

AN ANALYSIS OF SHIITE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE QUR'AN FROM THE SUNNITE PERSPECTIVE

(Analisis Tafsiran Shiah Terhadap Al-Quran Menurut Perspektif Ahli Sunnah)

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Abstract

Majority of Muslims base their understanding of the Qur'an on the interpretations of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah scholars because it is believed that their scholarly interpretations are the most accurate at helping Muslims to understand the Qur'an correctly. However, the Shiite scholars' interpretations are different from the Sunnite versions. This study conducted a content analysis on some of the books written by the Shiite and Sunnite scholars and found that there are several interpretational differences. This article describes the irregularities found in the Shiite interpretations of the Qur'anic verses from the Sunnite perspective. These irregularities exist because Shiite scholars tend to base their interpretations on the concept of the religious leadership, a main pillar of their faith.

Keywords: Interpretation (Tafsir), Qur'an, Shiite, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah

Abstrak

Majoriti umat Islam memahami ayat-ayat al-Quran berdasarkan tafsiran para ulama Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah kerana dipercayai bahawa tafsiran golongan yang benar ini berupaya membantu umat Islam memahami al-Quran sebaik-baiknya. Namun, wujud golongan yang memberi tafsiran yang berbeza berbanding tafsiran yang difahami oleh para ulama Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah iaitu golongan Shi'ah melalui kitab-kitab tafsir mereka. Justeru, kertas kerja ini akan menghuraikan penyelewengan Shi'ah dalam penafsiran beberapa ayat al-Quran. Metodologi penyelidikan adalah berdasarkan kaedah analisis kandungan terhadap beberapa kitab ulama Shi'ah dan ulama Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. Kertas kerja ini merumuskan terdapat penyelewengan dalam penafsiran ayat-ayat al-Quran yang telah dilakukan oleh Shi'ah.

Kata kunci: Tafsiran, al-Quran, Shi'ah, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah

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Introduction

Historians dispute the origin of Shiite, but it is claimed that the sect appeared towards the end of Uthman's reign as a Caliph and spread during Ali's reign (Abu Zahrah, 1996). Shiites are loyal followers of Ali and his descendants, specifically of the Salaf or Khalaf generations (Ibn Khaldun, n.d). This definition illustrates the depth in which the Shiites glorify Ali and his descendants. Shiite originated from a conflict that revolved around the question of religious leadership (*imamiyyah*) after the death of Rasulullah SAW (Al-Kulaini, 1388H). Shiites believe that Muhammad S.A.W chose Ali to be his successor and the first caliph. However, the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah reject this claim, stating that evidence supporting it come from false hadiths fabricated by Shiites to justify their stance (Al-'Ajluni, n.d).

Shiites support their claims further by asserting that Ali was Rasulullah's relative, unlike the other three caliphs; Abu Bakar, Umar, and Uthman (al-Maghribi, 1995). They also argue that the *imamiyyah*, or imamate, is the main pillar of faith, and that the appointment of a caliph cannot be made by the people. Shiites considered it an obligation that all messengers of Allah have appointed their successors before they passed away and that their successors would be without any forms of sin, whether great or small (Ibn Khaldun, n.d). Thus, the Shiite believes that Ali and his descendants are the rightful successors of Muhammad and that Muslims must not reject or deny this claim.

The origin of Shiite is often associated with a Jew who pretended to have accepted Islam. His name was 'Abd Allah bin Saba'. This man strongly opposed Uthman's government and fought to make Ali the next caliph by spreading false rumours about Ali being the rightful successor to Muhammad. When Ali was killed, 'Abd Allah bin Saba' rallied support for him by claiming that it was not Ali who was killed, but a devil disguised as Ali. 'Abd Allah bin Saba' also claimed that Allah raised Ali to the skies after his death, just as He raised Prophet Isa (Abu Zahrah, 1996). These claims caused Ali's followers to place Ali on an even higher pedestal.

The origin of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah contrasts with the origins of Shiite and Khawarijite. The emergence of the latter two were politically motivated, which is why both Shiite and Khawarijism are said to be two of the earliest Islamist political parties before they developed into sects (Abdul Shukor, 1998; Abu Zahrah, 1996). Even though scholars have not determined exactly when Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah emerged, the Salaf used the terms 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah' and 'Ahl al-Sunnah'. In his interpretation of verse 106 of surah Ali 'Imran, Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68H) stated that "those whose faces will be brightened are the Ahl al-Sunnah wa Al-Jamaah. As for those whose faces will be blackened, then they are the people of innovation and misguidance" (Ibn Kathir, 1999).

The term 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah' became popular during the reign of Mu'tazilah (al-Misri, 1992; Abdul Shukor, 1998). During that time, through *al-Mihnah* tests, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah scholars such as Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 241H) were forced into agreeing with the Mu'tazili's belief that the Qur'an was a creation (Abu Zahrah, 1996; Abu Rayyan, n.d). The term 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah' was thus used to differentiate the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah from other sects such as Shi'ism, Khawarijism, and Mu'tazilism, among others. Scholars soon began using the term more frequently in their writings and their missionary work. Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 241H) even named a book "*Risalah Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*". The continuation of these efforts led to the spread of the use of the term 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah' among the majority of Muslims, even to this day.

The Qur'an According To The Shiites

The Shiites are generally divided into two groups: extreme and moderate. Extremist Shiites believe that Prophet Muhammad's companions altered the current form of the Qur'an. In his book titled *Fasl al-Khitab fi Tahrif Kitab Rabb al-Arbab*, Husain ibn Muhammad Taqi al-Nuri al-Tabrasi wrote: "...I wrote this book to declare that the Qur'an has been altered..." (al-Salus, 2011)

His book contains a story about how after Rasulullah's death, Ali had compiled all the Qur'anic verses, folded them within a piece of cloth, and said, "*O Muslims, this is the Book of Allah which the Prophet has instructed me to show you so that it may come as an intercessor on the Day of Resurrection.*" Umar, whom the writer refers to as Pharaoh and Nimrod, then said, "*We do not need your Qur'an.*" Abu Bakr exclaimed, "*Anyone who owns the Qur'an must come forth and pass what they own of the Qur'an to me*". Thus, many of the Prophet's companions, including Abu Ubadah al-Jarrah, Uthman al-Affan, Saad ibn Abi Waqqas, Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, Abd al-Rahman ibn Auf, Talhah ibn Ubaidillah, Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, and Hasan ibn Thabit, went to him carrying what they possessed. However, the Qur'an that Abu Bakr managed to compile was not whole. The Shiites believe that the perfect version of the Qur'an was compiled by Ali. It is now in the possession of Sahib al-Amr, the 12th Imam of Shiite (al-Salus, 2011; al-Jaza'iri, n.d).

According to *al-Usul min al-Kafi* by al-Kulaini (d. 329H), Abu Ja'far had said that whoever claims to have compiled the Qur'an in the order that it was revealed are liars (*kadhhab*) as nobody other than Ali and the Shiite Imams who came after him have compiled the Qur'an in such a way. Al-Kulaini also wrote that nobody other than Ali and the Shiite Imams (the *al-awsiya'*) can claim that they had the complete version of the Qur'an (Al-Kulaini, 1388H). Going by these claims, it is clear that the Shiites believe that there is a different version of the Qur'an. According to Shiites, Ali first compiled the Qur'an, but his compilation was not recognised by the companions at the time. The Shiite version of the Qur'an was then passed down to the Shiite Imams, and will eventually be revealed by Imam Mahdi.

Ja'far al-Sadiq claimed that "*If the Qur'an was read in the order that it was revealed, you will find the names of the twelve Shiite Imams written in it*" (Al-'Ayyashi, n.d). This means that some Shiites believe that the names of the twelve Shiite Imams are in the Qur'an. Al-Kulaini also wrote that Ja'far al-Sadiq stated that "*Gabriel revealed to the Prophet 17,000 verses.*" According to Sunnite Muslims, there are approximately 6,000 verses in the Qur'an. The Shiites believe that the number of verses in the Qur'an had been decreased by the companions. Thus, the Shiites believe that the companions were dishonest and unqualified to compile the Qur'an as they had omitted around 11,000 verses (al-Salus, 2011). According to Shiites, the companions removed verses that were related to Ali's rightful position as the first caliph after the Prophet's death (Abdul Mun'im, 2003)

However, there are a group of moderate Shiites who reject these extremist views. Among the Shiite scholars who disagree that the Qur'an had been altered are Muhammad ibn Babawaih al-Qummi, also known as al-Saduq (d. 381H), Sayyid al-Murtada (d. 436H), his student Abu Ja'far Muhammad al-Tusi (d. 460H), and Ali al-Fadl al-Tabrasi (d. 548H). Al-Saduq wrote: "*Our belief is that the Qur'an that Allah revealed to His Prophet Muhammad is (the same as) the one between the two covers (daffatayn). And it is the one that is in the hands of the people, and is not greater in extent than that. He who asserts that we say that it is greater in extent than that, is a liar.*" To these Shiites, the Shiite and Sunnite versions of the Qur'an are one and the same (al-Salus, 2011).

According to Sayyid al-Murtada, the Qur'an is a miracle and a source of Islamic knowledge and religious rule that is preserved by scholars through serious, honest and careful memorisation. Al-Murtada believes that there is no possibility that parts of the Qur'an were added or deleted. According to him, *"the Qur'an that was compiled during the Prophet's time is the same as the one that is in our hands today"*. He urged people to ignore the views of some Shiites who claim that the Qur'an has been altered. He wrote: *"Their opinions should be ignored as they prefer to use weak hadiths that they believe are authentic hadiths, even when they are clearly weak."* It is thus clear that some Shiite groups believe that those who claim that the Qur'an has been altered support their claims with weak hadiths (al-Salus, 2011).

According to al-Tusi, there is no proof to support the claim that the Qur'an has been altered, and there is complete consensus that no such thing has happened. Al-Tusi also believes that the evidences used to support the claim that the Qur'an has been altered are *ahad*, and thus unreliable. This opinion is in line with Muhammad Husain Ali Kashif al-Ghita's views. In his book, *Asl al-Shi'ah wa Usuluha*, he wrote: *"(...) such views are incorrect, and they should not be adhered to."* He added that such views should be renounced or ignored. Thus, it can be seen that there are differences of opinion regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an. However, the majority of scholars believe that the Qur'an that exists today is genuine, and claims against its authenticity are strongly criticised by many Shiite scholars (al-Salus, 2011).

Analysis Of Shiite Interpretations

This subtopic will only focus on a few irregularities found in the Shiite interpretations of the Qur'an from the Sunnite perspective. Although the majority of Shiites recognise the authenticity of the Qur'an, many of their interpretations conflict with the interpretations of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah scholars. For instance, there are irregularities in the Shiite interpretation of this following verse:

قَالُوا رَبَّنَا أَمَتْنَا اثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا اثْنَتَيْنِ فَاعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَى خُرُوجٍ مِّنْ سَبِيلٍ ۝ ١١

Translation: They will say: "Our Lord! Twice hast Thou made us without life, and twice hast Thou given us Life! Now have we recognised our sins: Is there any way out (of this)?"

(al-Mu'min 40:11)

According to the Shiite concept of *al-raj'ah*, Allah S.W.T. will resurrect those among the true believers to join the army of Imam al-Mahdi. Together, the army will punish those who have committed evil. This concept, which is one of the main principles of Shiite faith, is claimed to have originated from several Persian religions, including Zoroastrianism (Kamaluddin Nurdin Marjuni, 2013). The Shiites believe that Allah S.W.T. will resurrect the Ahl al-Bayt and the Shiite Imams. Among those who will be punished are Abu Bakar, Umar, Uthman, Aishah, Hafsa, Muawiyah, and other companions. After they are punished, they will die once more and be punished again, this time by Allah S.W.T. In his book, *Tafsir al-Ayyashi*, Muhammad ibn Mas'ud al-Ayyashi (d. 320H), a trusted scholar among the Shiites, interprets surah Ali 'Imran verse 81 slightly differently, adding that all the prophets will rise along with Ali to defeat their enemies (Al-Ayyashi, n.d.).

However, according to Sunnite interpretation, verse 11 of surah al-Mu'min refers to a dialogue between Allah S.W.T. and the infidels on the Day of Judgement. In this verse, the infidels have

repented and are trying to find a way out of hell, and are asking Allah S.W.T to give them a second chance. This interpretation is in line with the following verse (Mohd Aizam, 2013):

كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَكُنْتُمْ أَمْوَاتًا فَأَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ٢٨

Translation: How can you disbelieve in Allah when you were lifeless and He brought you to life; then He will cause you to die, then He will bring you [back] to life, and then to Him you will be returned.

(al-Baqarah 2:28)

According to Sunnite belief, disbelievers will be punished by Allah S.W.T. on the Day of Judgement, not by the Shiite Imams, as illustrated in the following verse (Mohd Aizam, 2013):

وَيَوْمَ نُسِيرُ الْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً وَحَشَرْنَاهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ٤٧

Translation: And [warn of] the Day when We will remove the mountains and you will see the earth prominent, and We will gather them and not leave behind from them anyone.

(al-Kahfi 18:47)

The following is another verse interpreted by the Shiite in *Tafsir al-'Ayyashi*:

صِبْغَةَ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنَ اللَّهِ صِبْغَةً وَنَحْنُ لَهُ عَابِدُونَ ١٣٨

Translation: [Say: "Our life takes its] hue from God! And who could give a better hue [to life] than God, if we but truly worship Him?"

(al-Baqarah 2:138)

According to al-'Ayyashi, the meaning of the word *sibghah* (hue) in this verse refers to Ali's knowledge of being appointed the successor to Muhammad in an earlier agreement (al-Salus, 2011). As explained before, the Shiite interpretations of the Qur'an revolve around Ali's imamate and his rightful position as the first caliph after the death of Muhammad S.A.W. However, according to Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah scholars, and as described by al-Tabari, "*sibghah Allah*" refers to Allah's *deen* (Al-Tabari, 2000). This interpretation contrasts with that of the Shiites. The concept of the imamate has nothing to do with this verse according to the Sunnite interpretation.

The Shiite have also misinterpreted the following verse:

وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ٥٣

Translation: And (recall) when We gave Moses the Scripture and the Discrimination (clear proof and argument to know the right from the wrong), so that you might be guided aright.

(al-Baqarah 2:53)

According to Ya'qub Yusuf and Abu al-Hasan Ali, in his exegesis, which only contained interpretations of Surah al-Fatihah to verse 282 of Surah al-Baqarah, Al-Hasan al-Askari, who is

regarded as one of the Twelve Imams, misinterpreted the above verse. The following is his interpretation:

“Oh Musa! Swear upon the Children of Israel that Muhammad is the best of men and the Chief of the Messengers; and his brother and his Trustee Ali is the best of the Trustees; so that you might be guided aright.” (al-Salus, 2011)

According to Sunnite scholars like Ibn Kathir (1999), the verse above refers to Allah S.W.T. revealing the Torah to Prophet Musa as a guide to the right path. Other Sunnite interpretations of this verse, which is about Allah’s revelation to Prophet Musa, do not mention Ali because he is irrelevant here. The Torah is about the Children of Israel who were led by Prophet Musa thus, the verse revolved around them and the laws of their land during that era. It would therefore have no need to mention Ali.

Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Ibrahim ibn Hashim al-Qummi’s (d. 307H) book, *Tafsir al-Qummi*, was used as a reference by his student, Muhammad ibn Ya’qub al-Kulaini when the latter wrote *Al-Kafi*, a book of hadiths that is the Shiite equivalent of *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Al-Qummi, who was a trusted scholar among the Shiites, interpreted the following verse (al-Salus, 2011):

وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَمِيثَاقَهُ الَّذِي وَاثَقَكُمْ بِهِ إِذْ قُلْتُمْ سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا
وَأَنْفُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ ٧

Translation: And [always] remember the blessings that God has bestowed upon you, and the solemn pledge by which He bound you to Himself when you said, "We have heard, and we pay heed." Hence, remain conscious of God: verily, God has full knowledge of what is in the hearts [of men].

(al-Maidah 5:7)

According to al-Qummi, the companions vowed to accept Ali as their Caliph, but they broke their vow. According to him, “when Rasulullah appointed Ali as his successor (or caliph), his companions vowed to obey and accept the Prophet’s decision. However, they soon broke their vow” (al-Salus, 2011). From a Sunnite perspective, Al-Qummi had misinterpreted the verse above by linking it to Ali. The Sunnite interpretation of the verse has nothing to do with Ali. According to al-Baghawi, the verse above refers to a deal made between Rasulullah and the believers, who vowed to obey him no matter what (Al-Baghawi, 1997). No interpretation that associates this verse with Ali exists, other than those made by Shiite scholars. Shiite scholars also misinterpreted the following verse:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَمُوا ... ٣٠

Translation: Lo! those who say: Our Lord is Allah, and afterward are upright...

(Fussilat 41:30)

According to Al-Qummi, this verse refers to the believers as *amir al-mu'minin 'alaihi al-salam*. They are those who believe in Ali’s imamate (Al-Qummi, n.d). Al-Tabari (2000), on the other hand, explains that this verse is about believing in the oneness of Allah S.W.T. and obeying Him, and rejecting *shirk*. Based on Sunnite interpretation, it is clear that this verse has nothing to do with the Shiite concept of the imamate.

Conclusions

From the Sunnite perspective, irregularities in the Qur'anic interpretations are found in Shiite tafsir books (exegeses), such as *Tafsir al-'Ayyashi*, *Tafsir Hasan al-'Askari*, and *Tafsir al-Qummi*, among others. These misinterpretations exist because Shiite scholars tend to base their interpretations on the concept of the imamate, a main pillar of their faith. Thus, it is evident that their interpretations are heavily relied upon this concept and are thus different from the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah's interpretation.

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