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## Book Reviews



al-Sharīf al-Raḍī. *Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ‘Alī*. Parallel Arabic-English Text. Edited and translated by Tahera Qutbuddin. Islamic Translation Series. Leiden: Brill, 2024. xiii + 1010 pp. Glossary, appendix, bibliography, indexes. E-Book (PDF). ISBN 978-90-04-68260-3. Open Access. Hardback. ISBN 978-90-04-68259-7. \$300.00.

Few works in Arabic literature have exerted simultaneous command of the heart, intellect, and tongue as powerfully as *Nahj al-balāgha*. Celebrated not only for its rhetorical brilliance but also for its enduring spiritual and moral insight, after the Quran it stands as one of the most profound treasuries of guidance in the Islamic tradition. The teachings it preserves are attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, the fourth Caliph in Sunni Islam, and regarded by many, especially within the Shi‘i tradition, as the Prophet’s spiritual heir. Imam ‘Alī’s sayings offer a compelling vision of doctrine, philosophy, ethics, counsel, and practical wisdom. His sermons, letters, and aphorisms were later selected and compiled in the fourth/tenth century by the distinguished scholar al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015) whose editorial hand shaped the work’s lasting impact and literary form. This award-winning volume was edited and translated by Tahera Qutbuddin, who is the Abdulaziz Saud Albabtain Laudian Professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford. It offers not only a critical edition and an elegant English rendering, but also a significant scholarly introduction that contextualizes the text’s historical, theological, and literary importance. The accompanying Arabic text (the parallel Arabic-English text format is standard in Brill’s Islamic Translation Series) is particularly useful to seasoned Arabists, as it gives them a clear window into the linguistic power and energy of the original language.

The structure of the volume mirrors the traditional tripartite division established by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī: orations (*khuṭab*), letters (*rasā’il*), and sayings (*ḥikam*). ‘Alī’s orations, articulated in rhythmic prose (*saja’*), are filled with powerful imagery and cover a vast range of themes from divine unity and hu-

man mortality to political counsel and spiritual exhortation. The letters, addressed to governors, companions, and adversaries, reveal ‘Alī’s administrative prowess and ethical integrity. The sayings offer distilled wisdom in the form of maxims and aphorisms, many of which have come to form the fabric of Islamic ethical thought.

This edition and translation is accompanied by extensive appendices and back matter, which serve as a vital resource for students and researchers alike. The “Glossary of Names, Places, and Terms” provides historical and biographical context for figures mentioned in the text, while the “Appendix of Sources” traces the provenance of individual sermons, letters, and sayings, enabling critical engagement with the textual tradition. The work also includes a comprehensive bibliography and multiple indexes that have been meticulously crafted to facilitate cross-referencing and thematic exploration: an “Index of Names and Places;” “Index of Terms;” and an “Index of Quran, Hadith, Poetry, and Proverbs.” The inclusion of an Arabic “Index of Religious and Moral Concepts” (فهرس المفاهيم الدينية والأخلاقية) underscores the work’s utility for Arabic-speaking audiences and scholars of Islamic ethics. These supporting materials elevate the volume from a literary translation to a full-fledged academic edition that invites both close textual study and broader theological reflection.

Qutbuddin’s introduction is itself a masterwork. She presents a detailed study of ‘Alī’s life, his political struggles, and his multifaceted legacy across the Sunni, Shi‘i, and Sufi traditions. She traces the oratorical culture of early Islam and explores the question of authenticity through orality theory and textual criticism, drawing on her earlier research in *Arabic Oration*. The manuscript base for her Arabic edition includes some of the earliest surviving codices, several of which were compared against versions that go back to al-Raḍī himself.

This volume is without doubt the definitive edition of the *Nahj al-balāgha*. A work of this caliber requires not only complete command of the Arabic language, but also deep proficiency in the full spectrum of the classical literary sciences. These include syntax (*‘ilm al-naḥw*), morphology (*‘ilm al-ṣarf*), philology (*fiqh al-luġha*), and etymology (*‘ilm al-ishtiḳāq*), all of which underpin the semantic precision of Arabic expression. Equally essential are the disciplines that constitute rhetoric (*‘ilm al-balāgha*): contextual semantics and sentence construction (*‘ilm al-ma‘ānī*), figurative language and clarity (*‘ilm al-bayān*), and ornamentation and linguistic devices (*‘ilm al-badī‘*). Mastery of prosody (*‘ilm al-‘arūḍ*) and rhyme (*‘ilm al-qāfiya*) further allows one to appreciate the rhythmic force and sonic architecture of ‘Alī’s oratory. Furthermore, disciplines related to the Quran, such as Quranic exegesis (*‘ulūm al-tafsīr*), theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), ethics (*akhlāq*), and spirituality (*taṣawwuf*), are crucial for unpacking the layered meanings, scriptural allusions, and resonances that character-

ize this text. For the most part, Qutbuddin's translation is both faithful and fluid: the English translation often matches the intensity of the Arabic.

For the remainder of this review, I would like to focus on the translations of two passages that address an important theme in *Nahj al-balāgha*, namely the distinctive spiritual and ethical qualities of the faithful believer (*mu'min*).

(1) 3:319 (p. 783) outlines the characteristics of the believer:

المؤمن بشره في وجهه وحزنه في قلبه أوسع شيء صدرًا وأذل شيء نفساً

Qutbuddin renders this as: "A believer shows his joy in his face and hides his sorrow in his heart. His generosity is vast, his humility is deep." While elegant, this translation introduces the verbs "shows" and "hides," which are not present in the Arabic. The original phrasing, *bishru-hu fi wajhihi wa-ḥuznuhu fi qalbihi*, offers no verbal markers, thus emphasizing the *state* of the believer rather than implying any deliberate display or concealment. This subtlety is important: it suggests that the believer's joyous countenance and inward sorrow are intrinsic aspects of his being and not performative displays.

The following two descriptions are expressed in the superlative: *awsa'u shay'in ṣadr<sup>an</sup>* (the broadest in breast) and *adhallu shay'in naḥs<sup>an</sup>* (the humblest of self). Here, the term *ṣadr*, unfortunately flattened into "generosity" in the translation, warrants closer attention. In Arabic, *ṣadr* literally means "chest" or "bosom," but it signifies far more: an expansive inner capacity, a heart open to divine light, tolerance, and spiritual receptivity. The Quran refers to this in its address to the Prophet: "Did We not expand your breast for you?" (*a-lam nashraḥ laka ṣadrak*, Q 94:1), alluding to the Prophet's capacity to bear the gravity of revelation. In the Sufi tradition, the *ṣadr* is considered the first and outermost station of the heart—preceding the *qalb* (heart), *fu'ād* (inner heart) and *lubb* (kernel), and thus represents the entry point for divine illumination.

The phrase *awsa'u shay'in ṣadr<sup>an</sup>* implies a magnanimity that surpasses all else, a vastness of spirit that can encompass creation and reflect divine attributes. When paired with "the humblest of self," this forms a classical *balāgha* paradox: the more capacious and spiritually radiant the inner being, the humbler and more effaced the self. In this rhetorical symmetry, magnanimity and humility are not opposites but correlates; the greater the expansiveness of the breast/heart, the greater the dissolution of one's ego and selfhood before the divine presence.

Finally, the contrast between joy on the face and sorrow in the heart gestures toward the inner dialectic of *rajā'* (hope) and *khawf* (fear), central to spiritual psychology. The believer carries both—offering the world the light of joy,

while bearing in his heart the burden of awe, compassion, and longing. Such layers of meaning, deeply embedded in the Arabic phrasing and cosmology, call for a translation that can reflect not only the semantic range, but the spiritual architecture of the original.

(2) 1.217 (p. 500) describes the stages of the believer's journey back to God:

قد أحيا عقله وأمات نفسه حتى دقَّ جليله ولطف غليظه وبرق له لامع كثير  
البرق فأبان له الطريق وسلك به السبيل

Qutbuddin translates this phrase as: “This man resuscitated his intellect and killed his sentient soul, until his body became emaciated and his frame became slight. Lightning shone in a brilliant flash that illuminated the road for him and showed the way.” In this difficult and densely symbolic passage, however, “resuscitated” is not the most felicitous choice. In English usage, “resuscitate” typically denotes restoring life after clinical or physical death, a connotation that risks suggesting the *‘aql* (intellect) was lifeless or inert. This does not reflect the sense of *ahyā*, which here denotes enlivening, activating, or bringing the intellect to full realization. The term participates in the broader spiritual vocabulary of *ihyā*, signaling awakening rather than revival from extinction.

Similarly, the *nafs* in this context is not best rendered as the “sentient soul,” but rather what Q 12:53 refers to as the lower self that commands to ugliness (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sū*). Accordingly, “killing the ego” better captures the intended meaning, pointing to the disciplined spiritual struggle (*riyāḍa*) by which the ego is subdued under the guidance of the illumined intellect. The paired expressions *daqqa jaliluhu* and *laṭufa ghalizuhu* further complicate a purely physical reading. While these phrases may allude to bodily refinement, their primary force lies in ethical and spiritual transformation: what was once coarse, weighty, or harsh, whether in form or character, has become subtle, gentle, and refined. This recalls the juxtaposition in Q 3:159 between *ghilẓat al-qalb*, or harshness of heart, and the prophetic virtue of *luyūnat al-qalb*, or gentleness of heart.

The subsequent imagery—“a brilliant flash, with frequent lightning, shone for him”—functions as a classic symbol of sudden unveiling (*kashf*) and repeated moments of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*). The light does not merely illuminate the path abstractly, it actively discloses the way and carries the seeker forward upon it. In this respect, the passage stands as one of the most eloquent articulations of mystical epistemology and spiritual wayfaring in the Sufi tradi-

tion: the activation of the intellectual faculty (*'aql*), the subjugation of the ego (*nafs*), the refinement of character, the reception of divine flashes of insight, and the attendant luminous journey back to God.

Nevertheless, the translation of the passage in question does admirably succeed in capturing the arc of transformation that lies at the heart of 'Alī's vision, as well as the spirit and momentum of his stunning Arabic style.

*Nahj al-balāgha* has long occupied a special place in my intellectual and spiritual formation. Like the translator, I was introduced to its luminous teachings at an early age, when I could barely fathom the depth of its philosophical insights and moral gravity. Yet its words left an indelible mark on my being, imperceptibly shaping my ethical compass and spiritual sensibility. Only later did I come to recognize the extent to which its wisdom helped chart the course of my path as a practitioner and scholar. In reading Qutbuddin's masterful translation, I felt once again the stirrings of that early encounter, now deepened, clarified, and magnified through her faithful and elegant rendering. Through this marvelous edition and translation, the wisdom and light of Imam 'Alī's words are now accessible to a new generation of students and scholars; and for this, we are all deeply indebted to Tahera Qutbuddin.

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