

Intellectual aspects of the Imam's life

His Works

I do not think that I will be able in this research to do justice in recording all the rich aspects of the intellectual life of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), but I will try my best to provide a quick and clear idea about the intellectual output presented by the Imam for mankind in various fields of knowledge. Thus, we would be able from a distance to conduct a complete definition of the aspects of the portrait in which we can view the life style of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), having finished researching its historical side.

Ibn Khaldun Doubts Imams' Knowledge

Some historians doubted the scholarship of the Imams, let alone their scholarly superiority, basing their doubts on the claim that had they been truly scholars, their books would have been made available to the public as is the case with all other scholars.

Anyone who considers the revolution of Imam Husain (a.s.) against Yazid as a mistake committed by the Imam (a.s.) and a gross miscalculation cannot be expected to refrain from making such a statement which we cannot attribute to ignorance or lack of the ability to know, but it is nothing other than the cloud of sectarian prejudice which stood as a curtain between him and seeing the events, issues, and their reflections as they really were. The "fair-minded" historian is asked to tell us about the books authored by the *sahaba* and their works from whom he derived the principles and precepts of the creed of the Prophet (S), or even the works of the *tabi'in* whom he regards as the second class that is knowledgeable of the issues of the *shari'a*, custodians of its structure.

He may seek his excuse by saying that the narratives of *hadith* and news of events narrated through them are suitable as a criterion for judging the extent of their knowledge. This is actually how we, too, defend our Imams, for the legacy they have left us in various fields of knowledge and which is narrated about them is sufficient to acquaint us with the extent of their knowledge and even superiority over

others. Is it really possible that Ibn Khaldun did not review such legacy of ahadith which reached us through them and recorded by scholars and thinkers and upon which the structure of their school of thought, in which a large section of the nation believes, stood? We doubt it; nay, we may even be positively sure about the unrealistic nature of such an odd question especially since Ibn Khaldun is one of the most knowledgeable, most highly intellectual, and most mature writers.

Imams and the Persecution of Rulers

The Imams were tested during various periods of their lives by pressing crises due to the trespassing of oppressive rulers on their civil liberties. They pursued their followers and sincere adherents, straitening on them in various aspects of their everyday life, so much so that the word *rafidi* came to represent in the eyes of the rulers the final indictment of anyone proven to be "guilty" of its context, a believer in its background.

Because of that, the chance was lost for many of those who sought knowledge to derive from that leading fountainhead, and the chance to find the scholarly solutions for the intellectual problems because of which they were disturbing their minds. Despite all these pressures and violent trespassing, mankind is not intellectually deprived of a great deal of intellectual masterpieces which the Imams (a.s.) dictated to their students and disciples in various aspects of scholarship.

Some of those students used to give jailers whatever they demanded so that they might agree to carry written questions to the jailed Imam (a.s.) and bring them back his answers thereto, out of their desire to benefit from the presence of the Imam (a.s.), and due to their desire to be faithful to the trust of scholarship, and in order to protect it from the labyrinths of doubt.

The biography of the jailed Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) bears witness to that according to those who quoted him. Historians and biographers of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) do in fact mention some books authored by the Imam (a.s.) besides his narration of hadith and issues which he dictated to those who asked him and to his close companions who used to frequently question him about the types of knowledge which they could not understand. To positively identify these books as authored by the Imam (a.s.) may require a convincing evidence which we may not sometimes have.

Al-Fiqh al-Radawi

Among those books is *Al-Fiqh al-Radawi* which was for quite some time the subject of debate among scholars, for there are among them those who considered it to be authored by the Imam (a.s.), relied on it, and established their arguments on such a basis, such as the Majlisis, Sayyid Bahr al-Uloom, the author of *Al-Hada'iq*, Shaikh al-Nawari, and others. But the large number of scholars of verification conceded that it could not have been said for sure that it was authored by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) because of the lack of sufficient evidence in addition to their doubt, or the lack of conviction, of the arguments brought forth by those who considered it one of the Imam's works.

The fact that it was not at all common knowledge that that book was authored by the Imam (a.s.) prior to the late time of the Majlisis, in addition to the lack of knowledge of scholars before their time of any information about such an authorship, all of that negates the belief that it was attributed to or personally authored by the Imam (a.s.). There was no reason why that book would not have been famous during the life-time of the Imam (a.s.) especially since the knowledge of the Imam (a.s.) was very well known to everyone, so much so that when he narrated *hadith* to the scholars of Nishapur, more than twenty thousand scribes wrote it down there and then, besides others, as scholars of *hadith* tell us.

How the Book Appeared

The story how this book appeared says that a group of the residents of Qum brought a copy with them to Mecca where the ruler-judge (*qadi-amir*) Sayyid Husain al-Isfahani saw it and testified to its being authored by ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and made a copy of it for himself which he brought to Isfahan. There he showed it to the first (senior) Majlisi who likewise was sure it was authored by the Imam (a.s.) and so was his son the second (junior) Majlisi, and he quoted the *ahadith* it contained in the volumes of his book *Bihar al-Anwar*, making the book one of his own book's references, and this is how its fame spread.

In his Introduction to *Bihar al-Anwar*, al-Majlisi writes, "I was told about the book *Fiqh ar-Ridha'* by the virtuous traditionist the ruler-judge Husayn, may God be Gracious unto his soul, after coming to Isfahan. He said to me, 'It happened that during the time when I was neighboring the House of God, a group of the residents of Qum visited me while performing their *hajj* and they had with them an old book the date of its writing agreed with the date during which ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was alive.'" Then al-Majlisi continues to say, "I heard my father saying that it was in the handwriting of ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and a large number of dignitaries testified to the same."

Sayyid Husayn al-Isfahani said: "Through those evidences, I came to know that it was indeed authored by the Imam (a.s.); therefore, I took the book and made a copy of it and corrected my copy by comparing it with the original, then my father took my copy and made yet another copy of it and compared the copy with the original, and most of its statements agree with what is mentioned by al-Saduq Abu Ja'far ibn Babawayh in his book *Man la Yahdaruhu al Faqih* without giving credit to the book, and in agreement with what his father states in his letter to him. A large number of *ahkam* which our fellows have mentioned and whose source is unknown are mentioned in it."

Doubting the Accuracy of Rendering it to the Imam

What makes us doubt the attribution is that Shaikh al-Saduq, who took pains in documenting all the legacies of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and who researched him in his book *'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha'*, and in others, did not mention that he had authored such a book. Also, other scholars who came after him, be it residents of Qum or others, did not mention anything about it, and Sayyid al-Isfahani did not say anything about those pilgrims from Qum who showed him the book as to how they acquired the book, and who the person who was telling its story was.

It is also unusual that the book should remain obscure for such a long period of time in the hands of some residents of Qum without any of the city's scholars or traditionists getting to have a look at it, although those scholars were known not to leave anything small or big without writing it down in order to safeguard it against loss.

There are three possibilities regarding the book:

1. That it is authored by the Imam (a.s.) on the account of evidences in it which give that impression such as his statement at its beginning, "Abdullah Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' says...", and "... one of our own customs, we people of the Ahl al-Bayt." In its chapter on *zakat*, it states, "It is narrated about my father the scholar..." In its chapter on usury, it states, "My father ordered me and I obeyed." In the chapter on *hajj*, it states: "My father said that Asma daughter of Aamees..." It also says, "... my father from my grandfather from his father said: 'I saw Ali ibn al-Husayn walking without running.'" It also contains: "I heard the scholar. I heard him say..." "Scholar" is the title of Imam al-Kazim (a.s.), up to the end of such statements which give the impression that the book was his, that he was its author, and they may be the evidences which encouraged many scholars to be positively sure that the book was written by the Imam (a.s.), and to act accordingly.
2. That it was authored by the man's father, whose name happens to be Ali ibn Musa. He authored it for his son al-Saduq, and it is a compilation of narratives which came through Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.). This view was tolerated by some scholars, but the word "ar-Ridha' (a.s.)" in the title of the book negates the possibility of its being authored by him except this may be the fault of those who made copies of the book and of the scribes since the complete name of the Imam (a.s.) comes to mind.
3. That it was compiled by Ibn Babawayh, or someone else, which he compiled on behalf of the Imam (a.s.) and in which he recorded the traditions which were narrated about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and classified them in a way which gives the impression that he was an author for the Imam (a.s.) since the traditions about him are actually his own with only one difference: references of those traditions were eliminated. This may be the best possibility since other possibilities do not say anything about why the book's subject-matters were classified the way they are.

Views of Some Scholars About the Book

Our master mentor Imam al-Khoi has stated that, "It is not proven that it is ar-Ridha's *fiqh* by narration, but it contains evidences which point out to its being a collection of *fatawa* of some *ulema*, and due to the agreement of most of its contents to the letter Ibn Babawayh wrote to his son¹; had it been otherwise, al-Saduq would have had to acquaint us with it."

The verifier (*muhaqqiq*) Mirza Abdullah al-Afandi, in his book *Riyad al-'Ulemaa*, is positive about the book being the same letter referred to above, adding that the reason for the occurrence of the Imam's name in it is due to the fact that both men share the same first and second names, and this is why it is attributed to the Imam (a.s.).

Sayyid Hasan al-Sadr wrote a dissertation about the lack of evidence (that it was the Imam's), saying in his authorization to Shaikh Agha Bazrag of Tehran that it is the same book authored by Ibn Abu 'Azaqir better known as al-Shalmaghani. Anyhow, attributing the book to the Imam (a.s.) is doubtful enough to almost a firm belief that the book was not authored by him. But the book, although we disagree with our master mentor, may God prolong his shade, in his description of it as a collection of *fatawa* of some *ulema*, is no less than a narration whose narrator is anonymous; therefore, we cannot attribute it to the Imam (a.s.) and accept it as a reference to rely upon for issuing religious verdicts or to know what is Islamically unlawful.

Al-Risala al-Dahabiyya fil Tibb

Among such books is *Al-Risala al-Dahabiyya fil Tibb* (the gold medical dissertation) for which sources are counted reaching sometimes to Muhammad ibn Jumhoor, and sometimes to al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Nawfali who was accepted as trustworthy by al-Najjashi who described him as "highly esteemed and trustworthy; he narrated one text about ar-Ridha' (a.s.)," which could be "the gold medical dissertation."

It is possible that the dissertation's fame among scholars, and their consensus in various centuries that the Imam (a.s.) was its author, and that nobody doubted such an authorship, are enough proofs leading the researcher to comfortably and almost positively conclude that it was indeed from the intellectual output of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) himself.

Dissertation Was Authored by the Imam

Despite all of this, we see no reason to doubt that it was authored by the Imam if we apply the criterion generally applied to derive legislative verdicts (*ahkam*), or to be familiar with the principles of the creed (*usool*), for in that case there are conditions which are not required here; otherwise, doubt would have necessitated the attribution of authorship to a large number of books due to the lack of a method which would assure us of the reliability of such an attribution. Yet the fame which many verifiers consider as a means towards confirmation can by itself prove to us the accuracy of attributing this dissertation to the Imam (a.s.).

If it is proven for us that al-Najjashi meant this same gold dissertation when he was quoting al-Nawfali saying that he narrated one text from ar-Ridha' (a.s.), the knot would surely be untied. What supports this assumption about al-Najjashi is that some scholars have said that the library of *allama* al-'Askari in Samarra (Iraq) contains a copy of a manuscript dealing with the medical knowledge of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) narrated by Abu Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Nawfali [2](#), provided there is no other copy by al-Nawfali in which he quotes the Imam (a.s.) other than this dissertation; otherwise, we would be confused and we would not be able to reasonably understand why al-Najjashi did not provide sufficient details about the books which he attributed to their respective authors or narrators, or at least

indicate their titles!

This dissertation is one of the most precious pieces of Islamic legacy dealing with the science of medicine. This inclusive, scientific and invaluable dissertation is a summary of a number of medical sciences such as anatomy, biology, physiology, pathology and the science of health care. It provided most of the knowledge related to the science of protective medicine, nutrition, chemistry, and a large portion of other sciences as well.

The Imam (a.s.) sent this dissertation to the caliph al-Ma'mun around the year 201 A.H. when medicine was a primitive science and its research was not conducted scientifically but based on practice alone rather than on scientific discoveries, and when the science of bacteriology was not discovered yet, nor was there any significant knowledge of nutritional supplements such as vitamins, or other significant medical discoveries for fighting microbes such as penicillin, streptomycin, oromycin, etc.

On the surface, the dissertation seemed to be very simple in order to be in line with the mentality of that time, but it is quite deep and complicated in its implications and it needs a scientific study and lengthy researches to unveil its secrets and uncover its treasures, and it should be compared with modern scientific facts. [3](#)

Al-Ma'mun Evaluated Dissertation

Al-Ma'mun was very pleased to receive that dissertation and he expressed how much he cherished it by ordering to have it written down in gold and to be deposited at his "depository of wisdom," thus its name "the gold dissertation."

In praising it, al-Ma'mun said, "I have reviewed the dissertation of my learned cousin, the loved and virtuous one, the logical physician, which deals with the betterment of the body, the conduct of bathing, the balance of nutrition, and I found it very well organized and one of the best blessings. I carefully studied it, reviewed and contemplated upon it, till its wisdom manifested itself to me, and its benefits became obvious, and it found its place in my heart, so I learned it by heart and I understood it by my mind, for I found it to be a most precious item to post, a great treasure, and a most useful item, so I ordered it to be written in gold due to its being precious, and I deposited it at the depository of wisdom after I had it copied down by the descendants of Hashim, the youths of the nation. Bodies become healthy by balanced diets, and life becomes possible by overcoming disease, and through life wisdom is achieved, and through wisdom Paradise is won, and it is worthy of being safeguarded and treasured, and an object of value and esteem and a reliable physician and a counselor to refer to and a substance of knowledge in its injunctions and prohibitions.

"Because it came out of the house of those who derive their knowledge from the knowledge of the Chosen One (S), the missive of the prophets, the proofs of successors to the prophets, the manners of scholars, the cure to the hearts and the sick from among the people of ignorance and blindness..., may

God be pleased with them, bless and be merciful to them, the first of them and the last, the young and the old, I showed it to the elite among my closest train who are known for their wisdom, knowledge of medicine, authors of books, those who are counted among the people of knowledge and described with wisdom, and each one of them lauded it and thought highly of it, elevated it with esteem and appreciated it in order to be fair to its author, submitting to him, believing in the wisdom he included therein."⁴

Al-Ma'mun Asked the Imam to Write It

The story of this dissertation is that al-Ma'mun had a very inquisitive mind eager for knowledge, fond of obtaining more of it. During one of his scientific debates, a group of physicians and philosophers in Nishapur, including Yohanna (John) ibn Masawayh the physician, Jibraeel (Gabriel) ibn Bakhtishoo' the physician, Salih ibn Salhama the Indian philosopher, in addition to others, had gathered. Discussion turned to medicine and how in it the bodies are improved.

Al-Ma'mun and his attendants were involved in a very lengthy discussion of the subject, and how God created the human body and the contradictory things in it, the four elements, the harms and benefits of various types of food, while the Imam (a.s.) kept silent and did not take part in any of that. Al-Ma'mun, therefore, said to him, "What do you have to say, O father of al-Hasan, in today's subject of our discussion?" Abul-Hasan (a.s.) said, "I have of this the knowledge of what I have personally tested and came to know about its accuracy by experience and by the passage of time in addition to what I was told by my ancestors of what nobody can afford to be ignorant of nor excused for leaving out. I shall compile that with an equal share of what everyone need know."

Al-Ma'mun then rushed to Balkh and Abul-Hasan (a.s.) did not accompany him; therefore, al-Ma'mun sent him from there a letter asking him to fulfill his promise and make that compilation, so ar-Ridha' (a.s.) wrote him saying:

"In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful; My reliance is upon Allah

I have received the letter of the commander of the faithful regarding what he ordered me about acquainting him with what is needed of matters I have tested and heard about foods and drinks, medicines, venesection, blood letting, bathing, poisons, what should be avoided, and other things which manage the health of the body, and I explained what is needed to be done regarding one's own body, and God is the One Who gives success."

After that he initiates the dissertation.

Commentaries on the Dissertation

A good number of scholars attempted to write commentaries on the dissertation; here is a partial listing of some of them:

1. *Tarjamat al-Alawi lil Tibb al-Radawi* by Sayyid Diaud-Din Abul-Rida Fadlallah ibn Ali al-Rawandi (d. 548 A.H.).

2. *Tarjamat al-Dhahabiyya* by *mawla* Faydallah 'Usarah al-Tasatturi who was an authority on medicine and astrology during the regime of Fath-Ali Khan. This book was written under the cover of secrecy in about 107 A.H. A handwritten copy of the manuscript dated 1133 A.H. is available at Mishkat Library of the Tehran University.
3. *Tarjamat al-Dhahabiyya* by Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi. It is available at the private library of the late Sayyid Hasan al-Sadr in Kazimiyya (Iraq).
4. *'Afiyat al-Bariyya fi Sharh al-Dhahabiyya* by Mirza Muhammad Hadi son of Mirza Muhammad Salih al-Shirazi. It was authored during the regime of Sultan Husayn al-Safawi. It is in handwritten manuscript form and it is available at the Sayyid Husayn al-Hamadani Library, Najaf al-Ashraf (Iraq).
5. *Sharh Tibb ar-Ridha'* by *mawla* Muhammad Sharif al-Khatoonabadi. He authored it around 1120 A.H.
6. *Tarjamat al-Dhahabiyya* by Sayyid Shamsud-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad Badi' al-Radawi al-Mashhadi. It was finished in 1155 A.H., and it is available at the Shaikh Muhammad Ali Akbar al-Nahawandi library in Khurasan (Iran).
7. *Sharh Tibb ar-Ridha'* by Sayyid Abdallah al-Shubbar who died in 1242 A.H. Shaikh al-Nawari mentioned that he saw that copy himself.
8. *Sharh Tibb ar-Ridha'* by *mawla* Muhammad ibn al-Hajj Muhammad Hasan al-Mashhadi who taught at Mashhad and died in 1257 A.H.
9. *Sharh Tibb ar-Ridha'* by *mawla* Nawrooz Ali al-Bastami.
10. *Al-Mahmoodiyya* by al-Hajj Kazim al-Moosawi al-Zanjani who died in 1292 A.H. It is in manuscript form and it is available with the author's grandsons.

There are others besides these scholars who explained and commented on it, revealing what is hidden of its secrets and obscure treasures. Probably the latest person who explained it and conducted a comparative study between its theory and the latest modern scientific discoveries is Dr. Abdul-Sahib Zaini in the "Multaqā al-'Asrayn" series.

Sahifat ar-Ridha'

Among those works is *Sahifat ar-Ridha'* which deals with *fiqh*. Apparently, it is not confirmed by our famous scholars although the author of *Mustadrak al-Wasail* described it as "among the well-known books which is relied upon and which no other book, before it or after it, is more esteemed or reliable," and we do not know how realistic some of the judgment issued by the author of this *Mustadrak* about such an evaluation are. What is unusual is that al-Majlisi, in his *Muqaddimat al-Bihar*, stated that despite its fame, it is on the level of a lecture rather than a *musnad*.

Al-Saheefa's Musnads

But Sayyid al-Amin, in his *A'yan* mentions an isnad (ascription) related to it alone from Shaikh Abdul-Wasi' al-Yamani al-Zaydi for the copy brought by the said Shaikh from Yemen and published in Damascus. Also, some of its copies contain its ascription to Abu Ali al-Tibrisi, but Shaikh al-Majlisi says that he does not know anything about that.

Al-Mustadrak states: "The esteemed Mirza Abdallah al-Afandi, in his *Riyad al-'Ulema*, has compiled all its sources and said, 'Among that is a copy of this Saheefa which I saw at the town of Ardabil, and its *sanad* was...', and he goes on to indicate its *sanad* after that. But the ascription he mentioned is debatable in as far as his narrators are concerned, and what we opt for regarding the dissertation is that its authenticity is not verified and is not suitable in its context for deciding about *ahkam*. Suffices us the fact that great scholars and verifiers of past centuries refused to acknowledge its authenticity, refusing also to believe it was authored by the Imam (a.s.); therefore, we have no excuse if we include it among the works of the Imam (a.s.) and his scholarly production.

Mahd al-Islam

Among other works attributed to the Imam (a.s.) is the book titled *Mahd al-Islam wa Shara'i ad-Din* which is referred to by al-Saduq in his *Uyoon* from al-Fadl ibn Shathan, but he did not indicate that it was written in response to al-Ma'mun's request.⁵

Doubting Its Attribution To The Imam

What appears to us after scrutinizing the list of its ascription is that we cannot rely on its attribution to the Imam simply because some of its narrators are not held reliable. Yet even the style of this dissertation is shaky, with disturbed expressions intermingled in it. This gives us the impression that it is highly unlikely that the Imam (a.s.) dictated it despite its inclusion of some *ahkam* the upholding to which is not considered obligatory in our school of thought such as making obligatory the *qunoot* in all five daily prayers, the obligation of sending blessings unto the Prophet (S), i.e. *salawat*, at all places, at sneezing, sacrificial animals, etc., and the obligation of *takbir* during the Eid al-Fitr prayers after five *salawat*, during the Eid al-Adha after ten *salawat*, and at Mina after fifteen *salawat*, that a woman whose menstrual period continues for eighteen days must not say the daily prayers, but if she became clean before then, she could say them, and if she is not clean till after eighteen days, she would bathe and say her daily prayers and does whatever a woman does during her period.

In his second narrative, he adds to the first one saying, "And he stated in it that the small sins of prophets are forgiven," which is contradictory with the Imam (a.s.) declaring that they are infallible and do not commit small or big sins.

All of this strengthens our belief that the dissertation was not authored or dictated by the Imam (a.s.), but

it contains a nullification of the caliphate of al-Ma'mun and other preceding caliphs, calling them misguided and ones who forsook righteousness and guidance, clearly confining the true Imamate to the Twelve Imams (a.s.).

The dissertation also contains a violation of the principle of *taqiyya* and of its curtain which was upheld by the Imams during their lengthy history. This adds more doubt in the accuracy of the attribution of the dissertation to the Imam (a.s.). What we think to be quite possible is that the dissertation may have been a collection of *fatawa* (verdicts) of one scholar and his views regarding doctrinal and legislative issues. The lack of order of the dissertation's style and organization in listing subject-matters and their sequence, in addition to the fact that some of its *ahkam* are simply in disagreement with the established ones, all this leads us to and confirms this possibility.

Ajwibat Masail Ibn Sinan

(Or "Answers to Ibn Sinan's Queries") What may be described as works by the Imam (a.s.) are his answers to questions put forth to him by Ibn Sinan. But this cannot be described as a book authored by the Imam (a.s.); otherwise, the collection of his answers to the questions of many others, which deal with various fields of knowledge and scholarship, must be described likewise.

'Ilal Ibn Shathan

Also, the (Imam's answers to) ailments about which Ibn Shathan had asked him cannot be considered as a book he authored, as some scholars concluded, since they were organized by Ibn Shathan himself though they were derived from the knowledge of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and his answers to the questions about ailments.

For this reason, we find Ibn Shathan presenting those ailments in a problem and a solution format, and we do not know whether the texts he mentioned were the exact answers of the Imam (a.s.) *verbatim* or not, for it is quite possible that he presented them in his own personal style while maintaining the essence of the idea which the Imam (a.s.) presented in his answer, which we think was the case.

Summary

From what we have discussed honestly and frankly regarding the authenticity of the books which were attributed to have been authored by the Imam (a.s.), it becomes clear that the only book which we dare to describe as authored by the Imam (a.s.) is *Al-Risala al-Dhahabiyya fil Tibb* which he wrote in response to caliph al-Ma'mun's request.

This does not mean at all that the other books attributed to him did not carry views and theories which he had dictated to those who questioned him about this and that, or to those who were seeking his supreme fountainhead of knowledge, and our discussion is only in form, not in context and substance.

- [1.](#) Al-Muhadarat fi al-Fiqh al-Ja'fari by al-Sayyid al-Shahroodi, "Report on Imam al-Khoi's Lecture," Vol. 1, p. 7
- [2.](#) Tibb ar-Ridha' ("Medicine of ar-Ridha"), "Multaqā al-'Asrayn" series, issue number 2, p. 130
- [3.](#) Ibid., pp. 19–20
- [4.](#) A'yan al-Shi'a, Vol. 4, pp. 2, 143 and 144
- [5.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 121

Altercations

On various occasions, al-Ma'mun tried to force Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) into the arena of complex debates with various groups and creeds. He used to conduct scientific and intellectual sessions to which he invited giant thinkers, leading scientists, the atheists of the century, and debaters whose scientific might was feared and before the stubbornness of whose complex arguments the evidence was muted and due to the fierceness of whose doubt the proof was weakened.

In all such debates, the Imam would come out victorious over his opponents due to the tremendous power of knowledge he possessed without forcing himself into the sophistry of arguments to which some might have resorted in order to demolish the structure of his opponent's argument and weaken his ability to provide evidence. Rather, he depended in his debate upon honest arguments in order to prove right to be right, his miraculous ability of conviction, and his calm stylistic method.

Al-Nawfali Warns the Imam

Al-Nawfali tried to warn the Imam against attempting to deal with the debates of such people when the Imam asked him why al-Ma'mun had invited him to debate them, for al-Ma'mun had asked the Catholic archbishop, the High Rabbi, leading Sabians, the Hindu high priest, followers of Zoroaster, Nestus the Roman medical scientist, and a group of orators, to enter into a scientific debate with Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.). He sent Yasir the servant to the Imam to tell him about the time when the debate would start, requesting him to attend. When Yasir went out and al-Nawfali was alone with the Imam, the Imam (a.s.) turned to him and asked him in the form of a dialogue, "O Nawfali! You are an Iraqi, and the heart of an Iraqi is not severe; so, what can you gain from causing your cousin to require us to meet with disbelievers and rhetoricians?"

Al-Nawfali answered, "May my life be sacrificed for yours! He wants to put you to test, and he loves to know how much knowledge you possess. He has, indeed, built his assumption on a shaky foundation, and doomed, by God, what he has built." He asked, "And what has he built?" He answered, "Scholars of *kalam* and innovators are opposite of the scholars. A scholar does not deny the undeniable, whereas rhetoricians and polytheists are people who deny and try to prove what is not true. If you argue with them and tell them that God is One, they would say, 'Prove His Oneness,' and if you say that

Muhammad (S) is the Messenger of God, they would say, 'Confirm his Message,' then they would press their lies on a person while he tries to disprove their lies, and they would continue to prove that he is mistaken till he abandons his argument; so, beware of them, may my life be sacrificed for you."

He smiled and asked, "O Nawfali! Do you fear that they will disprove my argument?" He answered, "No, by God! I have never worried about you, and I hope God will enable you to have the upper hand over them." The Imam asked again, "O Nawfali! Would you like to know when al-Ma'mun will feel regretful?"

He answered, "Yes." He said, "When he hears me argue with the people of the Torah quoting their own Torah, with the people of the Gospel (Bible) quoting their own Gospel, with the people of the Psalms quoting their own Psalms, with Zoroastrians arguing in their Persian language, with the Romans in their own Latin, and with rhetoricians using their very rhetoric. So, if I closed all the avenues of argument in the face of each arguing party and disproved his claim, making him renounce his statement from its onset and referring to my own statement, then al-Ma'mun would know that he would not achieve what he aspires. It is then that he will feel regretful; *We are God's, and Unto Him is our return.*"

Thus does the Imam show that he was taking lightly and was not concerned about such persons whom al-Ma'mun wished to gather together against him trying to embarrass him with their falsification and arguments which he hoped might close for the Imam (a.s.) all the avenues of argument. When the session starts and the Imam (a.s.) is invited to join it, discussion starts and the Imam (a.s.) starts his debate with the Catholics, making the Bible his reference to prove his own defense of the Unity of God and disprove the Godhead of Christ (a.s.) by those who regarded him as a god besides God.

Then he follows with a magnificent discussion proving that the Bible in circulation today is not the same which God had revealed to Christ (a.s.) and that it is authored by some of the disciples of Jesus (a.s.) who are the authors of the four gospels, depending in his argument on the fact that the details presented by each one of them stand in flagrant contradiction with those of the other. The Catholic archbishop slipped into an obvious self-contradiction; for he on one hand sanctified the authors of the four gospels and held them above lying while, on the other hand, he admitted to the Imam that they did tell lies about Christ (a.s.).

Then the Imam (a.s.) goes to debate the High Rabbi, scholar of the Jews, to prove the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (S) from the previously revealed divine testaments, after which he follows with a very logical debate. Having argued with him that one of the requirements of a Prophet was to perform something all other creation are unable to perform, he asked him about the reason why they, the Jews, refrained from believing into the miracles of all prophets other than Moses (a.s.) son of Imran (Amram), and the High Rabbi answered him saying, "We cannot admit the prophethood of any who professes prophethood except after bringing us knowledge similar to that brought by Moses." Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said to him, "Then how come you admitted the prophethood of other prophets who preceded Moses (a.s.) who did not split the sea, nor cleave the stones so that twelve springs would gush forth from it, nor took their hands out shining white as Moses did, nor did they turn a cane into a snake?!" It was then that the

High Rabbi overcame his stubbornness, submitted to the argument, and admitted that any supernatural act beyond human capacity was indeed a proof of prophethood.

The Imam (a.s.) asked him then about the reason why they did not believe in the prophethood of Jesus (a.s.) despite the fact that he brought forth miracles beyond human capacity such as bringing the dead back to life, healing those who were born blind and the lepers, and about the reason why they did not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad (S) despite his bringing an extra-ordinary miracle, that is, the Holy Qur'an while he was neither a scholar nor a writer. The High Rabbi had no answer at all.

Then came the turn of the Zoroastrian high priest whom the Imam debated depending on the priest's belief in the prophethood of Zoroaster. The Zoroastrian tells the Imam that Zoroaster brought them what no other man had ever brought them before. "We did not see him," he continues, "but the stories of our ancestors told us that he legalized for us what no other person before made legal; so, we followed him." The Imam asked, "You believed in the stories which came to you about him, so you followed him, didn't you?" "Yes," he answered. The Imam (a.s.) said, "This is the case with all other nations. Stories came to them about what the prophets had accomplished, what Moses (a.s.), Jesus (a.s.), and Muhammad (S) had all brought them, so why did you not believe in any of these prophets, having believed in Zoroaster through the stories that came to you about him saying that he brought forth what others did not?"

Imam's Debate With the Sabian

The Zoroastrian high priest had no more to say. The Imam then turned to the debate's witnesses, having finished debating with the chief representatives of those creeds, asking anyone else to go ahead and put forth any question he had, everyone abstained from doing so. It was then that Imran the Sabian, who was one of the most distinguished scholars of the science of kalam of his time, approached the Imam (a.s.) and asked him how he could prove the existence of the Creator, and the discussion between them delved into the deepest depths of this complex question, while the Imam answered the man's questions through obvious scientific facts in a gloriously simple way.

Among the questions Imran asked was: "Master! Was the Being known to Himself by His Own Self?" The Imam said, "Knowledge is acquired by something which would negate its opposite, and so that the thing itself would be existing through what it is negated about it, without the existence of anything which contradicts its existence so that a need arises to negate that thing about itself by defining what is known about it. Do you understand, O Imran?" He said, "Yes, by God, master! Tell me, then, by what means did He come to know what He knew, by a pronoun or by something else?"

The Imam (a.s.) said, "If it had been by a pronoun, would He then find anyway not to establish for that pronoun a limit where knowledge ends?" Imran answered, "Yes, He will have to find such way." The Imam then asked him, "Then what is that pronoun?" Imran could not provide any answer. The Imam (a.s.) said, "Is it alright if I ask you about the pronoun and you define it by another pronoun? If you answer in the affirmative, then you would make both your claim and statement void. O Imran! Ought you

not come to know that the One cannot be described by a pronoun, and would not be described except by a verb, by deed, by action, and He cannot be expected to be parts and kinds like human beings?"

Then Imran asked him, "Master! The knowledge I have says that the being is changed in his essence by his action of creating..." The Imam (a.s.) said, "Does your statement, O Imran, mean that the being does not in any way change its essence except when it affects its own essence in a way which changes it? O Imran! Can you say that the fire changes its own self, or that the heat burns itself, or have you seen anyone seeing his own vision?" Imran said, "No, I have not seen that; could you please tell me, master, is it in that in the creation, or is it the nature of creation in it?"

The Imam (a.s.) said, "Yes, O Imran, He is above all of that; He is not in the creation, nor is the creation in Him; He is elevated above that, and bad indeed is your knowledge about Him, and no might except in God. Tell me about the mirror: are you in it or is it in you? If neither one of you is in the other, then how did you come to see your own self's reflection in it?" Imran said, "Through the light between myself and itself." The Imam (a.s.) said, "Can you see of that light more than what you can see with your own eyes?"

He answered, "Yes." The Imam (a.s.) said to him, "Then show it to us..." It was then that the man was too baffled to say a word. The Imam (a.s.) said, "I do not see the light except leading you and the mirror to come to know each without being in either one of you. There are many such examples which the ignorant simply cannot observe, and God Has the greatest example."

Thus did the Imam face the challenge of Imran the Sabian's doubting method, demolishing its structure and dispelling the ambiguity of the complex doubts which he could not understand till vision became clear to him. The Imam (a.s.) did not determine an evidence except after building it with simple easy to understand proofs out of the everyday life of man in order not to leave any way for the opponent to doubt after transforming a most complex theory into an easy and commonsense idea, all of that by employing a very beautiful and miraculous style.

Debating al-Maroozi

In another session, al-Ma'mun invited him to debate Sulayman al-Maroozi, Khurasan's scientist in *kalam*, and the debate between them dealt with some significant topics which were being debated then by scholars of the science of *kalam*, and the starting-point of the discussion was the issue of *badaa*. The Imam (a.s.) explained its sound meaning, indicating that the Sublime and Dear God had innermost knowledge which nobody but He knew, and that was the source of *badaa* and knowledge which He taught His angels and Prophets.

To explain it in a way which would remove all confusion and ambiguity, we can say about *badaa* is that God makes manifest that His Will is linked to an advantage which necessitates it, and the apparent reality is that His Will is hinging on what is opposite to it. Then He after that makes manifest His actual Will when the advantage is satisfied from all aspects and the reasons for which it was not previously

manifested are removed, and it appears to the creation as if God willed to abandon His first Will, hence it is in the view of creation, not in the reality of Will, *badaa*.

This is the theory of *badaa* in its simple logical context which Imamis (Shi'as) uphold and which some people misunderstood and misinterpreted, giving it a wrong meaning which necessitated attributing ignorance (!!!) to the Almighty God and an excuse to wage an unfair campaign of defamation against Imami Shi'as by their opponents from among the followers of other sects.

Imam Proves Badaa

The Imam (a.s.) has proven the accuracy of *badaa* in which Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) believe by first quoting the Holy Qur'an, for God Almighty said, "So leave them alone, for you shall not be blamed for that,"^{[1](#)} meaning thereby that He intends to annihilate them, then the Almighty, according to the *badaa* theory, He has said, "So remind, for reminding may avail the believers,"^{[2](#)} which indicates a shift from the first decision as observed from studying the context of both verses.

Second, he tries to prove it by traditions narrated from his forefathers from the Messenger of God (S) who said: "God sent his *wahi* to one of His prophets to inform him that he would die on a particular day, and when that prophet was told so, he pleaded God, the King, while on his bed, saying, 'Lord! Postpone my demise till I see my son growing up to carry out my will,' till he fell from his bed, whereupon God sent his *wahi* again to the same prophet to inform him that He decided to postpone it."

It is apparent that *badaa* in the meaning which we indicated requires no alarm whatsoever and it does not justify waging a campaign of defamation to those who believe in it.

Eternity Versus Transience of the Will

The same discussion led to discussing the will's eternity and transience, and the Imam (a.s.) stood to disprove the theory which called for the eternity of the will, proving its being transient by revealing its own self-contradiction, removing the confusion which may occupy anyone's mind in its regard.

Will, as the Imam (a.s.) says, is one of the actions of the Almighty. It is not one of His attributes; therefore, it is transient, not perpetual, since an action is a form of event, and the deed cannot be identical to the doer, so the will cannot be identical to the willing person. Will is not like hearing or seeing or knowing as al-Maroozi tried to prove, because it does not make sense, the Imam says, to say that He wanted Himself. Does He want to be "something," or does He want to be Alive, Seeing, Hearing, or Able? If this is according to His Will, it would require the impossible which is the change occurring to the self, for the meaning then would be that He wanted Himself to be something which was not... Sublime is God greatly above all of this.

Thus did the debates between the Imam and al-Maroozi occur frequently about the eternity of the will

versus its transience about relevant matters.

Al-Maroozi's Argumentativeness

In his debates with the Imam, al-Maroozi kept arguing and coming back to the same point from which he had started his argument in an inflexible argumentative manner. While accepting that to desire something (to "will", to wish) is a verb, he goes back to deny that and claim that it is an adjective, and he may admit something and say something else.

The Imam asks him, "O Abu Sulayman! Can you tell me if the will is a verb or not?" He says, "Yes, it is a verb." He asks, "Is it causative, since verbs are?" "It is not a verb," comes the answer. The Imam (a.s.) asks, "Is there any with Him who is eternal?" Sulayman answers, "Willing is doing." He says, "O Sulayman! This is the same which you criticized Dirar and his followers about for saying that everything God Almighty has created in His heavens and earth, ocean or land, dog or pig, monkey, human, or an animal, is God's will, and that God's will gives life and takes life away, and it goes here or drinks from there, marries, enjoys food, commits immoral acts, disbelieves and commits *shirk*..."

Sulayman said, "It is like hearing, seeing, or knowing; that is, it is an adjective, an attribute." Having abstained from providing an answer to the Imam's question, Sulayman goes back to the beginning of the argument regarding whether the will is an adjective, an attribute, or a verb, but the Imam nevertheless repeats his argument with him by following another route different from the one he took first, which indicates how commonsense the idea seems to him and his ability to prove it however he willed.

Imam's Style in Debating

The debate continues between them in the same calm manner in which the Imam (a.s.) coins his questions, which is the most magnificent method of debate. In his way of providing answers, the Imam never blocks the way before his opponent to continue the debate; rather, he leaves him completely free to debate in whatever manner he wishes through his questions till he brings him to a dead-end where he cannot proceed anymore just to go back seeking another route which the Imam himself wants him to seek out of his own will and after his own conviction.

Al-Ma'mun Rebukes al-Maroozi for Fumbling About

But Sulayman kept fumbling about in his answers to the Imam's questions after the Imam had closed before him all avenues of his argument, and al-Ma'mun was quick to notice his fumbling about which indicated Sulayman's loss, so he rebuked him and criticized him. It is reported that during the debate, when ar-Ridha' (a.s.) asked him to continue his questions, he said, "Will is one of His attributes." The Imam said, "How many times has it been said that it is one of His attributes, so is it a new attribute, or has it always been so?" Sulayman said, "New." The Imam (a.s.) said, "*Allahu Akbar!* You are telling me

that His attribute is new! Had it been one of His attributes, and an eternal one, then He willed and He created as long as His will and His creation are eternal...! This means it is an attribute of someone who did not know what he did! God is Elevated above this..."

Sulayman said, "Things are not a will, and He did not will anything." Here the Imam said, "You have hissed, O Sulayman! He did and He created as long as His will and His creation are eternal...?! This is the attribute of someone who does not know what he did! Elevated is God above all of that." Sulayman, turning to al-Ma'mun, then said, "Master! I have already informed him that it is like hearing and seeing and knowing." Al-Ma'mun said, "Woe unto you, Sulayman! How you have erred and how often you have repeated yourself! Stop it and take another route, for you seem to be unable to provide any answer better than that."

The debate continues after that till Sulayman's tongue is tied, whereupon al-Ma'mun says, "O Sulayman! This is the most learned descendant of Hashim," and the session disperses.

Imam Debates Ali ibn al-Jahm

The Imam (a.s.) conducted a very magnificent debate with Ali al-Jahm dealing with the infallibility of prophets in which he explained in a very beautiful way the actual meaning of some verses which may on the surface give the impression to the contrary.

Interpreting the Holy Qur'an According to One's Opinion

The Imam (a.s.) started his discussion with Ali ibn al-Jahm by criticizing him and those who interpreted the Book of God according to their own viewpoint, stating that he and those have to refer to those whom God endowed with the faculty of knowledge and understanding in order to learn the actual and accurate interpretation of its verses according to the sacred verse which says, "And none knows its interpretation except God and those deeply grounded in knowledge."³

Interpreting Verses Whose Superficial Meaning Suggests Prophet's Fallibility

Then the Imam (a.s.) started explaining the verses whose superficial meaning indicates the fallibility of and possibility of sinning by prophets. He indicated that Adam's transgression took place while he was in Paradise, not on earth, and the infallibility in question is earthly, and that he did not commit any act as long as he lived on earth which contradicted his infallibility as proven by the sacred verse: "God did indeed choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of Imran above all people."⁴

As regarding the verse which states: "And remember Zun-nun when he departed in wrath; he imagined that We had no power over him, but he cried through the depths of darkness, 'There is no god but Thou!

Glory to Thee; I was indeed wrong,"⁵ what is meant by "he imagined that We had no power over him" is that he realized that God was not going to sustain him." Had he thought that God was unable to overpower him, he would have then committed *kufr* (disbelief) and he would have also committed *'isyan*, transgression.

As regarding the verse "And (with passion) did she desire him, and he would have desired her,"⁶ the case regarding what the wife of al-'Aziz wanted, and what Yousuf (a.s.) desired to do, are two different things, for she wanted to commit a sin while he desired to kill her if she forced him; therefore, God saved him from the deed of killing her and its terrible consequences, and saved her from her own wishful desire to commit a sin.

As regarding David, his statement that the defendant had committed injustice by asking for the goat, it was an error only within the framework of the case, and it took place before he had asked the defendant about his defense against the plaintiff's claim, and it is not a transgression, for God corrected for him his decision by bringing him the example of the two kings. As regarding his marriage with the widow of Oorya, which was regarded by people at that time as a sin and criticized him for it, it was done for the sake of effecting a legislative interest whereby David wanted to shatter the then prevalent custom of a widow not getting married after the death of her husband.

It is similar to what happened to the Prophet with Zainab daughter of Jahsh, wife of Zayd ibn Haritha who had been adopted by the Prophet (S), for the Prophet, by marrying Zainab after granting her divorce from Zayd, wanted to shatter the pre-Islamic custom whereby a man would not be permitted to marry the former wife of someone he had adopted as is clear in the text of the Holy Qur'an. The Prophet (S) was apprehensive of the criticism of the hypocrites of his action, so the Almighty addressed him by saying, "Do not fear people; it is more fitting that you should fear God,"⁷ since it was God Who ordered him to marry her as we understand from the verse, "Then when Zayd had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality), We joined her in marriage to thee in order that (henceforth) there may be no difficulty to the believers in (the matter of) marrying the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality, their marriage) with them, and God's command must be fulfilled."⁸

By providing such glorious knowledge of the exegesis of sacred Qur'anic verses, and by giving such honest interpretations which safeguard the integrity of the context, the Imam (a.s.) used to dispel the unusual confusion of those who did not have a deep actual understanding of the Glorious Book of God.

An Artificial Argument

In his book *Al-'Iqd al-Farid*, Ibn Abd Rabbih al-Andalusi recorded a debate on the subject of Imamate between the Imam and the caliph al-Ma'mun which seems to be stamped with artificiality, and we think it is possible that some fanatics among those who deviated from the line of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) had fabricated it, for he stated the following in his book:

"Al-Ma'mun said to Ali ibn Musa, 'Why do you claim it (Imamate) for your own selves?' He answered, 'Due to Ali and Fatima (a.s.) being near in kin to the Messenger of God (S).' Al-Ma'mun said, 'If it is only a matter of kinship, then the Messenger of God (S) had left behind him those who were closer in kinship to him than Ali or any of his relatives, and if you mean the kinship of Fatima (a.s.) to the Messenger of God (S), then the matter (Imamate) after her should have belonged to al-Hasan and al-Husayn (a.s.) whose right was confiscated by Ali even while they were still alive, taking control of what was not his.' Ali ibn Musa could not provide an answer."⁹

Let us record the following regarding this quotation:

The Imam did not claim his right to caliphate only on account of his kinship to the Prophet (S) but rather on account of the clear statements made by the Prophet (S) emphasizing that he was to be the caliph after him, in addition to the personal qualifications Imam Ali (a.s.) had had which distinguished him above the rest of *sahaba*.

The concept of caliphate according to Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) is that it is decreed according to a divine text, not dictated due to factors of kinship, politics, etc. God is the One Who chooses, and His choice is voiced by His Prophet, whoever He sees to be most fit to safeguard the Message and the interest of the nation, as we explained when we quoted Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) discussing the subject of Imamate. The claim of those who said that they deserved caliphate due to their kinship to the Prophet (S) is similar to the claim of those who said that the *muhajirun* (immigrants) were more qualified than the *ansar* (supporters of Medina) due to the nearness of the first party to the Messenger of God (S).

The Imam, if this story is true at all, would not have been unable, as the story suggests, to answer al-Ma'mun's objection that there are among the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) those who have more priority than Ali (a.s.) or any of his relative, an apparent reference to his grandfather al-Abbas ibn Abdul-Muttalib, to it.

It was al-Abbas himself who approached the Imam requesting him to stretch his hand to him so that he would swear the oath of allegiance to him when he felt that the fate looked ominous and that the environment was threatening of a revolt, but the Imam refused to accept such an oath privately; rather, he preferred that such an oath be sworn to him in public and before eye witnesses after finishing the funeral rites of the corpse of the Messenger of God (S) which was still lying in state waiting to be bathed. If you suppose that al-Abbas had any right to caliphate, he would then have relinquished it.

As regarding al-Hasan and al-Husayn, they were then very young, and neither *wilayat* nor *wisayat* can be enforced on caliphate till they were old enough, for caliphate is a post which permits no *wisayat* at all; therefore, the issue of caliphate was confined to Ali (a.s.) alone.

This is our argument if we suppose that caliphate is a matter decided due to kinship to the Prophet (S).

But if we say that it is decreed by a divine decree, these proofs will not be relevant.

But the fact that al-Ma'mun's way of thinking regarding the issue of caliphate, and his views with which he confronted the *faqih*s in his debates with them, as the author of *Al-Iqd al-Farid* himself mentions,

proving that caliphate was the legitimate right of only Ali rather than anyone else among the *sahaba*, this fact itself convinces us that this fabricated dialogue quoted above was written by some fanatic followers of other sects.

These are some debates and discussions of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) which were narrated about him in which he debated some scholars of *kalam* of his time which we wanted to indicate here briefly in order to give the reader a general idea about the style employed by the Imams among the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) in their debates and discussions with others, so that the reader may live the free democratic environment which dominated that period of time in its intellectual and scientific spheres.

[1. Al-Thariya:54](#)

[2. Al Thariyat:55](#)

[3. Aali Imran:7](#)

[4. Aali Imran:33](#)

[5. Al Anbiyaa:87](#)

[6. Yousuf:24](#)

[7. Al Ahzab:37](#)

[8. Al Ahzab:37](#)

[9. Al-'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. 2, p. 285 and also Vol. 5, p. 103](#)

Basic Beliefs

Islam is the religion which preaches *tawhid*, the Unity of God. *Tawhid*, then, is the starting point from which a Muslim sets out to build his creed deep inside his inner self; otherwise, he cannot be called a Muslim, nor can the light of faith shine in his soul. The sound definition of *tawhid* is what has been endorsed by the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) through their teachings and statements; anything other than that is but falsification and adulteration and insinuations which may have been necessitated by erroneous philosophical ideologies the inventors of which tried to reach the furthestmost depth of the essence of the Divine, but the results they reached caused them to deviate from reaching even the beginning of belief, so they indulged themselves into the labyrinths of atheism and loss.

In researching such an extremely complex issue, we have to follow into the footsteps of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.). If we accept them as our guides, we shall have no fear about falling into destruction or departing from the Straight Path according to what is already reported about the Prophet (S) who said: "My Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) among you are like the ark of Noah: whoever boards it is saved, and whoever lags behind it is drowned and ruined."

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) did not have a system of his own regarding the philosophy of *tawhid*; rather, his was the very same pristine system about which all Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) unanimously agreed and to whose safeguarding they dedicated their lives in the face of all other sects which may have

deviated from the achievement of the noble objective.

We are not going here to make a comparison between these sects in as far as the belief in tawhid is concerned, for this may require a very lengthy research whose discussion will require us to go beyond the limits we have set for our study here; rather, what is important for us here is to present the limits of the concept of tawhid from the stories we have already narrated about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

Misconception of the Similitude of God to His Creation

The first to come across in researching the *hadith* narrated by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in the subject of *tawhid* is this one: "Anyone who makes a similitude of God with His creation is a *mushrik* (polytheist), and anyone who attributes to Him what He has prohibited is *kafir* (disbeliever)" which is, as reported about the Prophet (S), a clear answer to those who claim that "God created Adam in His Own Image."

In another text, the Imam (a.s.) explains to us the misconception in whose pitfall others have fallen; al-Husayn ibn Khalid reported saying, "I said to ar-Ridha' (a.s.), 'O son of the Messenger of God! People say that the Messenger of God (S) said that the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam in His Own image.' He said, 'May God fight them! They distorted the beginning of this *hadith*. The Messenger of God (S) passed by two men exchanging insults and abusive language, and he heard one of them saying to the other, 'God made your face ugly and ugly is anyone who is like you,' whereupon he (S) said, 'O servant of God! Do not say so to your brother, for the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam's image like his.'"

The Messenger (S) here is forbidding the man from articulating such an abusive language which abuses Adam, father of all men. The pronoun in the original text (i.e., "image like his") belongs to the man being abused, not to God; therefore, it is erroneous to say that the meaning here is that God created Adam in His Own Image. The Imam emphasizes this by narrating one *qudsi hadith* in which the Almighty tells the Messenger of God (S), "The one who makes a similitude of Myself to My creation is indeed ignorant of Who I am."

The *hadith* regarding the Divine is entangled and complex, but if you read it in the *hadith* narrated by the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), you will find it in full harmony with the human nature, lucidly interpreting the obscure concept in brief expressions with a full vision despite their inclusion of a spacious philosophical context.

God's Attributes are His Own Essence

While researching the *hadith* of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in this regard, we come across his treatment of the issue of His Attributes which are none other than a description of His Own Essence, and that it is impossible that they should be anything else.

For example, al-Husayn ibn Khalid said, "I heard ar-Ridha' (a.s.) saying, "God has always been

Knowing, omni-Potent, Living, Eternal, Hearing, Seeing,' so I said to him, 'O son of the Messenger of God (S)! People have been saying that God knows through His faculty of knowledge, omni-Potent through His faculty of power, Eternal through His ability to withstand time, Hearing through His faculty of hearing, and Seeing through His faculty of vision.' He (a.s.) said, 'Anyone who says so and believes in it has indeed accepted other gods besides God, and he has nothing to do with our religion.'

Then he added, 'God has always been Knowing, omni-Potent, Eternal, Hearing, and Seeing in His Own Essence; Exalted is God above the claims of the polytheists and those who make such similitudes a great deal of exaltation.'

Knowledge, might, and other attributes of God are not actually different from His Essence; rather, they are the same like the Essence in their existence and reality; otherwise, they would have been partners with God in His eternity which contradicts the very concept of *tawhid* which agrees with the nature of His being, that is, the eternity of the Self on its own, without having anything else as partner therewith.

Belief in Plurality of the Essence and Attributes is Shirk

In another *hadith* reported by Muhammad ibn Arafa, the Imam (a.s.) explains to us how one will be committing *shirk* if he considers the Essence of the Almighty and His Attributes as separate from each other. Muhammad said, 'I asked ar-Ridha' (a.s.), 'Did God create things by some sort of power or not?'

He answered, 'It is not possible that He must have used some sort of power to do so because if you say that He created things by a power, you would be saying that you imagined a tool whereby He created things, which is *shirk*. And if you say that He created things which He subjected to His power, you would be saying that He made sure He would be able to overpower them, while He is not weak or incapable or in need of anyone else; rather, He, Glory be to Him, is Almighty due to the fact that His own Essence is Mighty.'

The Difference Between God's Will and People's

In another part of the discussion, the Imam (a.s.) tells us about the difference between the Will of God and the will of humans. Safwan ibn Yahya said, 'I asked Abul-Hasan (a.s.), 'Tell me about God's Will and the will of His creation.' He said, 'The will of a person is something he possesses, hence it is a possessive pronoun; as regarding God, His Will is His Action, nothing other than that, because He does not contemplate upon doing something, nor does He decide to do something, nor does he sets His mind to do something, and all these verbs have nothing to do with His Essence; they are among the faculties of humans, and they are among the characteristics of the creation. God's Will is His Action, nothing other than that. He says 'Be!' and it is without articulating something, or using a tongue, or sets his mind upon something or contemplates upon doing something, nor does He think about the means to do so, nor does He think about how.'

The previous chapter contained a discussion of the issue of eternity of God's Will in a debate between the Imam (a.s.) and Sulayman al-Maroozi, the Khurasani scientist of *kalam* who was invited by al-Ma'mun to debate the Imam.

Queries

There may be some innocent questions which come to the mind of anyone which the Imam may have tried to answer in a very simple way relying on clear Qur'anic verses whereby we may pass without being aware of their precise meaning and the depth of their context. For example, regarding the Knowledge of God, he was asked by al-Husayn ibn Bashshar, "Does God know about the thing which never was how it would look like when it is?" He answered, "God Almighty knows of things before their existence; He has said: 'We were wont to write down all that ye did,'¹ and He said to the inmates of Hell, 'If they were returned (back to earth), they would certainly relapse to the things they were forbidden, for they are indeed liars.'²

The Exalted and the Almighty God knows that if those inmates were to be returned to earth, they would go back to their old ways and commit what they were prohibited from committing. When the angels said, 'Wilt Thou place therein one who makes mischief therein and shed blood while we celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy Name?' He said, 'I know what ye know not.'³ So God always knows since eternity about things before He creates them."

We may find in some Qur'anic verses that God is describing Himself with attributes which do not fit His Exalted Status such as mocking and ridiculing as in the verse, "God will throw back their mockery on them"⁴ and "God will throw back their ridicule on them"⁵ and "(the unbelievers) plotted and schemed, and God too plotted"⁶ and "They strive to deceive God while He is deceiving them."⁷

But the Imam (a.s.) answers by saying that God Almighty does not ridicule, mock, cheat, or anything like that, but He rewards those who commit these sins with the reward they deserve for their ridicule, mockery, cheating, etc.

The Imam's answer is derived from the meaning of the Qur'anic verse which states, "The plotting of evil will hem only the author thereof."⁸ When these individuals ridicule, mock, plot, or cheat, they do not sense the destined consequences for such a behavior when the tables are turned and they have to suffer perpetual pain and torture. This is proven by the verses, "They plotted and planned, but We too planned, even while they perceived it not. Then see what the end of their plot was! We destroyed them and their people, all of them."⁹

There are Qur'anic verses which deserve a serious look into them when their superficial meaning gives the impression that they invite one to uphold what must not Islamically be upheld, departing from the concept of the Divine Perfection. For example, the Almighty has said, "They have forgotten God, so He has forgotten them,"¹⁰ and "We shall that day forget them as they forgot the meeting of this day of

theirs."^{[11](#)}

To attribute forgetfulness to God is erroneous because it is an attribute of His creation; besides, such a superficial meaning contradicts another verse which says, "... and thy Lord never forgets."^{[12](#)} But the Imam interprets "forgetfulness" in these texts to mean abandonment, and that God abandons them by not allocating for them the rewards He allocates to those who yearn for such meeting. Since they forgot about God and did not do good deeds prior to such meeting, God will make His good rewards distant from them and will reward them with torture and eternal Hellfire.

What is meant by "forgetfulness" in these texts is not overlooking or bypassing, nor does the meaning of abandonment is negligence. The Imam pointed this out when he answered someone who asked him about the meaning of the verse "... and God left them in utter darkness so they could not see"^{[13](#)} by saying, "God, the Sublime and Praised One, cannot be described as abandoning as can His creation, but when He knows that they would never leave disbelief and straying, He would stop His support for them and His kindness, leaving them to have their own way."

Seeing God

The discussion of "seeing" God is one of the subjects of the science of *kalam* in which views of Islamic schools of thought differed since the battle and argument on *kalam* started, shattering the unity of the Creed's interpretation of many doctrinal bases upon which the structure of the Islamic Message was established. The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) took a stance towards the subject of "seeing" God which was in harmony with the pristine concept of *tawhid* as Islam intends it to be, regarding Him above being physically seen simply because that would be possible only for an object of limited dimensions.

As regarding the verses which give the impression that "seeing" God is possible, such as "Some faces on that Day shall be bright, looking towards their Lord,"^{[14](#)} and "Verily, from (the Light of) their Lord, that Day, will they be veiled,"^{[15](#)} and "Thy Lord comes, and His angels, rank upon rank,"^{[16](#)} as well as other such verses, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) interpreted them in a way which kept them in the context in which they were revealed. For example, the meaning of "... looking to their Lord" is that they were bright with hope and anticipation waiting to be awarded with their Lord's rewards, that is, anticipating His generosity and prizes.

The meaning of the second verse is that they are veiled from receiving the rewards of their Lord, for God Almighty cannot be said to occupy a physical space, a place, in which He would settle, veiling Himself from His servants. In the third verse, what is coming is God's Decree, that is, your Lord's Decree is coming to pass; otherwise, God Almighty cannot be said to come and go, for these movements are characteristic of His creatures, and it is impossible that He should have their attributes, for this would mean that there would be a place where He is not there! God is highly elevated above this degradation.

Thus are the Qur'anic verses interpreted according to the occasion upon which they were revealed.

Moreover, such an interpretation which takes into consideration both context and occasion (or reason for revelation) does not depart even a little bit from the particular appearance of such verses simply because such an understood appearance is not derived from the verbal text alone; rather, other aspects which encompass the subject's angles, and for whose explanation the text was revealed, have also to be taken into consideration.

Compulsion and Empowerment

While researching the way Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) employed to explain the subject and relevant topics related to the unity of God, we are faced by others with many questions inquiring about the theory of compulsion and empowerment which occupied the minds of Muslims for a long period of time and caused a great deal of more division among them due to the debates among the scholars of the science of *kalam* of various sects at that time. Some endorsed compulsion, others endorsed empowerment, while still others preached taking an in-between approach.

- [1. Al Jathiya:29](#)
- [2. Al An'aam:28](#)
- [3. Al Baqara:30](#)
- [4. Al Baqara: 15](#)
- [5. Al Tawba:79](#)
- [6. Aali 'Imran:54](#)
- [7. Al Nisaa: 142](#)
- [8. Fatir:43](#)
- [9. Al Naml:50-51](#)
- [10. Al Tawba:67](#)
- [11. Al A'raaf:51](#)
- [12. Maryam:64](#)
- [13. Al Baqara: 17](#)
- [14. Al Qiyama:22-23](#)
- [15. Al Muttaffifin \(or Taffif\): 15](#)
- [16. Al Fajr:22](#)

The Approach Adopted by Ahl al-Bayt

The school of thought preached by Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) regards the latter concept as the basis of Divine Justice whereby God rewards good doers for their good deeds and punishes the evil doers for their evil. Compulsion is akin to oppression and is a negation of justice, while empowerment is a postponement of effecting justice, disabling it from getting the upper-hand and the power it rightfully deserves. Both contradict the concept of the absolute perfection of the Divine.

A man visited Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and asked him, "O son of the Messenger of God (S)! It has been reported to us that the truthful (As-Sadiq) Ja'far ibn Muhammad (a.s.) said, 'There is neither compulsion nor empowerment but a way to choose one of two.' What does he exactly mean?" He answered, "Whoever claims that God does our deeds and then penalizes us for doing them has in fact accepted the concept of compulsion, and whoever claims that God Almighty empowers His Proofs to distribute His sustenance has in fact adopts the belief of empowerment.

One who believes in compulsion is a *kafir* (disbeliever), and one who believes in empowerment is a *mushrik* (polytheist)." So I asked him, 'O son of the Messenger of God! Then what is this way to choose one of two means?' He answered, 'It is finding a way to do what they are enjoined to do and forsake what they are enjoined to forsake.' I asked him, 'Does God Almighty have a Way and a Will in this regard?' He said, 'As regarding deeds done in obedience to His commandments, His Will in their regard is His approval of and assistance in their performance. As regarding His Will about sins, it is His order that they should be shunned, that He condemns them, and that He forsakes those who commit them.'"

Empowerment

Yasir the servant said, "I asked ar-Ridha' (a.s.), 'What do you say about empowerment?' He said, 'God Almighty entrusted His Creed to His Prophets to convey to people, saying, 'Whatever the Messenger permitted for you, take it with approval, and whatever he ordered you not to do, do not do it.' As regarding creation and sustenance; no, He did not empower anyone in their regard.' Then he said, 'God Almighty says: 'God is the Creator of all things,'¹ and He also says, 'It is God Who has created you: further, He has provided for your sustenance; then He will cause you to die; and again He will give you life. Are there any of your (false) partners who can do any single one of these things? Glory to Him! And High is He above the partners they attribute (to Him)!'"²

Imam Warns

In another narrative, the Imam discloses for us the conduct which a believer has to undertake with those who believe in empowerment in order to create a psychological barrier between them and others which would paralyze their action and deprive them of the element whereby they influence others by the misleading and false creed they preach.

Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari says: "I asked Abul-Hasan (a.s.) about the *ghulat* and about those who believed in empowerment, and he said, 'The *ghulat* are *kafirs* (disbelievers), while those who believe in empowerment are *mushriks* (polytheists). Those who sit with them, mix with them, eat or drink with them, visit them, marry their daughters to them or marry their daughters, accept their trusts or entrust them to keep theirs, believe in them, support them even by a fraction of a word, have abandoned the nearness to God, to the Messenger of God, and to us Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.).'"

In another narrative, when someone mentioned compulsion and empowerment, the Imam (a.s.) said to

the attendants, "Shall I provide you with an original view in which you shall not dispute with each other, and through which you will win the argument over those who argued with you in its regard?' We requested him to do so, whereupon he said, 'God Almighty was not obeyed by compulsion, nor was He disobeyed by being over-powered. He did not neglect His servants living in His domain; He is the King above their kings, the Powerful One above those who have power among them.

When His servants opt to obey Him, He would not stop them nor forbid them, and if they opt to disobey Him, He may interfere and foil their attempt, or He may not and they will do just that; therefore, He is not the One who caused them to disobey Him.' Then he said, 'Anyone who masters this will have the winning argument over his opponent.'"

Imams Did Not Endorse Making Similitudes With God

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), in a dialogue with al-Husayn ibn Khalid, denied what some people attributed to his forefathers when they claimed that they made similitudes to God and believed in compulsion, describing those people as *ghulat* who underestimated the Greatness of God Almighty, and that their fabrication about his forefathers and their attributing to them what they did not say was similar to the fabrication of others about the Messenger of God (S) by their narration of allegations endorsing making such similitudes and also endorsing compulsion.

Regarding the subject of *tawhid* and its relevant topics, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) has a long discussion which requires an independent and sufficient research, and suffices us this brief presentation of what was reported about him in this regard. Those who wish to pursue their research of this subject are referred to '*Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha' (a.s.)*' by Shaikh al-Saduq in which he compiled what was narrated about the Imam in this regard.

Transmigration of Souls

Al-Tanasukh kufr, that is, "To believe in the transmigration of the souls is to disbelieve in God," says the Imam in an answer to the question "What is your view regarding the transmigration of the souls?" put to him by someone. He answered saying, "Anyone who believes in *tanasukh* is *kafir* (disbeliever) in God the Great, a disbeliever in Heavens and in Hell." The reason for this is that the belief in the transmigration of the souls means that the human soul, after its departure from the body at the time of death, goes to the body of an animal to live in it. In other words, it is like a bird that as soon as it is set free from its cage will seek another cage. This implies a negation of the Judgment which is one of the basic principles of the Islamic creed, hence it is a negation of Paradise and Hell.

Those who believe in the transmigration of the souls interpret Paradise and Hell by saying that if the soul that was set free from the body settles inside a good animal, then it is Paradise, and if it settles inside a bad animal, then it is Hell, which is nothing but a hallucination which the Holy Qur'an clearly refutes, for both Paradise and Hell are realities rather than symbols as these persons would like to think.

Imamate

Imamate is one of the basic beliefs (*usool*) which was the starting point for all the deep differences since the early period of Islam and immediately after the demise of the Prophet (S). The Muslim *ummah*, therefore, split into contradictory and contrasting sects due to the deepening of the gaps either due to the actions of the ruling authorities, or to personal ambitions aspired by some of those who coveted to be Imams.

There are two major schools of thought in Islam which are regarded as the stems from which those sects branch. They are the Sunni school of thought, which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S) was the right of Abu Bakr then to the three caliphs who succeeded him, and the Imami Shi'a school of thought which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S) was the right of Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) and to his eleven descendants after him. Each of these schools has its own arguments regarding proving its authenticity and the lack thereof of the other.

The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) derive their arguments from clear and obvious statement in their regard said by the Prophet (S) and also due to their merits and qualifications which raised them above both common and elite individuals. Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) explained to us the actual program to identify an Imam which agrees with the human nature in considering the distinctive merits and the sufficient qualifications present in a person to qualify for such a very important status.

Imam's Qualifications

In defining the qualifications of the Imam, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) tells us that he has to be the most knowledgeable among people, the most wise, the most pious, the most courageous, the most generous, and the best in worshipping God. These qualifications have to be present in the imam since he is the one charged with safeguarding the Islamic Message after the Prophet (S) and the one who clarifies its precise details and hidden meanings to people.

Selection of the Imam is Done by God

The Imam (a.s.) assured the person who inquired about these qualifications that the nation cannot be left to choose its *imam* without statements in this regard made by the Prophet (S) who in turn conveys God's commandments related to this issue, for nobody other than God knows the secrets of the individuals and what they hide inside their hearts.

The Imam (a.s.) said: "Do they really realize the significance of Imamate so that they permit themselves to make a choice in its regard? Imamate is greater in prestige, more significant, higher in status, more difficult to attain, harder to achieve, than can people conceive in their minds or define according to their views, or select an Imam as they please, for Imamate became the sole prerogative of Prophet Ibrahim

(a.s.), the Friend of God, second in significance only to Prophethood, whereby He honored him, saying, 'He (God) said, 'I will make thee an Imam to the nations.' He pleaded: 'And also (Imams) from my offspring?!' He answered: 'But My Promise is not within the reach of evil-doers.'³

This verse, therefore, has nullified the imamate of any oppressor till the Day of Resurrection and became the prerogative solely of those elite persons. God, thus, honored Ibrahim (Abraham) by allotting Imamate to those of his progeny who are the elite and who are the Purified, saying, 'And We bestowed upon him Isaac and, as an additional boon, (a grandson), Jacob, and We made righteous men of everyone (of them). And We made them Imams guiding (men) by Our Command.'⁴

Imamate, then remained among the descendants of Ibrahim (a.s.), son inherited it from father, one century after another, till the Prophet (S) inherited it. It was then when the Almighty God said to him, 'Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to Abraham are those who follow him as are also this Prophet and those who believe, and God is the Protector of those who have faith.'⁵ Thus, Imamate became the right of the Prophet (S) who, according to the commands of the Almighty God, and in the manner He deemed, vested it upon Ali (a.s.) and it settled among the elite of his descendants whom God gifted with the gift of knowledge and true belief."

The Imam (a.s.) continues to say: "Imamate is the status of the Prophets, the legacy of the wasis (successors of Prophets); Imamate is the caliphate of God Almighty and of His Messenger (S)."

"The caliphate of God Almighty" has to be the prerogative of the best of people after the Prophet (S) simply because he, the successor of the Prophet (S), is God's caliph on earth after the demise of the Prophet (S). His selection, therefore, has to be done by God for how can anyone judge anyone else to be eligible for it if he does not know that person's true inner self? We simply do not understand at all the wisdom of leaving the selection of the Imam to the nation without a final judgment in this regard coming from the Almighty...

An Imam's Attributes

Having defined the attributes an Imam has to have which represent his day-to-day conduct needed by people, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) says: "An Imam is a scholar who is not ignorant, someone who looks after others untiringly, the substance of sanctity and purity, asceticism and renunciation of the world, of knowledge and adoration. His knowledge grows, his clemency is perfect; he is aware of the responsibilities of Imamate, knowledgeable regarding politics, commanding obedience, executing the Commandments of God, advising the servants of God, protecting the creed of God. Prophets and Imams are assisted by God Who bestows upon them from the treasures of His knowledge and sovereignty in a way He does not endow anyone else, making their knowledge superior to that of anyone contemporary to them, for He, the Exalted and the Sublime, has said, regarding Talut (Samuel), 'God has chosen him above you and has gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess; God grants His authority to whomsoever He pleases. God cares for all, and He knows all things.'⁶

Regarding the Imams from the Household, progeny and elite descendants of His Prophet (S), the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), the Dear and Sublime One has said, 'Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of His bounty? But We had already given the people of Abraham the Book and Wisdom and conferred upon them a great kingdom,'⁷ and when God selects one of His servants to deal with the servants of God, He broadens his heart for such responsibility, depositing in it springs of wisdom, inspiring knowledge to him."

Indications of Imamate

As regarding how an Imam can be identified, and what the indications are, this is explained by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in his answer to the question someone put to him which was: "By what indication can Imamate be regarded authentic for one who claims it to himself?" He said: "By text and evidence." The man asked: "What is the characteristic of an Imam?" He answered: "Knowledge, and God's answer to his plea." The man asked, "By what can you yourselves prove your Imamate?"

He answered: "By a Promise made to us by the Messenger of God (S)." The man asked: "What is the evidence that you can tell what is on the mind of people?" He answered: "Have you not come to know that the Messenger (S) said, 'Beware of the discretion of a *mumin* for he looks through the light of God'?" The man answered in the affirmative, so the Imam (a.s.) continued saying, "Every believer has a share of discretion, looking through the light of God according to the amount of his belief and the extent of his foresight and knowledge. God has combined in us what He has distributed to all the believers combined and said in His Book, 'Behold! In this are signs for those who by tokens do understand.'⁸

The first of these *mutawassimeen* is the Messenger of God (S), then the Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) after him, then al-Hasan then al-Husayn, then the Imams from among the descendants of al-Husayn till the Day of Judgment."

By all of these statements does Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) define for us the qualifications of an Imam and the group that chooses him in statements which agree with the human nature and the balances of reason which are the final judge on such issues.

^{1.} Al Zumar:62

^{2.} Al Rum:40

^{3.} Al Baqara: 124

^{4.} Al Anbiyaa:72-73

^{5.} Aaali 'Imran:68

^{6.} Al Baqara:247

^{7.} Al Nisaa:54

^{8.} Al Hijr:75

Exegesis

Exegesis (Tafsir) According to the Ahl al-Bayt

When we examine the method employed by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the other Imams from the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) in interpreting the text of the Holy Qur'an, we find out that it depends on the general overall meaning in interpreting one particular verse, distancing itself from interpretations which do not suit its own general or particular meaning.

This does not mean that the Holy Qur'an can be interpreted by anyone according to what he understands of its apparent meaning; rather, its interpretation is not limited to the *verbatim* understanding of the text. Instead, some matters have to also be taken into consideration which may be hidden in a way which requires seeking assistance from those whom God endowed with the faculty of knowledge and understanding, namely the Prophet (S) and his Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) who are the actual testimony to the verse which says: "Nobody knows its interpretation except God and those deeply grounded in knowledge."

An Exegesis Phenomenon Regarding Ahl al-Bayt

One who studies *tafsir* according to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) will clearly notice the phenomenon that they may interpret some verses on their own, while others may be a reference to obeying and loving them. Some people try to use this phenomenon to make notorious remarks, to deliberately distort, and openly condemn the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), trying to attribute to them their attempt to make the Holy Qur'an a book regarding their own sect and nobody else's.

There is nothing further from the truth. The interpretation provided by the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) of certain verses to be a direct or indirect reference to them is due to one's perfect practical implementation of *tafsir*, and the fact that they themselves are living witnesses to the truth in such verses, or that should such verses make a reference to them, they are all proofs of the truth contained in the Holy Qur'an and it does not take the verse out of its intended general meaning. For example, when Imam As-Sadiq (a.s.) interprets the *ummah* (nation) in the text of the Holy Qur'an to mean the *a'immah* (Imams), he gives it the meaning that they are the most distinguished practical manifestation of its Qur'anic meaning.

To use the word "interpretation" in such context may imply a metaphoric meaning of the word, for what is intended by it is to provide the best possible practical meaning which agrees with the spirit of the text, which is something neither reason nor citation object to it.

Exegesis of Imam ar-Ridha'

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) did not author a book on exegesis, but he explained the meanings of the verses

about which he was questioned by others who wanted to know his views in their regard, and we will indicate here some such explanations in order to acquaint you with the magnificent method and innovative style of the Imam (a.s.) in this regard.

It is reported that al-Ma'mun asked him once to explain some Qur'anic verses out of his curiosity about the knowledge God bestowed upon the Imam regarding their meanings. Among such verses was: "He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was over the waters, that He might try you which of you is best in conduct."¹ He said, "The Praised and Exalted God created the Throne, the water, and the angels before the creation of heavens and earth, and the angels used to know God through their own creation, through the Throne and the water.

Then He made His Throne over the water in order to manifest His might to the angels so that they might know that He is capable of doing whatever He pleased. Then He raised the Throne through His might, moved it and made it above the seven heavens. Then He created the heavens and the earth in six days while He was omni-Potent on His Throne.

He was capable of creating them in a twinkle of the eye, but the Exalted One created them in six days in order to show the angels what He was creating one after the other so that they would know time and again that God was the Originator of each and every thing. God did not create the Throne because He was in need for it since He is independent of the Throne and of everything He created; He cannot be described by anything in the cosmos simply because He has no physical body; Exalted He is above the characteristics of what He created a great deal of Exaltation.

"As regarding His saying, `...that He might try you which one of you is best in conduct,' He has created them in order to test them through the responsibility of obeying and worshipping Him, not out of His desire to test or try them, since He already knows all things."

This glorious explanation of the Imam (a.s.) for the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days is considered, we think, among the best explanations because gradual creation and perfection deepens the feeling of awe regarding the greatness of the Creator and Originator more than had it been at once.

Al-Ma'mun also asked him about the meaning of the verse: "Had it been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?! No soul can believe except by the Will of God."² Quoting his forefathers, ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said: "Muslims said to the Messenger of God (S), `We wish you forced those whom you have conquered, O Messenger of God, to accept Islam, so that our number would increase, and we would become stronger in the face of our enemies.'

The Messenger of God (S) said: `I am not going to meet God, the Almighty and the Exalted, having invented an innovation which He did not command me to do, nor am I the type of person who forces others to do anything at all.' It was then that this verse was revealed: `Had it been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth,' by means of forcing them, or when they find no other

choice while in this world just as those who believed only after seeing God's might and retribution in the life after death. 'If I do such a thing to them, they would not deserve any reward, but I wish they accept it out of their own choice rather than being forced to do so in order that they will deserve to be close to me and blessed through me, and they would remain in Paradise forever.'

"As regarding the meaning of 'No soul can believe except by the Will of God,' it does not mean that it is prohibited from believing (without a prior consent of God); it simply means that God invites it to believe without forcing it to do so."

The Imam (a.s.) said the following in his explanation of the verse which says: "[God is He] Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy":[3](#)

"He made the earth suitable to the creation of your nature, agreeable to your bodies; He did not make it too hot to burn you, nor too cold to freeze you, nor too windy to cause you dizziness, nor too stinky to damage your heads, nor as liquid as water to cause you to drown, nor too solid to enable you to build houses and graves for your dead; rather, the Exalted and Sublime made it strong enough to be useful for you, for your bodies, and for your buildings, making it usable in your homes and graves and a great deal of other advantages as well; thus, He made the earth a couch for you.

"As for the heavens, He made them like a protective ceiling above your heads in which He let the sun and its moon and the stars orbit for your own good. He '... sent down water from the heavens, and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance,' meaning thereby water which He caused to descend from a high altitude in order to reach the summits of your mountains and hills, valleys and plains, which He caused to descend as showers and as moisture which soil inhales, and He did not cause it to pour down at once to ruin your lands, trees and other vegetation and fruits. 'And brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance'[4](#) means whatever grows on earth for your sustenance, so 'Do not set up rivals unto God when ye know (the truth)',[5](#) that is, 'rivals' such as similitudes and such things like idols which have no comprehension, hearing, sight, or are able to do anything at all, while you know that they cannot create any of these great blessings with which He, your Lord, the Exalted, the Most High, has blessed you."

This simple explanation provided by the Imam (a.s.) gives the meaning of the verse clarity and ease which can be comprehended by anyone, even one whose share of intelligence is most modest, enabling him to appreciate the magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the creation. He may even explain the important points in a verse which may cause the wisdom of their making as we find him doing with the last verse in order to point out the depth of miraculous aspect of the verses of the Holy Qur'an.

The Holy Qur'an and the Infallibility of the Prophets

In the subject of the infallibility of Prophets, the Imam (a.s.) was asked to explain the meanings of some verses whose superficial meanings suggested that Prophets were not infallible at all, that they were

liable to commit sins. In our discussion of queries above, we dealt with this subject when we discussed the dialogue between the Imam (a.s.) and Ali ibn al-Jahm, while here we would like to mention more of the same regarding questions al-Ma'mun put forth to the Imam (a.s.) inquiring about such verses:

Adam

At one of the meetings arranged by al-Ma'mun, the latter asked the Imam (a.s.): "O Son of the Messenger of God (S)! Don't you claim that Prophets are infallible?" The Imam (a.s.) answered in the affirmative. Al-Ma'mun then asked, "Then what is the meaning of the verse, 'Thus did Adam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced'?" The Imam answered this question by explaining that God had forbidden Adam and Eve from coming close to a particular tree without forbidding them from eating its fruit or the fruit of similar trees.

They obeyed God by not coming near that tree, but Iblis (Eblis) confused them in this regard and suggested that they should eat not from that tree but from other similar trees, swearing to them by God that he was only providing them with an advice. So they believed in his oath and they ate the fruit of a similar tree, and that was before Adam was considered as a Prophet and before his descent to earth, and what he did was not a sin for which the penalty is Hellfire, but it was a minor disobedience which could be forgiven and could be committed by Prophets before wahi (revelation) reaches them.

When God chose him and made him a Prophet, he became infallible and was not permitted to commit a sin, minor or major, telling him, "Thus did Adam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced. But his Lord chose him (for His Grace); He turned to him, and gave him guidance.

Ibrahim, the Friend of God

Then he asked him about Ibrahim (Abraham) al-Khalil (a.s.), the Friend of God, and about the stage of doubt through which he passed as appears superficially in the Holy Qur'an when he is mentioned, till truth became manifest to him and he believed therein. The Almighty says: "When the night covered him over, he saw a star. He said: 'This is my Lord.' But when it set, he said, 'I do not love those that set.' When he saw the moon rising in splendor, he said, 'This is my Lord.'

But the moon set, so he said, 'Unless my Lord guides me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.' When he saw the sun rising in splendor, he said, 'This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all).' But when the sun set, he said, 'O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to God. For me, I have set my face firmly and truly towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God.'" ⁶ About this, the Imam comments thus:

"Ibrahim (a.s.) did not pass by a stage of doubt in God; rather, his story may be summarized thus: He lived in a society where three types of worship dominated: the worship of Venus, the worship of the moon, and the worship of the sun. The outward pretense of Ibrahim (a.s.) to follow these religions before declaring his belief in God was only to deny the validity of each one of them and to prove to others the

fact that they were invalid, not due to his temporary belief in them. He simply wanted to prove to their followers, through the method of argument which he employed in a spirit filled with belief in Him, that their type of creed and their norm of worship of Venus, the moon, and the sun, were not appropriate due to the variation which occurred to them and which is one of the attributes of the creature, not the Creator."

Then the Imam (a.s.) adds saying, "What Ibrahim al-Khalil (a.s.) did was actually according to the inspiration he had received from God by the token of the verse that says, 'That was the reasoning about Us which We gave to Abraham (to use) against his people.'" ⁷ What he did, therefore, was merely a method to win the argument against his people regarding the invalidity of their norms of worship and in their belief in gods other than God, which is a unique method among Qur'anic methods to invite others to believe.

Messengers and Despair

Al-Ma'mun then asked him about the meaning of the verse which says, "... till the apostles give up hope (of their people) and (their people come to) think that they proved them to be liars, Our help will then come to them." ⁸ What may be a cause for questioning in this verse is to attribute despair to God's Messengers after being promised help from God. Despair and despondency are forms of *kufir* (disbelief), for the Almighty has said, "Never give up hope of God's soothing mercy; truly none despairs of God's soothing mercy except those who have no faith." ⁹ So, how can despair find its way to the heart of a messenger of God or a prophet, knowing that, according to this verse, only *kafirs* can do so, and what is a greater sin than committing *kufir*?!

What is superficially obvious from the text of this verse is that the time when they despaired was after receiving the Message and inspiration. To this, the Imam (a.s.) answers by saying that the subject of despair in this verse is **not** God's help promised to His messengers, but rather losing hope of their people ever believing in them and accepting their message; i.e. to believe in Him and renounce their previous disbelief and disobedience by their worship of gods other than God. The meaning of this verse, then, will be something like this: When the messengers lost hope that their people would ever believe in them, and when those people thought that they succeeded in proving those messengers as liars, it is then that Our help came to them.

Thus is the outward ambiguity of the verse removed, and thus does the Imam (a.s.), through providing such glorious meanings to the sacred verses of the Holy Qur'an whose outward meaning is actually the opposite of that of their context, dispel the cloud of doubt which may come to one's mind regarding the infallibility of Prophets. They are not mere justifications or one's own personal opinions but actual facts the upholding to whose contrary is not possible.

God's "Hand" is His Might

There are other verses the superficial meaning of which gives the impression that God has limbs just as humans do which He uses to achieve His purpose, such as His statement addressing Iblis when the latter refused to prostrate to Adam as commanded by God: "What prohibited you from prostrating to what I have created in My own hands?" and also like the verse saying, "When a leg will be uncovered and they are invited to prostrate..."

The Imam (a.s.) explains the meaning of God's hand to be His might. The meaning of the previous verse would be, "What prohibited you from prostrating to what I have created by My might and potency?" God does not have eyes, legs, hands, or any such things as we may imagine which would put limits to God like those to man, and the revealed texts containing a reference to such things are given meanings which agree with conceiving God to be Exalted above having physical dimensions a great deal of Exaltation.

The "leg" is interpreted by the Imam as a barrier of light which, when removed, will cause the believers to fall prostrating, while the legs of the hypocrites become too stiffened to prostrate.

Thus does Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) portray for us an accurate portrait which is honest in interpreting the meanings embedded in the Glorious Book if we wish to honestly and wisely interpret its verses.

One more thing remains to be indicated here. There are some narratives which contain some interpretations of Qur'anic verses attributed to Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) the authenticity of which is questioned simply because some of those who reported them are not free of the practice of distortion or fabrication. What we feel comfortable about is that the fact that if such narrations do not contain anything which disagrees with the beliefs of followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) regarding the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, they testify to their authentic reporting. Add to this the fact that we think it is quite unlikely that some narrators would deliberately tell lies about the Imam (a.s.) in cases where telling lies does not benefit the narrator a bit, particularly in the interpretations of the verses we have quoted above.

This is why we find scholars of exegesis rely on such narratives and their likes in explaining the Holy Qur'an, and if they contradict one another, they accept the one which seems to have the most sound meaning, or to the ones which agree with the basic principles of the school of thought.

In the case where the interpretation of certain verses becomes the basis of a legislative rule, or in the process of deriving one, then the authenticity of narration or interpretation has to be verified first as one provided by the Prophet (S) or by members of his Ahl al-Bayt, peace be upon them, and attempts should be made to make sure that the integrity of their narrators is not questioned.

[1.](#) Hud:7

[2.](#) Yunus:99-100

[3.](#) Al Baqara:22

[4.](#) Al Baqara:22

- [5. Ibid](#)
- [6. Al An'aam:76-79](#)
- [7. Al An'aam:83](#)
- [8. Yousuf: 110](#)
- [9. Yousuf:87](#)

Shari'a (Islamic Legislative System)

We do not attempt here to present the legislative heritage left us by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) or trace the *ahadith* which were reported about him in this regard, for this is the job of authors of books of *hadith* and *fiqh*. What we would like to deal with here, rather, is to evaluate the knowledge which reached us from him and from other Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) in the area of legislation, and the safe route they took in providing us with a basis for deriving such legislative rules from their accurate source.

As we stated in the Introduction, what caused us to follow the creed of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and use their *hadith* as a source for legislation is due to the clear and unequivocal statements of the Prophet (S) regarding the necessity of upholding their way and following their guidance such as the tradition of the two weighty things (*hadith al-thaqalayn*) and of the ark of Noah (a.s.), and other *ahadith* which cannot be doubted in their authenticity, structure, or objective. This is why any *hadith* reported by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) or by any other Imam is regarded as though it had been said by the Prophet (S) not because these Imams have the authority to initiate legislation, or be independent in enjoying the responsibility of inventing a legislative rule, but by considering it an extension of the pristine legislation brought forth by the Prophet (S) from his Lord, due to what they learned of the secrets of legislation and its fruits left for them as a legacy by the Prophet (S), after being made by the Almighty as custodians of the Message after the Prophet (S).

Their Hadith is Muhkam and Mutashabih

The *hadith* narrated about them is, as is the case with the Holy Qur'an, both *muhkam* and *mutashabih*. The *muhkam*, as its name suggests, does not accept but one single meaning, while the *mutashabih* is on the contrary permitting many facets of interpretation, and its actual meaning is not known exactly. This is the meaning we accept for these two terms.

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) is quoted in a narration as having said, "Among our narratives are *mutashabih* like the Qur'an's, and also *muhkam* like the Qur'an's; so, seek help from the *muhkam* to understand the *mutashabih*, and do not follow the *mutashabih* without the *muhkam* else you should stray."

Justifying the Mutashabih in the Qur'an

The Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) justifies the existence of Qur'anic verses which can be interpreted in more than one way by saying: "The Almighty has done so in order to foil the attempt of wrong-doers from among those who would take control over the legacy of the knowledge of the Book left by the Messenger of God (S), which he did not intend them to acquire, rendering them unable to explain the various possible meanings thereof." It is as if God willed that the Prophet (S) and those who would bear the Message after him would have a special distinction which is the understanding of what others are not able to understand so that people would resort to them when they are unable to understand certain verses of the Holy Qur'an which they need to understand for the betterment of their life and the comprehension of their creed.

Justifying the Mutashabih in the Hadith

As regarding the existence of the *mutashabih* in the *hadith* reported about the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), as the Imam pointed out in his tradition cited above, this can be justified in the following manner:

These Imams (a.s.) used to suffer a great deal of persecution at the hands of their contemporary rulers who incessantly pursued them and their followers, forcing upon them a very strict surveillance, counting their breath. In many cases, in the face of such an intolerable treatment at the hands of those rulers, the Imams had to resort to the *taqiyya* in many of their deeds and sayings. They might have been asked, for example, about their judgment of a particular incident, or about something related to the creed and school of thought, and they would answer in a way which permitted more than one way of understanding the answer due to their own apprehension of the ruler's watchdogs and informers.

The meaning may be derived at the time the question is put forth when a related matter is at hand. It will be built according to one of the possibilities inspired by the text which would provide the inquirer with the desired satisfaction of the answer while, at the same time, such possibilities are hidden from others who will be confused about them and about the actual meaning the Imam (a.s.) meant thereby. It is then that it must be compared with other *ahadith* said on similar occasions, or with the context of bases which agree with it and which were set by them, peace be upon them. The meaning of the *mutashabih* may be similar to the general and the particular, the unrestricted and the absolute, while the general and the absolute would then be similar to the *mutashabih*, the special and the restricted would be similar to the *muhkam*.

Genuineness of the Creed of Ahl al-Bayt

We cannot find in any other sect the genuineness which characterizes the creed of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) in the area of legislation, for it relies on a deep understanding of the Holy Qur'an and the pristine Prophetic Sunnah which derives from its original leading fountainhead a source of its legislation and

such rules.

For example, according to a narrative, a man asked Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) about another man who said at the time of his death, "Any old slave I have is now emancipated for the sake of pleasing God." The Imam said, "Yes, there is a way to determine who is 'old' according to the Almighty and Praised God Who says in His Book, '... till it became like an old date cluster;' therefore, anyone among his slaves who has been with him for at least six months must now be freed."

The date cluster becomes old and dry during the period of six months. In this example, the Imam (a.s.) did not contend himself by just providing a legislative rule; he also derives its rule from the text of the Holy Qur'an.

Independence of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) From Qiyas and Others

The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) did not sense the need to seek avenues which were distant from the legislative realities in the conclusions they reached such as *qiyas* (comparison), *istihsan* (preference), etc., which were regarded by others as indicative of the legislative rule when they lack a concrete text, due to the fact that, because of the knowledge and the secrets of the Message which they inherited from their grandfather the Messenger of God (S) as well as their own level of *iman* (firm belief), they were self sufficient, independent, and due to what God had endowed them with of the faculty of knowledge in order they might be His Proofs over people.

The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) strongly condemned the use of *qiyas* and other such methods invented by others as means whereby they would justify their derivations when they lacked concrete evidence. Because of this, many strong confrontations happened between them and these people, and we may discuss this subject in detail in our forthcoming book about Imam As-Sadiq (a.s.) because the most violent of such confrontations took place during his time when promoters of various sects were free to express their views.

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