Commentaries on the First Sermon of Nahj al-Balagha

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Abstract: *This text captures a lecture-style commentary on the first sermon of Nahj al-Balagha by Imam Ali (AS). The speaker walks the audience through the profound concepts of* ***Monotheism (Tawhid)****, explaining the limitations of human intellect in grasping God's essence and clarifying complex theological attributes. The lecture transitions into a vivid description of the* ***Creation of the Universe****, using metaphors to explain the formation of the heavens and earth. It then retells the story of the* ***Creation of Adam****, the test of the angels, Satan's prideful fall, and Adam's descent, drawing practical moral lessons. The speaker further discusses the philosophy of* ***Prophethood****, emphasizing the continuous chain of divine guidance leading up to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The talk concludes with a discussion on the* ***Quran*** *as a comprehensive guide and a brief*

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*mention of the significance of **Hajj**, all presented in an engaging, explanatory tone.*

Key words: Nahj al-Balagha, Imam Ali, Lecture, Monotheism, Creation, Adam, Satan, Prophethood, Prophet Muhammad, Quran. Sermon 1: Part One – Monotheism (Tawhid)

Introduction:

Sharif Razi (may Allah raise his status) gives this first sermon of *Nahj al-Balagha* a title. He says: **"From a sermon of his, wherein he mentions the genesis of the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the creation of Adam."**

Now, this is a sermon—numbered as the very first one—where the Imam talks about how the sky, the earth, and Adam were created. But before he gets to the creation part, he starts by praising God. He lays out some specific points about knowing the Almighty .

And you know, there is room for a long discussion here, but all these points actually touch upon issues that later caused deep disagreements among Muslims regarding the nature of God. If people back then had truly heard, understood, and accepted these words, none of those theological conflicts would have ever happened .

So, let's take this section by section, and I'll explain the points as we go.

"Praise is due to Allah whose worth cannot be described by speakers."

He says: Praise belongs to God, a God whom no speaker can ever fully praise.

Now, look, the word "Madah" (praise) means to speak well of someone. It means stating the praiseworthy realities found in a being. That's why praise has to be factual—it's about stating what *is*. It's not just about feelings.

For example, if I say, "I love this person so much, my heart opens up when I see him and I get sad when he's gone"—that's not praise. I haven't praised *him*; I haven't mentioned his qualities. I've just described my own state of mind .

The difference between describing and praising is this: a description might just list facts, but praise focuses on qualities that deserve admiration. So, if someone says, "I praised God," it means "I understood the realities of the Almighty and I expressed them." But the truth is, no being—except God Himself, who is Absolute Praise—can reach that level .

That is why in the prayers of the Prophet (PBUH), we read: *"You are as You have praised Yourself."* Meaning, "O God, You are exactly as You described Yourself. We can't fully describe Your attributes." My praise is really just me expressing gratitude and listing His good qualities, just as I might list the virtues of a learned or generous person. The goal of this praise is simply so that others might also grasp these realities and praise Him too .

"Whose bounties cannot be counted by calculators."

The Imam says: Those who try to count cannot number His blessings.

Here, Imam Ali is essentially speaking the Quran but in his own words. The Quran says: *"And if you should count the favor of Allah, you could not enumerate them"* (Surah An-Nahl: 18) .

If you try to count God's blessings, you just can't. You can't reach a point where you say, "Okay, that's it, nothing is left." No matter how much you say, there's always something left unsaid. Someone might list some blessings, true, but they haven't counted *all* of them . (In *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 68, p. 23, this is discussed).

The Imam's point is this: if you want to introduce God, you can't fully do it. Why? Because God is all grace, all virtue. And God—God forbid we think otherwise—is described by negative attributes only in the sense of stripping away imperfections; proving His positive attributes fully is impossible because they are infinite .

So, we can neither fully praise Him nor fully count His blessings. But we can do one thing: we can do what these blessings demand of us.

"Whose due cannot be discharged by those who strive."

He says: No matter how hard the strivers try, they cannot fulfill the right of His blessings.

A person can try as hard as they want, but they can never do what is truly worthy of God's gifts. So, the result? Human beings must admit their flaws and shortcomings .

"He whom the height of intellectual courage cannot appreciate."

God is the One whom far-flying thoughts cannot grasp.

"Himmah" (ambition or courage) refers to the peak of effort. But even the "peak" varies. Let me give you a simple example: Imagine

a person who can walk 100 meters, or maybe 500 meters. If he exerts his "utmost effort," he walks as far as he can. Someone else might walk 10 kilometers. But no matter how much it is, effort has a limit .

But with God? No matter how much a human tries to know Him, these "ambitions"—no matter how far they fly—never reach Him. (You see, Scripture and Tradition often tell the intellect: "Stop here." In some theological matters, the intellect just doesn't work. When I walk into a house, I can tell an architect built it—that's "proof." But knowing the architect personally? That's different. "Knowing God" (Ma'rifat Allah) in His essence is not our job; it's God's doing. We have senses and intellect, but neither works for grasping God's essence because He isn't physical to be sensed, nor is He a limited concept for the intellect. As Imam Baqir (AS) said in a narration mentioned by Mulla Sadra: *"Whatever you distinguish with your illusions... is a creature made like you and returns to you"*. Imam Ali also said: *"Whatever you imagine, God is the opposite of that"*).

"And the divings of understanding cannot reach Him."

And deep intelligences cannot reach His reality.

"Fitan" implies sharpness of mind. It's about not being superficial. A smart person (Fatin) is someone who dives from the surface to the depth—that's why the Imam uses the word "diving" (Ghawwas). Look at the sea; the surface is just water. The real difference is deep down. To know the sea, you have to dive .

In material things, diving deep gives you better understanding. But God? He is such that no amount of smartness, sharp-wittedness, or deep thinking can access Him. For everything else, the deeper you look, the more you know. But not here .

"He for whose description no limit has been laid down, no eulogy exists."

He is the One for whose description there is no limit, and no defining eulogy exists.

In Arabic, "Na't" (eulogy) is like a description of a description. For example, if I say "Ahmad is learned," that's a description. If I say "Ahmad is learned *in mathematics*," that "in mathematics" qualifies the learning. It limits it. God has no such limiting descriptions .

God's attributes don't have "existential qualifications" (Na't Wujudi) that limit them. If we say "God is All-Knowing," we don't mean He knows *some* things. We mean He is not ignorant of anything. God's knowledge isn't limited to a specific book or field .

When the Quran says "God has power over all things," it doesn't mean to limit His power; it means to show there is no limit. It's different from saying "Muhammad is but a Messenger"—that sets a limit. With God, descriptions are about negating imperfections, not setting boundaries .

Think of it this way: If I say "This cloth is black," and then add "pitch black," I am negating other shades of black. I am narrowing it down. But with God, we don't narrow it down. We say "He knows," meaning He is not ignorant. We don't say "He knows *only this*." (Imam Reza (AS) said: *"The system of His Unity is the negation of attributes from Him"*. This means we shouldn't attribute qualities to Him in the limited way we understand them for creatures).

"And no time is ordained and no duration is fixed."

His pure Essence has no set time and no ending term.

"No time" doesn't mean He doesn't exist *now*. It means His existence isn't *limited* to "now." Some people mistakenly think "God has no time" means He isn't here! No, it means "time" is a limit for *us*, not Him. I am here for a hundred years; God was here before and will be here after. He doesn't have an "Ajal" (term) or duration because duration implies a beginning and an end, a limit. God is eternal .

"He brought forth creation through His Omnipotence."

"Dispersed winds through His Compassion."

"And made the shaking earth firm with rocks."

"The foremost in religion is the acknowledgment of Him."

The very beginning of religion is knowing Him.

Obviously, the value of knowledge depends on what you are knowing. Since God is incomparable, knowing Him is the highest knowledge. Imam Ali says: *"Knowing Allah is the highest knowledge"*. And notice, knowing God in human schools of thought takes years of study. But here, the Imam says it's the *beginning* of religion. The Prophet came for everyone—educated or uneducated—to make them know God.

"The perfection of acknowledging Him is to testify to Him, and the perfection of testifying to Him is to believe in His Oneness (Tawhid)."

Perfection here means it has an effect. It's not just a theory. If you really know God, you accept Him completely—not logically contrasting concepts, but confirming Him with your whole being. And the result of that confirmation is seeing Him as One .

Believing God is "One" numerically (like one apple vs. two apples) is incomplete. This leads us to the next steps: Tawhid of attributes and actions.

"And the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to regard Him as Pure (Ikhlas)."

And the perfection of Tawhid is sincerity towards Him.

This is a pedagogical point by the Imam. He’s not just teaching dry theology; he’s teaching how to *be*. He’s saying: To be a true monotheist, you must be sincere. You must attribute everything you have to God. If you think someone else provides your sustenance, you can't truly say "God is the Provider." You can't be a monotheist if you are not sincere .

"And the perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes."

The height of sincerity is to deny attributes from Him.

Now, wait a minute. This sounds contradictory to the earlier part where he praised God's attributes, right? Let me explain. He means denying *limiting* attributes. It means you don't look at God and see "God" plus "Knowledge" as two separate things stuck together.

In humans, "Ahmad" is one thing, and "his knowledge" is another. You can imagine Ahmad without knowledge. But with God, His Knowledge *is* His Essence. His Power *is* His Essence. (Imam Ali says elsewhere: *"The system of Tawhid is the negation of attributes"*.

If you attach attributes to God like patches on a garment, you are creating a duality: The Essence + The Attribute. That’s "Shirk" (polytheism) in a subtle way. It means you think God is made of parts. And if He has parts, He is created.

"Whosoever describes Allah has limited Him... and whosoever limits Him has numbered Him."

If you say "God is this *and* that" (as separate things), you've made Him two, or three, or eight! Like the poet who mocked a sect saying, "Christians made God three, but you made Him eight (Essence + 7 attributes)!".

"Whosoever says: 'In what is He?', he has contained Him."

If you ask "Where is God inside?", you think He is contained. Like water in a glass. That makes Him limited.

"And whosoever says: 'On what is He?', he has held Him to be free [of something]."

And if you ask "What is He sitting on?", you imply there are places where He *isn't*.

There was a writer, Zabihollah Mansouri, who translated a book by Maeterlinck. He wrote: "Is God in this room? No. In the wall? No. So God is nowhere!" This is nonsense. When we say God is everywhere, we don't mean He fills space like gas fills a balloon. We mean His *authority* and *knowledge* encompass everything. He is not "in" things physically, nor "on" things physically. (As the Quran says: *"He is Allah in the heavens and in the earth"*. He is the God *of* heaven and earth, not physically sitting there).

"He is a Being, but not through the phenomenon of coming into being."

He exists, but not like things that appear after being nothing.

"He exists but not from non-existence."

He doesn't have a "before" where He didn't exist.

"He is with everything but not in physical nearness. He is different from everything but not in physical separation."

He is "with" us (as the Quran says, *"He is with you wherever you are"*), but not like I am "with" you, sitting next to you. And He is distinct from everything, but not like being in a separate room. His "otherness" is in Essence, not in distance.

"He acts but without connotation of movements and instruments."

When we speak, we move our tongues. When we work, we use tools. God acts simply by Will. *"Be, and it is"*.

"He sees even when there is none to be looked at."

He was "All-Seeing" even before He created anything to see. His sight isn't dependent on an object, like ours is.

"He is only One, such that there is none with whom He may keep company or whom He may miss in his absence."

He is solitary. He doesn't get lonely. We seek friends because we have needs; we get scared when alone. God has no needs, so He has no "wildness" (Wahshah) from solitude.

Part Two: Creation of Heavens and Earth

"Then He gasped the layers of the atmosphere, split the sides of the universe, and created empty spaces."

Now the Imam talks about creation. He says God opened up the skies. It sounds like everything was one compressed mass, and God expanded it.

"He flowed into it water, whose waves were stormy and whose surges leapt one over the other."

He poured a "water" into it—now, pay attention, when the Imam says "water," it's a metaphor. In those days, there weren't scientific terms for "plasma" or "molten matter," so he used the word "water" to describe this fluid, stormy substance.

"He loaded it on dashing winds and breaking typhoons."

He put this churning mass on top of a mighty wind. Again, "wind" implies a powerful force that carries and controls this matter.

"He ordered them to shed it back... and acquainted it with its limitations."

He established laws—like gravity or pressure—to keep this mass in check.

"Then Almighty created a wind and made its movement sterile..."

He created a specific force ("wind") that didn't just blow away; it stayed to churn the matter.

"It churned it like the churning of curd... turning its beginning into its end."

Imagine shaking a skin bag of milk to make butter. God churned this cosmic matter violently.

"Till its level was raised and the surface was full of foam."

It got so intense that "foam" appeared on top.

"Then He raised the foam in the open wind... and made therefrom the seven heavens."

From this "foam"—this cosmic dust or gas—He built the seven skies.

"He made the lower one as a stationary wave and the highest one as a protected ceiling."

"Without any pillars to support them or nails to hold them together."

He held them up without visible pillars. You don't see any nails holding the sky, do you? It's the invisible laws of God holding them.

"Then He decorated them with stars and the light of meteors."

"And hung the sun and the moon in a revolving orbit, a moving roof, and a rotating firmament."

He set the sun and moon in motion. Notice the Imam says "revolving orbit" and "rotating firmament." Everything is swimming, everything is moving. It’s a dynamic universe, not a static one.

Part Three: Creation of Adam

"Allah asked the angels to fulfill His pledge... to submit to prostration before him."

God had taken a pledge from the angels: "When I create Adam, you must bow." It was a test.

"So Allah said: 'Prostrate to Adam,' so they prostrated except Iblis."

They all obeyed, except Iblis (Satan).

"Self-importance overtook him... He took pride in the creation from fire and treated the creation from clay as contemptible."

Here is the problem: Arrogance. Iblis looked at himself and said, "I am made of fire!" (Yes, Jinn are made of a type of energy or fire). He looked at Adam and said, "He's just dried mud!" He used his own logic to judge God's command. That was the first racism, the first arrogance.

"So Allah gave him time... in order to let him deserve His wrath completely and to complete the test."

God didn't destroy him instantly. He gave him respite. Why? To let Iblis fill his cup of sin, and to set up a test for humanity.

"Then Allah inhabited Adam in a dwelling where life was easy and safe."

God put Adam in a place where he didn't have to work for food. Everything was ready ("Raghad").

"And He warned him of Iblis and his enmity."

He told him: "Watch out, this Iblis is your enemy."

"But his enemy deceived him because of his envy..."

Satan was jealous. He couldn't stand seeing Adam happy and honored. So he tricked him.

"So he sold certainty for his doubt."

Adam *knew* he was safe. He had certainty. But Satan whispered, "Do you want eternal life? Do you want a kingdom that never fades?" (Quran: Surah Taha: 120). Satan sold him a fantasy. And Adam bought the doubt and sold his certainty.

"He exchanged happiness for fear. And disgrace for regret."

Instead of the joy he had, he got fear. Instead of honor, he got regret.

"Then Allah offered to him His repentance... and sent him down to the place of trial and procreation of progeny."

But God is Merciful. He taught Adam how to repent. But the consequence remained: Adam had to leave that easy life and come down here—to the "Abode of Trial," where we have children, struggle, and are tested.

Part Four: General Prophethood

"From his progeny, Allah chose prophets."

God didn't leave Adam's children alone. He picked prophets.

"And took their pledge for (revelation) and for carrying the trust of the message."

He made a contract with them: "You must deliver My message."

"In the course of time, many people changed the covenant of Allah."

Why did He send them? Because over time, people forgot. They broke their promise to God.

"They ignored His right and took equals with Him."

They started worshipping idols.

"Satan turned them away from knowing Him..."

Satan uprooted the knowledge of God from their hearts.

"So Allah raised among them His messengers... to fulfill the pledge of His creation (Fitrah)."

God sent prophets—one after another—for what? To ask people to fulfill the pledge of their nature. You see, knowing God is inside us

(Fitrah). Prophets don't just bring new info; they remind us of what we already know deep down.

"To recall to them His forgotten bounties. And to argue with them by communication."

"And to unearth for them the buried treasures of the intellects."

This is beautiful. The Imam says prophets come to dig up the "buried treasures of the mind." Our intellect gets covered by dust, by ignorance. Prophets come to clear that dust so we can think again.

"And to show them the signs of His Omnipotence."

They point to the sky, the earth, our life, our death—saying "Look! These are God's signs!"

"Allah never allowed His creation to remain without a Prophet... or a book... or a binding argument."

God never leaves the earth empty of a guide. Never. Even if the number of prophets is small, or their enemies are many, the proof of God is always there.

"Among them was a predecessor who would name the one to follow..."

Prophets predicted each other. Jesus predicted Ahmad (Muhammad) (Quran: Surah As-Saff: 6).

"Till Allah deputed Muhammad (PBUH) to fulfill His promise and complete His Prophethood."

Finally, the time came for the last one. Muhammad (PBUH) came to finish the job.

"His pledge had been taken from the Prophets..."

All prophets knew him. His signs were famous among them.

Part Five: Specific Prophethood

"The people of the earth at this time were divided in different parties..."

What was the world like when he came? Chaos. People were split into sects.

"They were either likening Allah with His creation or twisting His Names or turning to other than Him."

Some thought God had a body (like humans). Some twisted His names (like the Jews attributing bad emotions to God). Some just worshipped idols.

"So He guided them out of error through him."

The Prophet saved them from this mess.

"Then Allah chose for Muhammad (PBUH) to meet Him..."

And when his job was done, God honored him by taking him back. He took him away from this place of trouble ("Balwa") to His own proximity.

Part Six: Imamate and Quran

"He left among you that which other Prophets left among their people."

But did he leave us empty-handed? No. Just like other prophets, he left a legacy.

"The Book of your Lord."

He left the Quran.

"In it He has explained the lawful and the unlawful, the obligatory and the recommended."

This Book has everything. Halal, Haram, Wajib, Mustahabb.

"The abrogating and the abrogated..."

It tells you which laws replaced older ones.

"The specific and the general, the lessons and the proverbs."

It has "lessons" (Ibar) to learn from, and "proverbs" (Amthal) to make us understand. Like comparing a scholar who doesn't practice to a donkey carrying books—it’s a metaphor to show the state of the person, not about the donkey!.

"It contains matters regarding which the knowledge is obligatory and others regarding which the people are allowed to be ignorant."

Some things you *must* know (like Tawhid). Some things, if you don't know the details (like exactly what happened to ancient tribes), God won't punish you.

"It contains what appears obligatory in the Book but its abrogation is evident in the Sunnah."

The Imam explains the relationship between Quran and Sunnah. Sometimes the Quran gives a general rule, and the Prophet's practice clarifies or restricts it. You can't just take the Quran and ignore the

Prophet. For example, the Quran doesn't explicitly name every forbidden animal (like dogs), but the Sunnah clarifies it.

"And that which is obligatory for a time but ceases in the future."

Like Hajj—it has a specific time. If you miss the days of Hajj, you can't do it in another month. But prayer? You can do it all year round.

"It differentiates between the major sins... and the minor ones."

It draws a line between big sins (Kabir) that lead to Fire, and small errors that God forgives.

"And that which is acceptable in its minimum but has freedom in its maximum."

Like prayer times. You can pray right at the start (which is best), but you have time until the end. God made it flexible (Muwassa') so you aren't destroyed by rigidity.

Part Seven: Hajj

The sermon originally continues with a section on Hajj, but Sharif Razi (the compiler) only selected parts of it. He wanted to show the eloquence of the Imam, so he didn't include every single legal detail. But he mentions that Hajj is a key part of this sermon.