

Scientific Miracle Readings of Nahj al-Balāgha: A Critical Review of Contemporary Approaches*

Elham Tavakolizadeh ¹

Abstract

This review examines the growing scholarship on Nahj al-Balāgha through the lens of scientific miracle discourse (i'jāz 'ilmī). It argues that this literature has advanced the study of the text by moving beyond devotional or traditional readings and by engaging contemporary debates on science, epistemology, and modernity. In doing so, these studies have sought to demonstrate the enduring relevance of classical Islamic thought in an age shaped by scientific knowledge and technological progress. At the same time, the review contends that much of this scholarship remains methodologically problematic. Its key strengths include interdisciplinary orientation, renewed attention to the text's cosmological and natural imagery, and efforts to foster dialogue between premodern Islamic thought and modern scientific paradigms. However, these contributions are often accompanied by significant shortcomings, such as anachronistic interpretation, selective textual appropriation, insufficient regard for historical and linguistic context, and an implicit tendency to treat modern scientific theories as the ultimate standard for validating classical texts. Such approaches risk subordinating textual integrity to external epistemological frameworks and may obscure the original intellectual horizons of Nahj al-Balāgha. The review concludes that the work should be approached primarily as a classical composition in rhetoric, theology, ethics, and philosophy, whose historical and literary contexts must remain central to interpretation. Only after establishing such foundations can meaningful comparison with scientific discourse be undertaken, thereby preserving historical integrity while enabling exploration of its contemporary relevance for knowledge, nature, and human understanding.

Keywords: *Nahj al-Balāgha*; Imam 'Alī; Scientific Miracles (*I'jāz 'Ilmī*); Scientific Exegesis; Qur'ānic and Post-Qur'ānic Interpretation

* Received: 2026/3/8

Accepted: 2026/5/1

1. M.Sc. Graduate in Nahjolbalaghe studies, Iran. E-mail: elhamtavakoli1359@gmail.com

Introduction

The discourse of scientific miracles (i'jāz 'ilmī) has become one of the most influential interpretive strategies among modern Muslim thinkers seeking to demonstrate not merely the compatibility of Islamic revelation with modern science, but its epistemic precedence over contemporary scientific knowledge. Although the Qur'ān has remained the primary focus of such efforts, recent decades have witnessed the extension of this hermeneutical framework to other foundational texts, most notably *Nahj al-Balāgha*, the celebrated collection of sermons, letters, and aphorisms attributed to Imam 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. This development reflects a broader transformation in contemporary Islamic discourse; wherein classical sources are increasingly reinterpreted through modern epistemological and scientific paradigms.

The origins of scientific exegesis (tafsīr 'ilmī) are generally traced to the intellectual challenges posed by European modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Confronted with Western scientific and technological ascendancy, reformist thinkers such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā sought to articulate an Islam capable of engaging constructively with modern knowledge while preserving revelatory authority. Subsequent generations, however, increasingly adopted scientific validation as a central apologetic strategy, leading to the widespread claim that Islamic sacred texts contain implicit references to scientific discoveries unknown at the time of revelation.

Although *Nahj al-Balāgha* lacks the canonical scriptural status of the Qur'ān, it occupies a uniquely influential position within Shi'i intellectual, theological, and devotional traditions. Its rhetorical sophistication and extensive reflections on metaphysics, cosmology, ethics, anthropology, and governance have rendered it a particularly fertile site for new interpretive approaches. Proponents of scientific miracle discourse have accordingly turned to *Nahj al-Balāgha* in search of passages anticipating modern theories on cosmological expansion, meteorology, embryology, and geology.

This interpretive tendency should not be regarded merely as an extension of Qur'ānic scientific exegesis; rather, it constitutes a distinct hermeneutical enterprise with its own assumptions and challenges. Unlike the Qur'ān, whose divine origin is a foundational theological principle, *Nahj al-Balāgha* is a compiled literary work assembled by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī in the fourth/tenth century. While its attribution to Imam 'Alī enjoys broad acceptance within Shi'i scholarship, questions of textual transmission, authenticity, and historical provenance have received varying assessments among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.¹ The application of scientific miracle discourse to *Nahj al-Balāgha* therefore requires additional

¹ Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–12.

justificatory premises, including the elevation of Imam ‘Alī’s epistemic authority and the assumption that his statements reflect a form of divinely guided or supra-ordinary knowledge.

Advocates of this approach commonly begin by identifying passages that describe natural phenomena in vivid and sometimes highly suggestive language. References to the structure of the heavens, the movement of celestial bodies, the formation of clouds, atmospheric processes, or the emergence of life are frequently interpreted as exhibiting striking correspondences with contemporary scientific explanations. Such passages are subsequently rearticulated through the conceptual vocabulary of modern science, thereby producing readings in which Imam ‘Alī appears to anticipate discoveries that would only become known many centuries later. Methodologically, however, these interpretations often depend upon retrospective harmonization, semantic elasticity, and the selective extraction of textual elements from their broader literary and historical contexts.¹

A growing number of scholars have raised substantial methodological objections to this mode of interpretation. Foremost among these concerns is the problem of anachronism. The projection of modern scientific concepts onto premodern texts risks obscuring the historical, linguistic, and intellectual contexts within which those texts were originally produced and understood. Like many works of classical Arabic literature, *Nahj al-Balāgha* frequently employs metaphorical, symbolic, and rhetorical modes of expression that resist reduction to empirical description. Interpreting such language as precise scientific statement may diminish or even eclipse the ethical, spiritual, theological, and philosophical purposes that originally animated the text. Furthermore, the tendency to conflate interpretive possibility with historical demonstration often blurs the crucial distinction between analogical resemblance and evidentiary proof.²

The present study seeks to evaluate critically the principal trends, assumptions, and methodological commitments that characterize scientific miracle readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Rather than assessing whether particular passages genuinely anticipate modern scientific discoveries, the focus here is on the interpretive frameworks through which such claims are advanced. By examining both the contributions and limitations of this literature, the study aims to situate scientific miracle discourse within broader debates concerning scriptural interpretation, religious authority, the construction of knowledge, and the relationship between Islam and modern science.

1. Scientific Miracle Readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha*

The growing interest in interpreting *Nahj al-Balāgha* through the framework of scientific miracle discourse (*i’jāz ‘ilmī*) reflects a broader intellectual tendency within contemporary

¹ Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi‘ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 81–98.

² Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 187–205.

Muslim thought to demonstrate that foundational Islamic texts not only remain compatible with modern scientific knowledge but, in certain respects, anticipate it. *Nahj al-Balāgha*, the celebrated compilation of sermons, letters, and aphorisms attributed to Imam ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and assembled by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, has traditionally been appreciated for its literary excellence, theological sophistication, ethical teachings, and philosophical reflections. More recently, however, a distinct interpretive trend has emerged in which selected passages are presented as repositories of scientific knowledge that allegedly transcend the intellectual horizons of their historical milieu.¹

This development should be situated within the wider history of scientific-exegetical approaches in modern Islam. The discourse of *i’jāz ‘ilmī* seeks to identify correspondences between scriptural or religious texts and empirical discoveries established by modern science. While this tendency initially developed within the field of Qur’ānic interpretation, it has increasingly expanded to encompass other authoritative texts of the Islamic tradition. Consequently, a substantial body of literature has emerged that reads descriptions of creation, celestial order, terrestrial formation, meteorological phenomena, mountains, oceans, human nature, and cosmic harmony in *Nahj al-Balāgha* as indicators of scientific knowledge allegedly unavailable in the seventh-century Arabian context. Several contemporary studies and institutional research projects have gone further by explicitly portraying *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a source of scientific concepts, scientific methodology, or proto-scientific insights compatible with contemporary understandings of the natural world.²

From a historiographical perspective, this literature may be classified into several major trends, each characterized by distinct methodological assumptions and scholarly objectives.

2. Main Research Trends

The first and most established strand consists of philological, historical, and textual scholarship. Researchers working within this framework focus primarily on questions of authenticity, compilation history, textual transmission, literary structure, and comparison with parallel materials preserved in earlier historical and hadith sources. Representative studies investigate the circumstances surrounding the compilation of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, evaluate competing claims regarding attribution, and analyze its rhetorical and stylistic characteristics within the broader tradition of classical Arabic literature. A notable example is the University of Edinburgh dissertation *Critical Study of Nahj al-Balagha*, which surveys both classical and modern

¹ Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (London: Routledge, 1994), 30–58; Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), s.vv. “al-Sharīf al-Raḍī” and “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.”

² Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 151–182; Johanna Pink, “Scientific Miracles,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

critiques of the text, examines its historical development, and explores its literary dimensions.¹ Such scholarship is particularly significant because it provides the textual and historical foundations necessary for responsible interpretation, foundations that are frequently marginalized in scientific-miracle readings.

A second strand comprises devotional, apologetic, and semi-academic studies that seek to establish the compatibility of *Nahj al-Balāgha* with contemporary scientific knowledge. These works are typically organized around thematic categories such as cosmology, natural sciences, education, psychology, environmental phenomena, anthropology, ethics, or social organization. Their central argument is that Imam ‘Alī articulated insights whose full significance could only become apparent through the development of modern scientific inquiry. In many cases, the text is presented not merely as compatible with science but as containing anticipatory formulations that correspond to later scientific discoveries. Accordingly, authors frequently describe *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a source of “scientific insights,” “scientific principles,” or even “scientific miracles,” often employing descriptive and library-based methodologies that emphasize thematic parallels rather than historical contextualization.²

A third strand adopts a more explicitly critical and methodological orientation. Rather than attempting to verify scientific predictions within the text, scholars working in this tradition investigate the hermeneutical mechanisms through which such claims are produced. Their analyses focus on questions of interpretation, epistemology, historical context, semantic flexibility, and the relationship between premodern religious language and modern scientific categories. From this perspective, the primary object of inquiry is not whether *Nahj al-Balāgha* contains scientific knowledge in a modern sense, but how contemporary readers construct such meanings and what intellectual, theological, and cultural assumptions underlie these constructions. Related studies addressing issues of textual verification, documentary authenticity, and critical responses to skepticism concerning *Nahj al-Balāgha* indicate an increasing engagement with modern academic standards, even when they do not directly address scientific miracle discourse itself.³

Taken together, these three strands illustrate the diversity of contemporary scholarship on *Nahj al-Balāgha*. They also reveal a significant methodological tension between historically grounded textual analysis and interpretive approaches that seek to align the text with contemporary scientific paradigms. Understanding this tension is essential for evaluating both

¹ *Critical Study of Nahj al-Balagha* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2013); Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 169–205.

² Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 285–320; Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science*, 151–182.

³ Andrew Rippin, “The Function of Asbāb al-Nuzūl in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 1 (1988): 1–20; Johanna Pink, “Scientific Miracles,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*.

the scholarly contributions and the limitations of scientific miracle readings in modern Islamic thought.

3. Strengths of Scientific-Miracle Readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha*

One of the most significant contributions of scientific-miracle readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha* has been their expansion of the field beyond exclusively devotional, liturgical, or traditional modes of engagement. For much of its interpretive history, the text was primarily approached as a source of ethical instruction, theological reflection, spiritual guidance, and political wisdom. Scientific-oriented studies have broadened the range of questions asked of the text by exploring its possible implications for discussions of nature, cosmology, knowledge, and the structure of the physical world. Whether or not one accepts the conclusions of these studies, they have undeniably enlarged the interpretive horizons within which *Nahj al-Balāgha* is read and discussed.¹

This expansion of interpretive horizons has also encouraged interdisciplinary scholarship. Scientific readings frequently draw upon theology, philosophy, linguistics, history of science, Qur'ānic studies, intellectual history, and literary criticism. As a result, researchers working within different academic traditions have found new reasons to engage with *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Such cross-disciplinary interaction is valuable because it prevents the text from being confined to a single interpretive framework and allows it to participate in broader scholarly conversations concerning knowledge, authority, and the human understanding of nature.

A related strength is the way these studies have contributed to the continued relevance of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in contemporary intellectual life. Classical religious texts often face the challenge of remaining meaningful within social contexts shaped by rapid scientific and technological transformation. Scientific readings attempt to address this challenge by demonstrating that the concerns expressed in the text are not restricted to a distant historical setting but may continue to resonate with contemporary discussions. Even when particular claims prove difficult to sustain, the broader effort reflects a dynamic rather than static understanding of the Islamic intellectual heritage.²

Another important contribution lies in the attention these studies devote to the semantic richness of classical Arabic. The advocates of scientific interpretations frequently undertake detailed examinations of key terms, metaphors, and descriptive passages. Such investigations often reveal the remarkable density of meaning characteristic of classical Arabic prose and underscore the fact that many expressions in *Nahj al-Balāgha* cannot be reduced to a single

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 295–341; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 423–456.

interpretive possibility. By encouraging close textual analysis, these studies have occasionally drawn attention to lexical and rhetorical subtleties that might otherwise escape notice. Even when the resulting scientific interpretation is debatable, the philological engagement itself can be intellectually productive.¹

Furthermore, scientific readings have helped revive scholarly interest in the cosmological and natural dimensions of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. A considerable portion of the text reflects upon creation, celestial phenomena, the earth, natural processes, and the order of the universe. Historically, many commentators concentrated primarily on theological, ethical, and political themes. Scientific-oriented approaches have encouraged a more systematic examination of passages dealing with the natural world. This renewed attention has expanded the thematic range of *Nahj al-Balāgha* studies and has prompted researchers to reconsider the place of cosmological reflection within the text as a whole.²

A further merit of these studies is their attempt to address a persistent tension experienced by many contemporary Muslims: the perceived conflict between inherited religious commitments and modern scientific authority. Since the nineteenth century, Muslim intellectuals have grappled with the challenge of responding to scientific modernity while preserving the authority of religious tradition. Scientific readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha* represent one strategy for negotiating this challenge. By presenting the text as compatible with, or even anticipatory of, scientific knowledge, they seek to construct a framework in which faith and scientific inquiry can coexist without contradiction. Regardless of the success of individual arguments, this effort addresses a genuine intellectual and cultural concern within modern Muslim societies.³

Closely related to this is the pedagogical value of such studies. Scientific interpretations often make *Nahj al-Balāgha* more accessible to younger generations educated within modern scientific frameworks. For readers whose intellectual formation has been strongly shaped by contemporary science, discussions of cosmology, astronomy, geology, or natural phenomena may provide an entry point into a text that might otherwise appear remote or exclusively devotional. In this sense, scientific readings function not only as interpretive exercises but also as educational tools that facilitate engagement with the broader Islamic intellectual tradition.

Another strength lies in the way these studies encourage reflection upon the concept of knowledge itself. Modern scientific discourse frequently treats knowledge as a primarily empirical enterprise grounded in observation, experimentation, and verification. By contrast,

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305–329.

² Robert Wisnovsky, *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–22; George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 281–310.

³ Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 57–89; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423–456.

Nahj al-Balāgha presents a more comprehensive epistemological vision in which intellectual understanding is inseparable from ethical responsibility, spiritual cultivation, and practical wisdom. Studies that explore the relationship between scientific and religious knowledge often bring this broader conception of knowledge into sharper focus. As a result, they contribute to discussions concerning the limits of empiricism and the place of moral and metaphysical inquiry within human understanding.¹

Scientific readings have also played a role in recovering the intellectual dimensions of the legacy associated with Imam ‘Alī. In many popular contexts, Imam ‘Alī is remembered primarily as a religious leader, moral exemplar, and political figure. Scientific-oriented studies highlight another aspect of his legacy by emphasizing themes related to reflection, observation, rational inquiry, and contemplation of the natural world. While such interpretations sometimes risk exaggeration, they nevertheless contribute to a more expansive appreciation of the intellectual breadth of the tradition associated with him.

An additional merit is their contribution to discussions concerning Islam and science more broadly. The relationship between religion and science remains one of the most contested themes in contemporary intellectual history. By examining *Nahj al-Balāgha* through this lens, researchers participate in larger debates regarding the compatibility of revelation and reason, the historical development of scientific thought, and the role of religious worldviews in shaping human understandings of nature. Consequently, these studies help situate *Nahj al-Balāgha* within wider academic conversations that extend far beyond the boundaries of traditional Islamic scholarship.²

Moreover, scientific-miracle readings often function as expressions of cultural and intellectual self-confidence. Emerging largely within postcolonial contexts, many of these studies seek to challenge assumptions that scientific rationality is exclusively a product of modern Western civilization. By highlighting passages that appear to resonate with contemporary scientific ideas, their authors attempt to demonstrate that the Islamic intellectual heritage possesses resources capable of contributing to modern discussions of knowledge. In this respect, the literature may be understood not merely as a form of textual interpretation but also as a response to broader questions of cultural identity, intellectual legitimacy, and civilizational memory.³

¹ George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, 281–310; Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 115–148.

² Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 151–182; Robert Wisnovsky, *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion*, 1–22.

³ Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 115–148; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 27–54.

These studies have likewise encouraged greater public interest in *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Academic research on classical texts often remains confined to specialist circles, but scientific-miracle interpretations have succeeded in attracting audiences beyond traditional scholarly communities. Public lectures, educational programs, conferences, and popular publications devoted to scientific themes in *Nahj al-Balāgha* have increased awareness of the text and stimulated interest in its study. Although popularity should not be confused with scholarly validity, increased public engagement can create opportunities for more rigorous forms of academic investigation.

Another important strength is that these studies have stimulated methodological reflection within the field itself. In attempting to establish correspondences between textual statements and scientific theories, researchers are inevitably forced to address fundamental questions concerning language, meaning, evidence, interpretation, and historical context. What constitutes a legitimate scientific correspondence? How should metaphorical language be distinguished from empirical description? What criteria should govern the relationship between premodern texts and modern concepts? Even when scientific-miracle studies do not provide satisfactory answers, they compel scholars to confront these questions directly.¹

Finally, the enduring significance of this literature lies not only in the validity of its conclusions but also in its capacity to generate debate. Intellectual traditions remain vibrant when they are subjected to ongoing reinterpretation, criticism, and discussion. Scientific readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha* have provoked responses from historians, philologists, theologians, philosophers, and scholars of religion, thereby enriching the broader field of *Nahj al-Balāgha* studies. By opening new lines of inquiry and encouraging methodological self-reflection, they have ensured that the text continues to function as a living object of intellectual engagement rather than merely a revered monument of the past.

4. Weaknesses and Critique

Despite the contributions outlined above, the scientific-miracle literature on *Nahj al-Balāgha* suffers from a number of serious methodological, hermeneutical, and epistemological weaknesses. While individual studies vary considerably in quality and sophistication, many of the central assumptions that characterize this body of literature remain highly problematic when examined from the perspective of contemporary scholarship in religious studies, intellectual history, textual criticism, and the philosophy of interpretation.

The most fundamental weakness is the tendency toward retrospective interpretation. In many scientific-miracle studies, the interpretive process begins not with the historical text but with an already established scientific theory. The task of interpretation then becomes the identification

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295–341; Andrew Rippin, “The Function of Asbāb al-Nuzūl in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 1 (1988): 1–20.

of passages that can be made to correspond to that theory. Such an approach effectively reverses the normal order of textual analysis. Rather than asking what a passage meant within its original linguistic, rhetorical, theological, and historical context, the interpreter asks how it might be reconciled with modern scientific concepts. The resulting interpretation is therefore often driven less by the internal logic of the text than by the external demands of contemporary scientific discourse.¹

This tendency produces the problem of anachronism, one of the most widely discussed methodological concerns in historical scholarship. Anachronism occurs when concepts, categories, or assumptions belonging to one historical period are projected onto texts produced in a very different intellectual environment. Modern scientific disciplines such as astrophysics, evolutionary biology, geology, atmospheric science, or cosmology emerged through highly specific historical developments and employ technical vocabularies that would have been entirely foreign to the intellectual world of late antiquity and the early Islamic centuries. To assume that premodern texts were secretly addressing these concepts risks imposing meanings that neither authors nor audiences could reasonably have possessed.²

The problem becomes especially acute in the case of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, whose language is deeply embedded in the rhetorical conventions of classical Arabic discourse. The sermons and sayings attributed to Imam ‘Alī frequently employ metaphor, analogy, symbolic imagery, hyperbole, and moral exhortation. Such forms of expression are characteristic of persuasive and contemplative discourse rather than empirical description. When scientific-miracle interpretations treat these rhetorical devices as technical scientific statements, they risk transforming literary and theological language into something it was never intended to be. The consequence is not merely a questionable interpretation but a fundamental alteration of the text’s communicative function.³

Closely related to anachronism is the problem of genre confusion. *Nahj al-Balāgha* is not a scientific treatise, a philosophical encyclopedia, or a natural-history manual. It is a collection of sermons, letters, and wisdom sayings designed primarily to instruct, persuade, inspire, and guide. Genre is not a superficial feature of a text; it shapes the expectations with which statements should be interpreted. A sermon describing the majesty of creation cannot

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 300–341; Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

² Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” 3–53; Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 23–71.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45–89; M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422; Wolfhart Heinrichs, *Studies in Neo-Arabic and Classical Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 112–145.

automatically be read according to the same standards as a scientific explanation of physical processes. Scientific-miracle studies frequently blur these distinctions, treating rhetorical descriptions as though they belonged to the domain of empirical investigation. This neglect of genre represents a significant methodological weakness because it obscures the communicative purposes for which the text was originally composed.

A second major weakness concerns insufficient attention to textual history and source criticism. The strongest academic scholarship on *Nahj al-Balāgha* has long emphasized questions of compilation, transmission, attribution, and textual provenance. Since the work was assembled by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī several centuries after the lifetime of Imam ‘Alī, scholars have devoted considerable effort to tracing individual passages through earlier sources and evaluating their historical reliability. These questions are not peripheral; they are foundational to any serious scholarly engagement with the text.¹

Yet many scientific-miracle studies proceed as though such issues were irrelevant. Individual passages are frequently cited without discussion of manuscript traditions, transmission history, variant readings, or debates regarding authenticity. The assumption that every statement can be treated as a direct and historically secure utterance of Imam ‘Alī often functions as an unexamined premise rather than a demonstrated conclusion. Consequently, arguments that attempt to establish extraordinary scientific foresight sometimes rest upon textual foundations whose historical status remains uncertain.²

A third weakness is the widespread practice of selective quotation. Scientific-miracle arguments often focus upon isolated words, phrases, or short excerpts that appear compatible with modern scientific concepts. These fragments are then detached from their immediate literary context and interpreted independently. Such a procedure is particularly problematic in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, where meaning is frequently cumulative and emerges through the interaction of multiple themes within a larger rhetorical structure. When individual expressions are extracted from their context, their semantic possibilities expand dramatically, making it easier to identify apparent parallels with contemporary scientific ideas. However, interpretive ease is not necessarily evidence of interpretive validity.³

The issue is compounded by a tendency to privilege those textual elements that support a scientific reading while neglecting adjacent passages that clearly point toward ethical, theological, or spiritual concerns. This selective engagement creates a distorted picture of the

¹ Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi‘ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 81–98; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 173–185.

² Etan Kohlberg, “Some Imāmī-Shī‘ī Views on the Ṣaḥāba,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 143–175; Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, 81–98.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 45–89; Wolfhart Heinrichs, *Studies in Neo-Arabic and Classical Arabic Literature*, 112–145.

text as a whole. Rather than allowing the broader context to shape the interpretation of particular statements, the interpretation is often determined by a prior commitment to demonstrating scientific correspondence.¹

Another major weakness concerns the conflation of resemblance with evidence. A recurring pattern within scientific-miracle literature is the assumption that if a passage can be interpreted in a way that resembles a modern scientific concept, then the passage must constitute evidence of miraculous foreknowledge. Yet resemblance alone establishes very little. Human language is often sufficiently flexible that later readers can identify parallels between older texts and newer ideas. Such parallels may be intriguing, but they do not automatically justify claims of prediction, anticipation, or supernatural knowledge. The transition from analogy to proof requires rigorous methodological criteria that many studies fail to provide.²

This problem becomes particularly visible when authors employ expressions such as “scientific miracle,” “scientific prediction,” “scientific fact,” or “scientific concordance” without clearly defining what standards these terms entail. Is the correspondence precise or merely approximate? Is the scientific theory universally accepted or still debated? Does the proposed interpretation represent the most plausible reading of the text, or merely one possible reading among many? Without clear criteria, the distinction between scholarly analysis and apologetic assertion becomes difficult to maintain.³

A fifth weakness lies in the overreliance upon modern science as an external criterion of textual value. Many scientific-miracle studies implicitly assume that the significance of *Nahj al-Balāgha* increases in proportion to its agreement with contemporary scientific theories. This assumption is problematic for several reasons. First, it risks subordinating the text’s own intellectual framework to a foreign epistemological standard. Second, it overlooks the fact that scientific knowledge is historically contingent and subject to revision. Theories regarded as authoritative in one period may later be modified, replaced, or abandoned. Consequently, tying the authority of a religious text too closely to contemporary scientific paradigms creates an unstable foundation for interpretation.⁴

¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 259–422; Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 45–71.

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 92–110; Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 77–105.

³ Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 285–320; Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 77–105.

⁴ Ziauddin Sardar, *Exploring Islam’s Scientific Tradition* (Leicester: Kube Publishing, 2014), 141–175; Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 115–162.

From a broader philosophical perspective, this tendency reveals an implicit hierarchy of knowledge in which scientific discourse becomes the ultimate arbiter of truth. Such a hierarchy is difficult to reconcile with the epistemological vision articulated throughout *Nahj al-Balāgha*, where knowledge encompasses ethical insight, spiritual awareness, practical wisdom, and metaphysical understanding in addition to empirical observation. Ironically, an approach intended to demonstrate the greatness of the text may end up reducing its significance by evaluating it according to standards external to its own intellectual universe.¹

A sixth weakness concerns the limited methodological sophistication of many studies. Compared with the strongest philological, historical, and literary scholarship on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, a considerable portion of the scientific-miracle literature remains primarily descriptive. Authors often identify thematic parallels between passages and scientific concepts but devote relatively little attention to questions of semantics, historical context, theories of interpretation, or the philosophy of language. As a result, the methodological foundations of their arguments frequently remain underdeveloped.²

More broadly, many of these studies exhibit insufficient engagement with contemporary hermeneutical theory. Modern scholarship has devoted extensive attention to questions concerning authorial intention, reader reception, historical situatedness, linguistic indeterminacy, and the construction of meaning. Yet scientific-miracle interpretations often proceed as though meaning were self-evident and directly accessible, requiring only the discovery of the correct scientific parallel. Such assumptions overlook decades of theoretical reflection concerning the complexity of textual interpretation.

There is also a deeper philosophical concern. Scientific-miracle readings frequently transform *Nahj al-Balāgha* into a repository of hidden scientific information awaiting discovery by modern readers. This model of interpretation encourages an instrumental view of the text in which its value derives primarily from its ability to anticipate future scientific developments. Such a perspective risks marginalizing the theological, ethical, spiritual, political, and existential dimensions that constitute the core of the work. The language of the text becomes significant not because of what it says about justice, virtue, human responsibility, or the relationship between humanity and God, but because it can allegedly be translated into modern scientific terminology.³

¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181–201; Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 115–162.

² E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1–23; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 10–45.

³ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 24–43; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 45–89.

From this perspective, the most significant criticism of scientific-miracle interpretations is not that they occasionally misidentify scientific correspondences or rely upon weak evidence. Rather, it is that they fundamentally alter the conditions under which the text is read. Instead of approaching *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a complex product of a particular religious, linguistic, and intellectual tradition, they approach it as a coded repository of scientific information. Such an approach risks obscuring precisely those dimensions that have historically made the text influential and enduring.¹

For these reasons, the weaknesses of scientific-miracle readings extend far beyond isolated methodological errors. They raise fundamental questions about interpretation, historical understanding, textual authority, and the relationship between religion and modern knowledge. A more defensible approach would begin with textual criticism, historical contextualization, linguistic analysis, and genre-sensitive interpretation. Only after these foundations have been established would it be appropriate to ask whether particular passages bear meaningful analogical or conceptual relationships to modern scientific ideas. Such an approach preserves both the historical integrity of the text and the legitimacy of contemporary inquiry, without sacrificing one in the service of the other.²

5. Toward a Contextual and Hermeneutically Grounded Approach

The limitations of scientific-miracle readings of *Nahj al-Balāgha* do not necessarily require abandoning all attempts to relate the text to contemporary scientific discourse. Rather, they suggest the need for a more historically grounded, hermeneutically self-conscious, and methodologically rigorous approach. The central issue is not whether modern readers may find conceptual resonances between *Nahj al-Balāgha* and contemporary scientific knowledge. Such resonances are often inevitable whenever influential classical texts are reread in new intellectual environments. The crucial question is how such relationships should be conceptualized and what interpretive standards should govern their identification.³

A more satisfactory approach must begin with the recognition that *Nahj al-Balāgha* is first and foremost a historical text. Like all texts, it emerged within a particular linguistic, cultural, theological, and intellectual context. Its language reflects the conceptual resources available to its original audience, and its rhetorical strategies were shaped by the communicative purposes for which the sermons, letters, and sayings were delivered. Consequently, interpretation should begin not with contemporary scientific theories but with the historical horizon of the text itself.

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300–341; Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 24–43.

² Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 1–28; Johanna Pink, “Scientific Miracles,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 151–182.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 269–341.

Questions concerning genre, audience, vocabulary, rhetorical convention, and theological intention must therefore take priority over attempts to establish scientific correspondence.¹

Such an approach requires renewed attention to textual criticism and transmission history. Before claims concerning scientific anticipation can be evaluated, scholars must first establish the textual status of the passages under consideration. The history of compilation, questions of attribution, manuscript evidence, and the relationship between *Nahj al-Balāgha* and earlier source materials are not secondary concerns but essential components of responsible interpretation. A historically grounded methodology therefore begins with the text as a historical artifact before approaching it as a source of contemporary reflection.²

Equally important is the need for greater sensitivity to genre. Sermons, ethical exhortations, theological reflections, prayers, and wisdom sayings operate according to different communicative logics than scientific discourse. The primary purpose of many cosmological descriptions in *Nahj al-Balāgha* is not to provide empirical explanations of natural phenomena but to evoke wonder, contemplation, gratitude, humility, and awareness of divine power. Their significance often lies less in the transmission of factual information than in the cultivation of particular modes of perception and moral orientation. Recognizing this distinction allows scholars to appreciate the intellectual richness of the text without forcing it into categories foreign to its original purposes.³

A hermeneutically grounded approach must also distinguish carefully between correspondence, analogy, and prediction. These categories are frequently conflated within scientific-miracle literature, yet they represent fundamentally different interpretive claims. Prediction implies that a text explicitly anticipates a future discovery that could not reasonably have been known at the time of its composition. Correspondence refers to a more limited claim that a textual statement appears compatible with a modern scientific account. Analogy is more modest still, suggesting only a conceptual resemblance between two modes of describing reality. Many scientific-miracle interpretations would become considerably more defensible if they abandoned claims of prediction and instead framed their observations in terms of analogy or conceptual resonance.⁴

This distinction is important because it permits meaningful dialogue between classical texts and modern science without requiring either historical distortion or apologetic exaggeration. A passage may illuminate contemporary scientific concerns without having been intended as a

¹ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

² Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 81–98.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 71–88.

⁴ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 24–43.

scientific statement. Likewise, a scientific theory may provide new perspectives on a classical text without becoming the ultimate criterion of its meaning. Such an approach preserves the autonomy of both domains while allowing productive intellectual exchange between them.¹

Another essential component of a contextual methodology is the recovery of the broader epistemological framework within which *Nahj al-Balāgha* understands knowledge. Modern scientific discourse often privileges empirical observation and experimental verification as the primary means of attaining truth. By contrast, *Nahj al-Balāgha* presents a more expansive conception of knowledge that integrates reason, ethical discernment, spiritual insight, practical wisdom, and awareness of divine reality. A hermeneutically responsible reading should therefore avoid reducing the text's epistemology to categories derived exclusively from modern science. Instead, it should seek to understand how different forms of knowledge interact within the intellectual world reflected in the text.²

This broader perspective also helps overcome one of the most persistent weaknesses of scientific-miracle interpretation: the tendency to evaluate religious texts primarily according to their scientific utility. The enduring significance of *Nahj al-Balāgha* lies not in its ability to function as a substitute for scientific literature but in its profound reflections on justice, moral responsibility, governance, human nature, suffering, wisdom, and the relationship between humanity and God. These dimensions constitute the central intellectual and spiritual contribution of the text. Any interpretation that marginalizes them in favor of scientific validation risks misunderstanding the hierarchy of concerns that structures the work itself.³

At the same time, a contextual approach need not deny the legitimacy of contemporary appropriation. Classical texts continue to generate new meanings because they are repeatedly interpreted within changing historical circumstances. Modern readers inevitably approach *Nahj al-Balāgha* with questions that differ from those of its earliest audiences. Scientific developments, environmental concerns, technological transformations, and new conceptions of knowledge all shape contemporary horizons of understanding. A productive hermeneutic therefore recognizes the legitimacy of modern engagement while maintaining a critical distinction between original meaning and contemporary significance.⁴

In practical terms, this suggests a multi-layered interpretive model. The first stage should consist of philological and historical analysis aimed at reconstructing the most plausible meaning of a passage within its original context. The second stage should examine the

¹ Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 77–105.

² George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 281–310.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593.

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 10–45.

theological, ethical, and philosophical functions of the passage within the broader structure of the text. Only at a third stage should scholars explore possible analogies, resonances, or conceptual affinities between the passage and contemporary scientific ideas. Such a sequence preserves methodological discipline while still allowing meaningful dialogue between the classical tradition and modern intellectual life.¹

Ultimately, the goal should not be to prove that *Nahj al-Balāgha* contains hidden scientific data awaiting modern discovery. Rather, it should be to understand how the text articulates a vision of reality that continues to stimulate reflection across historical periods. A hermeneutically grounded approach neither dismisses contemporary scientific concerns nor subordinates the text to them. Instead, it seeks a balanced framework in which historical integrity, textual complexity, and contemporary relevance can coexist. Such a framework offers a more sustainable foundation for future scholarship than either uncritical scientific concordism or the complete isolation of classical texts from modern intellectual debates.²

References

- Critical Study of Nahj al-Balagha*. PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2013.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barbour, Ian G. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd rev. ed. New York: Continuum, 1989.
- Guessoum, Nidhal. *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.
- Hallaq, Wael B. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Heinrichs, Wolfhart. *Studies in Neo-Arabic and Classical Arabic Literature*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006.
- Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- Iqbal, Muzaffar. *Islam and Science*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002.

¹ E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1–23.

² Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 301–320.

- Khalidi, Tarif. *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Kohlberg, Etan. "Some Imāmī-Shī'ī Views on the Ṣaḥāba." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 143–175.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Leaman, Oliver, ed. *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Makdisi, George. *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.
- Modarressi, Hossein. *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.
- Momen, Moojan. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Numbers, Ronald L., ed. *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Pink, Johanna. "Scientific Miracles." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Pink, Johanna. "Scientific Exegesis and Qur'ānic Interpretation in the Modern Period." In *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, edited by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, 471–500. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.
- Rippin, Andrew. "The Function of Asbāb al-Nuzūl in Qur'ānic Exegesis." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 1 (1988): 1–20.
- Rippin, Andrew. *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001.
- Rosenthal, Franz. *The Classical Heritage in Islam*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Sardar, Ziauddin. *Exploring Islam's Scientific Tradition*. Leicester: Kube Publishing, 2014.
- Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Wisnovsky, Robert, ed. *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.