



Lexical and Contextual Analysis of the Term "Ṣawm" in *Nahj al-Balāgha*

Elham Zarinkolah

Assistant Professor of Quran and Hadith Sciences, Eqlid Higher Education Center, Iran

ezarinkolah@yahoo.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v13i2.7404>

Abstract

One of the key concepts employed in *Nahj al-Balāgha* is the term "ṣawm," which holds profound significance from theological, educational, political, and jurisprudential (fiqhī) perspectives within this esteemed text. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical textual approach for data analysis and a library-based methodology for material collection. It extracts all instances of "ṣawm" and its derivatives in *Nahj al-Balāgha* while conducting lexical and contextual analyses. Findings indicate that "ṣawm" and its derivatives occur a total of 12 times, extending beyond its literal meaning to function as an educational-political instrument. Specifically, it manifests in political contexts (reprimand of women, superiority of soul-reform, attention to congregational leadership duties of provincial governors) and divine rituals (shield against punishment, alms of the body and soul-struggle, factor of examination and testing).

Keywords: *Nahj al-Balāgha*; Ṣawm; Semantics; Political Context; Jurisprudential and Devotional Context

1. Introduction

Nahj al-Balāgha, as one of the most distinguished Shi'ī literary-religious texts, constitutes an unparalleled treasury of Islamic teachings, reflecting the discourses of Imam 'Alī (AS). In addition to the individual sermons, letters, and wisdoms therein—which articulate invaluable insights across diverse domains such as politics, economics, education, and beyond—each and every concept and term embedded within carries profound semantic depth and rich intellectual content. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of these terms holds paramount importance. One such term is "ṣawm."

Lexically, "ṣawm" signifies abstinence from action (Ṭurayhī, 1375 SH, vol. 6, pp. 103–104); in shari'a, it denotes restraint from fasting-nullifiers with requisite intention; and in fiqh, avoidance of acts invalidating the fast. Nevertheless, its applications in *Nahj al-Balāgha* transcend this literal definition, extending into political contexts and divine rituals.

Despite extensive scholarship on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, no dedicated lexical study of the term "ṣawm" has been undertaken to date. Existing works have largely contented themselves with succinct explanations

and commentaries embedded within broader explications of its sermons, letters, and wisdoms. Consequently, there is a compelling necessity for a research endeavor that meticulously extracts this term and its derivatives from *Nahj al-Balāgha*, while systematically elucidating their semantic and contextual dimensions. Accordingly, the present study furnishes a comprehensive statistical explication of "ṣawm" and its derivatives, coupled with interpretive and contextual analyses—particularly addressing contentious instances such as Sermon 79 ("deficiency in women's faith due to their abstention from prayer and fasting during menstruation"), which has elicited sharply divergent scholarly interpretation.

2. Statistical Analysis

awm" (with fathāh on ṣād and sukūn on wāw) fundamentally denotes abstinence from action. Hence, one who refrains from eating and drinking is termed *ṣā'im*. Concurrently, in sharī'a, it signifies restraint from fasting-nullifiers with requisite intention (Ṭurayhī, vol. 6, pp. 103–104); in fiqh, avoidance of fasting-invalidators. This term and its derivatives appear a total of 12 times in *Nahj al-Balāgha* (10 as "ṣiyām," 1 as "ṣā'im," and 1 as "ṣawm"). Notably, Qurshī (vol. 2, p. 653) reports 11 occurrences. Of these, 5 pertain to sermons (79, 109, 120, 234 [twice]), 2 to letters (47 and 52), and 5 to wisdoms (131, 137 [twice], 244, 420).

Of this total, three instances occur in political contexts and settings, while the remainder pertain to expositions of divine rituals

3. Political Contextual Analysis

Of the three instances in political contexts and settings, one occurs post-conclusion of the Battle of Jamal in the reprimand of women (Sermon 79), another is addressed to al-Ḥasanayn (AS) enjoining them against retaliation against their father's assassin (Letter 47), and the final one is directed to provincial governors elucidating their duties (Letter 52).

3-1 . In the Context of Reprimanding Women Post-Battle of Jamal

One instance of the term "ṣawm" occurs in the context of reprimanding women following the Battle of Jamal. The women referenced in this sermon are likely 'Ā'isha and her associates. In this discourse, Imam (AS) describes women as deficient in three domains—faith, inheritance, and intellect—and subsequently explicates the deficiency in faith through the phrase: "fa ammā nuqṣānu ṡmānihinna fa qu'ūduhunna 'ani al-ṣalāti wa al-ṣiyāmi fī ayyāmi ḥayḍihinna" (as for the deficiency in their faith, it is their abstention from prayer and fasting during their menstrual periods) (cf. Sermon 79).

In determining the intended meaning of Imam (AS) in this statement, a variety of scholarly positions are observed

Some scholars have accepted it and defended it (for further details, see Sayyid Murtaḍā, p. 124; Baḥrānī, vol. 4, p. 118). Sayyid Murtaḍā, referencing a Prophetic tradition on the matter and responding to inquiries regarding the meaning of deficiency in women's faith, states: "The deficiency in women's religion means that most women are deprived for several days each month from performing worship and attaining its reward" (Sayyid Murtaḍā, 1405 Q, p. 124).

He subsequently cites the statement of Imam 'Alī (AS) as corroboration. Ibn Maytham, in his commentary on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, writes: Following the Battle of Jamal, which resulted in the perdition of numerous Muslims due to the decision and resolve of a woman ('Ā'isha), the Imam directed the people's attention to women's deficiencies. One aspect of this deficiency is in faith, substantiated by their abstention from prayer and fasting during menstruation. It is self-evident that prayer and fasting constitute perfections of religion and forms of spiritual asceticism. Women's abstention from this asceticism during

their monthly periods results in a deficiency in their faith. The sharī'a has accordingly exempted them from these two acts of worship due to their state of ritual impurity, as it is unbecoming for them to stand in prayer before the Most Exalted Lord in such a condition. Furthermore, women's abstention from fasting has another rational basis: the excessive weakness induced by menstrual bleeding. Of course, the subtleties of the sharī'a surpass human intellect's comprehension. In any case, during their menstrual periods, women must neither perform prayer nor fast, and this constitutes the rationale for their faith deficiency (Baḥrānī, 1385 SH, vol. 4, p. 118).

Some scholars, in addition to accepting Imam (AS)'s statement, have sought to justify it (cf. Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, vol. 2, p. 1035; Javādī Āmulī, p. 375). Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, in his commentary on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, explains: The entirety of this sermon refers to 'Ā'isha, and our companions unanimously agree that 'Ā'isha erred in what she did on the day of the Battle of Jamal, but she subsequently repented and departed this world in a state of repentance, thus being among the people of Paradise. Ayatollah Javādī Āmulī has pursued the same interpretation.

Meanwhile, a group of thinkers, in order to justify the statement of Imam 'Alī (AS), have interpreted "nuqṣān" (deficiency) to mean "difference," maintaining that the apparent wording of this sermon and the term "nuwāqīṣ" (deficient ones) contradicts Qur'ānic verses, Islamic doctrines, and philosophy. If we were to claim that God created half of humanity deficient, the only way to reconcile this with other evidence is to reinterpret the term "nuwāqīṣ" as signifying "difference" or "disparity," terms which are interchangeably used in Qur'ānic vocabulary. In this interpretation, the apparent contradiction between this sermon and Qur'ānic verses, as well as doctrinal foundations, is resolved. The term "nuwāqīṣ" here signifies "difference," akin to the Qur'ānic phrase in Mulk 3: "mā tarā fī khalqī al-raḥmān min tafāwut" (you see no disparity in the creation of the Most Merciful). In this sermon, the intent is to convey that "woman" implies difference. The Imam and man each possess distinct dispositions and attributes, and the proper station of each must be preserved. Therefore, do not appoint 'Ā'isha—a woman—mounted on a camel as your commander, lest she incite the Basra uprising and shed the blood of numerous Muslims (Khaz'alī, K., et al., 1380 SH, p. 219). Some have stated that the term women in such narrations refers to the concept of femininity as perceived in the public mindset of that era, rather than its literal meaning. The people of that time, in their understanding of "womanly" and "femininity," envisioned a category of humanity generally characterized as naive and of limited intellect (ibid.).

Meanwhile, others, citing issues such as fabrication, have hesitated in interpreting Imam (AS)'s statement and deemed it lacking in authenticity and validity (cf. Faḍl Allāh, p. 40). Nevertheless, according to the definition of faith proffered by most scholars of kalām, the reality is that women experience a deficiency in faith due to their abstention from prayer and fasting on certain days. This deficiency is compensable; hence, it may be concluded that Imam (AS)'s statement entails no contradiction with the Qur'ān or narrations, serving rather as an admonition and reminder directed toward women.

3.2. In the Context of Admonishing al-Ḥasanayn (AS) Against Retaliation Following the Assassination Attempt

One of the instances where the term "ṣawm" is employed in a political context pertains to the occasion when, after being struck by Ibn Muljam, the Imam (AS)—while enjoining al-Ḥasanayn (AS) against blood vengeance—addressed a letter to all, calling them to taqwā and soul-reform, deeming the latter superior to prayer and fasting (Letter 47). To substantiate this assertion, he cited a Prophetic tradition elevating soul-reform above prayer and fasting for an entire lifetime.

This is elucidated as follows: God's paramount objective is to preserve people on the path toward Him and to bind them in the thread of religion, which is unattainable amid discord and fitna. Hence, peace among the people ranks foremost among the means indispensable to realizing the Lawgiver's aims—a dimension absent in prayer and fasting. For these latter may be fulfilled without it, yet the aforementioned objective remains attainable thereby (Baḥrānī, vol. 5, p. 121).

3-3. In the Context of Delineating the Duties of Provincial Governor

The third instance of "ṣawm" in a political context is addressed to the *umarā' al-bilād* (provincial governors and commanders) in Letter 52. This letter, as one of Imam 'Alī's (AS) most comprehensive governmental testaments, imposes upon them oversight of religious affairs (establishment of rituals and enjoining good) and worldly matters (economic justice, public security), along with extensive other duties, particularly leading Friday and congregational prayers. With the precise rhetorical expression "wa ṣallū bihimu al-maghriba ḥīna yuftar al-ṣā'imu wa yadfa'u al-ḥājju ilā Minā," the Imam (AS) anchors the timing of Maghrib prayer to two tangible phenomena: the ifṭār of fasters (indicative of sunset) and the collective movement of pilgrims from 'Arafāt to Minā.

This expression exemplifies the Imam's (AS) practical eloquence (*balāgha 'amalī*), as it eschews complex astronomical descriptions (such as "the time of the sun's setting") in favor of accessible and widely recognized public markers, rendering them unequivocally clear and indisputable for the Muslim masses (Baḥrānī, 1385 SH, vol. 5, p. 133; Makārim Shīrāzī, 1375 SH, vol. 10, p. 346).

4. Jurisprudential and Devotional Contextual Analysis

In the remaining nine instances, the concept of "ṣawm" is predominantly employed in the context of expounding divine rituals and their devotional-educational functions. These applications elevate fasting from a mere jurisprudential obligation to a comprehensive instrument for divine proximity, soul-struggle (*mujāhada al-nafs*), and attainment of inner taqwā. In effect, Imam 'Alī (AS), through his distinctive and impactful discourse, delineates the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of fasting, situating it within the Qur'ānic objective: "la'allakum tattaqūn" (that perhaps you may become righteous; al-Baqara: 183).

These instances are as follows:

4-1. Fasting as a Shield Against Punishment and Means of Divine Proximity

Imam (AS) presents fasting as one of the primary means of proximity to God, explicating its rationale through the expression "fa innahu junnatun mina al-'iqābi" (Sermon 109). Although this attribute is extensible to other acts of worship (such as prayer and pilgrimage), the Imam (AS) attributes it specifically to fasting; for fasting, more than any other deed, serves as a barrier to disobedience, subdues carnal desires and satanic instruments, and safeguards humanity from plummeting into the abyss of divine punishment (Baḥrānī, 1385 SH, vol. 3, p. 79; Kāshānī, 1378 SH, vol. 1, p. 535).

In fact, this expression of Imam (AS) alludes to the philosophy underlying the legislation of fasting, as the faster, through abstinence from permissible pleasures during daylight hours, subjects the soul to ascetic discipline and bars Satan from infiltrating it. Baḥrānī emphasizes that "fasting is a wall between the servant and the forbidden," a quality that transforms it into a "junnaḥ" (impenetrable shield) (Baḥrānī, *ibid.*). On this basis, fasting not only ranks among divine rituals but also serves as an eschatological bulwark.

4.2. Fasting as the Alms of the Body

Imam (AS), in Wisdom 131, declares with the phrase "wa li-kulli shay'in zakāh wa zakāt al-badan al-ṣiyām" that fasting constitutes the alms of the body. This profound analogy rests upon a rhetorical analogy (*qiyās balāghī*) with financial alms: just as zakāt on wealth outwardly diminishes assets yet inwardly enriches them through divine barakah, rendering them abundant and fruitful, fasting—through abstinence from eating and drinking—apparently diminishes bodily strength but inwardly, by eschewing desires, empowers the soul and purifies the spirit (Baḥrānī, 1385 SH, vol. 2, p. 660; Makārim Shīrāzī, 1375 SH, vol. 13, p. 124).

In fact, this perspective of Imam (AS) accentuates the economic-educational dimension of fasting, whereby the alms of the body, akin to the alms of the soul, precludes the soul's transgressions and fosters psychosomatic equilibrium. As Makārim Shīrāzī articulates, fasting represents an eschatological investment for fortifying the will, thereby transforming it into a symbol of self-sacrifice and purification.

4.3. The Corporeal and Spiritual Dimensions of Fasting

Imam (AS), in Wisdom 137, explicitly states that fasting is not merely exoteric abstinence but possesses "jismun wa rūḥun" (a body and a soul): its outward aspect entails refraining from eating, drinking, and intercourse; its inward aspect involves fortifying faith, willpower, and combating satanic desires. Indeed, absent the realization of this inner dimension, the divine objective "la'allakum tattaqūn" (that you may become righteous; al-Baqara: 183) remains unfulfilled (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1375 SH, vol. 13, p. 176).

This duality rests upon the distinction between "ṣiyām al-jasad" (fasting of the body) and "ṣiyām al-naḥs" (fasting of the soul). Baḥrānī (1385 SH, vol. 2, p. 660) terms it "jihād al-akbar" (the greater struggle), as the faster subdues the commanding soul through hunger and deprives Satan of psychical instruments. This portrayal elevates fasting to the realm of pure worship, discernible only to God.

4.4. Philosophy of Fasting's Legislation: Testing Sincerity, Soul's Struggle, and Psychosomatic Equilibrium

In light of the aforementioned functions, the primary philosophy of fasting's legislation, from Imam Ali's (AS) perspective, is the testing of servants' sincerity ("al-ṣiyāma ibtilā'an li-ikh'lāṣ al-khalq"; Wisdom/244). This expression elevates fasting to a level of worship wherein the servant's pure intention is revealed before God; for unlike overt acts of devotion (such as prayer), fasting's outward form remains concealed, known solely to the All-Knowing Knower of hearts regarding the faster's sincerity. Makārim Shīrāzī (1375 SH, vol. 14, p. 78) designates this as the "sublime stage of taqwā," since the faster restrains the soul without human oversight, rendering its profound impact on ikhlāṣ the paramount instrument for testing servants. This condition, though not exclusive to fasting, attains unparalleled depth in gauging faith due to its outward concealment. The hidden nature of fasting's physical abstinence—imperceptible to others—intensifies the trial of inner conviction, distinguishing genuine piety from performative acts. Thus, it uniquely probes the soul's authenticity, where only divine omniscience discerns true adherence amid temptation.

From Imam's (AS) viewpoint, the sincere faster, enduring successive hardships (hunger, thirst, abstinence from pleasures), remains constantly attuned to divine majesty and glory, performing acts solely out of servitude and humility. This constitutes "mujaḥadat al-ṣiyām fi al-ayyām" (the struggle of fasting through the days; Sermon/234), safeguarding humanity from arrogance and pride: humility against haughtiness, weakening satanic faculties against the commanding soul, and shattering psychical instruments (desires). Baḥrānī (1385 SH, vol. 3, p. 79) calls this "riyāḍat al-akbar" (the greater spiritual discipline), as the faster, despite satanic temptations, prioritizes divine will over whims and passions, attaining true servitude.

Imam (AS) describes the fasting of past companions with the phrase "khums al-butūn min al-ṣiyām" (Sermon/120) as their hallmark trait. This depiction points to sustained spiritual discipline and its positive physical impact, not profound harm that disrupts bodily health and vitality. Rational evidence lies in the companions' valor and strength in battles (such as Siffin and Nahrawan), attesting to physical equilibrium; for severe illness or debility would render such feats impossible (Ja'farī, n.d., vol. 21, p. 262). Thus, the intended leanness symbolizes purification and contentment, not malnutrition.

Imāmī jurisprudence, grounded in wisdom, prescribes concessions (fidya) for the physically frail (elderly, ill); no obligation exists to impose the severe disciplines of the great men (such as the companions) (Ja'farī, n.d., vol. 21, p. 262). Nonetheless, if spiritual inclinations lead one to abstain from

pleasures and adopt moderate contentment with material things—directing the soul toward otherworldly matters—no harm arises. This perspective emphasizes the soul's superiority over the body: a potent spirit can influence the material frame, establishing psychosomatic equilibrium without excess or deficiency.

Ultimately, Imam (AS) states with the phrase "innamā huwa 'īdun liman qabila Llāhu ṣiyāmahu" (Wisdom/420) that Eid al-Fitr is a true festival only for those whose "fasting and obedience have been accepted." This expression underscores the divine criterion (acceptance of sincerity), not mere outward celebration; Fitr completes Ramadan, linking the trial of ikhlāṣ to eschatological reward (Makārim, 1375 SH, vol. 14, p. 78).

5. Conclusion

Lexical and contextual analysis of "ṣawm" in Nahj al-Balāgha has demonstrated;

- 1- This concept transcends mere outward abstinence, serving as an educational-political instrument for testing sincerity, suppressing desires, and preserving social unity.
- 2- "Ṣawm" symbolizes the struggle of the soul (mujāhada al-naḥs) and the testing of sincerity; the leanness of the companions' bellies and Eid al-Fitr for those whose fasts have been accepted emphasize its spiritual dimension.
- 3- "Ṣawm" serves as a criterion for punctuality (Maghrib prayer) and the superiority of reforming the soul over outward rituals, prioritizing community unity over preserving lives and deeming women's faith deficiency a redeemable admonition.
- 4- "Ṣawm" harbors no contradiction with the Quran; the faith deficiency (Sermon 79) is temporary and rectifiable, while fasting serves as an instrument for suppressing arrogance and pride (Sermon 234) without severe bodily harm, as attested by the jihad warriors' valor.

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