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## ‘Alī’s Contemplations on this World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times

An important theme of the early Islamic oration (*khuṭba*) is contemplating this world and the next (*al-dunyā wa al-ākhirā*). These contemplations form a particularly significant element of the orations of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661). ‘Alī was the first Shi‘a imam and fourth Sunni caliph, an acknowledged master of Arabic eloquence, a sage of Qur’anic wisdom, a model of piety, and arguably the most influential orator of Islam. The tenth-century compilation of his words titled *Nahj al-Balāgha* (*Path of Eloquence*),<sup>1</sup> the fifth-/eleventh-century collection *Dustūr Ma‘ālim al-Ḥikam* (*A Treasury of Virtues*),<sup>2</sup> and other anthologies of his words,<sup>3</sup> as well as a large number of early and eclectic historical and literary texts,<sup>4</sup>

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1 Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, comp., *Nahj al-Balāgha*, ed. Ḥusayn al-A‘lamī (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-A‘lamī, 1993).

2 Al-Qaḍī al-Quḍā‘ī, comp., *Dustūr Ma‘ālim al-Ḥikam wa Ma‘thūr Makārim al-Shiyam*, ed. and tr. Tahera Qutbuddin as *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of ‘Alī, with the One Hundred Proverbs of al-Jāhīz* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

3 Other extant medieval anthologies of ‘Alī’s words include Ṭabarsi’s *Nathr al-La‘ālī* (Scattered Pearls), and Āmidī’s *Ghurar al-Ḥikam wa Durar al-Kalim* (Radiant Maxims and Pearly Sayings). For a full list, see ‘Abd al-Zahrā’, *Maṣādir*, 1:66–86.

4 Extant early literary and historical works containing texts of ‘Alī’s sermons, letters and sayings include (in chronological order of death dates): Mīnqārī, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, 3, 9, 15, 52, 55, 112, 131, and passim (see entry on ‘Alī in Index of Sermons, 613, and Index of Letters, 614); Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 2:50–56, 59–61; Zubayr ibn Bakkār, *al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 325, 347–48; Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-Akhbār*, 2:256–58 and passim; Ibn Qutayba, *al-Imāma wa al-Siyāsa*, 1:70, 86, 100, 110, 111, 113, 122, 134, 138, 143, 151, 160, 163–66, 170; Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, 2:192, 272, 317, 320–21, 330, 358; Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 191–212; Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, 1:19–26, 213, 312–13, 3:208; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 4:436, 479, 548, 556, 567, 5:7–8, 13–17, 25, 37–38, 45, 48–49, 60, 61–62, 66, 77–80, 84–85, 88, 90, 95, 96, 97, 102, 107–108, 134, 147–48; Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, 2:465,

contain numerous sermons, speeches, letters, aphorisms, and ad hoc statements attributed to him that typically focus on this world and the hereafter. Within this profusion, however, one observes—at least at first glance—a clear dichotomy in his treatment of this world. Despite the similar subthemes and identical rhetorical techniques in all his addresses, we find two radically contradictory positions articulated, one harshly castigating this world, the other staunchly defending it. In this paper, I attempt to resolve this dichotomy by contextualizing the material. I contend that a cohesive sense of ‘Ali’s ideas on this world and the hereafter can be gained only by examining closely the historical, psychological, and literary milieus for these texts. By examining the backgrounds of the sermons, we see that the difference in characterization stems from the difference in context—and that the message is essentially the same: in all his discourses describing the world, whether the portrayal is positive or negative, ‘Ali is urgently exhorting his followers to realize the transience of human existence, reject materialism, and lead a godly life on earth in preparation for the eternal life to come; he is urging them at all times to be mindful of the hereafter.

This paper employs a multifaceted contextualization. In their theoretical work on the subject, Rick Rylance and Judy Simmons provide a useful list of the important types of context, which include the context of the period in terms of significant social, historical, political, and cultural processes; the context of the work in terms of the writer’s biography or milieu; the context of a specific passage in terms of the whole work from which it is taken, and in terms of other works by the same author; the literary context in terms of the question of generic factors and period-specific styles; and the different contexts for a work established by its reception over time.<sup>5</sup> These classes of context are harnessed collectively to my analysis, in an attempt to provide an interdisciplinary scrutiny of the texts that display ‘Ali’s presentation of the theme of this world and the next. Scriptural, historical, literary, critical, legal, philological, theological, exegetical, and commentary works are mined for relevant information. Together, they paint for us a rich, many-sided picture of ‘Ali’s Qur’an-based worldview and his enduring literary legacy.

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491–92, 494, 550; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farīd*, 4:63–75; Ibn Shu‘ba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-‘Uqūl*, 59–167; Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, 2:413–19; Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 1:157–58, 369–73; Maydānī, *Majma‘ al-Amthāl*, 2:453–55; Zamakhsharī, *Rabī‘ al-Abrār*, 1:19, 36, 37, 39, 40, 215–18, 224, 2:13, 14, 16, 27–28 and passim; Muḥammad ibn Ṭalḥa, *Maṭālib al-Sa‘ūl*, 1:205–59; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Tadhkirat al-Khawāṣṣ*, 119–71.

5 Rick Rylance and Judy Simons, *Literature in Context*, xxiii.

Before I get into the details of 'Alī's characterizations of the world, I should say a few words on the provenance of the sermons cited. 'Alī lived in a largely oral society, where writing, though known, was infrequent, and was usually reserved for important documents and inscriptions. 'Alī's orations and sayings, like those of others of his period, were initially produced orally and then for the most part transmitted by word of mouth over two or three generations. Only after the introduction of papermaking techniques to the Islamic world in the mid-eighth century were they systematically transcribed in historical and literary books. The initial period of oral transmission meant that these materials were vulnerable to error or fabrication. But scholarly findings of the last few decades about the nature of orality indicate that the strength of the indigenous Arabian tradition of oral transmission should not be underestimated. Mary Carruthers has demonstrated that people of oral societies have prodigious memories, which they harness to good effect in transmitting their artistic verbal productions,<sup>6</sup> and the phenomenal memories of members of early Islamic society are amply documented. Walter Ong has shown that in an oral society, artistic verbal materials are underpinned by mnemonic devices of cadenced rhythms and vivid imagery that help the audience to remember them,<sup>7</sup> and these devices are clearly visible in 'Alī's oeuvre. And Gregor Schoeler has established that side by side with oral transmission, eighth-century Arabic scholars wrote down historical and literary materials as notes to be used as aides-mémoires in teaching.<sup>8</sup> 'Alī was one of the most important and revered personages of early Islam, his eloquence was proverbial, and during the four years of his caliphate, he preached long and frequently to large public audiences. Thus, it is likely that the recorded sermons attributed to 'Alī possess a genuine core, and a portion of the orations and sayings attributed to him are authentic, some in essence, some even verbatim. Moreover, given the consistent, multiple, and early attribution to 'Alī of certain Qur'an-based themes and nature-oriented images,<sup>9</sup> and given their compatibility with the historical and literary ambience of the time, it is feasible that they represent a true picture of 'Alī's views on this world and the hereafter.

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<sup>6</sup> Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, passim.

<sup>7</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, passim.

<sup>8</sup> Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*; Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*; Schoeler, "The Relationship of Literacy and Memory in the Second/Eighth Century," passim.

<sup>9</sup> See details of 'Alī's Qur'an-based themes and nature-oriented imagery, as well as translations of some of his key sermons, in Qutbuddin, "Sermons of 'Alī," 205–6 and passim.

## Condemnations of This World

‘Alī emphasizes time and again that this world has no value. To point out its total insignificance, he compares it graphically in his sermons to objects familiar in the daily lives of people living in first-/seventh-century Arabia that they would have held in utter contempt: a decaying carcass (*jīfa*),<sup>10</sup> residual remnants of food scraps in the mouth (*lumāza*),<sup>11</sup> the bones of a pig in the hands of a leper (‘*irāqi khinzīrin fī yadi majzūm*),<sup>12</sup> shreds from the pods of a spiny acacia shrub (*ḥuthālat al-qaraz*),<sup>13</sup> woolfluff floating off a pair of shears as they clip (*qurādat al-jalam*),<sup>14</sup> bitter gallnuts (‘*afṣa maqira*, a cancerous growth produced by certain plants to surround and kill wasp eggs laid on their surface),<sup>15</sup> a leaf being chomped in the mouth of a locust (*waraqatun fī fami jarādatin taqḍamuhā*),<sup>16</sup> and the sneeze expectorate or fart of a goat (‘*aftat ‘anz*).<sup>17</sup>

‘Alī’s insistence on the insignificance of this world is rooted in the teachings of the Qur’an. In over forty verses, the Qur’an denounces this world as “a cargo of deception,”<sup>18</sup> “play and frolic,”<sup>19</sup> “inconsequential,”<sup>20</sup> “[superficial] ornamentation,”<sup>21</sup> and “[mere] commodities.”<sup>22</sup> One verse that brings together all these epithets is Ḥadīd 57:20:

10 Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, 4:73; Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 239; Quḍā’ī, *Dustūr Ma‘ālim al-Ḥikam*, 52; ‘Āmilī, *Kashkūl*, 2:119.

11 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 727; Maydānī, *Majma‘ al-Amthāl*, 2:453.

12 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 677.

13 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 101; Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 2:60–61.

14 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 102; Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 2:60–61.

15 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 559.

16 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 469; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, 1:97; ‘Āmilī, *Kashkūl*, 2:21.

17 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 57; Ābī, *Nathr al-Duwar*, 1:187; Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *Nihāya*, 3:164; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, ‘-F-Ṭ; Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, ‘-F-Ṭ.

18 Qur’an, Āl ‘Imrān 3:185; see also An‘ām 6:70 and 130, A‘rāf 7:51, Luqmān 31:33, Fāṭir 35:5, Jāthiya 45:35.

19 Qur’an, An‘ām 6:32, 70, A‘rāf 7:51, ‘Ankabūt 29:64, Muḥammad 47:36.

20 Lit.: “little.” Qur’an, Nisā’ 4:77, Tawba 9:38.

21 Qur’an, Qaṣaṣ 28:60, Baqara 2:212, Yūnus 10:88, Aḥzāb 33:20.

22 Qur’an, Zukhruf 43:35, Shūrā 42:36, Ghāfir 40:39, Āl ‘Imrān 3:14.

Know that this worldly life—which is but play and frolic, superficial ornamentation and boasting, and vying for more and more wealth and offspring—is like a rain shower whose resultant verdure delights unbelievers, but soon the vegetation dries up and you see it yellowing, then it becomes dust. The hereafter brings either a severe punishment, or it brings forgiveness and acceptance from God. This worldly life is naught but a cargo of deception.

أَعْلَمُوا أَنَّهَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ وَزِينَةٌ  
وَنَفَاحٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاتُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ كَمَا تَلَّ  
عَيْبٌ أَعْجَبَ الْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُ ثُمَّ يَهِيحُ فَتَرَاهُ مُصْفَرًّا  
ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطْمًا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ  
وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانٌ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا  
مَنْعُ الْغُرُورِ

In its strongly negative portrayal of this world, the Qur’an sets it up against the hereafter. ‘Alī frequently uses these Qur’anic appellations in declaring the transience and insignificance of this world,<sup>23</sup> and as we shall see, he too presents this transient world as a foil for the eternal afterlife.

The bitter, sometimes resigned, occasionally irate castigations of the world in ‘Alī’s sermons and letters are also partly grounded in his troubled historical context. Early on, he had put his very life on the line, time and again, fighting in the Muslims’ battles against the Meccans. Muḥammad’s death had struck him hard, as he mourned a deeply revered leader and beloved friend. Moreover, according to several early historians, ‘Alī believed that the succession to Muḥammad, wielded by Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān for twenty-five years, rightfully belonged to him. Ibn Hishām, Ṭabarī, Ya‘qūbī, and Ibn Qutayba record ‘Alī’s initial refusal to accept Abū Bakr as caliph until forced to do so. They also record ‘Alī’s declarations about his own superior right to the caliphate, both immediately after Muḥammad’s death, and later, during the deliberations of the Shūrā committee that appointed ‘Uthmān.<sup>24</sup> Even after becoming caliph upon ‘Uthmān’s death, he was faced by revolts from within, one after the other. In the four years that he ruled, he fought three major battles: the Battle of the Camel against the Prophet’s widow ‘Ā’isha and the Prophet’s companions Ṭalḥa and Zubayr and the people of Basra, the Battle of Ṣiffīn against the Umayyad Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān and the people of Syria, and the Battle of Nahrawān against a renegade

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Qutbuddin, “Sermons of ‘Alī,” passim.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira al-Nabawiyya*, 2:489–90; Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2:126; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 4:231–33, 5:7–8; and Ibn Qutayba, *al-Imāma wa al-Siyāsa*, 1:28–33. For details of this issue and further primary sources see Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad*, 28–33, 141, and passim; Madelung, “Shī‘a,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005).

group from his own army known as the Khārijites or Seceders. Some of his closest associates and family members were killed at Ṣiffīn and in its aftermath. After the post-Ṣiffīn arbitration went against him, most of his supporters pulled back, and he spent the last few months of his life unsuccessfully persuading them to resume the fight. Meanwhile, Mu‘āwīya was going from strength to strength, taking over Egypt, and sending raiding parties into the Arabian Peninsula and even Iraq itself, not far from ‘Alī’s capital, Kūfa. This state of affairs continued until ‘Alī was killed by a Khārijite’s sword while he was praying in the mosque in Kūfa. Some of ‘Alī’s lines quoted in this paper are spoken in defense of his own high moral grounding vis-à-vis these events. Others are articulated as part of his teaching oeuvre, in individualized situations as well as more general preaching events. ‘Alī’s strongly personal take on the subject is clear from the repeated use of the first-person pronoun in many of the descriptive phrases cited above, which read, to take just two examples: “Your world is worth less in my eyes (*fī ‘aynī awhā wa ahwan*) than a bitter gallnut,” and it “is less appealing to me (*azhadu ‘indī*) than a goat sneeze.” Clearly, each of these phrases is pronounced in a text that comes out of a very specific, and very personal, context.

One of these specific contexts is the political situation of the time, which found ‘Alī at the center of a maelstrom of contentious claims regarding the leadership of the nascent Muslim community.<sup>25</sup> The “sneeze of a goat” image is set explicitly against the background of ‘Alī’s situation vis-à-vis the first three Sunni caliphs. It comes at the end of the famous (and controversial) oration named the *Shiqshiqiyya*, in which ‘Alī—after becoming caliph—stated that Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān had earlier assumed the caliphate while knowing full well that ‘Alī’s place in it was as central to it as that of “the pivot in the grinding stone” (*maḥall al-quṭb min al-raḥā*).<sup>26</sup> The context of this oration can be further elaborated by factoring in the accusations leveled at ‘Alī by his challenger Mu‘āwīya and Mu‘āwīya’s associate ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ before and after the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 36/657, spelled out in their correspondence with him. They charged that he had been envious of the first three caliphs, and that he had always avidly desired the caliphate.<sup>27</sup> ‘Alī responded directly to their accusations elsewhere by letter;<sup>28</sup> in

25 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad*, passim.

26 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 50–57; Ābī, *Nathr al-Durar*, 1:187; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Tadhkirat al-Khawāṣṣ*, 124–25. For a list of medieval sources citing the *Shiqshiqiyya*, see ‘Abd al-Zahrā’, *Maṣādir*, 1:309–22. See parts of the *Shiqshiqiyya* and similar speeches in Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabayīn*, 2:51; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farīd*, 4:63, 68; and Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘, *Tahrīr al-Taḥbīr*, 383.

27 Minqarī, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, 86–87.

28 Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 521–22; Minqarī, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, 88–91; Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘, *Tahrīr al-Taḥbīr*, 380–81.

the *Shiqshiqiyya* oration, he appears to be speaking indirectly to the same allegations. When he says this world means less to him than the sneeze of a goat, he is in fact stating that he cares nothing for the caliphate and for the worldly benefits that accrue from it, and that his motive for proclaiming his right to the caliphate is not greed for wealth or power, but the desire to establish God’s religion. This is made very clear in the phrases immediately preceding the comparison we are discussing here, where he says: “If God had not made it incumbent upon the learned to rise up in the face of oppression and help the oppressed ... you would have found this world of yours less appealing to me than the sneeze-expectorate of a goat.”

Another context for understanding the background of these harsh criticisms of the world is what we know from the sources about ‘Alī’s personality, his asceticism (especially in the last few years of his life), his strict ideas about right and wrong, his fairness with regard to distribution of treasury funds, and his crack-down on any hint of corruption among his governors.<sup>29</sup> Following the conquests, the Muslim empire had grown large and rich, and as a consequence worldliness and bribery had spread among the inhabitants of Medina and Kūfa. In contrast, ‘Alī himself lived simply, and he urged his followers to do the same. The assertion about the world being “worth less than bitter gallnuts” was prompted by the following incident: ‘Alī’s governor in Basra, ‘Uthmān ibn Ḥunayf al-Anṣārī, participated in an extravagant wedding celebration. His rich hosts, according to ‘Alī, routinely shunned the poor, and the sources of their wealth were dubious. ‘Alī reprimanded the governor in a letter urging ‘Uthmān ibn Ḥunayf to follow his own—‘Alī’s—example. And what was ‘Alī’s example? That he took from this world only the bare necessities, for it was “worth less [to him] than bitter gallnuts.”

Within this same context of ‘Alī’s personality, we can place yet another of his harsh characterizations of the world. In one oration, ‘Alī mentioned that his own brother, ‘Aqīl ibn Abī Ṭālib, having many children to provide for and having become destitute, had implored him for funds from the state treasury; he, ‘Alī,

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding ‘Alī’s asceticism, see report of his patched-up garments in Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:20. See also Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī’s oration in which he said ‘Alī left behind no gold or silver, in Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:28; Ya’qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2:213; and Ṭabari, *Tārīkh*, 5:157. See also the report of Ḍirār al-Nahshali in Qālī, *Amālī*, 2:147; Mas’ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, 2:415; Qāḍī al-Nu’mān, *Sharḥ al-Akhbār*, 2:391–92; Abū Nu’aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, 1:84–85; Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 641–42; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 24:401; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, 4:28; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, 18:225–26. See also the chapter on ‘Alī’s asceticism in Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Tadhkirat al-Khawāṣṣ*, “Fī Dhikr Wara’ih wa Zahādatihī wa Khawfihi wa ‘Ibādatihī,” 109–19.

had denied the request, since the money was not his to give.<sup>30</sup> He mentioned in the oration that he had brought a fiery iron rod close to ‘Aqīl, and when ‘Aqīl had screamed from pain and fear, he had said, “Do you scream from the pain of an iron rod heated by a human for sport, while you drag me into the fire stoked by the Powerful One to punish those who have incurred His wrath? Do you scream from pain, while expecting me not to scream from the flames of hell?” In the same text, ‘Alī went on to profess outrage at a gift that he had been offered by a certain man (according to the commentators, the Kūfan notable Ash‘ath ibn Qays),<sup>31</sup> presumably for a less than honest purpose. After recounting the incidents with ‘Aqīl and Ash‘ath, ‘Alī proclaimed that this world was worth less to him than “a leaf being chomped in the mouth of a locust,” continuing, “what would ‘Alī want with pleasures that will end and delights that will not abide?!”

The severity of ‘Alī’s reaction to both ‘Uthmān ibn Ḥunayf and ‘Aqīl ibn Abī Ṭālib can also be explained through the historical context of ‘Alī’s caliphate coming at the heels of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān’s. Ibn Sa‘d, Balādhurī, and other early historians have stated that much of the dissatisfaction of the Muslim community with ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān’s caliphate had to do with nepotism and corruption;<sup>32</sup> ‘Alī would have wanted to wipe out all traces of these, to show his constituency that he would not tolerate dishonesty among his governors, nor show favoritism to his family.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Balādhurī again, as well as Ya‘qūbī and Ibn Qutayba, narrate that Mu‘āwiya unlawfully appropriated property and arbitrarily disbursed treasury funds to garner support for his illegitimate claims.<sup>34</sup> Ironically, the sources tell us that ‘Aqīl, having been turned down by ‘Alī, went to Mu‘āwiya to ask for financial help.<sup>35</sup> In his responses to ‘Aqīl and ‘Uthmān ibn Ḥunayf, ‘Alī probably wanted to emphasize his own clean dealings in comparison with Mu‘āwiya’s.

<sup>30</sup> Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 469.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, 11:247–48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:47; Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 5:25, 28. For a detailed analysis of the charges of nepotism against ‘Uthmān, see Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad*, “The Grievances against the Caliph,” 81–113.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g. Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 4:440.

<sup>34</sup> Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2:221–22; Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 5:122; Ibn Qutayba, *al-Imāma wa al-Siyāsa*, 1:213–14. For collected citations about Mu‘āwiya’s appropriation and distribution of funds and property, see Ṣāhib Yūnus, *Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān*, “*Mu‘āwiya Yastaṣfī Amwāl al-Nās li-Nafsi-hī*,” 235–38.

<sup>35</sup> Zubayr ibn Bakkār, *al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 334–36; Ibn ‘Abd-Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-Farīd*, 4:6–7; Ibn Qutayba, *al-Imāma wa al-Siyāsa*, 1:101–2; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, 11:251–54.

The wide and early provenance of ‘Ali’s sermons denouncing this world indicates a common position taken by ‘Ali, particularly during the four turbulent years of his caliphate; it appears that ‘Ali was known for such teachings, and literary scholars recognized that ‘Ali’s particular historical context would produce such themes. Ibn Manẓūr in the *Lisān al-‘Arab* (*The Arabic Tongue*),<sup>36</sup> and Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr in his *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa al-Āthār* (*Ultimate Book of Rare Words from the Hadīth and Sayings*), listed the “sneeze of a goat” phrase as a now-common Arabic proverb and traced its origin to ‘Ali. More directly to our point is a remark made by the famed Abbasid litterateur Jāḥiẓ. Recording the “shreds from the pods of an acacia tree, woolfluff floating off a pair of shears” oration in his *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* (*Eloquence and Exposition*), he stated that although it was attributed by his informant to Mu‘āwiya, he, Jāḥiẓ, believed it was “more like the words of ‘Ali ... and closer to his situation.”<sup>37</sup>

Detailed and explicit descriptions of the world’s decrepitude and deceptions constitute the single most prominent theme in ‘Ali’s oeuvre. Using metaphors of predatory beast for death and beautiful temptress for the world, employing the technique of dramatization in his presentations of death, and asking *ubi sunt* rhetorical questions about the whereabouts of the audience’s forebears, time and again he articulated the ignoble nature of this world. Why did ‘Ali teach that this world is paltry? Because—as he explained copiously in many of his orations—it is corrupt, impure, deceitful, unstable, and transient.<sup>38</sup> There is nothing in it that is good or stable or loyal or permanent. This line of argumentation is visible in most of ‘Ali’s orations.

But why use such strong language? Why the relentless emphasis on the negative aspects of the world? I have cited in a previous article the following report to underline ‘Ali’s reason for dwelling in his sermons on death. The report also helps us understand why ‘Ali so often and so lengthily castigated the world, whose transience he emphasized as the reason to plan for what comes after. This is the report:<sup>39</sup>

‘Ali was participating in a funeral procession when he heard a man laugh. He exclaimed:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, ‘F-T.

<sup>37</sup> Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 2:59–61.

<sup>38</sup> For translations and analyses of some of ‘Ali’s key sermons on this issue, see Qutbuddin, “Sermons of ‘Ali,” 214–18.

<sup>39</sup> Raḍi, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 653. Cited and discussed in Qutbuddin, “Sermons of ‘Ali,” 217–18.

We behave as though death were decreed for everyone other than ourselves, as though duties were incumbent upon everyone other than ourselves, as though people who die in front of our eyes are travelers who will soon return. We consign their bodies to the grave and then go on to consume their wealth—forgetting every counselor and shrugging off every tragedy.

كَأَنَّ الْمَوْتَ فِيهَا عَلَى غَيْرِنَا كُتِبَ  
وَكَأَنَّ الْحَقَّ فِيهَا عَلَى غَيْرِنَا وَجَبَ وَكَأَنَّ الَّذِي  
نَرَى مِنَ الْأَمْوَاتِ سَفْرٌ عَمَّا قَلِيلٍ إِلَيْنَا رَاجِعُونَ.  
نُبِؤُهُمْ أَجْدَانَهُمْ وَنَأْكُلُ نُرَاتِهِمْ كَأَنَّا مُخَلَّدُونَ  
بَعْدَهُمْ. ثُمَّ قَدْ نَسِينَا كُلَّ وَاعِظٍ وَوَاعِظَةٍ وَرَمِينَا بِكُلِّ  
فَادِحٍ وَجَالِحَةٍ.

‘Ali’s sermons—with their harsh and relentless characterization of the world’s ignoble nature—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.

Although ‘Ali’s condemnation of the world appears total, it is in fact qualified, and a means to an end. The particular contexts of these orations show that the world, when denounced in his orations, is not to be taken as an absolute term. Rather, the criticism is directed to the base aspects of the world, including money, power and fame, particularly when they distract from the hereafter, or worse, when they are obtained illegally and incur reprisals in the afterlife. In many sermons and sayings, ‘Ali provides ethical instructions on how to be a morally upstanding human being. The audience is urged to not immerse themselves in this world to the extent that they forget the next. Present in all of ‘Ali’s sermons that discuss the world we find a comparison with the hereafter. In many orations, he presents the two in a comparative framework.<sup>40</sup> Even when the hereafter is not plainly mentioned, even when the stated theme is this world, the hereafter is still the coded referential theme. The aim of promoting mindfulness of the hereafter is either achieved directly by instructing the audience to strive for it, or it is gained indirectly by using this world as a foil and warning of its transience. The dichotomy is set up plainly in many of his orations, so even in those times that the hereafter is not mentioned overtly one evokes the other. Explicitly or implicitly, the vast majority of ‘Ali’s orations and epistles urge an audience focused on their worldly lives to contemplate and prioritize the hereafter.

<sup>40</sup> For translations and analyses of some of ‘Ali’s key sermons on this issue, see Qutbuddin, “Sermons of ‘Ali,” 218–20.

## Praise of This World

In startling contrast to ‘Alī’s censorious characterization of the world in most of his sermons, in just a few pieces attributed to him we see a vigorous defense of this world, even praise.

One widely cited example is recorded (with minor variations) in several early sources including the *Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* and *Maḥāsīn wa al-Aḍḍād* of Jāḥiẓ, the *Iṣlāḥ al-Māl* of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, the *Tārīkh* of Ya‘qūbī, the *Murūj al-Dhahab* of Mas‘ūdī, the *Nahj al-Balāgha* of Sharīf Raḍī, and several other historical and literary works.<sup>41</sup> In the *Nahj al-balāgha* narrative (and in many of the others), the oration is framed as a strongly worded retort to a man whom ‘Alī overheard criticizing this world:<sup>42</sup>

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**41** Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 2:190–91; Jāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Aḍḍād*, 1:113. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Iṣlāḥ al-Māl*, 1:50; Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2:208; Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, 2:413–14; Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 655–57. Additional sources include: Ibn Shu‘ba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-Uqūl*, 186–88; Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Masāwī‘*, 1:265–66; Abū Bakr al-Dinawarī, *al-Mujālasa wa Jawāhir al-‘Ilm*, 1:210; Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā‘ir wa al-Dhakhā‘ir*, 1:51; Ābī, *Nathr al-Durar*, 1:185; Ḥuṣrī, *Zahr al-Ādāb*, 1:51; Khaṭīb Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 7:287; Rāghib Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarat al-Udabā‘*, 2:403; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 42:498–99 and 58:79–80; Muḥammad ibn Ṭalḥa, *Maṭālib al-Sa‘ūl*, 1:215–16; Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘, *Tahrīr al-Taḥbīr*, 277–79; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, 1:73; Qurtūbī, *Tafsīr*, 6:414–15; Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt*, 18:7; Suyūṭī, *Jāmi‘ al-Aḥādith*, 15:353; Ṣāliḥī, *Subul al-Hudā*, 11:304; Muttaqī Hindī, *Kanz al-Ummāl*, 3:292; Saffārīnī, *Ghidhā‘ al-Albāb*, 2:430; Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 2:353. See also Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘’s versification of ‘Alī’s piece in Ṣafadī’s *al-Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt*, 18:6–7; and Dā‘ī Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn’s versification in his *Dīwān*, “Qaṣīdat al-‘Aql,” 1:403. The piece has also been translated by Cleary, *Living and Dying with Grace*, 21.

**42** Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 655–57. Due to the continuous nature of the quotation that follows and the formatting necessities in accord, the following space could not be helped.

O you who reproach this world while being so willingly deceived by her deceptions and tricked by her falsehoods! Do you choose to be deceived by her yet censure her? Should you be accusing her, or should she be accusing you?! When did she lure you or deceive? Was it by her destruction of your father and grandfather and great grandfather through decay? Or by her consigning your mother and grandmother and great grandmother to the earth? How carefully did your palms tend them! How tenderly did your hands nurse them! Hoping against hope for a cure, begging physician after physician for a medication. On that fateful morning, your medicines did not suffice them, your weeping did not help, and your apprehension was of no benefit. Your appeal remained unanswered, and you could not push death away from them although you applied all your strength. By this, the world warned you of your own approaching end. She illustrated by their death your own.

Indeed, this world is a house of truth for whomsoever stays true to her, a house of wellbeing for whomsoever understands her, a house of riches for whomsoever gathers her provisions, a house of counsel for whomsoever takes her advice. She is a mosque for God's loved ones, a place where God's angels pray, where God's revelation alights, where God's saints transact, earning his mercy and profiting paradise.

Who would blame her, when she has honestly declared her imminent separation, proclaimed her impending departure, and announced her own and her people's looming destruction?! She has illustrated by her trials the terrible trial of the fire, and awakened by her delights a desire for the abundant delights of paradise. In the evening she leaves you healthy and happy, only to arrive the next morning with an awesome calamity. All this, to awaken your desire and alarm, to stir up your fear and vigilance.

Some will blame her on the morning of regret. Others will praise her on the day of judgment. For she reminded them and they took heed. She told them about herself and they believed. She counseled them and they were mindful.

أبيها الذامَ للدنيا المغتَرَّ بغرورها  
المخدوع بأباطيلها. أتغترَّ بالدنيا  
ثم تندمها؟ أنت المتجرّم عليها أم  
هي المتجرّمة عليك؟ متى  
استهوتك أم متى غرتك؟  
أبمصارع أبائك من البلى؟ أم  
بمضاجع أمهاتك تحت الثرى؟  
كم علّلت بكفّيك. وكم مرضت  
بيديك. تبغي لهم الشفاء و  
تستوصف لهم الأطباء. عادة لا  
يُغني عنهم دواؤك ولا يُجدي  
عليهم بكأؤك. لم ينفع  
أحدهم إشفافك و لم تسعف فيه  
بطلبتك ولم تدفع عنهم بقوّتك. قد  
متّلت لك به الدنيا نفسك  
و. وبمصراع مصرعك  
إنّ الدنيا دار صدق لمن صدقها  
ودار عافية لمن فهم عنها و دار  
غنى لمن تزوّد منها و دار  
موعظة لمن اتّعظ بها. مسجد  
أحبّاء الله ومصلى ملائكة الله  
ومهبط وحي الله ومتجر أولياء  
الله. اكتسبوا فيها الرحمة  
وربحوا فيها الجنّة.  
فمن ذا يذمّها و قد أدنت ببينها و  
نادت بفراقها و نعتُ نفسها و  
أهلها. فمتّلت لهم ببلائها البلاء  
و شوّقتهم بسرورها إلى  
السرور. راحت بعافية وابتكرت  
بفجعية. ترغيبا و ترهيبا  
وتخويفا و تحذيرا.  
فدّمها رجال عادة الندامة،  
وحمدها آخرون يوم القيامة.  
نكّرتهم الدنيا فتذكروا و حدّثتهم  
فصدقوا و وعظّتهم فاتّعظوا.

Although Raḍī does not provide the wider context for this piece, another author fills us in. According to the eminent tenth-century Twelver Shi‘a scholar Ibn Shu‘ba al-Ḥarrānī in his compilation of sermons *Tuḥaf al-‘Uqūl ‘an āl al-Rasūl* (*Rare Gifts for the Intellect from the Progeny of the Messenger*), ‘Alī delivered this oration to a group of men from his own army, late in the night, immediately following the Battle of the Camel in Basra.<sup>43</sup> The narrator of the *Tuḥaf* is ‘Alī’s companion, also a companion of the Prophet and a prolific raconteur of hadith, Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī. Jābir reported that he was present when ‘Alī addressed this group from among his supporters whom he overheard censuring the world, with the words I have just cited (and Ibn Shu‘ba’s version of the text includes some variants and additions).

By censuring this world, ‘Alī’s companions were presumably shifting blame for their own shortcomings. They were perhaps also using it as a scapegoat to explain the inexplicable failings of the People of the Camel, Muslims all, who had borne arms against the incumbent caliph, ‘Alī, to whom they had earlier sworn a pledge of allegiance. ‘Alī reminded his companions 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. We should not reproach the world for our own defects. Yes, its characteristics are base, but it does not hide them from us. Rather, it warns us time and again, showing us plainly by the deaths of our fathers and mothers that our fate will be exactly the same. The world is a bridge to paradise for the person who looks at it with the eye of reflection. It is here that one has the opportunity to prepare for the hereafter, to pray and perform good deeds, deeds that serve as a passport to heaven. But for the person who neglects to prepare for the hereafter, the world is a bridge to hellfire. In both cases, the world is not responsible for the fate of its inhabitants. It is they who choose their path. They make of the world what they will. They use it or abuse it as they will.

In many segments of this oration we sense an underlying woman metaphor that pins down much of the imagery ‘Alī uses for the world. Elsewhere, ‘Alī is reported to have addressed the world directly as a woman—“I have divorced you thrice!”<sup>44</sup>—referring to a form of Islamic divorce that permanently closes the door to reconciliation and remarriage. The grammatical structure of Arabic lends itself effectively to this particular metaphor. As we know, Arabic has no neutral gender; all nouns are either masculine or feminine, and the word used to denote this world, *dunyā*, is feminine, which is what partly prompts ‘Alī’s personification of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibn Shu‘ba, *Tuḥaf al-‘Uqūl*, 186–88. Jābir related that ‘Alī began with praise of God, which endorses the public, oratorical provenance of the piece.

<sup>44</sup> Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 641.

the world as a woman. The leitmotif of the faithless woman in the *qaṣīda* tradition could also be at work here; ‘Alī could be evoking the beautiful but ultimately disloyal beloved of the poetic love prelude, the *nasīb*. In the *nasīb*, the poet bemoans the departure of the beloved, motifs of the faithless woman being combined with those of separation. This combination carries over into ‘Alī’s pious-counsel orations, where themes of death and departure from this world are combined with a personification (*tashkhiṣ*) of the world as a seductress. In the oration cited above (as in many of ‘Alī’s orations castigating the world), a woman is not obviously referenced, but the presentation is made immediately more meaningful when one realizes this veiled underpinning, hinted at by the vocabulary of seduction. Interestingly in this case, the metaphor is reversed—the idea that the world beguiles its inhabitants is turned around, with the rhetorical question: “When did she [i.e., the world] seduce you?”

Several medieval scholars remarked upon the fundamental departure in the “O you who reproach this world” sermon from ‘Alī’s customary tone of censure when talking about the world. In his *Taḥrīr al-Taḥbīr fī Ṣinā‘at al-Shi‘r wa al-Nathr* (*Register of Adornments of the Craft of Poetry and Prose*), the seventh-/thirteenth-century Cairene scholar Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘ recorded this oration as the most interesting example of the rhetorical technique of radically shifting one’s perspective (*taghāyur*).<sup>45</sup> Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘’s contemporary, the Mu‘tazilite commentator of the *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, also pointed out ‘Alī’s diametric divergence from his usual perspective on the topic, and added that the Prophet Muḥammad too had portrayed the world in both negative and positive terms.<sup>46</sup> (Jāḥiẓ and Bayhaqī also cite this piece alongside ‘Alī’s negative characterizations of the world in for-and-against type books.)<sup>47</sup> Indeed, praise of this world is not the dominant approach in ‘Alī’s oeuvre, but it could have been a more common one than Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘ and Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd realized. Mas‘ūdī, in the early tenth century, had prefaced his citation of the same piece with the words “‘Alī used to say,” thus presenting it as a frequent topic in his orations.<sup>48</sup>

Like his condemnation of it, ‘Alī’s praise of the world is a means to an end. In some sources, the text cited above is followed by two interesting tags, which indicate that for ‘Alī, the real point of praising the world is to praise the hereafter; or in other words, to assert the importance of using one’s time in this world to make preparations for the hereafter. These sources report that after ‘Alī finished his

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Abī al-Iṣba‘, *Taḥrīr al-Taḥbīr*, 277–79.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, 18:326.

<sup>47</sup> Jāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Aqdād*, 1:113–14; Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Masāwī*, 1:265.

<sup>48</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, 2:413–14.

impassioned speech in defense of the world, he turned to face the cemetery and said:<sup>49</sup> “O you who are residents of these graves, O people living in narrow confines and loneliness, O people of exile and isolation: If you were to ask us about your homes—others have occupied them. If you were to ask us about your wives—others have bedded them. This is our news—what is yours?” Then he turned again to his companions and said: “If they were given permission to speak, they would say: ‘The best provision is piety!’ (إِنَّ خَيْرَ الْبَرِّ إِذَا نَفَّوْا)”<sup>50</sup> Another corroboration of the proposal that ‘Ali’s praise of this world is to be read in terms of his exhortations to prepare for the hereafter is found in an exegetical text. Qurṭubī, in his *Tafsīr*, quotes the first line of ‘Ali’s oration in his explanation of the Qur’anic verse, “This worldly life is but meaningless play and frolic” (وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ)<sup>51</sup> to explain that activities in this world by which the hereafter is intended are to be excluded from this divine condemnation of worldly life.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, the nature of the praise in the oration is the strongest evidence for this contention. For ‘Ali praises the world as “a house of truth for whomsoever stays true to her, a house of wellbeing for whomsoever understands her, a house of riches for whomsoever gathers her provisions, a house of counsel for whomsoever takes her advice ... a mosque for God’s loved ones, a place where God’s angels pray, where God’s revelation alights, where God’s saints transact, earning his mercy and profiting paradise”—all the aspects of this world that the praise focuses on are related to God, godliness, and the hereafter.

The notion that the essential message of ‘Ali’s expositions on the world was the importance of using one’s time here to prepare for the hereafter is clarified yet further in a formal epistle of counsel that he wrote to his ward Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr when he dispatched him as governor of Egypt soon after the Battle of Šiffīn. The epistle—as was common practice at the time—would presumably have been read out in the mosque, or some other public venue, to the people of Egypt at large. Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr was the letter’s immediate addressee, but ‘Ali, in his role as Imām of the Muslim community, was simultaneously preaching to a wider audience. Moving away from his usual strong criticisms of worldly pleasures, he empties this piece of the slightest whiff of asceticism. Similar to the Qur’anic verse “Through the blessings that God has granted you, seek the abode

<sup>49</sup> Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Masāwī*, 1:265; Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir wa al-Dhakhā’ir*, 1:51; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 42:498–99 and 58:79–80; al-Saffārīnī, *Ghidhā’ al-Albāb*, 2:430.

<sup>50</sup> Qur’an, Baqara 2:197.

<sup>51</sup> Qur’an, An’ām 6:32.

<sup>52</sup> Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 6:414.

of the hereafter; but do not forget to enjoy your share of this world,”<sup>53</sup> ‘Ali’s letter to Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr and the Egyptians explicitly praises good living as long as it is accompanied by godliness. The *Nahj al-Balāgha* records the letter as follows:<sup>54</sup>

You should know, O servants of God, that the pious partake of the joys of this world and those of the next. They share the world with the worldly, but the worldly do not share the hereafter with them. In this world, they reside in the most splendid of residences and consume the finest of delicacies. They possess the sumptuous comforts of the wealthy and partake of the lavish luxuries of the mighty. Yet, when they depart, they leave with full provisions and a large profit. They enjoy the pleasures of this world without becoming immersed in worldliness, happy in the certain knowledge that they will be God’s neighbors in the next: no prayer rejected, no pleasure withheld.

واعلموا عباد الله أن المتقين ذهبوا  
بعاجل الدنيا وأجل الآخرة  
فشارَكوا أهل الدنيا في دنياهم ولم  
يشاركهم أهل الدنيا في آخرتهم.  
سكنوا الدنيا بأفضل ما سُكنت  
وأكلوها بأفضل ما أكلت. فحفظوا  
من الدنيا بما حظي به المترَفون  
وأخذوا منها ما أخذه الجبابرة  
المتكبرون. ثم انقلبوا عنها بالزاد  
المبلىغ والمتجر الرايح. أصابوا  
لذة زهد الدنيا في دنياهم وتيقنوا  
أنهم جيران الله غدا في آخرتهم.  
لأثر ذلك لهم دعوة ولا ينقص لهم  
نصيب من لذة.

In this epistle, ‘Ali explains that while living a full and engaged life in this world, its people should also use their time to prepare fully for the next. They should be happy in this world and enjoy its delights to the fullest, yet at the same time they should always bear in mind—not pessimistically, but realistically—the imminent arrival of death. (Death is the subject of the next part of the epistle, which begins “Servants of God, beware of death and its imminence.”)

## Weighing the Two Positions: What the Context of ‘Ali’s Sermons Tells Us about His Worldview

Discussing ‘Ali’s oration defending this world, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd implicitly refers to the context as justifying the 180-degree turn from ‘Ali’s usual approach, and he comments: “This piece is in praise of the world, and it illustrates ‘Ali’s ability to control his themes, maneuvering them in any which way he wished. Almost all

<sup>53</sup> Qur’an, Qaṣaṣ 28:77.

<sup>54</sup> Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 516–17; Zamakhsharī, *Rabī’ al-Abrār*, 2:27–28; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, 1:81.

his orations are in censure of the world, whereas here, he praises it. But he is true there, and he is true here.”<sup>55</sup> Even in the orations that contain harsh condemnation of this world, if we look closely, the approach is more complex than meets the eye. Although ‘Ali is saying that the world deceives, through his castigation of the world, he is, in fact, metonymically castigating the people of the world—humans, who by their own volition have become enamored of her, to the degree that they have become oblivious to the hereafter.<sup>56</sup> Knowledge of the context is vital in interpreting these oratorical texts. Just as ‘Ali’s orations help explain his times and scenes, his times and scenes help explain his orations. Understanding the background of his orations gives us a fuller awareness of why they were said and what they meant to their original audience. As we have seen, the orations discussed in this article are firmly grounded in the political reality of ‘Ali’s time, as well as in the literary scene of early Islamic Arabia. Contextualization provides us with a richer sense of those associations.

Paradoxically, identifying the local, temporal context of the orations also helps us in identifying what it is that renders them universally relevant, for fundamentals of the local context stay constant across time and place. Although details of conflicts and conversations vary, the essentials of human existence, their questions and their concerns, in many ways remain the same. Because the local context of ‘Ali’s orations taps into humanity’s existential questions of being and purpose, they have relevance beyond their original context, and are commonly recognized as timeless founts of moral counsel. Clear proof of the influence of his teachings is found in the wide dissemination, both diachronically and synchronically, of some of his orations, including the sermon in defense of the world. In the orations that I have discussed here and the many others that I have not, he urges his audience to live a virtuous life in this abode and prepare for the next, by pointing out the limited span of life on earth, the imminence of death, and the eternity of bliss or hellfire in the hereafter—teachings that continue to resonate over a thousand years later.

When ‘Ali is censuring the world, he is criticizing certain aspects of human nature that are base. He is addressing an audience whose members are immersed in worldliness at the expense of the hereafter. ‘Ali’s response to their gross mate-

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55 Ibn Abi al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, 18:325–27.

56 See for example, an oration attributed to ‘Ali (Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 464–67), in which he expounds the meaning of the Qur’anic verse “O human, what deceived you with regard to your gracious Lord?” (Qur’an, Infiṭār 82:6); and another (Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, 456–61), on the verse “You remain occupied with collecting more and yet more, until you visit [your] grave” (Qur’an, Takāthur 102:1).

rialism is to point out the insignificance of the world and its ultimate destruction. When he is defending this world, he is addressing an audience whose members are implicitly disclaiming responsibility for their own immorality by blaming the world. 'Alī's response to their disclaimer is to point out to them that the world is merely an arena for performing one's actions, and the choice as to how we use the world, for good or for bad ends, is entirely ours. Whether he censures this world or defends it, the core message of 'Alī's teachings is mindfulness of the hereafter.

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