

followers of these prophets to 'believe in' and 'help' the Prophet when he arose and proclaimed his mission. See, for example, al-Zamakhshari's comment on this verse in his *Tafsir al-kashshāf*, vol.1, p.371.

31. The 'conditionally permissible' (*rukḥaṣ*, plural of *rukḥṣa*) refers, as the commentators explain, to those acts that are permissible in extreme circumstances only, and forbidden outside of those circumstances. Ibn Abi'l-Ḥadīd gives the example of 5: 3, which details all the kinds of food forbidden to Muslims (such as carrion and pork, etc.), and then concludes, 'Whoso is forced by hunger, not through inclination to sin, [unto him] God is forgiving, merciful'. The 'unconditionally compulsory' (*'aẓā'im*, plural of *'aẓīma*) refers to those principles of belief which must be adhered to in an unconditional and absolute manner. The example given here is the fundamental principle of faith enunciated in verse 47: 19, 'So know that there is no god save God ...' Ibn Abi'l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāgha*, vol.1, p.121.

32. *Khāṣṣahu wa 'ammahu*. An example of the 'specific' kind of ordinance is, according to Ibn Abi'l-Ḥadīd, that in which the Qur'an permits the Prophet, alone, certain privileges as regards the formalities of the marriage contract (33: 50); and as regards the 'general' ordinances, these pertain to the injunctions to pray and fast, and so on. Ibid., vol.1, p.121.

33. *Mursalahu wa maḥdūdahu*. The word *mursal* literally means 'the sent forth' but according to the commentators, it is to be understood as undelimited or universally applicable (*mutlaq*, according to Ibn Abi'l-Ḥadīd), as opposed to being conditional. Ibid., vol.1, p.121.

34. *Muḥkamahu wa mutashābihahu*. The 'unambiguous', clear and decisive verses are those about the meaning of which there is no doubt, such as 'Say: He is God, the One' (112: 1); the example given by Ibn Abi'l-Ḥadīd of an ambiguous equivocal verse is, 'Looking upon their Lord ...' (75: 23). Ibid., vol.1, p.121.

The Letter of Imam 'Alī to Mālik al-Ashtar

(Written when the Imam appointed him as governor of Egypt and its regions, at a time when the rule of its governor, Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, was unstable; it is the longest of the letters written by the Imam, and the most all-embracing as regards beauty of form and excellence of meaning.)'

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

This is what the servant of God, 'Alī, Commander of the Faithful, enjoins upon Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar, in his mandate (*'ahd*) to him, appointing him as governor of Egypt: to collect its revenues; to fight its enemies; to establish the welfare of its inhabitants; and to bring prosperity to its lands.

He enjoins him to have fear of God; to prefer obedience to God [above all things]; and to abide by what He has commanded in His Book—acts both obligatory and recommended—for no one prospers except through abiding by them, and no one is wretched except through repudiating and neglecting them. [He further enjoins him] to assist God with his heart, his hand and his tongue: for truly He—majestic is His Name—has undertaken to grant victory to him who assists Him, and to elevate him who exalts Him.² He enjoins him to break the passionate desires of his soul, and to restrain it when it is beset with whim and caprice, for truly the soul incites to evil, unless God has mercy.

And be aware, Mālik, that I am directing you to a land which has been ruled by states—just and unjust—before you; and that the people

will evaluate your conduct, just as you have evaluated the conduct of governors before you. They will speak about you just as you spoke about them; and the righteous are proven such only through what God has caused to flow from the tongues of His servants. So let your most beloved treasure be the treasure of virtuous acts. Dominate your inclinations, and exercise self-restraint in the face of that which is unlawful for you—for indeed self-restraint engenders within the soul a proper balance as regards what it likes and what it dislikes.

Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them and kindness towards them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. For they are of two types: either your brother in religion or your like in creation.³ Mistakes slip from them, defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness and your pardon, just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon; for you are above them, and the one who has authority over you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you. He expects you to satisfy their needs; and through them He tests you.

Do not set your soul up for war with God. For before His retribution you have no resistance, and in the face of His forgiveness and mercy, no independence. So feel no regret when you pardon, and do not rejoice when you punish. Do not let an impulse propel you rashly towards any course of action, if you can see an alternative to it. Do not say, 'I have been given authority, I order and am obeyed', for this leads to corruption in the heart and the erosion of religion; and it brings closer the adversities of fate. If the authority of your position engenders vanity and arrogance, then look at the grandeur of God's dominion above you, and at His power to do for you that which you have no power to do for yourself. This will calm your ambition, restrain you from your own vehemence, and restore to you what had strayed from your intellect. Beware of comparing [yourself] with God in greatness and likening [yourself] to Him in might, for God abases every tyrant and disgraces every braggart. Be just with God and be just with people [giving them what is their due] from yourself, from your close relatives, and from those of your subjects towards whom you are most affectionate. If you fail to do this, you will be an oppressor. And he who oppresses the servants of God will find

that God, as well as His servants, will oppose him. God refutes the argument of whomever He opposes. He [the oppressor] remains at war with God until he desists and repents. Nothing so surely induces the removal of God's grace and hastens His retribution as persistence in oppression. For God hears the cry of the oppressed and keeps a vigilant watch over the oppressors.

Let the most beloved of affairs to you be those most centred upon the right, the most comprehensive in justice, and the most inclusive of popular contentment, for the discontent of the common folk (*al-āmma*) undermines the contentment of the elite (*al-khāssa*); while the discontent of the elite is compensated by the contentment of the common folk. In times of prosperity no subjects are more of a burden to the ruler as regards seeking his favour than the elite, and none who are less helpful to him in times of trial; none more repelled than they by justice, more importunate in making demands, less grateful when granted favour, slower to pardon when deprived, less patient in the face of the vicissitudes of time. By contrast, the pillar of the religion, the cohesion of the Muslims, and the implement [for fighting] the enemies are constituted by the common folk, so be well disposed to them and incline towards them.

Let those of your subjects who most keenly seek out the faults of others be the ones furthest away from you and the most despicable in your eyes. For people do have faults which it behoves the governor—above all others—to conceal. So do not disclose those faults which remain hidden from you. Your duty is but to purify that which has become apparent and obvious to you; God will judge concerning those things which remain hidden from you. So try and veil deficiencies as much as you can, so that God may veil from your subjects that in yourself which you wish to be veiled. Untie the knot of all resentment amongst the people, and cut from yourself the rope of all rancour. Ignore everything which is obscure to you. Never be quick to believe a slanderer, for a slanderer is a deceiver, even if he appear in the guise of a good adviser.

Do not allow into your sphere of consultation any misers, for they would deflect you from generosity and threaten you with poverty; nor any cowards, who would weaken you in your affairs; nor those who are avaricious, for they would adorn avidity for you with injustice.⁴

Truly, miserliness, cowardice and avarice are so many diverse inclinations comprised within a bad opinion of God. The worst of your ministers is he who ministered to evil [rulers] before you, participating in their sins. So do not allow them to enter your inner circle, for they are assistants to sinners, brothers of tyrants. The best alternatives to them will be found among those who are as intelligent and capable as they are, but who are not saddled with their burden of sin, and have not assisted any tyrant in his tyranny nor any sinner in his sin. Such people will be less of a burden for you as regards provision, most helpful to you as regards succour, most deeply inclined towards you in affection, and least attached to people other than you. So choose such people as intimate companions, to be with you in private and in public. Within this group, give preference to the one who most sincerely speaks the truth, however bitter it may be to you, and who supports you least in doing that which God dislikes for His friends, however painfully this may strike at your desires.

Attach yourself to those who are known for their piety and sincerity, and train them in such a manner that they do not flatter you or lavish praise upon you for doing something which you have not in fact done. For excessive praise breeds pride and carries one headlong towards vainglory. Do not place the virtuous and the wicked in the same rank before you, for this would result in the virtuous belittling the virtues and the wicked entrenching their vices. Impose upon them [the appropriate reward or punishment for] what they have imposed on themselves. Be aware that nothing so effectively engenders the governor's confidence⁵ in his subjects than his virtuous behaviour towards them, his relieving of their hardship, and his refraining from compelling them to do what is beyond their power.

Let there thus arise a situation in which you can enjoy confidence in your subjects, for such an attitude will spare you much trouble. He who is most worthy of your confidence is he by whom your trial was deemed good, while he who is most deserving of your distrust is he by whom your trial was deemed bad.⁶

Do not rupture any beneficial tradition established by the leaders of this community, as a result of which unity has been harmoniously established, and from which the subjects have prospered. Do not set up some new practice which is detrimental to the already established

traditions; if you do so, the reward for their observance will redound to him who established them, while the onus of their destruction will be upon you.

Study much with the scholars (*al-ʿulamāʾ*) and hold much discourse with the sages (*al-ḥukamāʾ*), in order to consolidate that which brings well-being to your lands, and to further entrench that which has already been established by your predecessors. Be aware that the subjects consist of various classes, none of which can be sound without the others being so, and none can function independently of the others. Among these classes are the soldiers of God (*jund Allāh*); the scribes (*kuttāb*, sing. *kātib*) administering to the common people and the elite; the judges (*quḍāt al-ʿadl*); officials responsible for upholding fairness, and establishing the right of redress (*rifq*);⁷ those who pay the *jizya* (poll-tax) and the *kharāj* (land-tax) from among the 'protected people' (*ahl al-dhimma*)⁸ and the Muslims; the merchants and artisans; and the lowest class, comprising the needy and destitute. God has prescribed to each [class] its share and has ordained—as a binding covenant (*ʿahdan*) with us from Him—for each its limits and its duties, according to His Book or the *Sunna* of the Prophet—God bless him and his family.

So as regards the soldiers, they are—by the grace of God—the fortresses of the subjects, the adornment of the governors, the power of religion, and the pathways to security (*subul al-amn*). The subjects cannot maintain themselves except by means of the soldiers, and the soldiers for their part cannot be maintained except by means of the [revenues of the] *kharāj* which God extracts for them; with this, they have the wherewithal to wage war on their enemies, establish their welfare, and fulfill their needs.

These two classes [the soldiers and the peasants] cannot be maintained except through the third: the judges, administrators and scribes, inasmuch as they uphold all contracts, harmonize and organize all interests and benefits, being charged with the maintenance of the specific and general affairs [of state and society]. All of these classes need for their proper functioning the merchants and artisans, who gather the requisite goods, and establish the appropriate markets. They fulfill [the needs of the other classes] by procuring through their specific functions those resources which cannot be obtained

by the work of others. Finally, there is the lowest class, consisting of the needy and the destitute—those deserving assistance and favour. For each [class] there is plenitude with God; and each has, in relation to the governor, a right proportioned to the needs of its welfare. The governor cannot fully accomplish the tasks imposed upon him by God without resolute determination and resorting to God's help (*al-ihitimām wa'l-isti'āna*), galvanizing himself for the prerogatives of rectitude, and manifesting patience in the face of ease and difficulty.

Appoint as the commander of your soldiers the person whom you feel deeply is the most sincere in relation to God, the Prophet and your Imam, the purest of heart, the one most excellent in forbearance (*ḥilm*); who is slow to anger, happy to pardon, kind to the weak, severe with the strong; one who is neither moved by violence, nor held back by weakness. Cleave to those of noble descent, belonging to pious families of established name and repute, and to men known for their bravery, courage, generosity (*al-sakhā*) and tolerance (*al-samāha*)—for they constitute a group formed by nobility, and a party made of honour. Then supervise their affairs as parents would supervise their child. Let no act by which you strengthen them appear too great in your eyes. Do not belittle any kindness—however slight—which you have promised them, for such kindness is as a summoner (*dā'iya*) unto them, calling them to dispense good advice to you, and to enjoy trust in you. Do not abandon a close inspection of their affairs in favour of [ostensibly more] weighty matters, for there is a situation in which they benefit from even a small act of kindness, and one in which they cannot dispense with the weighty matters.

Let the most preferred of your commanders be one who is benevolent to the people, and most generous to them with his bounty, such that they have ample means, they and those among their relatives who succeed them. Let their concern be integrated within one resolve: to fight the enemy. Truly, your kindness towards them will cause their hearts to incline towards you.

The greatest source of joy for the governors is the establishment of justice in the land, and the emanation of love from his subjects. Such love will not be manifest unless their hearts be secure. And their advice will not be sound except through the governors' supervision

of those in charge of the subjects' affairs, and their ensuring that they find the burden of rule light and easy to bear, and that they no longer anxiously hope that the rule of the governor will be terminated. So raise their hopes, keep up your continuous praise of them, and your enumeration of the brave deeds of those who have been brave—for truly, abundant praise of their noble acts rouse the brave, and spur on the lazy, if God wills. Acknowledge the courageous deeds of every man, and do not ascribe the deeds of one to someone else, or fall short in granting due acknowledgement. Do not let the nobility of a man cause you to reckon a small accomplishment great; and do not allow the lowliness of a man cause you to reckon a great one small.

Refer to God and His Messenger any matter which weighs heavily on you, or which is unclear to you, for God the Exalted has declared to a folk whom He loved to guide: 'O ye who believe, obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if ye dispute with one another over anything, then refer it to God and the Messenger' (Qur'ān, 4: 59). To 'refer to God' means following that which is clear and unequivocal in His Book; and 'refer to the Messenger' means following that part of his Sunna which unites, rather than that which divides.

Choose as judges those whom you consider the most excellent of your subjects—those who are not confused by complex matters, nor angered by disputants; who do not persist in error, and are not reticent about turning to the truth when they perceive it; whose souls are not susceptible to avarice; who, dissatisfied with a superficial understanding, will probe deeply; who are most circumspect in the face of ambiguities; most consequent in argumentation; least perturbed by the appeals of litigants; most patient in efforts to disclose the true state of affairs; most resolute when the right judgement is clear; who are not beguiled by praise nor misled by blandishment. Such people are indeed rare!

Then examine carefully and frequently the execution of the judge's verdicts, and be generous in paying him, so that any deficiency [in terms of livelihood] will be removed, thus diminishing his need for help from people. And bestow upon him a rank of proximity to yourself, one which nobody else from among your close companions might hope to attain. He should be made safe in your presence,

SKIP TO
NEXT
PAGE

is no sincerity or fidelity. Rather, investigate them carefully, doing so in relation to that with which they were entrusted by good people before you; and trust him whose virtue left the deepest impression upon the common people, and whose reputation for integrity is most widespread. This will be proof of your sincerity towards God and towards the one who appointed you.

Appoint for each of your affairs a head-officer among your officials, one who will not be daunted by the magnitude of affairs nor dispersed by their multiplicity. Any fault of your scribes which you have ignored will be ascribed to yourself.

Then attend to the merchants and artisans. Treat them well, urging the same on others. [Among them are] those of fixed abode, those who travel with their goods, and those who earn their livelihood with their hands. They are sources of benefit and the means by which conveniences are obtained. By them are procured goods from distant and remote places, brought by land and sea, from plains and mountains, and from places where men do not settle nor even dare to venture. They are in a state of reconciliation (*silm*), and from them no calamity need be feared; and they are in a state of peace (*ṣulḥ*), from them no disturbance need be feared. Examine their affairs attentively, both those which are close to you and those in all corners of your land. Be aware that, despite what has been said, there is in many of them a despicable stinginess, a repugnant greed, a propensity to hoard goods, and to arbitrarily fix prices. All of this brings about loss for the populace, and is a source of shame for the governors. So prohibit hoarding, for the Messenger of God—God bless him and his family—prohibited it. Let trading be carried out with propriety and fairness, according to prices which do not harm either of the two parties, the buyers or the sellers. So if any one of them succumbs to the temptation to hoard, after you have prohibited it, inflict upon him an exemplary—but not excessive—punishment.

Then—O God, O God!—[pay particular attention to] the lowest class, those who have no wherewithal, the destitute, the needy, the afflicted, the disabled. Within this class are those who beg, and those whose wretchedness calls out to be alleviated but do not beg.¹¹ Be mindful of God in regard to their rights, for He has entrusted these rights to your care. Assign to them a portion from your public

START
READING
HERE

treasury (*bayt al-māl*), and a portion of the produce of what is taken as booty by the Muslims in every region, for those who are furthest have the same rights as those nearest. Upholding the right of each of them is incumbent upon you. Do not let any haughtiness on your part cause you to neglect them, for you will not be pardoned even the slightest shortcoming [in fulfilling your obligations towards them] as a result of attending to some important matter. So do not turn your concern away from them, nor assume a contemptuous attitude towards them. Keep a watchful eye over the affairs of those who have no access to you, and who are disdained by men of high standing. Appoint from among those you trust a God-fearing and humble person to be responsible for bringing their affairs to your attention. Treat these people in a manner such that God may excuse you on the day you meet Him, for they are more in need of justice from you than any others among your subjects. In regard to each of them, offer your excuse to God¹² in respect of fulfilling his right. Assume responsibility for the orphans and the elderly, those who have no resources yet cannot being themselves to beg. This is onerous for the governors, and [the fulfilment of] all rights is onerous, but God makes it light for those who aspire to the Hereafter, who restrain their souls in patience, and trust in the truth of that which is promised them by God.

Apportion a part of your time to those who have special needs, making yourself free to attend to them personally, sitting with them in a public assembly with all due humility before God, your Creator. Keep your soldiers, guards and officers away from them, so that they can speak to you in an uninhibited manner¹³ for I heard the Messenger of God say—God bless him and his family—on more than one occasion: 'A nation in which the rights of the weak are not wrested in an uninhibited manner from the strong will never be blessed.'

Bear patiently any coarseness or inarticulate expression that they might manifest; do not show any irritation or disdain towards them—God will thereby extend the most extensive dimensions of His compassion to you and make incumbent the reward for your obedience to Him. Give whatever you give with beneficence, and withhold [if this be unavoidable] with grace and apology.

There are certain affairs which you must take care of personally—among which are replying to your officers if your scribes are