

Chapter 2: Sources of shi'i thought

Before studying Shi'a doctrines or practices, it is necessary to know the sources on which the Shi'a rely for understanding Islam. In what follows, we will study the four sources of Shi'i thought or in other words the four sources on which, from a Shi'i point of view any investigation about Islam has to be based: the Glorious Qur'an, the Sunnah, the reason and the consensus.

The Glorious Qur'an

Needless to say, the Qur'an is the most important source for all Muslims, including the Shi'a. The Qur'an also acts as an instrument of unity among all Muslims. Regardless of their different sectarian and cultural backgrounds, all Muslims refer to the same book as the Divine guide to govern their life. As in any other time, today throughout the Muslim world there exists only one Qur'an without any addition or alterations. A typical Shi'a standpoint towards the Qur'an can be found in the following passage:

We believe that the Qur'an was Divinely inspired, and revealed by Allah on the tongue of His honourable Prophet, making clear everything, an everlasting miracle. Man is unable to write anything like it because of its eloquence, clarity, truth and knowledge, and no alteration can be made to it. The Qur'an we have now is exactly what was sent to the Prophet, and anyone who claims otherwise is either an evil-doer, a mere sophist or else a person in error, and all of them have gone astray, because it is the speech of Allah, and:

“Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or from behind.” (41:42)

We also believe that we must respect and give dignity to the Glorious Qur'an, and this both in word and in deed. Therefore, it must not be defiled intentionally, not even one of its letters, and it must not be touched by one who is not tahir [i.e. 'pure']. It is said in the Qur'an:

“None can touch it save the purified.” (56:79) 1

Shi'a deny any alteration in the Qur'an

As mentioned above, the Shi'a deny any alteration in the Qur'an and believe that the Qur'an available today is the same one that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is complete. No one has ever seen a copy of the Qur'an different from the standard one in any part of the Islamic world. There are manuscripts of the Qur'an available today that go back to the time of Shi'a Imams and they are exactly the same as the current ones.

The Glorious Qur'an itself explicitly says that God Himself preserves the Qur'an from any alteration and mutilation:

Surely We have revealed the Reminder and We will most surely be its preserver. (15:9)²

Regarding this verse, `Allamah Tabataba'i in his renowned Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, one of the greatest commentaries of the Qur'an, states:

...the Qur'an is a living and eternal Reminder which will never die and fall into oblivion. It is immune from any addition and loss. It is immune from and secure against any alterations in form and style which could affect its character and role, that is, as, "the Reminder of Allah which expresses divine truth and knowledge". For this reason, the aforesaid verse indicates that the Divine Book has always been and will continue to be guarded against any mutilation and alteration.

The Sunnah

After the Glorious Qur'an, the most important source for understanding Islam and therefore Shi'i thought is the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, including his sayings and his deeds. The Qur'an itself clearly gives such a high position to the Prophet, as he is referred to as the one who is responsible for explaining the Qur'an (16:44) and teaching the Qur'an and wisdom (62:2).

The Prophet is a perfect example for the believers (33:21). He never speaks out of his own wishes (53:3). Muslims are asked to hold on to whatever he gives them and refrain from whatever he prohibits (59:7).

Knowing the above verses and many other verses on the status of the Prophet and taking into account the significance of acting as a divine messenger chosen directly by God and spoken to by Him, the Shi'a, along with other Muslims, cultivated a state of sincere love for and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad.

The household of the Prophet

There seems to be no disagreement among Muslims about the validity of following the teachings of the household of the Prophet in understanding Islam, especially according to the Sunni view which considers

even all the companions of the Prophet as reliable sources of understanding Islam.³ There is no doubt, then, that the household of the Prophet are reliable and trustworthy in presenting Islam.

This fact becomes even clearer when we refer to the traditions from the Prophet about his household, and examine sayings of Sunni scholars about the knowledge of Ali and members of the household of the Prophet. For example, Imam Malik says: "No eyes have seen, no ears have heard, and nothing has come to the heart of any human being better than Ja'far b. Muhammad in his knowledge, in his piety, in his asceticism and in his servitude to God." This is what Ibn Taymiyah reports from Imam Malik in his book. ⁴

In a survey about those people who narrated from Imam Sadiq, Shaykh al-Mufid (d.413) in his al-Irshad asserts that those who were trustworthy among them from different schools of thought were 4000 in number. Thus, there is no ambiguity here and this is why many Sunny scholars such as the late Shaykh Shaltut have clearly pointed out that every Muslim is allowed to act according to one of the five Islamic schools of fiqh: Ja'fari, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'i.

The reason is clear, because if Imam Ja'far Sadiq or other members of the household of the Prophet did not possess more knowledge or better access to the knowledge of the

Prophet than the rest, then one has to admit that he must have been at least equal to others, especially if he is to have taught them such as Abu Hanifah, the Imam of Hanafi Muslims who attended Imam Sadiq's lectures for two years. People who are educated or who are seeking the truth are expected, therefore, to examine all Islamic sources available, and thereby come to a conclusion about the ways Muslims can lead exemplary lives. Certainly one rich source is the teachings of the household of the Prophet.

Now, let us see whether it is necessary to refer to the household of the Prophet in understanding Islam or not. To provide an answer I will just focus on some traditions from the Prophet narrated by great Sunni narrationists and accepted by both Sunni and Shi'a scholars. But prior to that it has to be noted that all the teachings of the household of the Prophet were always based on the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

No one should think that for example Imam Sadiq was saying something according to his own opinion about Islam. Whatever they uttered was exactly what they had themselves received from the Prophet. There are many traditions in this regard. For example, in Usul al-Kafi we find that Imam Sadiq said that whatever he said was what he had received through his forefathers from the Prophet.

One of these traditions is the famous tradition of Thaqalayn. This tradition was uttered by the Prophet on different occasions, including the day of 'Arafah in his last pilgrimage and the 18th of Dhu'l-Hijjah in Ghadir Khum. Despite minor differences in the wording the essence remains the same in all versions of the tradition.

For example, in one version of the tradition the Prophet said:

“Oh people! I leave among you two precious things: the Book of God and my household. As long as you hold on to them you will not go astray.”

Or in another tradition the Prophet said:

“I leave among you two precious things, which if you hold on to you will not go astray after me: the Book of God which is like a rope extended between the heaven and the earth, and my household. These two things will not separate from each other until they reach me near the fountain on the Day of Judgement. Look and be careful how you treat them after me.”

This shows that the Prophet was worried about the way that Muslims, or at least some of them, would treat the Qur’an and his household. In another tradition he said:

“I leave two successors: first the Book of God which is like a rope extended between heaven and the earth and second my household. They will not separate from each other until they come to me near the fountain of Kawthar.”

The above traditions can be found in major Sunni sources, such as: Sahih Muslim (Vol. 8, p. 25, No. 2408), Musnad by Imam Ahmad (Vol. 3, p.388, No.10720), Sunan by Darimi (Vol. 2, p. 432), and Sahih by Tirmidhi (Vol. 5, p. 6432, No. 3788).

They are also mentioned in books such as Usd al-Ghabah by Ibn Athir (Vol. 2, p. 13), Al-Sunan al-Kubra by Bayhaqi (Vol. 2, p. 198) and Kanz al-’Ummal (Vol. 1, p. 44).

Now let us reflect on the content of the hadith, i.e. the fact that the Prophet has left among Muslims two weighty things: the Qur’an and his household and that as long as people hold on to them both, they will not go astray. This shows that these two things must always be in harmony with each other, and that they never contradict each other. Otherwise, the Prophet would not have given the instruction to follow both of them.

Moreover, the people would get puzzled about what to do if the household of the Prophet were to tell them to go in one direction and the Book of God says to go in another. Although this fact is implicitly understandable from the beginning of hadith, the Prophet himself later explicitly confirmed this fact by saying, “They will not separate from each other until they come to me near the fountain of Kawthar”.

Thus, this hadith in all versions indicates that:

- From the time of the Prophet until the end of the world the Book of God and the household of the Prophet will always be together.
- No one can say that the book of God is enough, and that we do not need the household of the Prophet, or vice versa, for the Prophet clearly said: I leave two precious things that you must grasp and if you do so you will not be misled.

- The household of the Prophet would never make mistakes and they are always truthful.
- It is also interesting that according to this hadith the household of the Prophet, like the Qur'an itself, is held to be continuous, persisting until the Day of Judgement and Paradise. Thus, the household of the Prophet will never disappear, even for a short period of time.

The other hadith is the hadith of Safinah (ship). All Muslims have narrated that the Prophet said:

“Be aware that surely the example of my household among you is like the example of the ship of Noah. Whoever boarded the ship of Noah was saved and whoever refused to enter the ship of Noah was drowned.”

The hadith of Safinah in its different versions emphasises the same fact and can be found in different Sunni books. For example, it can be found in Mustadrak by Hakim Nishaburi, Vol. 3, pp. 149&151, Arba'in Hadith by Nabahani, al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah by Ibn Hajar amongst other sources.

Thus, according to these sets of traditions the appeal to the guidance of the household of the Prophet is of the utmost necessity.

Note: The tradition of thaqalayn is mentioned in both Sunni and Shi'a sources so it is a matter of agreement among all Muslims. However, there is a version of the hadith in which the Prophet is quoted as saying 'my Sunnah' instead of 'my household'. Although this version can only be found in some Sunni sources, there is no difficulty in understanding what this tradition means, provided that this version too can be authenticated.

The Prophet in many traditions narrated by all Muslims has said: “I am leaving two precious things and those are the glorious Qur'an and my household” and in a few traditions narrated only by a particular group of Muslims has said: “the glorious Qur'an and my Sunnah.” Obviously the result would be that as one side of the comparison is the same, i.e. The Qur'an, the other side too must be identical.

Therefore, 'my Sunnah' and 'my household' also must be identical; otherwise one has to say that there is no harmony in what the Prophet said. Thus, the very act of resorting to the teachings and advice of the household of the Prophet is the very act of resorting to the Sunnah of the Prophet. Thus, the only way to reach the Sunnah of the Prophet and to understand exactly what his Sunnah was, is to refer to these people who have had the closest relationship with him and who knew better than anyone else what he said or did or approved.

Who constitute the house hold of the Prophet?

The other question concerns the exact meaning of “the household”. According to many traditions, we are told to refer to the household of the Prophet: “Ahlul Bayt” or “Itrah”. What do these terms refer to? There is no doubt about the status of the household of the Prophet in Islam, but there may be a need to

investigate the referent of the term to see whether it includes anyone who was a relative of the Prophet or not.

Of course, there is no doubt among Muslims that certainly Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, Imam Ali, and their sons: Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn are members of his household. The only concern is whether other relatives of the Prophet are included or not, and if so, to what extent.

Sunni Muslims believe that all relatives of the Prophet are included. Of course, they exclude those who did not embrace Islam, such as Abu Lahab, one of the uncles of the Prophet and at the same time one of his most hostile enemies who has been cursed in the Qur'an. Shi'a Muslims believe that the Ahlul Bayt are those who have appropriate levels of faith and knowledge that make it possible for them to be mentioned along with the Qur'an in the tradition of the Thaqalayn and others. Moreover, they believe that the Prophet himself has clearly defined them.

In what follows, I will mention some hadiths narrated in major Sunni sources:

(1) Muslim narrates from 'Ayishah, Umm al-Mu'minin:

The Prophet went out wearing a black woollen cloak, when Hasan the son of Ali came to him, so the Prophet let Hasan come in with him under the cloak. Then Husayn came and he too entered. Then Fatimah came. She entered as well. Then Ali came. He also went under the cloak, such that the cloak covered the Prophet, Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn. Then the Prophet recited:

'God only desires to keep away impurity from you, O People of the House! And to purify you a (thorough) purifying' (33:33) 5

(2) Muslim narrates from Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas that he was asked by Mu'awiyah why he refused to verbally abuse Ali. Sa'd replied:

"I remember three sayings of the Prophet about Ali which caused me not to say anything bad about him. If I possessed even one of these qualities it would be better for me than red camels.⁶

The first was that when the Prophet wanted to go to the war of Tabuk, he left Ali in Medina. Ali was very sad at not having the good fortune to join the army and fight for the sake of God. He went to the Prophet, saying: 'Do you leave me with the children and women?' The Prophet replied: 'Are you not happy to be to me, as Aaron was to Moses, except that there will be no prophet after me?'

Second I heard from the Prophet on the day of conquest of Khaybar: 'Certainly I will give the flag [of Islam] to a man that loves God and His Messenger and is loved by God and His Messenger'. We hoped to be given the flag, but the Prophet said: 'Call Ali for me!' Ali came while suffering from pain in his eyes. The Prophet gave him the flag and at his hands God granted us victory.

Third when the verse of Mubahalah was revealed the Prophet called Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn

and said: 'My Lord! These are my household'."7

(3) Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal narrates from Anas b. Malik that when the verse of tathir (33:33) was revealed, for six months the Prophet used to call at the house of Ali and Fatimah every morning on his way to the mosque for the Dawn Prayer and say: "Prayer, O People of the House!"8

There are also traditions about the meaning of Qurb, (near ones) which has been mentioned several times in the Qur'an. For example, according to the Qur'an, the Prophet did not ask any payment in return for his teachings from the people. He just wanted the people to love his Qurb, for their own benefit.

So who are the Qurb? Zamakhshari, a great Sunni scholar and exegete of the Qur'an, says that when this verse was revealed the Prophet was asked who are meant by this verse, and to whom all have to be respectful. The Prophet replied: "Ali, Fatimah and their two sons".9

The reason

The Shi'a believe that the reason is a reliable source of knowledge and in complete harmony with revelation. According to some hadiths, God has two proofs (hujjah), through which humans can understand His will: the internal one which is the reason (al-'aql) and the external one, which are the prophets. Sometimes the reason is called, "the internal prophet" and the prophets are called "the external reason".

There is an established rule among Shi'a jurists that whatever judgement is made by the reason is the same as that made by the religion (shar') and vice versa. It is also unanimously accepted that one of the conditions of moral or legal responsibility is to have a sound reason. If someone is insane, he is not considered as responsible upon what he acts.

What is expected of the people in religion also varies according to their mental and rational capacity. Those who are very clever and intelligent are expected to be more prepared, to be more pious and obedient than those who are lay or ignorant.

According to the Qur'an, God requires all human beings to exercise their rational faculty and to ponder on His signs and communications in the universe. On many occasions disbelievers are condemned and criticized because of their failure to think or to act according to rational requirements.

For example, they are condemned because of their blind imitation of their ancestors, and there are many verses with rhetorical questions, calling for people to think like:

"Do not they think?!" (36:68),

"Do not they ponder on the Qur'an?!" (4:82; 47:24) and

"In these, there are signs for those who are thoughtful" (13:4; 16:67; 30:28)

In general, the reason contributes to religious studies in three major areas: One is to understand the realities of the world, such as the existence of God, the truth of religion and scientific facts. The second is to introduce principles of moral values and legal norms, such as the wrongness of oppression and the rightness of justice. The third is to set up standards and logical processes of reasoning and inference. All these three roles of the reason are recognised and, indeed, urged by Islam.

In contrast, the role of revelation or the Scriptures in religious studies can be summed up as follows:

- confirmation of the facts that are already known by the reason;
- introducing new subject that are not known by the reason, such as details of resurrection and detailed accounts of moral and legal systems;
- Providing sanctions through the religious system of reward and punishment.

At the end, I should mention that there is nothing irrational in Islam. Of course, one has to distinguish between certain and decisive rational judgements, and one's guessing or personal opinions. If there is a case in which it seems that the rational judgement is in conflict with certain religious positions, one has to verify that there must be a mistake in at least one side: either it was not a real judgement of the reason or it was not a religious law.

God never misleads people by telling them to do something through the prophets, and the opposite thing through our God-given reason. There have always been some judgements attributed to reason and taken as contradicting religious positions, that after close consideration have proven to be contrary to decisive rational premises.

Consensus

Traditionally one of the sources of understanding Islam is considered to be consensus (ijm,'). According to Shi'a methodology of thought, the consensus of all people or a group of them, such as the scholars by itself is not sufficient as a proof (hujjah); As one person may make mistake, two or three, or thousands or even all of them may do so.

However, whenever there exists an agreement among all Muslims or Muslim scholars in a way whereby it unveils the Sunnah, it can serve as a proof, as an instrument to uncover the will of God. For example, when we find that every Muslim in the time of the Prophet said his prayer in a certain way we realize that the Prophet had instructed them to do so; otherwise there would be no factor to unify their action. It is not possible to imagine that they had all acted blindly and without instruction or that they all made mistakes and the Prophet did not correct them.

Thus, for the Shi'a consensus in itself is not a proof. It only works when it leads to the discovery of Sunnah. Accordingly, if Muslims today agree on a given subject, while a scholar has doubt about the

Islamic judgement on that subject, he methodologically cannot say that because everybody says so, I also say the same.

There have been many cases in the history where all human beings believed in the same way and later they found out that they were wrong, e.g. the earth being flat. It is only the Qur'an and the Sunnah that are unquestionably true and immune from any error or mistake.

This approach grants a type of dynamism to Shi'i thought, so that every generation of scholars and even any single scholar is able and indeed is required to refer directly to the Qur'an and Sunnah and conduct his own original ijtihad, that is his investigation and independent judgement. Ijtihad has never been banned or closed in the Shi'a world. The Shi'a believe that the view of no jurist, however high his position, is immune from scientific questioning or challenge. Of course, as in any other discipline, every religious scholar needs to consult and examine carefully the works of his predecessors.

1. Muzaffar, p. 26

2. It has to be noted that the charge with belief in alteration is limited to deletion of some alleged verses; otherwise neither Shi'ites nor Sunnites have ever been charged with belief in addition to the Qur'an. Therefore, one can argue from any verses of the Qur'an and to refute the idea of alteration.

3. Sunni Muslims hold that whoever met the Prophet while believing in him is considered as a companion of the Prophet and can be relied on in acquiring knowledge about Islam. Accordingly, members of the household of the Prophet such as Imam Ali and Fatimah who have always been with the Prophet and had the closest relation to the Prophet can unquestionably be relied on.

4. Al-Ta'wuz wa al-Wasilah, p. 52, first edition.

5. Sahih by Muslim, Vol. 4, p. 1883, No.2424 (Kitab Fada'il al-Sahabah, Bab Fada'il Ahlul Bayt, Sakhr serial no. 4450)

6. Red camels were considered very valuable in those days.

7. Sahih by Muslim, Vol.4, p.1871, no.2408. (Kitab Fada'il al-Sahabah, Sakhr serial No. 4420).

8. Musnad by Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal, international serial no. 13231. See also Sunan by al-Tirmidhi, international serial no. 3130.

9. Al-Kashshaf by Zamakhshari, Commentary of the verse 42:23, Vol.4, p. 220.

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