Sources of Nu'mani's al-Ghaybah – Part 1

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The Ghaybah (Occultation) of the 12th Imam is one of the most fundamental theological beliefs of the Twelver Imami Shi'as. Three primary books of traditions dedicated to this topic, which have come down to us today, are in chronological order Kitab al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani (d. 360), Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah of Shaykh Saduq (d. 381), and Kitab al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Tusi (d. 460). While all three books have their own specific methodology and framework and are different from one another, there are some common points as well. One common point is that the majority of sources employed by these authors are not available to us today, which makes these books our sole access to them.

Becoming familiar with the sources used by authors in any given book is crucial for a number of reasons. It can help us strengthen or weaken the reliability of the book, it helps us better understand the methodologies of the authors, and it can even help us re-construct works that no longer exist today. Furthermore, by studying the sources and chains of narrators, we can pick up on mistakes, copyist errors, or even mere fabrications.

Given these reasons, this series of posts will be a translation of a number of research articles written by Ustad Sayyid Muhammad Jawwad Shubayri Zanjani on Nu'mani and the sources he used for his Kitab al-Ghaybah.

Biography of Nu'mani (ra)

The author of Kitab al-Ghaybah is Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Ibrahim bin Ja'far al-Nu'mani al-Katib, one of the greatest Shi'i scholars of 4th century Hijri. Najashi says the following about him

المعروف بابن زينب شيخ من أصحابنا عظيم القدر شريف المنزلة صحيح العقيدة كثير الحديث. قدم بغداد و خرج إلى الشام و مات بها

Known as Ibn Zaynab[1], he is from our senior scholars, of great value, of honorable position, is of sound theological beliefs and reports many traditions. He came to Baghdad, then went to Syria and passed away there.[2]

Nothing is known about his place of birth, his family and early stages of his life. What we can

gather from the different chains of narrations from his al-Ghaybah though, is the following

1. Abu al-Qasim Musa bin Muhammad Qummi narrated the famous Hadith al-Lawh (from Jabir bin ‘Abdillah Ansari) for him, from Sa’d bin ‘Abdillah Ash’ari, in the year 313 Hijri in Shiraz.
2. He was in Baghdad during the year 327 Hijri, because in the month of Ramadhan of that year he heard narrations at the house of Abu ‘Ali Muhammad bin Hamam.
3. In the year 333 Hijri, he learned a number of narrations from Muhammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Ma’mar Tabarani in Tabriyyah (part of Jordan).
4. In the beginning of some of the narrations from the chapter titled That which has been narrated regarding the 12 Imams from the ‘Aamah, someone by the name of Muhammad bin ‘Uthman is mentioned. This individual in most of the narrations happens to be reporting from an Ibn Abi Khuthayma (Abu Bakr bin Abi Khuthayma). In the beginning of these chains, the full name of the former is mentioned as Muhammad bin ‘Uthman bin ‘Allan al-Dahni al-Baghdadi and it says that narrations were taken from him in Damascus, but no date is given. Who is this narrator After investigating various historical and biographical works, we did not find anyone by this name. However, another similar name is seen in biographical works of the ‘Aamah, who is most probably this very individual.

In Tarikh Baghdad, there is entry for an ‘Uthman bin Muhammad bin ‘Ali bin Ahmad bin Ja’far bin Dinar bin ‘Abdullah Abu al-Husayn – known as Ibn ‘Allan al-Dhahabi as follow He would narrate traditions in Syria and Egypt.

Later, quoting a certain hadith scholar we find him saying Abu al-Husayn ‘Uthman bin Muhammad bin ‘Allan al-Dhahabi al-Baghdadi taught us narrations – he came to us in the year 332 Hijri.

In the end, the statements of some hadith scholars indicate that he was from Baghdad. Another remark says He went to Egypt…he left from there and passed away in Damascus. Some suggest he died in Halab. Suri believed he passed away in 340 Hijri, while some others believe it was 344 Hijri.[3]

Ibn ‘Asakir in his Tarikh Dimashq, mentions him as ‘Uthman bin Muhammad bin ‘Ali bin ‘Allan bin Ahmad bin Ja’far Abu al-Husayn al-Dhahabi al-Baghdadi and says He lived in Egypt and would teach narrations there and in Damascus. Ibn ‘Asakir then mentions his teachers, and we also see the name of Abu Bakr bin Abi Khuthayma there.[4]

Comparing the name mentioned by Ibn ‘Asakir and Khatib Baghdadi, it seems that ‘Ali and ‘Allan that appear in his genealogy, are the name of one person. ‘Allan seems to have been a reference to ‘Ali[5] and the mention of these two names separately in his genealogy is a mistake.

In any case, it appears that this is the same individual who is Nu'mani's teacher, and in the year 332 Hijri when he was in Damascus, narrated ahadith to Nu'mani. It seems that a copyist error has occurred in his name in al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani, or a genuine mistake, which resulted in the name of this narrator and his father getting switched around (it appears as Muhammad bin 'Uthaman in al-Ghaybah, rather than 'Uthman bin Muhammad). His title is also al-Dhahabi[6] and al-Dahani as it appears in al-Ghaybah is also a copyist error.

5. In the beginning of al-Ghayba, it says that Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Nu'mani narrated this book to Abu al-Husayn Muhammad bin 'Ali al-Bajali in Halab.

It appears this narrator is the same transmitter of al-Ghaybah who is known as Muhammad bin 'Ali Abu al-Husayn al-Shuja'ee al-Katib, and his name appears in other manuscripts of this book as well. Nu'mani narrated the book to him in Dhu al-Hijjah of the year 342 Hijri. In this case, it seems that the title al-Bajali is a copyist error for al-Shuja'ee.

What has been mentioned so far, alludes to instances that mention a certain time or location for when and where a certain narration was taken from or was transmitted. An interesting point here is that many of the teachers of Nu'mani were also the teachers of Harun bin Musa Tal'ukbari (a senior scholar of hadith in Baghdad), and Tal'ukbari heard many narrations from them in the year 327 Hijri – the same year Nu'mani heard narrations from Muhammad bin Hamam.

The absence of any mention as to which city Tal'ukbari was in when he learned narrations from his teachers perhaps indicates that it was in Baghdad. A few other references indicate that certain other teachers of Nu'mani were also in Baghdad. Therefore, it seems that Nu'mani took most of his narrations while he was in Baghdad as well. We will glance briefly over some of these teachers of Nu'mani, so that we can further strengthen our view. Other teachers of Nu'mani – other than Abu 'Ali Muhammad bin Hamam – from whom Nu'mani seems to have taken his narrations from while in Baghdad are

Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Sa'eed al-Kufi, famously known as Ibn 'Uqda (d. 332 Hijri)[7]. Nu'mani reports numerous times from him, and Ibn 'Uqda travelled to Baghdad three times.[8] During his third trip to Baghdad in the year 330 Hijri he had a session where he dictated ahadith in Masjid Buratha.[9]

Ahmad bin Nasr bin Hawzah Abu Sulayman Bahili (d. 333 Hijri Dhu al-Hijjah near the bridge of Nahrawan). Tal'ukbari heard narrations from him in the year 331 Hijri, and he has permission to narrate from Ahmad.[10]

Salamah bin Muhammad, his narrations in al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani are more than Ahmad bin 'Ali bin Dawood Qummi's. Shaykh Tusi says about Salamah bin Muhammad bin Ismail Arzani

Resident of Baghdad, Tal'ukbari heard narrations from him in the year 328 Hijri and has permission to narrate from him.[11]He was the maternal uncle of Abu al-Hasan Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Dawood. According to Najashi[12], Ahmad bin Dawood married the sister of Salamah bin Muhammad, and through their union Abu al-Hasan Muhammad bin Ahmad was born. Salmah bin Muhammad – after the death of Ahmad bin Dawood – brought Abu al-Hasan Muhammad to Baghdad and lived there for a while. In the year 333 Hijri he travelled to Syria, then returned to Baghdad and passed away in the year 339 Hijri.There is a greater chance that Nu'mani took narrations from Salamah bin Muhammad in Baghdad (and not in Syria) around the year 328 Hijri, around the same time Tal'ukbari also heard narrations from Salamah.

4 & 5. Abu al-Hasan Abdul 'Aziz bin 'Abdillah bin Yunus Mousali Akbar and his brother Abu al-Qasim Abdul Wahid. Tal'ukbari heard narrations from both the brothers in the year 326 Hijri, and had an Ijaza from Abdul Aziz.

Muhammad bin Yaqub al-Kulayni. Nu'mani narrates from him plenty of times. In the year 327 Hijri, a few transmitters of al-Kafi heard narrations from Kulayni in Baghdad, near Baab al-Kufa gate of Silsilah.[13] Kulayni passed away in this very city around 328 or 329 Hijri, and is buried in the graveyard of Baab al-Kufa.

Nu'mani must have heard narrations from Kulayni around the year 327 Hijri. According to Ibn 'Asakir, Kulayni visited Damascus and transmits a few narrations from his teachers in Ba'labak. However, the journey of Nu'mani to Syria seems to have been after the death of Kulayni. Therefore, we cannot say that the narrations of Nu'mani from Kulayni were connected to this journey.

Another one of Nu'mani's teachers – who seems to have been present in Baghdad – is Ahmad bin Muhammad bin 'Ammar al-Kufi (Tal'ukbari also transmits narrations from him). Muhammad bin 'Abdillah bin Ja'far Himyari narrates from him that a part of the manuscript from the book Masahaat of Ahmad bin Abi Abdillah al-Barqi was lost. They asked around some other scholars regarding it in Qom, Baghdad and Rey, but did not find anyone who possessed it.

Another teacher of Nu'mani was 'Ali bin Ahmad Bandniji. Bandnijin was a city near Baghdad. Perhaps this is the same individual as 'Ali bin Ahmad bin Nasr Bandniji, who Ibn Ghadairi deems to be a resident of Ramallah (in Palestine). It appears that Nu'mani took narrations from him in Baghdad or in one of the cities of Syria.

Yet another one of Nu'mani's teachers is someone by the name of Muhammad bin al-Hasan bin Muhammad bin Jamhur 'Ammyyi, whose name only appears besides the name of Muhammad bin Hamam. As per Qadhi Muhassin bin Ali Tunukhi (author of Nishwar al-

Mahadhira), he was from the senior scholars of grammar in Basra, and was very close with the father of Qadhi Tunukhi.[14]

Qadhi Muhassin Tunukhi – who himself was raised in Basra – learned calligraphy and writing from him, and was very close to him. Now, did Nu'mani take narrations from Muhammad bin al-Hasan bin Muhamad bin Jamhur in Basra or was it from Baghdad, just like he did from Muhammad bin Hamam It is really not clear.

In conclusion, based on what has been said so far, we can get a better picture of Nu'mani's life. He was not from Baghdad, but was living there in the year 327 Hijri, and till about 330-331 Hijri he learned traditions from the teachers of this city. In the year 332 or 333 Hijri, he traveled to Shaam, and in the year 342 Hijri he was present in the city of Halab. He recited his book for his student there, and he most probably wrote the book there as well and eventually passed away in this very city.

It should also be mentioned that before the year 330 Hijri, some Shi'i scholars immigrated to Baghdad. One of them is Muhammad bin Ya'qub al-Kulayni and another is Abu Abdillah Nu'mani who was present in Baghdad during the year 327 Hijri. The migration of Salamah bin Muhammad Arzani alongside his nephew Abu al-Hasan Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Dawood Qummi to Baghdad must have taken place during these years as well. Salamah bin Muhammad and Muhammad bin Ya'qub al-Kulayni and Abu Abdillah Nu'mani – all three of them – had journey to Shaam. The journey of Salamah bin Muhammad to Shaam was in the year 333 Hijri, around the same time as when Nu'mani traveled there. Did these two journeys to Shaam take place due to similar reasons Is it possible that the presence of the Shi'i family of Aal al-Hamada, specifically Sayf al-Dawlah who had a fascination for learning and grammar and treated scholars with respect, played a role in these two journeys[15]

Ibn Ji'abi – a famous Shi'i scholar of hadith in Baghdad – went to Sayf al-Dawlah and Sayf had him turned into one of his close associates.[16] Sayf al-Dawlah took Halab under his power during the year 333 Hijri and he had full control over it by the year 334 Hijri.[17]

Regardless, the title al-Katib (scribe) that has been ascribed to Nu'mani is probably due to a relationship he may have had with some of these appointed ministers. However, we do not .know whose scribe he was

History of Kitab al-Ghaybah's Compilation

Precise details for when al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani was written is not available for us. The researcher of the book quotes from one of the manuscripts of the books and deemds the compilation of the book to be 342 Hijri Dhi al-Hijjah, however this opinion is baseless. This date is for when the author narrated the book to his student Abu al-Husayn al-Shuja'ee. Thus,

generally speaking[18], the compilation of the book must have taken place before that. In order to determine the precise date for when the book was compiled, we can refer to the narrations the author took from Muhammad bin ‘Abdillah Tabarani in the year 333 Hijri. Therefore, the book could not have been compiled any later than 335 Hijri. Another, more precise way does exist, when we look at the remarks of the author in his book regarding the Imam (s) where he says Right now he is 80-odd years old. Since this remark does not make it completely clear as to how old the Imam was, we can say that he was at the very least 81 years old. Based on the fact that the Imam was born in the year 255 or 256 Hijri, the compilation of the book cannot be any later than 336 Hijri. Therefore, the book must have been compiled between the years 336 and 342 Hijri.

The book must have been written after Nu’mani travelled to Sham, and would have been written in one of the cities there. It was most probably written in the city of Halab, the same city where he made his student Abu al-Husayn al-Shuja’ee write the book as well. From the introduction of the book, it seems that the book was written far away from Nu’mani’s home town. This is because he explicitly says that he is only recording those narrations that he has at his disposal, and all the narrations that he has on this topic are not at his disposal. Perhaps Nu’mani was not able to take all the narrations and books that he had to Syria. .Despite this, the number of narrations and the numerous sources for them are noteworthy

References

[1] In a chain of narrators in recorded in al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Tusi this is what is written about him Well-known as Ibn Zaynab al-Nu’mani al-Katib

[2] Rijal al-Najashi, Page 383, Entry #1043

[3] Tarikh Baghdad, Volume 13, Page 189-190, Entry # 6044

[4] Tarikh Dimashq, Volume 40, Page 26, Entry # 4635

[5] al-Ansab of Sum’ani, Volume 6, Page 29, Entry for al-Dhahabi, it says ‘Uthman bin Muhammad bin ‘Ali bin Ahmad bin Ja’far bin Dinar bin Abdillah al-Dhahabi, known as Ibn ‘Allan

[6] Tawdhee al-Mushtabih of Ibn Nasir al-Din al-Dimashqi, Volume 4, Page 49; al-Ikmal of Ibn Makula, Volume 3, Page 396; Tarikh Dimashq of Ibn ‘Asakair, Volume 40, Page 27, quoting Abdul Ghani bin Sa’eed

[7] Tarikh Baghdad, Volume 6, Page 147, Entry #2634; Rijal al-Tusi, Entry # 5949, Page 409. Compare this with Fihrist of Shaykh Tusi, Page 70 and Rijal al-Najashi Page 95, Entry #233 who mention his death to have taken place in the year 333 Hijri. This seems to be a mistake.

[8] Tarikh Baghdad, Volume 6, end of page 153, narrating from Ibn Ji’abi, a student of Ibn ‘Uqda

[9] Tarikh Baghdad, Volume 6, page 158; al-Amali of Shaykh Tusi, Page 269, Assembly #10, Hadith # 501,

[10] al-Rijal of Shaykh Tusi, Page 410, Entry # 590

[11] al-Rijal of Shaykh Tusi, Page 427, Entry # 6139

[12] Rijal al-Najashi, Page 192, Entry # 514

[13] Mashaykha al-Istibsar, Page 310

[14] Nishwar al-Muhadhira, Volume 4, Page 109

[15] Dairah al-Ma'arif Buzurg Islami, under Hamadan – quoting from Tha'alabi's Yatimah al-Dahr

[16] al-Fihrist of Shaykh Tusi, Page 325, Entry #506

[17] Dairah al-Ma'arif Buzurg Islami, under Hamadan

[18] We write 'generally speaking', because generally books were narrated to students after they were fully written and completed. However, sometimes books themselves were mere dictations to the students. Many works of Shaykh Tusi and Sayyid Murtadha are of this nature, such as 'Uddah al-Usul, al-Khilaf, Ikhtiyar al-Rijal, al-Dhari'ah.