

Introduction to Nahjul Balagha

Nahjul Balagha is a collection of the sermons, letters and sayings of Imam Ali (a). It is considered to be one of the masterpieces of Islamic literature, second only to the words of the Holy Prophet (s). Imam Ali (a) was an eloquent speaker and his words were very effective. The topics in Nahjul Balagha deal with different religious subjects and teach people how to be pious and prepare for the Hereafter.

Before Nahjul Balagha was compiled, the words of Imam Ali (a) existed in different books. A scholar by the name of Sharif ar-Radhi gathered some of them and compiled them into one book. He called the book Nahjul Balagha – the Peak of Eloquence. It is not a complete compilation of all that Imam (a) said and wrote. There are some sermons and sayings of Imam Ali (a) which exist in other books but are not there in Nahjul Balagha.

What non-Shia scholars have to say about Nahjul Balagha

1) Ibne-Abil Hadeed-e-Mu'tazali (d.655 A.H.) has written a commentary on Nahjul Balagha. He says:

'His speeches, letters and sayings are so supremely eminent that they are above the sayings of man and below only to the words of God. None can surpass it but the Holy Quran.'

'His sayings are a miracle of the Holy Prophet (A.S.). His prophecies show that his knowledge was superhuman.'

2) The Mufti of Egypt, Shaikh Mohammed Abdahu (1323 A.H.) has written a commentary on Nahjul Balagha. He was a modern thinker who made the world realize the beauty of Islam. He was also a professor of Arabic literature and philosophy. He persuaded the Universities of Cairo and Beirut to include the book Nahjul Balagha in their courses for advance studies of literature and philosophy. In his introduction to his commentary he writes:

'Everyone who fully understands Arabic language must agree that the sermons and sayings of Hazrat (a.s.) are next only to the words of God and the Holy Prophet (s). Ali's words are so full of meanings and they convey such great ideas that this book Nahjul Balagha should be very carefully studied, referred and quoted by students as well as teachers.'

3) The famous Christian moralist, author and poet, Polos Salamah in his book *Awal-lay-Mulhamah-e-Arabia*" (printed at Alnaseer Press of Beirut) says:

'The famous book Nahjul Balagha is the work which makes one realize the great mind of Ali Abu Talib. No book can surpass it but the Quran. In it you will find pearls of knowledge strung in beautiful chains, flowers of language making one's mind fragrant with sweet and pleasing smell of

heroism and nobility, and streams of chaste language sweeter and cooler than the famous stream of the Kauser flowing constantly and refreshing minds of readers.'

Appreciating Nahjul Balagha

Nahjul Balagha is a book to be discovered and savoured, a treasure box full of precious jewels. Ayatullah Mutahhari, a Shia scholar of the twentieth century, talks about the joys of discovering Nahjul Balagha in his book: *Glimpses of Nahjul Balagha*.

'From my childhood years I was familiar with the name 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 "*sutub*", during all those days the name of the *Nahj al-balaghab* was heard more often than that of any other book after the Quran. 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 of my colleagues at the theology school (*Hawzah 'ilmiyyah*), I was quite ignorant of the world of the *Nahj al-balaghab*. We had met as strangers and passed by each other in the manner of strangers. This continued until the summer of 1325 (1946) when in order to escape the heat of Qum, I went to Isfahan. A small accident brought me into contact with a person who took my hand and led me somewhat into the world of the *Nahj al-balaghab*.

When this happened, I realized that I knew little about this book until that time. Later I wished that I would also find someone who would introduce me into the world of the Quran. Since then, the countenance of the *Nahj al-balaghab* 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 I had known until that moment. I felt as if I had discovered an entirely new world.'

(Introduction, *Glimpses of Nahjul Balagha*, <http://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/glimpses/>)

Important Vocabulary

Nahj - peak, height, etc. *Balaghab* - eloquence, art of good speech.
Khutba – sermon *Hadith* - Saying

Contents of Nahjul Balagha

Nahjul Balagha discusses many different subjects. Some of these include:

1. Knowledge of Allah, His attributes, praise of God, trust in God, worship, Divine decree,
2. Knowledge of the Universe: creation of heaven and earth, properties of living beings, human nature, angels, Shaytan,
3. Knowledge of the proofs of Allah: Prophethood, Holy Prophet (s), Ahlul Bayt (a), the Quran, Imam al-Mahdi (a)
4. Government and society: politics, truth and falsehood, , types of people, poverty, duties of rulers.
5. Rules of Shariah: philosophy of laws, the Furu ad-din, taqiyyah,
6. Akhlaq: reason, comtemplation, intellect, the heart, knowledge, the world and the hereafter, taqwa, friendship, the tongue, moral vices
7. History: life of Imam Ali (a), battles, enemies, companions, events after the death of the Holy Prophet (s), historical predictions,
8. Knowledge of the Hereafter: death, the grave, Day of Judgment, heaven and hell

Sharif ar-Radhi, Compiler of Nahjul Balagha

Sharif ar-Radhi, the compiler of Nahjul Balagha was a very pious and learned Shia scholar who lived in Baghdad, Iraq. He compiled the Nahjul Balagha four centuries after Hijrat (over a thousand years ago). This was during the time of the Abbaside rulers. There were many Muslim scholars and scientists at that time, and Baghdad was a center of Islamic learning. Sharif ar-Radhi himself was a student of Shaykh al-Mufid.

Sharif ar-Radhi was born in the year 359 A.H. (939 A.D.), in the Shi'ite district of Karkh in West Baghdad. He was named Muhammad and his full name was Muhammad bin Huysayn bin Ahmed. Later he became famous as Sharif ar-Radhi. He was born into a religious and honorable family which has produced many great Shia scholars. His parents were Sadaat, that means both were descendants of the Holy Prophet (s). His father was Husayn bin Musa, the descendant of the seventh Imam, Imam Musa al-Kadhim (a), and his mother was Fatima, the descendant of the fourth Imam, Imam Zaynul Abidin (a). Thus, Sharif ar-Radhi is also known as Sayyid Radhi.

Sharif ar-Radhi loved knowledge and spent his whole life learning and acquiring wisdom. He attended many classes, lectures and religious gatherings. People respected him a lot and even the Sunnis and non-Muslims in Baghdad spoke highly of him.

There is an interesting story how Sharif ar-Radhi and his elder brother Sayyid Murtaza started their formal Islamic education. According to Ibn Abi al-Hadid in Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, Shaykh Mufid who was a famous and respected scholar in Baghdad at that time saw a dream. A lady appearing to be the Prophet's daughter Hazrat Fatimah Zahra (a) entered his mosque in Baghdad with two small boys and asked him to teach them fiqh. The Shaykh woke up rather confused. How could he teach Imam Hasan (a) and Imam Husayn (a)? But the next day when Fatimah, the mother of Sharif ar-Radhi, entered the mosque with her two sons and requested him to teach them Islamic sciences, he understood the message of his dream and felt honored to accept it. The two brothers together soon mastered different branches of Islamic sciences under Shaykh Mufid and other leading scholars of Baghdad. Sharif ar-Radhi was more inclined towards politics and literature while his brother Sayyid Murtdhza was deeply interested in fiqh.

Sharif ar-Radhi studied under different scholars to master the various branches of Islamic sciences. He started holding his own classes at a very young age, by setting up a school near his house in his locality and named it Dar al-Ilm. It was a large school consisting of several buildings and halls for conducting classes, presenting speeches and holding meetings and academic debates with researchers. It also had resident quarters for students and was equipped with a large library filled with important Arabic and Islamic reference books and sources. Sharif ar-Radhi personally administered the school, student affairs and the library. A great number of intellectuals graduated from his school. These graduates in turn taught others.

Sharif al-Radhi was an outstanding Arabic poet and a literary genius. He spent a lot of time studying literature, doing research, and studying philosophy and fiqh. He also wrote a number of books. His most famous work is Nahj al-Balaghah.

Sharif al-Radi, in the introduction to Nahjal-balaghah, gives an account of the circumstances that led him to compile the Nahj al Balagha. He narrates that while busy writing a book on the qualities of the Imams he planned to devote the last part of the book to the sayings and writings of Amir al-Mu'minin (as). His friends and fellow believers really liked that and requested him to compile a book covering all the forms of Imam Ali's utterances. They knew that this would be highly beneficial for society. Sharif ar Radhi accepted the request and set about gathering all the utterances of Imam Ali that he could find. Eventually this became the book Nahjul Balagha.