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Al-Suyuti on the Merits of Imam ‘Ali S. R. Burge

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There are a great many short *hadith* (traditions attributed to Prophet Muhammad) collections comprising forty *ahadith* (pl. of *hadith*). The most famous is the *Forty Ahadith* of Muhyi al-Din Abu Zakariyya Yahya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi (d. 631/1233). The al-Nawawi collection, actually containing forty-two *ahadith*, was aimed at the general public. This can be seen in the work’s brevity, and the fact that the *ahadith* act as his summary of Islam as understood by the *ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaah* (commonly referred to as Sunni Muslims), exploring the most important ideas and beliefs. The collection also contains many of the most famous *ahadith* in the Sunni canon, and so allows those members of society who might be daunted by weighty tomes such as the *Sahihayn* of al-Bukhari and Muslim (considered by most Sunni Muslims to be authoritative collections of *ahadith*), or who might find the works like the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal (a collection of *ahadith* with supporting chains of transmission) intimidating.

These small collections of *ahadith*, often called ‘*arba’un*’ (lit. the forty) collections, were obviously intended for the general public. This is, in itself, something of interest. Firstly, it shows that the scholarly community recognised a need for the general public to have such ‘mini-guides’ to the world of *ahadith*. Was this in reaction to misinformation propagated by popular preachers and story-tellers? It is difficult to be sure, but their existence seems to show that the scholarly classes hoped to influence the religious life of the general public. Secondly, it reveals the extent of literacy in the classical period. The collections are not for scholars; so who are they for and who could read them? Historical evidence would suggest that literacy was not universal, but the existence of these short, popular collections of *ahadith* indicates that the middle classes (merchants, civil servants, etc.) were interested in reading this sort of material. Lastly, by selecting only a few *ahadith*, the compiler reveals ideas and beliefs that he feels are important. We can learn much from examining what a compiler included in a collection, especially when the material is limited in scope. With fewer *ahadith* included, the compiler has to be much more selective. What can one learn from the selection?

‘Abd al-Rahman Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) is one of the most famous scholars of the late Mamluk period. He worked in the dying days of the Circassian Mamluk Sultanate, with the Ottomans taking control of Cairo within a decade of al-Suyuti’s death. He was the son of a judge in Cairo and became an important, learned scholar, specialising in law, *hadith* and exegesis. He wrote works on an extremely wide range of subjects, making him one of the last great polymaths. He was also one not noted for his modesty, even claiming himself that he was the *mujaddid* (one who is expected to revive Islam) of the age. This made him rather unpopular with his contemporaries, especially al-Sakhawi, with whom he often clashed violently. Al-Suyuti is famed for his extraordinarily large output, with estimates



ranging from 500 to 900 works in total. The number of these works is partly so large, because it includes a number of shorter works, including *fatwas* (opinions concerning Muslim law) and short collections of *ahadith* such as the text translated below.

This collection, *Al-Qawl al-jaliyy fi fada'il 'Ali* (*The Clear Statements on the Merits of Ali*) is a collection of forty Prophetic *ahadith*, concerning Imam 'Ali and his esteem in the Sunni community. This makes the work particularly intriguing and shows that the Prophet's family was not only held in high regard by the Shi'i community, but by the Muslim community as a whole. Without knowing the religious beliefs of al-Suyuti, having read the collection, one might suppose that the work was of Shi'i origin. However, figures like Imam 'Ali and Fatima also have exalted status amongst most Sunni communities, even if they do not extend to incorporate all Shi'i beliefs about them. Indeed, al-Suyuti also wrote another collection, entitled *Musnad Fatima al-Zahra wa-ma warada fi fadliha* (*The Narrations of Fatima al-Zahra and what is narrated about her merits*).

The present collection is one of a quartet on the merits of the first four caliphs, often referred to as the *Khulafa Rashidun* (rightly guided caliphs). The work follows the typical form of al-Suyuti's collections, with the *ahadith* being drawn from textual sources, without an *isnad* (chain of transmission) being provided. Al-Suyuti does, however, provide the authority of each *hadith* and his textual source. The fact that al-Suyuti gives references to where he has taken the *hadith* from also enables us to see the many different works that include discussions of the merits of Imam 'Ali. The main themes of the collection are:

- (i) 'Ali had an extremely close relationship with the Prophet
- (ii) 'Ali and other members of the *ahl al-bayt* have a place in heaven
- (iii) 'Ali had an important role in the community after the Prophet's death
- (iv) 'Ali had an important part to play in the interpretation of the Prophet's teachings
- (v) The community and its members are defined through the way they treat Imam 'Ali.

These points could be considered as being very 'Shi'i', and they are certainly positions held by Shi'i Muslims. It is important, however, to note that al-Suyuti does not include any reference or suggestion that Imam 'Ali was the successor to the Prophet. Nevertheless, al-Suyuti's collection does show that Imam 'Ali was held in high regard by the Sunni community. The fact that al-Suyuti believed that the merits of Imam 'Ali would be of benefit for the general public, shows how important al-Suyuti believed them to be.

Translation Note

The translation is of an edition of the work made by al-Shaykh 'Amir Ahmad Haydar (Beirut: Mu'assasat Nadir, 1990) which is itself based on the Staatsbibliothek Berlin MS, 1516.



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The Clear Sayings on the Merits of Ali

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Praise be to God! the Highest, the Greatest, the Protector, the Friend, the All-Powerful! I extol Him, I give Him thanks, I repent to Him and seek forgiveness from Him. I bear witness that there is no god, but God. I bear witness that our Lord Muhammad is the Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation, and also upon Ali, his family, his companions, his supporters and his party.

Furthermore, this is a small collection of small drops in the abundant oceans which I have brought together in a simple volume, which [describes] the resplendent virtues of our lord, Ali, *may God honour him*, entitled *The Clear Sayings on the Merits of Ali*. I have included forty short *ahadith* in it, following by the source from which they have been taken, and some explanatory comments and the meanings of problematic [phrases]. By God! I ask that He give me His approval, and that he bestow upon me His blessing of loyalty towards the love of the Prophet's family, the best goal.

[1] [It is] on the authority of Sharahil ibn Murra that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Rejoice Ali, your life and your death are with me.'
Al-Tabarani narrated it in [his] *al-Kabir* and other works.

[2] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God honour him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'These, my two grandsons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, will be in charge of the young men in the Garden [of paradise]; and their father is better than both of them.'
Ibn 'Asakir narrated it.

[3] [It is] on the authority of Sa'id ibn Zayd that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Ali is in the Garden [of paradise].'
Ibn Abi Shayba and others narrated it.

[4] [It is] on the authority of Anas (*God have mercy on him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Ali is my cousin and my brother; he carries my flag.'
Al-Khalil narrated it in his *Mashaykha*.

[5] [It is] on the authority of Shaddad ibn Aws that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib has maintained my community and supported it.'
Al-Uqayli and others narrated it. [This hadith] was objected to by Ibn al-Jawzi in his [section on] *Irada* in his *al-Mawdu'at*.



[6] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Mas‘ud that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Alī ibn Abi Talib is to me, as my soul is to my body.’
Ibn al-Najjar narrated it.

[7] [It is] on the authority of Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn, on the authority of his father, on the authority of his grandfather that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Gabriel came to me and said, “Muhammad, God loves three of your companions. He loves Ali, Abu Dharr and al-Miqdad ibn al-Aswad. Muhammad, the Garden [of paradise] awaits expectantly for three of your companions: Ali, Ammar and Salman.”’
Abu Ya‘la al-Mawsili narrated it.

[8] [It is] on the authority of Jabir that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘The most favoured in my community is Ali ibn Abi Talib.’
Al-Tabarani narrated it in *al-Awsat*, and he declared it to be a fair hadith.

[9] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Mas‘ud that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘God commanded me to marry Fatima to Ali.’
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[10] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God be pleased with him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘No-one loves you, save the believer, and no-one hates you, except the hypocrite.’
Al-Tirmidhi narrated it, and he said that it was a sound *hadith*.

[11] [It is] on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘I am the master of [all] people; Ali is the master of the Arabs.’
Al-Daraqutni narrated it.

[12] [It is] on the authority of Abu Musa that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘I, Ali, Fatima, al-Hasan and al-Husayn will be in the dome under the Throne on the Day of Judgement.’
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[13] [It is] on the authority of Jabir that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali and I are from a single branch; the people are from all kinds of branches.’
Al-Daylami narrated it.

[14] [It is] on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘I am the warner and Ali is the leader; Ali, those finding the right way after me will find it in you.’
Al-Daylami narrated it.

[15] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God be pleased with him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘I am the abode of wisdom and Ali is its gate.’
Al-Tirmidhi narrated it, but he said it was strange (*gharib*).



[16] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God be pleased with him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate.' Abu Nu'aym narrated it in his *al-Ma'rifa*.

[17] [It is] on the authority of Jabir that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate; whoever wants knowledge should come to the gate.'
Al-Hakim narrated it, and he commented on it.

[18] [It is] on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate; whoever wants knowledge should come to it through its gate.'
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[19] [It is] on the authority of Anas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, whilst pointing to Ali, 'I and this man are the proof for my community on the Day of Resurrection.'
Al-Khatib narrated it.

[20] [It is] on the authority of Abu Hurayra (*God be pleased with him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said to Ali, Fatima, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, 'I am an enemy of whoever is your enemy and an ally of whoever is your ally.'
Al-Hakim and others narrated it.

[21] [It is] on the authority of Umm Salama that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Truly, [entering] this mosque is not permissible for the ritually unclean [*junub*] or menstruating women, except for the Messenger of God, Ali, Fatima, al-Hasan and al-Husayn; truly, I have made it clear for you.'
Ibn 'Asakir narrated it, and al-Bayhaqi [narrated it] in his *al-Sunan*, but he declared it to be weak. Another *hadith* can be found with this meaning, but [it mentions] only the status of Ali; some people have declared [this hadith] to be fair.

[22] [It is] on the authority of Hubashi ibn Janada that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, 'Indeed, for whomever I am master, Ali is his master; [O God] be a friend to his friends, help those who help him, and support those who support him.'
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[23] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) was praying for Ali and said, 'O God, support him and those that support him, have mercy on him and those that have mercy on him, help him and those that help him. O God, take as a friend whomever he befriends and abandon whoever he abandons.'
Al-Tabarani narrated it.



[24] [It is] on the authority of Amr Ibn al-Sharhil that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘O God, help whomsoever helps Ali; O God, honour whomsoever honours Ali; O God, forsake whomsoever forsakes Ali.’
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[25] [It is] on the authority of Burayda that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said to Ali and Fatima one night: ‘May God bless you both, bestow his blessings upon you, and give blessing to you both in your descendents.’
Ibn Sa‘d narrated it.

[26] [It is] on the authority of Ali that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘O God, you took Ubayda ibn al-Harith from me on the day of Badr and Hamza ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib on the day of Uhud; but this is Ali, do not take [this man] from me. You are the best of the inheritors.’
Al-Daylami narrated it.

[27] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Umar that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘O God, witness! O God, have I conveyed [the message]? This [man] – and he pointed to Ali – is my brother, my cousin, my son-in-law, and the father of my two grandchildren. May God throw those who fight him in the Fire.’
Al-Shirazi narrated it in *al-Alqab*, and Ibn al-Najjar [narrated it].

[28] [It is] on the authority of Wathala that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Praise God who gives your prayers, your compassion, your forgiveness and your good will to Ali, and upon them (meaning Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn).’
Al-Tabarani narrated it.

[29] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God honour him*) that the Messenger of God said, ‘The mercy of God is upon Ali, God have mercy upon him; make right, wherever he turns [his face].’
Al-Tirmidhi narrated it, and he said that it was an uncommon tradition [*gharib*].

[30] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘For me Ali is [the same] state as my head from my body.’
Al-Daylami narrated it.

[31] [It is] on the authority of Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is my brother in this world and the next.’
Al-Tabarani narrated it (*God have mercy on him*).

[32] [It is] on the authority of Umm Salama that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is with the Qur’an and the Qur’an is with Ali; you will never be able to distinguish between them until they come to the Pool.’
Al-Hakim narrated it, and al-Tabarani [narrated it] in *al-Awsat*.



[33] [It is] on the authority of Jabir that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is the Leader of the Dutiful, the killer of liars; whoever supports him is supported, and whoever abandons him is abandoned.’

Al-Hakim narrated it.

[34] [It is] on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is the basket [‘*ayba*] of my knowledge.’

Ibn ‘Addi narrated it.

[Al-Suyuti comments:] *Al-‘ayba* with a *fatha* over the unpointed ‘*ayn* and a *sukun* over the letter *ya*’, after it a letter with one diacritic point: The receptacle into which people put whatever they need which is precious to them.

[35] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God honour him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is the lord of the believers, just as money is lord of the hypocrites.’

Ibn ‘Addi narrated it.

[36] [It is] on the authority of Salman that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib will carry out my affairs, and he will rule on my faith.’

Al-Daylami and others narrated it.

[37] [It is] on the authority of Ali (*may God honour him*) that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is the wisest of people – in the name of God – the strongest person in love and the greatest amongst people. There is no god but God.’

Abu Nu‘aym narrated it.

[38] [It is] on the authority of Abu Dharr that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is the gate of my knowledge – the one who will explain to my community what I was sent [to proclaim] after [I have gone]. Loving him is faith, hating him is hypocrisy, looking at him is mercy.’

Al-Daylami narrated it.

[39] [It is] on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is a gate of forgiveness, whoever comes to him is a believer and whoever leaves him is an unbeliever.’

Al-Daraqutni narrated it in *al-Afrad*.

[40] [It is] on the authority of ‘Imran ibn Hasin that the Messenger of God (*God bless him and grant him salvation*) said, ‘Ali is from me and I am from Ali, and Ali is a friend of every believer after me.’

Ibn Abi Shayba narrated it, and he declared it to be sound.



Conclusion

Ali (*may God honour him and be pleased with him*) lived for sixty-three years, in truth, and it is [also] said that he was fifty-eight. He was killed (*may God be pleased with him*) in the year 40 (AH), and he was caliph for five years and six months, may God be pleased with him and may he send us and [all] Muslims his blessings.