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Part One

In the Name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful

The book consists of **several parts**. In the **first,** he discusses the two main characteristics of Nahjul-Balagha, its literary excellence and multi-dimensionality, quoting various viewpoints expressed about Imam Ali's eloquence in general and Nahjul-Balagha in particular. In the **second part,** the author discusses the theological and metaphysical ideas embedded in Nahjul-Balagha, comparing them with parallel viewpoints with which Muslim orators and philosophers are familiar. The **third part** deals with ibada (adoration) and its various levels. The fourth part deals with the Islamic Government and Social Justice. The **fifth**, which deals with the controversial issue of caliphate (khilafa) and the superior status of Ahl al-Bayt (as), is deleted from this translation. The **sixth and the seventh** parts discuss Nahjul-Balagha's ethical teachings, in particular the Islamic Concept of zuhd (asceticism), the meaning of the life in this world (dunya), so often condemned in Nahjul-Balagha, and the meaning of the contrast between life in this world and that in the Hereafter, which is also a recurring theme.

Introduction

Perhaps it may have happened to you, and if not, you may still visualize it: Someone lives on your street or in your neighborhood for years. You see him at least once a day and habitually nod to him as you pass by. Years pass by in this manner till, one day, you accidentally get an opportunity to sit down with him and become familiar with his ideas, views and feelings, his likes and dislikes. You are amazed at what you have come to know about him. You never imagined or guessed that he might be as you found him and never thought that he was what you later discovered him to be.

After that, every time you see him, his face, somehow, appears to you to be different. Not only this, your entire attitude towards him is altered. His personality assumes a new meaning and a new depth, and you develop respect for him in your heart, as if he were a person other than the one you thought you knew for years. You feel as if you have discovered a new world.

My experience was similar to such an analogy with regard to Nahjul-Balagha. Since the years of my

childhood, I was familiar with the title of this book, and I could distinguish it from other books on the shelves in my father's library. Years later, during my studies, first at the theological school of Mashhad, and later at Qum, when I was finishing the last stages of the preliminary education in theology called sutuh, during all those days, I kept hearing the title Nahjul-Balagha more often than that of any other book after the Qur'an. Some of its sermons on piety I had heard so many times that I almost remembered them by heart. Nevertheless, I must admit, like all my colleagues at the theological seminary (hawza ilmiyya), I was quite ignorant of the world of Nahjul- Balagha. We had met as strangers and passed by each other in the manner of strangers. This went on till the summer of 1325 (1946) when, in order to escape the heat of Qum, I went to Isfahan. A trivial incident brought me into contact with a person who took my hand and led me somehow into the world of Nahjul-Balagha.

When this happened, I realized that till then, I knew little about this book. Later, I wished that I would also find someone who would introduce me to the world of the Qur'an. Since then, the image of Nahjul-Balagha was transformed in my eyes. I became fond of it, and gradually my fondness grew into love. It was now a different book from the one which I had known till that moment. I felt as if I had discovered an entirely new world. Shaikh Muhammad 'Abdo, the former mufti of Egypt who edited and published Nahjul-Balagha with a brief commentary, introducing this book to the Egyptians for the first time, says that he had no knowledge of this book till he undertook its study far from home in a distant land.

He was struck with amazement and felt as if he had discovered a precious treasure trove. He, thereupon, immediately decided to publish and introduce it to the Arab public. The unfamiliarity of a Sunni scholar with Nahjul-Balagha is not surprising; what is surprising is that Nahjul- Balagha should be a stranger and alien in its own homeland, among the Shi'a of Ali (as), and that in the Shi'i theological schools as well, in the same way as Ali (as) himself has remained isolated, a stranger in his own land. Evidently, if the content and ideas of a book, or if the feelings and emotions of a person, do not harmonize with the mentality of a people, that book/person practically remains isolated like a stranger in an alien world, even though the name of such a person/book may be mentioned with great respect and admiration.

We, theology students, must admit our estrangement from Nahjul-Balagha. We have built a mental world of our own which is alien to the world of Nahjul-Balagha. As I write this Preface, I cannot abstain from recalling with sorrow the memory of that great man who introduced me for the first time to the world of Nahjul-Balagha and whose acquaintance I treasure as one of the most precious experiences of my life, something which I would not exchange for anything else. Not a day nor a night passes without my remembering him or mentioning him with gratitude. I daresay that he was a divine scholar (alim rabbani) in the true sense of the word, although I dare not claim that I was a learner of the path of deliverance (muta'allim 'ala sabil al-najat).[1] I remember that whenever I met him, I was always reminded of the following poetry of [the renown Persian poet] Sadi:

The devout, the ascetic, and the Sufi,

Are all toddlers on the path;
If there is any mature man,
It is none other than the 'alim rabbani.

He was a faqih, a philosopher, a man of letters and a physician, all at the same time. He was well versed in fiqh (jurisprudence), philosophy, Arabic and Persian literature as well as in the traditional medicine. And he was considered a specialist of the first order in some of these fields. He was a masterly teacher of al-Qanun, the treatise of ibn Sina (Avicenna) in medicine, which does not find a teacher these days. Many scholars of the theology school attended his lessons. Yet it was not possible for him to confine himself to one single field, and his spirit revolted against any kind of restrictions. Of his lectures, the most that interested him were those on Nahjul-Balagha which threw him into ecstasy. It seemed as if Nahjul-Balagha had opened its wings and he, having mounted them, was taken on a journey through strange worlds beyond our reach.

It was evident that he lived on Nahjul-Balagha; he lived it and breathed with it. His spirit was united with this book; his pulse throbbed and his heart beat in harmony with Nahjul-Balagha. Its sentences were always on his lips and their meanings engraved upon his heart. When he quoted its passages, tears would flow from his eyes, soaking his gray beard. During the lessons, his encounter with and involvement in Nahjul- Balagha would make him totally oblivious of his surroundings. It was a very educative as well as an attractive spectacle. Listening to the language of the heart from someone whose great heart is full of love and wisdom has altogether a different effect and attraction. He was a living example of the saints of the bygone days. These words of Ali (as) fully apply to him: "Had it not been for the fact that Providence had decreed the years of their life, the passionate yearning for Divine rewards and fear of chastisement would not have permitted their souls to remain in their bodies even for a moment. Their realization of the greatness of the Creator has made everything besides Him insignificant in their eyes."

This refined man of letters, the speculative philosopher, the great faqih, the adept man of medicine and the excellent master of theology was the late Hajj Mirza Ali Aqa al-Shirazi al-Isfahani, sanctified by Allah, a man of truth and wisdom who had attained deliverance from the finite self and selfhood and had merged with the Infinite Truth.

In spite of his sublime scholarly status and eminent social status, his sense of commitment to the society and burning love for Imam al- Hussain (as) compelled him to deliver sermons from the minbar. His sermons, since they came from the heart, had a deep effect on the hearts of his listeners. Whenever he visited Qum, the scholars of the first rank would persuade him to deliver his sermons from the minbar.[2] His sermons were charged with a passionate purity and sincerity that rendered them profoundly effective. They were not just words to be heard but a spiritual state to be experienced.

He, however, refrained from leading congregational prayers. One year, during the holy month of Ramadan, after a great deal of persuasion, he accepted to lead the prayers at Madrasat al-Sadr for that

month. In spite of the fact that he did not come regularly and refused to stick to any regular schedule, unprecedented crowds of people came to attend the prayers led by him. I heard that such strength declined in the jamaat in the neighborhood mosques and he, too, discontinued.

As far as I know, the people of Isfahan generally knew him in person and liked him. He was also loved at the theology school of Qum. The Ulama of Qum would eagerly set out to see him at the news of his arrival in the city. Like all other restrictions, he also refused to be bound by the conditions set for having admirers and followers. May Allah shower His infinite mercy upon him and lodge him in the company of His awliya on the Day of Resurrection.

Despite all his merits, I do not claim that he was familiar with all the worlds which Nahjul-Balagha embraces or that he had set his foot in all the domains encompassed by it. He had explored only a portion of its realms, and that a portion of Nahjul-Balagha had been incarnated in his personality. The universe of Nahjul-Balagha includes numerous worlds: The world of zuhd (renunciation of worldly pleasures) and taqwa (piety), the world of ibada (worship, devotion) and irfan (mystic knowledge), the world of hikma (wisdom) and philosophy, the world of moral preaching and guidance, the world of eschatology (malahim) and mysteries (mughayyabat), the world of politics and social responsibilities, the world of heroism and bravery, etc. too many worlds to be conquered by any single individual. Hajj Mirza Ali Aqa al-Shirazi had explored only a portion of this great ocean and knew it well.

Nahjul-Balagha And Present Days Islamic Society

The alienation from Nahjul-Balagha was not confined to me or to others like me. It pervaded through the Islamic society. Those who understood this book, their knowledge did not go beyond the translation of its words and the explanatory notes for its sentences. The spirit and the content of the book were hidden from the eyes of everyone. Only lately, it may be said, has the Islamic world begun to explore Nahjul-Balagha. In other words, Nahjul-Balagha has just started its conquest of the Muslim world.

What is surprising is that one part of Nahjul-Balagha, in Shi'ite Iran as well as in Arab countries, was first discovered either by atheists or non-Muslim theists who revealed the greatness of the book to the Muslims. Of course, the purpose of most or all of them was to utilize Nahjul-Balagha of Ali (as) for justifying and confirming their own social views. But the outcome was exactly the opposite of what they had desired. This is so because, for the first time, the Muslims have realized that the views expressed grandiloquently by others have nothing new to offer, and that they cannot surpass what is said in Nahjul-Balagha of Ali (as) or translated into action through the conduct (sira) of Ali (as) and his disciples such as Salman al-Farisi, Abu Dharr and 'Ammar.

The outcome was that instead of supporting the pretentious views of those who wished to exploit Nahjul-Balagha, Ali (as) and his book defeated their purpose. Nevertheless, it must be accepted that before this had taken place, most of us had little knowledge of Nahjul-Balagha, and it hardly went beyond appreciation of few sermons about the virtues of piety and abstinence.

Nobody had yet recognized the significance of the valuable epistle of Master Ali (as) to Malik al-Ashtar al-Nakhi; nobody had paid any attention to it.

As stated in the first and second chapters of this book, Nahjul- Balagha is a collection of sermons, precepts, epistles and aphorisms of Ali (as) compiled by Sayyid al-Sharif ar-Radi almost a thousand years ago. However, neither the recorded words of Master Ali (as) are confined to those collected by Sayyid ar-Radi, nor was he the only man to compile the sayings of Amir al-Mu'minin (as).

Al-Mas'udi, who lived a hundred years before Sayyid ar-Radi, in the second Volume of his work Muruj al- Dhahab, writes the following: "At present, there are over 480 sermons of Ali (as) in the hands of the people, whereas the total number of sermons included by Sayyid ar-Radi in his collection is only 239.

There are, at present, two kinds of work that must be accomplished with respect to Nahjul-Balagha, so that Ali's thought and views on various important issues expressed in Nahjul-Balagha, which are still relevant and are direly needed by the present-day Islamic society, may be brought to light.

The second kind of work required in relation to Nahjul-Balagha is researching the sources (asnad) and the documents relevant to its contents. Fortunately, we hear that Muslim scholars in various parts of the Islamic world are devoting themselves to undertaking both of these important tasks.

This book is a collection of a series of articles which originally appeared in the journal Maktab-e-Islam during from 1351 - 52 (1972-73), now presented to the learned readers in the form of the present book. Formerly, I had delivered five lectures on this topic at the Hussainiyyah Irshad.[3]Later, I took up with the idea of writing a series of articles to deal with the subject in greater detail.

From the outset, when I chose to call it "Sayr dar Nahjul- Balagha"(A Journey into Nahjul-Balagha), I was aware that my attempt would not deserve to be called more than a journey, or a short trip. This work, by no means, deserves to be called a research. I neither had the time nor the opportunity to conduct a research, nor did I consider myself fit for undertaking such a task. Moreover, a profound and comprehensive research study of the contents of Nahjul-Balagha, an exploration of the ideology of Ali (as), and, besides, a research about documenting its contents, is the job of a group, not of a single individual.

But, as it is said, that which cannot be attained in its entirety is not to be abandoned entirely[4]. And since humble attempts open the way for great tasks, I embarked upon my journey. Unfortunately, even this journey was not completed. The project that I had prepared for, and which the reader shall find mentioned in the third chapter, remained incomplete because of many preoccupations. I do not know if I will ever get the opportunity to continue my journey through Nahjul-Balagha. But it is my great desire to be able to do so.

A Literary Marvel

Nahjul-Balagha is a magnificent collection of the inimitable sermons, invocations (du'as), wills or pieces of advice, epistles and aphorisms of Amir al-Mu'minin (as), Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (as), compiled by Sayyid al-Sharif ar-Radi (may Allah be pleased with him) about one thousand years ago. Time and years have not only failed to diminish the impressive freshness of this work but have, instead, added constantly to its value as new concepts and ideas have emerged therefrom.

Ali (as) was undoubtedly a man of eloquence. He delivered a large number of speeches that became famous. Likewise, numerous sayings containing philosophical wisdom were heard from him. He wrote many letters, especially during the days of his caliphate, which his admirers recorded and preserved with remarkable interest and zeal.

Al-Mas'udi (d. 346/955-6), who lived almost a hundred years before Sayyid ar-Radi (d. 406/1115), in the second Volume of his book titled Muruj al-Dhahab, under the heading "Fi dhikr luma' min kalamih, wa akhbarih, wa zuhdih, says the following:

That which has been preserved by people of Ali's sermons, delivered on various occasions, exceeds 480 in number. Ali (as) used to deliver his extempore sermons without any prior preparation. The people recorded[5] his words and practically derived benefit from them.[6]

The testimony of an informed researcher and scholar like al- Mas'udi bears out the large number of Ali's speeches that were extant during his time. Only 239 of these have been handed down to us in Nahjul-Balagha, whereas their number, as mentioned by al-Mas'udi, was more than 480.

Moreover, al-Mas'udi informs us about the extraordinary dedication and ardor of various groups of people in recording and preserving Ali's words.

Sayyid Al-Radi And Nahjul-Balagha

Sayyid al-Sharif ar-Radi, or Sayyid ar-Radi, as he is commonly called, was an ardent admirer of Ali's speeches. He was a scholar, a poet and a man of cultivated taste. Al-Tha'alibi, his contemporary, says the following about him:

He is the most remarkable man among his contemporary and the noblest amongst the Sayyids of Iraq. Family and descent aside, he is fully adorned and endowed with literary excellence. He is the most remarkable poet among the descendants of Abu Talib, though there are many distinguished poets among them. To say that of all the tribesmen of Quraish no poet could ever surpass him would not be an exaggeration.[7]

It was on account of Sayyid ar-Radi's earnest love for literature in general, and his admiration of Ali's discourses in particular, that his interest was mainly literary in compiling Ali's words. Consequently, he

paid a greater attention to those passages which were more prominent from the literary point of view. This was the reason why he named his anthology Nahjul-Balagha[8] which means the "path of eloquence," giving little importance to mentioning his sources, a point rarely ignored by compilers of hadith (traditions).

Only at times does he casually mention the name of a certain book from which a particular sermon or epistle has been cited. In a book of history or hadith, it is of primary importance that the sources be precisely identified; otherwise, little credence can be given to it. The value of a literary masterpiece, however, lies in its intrinsic beauty, subtlety, elegance and depth.

Meanwhile, it is not possible to assert that Sayyid ar-Radi was entirely oblivious of the historical value and other dimensions of this sacred work, or that his attention was exclusively absorbed by its literary qualities.

Fortunately, after Sayyid ar-Radi, others took up the task of collecting the asnad of Nahjul-Balagha. Perhaps the most comprehensive book in this regard is Nahjul-Saada fi Mustadrak Nahjul-Balagha by Muhammad Baqir al-Mahmudi, a distinguished Shia scholar of Iraq. In this valuable book, all of Ali's extant speeches, sermons, decrees, epistles, supplications and sayings have been collected. It includes Nahjul-Balagha and other discourses which were not incorporated by Sayyid ar-Radi or were unavailable to him.

Apparently, except for some aphorisms, the original sources of all the contents of Nahjul-Balagha have been accounted for.[9]

It should be mentioned that Sayyid ar-Radi was not the only man to compile a collection of Ali's utterances; others, too, have compiled various books with different titles in this field. The most famous of them is Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim by al-Amudi on which Muhaqqiq [verifier] Jamal al-Din al-Khunsari has written a commentary in Persian which has been recently printed by the University of Tehran through the efforts of the eminent scholar Mir Jalal al-Din, the al-Urumawi traditionist.

Ali al-Jundi, dean of the faculty of sciences at the Cairo University, in the Introduction to the book titled Ali ibn Abu Talib (as): Shiruh wa Hikam cites a number of these collections some of which have not yet appeared in print and still exist as manuscripts. These are:

1) Dustur Ma'alim al-Hikam by al-Qudai, the author of Al-Khutat;

2) Nathr al-Laa li; this book has been translated and published by a Russian Orientalist in one bulky Volume.

3) Hikam Sayyidina Ali (as): A manuscript of this book exists in the Egyptian library, Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya.

Two Distinctive Characteristics

Since the earliest times, two distinct merits have been recognized as distinguishing Ali's discourses: Firstly, literary elegance (fasaha) and eloquence (balagha); secondly, their characteristic multi-dimensional nature. Any of these two qualities suffices for regarding Ali's words as valuable, but the combination of these two qualities (i.e. matchless eloquence, literary elegance and their multi-dimensional nature in that they deal with diverse and occasionally incompatible spheres of life) has made it almost miraculous. For this reason, Ali's speech enjoys a status in-between the speech of the human being and the Word of Allah. Indeed, it has been said of it that it is above the speech of beings and below the Word of the Creator.[10]

Literary Beauty And Elegance

This aspect of Nahjul-Balagha requires no introduction. Any reader of a cultivated literary taste, one capable of appreciating linguistic elegance and charm, surely realizes it. Basically, beauty is something perceived and experienced and not described or defined.

Nahjul-Balagha, even after nearly fourteen centuries, has retained the same attractiveness, freshness, charm and beauty for the present-day audience that it provided the people of earlier days. Here, we do not intend to give an elaborate proof of this claim. Nevertheless, as a part of our discourse, we shall briefly describe the marvelous power of the words of Ali (as) in moving hearts and infusing them with the feeling of wonder.

We shall start with Ali's own times and follow the effect of his discourses through the changes and variations in taste, outlook and mode of thought during different successive ages up to the present day.

The companions of Ali (as), particularly those who had a taste for language and literary grace, greatly admired him as an orator. Abdullah ibn Abbas is one of them. He, as al-Jahiz points out in his Al-Bayan wal-Tbyin[11], was a powerful orator.

He did not conceal his passion for listening to Ali (as) speak or the enjoyment he derived from it. Once, when Ali (as) was delivering his famous sermon called al-Shaqshaqiyya[12], ibn Abbas was also present. While Ali (as) was speaking, an ordinary man from Kufa handed him a piece of paper containing some questions, thus causing Ali (as) to discontinue his speech. Ali (as), after reading the sheet of paper, did not continue his speech in spite of Ibn Abbas urging him to do so.

Ibn Abbas later expressed his deep regret on that occasion, saying,

“Never in my life was I ever so sorry for interrupting a speech as I was for interrupting this sermon.[13]

Referring to a certain letter that Ali (as) had written to Ibn Abbas, the latter used to say, “Except for the speech of the Holy Prophet (S), I did not derive so much benefit from any utterance as I did from this

one."[14]

Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan, Ali's most contumacious enemy, also acknowledged the Imam's extraordinary eloquence. When Muhqin ibn Abu Muhqin forsook Ali (as) and joined Muawiyah, in order to please Muawiyah, whose heart surged with ill-will and bitterness towards Ali (as), he told him, I have left the dumbest of men and come to you. The flagrancy of this kind of flattery was so obvious that Muawiyah himself reproached him saying: "Woe unto you! Do you really call Ali (as) the dumbest of men?! Quraish knew nothing about eloquence before him. It was he who taught them the art of eloquence."

Effect Of Ali's Oratory

Those who heard Ali (as) speaking from the minbar were very much affected by his words. His sermons made hearts tremble and drew tears from the eyes. Even today, who can hear or read Ali's sermons without a tremor passing through his heart?

Sayyid ar-Radi, after narrating Ali's famous sermon al-Gharra'[15], says the following: "As Ali (as) delivered his sermon, tears flowed from the eyes of the listeners and hearts quivered with emotion.

Hamman ibn Shurayh, one of Ali's companions, was a man with a heart full of love for Allah and a soul burning with spiritual fire. At one time, he requested Ali (as) to describe the qualities of the pious and the God-fearing.

Ali (as), on the one hand, did not want to turn down his request and, on the other, he was concerned that Hamman might not be able to bear what Ali (as) would say. He, therefore, evaded this request, giving only a perfunctory description of piety and the pious. Hamman was not only dissatisfied with this, his eagerness was heightened, so he beseeched Ali (as) to speak with greater elaboration. Ali (as) commenced his famous sermon and began to describe the characteristics of the truly pious.

He enumerated about one hundred and five[16] qualities of such human beings and went on to describe more. But as Ali's words flowed in fiery sequence, Hamman was carried away to the very extremes of ecstasy. His heart throbbed terribly and his spirit was driven to the furthermost limits of emotion.

It advanced in eagerness like a restless bird trying to break out of its cage. Suddenly, there was a terrible cry and the audience turned around to find out that it came from no other man than Hamman himself.

Approaching him, they found out that his soul had already left its earthly abode to embrace an everlasting life. When this happened, Ali's remark, which carried both praise and regret, was: "I feared this would happen. Strange, yet this is how effective admonition affects sensitive hearts.[17] This is an example of the kind of influence which Ali's sermons had over the minds and the hearts of his contemporaries.

Views Of Ancient And Modern Scholars

After the Holy Prophet (S), Ali (as) alone has the distinction of being one whose speeches and sayings were recorded and preserved by the people with particular care.

Ibn Abul-Hadid quotes 'Abdul-Hamid al-Katib, the great master of Arabic prose[18] who lived during the early part of the second Hijri century, as saying, "I learned by heart seventy sermons of Ali (as), and from that time onwards, my mind always overflowed [with inspiration]."

Ali al-Jundi also relates that when 'Abdul-Hamid was asked about what had helped him most in attaining literary excellence, he replied, "Memorizing the discourses of the "bald one".[19]

Throughout the Islamic history, the name of 'Abdul-Rahman ibn Nubatah is proverbial for oratory among Arabs. He acknowledges that his intellectual and artistic attainments are indebted to Ali (as). Ibn Abul-Hadid quotes him as saying: "I committed to memory about a hundred discourses of Ali (as); since then, this has served me as an inexhaustible treasure [of inspiration]."

Al-Jahiz was a celebrated literary genius of the early third century of the Hijra, and his book Al-Bayan wal-Tabyin is regarded as one of the four main classics of Arabic literature[20]. Often, in his book, he expresses his great wonder and immense admiration for Ali's discourses. From his remarks, it is evident that a large number of Ali's sermons were commonly known to the people of his day.

In the first Volume of his Al- Bayan wal-Tabyin[21], after mentioning that some people praise precision in speech or prefer silence and disapprove profusion, al-Jahiz writes the following: "The profusion of speech that has been regarded with disapproval is futile talk, not so what is fruitful and illuminating; otherwise, Ali ibn Abu Talib (as) and 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas were men of prolific speech.

In the same Volume of his work, he quotes this famous sentence of Ali (as)[22]: "The value of a man lies in what he has mastered."[23]

Al Jahiz then devotes half a page to expressing his admiration for this sentence and writes further:

"If our book did not contain anything but this sentence, it would suffice it. The best speech is one the little of which makes you dispense with much of it, one in which the meanings are not concealed within words but stand out."

Then he remarks saying, "It appears as if Allah the Almighty has enveloped it with His glory and covered it with the light of wisdom proportionate to the piety and taqwa of its speaker."

Al-Jahiz, in the same work, where he discusses the oratory of Sa'sa'ah ibn Suhan al-'Abdi[24], says the following: "No greater proof of his excellence as an orator is required than the fact that Ali (as) occasionally came to him and asked him to deliver a speech.

Sayyid ar-Radi's following remarks in appreciation and praise of the speech of Imam Ali (as) are famous: Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (as) was the reservoir and fountain head of eloquence which derived its principles from his speeches and revealed its secrets through him. Every orator of mark tried to imitate him and every preacher learned from him the art of eloquence.

Nevertheless, others lagged far behind him while he excelled them all. His speech (alone) bears the imprint of Divine Wisdom and the fragrance of the Prophet's eloquence.

Ibn Abul-Hadid is a Mutazilite scholar of the 7th Hijri/13th A.D. century. He was a masterly writer and an adept poet, and, as we know, a man who adored Ali's discourses. Accordingly, he expressed his profound admiration for Ali (as) repeatedly throughout his book.

In the Introduction to his famous commentary on Nahjul-Balagha, he writes the following: "Truly have Ali's discourse been regarded as inferior only to that of the Creator and superior to that of all creatures. All people have learned the arts of oration and writing from him. Suffices to say that people have not recorded even one-tenth of one-twentieth of the speech of any other companion of the Prophet (S), of what they recorded and preserved of Ali's discourses, although there were many eloquent persons among them."

Again, it is sufficient that a man such as al-Jahiz has so much praise for Ali (as) in his book Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin.

Ibn Abul-Hadid, in the fourth Volume of his commentary, says the following about Imam Ali's letter to Abdullah ibn Abbas (written after the fall of Egypt to Muawiyah's forces and the martyrdom of Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr, a letter in which Ali [x] breaks the news of this disaster to Abdullah, who was then in Basra)25:

"Look how eloquence has given its reins into the hands of this man and is docile to his every signal! Observe the wonderful order of words coming one after the other to bow in his presence, or gushing like a spring that flows effortlessly out of the ground.

Praise be to Allah! An Arab youth grows up in a town like Mecca, one who has never met any sage or philosopher, yet his discourses have surpassed those of Plato and Aristotle in eloquence and profundity. He has no discourse with men of wisdom, yet he has surpassed Socrates.

He has not grown up among warriors and heroes but amongst traders and merchants, for the people of Mecca were not a warrior nation but traders, yet he emerges as the greatest of all warriors of supreme courage who have ever walked on the face of earth."Al-Khalili ibn Ahmed [al-Farahidi, the renowned linguist] was asked once: "Of Ali (as), Bastam, and 'Anbasah, who was the most courageous?" Replied he, "Bastam and 'Anbasah should be compared with other men; Ali (as) was superior to human beings. He came from Quraish who were not the foremost in eloquence, for the most eloquent among Arabs were Banu Jurham, although they were not famous for wisdom or wit. Yet Ali (as) surpassed even

Sahban ibn Wa'il and Qays ibn Sadah in eloquence."

Modern Perspectives

During the fourteen centuries that have passed since Ali's times, the world has seen innumerable changes in language, culture and taste. One may be led to think that Ali's discourses, although they might have invoked the adoration of the ancient ones, may not suit the modern taste. But one would be surprised to learn that such is not the case at all. From the point of view of literary form and content, Ali's discourses have the rare quality of transcending the limits imposed by time and place. That Ali's discourses are universal in their appeal to men of all times we shall discuss later. Here, after quoting the views of classical writers, we shall quote the relevant views expressed by our contemporaries.

The late Shaikh Muhammad Abdo, formerly Mufti of Egypt, is a man who came to know Nahjul-Balagha by accident. This preliminary acquaintance grew into a passionate love for the sacred book, leading him into writing a commentary on it. It also prompted him to undertake making it popular among the Arab youths.

In the Preface to his commentary, he says the following: "Among all those who speak the Arabic language, there is not a single man who does not believe that Ali's discourses, after the Qur'an and the ahdith of the Prophet (S), are the most noble, the most eloquent, the most profound and the most comprehensive."

Ali al-Jundi, once Dean of the Faculty of Sciences at the Cairo University, in his book titled Ali ibn Abu Talib: Shi'ruhu wa Hikamuh, writing about Ali's prose saying the following: "A certain musical rhythm which moves the innermost depths of the soul is characteristic of these discourses. The phrases are so rhymed that it can be called poetic prose.

He then quotes Qudamah ibn Jafar as saying: "Some have shown mastery in short sayings and others in long discourses, but Ali (as) has surpassed all others in both of these, even as he has surpassed them in other merits as well."

Taha Hussain, the renown Egyptian writer, in his book Ali wa Banuh (Ali [as] and His Sons), recounts the story of a particular man during the Battle of al-Jamal. The man is in doubt as to which of the two sides is on the right track.

He says to himself, "How is it possible that such personalities like Talhah and az-Subayr should be at fault? He informs Ali (as) of his dilemma and asks him whether it is possible that such great personalities and men of established repute should be in error."

Ali (as) answered him in the following: "You are seriously mistaken and have reversed the measure! Truth and falsehood are not measured by the worth of individuals. First, find out what is true and what is false, then you will see who stands by the truth and who is with falsehood."

What Ali (as) means is: “You have reversed your measuring criteria. Truth and falsehood are not measured by the nobility of birth or by how base and lowly one’s birth is. Instead of regarding truth and falsehood as the measure of nobility and meanness, you prejudge persons by your own pre-conceived notions of nobility and meanness. Reverse your approach. First of all, find out the truth itself, then you will be able to recognize who are truthful. Find out what falsehood is, then you will identify those who are wrong. It is not significant which person stands by the truth and which one sides with falsehood.”

After quoting Ali’s above-mentioned reply, Taha Hussain says the following: “Next to the Revealed Word of Allah, I have never seen a more glorious and admirably expressed view than this reply of Ali (as).”

Shakib Arsalan, nicknamed “Amir al-Bayan”(the master of clear speech), is another celebrated writer. Once in a gathering held in his honor in Egypt, a speaker mounted the rostrum and, in the course of his speech, remarked saying, “There are two individuals in the history of Islam each one of whom can truly be called Amir al-Bayan: one is Ali ibn Abu Talib (as) and the other is Shakib [Arsalan]. It was then that Shakib Arsalan (1871-1946) felt very irritated. He left his seat and walked to the rostrum. Deploring the comparison which his friend had just made between Ali (as) and himself, he said: “What comparison can there be between Ali (as) and me?! I am not worth to be compared even to the strap of Ali’s sandals![26]

In the Introduction to the book titled Imam Ali (as) by George Jurdaq, a Lebanese Christian writer, Michael Naimah, also a Lebanese Christian writer, says the following: “Ali (as) was not only a champion on the battlefield but also a hero in all other fields: in the sincerity of heart, in the purity of conscience, in the spell-binding magic of speech, in true humanitarianism, in the fineness and warmth of faith, in the height of tranquility, in the readiness to help the oppressed and the wronged, and in total submission to the truth wherever it may be and whichever form it assumes. He was a hero in all these fields.”

I do not intend to quote more from the writings of those who paid tributes to Ali (as), for the above-quoted remarks are sufficient to prove my point. One who praises Ali (as) extols his own merit for:

He who admires the Sun’s brilliance extols himself:

My two eyes are bright and my vision is not clouded.

I conclude my discourse with Ali’s own statement about himself. One day, one of his companions attempted to deliver a speech. He could not; he found himself tongue-tied. Ali (as) said to him: “You should know that the tongue is a part of man and under the command of his mind. If the mind lacks stimulation and refuses to budge, his tongue will not assist him. However, if the mind is ready, his speech will not give him a respite. Indeed, we (Ahl al-Bayt) are the masters of (the domain of) speech. In us are sunk its roots and over us are hung its branches.”[27]

Al Jahiz, in the al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, relates from ‘Abdullah ibn al-Hassan ibn Ali (as) that Ali (as) once said: “We (Ahl al-Bayt) are superior to others in five qualities: eloquence, good looks, forgiveness, courage, and popularity with women!”[28]

Now, we shall take up another characteristic of Ali's discourses which, in fact, is the main theme of this book, that is, multi- dimensionality.

Nahjul-Balagha Among Literary Classics

Most nations possess certain literary works which are regarded as "masterpieces" or "classics". Here, we shall limit our discussion to the classics of Arabic and Persian literature whose merits are more or less perceptible by us, leaving the other classics of the ancient world, of Greece and Rome and so on, and the masterpieces of the modern age from Italy, England, France and other countries to be discussed and evaluated by those who are familiar with them and are qualified to discuss them.

Of course, an accurate judgement about the classics of Arabic and Persian is possible only for scholars who have specialized in classical literature. But it is an accepted fact that everyone of these masterpieces is great only in a particular aspect, not in each and every aspect. To be more precise, every one of the authors of these classics displayed his mastery only in a single, specific field to which his ingenuity was confined. Occasionally, if one left his special field to tread other grounds, he failed miserably.

In Persian, there are numerous masterpieces in mystical ghazal, general ghazal, qasidah, epic, spiritual and mystical allegorical poetry, etc. But, as we know, none of the world renown Persian poets has succeeded in creating masterpieces in all these literary forms.

Hafiz is famous for mystical ghazal, Sadi for anecdotes and general ghazal, Firdawsi for epic, Rumi for his allegorical and spiritual poetry, Khayyam for his philosophic pessimism and Nizami for something else.

For this reason, it is not possible to compare them with one another or prefer one over the other. All that can be said is that each one of them is foremost in his own field. If occasionally one of these poetic geniuses left his special field to try another literary form, a visible decline in quality was readily perceptible. The same is true of Arab poets of the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods.

There is an anecdote in Nahjul-Balagha that once Ali (as) was asked this question: "Who is the foremost among Arab poets? Ali (as) replied: "To be sure, all poets did not tread one and the same path so that you may tell who is the leader and who is the follower. But if one were forced to choose one of them, I would say that the foremost among them was al-Malik al-Dilleel (the nickname of 'Imri'ul-Qays)."[29]

In his commentary, Ibn Abul-Hadid cites with asnad (authentic sources/references/transmitters) an anecdote under the above-mentioned comment. Here is what he writes the following: "During the holy month of Ramadan, it was Ali's custom to invite people to dinner. The guests were offered meat, but Ali (as) himself abstained from eating the food which was prepared for the guests.

After the dinner, Ali (as) would address them and impart moral instruction to them. One night, as they sat

for dinner, a discussion commenced about the poets of the past. After the dinner, Ali (as), in the course of his discourse, said: “The faith is the criterion of your deeds; taqwa is your shield and protector; good manners are your adornment, and forbearance is the fortress of your honor. Then, turning to Abul-Aswad al-Du’ali, who was present there then and who had moments ago taken part in the discussion about poets, said, “Let us see, who in your opinion is the most meritorious of poets?”

Abul-Aswad recited a verse of Abu Dawud al-Ayadi, remarking that in his opinion, Abu Dawud was the greatest poet. “You are mistaken; such is not the case,” Ali (as) told him, whereupon the guests, seeing Ali (as) taking an interest in their discussion, pressed him to express his opinion as to whom he considered to be the best among poets. Ali (as) said to them, “It is not right to give a judgement in this matter for, to be certain, the pursuits of the poets are not confined to a single field so that we may point out the forerunner among them. Yet, if one were forced to choose one of them, then it may be said that the best of them is one who composes not according to the period’s inclinations, nor out of fear and inhibition, [but he who gives free rein to his imagination and poetic inspiration].”Asked about whom this description would fit, Ali (as) replied, “Al-Malik al-Dilleel, Imri’ul-Qays.”

It is said that when someone inquired about who the most eminent poet of the Jahiliyyah (the pre-Islamic period) was, Yunus ibn Habib al-Dabbi (d. 798 A.D.), the famous grammarian, answered as follows: “The greatest of poets is Imri’ul-Qays when he mounts his steed [i.e. when he composes epic poetry motivated by the feelings of courage and bravery and the passions roused on the battlefield], al-Nabighah al- Thubyani [the genius belonging to Banu Thubyan] when he flees in fear [i.e. when he expresses himself on the psychological effects of danger and fright], al-Zuhayr ibn Abu Sulma when he takes delight [in something], and al-Asha [the one who could not see very well], when he is in a merry and joyful mood. Yunus meant to say that every one of these poets had a special talent in his own field, one in which his works are considered as masterpieces. Each of them was foremost in his own speciality beyond which his talent and genius did not extend.

Ali’s Versatility

One of the outstanding characteristics of Imam Ali’s sayings, which have come down to us in the form of Nahjul-Balagha, is that such sayings are not confined to any particular field alone. Ali (as), in his own words, has not trodden one single path only but has covered diverse grounds which occasionally are quite antithetical.

Nahjul-Balagha is a masterpiece but not of the kind which excels in one single field such as the epic, the ghazal, the sermon, the praise, the satire or the love poetry. Rather, it covers multifarious fields as shall be elaborated on. In fact, works which are masterpieces in a particular field do, indeed, exist; nevertheless, their number is not great, and they are countable. The number of works which cover numerous subjects but are not masterpieces is quite large. But the characteristic that a work be simultaneously a masterpiece without restricting itself to any one particular subject is an exclusive merit

of Nahjul-Balagha. With the exception of the Holy Qur'an, which is altogether a different subject to be dealt with independently, what masterpiece is comparable to Nahjul-Balagha's versatility?

Speech is the spirit's envoy, and the words of a man relate to the sphere in which his spirit dwells. Naturally, a speech which pertains to multiple spheres is characteristic of a spirit which is too creative to be confined to a single sphere. Since the spirit of Ali (as) is not limited to a particular domain but encompasses various spheres and he, in the terminology of Islamic mystics, is al-Insan al-Kamil (a perfect man), al-kawn al-jami' (the complete microcosm) and jami' kullal-hadarat[30] (the possessor of all higher virtues), so his speech is not limited to any one particular sphere.

Accordingly, as we should say, in terms current nowadays, that Ali's merit lies in the multi-dimensional nature of his speech, that it is different from one-dimensional works. The all- embracing nature of Ali's spirit and his speech is not a recent discovery. It is a feature which has invoked a sense of wonder since at least one thousand years. It was this quality that had attracted the attention of Sayyid ar-Radi a thousand years ago, and he fell in love with Ali's speeches and writings.

He writes saying, "Of Ali's wonderful qualities, which exclusively belong to him, none sharing them with him, is that when one reflects upon his discourses regarding abstinence (zuhd), and his exhortations concerning spiritual awareness, for a while one totally forgets that the speaker of these words was a person of the highest social and political caliber, one who ruled over vast regions during his time, and his word was an order for all. Even for a moment, the thought does not enter the reader's mind that the speaker of these words might have been inclined to anything except piety and seclusion, anything except devotion and worship, having selected a quiet corner of his house or a cave in some mountain valley where he heard no voice except his own and knew nobody except himself, being totally oblivious of the world and its hustle and bustle.

It is unbelievable that those sublime discourses on asceticism, detachment and abstinence and those spiritual exhortations came from somebody who pierced the enemy's ranks and went fighting to the very heart of their forces, with a sword in his hand, poised to sever the enemy heads, and who threw many a mighty warrior down from his steed, causing him to roll into blood and dust. Blood drips from the edge of his sword and yet he is the most pious of saints and the most devoted of sages."

Sayyid ar-Radi adds saying, "Frequently, I discuss this matter with friends, and it equally invokes their sense of wonder."

Shaikh Muhammad 'Abdo, too, was profoundly moved by this aspect of Nahjul-Balagha, and it made him marvel at its swiftly changing scenes which take the reader on a journey through different worlds. He makes a note of it in the Introduction to his commentary of Nahjul- Balagha.

Aside from his speech, in general, Ali (as) had a spirit that was universal, all-embracing, and multi-dimensional, and he has always been eulogized for this quality. He is a just ruler, a devotee who remains awake all night long worshipping Allah; he weeps in the niche of prayer (mihrab) and smiles on

the battlefield. He is a tough warrior and a soft- hearted and kind guardian. He is a philosopher of profound insight and an able general. He is a teacher, a preacher, a judge, a jurist, a peasant and a writer. He is a perfect man whose great soul envelops all spheres of the human spirit.

Safi al-Din al-Hilli (1277-1349 A.D.) says the following about him:

Opposites have come together in thy attributes,
And for that thou has no rivals.
A devout, a ruler, a man of forbearance, and a courageous one,
A lethal warrior, an ascetic, a pauper yet generous to others,
Traits which never gathered in one man and the like of which none ever possessed;
A gentleness and charm to abash the morning breeze, A valor and might to melt sturdy rocks;
Poetry cannot describe the glory of thy soul,
Your multi-faceted personality is above the comprehension of all critics.

Apart from what has been said, an interesting point is that in spite of the fact that Ali's discourses are about spiritual and moral issues, in them his literary charm and eloquence have attained their peak. Ali (as) has not dealt with popular poetic themes such as love, wine and vainglory, which are fertile subjects for literary expression in prose and poetry.

Moreover, he did not aim at displaying his skills in the art of oratory.

Speech for him was a means and not an end in itself. Neither did he intend to create an object of are nor did he wish to be known as an author of a literary masterpiece. Above all, his words have a universality which transcends the limits of time and place. His addressee is the human being within every person; accordingly, his message does not know any frontier although, generally, time and place impose limits on the outlook of a speaker and confine his personality.

The main aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is that its subjects and themes are altogether at variance with those current during the time of its revelation. It marks the beginning of a new era in literature and deals with another world and a different sphere. The beauty and charm of its style and its literary excellence are truly miraculous. In these aspects, too, as is the case with its other features, Nahjul-Balagha comes closer to the Qur'an. In truth, it is the offspring of the Holy Qur'an.

Themes Of Nahjul-Balagha

The variety of topics and themes discussed in Nahjul-Balagha unfolds a wide spectrum of problems that give color and hue to these heavenly discourses. The author of this dissertation has no pretension to possess the ability to do the book full justice and analyze it in depth. I just intend to give a brief account of the variety of its themes, and it is my firm belief that others will come in the future who shall be able to do justice to this masterpiece of human power of speech.

A Glance At The Varied Problems Covered By Nahjul-Balagha

The various topics covered in Nahjul-Balagha, everyone of which is worthy of discussion, may be outlined as follows:

- Theological and metaphysical issues;
- Mystic path and worship;
- Government and social justice;
- Ahl al-Bayt (as) and the issue of caliphate;
- Wisdom and admonition; the world and worldliness;
- Heroism and bravery
- Predictions, predictions, and eschatology;
- Prayers and invocations;
- Critiques of the contemporary society;
- Social philosophy;
- Islam and the Qur'an;
- Morality and self-discipline;
- Personalities... and a host of other topics.

Obviously, as the titles of the various chapters of the present book indicate, the writer of this Introduction does not make any claim that the topics cited above are all that can be found in Nahjul-Balagha. Neither does he claim that he has done an exhaustive study of these topics, nor has he any pretension to being considered competent for undertaking such a task. That which is offered in these chapters is no more than a glimpse.
Perhaps, in the future, with Divine assistance, after deriving a greater benefit from this inexhaustible treasure, the writer may be able to undertake a more comprehensive study. Or perhaps others may be blessed with the opportunity to accomplish such an undertaking. Allah is wise and, indeed, His assistance and help is the best.

1. Nahjul-Balagha, sermon 193.
2. Minbar is a raised platform with steps, the Islamic pulpit. Traditionally, the function of speaking at mourning gatherings, the majalis, has been performed in Iran by the mullahs, or ruhaniyyun, as they are called there.
3. Hussainiyyeh Irshad is a building in Tehran founded by the late Dr. Ali Shariati- Tr.

4. This is in reference to an Arabic maxim: That which cannot be attained in entirety is not to be abandoned completely.
5. Here, it is not clear whether al-Mas'udi means that Ali's sermons were recorded in writing, in books, or if he implies that people preserved them by memorizing them, or if he means both.
6. al-Mas`udi, Muruj al-Dhahab, (Beirut, 1983), Vol. 2, p. 431.
7. al-Thaalibi as quoted by Muhammad `Abdo in Sharh Nahjul-Balagha, Introduction, p. 9.
8. Nahj means an open way, a road, a course, a method, a path, or a manner; balaghah means eloquence, thy e are of good style and communication, rhetoric, etc.
9. Here, the author adds that "Till now, four Volumes of this book have been published."
10. The arabic is: fawqa kalamil makhluq wa duna kalam ul Khaliq.
11. al-Jahiz, Al-Bayan wal-tabyin, Vol. I p. 230.
12. Nahjul-Balagha, Khutab, No. 3.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. Rasa'il, No. 22.
15. Ibid. Rasa'il, No. 83.
16. According to my own counting, if I have not made a mistake.
17. Nahjul-Balagha, Khutab, No. 193.
18. Abdul-Hamid was a scribe (katib) at the court of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan ibn Muhammad. Of Persian origin, he was the teacher of the famous Ibn al-Muqaffa. It was said of him, The era of writing began with Abdul-Hamid and ended with ibn al-Amid. Ibn al-Amid was a minister to the Buwayhids.
19. Asla means someone whose frontal status, portion of the head, is bald. Abdul-Hamid, while admitting the greatness of Imam Ali (as), mentions him in a detracting manner due to his attachment to the Umayyad court.
20. The other three being: Adab al-kitab of Ibn Qutaybah, Al-Kamil, of al- Mubarrad, and al-Nawadir of Abu Ali (as) al-Qali: quoted from the introduction to Al-Bayan wal-Tabyin by ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddamah.
21. Al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, Vol. I p. 202.
22. Ibid. Vol. I, p. 83.
23. Nahjul-Balagha, Hikam, No. 81. See also Sayyid ar-Radi's comment on this aphorism.
24. Sa`sa`ah ibn Suhan al-Abdi was one of the eminent companions of Imam Ali (as). When, after the death of the third caliph, Ali (as) became the caliph. It was Sa`sa`ah who said to him: You [by assuming the caliphate] have given it beauty, while caliphate has not added luster to your personality. You have raised its worth, and it has not raised your station. It stands in a greater need of you than you need it.
25. Nahjul-Balagha, Rasaail, No. 35.
26. This anecdote was related by Muhammad Jawad Maghniyyah, a contemporary Lebanese scholar, at the occasion of a reception party given in his honor in the holy city of Mashhad.
27. Nahjul-Balagha, Khutab, No. 230.
28. al-Jahiz, op. cit. Vol. 2, p. 99.
29. A poetic form much popular in classical Arabic and Persian poetry. Ghazal is also another poetic form.
30. Imri'ul-Qays (500-540 AD) is the famous poet of the pre-Islamic era (Jahiliyyah), the author of the first Muallaqat; Al-Malik al-Dillili is his nickname.

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