



Methods of Citing the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* in the Commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an*

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Abstract

One of the most significant letters of Imam Ali (AS) preserved in *Nahj al-Balāghah* is his letter to *Mālik Ashtar Nakha'ī*, composed upon *Mālik*'s appointment as governor of Egypt. This letter, widely recognized as the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, has been cited by Muslim scholars in diverse ways throughout history. Among contemporary Qur'anic commentaries, *Nemooneh* and *Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an*, both supervised by Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi and authored by a team of scholars, frequently reference the Covenant. This study seeks to identify and classify the methods by which the

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Covenant is cited in these two commentaries, employing a descriptive-analytical approach. The findings demonstrate that commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* utilize the Covenant from a hermeneutical perspective, such as specifying the scope of general Qur'anic statements, clarifying qualifications attached to Qur'anic verses, and resolving textual ambiguities. Additionally, the Covenant is employed in semantic analysis, including the explanation of rare Qur'anic vocabulary and the expansion of the semantic range of Qur'anic terms.

Keywords: *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, Commentary *Nemooneh*, Commentary *Nafahāt al-Qur'an*, Citation.

Introduction

The eloquent sayings of Imam Ali (AS) represent a significant intellectual and spiritual legacy for Muslims and humanity at large. His rhetorical excellence, literary beauty, and comprehensive teachings have been acknowledged by both scholars and the general public. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, compiled by *Sharīf Raḍī*, preserves a substantial portion of these teachings through selected sermons, letters, and aphorisms.

One of its most significant texts is Letter 53, commonly known as the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, which Imam Ali (AS) addressed to *Mālik Ashtar*. Among the most significant texts within *Nahj al-Balāghah* is Letter 53, commonly referred to as the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, addressed by Imam Ali (AS) to *Mālik Ashtar*. This letter articulates foundational principles and directives concerning political

84 leadership, judicial administration, governance, and the establishment

of a just society. Analysis of the Covenant indicates that its guidance extends beyond the administration of Egypt, offering a model of governance relevant to diverse societies and historical contexts of *Nahj al-Balāghah* as a whole, the selection, structure, and ordering of its contents, was the work of *Sharīf Raḍī* (Pour Ezzat, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 7). Furthermore, the Covenant possesses a highly reliable chain of transmission. Shaykh Ṭūsī records its complete chain of narration under the biography of "*al-Aṣbagh ibn Nubātah*." (Ṭūsī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 88)

The profound meanings of the Covenant, together with its harmony with the Covenant's alignment with Qur'anic revelation and monotheistic teachings, have motivated scholars to explore its deeper meanings through various scholarly approaches. Among contemporary commentaries, *Nemooneh* and *Nafahāt al-Qur'an*, both produced under the supervision of Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, frequently cite the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* in multiple contexts.

1. Research Background

To date, no independent article, book, or academic thesis has specifically examined the methods by which commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* cite the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*. Nevertheless, several studies have addressed related topics in a broader context.

- Nabhan (2013 AD/1393 SH) in the thesis "Imam Ali (AS) letter to *Mālik Ashtar* and Its Qur'anic Corroborations," examines the close relationship between this remarkable letter and the Holy Qur'an.
- Karimi and Zarei (2010 AD/1389 SH), in their article "The Status of

Imam Ali's Covenant to *Mālik Ashtar* in Islamic Sources," examine the Covenant's position and significance in Islamic literature.

- Mohammadi (2000 AD/1379 SH), in "A Bibliography of Imam Ali's Covenant to *Mālik Ashtar*," provides a comprehensive bibliography of studies devoted to the Covenant.
- Esmacili (2022 AD/1401 SH), in "The Influence of Egypt's Cultural Context on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*: A Faircloughian Discourse Analysis," examines the ideological formation and intellectual foundations of the Covenant in light of its social context.
- Eslami et al. (2014 AD/1393 SH), in "A Phenomenological Study of Imam Ali's Techniques for Peace: A Case Study of the Written Covenant Addressed to *Mālik Ashtar*," analyze the Covenant from a phenomenological perspective.
- Abd Khodaei et al. (2021 AD/1400 SH), in "An Examination of Imam Ali's Covenant to *Mālik Ashtar* from the Perspective of the Functions of Political Jurisprudence," analyze the Covenant through the lens of Islamic political jurisprudence.
- Ramezani (2021 AD/1400 SH), in "The Conceptual and Ethical Framework of Leadership and Governance from the Perspective of *Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib* (AS): Based on a Content Analysis of the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar al-Nakha'i*," explores the ethical values of leadership articulated in the Covenant. Accordingly, the present article aims to identify and classify the methods and patterns by which the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* is cited in commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an*, thereby providing a focused contribution to the scholarship on these commentaries.

2. Methods and Types of Citation of the Covenant of *Mālik*

In numerous instances, commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* cite the Covenant of *Mālik* to clarify the meaning of Qur'anic verses or to resolve their ambiguity. These citations function at various levels, including textual indication (hermeneutical or semantic) and semantic analysis, among other approaches discussed below.

2-1. Clarifying and Elucidating the Qualification of a Qur'anic Verse Through the Covenant of *Mālik*

In several instances, the two aforementioned Qur'anic commentaries clarify and explicate the qualifying phrase of a Qur'anic verse by citing the Covenant of *Mālik*. For example, in Surah *al-Nisā'*: 59, obedience to God, the Messenger, and those vested with is stated in absolute terms. However, in Surah *al-Mumtaḥinah*: 12, the expression "And that they will not disobey you in what is right" implies that obedience to the Prophet is conditioned upon what is recognized as right, whereas in the earlier verse obedience appears unconditional. Since the Prophet (PBUH) is infallible and never commands wrongdoing, the question arises: 'Why does the verse include the qualification, "And that they will not disobey you in what is right"?' In commentary *Nemooneh*, Makarem Shirazi argues, on the basis of the Covenant, that this qualification serves as a model for all Islamic rulers who are not impeccable. Accordingly, obedience to a ruler or governor is obligatory only so long as his commands do not contradict the commands of God. He writes: "Although obedience to the Prophet (PBUH) is qualified by the phrase "In what is right," despite the fact

that the Prophet is impeccable and never commands evil, this expression may serve as a model for all commands issued by Islamic rulers. Such commands deserve respect and are binding only insofar as they conform to the teachings of the Qur'an and the principles of Islamic law, thereby falling within the meaning of "*Wa lā Ya 'ṣīnaka fī Ma'rūf*." For this reason, the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (AS), in his famous letter to the people of Egypt concerning *Mālik Ashtar*'s governorship, after praising him in the highest terms, concluded by saying: "Listen to him and obey his commands in whatever accords with the truth, for he is one of the swords of God." (Makarem Shirazi, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 24, 50) Analysis and Discussion: By citing the Covenant, Tafsir *Nemooneh* explains the function of the qualification contained in the verse. According to this interpretation, obedience to Islamic rulers is obligatory only when their commands align with those of God. The view that every command of any ruler is unconditionally binding, regardless of its nature or source, is inconsistent with both reason and Islamic law. The phrase "*Wa lā Ya 'ṣīnaka fī Ma'rūf*" thus establishes an objective criterion: "A ruler should be obeyed only when his commands are consistent with the Qur'an and reason. If he commands otherwise, obedience is no longer obligatory."

2-2. Clarifying the Ambiguity of a Qur'anic Verse through the Covenant

Some verses are ambiguous and a commentator clarify the verses
88 ambiguity using the verses and traditions. In the terminology of

Qur'anic sciences, a *Mujmal* (ambiguous expression) is one whose intended meaning cannot be understood without further explanation, whereas a *Mubayyan* (clear expression) is one whose meaning is explicit (Zarkashī, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 2, 184; Suyūṭī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 1, 385).

For example, Islamic teachings strongly encourage believers to maintain a favorable opinion of fellow Muslims, while unfounded suspicion is condemned in many Qur'anic passages (e.g., Yūnus: 36). On the other hand, the Qur'an states: "If they incline toward peace, then you should also incline toward it." (al-Anfāl: 61) This verse encourages accepting a ceasefire and ending armed conflict, even when the enemy proposes peace. The question therefore arises: 'After concluding a peace agreement or ceasefire, should Muslims maintain a favorable opinion of the enemy, or should they remain cautious and suspicious?' Furthermore, the verse continues with the command, "And put your trust in God." 'Does this imply that one may simply trust the enemy while relying solely upon God?'

Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an, in clarifying this ambiguity and explaining the prohibition against excessive trust in the enemy after peace has been concluded, cites the Covenant. It states: "Not every peace agreement is legitimate; rather, only a peace that preserves the dignity of the Muslims and establishes justice is valid. Imam Ali (AS) warned *Mālik* that after making peace with the enemy, he should remain vigilant and should not place excessive trust in them." (Makarem Shirazi et al., 2005 AD/1426 AH: 10, 298)

It is evident that reliance upon God does not mean abandoning

sound management or acting negligently. As this discussion demonstrates, the verse is ambiguous about proper conduct toward an enemy after peace has been established, which is a particularly sensitive issue. Imam Ali (AS), with notable wisdom and foresight, advises *Mālik Ashtar* as follows:

"However, after concluding a peace treaty, remain exceedingly vigilant against your enemy, for he may have sought peace only to take you by surprise. Therefore, do not abandon prudence and foresight, and do not place your trust in him in this matter." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53)

According to Imam Ali's guidance, concluding a peace agreement should never lead to unquestioning trust in the enemy or to granting illegitimate concessions. History provides numerous examples in which excessive trust in adversaries has inflicted serious harm upon the Muslim community. Peace benefits the Islamic community only when it is accompanied by prudence and freedom from unwarranted optimism regarding the enemy. Such vigilance enables society to neutralize threats and safeguard its security. Consequently, even after negotiations succeed and a peace agreement is reached, complete trust in the opposing party remains inappropriate, since the possibility of deception and treachery always exists. Following an agreement, the opposing party's actions should continue to be carefully monitored, and any violation of the agreement should be met with a firm and decisive response.

2-3. Restricting the General Meaning of a Qur'anic Verse through the Covenant

90 At times, a Qur'anic verse conveys a general and all-inclusive

meaning, in contrast to verses that express a specific and limited ruling. One of the essential tasks of a Qur'anic exegete is to identify general and specific verses and interpret them in relation to one another (cf. Khakpour, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 45).

For example, in the verse: "If they incline toward peace, then you also incline toward it," (al-Anfāl: 61) God speaks of accepting a peace proposal from the enemy in general and unrestricted terms. The question arises whether accepting the enemy's offer of peace and placing one's trust in God constitute the entirety of the divine intent. A reference to the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* demonstrates that this is not the complete meaning; rather, the general wording of the verse is qualified. Several exegetes have relied upon the Covenant to establish this qualification. In *Tafsir Nemooneh*, the authors cite the Covenant while distinguishing between two categories of peace: "Legitimate Peace" and "Inappropriate Peace." The former is a peace agreement that fully safeguards the interests of the Muslim community, whereas the latter is one proposed by weak and hesitant Muslims when they are on the verge of victory. Referring to Imam Ali's instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*, the commentary states: He says: "Whenever your enemy invites you to a peace in which God's pleasure is secured, do not reject the proposal." The fact that the proposal originates from the enemy on the one hand, while at the same time being conditioned upon God's pleasure on the other indicates that peace is of two distinct types, as described above (Makarem Shirazi et al., 1995 AD/1374 SH: 21, 491).

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serves as a specification of the general wording of the verse. He emphasizes that even after concluding peace; Muslims must remain alert to the enemy's deception. At times, an offer of peace is merely a tactical maneuver designed to create favorable conditions for launching a devastating attack against the Muslim community. Furthermore, Muslims must avoid both inappropriate peace agreements and those that neither secure God's pleasure nor protect the interests of the Muslim community. Constant vigilance against enemy deception is therefore required. Accordingly, the continuation of the verse itself addresses the possibility of enemy treachery. One of the most important principles in dealing with an adversary is to avoid trusting outward displays of peaceful intentions, since in many cases such negotiations have served merely as instruments for deception and for weakening the Muslim front.

2-4. Explaining Rare Qur'anic Vocabulary through the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*

The semantic analysis of Qur'anic vocabulary occupies a position of great importance in Qur'anic studies. Since the Qur'an was revealed in the language of the Prophet's people, the correct meanings of its words must be determined in light of the meanings they carried in the Arabian milieu at the time of revelation. In this context, the significance of explaining Qur'anic vocabulary through the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* becomes evident, since its author, Imam Ali (AS) was among the foremost interpreters of the Qur'an during the period of revelation.

1) The Word "*Ghanam*" (Semantic Expansion)

92 The term "*Ghanam*" in surah *al-Anfāl*: 41 is one example in which

Makarem Shirazi employs the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* to demonstrate the semantic expansion of the word: "And know that whatever (*Ghanimtum*) you acquire as gain, one-fifth of it belongs to Allah, the Messenger..."

This verse was originally revealed concerning the spoils of the Battle of *Badr* in the third year after the Hijrah in order to determine the distribution of one-fifth (*Khums*) of those spoils. Subsequently, however, scholars cited this verse as evidence that *Khums* applies not only to the spoils of *Badr* but also to other forms of gain. *Khums* is due on everything from which people derive benefit, whether the amount is small or large. As can be seen, although the immediate context concerns war booty, the specific reference to military spoils is set aside in light of the general expression "Whatever" (*Mā*) and the broader meaning of "*Ghanam*," which denotes any form of gain or benefit. Consequently, the general legal ruling is derived directly from the wording of the verse (Maʿrifat, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 93). From this discussion, it becomes clear that "*Ghanam*" possesses a broad semantic scope, encompassing all forms of profit or income.

Accordingly, based on the Qur'anic injunction, a portion of people's income should be allocated to the Prophet's Household (Ahl al-Bayt) and his relatives.

To demonstrate that this term also denoted income and general profit during the time of revelation, the authors of *Tafsir Nemooneh* cite the following passage from Imam Ali's (AS) letter to *Mālik al-Ashtar*: "Do not be like a ravenous beast toward the people of Egypt, considering the devouring of them as a source of income for yourself."

(Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53)

Tafsir Nemooneh further states: "In ordinary usage, "*Ghanīmah*" (gain) is mentioned in contrast to "*Gharāmah*" (loss or liability). Just as "*Gharāmah*" has a broad meaning encompassing every form of loss or liability, "*Ghanīmah*" likewise has a broad meaning and refers to any significant income or profit. This term is employed in *Nahj al-Balāghah* on numerous occasions with precisely this meaning. For example, in Letter 53 to *Mālik Ashtar*, Imam Ali (AS) states: "Do not be like a ravenous beast toward the people of Egypt, considering the devouring of them to be a gain (*Ghanīmah*) and a source of income for yourself." (Makarem Shirazi et al., 1995 AD/1374 SH: 7, 177)

As demonstrated above, *Tafsir Nemooneh* relies on Imam Ali's use of the verb "*Taghtanim*" (to regard something as gain) in his address to *Mālik Ashtar* to explain the meaning of *Ghanam* as an uncommon Qur'anic term. Moreover, the commentary not only clarifies the word's lexical meaning but also demonstrates its semantic expansion by reference to the Covenant.

Consequently, "*Ghanimah*" is interpreted to encompass all substantial forms of income or profit, thereby establishing a broad semantic range for the term.

2) The Meaning of the Word "*Maqt*"

One of the less common Qur'anic terms is "*Maqt*." In verse 3 of Surah *al-Şaff*, God says: "Grievously hateful (*Kabura Maqtan*) in the sight of Allah is that you say what you do not do."

94 This verse identifies one of the defining characteristics of true

believers as the harmony between their words and their deeds. Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī explains: "There is a difference between saying something that one never intends to do and failing to do something that one had said one would do. The former is evidence of hypocrisy, whereas the latter indicates weakness of will. Sometimes a person makes a statement while already intending not to fulfill it; this is a form of hypocrisy. At other times, one sincerely intends to act but later changes one's mind; this reflects weakness of determination." (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 19, 421)

Drawing upon Imam Ali's statement in the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, Tafsir Nemooneh further explains: "In any case, the above verse encompasses every form of violating a covenant, agreement, or promise, and according to some scholars, it even includes vows." Thus, in his instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*, Imam Ali (AS) said: "Beware of reminding people of your favors, exaggerating what you have done for them, or making promises that you fail to fulfill. For reminding others of your favors nullify your benevolence, magnifying your own deeds extinguishes the light of truth, and breaking promises provokes the anger of both God and the people." God, the Exalted, says: "Grievously hateful in the sight of Allah is that you say what you do not do." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53; Makarem Shirazi et al., 1995 AD/1374 SH: 24, 63)

Analysis and Discussion: A careful reading of Imam Ali's words makes the meaning of "*Maqt*," namely, intense anger and profound abhorrence, entirely clear. Moreover, after employing the concept of "*Maqt*" in the sense of divine wrath, Imam Ali himself directly cites

the same Qur'anic verse. It is noteworthy that he invokes this verse specifically as a warning against breaking one's covenant. Tafsir *Nemooneh* derives an additional implication from Imam Ali's statement: "Violating covenants and failing to honor promises are themselves instances of saying what one do not do. Accordingly, the commentary concludes that the verse encompasses every breach of a covenant, agreement, promise, and even a religious vow, since a vow likewise constitutes a binding commitment."

2-5. Demonstrating the Absence of Abrogation through the Covenant

Knowledge of the abrogating and abrogated verses is one of the essential qualifications of a Qur'anic exegete, enabling him to avoid interpretive error. In the technical terminology of Qur'anic sciences, abrogation refers to "The repeal of a previous legal ruling through the enactment of a new ruling, where the earlier ruling appeared to be permanent, such that the new ruling replaces the former and reconciliation between the two becomes impossible." (Khu'ī, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 377; Ma'rifat, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 184)

Among the passages discussed in relation to abrogation are surah *Muḥammad* : 35 and surah *al-Anfāl*: 61. Both verses concern peace. In surah *Muḥammad*, God commands the believers not to call for peace when they are in a position of superiority, whereas in surah *al-Anfāl* instructs them to accept peace if the enemy inclines toward it and to place their trust in God, who is All-Hearing and All-Knowing. After a detailed discussion of these verses, Tafsir *Nemooneh* argues that no

96 abrogation exists between them. It writes: "Following the preceding

verses concerning jihad, this verse highlights an important principle: "Those who are weak and lacking in faith often raise the issue of peace merely to escape the burdens of jihad and the hardships of the battlefield. Peace is undoubtedly desirable, but only in its proper place: "A peace that secures the lofty objectives of Islam and preserves the dignity, honor, and prestige of the Muslim community, not a peace that leads to humiliation and disgrace." Therefore, having heard the previous commands, do not become weak and do not invite the enemy to peace while you hold the upper hand: "So do not lose heart and call for peace while you are superior." (Muḥammad: 35) That is, when the signs of your victory and superiority have already become manifest, why should you nullify your achievements by proposing a peace that signify retreat and defeat?" (Makarem Shirazi et al., 1995 AD/1374 SH: 21, 489)

The commentary continues: "Each of these two verses relates to a distinct circumstance. One refers to reasonable (legitimate) peace, while the other concerns inappropriate (misplaced) peace. The first describes a peace that fully safeguards the interests of the Muslim community, whereas the second concerns a peace proposed by weak and hesitant Muslims when they stand on the verge of victory. Accordingly, the following verse 62 states that if the enemy seeks to deceive you through an offer of peace, you should never surrender to their deception or become anxious, for God is your supporter." (Makarem Shirazi et al., *ibid*: 21, 490)

Tafsir *Nemooneh* then traces this distinction between the two

categories of peace to Imam Ali's instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*: "The Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (AS), referred to both kinds of peace in his instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*, saying: "Whenever your enemy invites you to a peace in which God's pleasure is secured, do not reject the proposal." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53; Makarem Shirazi et al., ibid: 21, 490)

Accordingly, Tafsir *Nemooneh* argues that, in light of the Covenant, each of the two Qur'anic verses addresses a separate legal and practical situation rather than one abrogating the other. One concerns legitimate and beneficial peace, while the other addresses misplaced and harmful peace. The former protects the interests of the Muslim community, whereas the latter reflects weakness and timidity at the threshold of victory. Consequently, the two verses should not be understood as constituting a case of abrogation.

2-6. Citing the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* to Explain the Wisdom and Philosophy of Matters

In several instances, Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi cites the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* to explain the underlying wisdom and rationale of certain Qur'anic injunctions and ethical principles.

1) The Wisdom and Philosophy of Faithfulness to Covenants and Agreements

One of the defining characteristics of true believers is fidelity to covenants and promises, a virtue strongly emphasized in both the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

98 said: "He who does not honor his covenant has no religion."

(Rāwandī, 1997 AD/1376 SH: 39) To explain the philosophy behind remaining faithful to one's promises, Tafsir *Nemooneh* cites Imam Ali's instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*. The commentary infers that Imam Ali regarded the observance of covenants as one of the most important and universally accepted moral principles. It states that: "Imam Ali considered faithfulness to agreements to be among the most fundamental and universal ethical obligations. He emphasized that even the polytheists adhered to this principle because they had come to recognize the disastrous consequences of breaking agreements." The commentary further adds: "Islamic laws governing warfare state that even if a single ordinary Muslim soldier grants safe-conduct to one or more enemy combatants, all Muslims are obliged to honor that guarantee." (Makarem Shirazi et al., *ibid*: 21, 489)

2) The Wisdom of Honoring and Caring for the Poor and the General Public

According to Islamic teachings, an individual's status before God is determined by piety, righteousness, and moral worth rather than wealth or social standing. Accordingly, the Qur'an declares: "The believers are but brothers. Therefore, reconcile your brothers, and be mindful of God so that you may receive His mercy." (al-Ḥujurāt: 10)

Those who possess genuine faith are therefore brothers and sisters in religion, a relationship that requires mutual respect and affection regardless of wealth or social class. Among all members of society, Islam places particular emphasis on respecting and caring for the poor and the ordinary people because of the profound wisdom underlying this principle. Drawing upon Imam Ali's instructions in the Covenant, Tafsir

Nemooneh explains: "This divine admonition clearly demonstrates that Islam and the Qur'an attach special importance and respect to those who sincerely seek the path of truth, particularly among the oppressed and disadvantaged classes. Conversely, they adopt a firm stance toward those who have become intoxicated and arrogant because of abundant worldly blessings. God is not pleased that, in order to satisfy the wealthy and powerful, even the slightest hurt should be inflicted upon these sincere and oppressed seekers of truth. The reason is evident: throughout history, this group has always been the devoted supporters of Islam, the loyal defenders of the great religious leaders during times of hardship, and the self-sacrificing participants on the battlefields and in martyrdom." (Makarem Shirazi et al., *ibid*: 26, 123)

The commentary then traces this interpretation directly to Imam Ali's famous instructions to *Mālik Ashtar*: "The backbone of religion, the collective strength of the Muslims, and the reserve force against the enemy are none other than the masses of the people. Therefore, let your attention and affection be directed toward them." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53)

Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī explains these words of Imam Ali by identifying three characteristics of the common people:

1. They are the pillar of religion. The expression "Pillar" is used metaphorically, just as a building stands upon its columns; religion is upheld by the people.
2. They constitute the overwhelming majority of the Muslim community, forming the main body of society.

3. Owing to their large numbers, they are the primary source of military strength against external enemies, particularly since they comprised the fighting force of the Muslim community during Imam Ali's time. These characteristics, according to *Ibn Maytham*, justify Imam Ali's instruction that rulers should cultivate the affection of the general public and give priority to their interests over those of the privileged elite (Ibn Maytham, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 5, 242). Similar explanations are also found in *Khu'ī's "Minhaj al-Barā'ah."* (Khu'ī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 20, 186)

From this passage it becomes clear that the Qur'anic theme under discussion concerns showing respect and concern for the poor and the general populace. Imam Ali emphasizes that winning the affection of ordinary people and giving precedence to their support over that of the elite constitutes a fundamental principle of sound governance. Tafsir *Nemooneh* employs the Covenant to explain both the rationale and the wisdom underlying this principle.

3) Explaining the Reason for Fearing Other than God

One of the reprehensible moral traits in Islam is fear of anything other than God. Fear itself assumes different forms. Some forms, such as fear of God and fear of committing sin, are praiseworthy, whereas blameworthy fear refers to fear of created beings, such as fear of participating in jihad or fear of public opinion. Tafsir *Nemooneh* writes: "Because these weak believers or hypocrites are naturally timid and comfort-loving individuals who instinctively avoid warfare and every form of confrontation, their interpretation of events bears no resemblance to reality. Their fear, love of comfort, and unwillingness

to shoulder responsibility transform their suspicions into perceived realities. Consequently, they become pessimistic about everything, even regarding the Messenger of God and even God Himself." (Makarem Shirazi et al., 1995 AD/1374 SH: 22, 48)

The commentary then supports this interpretation by citing Imam Ali's words in the Covenant: "Miserliness, cowardice, and greed are different blameworthy characteristics, all of which arise from having a negative opinion of God." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 54)

The Qur'anic verse under discussion addresses those who refused to participate in the *Ḥudaybiyyah* expedition and offered unjustified excuses for their absence. According to Tafsir *Nemooneh*, these excuses did not reflect their true motives, which were rooted in fear, distrust, miserliness, and insufficient reliance upon God. By referencing the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, the commentary explains that cowardice, greed, and pessimism originate from deficient trust in God. Their misinterpretation of events was shaped by fear of hardship and reluctance to fulfill responsibilities, leading them to perceive their suspicions as justified.

4) The Wisdom of Ceasefire

Peace, ceasefire, and the establishment of security have always been among the primary goals pursued by all prophets and the righteous servants of God. Accordingly, throughout the life of the Noble Prophet of Islam (PBUH), he was never known to initiate a war. This is because the vitality and progress of religion do not depend on warfare and bloodshed. Rather, since religion appeals to human reason, conscience, and innate nature, its message is conveyed far

more effectively through peace, wisdom, and good conduct than through resorting to the sword.

Imam Ali (AS) states: "I have found peace and reconciliation to be more effective than war, so long as they do not lead to the humiliation of Islam." (Laythi Wāsiṭī, 1997 AD/1376 SH: 506)

Even when war becomes unavoidable, peace remains the preferred option whenever its conditions are met, reflecting Islam's fundamental reluctance toward bloodshed. Thus, the Qur'an declares: "If they incline toward peace, then you also incline toward it, and place your trust in Allah. Indeed, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing." (al-Anfāl: 61)

This verse indicates that even if the enemy proposes peace, Muslims should be prepared to accept it, since peace offers significant benefits and profound wisdom. Imam Ali highlights these benefits in his Covenant to *Mālik Ashtar*, stating: "For in peace are secured the comfort of your soldiers, your own peace of mind, and the security of your country." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53)

Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an, while citing the Covenant, states: "Islamic traditions strongly emphasize the establishment of peace and reconciliation within human societies. It has even been narrated that, in Imam Ali's covenant to *Mālik Ashtar*, one of the distinguishing characteristics of an Islamic government is its commitment to establishing peace." (Makarem Shirazi et al., 2005 AD/1426 AH: 10, 297)

Accordingly, the commentary explains that the rationale for accepting a peace proposal from the enemy lies in the benefits it secures, namely, the comfort and relief of soldiers, greater security for

cities, and psychological tranquility for government officials. It attributes this understanding directly to the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*.

Ibn Maytham similarly explains: "Imam Ali warned *Mālik* not to reject a peace agreement that was pleasing to God when the enemy invited him to it. He drew his attention to the benefits and advantages of such a peace. At the same time, he instructed him to remain extremely cautious of the enemy after reconciliation, emphasizing the necessity of exercising prudence and warning him not to rely upon any favorable opinion that peace with the enemy might create. He further demonstrated the necessity of such caution through an implicit analogy." (Ibn Maytham, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 5, 301)

Thus, *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* employs the Covenant to explain that the wisdom behind accepting an enemy's offer of peace lies in ensuring the well-being of the armed forces, strengthening public security, and providing peace of mind for government authorities.

2-7. Administrative Citation of the Covenant

The Covenant is among the greatest and most comprehensive documents on governance and public administration in Islamic thought. It is the longest directive that Imam Ali (AS) addressed to *Mālik Ashtar* and, according to some commentators on *Nahj al-Balāghah*, represents Imam Ali's most complete political and administrative charter for governing a state (Husseini Shirazi, n.d.: 4, 142).

In this Covenant, Imam Ali (AS) outlines the most fundamental principles of leadership. He begins by reminding the governor of the
104 primary objectives of authority, governance, and leadership, principles

upon which the entire political order depends. He then explains the ethical and practical requirements for governing the country and administering its cities. Finally, he discusses the various social classes upon whom the prosperity of society depends, assigning each its proper place, before concluding with ethical and political instructions, some directed toward all people and others specifically intended for government officials, close associates, advisers, and the governor himself (Baḥrānī, 1983 AD/1362 SH: 5, 228).

Both commentaries *Nemooneh* and *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* cite the Covenant in discussing several important principles of public administration.

1) Principles Governing the Appointment of Judges

The fair administration of justice constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of governance in an Islamic society. Indeed, judicial integrity influences every aspect of government, and a just judge occupies an exceptionally elevated position in Islam. In the Covenant of *Mālik*, Imam Ali lays down remarkably comprehensive principles for selecting and appointing judges. Under the heading "The Governing Principles behind the Appointment of Judges," *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* observes: "The qualities and regulations concerning judicial appointment contained in the Covenant constitute one of the most remarkable legal frameworks for selecting judges. Comparable principles have neither been found nor systematically formulated in any other religious or legal tradition as guidelines issued by the leader of an Islamic government for appointing judges throughout the Islamic territories." (Makarem Shirazi et al., 2005 AD/1426 AH: 10, 133)

Thus, *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* skillfully utilizes the Covenant to identify the qualifications required for judicial office and to explain Imam Ali's standards for selecting individuals worthy of this crucial responsibility.

2) The Secret to Sustainable Reform: Improving the Affairs of Cities

At times, an Islamic ruler may undertake sincere efforts toward reform, yet those reforms fail to endure. Imam Ali identifies both the cause of this problem and its solution in one of the passages of the Covenant, a passage that has received considerable attention from later commentators. Imam Ali instructs *Mālik*: "Consult frequently with scholars and wise men concerning the affairs of your provinces and regarding those measures through which previous generations succeeded in bringing prosperity and reform to their cities." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53)

This luminous statement identifies two essential principles for ensuring lasting reform:

1. Maintaining close association with scholars;
2. Engaging in continual consultation with wise and experienced experts.

Both principles are strongly emphasized throughout Islamic teachings. Commenting on Qur'an 4:135 under the heading "Principles Governing Social Relations," *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* draws upon this passage of the Covenant and writes: "A beautiful lesson may be derived from this section of the Covenant: "Government officials and Muslim rulers are advised to seek counsel from specialists in every political and social matter." They should never make important governmental decisions without consulting experts in the relevant

Accordingly, the commentary highlights one of the Covenant's major administrative principles: the use of qualified advisers and consultation with competent experts as the key to solving societal problems and ensuring the durability of political reform.

3) Trust in the People

Within the Alavid model of governance, one of the most important administrative principles is trust in the people. This principle may also be inferred from several Qur'anic verses, including surah *Āli 'Imrān*: 159, where God instructs the Prophet to pardon the believers, seek forgiveness for them, and consult them in public affairs. The verse therefore implies that the Prophet should place confidence in the people and involve them in decision-making.

While commenting on this verse under the heading "Reliance upon the People," *Nafaḥāt al-Qur'an* cites the Covenant of *Mālik* and writes: "Imam Ali instructed *Mālik* to place his trust in the general public and to avoid relying upon the privileged elite." He said: "Let the most beloved of affairs to you be those that are most moderate in truth, most comprehensive in justice, and most inclusive in securing the satisfaction of the people; for the anger of the general public nullifies the satisfaction of the elite, whereas the displeasure of the elite is rendered insignificant when the people are content. The privileged classes invariably impose the heaviest burdens upon the government. They offer the least assistance in times of hardship, are the least satisfied with justice, and are the most persistent in their demands, the least grateful for favors received, and the slowest to

accept refusal and the least steadfast during times of difficulty. In contrast, it is the masses of the people who constitute the firm pillars of religion, the united body of the Muslims, and the reserve force for defense. Therefore, let your inclination and affection always be directed toward them." (Nahj al-Balāghah, Letter 53; Makarem Shirazi et al., 2005 AD/1426 AH: 10, 131)

Accordingly, *Nafahāt al-Qur'an* interprets Imam Ali's instructions in surah *Āli 'Imrān*: 159 as establishing an important administrative principle: rulers should place their trust in the general public rather than rely primarily on the privileged elite. The commentary therefore presents public trust and popular support as essential foundations of effective and just governance.

Conclusion

As the foremost interpreter of the Qur'an after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Imam Ali (AS), in his extraordinary Covenant addressed to *Mālik Ashtar al-Nakha'ī*, recognized as the foremost interpreter of the Qur'an after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), presented in his Covenant to *Mālik Ashtar al-Nakha'ī* a comprehensive charter of governance principles and methods, characterized by exceptional precision and insight. The close relationship and harmony between the Covenant's expressions and Qur'anic verses have endowed it with significant exegetical value, securing its prominent place in Qur'anic interpretation. As a result, many Qur'anic exegetes have relied on the Covenant to achieve a more nuanced and scholarly understanding of

108 the Qur'an, particularly regarding its deeper layers of meaning. Both

commentaries have used Qur'anic passages in the interpretation, difficult lexical expressions, specifying the scope of general Qur'anic statements, assisting in determining that certain verses have not been abrogated, and refuting incorrect interpretive opinions.

From a philosophical and wisdom-oriented perspective, the two commentaries also employ the Covenant to explain the underlying rationale behind Qur'anic injunctions. These include the wisdom of honoring covenants and agreements, as well as the reasons why Islamic rulers should show affection, concern, and respect toward the general public and the poor.

In the field of governance and administration, the Covenant is likewise cited under various Qur'anic verses to derive practical managerial principles, including methods for educating and training administrators and guidelines for how Islamic leaders should interact with and govern the people.

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