

Chapter 7: Imamate in the Verse of Ilm al-Kitab

﴿وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَسْتَ مُرْسَلًا قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَمَنْ عِنْدَهُ
عِلْمُ الْكِتَابِ﴾

“Those who disbelieve say: “You are no emissary (of Allah)”. Say: “God suffices as a witness between me and you (all), as well as the one who has knowledge about the Book”. (13:43)

This verse speaks of one of the great virtues of Imam Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, peace be on upon him; a virtue that the *hadith* of *Ihtijaj*¹ has called Imam Ali’s (as) greatest virtue. The verse is, therefore, worth further deliberation.

At the outset, the verse refers to the pagans who rejected the prophet hood of the Prophet (saws) and names two witnesses who confirmed his prophecy: the Most Exalted God, and the one who has knowledge about the Book.

In order to clarify what the Qur’anic verse wants to demonstrate, we need to follow up the discussion by considering the following two points:

1. How is God’s testimony given?
2. Who is meant by “the one who has knowledge of the Book”?

The Testimony of the Most Exalted God

The Qur’anic verse mentions God, the Most Exalted, as the first witness to the prophet hood of the Prophet (saws). This testimony may be either of these two:

1. The testimony may be an oral one represented in words and discourse, and the Qur’anic verses that

clearly point to the prophecy of Mohammad (saws) confirm this view, as shown in this verse,

“I swear by the Qur’an full of wisdom; most surely you are one of the apostles” (36:2-3)

2. The testimony may be an actual one, in the form of miracles which God, the Most Exalted, made manifest through the Prophet (saws). These miracles, particularly the Glorious Qur’an, which is Mohammad’s ever-enduring miracle are irrefutable documents, lucid proofs and eloquent arguments for the truthfulness of his claim of being messenger of God. These miracles which are made by God in some way attest to the prophecy of the Prophet (saws).

Who Is Meant by “the One Who Has Knowledge about the Book?”

Here, the discussion focuses on what is meant by “the Book”, and by “the one who has knowledge about the book”. Some ideas are proposed in this regard, and they are as follows:

First: By “*The Book*” means the divine Scriptures before the Qur’an, and “*the one who has knowledge about the Book*” means the Jewish and the Christian scholars. Accordingly, the meaning of the verse would be: (O Messenger), Say: God and those who have knowledge about the previous Books, such as the Jewish and Christian scholars, are sufficient (witnesses between us) to my being messenger.

These Books contain the name and mission of the Prophet (saws); so the Jewish and Christian scholars, who are aware of the matter, bear witness to it.

Answer: This proposition is not valid, because the Jewish and Christian scholars, though well acquainted with their own divine Books, were disbelievers and would never stand witness against themselves.

Second: “The Book” means any divine Scriptures before the Qur’an, and “*the one who has knowledge about the Book*” means those Jewish and Christian scholars, who were well acquainted with their own divine Scriptures (Torah and the Gospel), and who converted to Islam, such as Salman Farsi, Abdullah ibn Salam, and Tamim al-Dari.

Answer: This proposition is not valid either, because the Qur’anic Surah of *Ra’d*, and the verse at the beginning of this chapter which comes at the end of this Surah were revealed in Mecca, and when the above mentioned people converted to Islam they were in Medina (subsequent to the Prophet’s emigration to this city). So, to invite disbelievers who have not converted to Islam to bear witness against themselves would not make sense.

It is reported that Sha’bi and Sa’id ibn Jubayr have rejected the stated proposition that “*the one who has knowledge about the Book*” refers to Abdullah ibn Salam, because the Surah of *Ra’d* is a Meccan one, whereas Abdullah ibn Salam became muslim in Medina.²

Third: “*One who has knowledge about the Book*” means God, the and “*the Book*” means لوح محفوظ “*the guarded Tablet*”, thus the verse will mean: God, and the one who has knowledge of the guarded tablet –in which all facts of the world are inscribed– bear witness to your prophet hood.

Answer: This proposition is not valid either because it is understood from the appearance of the organization of the sentence, “*Say: God suffices as ... the Book*”, that “*the one who has knowledge about the Book*” is not God, who is referred to at the beginning as the first witness.

Also, in Arabic it is quite common to conjoin two attributive adjectives, as it is noticed in the following verse:

“*The revelation of the Book is from Allah, the Mighty, the Knowing, the Forgiver of faults and the Acceptor of repentance*” (40:2–3)

in which the two attributive adjectives “*the Forgiver of faults*”, and “*the Acceptor of repentance*”, conjoined by “*and*”, refer to God, the Mighty and High. But in the cases where a concrete noun was mentioned, commonly, no adjective is taken to refer to it. Therefore, no one can claim that the phrase “*the one who has knowledge about the book*” is God, the Mighty and High.

Fourth: *The Book*, means “*the guarded Tablet*”, and “*the one who has knowledge about the Book*” means Imam Ali (p.u.b.h.) the Commander of the Faithful.

We try in the following pages to expound this proposition.

The Guarded Tablet, and the Facts of the Universe

It is understood from many Qura’nic verses that all the facts of the universe are contained in what the holy Qur’an calls “*a clear book*”³, “*a clear writing*”, “*a guarded tablet*”⁴, a notion which can be found in such verses like, “***And there is nothing concealed in the heaven and the earth but it is in a clear book***”⁵. Now, the question is: Is it possible for one to have acquaintance with the facts contained in the guarded tablet? If it is, who can have such acquaintance, and to what extent?

“The Purified Ones” and Their Knowledge of “the Guarded Tablet”

Now, let us consider some of the verses in the Qur’anic Surah of *Waqia*,

“*But nay! I swear by the stations of stars; And most surely it is a great oath if you knew, Most surely it is an honoured Qur’an, In a book that is protected; None shall touch it except the purified ones*”. (56:75–79)

At the beginning God swears by the stars, then the greatness of the oath is emphasized. It is necessary

to note that there is congruity and balance between the “oath” and the “truth” to be established and emphasized. The truth for which this great oath is taken is:

“most surely it is an honoured Qur’an, In a book that is protected; None shall touch it except the purified ones”.

The last statement:

“None shall touch it except the purified ones”

deserves particular attention.

When seen at the first time it is thought that the mentioned verse indicates that except for those who are ritually pure, no one is allowed to touch the Qur’an and its lines, for it is strictly forbidden. A deeper study of the verse, however, reveals that in the verse, the word touching is not used in its literal sense.

Also “the *purified ones*” does not mean those who have done ritual washing, for example *wudu*. Besides the pronoun “it” in “*None shall touch it*” does not refer to the holy Qur’an, and the word “*touching*” in this verse means “spiritual contact”, and “*the purified ones*” means those to whom God, the Mighty and High, has granted particular “purity”. The antecedent for pronoun “it” in “*none shall touch it*” is “*the guarded tablet*”. Below are explanatory notes on this point:

1. The sentence “*None shall touch it*” is a descriptive one not a command. Apparently this sentence, like the phrases previously used as adjectivals, functions as an adjective, so it cannot be a command. It is a descriptive sentence. Also, there is no indication in the verse that there is a command that “the non-purified” must not touch the Qur’an due to the fact that the stated sentence is a command, not a descriptive one.
2. The pronoun “it” in the sentence “*Non shall touch it*” refers to the phrase “*a book that is protected*” which comes directly before this sentence, not to “*the Qur’an*”, which comes before this phrase and which is separated from it by some words.
3. The glorious Qur’an is described to have been placed “*in a book that is protected*”, out of reach of ordinary people, and this notion is incongruous with the idea that the Qur’an should not be touched.
4. Those who are ritually pure, that is who have already done the ablution or total ablution (*gusl*) or have betaken themselves to pure earth (as is their duty) are called (in Arabic) *mutatahir* مطهر , not *mutahar*, مطهر.

These notes show clearly that the Qur’anic sentence: *None shall touch it except the purified ones* means that no one except the “*purified*” one are allowed to touch, i.e. be in contact with “*the book that is guarded*”, i.e. (*the guarded tablet*) and get acquainted with the facts contained in it.

Let's now see who enjoys such purity, and who "*the purified ones*", who can get acquainted with the facts contained in "*the protected book*" are.

Who Are the Purified Ones?

Is the term "*the purified ones*" ascribed only to angels, as certain commentators claim,⁶ or does it have a general sense which includes divinely purified people, as well?

A study of the verses concerned with the creation of Adam, and his knowledge of "*the names*" –of whose reality the angels pronounced their lack of knowledge–, along with his being placed God's "*vicegerent*" on the earth and the angels' bowing themselves to Adam, all establish the fact that a "perfect man" is worthier of being acquainted with special knowledge than angels.

Thus, to interpret "*the purified ones*" in the verse: "*None shall touch it except the purified ones*" as the angels has no reasonable basis, since the glorious Qur'an itself states that there *are* chosen people who enjoy such purity.

The Verse of Tatheer and the Prophet's Family

"Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O people of the House! and to purify you a (thorough) purifying"

This verse indicates that the respectable family of the Messenger of God (saws) enjoy particular purity granted to them by God, and the phrase (*thorough*) *purifying* denotes typical purity.

We do not want here to give a detailed analysis of the verse, because we have elaborated on it in chapter six, and reached the conclusion that the respectable family of the Prophet (saws) headed by the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (as) enjoy the divine purity mentioned in the mentioned verse, are the purified ones (*mutahirun*), and are meant by the holy verse: *None shall touch it except the purified ones*.

Asaf ibn Barakhya and His Knowledge of Some of the Book

It is known that God, the Mighty and High, granted Prophet Solomon extensive authority not only over man but over the *jinn*s and birds, as well. At that time when *jinn*s and (a group of) people were gathering around him, Solomon asked them "Which one of you can bring the throne of Bilkis to me before she comes to me in submission? The glorious Qur'an says, an efreet of the *jinn*s said,

"I will bring it to you before you rise from your place" (27:39)

Then, "***The one who had some knowledge of the Book said, "I will bring it to you in the winking of an eye" (27:40)*** and this he did.

As commentators say the “Book” in the mentioned verse means “*the guarded tablet*”. Both Shi’ite and Sunnite commentators say that the phrase “*the one who has some knowledge of the Book*” is Asaf ibn Barakhya, Prophet Solomon’s *wizir*, who had a surprising and extraordinary power because he had a some knowledge of the Book (the guarded tablet).

It is obvious that there are different grades of purity; the more perfect purity is, the more extensive the knowledge and power will be. We have learnt from the holy Qur’anic verse “*None shall touch it except the purified ones*” that the acquaintance with the facts in “*the guarded tablet*” results from a particularly divine purity.

The verse of *Tatheer* has established the idea that this purity, which is granted to *Ahl al-Bayt*, is equal to the purity of the Messenger of God. It is, therefore, not strange if one says that the Commander of the Faithful, Ali, and the other infallible Imams of the Shi’ates (p.b.u.th) are acquainted with the facts in the *guarded Tablet*.

Accordingly Th’alibi, whom the Sunnite scholars⁷ of the Qur’an commentary consider an *imam* (leader) a *hafiz*, and a *Sheikh* master in the Qur’an commentary, and whose narrations the leading scholars in *ilm-al-rijal*⁸ regard as “sound and trustworthy”, states in his commentary *al-Kashf wa al-Bayan*,⁹ that by “*the one who has knowledge of the Book*” it is meant the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (as). Hakim Hasakani,¹⁰ in his *Shawahid al-Tanzeel*,¹¹ a commentary (of the Qur’an), quotes a few Companions such as Abu Sa’id Khidri, Abdullah ibn Salam and ibn Abbas to have said same the same thing.

Furthermore, Abu Sa’id Khidri and Abdullah ibn Salam are quoted to have asked the Prophet (saws): “Who is meant by “*the one*” in the verse: “*except the one who has knowledge of the Book*”? The Prophet (saws) told them that it was Ali (as) Sa’id ibn Jubayr, Abi Saleh and Mohammad ibn Hanafiyyeh have reported the same *hadith*.

Various narrators have also reported that Abdullah ibn ‘Ata was once accompanying Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him and ibn Salam’s son passed by. So ibn ‘Ata, referring to ibn Salam, asked Imam al-Baqir (as), “Is this the son of the one who has knowledge of the Book? The Imam said, “No, he is not”. The one who has knowledge of the Book is the Commander of the Faithful, Ali ibn Abi Talib (as).

As regards the Qur’anic verse 43 of Ra’d chapter:

“And those who disbelieve say: You are not a messenger. Say: Allah is sufficient as a witness between me and you and the one who has knowledge of the Book”,

Ibn Shahr Ashoob¹² states in his book *Manaqib*¹³: Mohammad ibn Muslim, Abu Hamzah Thumali, and Jabir ibn Yaqzi quoting Imam al-Baqir (as), Ali ibn Fazzal, Fuzayl ibn Yasar and Abu Basir quoting Imam al-Sadiq (as) and Ahmad ibn Mohammad Halabi and Mohammad ibn Fuazyl quoting Imam al-Rida (as) that they said:

“*the one who has knowledge of the Book*” is the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (as) and the other infallible Imams (p.b.u.th.). This account is also quoted from Imam Musa ibn Ja’far (as), Zayd ibn Ali, Mohammad ibn Hanafiyyeh, Salman Farsi, Abu Sa’id Khidri and Ismail Sadi.

Kulayni’s *Usul al-Kafi*, through an authoritative chain of transmission, quotes Barid ibn Mua’wiyeh, a companion of Imam al-Baqir (as) to have asked the Imam: “Who is meant by ‘the one’ in the Qur’anic verse:

‘*And those who disbelieve say: Allah is sufficient as a witness between me and you and the one who has knowledge of the Book*?’”

The Imam answered, “The verse means none other than us (the infallible Imams), and Ali (as) as the foremost and best of us after the Prophet (saws)”.

We can find an interesting comparison in *hadiths* between the one who has knowledge of the Book i.e. Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) and the infallible Imams on the one hand and the one who has some knowledge of the Book (Asaf ibn Barkhya) on the other, which is as follows:

“Imam al-Sadiq (as) has said, ‘The one who has knowledge of the Book is the Commander of the Faithful, Ali ibn Abi Talib (as)’. When asked: ‘Who is superior, the one who has some knowledge of the Book (i.e. Asaf ibn Barkhya) or the one who has knowledge of the Book (i.e. Ali ibn Abi Talib)?’,

the Imam answered, “Comparing the knowledge of the one who has some knowledge of the Book with of the one who has knowledge of the Book is like comparing the small amount of water that touches the wing of a mosquito with the water of the sea”.¹⁴

These discussions aim to establish the idea that by “الكتاب *the Book*” in the verse “*the one who has knowledge of the Book*” it is meant “*the guarded tablet*”. If it is taken to mean any book because it is preceded by the definite article ‘the’, it will denote any book including “*the guarded tablet*”, such as the earlier Scriptures and the holy Qur’an.

The phrase “*the one who has knowledge of the Book*”, however, means Imam Ali (as), and his acquaintance with the facts in “*the guarded tablet*” is inferred from the verse, “*None it except the purified ones*” and from the verse of *Tatheer*.

His being aware of the every detail of the holy Qur’an is understood from many *hadiths*, including the *hadith* of Thaqalayn¹⁵ which confirms that the Household of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*), will never separate from the Qur’an, an indication that Imam Ali (as), has complete knowledge of the Qur’an. Were there anything in the Qur’an of which he was unaware, he would be separated from the Qur’an. Therefore, such a proposition counters this *hadith*.

Imam Ali’s knowledge of the divine Scriptures can be inferred from the *hadiths* quoted by both the Shi’ite and the Sunni narrators. It is related that Imam Ali has said, “If the cushion (on which a judge sits) was

folded for me, I would judge among the people of the Torah by their Torah, among the people of the Gospels by their Gospels, and among the people of Psalms by their Psalms".¹⁶

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1. – al-Misbah al-Hidayah, p. 43.
 2. – Ma'alim al-Tanzeel, vol. 3, pp. 364–5; al-Itqan, vol. 1, p. 36; Dar ibn Katheer, Beirut.
 3. – Surah 10, verse 61; Surah 27, verse 75; Surah 34, verse 3.
 4. – Surah 85, verse 22.
 5. – Surah 27, verse 75.
 6. – Ruh al-Ma'ani, vol.27, p. 154, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, Beirut.
 7. – Dhahabi, a Sunnite great authority on ilm al-rijal says on vol. 17, p. 435, of his Siyar a'lam al-Nubalah', "al-imam, the one who knows the Qur'an by heart, the most knowledgeable, allamah, and a master in Exegesis of the Qur'an".
 8. – Abdul Gafir al-Nayshaburi in his book Tarikh Nayshabur, p. 109 regards Tha'libi as trustworthy in transmitting hadiths.
 9. – Al-Kashf wa al-Bayan, vol. 5, pp. 303–3, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabiyyah; Beirut.
 10. – See Dhahabi's words concerning Hasakani, chapter five, the commentary on the Qur'anic verse of Sadiqin.
 11. – Shawahid al-Tanzeel, reviewed by Sheikh Mohammad Baqir Mahmodi, vol. 1, p. 400.
 12. – Dhahabi's praise of Shahr Ashoob was previously mentioned while explaining the verse of Sadiqin, the truthful.
 13. – Manaqib, ibn Shahr Ashoob, vol. 2, p. 29, Alama Publications, Qum.
 14. – Nur al-Thaqalayn, vol. 4, pp. 87–88.
 15. – Sunan of Tirmidhi, vol. 5, p. 622; Ahmad's Musnad, vol. 3, pp. 14, 17, 26, and 59; also, vol. 5, pp. 188–9; Nisa'i's Khasa'is Amir al-Mumenin (p.b.u.h.) pp. 84–5.
 16. – Fara'id al-Simtayn, vol. 1, pp. 339–341; Shawahid al-Tanzeel, vol. 1, p. 366, tradition 384.

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