', although it seems unlikely that it would have been perceived as such by classical Shi'i scholars given the sanctity associated with the transmission of hadith. Patricia Crone, 'Mawali and the Prophet's family: an early Shi'ite view', in M. Bernards and J. Nawas (eds.), *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 167–94.

⁶. Tamima Bayhoum-Dou, 'Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays revisited', in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* LXXVIII, no. 1 (February 2015), 105–119.

⁷. 'If any of our Shi'a or those who love us do not have *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, then they do not have anything of our matter [i.e. wilayah], and they do not know anything of our ways. It is the alphabet of the Shi'a, and a secret of the secrets of the family of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family.' al-Mirza al-Nuri, *Mustadrak al-Wasa'il* XVII, 298, no. 42 (21397). The late provenance of the narration makes it difficult to discern whether it really traces back to Imam

al-Sadiq, but it does indicate that, at some point, this conception of Kitab Sulaym as definitively Shi'i was in circulation. In any case, Kitab Sulaym clearly situates itself against the Umayyads.

8. Because Kitab Sulaym is relatively short, narrations are given by number. Taken from Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilali, Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilali, ed. M. Baqir al-Ansari al-Zanjani, 3 vols. (Qum: Nashr al-Hadi, 1415 ah).

9. In contrast to the description of women mourning publicly here, as well as in the account of Fatimah al-Zahra' mourning publicly and audibly for her father, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram, a contemporary scholar who wrote a commonly referenced work on the Karbala' narrative, refutes narrations saying that Um al-Banin, the mother of 'Abbas ibn 'Ali, publicly mourned her sons as well as al-Husayn at the Baqi' cemetery on the grounds that, due to her stature and her position as a wife of Imam 'Ali: 'She could not have said anything contradictory to the canon of the shari'ah which prohibits a woman from being exposed in any way to strangers either through prohibition or as a precaution so long as there was no extreme necessity for it. It goes without saying that when a woman mourns someone she has lost, she ought to sit in her house and fortify herself against being seen by strangers or her voice being heard by them as long as there was no urgency for it.' 'Abd al-Razzaq, Maqtal al-Husayn (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami, 1979), 336-340. (Translation taken from Yasin Jibouri, Maqtal al-Husayn: Martyrdom Epic of al-Husayn (n.p.: n.l.)) This is an example of projecting contemporary assumptions about ideals for women onto primary sources.

10. Theresa Bernheimer, The 'Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750-1200 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 37.

11. Fadak as a model for female activism is discussed in Rachel Kantz Feder, 'Fatima's Revolutionary Image in Fadak fi al-Ta'rikh (1955): The Inception of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's Activism', in British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies XLI, no. 1 (2014), 79-96.

12. In her analysis of this narration, Crone indicates that this is the mechanism where by 'elites turn themselves into [...] castes' and notes that many tribal Arabs did in fact refuse to marry their daughters to non-Arabs. Of course, this mechanism is dependent on the notion that identity and social belonging are transmitted patrilineally. That being said, it should be observed that some Shi'i laypeople today object to marrying sayyid girls to non-sayyid males, which results in the same phenomenon simply in reverse.

13. al-Saduq, al-Faqih IV, 226, no. 5534.

Conclusion

The material attributed to and about Imam 'Ali in *Nahj al-Balaghah* and *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* portrays women in vastly different ways. The selections from *Nahj al-Balaghah* portray Islam as male-normative, and women as exceptions. 'A'ishah is attacked the grounds of her femininity and for stepping out of her place as a woman. Women are inferior to men in their essential nature, and should be kept out of the public sphere, strictly covered, and secluded. Unlike in the Qur'an, women are likened to animals (beasts, carnivores, and scorpions).

This set of values best represents the cultural norms of Islamic Iraq at the time *Nahj al-Balaghah* was compiled. This raises the question of why Imam 'Ali – who was raised in the Arabian Peninsula and only moved to Iraq towards the end of his life – would choose to codify the value system of that region as the Islamic norm, particularly given his less than favourable experiences there (including civil unrest, culminating in his assassination).

Summary of Main Ideas about Women

Nahj al-Balaghah

- Men are intellectually, spiritually, and ethically superior.
 - Women are inferior because they menstruate.
 - Men are normative.
 - Men belong in the public sphere, and women belong in the private sphere.
 - Women are evil.
 - Women are bestial.
 - Women do not belong in the public sphere; women's seclusion is ideal.
 - Women are interested in trivial things
 - Male authority is necessary.
 - Chastity is emphasised for women but not men.
-
- Men are responsible for enforcing chastity on their womenfolk.

Although the idea that women are intellectually deficient has persisted in Shi'i discourse, this idea mimics Aristotle's views of women. This leads to the possibility that these ideas emerged after the Prophetic era due to the importation of ancient Greek ideas into Islamic thought, as well as pre-Islamic cultural interchange. This does leave open the question of why Aristotle would be the more influential ancient Greek thinker in the Islamic world – as opposed to, say, Plato, who expressed much more gender-egalitarian views; perhaps the answer lies in the harmony between Aristotle's views and the cultural reality of mediaeval Mesopotamia. Of course, correlation does not prove causality.

There is no reason why Imam 'Ali could not have been familiar with Aristotle's views, or that he could not have come up with a similar idea. Nonetheless, it is my hope that someone (perhaps, a specialist in philosophy) who is reading this will take up this train of thought and continue exploring the influence of the Greek philosophical heritage on the development on ideas about women in the Islamic world.

In contrast, *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* is attributed to the era *before* the adoption of Greek thought in the Islamic Empire, and to a region and time in which women were more visible in public society. With that in mind, it is not surprising that *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* presents an equitable view of women and men – one in which both women and men are involved in the public sphere, the affairs of the religious community, and sacred narrative. No creational differences between women and men are implied, and men and women are criticized for their actions, not their gender. In short, *Nahj al-Balaghah* presents a sharp gender hierarchy, whereas *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* offers a much more egalitarian message.

While both *Nahj al-Balaghah* and *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* are associated with Shi'ism, *Kitab Sulaym* is more concerned with constructing a Shi'i identity. Despite the centrality of *Nahj al-Balaghah* in the Shi'i heritage, these passages from *Nahj al-Balaghah* recur in Sunni works. In contrast, *Kitab Sulaym* has the tone of a counter-narrative – a counter-narrative to the first three *khalifahs* and the Umayyads, and one of the ways that it establishes its alternative view is by going against the 'orthodoxy' of misogyny established by 'Umar and Mu'awiyah in favour of the equal inclusion of women and the spiritual position of Fatimah al-Zahra'. That is, it delineates Shi'i identity as one which is non-misogynistic.

As for textual authenticity, it is clear from the foregoing that there is no evidence to lend credence to the

above selections on women from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, particularly the sermon on the deficiencies of women; the common practice of listing alternative sources as justifications for them falls short when actually challenged. The alternative textual sources also weaken the popular view that some of these words were addressed to ‘A’ishah at the Battle of the Camel. It is also likely that the sermon on the ‘deficiencies’ of women is an amalgamation of material from three different sources, some of which is also in *Sahih Bukhari*. Needless to say, the presence of different parts of this sermon in different books, attributed to various people at different times, makes it unlikely that these words were actually addressed to ‘A’ishah, or that they were said by Imam ‘Ali at all.

The contents of these sermons can also be challenged logically. Thematically, they contradict the Qur’an, as well as the status of Fatimah al-Zahra’ and other sacred women in the Shi’i tradition. Therefore, despite the concern quoted in the introduction, one can easily set aside these sermons without actually challenging the entire corpus of Shi’i narrations. (One can even argue that most of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is authentic, while at the same time dismissing these passages.) The question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* is more complex; while it is not necessary to accept *Kitab Sulaym* as authentic in order to reject these passages from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, there at least is a stronger argument for the authenticity of much of *Kitab Sulaym*, compared to these sermons.

Nahj al-Balaghah is far more prominent than *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, and these passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are often used to promote cultural restrictions on women. Essentially, some people unwittingly portray Imam ‘Ali as a misogynist. However, by arguing for the textual unreliability of these sermons, and by presenting the alternative picture of women in *Kitab Sulaym*, it is possible to challenge this portrayal of Imam ‘Ali, and instead to present him as offering a distinctly Shi’i view of women as being one of equity and inclusiveness.

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