

The Explanation of Shahrīstānī's View of the Comprehensibility of the Qur'ān Based on the Narrations of Ahl al-Bayt (a) of the Prophet (s) Expressed in the Introduction of *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa maṣābīḥ al-abrār* Commentary

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show that how Shahrīstānī, as one of the Sunnī great writers and exegetes, is influenced in his commentary by the narrations of Imāms (a) and in particular those of Imām Ṣādiq (a), how he expresses his views on the issues of interpretation and comprehensibility of the Qur'ān, and what solutions he proposed in this regard. The article at hand has adopted the analytical research method. Examining the comprehensibility principles proposed by Shahrīstānī in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* commentary, we come to the point that Shahrīstānī deems that the reference to the narrations of Ahl al-Bayt (a) is the only way to understanding the Holy Qur'ān, and he himself has been influenced greatly by them in his discussion of the Qur'ānic principles. In addition, he takes the knowledge of the Qur'ān - including exegesis and esoteric interpretation - exclusive to Ahl al-Bayt (a), maintains that exegetes wonder in the interpretation of the Qur'ān because they do not refer to Ahl al-Bayt (a), deems that staying away from them is the cause of destruction, and believes that Ahl al-Bayt (a) are the true protectors of the Qur'ān. In the light of Shahrīstānī's comments in the introduction to his commentary and using Ahl al-Bayt's (a) narratives, we might conclude that there is a possibility to understand and interpret the Qur'ān for all exegetes provided that they set aside their religious presuppositions in interpretation and choose the correct method for the interpretation of the Qur'ān, which is referring to Ahl al-Bayt (a) and using their narration, as the Prophet (s) repeatedly noted in his valuable words.

Keywords: Qur'ān, Ahl al-Bayt (a), Imām Ṣādiq (a), Shahrīstānī, Principles of interpretation, Comprehensibility.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the interpretation knowledge is based on understanding the methods of interpretation, esoteric interpretation, and the principles of commentators' understanding. This is true about their verbal, doctrinal, and thinking status. The interpretation knowledge is on the one hand dependent on the narrative interpretations received from Ahl al-Bayt (a), and on the other hand, on the commentators' opinions and views. *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is a sixth-century theological and rational commentary that entails points about the Arabic language and Khurāsān literature. In addition to its verbal aspect, this commentary has an esoteric interpretation dimension that makes it similar to mystical commentaries. This content is

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located in the “asrār” section of this book. Shahrīstānī, the sixth-century exegete, began to write commentaries on the Qur’ān later in his life but failed to completely interpret the Qur’ān. From his commentary, there remains only his interpretation of the first and second chapters of the Qur’ān. Though his methods of interpretation and discussion of the Qur’ān is not the subject of this article, the exploration of his intellectual foundations, thought processes, and method of interpretation seems to be necessary. Shahrīstānī’s method is based on an understanding of science in methods of creation and order, the stages of the conflict and the sequence, the aspects of public and private, and *musta’nif* and *mafrūq* rules. Therefore, this method can be understood as one that is based on non-famous scientific rules among Muslim scholars in that period, which are part of the secret knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt (a) (Ādharshab, 2001: 40).

Examining the introduction of the book “*Mafātīḥ al-asrār*,” this article attempts to identify the intellectual foundations of Shahrīstānī’s thought, analyze his ideas in interpretation and understanding of Qur’ān, measure the extent to which he is affected by Ahl al-Bayt (a), and provide a detailed answer to the following question.

What are Shahrīstānī’s terms to the Qur’ān comprehensibility

It seems that in Shahrīstānī’s view, the Qur’ān comprehensibility is in recourse to Ahl al-Bayt (a) and the use of their knowledge in the Qur’ān interpretation is necessary. Therefore, this article is going to discuss and analyze this theory. Consequently, after presenting a brief introduction to Shahrīstānī’s characteristics and his commentary, the components of the Qur’ān comprehensibility from his viewpoint is clarified. Then, his ideas on the interpretation of the Qur’ān and the extent to which he is affected by Ahl al-Bayt (a) – in particular Imām Ṣādiq (a) – are investigated.

General features of the commentary

Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa maṣābīḥ al-abrār commentary is one which entails expression, interpretation, and citations. It has its own special literature and terms, especially in the *Asrār* section. This commentary is in two volumes that deal with two chapters of the Qur’ān (i.e., Qur’ān 1 and 2). The first volume contains an introduction and interpretation of the Qur’ān 1 and the verses 1 to 124 of the Qur’ān 2, while the second volume begins with the interpretation of the verse 125 of the Qur’ān 2 to the end of this chapter. Abulfath Muḥammad b. Abī al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Abī Bakr Aḥmad Shahrīstānī, known as Afḍal, Ḥujjat al-Ḥaqq, and Tāj al-Dīn, a Shāfi‘ī and Ash‘arī scholar, was born in “Shahrīstān” (an area between Nayshābūr and Khārazm) in the year 467, 469, or 479 in the era of Sultan Sanjar b. Malikshāh (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1, editor’s introduction: 15).

He is the writer of a famous book known as *Milal wa niḥal*. He passed away in the year 548 LH (Namāzī Shāhrūdī, 2006, vol. 7: 162). He learned Islamic jurisprudence from Aḥmad Khāfi and theology from Abī Naṣr b. al-Qushayrī. Elsewhere it is noted that he learned jurisprudence and theology from Aḥmad Khāfi (Ibn Hajar ‘Asqalani, 1996, vol. 6: 304). Moreover, reputable and famous exegetes know him as a Muslim philosopher and Imām in theology and religions (‘Irfān, 1997: 381).

Introduction to the commentary

Shahrīstānī has written an important introduction to his commentary named *Mafātīḥ al-Qur’ān fī ‘ilm al-Qur’ān* and gives a great deal of important information in various fields related to the Qur’ān and its understanding principles.

In this introduction, he describes his purpose, introduces 12 chapters, with each chapter being devoted to a specific topic, as follows.

1. The beginning, the end, the revelation, and the order of the revelation of the Qur'ān
2. The compilation of the Qur'ān
3. The disagreements among the narrators about the order of the revelation of the Qur'ān
4. The readings of the Qur'ān
5. the acts that are ritually recommended to the reciter of Qur'ān
6. The number of the chapters, verses, words, and letters of the Qur'ān
7. The Companion and non-Companion exegetes
8. The meaning of interpretation and esoteric interpretation, generalities and particularities, ambiguous and unambiguous verses, abrogating and abrogated verses
9. Mafrūq and musta'nif, and the scope of conflict and relationship according to the two rules of creation and contingency
10. The miraculousness of the Qur'ān

Shahristānī's interpretation method

Shahristānī says in his introduction about his commentary and the way it was completed, I have brought reading, syntax, vocabulary, and meanings of verses from the books of commentators without any manipulation, and I have quoted them correctly. My only manipulation was the description of the lengthy points and a brief synopsis of the complete contents. In addition, I have brought interpretation of the verses in continuation as "asrār," and I have analyzed the deep dimensions of the verses, and from the secrets of Ḥirāya, what is obtained from the references of the elders, is included in this section (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 6).

Shahristānī brings in the twelfth chapter of his introduction a narration from Imām Ṣādiq (a) that reads, "God's book is in four sections: Expressions, hints, subtleties, and truths¹ (Ibid: 67; Miṣbāḥ al-Sharī'a, n.d.: 459).

He cites the narration of Imām Ṣādiq (a) and believes that the Qur'ān is not only an apparent book; rather, he follows it for its deep meaning, especially in subtitles and truths. In addition, he states the outstanding and noble issues of his commentary in the section "asrār" under each verse. He states at the end of the seventh chapter of his introduction that he has quoted the secrets of Ahl al-Bayt (a). He strongly avoids self-interpretation and admits everywhere in his interpretation, the statements "Qur'ān family" and "Owners of secrets" are not about he himself but they regard Ahl al-Bayt (a) who are have knowledge of the whole of Qur'ān (Shahristānī's, 2007, vol. 1: 45). Imām Ṣādiq (a) is one of the figures from whom Shahristānī has narrated many traditions. Ādharshab, the editor of the book *Maḥāṭib al-asrār*, wrote about the uses he has made of Imām Ṣādiq's (a) narrations,

In Shahristānī's commentary, the narrations of Imām Jafar Ṣādiq (a) are evidently used. He frequently uses his loose narrations ... Shahristānī sometimes refers to Imām Ṣādiq's (a) jurisprudence in his interpretation though he follows Shāfi'i jurisprudence. ... We see in his book *Milal wa niḥal* that the position of Ahl al-Bayt (a) in Shahristānī's thought and their secrets are beneficences of themselves (Shahristānī, 1997, vol. 1, editor's introduction: 41-43).

After the above preliminaries, we now describe the understanding of Qur'ān that Shahristānī has tried to explain through the Qur'ānic view of Ahl al-Bayt (a) and attempt to prove that his understanding of the Qur'ān is based on Ahl al-Bayt's (a) narrations.

1. Majlisī presents this narration from Imām Ṣādiq (a) with an added sentence, "Expressions are for the laymen, hints are for the special people, subtleties are for the saints, and truths are for the prophets" (Majlisī, 1983, vol. 89: 103).

The authority of the qur'ānic appearance and content

The apparent implications of the qur'ānic words are a lot, and in most cases, the interpretations of commentators are based on the appearance of the Qur'ān. Sometimes the appearance of verses is derived from the meaning of a word in the verse or the meanings of sentences, but is at other times derived from the assignment rules that have been taken from the verses. However, since the Qur'ān has unambiguous and ambiguous verses, the scope of the seeming meaning of the ambiguous verses is determined by the unambiguous verses (Mu'addab, 2009: 127).

“Batn” (the inner) in the Shī'a and Sunnī narrative texts is disclosed by ta'wīl (esoteric interpretation) and is accepted by both of them. The Sunnī and Shī'a narrations about the inner of the verses imply that all verses of the Qur'ān entail the inner. Although the inner meaning of them is not of the same nature, they are the same in the ruling that their meaning is inner and hidden. (Najjārzādīgān, 2009, 78-80).

In the eighth chapter of his introduction – which is about interpretation and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān – Shahristānī introduces interpretation as disclosing the meaning and uncovering facts and esoteric interpretation as retuning everything to its origin. He deems esoteric interpretation more general than interpretation. At the end of this chapter, he maintains that the science of interpretation is the same as the outer, revealed meaning of the Qur'ān (which he calls *Musta'nif*), while the science of esoteric interpretation is the same as the outer, essence of the Qur'ān (which he calls *Mafrūq*) (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 46-49).

In the twelfth chapter of his introduction, Shahristānī gives in a narration from 'Abdullāh b. Mas'ūd that he knew that the whole knowledge of the Qur'ān (its outer and inner meanings) belonged to Imām 'Alī (a), “Surely the Qur'ān was revealed in seven letters, and there is nothing in the outer or inner of the Qur'ān that is unknown to 'Alī (a)” (Ibn Shahr Āshūb, 2000, vol. 2: 43; Qumī, 1984, vol. 1: 20; Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65).

Therefore, Shahristānī knew the inner and outer of the Qur'ān and the authority of both in the science of the interpretation of Qur'ān, and knew that the whole knowledge of Qur'ān (both inner and outer) belongs to Imām 'Alī (a) and Ahl al-Bayt (a). He says that Ibn 'Abbās, who discussing his opinion about the source of all commentators, notes that the Prophet (s) prayed for Imām 'Alī (a) and said, “Oh God, make him jurisconsult in the knowledge of religion and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān” (Ibn Athīr, 1964, vol. 2: 43; Shīrāzī, 2004, vol. 2: 623).

Then, Ibn 'Abbās was the apprentice in presence of Imām Ali (a) until he became jurisconsult in religion and esoteric interpretation (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 5).

Shahristānī presents this narration and believes that Ibn 'Abbās learned the knowledge of religion and its esoteric interpretation from Imām 'Alī (a). Therefore, in Shahristānī's view, the knowledge of the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān belonged only to Imām 'Alī (a).

All qur'ānic knowledge belongs to Ahl al-Bayt (a)

In the twelfth chapter of his introduction, Shahristānī quotes a narration from Imām 'Alī (a) that reads, “By Allāh, no verse has been revealed unless I know its topic and the place of revelation; surely my Lord has blessed me with an understanding heart and an inquiring tongue (Arbilī, 2002, vol. 1: 116; Ḥaskanī, 1991, vol. 1: 45; Ibn Ṭāwūs, ۱۹۹۵: 189; Qundūzī, 1996, vol. 3: 146; Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65).

In addition, he asserts in his introduction that the qur'ānic knowledge exclusively belongs to Ahl al-Bayt (a):

Verily the companions of the Prophet (s) agree that the Qur'ān is specific to Ahl al-Bayt (a) because they constantly asked Imām 'Alī b. Abī Tālib (a), “Have you

Ahl al-Bayt (a) been given anything exclusive other than the Qur'ān?" He answered, "No, I swear by God who split the grain and created the soul, but with what is in the sheath of my sword" (Aḥmadī Miyānjī, 1999, vol. 1: 419; Baḥrānī, 1995, vol. 1: 20; Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 5).

Thus, the consideration of the Qur'ān as something that belongs only to Ahl al-Bayt (a) is the reason for the consensus among the Companions that the Qur'ān and its knowledge (both revelation and esoteric interpretation) are exclusive to Ahl al-Bayt (a) (Ādharshab, 2001, No. 1: 41).

He also believes that the knowledge of the Qur'ān is exclusive to Ahl al-Bayt (a) because he mentions in the tenth Chapter of his introduction a narration from Imām Ṣādiq (a), "A half of the Qur'ān is about us and the other half is about our enemies, and the content that is about our enemies is in fact about us"¹ (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 56).

In this narration, he suggests that not only the knowledge of the Qur'ān but essentially all of the Qur'ān is about Ahl al-Bayt (a)

Licensee of Interpretation provided returning to Ahl al-Bayt (a)

One of the principles of understanding the Qur'ān is the awareness about the permissibility and permission for the interpretation of the Qur'ān. According to the Qur'ān itself, this Scripture is bayān (explanation), tibyān (clarification), kitāb mubīn (explaining book), in clear Arabic, and provides easy to learn advice. However, any discerning thinker who is familiar with the Qur'ān and its teachings can understand that the knowledge of the Qur'ān has different grades and layers, and the level at which that knowledge is implied in different verses not the same (Rajabī, 2006: 24).

Mu'addab (Mu'addab, 2009: 98) believes that the Qur'ān is understandable and interpretable and the general levels of interpretation of the Qur'ān are possible for the non-infallible exegetes. There are important stances about the possibility of interpretation of the Qur'ān. Some believe any one is able to interpret the Qur'ān, and this view is correct. However, another group believes that the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'ān is possible only for Ahl al-Bayt (a). The latter view is mostly proposed by a group of narration transmitters known as Akhbārīs (Jawādī 'Āmulī, 2004, vol. 1: 86; Khū'ī, 1981: 267).

In the introduction of his commentary when he wants to address the Qur'ān interpretation, Shahristānī introduces his stance to moving from the outer meanings of the Qur'ān to its inner meanings and says,

I found it a great and deep sea, full of wonders and unknown issues. There are many pearls in it with only one diver, and there are many waters with only one pearl but filled with numerous divers. The diver wonders about choosing the right way. At the end, he asks a ship for help, and introduces himself an incapacitated person compared to that ship who does not have the complete access to the knowledge of that ship (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 6).

These statements of Shahristānī shows that in addition to his acceptance of outer and inner meaning of the Qur'ān, he wants to interpret the Qur'ān and deem it possible for himself. However, he finds out that his knowledge is not sufficient to pave this way alone. Therefore, he looks for a reference point - or in his own words, a saving ship – that could help him.

In Shahristānī's view, the "ship" is the knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt (a), as revealed by his quotation of the *saḥīfah* narration in the twelfth chapter and his clear stipulations in his commentary (Ibid: 67). In this narration, Ahl al-Bayt (a) are introduced as the saving ship.

1. This narration is mentioned in Kāfi (1987, vol. 2: 628) as "One third of it is about us and one third of it is about our enemies" and "one fourth of it is about us and one fourth of it is about our enemies."

It is clear from these words of Shahrīstānī that he believes in the permissibility of interpretation for the non-Infallible people, provided that they set their interpretations based on the traditions of the Infallibles (a) and refer to Ahl al-Bayt (a) in the interpretation. The reason is that he sets out to interpret the Qur'ān but does not see himself needless to Ahl al-Bayt (a) and their knowledge.

The results of not referring to Ahl al-Bayt (a)

The subjective interpretation of the qur'ānic text

Concurrent with the interpretation of the Qur'ān by the Companions of the Prophet (s), there appeared tradition fabrication, the semantic distortion of the verses, and the diversion of the public opinion from the facts of the noble Qur'ān. In order to achieve more benefits, some self-seeker people fabricated narrations against Ahl al-Bayt (a) and for their opponents as much as they could and undertook false esoteric interpretation of the qur'ānic verses ('Alawī Mehr, 2010: 75).

There are widely transmitted Shī'a and Sunnī narrations that prohibit and reprimand the subjective interpretation (tafsīr bi al-ra'y) of the qur'ānic text, such as what follows. Imām Ṣādiq (a) says, "Whoever interprets the Qur'ān subjectively is not granted any reward even if he does it correctly, and is liable for it if he makes a mistake" ('Ayyāshī, 2001, vol. 1: 17). Moreover, it is narrated from the Prophet (s), "Whoever interprets my statements subjectively does not have faith in me" (Ḥurr 'Āmilī, 1992: 28 & 137). Although these narrations have different wordings, they have the same content and imply the same stance and intention.

The word "ra'y" means a belief and viewpoint that a person selects or figures out through intellectual efforts. In the literary books, the majrūr "bi" has been given numerous meanings, the most appropriate ones for the subjective interpretation traditions are causality, assistance, and transference to the second object. If "bi" is used for causality, it means that a certain viewpoint that is formed in the mind of the exegete from a source out of the qur'ānic knowledge framework determines the cause of such an interpretation. Moreover, if "bi" intends assistance, it means that instead of interpreting the qur'ānic verses by the Arabic communication and literature rules and the existing indications, the exegete interprets the verses subjectively. Finally, if "bi" is used for transference, it means that instead of expressing the content of the verse, the exegete provides his own opinions and identifies his own words with the noble verse. This way, it becomes evident that "the subjective interpretation of the qur'ānic text" mentioned by some narrations means forcing one's personal judgment onto the verses and exploiting the verses to justify one's preselected viewpoint (Rajabī, 2006: 33-37).

After explaining his method for the development of his commentary in the prelude to his introduction, Shahrīstānī says,

I take refuge in God to help me avoid interpreting the Qur'ān subjectively, based on my [personal] opinion, or without evidence and narrations. I avoid delving into the secrecies and meanings of the Qur'ān without gauging them against the right, and stay away from distorting the public opinion (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 6).

Moreover, at the end of the seventh chapter of the introduction of his commentary, Shahrīstānī asks the sublime God to keep him away from subjective interpretation and satanic temptations and guide him to the Right Path, which is the path of the Prophet (s), the martyrs, and the righteous (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 45). Moreover, in the fourth chapter of his introduction, which is about the readings of the Qur'ān, after mentioning some discussions in this regard, he states that the Companions and the Successors never added anything to the reading of the Qur'ān and did not surpass the Prophet (s) in this regard, in the same way that they did not include their subjective opinions in the interpretation of the Qur'ān. He puts forth

a famous tradition by the Prophet (s) in which he says, “Anyone who interprets the Qur’ān based on his subjective opinion has made a mistake even if his assertion agrees with the right, and he will be located in Fire if he interprets wrongly” (Qurṭabī, 2008, vol. 1: 32). He then mentions a narration from Imām Ṣādiq (a) which reads, “Nothing is farther from people than the interpretation of the Qur’ān” (‘Ayyāshī, 2001, vol. 1: 11; Barqī, 1992, vol. 2: 300; Qumī, 1984, vol. 1: 19).

After mentioning these issues, Shahrīstānī quickly starts praying and says,

O my Lord! People to whom You bestowed the understanding of the Qur’ān: they are the nails of the earth, the cause for the safety of its inhabitants, the very successors of the prophets, one of the two Weights, and the selected humans; the same people who are Your relatives, the chests of Your secrets, and the rulers of Your Servants. We ask You to make us the ones who listen and obey their commands such that we try to satisfy them and follow their guardianship forever (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 37).

These statements of Shahrīstānī show his aversion to the subjective interpretation of the Qur’ānic text and the great influence the Infallible Ahl al-Bayt (a) have had on him. The reason is that in many cases in his commentary, when he presents a narration from the Infallibles (a), especially Imām Ṣādiq (a), he starts praising Ahl al-Bayt (a) and asks them for help. The pinnacle of this influence could be seen in his interpretation of the first verse of the Qur’ān 2. When Shahrīstānī wants to present his *Al-asrār* discussion of this verse, he begins as,

The Pure Lineage who are one of the two Weights and are comprised of 12 people have said that “Verily those who interpret the Qur’ān based on their subjective judgment are resided in Fire” ... this is because in their [subjective] interpretation, they did not refer to the sincere people whose sincerity is well-known ... therefore, they have disagreements about every verse, and even every word, and even every letter; they are people who have distorted the real meaning of statements and letters ... (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 119).

These statements not only show the great influence of Ahl al-Bayt (a) and Imām Ṣādiq (a) on Shahrīstānī, but also clarify his view to the subjective interpretation of the Qur’ānic text. He believes that the non-reference to Ahl al-Bayt (a) in the interpretation of the Qur’ān is an instance of subjective interpretation, and questions the exegetes who stay away from Ahl al-Bayt (a). This then leads us to the point that when Shahrīstānī has such a belief about others, he certainly refers to Ahl al-Bayt (a) in his commentary and opinions and puts forth his assertions based on their statements. In fact, we might say that his thought has been under the influence of the narrations of the Infallible Ahl al-Bayt (a).

Confusion and deviation

In the 12th chapter of the introduction of his commentary, which is about the conditions of the interpretation of the Qur’ān, Shahrīstānī (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65) writes that the confusion and deviation that has afflicted Muslims is due to their non-reference to Ahl al-Bayt and Imām ‘Alī (a). He says, “Verily this confusion has afflicted them because they did not sought knowledge from its door and did not cling to its means; therefore, the path to conclusion was closed to them, the means was cut for them, and they followed different sects while they were confused.” In order to verify his assertion, he mentions a narration from the Prophet (s) which reads, “‘Alī is from me and I am from him” (Ibn Ḥayyūn, 1989, vol. 1: 93; Majlisī, 1983, vol. 9: 34; Ṣadūq, 1997: 659; Tūsī, 1994: 820), and during the revelation of the Repentance chapter [Qur’ān 9] Gabriel said, “A man from you delivers the Qur’ān” (Ṣadūq, 1983, vol. 1: 311; Salīm b. Qays, 1985, vol. 2: 642).

Moreover, in this chapter of his introduction, after mentioning the conditions for the interpretation of the Qur'ān and its exegetes, he states that the observation of these conditions is very difficult, and the majority of exegetes interpret the Qur'ān based on their own assumptions (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65).

Therefore, with regard to the conditions of the Qur'ān exegete, he believes that the exegete should not have any presupposition, and deems the lack of reference to Ahl al-Bayt and their narrations as the reason for the confusion of the exegetes.

He then continues that the observation of this condition in the interpretation and esoteric interpretation of the ambiguous verses is very difficult, and many exegetes have abandoned it. He believes that commentaries are based on various sects such as Qadariyya, Ash'ariyya, Mushabaha, Mu'aṭala, and Wāqifiyya, each interpreting the Qur'ān based on their own principles. Nonetheless, Imām Ṣādiq (a) has distanced himself from all of them. For example, Wāqifiyya says, "I entrust my knowledge to God, and this is the right path." Another example regards the viewpoint of some Salafīs about God's standing on the Divine Throne, "Standing is known but its quality is unknown; belief in it is obligatory but asking questions about it is a blameworthy innovation."

Following these examples, Shahristānī asserts that this confusion is because they do not use the right source of the interpretation knowledge, and this has led the members of those sects to be wondering in those sects. He takes the verse "For they have rejected our signs, and failed to take warning from them" (Qur'ān 7:146) as an evidence and says,

The divine *signs* are the saints of God, as noted in verses "And We made the son of Mary and his mother as a Sign" [Qur'ān 23:50] and "If they had only referred it to the Messenger, or to those charged with authority [uli al-amr] among them, the proper investigators would have Tested it from them (direct)" [Qur'ān 4:83]. (Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65)

Shahristānī then presents the discussion between Imām Ṣādiq (a) and Sadīr al-Ṣayr about Imāms, in which Imām says, "We are God's signs and the notables of people; what we rule as licit is based on God's Book and what we rule as illicit is also based on it" (Ibn Ḥayyūn, 2006, vol. 1: 50; Majlisī, 1983, vol. 25: 261; Shahristānī, 2007, vol. 1: 65). This statement by Imām Ṣādiq (a) shows that he does not say anything by himself, but rather, he talks based on the Qur'ān, and Ahl al-Bayt (a) have all knowledge of the Qur'ān. Moreover, following the Qur'ān 4:83, Imām says, "We are leaders to whom God has ordered you to refer" (Ibn Ḥayyūn, 2006, vol. 1: 27).

The reflection on this narration once again reveals that Shahristānī is influenced by this sublime Imām, as he takes confusion and subjective interpretation of the Qur'ān as a result of non-reference to the leaders (authorities) and takes the Qur'ān 4:83 as an evidence for it.

Ignorance and destruction

After attributing all these praises to Ahl al-Bayt (a) and introducing them as the source for the true understanding of the Qur'ān, he once again relies on Imām Ṣādiq (a) to emphasize the necessity of reference to Ahl al-Bayt at the end of the 12th chapter of his introduction. He mentions a narration from Imām Ṣādiq (a) in which it is said,

A man told Imām, "There are people among us who say about the sublime God's statement 'If ye realize this not, ask of those who possess the Message' [Qur'ān 16:43], *The Message* is Torah, and *those who possess the Message* are the Judaist scholars." Imām said, "By God, They [Judaists] invite us by this means to their religion; however, By God we [Ahl al-Bayt] are *those who possess the Message*, the ones that the sublime God has ordered people to refer to in their issues" (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1995, vol. 3: 136; Ibn Ḥayyūn, 2006, vol. 1: 21).

Moreover, Imām ‘Alī (a) has said, “We are *those who possess the Message*” (Ḥimyarī, 1993, Introduction: 7).

Thus, Shahrīstānī deems it necessary to take knowledge from Ahl al-Bayt and Imām Ṣādiq (a) and refer to them in all issues. He then mentions the Safīna and Thaḳalayn traditions from Abūdhar Ghaffārī who narrates it during Ḥajj. After performing Ḥajj rituals and introducing himself, Abūdhar tells people that he heard from the Prophet of Allāh (s) when he was passing away,

I am leaving two things among you: the book of Allāh and my Ahl al-Bayt, my ‘itra (family). These two will not get separated up until they come to my presence next to the Kawthar pool (Ibn Ḥayyūn, 2006, vol. 1: 28; Salīm b. Qays, 1985, vol. 2: 894) ... Beware that these two are like the Noah’s Arch; anyone who boards it is saved and anyone who gets off it is drowned (Ḥimyarī, 1993, Introduction: 8; Ṣaffār, 1984, vol. 1: 297; Salīm b. Qays, 1985, vol. 1: 61; Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 66 & 67; Ṭabarī Āmulī, 1995, vol. 1: 578).

The Thaḳalayn tradition asserts that the reliance on the Qur’ān and the effort to be guided by the knowledge expressed in its verses is not possible without the explanation of that knowledge by the infallible Ahl al-Bayt (a). In order to maintain the unity and agreement of the Qur’ān and Ahl al-Bayt (a), it is necessary to refer to the Infallible Imāms to figure out the meanings and intentions of the qur’ānic verses; any separation of these two great prophetic legacies is impossible (‘Amīd Zanjānī, 1994: 204).

After mentioning the Thaḳalayn and Safīna traditions, Shahrīstānī mentions two narrations from Imām ‘Alī (a) in which Imām tells his companions, “Ask me before you lose access to me; no one is more informed than me about what is between the two tablets” (Ibn Ḥayyūn, 1989, vol. 1: 196; Ibn Ṭāwūs, 1993: 670). He also says, “I am not now a source of ruling; if am given such a seat, I will rule for the People of Torah with their Torah, the People of the Gospel with their Gospel, and the People of the Qur’ān with their Qur’ān” (Daylamī, 1992, vol. 2: 374; Mufīd, 1993: 235; Ṣadūq, 1978: 305; Ṭabrisī, 1983, vol. 1: 258;).

It is not surprising that Shahrīstānī mentions suchlike narrations with utmost clarity and without censorship, because he is a famous culturist with extensive knowledge of various people and sects. As the top Muslim writer about people and sects, he has carefully examined and analyzed all Islamic denominations and sects and has come to the conclusion that no university has perfect professors connected to the divine revelation other than the academy of the Infallible Ahl al-Bayt (a). In his view, there is nothing but ignorance and mistake (and extreme struggle in darkness) out of this university (‘Irfānī, 1997: 389).

Mentioning these narrations, Shahrīstānī takes Ahl al-Bayt (a) as the only way for salvation and the only source for the answers to questions, and suggests that anyone who stays away from them will be annihilated.

Ahl al-Bayt as the reason for the immunity of the Qur’ān

The distortion of the Qur’ān can be divided into semantic and literal types. The semantic distortion means the distorted understanding, interpretation, and translation of a statement that is different from the intention of the articulator. This type of distortion has occurred with regard to the Qur’ān, and it means incorrect and irregular understandings of the Qur’ān (which is called subjective interpretation) (Najjārzādīgān, 2009: 126).

The second type of distortion is the change in the words and verses of the Qur’ān and the reduction or increase in its statements. The exegete that intends to discover the divine intention of the outer qur’ānic statements should believe in the immunity of the Qur’ān from distortion as one of the essential assumptions of exegesis. The reason is that if the existence of distortion is assumed, it is likely that an indication or condition that has a direct effect on

understanding the verses is changed or lost, and so, the outer statements of the Qur'ān will be faulty in delivering the divine intention, and they could not lead the exegete to the true understanding of the divine intention (ibid: 125).

In the introduction of his commentary, Shahrīstānī – the great Sunnī exegete – not only introduces Ahl al-Bayt as the source of understanding and esoteric interpretation and the saving ship of the humans, but also deems them as the protectors of the Qur'ān. In the praising section of his book, he says that Imāms are the complements of the angels, and if the latter group is the means for the revelation of the verses, Imāms and the sincere scholars are the means for their interpretation. Both groups have their great role in the completion of the great circle of revelation from God to the human, and both perform their divine tasks (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 4).

Shahrīstānī deems this stance as the content of the Qur'ān 15:9, “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).” In other words, God is the real agent in the revelation of the Qur'ān to this world through angles, and He is the real protector of these meanings through Imāms (ibid).

Moreover, in the second chapter of his introduction (which is about the compilation of the Qur'ān), Shahrīstānī first writes about the manner of the compilation of the Qur'ān, and mentions the existence of Imām 'Alī's (a) manuscript and the Caliph's rejection of it. Then, he comments on the compilation and maintenance of the Qur'ān and the role of Ahl al-Bayt in this regard, and asks how it is possible that the Prophet (s) to whom the Qur'ān was revealed was not concerned about the maintenance of the Qur'ān while it was scattered on different recording means such as the shoulder bone of the camel, the skin of the tree, and the hearts of people and did not introduce anyone he trusted to compile it (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 14).

After mentioning this, Shahrīstānī presents the Thaḳalayn tradition, introduces Ahl al-Bayt as one of the Thaḳalayn, introduces the Qur'ān and its knowledge as exclusive to them, asserts that the Qur'ān maintenance is conditioned to the maintenance of Ahl al-Bayt, and notes that these two are inseparable. He then points out that the Qur'ān is in the hands of people who preserve it, and puts forth the verse “Day, this is a Glorious Qur'an, (Inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved!” (Qur'ān 85:21-22) as an evidence for his assertion (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 14).

Moreover, in the prelude of his introduction that he starts with praising God and mentioning His blessings – including the appointment of the prophets in general and the Prophet of Islam (s) in particular – he thanks Him for the kindness He has had to the humans in appointing the Prophet (s) and sending Islam with him. Shahrīstānī then describes the Qur'ān and says, “The transportation of this book [i.e. the Qur'ān] is exclusive to the pure Family of the Prophet (s) who rightly conduct its true recitation, are its heirs, and are one of the Thaḳalayn” (Shahrīstānī, 2007, vol. 1: 4).

Pointing out these issues, Shahrīstānī shows that he believes in the non-distortion of the Qur'ān. He writes about the maintenance of the Qur'ān,

The Qur'ān that exists now and is within two covers is protected by God from any change, shortcoming, or mistake. There is a group of people who rightly conduct its true recitation, know its esoteric interpretation and revealed form, and prevent the introduction of any distortion or falsehood in it (ibid: 15).

Based on the descriptions he gives about Ahl al-Bayt, the term “a group of people” here is the same as the Infallible Ahl al-Bayt whom Shahrīstānī introduces as the protectors of the Qur'ān.

Conclusion

Based on what we said about the comprehensibility of the Qur'ān from the viewpoint of Shahrīstānī, we conclude that he believes in the authoritativeness of the outward and inward

of the Qur'ān, and takes the narrations of Ahl al-Bayt as his evidences. He not only deems the interpretation and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān but also all sciences related to the Qur'ān and religion as exclusive to Ahl al-Bayt, and introduces the path from the outward of the Qur'ān to its inward to be through Ahl al-Bayt.

He takes the interpretation of the Qur'ān as possible for all exegetes provided that they set aside their religious presuppositions and inclinations and seek help from Ahl al-Bayt and their narrations.

The main rule that Shahristānī sets for himself in his commentary is the reference to Ahl al-Bayt and the reliance on their narrations. He reprimands those who have not referred Ahl al-Bayt in their exegesis, sees them in confusion and ignorance, and says that they have entangled with subjective interpretation in their commentaries and will be finally destroyed.

Shahristānī believes that the reason for the immunity of the Qur'ān from distortion is the protection provided by Ahl al-Bayt. He deems them as the reason for the immunity of the Qur'ān and introduces them the true example of the term *protectors* in the Qur'ān 15:9.

Shahristānī's presentation of numerous narrations from Ahl al-Bayt, especially from Imām Ṣādiq (a) in his exegesis shows that his thought is greatly influenced by them, he has set his method in the interpretation of the Qur'ān to be through Ahl al-Bayt, and has asked God to help him in this way.

References

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