

A Brief History of Nahj al-Balaghah

Nahj al-Balaghah (compiled 1009–1010 ce/400 ah – that is, slightly after *al-Kafi* and *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih*, two of the most prominent Shi'i books of *hadith*) consists of sermons, letters, and sayings attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and was compiled by al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015 ce), a prominent Shi'i scholar. This was roughly three centuries after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 ce), and well after the 'orthodox' norms of thought regarding women were established in classical Islamic thought.

His aim was not to present a book of *hadith*, history, or jurisprudence, but rather to demonstrate the literary style and eloquence of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Because of this, he did not include chains of narration or indicate where he took his material from. As a result, a discussion of the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is challenging.

The idea that al-Sharif al-Radi himself wrote it has been dismissed due to the presence of portions of *Nahj al-Balaghah* in other sources, and an identifiably different writing style in his own works. However, because he did not include chains of narration – traditionally, the first means of authenticating a *hadith* – the passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are not admissible within Shi'i scholarship as a source for deriving jurisprudence, although, in practice, they figure strongly in the Shi'i worldview.

However, within the Shi'i tradition, the work has gained such prominence that 'Allamah Tabataba'i, the famous twentieth-century exegete, said, 'For us, whoever wrote *Nahj al-Balaghah* is 'Ali, even if he lived a century ago'. This was in response to the assertion that Western scholars claim that the material in *Nahj al-Balaghah* does not actually trace back to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating a genuine reverence for the book, this response may have been politicized; such ideological concerns often make it difficult to raise genuine questions – particularly about gender or the authenticity of texts – in contemporary Shi'i (and Sunni) discourse.

Arguing for the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* also has a polemical dimension, since Sunni scholars argue against its authenticity due to its severe criticisms of the first three caliphates and Mu'awiyah. Reza Shah-Kazemi notes that, 'over the centuries, Shi'i scholars have assiduously rebutted the charges against the authenticity of *Nahj*', although he cites the more tempered opinion that 'a large portion' of *Nahj al-Balaghah* can be reliably traced to Imam 'Ali rather than every single word.¹ (Shah-Kazemi,

incidentally, does not delve into the sermons on women, even though his book explores justice and the intellect in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, and so it would have been an ideal opportunity to explore whether these perceptions of justice and intellect extend to women.)

However, Hossein Modarressi observes that, late in the third century *hijri*, 400 sermons were ascribed to Imam 'Ali; while, half a century later, that number had grown to 480.² Today, openly questioning the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* can lead to hostility, although it is sometimes done privately.³ A reasonable approach to the authenticity of the contents of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, however, is to treat it like any other book of *hadith* – that is to say, to discuss the authenticity of each passage individually, rather than evaluating the book as a whole, particularly since al-Sharif al-Radi collected the contents from different manuscripts and sources.⁴

One common method of exploring the authenticity of *Nahj al-Balaghah* is to look for other sources which contain the same passages; another common approach is to compare the passages to the Qur'an. As mentioned above, both approaches will be used here, in addition to textual criticism along with a sprinkling of speculation.

¹. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006), 3, citing the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

². Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 14. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that material published later is inauthentic, since reliable material could have been discovered in other books.

³. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i, *A Shiite Anthology*, trans. W. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain, 1980), 5-6 (discussion with Henri Corbin). Also see Reza Shah Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali*, 3-4; he also cites the same exchange between Corbin and Tabataba'i. See also M. Motahhari, Selection [sic] from *Glimpses of Nahj al-Balaghah* [a translation of portions of *Sayri dar Nahj al-Balaghah*], trans. anonymous (n.p.: n.l., 1975).

⁴. The late Sayyid Fadlallah also mentions on his official website that not everything in *Nahj al-Balaghah* can be ascribed to Imam 'Ali and that each passage should be evaluated individually; he also rejects the idea that al-Sharif al-Radi wrote it himself. Bayyinat, 'FAQ – Authenticity of Nahj Al-Balagha' . Accessed 18 August 2014.

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