

## در ترجمه دو نامه امام علی (ع) در نهج البلاغه

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### چکیده

فرصتی برای ترجمه دو نامه بسیار معروف امام علی (ع) در نهج البلاغه، یکی از متون مقدس شیعه پس از قرآن، از عربی به ژاپنی برای من دست داد. یکی نامه امام به امام حسن، پسر ارشد او و دومین امام است، و دیگری نامه او به مالک اشتر به عنوان فرماندار مصر است. در این مقاله، ابتدا جزئیات ترجمه و انتشار آنها در دو جزوه در ایران و ژاپن توضیح و نشان داده شده که توصیه موسسه نهج البلاغه در قم و کمک محققان ژاپنی در این راستا سودمند بوده است. سپس، مطالب اخلاقی آنها، به ویژه با استفاده از کتاب حکمت معیشت، تجزیه و تحلیل شده است. در نامه اول، امام علی (ع) بر ضعف انسان در تمایل به بدی اشاره شده است، و امام به انسان‌ها سفارش می‌نماید که با ابتکار خود و با کسب حکمت از طریق آموزه‌های او به انجام اعمال خوب بپردازند و در برابر خدا فروتن باشند. در این زمینه، در نامه دوم، بر امام حکمرانان توصیه می‌کند که مردم را امر به معروف و نهی از منکر نموده و ارزش‌های بنیادی اخلاقی اسلام را ترویج نموده و برای محافظت از رفاه مردم عادی و جلوگیری از ظلم و ستم در جامعه اقدام نمایند.

**کلید واژه‌ها:** امام علی (ع)، نهج البلاغه، ارزش اخلاقی، تواضع، امر به معروف و نهی از منکر

## On the Translation of Two Letters of Imam ‘Alī in Nahj al-Balāghah

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### Abstract

I had an opportunity to translate the two most famous letters of Imam ‘Alī (a.s.) in Nahj al-Balāghah (Peak of Eloquence), the famous collection of the preaching and letters of Imam ‘Alī and one of the most sacred books of Shia Islam after the Qur‘an, from Arabic into Japanese. One of them is his letter to Imam Ḥasan, his eldest son and the second Imam, and the other is an appointment letter to Mālik Ashtar as the governor of Egypt. In this article, I explained first the details to translate and publish them in two booklets in Iran and Japan, indicating the recommendation of Institute of Nahj al-Balāghah in Qom and assistance of Japanese scholars. Second, I made an analysis on the contents’ ethical qualities, referring especially to the book of ‘Abdol-Karīm Soroush, *Hekmat va Ma‘īshat*. In the first letter, ‘Alī stresses the feebleness of human beings inclined to vice, and instructs to do good with their own initiative, by acquiring wisdom through his teachings and becoming humble in the face of Allah. In this context, in the second letter ‘Alī instructs governors to enjoin good and forbid evil, the fundamental ethical value of Islam, to protect the welfare of the common people and avoid tyranny in administration.

**Keywords:** Imam ‘Alī, Nahj al-Balāghah, ethical value, humbleness, enjoining good

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## **Introduction**

Nahj al-Balāghah (Peak of Eloquence) is the famous collection of the preaching and letters of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib (ca. 600–661), the fourth Caliph and the first Imam of Shia Islam, edited by Sharīf Raḡī (970–1015). Particularly among Shia believers, it has been respected as one of the most sacred books after the Qur’an because it is a collection of the original spoken words and writings of the first supreme leader and founder of Shia Islam.

I had the very rare and fortunate privilege of being among the first persons to translate the two most famous and popular letters of Imam ‘Alī from Arabic into Japanese. One of these is his letter to Imam Ḥasan, the eldest son of ‘Alī and the second Imam of Shia Islam, called “Vasīyat-name” in Persian, or a will of ‘Alī to Ḥasan; the other is “Ahd-name,” or an appointment letter to Mālik Ashtar as the governor of Egypt. Thanks to the support of the Institute of Nahjol-Balāghe in Qom, along with the cooperation of Prof. Nomoto from Keio University and other scholars in Japan and Iran, we succeeded in publishing the translation of these two letters in the last two years in both Iran and Japan (Sano et al. 2015, 2016).

Here, I would like to make some comments on this translation, including how the opportunity to do this work arose, the textual background of this translation, and a basic analysis of the contents’ ethical qualities.

### **1. The Translation Opportunity**

The first time I noticed the title Nahj al-Balāghah (hereafter NB) was during the 1990s, when I spent three years as a researcher

for the Embassy of Japan in Tehran. Watching Iranian media, I noticed that sometimes the name NB was heard in the statements of religious leaders and politicians, suggesting its importance as the socio-political and ethical model for Shia Islam and of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

When I visited Qom as an interpreter for the Ambassador of Japan, who paid a courtesy call to Āyatollāh Makārem Shīrāzī in 1997, I happened to receive a copy of NB. It was given by the Āyatollāh as a gift (along with a copy of the Qur'an) to the Ambassador, who in turn gave it to me. The book is an English translation with Arabic text published by Ansariyan Publications in Qom (Syed Ali Raza n.d.), and it is one of the most popular English translations of NB. However, I did not read it

immediately, since it was not directly related to my research on Iran at that time.

Almost 15 years later, when a Buddhist–Islamic dialog started between Ryukoku University in Japan and Adyan University (University of Religions and Denominations) in Qom in 2010 with the assistance of the Embassy of Japan in Tehran, I began to perceive NB as the most obvious ethical model of Shia Islam comparable to the fundamental teachings of Buddha. Subsequently, at the recommendation of Adyan University, I visited the Institute of NB in Qom, and I was persuaded to do a Japanese translation of NB by Mr. Dīnparvar, a mullah and the director of the Institute, as a step toward mutual inter-religious understanding between Japan and Iran. He recommended that I start with these two letters of Imam 'Alī, the Persian translation of which, with Arabic text, had been published in two booklets

by the Institute (Dīnparvar 1993; Gorūh-e Tarjome 1992).

In view of the sacred nature of NB, which deserves the most exact translation—word for word, sentence for sentence—to avoid any misunderstanding, I asked some scholars of Islamic studies in Japan who are skilled in Arabic, including Prof. Nomoto of Keio University, Dr. Takahashi, Dr. Yamaguchi, and Prof. Yoshida, to collaborate on the translation. We had a translation meeting every one or two months at the Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies of Keio University in Tokyo. This institute was founded by Prof. Izutsu, one of the greatest scholars of Islamic mystical philosophy in the world. It was not an easy task, and sometimes there were disputes among us on the interpretation of a particular word or sentence in the Arabic text. But over the course of one year, we somehow finished the translation of Imam 'Alī's letter to Imam Ḥasan and submitted it to Mr. Dīnparvar.

A ceremony marking the publication of our translation was held in the Institute of NB's building in the center of Qom in early March 2015; the ceremony witnessed the participation of a number of mullahs and journalists, which included Ayatollah Dīnparvar, the father of Mr. Dīnparvar. This event was reported by the Iranian media and newspapers due to the importance of NB. Unfortunately, the booklet on our translation that was published in Iran had several mistakes. We re-edited it in Japan with Mr. Dīnparvar's permission and published a corrected version of it in May 2015. The reaction was quite positive among Japanese readers, and thus we moved on to the translation of NB's second part, the appointment letter to Mālīk Ashtar, and finished

it in February 2016. The booklet containing this work was published by the Institute of NB in Qom, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Mr. Dīnparvar and others, at the beginning of March 2016, and it is to be re-edited and published in Japan in a few months.

In terms of the textual background for our Japanese translation, first, we used the Arabic text of the aforementioned two booklets in Persian translation as edited by the Institute of NB, which are extracted from the full Persian translation completed by the Institute (Dīnparvar 2010). The Arabic text of the latter was originally edited with utmost accuracy by the Institute, using five old manuscripts in the Mar‘ashi Najafī library in Qom, Mashhad, and India, in addition to three manuscripts of the commentary of NB (al-‘Atārudī 1993). The oldest of these sources is the manuscript in the Mar‘ashi Najafī library dated H.469 (1076–1077)<sup>1</sup>, only half a century after Sharīf Raḍī’s death.

Our Japanese translation was mainly based on the Arabic text and its Persian translation by the Institute, together with other reliable Arabic texts as well as Persian and English translations (Ibrāhīm 1963; Feyzol-Eslām 2002; Shahīdī 2011). At the same time, the word-for-word commentary with Persian translation by Āyatollāh Makārem Shīrāzī provided us with useful information, although we did not have enough time to refer to the famous commentary on NB by Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd in the 14th century<sup>2</sup>. Considering the reliability of the texts used in our translation and the cooperation among specialists in Islam and Arabic, the quality of translation seems worthy of respect.

## 2. Ethical Qualities of the Two Letters

1. According to the book of catalog of every manuscripts in Mar'ashi Najafi library edited by S. M. Mar'ashi Najafi, the director of the library, this oldest manuscript of 171 pages was transcribed by Husain al-Mu'addab, a famous Shia scholar of H. 5 century when Sharif Raḍī himself lived, and is thus very precious. Therefore, the editor published the photocopy of it in H.1406 (1985-1986) (Mar'ashi Najafi 2003). Quite fortunately, I could get the data of the whole copy of this manuscript (manuscript No. 3827) with Dr. A. Q. Ja'fari's help, a mullah and scholar of Adyan University. We try to reflect the difference of Arabic text in the booklet of our translation due to be published in Japan, comparing it with Dīnparvar's version.

2. These texts are included in *Dāneshnāme-ye 'Alavī* (CD of the whole collection of NB) published by the Computer Research Center of Islamic Sciences or the Noor Institute in Qom.

The first impression noted by everyone who reads these two letters is the great depth of their ethical qualities, based on the insights of Imam 'Alī regarding human nature. Ethics (*akhlāq*) in Islam are firmly grounded on monotheism, which is sometimes beyond the grasp of the Japanese people. As one of the sacred books of Islam, NB's ethics also has its roots in monotheism and a feeling of awe of Allah (*taqwā*). In this respect, it is quite different from the mainstream of modern Japanese and Western ethics, which is based on a humanly derived sense of values within a framework of secularism.

'Abdol-Karīm Soroush, a modern philosopher of Iran, wrote a book full of interesting suggestions in his analysis of the letter of

Imam ‘Alī to Imam Ḥasan (Soroush 2009, 2013),<sup>1</sup> in which he acknowledges monotheistic belief in Allah as the background of every aspect of this letter. Based on this, the essence of humanity as described at the beginning of the letter is meticulously considered. Imam ‘Alī says that this letter is sent from the father “who is (shortly) to die ... [and] who realizes the evils of the world” to the son “who yearns for what is not to be achieved ... who is a target of hardships, a slave of the world, a trader of its deception (*tājir al-ghurūr*)” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 336–337; Sano et al. 2015, pp. 20–21). It seems that ‘Alī views the real nature of humanity and the world quite pessimistically and negatively.

Soroush also accepts the essence of humanity as feeble and inclined to vice, quoting related verses from the Qur‘an. This feebleness is not an acquired characteristic but part of the innate nature of humanity as determined by Allah; at the same time, however, human beings should make an effort to do good and avoid vice, since in the framework of Islam, human beings should worship and live in closeness to Allah, the sole god and the only perfect and good essence, as much as possible. Soroush further argues that to accomplish this purpose, humans should “select” their activities so as to do good on their own initiative, avoiding evil activities motivated by worldly desires and greed. According to Soroush, Allah created the mind of human beings in such a way that they have this initiative of “selection,” even though the essence of humanity contains both good and evil (Soroush 2009, pp. 43–83).

This argument seems consistent with the teachings of Islam as



derived from the Qur‘an, further developed in the Middle Ages in Islamic

1 This book is a collection of his lectures on this letter delivered in 1980s’ and was expected to be published in 4 volumes, but only two volumes have been published till now.

theology, and also seen in the contents of this letter. In relation to it, ‘Alī says, “Certainly, the heart of a young man is like uncultivated land. It accepts whatever is strewn on it” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 342–343; Sano et al. 2015, pp. 38–39). This comment implies that the mind of the young is pure and has a potential to be tinged with either good or evil as a result of external influences and instigations. Then, ‘Alī asserts that based on righteous belief in Allah and proper education and instruction by ‘Alī himself, the young (including his son) can be oriented to the righteous path so that in the end they will be able to “select” the good by themselves.

Soroush also recognizes the role of prophets or sacred figures like ‘Alī in guiding people on the righteous path. However, he, like ‘Alī, admits that it is difficult for prophets to lead all of them successfully to paradise, due to the allure of worldly desires or avarices that mislead them into becoming “traders of deception” and finally caused them to go to hell. To avoid this fate, it is necessary for human beings to live in moderation and modesty so that they can select the good on their own initiative. Following ‘Alī, Soroush suggests several methods to do this, one of which is to gain wisdom (*hikma*) regarding the vanity of this world. But this wisdom is not limited only to the knowledge acquired by means of prophetic teachings; it is also quite action-

oriented in involving the performance of the concrete contents of knowledge. For example, Allah in the Qur‘an orders people not to worship gods other than himself, to pay respect to one’s parents, to give to all fellow men their due including the poor and the wayfarer, not to kill one’s children for fear of poverty, to steer clear of unlawful sexual intercourse, and not to kill anyone except for a just cause, which “is (part) of the wisdom that Allah has inspired in you” (Qur‘an Isrā’ 23–41). Through performance of this wisdom, human beings would be protected from the vanity of the world (Soroush 2009, 137–155).

However, the most obvious and effective way described in ‘Alī’s teachings to discipline the human mind is to remember that you have to die or *memento mori*. ‘Alī says, “You are being chased by death, from which the person who tries to run away cannot escape, as it would surely overtake him. So be on guard against it lest it overtake you at a time when you are in a sinful state. ... O my child, remember death very much and the place where you have to go suddenly and reach after death, so that when it comes you are already on your guard against it and have prepared yourself for it” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 354–357; Sano et al. 2015, pp. 84–87).

This moral attitude toward death most effectively awakens human

beings to the limited and transient nature of their life and rids them of susceptibility to the vanity of this world or to becoming “traders of deception.” This teaching seems quite similar to that of Christianity and other religious and ethical traditions of the world. ‘Alī instructs his son and every young person that with

such wisdom and awareness of humanity’s limitations in the face of the eternal afterlife and Allah, they should be very humble and kind toward others and themselves in every aspect of life. It can be said that “enjoining good and forbidding evil,” the most fundamental Islamic ethical value ordered by Allah in the Qur‘an several times, does not materialize in one’s personal and social life until this moral attitude of humility is realized in one’s mind and behavior.

‘Alī instructs his readers to maintain and put into effect this Islamic value as follows: “Ask others to do good; you will thus be among the good doers. Encourage others to desist from evil with your actions as well as your speech, and stay away, to the best of your ability, from him who commits it” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 340–341; Sano et al. 2015, pp. 32–33). This is an obligation not only of the common people but also of the Islamic community’s ruling class (*‘umma*). Quoting the verse, “You [Muslims] are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin good and forbid evil, and you believe in Allah” (Qur‘an ‘Imrān 110), Soroush argues that governors, governments, and common people alike have a mutual obligation to enjoin good and forbid evil in the Islamic community, which is the best community among mankind. Governors are particularly obliged to realize this ideal in the community, even more so than the common people, who have the right to ask governors to do so more and more and to be just rather than oppressive in their administration. Since it is Allah, not governors, who has ordered people to enjoin good and forbid evil, the people should observe this moral obligation in mind,

word, and action on their own initiative, and they have the right to ‘select’ their governors to realize it in the community (Soroush 2009, pp. 259–285).

At the beginning of his letter to Mālik Ashtar, ‘Alī instructs the latter “to fear Allah, to prefer obedience to Him, and to follow what He has commanded in His Book [the Qur‘an] out of His obligatory and elective commands ... and to help Allah the Glorified, with his heart, hand, and and tongue<sup>1</sup>” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 432–433; Sano et al. 2016, pp.

1 ‘Alī sometimes says people tend to ignore ‘enjoying good and forbidding evil’ first by tongue, second by hand, and finally by heart (Soroush 2009 p.263). Then, his instruction to Mālik Ashtar to help Allah with his heart, hand, and tongue suggests the importance not to ignore it.

18–19), which suggests that he acknowledges the heavy burden of governors to enjoin good and forbid evil as a divine obligation too. To accomplish this, ‘Alī instructs people to be humble before Allah and listen to the advice and criticism of his reliable ministers (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp.440–441; Sano et al. 2016, pp. 36–37). Governors, meanwhile, should care about the welfare of the common people as the core of the Islamic community, and they should not give the privileged class special treatment.

‘Alī in this letter stresses the equality of all human beings regardless of whether they are Muslims, saying, “Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds, either your

brother in religion or one like you in creation” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 434–435; Sano et al. 2016, pp. 22–23). This seems to be one of the most impressive expressions in an Islamic context of the equality of mankind, a perspective that is comparable to modern Western value systems. On this basis, ‘Alī makes it a priority to assist the poorest members of society, expressing this point with some degree of emotion: “(Fear) Allah and keep Allah in view in respect of the lowest class” (Syed Ali Reza, vol. 2, pp. 456–457; Sano et al. 2016, pp. 72–73). At the same time, he orders everyone—from ministers, commanders of the army, administrative officials, and judges to merchants and artisans—to treat all people with justice and fairness. In addition, he places a special importance on the equality of land tax (*kharāj*), which is an effective way to help the common people and a foundation of a country’s prosperity. In this way, ‘Alī asserts the equality of those who govern and the governed, indicating with a sort of *noblesse oblige* that the governor must enjoin good and forbid evil on his own initiative and also indicating the rights of the governed with respect to those who govern them. Consequently, his call for a government administration that follows ethical values and is based on respect for Allah seems quite comparable to the modern Western sense of democratic values.

### **Conclusion**

Fortunately, we could publish the second letter of Imam ‘Alī at the beginning of May 2016 in Japan with a beautiful cover of the picture of cherry blossom of Kyoto, Japan, using one of the oldest Arabic manuscripts as suggested in the first note. It has

been distributed among related scholars, specialists, and graduate students. We expect they will be hopefully influenced by the ethical contents of the letter and reconstruct Islamic image somewhat damaged by the recent incidents in Syria or a part of Europe.

These two letters are full of interesting suggestions that could cause Western and Japanese eyes to reevaluate the ethics of Shia Islam or of Islam generally in comparison to the ethics of their own religions, including Christianity and Buddhism. It may be possible that the two letters of Imam ‘Alī in NB could be a very significant basis for religious and ethical communication or dialog between Islam and Christianity or Buddhism in the future.

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