Sources of Nu'mani's al-Ghaybah – Part 3

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We previously mentioned that al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani was written before the month of Dhi al-Hijjah 342 Hijri, which was the date Nu'mani dictated the book to his student. Furthermore, taking into consideration that he deemed the age of the Imam (s) at the time to be around eighty-years while writing the book, the book cannot have been written earlier than 336 Hijri. Therefore, we previously concluded that the book must have been written between the years 336 and 342 Hijri.

Now we will try to determine an even more precise date for when the book was written, by looking at another statement mentioned in al-Ghaybah. In the middle of the book, there is a discussion on one of the false Mahdis, namely Abu Yazid al-Umawi. Some have assumed that the book was written before the death of Abu Yazid, and at the time he was making his claims. Although, this really cannot be understood from what is written in the book, this remark still helps us in our discussion. Before we explain any further, we will quote the remarks of Nu'mani.[1]

After reporting a few narrations on the description of Imam Mahdi (s), Nu'mani narrates a tradition from Imam Sadiq (s) where the Imam responds to the narrator saying: If I were to witness him (i.e. the Mahdi), I would have definitely spent my life in his assistance. Nu'mani adds his remarks after this and says:

فتاملوا [بعد هذا] ما يدعيه المبطلون، و يفتخر به الطائفة البائنة[2] المبتدعة من ان الذي هذا وصفه و هذا حاله و منزلته من الله عزوجل، هو صاحبهم و من الذى يدعون له; فانه بحيث هو في اربعمئة الف عنان و ان في داره اربعة آلاف خادم رومي و صقلبي .[3] وانظروا هل سمعتم او رايتم او بلغكم عن النبي (صلى‌الله‌عليه‌وآله‌وسلم) او[4] عن الائمة الطاهرين (عليهم‌السلام). ان القائم بالحق هذه صفته التى يصفونه بها، و انه يظهر و يقيم بعد ظهوره، بحيث هو في هذه السنين الطويلة، و هو في هذه العدة العظيمة يناقفه ابويزيد الاموي، فمرة يظهر عليه و يهزمه، و مرة يظهر هو على ابي يزيد، و يقيم بعد ظهوره و قوته و انتشار امره بالمغرب والدنيا على ما هى عليه؟ ! فانكم تعلمون بعقولكم اذا سلمت من الدخل و تمييزكم اذا صفى من الهوى ان الله قد ابعد من هذه حاله عن ان يكون القائم لله بحقه والناصر لدينه والخليفة في ارضه والمجدد لشريعة نبيه

In these statements[5], only Abu Yazid al-Umawwi's revolt alongside his claim to be the Mahdi has been discussed, but it doesn't mention whether his fights are continuing or have they ended. Before we proceed forward, a brief overview of Abu Yazid's revolt will be beneficial.

Abu Yazid al-Mukhallad bin Kayrad was from the Nakariyyah branch of the Khariji sect, and in 316 Hijri he gathered a number of people with him and began focusing on popularizing takfeer of Muslims who were against the Khawarij. History books have spoken about his revolt against the Fatimid caliph Qa'im – the successor of Mahdi – and his later escape to Tozeur (in Tunisia) in the year 325 Hijri. It has also been mentioned that he was later arrested by the governor of Qastiliyyah, and then escaped due the assistance of his followers, subsequently taking refuge in the Aurès mountains. Qa'im surrounded him in that region, and this blockade lasted for seven years.

His fights and skirmishes with Qa'im in different cities of West Africa continued on till 332 and 333 Hijri. In the year 333 Hijri, Abu Yazid was able to control many cities in North Africa, such as Qastiliyyah, Laribus and Kairouan, and created a blockade for Qa'im in the city of Mahdiyyah. This blockage lasted until 334 Hijri.

In the month of Ramadhan of this year, Qa'im passed away and his son Mansur became the next caliph. The battles of Abu Yazid with the Fatimids continued, however eventually Abu Yazid got caught up between the army of Mansur and later died due to the injuries he sustained in battle, in Muharram 336 Hijri.

More detailed accounts of these battles exist in books of history, and any further details are outside the scope of this article.

In the paragraph from al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani – which is the topic of our discussion in this article – two points are worthy of attention:

1) Referring to Abu Yazid as an 'Umawi, is a reference not seen anywhere else. Abu Yazid was often referred to as a Berber, Yafrini, Zenati due to his ethnic background, or a Khariji, Abadhi, or Nukkari due to his ideology.[6] Why has he been called Umawi by Nu'mani? Perhaps his relationship with the Umayyads of Andalus was the reason.

Ibn 'Uzari al-Marakishi writes: Near the end of Shawwal, in the year 333 Hijri, two people sent by Abu Yazid al-Mukhallad bin Kaydad to Nasir arrived, and they were carrying a letter on behalf of him. In it was a mention of his victory over Kairouan and Riqadah, and his belief in the Imamah of Nasir. The letters of Abu Yazid and his dispatchers, from that time till his death continued consistently.[7]

In books of history, the year 334 and as well as 335 Hijri have been recalled as the years where this communication was an indication of Abu Yazid trying to seek the help of Nasir.[8]

The important point here is that the fact that Nu'mani describes him as someone claiming to be the Mahdi, makes it clear that he was compiling the book when Abu Yazid was alive.

This statement of his: He has four-hundred thousand horsemen and four-thousand caretakers,

also strongly suggests that he was alive at the time. This – without a doubt – is a reference to a Fatimid caliph. However, is Qa'im from the Fatimid dynasty the one implied here? Just like how Ustad Ghaffari has suggested and Nu'mani's usage of phrases such as al-Qa'im bil-Haqq and al-Qa'im lilahi bi-haqqihi all imply, that this was indeed a reference to the caliph Qa'ims. The statement:

بحيث هو في هذه السنين الطويلة

can also be used as evidence for that. If this is correct, taking into consideration the death of Qa'im in Ramadhan of the year 334 Hijri, al-Ghaybah therefore must have been written before this date. However, this is not in accordance to our previous claim where we said that the book was not written earlier than the year 336 Hijri.

2) We want to add another point here and that is, al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani is not a very large work, and naturally it would have been compiled in the order it exists today. The relevant paragraph regarding Abu Yazid's battles in al-Ghaybah is roughly a 100-pages after the reference to the Imam's (S) age, by which we concluded that the book is not written earlier than 336 Hijri, and thus now we see an apparent inconsistency. However, if we say that the individual claiming to be the Mahdi was Mansur[9], the son of Qa'im, who died in 341 Hijri, then we will not have an issue in reconciling the dates. However, it is too far-fetched to say that Nu'mani had Mansur in mind.

This issue has been alluded to by historians as well. They have said, Mansur had kept the death of his father hidden due to the fear of Abu Yazid and did not refer to himself as the caliph, neither did he change the imprints on the coins nor bring any changes to the sermons or other matters that pertained to the caliphate. However, after the revolts of Abu Yazid had died down, Mansur announced the death of his father, and announced his official caliphate.[10]

Therefore, it is possible that by year 336 Hijri, Nu'mani was not yet aware of Qa'im's death and was presuming him to still be alive. By putting together these two points, we can say that the middle-portion of al-Ghaybah was written around the year 336 Hijri, because given that Abu Yazid died in Muharram of 336 Hijri, it seems far-fetched that Nu'mani would not have known about the death of Qa'im the Fatimid caliph till the end of this year. Furthermore, given that the book is not so lengthy, we can say that it was either completed in the year 336 Hijri or the year after that.

We should not forget though, that while Nu'mani did add a few narrations after the completion of the book, we do not have any evidence that suggests any major changes were made to the

general order of the book. Subsequently, the book does not have two different periods of compilation which would have required two different discussions on the historicity of its compilation.

The conclusion of our discussion is that the middle part of al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani was written in the year 336 Hijri and the book would have been completed around the same year or the year after.

An Additional Point Regarding Nu'mani's al-Ghaybah

Sharaf ul-Din Astarabadi in his book Ta'weel al-Ayaat, records a few narrations from al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Mufeed, where in most cases he has omitted the chain of narrators. However, on page 208, under Surah al-Tawbah, he brings two narrations with a complete chain alongside an explanation between the two narrations as follow:

حدثنا علی بن الحسین قال حدثنا محمد بن یحیی العطار

و اوضح من هذا، بحمدالله و انور و ابین و ازهر

اخبرنا سلامة بن محمد، قال: حدثنا ابوالحسن علی بن معمر

Ali bin al-Husayn narrated to us saying: Muhammad bin Yahya al-'Attar narrated to us… And more clear than this, with the praise of Allah, and apparent, and more obvious and more radiant…

Salamah bin Muhammad reported to us saying: Abu al-Hasan 'Ali bin Mu'mar narrated to us…

These two narrations have appeared in al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani exactly in this manner.[11] All other quotations in Ta'weel al-Ayaat supposedly from al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Mufeed have also been recorded in al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani:

See Ta'weel al-Ayat: Page 87 (under Surah al-Baqarah); Page 102 (under Surah al-Baqarah); Page 123 (under Surah Aal 'Imran); Page 133 (under Surah Aal 'Imran), Page 256 (under Surah al-Nahl), and Page 384 (under Surah al-Shu'ara).

It becomes apparent that what Sharaf ul-Din Astarabadi was quoting from – and was referring to as al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Mufeed – was nothing other than al-Ghaybah of Nu'mani. What caused this confusion?

In response to this, we must remember that Shaykh Mufeed did indeed have a book called al-Ghaybah, as has been mentioned in Najashi's al-Rijal.[12] However, it is from one of the lost books of Shaykh Mufeed and we do not know of any existing manuscript from it, neither do we

have any real information regarding the book.

On the other hand, Shaykh Mufeed was also known as Abu ‘Abdillah and his name was Muhammad bin Muhammad bin al-Nu’man, and he was often referred to as Abu ‘Abdillah bin al-Nu’man.[13] The resemblance of his name with Abu ‘Abdillah al-Nu’mani, the author of al-Ghaybah, is very clear. Therefore, a copyist error between Abu ‘Abdillah al-Nu’mani and Abu ‘Abdillah al-Nu’man could have caused this misattribution of Nu’mani’s al-Ghaybah to Shaykh Mufeed’s.

References

[1] I am relating the text from the Radhawiyyah manuscript. We will also point out the differences it has with the edition published by Ustad Ghaffari

[2] In the Radhawiyyah manuscript, this word is not very legible. In the footnotes of Ustad Ghaffari, it is claimed while referring to a few other manuscripts, that the word is الشانئة

[3] In the published edition of al-Ghaybah, the word صـقالبى has appeared. Saqlab (صـقلب) is a city in Saqliyya (present-day Sicillia) an island located in a sea, close to Tunisia. See: Taaj al-‘Urus, Volume 3, Page 200

[4] In the printed edition, the word و is written instead of او

[5] al-Ghaybah of Nu’mani, Page 245 and 246

[6] As an example, refer to al-Tanbih wa al-Asharf, page 289; al-Kamil of Ibn Athir, Volume 8, Page 422; al-Bayan al-Maghrib fi Akhbar al-Andalus wa al-Maghrib, Volume 2, Page 212 & 214; Tarikh Ibn Khaldun, Volume 4, Page 52

[7] al-Bayan al-Maghrib, Volume 2, Page 212

[8] al-Bayan al-Maghrib, Volume 2, Page 212-214

[9] However, this view that Mansur had claimed to be the Mahdi, it self needs research and investigation

[10] al-Kamil of Ibn Athir, Volume 8, Page 434 and 455; Iftitah al-Da’wah, Page 334

[11] Although, few minor differences can be seen. For example in al-Ghaybah of Nu’mani. Some descriptive titles of the narrators have not appeared in Ta’weel al-Ayaat, and these were probably omitted by the author himself, حـــــدثنا in the first narration appears as اخبرنـــا

[12] al-Rijal of Najashi, Page 401, Entry #1067

[13] Maskan al-Fawa’id, Page 37; al-Rijal of Najashi, Page 404, Entry #1070; Sharh Nahj al-Balagha of Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Volume 2, Page 165; also the phrase “Ibn al-Nu’man” in Najashi’s al-Rijal on Page 161, 431 and 457