

QUR'ANIC THREADS: TOWARDS VALIDATING MANIFEST IMAMAT FROM THE QUR'AN ALONE

MOHIB EBRAHIM

INTRODUCTION

Upon the death of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) a fundamental debate arose as to who was his rightful successor as leader of the nascent Muslim community. The debate is so fundamental that it is at the root of the Shia/Sunni difference of Islam and it has simmered continuously in the subsequent 1,400 years, at times boiling over with rage.

Over the centuries much has been written by both Shia and Sunni to "prove" their respective positions correct. On the one hand Shia theologians, philosophers, scholars, clergy and lay people have all sought to validate the Shia Imamate while on the other, their Sunni counterparts attempt to make the converse case. What is particularly perplexing and vexing to outside observers is both parties make their case from the same evidence -- marshalling quotes from the Qur'an and Hadith (anecdotes about, and sayings of, the Prophet), key historical records as well as relying on rational or "common sense" arguments.

The paradox arises because there is no unanimous agreement over which historical records are accurate, which Hadith are authentic, and then even when there is agreement, disagreement arises over their interpretation. The dilemma is not improved, but rather compounded, when evidence from the Qur'an is relied upon simply because the Qur'an itself admits, in verse 3:7, to its own partial ambiguity thereby rendering those parts open to individual interpretation.

DISAGREEMENT OVER THE HISTORICAL RECORD

To appreciate the depth of the quagmire over historical records, it would be instructive to review one particularly important example relevant to the Shia/Sunni disagreement over the Shia Imamate.

Consider the official position of the Ismailis -- who are also the only branch of Islam, Shia or Sunni, which have "a living Imam who traces his family back to Hazrat Ali" (1). They state, as do all Shia, that:

[The Shia's] espousal of the right of Ali and that of his descendants, through Fatima, to the leadership of the community was rooted, above all, in their understanding of the Qur'an and its concept of qualified and rightly guided leadership, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions. The most prominent among the latter were part of the Prophet's sermon at a place called Ghadir Khumm, following his farewell pilgrimage, designating Ali as his successor, and his testament that he was leaving behind him 'the two weighty things', namely the Qur'an and his progeny, for the future guidance of his community. (2)

In addition, all Shia maintain that the Prophet also said at Ghadir Khumm, as quoted by Mir Ahmed Ali:

To whomsoever I am the Maula (the Lord - the Master), Ali is his Maula (the Lord - the Master). O God! Be Thou a friend to him who is a friend to him (Ali). (Be Thou) an enemy to him who is enemy to him (i.e. Ali). Help one who helps him (i.e. Ali). Foresake one who foresaketh him (i.e. Ali). (3)

Finally, Mir Ahmed Ali also notes:

[Upon] descending from the pulpit [after appointing Ali as Maula], the Holy Prophet commanded everyone of the huge gathering to pay his "Baiyat" or homage or allegiance to Ali. The first one to pay the baiyat was Omar ibne Khuttab (who later became the 2nd Khalif).... Hearing the words with which Omar felicitated Ali, the Holy Prophet commanded Omar not to address Ali as son of Abu Taleb, but as 'Amirul-Momineen', i.e. the Lord Commander of the Faithful.... Like his other titles ... the title of

'Amirul-Momineen' was also bestowed upon Ali exclusively for him by the Prophet himself for none else held any of the titles during his lifetime of the Holy Prophet, particularly 'Amirul-Momineen'. (3)

The question is then of course: what is the Sunni position over Ghadir Khumm? Mir Ahmed Ali lists some 80 of the most respected Sunni authorities and books which have "reported this event in all its details." (3) He also adds that the number of authorities who have "relayed this event with its true significance" (3) is such that there is "not a single event of the Islamic history nor any other Qur'anic Verses which has earned so much unanimous, universal, unquestionable and doubtless attention from such great authorities in such a huge number" (3).

Nevertheless, despite such an agreed upon record of what took place at Ghadir Khumm, the Prophet's words were still parsed and dissected by, what appear to the uninitiated, hair-splitting arguments over Arabic and its grammar, that in all likelihood the matter will never be settled. For example, the word *Maula* is taken to mean "friend" and not "Lord" or "Master." Such is the state of affairs, that, in concluding his lengthy commentary about the event, Mir Ahmed Ali wrote out of frustration:

[I]n spite of so much of the doubtless and the unchallengeable acknowledgement of the facts [over Ghadir Khumm] it is only a wonder how man could ever insist upon his own fanciful notions and hold himself fast to them, unless his conscience and reasoning cease to work or he does not want to be corrected. (3)

DISAGREEMENT OVER QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATIONS

Given the disagreement about a historical event despite overwhelming agreement on its record by both sides, one can only imagine the disagreement over arguments relying on the Qur'an, given its admitted ambiguity. Perusing, for example, Chapter 4, "*Al-Baqir's Views on the Imamate*," of Arzina Lalani's "*Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir*" offers a flavour of this, vis a vis the Imamate. In it, she discusses some of the Qur'anic verses -- including 5:55, 5:67, 5:3, 4:59, 4:83, 4:51, 4:53, 4:54, 4:58, 9:119, 9:105, 2:143, 3:5 [sic, 3:7], 35:32, 42:22 [sic, 42:23], 64:8, 57:28, 6:122, 33:6, 43:28, 33:33, 17:71 -- cited and interpreted by the 4th/5th Imam (i) revered by all Shia, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, in his defence of the Imamate. Needless to say, the Sunni have their own interpretations for each of these verses.

While some of the Sunni interpretations appear strained to Shia ears, the Shia interpretation of others can only be understood as referring to the Imamate when explained by the Imams themselves, giving rise to suggestions of self-serving interpretations. Other verses, like the historical record, have been subjected to similar hair-splitting debates over the Arabic and its grammar, perhaps none more so than 3:7 where the debate quite literally rages over the placement of a full stop.

IF THE ISSUE IS UNRESOLVABLE, IS THAT ITSELF A REASONABLE STATE OF AFFAIRS?

So does this Gordian Knot have a solution or are we of modern and later times hamstrung with the vexing task of trying to tease out the truth from an incomplete historical record 1,400 years after the fact? And, must those of us not versed in Arabic relegate our faith, and thus perhaps our salvation, to guessing which of several duelling Arabic linguists' arguments seem most credible to us, even though we have neither the knowledge nor the qualifications to assess the merits of their arguments? In other words, is religion for us reduced to blind faith in an arbitrary choice? And if Prophet Muhammad was indeed the last Prophet, then did Allah really leave us in such an unsettled, ambiguous, final state (at least until End Times), a state which cannot but breed more and more doubt, while simultaneously Hazrat Ali, first Shia Imam, informs us that, on the contrary, "sleeping with certainty is better than praying with doubt" (4).

Or, alternatively can we divine the truth from the Qur'an with a new approach, assuming good faith in translations? For is not truth blind to specific languages or the fallibility of man to record history and instead able to shine its essential light regardless, just as scientific discoveries are not limited to the language or writings of the discoverer, but have an essential light to them? After all Imam Jafar al-Sadiq informs us that "intellect is that by which Allah is worshipped and a place in Paradise earned" (5) and so relegating my faith to blindly following an arbitrarily chosen opinion of another person -- a linguist or historian -- is not only irredeemably unsatisfying both spiritually and intellectually, but in complete contradiction to both my

understanding of what Imam al-Sadiq advises as well as my firm conviction that faith must and should be verifiable, for all the reasons explained in my article *Truth, Reality and Religion*. (6) And thus, for me, finding a way to untie this Gordian Knot around the Shia Imamate was an intellectual and spiritual necessity irrespective of, but also especially because of, my being Ismaili.

SETTING THE GROUND RULES FOR A NEW APPROACH

Leaving aside those ambiguous verses that require the Imamate to explain they refer to the Imamate, past attempts to validate the Imamate from the Qur'an were, in general, based on arguing a specific interpretation of what were, hopefully, "smoking gun" verses that one could then point to and proclaim, "Here, clear verses where Allah ordained the Imamate." However, the fact is that such "smoking gun" verses are few and far between -- if they are to be found at all, given the disagreements over interpretation, as explained above. Furthermore, even if they are very clear when read in a certain light, it is precisely because they need to be read in that certain light and then argued in isolation, that they do not, in my opinion, provide substantive, let alone conclusive, evidence.

Consequently, inspired by the Ismaili position mentioned above, it began to dawn on me that perhaps there was an alternative approach -- at least for me -- to resolve the dual quagmires of contradictory historical records and Qur'anic interpretations. However, several severe constraints were first needed. The "Ground Rules" as it were.

Firstly, the position of the Ismailis is that validation of the Imamate comes first and foremost from the Qur'an and then secondly, only as reinforcement, from Prophetic traditions. To me that meant, theoretically at least, one should be able to validate the Imamate from the Qur'an alone and dispense with the historical record with their inevitable conflicts. For as His Highness the Aga Khan, the present, 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismailis, also said with respect to the historical record:

... nothing was written at the time, the Qur'an itself was memorised -- but at the time of the death of the Prophet, what was [sic] the ingredients of the division between the Shia and the Sunni is not really entirely clear, because all we have today is literature which is based on repetition of what was said, the Hadith in a sense. (7)

However, when one enlists the Qur'an, disagreement over interpretations, translations and the Arabic language promptly log-jam the discussion, perhaps even more obstinately than disagreements over the historical record. Nevertheless, I find it hard to accept that Allah has left the truth of this matter hostage either to the irreconcilable differences of expert Arabic linguists or personal interpretations of the Qur'an's ambiguous verses. And so, for these reasons the second, third and fourth constraints dictate answers must not be dependent on:

- i) knowing Arabic,
- ii) parsing the Arabic text or
- iii) ambiguous verses of the Qur'an, but rather only from those that are plain and understood by all so they are able to be translated without issue.

Surely it is self-evident that answers must be found in the "plain verses," and not the ambiguous ones, for otherwise we would have an unresolvable paradox where the instructions on how we are to acquire the correct meaning of the Qur'an's ambiguous verses, were themselves cloaked in ambiguity.

QUR'ANIC THREADS: TAKING UP THE INVITATION OF VERSE 4:82

The problem, however, is that the unambiguous verses do not come specially identified. And, since merely quoting a verse from the Qur'an implies interpretation, the first question which arises about a verse is whether or not it is one of the ambiguous verses. If the verse is not sufficiently clear by itself to be excluded from the ambiguous verses, then -- rather than trying to justify the interpretation semantically, parsing words or Arabic,

or resorting to the historical context of the verse -- perhaps other verses can be brought to bear and corroborate the interpretation offered and thereby settle issue with evidence. In fact the verse:

Will they not then ponder on the Qur'an? If it had been from other than Allah they would have found therein much incongruity. (Qur'an 4:82)

invites us to validate our interpretations by reconciling them with other parts of the Qur'an to and iron out any "apparent" inconsistencies our (mis)understandings create. Therefore, rather than trying to find and interpret a single "smoking gun" verse, argued and relied on in isolation, to justify Imamat, I use what I call Qur'anic Threads.

Qur'anic Threads propose a conclusion that arises from a set of mutually supportive, interlocking Observations related to a single concept with each Observation substantiated from a set of verses. It seems self-evident that if the Qur'an has no discrepancies, per 4:82 above, then surely it must neither have discrepancies at the micro (verse) level nor at macro (conceptual or "thread") level. Therefore, if the thesis behind a thread is valid, threads will give interpretations credence, objectivity, coherence, resilience and stability because well formed threads are internally consistent from several perspectives and thus threads provide robust, perhaps even conclusive, lines of evidence and argument which are able to better withstand challenge as compared to individual, "smoking gun" verses argued in isolation.

INSPIRATION FOR A FRESH PERSPECTIVE AND A CORRESPONDING NEW APPROACH

Although the aforementioned constraints prevents the demonstration from getting mired once again in the quicksands of parsing Arabic, personal interpretations of allegorical verses and conflicting historical records, they appear, superficially, to be unreasonably severe rendering it all but impossible to accomplish anything. Hope, however, lies in precise notions articulated in the Ismaili explanation of the Shia position, highlighted below:

[T]he Shia's espousal of the right of Ali and that of his descendants, through Fatima, to the leadership of the community was rooted, above all, in their understanding of the **Qur'an and its concept of qualified and rightly guided leadership**, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions. [Emphasis added] (2)

Namely, that the Qur'an sets out two criteria for valid leadership: qualified and rightly guided. Here now were precise, specific criteria that could be tested objectively -- as opposed to the subjective duels of linguists and historians -- exactly as verse 4:82 proposes in the same spirit of scientific inquiry. Perhaps this is why Imam Jafar al-Sadiq said "Intellect ('*aqal*) is that by which Allah is worshipped and a place in Paradise earned" (5) and the Holy Prophet said:

To listen to the words of the learned and to instil into others the lessons of science is better than religious exercises. (8)

The Ismaili explanation of the Shia position and these two criteria beg the question: Does the Qur'an indeed declare a notion of "qualified and rightly guided leadership?" And if it does, then it prompts several fundamental questions:

- i) What qualifications make one "qualified and rightly guided" to lead?
- ii) Who are the "qualified" to lead and who are "the rightly guided?"
- iii) And most importantly, can they be identified?

Individually, each answer would be of immense value. Collectively, however, the conclusion they offer may well be unassailable. Surprisingly the answers are neither as obscure nor as surprising as one might imagine.

To investigate the Qur'anic position on the previous questions, three Threads (corresponding roughly to each question) were developed. Each thread is depicted in single page chart, which can be read independently of the commentary which follows each.

NOTES TO THE THREADS/CHARTS

Granted, short of Allah Himself confirming an interpretation of the Qur'an as correct, any interpretation or conclusion, by definition, relies on the circumstantial evidence of "logical" deductions or argument which some may find more compelling than others. Nevertheless, I am reminded of this old story about Henry David Thoreau and circumstantial evidence:

During the mid 1800s, milk distributors in Boston were notorious for heavily diluting their milk with water from Cochituate River, but there was no proof. Thoreau commented, "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find trout in the milk." (9)

However, in the final analysis, both the quality of the deductions or arguments, such as those presented, and the ability for another to appreciate the same is dependent on one's knowledge and, in particular, one's insight into that knowledge. I think what is presented will be, at the very least, for some, "trout in the milk," but if not, perhaps the approach will inspire others to develop threads for this or other debates over interpretation.

Unless otherwise noted, all verses cited use the Pickthall translation but it has to be admitted that working from translations of the Qur'an is not ideal, and so several translations were consulted to ensure all the translations convey the same essence -- in the same vein, as mentioned earlier, that scientific truths are independent of language -- and also to ensure what is said is both clear and similar, if not the same, in all the translations, as would be expected from unambiguous verses. Consequently, apart for three instances, little or no difference was found between Sunni and Shia translations or interpretations of the verses cited. In those three instances, the Shia translation or interpretation is used because, as explained for each, the Sunni version results in a contradiction or inconsistency with other verses within the thread, thus violating verse 4:82.

In the charts, the relevant portions of verses which substantiate each observation are highlighted, as a result some verses are cited more than once, each time drawing attention to a different part of the verses. The verses cited are not be exhaustive, but merely establish each observation and additional verses would only make the observations, and hence the threads and their conclusions, firmer. Observations are numbered sequentially, irrespective of thread, for ease of reference.

THREAD I

THE QUR'AN ON THOSE VESTED WITH AUTHORITY TO LEAD

1 LEADERS OF MANKIND ARE APPOINTED BY ALLAH AND GUIDED BY ALLAH. THAT IS, ALLAH DID NOT LEAVE MANKIND TO CHOOSE ITS OWN LEADERS.

... He said: Lo! *I have appointed* thee [Abraham] *a leader for mankind*.... (2:124)

And *We made* them *chiefs* who guide by *Our command*. (21:73; see also 32:24)

... *We bestowed* on them [the house of Abraham] *a mighty kingdom*. (4:54)

2 THE PROPHETS OF THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK ARE ALL DESCENDED FROM ONE FAMILY, PREFERRED ABOVE ALL OTHERS AND APPOINTED LEADERS FOR MANKIND.

Lo! Allah *preferred Adam* and *Noah* and the *Family of Abraham* and the *Family of 'Imran* above (all His) *creatures*. They were *descendants one of another*.... (3:33-34)

... O *Mary!* Lo! Allah hath *chosen thee and made thee pure*, and hath *preferred thee above (all) the women* of creation (3:42) ... I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may *bestow on thee a faultless [pure] son*. (19:19)

... He said: Lo! I have appointed thee [Abraham] *a leader for mankind*. (Abraham) said: *And of my offspring (will there be leaders)?* He said: *My covenant includeth not wrong-doers*. (2:124)

And We verily sent *Noah and Abraham* and placed the *Prophethood* and the Scripture *among their seed* ... (57:26)

We gave unto *Moses* the Scripture, and We appointed it a guidance for the Children of Israel ... (They were) the *seed of those whom We carried (in the ship) along with Noah*.... (17:2-3)

These [Zachariah, his son John, Jesus (son of Mary – sister of Aaron), Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Ishmael, Idris] are ... of the *seed of Adam* and of those whom We carried (in the ship) with Noah, and of the *seed of Abraham* and Israel, and from among those whom We guided and *chose*.... (19:58)

[Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Lot, Ishmael, Elisha, Johah] ...With some of their *forefathers and their offspring and their brethren*; ... Those are they unto whom We gave the Scripture and *command* and prophethood ... (6:84-90)

3 ONLY THE PURE ARE ALLOWED TO LEAD; THE IMPURE ARE NOT GRANTED THE AUTHORITY. EVEN THE HOLY PROPHET IS NOT TO OBEY A SINNER AND WE, NOT TO OBEY DISBELIEVERS.

... He said: Lo! I have appointed thee [Abraham] *a leader for mankind*. (Abraham) said: *And of my offspring (will there be leaders)?* He said: *My covenant includeth not wrong-doers*. (2:124)

... But if these [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Lot, Ishmael, Elisha, Johah and some of their forefathers, offspring and brethren] *disbelieve therein*, then indeed We shall entrust it [scripture and *command* and prophethood] to a people *who will not be disbelievers* therein. (6:89)

... and [Mohammad] obey *not from among them (man) a sinner* or an ungrateful one. (76:24; see also 33:1, 33:48)

So *obey not the disbelievers* ... (25:52; see also 18:28)

O ye who believe! *Obey Allah*, and *obey the messenger* and those of you who are in authority; ... (4:59)

[If "those who are in authority" were also not pure, like Allah and the Messenger, then, to ensure they were not being misled, the believers would need to have more knowledge than "those in authority" and thus render them redundant.]

CONCLUSION

Allah appointed purified leaders for mankind and instructed us to not follow those who sin.

COMMENTARY TO THREAD I

Note firstly that, Allah informs us that He does not change His practices:

Such is the way of God concerning those who passed away before, *and never shall you find in the way of God any change.* (Qur'an 33:62, S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali translation)

As set out from the verses cited, prior to Prophet Mohammad, Allah limited "command" or "leadership for mankind" exclusively to those who were either purified, faultless, righteous, not among the wrong-doers or disbelievers, and so forth. Then, consistent with this historical practice, Allah, in his last and final revelation (i.e. the Qur'an), instructs mankind not to obey those who have sinned or who are disbelievers. More particularly, in verse 4:59, Allah instructs those who believe to follow Him, the Prophet and "those of you who are in authority."

Exactly who are "those in authority" has been the subject of much debate, with the Sunni insisting they may be any ruler while the Shia insisting they may only be someone pure and faultless since it makes little sense for Allah to command mankind to follow Allah and the Prophet, both of whom are pure and faultless, as well as any other ruler irrespective of their character or virtue or faith or knowledge. For, it is self-evident that if "those who are in authority" were also not pure, like Allah and the Messenger, they will make mistakes and, thus by definition, cannot be rightly guided. Consequently, to avoid being misled by such leaders, others with more knowledge would have to double-check them rendering such leaders redundant and undermining the legitimacy of their claim as rightly guided leadership.

Nevertheless, leaving aside the rational arguments as to who "those in authority" may or may not be, our methodology, when faced with conflicting interpretations, is to invoke 4:82 and see if other verses bring clarity to what is intended. If the Sunni position is correct, and "those in authority" neither have to be pure and faultless nor be of the same family from which those with "command" and "leadership for mankind" were previously appointed, then this would be, as per the verses cited:

- i) inconsistent with Allah's final command in the Qur'an not to obey those have sinned or who were disbelievers and render it impossible to follow,
- ii) inconsistent with Allah's steadfast, unyielding practice -- going as far back as the Qur'an speaks to -- to appoint mankind's leadership for him,
- iii) inconsistent with Allah's steadfast, unyielding practice -- going as far back as the Qur'an speaks to -- to vest leadership only in the pure and the faultless, and
- iv) inconsistent with Allah's steadfast, unyielding practice -- going as far back as the Qur'an speaks to -- to vest leadership with the righteous of the same family.

Furthermore and notwithstanding the above, the Sunni position -- that "those in authority" do not need to be pure and faultless -- is just *an interpretation* since there aren't, to my knowledge, any verses in the Qur'an stating that Allah left mankind free to choose their own leaders and/or that mankind's kind leadership do not have to be pure and faultless (and breaking with His historical practices of ii, iii and iv above and in contradiction to verse 33:62). On the other hand, the verses of the Thread speak directly to and establish the contrary. It is self-evident what is explained, understandable and corroborated by several verses takes precedence over an interpretation, with no corresponding verses to substantiate the interpretation.

Since the interpretation allowing "those in authority" to be impure, generates all these (and other) inconsistencies while the contrary interpretation clears them all, then by verse 4:82 -- that the Qur'an is free of any inconsistencies -- the acceptable interpretation is that "those in authority" must be the pure.

Since we are unable to judge -- perfectly and without error -- who are the pure, Thread III will address the apparently impossible command not to follow disbelievers or those who have sinned. Indeed, Allah has said He will judge wherein we differ (42:10, 22:67-69, 5:48, 39:46, 6:164, etc.) thus precluding us from even making such assessments.

THREAD II

THE QUR'AN ON INTERPRETING IT AND ON THOSE VESTED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE TO DO SO

4 THE EXPLANATION OF THE QUR'AN WILL COME FROM ALLAH AND WE ARE TO FOLLOW IT.

Lo! upon Us (resteth) the putting together thereof and the reading thereof. And when We read it, follow thou the reading; Then lo! upon Us (resteth) the explanation thereof. (75:17-19)

5 ALTHOUGH, EVERYONE CAN UNDERSTAND PARTS OF THE QUR'AN,

He it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture wherein are clear revelations - they are the substance of the Book ... (3:7)

6 THE QUR'AN IS, NEVERTHELESS, "FULLY EXPLAINED".

... He it is Who hath revealed unto you (this) Scripture, fully explained? ... (6:114)

A scripture whereof the verses are expounded, ... for people who have knowledge. (41:3; see also 29:49, 6:98, 6:105)

7 BUT ONLY THE (A) KNOWLEDGEABLE AND (B) PURIFIED ARE RIGHTLY GUIDED TO EXPLAIN IT.

(a) ... clear revelations in the hearts of those who have been given knowledge, ... (29:49; see also 41:3, 6:98, 6:105)

(a) ... and others (which are) allegorical.... None knoweth its explanation save Allah and those who are of sound instruction.... (3:7 Mir Ahmed Ali)

(b) Nay, I swear by the places of the stars ... That (this) is indeed a noble Qur'an In a Book kept hidden Which none toucheth save the purified. (56:75-80)

(b) Those who believe and obscure not their belief by wrong doing, ... they are rightly guided. (6:82)

JUST AS AFORETIME, ONLY THE PURE AND RIGHTEOUS WERE THE RIGHTLY GUIDED.

... and never shall you find in the way of God any change. (33:62 Mir Ahmed Ali)

(And it was said unto his [Zachariah's] son): O John! Hold fast the Scripture. And We gave him wisdom when a child ... and purity ... (19:12-13)

... that I may bestow on thee [Mary] a faultless son (19:19) ... And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom ... (3:48)

... We bestowed upon the house of Abraham (of old) the Scripture and wisdom ... (4:54)

And We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and We established the Prophethood and the Scripture among his seed, ... and lo! in the Hereafter he verily is among the righteous. (29:27)

And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob; each of them We guided; and Noah did We guide aforetime; and of his seed (We guided) David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward the good. And Zachariah and John and Jesus and Elias. Each one (of them) was of the righteous. And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot ... With some of their forefathers and their offspring and their brethren; and We chose them and guided them unto a straight path.... Those [see 6:84-90 in Thread I] are they unto whom We gave the Scripture and command and prophethood... But if these disbelieve therein, then indeed We shall entrust it to a people who will not be disbelievers therein. Those are they whom Allah guideth, so follow their guidance. (6:84-90)

CONCLUSION

The Qur'an is "fully explained" but only the purified are rightly guided and have that full explanation.

COMMENTARY TO THREAD II

Since this thread is concerned with the question of how we are to acquire the correct meaning of the Qur'an, as explained previously, it is self-evident that the verses which will provide the answer must themselves not be among the ambiguous verses for otherwise we have an intractable paradox: the Qur'an's instructions on how to obtain the correct meaning of itself cannot be understood because the instructions themselves are ambiguous. Therefore, out of necessity, we have no option but to take all verses relevant to answering this question at their face value, at least as far as their interpretation is relevant for this issue.

When it comes to acquiring the correct meaning of the Qur'an there are three key questions:

- a) Is the Qur'an fully understandable by all?
- b) If not, then are the parts which are not understandable by everyone understood by anyone, other than Allah?
- c) If they are, how can we identify them?

With respect to question (a), verse 3:7 explicitly states that some verses of the Qur'an are plain to understand, while others are allegorical, therefore questions (b) and (c) become pertinent.

With respect to question (b) several verses cited clearly indicate that some do indeed understand the whole Qur'an. In particular verses 29:49, 56:75-80 and 75:17-19, which are discussed below.

VERSES 3:7 (FIRST HALF) AND 29:49

Firstly, from the first part of 3:7 we know parts of the Qur'an are plain for everyone to understand and therefore confirm there is a common base of knowledge everyone has in order to understand those clear parts, yet 29:49 (and 41:3, 6:98, 6:105) speaks of a special group who have been granted additional knowledge to make the Qur'an "clear". Since this additional knowledge is not needed to understand the plain parts (because everyone can already understand them) it is reasonable to assume the knowledge is for understanding the ambiguous parts mentioned in 3:7, which not everyone can understand. Having such knowledge to understand those parts, would make the Qur'an, for them, fully explained just as 6:114 says the Qur'an is.

VERSES 56:75-80

Similarly verses 56:75-80 speak of the Qur'an being hidden which none can touch except the purified. It is self-evident that this cannot refer "touching" the physical Qur'an simply because many have defiled the physical Qur'an and such people are not considered "pure" by any definition. Nevertheless, Allah has said the Qur'an has been hidden from everyone except the pure which means, therefore, some other attribute of the Qur'an and not the physical Qur'an is hidden. The question is what attribute is not hidden for the purified?

Thread I set out that, prior to Prophet Mohammad, Allah reserved leadership only for the pure. Similarly, Allah informs us in the verses cited in this thread, that, in the past, scripture and guidance (i.e. knowledge) was also only vested with the pure. Consistent with this, in this, His final revelation, Allah confirms, once and for all, in 6:82, only the pure are rightly guided (i.e. have knowledge of scripture). In other words, only the pure have ever had, or ever will have, that special knowledge of scripture -- over and above what everyone already has -- that makes them rightly guided.

Summarising the above we have:

- i) In the past, only the pure were ever vested with knowledge of scripture and rightly guided.
- ii) Only the pure will ever be rightly guided (and thus have the knowledge of scripture to be rightly guided).

- iii) The Qur'an is fully explained and also, per 29:49 (and other verses listed), a special group of people is vested with additional knowledge that makes the Qur'an "clear" to them. In other words, they are vested knowledge of scripture and would thus be rightly guided.
- iv) The Qur'an is not "hidden" for the pure. In other words, the pure (who are rightly guided by definition) are vested with knowledge of scripture.

It is self-evident then that those with the knowledge of scripture which makes the Qur'an clear to them, are the pure. Or, in the converse, what is hidden about the Qur'an (per 56:75-80) for all except the pure, is knowledge of scripture.

Finally, verses 75:17-19 inform us we are to only follow His explanation of the Qur'an. Clearly, the plain verses mentioned in 3:7 above do not require Allah's explanation, and so the explanations spoken of in 75:17-19 must refer to the explanations of allegorical verses. Therefore it is self-evident if none are vested with that knowledge, we can not get His explanation that He has asked us follow. As we know, and also set out above, Allah speaks to us by vesting knowledge of scripture with the pure and so when the pure -- who have been granted that knowledge which makes the Qur'an clear to them -- explain the Qur'an to us, they are explaining it to us the way Allah wishes it to be explained, providing us with His explanation that we are to follow, exactly as described in 75:17-19.

VERSE 3:7 (SECOND HALF)

Finally, we come to the second half of verse 3:7, a verse which like 4:59 of Thread I has been the subject of much debate between the Sunni and Shia. The disagreement arises, quite literally, over the placement of a full stop. The Sunni version of the verse is:

He it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture wherein are clear revelations - they are the substance of the Book - and others (which are) allegorical... None knoweth its [the allegorical verses'] explanation save Allah. And those who are of sound instruction say: 'We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed. (Qur'an 3:7, Pickthall)

While the Shia version of the ending is:

... None knoweth its [the allegorical verses'] explanation save Allah and those who are of sound instruction. They say: 'We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord' but only men of understanding really heed. (Qur'an 3:7, Pickthall, modified according to Shia belief)

The difference (underlined) being whether Allah alone knows the meaning of the allegorical verses, or Allah and "those of sound instruction" -- or "those firmly rooted in knowledge" as given in other translations -- both know the meanings.

As before, when faced with such conflicts our methodology is to invoke 4:82 and see if other verses bring clarity to what is intended, rather than resorting to parsing the Arabic or examining the historical record.

If the Sunni position is correct -- that everyone has the knowledge to understand the plain verses of the Qur'an but only Allah knows the meaning of the allegorical verses -- then this would be:

- i) Inconsistent with 6:114 which informs us that the Qur'an is fully explained.
- ii) Inconsistent with verses 29:49 (and other verses listed) and 56:75-80 which, as explained above, inform us that some -- the pure -- have been granted special knowledge to understand the whole Qur'an.
- iii) Inconsistent with verses 75:17-19 which direct us to only follow Allah's explanation of the Qur'an. However this command is impossible to follow since He has not vested anyone with the knowledge to provide us with His explanation.

On the other hand, if the Shia version is correct -- that there are some vested with knowledge to understand the allegorical -- this would corroborate and be consistent with:

- i) verse 6:114 that the Qur'an is fully explained,
- ii) verses 29:49 (and the other verses listed) and 56:75-80 which, as explained above, inform us that some -- the pure -- have been granted special knowledge to understand the whole Qur'an,
- iii) verse 75:17-19 which, as explained above, directs us to only follow Allah's explanation of the Qur'an, which is only possible if some are vested with His knowledge to pass on to us.

Furthermore and notwithstanding all of the above, the Sunni position -- that only Allah knows the meaning of the allegorical verses -- is just an *interpretation* of 3:7 since there aren't, to my knowledge, any verses in the Qur'an stating only Allah knows the meaning of the allegorical verses. On the other hand, the verses of the Thread speak directly to and establish the contrary. And so, as with Thread I, what is explained, understandable and corroborated by several verses takes precedence over an interpretation, with no corresponding verses to substantiate the interpretation.

Since the Sunni interpretation of 3:7, generates all these inconsistencies while the Shia interpretation clears them all then by verse 4:82 -- that the Qur'an is free of any inconsistencies -- the acceptable interpretation is that Allah and others know the meaning of the allegorical verses.

From the above, we now also have the answer to question (c), posed at the start of the commentary for this thread, and the identifying characteristic of those who have the knowledge to understand the whole Qur'an is they are the purified. As was pointed out with leadership, in Thread I, it is self-evident that if who interpret the Qur'an were also not pure, like the Messenger, they will make mistakes and, thus by definition, cannot be rightly guided. Consequently, to avoid being misled by such interpreters, others with more knowledge would have to double-check them would not only render such interpreters redundant but also undermine the legitimacy of their claim to interpret as the rightly guided.

However, as with Thread I, we are again left with an seemingly impossible situation of knowing who are the pure.

THREAD III

THE QUR'AN ON THE PURIFIED

8 ONLY ALLAH PURIFIES.

Hast thou not seen those who praise themselves for purity? Nay, Allah purifieth whom He will ... (4:49; see also 24:21)

9 FROM THREADS I & II WE LEARN THAT ALLAH HAS VESTED TWO AUTHORITIES, IN PERPETUITY, ONLY WITH THE PURIFIED:

A) LEADERSHIP: *We are to only obey the pure and only the pure from one family have been given the authority to lead.*

B) KNOWLEDGE: *The Qur'an is fully explained but only the purified have the knowledge and are rightly guided.*

10 SINCE WE CANNOT JUDGE WHO ARE THE PURIFIED AMONG US, ALLAH MUST IDENTIFY THEM. THE QUR'AN DOES SO, ONCE, NAMING ONLY THE FAMILY OF THE PROPHET.

Allah's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you, O Folk of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification. (33:33)

JUST AS AFORETIME, THE QUR'AN ONLY IDENTIFIES THE DESCENDANTS OF THE PROPHETS AS PURIFIED.

... and never shall you find in the way of God any change. (33:62 Mir Ahmed Ali)

And remember Our servants, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, men of power and insight. Surely we purified them by a pure quality ... (38:45-46 Shakir)

(And it was said unto his [Zachariah's] son): O John! Hold the Scripture. And We gave him wisdom when a child ... and purity ... (19:12-13)

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation. (3:42) ... that I may bestow on thee [Mary] a faultless son (19:19)

11 LOVE OF THE PROPHET'S NEAR RELATIVES WAS THE ONLY REQUEST MADE OF US.

... Say: I do not ask of you any reward for it but love for my near relatives; ... (42:23 Shakir)

And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided ... (3:103 Yusuf Ali)

12 FINALLY, ALLAH PROMISES HE WILL GUARD HIS MESSAGE. THAT IS, BOTH THE TEXT ITSELF AND THE "ROPE" OF INTERPRETERS MUST BE GUARDED.

Surely We have revealed the Reminder and We will most surely be its guardian. (15:9 Shakir)

CONCLUSION

Since we require the purified to both lead us *and* interpret the Qur'an for us (because *only* the pure are rightly guided and vested with these two authorities) and since *only* The Family of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) are *identified as purified* in the Qur'an, a member of his family must be *present and manifest* to us, in perpetuity, to execute these authorities.

Or as the Qur'an says:

And We have vested everything in a manifest Imam. (36:12 Ismaili)

COMMENTARY TO THREAD III

There is no disagreement among all Muslims -- Sunni and Shia -- that:

- i) Only Allah purifies.
- ii) The Prophets, being purified by Allah and having knowledge of scripture, are rightly guided.
- iii) That the Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an -- including Prophet Muhammad -- are from the same "seed," i.e. family line.
- iv) That Allah promised Abraham leadership among the righteous of his "seed."
- v) As per verse 33:33, the *Ahl al-bayt*, i.e. the People of the Prophet's Household, are purified by Allah.

What is contested is whether or not all of the Prophet's wives and/or the progeny of the Prophet are included as members of the *Ahl al-bayt* and thus purified.

According to the Shia, citing the historical record, when 33:33 was revealed the Prophet indicated that along with himself, only Hazrat Ali and his wife -- the Prophet's daughter, Fatima -- and their two sons, Hussan and Hussein, were his *Ahl al-bayt*. Prophetic tradition -- such as those from Ghadir Khumm discussed earlier -- extend the *Ahl al-bayt* to include the Shia of Imams arising from Hussein's progeny. The Sunni disagree. They include some or all of the Prophet's wives and exclude any further progeny from the *Ahl al-bayt*. Whether or not the Prophet's wives are included as part of the *Ahl al-bayt* is not relevant to the issue of Imamah, but the Prophet's progeny is of course fundamental, for if they are, then according to 33:33 they are purified and have automatic right to leadership and are vested with the knowledge to interpret the Qur'an.

As was done with Threads I and II, when faced with conflicting interpretations, our methodology is to invoke 4:82 and see if other verses can resolve the conflict.

Observation 9 summarises the conclusions of Threads I and II, that (a) on the matter of leadership we are instructed to obey the pure and (b) on the matter of interpretation of the Qur'an, it is fully explained and that explanation lies with the purified. Leaving aside the issue of the Prophet's progeny, the fact that the Sunni position doesn't even insist that the purified are required to fulfil these two conditions is itself inconsistent with the Qur'an. The question, therefore, is not if the purified must be present among each generation, but rather, who are they?

It is self-evident that, during the Prophet's lifetime, these two conditions were met by the Prophet himself. Similarly it is also self-evident that:

- i) if each generation after the Prophet are to obey Allah's instructions to only follow purified leaders, and
- ii) if the Qur'an is to be fully explained, in perpetuity, as Allah promises,

then a purified person must live with each generation after the Prophet. That two conditions require the purified to satisfy them doubly confirms the necessity of a purified among each generation.

As Observation 10 notes, we must be informed by Allah who are purified since we are not able to make that judgement by ourselves since our knowledge is limited and not perfect. At the Prophet's time, Allah only identified the *Ahl al-bayt* -- i.e. the People of [Mohammad's] House -- as purified. If the purified, who are to fulfil the above two conditions in each generation, do not come from the *Ahl al-bayt*, then we have no way of identifying them -- since Allah doesn't inform us that any other family will be purified after the Prophet -- and thus it becomes impossible to fulfil or meet the above two conditions. This would be a significant inconsistency in the Qur'an.

On the other hand, Threads I and II expound -- in consistency with the Shia position that purified in each generation are part of the *Ahl al-bayt* -- that, historically (going as far back as the Qur'an speaks to) all the purified have descended from, or are members of, one "house," i.e. family, and furthermore, Allah promised that He would continue to appoint the righteous from the same "house" (the House of Abraham) as leaders

for Mankind, i.e. they will be the purified, per Thread I. And consistent with this and verse 33:62 -- where Allah informs us that He does not change His practices -- there aren't, to my knowledge, any verses in which Allah indicates He has terminated this practice or rescinded his promise to Abraham and therefore we have no reason whatsoever to assume the purified will not continue to be appointed from one family -- indeed the same family they were appointed from prior to the Prophet. Failure, therefore, to find such a continuous lineage of the purified after the Prophet, descended from the Prophet, would again result in a serious failing in the order the Qur'an lays down for mankind.

On the other hand that there is such a lineage, and critically only one such claimed lineage of "qualified rightly guided leadership", i.e. leadership appointed by Allah, at the very least corroborates or at best confirms the Qur'an (depending on one's insight into the evidence). That lineage is the lineage of the Shia Ismaili Imams, of whom His Highness the Aga Khan is the 49th hereditary Imam. As his predecessor, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, said:

If those who believe that Hazrat Ali was the rightful successor of the Prophet to be the 'Ulu'l-amr Menkom [then they] must accept the principle of that succession — for the same reasons they accept in the case of Hazrat Ali — his rightful Imam descendants. [T]he Spiritual Imam remained with Hazrat Ali and remains with his direct descendants always alive till the Day of Judgement. That a spiritual succession to the Imam makes the Imam the 'Ulu'l-amr Menkom always according to the Qur'an and though he has his moral claim to the Khalifat as well, always he can, like Hazrat Ali himself owing to the conditions of the world, accept and support such worldly authorities as the Imam believes help the cause of Islam. (12)

Observations 11 and 12, and verse 36:12 quoted in the conclusion of the thread are not critical to the argument but offered merely to illustrate how allegorical verses -- when viewed through the prism of the foregoing -- assume a corroborative air or quality, consistent with the necessity of a lineage of purified, descended from the Prophet, living among each generation.

CONCLUSION AND GHADIR KHUMM REVISITED

The point of departure for this exploration was the Ismaili position that the Shia's espousal to the right of the Imam was first and foremost rooted in the Qur'an and that Prophetic traditions only reinforced, or corroborated, that understanding of the Qur'an. Threads I, II and III set out and establish, from the Qur'an alone, that understanding, employing verse 4:82 -- that the Qur'an is free of inconsistency -- as the arbiter to resolve differences in interpretation, as opposed to the never ending debates of experts over the Arabic or historical record. Specifically, the threads establish that:

- i) Allah appointed purified leaders for mankind and instructed us to not follow those who sin.
- ii) The Qur'an is "fully explained" but only the purified are rightly guided and have that full explanation.
- iii) Since we require the purified to both lead us *and* interpret the Qur'an for us (because *only* the pure are rightly guided and vested with these two authorities) and since *only* The Family of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) are *identified as purified* in the Qur'an, a member of his family must be *present and manifest* to us, in perpetuity, to execute these authorities.

It would now be instructive, however, to revisit the Ismaili position quoted earlier, this time with a view to seeing if, and how, Prophetic traditions do indeed reinforce or corroborate the Qur'anic position set out in the Threads. It is self-evident that the traditions of Ghadir Khumm stated earlier corroborate and reinforce perfectly the position of the Qur'an put forth in the threads:

- i) The continuity of Allah's heretofore existing practice of appointing leadership for mankind.
- ii) The continuity of Allah's heretofore existing practice of vesting that leadership only among the chosen from one family.
- iii) The continuity of Allah's heretofore existing practice of vesting knowledge of scripture and rightly guiding only among the chosen of that same family.
- iv) The appointment of a continuous purified lineage so that every generation has a pure leader among them to follow, as ordered by Allah, and also access to the explanation of the Qur'an in full.

Notwithstanding the internal consistency of the Qur'anic position presented, the position makes a testable demand: the insistence of an uninterrupted, hereditary lineage not only going back to and initiated by the Prophet, but also claiming, without exception, to be the lineage necessary to meet the dual conditions of the Qur'an: (a) we are to only follow the purified from the family given authority to lead and (b) the promise that the Qur'an is fully explained.

And so it is, of course, the *continuity* of this purified lineage, present and manifest among mankind, that is the final validation of not only the Qur'anic position set out in Threads I, II, and III but also of the Prophetic traditions. That for 1,400 years such a lineage is claimed and that only one such lineage makes the claim -- namely the Ismaili Imam -- is therefore the final validation. Perhaps understanding this indispensability, this pre-eminence, this axiomatic necessity of the lineage's *uninterrupted continuity*, allows us better understand the Aga Khan's 2005 remark that:

The Imam is a transitory being, who forms a link between the past and the future. For this reason, ensuring the *continuity of the institution* and its ability to fulfil its role is what my life is all about. [Emphasis added] (10)

In conclusion, allow me to quote and repeat myself:

Granted, short of Allah Himself confirming an interpretation of the Qur'an as correct, any interpretation by definition relies on the circumstantial evidence of "logical" deductions or argument which some may find compelling, or perhaps even conclusive, but others not so. However, as Henry David Thoreau stated about the circumstantial evidence that milk distributors in the 1800s were diluting their milk from the Cochituate River: "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find trout in the milk" (9).

Nevertheless, both the quality of a deduction, argument or even a proof, such as those presented, and ability for another to confirm the same is dependent on one's knowledge and, in particular, ones insight into that knowledge.

NOTES

(i) "All Shi'i groups including the Isma'ili da'wah of the Fatimid period considered Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib [Hazrat Ali] as the first Imam, his elder son Imam al-Hasan ibn 'Ali as the second Imam, and his younger son Imam al-Husayn ibn 'Ali as the third Imam. The Isma'ili thinkers do differentiate al-Hasan from the rest of the Imams because he was an Entrusted Imam (imam mustawda) while Imam al-Husayn and the Imams succeeding him in his lineage are Permanent Imams (imam mustaqarr). For this reason, the Present Imam – Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV -- is today reckoned as the forty-ninth Imam in the chain of Permanent Imams when al-Hasan is not counted in the list." (11)

REFERENCES

- 1) Independent Television Interview of His Highness the Aga Khan, 4 June 1985
<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3134/>
- 2) The Ismaili Imamat
http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=110993
- 3) S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, English Translation of the Qur'an, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Elmhurst, New York, Second Edition, 1995, Commentary to verse 5:67.
<http://koranusa.org/Mir%20Ahmed%20Ali%20hardcover.htm>
- 4) Reza Shah-Kazemi, Justice and Remembrance, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2006, pp 50
http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=106552
- 5) Usul al Kafi, Book I, Chapter I, Tradition 3
- 6) Mohib Ebrahim, Truth, Reality and Religion: On the use of Knowledge and Intellect in Deen and Dunia, 2012
<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/wp-content/uploads/documents/2012.07.11 - Truth, Reality and Religion.pdf>
- 7) BBC Radio 4 Interview of His Highness the Aga Khan, Michael Charlton, 6 September 1979
<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1988/>
- 8) Marmaduke Pickthall, 1927 Madras lecture on Islamic Culture as reported in Africa Ismaili, 9 May 1969, pp 9. Also published at:<http://muslimcanada.org/pickthallculture.html>
- 9) Ron Schmid, The Untold Story of Milk, New Trends Publishing, Washington DC, 2009, pp 157
- 10) Paris Match Interview of His Highness the Aga Khan, Caroline Pigozzi, 3 February 2005
<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7190/>
- 11) Esoteric Apocalypse (Qiyamah): Isma'ili Muslim Perspectives on the "End of the World" (Part 2)
<http://ismailignosis.com/2012/12/24/esoteric-apocalypse-qiyamah-ismaili-muslim-perspectives-on-the-end-of-the-world-part-2/>
- 12) K.K. Aziz, Ed, *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah*, Kegan Paul International, 1997, Vol II, pp.1417 (<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10120/>)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohib Ebrahim is the Editor and Publisher of the NanoWisdoms Archive of Imam Speeches, Interviews and Writings (<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/>). Launched several years ago, in 2011, upon receiving special permission from Aiglemont to publish His Highness the Aga Khan's speeches, the NanoWisdoms Archive is a unique website dedicated solely to the Ismaili Imamat's speeches, interviews and writings. With over 500 readings -- from akdn.org, iis.ac.uk, theismaili.org, aku.edu, archnet.org, pluralism.ca, printed materials, media Web sites and other sources -- and thousands of quotes, the Archive is the most comprehensive, public collection of Ismaili Imamat knowledge available today.

An honours graduate of Simon Fraser University in Computer Science and Mathematics, Mohib has been involved in software development and the IT industry since the '80s. His current project, MasterFile, is a state-of-the-art evidence system for academic researchers, investigators, and litigators. Mohib has also been a keen amateur astronomer for almost 40 years and his religious interests lie in the reconciliation of faith and reason.

OTHER ARTICLES BY THE AUTHOR

Truth, Reality and Religion: On the use of Knowledge and Intellect in Deen and Dunia: <http://bit.ly/1yGcCz5>