Introduction

دون كلام الخالق وفوق كلام المخلوقين

"Below the words of the creator and above the words of his creatures"

The eminent Sunni commentator Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (d. ca. 656/1258) endorsing a common line of praise for ʿAlī's words.[1]

Over fourteen centuries, across five continents, and among many faith denominations, scholars and laypeople alike have drawn on the deep wisdom stored in the eloquent words of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661).[2] Cousin, son-in-law, and ward of the Prophet Muḥammad, ʿAlī was the first male to accept Islam, the first Shiʿi Imam, and the fourth Sunni Caliph. Revered as a sage and religious authority, he is also lauded as Islam's master orator. ʿAlī's words—including first and foremost his dazzling orations, as well as his pithy sayings and magisterial letters—span a wide spectrum of preaching, philosophy, and government. They offer profound reflections on the majesty of the creator, fervent warnings on the transience of this world, and urgent exhortations to prepare for the imminent hereafter. They encompass pious sermons counseling virtue, earnest directives to cultivate the intellect, and reverent praise for the Prophet Muḥammad. They animate rousing battle and political speeches, passionately maintaining righteousness. They instruct in strict dispatches to tax-collectors, urging compassion. They inscribe erudite letters to governors, demanding justice. And they contain a host of timeless maxims offering religious, pragmatic, and character-building wisdom. All these themes and more are articulated in

1 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:24; the same laudation, with some variation in language, is offered by Rāwandī (d. 573/1177, Shiʿi), *Minhāj al-barāʿah*, 1:4: "below the words of God and his Messenger, and above the words of humans" (دون كلام الله ورسوله وفوق كلام البشر); and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905, Sunni), *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:6: "the most noble and eloquent of words after the words of God and the words of his Prophet" (أشرف الكلام وأبلغه بعد كلام الله تعالى وكلام نبيّه).

2 The attribution to ʿAlī, here and throughout, is to be understood in light of complexities discussed in the next section, "Collection of ʿAlī's Words: Orality, Authenticity, Written Sources, and Influence on Litterateurs": viz., many of the texts attributed to ʿAlī are probably genuine remnants, some with modifications, some even verbatim, but interpolations, modifications, and texts of later provenance are also likely to be in the mix. To determine probable authenticity, we must assess individual texts—rather than the compilation as a whole—based on early and wide provenance and compatibility with the literary and historical milieu of ʿAlī's time.

pulsating oral rhythms and vibrant desert-and-camel images within the pages of the present volume of ʿAlī's words, *Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ʿAlī*, compiled by the eminent Twelver Shiʿi Baghdadi scholar, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015).

Accolades for ʿAlī's words and wisdom would fill volumes,[3] but suffice it to say that friend and foe alike have paid them homage: ʿAlī's follower Ḍirār ibn Ḍamrah (fl. 1st/7th c.), for example, declared that "wisdom spoke upon his tongue."[4] The chancery head of the intensely anti-ʿAlid Umayyads, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750), who is venerated as the father of Arabic prose, credited his training in the art of eloquence to "memorizing the orations of ʿAlī."[5] The ultimate tribute is paid in the lines I have cited in the epigraph above, in which ʿAlī's words are extolled as being "below the words of the creator and above the words of his creatures."

Nahj al-Balāghah is the most celebrated compilation of ʿAlī's words, and one of the most influential texts of the Arabic Islamic literary heritage. Widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of Arabic literature and font of Islamic wisdom, it has been avidly cited, studied, commented on, and memorized across the Islamic world continually for more than a thousand years. In this volume, I present a critical Arabic edition based on the earliest extant manuscripts, dating from the 5th/11th through the 7th/13th centuries, three of which were checked against a manuscript authorized by Raḍī himself, side-by-side with my carefully researched English translation. For the translation, I took a long, deep dive into the text, along with a careful reading of its major commentaries and a collation of the history and literature of the early Islamic period; all the while, I paid close attention to the graphic imagery that underpins the Arabic phrases and the parallelism of their pithy cadences. My hope is to have produced an accurate edition and a lucid translation that captures some of the depth and brilliance of the original.

---

3 See collected accolades by Ṭabāṭabāʾī, "Fī Riḥāb Nahj al-balāgha," part 4, *passim*; ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:87–99; ʿUṭāridī, "Introduction" to his edition of Kaydarī's commentary, 1:5–10, 52–53; Keizoghani and Nafchi, "The Greatness of *Nahj Al-Balagha*." Some laudatory statements are quoted later in the present Introduction.

4 (تنطق الحكمة على لسانه), with some variants: Nuʿmān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 2:391–392; Qālī, *Amālī*, 2:147; Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, 2:415; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh*, 24:402; Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, 1:84–185; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkirah*, 4:28; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 18:225–226.

5 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:24. The same report—with "words" instead of "orations"—is also cited by Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarāʾ*, 82; Thaʿālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 165; Zamakhsharī, *Rabīʿ al-abrār*, 4:50; and Ṣafadī, *Wāfī*, 18:23.

1 ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661)

An appreciation of ʿAlī's renown is essential for understanding the resounding reception of his compiled words, just as his biography is essential to contextualizing their doctrinal and political content.[6] Since ʿAlī's words collected in the present volume directly speak to events in his life, a sketch of the main episodes and actors of his time will help the reader situate their consequence, and a summary of his legacy will help explain their dissemination.

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim was born around 600 AD in Mecca, according to some reports, inside the Holy Kaaba, to the Hāshimite chieftain Abū Ṭālib and the Hāshimite noblewoman Fāṭimah bint Asad. When he was just an infant, his older cousin Muḥammad, an orphan whom ʿAlī's parents had raised, asked for his charge, and ʿAlī grew up in the care of the future Prophet of Islam. ʿAlī was approximately ten years old when Muḥammad began his call to the new religion, and he immediately accepted Islam. He prayed for two years alone with Muḥammad and Muḥammad's wife Khadījah before others joined the fold. Around twenty-three at the time of Muḥammad's migration to Medina, ʿAlī played a vital role in establishing Islam in its nascent stage. His valor in the battles of Badr, Uḥud, Khaybar, and Khandaq against the Meccans and their allies would become legendary, as would his sagacity and erudition. Both Sunni and Shiʿi Muslims recount numerous hadiths from the Prophet praising ʿAlī, among the most famous of which are the following: "I am the city of knowledge and ʿAlī is its gateway"; "ʿAlī is to me as Aaron was to Moses"; and "You, ʿAlī, are my brother in this world and the next."[7] Soon after Muḥammad settled in Medina, ʿAlī married Muḥammad's youngest daughter, Fāṭimah al-Zahrāʾ, and had four children with her: Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Zaynab, and Umm Kulthūm. Muḥammad's line continued solely through them, and the line through Ḥusayn would become an important locus for the Shiʿi doctrine of the imamate. According to the Shiʿa, Muḥammad appointed ʿAlī as his successor on 18th Dhū al-Ḥijjah in the year 10/632, at the caravan stop of Ghadīr Khumm, enroute from Mecca to Medina after his last pilgrimage, uttering the

6 Western studies on ʿAlī's biography include Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, 141–310; Gleave, "ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib," *EI*[3]; Manouchehri et al., "ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib," *Encyclopaedia Islamica*; Abbas, *The Prophet's Heir: The Life of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib*; Qutbuddin, "ʿAli ibn Abi Talib," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

7 (أنت يا عليّ أخي في الدنيا والآخرة), (أنا مدينة العلم وعليّ بابها). Cited widely. Shiʿi sources include: Nuʿmān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 1:89, 97. Sunni sources include: Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, §3720, §3725, §3730, §3731; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:22; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, 145, §121.

famous line, "Whoever takes me as his master, ʿAlī is his master."[8] The Sunnis also narrate this hadith, and they interpret the declaration as praise for ʿAlī's high station, rather than a designation of succession.

Muḥammad died a few months later, in 11/632, and ʿAlī led the burial preparations. Though upholding his right to the succession, he ceded command to the first three Sunni caliphs, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān. For the next twenty-five years, which saw the consolidation of the Muslim polity in the Arabian Peninsula and its expansion into Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran, ʿAlī retreated from direct involvement in governing. The history books recount that he spent those years collecting and collating the texts of the Qurʾan and teaching Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.

In 35/656 in Medina, a group of irate Muslims assassinated ʿUthmān, accusing him of nepotism; in the turbulent aftermath and after repeated solicitations, ʿAlī accepted the caliphal pledge of allegiance from the Muslim community in Medina and across most of the Islamic empire. He ruled until 40/661, when he, too, was assassinated. Most of ʿAlī's recorded sermons, letters, and sayings are woven into the political and military fabric of those four difficult years. They articulate morality and conviction and champion justice and charity.

As caliph, ʿAlī was forced to fight three groups of Muslims who rebelled against his strict ideas of equity and equality: the first two were armies brought against him by prominent individuals, who, in furtherance of their political ambitions, falsely accused him of complicity in ʿUthmān's murder; the third were rebels from his own army.

ʿAlī fought the first pitched battle of his caliphate just outside Basra, in Iraq, in 36/656, four months after he was proclaimed caliph. His challengers were the Prophet's widow ʿĀʾishah and the Quraysh Emigrants Ṭalḥah and Zubayr. Famed as the Battle of the Camel, it was named for the animal ʿĀʾishah rode onto the battlefield, serving as a metaphor for its rider. The so-called "associates

8 (من كنت مولاه فعليّ مولاه). Sunni sources include: Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, s.v. "*Faḍāʾil aṣḥāb Rasūl Allāh*"; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, s.v. "*al-Khulafāʾ al-rāshidūn*"; Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, s.v. "*Manāqib*"; Bayhaqī, *Iʿtiqād*, 354–357; Iskāfī, *Miʿyār*, 210–218; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, 20.2:137; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *ʿIqd*, 4:291; Zamakhsharī, *Rabīʿ al-abrār*, 1:69–70; Sibṭ, *Tadhkirah*, 29–34, 62; Ghazālī, *Sirr al-ʿālamayn* 18, and in several other works; Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 8:335, classifying it as a "widely narrated" (*mutawātir*) hadith. Shiʿa sources include: Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2:112; Nuʿmān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 1:99, 104, 106; Nuʿmān, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*, 1:15–19; Nuʿmān, *al-Majālis wa-l-musāyarāt*, 327–329; Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 65–74; Ṣadūq, *Amālī*, 2, § 1, 108, § 26, 317–318, § 56, 514, § 84; ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad, *Dāmigh al-bāṭil*, 2:112–113; Thaqafī, *Ghārāt*, 2:658–659; Ṭabrisī, *Iḥtijāj*, 1:55–67; Mufīd, *Irshād*, 1:174–177; idem, *Amālī*, 44; Fattāl, *Rawḍat al-wāʿiẓīn*, 103, 350; Idrīs, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, 1:480–487.

of the Camel" were recruited mostly among the Basrans, while ʿAlī was supported by many from neighboring Kufa, a few groups from Basra, and several distinguished Emigrants and Allies, close Companions of the Prophet who had accompanied ʿAlī from Medina. The battle ended swiftly in a clear victory for ʿAlī. Ṭalḥah and Zubayr were killed, ʿĀʾishah was sent back to Medina, and their erstwhile supporters pledged allegiance to ʿAlī.

ʿAlī stayed on in Iraq, with Kufa becoming his de facto capital, pressed to deal with the other grave challenger on the horizon, the Umayyad governor of Damascus, Muʿāwiyah. Muʿāwiyah was ʿUthmān's cousin, and son of one of Muḥammad's chief enemies, Abū Sufyān, many of whose pagan family members ʿAlī had slain on the battlefield; he refused to accept ʿAlī as caliph. ʿAlī sent his associate Jarīr—earlier ʿUthmān's governor in Hamadhān—to Damascus to convince Muʿāwiyah to pledge allegiance. Muʿāwiyah responded with a call to arms. In 37/657, the two clashed at the Battle of Ṣiffīn, on the banks of the Euphrates at the border of Iraq and Syria. Muʿāwiyah was supported by his Umayyad clan and many tribesmen from Syria. His main advisor was ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, commander of the Muslim army that had conquered Egypt three decades earlier, recalled by ʿUmar on charges of corruption. ʿAlī's army consisted of several Companions of the Prophet from Medina, and many tribesmen from Iraq. ʿAlī challenged Muʿāwiyah to a duel, but Muʿāwiyah, aware of ʿAlī's reputation as an intrepid warrior, refused. Battle commenced and continued for ten days. ʿAlī himself—then around sixty years of age—took up the sword. Tens of thousands were killed. Then, as the tide slowly turned in ʿAlī's favor, Muʿāwiyah's army famously raised pages of the Qurʾan on spears as an appeal for arbitration. ʿAlī initially rejected the suggestion as a ruse. Ironically, many of his own Iraqi commanders insisted he accept, and he gave in, stipulating that the arbitrators must rule according to the Qurʾan. ʿAlī then attempted to appoint his cousin, the learned ʿAbdallāh ibn al-ʿAbbās as arbitrator, but he was overruled, and, again ironically, his commanders insisted that he appoint the dismissed governor of Kufa, Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, who, in the lead-up to the Battle of the Camel, had publicly directed them not to support ʿAlī. Muʿāwiyah appointed ʿAmr. The two arbitrators met a few months later at Dūmat al-Jandal, in southern Syria. Their judgment—which, given their back-stories, was to be expected—had cataclysmic consequences: Abū Mūsā ruled against ʿAlī. ʿAmr ruled for Muʿāwiyah. The Syrians rejoiced. The Iraqis were thrown into disarray.

The rumblings of Iraqi dissatisfaction crescendoed in the renegade movement of the so-called Kharijites, "Seceders." Under the leadership of ʿAbdallāh ibn Wahb, four thousand men "seceded" from Kufa and ʿAlī's following. With the rallying cry, "No rule but God's!" they took up arms against him. ʿAlī fought them at the Battle of Nahrawān in 38/658, on the banks of the Tigris River in

Iraq. A thousand Kharijites were persuaded to leave the battlefield before the fighting began, a few took flight during the battle, four hundred wounded were pardoned, and the rest, including their leader, were killed.

Having dealt with the immediate danger, ʿAlī attempted to resume the fight against Muʿāwiyah. But the Iraqi tribesmen were tired, and ʿAlī spent his final months urging them to mobilize. Meanwhile, Muʿāwiyah was gaining ground. He took over Egypt, where his ally ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ tortured and killed ʿAlī's ward and governor, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. Muʿāwiyah also reportedly poisoned Mālik al-Ashtar, one of ʿAlī's staunchest supporters, who had been enroute to Egypt to take over the governorship from Muḥammad. From Damascus, Muʿāwiyah sent raid after raid against the cities of Arabia and even to the heart of Iraq.

ʿAlī was praying in the Grand Mosque in Kufa at dawn on 19th Ramaḍān 40/661, when the Kharijite agent Ibn Muljam (or Ibn Muljim) struck him a deathblow. He lived for two more days, during which he counselled his followers to piety and appointed his son Ḥasan as his successor. He died on 21st Ramaḍān, at sixty-one years of age.

ʿAlī is a familiar figure in medieval Islamic histories. Chronicles refer to him frequently in their accounts of the Prophet's mission, the reigns of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān, and his own caliphate. Biographical works usually include a long entry on ʿAlī, with chapters on his acceptance of Islam, his excellent character, the praise for him expressed by the Prophet, his juridical decisions, physical appearance, garments, seal and armor, marriages and children, death, elegies composed in his memory, and his sermons and sayings. Several monographs recount his battles, notably The Battle of Ṣiffīn (*Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*) by the early author Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqarī (d. 202/818). Martyrologies of ʿAlī are also many, second in number only to those written about his son Ḥusayn, the martyr of Karbala; fourteen are listed by the Shiʿi bibliographer Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī (d. 1970), including the lost martyrology of the early author Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/773). Numerous medieval works are devoted to cataloging ʿAlī's merits, including works by well-known Sunni hadith scholars: Nasāʾī (d. 303/915), Book of Virtues: The Excellence of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (*Kitāb al-Khaṣāʾiṣ fī faḍl ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib*), Ibn al-Maghāzilī (d. 483/1090), Qualities of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (*Manāqib ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib*), Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256), Reminder for the Elite (*Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ*), and numerous others. ʿAlī also figures prominently in devotional poetry composed through the centuries by Shiʿi as well as Sunni poets.

Although events of ʿAlī's life are portrayed in similar fashion by most historians, he is perceived differently by different denominations. For Sunnis, ʿAlī is a pious and austere man, a close Companion of the Prophet, and the fourth

Rightly Guided caliph of Islam. His knowledge of Islamic doctrine and law, his love for Islam and his closeness to the Prophet Muḥammad, his heroic role in the early battles of the Muslims, and his principled and pious rule are all applauded. *Tafḍīlī* Sunnis ("Upholders of ʿAlī's Superiority"), who also revere the first three caliphs, believe that ʿAlī was the most excellent individual after the Prophet. For Sufi mystics, many of whom are *Tafḍīlī* Sunnis, ʿAlī is the first link after the Prophet in the chain of mystic masters, and they regularly quote his ethical and doctrinal statements in manuals of spiritual guidance. For the Shiʿa, ʿAlī is the spiritual and temporal successor of the Prophet, the infallible Imam, divinely guided and able to perform miracles. His descendants are believed to inherit this role, and allegiance to them is considered necessary for salvation. The Shiʿa—short for *Shīʿat ʿAlī*, or "followers of ʿAlī"—have branched out into several denominations, based on the line of succession they accept as legitimate. The majority in the present time are the Twelver Shiʿa—to whom our compiler, Raḍī, belonged—and they form the bulk of the population in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. The Fatimid-Ismāʿīlī Shiʿa ruled a large part of the Islamic empire from the 10th to the 12th centuries AD with their seat in Cairo and are now located primarily in South Asia, in the two main denominations, Ṭayyibīs and Nizārīs. The Zaydī Shiʿa—earlier also a large presence in the region of the Caspian Sea—are concentrated today in Yemen. Some smaller branches, such as the Nuṣayrī denomination, proclaim ʿAlī's divinity. Such groups are often termed Exaggerators (*Ghulāt*) in Islamic doctrinal works.

Muslims know ʿAlī by several titles that signify his preeminent stature. He is hailed by Shiʿa and Sunnis as "God's lion" (Arabic: *Asad Allāh*, Persian/Urdu: *Shēr-ē Khudā*), and "*Ḥaydar*" or "*Ḥaydarah*" a king among lions, stemming from his proverbial prowess in battle. He is petitioned as "Dispeller of hardships" (Persian/Urdu: *Mushkil kushā*). He is praised as "*Murtaḍā*," the one with whom God is pleased. He is lauded as the "*Waṣī*," the Prophet's legatee. And he is referenced as the "*Imām*," an authoritative religious leader. The Shiʿa also revere him as "*Sāqi-ye Kawthar*" (Cupbearer of the Pool of Kawthar in Paradise), "*Ṣiddīq*" (Greatest Supporter of the Prophet), "*Mawlā*" (Master, a reference to the aforementioned Ghadīr Khumm hadith, "Whoever takes me as his master, ʿAlī is his master"), and "*Amīr al-muʾminīn*" (Commander of the Faithful). This last is the most used of his titles in Shiʿa circles; Sunnis apply the title to all Muslim caliphs, including ʿAlī.

ʿAlī's shrine in the city of Najaf, in southern Iraq, is visited annually by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. His caliphate is upheld as a model for just rule, and his words and teachings are revered as repositories of inspired wisdom. ʿAlī had declared to his associate Kumayl, "Those who hoard wealth are dead even

as they live, whereas the learned remain as long as the world remains—their persons may be lost, but their teachings live on in the hearts of men" (§ 3.133). ʿAlī's legacy lives on in the hearts of men.

2 Collection of ʿAlī's Words: Orality, Authenticity, Written Sources, and Influence on Litterateurs

ʿAlī lived in a world where the principal mode of production, transmission, and collection of words was oral. In his time, written Arabic texts were rare. Although ʿAlī himself served as one of the Prophet's scribes in Medina and wrote down Qurʾanic passages as they were revealed, written transcription by him and his few lettered compatriots was carried out with rudimentary instruments and limited to important documents. Most verbal materials from the early period were initially related and preserved for a century or more chiefly by means of oral transmission, until, after paper was introduced from China in the early 2nd/8th century, writing burgeoned and they were systematically transcribed in books.

It is fair to ask the question: Are ʿAlī's words as transcribed in the present volume genuine? The short answer is that substantial portions could be authentic, some in gist, and some—especially those with striking images and rhythmic lines—verbatim. ʿAlī was one of the most revered personages of early Islam, his eloquence was proverbial, and during the four years of his caliphate, he preached long and frequently to large, public audiences, and so it is likely that many recorded materials attributed to him are genuine. Moreover, given the consistent attribution to ʿAlī of certain Qurʾan-based themes and nature-oriented images, and given their compatibility with the historical and literary ambience of the time, it is likely that they represent a true picture of his teachings.

The longer, technical back-story to that assessment—based on detailed research grounded in empirical data and orality theory in my recent book, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*—is as follows:[9] It is true that the extended period of oral transmission for early Arabic verbal materials meant that many inaccuracies entered the written corpus. It is also true that there were many drivers to false ascriptions, as well as instances of rhetorical "improvements."[10] Nevertheless, there is clear evidence for the existence of a genuine core of texts. As

9 Qutbuddin, "The Preservation of Orations: Mnemonics-Based Oral Transmission, Supplementary Writing, and the Question of Authenticity," in *Arabic Oration*, 21–63.

10 For example, the earliest manuscripts M, Sh, N, and H render the last sentence of ora-

scholars of orality theory have established, formal verbal productions of oral communities are rooted in "mnemonics"—i.e., memory aid techniques, such as intense rhythm and graphic imagery. In addition to producing beautiful language, these constitute a physiological aid to memorization. Neuroscientists explain memory formation through the propensity of the brain to organize information in patterns. The process is called "neuronal entrainment." Children today learn the ABCs, for example, through a melody. Imagine trying to memorize a random list of letters without that jingle! Rhythm is present even in writing societies. In an oral society, it is a primary characteristic. Like the Qur'an, like orations and sayings by other leaders from this period, ʿAlī's words were rhythmic and visual. These rhetorical features—combined with the attested powerful memories of oral societies—ensured that many orations and sayings were captured. ʿAlī's family and close associates were the first narrators. Early transmitters narrated materials partly in substance and partly verbatim. This hybrid mode fell somewhere between the meaning-based transmission of historical reports and the near-literal transmission of the Qur'an and poetry.[11]

Moreover, as Gregor Schoeler has convincingly demonstrated,[12] oral circulation in this society was increasingly supplemented by scholarly notetak-

---

tion §1.201 as (فقدّموا بعضًا يكن لكم ولا تخلّفوا كُلًّا فيكون عليكم), "Send ahead a part that will remain yours. Do not leave everything behind, for that will count against you." Whereas Y and many later manuscripts have (فقدّموا بعضًا يكن لكم قرضًا ولا تخلّفوا كُلًّا فيكون عليكم كَلًّا), which says basically the same thing, but has more elaborate parallelism and prose-rhyme. That latter reading is also added in the margins of M, Sh, and H.

11 Four reservations expressed by modern authors—e.g. Aḥmad Amīn, *Fajr al-Islām*, 1:148–149; and Ṣafāʾ Khulūṣī, *The Authenticity of Nahj al-Balagha*, 31–35—apply to a handful of *Nahj al-balāghah* texts, which, they say: contain (1) later philosophical terms such as "the where" (*al-ayn*) and "eternal-ness" (*al-azaliyyah*); (2) detailed descriptions, unusual for the period, of animals like the ant and the peacock; and (3) prophecies about future events, such as the Zanj rebellion. Also, (4) some sermons are long and would be difficult to memorize on the fly. The possibility of later provenance for some of these texts, or at least of modifications, remains high. As a caveat to the caveats, though, it is also possible that technical terms were inserted into original texts, and shorter pieces were later stitched together into lengthier scripts. And it could be argued that the prophecies are cryptically worded and plausible, and that copious descriptions of animals are also found in pre- and early Islamic poetry. As in all compilations of early Islamic materials, some parts are likely genuine, while others may be later additions or modifications. As mentioned earlier, we must examine individual pieces, rather than the compilation as a whole, to determine probable authenticity.

12 Schoeler (*Genesis of Literature*, 71–72, 77–78) discusses the composition of Ibn Isḥāq's *Maghāzī* as a teaching collection of notes. He also discusses an earlier work with the same name by ʿUrwah ibn Zubayr as a hypomnema notebook, collected by his students and used as a teaching aid (ibid., 17).

ing. Over the century following ʿAlī's death of primarily oral transmission, we see a steady increase of concurrent written transcription. Like the Prophet's hadith, a fraction of ʿAlī's words was probably transcribed during his lifetime or immediately afterward; we are told of a written collection titled *Khuṭab Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿalā l-manābir fī l-jumaʿ wa-l-aʿyād wa-ghayrihā* (Orations of the Commander of the Faithful upon the Pulpit on Fridays, Eids, and Other Occasions) by Zayd ibn Wahb al-Juhanī (d. 96/715), who fought in ʿAlī's army at Ṣiffīn and Nahrawān.[13]

Through the following centuries, ʿAlī's words were recorded in books by major historians, litterateurs, and compilers.[14] From the late 2nd/8th and early 3rd/9th centuries, Kufan scholars—including Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ ibn Yaḥyā (d. 157/773), Ibrāhīm ibn Ḥakam al-Fazārī (d. 177/793), Masʿadah ibn Ṣadaqah al-ʿAbdī (d. 183/799), and Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 206/820)—produced dedicated compilations of ʿAlī's words; this is as one would expect, given the presence of ʿAlī and his most loyal followers in Kufa. Scholars from Baghdad—including Wāqidī (d. 207/823), Minqarī (d. 212/827), and Madāʾinī (d. 224/829)—also compiled ʿAlī's words. All these works have been lost. The last three scholars, however, include many of ʿAlī's texts in their extant histories, as do other 3rd/9th- and 4th/10th-century historians from far-flung parts of the Muslim empire with disparate denominational affiliations: Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833, after Ibn Isḥāq, d. 151/768), Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), Balādhurī (d. 279/892), Abū Isḥāq al-Thaqafī of Isfahān (d. 283/896), Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897), Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Ibn Aʿtham (d. 314/926), al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), and many more. The above–mentioned Juhanī, who served in ʿAlī's army, is the chief source for Abū Mikhnaf's lost work on ʿAlī's battles, which is cited in turn by Ṭabarī in his celebrated History. Literary anthologists, including Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih of Spain (d. 328/940), Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), and Ibn Shuʿbah of Ḥarrān (fl. 4th/10th c.), also include large numbers of ʿAlī's orations, and many praise them profusely. Jāḥiẓ is said—though this attribution is uncertain—to have produced a concise compilation of ʿAlī's maxims titled *Miʾat kalimah* (Hundred Proverbs), that I have edited and translated.[15] Jāḥiẓ also quoted ʿAlī abundantly in his accepted works and praised him as the archetypal paradigm of eloquence. Early Muʿtazilī thinkers such as Iskāfī (d. 240/854) record ʿAlī's orations on the unity of God. Chancery-manual

13 Ṭūsī, *Fihrist*, 130, after Minqarī (d. 212/827), on the authority of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/773).

14 See detailed list in ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir*, 1:454–486.

15 Jāḥiẓ, *Miʾat kalimah*, ed. and trans. Qutbuddin, in Quḍāʿī, *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of ʿAlī with the One Hundred Proverbs Attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ*, 219–233.

authors such as the Egyptian Naḥḥās (d. 338/950) present whole chapters on ʿAlī's orations as part of the scribe's curriculum. Twelver Shiʿi jurists such as Kulaynī (d. 329/941) and Ibn Bābawayh (d. 381/991) include numerous citations of ʿAlī's words in their works. The Shāfiʿī-Ashʿarī scholar Māmaṭīrī (d. ca. 360/971) compiled a large volume of ʿAlī's words and interactions.

In the 4th/10th, 5th/11th, and 6th/12th centuries, major independent collections of ʿAlī's words were compiled and are still extant. The earliest surviving compilation is the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (The Book of God's Unity), compiled by the aforementioned Fatimid-Ismāʿīlī Shiʿi scholar al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), which contains two long sermons on God's oneness, titled The Pearl (*Durrah*) and The Unique Sermon (*Waḥīdah*), with Nuʿmān's commentary. Next is the present volume, compiled by Raḍī in 400/1010, *Nahj al-Balāghah* (The Way of Eloquence). Then came *Dustūr maʿālim al-ḥikam* (A Compendium of Signposts of Wisdom) by al-Qāḍī al-Quḍāʿī (d. 454/1062), which I have edited and translated;[16] Quḍāʿī's main source appears to have been Māmaṭīrī's *Nuzhat al-abṣār*. Subsequent compilations were dedicated to ʿAlī's aphorisms: *Nathr al-laʾālī* (Scattered Pearls) by Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153), and *Ghurar al-ḥikam* (Radiant Maxims) by Āmidī (d. 550/1155). Kaydarī (d. after 576/1180), who also wrote a commentary on *Nahj al-Balāghah*, collected ʿAlī's verse into a *Dīwān* titled *Anwār al-ʿuqūl* (Lights for Intellects). Of less certain provenance, an anonymously compiled book of supplications titled *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-ʿAlawiyyah* (ʿAlī's Parchments) is also attributed to ʿAlī, as is a short compilation of Prophetic hadith titled *Ṣaḥīfat ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib* (Scrolls of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib). Additionally, Twelver Shiʿis regularly recite a supplication ʿAlī is said to have taught his devotee Kumayl, known by the latter's name as *Duʿāʾ Kumayl* (The Kumayl Supplication). Finally, Fatimid Ṭayyibīs believe that ʿAlī composed *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* (The Book of Knowledge), which he bequeathed to his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, and which is now with the Imam in seclusion.

In the emergent Islamic civilization, ʿAlī's words influenced major litterateurs and scholars of Islam across denominational boundaries. Among early orators, ʿAlī's words were favorite sources—memorized, alluded to, or quoted in full. Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd compares ʿAlī's influence on orators to the influence of the preeminent pre-Islamic poet Imruʾ al-Qays on poets.[17] The pro-Umayyad ascetic preacher of Basra al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) was guided by ʿAlī's pious themes and language, as was the Syrian preacher Ibn Nubātah al-Khaṭīb

16 Quḍāʿī, *Dustūr maʿālim al-ḥikam*, ed. and trans. Qutbuddin, *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of ʿAlī*.

17 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 2:83.

(d. 374/985), who had memorized a large number of ʿAlī's orations.[18] Among scribes, ʿAlī's words were equally effective. I have mentioned ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's acknowledgment that he had "learned eloquence by memorizing the orations of ʿAlī," and Naḥḥās's allocation of four chapters of the Eloquence section in his chancery-manual to ʿAlī's words.[19] Tributes were also paid by early prose writers who recorded ʿAlī's words and praised them, and I have mentioned some of these litterateurs earlier. Masʿūdī, who recorded many of ʿAlī's texts, noted that scholars in his time had memorized more than 480 of ʿAlī's speeches, which they frequently quoted.[20] ʿAlī's orations had special resonance among those who held to the theological school of the Muʿtazilah, to whom Raḍī and several of his compilation's commentators belonged, and among whom Iskāfī was mentioned as having recorded ʿAlī's texts. These rationalist scholars acknowledged their debt to ʿAlī on the fundamental subject of God's unity.[21] And ʿAlī's influence was not limited to prose. Numerous wisdom-verses by the poet-prodigy Mutanabbī (d. 354/955)—who, it should be noted, grew up, as did ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib, in ʿAlī's capital, Kufa—are distilled from ʿAlī's words.[22]

3 Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015): Career and Works

Best known as compiler of *Nahj al-Balāghah*, al-Sharīf Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Raḍī—in short, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, or simply Raḍī—was an eminent Twelver Shiʿi Muʿtazilī thinker, a prominent political personage in the Abbasid-Būyid realm, and one of the most notable scholars of his time. He was born in 359/970 in Baghdad and was a lifelong resident of this city. His family was descended from the Prophet Muḥammad and ʿAlī, his grandfather being the great-grandson of Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and Raḍī was thus closely connected with the Shiʿi imamate. His father had held the post of Chief of the Prophet's Descendants (*Naqīb al-ashrāf*) in Baghdad; Raḍī was appointed aide to his father at the young age of twenty, and after him as *Naqīb* for the entire Abbasid realm. His extraordinary standing is illustrated by the

18 For al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, see Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, 85. For Ibn Nubātah, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 4:150.

19 Naḥḥās, *ʿUmdat al-kātib*, 304–310, 316–321.

20 Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 3:172.

21 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:17, cited later in the present Introduction. See more references and discussion in Qutbuddin, "Additional Categories: (2) Theology," in *Arabic Oration*, 372–377.

22 ʿAbd al-Zahrā', *Miʾat shāhid wa-shāhid min maʿānī kalām al-Imām ʿAlī ʿalayhi l-salām fī shiʿr Abī al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī*.

fact that he was given this high appointment ahead of his elder brother, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, also a distinguished scholar, who would occupy the post after Raḍī's death. Additionally, Raḍī was put in charge of the annual Pilgrimage to Mecca and appointed Chief Judge over the Court of Petitions.

Raḍī studied various disciplines with famous scholars. His teachers included the grammarians Sīrāfī (d. 368/979), who died when Raḍī was nine, Fārisī (d. 377/987), and Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1001), the aforementioned preacher Ibn Nubātah al-Fāriqī al-Khaṭīb (d. 374/984), the historian Marzubānī (d. 384/994), the Twelver Shiʿi hadith scholar Mufīd (d. 413/1022), and the Muʿtazilī theologian al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024). His students included the poet Mihyār al-Daylamī (d. 428/1037).

Raḍī enjoyed the patronage of the Buyid sultan Bahāʾ al-Dawla (r. 379–403/989–1012), who ruled in the name of the Abbasid caliph al-Qādir (r. 381–422/991–1031). Toward the end of his life, he had a showdown with Qādir regarding the Prophetic lineage of the rival Fatimid dynasty. Qādir was shown Raḍī's verses expressing his wish to live in the Fatimid realm,[23] and the caliph insisted he sign a manifesto denouncing the Fatimid lineage. Raḍī refused, and Qādir stripped him of his official positions. Most sources report the incident thus from Raḍī's colleague, the litterateur Hilāl al-Ṣābī (d. 448/1056), but a later report states that Raḍī submitted and signed; likely, his name was inserted after his death to lend credence to the Abbasid claim of legitimacy.[24] It is also reported that Raḍī believed himself worthier of the caliphate than the Abbasids and was poisoned by them.

Raḍī died in 406/1015 at the relatively young age of forty-seven. Attesting to his prominence and popularity, his funeral was attended by the grand vizier Fakhr al-Mulk, as well as judges, scholars, and other state dignitaries, and a large number of the people of Baghdad. Several elegies were composed in his memory.

Raḍī was an outstanding poet and scholar with sixteen substantial books to his name; high praise is recorded for his poetry and his prose from contemporaries as well as later scholars. His works include studies of the literary and grammatical features of the Qurʾan and hadith, works of history and biography, anthologies of poetry, and glosses on books of jurisprudence and grammar. Eight works are extant, listed here in chronological order of composition:

1. *Dīwān* (Collected Poetry), 684 poems in about 10,000 verses, containing panegyric for ʿAlī and the family of the Prophet, as well as rulers and

23 Raḍī, *Dīwān*, 2:120.

24 Jiwa, "The Baghdad Manifesto," 42–43. Raḍī's brother Murtaḍā is also reported to have signed the document.

viziers, laments for Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī and for the poet's family and friends, censure of the age, love, vaunt, and miscellaneous other themes, composed over Raḍī's lifetime, starting from 369/980, when he was ten years old.

2. *Rasāʾil* (Letters), literary epistles exchanged with Hilāl al-Ṣābī, in about a thousand folios, of which only a small portion composed between 380/990 and 384/994 is extant.
3. *Khaṣāʾiṣ al-aʾimmah: Khaṣāʾiṣ Amīr al-muʾminīn* (Qualities of the Imams: Qualities of the Commander of the Faithful), a compendium of ʿAlī's biography, virtues, and pithy sayings composed in 383/994. In his introduction, Raḍī explains that he planned to record the virtues of the Twelve Imams to refute an Abbasid detractor,[25] but was able to complete only the section on ʿAlī (82 pages in the 1986 Beirut edition). *Nahj al-Balāghah* is an expansion of the "sayings" section of this earlier work.
4. *Nahj al-Balāghah* (The Way of Eloquence), a compilation of orations, letters, and sayings attributed to ʿAlī, composed in 400/1010 (the text of the present volume—more on this work below).
5. *Majāzāt al-Qurʾan* or: *Majāz al-Qurʾan* (Figurative language of the Qurʾan), also titled *Talkhīṣ al-bayān fī majāzāt al-Qurʾān* (Summary Exposition of the Qurʾan's Figurative Concepts), composed in 401/1011, extant almost in full, with chapters arranged in the order of the Surahs.
6. *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* (Themes of the Qurʾan), also titled *Ḥaqāʾiq al-taʾwīl fī mutashābih al-tanzīl* (True Realities of Interpretation Regarding Ambiguous Verses of Revelation), a large multi-volume *tafsīr* work composed in 402/1011, of which only volume 5 (itself 376 pages in the Cairo edition) is extant, also with chapters arranged according to the order of the Surahs.
7. *Al-Majāzāt al-nabawiyyah* (Figurative Language of Prophecy), also titled *Majāzāt al-āthār al-nabawiyyah* (Figurative Language of Prophetic Hadith), composed between 400/1010 and 406/1015, containing literary and theological commentary on 360 hadiths.
8. *Amthāl* (Proverbial Verses), a compilation of unknown date, partially preserved in Ibn al-Ẓahīr al-Irbilī's (d. 677/1278) abridgment, *Mukhtaṣar Amthāl al-Sharīf al-Raḍī*.

The following eight works are lost:[26]

9. *Al-Ziyādāt fī shiʿr Abī Tammām* (Additions to the Poetry of Abū Tammām).
10. *Al-Jayyid min shiʿr Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (The Best Poems of [al-Ḥusayn ibn Aḥmad] Ibn al-Ḥajjāj).

25 Raḍī, *Khaṣāʾiṣ al-aʾimmah*, 36–38.

26 Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 398; Ṣafadī, *Wāfī*, 2:277.

11. *Al-Ziyādāt fī shiʿr Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (Additions to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's Poems).
12. *Mukhtār shiʿr Abī Isḥāq al-Ṣābī* (Selections from Abū Isḥāq [Ibrāhīm] al-Ṣābī's Poems).
13. *Taʿlīq Khilāf al-fuqahāʾ* (Annotation of "Jurists' Disagreements"), perhaps an annotation of the work better known as *Ikhtilāf al-fuqahāʾ* (Jurists' Differences) by Ṭabarī.
14. *Taʿlīq fī al-Īḍāḥ li-Abī ʿAlī* (Annotation of Abū ʿAlī [al-Fārisī's] "Elucidation"), on Arabic grammar.
15. *Sīrat wālidihi al-Ṭāhir* (Biography of [Raḍī's] Father, Ṭāhir).
16. *Akhbār quḍāt Baghdād* (Reports about Baghdad's Judges).

4 Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ʿAlī

The full Arabic title of the present volume is *Nahj al-balāghah min kalām Amīr al-muʾminīn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib ṣalawāt Allāh ʿalayhi*, which translates literally as The Way (or: Well-Trodden Track, or: Clear Course) of Eloquence: Selections from the Words of the Commander of the Faithful ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, God's blessings on him. As Raḍī tells us in his Introduction, his main criterion for the selection of texts was eloquence, which is why he chose this title for his compilation. Sure enough, it includes some of the most beautiful and powerful expressions in the Arabic language. Compiled in 400/1010, its fame almost immediately took wing—within a few short decades, *Nahj al-Balāghah* had become one of the most celebrated texts of the Arabic Islamic heritage.

4.1 *Form and Organization*

Nahj al-Balāghah is a collection of texts—mostly excerpts, ranging roughly from a few lines to a page or two in most standard editions—divided into three genre-based sections: 232 orations (sing., *khuṭbah*), 78 letters (sing., *risālah* or *kitāb*), and 429 sayings (sing., *ḥikmah*), the latter containing aphorisms as well as slightly longer sayings.[27] Into these three sections are integrated texts from

27 Numbers vary slightly in different editions, depending on how an editor separates or amalgamates certain pieces. In a few cases, there is a difference of opinion as to the genre of the texts—Raḍī, for example, lists §30, §1.212, §1.215 as orations, whereas some other scholars list them as epistles (for details, see my notes for these texts). Raḍī also sometimes lists parts of a single text in different chapters: for example, he places §1.147, a text he identifies as ʿAlī's deathbed testament, under Orations, and what he says is another part of the same text, §2.23, under Letters. In what is probably a counterintuitive proposition for modern readers, a text could in some cases fall into both categories, oral and written. It could have been first delivered as an oration, then transcribed and disseminated as an

subsidiary genres, such as testaments (sing., *waṣiyyah* or *ʿahd*), supplications (sing., *duʿāʾ*), questions and answers, responses to reports, and counsel to individuals. A subsection in the Sayings section contains nine lines with rare words (*gharīb*), followed by Raḍī's explications. The compilation is prefaced with Raḍī's introduction explaining the stimulus for his undertaking, his method of compiling, and the broad compass and immense value of the contents.

Within each section, the compilation's sequence is based on the order in which Raḍī happened to find his texts, rather than a methodical consideration of chronology or theme.[28] A handful of texts are followed by Raḍī's comments on their virtuosity. Most texts are prefaced by a phrase that goes something like "From an oration (or: letter, or: words) by him." A few texts are preceded by a line or two of context, but the circumstances are not systematically noted, in conformity with the practice of most literary anthologists of Raḍī's time.

4.2 *Sources*

Also consistent with the practice of other literary anthologists—such as Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940) and Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1039), for example—Raḍī does not systematically note the provenance of his texts. However, in the past fifty years or so, scholars including al-Khaṭīb ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ and Imtiyāz ʿArshī have meticulously listed extant early books in which the compilation's texts appear, sometimes with full or partial transmission chains (*isnād*); an updated list is provided as an Appendix of Sources to the present volume. Some of the earlier books could be Raḍī's actual sources,[29] but more work is needed to determine concrete lines of textual transmission. It is likely that Raḍī also sourced from early books and documents that are now lost.

For a handful of texts in *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Raḍī does furnish the name of a source. For orations, he notes ʿAlī's associates Nawf al-Bikālī (§ 1.180) and Dhiʿlib al-Yamānī (the latter through Aḥmad ibn Qutaybah, through ʿAbdallāh ibn Mālik ibn Dajnah, § 1.231). For letters, Raḍī mentions Wāqidī's *Kitāb al-Jamal* (Book of the Camel, § 2.75), Iskāfī's *Kitāb al-Maqāmāt* (Book of Exhortations, § 2.54), Saʿīd ibn Yaḥyā al-Umawī's (d. 249/863) *Maghāzī* (Expeditions, from the

epistle. It could also be that historians are unsure about the genre because excerpts from orations and epistles from the early period are stylistically quite similar. See discussion of this similarity in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, 416–419.

28 Themes may be located using the present volume's Detailed Contents and Indexes, and through published concordances, including Muḥammad, *al-Muʿjam al-mawḍūʿī li-Nahj al-balāghah*; Muḥammadī and Dashtī, *al-Muʿjam al-mufahras li-alfāẓ Nahj al-balāghah*; and Bayḍūn, *Taṣnīf Nahj al-balāghah*. Chronology—for the texts I was able to situate—is noted in the footnotes to the present volume's translation.

29 See a brief list of tentative sources in the introduction to the Appendix of Sources.

author's father, d. 184/809, after Ibn Isḥāq, § 2.78), and a copy in the hand of Ibn al-Kalbī (§ 2.74). For sayings, he cites ʿAlī's great-grandson Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/735, § 3.79), Thaʿlab (d. 291/904, § 3.405), Abū ʿUbayd's (d. 224/838) *Gharīb al-ḥadīth* (Rare Words from the Hadith, § 3.248), and ʿAlī's associates, Nawf again (§ 3.95), and Kumayl ibn Ziyād al-Nakhaʿī (§ 3.133, § 3.242).

As a result of the early oral transmission of these materials, different sources offer assorted renderings of the same piece, and Raḍī sometimes includes more than one rendering in his compilation; aware of the phenomenon, he mentions it in his Introduction and flags texts that are repeated. Another consequence of the initial oral transmission is that a handful of texts attributed to ʿAlī in one source are attributed elsewhere to others, and Raḍī identifies some of these ascriptions as well.

4.3 *Contents: Contemporary History and Islamic Teachings*

The contents of *Nahj al-Balāghah* straddle two broad overlapping areas: contemporary history and Islamic teachings. Given the multipurpose function of oration, themes from each of these two areas intermingle and recur. Historical material in the volume is grounded in the final four-year period of ʿAlī's life, when he ruled as caliph of the Muslim empire. The texts depict the ethos of ʿAlī's time. They contain subtleties of event trajectories, particularly ʿAlī's accession to the caliphate and his battles. They offer nuanced portraits of historical personalities, above all, of ʿAlī himself, but also of influential individuals from his caliphate.[30] They portray his sons, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, and Muḥammad (ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah), his brother ʿAqīl ibn Abī Ṭālib, his ward Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr, and his cousin ʿAbdallāh ibn al-ʿAbbās. They praise staunch followers including Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, ʿAmmār ibn Yāsir, Mālik al-Ashtar, and al-Ḥārith al-Hamdānī, and refer to various governors, commanders, judges, and tribal chieftains, some of whom he chastised, as he did al-Ashʿath ibn Qays. They describe adversaries, chiefly Muʿāwiyah and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, but also Ṭalḥah and Zubayr, as well as Muʿāwiyah's principal supporters and commanders. They present contextual shades in political and doctrinal positions, including proto-Shiʿi and proto-Sunni stances, as well as the evolution of the Kharijites. As mentioned above, most of the compilation's texts are from ʿAlī's caliphate, but several also refer to events and individuals earlier in his life, and they include copious praise for the Prophet Muḥammad and tribute to Muḥammad's first supporters. A few texts date from ʿAlī's pre-caliphate years, and these include a eulogy to his wife Fāṭimah, a letter to his close associate Salmān al-Fārisī, and interactions with and about the Sunni caliphs ʿUmar and ʿUthmān. In addition to actual data,

30 To locate names and themes within the volume, see Detailed Contents and Indexes.

the historical texts portray the personal struggle, bringing into relief the human aspect of ʿAlī's history and his impression of the events and persons therein.

ʿAlī's teachings, the second large content area of *Nahj al-Balāghah*, comprise facets of doctrine, philosophy, ethics, counsel, and practical wisdom. Growing up under Muḥammad's care, ʿAlī was continuously exposed to the Qur'anic revelation. Permeated by its vocabulary and themes, his words urge worship of the creator, promote awareness of the transience of human life, and highlight the urgent need to prepare for the imminent hereafter.[31] Combining piety with virtue, they exhort truth, gratitude, and patience, and extol the benefits of living a modest and temperate life.[32] Taking the middle ground between secular humanism and insular faith, they advocate an inseparable blend of individual devotion and dynamic social engagement. Consistently, they highlight the eminence of reason and learning. Numerous texts feature a detailed parsing of God's transcendent oneness. Many describe the marvels of God's creation, mostly the heavens, the earth, and the human being, but also, in a couple of texts, the peacock, the bat, and the ant. Several texts laud the stature of the Prophet's family. Some contain down-to-earth instructions and acute observations of human behavior. Many portray the art of just leadership, predicating true justice on compassion, wisdom, integrity, pluralism, and accountability to God.[33] They advocate strongly for the socially disadvantaged. They preach kindness to animals. A few contain legal rulings, judgments pronounced by ʿAlī for actual cases. Yet others are supplications: some implore God's forgiveness and aid, one prays for rain, one at the start of battle beseeches God's protection and victory, and one, a daily morning prayer, contains thanks and entreaties.[34] Three texts of counsel are grounded in specific Qur'anic verses.[35] In sum, the teachings of ʿAlī—a learned philosopher, a pious ascetic, a just leader, a governing caliph, a brave warrior, and an astute commander—bring together disparate elements of the human experience.

---

31 Qutbuddin, "ʿAlī's Contemplations on this World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times"; Qutbuddin, "The Sermons of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia."

32 Qutbuddin, "Piety and Virtue in Early Islam: Two Sermons by Imam Ali"; Qutbuddin, "Classical Islamic Oration's Art, Function, and Life-Altering Power of Persuasion: The Ultimate Response by Hammam to Ali's Sermon on Piety, and by Hurr to Husayn's Battle Oration in Karbala."

33 Qutbuddin, "Just Leadership in Early Islam: The Teachings and Practice of Imam Ali"; Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, 73–133.

34 Supplications: general (§ 1.222, § 1.224), for rain (§ 1.141), at the start of battle (§ 2.15), daily morning prayer (§ 1.213).

35 § 1.218, § 1.219, § 1.220.

Some longer, thematically focused texts have special names. Five named orations are Ethereal Forms (*Ashbāḥ*), on the creation of the universe; The Crusher (*Qāṣiʿah*), which castigates Lucifer and factionalism; The Radiant (*Gharrāʾ*), which contemplates human mortality and counsels preparation for the imminent hereafter; The Roar of the Camel Stallion (*Shiqshiqiyyah*), on ʿAlī's right to the caliphate; and The Oration to Hammām: Description of the Pious (*Khuṭbat Hammām fī ṣifat al-muttaqīn*), which lists the myriad virtues of those who truly deserve the epithet pious. In the Letters section, two long texts are the Testament of Counsel for Ḥasan (*Waṣiyyat al-Ḥasan*), in which ʿAlī cataloged ethical and practical advice for his son, and the Letter of Appointment for Mālik al-Ashtar (*ʿAhd al-Ashtar*), in which he laid out for Ashtar, whom he was sending to govern Egypt, the moral backbone required for righteous rule. In the Sayings section, two are particularly lengthy and distinct: The Four Pillars of Faith (*Daʿāʾim al-īmān*) are parsed as patience, conviction, knowledge, and struggle against evil; Knowledge is Better than Wealth (*al-ʿIlmu khayrun mina l-māl*) is a text of advice to Kumayl al-Nakhaʿī.[36]

4.4 *Style: Oral Aesthetics of Rhythm and Imagery*

Rhythmically cadenced and stunningly visual, *Nahj al-Balāghah* reflects ʿAlī's oral milieu.[37] ʿAlī's orations and sayings, even his written letters, breathe the aesthetic of orality, articulated in mnemonics and metonymy. Mnemonics—memory aid techniques—manifest in intensely rhythmic prose with condensed sentences and balanced parallelisms, and graphic and often startling natural and lifeworld imagery, with extended verbal metaphors and gripping dramatization. Language is grounded in the features and movements of the camel and of other desert animals, lifeworld objects, and cosmic phenomena. Abstract concepts are made immediate and relevant through concrete physical images. Metonymy—evocation by association—manifests in skillful allusion to historical and literary context. Alongside emphatic grammar structures and rhetorical questions, these stylistic devices also served as audience-engagement techniques that invited the audience to participate in the speech act with internal response, and sometimes overt answers, comments, and

36 *Ashbāḥ*, §1.88; *Qāṣiʿah*, §1.190; *Gharrāʾ*, §1.80; *Shiqshiqiyyah*, §1.3; *Khuṭbat Hammām*, §1.191; *Waṣiyyat al-Ḥasan*, §2.31; *ʿAhd al-Ashtar*, §2.53; *Daʿāʾim al-īmān*, §3.26; *al-ʿIlmu khayrun mina l-māl*, §3.133.

37 For more detail, see Qutbuddin, "Style of the Oration," in *Arabic Oration*, 91–164; Qutbuddin, "A Sermon on Piety by Imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded"; Qutbuddin, "The Sermons of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia."

actions. The texts are further characterized by fine-grained, condensed vocabulary and a high, dignified linguistic register.

Eloquence is a crucial component of preaching, and as scholars of literature have argued, it "tacitly persuades."[38] A brilliant exposition is more effective than a clumsy harangue, and beautiful language more likely to evoke a positive response than a plodding lecture. In combination with Qur'anic validation and rational argumentation, ʿAlī attempted to stir the hearts and minds of his audience with verbal artistry. Moreover, there is a religious flavor, a focus on piety, in all modes of ʿAlī's speech, undergirding even the material produced in a political or military context. At the same time, his words also have a distinctly local flavor, a cultural texture grounded in desert topography, tribal society, nomadic lifestyle, and the rich poetic tradition of the Arabian Peninsula.

4.5 *Commentaries and Response Works*

Nahj al-Balāghah has generated an extraordinary number of response-works, including commentaries, translations, supplements, and abridgments by Shiʿi, Sunni, and Arab Christian scholars in medieval and modern times, as well as glosses, concordances, works on sources, and thematic essays by present-day scholars. In my rough estimate, the number of serious extant works in this category ranges around 500, many in multiple volumes.

Depending on the cataloger's range, the number of known commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāghah* lies somewhere between 81 and 210.[39] After the Qur'an, this is perhaps the largest number of commentaries generated by any Arabic work—compared with approximately 40 on Mutanabbī's *Dīwān*, 70 on Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, and 20 on Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, three of the best-known Arabic Islamic works. Most *Nahj al-Balāghah* commentaries are in Arabic; some are in Persian and other Islamic languages. Most comment on the full compilation; some comment on a specific longer text, and a few of these latter commentaries are in verse.

Some of the best-known full commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāghah* are the following (all in Arabic, except the three noted as Persian):

– Early Twelver Shiʿi commentators include ʿAlī ibn Nāṣir al-Sarakhsī (fl. 6th/12th c.), Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāwandī (d. 573/1177), Quṭb al-Dīn al-Kaydarī (d. after 576/1180), and Ibn Maytham al-Baḥrānī (d. 679/1280).
– Early Sunni commentators include Ibn Funduq al-Bayhaqī (d. 565/1170) from Khurasan, who wrote one of the earliest commentaries, and relied on

38 See Lanham, *Analyzing Prose*, *passim*.

39 Amīnī, *Al-Ghadīr*, 4:257–272, lists 81; ʿAbd al-Zahrā', *Maṣādir Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:202–254, lists 101; Lakhnawī, introduction to Rāwandī's commentary, 1:36–49, lists 112; and ʿĀmilī, *Shurūḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, lists 210.

the lost, and possibly the first, *Nahj al-Balāghah* commentary of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Wabrī (fl. early 6th/12th c.), from Khwārazm. (Sarakhsī also quotes Wabrī). Prominent Sunni authors whose commentaries are lost include Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1390).

– Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd al-Muʿtazilī (d. ca. 656/1258) is the best-known (early Sunni) commentator of all, whose celebrated commentary in 20 volumes itself generated numerous response works. Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd—who also composed Seven Odes in Praise of ʿAlī—writes in his introduction that "the noblest branch of learning is knowledge of God … ʿAlī's words kindled that fire … the Muʿtazilah … masters of theology, from whom all others learned this skill, are ʿAlī's students and emulators."[40] He adds that ʿAlī is "leader of the eloquent and lord of the articulate … oratory and epistle-writing began with him."[41]
– The Yemeni Zaydī Shiʿi Imam al-Muʾayyad bi-llāh Yaḥyā ibn Ḥamzah (d. 749/1348) wrote a commentary in six volumes. He traced his license to teach the compilation back to Raḍī himself, by way of a sequence of licenses granted by Zaydī scholars.[42] Other Zaydī commentators are Fakhr al-Dīn ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Hādī (d. at the end of the 8th/14th c.) and Yaḥyā ibn Ibrāhīm al-Jaḥḥāf (d. 1102/1690).[43]
– Safavid-era Twelver Shiʿi Sufi scholars who wrote commentaries include Ilāhī-Ardabīlī (fl. ca. 9th/15th c., Persian), ʿAbd al-Bāqī Dānishmand (d. after 1039/1630), and Niẓām al-Dīn al-Jīlānī (d. 1053/1643).
– Commentaries by modern Egyptian-Sunni-Azharī scholars include the famed introduction-cum-wordlist by the Grand Mufti of Egypt Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), which was later expanded by Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī (d. 1935) and then by Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (d. 1972). In the introduction, ʿAbduh speaks of his first encounter with *Nahj al-Balāghah*, saying, "I felt I was witnessing a radiant intellect … which had detached itself from the divine procession and connected itself to the human soul." He goes on to declare that memorizing and studying the compilation "are essential to those who seek the precious gems of Arabic and wish to rise in its ranks."[44]

40 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:17.
41 Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:24.
42 Muʾayyad Yaḥyā, *al-Dībāj al-waḍī*, 1:104–105.
43 Details of the latter two may be found in Ansari and Schmidtke, "The Literary-Religious Tradition among Seventh/Thirteenth-Century Yemeni Zaydīs (11): Appendix 11," 220.
44 ʿAbduh, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 1:4.

– Modern Iranian Twelver Shiʿi commentators include Muḥammad Taqī Naqavī, Muḥammad Taqī al-Tustarī, Nawwāb Lāhījānī (d. ca. 1824), and the Grand Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭāliqānī, the last two writing in Persian. A modern Lebanese Twelver Shiʿi commentator is Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyyah.

The commentaries discuss lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical matters, and sometimes provide historical context and transmission history. The longer commentaries include extensive historical, doctrinal, thematic, and literary annotation, as well as further texts attributed to ʿAlī and other historical figures. As we should expect, each commentator interprets ʿAlī's statements, both historical and doctrinal, according to his own denominational approach.

Numerous abridgments of selections from *Nahj al-Balāghah* have been compiled:

– 3 medieval abridgments: Abū al-Saʿādāt al-Isfahānī's (d. 634/1237) published work, *Maṭlaʿ al-ṣabāḥatayn* (Two Suns Rising), transcribes the Sayings section from *Nahj al-Balāghah* alongside the ethical hadith of the Prophet Muḥammad compiled by Quḍāʿī (d. 454/1062) in *Kitāb al-Shihāb* (*Light in the Heavens*, which I have edited and translated).[45] Two further selection volumes are extant in manuscript form: *al-Nafāʾis* (Precious Words) by Niẓām al-Dīn al-Muṭahhar (fl. 8th/14th c., Sunni), and *al-Ṭarāʾif* (Marvelous Words) by an anonymous author.[46]
– More than 34 modern selections (called *mukhtārāt* or *muntakhabāt*).[47]

Nahj al-Balāghah has been translated into more than 15 languages:

– A medieval Persian translation by Fatḥallāh Kāshānī (d. 988/1580) titled *Tanbīh al-ghāfilīn* (Waking the Heedless) is possibly the oldest translation.
– Numerous modern translations have been published in Persian, many in Urdu and Turkish, and several in other Asian languages, including Kazakh, Armenian, Chinese, and Thai, as well as a number of European languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Romanian, Polish, and Croat. Many translations, including perhaps all the English translations published to-date, have been rendered indirectly, via Persian.[48]

Also, many modern compilations style themselves as supplements (*mustadrakāt*) to *Nahj al-Balāghah*, notably the 8-volume compilation by Muḥammad Bāqir Maḥmūdī.

---

45 Quḍāʿī, *Kitāb al-Shihāb*, ed. and trans. Qutbuddin, *Light in the Heavens: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*.

46 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, "Fī Riḥāb," part 3, 49–50.

47 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, "Fī Riḥāb," part 3, 50–62.

48 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, "Fī Riḥāb," part 3, 63–89; Esḥāqī, "Manbaʿ-shināsī-yi tarjamah-hā-yi *Nahj al-balāghah*." Select list in present volume's Bibliography, under Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*.

4.6 *Dissemination: Manuscripts, Study, Admiration, and Controversy*

In addition to the vast number of response works generated in the medieval Middle East by *Nahj al-Balāghah*, its immediate and wide circulation is evident in the hundreds of manuscripts produced in different parts of the Muslim world dating from as early as the 5th/11th century—many in Iraq and Iran, but also across the Islamic lands, from India (in later medieval times) in the East, through Khurasan in Central Asia, through Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula, toward the West to Turkey, Syria, and Egypt.[49] Of these, many manuscripts were produced in markedly Sunni communities, particularly in Khurasan—such as the manuscript of Yaʿqūb al-Naysābūrī (d. 474/1081), from which our manuscript Y was transcribed—from an early time.[50] And in the 9th/15th–10th/16th-century (Ḥanafī Sunni) Ottoman caliphate, compilations of ʿAlī's words were the centerpiece of the Topkapi Palace library's oration collection, used, among other things, to teach palace scribes.[51] Another example of the esteem with which Sunni scholars viewed the work is evidenced by the Ottoman scholar and head of the chancery (*Raʾīs al-kuttāb*) Ahmad Efendi Taşköprüzāde (d. 968/1561), who systematically cites ʿAlī's texts from *Nahj al-Balāghah*, alongside Qurʾan and hadith, in his commentary on Ījī's *Şerhu'l-Ahlaki'l-Adudiyye* (Book of Good Character);[52] he does not mention the *Nahj al-Balāghah* by name, though we know that he knew the text well—the Sulaymaniye library in Istanbul holds several manuscripts in its "Raʾīs al-kuttāb" collection, with ownership marks, including one with his name inscribed on the flyleaf in his own hand (MS "S" in the present volume; see also MS "K"). *Nahj al-Balāghah* entered China in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Chinese Muslims went to the Middle East and brought back religious texts, as well as Indonesia and Malaysia, where Muḥammad ʿAbduh's ideas were influential during that period.[53] Perhaps with some minor exceptions,[54] the two regions in the pre-

49 Ṭabāṭabāʾī lists 172 early manuscripts dating from the 5th/11th through the 12th/18th centuries in worldwide collections. Muttaqī lists 458 manuscripts through the early 14th/20th century. Details in Note on the Edition.

50 Ansari, "Tāzah-hā-yi darbāra-yi riwāyat *Nahj al-balāghah*." For details of our Y manuscript, see Note on the Edition in the present volume.

51 Qutbuddin, "Books on Arabic Philology and Literature," in *Treasures of Knowledge*, 607–623.

52 Taşköprüzāde, *Şerhu'l-Ahlak*, 37, 43, 49, 67, 69, 73, 75, 81, 83, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97. I thank Sarah Aziz for this reference.

53 I thank Sachiko Murata and Wang Xi (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) for the information on China, and Karim Crow and Asna Husin for the information on Malaysia and Indonesia.

54 John Morrow notes two citations of ʿAlī's words—that do not, however, mention *Nahj al-balāghah* specifically—in Aljamiado traditions among Spanish Moriscos (Muslims who

modern Islamic world where *Nahj al-Balāghah* does not appear to have made inroads are Umayyad Spain and Umayyad-influenced (post-Fatimid) North Africa, which were both, for the most part, intensely anti-Shiʿi.[55] The dissemination question—which awaits more thorough exploration—is an important one and speaks to many aspects of religious, scholarly, literary, and political life in the premodern and modern Islamic world.

Study of *Nahj al-Balāghah* and admiration for the compilation are pronounced among all branches of the Shiʿa, as well as among Sunnis and Arab Christians, in medieval and modern times. A few quotations by the compilation's commentators have been cited earlier. The following snapshot of other authors who expressed high regard for the collection, with a few soundbites from their laudations, further underscores the esteem in which *Nahj al-Balāghah* was, and continues to be, held:

– Twelver Shiʿi reverence for *Nahj al-Balāghah* is well documented through the ages. In recent times, Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī (d. 1970) writes: "After divine revelation, no book has come into existence more bonded to God's word than *Nahj al-Balāghah*."[56] Among the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī Shiʿa, the compilation is an integral part of the religious curriculum. It is quoted abundantly in sermons and works of history and doctrine, including the works of the Yemeni *Dāʿī*s Sayyidnā Ḥātim Muḥyī al-Dīn (d. 596/1199) and Sayyidnā Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468), and the Indian *Dāʿī* Sayyidnā Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn (d. 1965); these authors also pronounce benedictions on Raḍī.[57] The latter quotes from *Nahj al-Balāghah* in a full 65 instances in his annual *Rasāʾil Ramaḍāniyyah* (Ramaḍān Treatises); in one instance, he prefaces the quotation with explicit reference to the compilation's title, saying: "Wisdom spoke on ʿAlī's tongue, and the *way of eloquence* (*nahj al-balāghah*) became clear through his exposition. Belief and conviction increase whenever a believer

were forcibly converted to Christianity) in the 16th century: § 38 in Morrow's "Sources" volume on divine decree, and § 41 on knowledge (Morrow, *Shiʿism in the Maghrib and al-Andalus*, 2:131–132 and 2:137) are the same as *Nahj al-balāghah*, § 3.273 and § 3.349. I thank Linda Jones for this reference.

55 There seem to be no manuscripts of *Nahj al-balāghah* from these two regions, no mention in scholarly curricula or biographies, and no citations in books. See the text's absence from Fierro's 8th–15th c. AD bio-bibliographical database, *History of the Authors and Transmitters of al-Andalus* (*HATA*- https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/). Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih however, as mentioned earlier, includes several orations attributed to ʿAlī in his anthology, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, which is mainly influenced by the Islamic East.

56 Tihrānī, *Dharīʿah*, 4:144.

57 Ḥātim, *al-Majālis al-Ḥātimiyyah*, Majlis § 110–130; Idrīs, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, 3:367; Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn, *Ḍawʾ nūr al-ḥaqq*, 98, *Masarrāt al-fatḥ*, 192.

hears his words."[58] Among the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Shiʿa, quotations are found in early works of Khwājah Qāsim Tushtarī (died after 533/1139) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274).[59] Zaydī Shiʿi channels of transmissions to and within Yemen from the 7th/13th century onward have also been described recently in some detail.[60]

– In the past two centuries, distinguished Sunni Arab writers have continued to pay tribute.[61] The Iraqi Salafi al-Ālūsī (d. 1924) called *Nahj al-Balāghah* "an ember from the fire of God's speech, and a sun that radiates the Prophet's eloquence." The Egyptian Zakī Mubārak (d. 1952) wrote that it "bequeaths manliness, nobility, and loftiness of the soul, hailing from an indomitable spirit who faced danger with a lion's resolve." His fellow Egyptian scholar ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (d. 1964) wrote a book on ʿAlī titled *ʿAbqariyyat al-Imām* (The Genius of the Imām)—assuming everyone would recognize that the quintessential Imam is ʿAlī—in which he declared that ʿAlī's words in *Nahj al-Balāghah* encompass "divine wisdom."
– *Nahj al-Balāghah* is also extolled broadly by Arab Christian scholars.[62] They include the Jordanian Rūkus ibn Zāʾid ʿUzayzī (b. 1903), the Syrian ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Anṭākī (d. 1923), and numerous Lebanese scholars, including Luwīs Maʿlūf (d. 1946), Būlus Salāmah (d. 1979), Amīn Nakhlah (d. 1976), Fuʾād Afrām al-Bustānī (d. 1994), and Ḥannā al-Fākhūrī (d. 2011). The Lebanese scholar Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī (d. 1871) declared that anyone who wished to excel in eloquence "should memorize the Qurʾan and *Nahj al-Balāghah*."[63] Another Lebanese scholar, Jurj Jurdāq (d. 2014), memorized the collection by the age of thirteen, and engaged with it deeply in a five-volume work on ʿAlī that he titled *al-Imām ʿAlī: Ṣawt al-ʿadālah al-insāniyyah* (Imam ʿAlī: The Voice of Human Justice).

58 Sayf al-Dīn, *Zubdat al-burhān*, 31. Elsewhere, Sayf al-Dīn says: "Orations and sayings of the Commander of the Faithful ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib are stairways to the True Realities. Their way is the heart-healing 'Way of Eloquence,' and their lines are lines of divine light" (*Dalw ghadīr ḥaqq*, 134).

59 Tushtarī, *Maʿrifat*, 253/260; Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Rawḍah*, 41/44, 74/86, 79/93, 128/160; idem, *Maṭlūb*, 20/36; idem, *Āghāz*, 55/64–65.

60 Ansari and Schmidtke, "The Literary-Religious Tradition among Seventh/Thirteenth-Century Yemeni Zaydīs (11): Appendix 11," 220–230.

61 Quotes and references in ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir*, 1:87–99; Ṭabāṭabāʾī, "Fī Riḥāb," part 4, *passim*.

62 Quotes and references in Keizoghani and Nafchi, "The Greatness of *Nahj Al-Balagha* and the Words of Imam Ali from the Perspective of Modern Christian Figures."

63 ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir*, 1:91.

– *Nahj al-Balāghah* also continues to be admired in present-day India, where it forms a regular part of the curriculum in Shiʿi as well as many Sunni madrasas.[64]

I am not sure why, compared to other compilations of ʿAlī's words, *Nahj al-Balāghah* has become the target of a certain amount of sectarian controversy.[65] It is true that the volume includes the Shiqshiqiyyah oration (§1.3), in which ʿAlī claims his right to Muḥammad's succession. But Jāḥiẓ, Ṭabarī, Ibn Hishām, and Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, for example—four famous and respected early Sunni scholars—cite sermons, conversations, and letters by ʿAlī that contain similar themes.[66] And large parts of the Shiqshiqiyyah itself are recorded much before Raḍī by the early Sunni-Muʿtazilite author Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī (d. 319/931), and the Sunni-Shāfiʿī-Ashʿarī scholar ʿAlī ibn Mahdī al-Ṭabarī al-Māmaṭīrī (d. ca. 360/971).[67] The Testament of Ashtar (§2.53 in the present volume), too, another unfairly maligned text (by, for example, Wadād al-Qāḍī, "An early Fāṭimid political document"), is recorded not only in the Twelver Shiʿi Iraqi narrative tradition by Ibn Shuʿbah al-Ḥarrānī (fl. 4th/10th c.) and Raḍī (d. 406/1015), but also in a distinct Fatimid Ismāʿīlī Shiʿi Egyptian narrative tradition by al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), and in a yet further and distinct Zaydi Shiʿi Yemeni narrative tradition in an unpublished manuscript in the Ambrosiana library in Milan.[68] It appears that it was almost three centuries after Raḍī, when the Damascene historian Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) first raised doubts about the compilation's authenticity, that it began to be viewed in some quarters as a "Shiʿi"—code for "seditious"—text. Several pro-Umayyad Damascus authors—including, notably, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328)—followed Ibn Khallikān's lead.[69] This limited group of detractors notwithstanding, *Nahj al-Balā-*

64 Kaur, *Madrasa Education in India*, 387.

65 See detailed analysis in Qutbuddin, "Is *Nahj al-balāghah* a Shiʿi Book? Insidious Labels and Academia's Myth of Objectivity."

66 E.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīrah*, 2:489–490; Jahiz, *Bayān*, 2:50–52; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 4:231–233, 5:7–8; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *ʿIqd*, 4:63, 68; more in Madelung, *Succession to Muhammad*, 28–33, 141, and *passim*.

67 Quotation of Shiqshiqiyyah oration in Balkhī's now lost books cited by Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (Ḥ 1:205/206); Māmaṭīrī, *Nuzhat al-Abṣār*, 255 (several biographers say Māmaṭīrī was a Sunni Shāfiʿī Ashʿarī, a few say he was a Shiʿi Zaydi; details in editor's introduction, ibid., 15–23).

68 Nuʿmān, *Daʿāʾim*, 1:353–367; see details of Zaydi Ambrosiana manuscript (catalog no. H 129, fol. 167^{v} ff.) in Anṣārī, "Majmūʿah-ye dīgar az nuskhah-hā-ye khaṭṭī Ambrosiana." See also Anṣārī, "Riwāyat wa-nuskha-ī jadīd az ʿahdnāmah-ye Mālik-e Ashtar."

69 Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), *Minhāj al-sunnah*, 8:55–56; Dhahabī (d. 748/1347), *Mīzān al-iʿtidāl*, 3:124; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1448), *Lisān al-mīzān*, 5:529. The following are their three main critiques: (1) *Nahj al-balāghah*'s materials are not found in earlier sources—which is simply incorrect; see, for example, Appendix of Sources in the present

ghah continues to be memorized, studied, and cited avidly across wide reaches of the Islamic world. This brilliant ecumenical text rightly belongs to the collective heritage of Islam, the communal legacy of Arabic, and the shared inheritance of humanity.

5 Concluding Remarks

Of the numerous compilations of ʿAlī's words, *Nahj al-Balāghah* towers above the rest in its fame. With a winning combination of brilliant prose and deep wisdom, it has enjoyed unprecedented currency through the centuries, being widely read and highly acclaimed throughout the Islamic world. On the one hand, the collection has become a benchmark for high style, the exemplar par excellence for those who would follow the Arabic "way of eloquence." On the other hand, ʿAlī's wise teachings have resonated with Muslims throughout the past fourteen centuries, and they continue to hold immense consequence today. As a system of values, they promote a just and compassionate vision of Islam. In strife-torn Muslim-majority lands, they could unify Shiʿis and Sunnis in their common faith. The divide between Shiʿism and Sunnism, to put the issue in simplistic terms, is largely based on the perception of ʿAlī's role as first Imam versus fourth Caliph. His own words and his example can and should be used not to create divisions between groups but to bring people together, to heal. As universal teachings of ethics, moreover, ʿAlī's words transcend time, place, and affiliation. They embody the best values we all possess. They teach harmonious relations with all humans—for, as ʿAlī reminds us, people are "are either our brothers in faith or our peers in creation."

---

volume, and the list of earlier sources in which *Nahj al-balāghah* texts are found in ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir Nahj al-balāghah*, *passim*; ʿArshī, *Istinād Nahj al-balāghah*, *passim*; Dashtī, *Ravish-i taḥqīq*, *passim*. (2) Raḍī does not cite his sources—mostly correct, but, as mentioned earlier, he followed the norm for literary compilations of his time, and modern scholars have filled the breach. (3) The book contains insults (*sabb*) directed at the first three Sunni caliphs—a more complicated issue, but in essence, the charge is false. Only a handful of texts reference Abū Bakr and ʿUmar at all, and they say nothing directly critical. Even regarding ʿUthmān, whose administration many Muslims censured, *Nahj al-balāghah* texts contain no overt reproach. Abundant castigations, however, are directed at Muʿāwiyah and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, and, to a lesser extent, Ṭalḥah and Zubayr—individuals who brought armies to fight ʿAlī. ʿĀʾishah, another lead player in the Battle of the Camel, is not referenced directly, presumably for reasons of decorum. See further details of critiques and responses in Sultan, *Étude sur Nahj al-Balâgha*, *passim*; Hassan, *A Critical Study of Nahj al-balāgha*, 25–58; Djebli, *Encore à propos de l'authenticité du Nahj al-Balagha*, *passim*; ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ, *Maṣādir*, 1:100–199; Jalālī, *Dirāsah ḥawl Nahj al-balāghah*, 52–75; summarized in Qutbuddin, "Nahj al-balāgha," *EI*³; and Qutbuddin, "Is *Nahj al-balāghah* a Shiʿi Book?"