

# The Invaluable Book, A Brief Commentary on the Nahju 'I-Balaghah

## Author(s):

Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari [3]

In this text the author speaks about the Nahju 'I-Balaghah which is a precious collection of the sermons, letters, invocations, advices and the sayings of Amiru 'I-Mu'minin, Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib (upon whom be peace), about the author that compiled the book and about Imam Ali's Hadiths, how many were recorded, how they were transmitted and how they are perceived today.

## Translator(s):

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi [4]

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# 1. A Precious Collection

The Nahju 'l-Balaghah is a precious collection of the sermons, letters, invocations, advices and the sayings of Amiru 'l-Mu'minin, Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib (upon whom be peace). It was compiled by a great Shi'ite scholar 'Allamah Sayyid Sharif Radhi about a thousand years ago. The passage of time has not been able to antique it, rather the appearance of new ideas and wise thoughts has increased its value.

As 'Ali was a man of speech, he delivered many lectures, and on different occasions many wise-sayings were heard from him; also many letters were written by him, especially during the period of his caliphate. The Muslims were very keen to preserve his sayings as can be seen from what al-Mas'udi, who lived a century before Sayyid Radhi, wrote in his famous history book *Muruju 'dh-dhahab*:

Alone the sermons of 'Ali (peace be upon him), which have been preserved by various people, number more than four hundred and eighty. 'Ali delivered these sermons extemporaneously without any notes or written outlines. People memorized the words and benefitted from these words in their practical lives.<sup>1</sup>

In the Nahju 'l-Balaghah only two hundred and thirty-nine sermons of 'Ali have been recorded, but the testimony of a great historian like al-Mas'udi shows that the lectures delivered by the Imam were more than four hundred and eighty. From al-Mas'udi's quotation we can also understand that many people were eager to memorize the sermons of the Imam.

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1. al-Mas'udi, Abu 'l-Hasan 'Ali, *Muruju 'dh-Dhahab*, vol. IV, Paris (with French translation) n.d., p. 441. It is not clear for me whether al-Mas'udi means only the sermons- which were recorded in writing, or only the ones which were memorized by the people, or both.

## 2. Sayyid Radhi and the Nahju 'I-Balaghah

To get to know the Nahju 'I-Balaghah without being acquainted with the personality of its compiler would be an incomplete introduction to this marvellous book.

Sayyid Radhi<sup>1</sup> was a literary figure, a poet, and a man of letters; he was very much enamoured of the sayings of Imam 'Ali. Ath-Tha'alabi, a contemporary of Sayyid Radhi, speaks about him as follows: "He was the most charming men of his age and the most noble sadat of Iraq. Alongwith his noble birth and his personal merit, he is also blessed with politeness and the best virtues ... He is the greatest of all the poets of the family of Abu Talib, even though Abu Talib's family had many distinguished poets. It would not be far from the truth if I were to say that none of the poets from the whole tribe of the Quraysh can be put in the same rank as his."<sup>2</sup>

Sayyid Radhi observed the sayings of Imam 'Ali from the point of view of eloquence and clarity, this observation steamed from the attraction which he had towards literature in general and the sayings of 'Ali in particular. Even in his collection of the sayings of the Imam, Sayyid Radhi's selection was made by keeping in mind the perspective of literature, and the parts which were marked by eloquence and clarity attracted his attention most.

Because of the same reason he named the book as *Nahju 'I-Balaghah* – the Path towards Eloquence. And for the same reason he did not give importance to the providing of sources for the Imam's sayings except in a few places where, because of particular reasons, he gives the source of the relevant part.

In writing history or collecting the ahadith the most important thing is, first of all, the specification of the documents and sources, otherwise it cannot be reliable and authentic. On the other hand, the value of a literary work lies in its subtlety, beauty, melliflence and charm. At the same time it cannot be said that Sayyid Radhi was unmindful of the historical and other values of this noble work, and was only interested in its literary aspect. Fortunately, in recent times, others have attempted to collect the sources of the Nahju 'I-Balaghah.

Probably, the most comprehensive book, in this field, is *Nahju 's-Sa'adah fi Mustadrak Nahji 'I-Balaghah*, which is being prepared by Muhammad Baqir Mahmudi, a Shi'ah scholar of Iraq. In this general collection of the sayings of Imam 'Ali, his sermons, commandments, letters, advices, prayers and aphorisms have been collected.

This book contains, together with the Nahju 'I-Balaghah, other sayings of the Imam which were not incorporated by Sayyid Radhi or were not at his disposal. Apparently the sources of all the contents of the Nahju 'I-Balaghah, with the exception of some of the aphorisms, have been quoted therein. Until now only four volumes of this book have been printed.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the work of collecting the sayings of Imam ‘Ali was not only done by Sayyid Radhi, others have also worked along the same lines. The most famous of these other collections is *al-Ghurur wa ‘d-Durar* of Amudi which was condensed into Persian by Jalalu ‘d-Din Khunsari and was recently published by the University of Tehran through the efforts of Mir Jalalu ‘d-Din Muhaddith Arami. ‘Ali al-Jundi, dean of the Science faculty of al-Azhar University, in the preface of *‘Ali bin Abi Talib – shi’ruhu wa hikamuhu* mentioned some of the books and manuscripts containing the sayings of Imam ‘Ali; some of these are still available in manuscript only:

1. *Dastur Ma‘alimi ‘l-Hikam* by al-Qudha‘i, the writer of al-Khutat.
2. *Nathru al-Li‘ali*; this book has been translated and printed by a Russian orientalist in one bulky volume.
3. *Hikam Sayyidina ‘Ali*; a manuscript copy of this book exists in Daru ‘1-Kutub al-Misriyyah.

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1. (translator’s note) Abu ‘1-Hasan Muhammad known as ash-Sharif ar-Radhi (359/969–406/1015), his genealogy stretches back, after seven generations, to Imam Musa al-Kazim the seventh Shi‘ite Imam. He is from a well-known family which was respected by the ‘Abbassides and the Buyaids rulers; his father was the naqib (head of the descendents of the Prophet) of his time. His famous works, besides the compilation of the *Nahju ‘l-Balaghah*, are *al-Majazatu ‘n-Nabawiyyah*, *Haqi‘iqu ‘t-Ta‘wil*, and *Talkhi‘u al-Bayan fi Majazi al-Qur’an*. There exist also a collection of his poems known as *Diwan Sharif ar-Radhi* in two volumes. For his biography see *A‘yanu ‘sh-Shi‘ah of al-‘Amili*, ash-Sharif ar-Radhi of M. R. Kashifu al-Ghita.

2. Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Nahju ‘l-Balaghah* (with commentary in foot-notes), Beirut 1973, p. 13.

3. (translator’s note) At the time of translating this book, eight volumes of the *Nahju ‘s-Sa‘adah fi Mustadrak Nahji al-Balaghah* have been published in Beirut. In volume I to III, the compiler has recorded 509 sermons and lectures, of which the time of 388 lectures has also been specified; in volume IV and V, 186 letters of the Imam have been collected; in volume VI and VII, 65 advises and in the last volume 105 invocations have been gathered. Besides this work, there is a book known as *Masadir Nahji al-Balaghah wa Asaniduhu*, in four volumes, by Sayyid ‘Abdu ‘z-Zahra’. After a lengthy introduction on the authenticity of the *Nahju ‘l-Balaghah* and on its commentaries, the writer, in the first three volumes has recorded the sources of 239 sermons and lectures of the *Nahju ‘l-Balaghah*; and in the last volume the sources of 480 short sayings have been mentioned.

## 3. Two Distinctive Characteristics of Imam ‘Ali’s Sayings

The sayings of Imam ‘Ali (upon whom be peace) possess two distinctive characteristics for which they are famous from the very beginning:

1. Eloquence (fa‘ahat) and clarity (balaghat).

2. They each contain many meanings, they are multi-dimensional. Any of these two characteristics would have been enough to raise the value of the Imam's sayings, but the combination of these two (that is, the ability to combine in a saying two different matters, sometimes antithetical, while at the same time preserving eloquence and clarity) has placed the sayings of 'Ali on the level of a miracle. For the same reason, his sayings have achieved the distinction of being half-way between the sayings of human beings and the sayings of God. A famous and well-known sentence describes them as the saying which is "superior to the sayings of the created, but inferior to the sayings of the Creator."

Elegance and Eloquence in the Sayings of 'Ali: There is no need to explain the elegance of the Nahju 'l-Balaghah to a person who besides knowing the Arabic language is careful in his speech and understands the elegance of a literary work. The essence of elegance cannot be described.

Even after fourteen centuries the Nahju 'l-Balaghah has not lost any of its subtlety, attraction and melliflence which it had for the people of 'Ali's time. We do not intend to present proofs of this fact here. But because of its relevance to the subject, here we shall discuss the effects of the sayings of 'Ali on his audience, starting from the Imam's own time upto now, even though a great difference and change has taken place in the ways of thinking and literary tastes. I shall start with the period of the Imam.

The friends of Imam 'Ali, particularly those who enjoyed eloquence, were enamoured of his sayings. Ibn 'Abbas was one of them; according to al-Jahiz, in *al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin*, he was one of the distinguished orators of his time.<sup>1</sup> He did not hide his eagerness to hear, and pleasure at hearing, the elegant sayings of the Imam.

Once when the Imam was delivering a sermon (which later became famous as *ash-Shaqshaqiyyah*) Ibn 'Abbas was present in the audience. In the course of this sermon, a man from Kufa handed a letter containing some questions to 'Ali and thus the sermon was interrupted. After reading the letter, 'Ali did not continue with his lecture, even though Ibn 'Abbas insisted. Ibn 'Abbas there-upon said, "Never have I been so sorry in my life for interruption of a speech as I was for the interruption of this sermon."

Praising a letter of Imam 'Ali addressed to him, Ibn 'Abbas says, "Sparing the Prophet's sayings, I never gained from any saying except from this one."<sup>2</sup>

Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan, a bitter enemy of 'Ali (upon whom be peace), confesses to the supernatural beauty and eloquence of the sayings of Imam 'Ali. Muhqin bin Muhqin was a person who deserted Imam 'Ali and joined Mu'awiyah. In order to please Mu'awiyah, he said, "I have come to you from the most dumb person." This flattery was so repulsive that Mu'awiyah himself corrected Muhqin by saying, "Woe on you, 'Ali is the most dumb man?! The Quraysh did not know eloquence before him; he is the one who showed the path of eloquence to the Quraysh."<sup>3</sup>

The people attending the lectures of 'Ali were very much affected by them. As a result of his admonitions hearts were moved, spirits soared, bodies shuddered and tears flowed down the cheeks. Even now, whose heart is not moved by reading his admonitions or hearing them recited?

After recording the famous sermon known as al-Gharra', Sayyid Radhi writes, "When 'Ali was delivering this sermon bodies shuddered, tears flowed and heart-beats quickened." Overflowing with love of Allah and with a soul shinning from the torch of sincerity, Hammam bin Sharih, a companion of 'Ali, insisted the Imam to describe the complete qualities of pious and God-fearing men. On the one hand, 'Ali did not want to turn down his request and on the other hand, he was afraid that Hammam would not be able to bear it. So, in a few sentences, the Imam gave a short answer. But Hammam was not satisfied, rather his yearning became greater and he insisted more. Imam 'Ali began the lecture again. He inserted in his description of pious people about hundred and five attributes, and the lecture had still not come to its end. But as the speech of 'Ali proceeded, the heart-beats of Hammam became faster and faster; his agitated spirit was becoming even more agitated and trying to break out of the prison of his body. Suddenly a frightful cry was heard. The cry had come from none other than Hammam. When the people reached him, he was already dead, he had left this mortal world which is but a cage for the mu'min. 'Ali said: "This is the outcome of which I was afraid. It is amazing to see how eloquent preachings affect the perfect souls." These were the reactions of 'Ali's contemporaries to his sayings.

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1. al-Jahiz, Abu 'Uthman, al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin, vol. I, p. 230.

2. Nahju 'l-Balaghah, letter No. 22.

3. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahji 'l-Balaghah, vol. I, Cairo 1959, p. 24.

## 4. The Opinions of the Ancient Scholars on the Sayings of Imam 'Ali

Efforts to memorize and preserve people's sayings, after those of the Holy Prophet of Islam, centered on the sayings of Imam 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid<sup>1</sup> relates from 'Abdu al-Hamid al-Katib,<sup>2</sup> (of the early second century of the hijrah, whose writings are a yardstick in this art) that, "I have memorized seventy sermons of 'Ali, after which my mind began to soar." 'Ali al-Jundi also relates that 'Abdu al-Hamid was asked, "What is the secret of your high standard of eloquence?" He answered, "Memorizing the sayings of 'Ali."

'Abdu 'r-Rahman bin Nubatah, a renowned Arabian orator of the Islamic period, confessed that his intellectual and stylistic source was 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes him in the preface of *Sharh Nahji 'l-Balaghah* as saying, "I memorized hundred sections of the sayings of 'Ali, which proved to be an everlasting treasure for me."<sup>3</sup>

Al-Jahiz was a famous literary figure, a man of letters and one of the geniuses of literature during the third century of the hijrah; his book *al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin* is one of the four classical books of Arabic

literature.<sup>4</sup> In many places therein, he has highly praised the sayings of ‘Ali.

In the first volume of the book, after recording the opinions of the masters of literature who praise the way of speaking which is brief and to the point, and condemn lengthy manners of expression, he writes that, “The long sayings which have been condemned are the sayings that have no sense, not the beneficial ones; indeed ‘Ali bin Abi Talib and ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbas had many long sayings.”

In the same book, on page 83, al-Jahiz quotes the famous saying of Imam ‘Ali: “The worth of every person is according to his knowledge.” Then he praises this small sentence for more than half a page and says, “In the whole of my book if there were no sentence except this one, it would have been sufficient. The best saying is the one which, despite its being short, dispenses one from the more of it; and in which the meaning of the word should be very clear, not hidden in it.”

He adds, “It is as if Allah has showered glories upon this short sentence and as if a curtain of the light of wisdom has covered it, consistent with the sincerity, pure intention and piety of its speaker.” When al-Jahiz wanted to give his opinion concerning the eloquence of ‘Abdullah bin Sawhan, he says: “The best evidence for his eloquence is that ‘Ali sometimes used to ask him to lecture.”<sup>5</sup>

Sayyid Radhi, in the preface of the *Nahju ‘l-Balaghah*, gives a beautiful description praising the saying of Imam ‘Ali. He says:

‘Ali was the life-source of clarity of the language; the birth-place of eloquence; from him were acquired its rules. Every orator follows his example, every preacher benefits from his sayings. Despite this he progressed and went forward while others draw up short and were left behind, because his sayings had a touch of Allah’s knowledge and perfume of the Prophet’s sayings.”

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, a Mu‘tazili scholar of the seventh century of the hijrah, was an expert literary and a distinguished poet. As we know he was very much enamoured of the sayings of ‘Ali, for he expressed this in his book, *Sharh Nahji ‘l-Balaghah*, at various places.

In the preface of the book, he writes, “It is said in regard to his (‘Ali’s) sayings that it is ‘superior to the sayings of the created, but inferior to the sayings of the Creator.’ From him, people have learnt the art of speech and writing... It is enough to say that the recorded sayings of none of the eloquent companions of the Prophet can amount upto one tenth or even one twentieth of the compiled sayings of ‘Ali. And again it is enough for proving ‘Ali’s superiority in this field that a person like Abu ‘Uthman al-Jahiz should praise him in his *al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin* and other books.”<sup>6</sup>

In the commentary on a letter of the Imam addressed to ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abbas, at Basra, informing the latter about the tragedy of the capture of Egypt by Mu‘awiyah’s army, and the murder of Muhammad bin Abi Bakr, Ibn Abi al-Hadid writes:

Look how eloquence has entrusted its guidance to this man’s hands and has given him the reins; look at the astonishing combinations of words, one after another they come and are at his disposal, like a

stream which flows by itself without any external force... May all praise be to Allah, Who granted to this man these great virtues and noble merits. A young man from the Arabs, who was brought up in Mecca, did not study with any wise-man – but he appeared more knowledgeable in wisdom and profound divine matters than Plato and Aristotle. He did not live with any wise-sage of practical wisdom (i.e., ethics and morals) because none of the Qurayshites were famous in this respect – but even then he became greater than Socrates. He was not brought up in a courageous tribe as the Meccans were mostly merchants, not warriors – but he became famous as the bravest man on the earth... Khalid bin Ahmad was asked, “Who is the most courageous, Ambash, Bastam or ‘Ali bin Abi Talib?” He said, “Ambash and Bastam should be compared with other men not with the one who is superior to human beings...” He was more eloquent than Subhan bin Wa’il and Qays bin Sa’idah, although the Quraysh were not the most eloquent of the Arabian tribes; the Jurhum were the most eloquent among the Arabs, but they were not intelligent...7

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1. (translator’s note) ‘Izzu ‘d-Din Abu Hamid ibn Abi al-Hadid (586–656 A.H.) was born in Mada’in and completed his elementary studies there; then he proceeded to Baghdad which was one of the centres of learning. In Baghdad, he studied about the different schools of theology (kalam) and at last famed as a great Mu‘tazili scholar and an expert literary. His *Sharh Nahji al-Balaghah* (in twenty volumes) is one of the most famous, comprehensive and widely referred commentaries of the *Nahju‘l-Balaghah*. It has been published several times in Cairo, Beirut, Najaf and Qum.

2. ‘Abdu al-Hamid al-Katib, an Iranian originally, was teacher of Ibn Muqaffah the well-known scholar and writer of Arabic literature. He was the scribe (katib) of Marwan bin Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph. It is said in regard to him that, “writing started from ‘Abdu al-Hamid and ended with Ibnu al-‘Amid, a minister of the Buyaids.”

3. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *ibid*.

4. The other three books are *Adabu ‘l-katib* of Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Kamil* of Mubarrad and *an-Nawadir* of Abi ‘Ali Qali.

5. He was one of the most respected companions of Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) and a famous orator. When the Imam formally became a caliph after ‘Uthman, ‘Ala‘a‘ah addressed ‘Ali and said, “You have graced the caliphate by accepting it, but it did not grace you; and you have elevated it but it did not elevate you, and verily the caliphate is in greater need of you than you of it.” ‘Ala‘a‘ah was one of the few who attended ‘Ali’s funeral in the darkness of night. At the end of burial of the Imam’s body, he stood at the grave with a hand on his chest and by the other hand, he gathered handful of earth and scattered it on his head and delivered a moving lecture for the family and friends of ‘Ali (a.s.) ‘Allamah al-Majlisi has recorded his lecture in vol. 9 of *Bihar al-Anwar* under the chapter of “Martyrdom of Amiru ‘l-Mu‘minin (a.s.)”.

6. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *ibid*.

7. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *op. cit.*, vol. 16, p. 145.

## 5. The Nahju ‘l-Balaghah in the Present Age

There is a great difference between the world fourteen centuries ago and our age; it has changed many cultures, tastes, likes and dislikes. Somebody may think that the culture and taste of ancient times enjoyed and appreciated the sayings of Imam ‘Ali, and that new thoughts and tastes would form different



opinions about them.

But the fact is that the sayings of ‘Ali (both in respect of their style and meaning) are not confined to a particular time or place. His sayings are universal. Along with the opinions of the past scholars, quoted above, we intend to write here what the famous scholars of our age have to say about the Imam’s sayings.

Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, the famous Mufti of Egypt, is a person whom coincidence and distance from home-land introduced to the Nahju ‘I-Balaghah. This new chapter of knowledge gave rise to a great love in him, which made him write a commentary on the book and publicise it in the Arab Sunni world.

In the preface to his commentary, he declares that, “No one among the Arabs can be found to deny that the sayings of Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Talib are, next to the Qur’an and the ahadith of the Messenger of Allah, the most noble, the most eloquent, the most abundant in knowledge, the most high in style, and the most comprehensive in profound thoughts.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Ali al-Jundi, writes in the preface to *‘Ali bin Abi Talib – shi’ruhu wa hikamuhu* concerning the prose writing of ‘Ali as follows: “In these sayings there is a special musical rhythm which affects the profound feelings. It is so excellently composed with regards to metre and harmony that it can be called the ‘poetical prose’.”

He then quotes from Qudamah bin Ja’far that, “Some are master in short sayings and others in long speeches. But ‘Ali, apart from his other virtues, excels both in the short sayings and the long speeches.”

Tahah Husayn, a literary celebrity and a famous writer of Egypt, in his book *‘Ali wa Banuhu* relates the story of a man who, while fighting on the side of ‘Ali in the battle of Jamal, hesitated and wondered to himself that how could it be possible for persons like Talhah and Zubayr to be on the wrong side.

He approached ‘Ali and expressed his concern over the probability of such persons being on the wrong side. ‘Ali (upon whom be peace) answered, “You made a great mistake. Verily the truth and falsehood cannot be known by a person’s rank and status. Recognise the truth, you will be able to know its followers; and recognise the falsehood and you will be able to know its followers.”

The poor fellow, instead of regarding the truth and the falsehood as the standard for evaluating people’s rightfulness or otherwise, had assumed that the truth and the falsehood should be evaluated by the rank and status of the people. After writing this answer, Tahah Husayn says, “I have never seen or recognised such a glorious and eloquent answer apart from the revelation and sayings of Allah.”

Shakid Arsalan, known as Amiru ‘I-bayan (the master of speech), is one of the great Arab writers. At a reception held in Cairo in his honour, a man from the gathering went onto the podium and praised the chief guest in the following words: “Only two persons have emerged in the Islamic history who can rightly be called as Amiru ‘I-bayan. One of them is ‘Ali and the other is Shakid Arsalan.” On hearing this

remark, Arsalan immediately went onto the podium and said, “How can you compare me with ‘Ali? I do not deserve to be even his shoe-lace.”<sup>2</sup>

Michael Na‘imah, a Lebanese Christian writer, writes in his preface to *al-Imam ‘Ali* (by George Jurdaq), “‘Ali was not only the pride of the battle-field, he was superior in every aspect – in sincerity of heart, purity of conscience, attractive speech, perfect humanity, spirit of belief, he was a great calm helper of the oppressed, always submitting to the reality in every place and moment; wherever you look, he is superior in all fields.”

I should now stop my pen from writing the opinions of others. But I wish to end this chapter by quoting a saying of ‘Ali as his sayings are like a mirror which reflects his personality more clearly.

One day a companion of Imam ‘Ali wanted to lecture but could not, then the Imam said, “*The tongue is a part of man. If man desists from thinking, the speech will not help him; and when he dilates his thoughts, the speech will not give him time. Verily, we are the masters of speech, in us have been planted its roots and over us dangle its branches.*” (Sermon No. 233)

In *al-Bayan wa at-Tabyin*, al-Jahiz narrates from ‘Abdullah bin al-Hasan bin ‘Ali that ‘Ali said, “We are distinguished from others by five virtues: eloquency, having beautiful cheeks, forgiveness and overlooking other’s mistakes, courage and braveness, and being loved by women.”<sup>3</sup> Now I shall write about the second distinctive characteristic of the sayings of Imam ‘Ali, that is, their multi-dimensionality.

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1. Mu‘ammad ‘Abduh, op. cit., p. 12.

2. This event was narrated to me by a contemporary Shi‘ite scholar of the Lebanon, Shaykh Muhammad Jawad Mughniyah in a reception held in his honour at Mashhad a few years before.

3. al-Jahiz, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 99.

## 6. The Master-Piece of the Master-Pieces

In our world almost every nation has some literary works, but among these works just a few are counted as “masterpiece.” To give an opinion about the ancient master-pieces of Greek literature or of the present-day literary works of European languages such as Italian, English or French, is the work of the experts of those languages. I intend to restrict my writing to the master-pieces of Arabic and Persian languages with which I am familiar.

Of course, an accurate opinion about the master-pieces of these two languages also can only be given by the experts; but it is an accepted fact that almost all the literary master-pieces are concerned with

one particular subject or another.

In other words, their excellence and beauty lies in their specific domain, and if the same person, who has produced a master-piece in one particular subject, attempts to work in a different area, his work will not be a master-piece—because he has stepped outside his domain.

To clarify the matter, let us have a look at the masterpieces of Persian literature. To name a few, there are Sufic or gnostic poems (ghazal-e ‘irfani), poems of exhortation and counsel (pand wa andarz), simple poems (ghazal-e ‘adi), spiritual and gnostic allegories (tamthilat-e ruhi wa ‘irfani), epic poems (hamasah), elegiacs (qaṣidah), etc; but none of our Persian poets was able to produce a literary master-piece embracing all these different literary forms.

Hafiz was famous for his Sufic poems. Sa‘di for his exhorting and simple poems, Firdawsi for his epic poems, Mawlavi for his allegories and profound spiritual thoughts, Khayyam was famous for his pessimism towards philosophy and Nizami for some other art.

Because of the difference in thoughts and in choice of subjects in their verses, these poets cannot be compared to each other. The only tribute we can pay to them is to remark that each of them was a master in his own particular poetic form. And occasionally if they attempted to step out of their domain, great difference appeared in their writings. The same thing can be observed among the Arab poets, both in Islamic and pre-Islamic eras.

It has been mentioned in the Nahju ‘l-Balaghah that once ‘Ali was asked, “Who is the best among the Arab poets?” He answered, “They did not ride in the same domain so that one could know the result at the finishing line. But if I am forced to choose one of them, then Imrau ‘l-Qays is the best.” (Saying No. 461)

In his *Sharh* on the Nahju ‘l-Balaghah, under the above mentioned sentence, Ibn Abi al-Hadid writes the following story with reference: ‘Ali used to invite people in the holy month of Ramadan and offer meal to them, but he himself never ate from it. After dinner he used to deliver a lecture and preach them. In one of the nights, over dinner, the guests were talking about poets. After eating, ‘Ali said in his lecture that, “The standard of your deed is your religion; the source of your protection is your piety; good behaviour is your jewel; patience is the protecting limit of your prestige.” Then he faced Abu al-Aswad<sup>1</sup> – who was among those who were talking about the poets – and asked, “What is your opinion about the best poet?” Abu al-Aswad recited a poem of Abu Dawud Ayadi and said, “This man is the best poet.” ‘Ali said, “You are mistaken, it is not so.”

As the audience saw that ‘Ali was interested in the subject of their discussion, all requested him to give his opinion. He said, “Judging in this matter is wrong. If they had been working in the same field, it would have been possible to prefer one of them and name him the best. But if it is necessary for me to express my opinion, then I say that the one who composes a poem without considering any personal desire, and without being overcome by fear of anyone is to be preferred to the others.” When the people inquired

about such a person, he replied, “Imrau ‘l-Qays.”<sup>2</sup>

It is quoted that Yunus, the famous grammarian (of Arabic language), was asked about the best poet of the jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic) period. He answered, “Imrau al-Qays when he is astride a horse i.e., when his courageous feelings are aroused in battle-field and he is inspired to recite epic poems; an-Nabighah when fleeing i.e., when he is afraid and wants to flee in order to save his life; and Zubayr bin Salmah when he is delighted.” Yunus wanted to say that these poets had ability in specific areas and had produced master-pieces in the related subjects; he wanted to indicate that each one of them was the master of his own domain, but not a genius in other areas.

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1. (translator’s note) Abu al-Aswad ad-Dawa’ili (d. 69 A.H.) is one of the tabi’in (the disciples of the Prophet’s companions) and a follower of Imam ‘Ali. He is known as the first person to have written a risalah (treatise) on rules of Arabic grammar (an-nahw) which he had been taught by Imam ‘Ali (a.s.). See Ta’ssu ‘sh-Shi’ah li ‘ulum al-Islam of Sayyid Hasan a-‘adri, pp. 40-60; Muallifu ‘sh-Shi’ah fi ‘adri ‘l-Islam of Sharafu ‘d-Din al-Musawi, pp. 20-29; al-Fihrist of Ibn Nadim, Beirut n.d., pp. 59-62.

2. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, op. cit., vol. 20, p. 153

## 7. The Universality of Imam ‘Ali’s Personality

One of the distinguished qualities of the sayings of Imam ‘Ali, in the Nahju ‘l-Balaghah, is their comprehensiveness and universality, they are not limited to a particular subject, or a specific time or place. ‘Ali, using his own expression, had not ridden in one arena; he had raced his horse in various fields, occasionally some subjects were antithetical.

Indeed Nahju ‘l-Balaghah is a master-piece not limited to a particular form or topic like exhortation and epic poems, or lyric and love poems. It is an all-embracing master-piece or in other words, it is the master-piece of the master-pieces.

The writings which are master-piece in a particular subject – although few in number – can be found in the literary world; and likewise, many writings covering various subjects, but in a simple style can also be found. But the writings and sayings which can be regarded as a literary master-piece and at the same time cover various subjects is the unique quality of the Nahju ‘l-Balaghah.

Apart from the Qur’an, is there any multi-dimensional master-piece like the Nahju ‘l-Balaghah? Speech is a mirror which reflects the horizons of the speaker’s perception, it is the representative of the soul. The speech which is not limited to a particular world, shows that the soul of speaker is also not limited to one world; and ‘Ali’s soul, indeed, was not limited to a particular world, it was everywhere free from the

context of time and age; or as the Gnostics say – ‘Ali was a Perfect Man, a Complete Existence, comprehending the whole existence and the possessor of all perfect virtues; and so the sayings of ‘Ali are also multidimensional.

The universality of the sayings and the soul of ‘Ali is not a newly discovered fact. It is a matter which aroused surprise even centuries before. Sayyid Radhi, who was aware of this fact, says: One of the distinctions of ‘Ali (peace be upon him) – in which he was unique and no one was his equal – is that if a person, without thinking about ‘Ali’s personality and prestige in society, considers his sayings concerning piety, exhortation and advices, he will surely have no doubt that these sayings come from a person who has no share except in piety and has no work except meditation and prayers, as if he had secluded himself in a lonely place in a foot of a mountain, neither hearing any sound except his own breathing nor seeing anything save himself. He will not believe that such divinely exalted sayings are from a person who penetrates the enemies’ army in battle with a heavenly sword, chops the necks, defeats the braves and returns from the battle–field while blood is running from his sword, and that at the same time he was the most pious and the most humble worshipper.” Then the Sayyid adds, “I have talked over this matter with my friends, whose surprise knew no limits when faced with this fact.”

Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh was also attracted, and deeply affected, by this aspect of the Nahju ‘I–Balaghah, and he says in the preface of his commentary that the changing screens of the Nahju ‘I–Balaghah and its power to keep the reader informed of various subjects, interested him most.

Imam ‘Ali’s soul was indeed a very comprehensive and multi–dimensional soul, a distinguishing quality for which he has always been praised. He was a just ruler, a worshipper who stayed up all night; in mihrab he wept, in the battle–field he smiled; he was a disciplined soldier, an able commander, a teacher and an orator, a judge and a jurist, a farmer and a writer – all at one and the same time. He was a perfect human being, familiar with the whole spiritual world. Safiu ’d–Din al–Hilli (fl, ca., 8th c. A.H.) says about Imam ‘Ali (peace be upon him):

In your virtues contraries have come together,  
And for this antagonists have paid respect to you;  
The ascetic, the patient, the brave, the ruler,  
The warrior, the saint, the kind, the pauper,  
Those traits which never met in one man together,  
And the like of them no ‘abd of God has attained ever;  
A refined morality faced with which the gentle breeze felt ashamed,  
And a strength which makes the solid melt;  
Your qualities are greater than can be encompassed,  
In verses of a poem or counted by any critic.

Besides all this, an interesting point is that when ‘Ali attempted to deal with the spiritual subject which are difficult to express in an eloquent style, his sayings reached perfect eloquence. ‘Ali did not engage in

open and wide topics like wine, the beloved, or in self-glorification. He never uttered these sayings to demonstrate his eloquency or his skill with words.

Actually, speech was, for him, a means of imparting his thoughts; not a target or an aim per se. He never intended to produce art or a literary master-piece. The most important thing is that his sayings are universal, free from the context of time or place. His audience is humanity of all ages and times; his sayings does not recognise any border, limit or period, rather all fields are limitations imposed on them.

The greatest aspect of the Qur'anic miracle from the point of view of its style is that although its wordings were related to the matters which were completely unknown and new to intellectuals of the early Islamic era, still it preserved its fluency and eloquence, and reached the degree of miracle. The Nahju 'I-Balaghah was influenced in this respect by the Qur'an as in all of its other aspects. And, in reality, the Nahju 'I-Balaghah is an off-spring of the Qur'an.

## **8. The Contents of Nahju 'I-Balaghah**

There are many subjects and topics in the Nahju 'I-Balaghah, approached in various ways. I do not claim to have analysed the Nahju 'I-Balaghah as it deserves, and I hope to see someone who will attempt to research into this area more deeply.

A glance at the various subject-matters of the Nahju 'I-Balaghah will not be out of place:

1. Theology and metaphysics.
2. Spiritual way-faring and worship.
3. Governance and justice.
4. Ahlu al-Bayt and khilafat.
5. Exhortation and wisdom.
6. The world and worldliness.
7. Heroism and Courage.
8. Vicissitudes and the divine secrets.
9. Invocations.
10. Complaints against, and criticisms of, contemporary people.
11. Social principles.
12. Islam and the Qur'an.
13. Morals and refining of the self.
14. Personalities, etc.

As it is clear from the list, my book does not claim that these subjects cover all the topics discussed in

the Nahju 'l-Balaghah. Nor do I claim that my writing is the final word on the subjects discussed therein. Whatever is expressed in this book is nothing more than a mere glance. May Allah grant me an opportunity in the future for further study, or bless others for this noble work.

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