Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

Nahj al- balāgha

(4,347 words)

Nahj al-balāgha ("The measure of eloquence") is an anthology of orations, epistles, and sayings attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), who was the first Shīʿī Imām and the fourth Sunnī caliph (r. 35–40/656–61). The work was compiled in 400/1010 by the Twelver-Shīʿī Baghdadi scholar and poet ***al***-Sharīf ***al***-Raḍī (d. 406/1015). Acclaimed as a masterpiece of Arabic literature and a font of Islamic wisdom literature, it contains material on a range of topics, including history, theology, ethics, just governance, pragmatic instruction, and praise for the prophet Muḥammad. It displays an orality-based rhythmic style grounded in intense parallelism and vivid desert and camel imagery. Its teachings focus on leading a pious life and preparing for the imminent Hereafter.

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1. Format, content, and style

Nahj al-balāgha is formatted as a collection of texts divided into three genre-based sections: 232 orations (*khuṭab*, sing. *khuṭba*), 79 letters (*rasāʾil*, sing. *risāla*), and 429 aphorisms (*ḥikam*, sing. *ḥikma*), organised without regard to chronology or theme. Material belonging to supplementary genres such as testaments, question-and-answer dialogues, and counsel to individuals is integrated into these three sections. Most orations and epistles are excerpts ranging from a few lines to about a page in most standard editions; a handful are two to five pages long. Aphorisms are pithy one-liners or a few parallel lines, with some longer pieces; a subsection lists nine sayings containing rare words (*gharīb*), with a brief lexical commentary and, in some cases, a testamentary poetry citation. In conformity with most literary anthologies, chains of transmission are not systematically noted in the volume. Rather, each text is prefaced with words such as "from an oration by him [that is, ʿAlī]," and, in a few pieces, a brief context is

provided. Some texts are followed by ***al***-Raḍī's comments on their brilliance. A handful are flagged as different versions of the same passage. The compilation is prefaced by ***al***-Raḍī's introduction explaining his reason for the undertaking, his method of compiling, and the compass and value of the contents. The compilation is an expansion of the section on ʿAlī's aphorisms in ***al***-Raḍī's partially completed book of 383/994, *Khaṣāʾiṣ* ***al****-aʾimma* ("Merits of the Imāms").

The contents of ***Nahj al-balāgha*** fall into two broad, intertwining areas: contemporary history, including politics and governance, and Islamic teachings, comprising doctrine, philosophy, ethics, and pragmatic wisdom.

The historical material is grounded in the final period of ʿAlī's life, when he ruled as caliph of the Muslim empire, 36–40/656–61, with a few pieces from earlier years. It offers nuanced presentations of historical personalities, above all, ʿAlī himself, but also influential individuals from his time: the prophet Muḥammad and other members of ʿAlī's family; supporters of ʿAlī, such as Abū Dharr ***al***-Ghifārī (d. 32/652), ʿAmmār b. Yāsir (d. 37/657), Mālik ***al***-Ashtar (d. 37/657), and Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr (d. c.38/658); opponents, chiefly Muʿāwiya (d. 60/680) and ʿAmr b. ***al***-ʿĀṣ (d. c.42/662), but also Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbaydallāh (d. 36/656), ***al***-Zubayr b. ***al***-ʿAwwām (d. 36/656), and the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾisha bt. Abī Bakr (d. 58/678). It traces with subtlety the trajectories of major events, particularly ʿAlī's accession to the caliphate, and the Battles of the Camel (36/656), Ṣiffīn (37/657), and ***al***-Nahrawān (38/658), contextualising the political and doctrinal positions taken by the various actors, including proto-Shīʿī and proto-Sunnī stances, as well as the evolution of the Khārijīs, that is, the Muslim dissenters, those who "went out." In conjunction with the narrative record, these texts depict the ethos of the time, while exhibiting the personal struggle and the human aspect.

The compilation's teachings are anchored in the Qurʾān and the sayings of the prophet Muḥammad. They urge worship of the Creator, promote awareness of the transience of human life, and highlight the urgent need to prepare for the imminent Hereafter. Marrying piety with virtue, the texts exhort truthfulness, gratitude, and patience and extol the benefits of living a modest and temperate life. Taking the middle ground between secular humanism and insular faith, they advocate a blending of individual devotion with dynamic social engagement. Consistently they highlight the eminence of reason and learning. Numerous texts speak of the transcendent unity of God and the marvels of His creation. Several contain eulogies to Muḥammad and highlight the lofty stature of the Prophet's family. Many delineate the art of just leadership, seen as integrating compassion, wisdom, integrity, pluralism, and accountability to God. Others discuss faith and its four pillars of patience, conviction, knowledge, and struggle against evil.

The style of the work reflects its oral milieu. Although literate himself, ʿAlī lived in a society

where writing was rare and reserved for official documents. His orations and sayings and even his written epistles display the aesthetic of orality, articulated in mnemonics and metonymy. Mnemonics—memory aid techniques—manifest in intensely rhythmic prose with condensed sentences and parallelisms, and graphic and often startling imagery drawn from everyday life, with extended metaphors and gripping dramatisation. Language is grounded in the concrete features and movements of the camel and other desert animals, commonplace objects and implements, and cosmic phenomena, as the following examples illustrate: “Opportunity passes like clouds—seize every opportunity for good.” “This world is like the snake—its touch is soft, its poison fatal.” “Prayer is the believer’s weapon.” “Believers, wisdom is your own lost camel.” Metonymy—evocation by association—manifests in referencing context, both historical and literary. This, alongside audience-engagement techniques such as grammatically emphatic structures and real and rhetorical questions, invites the audience to participate in the speech act by means of internal response and sometimes overt reply, comment, and action. The texts are further characterised by a fine-grained, condensed vocabulary and a high linguistic register. In addition to the ethical, doctrinal, and historical value of the contents, the compiler’s declared raison d’etre for compiling the ***Nahj al-balāgha*** is to provide an exemplar of eloquence. ***Al***-Raḍī says he chose the most sparkling of ʿAlī’s words for his compilation and named it *The measure of eloquence* because it “opens doors of eloquence and helps the reader acquire its tools” (***Nahj al-balāgha***, 38).

2. Provenance

Provenance, an important question regarding ***Nahj al-balāgha***, could equally be posed to most materials attributed to the early period of Islam, which were for the most part transmitted by word of mouth over two or three generations and transcribed into books after the introduction of paper to the Islamic world in the early third/ninth century. Although vulnerable to error and fabrication, robust oral transmission, supplemented by a small amount of written text, ensured that a quantity of genuine pronouncements from early times was captured (Qutbuddin, *Arabic oration*, 21–63). Built-in mnemonic devices facilitated memorisation, and these materials were passed from person to person in a mix of verbatim and gist transmission until they were systematically collected and written down.

ʿAlī was one of the most revered personages of early Islam and his eloquence was proverbial; during the four years of his caliphate he preached lengthy sermons, frequently to large, public audiences. It is likely that many recorded materials attributed to him are authentic, some in essence, some even verbatim. Moreover, given the consistent attribution of certain Qurʾān-based themes and nature-oriented images and their compatibility with the historical and literary ambiance of the time, it is plausible that they represent a true picture of ʿAlī’s teachings. In ***Nahj al-balāgha***, like other compilations of early Islamic materials, some parts are likely genuine, while others are later additions or modifications. In order to determine probable authenticity,

individual pieces, rather than the compilation as a whole, must be examined. Through the centuries, ʿAlī's words were collected by a large number of individuals (ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ ***al***-Ḥusaynī, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, 1:454–86), and ***al***-Raḍī draws on these written compilations, as well as on historical and literary sources, some now lost, for ***Nahj al-balāgha***. Several scholars have compiled its sources (ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, passim).

Four reservations that have been raised about ***Nahj al-balāgha***'s authenticity apply to a handful of specific texts. Two question the book's inclusion of texts with features from later periods: philosophical terms such as ***al***-*ayn* ("the where") and ***al***-*azaliyya* ("eternal-ness"), and unusual narrative descriptions of animals such as the ant and the peacock. Two more question the book's (cryptic) prophecies of events that did in fact occur centuries later, such as the Zanj rebellion, an uprising of enslaved Blacks in Iraq, which took place from 255/868 to 270/883, and the inclusion of long sermons that would have been difficult for listeners to memorise in the moment. These few texts appear to be outliers within the compilation, in terms of fit with the period's literary and historical ambiance, and thus the possibility remains high of a later provenance for them, or, at least, of later modifications. Nevertheless, the majority of the book conforms in broad strokes to the orality-based norms and the known history of ʿAlī's lifetime.

3. Commentaries

Nahj al-balāgha has generated an extraordinary number of response works from mediaeval to modern times, including commentaries, translations, supplements, abridgments, glosses, concordances, works on sources, and thematic essays. Roughly estimated, the number of serious works, many in multiple volumes, ranges to around five hundred. The number of known Arabic and Persian commentaries varies between 81 and 210, depending on the cataloguer; after the Qurʾān, this is arguably the largest number of commentaries generated by any Arabic work (compared to approximately seventy on ***al***-*Ṣaḥīḥ*, the *ḥadīth* collection by ***al***-Bukhārī, d. 256/870; forty on the *Dīwān*, or collected works, of the poet ***al***-Mutanabbī, d. 354/965; and twenty on the *Maqāmāt* by the belletrist ***al***-Ḥarīrī, d. 516/1122).

Several commentaries, including two of the most famous, are by Sunnī scholars. The best known is the twenty-volume *Sharḥ* ***Nahj al-balāgha*** by the Muʿtazilī author Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd (d. c.656/1258), which itself generated numerous response works. Almost as renowned but much shorter is the introduction and word list by the then Grand Muftī of Egypt Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905). One of the earliest extant commentaries is by Ibn Funduq ***al***-Bayhaqī (d. 565/1170), a Sunnī author from Khurāsān. Prominent Sunnī authors whose commentaries are lost include Fakhr ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Saʿd ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1390). Commentaries by Twelver-Shīʿī scholars abound. Early Twelver commentators include ʿAlī b. Nāṣir ***al***-Sarakhsī (fl. sixth/twelfth century), Quṭb ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Rāwandī (d. 573/1177), Quṭb ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Kaydarī (d. after 576/1180), and Maytham ***al***-Baḥrānī (d. 679/1280). Three Ṣafavī-era Ṣūfī

commentators are Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd ***al***-Ḥaqq Ilāhī Ardabīlī (fl. ninth-tenth/fifteenth-sixteenth century, writing in Persian), ʿAbd ***al***-Bāqī Dānishmand (d. after 1039/1630), and Niẓām ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Jīlānī (d. 1053/1643). The Zaydī-Shīʿī Imām ***al***-Muʾayyad bi-llāh Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza ***al***-Yamānī (d. 749/1348) also wrote a commentary. A number of commentaries, some in verse form, address particular texts, especially ʿAlī's "Shiqshiqiyya" oration, his testament to his son ***al***-Ḥasan, and his testament on sound governance based on humanitarian principles of justice and compassion addressed to his governor Mālik ***al***-Ashtar (ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, 1:202–54, 3:312). The commentaries discuss lexical and rhetorical matters, and sometimes provide historical context and transmission history. The longer ones include extensive historical, doctrinal, and literary annotation, as well as further texts attributed to ʿAlī and other historical figures. As can be expected, each commentary interprets these materials according to the author's sectarian and theological approach.

4. Influence

ʿAlī's words influenced major littérateurs and scholars of Islam across sectarian boundaries. Among early orators, ʿAlī's words were favoured sources that were memorised and whose lines were alluded to or quoted; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd (2:83) compares the influence of the pre-Islamic poet Imruʾ ***al***-Qays (d. c.550 C.E.) on later poets to ʿAlī's influence on later orators. The pro-Umayyad ascetic preacher ***al***-Ḥasan ***al***-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) was guided by ʿAlī's pious themes and language (Mourad, 85), as was the Syrian preacher Ibn Nubāta ***al***-Khaṭīb (d. 374/985), who had memorised a large number of ʿAlī's orations (Ibn Taghrībirdī, 4:150). Among secretaries, ʿAlī's words were equally admired. ʿAbd ***al***-Ḥamīd ***al***-Kātib (d. 132/750), the Umayyad chancery head whose epistles are deemed to be founding texts for written Arabic prose, said he had "learned eloquence by memorising the orations [or words] of ʿAlī" (***al***-Jahshiyārī, 82; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, 1:24). The Egyptian philologist ***al***-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950) allocated four chapters of the "eloquence" section in his chancery manual (219–22, 225–7) to ʿAlī's words. Profuse homage is paid by early prose writers, foremost among them ***al***-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868; 83 and passim), who quotes ʿAlī often as the exemplar par excellence of eloquence. ***Al***-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956; 3:172) noted that people in his time had memorised more than four hundred eighty speeches by ʿAlī, which they frequently quoted. Numerous wisdom-verses by ***al***-Mutanabbī are distilled from ʿAlī's words (ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Miʾat shāhid*, passim).

Among the many compilations of ʿAlī's words, ***Nahj al-balāgha*** has earned the highest acclaim (***al***-Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Fī Riḥāb, part 4; ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, 87–99). The text has been widely studied and even memorised over the centuries. Effusive praise has come from the text's commentators, who chorus that "'Alī's words are below the words of God and His Prophet and above the words of humans" (***al***-Rāwandī, 1:4; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, 1:24; ʿAbduh, 1:6, with slight variations). ʿAbduh (1:4) declares that memorising and studying ***Nahj al-balāgha*** are "essential to those who seek the precious gems of the Arabic language and wish to rise in its ranks." ʿAlī's

orations had special resonance among the Muʿtazila, who acknowledged indebtedness to them on the fundamental subject of God's unity (Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, 1:17).

In addition to the numerous early commentaries, the immediate and wide circulation of ***Nahj al-balāgha*** is evident from the large number of manuscripts produced in different parts of the Muslim world. ***Al***-Ṭabāṭabāʾī lists 172 early manuscripts dating from the fifth/eleventh through the twelfth/eighteenth centuries in worldwide collections. The wide transmission of ***Nahj al-balāgha*** among Sunnīs through the centuries, from Khurāsān to Yemen, is also clear from the manuscript tradition (Anṣārī). Another example comes from ninth-tenth/fifteenth-sixteenth-century Ḥanafī-Sunnī Ottoman Istanbul, where compilations of ʿAlī's words were the centrepiece of the Topkapı Palace Library's oration collection, used, among other things, to teach palace secretaries (Qutbuddin, Books, 607–23).

Twelver Shīʿī reverence for ***Nahj al-balāgha*** is well documented, but admiration for the compilation is pronounced among all branches of the Shīʿa, as well as among Sunnīs and Arab Christians. Among Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī Shīʿīs, ***Nahj al-balāgha*** is an integral part of the religious curriculum; it is quoted in sermons and works of history and doctrine, including the Yemeni *dāʿī* Idrīs ʿImād ***al***-Dīn's (d. 872/1468) *ʿUyūn* ***al****-akhbār* (3:367) and the Indian *dāʿī* Ṭāhir Sayf ***al***-Dīn's (d. 1965) annual treatises *Rasāʾil Ramaḍāniyya* (for example, *Ḍawʾ nūr* ***al****-ḥaqq* 98, *Masarrāt* ***al****-fatḥ* 192). Among the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Shīʿa, quotations are found in early works of Khwāja Qāsim Tushtarī (d. after 533/1139; Ar. 253/trans. 260) and Naṣīr ***al***-Dīn ***al***-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274, *Rawḍah-yi taslīm*, Ar. 41/trans. 44, passim). Among the Zaydī Shīʿa, evidence of the book's currency is found in the six-volume commentary by the *imām* ***al***-Muʾayyad (d. 749/1348); he traces his license to teach the work through a sequence of licenses granted by Zaydī Shīʿī scholars all the way back to ***al***-Raḍī himself (1:104–5). In present-day India, ***Nahj al-balāgha*** forms a regular part of the curriculum in Shīʿī as well as many Sunnī *madrasa*s (Kaur, 387). Over the past two centuries, ***Nahj al-balāgha*** has continued to influence distinguished Arab writers, including the Iraqi Salafī ***al***-Ālūsī (d. 1924) and the Egyptian Sunnīs ʿAbbās Maḥmūd ***al***-ʿAqqād (d. 1964) and Zakī Mubārak (d. 1952; ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, 1:87–99), as well as the Lebanese Christians Nāṣīf ***al***-Yāzijī (d. 1871), Jurj Jurdāq (d. 2014), and Amīn Nakhla (d. 1976; Keizoghani).

Several abridgements comprising selections from ***Nahj al-balāgha*** have been produced, including three dating from mediaeval times. Of these, Abū l-Saʿādāt ***al***-Iṣfahānī's (d. 634/1237) *Maṭlaʿ* ***al****-ṣabāḥatayn* transcribes ***Nahj al-balāgha***'s aphorism section alongside the prophet Muḥammad's ethical *ḥadīth* compiled by ***al***-Qāḍī l-Quḍāʿī (d. 454/1062) in *Kitāb* ***al****-Shihāb*.

5. Controversy

Almost three centuries after the book began circulating, the Damascene historian Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) raised doubts about its attribution, claiming that "the compiler was himself the

author," and that ***al***-Sharīf ***al***-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), ***al***-Raḍī's brother, was the book's compiler (Ibn Khallikān, 3:313). Fifty years later, the Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) declared that most of the ***Nahj al-balāgha*** texts were "not found in any earlier source" (Ibn Taymiyya, 8:55–6). The Ḥanbalī historian ***al***-Dhahabī (d. 748/1347) pronounced the contents counterfeit, because they contained "insults to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar" and "contradictions and lowly things" (***al***-Dhahabī, 3:124). These writers were quoted by Ibn Ḥajar ***al***-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449, 5:529) and other pro-Umayyad scholars from the Mamlūk period, most with affiliations to pro-Umayyad Damascus. In the contemporary world, ***Nahj al-balāgha*** continues to be harshly criticised in certain quarters, citing the above-named scholars; Abū Jabal (7–24), for example, devotes the entire introduction to his 2013 ***Nahj al-balāgha*** edition to discussing its demerits; and the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Religious Affairs has a *fatwā* on its blog Islamweb.net, titled ***Nahj al-balāgha****: Mādhā ṣiḥḥat nisbatihi li-ʿAlī* ("***Nahj al-balāgha***: How correct is its attribution to ʿAlī?").

The detractors' three main critiques follow, with a summary assessment (details in Sultan, passim; Hassan, 25–58; Djebli, passim; ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha***, 1:100–99). The first critique is that ***Nahj al-balāgha*** materials are not found in earlier sources, a claim that is simply incorrect, as is demonstrated, for example, by the list of earlier sources in which ***Nahj al-balāgha*** texts are found, as given in ʿAbd ***al***-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir* ***Nahj al-balāgha*** (passim). The second critique is that it does not cite its sources—this is correct, but ***al***-Raḍī followed the norm for literary compilations, and modern scholars have filled the breach. The third critique is that the book contains insults aimed at the first three Sunnī caliphs—Abū Bakr (r. 11–3/632–4), ʿUmar b. Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–44), and ʿUthmān (23–35/644–56)—which is a more complicated issue, but in essence the charge is false. Only a handful of ***Nahj al-balāgha*** texts refer to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar at all, and they say nothing directly critical. Even regarding ʿUthmān, whose administration many Muslims censured, the book contains no overt reproach. The exception is the "Shiqshiqiyya" oration, which says that the first three caliphs assumed the caliphate while knowing that ʿAlī's position was like "the pivot in the millstone," meaning they all knew that he was Muḥammad's rightful successor; but similar texts are found in numerous Sunnī-authored books (for example, Ibn Hishām, 2:489–90, ***al***-Jāḥiẓ, 2:50–2; ***al***-Ṭabarī, 4:231–3, 5:7–8; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, 4:63, 68; more in Madelung, 28–33, 141, passim). What the book does contain is abundant castigations of Muʿāwiya and ʿAmr b. ***al***-ʿĀṣ, and, to a lesser extent, Ṭalḥa and ***al***-Zubayr, all individuals who brought armies to fight ʿAlī. ʿĀʾīsha, also a lead player in the Battle of the Camel, is not referred to directly for reasons of decorum, but the few texts that criticise women are probably directed at her (according to Inloes, these are later insertions). The main reason why this compilation of ʿAlī's words is singled out for censure, and why it is often referred to in sectarian circles as a "Shīʿī book" (code for unreliable and falsified), is probably because it includes texts with political resonance to early Islamic history.

Tahera Qutbuddin

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