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THE SERMONS OF 'ALĪ IBN ABĪ ṬĀLIB:
AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE CORE ISLAMIC TEACHINGS
OF THE QUR'AN AND THE ORAL, NATURE-BASED CULTURAL
ETHOS OF SEVENTH CENTURY ARABIA¹

*LOS SERMONES DE 'ALĪ IBN ABĪ ṬĀLIB:
EN LA CONFLUENCIA ENTRE LAS ENSEÑANZAS ISLÁMICAS DEL CORÁN
Y LA ÉTICA CULTURAL BASADA EN LAS TRADICIONES ORALES
SOBRE LA NATURALEZA DE LA ARABIA DEL SIGLO VII*

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Abstract: Sermons attributed to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (c. 600-661, first Shi'a imam and fourth Sunni caliph) promoted core Qur'anic doctrine and ethics through an aesthetic steeped in the oral, nature-based, poetic culture of seventh-century Arabia. Using traditional Arabian metaphors of camels, watering holes, and pithy, rhythmic, orality-grounded cadences, 'Alī urged his audience to worship the One God, follow the guidance of His prophet Muhammad, shun worldliness, perform good deeds, and prepare for the imminent hereafter. Through a close reading of his most celebrated discourses, this paper explores these teachings and their religious and cultural underpinnings.

Keywords: 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; Islam; Qur'an; Arabia; sermons; orality; nature-imagery; hereafter; consciousness of God; piety.

Resumen: Los sermones atribuidos a 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (c. 600-661, primer imam chií y cuarto califa suní) fomentaron las doctrinas y la ética coránicas fundacionales mediante una estética oratoria, imbuida de la cultura poética oral basada en metáforas de la naturaleza, característica de la Arabia del siglo VII. 'Alī utilizaba metáforas tradicionales de camellos y abrevaderos, junto con expresiones rítmicas y lacónicas llenas de cadencias de la oralidad, para instar a los oyentes a adorar al Dios único, seguir la dirección de su profeta Muhammad, rehuir las cosas mundanas, practicar las buenas obras y prepararse para la inminente vida en el más allá. A través de un análisis pormenorizado de sus discursos más célebres, este artículo explora dichas enseñanzas y sus bases religiosas y culturales.

Palabras clave: 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; islam; Corán; Arabia; sermones; oralidad; imágenes de naturaleza; el más allá; temor a Dios; piedad.

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I have transliterated all Arabic names and terms, except for the few used frequently in this paper: 'Alī, Muḥammad, Shi'a, Sunnī, Qur'ān, and Shari'a.

SUMMARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arguably the most famous orator in Islam, ‘Ali ibn Abī Tālib (c. 600-661) was an exemplar par excellence of a distinctive blend of Islamic and Arabian discourse². The first Shi‘a imam and the fourth Sunni caliph, he preached Qur‘anic doctrine and ethics through an aesthetic steeped in the oral, nature-based, poetic culture of seventh-century Arabia. Using pithy, rhythmic cadences, and traditional metaphors of camel caravans and waterholes, he urged his audience to worship the One God, follow the guidance of His prophet Muhammad, shun worldliness, perform good deeds, and get ready for the imminent afterlife. This paper explores ‘Ali’s most celebrated sermons to highlight his key teachings and their religious and cultural underpinnings.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ‘ALI’S SERMONS

2.1. Cultural and topographical background of pre-Islamic Arabia

On the eve of Islam, the million square miles of the Arabian Peninsula’s arid wilderness were dotted with shrine-based towns watered by permanent wells, such as the Prophet Muhammad’s birthtown Mecca, and settlements around oases, such as the destination of his migration, Medina. Flanked by the Persian and Byzantine empires, the inhabitants of the Peninsula led camel caravans through its parched wastes to trade in those lands. Their society was tribal, where security was maintained by alliances and mutual threat of blood revenge. It was chiefly nomadic, with most tribes migrating with the seasons from one watering place to the next. Although a few Jewish and Christian tribes lived in parts of the Peninsula, most of the inhabitants of the region worshipped nature deities or ancestral idols.

The Arabians assiduously cultivated the art of the spoken word –the eloquently, metaphorically, rhythmically, appositely spoken word. They were avid connoisseurs of poetry, viewing their odes (*qaṣīda*) as the pinnacle of high culture³.

² On the significance, typology, terminology, sources, structure, and style of early Arabic oratory, see T. Qutbuddin, *Khutba: The Evolution*. There are several Arabic monographs on the early oration, including Darwish, *al-Khaṭāba fī ṣadr al-islām*; al-Hāwī, *Fann al-khaṭāba*; al-Nuṣṣ, *al-Khaṭāba al-‘arabiyya fī ‘asrihā l-dhahabī*; and Ramaḍān, *Ta’rikh al-khaṭāba wa-ashhar khuṭab al-rasūl wa-l-ṣaḥāba* (fuller list in ibidem, p. 78, n. 8). In Western languages, Dähne, *Reden der Araber*, discusses the political speeches of the Arabs. Accolades to ‘Ali’s eloquence have been compiled by al-Khaṭīb in *Maṣādir*, vol. I, pp. 43-47, 87-99.

³ Much secondary literature has been produced on the pre-Islamic ode. See, for example, S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*; A. Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*; and M. Sells, *Six Classic Arabian Odes*.

These odes consistently referenced natural elements vital to their existence: water imagery, including word pictures of rain and waterholes, abounded, as did allusions to the camel, and descriptions grounded in warfare and hunting. The chief mode of formal communication used by the political, juridical, and spiritual leadership was the oration, rousing warriors to battle, legislating on civic and criminal matters, and –for orators of pious counsel– warning of the transience of human life. The orators used the same imagery as the poets (in fact, some orators were also poets), except that they harnessed it to different topics and distinct purposes. The early Islamic sermons would be produced against the backdrop of this society.

2.2. 'Ali's life and career in early Islamic Arabia and Iraq

'Ali was the cousin, ward, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, married to the Prophet's daughter Fātima, and father of the Prophet's only grandsons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Shi'a Muslims believe him to be Muhammad's designated successor, in both his spiritual and temporal roles, and thus the first "Imām" (divinely appointed leader) of the Muslim community after the Prophet. Sunni Muslims revere him as the last of the "Rightly Guided Caliphs", the first four successors to the Prophet's position as head of the community⁴.

'Ali was born in Mecca, and was about ten years old when, in around 610, Muhammad began calling to Islam. He is said to have been the first male to accept the Prophet's summons, and in 622, he followed Muhammad to Medina, having discharged the Prophet's trusts in Mecca. Well known for his piety, service to Islam, and valor in the early battles, he was also revered for his deep personal loyalty to the Prophet, and his unbending sense of justice and probity. By the time Muhammad died in 632, almost the whole of the Arabian Peninsula was Muslim, and the first three caliphs after him conquered large parts of the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, Persia, and Central Asia.

'Ali became caliph in 656. Almost immediately, three successive groups of rebels from within the Muslim community challenged his authority. 'Ali, supported by the people of Kufa and Medina, personally fought them in three major battles: (1) The Battle of the Camel in 656 outside the Iraqi camptown of Basra against the Prophet's widow 'Ā'isha, the Prophet's Companions Ṭalha and al-Zubayr, and the Basrans (the battle is named after the camel 'Ā'isha rode onto the field); (2) the Battle of Šiffin in 657 in northwest Syria against the governor of Damascus, Mu'āwiya, and the Syrians; and (3) the Battle of Nahrawān in 658 near Kufa against a group of defectors from his own forces called the Khārijites. Soon afterwards in 661, 'Ali was assassinated by a Khārijite while praying in the mosque in Kufa.

'Ali delivered a few orations at the time of his investiture in Medina, many orations on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, and the majority in his new capital, Kufa. The trials he faced through his youth, and the tribulations he encountered during his caliphate, profoundly affected the themes and modes of his preaching.

⁴ See 'Ali's literary biography and further references in T. Qutbuddin, *'Ali ibn Abi Talib. An important primary source is al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī: vol. XVI: The Community Divided, and vol. XVII: The First Civil War. The Shi'a view is supported and documented by W. Madelung, The Succession to Muhammad, the Sunni view by A. Afsaruddin, Excellence and Precedence.*

2.3. Transmission and authenticity of ‘Ali’s sermons

‘Ali lived in a primarily oral society. Writing was known in his time, but its use was spare and intermittent, and it was not until paper-making techniques were introduced into the Arabian Peninsula in the mid-eighth century that it became widespread. In this regard, the Qur’an is a special case, because it was arguably committed to writing sooner⁵. But all other verbal materials from the period, including poetry, prophetic hadith, historical reports, and sermons, were for the most part transmitted for a century or more by word of mouth.

The lengthy period of oral transmission left room for fabrication, incorrect transcription, and erroneous communication, so the authenticity of the sermons attributed to ‘Ali in our corpus is uncertain, the reservation applying to full sermons, as well as to lines and words within them⁶. Nevertheless, the existence of the early oratorical genre is affirmed by an indigenous system of continuous oral transmission. Mary Carruthers has shown that many oral societies had prodigious memories that they relied on to transmit lengthy pieces of their artistic verbal production⁷. Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated that the early Muslims increasingly engaged in scholarly note-taking alongside oral transmission⁸. The legitimacy of the genre is further corroborated by strong representation of oratorical materials within the earliest written sources, and by the fact that a few extant eighth century papyri preserve some orations⁹. It is conceivable, then, that the texts recorded in the sources are remnants –albeit imperfect ones– of the early oratorical tradition.

‘Ali was an important figure in the early Islamic community, and he preached often and in different contexts to large public audiences. The Muslims had good reason and ample opportunity to remember and pass on his teachings. Several hundred sermons are credited to him in historical and literary sources, including the works of al-Minqarī (d. 827), al-Jāhiz (d. 869), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), al-Balādhurī (d. 892), Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 940), al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Qāḍi al-Nu‘mān (d. 974), and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), and in dedicated medieval anthologies of his words such as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī’s (d. 1015) *Nahj al-balāgha (The Path of Eloquence)*, and al-Qāḍi al-Quḍā’ī’s (d. 1062) *Dustūr ma‘ālim al-ḥikam (A Treasury of Virtues)*¹⁰. The sermons in my selection are drawn from early sources, comprising various genres of works, and transmitted through multiple independent chains of narrators. In terms of their themes, imagery, and even some key utterances, they are likely to be the gist of ‘Ali’s teachings¹¹.

⁵ See J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’ān*.

⁶ Some texts are attributed in the sources to more than one person.

⁷ See M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

⁸ See G. Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature*, and idem, *The Oral and the Written*.

⁹ Cf. 8th century Arabic papyri edited by N. Abbott, in *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, vol. III, pp. 43-78. See also remarks on the early recording of ‘Ali’s sermons by ‘A.Z. al-Khaṭīb, *Maṣādir*, vol. I, pp. 51-52.

¹⁰ Versions of texts cited in more than one source usually contain variants arising from the nature of oral transmission.

¹¹ For more on the transmission of ‘Ali’s sermons and compilations of his words, see T. Qutbuddin, “Introduction” in the edition of Q. al-Quḍā’ī’s *Dustūr*.

3. CONTENT AND STYLE OF 'ALĪ'S SERMONS

3.1. Oral aesthetics

Walter Ong has demonstrated that in an oral culture, all thought and verbal expression is essentially mnemonic¹². He argues that to retain carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in rhythmic patterns shaped for ready, oral recurrence. Among the characteristics of orality, Ong includes pithy sentences, repetition, additive rather than subordinative phrases, aggregative rather than analytic expositions, an agonistic tone, testimonial citation, and closeness to the human lifeworld. To this list, we can add emphatic verbiage, rhetorical questions, and dignified yet simple language. Features of orality are observable in Biblical psalms and sermons, Greek and Balkan epics, and Zulu panegyrics¹³, and they are clearly discernible in the Arabic orations attributed to 'Alī¹⁴.

In addition to their mnemonic grounding, orality-based stylistic implements form an intrinsic component of 'Alī's persuasive tool-box. The purpose of sermonizing is to make an audience believe in the validity of a course of action, a mode of behavior, a way of thought, or a type of doctrine. Together with rational argumentation, 'Alī attempted to stir the hearts and minds of the early Muslims through artistic techniques of 'tacit' persuasion¹⁵.

3.2. Themes and genres

'Alī's preaching focused on four major themes: (1) A call to the worship of God and testaments to Muhammad's messengerhood; (2) repeated reminders of the transience of human life; (3) scathing censure of this world with a view to reducing worldly aspirations; and (4) urgent exhortations to lead a pious life and prepare for the hereafter.

These themes were presented through manifold subthemes, including: praise of God (*tahmīd*), affirmations of his oneness (*tawhīd*), and appeals to Him for guidance and forgiveness; injunctions to God-conscious piety (*taqwā*, henceforth translated either as 'consciousness of God', or 'piety'), obedience (*tā'a*), and pious deeds ('*amal*); laudations of Muhammad as a model to be followed; directives to take guidance from the Qur'an; warnings of the approach of death, conveyed through metaphors of predatory beast and camel-driver, and the remaining days of one's life portrayed as the last few drops of water in an emptied vessel; reminders about generations past and the terrors of the grave; images of the progression of human life in this world as a horse-race and as a journey by camel-caravan; injunctions to prepare provisions (*zād*); comparisons of deeds to trade, in a commercial, profit-and-loss frame; allusions to this

¹² W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 34-57. Ong's work has been criticised as too starkly binary, for its presentation of an inexorable linear progression of humanity from aural to visual, and for its argument that critical thinking is contingent upon writing. Notwithstanding these valid critiques, I find his characterisation of orally based thought to be valuable and pertinent to the discussion here.

¹³ The oral productions of these communities have been studied by several scholars including Ruth Finnegan, Susan Niditch, Michael O'Connor, Milman Parry, Albert Lord, John Foley, and Eric Havelock.

¹⁴ Although we know that 'Alī was literate –he was one of the scribes of the Prophet who wrote down verses of the Qur'an as they were revealed– his employment of orthographic notation would have been limited within the practice of the society he lived in.

¹⁵ For an analysis of 'tacitly persuasive' techniques, see R. Lanham, *Analysing Prose*.

world as a beautiful, unfaithful temptress; and a starkly dichotomous presentation of the base, unstable world, and the sublime, permanent hereafter. These themes, subthemes, and metaphors are present in different combinations in 'Ali's sermons. The selection of images in any single sermon is often ad hoc, with one image frequently giving way to another apparently unconnected one; what ties them together is their single purpose of promoting the hereafter-focused message of the sermon.

The interpenetration of themes also manifests on a broader level, with much mixing and merging of oratorical genres, all denoted by the Arabic term *khutba*: Pious sermons were colored by a historical context, political speeches and battle orations were permeated by pious counsel, and the ritual Islamic sermons for Friday and Eid prayer combined injunctions to godliness with administrative and military instructions. 'Ali's *khutbas* are thus sermons, political speeches and battle orations rolled into one, addressing both material and spiritual issues, yet always underpinned by pious counsel. His teachings are universal, yet they are also grounded in the literary, societal, and topographical context of Arabia, and in the religious, political, and historical environment of early Islam.

4. SERMONS: TEXTS AND ANALYSES

In the following pages, I translate and analyze the full texts of seven sermons attributed to 'Ali are translated and analyzed, each section focusing on different themes and distinct metaphors.

4.1. Sermon 1: Praise of God¹⁶

A sermon 'Ali preached in a Friday service upon first arriving in Kufa after the Battle of the Camel is held together by its typical articulation of the orator's and audience's relationship to God. It is permeated by various references to the Deity: praise of God; the Islamic testimonial to His oneness; injunctions to be conscious of Him, fear His punishment, and be sincere in performing good deeds for Him; and entreaties to Him for salvation in the hereafter.

The sermon begins with a typical formula of praise¹⁷:

God be praised! I praise Him, implore His aid, and beseech His guidance. I seek protection in Him from error. 'Whomsoever God guides, no one can lead astray, and whomsoever He leads astray, no one can guide aright'¹⁸. I bear witness that there is no god but God, One, He has no partner. I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger, whom He selected for His work, and privileged with prophecy. He is the most noble among God's creatures, and the most beloved of them to Him. He conveyed his Lord's message, sincerely counseled his community, and responsibly discharged his duties.

The first sentence echoes the opening line of the Qur'an "God be praised!" (*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*). The phrase would gradually come into regular use in the opening lines of most Muslim prayers, contracts, letters, books, speeches, and sermons. This

¹⁶ N. al-Minqarī, *Waq'at Šiffīn*, p. 10; also in A.H. al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akḥbār*, pp. 219-220; and Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ*, vol. III, pp. 103-104.

¹⁷ On the opening praise formula and its use in Islamic verbal productions as a locus of relationships, see A. Qutbuddin, *Taḥmīd: A Literary Genre*; idem, *A Literary Analysis of Taḥmīd*.

¹⁸ Modified quote from Qur'an, al-Ra'd 13:23, al-Zumar 39:23 and 26, al-Ghāfir 40:33.

line is followed by four verbal clauses imploring God for guidance and aid. Next is a modified quotation from the Qur'an, *Whomsoever God guides, no one can lead astray, and whomsoever He leads astray, no one can guide aright*. This is followed by a declaration of God's oneness using the Islamic testimonial of faith *There is no god but God*, with a familiar two-part Qur'anic tag *One*¹⁹, *He has no partner*²⁰.

In other sermons attributed to 'Ali, the doctrine of God's oneness is fleshed out in logical, theological detail, the Creator presented as a being above description, beyond imagination, from whom all attributes are to be negated²¹. Yet elsewhere, praise of God is contextualized to the historical situation, such his words *I praise God in every circumstance* in the opening lines of a sermon delivered just before the Battle of the Camel²². In our sermon here, the praise formula is presented in its standard, generic form, a form recorded also in the opening lines of sermons attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and several of his Companions²³. This formula is still recited verbatim at the beginning of many sermons across the Islamic world²⁴.

The testimonial of faith follows with a formal declaration of Muhammad's messengerhood, *Muhammad is His servant and messenger*, and a few spontaneous lines exalting him. In light of their close personal relationship, and 'Ali's commitment to the Islamic message, it is to be expected that the Prophet would figure prominently in 'Ali's discourse. In addition to the standard affirmation of Muhammad's messengerhood in the opening lines of this and other sermons, 'Ali often urged his audience to follow his example in order to lead a godly life²⁵; he also referenced other prophets, including Moses, Jesus, David, and Solomon, as paradigms for good²⁶. Here Muhammad's role of guide is presented implicitly through his messengerhood for the Divine Guide.

The sermon continues with another emblematic opening feature, enjoining the audience to piety:

I counsel you to piety: piety is the best counsel any of God's servants ever gave to another: it brings you closest to God's pleasure, and leads to the best outcome in the hereafter. You have been commanded to piety, and created to be good and obey Him. Beware of what God has warned you of, for He has warned you of a severe punishment. Fear God from your heart.

¹⁹ Qur'an, al-A'rāf 7:70, al-Ghāfir 40:12.

²⁰ Qur'an, al-An'am 6:163.

²¹ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 1, pp. 34-36, sermon 90, pp. 188-208, sermon 82, pp. 160-76; see also al-Wāsiṭī, *Uyūn al-mawā'iz*; al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabī' al-abrār*; I.S. al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-'uqūl*; and Q. al-Qudā'ī, *Dustūr*.

²² Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*; after Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharh*, vol. I, pp. 309-311. Cf. other contextual praise openings of 'Ali's sermons in al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermons #100, 111, 176, 188, pp. 222, 358-359, and 388.

²³ The opening praise formula is cited almost verbatim in three sermons attributed to Muhammad, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 148 (after al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*); Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 155 (after Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira*; al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān*; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*; al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharh*); Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 152 (after al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*). See the formula also in sermons by Abū Bakr, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 184 (after Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*); 'Uthmān, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 275 (after al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*; and Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*); Ash'ath ibn Qays, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 358 (after Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharh*); and Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. II, p. 189 (after Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*).

²⁴ This opening is used, for example, in contemporary Friday sermons in India (cf. M. Thanvi, *Khuṭubāt al-ahkām*, p. 219) and Turkey (cf. Turkish Diyanet ministry, *Hutbe Dualari*).

²⁵ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 104, p. 228; #156, p. 317; #196, p. 425; and *passim*.

²⁶ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 158, pp. 318-323.

Piety is a fundamental injunction in the Qur'an, occurring no less than 116 times²⁷, and it is a common directive in the Prophet's sermons²⁸ and in all forms of Islamic preaching. In fact, the Arabic verbal noun *taqwā*, along with its imperative form, is among the most frequently occurring lexemes of this type of sermon. The stock phrase used here –*I counsel you to piety (ūṣīkum bi-taqwā l-lāh)*– is a regular exhortation. Occurring at the top of this sermon's body right after the formulaic opening, the directive frames the entire piece, and underpins all its other pious themes.

Orators commonly expounded a rationale for piety. Not only did they instruct their audience to practice it, they told them why they should do so, their reasons including gratitude for God's bounties, protection from the vicissitudes of this world, and salvation in the afterlife. Here, 'Ali tells his audience that piety *brings you closest to God's pleasure, and leads to the best outcome in the hereafter*.

The directive to piety is conjoined with a charge to obey God, another common theme in the Qur'an (occurring 33 times)²⁹, and a frequent command in prophetic hadith and early Muslim preaching. Moreover, the linkage here –and elsewhere in 'Ali's sermons– echoes the Qur'an's recurrent association of the two concepts³⁰.

The orators' injunctions to obey God (and to be pious) are simultaneously general and particular, for their subtext is a charge to perform *acts* of obedience, namely, to observe the strictures of the Shari'a, or God's Law. Conversely, disobedience to God is often mentioned in the sense of sinning, or going against the regulations of the Shari'a. The connection is made explicit through juxtaposition as the sermon continues, the directions to piety and obedience followed immediately by instructions to *perform virtuous deeds* and to *fear God's punishment*:

Perform virtuous deeds without desiring praise: Whosoever performs deeds for one other than Him –God hands him over to that other. Whosoever performs deeds sincerely for God– He will ensure for him a goodly reward. Fear God's punishment, for "He has not created you without purpose, and has not left you, in any of your affairs, loose without direction"³¹. He has labelled your traces, knows your deeds, and decreed your lifespans.

These commands are given weight with a modified quotation from the Qur'an, saying *He has not created you without purpose*. The theme of purposeful creation is common for 'Ali, and it is reported that he rarely ascended the pulpit without saying these words at the beginning of every sermon³². The line is in conversation with the pre-Islamic negation of an afterlife, also signaled in the Qur'an in verses

²⁷ Qur'an, al-Baqara 2:197, 237, al-Mā'ida 5:8, al-A'rāf 7:26, Muḥammad 47:17, and *passim*.

²⁸ Eg., Šafwat vol. I, p. 148 (after al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh*), idem, p. 156 (after Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira al-nabawiyya*).

²⁹ Qur'an, Āl 'Imrān 3:32, 132, al-Nisā' 4:59, Ṭāhā 20:90, and *passim*.

³⁰ Qur'an, al-Anfāl 8:1, al-Zukhruf 43: 63, al-Shu'arā' 26:126 and *passim*.

³¹ Qur'an, al-Mu'minūn 23:115, al-Qiyāma 75:36.

³² al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabi'* vol. I, p. 39: "O people! Be conscious of God. 'Man has not been created without purpose, such that he waste his time in this world. He has not been left loose, such that he fool around.' The world that he finds so beautiful is no substitute for the hereafter that he finds ugly. The complacent man who obtains the highest honors of this world is not equal to one who attains the lowliest share of the hereafter". Also cited in S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 63, pp. 134-135; and Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, vol. I, p. 88.

such as this one: *They say, once we've died and become dust, are we to return?*³³ Life in this world is not jest and play, cautions 'Ali; it is serious business and there will be an accounting. Indeed, God *has labelled your traces, knows your deeds, and decreed your lifespans.*

Transitioning from this line which hinted at imminent death, the next section warns explicitly of the certain end of this world:

Do not be deceived by this world, for she is a great deceiver of her people: one who is deceived by her is truly deluded. All things in her will perish. "The hereafter is life, if only they realized it"³⁴.

Characterizing the world as a deceiver, 'Ali declares *all things in her will perish.* With its use of the word "perish" (*fanā*'), the assertion has clear Qur'anic resonance³⁵.

The body of the sermon ends here with a verbatim quotation from the Qur'an declaring the hereafter to be the abode of life. Citation of a verse or two from the Qur'an is a common though not requisite feature of the sermons attributed to the first century of Islam. It would become more frequent, even de rigeur, in later sermons³⁶. In early orations, Qur'an citations often came at, or towards the very end, of the sermon –as in this one– casting a retroactive seal of divine authority upon the orator's teachings.

The sermon concludes with a prayer to God:

May God grant me the stations of the martyrs, the companionship of the prophets, and the life of the blissful. Truly, we are all for Him, and because of Him.

Like the themes and vocabulary items in the earlier sections of the sermon, these concepts and terms too are firmly grounded in the text of the Qur'an³⁷.

Because of the nature of oral transmission, most oratorical texts in our sources are fragmentary. Often the formulaic beginning and ending are missing; sometimes other parts are omitted as well. At times we are told of the elision; often we are not³⁸. This sermon is the only full piece in our selection. With a distinct beginning comprised of formulaic praise of God and invocations for the Prophet Muhammad, a body with 'Ali's typical sermonizing themes (including censure of the world, an urging to prepare for the hereafter, be conscious of God, and perform good deeds), and a distinct ending comprised of prayer, the text exemplifies the standard structure of the early Islamic sermon.

³³ Qur'an, al-Mu'minūn 23:82, and *passim*.

³⁴ Qur'an, al-Ankabūt 29:64.

³⁵ Qur'an, al-Rahmān 55:26.

³⁶ Ibn al-'Aṭṭār summarized in his handbook *Adab al-khaṭīb* the rules for the contents of a Friday or Eid sermon, and included among them mandatory citation of Qur'anic verses, with specific verses to be cited (pp. 127-129).

³⁷ Qur'an, al-Nisā' 4:69 (prophets and martyrs in paradise), al-Baqara 2:156 (all of us are "for God").

³⁸ Conversely, some texts that are presented in the sources as one sermon might actually be pieces from several distinct sermons stitched together by the redactor.

4.2. Sermon 2: A camel caravan journeying to the hereafter³⁹

In another of his earliest sermons as caliph, 'Ali used the image of a traveler to convey the passage and purpose of life. Combining some of the major topics of his counsel within the complex rubric of one of his favorite metaphors, he presented the progression of human life in this world in terms of the perilous wilderness navigated by the traveler to arrive at water⁴⁰. The guide is God's Book which demarcates good and evil. The path is constituted by the mandatory religious duties of Islam (and more broadly, performance of pious deeds and maintaining the law). Sins are the burden that slows you down. Repentance lightens this load. The progression of human life in this world is as a camel caravan. The driver of the caravan is death. And the destination is heaven.

In the opening lines of this sermon we see both general religious teachings (God's guidance, good and evil) and specifically Islamic motifs (Qur'an, Islamic praxis, and the Garden):

God revealed a book to guide you, in which He distinguished between good and evil. So be good and shun evil. Undertake mandatory religious duties assiduously for God, and He will ensure your admission into His Garden.

Packaged in an Arabian travel image, these lines contain layers of explicit and implicit referencing. There is an overt mention of a guide *God revealed a book to guide you*. Another version of the sermon also contains an unambiguous mention of a path, *Take the path of goodness, and you will be rightly guided. Shun the course of evil, and you will fulfil your purpose*⁴¹. In our version, a path is implied through the motif of the guide and through the sermon's other path-relevant images. Also evoked subtly, in the reference to the mandatory duties of Islam (*al-farā'id*), is the word 'Shari'a,' originally meaning "a wellworn path to a watering hole", the watering-hole, the travellers' destination, being the Garden of Paradise.

The images of a 'path' and a 'guide' have clear resonance in the oft-cited verse in the prayer-like first *sūra* of the Qur'an, *Guide us to the Straight Path*⁴². The Qur'an itself was deeply infused with the oral, nature-based flavors of Arabian society, and 'Ali's imbibing of the cultural vocabulary is as much, if not more, from the Qur'anic exposition, as it is from the poetic tradition directly.

The next section moves into a different theme, namely, directions for maintaining a law-abiding society:

God has made certain things inviolable; they are not unknown to you. He has given highest priority to the sanctity of Muslim (life and property) over all other sacrosanct things. He has bound all Muslims firmly together with ropes of sincerity and the declaration of God's oneness. A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand all Muslims are safe, except when there is just cause. It is unlawful to harm a Muslim except when there is just cause.

³⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. IV, p. 436; *A Community Divided*, pp. 15-16; the sermon, with minor variants, is also reported in S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 165, pp. 341-42 (some of the lines in the piece are also reported in *ibid.*, sermon 21, p. 79); Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. III, p. 85; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. VII, p. 227; A. al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā*, vol. I, p. 258.

⁴⁰ See also the traveler image in S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj* sermon 98, p. 220; sermon 86, p. 179.

⁴¹ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 165, pp. 341-342.

⁴² Qur'an, al-Fātiḥa 1:5.

This theme is also underpinned, albeit lightly, by the travel image, with the path to heaven being embodied in the Divine Guide's directives. 'Ali asserts that the law is God's domain, and that it has been clearly explained (presumably through the Qur'an and Muhammad's practice or *sunna* incidentally, another word meaning path). The subsequent declaration, *He has given highest priority to the sanctity of Muslim (life and property) over all other sacrosanct things*, echoes Islam's challenge against the state of affairs in pre-Islamic Arabia, where security was maintained by mutual threat of blood vengeance and collective liability⁴³. Where, if one member of a tribe was killed by a member of another tribe, any members of the victim's tribe could, in retaliation, kill any member of the assailant's tribe. Muhammad prohibited this system, and instituted laws maintaining the sanctity of innocent life and property. Punishment in Islam was not to be random, but rather, it was to be meted out only with just cause and regulated by God's law. Muhammad, in what is termed his Farewell Sermon on Mount 'Arafāt, cancelled all cases of blood retaliation outstanding from pre-Islamic times⁴⁴. And Qur'anic verses laid down rules for paying blood money, sentencing a murderer, determining the cause of death, and eye-witness testimony⁴⁵. 'Ali's sermon explains the etymology of the word 'Muslim' on this basis: that a Muslim is one from whose harm other Muslims are safe (*salima*, which has the same consonant root as Muslim: *s-l-m*). This line is ascribed in some sources to the Prophet⁴⁶; perhaps 'Ali is quoting Muhammad here.

The earlier musings on the personal quest for salvation and piety are combined here with injunctions about societal welfare maintained according to God's laws. Furthermore, a theological substratum is applied to the legal prescription: It is their sincere belief and their declaration of the monotheistic creed of Islam that "firmly binds" (note the tent reference) the Muslims together as a community.

The succeeding section opens with a warning of impending death:

Hasten to acknowledge the affair that is common to all, yet personal to each one of you: death. People have gone before you, and the Hour drives you from behind. Lighten your burden of sin so you can catch up. Those who have gone before await the arrival of those who are yet to come.

The theme of human mortality was prominent in early Arabic orations of pious counsel. Rooted in the desert dweller's deep consciousness of cosmic cycles, sermons attributed to pre-Islamic Arabians focused on nature imagery and death. A famous oration ascribed to the Christian bishop Quss b. Sā'ida (d. c. 600) is an apposite example (and one of the few oratorical remnants accredited to pre-Islamic times), with Quss declaring, *He who lives dies. He who dies is lost forever. Everything that could happen will happen. Firm signs; rain and plants; (...) stars that come and go; seas that do not dry out; a sky-roof elevated; an earth-bed laid out*⁴⁷. The advent of Islam brought a radical shift. In the theistic vision of Muhammad and the Qur'an,

⁴³ See discussion of pre-Islamic blood-vengeance and relevant anecdotes and poetry in S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, pp. 55-83.

⁴⁴ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira*, vol. IV, p. 448.

⁴⁵ Qur'an, al-Nisā' 4:92-93.

⁴⁶ Cited in a large number of hadith works including Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. II, p. 1163. See also in Cleary, *The Wisdom of the Prophet*, p. 38; after al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*; and al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn*.

⁴⁷ al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān*, 1:308-9. See also the death-themed oration of Ma'mūn al-Ḥārithī in Ṣafwat 1:39 #455, after al-Qālī, *al-Amāli*.

the earlier themes and images were directed into a piety-based mode of preaching, and warnings of the coming end were used as a spur to urge the audience to prepare for the eternal hereafter. Pre-Islamic reminders of the relentless approach of death proliferate in 'Ali's sermons, but he channels them into an Islamic consciousness of life after death.

In this sermon, 'Ali weaves the death theme into the framing travel imagery, through a personification of death as a caravan driver steering his herd to the afterlife. The camel was an intrinsic part of the desert dweller's existence. Domesticated around 1000 BCE, this animal became a cornerstone of existence in the Arabian Peninsula. Being able to go without food or water for days or even weeks, and having a sturdy set of extremities, stretched out footpads that would not sink into the sand, it was a beast of burden ideally adapted to traverse the arid wastes of the Peninsula. It was an important means of transport, perhaps the only one, for the horse, although useful in battle, was not really suitable for long desert journeys. Sometime between 500 and 100 BCE the northern Arabs developed a new saddle, better balanced for wielding a lance, and providing support for bigger loads. The camel breeders began to control the caravan trade, and the camel almost completely replaced the wheel. From then on, camel caravans regularly cut across the arid wastes of the Peninsula to trade in neighboring lands⁴⁸. Being a vital component of Arabian life, the caravan was an image that would resonate with 'Ali's audience. A picture with which men and women, young and old, were intimately familiar, it formed a potent physical representation for abstract ideas. 'Ali took advantage of that resonance to convey to his audience the importance of staying on the path of truth and following the guidance of the Qur'an; and in this section, acknowledging the presence of death in their midst—a very personal presence—as a camel driver relentlessly pushing forward his beasts, letting none get away.

The audience was also aware of the sluggish progress made by a heavily loaded pack of camels versus the swiftness of one which travelled light. Accordingly, 'Ali instructed his audience to lessen their burden, so that they could catch up with those who had gone before. For the earlier travelers had already reached the alighting station of the hereafter and were in anxious anticipation of the latecomers' arrival. 'Ali charged them to repent of their errant ways, to shed the heavy load of their sins, to become better people, so they could attain paradise, and in it, the companionship of the pious folk who had preceded them there.

In addition to resonating with the Arabian lifestyle, the camel and caravan imagery also had tremendous cultural significance. The first of a pre-Islamic Arabic ode's typical three part structure, the love prelude, began with the poet weeping over the lost beloved who had journeyed away from him, as in the celebrated ode by Imru' al-Qays (d.c. 540): *It is as though I—on the day they loaded their camels near the tribe's acacia trees—were peeling bitter colocynth-onions*⁴⁹. The middle section of the ode was customarily focused on the poet's own voyage, often made on a camel, as in the ode by another famous poet, Labid (d.c. 661), who describes his desert travels *on a journey-worn mare, worn to a remnant, with sunken loins, and a sunken hump*⁵⁰. Usually the camel in the poems was a literal figure; sometimes it stood in figuratively for the poet himself. In 'Ali's sermons of pious counsel, the literary theme of the camel caravan was directed into the metaphorical mold of a different kind of journey, a spiritual passage.

⁴⁸ See R. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*.

⁴⁹ al-Zawzani, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Labid, *Mu'allāqa*, in M. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, p. 37.

The last part of the sermon comes back full circle, to once again direct the audience to virtue:

Be conscious of God in your dealings with His servants and His lands, for you are responsible for your deeds, even those pertaining to the earth and to cattle. Obey God, do not disobey Him. If you see good, grasp it. If you see evil, shun it. "Remember the time when you were few in number and vulnerable in the land"⁵¹.

The section opens with a familiar injunction, *Be conscious of God in your dealings with His servants and His lands*. Consciousness of God is presented in many sermons (as in Sermon 3) as the *best of provisions* for the journey to the hereafter⁵², based on the Qur'anic verse: *Gather provisions –and know that the best of provisions is Consciousness of God*⁵³. In this sermon, the connection is not made directly, but the audience– one well-versed in the Qur'anic text, and frequently exposed to oratorical expounding on *taqwā* as provisions –would comprehend the reference.

A link that *is* made explicitly here is the connection between individual piety and community-oriented living. It builds on the earlier theme of society and law, and emphasizes accountability for one's deeds, and for one's dealings with others, with all God's creation, not just people. The sermon continues with the familiar association between Consciousness of God, obedience, doing good deeds and rejecting evil. It closes with a verse from the Qur'an that reminds the audience that their prosperity and security is a gift from God.

4.3. Sermon 3: Death as a predator⁵⁴

'Ali frequently used striking images of predator and prey to present some of his main themes, as in the following sermon:

Get your supplies together –May God have mercy on you!– for the call has come to depart. Minimize your inclination toward the world, and see that you leave it with good provisions from your present life. Ahead of you is a tough ascent, and stations that are fearsome and alien, through which you must pass and at which you must alight.

You should know that death's gaze is zooming in on you. It is as though you are already warding off its unsheathed claws, and that already its horrific affairs and feared calamities are upon you. So cut off all links to this world and prepare provisions of piety.

In keeping with the characteristics of oral-period verbal production, 'Ali described the abstract idea of death using graphic images rooted in the human lifeworld

⁵¹ Qur'an, al-Anfāl 8:26. The verse continues: "and were afraid that people would wipe you out, whereupon He gave you refuge, strengthened you with His aid, and provided you with goodly sustenance. Will you not be grateful?" 'Ali's citation of part of the verse would evoke the remainder of the verse for the audience.

⁵² See for example a speech by 'Umar II, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. II, p. 209; after Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*.

⁵³ Qur'an, al-Baqara 2:192.

⁵⁴ S. al-Radī, *Nahj*, sermon 202, pp. 435-36; also reported with some variants in al-Tawhīdī, *al-Baṣā'ir*, vol. II, p. 63; al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durar*, vol. I, p. 23; Q. al-Quḍā'i, *Dustūr*, no. 4. 6.

of this culture. Death is portrayed in this sermon as a ferocious animal, such as a lion making ready to sink his claws into its prey, or an eagle, its talons unsheathed, fast homing in. In Sermon 2, we saw 'Ali's portrayal of death as a camel-driver. Elsewhere he embodied it as the *destroyer of pleasures* (*hādīm al-ladhdhāt*) and –reflecting the desert dweller's acute awareness of the value of pure water– the *turbidifier of desires* (*mukaddir al-shahawāt*)⁵⁵. In this sermon, he personifies death as a predator closing in for the kill. The abstract concept of death is given a physical form that would resonate with the audience, a form that simultaneously implies death's immutable power and the immediacy of its arrival. Nature images provided some of the most effective tools for the orator in his address to dwellers of the desert. 'Ali, to be sure, had grown up in Mecca and Medina, which were among the few scattered settlements in the Arabian Peninsula at the time, and the four years of his caliphate were spent in the new Iraqi camptown of Kufa. But these settlements were simpler and closer to nature than the sumptuous urban centers of later Islamic civilization, and life here was a far cry from ninth-century Baghdad, tenth-century Cairo, or eleventh-century Cordoba; lions thrived in Arabia and Iraq during 'Ali's time⁵⁶. Moreover, the image of death as a predator was also a typical motif in the poetic tradition that 'Ali inherited. It was particularly common in the genre of elegy, which usually prefaced praise of the deceased with gnomic pronouncements on death. A good example is a line by Abū Dhu'ayb al-Hudhālī (d. c. 649) in a poem mourning the death of his five young sons: *When death sinks its claws into you, no amulets will avail*⁵⁷.

The pre-Islamic image of death as predator is married in this sermon to the Islamic advocacy of preparing for the hereafter. In Sermon 2, the allusion to provisions was implied by its urging to piety within the context of a travel metaphor. Here, predicated on warnings about the fearsome stages of death, an explicit directive is given, not once, but three times: *Get your supplies together (...) see that you leave [the world] with good provisions from your present life (...) prepare provisions of piety*. So what constitutes provisions for the hereafter? As the last line explains, they are to be gathered by eschewing materialism and practising piety.

4.4. Sermon 4: Censure of the world and terrors of the grave⁵⁸

A common theme in 'Ali's discourses is condemnation of the world, as a way to caution against worldliness⁵⁹. Another is *ubisunt* questions, (Latin: 'Where are

⁵⁵ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, testament #227, p. 474; see also sermon 98, p. 220.

⁵⁶ The ninth-century Abbasid writer al-Jāhīz writes in his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* that lions proliferated even in his time on the banks of the Euphrates, especially in the environs of Kufa and Mosul. News reports indicate that lions were sighted in Iraq as late as 1914. (cf. Khalaf-von Jaffa, *The Asiatic or Persian Lion*).

⁵⁷ A.Dh. al-Hudhālī, *Dīwān*, p. 147. For an analysis of early Arabic 'borrowing' metaphor, see Heinrichs, *Hand of the Northwind*. The poetic genre of elegy and the sermon of pious counsel have other features in common as well, including musings on death, and laments on the fickleness of this world.

⁵⁸ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 223 p. 470; also in al-Dīnawarī, *al-Mujālasa*, vol. I, p. 364; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. III, pp. 212-213; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, vol. XLII, p. 500; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifāt al-ṣifwa*, vol. I, p. 322; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, vol. V, pp. 249-250; al-Suyūṭī, *Jāmi'*, hadith #8609, vol. XVI, p. 444; al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, *Kanz*, vol. XVI, p. 84.

⁵⁹ Censure of the world is present in many sermons by other early orators as well. See for example sermons by 'Umar II, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. II, pp. 205-206 (after Ibn al-Jawzī, *Sirat 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz*); Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. II, p. 200 (after Ibn 'Abd Rabīh, *al-'Iqd*); Ibn Qutayba, *'Uyūn*, and al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān*); al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol.

they?') underscoring for listeners their impending end, and urging them to ponder the fate of past generations. This sermon combines both themes.

The sermon begins with a harsh description of the deficiencies and dangers of this world:

It is an abode encircled by trials and known for deceit. Its conditions do not remain stable, and those who alight in it are not safe from its changing conditions and shifting times. Life in it is base and security not to be found. Its people are targets whom it shoots at with its arrows, and kills with its death.

The opening statement contains four key motifs: The world is a place of tribulation, where humans are continually beset by trials; its conditions constantly change, thus it is inherently unstable; life in it is vile and sordid; and it is a temporary abode, inevitably ending in death⁶⁰.

'Ali frequently presents the world's forbidding aspects metaphorically. In this sermon, he personifies the world as an archer whose arrows target humans, striking them down at every stage, and inevitably killing them off, one by one. In other sermons, he describes it as a green and lush garden, appealing to the senses, yet in reality a ghoulish, carnivorous eater of humans⁶¹, and as a cadaver, over which people are *fighting like dogs over a smelly carcass*⁶².

Often, 'Ali personifies the world as a beautiful but deceitful temptress. He warns of its dangers using the vocabulary of sensual love. In one sermon, he advises his audience to *reject the world in full censure, for she has rejected all who loved her with passion*⁶³. Elsewhere, he addresses the world directly, *I have divorced you thrice*⁶⁴. In this sermon, we see nothing obviously gendered, but given 'Ali's frequent explicit descriptions, we can read woman-metaphor beneath his lines *It is an abode (...) known for deceit*. This reading is also supported by the poetic and grammatical conventions of 'Ali's time. In pre-Islamic and early Islamic custom, the ode's beloved was typically portrayed as disloyal, and this characterization is extended to the oratorical image of the grammatically feminine world.

After the opening admonition regarding the wickedness of the world, the sermon segues into a warning of imminent death, with a reminder of past generations who are no more:

Servants of God! You should know that you, along with the world that you are in, are treading the path of those who went before. They were longer lived than you, more flourishing of abode than you, and had lon-

II, p. 489 (after al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān*); and Qatārī ibn al-Fujā'a in *Safwat, Jamhara*, vol. II, p. 454 (after al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān*; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā*; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*; Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn*).

⁶⁰ Two additional motifs, not mentioned in this sermon, are an integral part of 'Ali's censure of the world more widely: The world is tainted—never fully clean and wholesome, some bad always mixed in with any good; and it is of little worth: in one sermon, he says, "Let this world be smaller in your eyes than shreds from the pods of a spiny acacia tree, or wool fluff falling from a pair of shears". (S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 32, p. 101).

⁶¹ S. al-Raḍī *Nahj*, sermon 110, p. 243.

⁶² *Ibidem*, sermon 149, p. 303.

⁶³ *Ibidem, Nahj*, sermon 32, p. 101. See also sermon 98, p. 220.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem, Nahj*, saying 77, p. 641. According to Islamic law, a man and woman may divorce and remarry each other up to three times. After the third divorce, they may not marry each other ever again. For details, see A. Layish, "Ṭalāk".

ger lasting monuments than you. Their voices have become silent, their breath stilled, their bodies decomposed, their abodes abandoned, and their traces gone. They have exchanged fortified palaces and cushioned seats for propped up stones, for prepared graves, whose courtyard is built upon ruination and shored up with dirt, whose dwelling is near, yet whose resident is far, far away. They live with the people of a locale who take no comfort from one another, people who have no labor yet are completely preoccupied, people who do not find solace in a homeland nor visit as neighbors, even though they live in close proximity and their residences are next to each other. But how would they visit? Decay has crushed them with its chest, and rocks and earth have eaten them up!

In many sermons by 'Ali and other early Islamic orators⁶⁵, long strings of *ubisunt* questions aggressively ask audience members where powerful Arabian tribes like 'Ād, Thamūd, and Tubba' have gone, the Pharaohs, the Amalekites, even the prophet-king Solomon, directing them to take a lesson from the past. The *ubisunt* instructs them to take heed from rulers who exchanged jeweled thrones for hard earth, and from the example of their own fathers and mothers whose bodies now decompose in the soil. The aforementioned pre-Islamic orator Quss is reported to have declaimed to his fellow tribesmen, *O people of Iyād! Where are Thamūd and 'Ād? Where are your fathers and grandfathers?*⁶⁶ There are also poetic referents for the theme. The pre-Islamic poet al-Aswad ibn Ya'fur al-Nahshalī (d. c. 600) laments *What can I hope for, when the tribe of Muḥarriq has departed from their homes, as have Iyād? (...) the winds have blown dust over the site of their abodes (...) They used to live there in luxury (...) Indeed, all pleasures will one day turn to decay*⁶⁷. Other famous pre-Islamic poets such as al-A'shā (d. before 629), Ṭarafa (d. c. 550), Labīd, and Zuhayr (d. 609), stress the inevitability of death, and they mention the end of the selfsame 'Ād, Thamūd, and Tubba'⁶⁸. The Qur'an declares that it was God who destroyed these peoples, and He did so because of their disbelief, in verses such as the following: *'Ād and Thamūd did not believe that the great calamity would come. As for Thamūd, they were destroyed by an earthquake. And as for 'Ād, they were destroyed by a fierce and raging wind (...) Do you see any from among them now?*⁶⁹ Later ascetic poetry would pick up this theme, a prime example being the Abbasid poet Abū l-'Atāhiya, who would write lines such as *Give birth for death, and build for destruction. For whom do we build, when we're going unto dust, just as we were created from it?*⁷⁰ In this sermon, 'Ali changes the mode of the *ubisunt* from questions to declarations. Outlining a stark contrast between the earthly pomp of those peoples with their current somber state and emphasizing their utter loneliness, he warns the audience to take heed.

⁶⁵ Cf. other *ubisunt* segments in 'Ali's sermons: S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 223, pp. 470-471; sermon 180, pp. 363-370. *Ubisunt* sermons by other early orators include: Abū Bakr in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 182 (after al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*); Abū l-Dardā', in Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*, vol. III, p. 109, and al-Jāhiz, *Bayān*, vol. III, p. 136; 'Uthmān in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 270 (after a-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*); and al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, in Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. II, p. 299 (after Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*), 'Umar II (Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*, vol. IV, p. 84).

⁶⁶ al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān*, 1:308-309.

⁶⁷ al-Aswad ibn Ya'fur, *Dāliyya*, text from Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī, *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, vol. I, pp. 445-446.

⁶⁸ Cf. M.C. Lyons, *Identification and Identity*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁹ Qur'an, al-Ḥāqqā 69:4-8; see also Ibrāhīm 14:9-17, al-Ḥajj 22:42-45, and *passim*.

⁷⁰ Abū l-'Atāhiya, *Dīwān*, p. 46.

Frequently, this kind of reminder in early Islamic sermons is conjoined with macabre descriptions of the terrors of the grave. The orator 'answers' his own questions by a detailed account of the rapid and gross putrefaction of the human corpora, replete with horrific images: Maggots tearing into their skins, storms obliterating their traces, rosy hues becoming pale⁷¹. Here, 'Ali personifies decay as a beast that has crushed the dead with its chest, and he embodies rocks as a monster that has eaten them up. This graphic depiction is commensurate both with the close-to-nature lifestyle of its people and the oral milieu of 'Ali's time.

He ends the sermon by personalizing the lesson, connecting the people in front of him to those who have passed away:

Beware! It is as though you have come to what they came to, as though that same bed has claimed you, and that same resting place has enveloped you. How will it be with you, when all affairs end, and all graves are emptied? "Each soul will be tried for what it did in past times. They will be returned to their true master, and will not find there the lies they had spun"⁷².

As they died, so shall you. The terrors they faced, you shall face too. The Qur'anic verse cited at the end about the return unto God and the coming judgment implicitly enjoins: Repent of your sins before it is too late.

But why such strong, and what some might characterize as pessimistic, language? I would argue that the language is not pessimistic but realistic. The following report may be cited in explanation⁷³:

'Ali was following a bier in a funeral procession when he heard a man laugh. He said:

We behave as if death is written for people other than us, duties are incumbent upon people other than us, and those we see die are travelers soon to return. We carry their bodies to the grave and consume their wealth. Then we forget every counselor, and shrug off every calamity.

This quotation brings us to the heart of the matter, indicating 'Ali's purpose in dwelling so often and so lengthily in his sermons on death: It behooves us as intelligent beings to prepare for what comes after; to think long term, really long term. Human nature is such that we prefer not to ponder unpleasant things. We see death all around us yet refuse to grapple with the reality of our own imminent end. The early Islamic sermons –with their horrific images of bodies decaying in the soil and souls being punished for evil deeds– attempt to shake up the complacent masses who are lulled by their base and mundane routines into a dangerous oblivion of the inevitable end; to frighten them into taking heed while there is yet time.

Many of 'Ali's death-themed sermons are set in the context of his battles. In one *ubisunt* passage, he mentions his companions who were killed at Ṣiffīn, including the fiercely loyal 'Ammār ibn Yāsir. That sermon is in part eulogy to him: All humans die, even the mightiest of them, but the pious –such as 'Ammār– attain the everlasting delights of heaven⁷⁴.

⁷¹ See Q. al-Qudā'ī, *Dustūr*, 2.14, 3.1.

⁷² Qur'an, Yūnus 10:30.

⁷³ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, saying #123, p. 653. This text is ascribed in some sources to the Prophet; see for example, A.Ṭ. al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. I, p. 139.

⁷⁴ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 180, p. 369.

Thus the point of the censure is not to blame the world itself, but to warn against worldliness. In one often-cited sermon, 'Ali turns the censure around'⁷⁵:

O you who reproach the world, yet are deceived by her deception, and tricked by her falsehoods! Do you choose to be deceived by the world then censure her? (...) When did she lure you or deceive you? Was it by the destruction of your fathers through decay? Or by the lying down of your mothers under the earth? (...) Indeed, the world is an abode of truth for the one who is true to her, an abode of well-being for the one who understands what she means, an abode of wealth for the one who takes provisions from her, an abode of counsel for the one who takes counsel from her. She is the mosque for God's loved ones, the prayer place for God's angels, the place of descent for God's revelation, the place of trade for God's saints—in her they earn God's mercy, and through her they profit and enter Paradise.

'Ali reminds the listener that the world is neither good nor bad in and of itself, but that both the good and bad of this world are with reference to its people. The world presents both possibilities; you choose your own path in it and are responsible for your deeds. The apparent contradiction in 'Ali's characterization of the world—one harshly negative, one highly positive—is resolved by examining the purpose of the characterizations. In both, the goal is to motivate the audience to prepare for the hereafter.

4.5. Sermon 5: *Be you children of the hereafter!* A political and military context⁷⁶

A sermon 'Ali delivered immediately after his entrance into Kufa following the Battle of the Camel presents pious counsel in a historical frame. It combines references to military and administrative issues, with assertions about his righteousness, and advice about prioritizing the hereafter by not holding back from fighting for truth.

After the formulaic praise section (that the narrator mentions but does not cite), the body of the sermon begins with direct reference to the recent events leading up to the battle:

People of Kufa! You have God's favor through Islam as long as you do not deviate and change things. I called you to the Truth and you answered, but then you began to deviate from the accepted practice and changed things. Lo! God's favor for you is manifest in legal rulings and distribution of state stipends. You should be a model for those who answer and enter the path you have entered into.

Alluding to the community's recent pledge of allegiance to his caliphate, he says, *I called you to the Truth and you answered*. Then he talks about their 'changing things', likely an intimation of the renegeing on the pledge by the leaders of the Camel

⁷⁵ I.S. al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuhaf al-'uqūl*, pp. 186-188 and al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, saying #132, p. 655-657; also cited in al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*, al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt*, Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtasar Ta'rikh Dimashq*, Ibn Hamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, Ibn Abī al-Iṣḥāq, *Tahrir al-tahbir fi sinā'at al-shi'ra wa al-nathr*, Ibn Ma'sūm, *Anwār al-rabī' fi anwā' al-badī'*, and Ahmad al-Ḥāshimī, *Jawāhir al-adab*.

⁷⁶ N. al-Minqarī, *Waq'at Siffin*, pp. 3-4; also cited in S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 43, p. 116; Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn*, vol. II, p. 381; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. II, p. 414; and Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Tabṣira*, vol. I, p. 156. A similar oration is attributed to 'Ubāda ibn al-Ṣāmit (Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, vol. I, p. 261, after al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*).

group, the people of Basra, some of the Kufans who took their side, and the Iraqis or Medinese who sat on the sidelines without coming to his aid.

Following on from chastising those who “changed things” ‘Ali warns them in the next section against wordliness, and urges them to be mindful of the hereafter.

The most fearful thing I fear for you is twofold: following desires and prolonged yearning: As for following desire, it stops you from the Truth. As for prolonged yearning, it makes you forget the hereafter. Lo! This world is journeying in retreat and the hereafter is journeying forward. Each of the two has children. Be you children of the hereafter! Today is action and no reckoning; tomorrow is the reckoning and no action.

Cautioning the audience against closing their eyes to the inexorably approaching end, he castigates them for following their “base desires”, and having “prolonged hopes”—extensive worldly ambitions based on the complacent belief that they would live forever— (the converse is an urging to “short hopes” mentioned in other sermons). The journey metaphor is used yet again, with the world portrayed as a caravan that is going away, and the hereafter as another that is arriving at your door.

Another version of this sermon adds a second figurative layer, *Lo! This world has turned away in speed, and nothing remains of it except a residue, like the residue in a vessel which a pourer has emptied*⁷⁷. Water images would be particularly resonant in this arid landscape, and they abound in pre-Islamic poetry and oratory as well as in the Qur’an; more often there, it manifests in metaphors of rain and waterholes. In the above line, a totally commonplace water-based illustration culled from everyday life portrays the idea of life having almost run out.

Kinship imagery is also applied, with the audience urged to *be children of the hereafter* (another version of the text also adds the inverse, *do not be children of this world*, and it continues with a personification of the world and the hereafter as ‘mothers’, *for each son will be returned to his mother on the Day of Resurrection*). Elsewhere in his sermons, ‘Ali declares that the world is but a “passing place” “the hereafter is your home”, and “it is for the afterlife that you have been created”.

The sermon concludes with ‘Ali praising God for granting him victory over his enemies:

Praise be to God, who aided his friend and thwarted his enemy, who gave victory to the truthful and righteous and disgraced those who broke and cancelled the pledge. [Kufans!] Cleave to piety, and obey the one who obeys God from among the family of your Prophet. They are worthier of your obedience in all things that they obey God in, than those who make false claims and challenge us, those who appropriate the honor that is ours, reject our commands, wrest from us our right, and drive us away from it. They have tasted the evil consequences of their misdeeds, and “they will soon meet with utter disillusion”⁷⁸. Lo! Several men from among you sat back from coming to my aid; I serve them warning. Disassociate from them and chastise them harshly until they repent, so that “God’s army”⁷⁹ may be known.

⁷⁷ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 43, p. 116; this version only records the universally themed section of pious counsel, and not the concretely historical sections preceding and following it.

⁷⁸ Qur’an Maryam 19:59.

⁷⁹ Qur’an al-Mā’ida 5:56.

Here, 'Ali emphasizes his legitimacy as part of the "family of the Prophet" and urges his audience to obey him, connecting this obedience with obedience to God. He warns them not to be taken in by false claimants, and ends with a return to berating those among the Kufans who had refused to come to his aid.

4.6. Sermon 6: Metaphors of horse-racing and trade⁸⁰

This is one of 'Ali's most widely cited sermons, striking for metaphorical underpinnings of horse-racing and trade, and its presentation of this world and the hereafter as diametrical opposites. Using orality-based techniques of rhythm and antithetical parallelism, it highlights the sordidness of this world, and the sublimity of the heavenly abode.

The opening lines of the sermon set up a dichotomy between this world and the next:

The world has turned back and proclaimed its departure. The hereafter has come forward and announced its arrival.

The dichotomy frames the sermon and permeates its lines: The world will soon be as though it never was, and the hereafter will shortly be all that matters. By the proximate positioning of the two statements, the purpose behind the condemnation of this world is clarified: to energize the audience to think beyond the end of this life, and to prepare for the inevitable hereafter. 'Ali's frequent comparisons of the impure, unstable, and transient world with the pure, stable and eternal hereafter (as in Sermon 4), are present here in an implicit substrate, reinforcing the contrast.

The sermon continues with a horse-racing metaphor:

Today is the day of training and tomorrow is the race. Lo! These are your days of hope; coming right behind them is death. Whosoever performs good deeds during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death, will profit from his deeds and be unharmed by his hopes. Whosoever falls short during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death, will lose his deeds and be harmed by his hopes. Lo! Perform good deeds from love as you perform them from fear. Lo! I have not seen the like of paradise, he who desires it sleeping; nor the like of hellfire, he who runs from it sleeping. Lo! Whomsoever right does not benefit, wrong will harm. Whomsoever guidance does not put on the straight path, error will drag to destruction.

Like camels, horses in 'Ali's time were an integral part of the fabric of Arabian society. The pre-Islamic Arabians and the early Muslims keenly valued their steeds, which they used mainly for raiding and warfare. Horses were also a prominent theme in Arabic poetry, where their speed was vaunted, as in the famous horse-description passage of the aforementioned master poet Imru' al-Qays, *like a boulder*,

⁸⁰ al-Jāhiz, *Bayān*, vol. II, pp. 52-53; also in Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, vol. I, p. 86; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, vol. VII, p. 100; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Faḍā'il al-ṣāḥāba*, vol. I, p. 530; Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn*, vol. II, p. 256; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Qīṣar al-amal*, vol. I, p. 26 and vol. I, p. 50; al-Thaqafī, *Ghārāt*, vol. I, p. 633; Ibn Abī 'Āsim, *al-Zuhd*, vol. I, p. 130; al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. II, pp. 208-9; I. S. al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf*, p. 113; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*, vol. IV, p. 65; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. II, p. 414; al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, vol. I, p. 146; S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 28, pp. 93-94; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, vol. I, p. 63; Khwārizmī, *Manāqib*, p. 262.

*hurled down by the flood from above*⁸¹. However, the pre-Islamic poetic tradition does not appear to have connected the theme of horses to competing in life's racetrack. Like his co-opting of the camel-caravan metaphor to fit his journey-of-life theme, 'Ali drew on the image of the charger to serve the cause of pious counsel.

The image of a race track is common in 'Ali's sermons. A metaphor for the arena of life, the chargers stand in for humans who compete either in doing good deeds or evil ones (another version adds a further statement, *The prize is paradise, or the end is hellfire*⁸²). Racing towards a finish line has clear resonance with the Qur'anic verse: *Race toward your Lord's forgiveness and a paradise whose breadth is as the breadth of the sky and the earth*⁸³. A few sentences later, 'Ali personifies 'error' as a runaway horse dragging a fallen rider, whose foot is stuck in the stirrup, to his end, *Whomsoever guidance does not put on the straight path, error will drag to destruction*⁸⁴.

Servicing the same theme of piety, 'Ali employs the metaphor of trade, of buying and selling, profit and loss. One who *performs good deeds* will *profit from his deeds* on Judgment Day, the prize being paradise. One who *falls short* in leading a pious life will *lose his deeds*, and the punishment will be hellfire. This allusion references the Qur'an, which presents the term 'loss' alongside the term 'deeds' in four different verses, for example, in the *sūra* of the Cave: *Say: Shall we inform you of those who are the worst losers in terms of deeds?*⁸⁵

The sermon ends with ideas we have encountered before, reminders about the looming journey to the afterlife, injunctions to gather provisions for it, and warnings against worldly hopes:

Lo! You have been commanded to depart and guided toward provisions.
Truly, the most fearful thing I fear for you is twofold: following your
desires and prolonging your yearnings.

Another version adds the following end-line⁸⁶: *Take in the world, from the world, provisions with which you can nourish yourselves tomorrow.*

We see in this sermon (and in 'Ali's sermons generally) an abundance of audience engagement features: direct address, emphatic structures, rhetorical questions, and prescriptive phrases. Together, these elements create a dense web pulling in the audience towards participation in the speech act—and thus the persuasive goal—of the orator. Moreover, the sermon's simple elegance is apparent in its apposite positioning of words, careful selection of pronouns, and fitting juxtapositions. Stemming from its oral nature and function of persuasion, the intense rhythm of the classical Arabic oration is one of its hallmark characteristics. Framed in antithetical parallelism, and enriched by rhyme and repetition of key terms, this sermon displays the key mnemonic characteristics of orally based expression. Its parallelism brings a strong acoustic resonance into a semantic frame of antithesis. Moreover, the stylistic

⁸¹ al-Zawzani, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt*, p. 44.

⁸² S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 28, p. 93.

⁸³ Qur'an, al-Ḥadīd 57:21.

⁸⁴ Elsewhere in his sermons, 'Ali compares sins to "recalcitrant steeds mounted by sinners, their reins loose, galloping with their riders into hellfire"; and he likens piety, in a parallel antithesis, to "a docile steed, mounted by the God-conscious, reins firmly in their hands, delivering them to paradise" (S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 16, p. 68).

⁸⁵ Qur'an, al-Kahf 18:103; see also al-Mā'ida 5:5&53 and al-Zumar 39:65.

⁸⁶ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 28, p. 94.

features of the sermon are harnessed to the goal of convincing the audience to prepare for the hereafter. Concurrently with the logically persuasive content of the sermon, 'Ali's tacitly persuasive aesthetics skillfully delineate a contrast between this world and the next, today and tomorrow, good and evil, guidance and error, leaving the audience starkly reminded of the transience of this world, and the necessity for each individual to utilize his or her time in it to the fullest, in order to ensure salvation in the ensuing eternity.

4.7. Sermon 7: What is piety?⁸⁷

There is nary a sermon by 'Ali that is devoid of injunctions to reject worldliness and be pious. But what does piety entail exactly? In this sermon, 'Ali describes in detail the high moral characteristics, the conviction in belief, the hereafter-focused aspirations, and the entirely godly way of life, of those who truly deserve the epithet.

The world is journeying in retreat and the hereafter is journeying forward. Each of the two has children: Be you children of the hereafter. Be you not children of this world.

The pious are those who take the earth as a sleeping place, dust as bedding, and water as perfume.

Whosoever longs for the garden of paradise will refrain from indulging base desires. Whosoever fears the fires of hell will retreat from that which is forbidden. Whosoever rejects worldliness will make light of calamities.

There are those who worship God as though they see the people of paradise enjoying eternal life in paradise, and the people of the fire being tortured in the fire.

After proclaiming in the opening lines the imminence of the hereafter and the importance of preparing for it⁸⁸, the sermon gets into specifics of piety. The pious –the word used here is *zāhidīn* (verbal noun *zuhd*), literally, those who reject worldliness– are described as living simple lives. Explaining their motivation to be good, 'Ali says the world has no value in their eyes, they fear the fires of hell⁸⁹.

The sermon continues with particulars of the virtuous character of the truly pious –chastity, simplicity, kindness, and patience– as well as their conviction in the coming reality of the hereafter, and their rapt communion with God; all traits enjoined time and again in the Qur'an:

⁸⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *'Uyūn*, vol. II, pp. 380-381; also in al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 191, pp. 413-418, sermon 86, pp. 179-183; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *al-Tawaḍu'*, vol. I, p. 52; Abī Nu 'aym, *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, vol. I, p. 79, vol. VI, pp. 52-53, and vol. VI2, p. 306; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, vol. IV2, p. 493; al-Qurtūbī, *al-Jāmi'*, vol. I, p. 230; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. VII, p. 6.

⁸⁸ We have encountered these lines almost verbatim in Sermon 5; it is possible that 'Ali used similar phrases in different sermons, or perhaps they are variant reports of the same sermon.

⁸⁹ Advocating *zuhd* elsewhere, 'Ali explains that it is comprised of 'shortness of hopes' in worldly things, gratitude for God's bounties, and restraint when tempted by sinful acts; even if you cannot achieve all of this entirely, he says, at the very least stay away from 'the forbidden things', presumably from acts considered major sins, such as murder, stealing, alcohol, and adultery (S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 80, p. 158).

Their malice is never feared. Their hearts are sorrowful, their persons chaster, and their needs few. They patiently endure these few days here, awaiting the long comfort of the hereafter.

In the night, they stand before God in prayer, tears pouring down their cheeks, imploring God: O Lord! O Lord! In the daytime, they are kind, wise, good, and pious.

The final section likens them to arrowshafts:

Arrow shafts. One who sees them thinks them ailing, but they do not ail. He says, "They are crazy!", but they are crazed only by something immensely grave.

Used for hunting, in battle, and for the traditional *maysir* gambling game in pre-Islamic times, arrow shafts were made from slender sticks of wood. Unlike the oratorical image of the archer which was used to convey deadly intent, the picture of arrow shafts in sermons and poetry signified extreme hunger and resultant emaciation. The famous *Ode in L* attributed to the pre-Islamic brigand-poet Shanfarā (d.c. 550) likened the gaunt wolves of the wilderness (themselves a metaphor for himself and his bandit companions) to arrow shafts. Another association that could be at work here is the disdain of worldliness said to be espoused by Shanfarā's ode. The second Sunni caliph 'Umar is reported to have said *Teach your children Shanfarā's ode in L, for it teaches good character*⁹⁰. In 'Ali's sermon, arrow shafts are a metaphor for the pious, their bodies thin, presumably from long fasting (a sister act of worship to the lengthy prayers mentioned earlier in this sermon), and from a denunciation of base desire, a 'shortness' of material aspirations.

Several lines of this sermon are part of a much longer sermon attributed to 'Ali in the *Nahj al-balāgha* characterized as "The Hammām Sermon", which, the compiler's subheading informs us, contains a *description of the pious*⁹¹. It begins with a general statement. *The pious in this world are people of good moral character*. Then it provides a list of their traits: They "speak the truth", "dress simply", and "walk humbly". They possess *strength in religion, maturity with gentleness, belief with conviction, passion for knowledge, and moderation in wealth*. They are kind to their fellow humans, for they *forgive those who have oppressed them, give to those who have refused them, and are compassionate to those who shun them*. They are *dignified in times of calamity, patient in times of misfortune, and grateful to God in times of ease*. These, again, are characteristics praised frequently in the Qur'an.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POSTSCRIPT

'Ali's sermons are a stellar example of the nascent Islamic oratorical tradition, showcasing the blending of the Arabian cultural ethos into the core teachings of the Qur'an. The nature-grounded imagery of the pre-Islamic poetic tradition that constitutes

⁹⁰ al-Ṭuḡhrā'ī, *Lāmiyyat al-'ajam*, cited in Abū Nāji, *al-Shanfarā*, p. 119; the line is attributed to Muhammad in some late sources, eg., al-Naḥwī, *Sharḥ Lāmiyyat al-'arab*.

⁹¹ S. al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, sermon 191, pp. 413-418. He reports that a devout man named Hammām came to 'Ali and said "Describe to me the God conscious, such that I actually see them." 'Ali demurred, saying at first only "Be conscious of God, Hammām and perform good deeds, for "God is with those who are conscious of Him and perform good deeds" (Qur'an al-Naḥl 16:128). When Hammām insisted, 'Ali delivered a long sermon detailing the virtues of the pious.

the metaphorical base of 'Ali's sermons (and of the Qur'an itself) was harnessed to the spiritual purposes of the Islamic sermon. Pre-Islamic orators of pious counsel had reminded their audiences of the imminence of death. With the coming of Islam, we see a mixing of the old and the new. 'Ali's sermons remained entrenched in the earlier death-focused tradition, but they added a clearly Islamic dimension to this theme by presenting the transience of life on earth as the impetus to reject worldliness and prepare for the hereafter. Seamlessly combining the images, vocabulary, and contexts unique to his cultural, religious, and topographical terrain, with the spiritual and social teachings of the Qur'an, 'Ali produced a distinctive Arabian-Islamic mode of preaching.

The blend of interlinked themes and images prominent in 'Ali's preaching continued through the medieval period. Over the centuries, intellectuals and laymen studied his words, and orators and litterateurs emulated his style and motifs. Muslim preachers and scholars often drew on his Arabian nature metaphors, and sometimes even used his exact language. An early example is the eighth century scribe 'Abd al-Ḥamid al-Kātib. Even though he was chancery official for the fervently anti-'Alid Umayyads, when this 'father of Arabic prose' was asked: 'What enabled you to master the science of eloquence, what formed your training in it?' he replied, 'Memorizing the words of 'Ali'⁹². The famed tenth century Syrian preacher Ibn Nubāta al-Fāriqī had learned by heart the entire contents of the *Nahj al-balāgha* compilation, and 'Ali's teachings on piety permeated his sermons⁹³. Most of the eight hundred sermons of the eleventh century Cairene Fatimid scholar al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī opened with warnings of imminent death and injunctions to prioritize the next world, and they explicitly referenced 'Ali's exhortations⁹⁴.

The relevance of 'Ali's sermons continues in modern times. In the nineteenth century, the Egyptian Sunni reformist Muḥammad 'Abduh urged all students of eloquence and ethics to study 'Ali's discourses⁹⁵. In the twentieth century, the Fatimid-Ṭayyibi Indian religious leader and scholar Tāhir Sayf al-Dīn composed counsel poems in the Gujarati language with identical censures of the world and injunctions to perform good deeds, attributing these teachings to 'Ali⁹⁶. In the twenty-first century, the *Nahj al-balāgha* is a required component in the Twelver-Shi'ite seminary curriculum. Not only their highest-ranked clergy Khamenei and Sistani, but all their preachers in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere, have studied it and memorized sections, and they quote it in their own writings and sermons. And like the few examples named above, many, many Muslim preachers –of diverse affiliations, in distant parts of the Islamic world, and at different times– echoed and continue to echo 'Ali's mode of persuasion, with urgently personalized reminders of human mortality, couched in Arabian metaphors, framing injunctions to be conscious of God and prepare for the imminent hereafter.

⁹² al-Jahshiyārī, *K. al-Wuzarā'*, p. 82. Elsewhere 'Abd al-Ḥamid's reply is reported as: "I memorized seventy sermons of 'Ali, and they flowed and flowed" (Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ*, vol. I, p. 44). For 'Abd al-Ḥamid's epistles, see 'Abd al-Ḥamid, *'Abd al-Ḥamid ibn Yahyā al-Kātib wa-mā tabaqqā min rasā'ilih*.

⁹³ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm*, vol. IV, p. 150, in the year 374 A.H. (985 C.E.) in his obituary notice for Ibn Nubāta; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ*, vol. I, p. 24. For Ibn Nubāta's sermons, see Ibn Nubāta, *Sharḥ Khuṭab*. Note that Ibn Nubāta was a contemporary of the *Nahj*'s compiler al-Raḍī, and perhaps his teacher as well.

⁹⁴ See al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis*, vol. I: *majlis* 13, p. 53, *majlis* 84, p. 411-412, *majlis* 11, pp. 43-44; vol. II: *majlis* 1, p. 3; *majlis* 2, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁵ 'Abduh, Introduction to his commentary on al-Raḍī, *Nahj*, pp. 22-23.

⁹⁶ Sayf al-Dīn, *Naṣīḥat: Allāh ta'ālā no ḥamd tū karjē* and "Birādar tū naṣīḥat sun.

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